"Fusion of Horizons": Indigenous Australian literature and philosophical hermeneutics in dialogue

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of
The Australian National University.

September 2009
Declaration

I declare that authorship of this thesis is my own and that full acknowledgment of other sources has been provided where appropriate.

Cherisse Lyons (date).
Acknowledgments

Many people and many conversations have contributed to this thesis.

With respect and gratitude to the late Iain Wright who set me on this path, but sadly did not live to see where the path finally led. I would also like to express my deep appreciation to Simon Haines for taking over and guiding me on my way.

I am very much indebted to Monique Rooney, who generously gave of her time and comments. Without the scrutiny of her different eyes this thesis would be poorer. Thanks also to the following for their conversations, suggestions, and inspiration: Julieanne Lamond, Rich Pascal, Tim Rowse, Adam Shoemaker, Russell Smith, Livio Dobrez, Melinda Harvey, and Ned Curthoys.

For their good-natured enthusiasm for my project, I am grateful to my family and friends. Thanks especially to Emily for the long yarns and the view from the perspective of Art History. Finally, a special thank-you to Michael Carr, my closest companion and most astute critic, for sharing these years with me.
Abstract

This thesis has a double focus. First, it deploys the conception of
Horizontverschmelzung ("fusion of horizons"), devised by the German philosopher
Hans-Georg Gadamer, in order to discuss Indigenous Australian texts from a literary
standpoint. Gadamer's work on understanding, I argue, has been largely neglected in
Australian literary studies, yet it facilitates a fruitful reflection upon how non-
Indigenous readers may approach Aboriginal texts, and upon the value of such
engagements for negotiating new intercultural understandings. Gadamer's work
suggests that understanding a text has consequences for the person seeking
understanding. It describes how, through the experiences of "otherness" and
difference expressed in and by texts by Indigenous Australians, non-Indigenous
readers may become consciously aware of, and reflective upon, some of their
embedded pre-judgments and biases: in Gadamer's terminology, "prejudices"
(Vorurteile). The dialogue with the text may, in other words, facilitate the expansion
of the reader's horizons, since by becoming critically aware of one's own social and
literary traditions, a transformation of them has already taken place, and their
outlook and directedness toward the future has been changed.

The second focus is related to the first. The thesis also examines how voices which
come from and reference Indigenous Australian oral traditions, with different
conceptions of what creative activity and authorship is about, can help us resituate
the Romantic heritage to which Gadamer, while critical of it, is nevertheless
indebted. Moreover, since many of the assumptions embedded in modern literary
criticism have their roots in Romantic hermeneutics, the study of Indigenous
Australian texts is a way of illuminating some of the frequently unexamined presuppositions of contemporary literary theory in an interesting and productive way.
A Note on Spelling

I have attempted to use what is currently the most common orthography for the Indigenous Australian words and titles used in this thesis.

There are two points I would like to clarify.

1) There are a number of common spellings for the Noongar people and language of south-western Western Australia, including “Noongar,” “Nyungah,” “Nyoongar” and “Nyoongah.” Taking my cue from the Noongar Culture and Language Centre, I predominantly use the spelling “Noongar” (which was selected by a group of Noongar elders), unless directly quoting from a work.¹

2) The Yolngu people and languages of north-eastern Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory are referred to as Yolngu or Yolŋu. I shall use the first form of spelling.

List of In-text Citations

The following texts will be cited in the body of the main document, with abbreviations of the title as noted, followed by page number references.

Indigenous Australian Texts


Tara June Winch, *Swallow the Air*. St. Lucia, Queensland: Queensland University Press, 2006. (*STA*)


All citations of Gadamer’s work will refer to both the English translation, where available, and to the corresponding text in his *Gesammelte Werke*. References to *Truth and Method* will be made in the body of the text.

Hans-Georg Gadamer


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INTRODUCTION

The best definition for hermeneutics is: to let what is alienated by the character of the written word or by the character of being distantiated by cultural or historical distances speak again. This is hermeneutics: to let what seems to be far and alienated speak again ... we should never forget that the ultimate justification or end is to bring it near so that it speaks in a new voice.²

The following thesis is a study in listening to Aboriginal voices, as they speak in contemporary Indigenous literature. It is a study of listening to Aboriginal voices in order to understand those voices from the perspective of a non-Indigenous Australian. It is a study that recognises that the listener and the story teller, the reader and the writer, may be alienated from each other through time, physical distance, and culture, and that the differences that give rise to this alienation are significant. They are differences that cannot be immediately overcome. This thesis is a study of how


understanding literary texts in such circumstances can take place without violating cultural differences.

Concerned as it is with bridging – though not erasing – historical and cultural difference, it is also the contention of this thesis that philosophical hermeneutics offers a way of reflecting upon one’s engagement with Aboriginal texts which can assist in exploring not only what the texts say and how they say it, but in elucidating what this may mean for the reader. Philosophical hermeneutics foregrounds the recognition that engaging with literary texts is a dialogical activity involving reflection upon the limits and limitations of one’s self, and for non-Indigenous readers engaging with Indigenous texts, this means the relativisation of one’s own horizon as it comes up against that of another.

I acknowledge that there is a definite weighting toward hermeneutic ideas in the pages which follow. This is because philosophical hermeneutics provides an underexplored means of reflecting upon the key question of why it is important for non-Indigenous people (non-Indigenous Australians and otherwise) to attempt to relate to, and understand, the stories Aboriginal people tell – itself a question which is not often asked.

Philosophical Hermeneutics

In the quotation which heads the Introduction, Hans-Georg Gadamer, the primary philosopher this thesis will reference, suggests that we are aware that there are distances – temporal and cultural – which separate us from others, and that, in certain circumstances we seek to do something about them. That “something” is the hermeneutic endeavour, which comprises a number of impulses, evident in Helmut
Seiffert’s list of words related historically or etymologically to “hermeneutic" 
(Hermeneutik) in German. Usually glossed as “understanding” (Verstehen), 
hermeneutics also refers to interpretation as a systematic endeavour (Interpretation), 
and is related to explanation (Erklären), elucidation or exposition (Auslegung), 
interpreting (Interpretieren, Dolmetschen), translating (Übersetzen, Dolmetschen), 
indicating (Deuten), and exegesis (Exegese).3 Gadamer’s enterprise, which he refers 
to as “philosophical hermeneutics”, manifests all of these senses of “Hermeneutik”, 
as will be examined in detail in the chapters which follow. Philosophical 
hermeneutics concentrates, moreover, on yet another aspect: understanding in the 
sense of coming to agreement in conversation (Verständigung). This thesis uses the 
above senses of hermeneutics, and especially the idea of coming to understanding or 
agreement through an ongoing conversation, to consider a number of texts by 
Indigenous Australians and the process of engaging with such texts, by those who 
are not, themselves, Aboriginal. While the dialogue with a text is not the same as an 
actual face-to-face conversation, it shares some salient likenesses which shall be 
explored in the following chapters. The idea of dialogue (like other, related ideas 
including coming to agreement in conversation, play, and application), I argue, is an 
insightful and gainful way of reflecting upon the engagement with texts from distinct 
– but partially overlapping – traditions, since it characterises how meaning unfolds 
through protracted and substantive engagement, in a process in which differences 
and similarities are made explicit and evaluated.

I would like to identify at this point why hermeneutics is of particular relevance to 
such a project. Firstly, philosophical hermeneutics is particularly attuned to

3 Helmut Seiffert, Einführung in die Hermeneutik (Tübingen: Francke, 1992), 9-12.
questions of understanding in situations involving difference, whether these are cross-cultural situations, situations involving a historical gap between the reader or audience and the initial context of the work, or any other situation where difference comes into play. Hermeneutics is concerned to make “what seems to be far and alienated speak again ... to bring it near so that it speaks in a new voice.” Non-Indigenous readers schooled in and more familiar with European traditions may well have a sense of strangeness (to varying degrees) when coming across texts by Aboriginal storytellers. These texts may be as foreign to such traditions as oral songs which are part of ceremonies to sing a deceased person’s spirit or ghost away from the living and which are given to the singer in dreams, and they may be as relatively familiar as rhyming couplets and realist fiction in contemporary urban settings (which nonetheless may present a challenge to understanding). Importantly, though, while seeking to bridge differences, philosophical hermeneutics does not seek to erase them, but rather, to become aware of them and questioning of what they mean. It teaches us, even with seemingly familiar texts, to be alert to the possibilities of difference they express.

Philosophical hermeneutics offers a way of considering how and what kinds of understanding may be forged through our encounters with such texts. This style of thinking facilitates an appreciation that a text does not have one meaning which stands for all time. It is concerned with how meaning is continually unfolding, as discrete, distinct understandings are formed when a text is encountered in new circumstances, taken into different social and historical contexts, read by different eyes and heard with different ears.

This thesis teases out some of the implications of considering literary engagement hermeneutically. What interests me is identifying how non-Indigenous readers may
experience and respond to Indigenous Australian works in a way that does not seek to produce a monologue or disengaged knowledge about the “other”, but rather, suggests how engaging with literature offers us a possibility of entering into an imaginative space which is (at least to some degree) dialogical. Understanding a text, Gadamer argues, includes the need for some kind of application to the reader’s own situation: the text must be concretised in a specific set of circumstances for its meaning to be realised.

Because application is a necessary part of any understanding, reading is not simply the interrogation of a literary object about which we derive knowledge (which is one common characterisation of the reading process), but contains a reciprocal function whereby one critically reflects upon and questions one’s own responses in relation to what the text says. Understanding requires effort and risk: risk that one might have to change one’s ideas, challenge assumptions, or think differently, to engage with sensitivity to the other voice that is speaking, which may be difficult for us to hear.

Recent texts by Indigenous Australians also offer us a means to explore and assess some of the claims Gadamer makes about philosophical hermeneutics, and it is here that one of the distinctive contributions of this thesis occurs. Gadamer himself argued that the test of hermeneutics was its practical fruitfulness, yet there are surprisingly few recent considerations of literature or art which take philosophical hermeneutics as their orientation. This is particularly the case in Australia where works engaging with the twin fields of philosophical hermeneutics and Australian literatures are rare. This thesis seeks to redress this. It will consider a number of themes which occur in Aboriginal texts and the hermeneutic tradition, and place

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them in counterpoint with one another, to mainly explore interesting similarities but also to investigate productive differences between them.

Hermeneutics is of further relevance to a thesis which seeks to engage in a literary way with Indigenous Australian texts because literary studies remains indebted to the heritage of the early Romantics and to movements in German philosophical thought from the time of Kant and Hegel to the present, a heritage which has ongoing influence beyond specialised university studies in how the broader community thinks about books and authors. The philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer traces affiliations with Romantic hermeneutics as well as moving in significantly different directions. Thus, it enables a kind of sympathetic-yet-critical fulcrum through which to examine the effects of Romanticism and Romantic hermeneutics, both of which remain influential lenses through which we read. For these reasons it is of value to clarify how some of the resonances of Romantic thought continue to be influential on how general readers and specialist literary critics alike understand texts by Indigenous Australians, which emerge either from mainly pure Indigenous Australian traditions (in the case of some of the songs I consider), or from the interstices between European and Indigenous Australian creative practices.

A mixed focus thus informs the organising principles of this thesis, as I investigate a series of themes common to Aboriginal texts, philosophical hermeneutics and literary studies. Chapter One is about the role of the author and his or her place in ascribing a determinate meaning to a text in Romantic hermeneutics and recent versions of intentionalism. I am particularly interested in tracing how literary debates about this thorny subject appear unable to deal with the richness and variety of Aboriginal authoring practices, which prioritise such things as collaboration, and the idea that an author speaks for, and is representative of, a wider community. Chapter
Two examines how Kim Scott’s first novel, *True Country*, interrogates the age-old division between writing and speech, which has consequences *vis-à-vis* the division of societies into predominantly “literate” or “oral” formations influentially described and promoted by scholars such as Walter Ong. It also looks at Gadamer’s conception of bringing the word back to the “living voice”, which I suggest involves a significant revision of how we consider written and spoken situations. Chapter Three investigates the phenomenon of translation as both a bridge and a barrier to understanding, by examining a number of translated texts and some texts which, although in English, contain words which are embedded from Indigenous Languages or are composed in an English-Indigenous Language Creole. It further considers the scope of language and the pivotal role of language in world-disclosure.

In Chapter Four I shift directions to look in more detail at the process of what occurs when different horizons fuse or are relativised through coming into relationship with one another. In Chapters Four and Five the disparate horizons which fuse are historical: the present situated in relation to the past. Chapter Four discusses Gadamer’s conception of prejudices and the workings of tradition, and illustrates these through Kim Scott’s second novel, *Benang*. Questions of the relation between past and present are broadened in Chapter Five’s discussion of *Wirkungsgeschichte*, which means both the “history of effects” and “being-affected by history”.

*Wirkungsgeschichte* is the idea that our very structures of thinking are inflected and conditioned by the past; and this chapter develops an extended example, tracing how this concept can be used to describe the changing face, and the changing interpretation of stolen generations narratives – narratives told by and about the systematic practices which saw Indigenous children of mixed heritage removed from their families from the end of the nineteenth century through to the early 1970s.
Understanding and misunderstanding are the themes of the sixth chapter, which scrutinizes the representation of disparate horizons and the fusion of horizons in three novels. Misunderstanding seems to be a necessary component of early contact situations when people with very different horizons meet, but this misunderstanding may continue, or it may be revised to form better understandings. In this final chapter I relate the process of coming to be aware of misunderstandings (or not) to the three different ways of relating to others Gadamer outlines in *Truth and Method*.

The Conclusion proposes that “hermeneutic openness”, the third form of relating to others Gadamer discusses, is an intriguing means of identifying why it is of value for non-Indigenous readers to be exposed to Aboriginal texts. “Hermeneutic openness” describes the willingness of the reader herself to be challenged and potentially come to be aware of, and interrogate, some of her established views in the process of engaging dialogically with what the text says: it suggests that reading does not leave the reader, and his or her world-view unaffected or untouched. Texts by Indigenous Australians thus have an important role to play in the negotiation of new intercultural understandings between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, as they require non-Indigenous Australians to imaginatively identify and engage with differences between their pre-established views and those presented in the texts, and potentially be changed through the ongoing dialogue this sets into play.
Indigenous Australian Texts

Australians do not know and relate to Aboriginal people. They relate to stories told by former colonists.\(^5\)

In statements like this, the Indigenous scholar Marcia Langton draws attention to the need for people who are not of Aboriginal descent to engage with Aboriginal people and their stories in an intercultural dialogue – whether this is through face-to-face engagement or in what she calls the “republic of letters” (literary representations) – rather than to continue identifying with stories about Aboriginal people.\(^5\) One of the impetuses for this thesis is to respond to Langton’s call – to read stories Aboriginal people themselves tell.

This thesis will engage with a small selection of the diverse and expanding body of works by Aboriginal writers and storytellers. From the outset, it is necessary to acknowledge that reading and writing about Indigenous texts presents a number of challenges, and I would like to bring some issues to the forefront to spell out some of the project’s limits. Listed under “A” in Gordon Hookey’s “Terraist Manifesto” is the following quirky and provocative statement:

An advance affidavit affirming Aboriginal Australians are absolute authority arguing Aboriginality. Archaeologists, anthropologists, art arseholes, Americans, Anglos, Aryans, alcoholics, addicts, archpoliticians and all abhorred associates; aren’t.\(^7\)

Gordon Hookey is right; Aboriginal Australians are absolute authority arguing Aboriginality” (my emphasis) and there are many excellent critical discussions of the

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\(^6\) Ibid., 31-32.

\(^7\) Taken from Anita Heiss, ed., Life in Gadigal Country (Strawberry Hills, NSW: Gadigal Information Service, 2002), 41.
disputed meanings of “Aboriginality”, by Aboriginal people. This thesis does not make any attempt to discuss what makes, or does not make, an “Aboriginal” person. Here I also heed the words of Mick Dodson, who argues that Aboriginality has been defined by policy-makers and white authorities (including intellectuals in the academy) for too long; it is now the prerogative of “Aboriginal nations themselves within their boundaries” to affirm or deny people’s claims to Indigeneity. In this spirit he refuses to develop any essentialist or restrictive definition of Aboriginality since it may be used to exclude those with legitimate claims. Dodson writes:

In making our self-representations public, we are aware that our different voices may be heard once again only in the language of the alien tongue. We are aware that we risk their appropriation and abuse, and the danger that a selection of our representations will be to once again fix Aboriginality in absolute and inflexible terms … However, without our own voices, Aboriginality will continue to be a creation for and about us. This is all the more reason to insist that we have control over both the form and content of representations of our Aboriginalities. All the more reason that the voices speak our languages [and] resist translation into the languages and categories of the dominant culture.

When I discuss Aboriginal authors and Indigenous Australian writers and storytellers, it is accordingly (with one significant exception) because they identify and are uncontroversially identified by others in the relevant community as Aboriginal (the terms “Aboriginal” and “Indigenous Australian” are used

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10 See also Bain Attwood’s historical examination of how a common Aboriginal identity was forged. He argues that this occurred while different Indigenous groups were being brought in closer physical proximity, and occurred partially as a reaction to a common enemy of authoritarian and oppressive policies such as segregation and assimilation. Bain Attwood, The Making of the Aborigines (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1989), 150.
interchangeably because I do not discuss works by people identifying as Torres Strait Islanders here).

While being guided by Hookey's and Dodson's comments, I have included comments on some works by an author who has come to be seen as problematic, namely Mudrooroo's *Wild Cat Falling* series and his *Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World*. This is in spite of the fact that in the last decade it has become clear that Mudrooroo traces his biological ancestry not to Indigenous Australia, as he and others believed for much of his life, but through his father to Black America. Some reasoning for this is warranted, since there is disputation these days about whether Mudrooroo’s work should be accorded any attention. Mudrooroo, and the latter novel, remain important to me personally because this is the text which initially set off my engagement with Indigenous Australian texts. But, more than this, I am hesitant to exclude Mudrooroo because it seems to me that the complicated mapping of identity in Mudrooroo’s case offers a concrete example of the difficulties Dodson describes above. It has been the discovery that his “true” biological heritage is not Aboriginal but part-Afro-American which has often been used to declare that Mudrooroo is not Aboriginal and therefore not an Aboriginal writer. Yet genetic heritage is only ever a part of what a person’s identity comprises with lived experiences, self-identifications and how one is interpolated by others (in the sense described by Louis Althusser) just as important in any consideration of identity. Mudrooroo himself directly refers to this in his blunt response to the very public revelations about his father’s biological background: “Whatever my identity is, it rests on my history of over fifty years and
that is that." Mudrooroo, who for decades was considered an iconic Indigenous writer and critic (and considered himself to be this, too), but whose authenticity has been questioned in more recent years, therefore occupies the ambivalent limits of who is considered an Aboriginal author in this thesis.

The range of what is lived as "Aboriginality" in Australia today is extremely broad, and the texts this thesis considers are equally eclectic. In what follows I have selected a range of texts by people who live in the city, in rural areas and traditional homelands. While the language of these texts is predominantly English, there are a number of songs which are considered in translation, and many texts which incorporate words, phrases, and on occasion, longer passages from Indigenous languages. This is in acknowledgement that Aboriginal peoples possess distinct - though equally as authentic - experiences, modes of organisation, languages and ways of speaking, depending on where they live and how they have been affected and come to terms with the processes of colonisation and European settlement.

However, in spite of this attempt there are - inevitably - many gaps in the experiences of Aboriginality evoked by the works considered in the chapters which follow.

11 European Association for the Study of Australia, Newsletter No. 20, May 1999, quoted in culturebase@hkw.de, Culturebase.Net the International Artist Database: Mudrooroo, http://www.culturebase.net/artist.php?597. There have been many thousands of words written and spoken about Mudrooroo and how the question of his identity reflects upon how he is read (and whether he ought to be read at all). In his case this is particularly impassioned, since in his earlier critical writings Mudrooroo articulated quite rigid views about who was and was not, an Aboriginal, or an Aboriginal writer. Some of the complexity of his case has been teased out in the essays in Annalisa Oboe, ed., Mongrel Signatures: Reflections on the Work of Mudrooroo (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2003). See also Eva Rask Knudsen, The Circle and the Spiral: A Study of Australian Aboriginal and New Zealand Māori Literature (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2004), 15.

12 I will use the word "classical" Indigenous culture to describe pre-contact Aboriginal formations, since I find the idea of labelling these "traditional" Aboriginal cultures misleading (for reasons that will be discussed in Chapter Four) and will divide "contemporary" Aboriginal cultures into where people live (with the understanding that many Aboriginal people move between these) i.e. in the city, in rural areas and traditional homelands.
Why literature?

What does it mean to consider Australian Indigenous texts as literature? Stephen Muecke makes some suggestive comments:

To attempt to recuperate a body of Aboriginal narratives as ‘works of art’ or as ‘Literature’ is not to discover any intrinsic merit in them. Rather it is to reiterate a discourse of the aesthetic which reads them in a certain way. In a sense it rewrites them as literature.\(^\text{13}\)

An engagement with texts by Indigenous Australians which involves reading them as literature places them in a certain – literary and aesthetic – environment, Muecke suggests. His comments may seem to problematise literary approaches, but in fact they point toward what is involved in any approach, since to place Indigenous texts or songs in anthropological, historical, musicological, or other contexts (such as the “cultural studies” context employed by Muecke) is also to read them as something. Positioning these texts as “literature” is to filter them through traditionally-emergent and evolving questions of the kind considered appropriate to the discipline of literary appreciation and criticism. I believe that to date literary studies has not been engaged enough in the “literariness” of many of these texts – particularly songs from Indigenous languages which remain under-heard, under-read and under-appreciated – having been content to leave them to the interests of anthropologists and historians. This thesis accordingly probes what it is that a literary and aesthetic interest can – and cannot – do, tracing the extent to which Aboriginal works show similarity of concern with some fundamental literary preoccupations, as well as how these works open up and extend the horizons of the literary in their divergences.

My approach here is therefore not to reject established literary criticism and its questions, since these are the traditions of reading and questioning in which I have been acculturated and apprenticed. But equally I attempt not to merely slot Indigenous textual formations into its boxes. Such a project would continue a kind of "colonising" project which is all too familiar to Aboriginal Australians, in which Australian culture – and its literature – has been complicit. The use of the English language and literature as a means of imparting and promulgating European values and civilisation to Indigenous peoples across the world who were considered "savages" has been intensely interrogated by postcolonial scholars, and any engagement seeking to relate to Indigenous Australian texts in a "literary" way has to seek to understand the haunting history embedded within it. In what follows I therefore seek to explicitly display and draw out some of the tensions involved in literary approaches, such as (in one common literary stream), the presumption that authors are all alike: single individuals whose intentions are what makes it to a written page. As Chapter One details, Aboriginal creative practives reveal this figure as a Western, Romantic construct, as they show, in contrast, the importance of collaboration and they position texts more as being representative of a community rather than a single individual. The originator of words may be a person, or it may be a spirit, dead relative, or even the person when asleep.

**Fusion of Horizons**

At the heart of this thesis is Gadamer's explication of the "fusion of horizons" *(Horizontverschmelzung)*, so it is necessary to indicate how it conceives horizons and the idea of horizons fusing. What is a horizon? At its most basic level, Gadamer
writes, a horizon is “the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point.” We invoke this sense of horizons metaphorically when we speak of someone having narrow horizons, or that so-and-so’s horizons are expanding (TM 302/ GWI 307-8). A horizon, in other words, delimits a range of vision from sometime and somewhere in particular, marking limits, providing the tacit background for human beings’ engagement in a taken-for-granted world, and excluding the possibility of total knowledge or standing outside any and all situations to be able to take in everything at once. Horizons are a means of evoking and talking about the necessary, first-person perspective we bring to the world, and its shaping through historical, linguistic and social factors.

Horizons are fundamental in the sense that having a horizon – equally a perspective and a range of vision – is unavoidable. The world is never pure phenomenon or sheer things in themselves to us: it is, as Edmund Husserl suggested, a shifting life-world (Lebenswelt), which he describes in the following way:

(t)he life world, for us who wakingly live in it, is always already there, existing in advance for us, the ground of all praxis ... The world is pregiven to us, the waking, always somehow practically interested subjects, not occasionally but always and necessarily as the universal field of all actual and possible praxis, as horizon. To live is always to live-in-certainty-of-the-world.14

We always live in a taken-for-granted historical and social world which is saturated with meanings that exist before us, and which continue on after our death, and much of this thesis will be an attempt to conceive the repercussions of this for textual understanding. So too, will be the recognition that this taken-for-granted world is not static. Crucially, as much as horizons delimit a range of vision and what is seen at

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any one moment, horizons also suggest the ability to go beyond the limitations of one’s immediate setting to see something further away. As one moves about and gains more varied experiences, the horizon will shift as well, allowing some aspects of the scene to come more clearly into view and others to recede or be obscured.

The above indicates two seemingly opposed but integral aspects of horizons: they mark limits, and they suggest the ability to go beyond these boundaries. When I talk of horizons, it is with a sense of the continual oscillation between these two senses of the word.

The horizon from within which I come is that of a non-Indigenous Australian, and this is a thesis admittedly and openly “produced through the filter of the white gaze,” in Aileen Moreton-Robinson’s neat phrase. This is the condition of possibility of my understanding: as the above indicates, horizons or “filters” formed through personal experience, and familial, cultural and linguistic traditions determine and enable the very possibility of understanding. They are not to be rejected or negated, but rather, something to become aware one has, attuned toward, and probing of. In the following chapters I will enquire into the particularities and the consequences of having horizons which determine what is seen, but which are also undergoing constant alteration.

What happens when distinct horizons meet, or “fuse”? In the activity of hermeneutic engagement with a literary text, “fusion” describes how aspects of another horizon (that of the text) and the contours of one’s own are made more explicit at the points

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in which they meet, as the individual horizons, through this interaction, are transformed into something new.

It is important to carefully identify and define what I (following Gadamer) mean by the fusion of horizons, because whether “fusion of horizons” is actually such an appropriate term is a matter of debate. Admittedly the word “fusion” has, in these days of fusion food and fusion music, a hefty connotation of what Jacqui Lo calls “happy hybridity”. A sense of obliteration and melting away of differences is accentuated by the German word, Verschmelzung. And, as one of Gadamer’s most astute commentators remarks, the word “fusion” does not quite seem to fit the “ruptures that dis-turb (sic) our attempts to reconcile different ethical-political horizons.” This is unfortunate because Gadamer’s actual examples of the fusion of horizons are not at all smooth or homogenising. Rather, his descriptions of the meeting points between distinct horizons help us appreciate that the production of understanding is a provisional and endless activity or event which occurs ever anew in any and every meeting between people and texts from different cultures, from different temporal periods, and indeed may occur between individuals living in the same time and place.

It is through the intermeshed meeting and engagement or “fusion” of horizons that one’s personal horizons expand as, in the meeting with another horizon which differs, Gadamer describes how aspects of our own may become questionable. We come to be aware of and assess some of the prejudices and prejudgments which are embedded in our way of thinking and acting. In sum, the encounter with a text (or


with others) can lead to an encounter, for the reader, with the limits of him- or herself, and to investigate and interrogate the assumptions and pre-understandings brought to the text. Fusion thus involves a sense of reflection and transformation as parts of the foreign horizon are integrated into one’s own, with one’s own horizon and ultimately the “foreign” horizon becoming different as a result. This thesis seeks to investigate the possible transformative results of the meeting between distinct horizons through which differences and similarities themselves become thematised (rather than any cosy co-option or obliteration of differences). 19

**Difference to other approaches**

Philosophical hermeneutics is of importance and relevance to literary studies, I argue, in that it develops a coherent and practically-orientated account of the encounter with the different horizons presented by literary texts. As some of the major debates Gadamer was engaged in with critical theory and deconstruction show (the key points of which will be appraised in this thesis), however, this is not uncontroversial. It further needs to be acknowledged that similar kinds of issues have been addressed by the predominantly French developments of post-structuralism and deconstruction. Michel Foucault, Maurice Blanchot and Jacques Derrida (though for somewhat different reasons) all display similarities with Gadamer’s work in that they all highlight the centrality of language and are characteristic thinkers of the twentieth century “linguistic turn”. They relativise the role played by the consciousness of the

19 In a cross-cultural context the Yolngu metaphor of “Ganma” is also suggestive. Ganma refers to the meeting and mixing of water from the sea (Western knowledge) and the river of water from the land (Yolngu knowledge) which flow into a common lagoon and become one in what has been described as “a confluence of waters.” Helen Watson, the Yolngu community at Yirrkala, and David Wade Chambers, *Singing the Land, Signing the Land* (Geelong, Victoria: Deakin University Press, 1989), 5-11.
author and the interpreter, develop sophisticated insights into the relationship between the self and others, and offer critiques of an “objective” basis for thought, knowledge, and action.\(^{20}\)

This thesis focuses upon Gadamer’s work because I believe the post-Heideggerian German contribution to such questioning has been relatively overlooked, particularly in Australia. Gadamer’s distinctive concerns – the prominence he accords first-person approaches to understanding, his continuation and radical critique of Romantic hermeneutics, and his very acute sensitivity to the temporal and finite nature of understanding – provide an exemplary instance of these contributions.

Rather than offering much by way of a sustained comparison between Gadamer and the post-structuralists, I have restricted myself to intermittent comments since I did not wish too much attention to debates in European-centred philosophy to drown out the Indigenous Australian voices the writer of this thesis is learning so much from.

It is also necessary here, to note one last, seminal discourse which, although not often directly referred to, offers a tacit (and at times explicit) point of reference and comparison: the wide-ranging critique developed by post-colonialists in the last half-century.\(^{21}\) Post-colonialists have done important work in identifying and theorising


the strategies and effects of colonisation, and considering the extent to which settler societies like Australia have – and have not – moved beyond colonialism. They have interrogated the role played by literature in European imaginings, and the role played by writings of the colonised – like the works considered in this thesis – in attempting to reclaim and re-situate Indigenous cultural heritages while subjecting the colonial project to their own critiques.

By focussing upon a hermeneutic appreciation of Indigenous Australian texts, I aim to extend the conversation with these works along lines which are perhaps more unfamiliar than the now well-trodden terrain of post-colonialism. Philosophical hermeneutics makes a distinctive and enriching contribution, especially given that it seeks to address similar themes to post-colonialists, but does so in the light of the hermeneutic tradition: interrogating what occurs at the borders between different horizons (what post-colonialists call “hybridity”), raising issues of language and the extent to which we can identify what Jürgen Habermas calls “systematically distorted conversation” in language, and examining relationships between the self and other as these are inscribed within actual situations comprised of entrenched unequal social relations (between hegemonic and subaltern groups, or between the

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22 Many Indigenous Australian scholars and critics themselves weigh into the conversation with the suggestion that there is little “post” about the colonial enterprise in Australia. See, for instance, Anita Heiss’ collection of comments about the applicability of “post-colonial” to the Australian situation in Heiss, Dhuuluu-Yala: To Talk Straight, 43-46. A number of Indigenous critics – while utilising some of the critical tools that post-colonialism has made available – also express reservations. Michele Grossman, for example, in her Introduction to a collection of Aboriginal critical writings voices the suspicion that post-colonialism reinscribes the privilege of non-Indigenous academics, with the field of “post-colonial discourse” often constructed in a way as to omit Indigenous people, their ways of knowing and their current concerns. Michele Grossman, ed., Blacklines: Contemporary Critical Writing by Indigenous Australians, 23.
global North and South). While sharing some similarities, however, the ways hermeneuts and post-colonialists address these themes is not identical.

I believe that it is particularly the participant or first-person focus of hermeneutics that leads beyond some of the impasses of post-colonial thinking.²³ Hermeneutics pursues important questions that are often ignored by post-colonialists; namely, given that many recent texts by Indigenous Australians inscribe a sense of “difference” and “otherness” to European and white settler perspectives on experiences of the Australian past and present, what occurs when a non-Indigenous reader encounters such texts and seeks to understand them? This leads to other questions such as: why do some people find it interesting and valuable to read Indigenous Australian texts? Why would we like others to do so, too? This thesis therefore takes for granted post-colonial critique and its strategies to extend the conversation about Indigenous Australian texts in novel directions, and to re-introduce humanist-oriented questions that do not, however, display the universalist and apolitical naivety of earlier humanist inquiry.

²³ Paul Muldoon similarly positions hermeneutics as a potentially fruitful way of avoiding some of the problems of post-colonial theories that tend to rely on post-structuralist ideas, specifically in that it avoids their ambivalence toward the idea of emancipation. He identifies the ambiguity of the issue in the following way: post-colonialists and post-structuralists are highly attuned to the limitations inherent in essentializing Aboriginality, where “being Aboriginal means having to endlessly perform and give testament to a set of cultural beliefs and practices”. Taken in such a way “Aboriginality”, he notes, “could well become another vehicle of dispossession rather than a basis for resistance.” On the basis of this such critics are highly suspicious of placing any limits on what “authentic” or “genuine” Aboriginality may mean (see also Mick Dodson’s comments on page 21 of this thesis). But, at the same time, Muldoon acknowledges that there is something disquieting about “the refusal of humanist conceptions of the subject that incorporate the moral idea of authenticity or being ‘true to oneself.’” He argues that if “Aboriginality” is understood only as a discursive function or political site where different voices are competing for control (as it is construed by many post-structuralists and by post-colonial critics influenced by post-structuralist theories), then it can “never function as a basis for identification and resistance” – but this is plainly what the struggle of many Indigenous Australians for recognition is about. Philosophical hermeneutics overcomes this impasse, he suggests, because it is oriented toward the self-understanding of the speaker. Paul Muldoon, “Between Speech and Silence: The Postcolonial Critic and the Idea of Emancipation,” Critical Horizons 2, no. 1 (2001).
CHAPTER ONE

How do texts mean? "Authoring" the Aboriginal text

It is in the understanding of its readers that the text, even the biographical text, gains a reference (Bedeutung) that surpasses the memory of its origin.24 This first chapter exemplifies the way the first three chapters are structured. On the one hand it is a discussion of the differences apparent between some Indigenous Australian authoring practices and a dominant way of approaching the question of the author in literary studies (and in the hermeneutic tradition) – the creative, individual figure whose intentions are realised in a work. Conversely, it also examines some of the ways in which the preoccupations of literary studies influence how these texts are understood by non-Indigenous readers in the first place.

Debates about narrative meaning have often centralised around the question of authorial intention. I shall refer to those who prioritise the relationship between an

author's intentions and textual meaning, and who assert that this (single) meaning can be identified as the correct meaning of a work as "intentionalists". This chapter will trace the modern emergence of intentionalist theories to Romantic hermeneutics and the views of thinkers such as Friedrich Schleiermacher at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century. It then sketches in some more recent manifestations of intentionalism and explores variations between these "conventional" (non-Indigenous or "Western") ideas about authorship and the positions an Indigenous Australian author or storyteller may take. The basic question of who writes is one which is raised anew by some Aboriginal authoring practices. Who is it that for all intents and purposes, authorises certain texts, and can the "who" be delimited as neatly and as invariably as intentionalism tacitly assumes?

The second set of questions this chapter considers revolve around the situation in which meaning comes to be expressed (for literature, the situation of reading). I shall outline Hans-Georg Gadamer's characterisation of understanding as being engaged in a certain kind of event-like situation which is akin to a conversation and to the activity of play, and which stresses the need for applicatio (application) on the part of the person who is attempting to understand. I argue that this overcomes some of the limitations of intentionalist paradigms, and presents a far more evocative description of how non-Indigenous readers may engage with Indigenous Australian texts.
Romantic Hermeneutics and its link to contemporary views of the author

Let's start with a sketch of a conventional author. One common portrayal of the "typical" author is as a creative genius; he or she is the "creator of a unique written text, for which he or she exercised sole responsibility and deserved full credit."25 Here the author is typified as a talented individual who creates a piece of work through the struggle of his or her own imagination, with limited input from others. This view, importantly, contains the kernels of the Romantic view of creative talent, and it continues to infuse popular beliefs about what authors are and what they do.

The Australian writer Malcolm Knox, in identifiably Romantic vein, recently described authors as "those isolated individuals, separated from each other, living with their ghosts."26 What is relevant to us about Knox's statement is the way he identifies the "isolated individual" author and his or her practices as absolutely typical. Casting writers as those whose practice is "living with their ghosts" is also of note: writers are not only cloistered individuals but inward-looking, obsessed with the phantasmagoria of their own minds.

The Romantic period did not invent the author, inheriting much of the modern view of authorship from the Renaissance, which itself yielded such seminal authorial figures such as Philip Sydney and Pico della Mirandola.27 And prior to Romanticism,

27 Foucault traces the seeds of the emergence of the "author" (as opposed to the writer) to the Renaissance. Kevin Pask traces the author's origins in the English vernacular tongue to the late medieval period, as he examines how the poetic author gradually acquired authority and prestige. Kevin Pask, The Emergence of the English Author: Scripting the Life of the Poet in Early Modern England (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
in the patchwork and often fragmentary collection of texts and styles of thinking that form the traditions of hermeneutics the author was often considered to possess a central role, especially during the Reformation. However, it is arguable that a new currency was invested in the author in what became the major strain of Romanticism. Further, at this time the author's role in the interpretation of texts was shifted to centre stage. Friedrich Schleiermacher, who lived between 1768 and 1834, and who is one of the primary figures in the hermeneutic tradition, epitomizes this shift. In his work, the author provides the primary context for interpretation of a work.

Schleiermacher proposed that the goal of reading is to reconstruct the author's intentions in order to "understand the discourse just as well or even better than its creator." The "interpreter must put himself subjectively and objectively in the position of the author," and recreate his or her intentions from a first-person as well as a third-person perspective (my italics).

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29 Schleiermacher was a Protestant theologian, classical philologist, church statesman, educator and preacher. Our understanding of Schleiermacher's hermeneutical thought is derived mainly from manuscripts, lecture notes (from lectures conducted between 1805 and 1833), and some remarks in *Dialektik und Aesthetik*. Philosophically, Schleiermacher is involved in post-Kantian attempts to come to terms with Kant's transcendental philosophy and was linked to the *Frühromantik*, the early Romantics centred in Jena and Berlin at the end of the eighteenth century to early nineteenth century. This group also included Fichte, Friedrich Schlegel and his brother August Willhelm, Schelling, and the poets Ludwig Tieck and Novalis. Their reaction against the Enlightenment puts them in company with Hamann, Herder and Jacobi. For simplicity I discuss Schleiermacher as a representative figure of this period, and his is a recurring voice in the following chapters.


What is it to understand an author’s discourse “better” than she understood it herself? Understanding better, Schleiermacher argues, involves reconstitution: reconstituting the setting, contexts, motives and conventions (most importantly conventions of language and of genre) that the author operated in and against, rendering explicit much that the author took for granted or was unconscious of. The reader seeks to “step out of one’s own frame of mind into that of the author,” and to “become the immediate reader of a text in order to understand its allusions, its atmosphere, and its special field of images.” These elements of understanding the origin of the thought, which may be either expressed in verbal speech or in writing, are to be connected to the wider contexts of all parts of the author’s life and milieu in a quest to re-apprehend the creative act internally.

This is the core of what Schleiermacher calls the “psychological” or “technical” aspect of interpretation, in which the goal of interpretation is fulfilled by adequately reconstructing the author’s presence. He places this beside the “grammatical” interpretation of words and phrases which aims at understanding an expression in terms of its relationship to its language (Sprache) and the prevailing conventions of the time. “Grammatical interpretation” proposes a view of language as an interpersonal linguistic system, and has two canons. The first canon draws interpretation back to the field of language (Sprachgebiet) shared by the author and his or her readers. The second canon ties the meaning of a word to the totality of the utterance or text: “The meaning of every word in a given passage has to be determined in reference to its coexistence (Zusammensein) with those that surround

31 Ibid., 42-43.
it." Schleiermacher identified the twin pillars of interpretation (*Auslegung*) as equal and always interconnected, and thus combined a structural view of the workings of language (in grammatical interpretation) with a first-person focus on the author (in psychological-technical interpretation).

Following Schleiermacher, the author, conceived as the individual mind responsible for a work, remained central to hermeneutic thought about textual interpretation (as indeed it did to the general reading public). Wilhelm Dilthey, for instance, who disseminated many of Schleiermacher’s ideas after his death, proposed that reading is the reception of the externalisation or embodiment of another human being’s thought and action in words. The goal of understanding is to re-experience this objective spirit. More pronouncedly than Schleiermacher, the younger Dilthey sought to *reproduce* the author’s state of mind or psychology, following the question: “How can an individually structured consciousness reconstruct – and thereby know objectively – the individuality of another?”

Now, these conceptions of the need for the reader to step out of him or herself and reconstruct the author’s role and intentional state are not without consequences:

32 *Hermeneutics and Criticism and Other Writings*, 30, 44. My explication of Schleiermacher has drawn out equal importance of psychological and grammatical interpretation to Schleiermacher’s schema, which was circumscribed in Gadamer’s account in *Truth and Method*. Criticisms of Gadamer’s interpretation of Schleiermacher have been made by Andrew Bowie, E.D. Hirsch and Kristin Gjesdal. See Kristin Gjesdal, “Hermeneutics and Philology: A Reconsideration of Gadamer’s Critique of Schleiermacher,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 14, no. 1 (2006): 142. See also Bowie’s notes on further reading in Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics and Criticism and Other Writings*, xxxiv. Gadamer himself later admitted that his account of Schleiermacher in *Truth and Method* displays “a certain one-sidedness” (TM 564, GW2 462) as more of Schleiermacher’s manuscripts became available.

Gerard Bruns links such Romantic hermeneutic traditions to the emergence of modern literary criticism and its focus on the problem of the legitimacy of interpretations:

To interpret means to produce a version of what something means, thus producing, or presupposing, the need for (some would say, the problem of) authority. In fact, no interpretation ever takes place apart from a specific, authorizing tradition of doing such a thing. What is called “Romantic hermeneutics” is one of these traditions – the one in which modern textual and literary criticism came to flourish. It is one of the functions of any hermeneutic tradition to provide you with a way of answering the question, How do you know when you have interpreted Scripture (or any text) correctly? From the standpoint of Romantic hermeneutics, to interpret correctly means to stand in place of the author.34

Legitimate interpretations, in other words, in Romantic hermeneutics, are those which associate their activity with the author and his or her intentions, and this remains – despite the influence of formalism for much of the twentieth century, and the critical movements of post-structuralism (both of which will be discussed later) – a decisive influence upon contemporary readers and on practices of literary criticism.

The primary concern I have about such theories, as I detail below, is that intentionalism legitimises and normalises a certain view of what correct interpretation involves. Such a view, however, in being centred on an individual author and his or her creative activity, vitally misrepresents common Aboriginal creative practices. Before offering a survey of these, I shall trace some more recent manifestations of intentionalism in the present, in which echoes of Romantic hermeneutics remain apparent.

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Recent manifestations of intentionalism

Emilio Betti, one of the primary developers of Romantic hermeneutics in the twentieth century, continues to argue that the author is central to interpretation. He maintains that when we read we respond to thoughts preserved in the amber of words: to “sensible forms, through which another spirit, objectified in them speaks to ours.” “Everything,” he expansively suggests, that comes to us from another mind “extends a call to be understood, a request and a message to our sensibility and our intelligence.”35 This is a message-based conception of human communication where the constant is “always that of a mind to which come a message and a stimulus from the objectification of another individual.”36 In the English-speaking world, these ideas have been developed and propagated by Betti’s student E.D. Hirsch, whose Validity in Interpretation (1967), Aims of Interpretation (1976) and more recent essays on the subject are widely known.37

Hirsch is concerned about the legitimacy of interpretations, and identifies the author’s intentions (what he calls the “author’s verbal meaning”) as the only real means we have of providing a limitation on potential interpretive arbitrariness. Literary criticism should focus on intentions, he suggests, because they are the most practical candidate for a singular, determinate, and unchanging or fixed point of reference, an agreed norm able to legitimise some kinds of interpretative activity


36 This is not an unsophisticated concept, since Betti, who had a deep interest in legal hermeneutics, immediately goes on in this passage to recognise that an “individual” may be “personal and individually identifiable or impersonal and superindividual,” although one wonders what he would make of the kinds of authors discussed below. Betti, “The Epistemological Problem of Understanding as an Aspect of the General Problem of Knowing,” 35.

amidst the vast array of potentially different, even contradictory, readings. Hirsch’s proximity to Romantic hermeneutics can be seen in his assertion that meaning requires a meaner (someone who means something by what is expressed), and, on the opposite end, a receiver who attempts to recognise or reconstruct this. Reading, he proposes, involves an “Erkennen des Erkannten”, or re-cognising what has previously been cognised.

In Hirsch’s schema, the verbal meaning of a text includes a range of meanings (conscious or unconscious) that were intended in the author’s use of certain words. This is largely, but not purely a matter of desiring to uncover an individual’s psychological state (which is what Dilthey often argued), since Hirsch follows Schleiermacher in yoking what is sharable to the more general structures of the language. The goal of interpreting meaning is reconstructing, according to the rules of this particular language what could be intended by this particular use of words, trying to achieve a re-cognising of what the author has written in so doing.

A number of more recent – and more strident – literary theorists further develop Romantic hermeneutics’ fixation on the relation between authorial intent and literary meaning. P.D. Juhl, for instance, claims that even when we believe we are looking at other facets of the text, like what the “text itself” says, we are making inferences

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38 “Verbal meaning is whatever someone has willed to convey by a particular sequence of linguistic signs and which will be conveyed (shared) by means of those signs”. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 39. Husserl’s early work on intentional horizons and intended objects gives Hirsch the basis for positing the object of authorial intent. Giving the example of intending a tree, he examines how in different contexts the implications of “tree” differ. To a child, although she knows that trees have roots, she may “intend” only the visible parts of a tree when thinking of climbing it. A botanist would probably “intend” a tree differently, i.e. would have a different mental awareness when thinking about, or speaking about, a tree. Hirsch argues that verbal meaning in texts operates in a similar fashion: a “tree” in this instance is what was intended by the author’s use of words at a particular and originary historical point in time. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 58-59.

39 He emphasises that “[v]erbal meaning is, by definition, that aspect of a speaker’s ‘intention’ which, under linguistic conventions, may be shared by others.” Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, 218. This shares some features with Schleiermacher’s sense of the “grammatical” side of interpretation.
about the historical person and intention of the author. Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels go still further to argue that rather than there being a stipulative (or agreed-upon) connection between the author’s intentions and a determinate textual meaning (which is what Hirsch argues) there is, in fact, an irreducible logical connection between them. Knapp and Michaels assert that marks only become words and sentences (i.e. language) under the force of being uttered intentionally. Thus “meaning” simply just is what an author intended, or, to put it another way, there are no “intentionless meanings”. The upshot of this is that since one cannot avoid offering an interpretation that exemplifies the author’s intentions, they claim that not only is it “irrational” to concentrate interpretive questions about literary meaning upon anything other than an author’s intentions, it is pointless to bother with literary theory (attempts to reflect upon the practices through which literature is read and understood) at all. Although they follow a different path of reasoning for their conclusions, and do not acknowledge any affiliations to theorists like Schleiermacher, to my mind Knapp and Michaels uncannily pronounce the apotheosis of the author-centred view of meaning that was codified and developed in

40 P.D. Juhl, Interpretation: An Essay in the Philosophy of Literary Criticism (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980). The controversial paper “Against Theory,” by Knapp and Michaels (1982) set off a lively and influential debate in Critical Inquiry in the early 1980s, some of which (including this article) has been collected in W.J.T. Mitchell, ed., Against Theory: Literary Studies and the New Pragmatism (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1985). Extending John Searle’s work on intentionality and speech acts, Knapp and Michaels write: “Meaning is just another name for expressed intention, knowledge just another name for true belief, but theory is not just another name for practice. It is the name for all the ways people have tried to stand outside practice in order to govern practice from without.” (30)

Romantic hermeneutics, and which developed concurrently with the figure of the Romantic author.  

In all the above forms of intentionalism, someone – the “author” – has said something which can be discovered and understood by others. Understanding the meaning of a text is characterised as a mental event which involves reconstituting this message, whether this is heuristic and always approximate (Hirsch) or a logical extension of the way meaning, by definition, is associated with a speaker’s intention (Knapp and Michaels).

I have two major concerns with such theories. While intentionalist positions profess universal applicability, they generate and sanctify a view of the author which potentially misrepresents the ways in which Indigenous Australian works are produced, and trivialises the relationships between people, their environment, and their community, of which such productions are expressive. I suggest that there are real limitations to the insights to be gleaned from them since they tacitly start with a particular notion of what an author is (what I am referring to as the Romantic author), who is a single individual. However interesting Romantic hermeneutics and its contemporary successors may be, they fail, as I shall now discuss, to adequately accommodate or account for Aboriginal writings and storytelling practices, and some of the common modes of authorship that are practiced.

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43 Referring to the manifold forms of Indigenous creative activity, Stephen Muecke also criticises the West’s monological view of authorship in a post-structuralist inspired critique in Krim Benterrak, Stephen Muecke, and Paddy Roe, Reading the Country (Fremantle, WA: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1984), 242ff.
What I seek to demonstrate below is that many Indigenous authorial practices lead us to see the above forms of intentionalism, which place the individual author’s consciousness at the heart of interpretation, as peculiarly “Western”. Indigenous practices, whether in remote communities or in urban settings, tend to be far more communally and collaboratively based, and they frequently invoke other “creators” of the words which are spoken or sung to intentionally-directed human makers.

Following this section I will outline my second major concern with such theories: that conceiving literary meaning as comprising a “message” from author to reader, which the reader must reconstruct, fails to do justice to the literary encounter. Here, I will outline Gadamer’s approach, which insists that the text always reveals more than the author or creator (however conceived) intends, because the reader’s horizon is also necessarily engaged in any and every act of understanding.

**The Indigenous Australian author in society**

**Collaboration**

What I shall now examine are a number of ways the extensive and varied writings and practices of Indigenous “authoring” relativise the Western and Romantically-derived conception of the author and theories of textual meaning which rely upon it, by presenting explicit and implicit critiques of the individual author as the source or point of origin of a work.

Multiple authors who take turns as narrators, who play the roles of listeners as well as speakers, are an identifiable aspect of many Indigenous texts. This tendency can be discerned, for instance, in the common phenomenon of collaboration, particularly
in the mixed genre of life writing (which includes autobiography, biography and memoir). *Auntie Rita* is one well-known example, in which the writing is shared by Jackie and Rita Huggins, their voices stylistically separated through distinct typography (with Jackie’s voice appearing in italics and Rita’s in plain script).44 This device enables intergenerational perspectives to be offered as well as contrasting registers to be canvassed. Rita Huggins, whose life story forms the basis of the narrative, uses personal and colloquial forms of language. In her contributions Jackie Huggins appears to be both responding to her mother as a witness and participant in many of the events described, and offering a formal historian’s commentary about the ways in which her mother’s life experiences can be seen as typical of a generation of Indigenous Australians. At the beginning of the collection, Jackie Huggins acknowledges this to-and-fro movement, saying that through the separation of voices “I am not speaking for my mother but to her, with her, and about her.”45 There is, accordingly, no single focus or “intention” in *Auntie Rita*: the voices form a dialogue where each speaker either extends what the other one says, or shifts to related memories and thoughts, some of which contradict or revise the other’s memories. As this occurs, there is a continual oscillation between the vernaculars of personal forms of familial address and the explanatory academic speech patterns of the critical historian.

Rita and Jackie Huggins’ collaboration is notable in that it is an exploration of what Rocio Davis calls “the relational life”, a life lived amongst others and, from the

45 Ibid., 3. This form of co-operative storytelling has recently been employed in a similar way with the “Noongar talk” of Hazel Brown from Western Australia meeting the more literary, “authoritative” prose of her nephew, Kim Scott in Kim Scott and Hazel Brown, *Kayang and Me* (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2005), see 9-11.
outset, the memoir is at least *doubly*-intentioned. Such a mode of writing demonstrates the activity of dialogue and negotiation, since Jackie and her mother speak to, and at some points past one another in *Auntie Rita*, and navigate the various registers suitable to the arenas in which they live (in the family; in a community; in institutional environments; in the “virtual community” formed by writing).

Also reflecting a conception of life as a “relational life” are the large number of collaborations where, although one person has been responsible for writing, he or she does so with the consent, interest and participation of those whose stories are told. An instance of this is Doris Pilkington’s fictionalised memoir, *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*. This work relates the forced removal of the author’s mother and two aunts from their community of Jigalong in the Pilbara region of North-Western Australia as young children and their astonishing 2000km trek by foot across the desert to return home. Dramatising the story told by Pilkington’s relatives and archival data, the memoir also sets these lives in a much longer time frame. The text begins with an imaginative account, based on orally transmitted stories in the area, of the pre-contact life of the Noongar (or Nyoongah) people, then their early encounters with the colonisers and the decline of classical, tribal ways of life during the early contact period between the Noongar people and white whalers and settlers. It is into this setting that the later story of child removal and the girls’ attempt to return home is woven. This is significant: the girls’ outback odyssey is thus presented as

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46 Rocio G. Davis, “Dialogic Selves: Discursive Strategies in Transcultural Collaborative Autobiographies by Rita and Jackie Huggins and Mark and Gail Mathabane,” *Biography* 28, no. 2 (2005). The contribution of the editor, Alison Ravenscroft, will be discussed below in the section on the role of the Communications Circuit.

simultaneously detailing their own courageous feat and as part of the larger fabric of
stories from the area.

In more remote areas, collaboration also features strongly. The practices of the
Yanuna people from the Gulf of Carpentaria are prime examples where collaboration
is vital in song creation. While one person may compose most of a song, a relative or
known song person (a person recognised as having skill in song-making) assists in
bringing the song to its final form. This form of “editing” (or co-composition)
extends the practice of composition out to incorporate wider community
participation as an essential and irreducible component of the song’s production.48

Openly collaborative practices such as these serve to situate and bring into relief
other partnerships, such as the astonishing wealth of collaboration and partnership
between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in the past. These were not
adequately recognised at the time and remain insufficiently appreciated today – so
much so that Penny van Toorn asks the haunting question: “[w]hat would the history
of Aboriginal writing look like if all Aboriginal authorial, co-authorial and
translational practices were considered?”49 Until recently, white authors were
routinely given sole acknowledgement for many works which included significant
input by Aboriginal people, and the Indigenous people whose stories were being told
to white audiences were typically identified as “native informants” or not
acknowledged at all. These are not limited to anthropological writings, but also were
common practices in what are classified as literary works. Popular pieces such as
Douglas Lockwood’s I, the Aboriginal, the “Classic Aboriginal Biography” of the
1960s (as it has been described), are typical of this. The “I” of the title,

48 R.M.W. Dixon and Martin Duwell, ed., Little Eva at Moonlight Creek and Other Aboriginal Song
Waipuldanya, finds no mention on the cover or spine, although both Lockwood's name and the name of the white illustrator is prominent on both.\(^5\)

Earlier in the twentieth century, even in the unusual instances where Aboriginal people possessed a public voice, this did not preserve their stories from being attributed to others. A sense of scandal still attaches to the stories David Unaipon wrote between 1924 and 1925. Although Unaipon was a well-known inventor and public speaker, acknowledgment of Unaipon as the author of his stories waited many decades, with the collection titled *Legendary Tales of the Australian Aborigines* finally published in his own name in 2001. When the stories were first published in 1930 and in subsequent reprints they appeared under the title *Myths and Legends of the Australian Aborigines*. Authorship was attributed to W. Ramsey Smith, an anthropologist and at one time the Chief Medical Officer of South Australia who did not write any of the stories himself, but obtained the copyright from Angus & Robertson in rather scurrilous circumstances.\(^5\)

By no means uncommon occurrences, what these two instances illustrate is that it is only in a very restricted sense that "authorship" pertains simply to the writer of words on a page, as the intentionalists mentioned at the beginning of the chapter suppose. Adam Shoemaker and Stephen Muecke, the editors of *Legendary Tales of the Australian Aborigines*, point out that authorship also has social and legal components, and the unfolding case of Unaipon bears out their observation that in the 1920s authorship was "a right that Indigenous people were generally considered

\(^5\) Douglas Lockwood, *I, the Aboriginal* (Adelaide, Sydney, Melbourne: Rigby, 1962). This has been the case in all eleven editions published to date.

incapable of holding.” The lack of acknowledgment faced by Waipuldanya and Unaipon reflects the prevailing social, political and legal institutions of these times, in which Indigenous Australians lived under severe restrictions and the firmly-ingrained assumption in white settler society that Aboriginal people were not to speak for themselves, but were to be spoken for when deemed necessary. It also represents a more general fact which is not about legal rights but about the more nebulous area of authority in the social realm: Indigenous Australians were not considered to have the authority to be in control of (to “authorise”) their own words.

Other alternatives to the author as the singular origin of the work

Multiple authors and collaborative efforts are types of authorship that profoundly challenge the Romantic ideology of the individual creative genius, as does the realisation that an “author” is not merely a theoretical entity but involves legal and social components. Below, I want to outline another, related critique of intentionalism, in forms of Indigenous narrative art which present alternatives to the assumption that the creativity of the author wells up and outward from some specifically internal source.

Consider Pambardu, from the Pilbara region of Western Australia, reportedly the greatest maker of tabis (a kind of song) in the twentieth century. Pambardu was blind, and is said to have often sat alone listening to an invisible someone over his

\[^{52}\text{Unaipon, \textit{Legendary Tales of the Australian Aborigines}, xvii.}\]
\[^{53}\text{In order for the treatment of Waipuldunya and Unaipon to even appear scandalous, it seems to be a precondition that their authority to speak \textit{for themselves} is recognised. To put it the opposite way: authorship is not only about the creator of words on a page but about the kind of person who is considered to have the authority to speak. The failure of the exclusion of the \textit{author} to do so much as raise an eyebrow at the time shows that Aboriginal people were not publicly considered to hold the same capacity for authority – or authorship – as white people.}\]
shoulder, gathering songs. Pambardu’s practice of composition is typical of many Indigenous Australian cultures, where songs are not considered to be generated internally at all, but rather granted from external sources. Butcher Joe from the Roebuck Plains near Broome, for example, attributes a series of fifty nurlu songs to a balangan (a skeleton spirit, or spirit of the dead, in this case the spirit of his mother’s dead sister Dyabiya), who appeared to him while he was asleep. Rather than the songs’ creator, Butcher Joe remains the guardian of these songs (one says that he “owns” it) until such time as he publically entrusts it to the next custodian. Whereas the rise of the individual Western author occurred concurrently with the establishment of the legal rights of copyright to guarantee payment for the fruits of the author’s creativity, Indigenous song “ownership” differs. Moreso than an indication of rights, it is a signal of responsibilities. Song-ownership consists of a form of guardianship where the guardian is responsible for deciding when and how the song is staged, and, if it involves dancing, the dance and accoutrements used. If the singer is someone else, permission is sought from the guardian to use the song and the song melody.

All of this is at work in the following, “Gudurrugudurr” (Nyularn’s Nurlu), another nurlu song from the Broome area, which was given by a balangan spirit to Nyularn while he was either asleep or in an altered state of consciousness. This song describes a journey through the western Kimberley region, and the interaction between a human (Nyularn), and ray and balangan spirits. It was “owned” by

55 Ray Keogh, “Nurlu Songs from the West Kimberley: An Introduction,” *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, no. 1 (1989): 3. This is a widespread phenomenon: the Armerre people in Central Australia have a genre of women’s songs (akweleye) which are also dream-given. Myfany Turpin discusses the latter in “Artfully Hidden: Text and Rhythm in a Central Australian Aboriginal Song Series,” *Musicology Australia* 29 (2007).

Nyularn, and translated and interpreted by the well-known Indigenous storyteller and Nyigina speaker, Paddy Roe.\textsuperscript{57}

Dawurlngana Dawurlngana wila

\textit{Nyularn and a group of ray were camped at the riverbank at Fitzroy Crossing (Dawurlngana). They saw two balangan drinking water from the river.}

Birurrururruy

yindydyangadyangadangyina

\textit{The balangan are called Birurrururruy. Nyularn’s group can see them getting ready to dance.}

mirurrungana

dyaburrugula dyaburrugula

\textit{The balangan suddenly appeared out of the fog. Perhaps they are devils and the fog has disguised them.}

birurrururruy

dyaburrga yinganydyina

\textit{The two balangan danced out of the fog and showed themselves to Nyularn’s group.}

gamngurruwara

buru dulgar jinganydyina

\textit{The two balangan wanted to pass through Nyularn’s camp, so they decided to go underground. They made a noise as they hit the ground, and they continued on their way after appearing on the other side of the camp.}

"Gudurrngudurr" (Nyularn’s Nurlu) highlights highly complex yet quotidian forms of interaction and communication between the spirit world (of balangan and ray) and

\textsuperscript{57} Duwell, ed., \textit{Little Eva at Moonlight Creek and Other Aboriginal Song Poems}, 74-75., with a description of the song on 71-72. Nurlu songs are also discussed in Keogh, “\textit{Nurlu Songs from the West Kimberley: An Introduction.}” Keogh also spent time with Paddy Roe and Butcher Joe Nangan in the 1980s. A slightly different translation is offered of the same \textit{nurlu} song on page 6 of this article, including Roe’s description of the accompanying dance. \textit{Nurlu} can be given by \textit{balangan} or \textit{ray} spirits.
the human, which disclose intimate relations and highly-wrought protocols between humans, spirits, and the landscape they all inhabit. The relationship between the balangan and human beings within the song (like the song’s origins as a dream) is remote from Western or European understandings. By association, the concept of the typical Romantic “author” as the composer of such works and to discuss its meaning through the idea of the “author’s intention” seems ludicrously out of place with such forms of song composition and associated forms of song guardianship.

Paddy Roe’s role of mediator or explicator is also significant. Because songs typically have many layers of meaning (which may be publically open and able to be known by all or secret, and known only to a circumscribed, initiated group) explication which is directed toward the particular audience members and performed in specific circumstances is frequently an associated part of the performance of the song itself. Here, again, song creation is not limited to the initial activity of composition, but has an afterlife which includes its explication toward particular audiences.

Two more examples from different areas in Australia indicate the complexity of ways in which the spirit world and human realms interact in many Indigenous Australian cultures. Known as Wangga songs, the first come from the Daly region in the North-West of the Northern Territory. Given to songmen by ghosts in dreams (who may be accompanied by animal or bird spirits), Wangga are sung at kapuk ceremonies, accompanied by the didjeridu, which are conducted to ease the passage of a dead spirit away from human society and back to the country from which it came. Wangga highlight the role of story and song in ceremonial life, indicating that
there is frequently a relationship between the ceremonial function of a song and whether its origins are considered to be human or ghostly. 58

The opening of David Unaipon’s short story “Hungarrda” provides the second example, where in sleep the narrator himself travels out of his body and travels immense distances in time and space. There he meets Hungarrda, the “great prophet who came out of the slimy sea, the Land of Mist” who imparts to him the secret code of initiation and laws of marriage. It begins:

Thus and thus spake Nha Teeyouwa (blackfellow). Ngan-Garra Doctor: Children, I have many strange stories to tell you. All came to me whilst I slumbered in deep sleep.

Enfolding itself from its appointed place my Spirit Self gently stepped outside my body frame with my earthly body subjective consciousness. And this is my experience. 59

This kind of authorship is intriguing vis-à-vis the question of authors and intentionality discussed at the beginning of the chapter, since it acknowledges the ultimate “author” to be one’s own spirit-self or oneself while asleep, yet this is by no means identical to the waking authorial self intentionalists presuppose. 60 It does not locate textual meaning in a message generated by an intentionally-directed, creative individual, but is more akin to a reporting or recording of an experience generated beyond the self.


60 Lionel Fogarty, a contemporary urban poet from Brisbane whose work will be discussed in Chapter Two, has a similar method of composition.
The Indigenous creative acts outlined above all raise the question of the relation between authorship and authority generated through such practices. For what I have called the Romantic or “typical” author the authority to speak is an assumed given, emerging from the creative genius of one’s individual talent. Being given songs by ghosts or attributing a song to a spirit author, in distinction, is a gesture which places the authority of the traditions, cosmology and convictions of the community behind the singer in a significantly different fashion.

What is common to all of the above examples is that they are inimical to linking authoring to the act of a person standing apart from his or her social world as an individual creator with identifiable intentions. Collaborative endeavours, for instance, open up the mental event of individual authorship since they are the end result of a set of social engagements “out” in the world rather than “in” individual’s minds. The participants in collaborations obviously have “intent” in the sense that each means something specific by what he or she says, but the text which results is a substantial modification and complication of any individual speaker’s meaning. Similarly, even if a spirit-author were acknowledged as the “author” (with a human conduit), to focus simply upon questions of the ghost-author’s intent fails to account for the complex negotiations between human and non-human realms which are mediated through such activities, which is an integral part of the meaning-complex being expressed.

All this is to say that authorship is always concretised in a range of specific practices and that it represents particular relations between people, their traditions and their structures of belief. As has been discussed, these structures are not equivalent between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian contexts. The question of who is an author, which I raised at the beginning of the chapter, admits of multiple answers
which relativise the Romantic view of the author, and intentionalist views of literary
meaning which take this figure for granted as the basis of their inquiry. This is
especially clear if we rephrase the question slightly: what is the source of the words
of the person who speaks, sings or puts words on a page?

The above practices are antithetical to what I have been calling the Romantic
conception of authorship. However, one must keep firmly in mind that there were a
number of competing impulses within Romanticism itself. There were and are many
Romanticisms, and some of these do not prioritise the author’s person and intent.

Intriguing similarities can be traced between the practices outlined above and
alternative Western traditions which also rely on a sense that words do not
necessarily have human makers but are granted to us through external (and often
divine) means. The religious poetic traditions of Europe, for instance, include figures
such as Milton and, into the Romantic period itself, William Blake, who believed
their words were imparted by the Holy Spirit or from angels. Mohammad received
the Qur’ān from God over a period of twenty years through the angel Gabriel. And
outside the Western literary heritage there are many contemporary similarities to
these practices: Fijians, to cite only one of many possible examples, continue to
understand that the words of the meke (songs, dances) are given by the ancestral
gods and are sacred. The poet, whose position is generally a hereditary one,
composes in a trance with the ancestral god speaking through him.61 All of these,
which share some similarities with Indigenous Australian textual practices are
similarly marginalised by intentionalist theories.

61 On meke, see Solaila Kubuabola, Ama Seniloli and Losana Vatucawaqa, “Poetry in Fiji: a general
introduction,” 7-19; and Semeti Kaisau, “The Functions of Fijian Mekes,” 20-31, in Ruth Finnegan
and Raymond Pillai, eds., Essays on Pacific Literature (Suva, Fiji: University of the South Pacific,
1978).
There are two other areas in which a singular focus upon intention would seem to vitiate an adequate understanding of Aboriginal creative activity that I shall now discuss.

**The representative activity of writing**

Although not what we would consider directly "collaborative" or "communal", many works by Indigenous Australians explicitly attest to the fact that they represent more than an individual perspective. The titles of Jack Miritji's memoir *My People's Life* and the anthology *Us Fellas* suggest that writing is often overtly used as a means of *representing* and *including* others.\(^{62}\) The protocols of community life also figure strongly in the following comment by the writer, Alexis Wright which draws out why she chooses, on the whole, to write fiction:

> I felt literature, the work of fiction, was the best way of presenting a truth—not the real truth, but more of a truth than non-fiction, which is not really the truth either. Non-fiction is often about the writer telling what is safe to tell. In being an Aboriginal person, we can feel constrained by cultural values on some issues. We can also feel constrained by our own families or the communities in which we live. This is to do with safeguarding all kinds of interests of the individual, the family, community, or Aboriginal people as a whole—and sometimes, rightly so. I have protected my family's interest. I also know 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. We have thousands of people who have no voice at all in today's Australia. I wonder how we are going to heal ourselves if we cannot speak about the pain of who we are?\(^{63}\)

This statement crystallises a sense of circumspection and responsibility towards those people Wright represents (or keeps silent about) in writing. Here, she suggests

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that writing – and especially fictional writing – offers a means of saying things which represent and affect a whole community, which for numerous reasons often remain unsaid. An early work by Wright, *Grog War*, exemplifies this desire to safeguard Aboriginal people in its utilisation of a highly unusual blend of factual and fictional narrative styles. *Grog War* recounts the internal negotiations over a number of years by the Warumungu people with the township of Tennant Creek and their eventual decision to restrict the sale of alcohol. Through newspaper reports, the minutes of major meetings, stories of participants, interpretations of the results of official reports and accounts of legal decisions it traces the often fractious process which led to limited trials and then the adoption of general rules limiting the amount of alcohol able to be procured and the times of day and days of the week it could be bought. Wright also examines the sources of resistance to these measures, including stonewalling by the local town council and the launching of legal action by the owners of bars and night clubs in the area. To focus on the destructive force of alcohol within the community, Wright intersperses the reports with the story of Lucas, Devine and Devine’s four teenage sons, all invented, but representatively typical, characters. All face lives blighted by the effects of alcohol and alcohol-fuelled violence and neglect, marred by the effects of despair, poverty and boredom, and informed by endemic racism and its effects. The stories are of existences akin to living nightmares, and serve to underscore both the complexity and intractability of the issues faced, and the urgency and strength of the desire of the Warumungu and Tennant Creek community to restrict access to alcohol. Day-to-day life is interspersed with casual scenes of alcohol-induced violence, such as this event involving the drunken Lucas and equally intoxicated Devine:

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It was about six o’clock in the morning when Devine was sitting down with her friends, sharing a five litre cask saved for an early morning reviver, catching dwindling warmth next to a dying fire. She hadn’t even bothered looking back when someone yelled, “Watch out! That’s Lucas coming,” and he just kept walking up behind her. She just kept talking to her friends about leaving Lucas.

“I did not even feel the knife go into my back,” she said after it happened. Only afterwards when the grog had finished did it hurt her. That’s the first time she left him. Only when the scar healed from bush medicine she took him back. A lot of women don’t go to hospital when their husbands stabbed them. Some do. Most don’t.65

Alexis Wright in many ways seems to epitomise the Romantic conception of the author: she is identifiable as a single author, writing mostly in what are readily identifiable as genres which originated in Europe (predominantly novelistic fiction) and winning mainstream literary awards like the Miles Franklin award for Australian writing in 2007, but pieces like Grog War and her own statements about her writing should give us pause. There is a significant difference between Romantic authoring and the kind of authoring Wright does; but it is a difference which would be easily missed if one were to simply look at the intentions seemingly manifested in her texts. In Grog War because Lucas and Devine are fictional characters, no specific, living individual is named or shamed, yet the urgency and despair of a very real community is rendered palpable. In this way Wright displays a highly attuned sensitivity toward questions of the author’s responsibility to the people she represents, and a concern to use the stories she has been told in an appropriate way. This indicates a key (if generally unspoken) role for the community of the writer in the authorial process itself. In other words, even though from a conventional literary perspective Wright may appear to be a quintessentially Romantic author, from an Indigenous perspective

65 Ibid., 211.
she represents a community of voices, and this associates her writings with other, more directly communal works.

This further demonstrates the need to be hermeneutically attuned to the *specific contexts* of creative practices. Without such awareness, the ways in which Wright references communal Indigenous traditions, and communal practices involved in story creation could be too-easily lost.

**The role of the author in the communications circuit**

The final area in which I suggest that limiting interpretive questions to the intentions of the (Romantically-conceived) author is limited is that it ignores the reality that the author is in actual fact only one member (albeit a primary member) of a larger collection of people and processes. A number of works by Indigenous Australians draw attention to how the author is embedded in a wider “communications circuit”, and these are particularly fascinating since they explicitly call attention to the mythology inherent in the very idea of the Romantic author – that a text solely represents the intended meaning of a creative genius, standing apart from, and separate to, the society in which he or she writes. These works critically scrutinize the idea that *any* author, from any background, has absolute control over the printed page as it is eventually received to be read. In so doing they intersect with recent research in Romantic studies which also examines and challenges how subsequent ages have perpetuated a “Romantic ideology”, by passing on unchallenged Romanticism’s self-representations of the author as a singular and detached individual whose intentions are actually what makes it to the printed page.66

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66 This research has been given direction by Jerome McGann, who persuasively argued that scholarship and criticism of Romanticism to the 1980s was dominated by a “Romantic Ideology, by
It is exceptionally rare that any author exists in the isolation and with the control so happily assumed of them. Studies of the “history of the book” substantiate this dramatically. Inspired by Robert Darnton’s classic formulation of the “communication circuit”, Jerome McGann’s studies of the “socialization of the text”, and Don McKenzie’s “sociology of the text”, these accentuate the social impact of books as artefacts which travel from private to public spaces, between writers to editors and printers, and which must also then be distributed before being read in a variety of ways by particular audiences. Book history studies have proved adept at drawing together themes often studied in isolation to create a more complex, holistic picture of how the whole industry of books, writing, and reading intersect at different historical periods and in different places (although the studies to date have been predominantly centred in Europe).67 These look at the interrelation between sponsors, publishers, editors, copyright laws (many of which emerged during the Romantic period), distributors, booksellers, literary agents, reading publics (which were also consolidated in the Romantic age) and others who, in addition to authors, have great influence on how books turn out.68

67 See the collection of classic essays on the subject in David Finkelstein and Alistair McLeery, eds., The Book History Reader (London and New York: Routledge, 2002); which includes Robert Darnton’s “What is the History of Books?”, and the modifications made to his model by Thomas R. Adams and Nicolas Barker in “A New Model for the Study of the Book”; D.F. McKenzie’s “The Book as an Expressive Form”; and Jerome McGann’s “The Socialization of Texts.”

68 Even the textual practices of central figures of the contemporary Western canon are rendered invisible in the Romantic view of the author outlined here. In his essay “What is a Text?” Stephen Orgel interrogates the assumption that the bibliographic text faithfully represents the “author’s final manuscript”, finding it to be rarely the case in Renaissance non-dramatic texts, and “almost never true” regarding Renaissance dramatic texts such as those by Shakespeare, where collaboration was the key. Rather than the author being central, plays were commissioned and the plot and subject usually dictated by the company which ran the play. Stephen Orgel, “What Is a Text?,” in Staging the Renaissance: Reinterpretation of Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama, ed. David Scott Kastan and Peter Stallybrass (New York and London: Routledge, 1991).
Whilst there is scant explicit reference to book history *per se* in scholarship on Indigenous writings, it is instructive to consider Indigenous writing in relation to these models, because there is relatively common mention of elements of the communication circuit *within* Aboriginal texts. The impact of publishing and editing practices on the finished work are explicitly identified in a number of Indigenous works. *Auntie Rita*, which was discussed earlier as a collaborative work between mother and daughter, begins with a reference to the non-Indigenous editor, Alison Ravenscroft, thus acknowledging that the voices of Rita and Jackie Huggins were not the only ones involved in putting word to page, and further complicating the question of whose “intentions” are realised by the text.69 A novelistic comedy of errors, Vivienne Cleven’s *Bitin’ Back* has taken this even further by incorporating an editor as one of its main characters.70 The intense and intimate relationship between editors and writers is portrayed in the relationship between Trevor Wren Davidson, a white, sandal-wearing editor from the city and Nevil Dooley, the aspiring black country teenager seeking to break established codes and be a writer. As Trevor and Nevil work on Nevil’s manuscript they spend long periods of time alone together, which leads to Trevor being mistaken as Nevil’s lover (a misrecognition encouraged by the fact that Nevil changes his name to Jean Rhys and starts wearing his mother’s dresses and makeup). Having faced much negative prejudice themselves, Nevil’s family struggle against their own misgivings to accept Trevor (and even more so the transformed Nevil), and so accept him into the family. He is offered Tim Tam biscuits and Coca Cola for breakfast by Nevil’s mother, taught to fight by his uncle Booty, and – an unfortunate consequence of his boxing lessons – arrested as a

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suspected drug dealer while participating in an illegal boxing match organised by Booty in a neighbourhood garage.

_Bitin’ Back_ openly acknowledges the impact of publishing and editing decisions on contemporary Indigenous writing and beyond, to all and any writing. There is no author who is totally isolated from the influences of the institutions of editing and publishing, and this can often make a difference to what readers ultimately receive. Sometimes the editorial impact can be very significant indeed, as the case of Doris Pilkington’s *Follow the Rabbit Proof Fence* shows. Having researched and written a draft of her family history in more conventional historical narrative form, Pilkington was told by Magabala books that “if you could write it as a fiction or narrative form, it would be much better.” This sparked a whole shift in genre, and the text which resulted is a stylistically fictional narrative fleshed out upon factual bones.  

While all authors are subject to editorial suggestion and the voices and influence of many others go into any work, Indigenous Australian cultural production has been affected by this in quite specific ways. The activity of framing Aboriginal voices by predominantly non-Aboriginal publishers, editors, and booksellers which orientate these to be palatable for mainly non-Aboriginal readerships has profoundly affected the ways in which Indigenous writings are put onto the page, marketed, distributed, and ultimately _read_. Publishing and editing practices have frequently stereotyped, silenced, and distorted Indigenous voices – as the case of David Unaipon so dramatically demonstrates.  

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72 A critical historiography of present and past practices of editing and publishing is developed in a recent monograph by Anita Heiss. *Dhuulul-Yala: To Talk Straight_ inquires into the institutions and procedures that support and foster (or discourage) authors, examining also the role the publishing industry has in determining the final appearance, content and form of Indigenous works, as well as _who_ is celebrated as an Indigenous author.
Indigenous authors in their works to talk about the numerous ways in which the communications circuit functions to shape and produce what is eventually published.

As a counterbalance to ways in which Indigenous voices have been coerced, coopted, enabled, and restrained by editorial and publishing practices, recent years have seen the foundation of Indigenous-specific publishing houses such as Magabala Books and jukurrpa, and wider interrogation of publishing and editing practices.

*Bitin' Back* represents another tactic: it offers an exemplary, light-hearted portrait of two men engaged in a process of shared activity, reciprocal exchange and personal discovery, as Trevor is protectively introduced to Nevil's country community by Nevil and his family, in return mentoring Nevil as he enters the foreign environment of books and publishing. *Bitin' Back* is a fiction which playfully exposes the idea of the author who springs fully-formed onto the page as itself a certain kind of fiction. Yet despite its comic nature, the novel makes a sober point in its representation of a non-exploitative editor-writer relationship.

**A work's meaning is engaging what is said: the two-sided word**

Above, this chapter discussed the concept of the author which is currently most influential, the Romantically-derived idea of an independent figure whose genius wells up from a characteristically internal source, and who tends to work in isolation. This conception, it suggested, tacitly informs and lends the authority of "common sense" to intentionalist views of literary meaning and the presumption that literary texts present a coherent, singular message from a particular mind oriented towards other minds, where the goal of understanding is in grasping this "meaning". To
contrast with this I have outlined a number of elements of Indigenous Australian
textual production where individual minds are generally not the key element in
understanding auctorial practices, but where various forms of collaborative
endeavour and attention to community protocols and needs are more dominant, and
occasions where human "authors" may be mouthpieces or collaborators in what is
considered to be ultimately given or "authorised" by ghosts and spirit selves.

Intentionalist theories of understanding meaning would seem to have problems in
adequately addressing and accommodating this range of authorial practices. This is
not a trivial quibble, since, as outlined above, intentionalist theories are not without
consequences. Indeed, they have very real effects in that they actively encourage
certain kinds of author-oriented reading at the expense of other kinds, while tacitly
relying on a certain – I have argued, limited – conception of what an author is. 73

What is most striking about these positions is that they are a strikingly one-sided
affair, dependent upon a certain conception of literary texts as being akin to
messages from a writer to a reader, with the reader's task one of dis-covering or re­
constructing this message. To this point I have been discussing how, by
hypostasising meaning to a focus on the author's role in this way, intentionalism
obscures from view the complex range of what authorship may involve. It also
obscures the recognition that particular readers and audiences are required to bring
the text into being in a genuine and radical way, and it is this point that I shall now
develop, with reference to Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics.

73 Stephen Mailloux recognises this when he says that even theories which are ultimately shown to be
false persuade readers to adopt a certain point of view in relation to the texts they read: adherence to a
theory tends to be more a matter of pragmatics or rhetoric than logic. Even if theories are ultimately
shown to be based on logical mistakes they still have consequences for critical practice and reading
strategies. New Criticism's creation of the Intentional and Affective Fallacies, for instance, convinced
people to do intrinsic analyses of texts, whereas the suspicion of unities in deconstruction encourages
people to search for contradictions and incoherencies in texts. Steven Mailloux, "Truth or
But before turning to Gadamer, I would like to mention two alternative theorisations of literary meaning of prominence in the twentieth century: formalism and post-structuralism. Formalist theories such as New Criticism are antagonistic toward tying meaning to an author's intent (and biographical or historical approaches *per se*). This is codified in Wimsatt and Beardsley's famous declaration that such approaches are "Intentional Fallacies", and exemplified by I.A. Richards' experimentation with "blind" readings of texts (where he gave students poems with no extraneous textual markers such as the author's name or the period of composition). What Richards and other New Critics concentrated upon was the use of language in a poem (in the "Affective Fallacy" Wimsatt and Beardsley also discounted reader's responses).

All three prioritised the study of literary language, literary devices and the internal poetic form of a work through close textual readings, with the assumption that formal or aesthetic value is universal across time and place.

Post-structuralists also tend to be inimical to the idea of an intentional author. Roland Barthes, for one, notoriously proclaimed the author's "death", and metaphorically killed off the author in order to pay attention to the multiple desires and interests of the reader. Equally as dramatically, Foucault identifies the author as a limit-point of interpretation. His genealogical study traces the historical emergence of the author, characterising it as an entity which has served to restrict and organise the polysemy of possible interpretations and ways of interpreting: the

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author is a "function" which provides "the principle of thrift in the proliferation of meaning."  

So, either the author and reader are declared irrelevant (Formalism), the reader is declared to have absolute priority (Barthes), or the author is just one of a number of possible organising functions which are productive of "meaning", albeit a function which has been historically privileged in the West in recent centuries (Foucault). All approach the question of meaning differently to the intentionalist theories described at the beginning of the chapter.

So do reader-response approaches and reception theory. As their names suggest, these approaches centre upon how a work is concretised by actual readers. However the author is conceived, it is the reception of a work and the reader's role in generating meaning that is of interest to such approaches. There are family resemblances between reader-response theories and reception aesthetics and philosophical hermeneutics, which are unsurprising since Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser were both Gadamer's students. If I concentrate upon Gadamer's work it is because I am more interested in his philosophical exploration of the liminal space where the reader meets the (author's) text than in simply focussing on investigating the variety of ways readers receive these texts.

For reasons which will become apparent below, I also find Gadamer's work a more persuasive description of the reader's encounter with texts by Indigenous Australians than the other theories just outlined. When non-Indigenous readers seek to understand such texts, they are not simply imposing their own, "Barthesian", readerly meanings on the text. Gadamer's work, which encourages attentiveness to

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the actual situations and contexts in which meaning is produced (where texts come from, as well as how they are read), also shows up the weaknesses of formalist descriptions. The "universal" aesthetic judgments about texts formalists make seem incapable of doing justice to texts which reference different traditions to one's own, in that very often, aesthetic categories differ. And, finally, one of the primary benefits of philosophical hermeneutics is that it allows investigations of first-person, participant perspectives on understanding. Foucault, as valuable as his work is, always concentrates on a third-person, descriptive viewpoint, and so the way the reader's encounter with a text is productive of meaning, and the possible benefits of this – which are two major concerns of this thesis – are beyond Foucauldian analysis.

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Gadamer shares the insight that the Russian semiotician Vološinov gives voice to, that the word is "a two-sided act...determined equally by whose word it is and for whom it is meant." This recognises that any word comprises a two-sided process or activity, and Gadamer looks at how this is an activity that commonly goes beyond the readers to whom a work was initially addressed. Texts address people far beyond the initial circumstances in which they were produced, and this, Gadamer argues, is a decisive and characteristic factor:

The real meaning of a text, as it speaks to the interpreter, does not depend on the contingencies of the author and his original public. It certainly is not exhausted by them, for it is always co-determined also by the historical situation of the

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interpreter... Not just occasionally but always, the meaning of a text goes beyond its author. That is why understanding is not merely a reproductive but always a productive activity as well. *(TM 296/ GWI 301)*

Below, I shall look at two of the seminal ways Gadamer discusses this productive activity: as a conversation and as a relationship of play. These offer a way of thinking about the understanding of texts which, although still informed by Romantic hermeneutics, has severed its fixation upon the author’s singular consciousness, and in so doing, I suggest, provides a useful model for the literary understanding of Aboriginal texts.

First, what about the role of the author and his or her intentions in Gadamer’s hermeneutics? Gadamer admits that there are times when one only attempts to understand the contents of an author’s mind. But these, Gadamer argues, are signs of failure. They indicate a breakdown in imaginative and cognitive engagement; as “it is only when the attempt to accept what is said as true fails that we try to ‘understand’ the text, psychologically or historically, as another’s opinion” *(TM 294/ GWI 299)*. Only when all other avenues have failed does Gadamer think that one solely takes account of the idiosyncrasy of the author or speaker and his or her creative activity *(TM 180/ GWI 183-184)*.

This does not mean, however, that under normal circumstances we totally ignore the author. Although in relation to poetic activity he later shifts ground somewhat, in *Truth and Method* Gadamer acknowledges that the author is frequently a valid and necessary focus of our attention and interest, since one part of understanding a text that comes from a different historical period or divergent culture to one’s own is indeed an appreciation of the particular historical and social circumstances in which the text was written:
The task of historical understanding also involves acquiring an appropriate historical horizon, so that what we are trying to understand can be seen in its true dimensions. If we fail to transpose ourselves into the historical horizon from which the traditional text speaks, we will misunderstand the significance of what it has to say to us. To that extent this seems a legitimate hermeneutical requirement: we must place ourselves in the other situation in order to understand it. (TM 303/GW 1 308)

Here, he is talking about understanding a text from the past, but the principle is the same for any text we seek to understand. We must place ourselves in the other situation (at the very least so we don’t totally misunderstand it) and this includes considering the conditions of production of the text – the author’s intentional use of words and the distinct relations of author and reader or audience within the wider communications circuit. Although not directly discussing the questions of multiple authors, collaboration, or spirit authors that was raised above, since it is not targeted at getting into the author’s mind or excavating his or her intending consciousness but is interested in the historical or cultural horizon from which he or she comes, this way of highlighting the relevance of the initial context of the work can certainly include them. Understanding the text’s historical horizon also involves examining the historical and textual situation of the work (advocated too by Schleiermacher and Hirsch); other works by the author; comparing the author’s oeuvre to others in the period, society or area; and closely examining words and structures within the text.

In the special context of Indigenous Australian texts it involves attempting to understand the significance of collaboration and the complex mediations of spirit authors and the role the stories and songs play in their initial contexts. This (as the following two chapters will go on to consider) may also involve coming to appreciate the multi-lingual nature of many texts and the primary role played by spoken forms within the societal context in which they were produced.
But while acknowledging the relevance of attempting to place ourselves in the other situation, Gadamer argues a further move is in constant operation. Considering the initial context alone is not adequate, since, as Manfred Frank clearly recognises, the very act of reading means that the initial situation has been surpassed.

To record an individual expression and re-produce it in the act of reading (in other words, re-create it) does not then signify (and this is decisive) articulating the same linguistic sequence again and indeed with like meaning, but rather undertaking another articulation of the same linguistic sequence.  

The act of reading comprises a new articulation of the initial utterance in a different context; it does not enable unfettered access to the initial meaning. The initial context, in other words, does not determine what happens when Indigenous songs and stories cross the border from being presented and understood in local Indigenous communities into predominantly non-Indigenous publishing and reading spaces where works by Indigenous Australians are received as a piece of “literature”. Nor can limiting our consideration to the initial context and audience exhaust, or adequately account for, what readers and audiences in different contexts will glean from the texts.

Gadamer argues that studying the author’s context is only ever half of the process, querying whether limiting understanding to the author’s meaning is adequate to describe the understanding that is required of us. The same is true of a conversation that we have with someone simply in order to get to know him – i.e. to discover where he is coming from and his horizon. This is not a true conversation – that is, we are not seeking agreement on some subject.

Crucially, prescribing the idea of “meaning” to only denote the author’s intended meaning is severely limited, because, in it, “we have given up the claim to find ...

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any truth that is valid and intelligible for ourselves” (TM 303/ GW 308). This is why Gadamer repeatedly suggests that conceiving the hermeneutic task as reconstruction is limited, something half-finished, making something an end which is really only a step in a larger undertaking. Considering the initial context or situation does not exhaust the possibilities of understanding because these also emerge through the conversation between the text and how the reader engages with the subject matter. What is important is finding valid and intelligible truths in a work, and this means engaging with what a text says rather than who says it. Thus, Gadamer’s misgivings about intentionalist models centre upon their tendency to reify the situation of the activity of the author’s creation of a text (including her personal circumstances and motivation) over and above an actual substantive engagement with what the text itself expresses.

In some places, Gadamer moves closer toward post-structuralist positions which are even more suspicious of the residual Romantic echoes in intentionalist ideas of textual meaning, and which, like Barthes’ celebration of the “death” of the author, focus more on the play of language. In “Text and Interpretation”, adapted from the first speech Gadamer gave during his meeting with Derrida in 1981, he discusses “eminent texts” such as lyric poetry and novelistic literature, as texts in which it is language itself which is coming to presence at the moment of being read, leaving any concern with identifying the intentions of the author far behind. Gadamer describes this in a marvellous way, suggesting that in reading literature one does not hurry impatiently to the end-meaning (or “message”). Getting to the end of a poem results in something different to reading a brief or a newspaper article: whereas in the latter we leave the words of the text behind because we have understood what they are about, with literature the opposite occurs. Any single reading of a poem will
not use it up. We do not leave the text behind "but allow ourselves to enter into it."79

As a result, the more one engages with the poem the more, not less, that one sees in it, as one discerns new connections and resonances.

This thesis is very interested in the way that language presents itself in Indigenous Australian texts, and with discerning new connections and resonances in relation to these texts. And yet, it is clear that this is not enough for non-Indigenous readers of Indigenous Australian texts, because at issue is questions of understanding texts which come from a different cultural horizon. Since a non-Indigenous reader cannot assume that to Indigenous peoples the poetic word held and holds similar meanings to Western understandings, considering the context and situation of the author remains an important aspect of listening to what the texts are about without pre-emptively imposing a misleading categorisation on them (like the pre-emptive misunderstandings which I am suggesting are generated by collapsing Indigenous authorship practices into the more restricted category of the Western author and its Romantic ties). Accordingly, in following chapters I will consider where necessary the role and person of the author, creator or song guardian under discussion.

Two ways Gadamer models the engagement with texts: conversation and play

Conversation

Given that all texts can operate beyond their initial environments, Gadamer suggests that understanding is not best approached as a message from author to reader. The author, having created the text and facilitated the conversation, recedes. The typical engagement with a text, which involves asking and answering questions about its subject matter, Gadamer suggests is more analogous to a virtual "conversation" between reader and text which reflects the to and fro movement of dialogue (TM 377/ GW1 383). A conversation involves at least two interlocutors, so to consider the experience of reading a text to be akin to a conversation emphasises the shared or communal nature of meaning and the social nature of human existence: there is no conversation or dialogue if only one person's opinions are being voiced. Crucially, in a conversation, neither participant "owns" the language being spoken; a text "belongs" neither to the author nor the reader.80

In applying this insight to the phenomenon of engagement with a literary piece, Gadamer suggests that in the meeting or conversation which is the reading of a text

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80 David E. Linge expresses this well, when he says that "as dialogue, language is not the possession of one partner or the other, but the medium of understanding that lies between them." David E. Linge, in Hans-Georg Gadamer, Philosophical Hermeneutics, ed. David E. Linge, trans. David E. Linge (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1976), xxxii. Gadamer himself writes: "[t]he dialogical character of language, which I tried to work out, leaves behind it any starting point in the subjectivity of the subject, and especially in the meaning-directed intentions of the speaker." Gadamer, "Text and Interpretation," 26.
both text and reader are involved in a complex activity or event *through which* meaning is disclosed.\(^8\)

Gadamer characterises reading as a process of engagement with a text which seeks, through a reflective conversation about what the text is saying, to ultimately come to an understanding (*Verständigung*) about the particular subject matter being discussed (*Sache*). In *Truth and Method* Gadamer explicated this thus:

> Conversation is a process of coming to an understanding. Thus it belongs to every true conversation that each person opens himself to the other, truly accepts his point of view as valid and transposes himself into the other to such an extent that he understands not the individual but what he says. What is to be grasped is the substantive rightness of his position so that we can be at one with each other on the subject. Thus we do not relate the other’s opinion to him but to our own opinions and views. (*TM* 385/ *GW* 1 389)

Now, coming to an understanding is not necessarily cosy or free of conflict or great divergences. The “unity” about the subject matter which is achieved is a provisional one, with a new understanding of the subject at issue being formed in the *transformation* of each of the dialogue partner’s views. Like a face-to-face conversation the conversation with a text occurs in a specific circumstance, and so is bound or limited. This is the “fusion of horizons” (*Horizontverschmelzung*). Like the Platonic dialogues where Socrates and his interlocutors engage on a topic with results which lead beyond the initial positions taken, coming to an understanding “is a life process in which a community of life is lived out ... Reaching an understanding

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8 Gadamer displays his similarities to the thought of his teacher, Martin Heidegger in this regard. Heidegger similarly holds that “meaning is neither in the intending act of the critic nor in the literary text (nor in both *per se*). Meaning is essentially *nexical*. Meaning is precisely the engagement of subject and object ... it arises when reader and text participate in a joint act.” Robert R. Magliola, *Phenomenology and Literature: An Introduction* (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1977), 180.
in language places a subject matter before those communicating like a disputed object set between them" (TM 446/ GWI 449-50).

This articulates an attitude toward texts – including Indigenous texts – that does not reduce our engagement simply to a question of reconstruction of an author’s intended meaning, but characterises it as a two-sided event that places more emphasis on what is said (the subject matter) and how it is said (how language discloses this) as ultimately being more important than interrogating the text to discern the precise intentions of who is talking. Through the conversation about the subject matter which ensues between what the text states and the reader, a transformation beyond the initial positions takes place. In subsequent chapters, then, while trying to understand as much as possible the initial contexts of production of the texts I examine, my interest in this is for the sake of better understanding the subject matter, for the sake of forming new understandings.

Play

In addition to conceiving understanding as a dialogue or conversation, Gadamer compares understanding to play (TM 101-134/ GWI 107-139). In play the consciousness or subjectivity of the other player is not what primarily interests me. What the other player contributes to the game is what I need to take account of, as I take this on and further it myself in the game’s continuation. What I “play at”, in any game, is not wholly determined by me, but is imposed externally by the developing rules and structures of the game itself, and my engagement with the other player(s). Like the reading experience, spontaneous play is a to-and-fro movement without a definite goal or definite end (although we finish a book, our understanding of it does not stop there). The idea of play thus highlights the event-like and participatory
experience of understanding. It also emphasises the way that understanding is a structure which takes up and transforms both participants (Gadamer calls this “Verwandlung ins Gebilde”, or “transformation into structure”).

To establish how understanding can be a transformative venture, Gadamer compares play to aesthetic experiences such as seeing a piece of theatre or reading a book, occasions in which the viewer or reader is transported to another “playful” reality, with its own purposes and concerns.82 This playful reality presents a challenge to the audience or the reader in that it presents different alternatives to one’s own life. This indicates something important about play; in the human and animal realms, play is not simply an escape into a substitute or fantasy world, but is a structured means of engaging reality, which can on occasion throw up the challenging and unexpected. Gadamer suggests that through this engagement is a possibility of re-envisioning or re-visioning “ourselves” – our individual selves, our polities, and our communities:

the play of art is a mirror that through the centuries constantly arises anew, and in which we catch sight of ourselves in a way that is often unexpected or unfamiliar: what we are, what we might be, and what we are about.83

With play, what occurs is that we are able to “dwell” with the artwork (which takes us out of “normal” or ordinary time), in a space which enables us to catch sight of ourselves and our world in a novel way.

Gadamer’s description of the playful engagement with an artistic work is one of the most decisive contributions he makes to questions of literary understanding. Playing is always a playing-with (Mitspielen) which breaks down the distance between

audience or reader and the work. 84 When seeking to understand it, one is not a passive consumer of an artistic work but is involved. This is one of the important elements shared by play and conversation: each is not something which we can simply observe detachedly from outside but is something one necessarily participates in. Gadamer writes:

The mere onlooker who indulges in aesthetic or cultural enjoyment from a safe distance, whether in the theater, the concert hall, or the seclusion of solitary reading simply does not exist. Such a person misunderstands himself. For aesthetic self-understanding is indulging in escapism if it regards the encounter with the work of art as nothing but enchantment in the sense of liberation from the pressures of reality. 85

The necessity of application

What the models of conversation and play both highlight is the necessary involvement of the reader or audience in understanding a text or piece of art. They do not limit the quest for understanding to the author’s milieu or initial situation, but figure it in terms of an unfolding engagement between text and reader. As such, what the reader brings to the text (his or her horizons) is not something to be suppressed or resisted in the interests of overcoming subjective bias and getting to the text’s “true meaning” but is, instead, a vital element in the process of understanding itself. In the hermeneutic tradition this is called the subtilitas applicandi, or application (Anwendung) to one’s own circumstances. 86

84 See Gadamer, The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays, 23.
85 Ibid., 130.
86 Johann Jakob Rambach first identified the unity of the subtilitas intelligendi (exactness of understanding), subtilitas explicandi (exactness of explication), and subtilitas applicandi in his Institutiones Hermeneuticae Sacrae of 1729. Gadamer’s discussion of application is in TM 306ff/ GW1 312ff
Application, which is not to be confused with appropriation, is a crucial element in Gadamer’s hermeneutics and is of relevance to why I consider his work to offer a thought-provoking means of conceiving the understanding of Indigenous Australian texts by non-Indigenous readers. To spell out what it means, I will take a circuitous route through the evolving work of E.D. Hirsch and his disagreements with Gadamer, because Hirsch, unlike the other contemporary intentionalists listed at the beginning of the chapter, does acknowledge that the reader has some role in understanding. In earlier works, Hirsch relates meaning to the original context of the work and therefore determinate and fixed. What readers do in their different contexts, Hirsch suggested, was better identified by another term — significance. He writes:

> **Meaning**, then, may be conceived as a self-identical schema whose boundaries are determined by an originating speech-event, while **significance** may be conceived as a relationship drawn between that self-identical meaning and something, anything else.

Hirsch initially considered the engagement of readers at different historical points or from different social formations as instances whereby an original meaning was recast in terms of new significance, generating “anachronistic” meanings which use

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different vocabularies and strategies of interpretation to keep a work of the past relevant in different circumstances.\textsuperscript{89}

However, as Hirsch himself came to realise, the distinction between original meaning and anachronistic significance is highly unstable, and in more recent works his position, especially in relation to allegory, has shifted much closer to Gadamer’s.\textsuperscript{90} The unresolved problem which has drawn Hirsch to this rapprochement is whether it is in fact possible to draw such a strict line dividing understanding and significance. Does one really first understand an author’s intentions, and only afterwards relate the text to one’s own historical or cultural circumstances? Ultimately Hirsch comes to share Gadamer’s view that understanding and interpretation are interrelated and interdependent aspects of a single and constantly-occurring process. The application of a text, in other words, is a legitimate and irreducible part of its meaning. Not only does Hirsch agree that “(a)nalogizing to one’s own experience is an implicit, pervasive, usually untaught response to stories,” he also recognises the potential sterility of identifying meaning only in the author. This realisation accords with a comment made by Gadamer in “Text and Interpretation”, where he states: “No matter how much the work of art

\textsuperscript{89} Although Hirsch acknowledges that anachronistic readings may be productive and creative, the view that understanding — either entirely or in part — involves what the reader brings with them is to the early Hirsch morally abhorrent, as he asks “Is it proper to make textual meaning dependent upon the reader’s own cultural givens?” Hirsch, \textit{Validity in Interpretation}, 213, emphasis added.

\textsuperscript{90} See later pieces like “Meaning and Significance Reinterpreted”; “Transhistorical Intentions and the Persistence of Allegory,” \textit{New Literary History} 25, no. 3 (1994); and “Coming to Terms with Meaning,” \textit{Critical Inquiry} 12, no. 3 (1986). Whilst in the earlier texts meaning and significance fell on either side of a very strict dividing line between the immutable and changeable, in later works Hirsch comes to identify a number of “future-directed intentions” designed to be applied in situations of which the author could have known nothing. Hirsch continues to disagree with Gadamer about other aspects of hermeneutics.
may appear to be an historical given, and thus a possible object of scientific research, it is always the case that it *says something to us.*”\(^9^1\)

To establish a distinction between original and anachronistic meaning, meaning and significance, or authorial meaning and reader’s meaning atrophies what is still a fluid and unfinished event for Gadamer, since understanding involves a “fusion of horizons”. This makes the reader, Gadamer says at one point, a “co-speaker” of the text. He or she “fills out and concretises what is said ... To be sure, everything that is fixed in writing refers back to what was originally said, but it must equally as much look forward.”\(^9^2\)

The fact that a text is differently understood in different historical and social spaces is one consequence of application, since the circumstances and the guiding questions of the time or place in which a text is interpreted differ in respect to the original text. What results is the perception of fresh meaning in works of the past, and fresh meaning in the expressive productions of other cultures; in these cases (as in any case of understanding), Gadamer suggestively states, “[i]t is enough to say that we understand in a different way, if we understand at all” (TM 297/GW 1 302).

We need to be careful, though, about sliding between the idea of there being an irreducible element of *application* to the reader’s situation in understanding and the idea of a necessary *appropriation* for these circumstances. What do I mean by this? Here, it is useful to take a cue from James Risser’s sensitive appraisal of the difference. Risser admits the following: “it is true that for Gadamer all understanding

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\(^9^1\) Gadamer, “Text and Interpretation,” 23-24, emphasis added. K.M. Newton pertinently argues that Gadamer’s approach does not lead to an arbitrary approach to interpretation since the interest of modern readers is seized by the discovery of new meanings in the original text. These meanings are part of the historical reality of the text and not projected onto it. See Newton, “Hermeneutics and Modern Literary Criticism,” 123.

\(^9^2\) Gadamer, “Text and Interpretation,” 36.
is self-understanding." Understanding involves the sense of making (a text) one's own, and this could lead one down the path of seeing understanding as appropriation. The latter, Risser suggests is - openly - what the French hermeneutic philosopher Paul Ricouer does. What differentiates Gadamer and Ricoeur, Risser argues, is that even though they frequently sound very similar

Gadamer does not privilege sameness – the rendering similar, the reduction of the other to the same, that appropriation seeks – in the way Ricouer does ... Gadamer does not really see hermeneutics as a subject's struggle against cultural distance, but asks about the possibility of hearing voices that are culturally distanced (my italics). Application is a way of enabling the possibility of hearing such culturally distanced voices by helping us comprehend more clearly what the other is saying, and this is done by relating it to our circumstances. This is not to appropriate what the other says, but is an ever-present process whereby the meaning of a text must always be concretised in the activity or practice of understanding, and concretized in such a way that good words are found, so that it makes sense and "speaks". Meaning, in other words, is not a universal divorced from the practical instances in which it is manifested. One way of thinking about this relates to translations from Indigenous languages (discussed in Chapter Three), where, to hear these voices without speaking the languages in question they must be translated – the application or actualisation of the text for the reader’s situation – but this translation does not necessarily need to render these voices similar to one’s own or appropriate them.

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94 Ibid., 103.
It is of interest that in the literary criticism of the twentieth century the two sets of issues considered in this chapter have lived parallel yet quite separate lives. Among literary theorists there is only occasional acknowledgement of the fact that the Romantically-derived figure of the author that forms the starting point for Romantic hermeneutics and intentionalism is a culturally specific and historically differentiated — and therefore circumscribed — figure. Contrastingly, although commentators on Aboriginal forms of storytelling frequently comment upon and seek to identify the areas of difference in forms of Aboriginal “authorship” to Western traditions there is scant investigation of how such concepts can contribute to the core questions of literary theory. It is at these points that the limitations of each approach come into view. The restricted focus on the epistemological question of how precisely meaning occurs in the intentionalist positions described earlier in this chapter, loses sight of the fact that a text is not just writing, but a highly inflected and multifarious social event both at the composing and receiving ends. On the other hand, for theorists of Indigenous Australian literature meaning is often related back to the socio-political environments in which texts are produced, published and received at the expense of engaging with debates in literary studies about the status and importance of the meaning of Aboriginal texts — to which they are rendered marginal.

I have suggested that the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer offers a way to bridge these two areas. It grants a role to the author and his or her circumstances, especially where the possibility of misunderstanding is more pronounced, and is interested in alternate forms of speaking like the variety of Indigenous Australian creative practices considered in this chapter. But further, and decisively for this thesis, it does not conceive meaning as something which is distant from the reader but something which he or she participates in. To understand a literary text is not to get inside it or
to relive the experiences or thought-processes of the author, but requires letting the
text speak – seeing how what is spoken of could be relevant to oneself and one’s
own historical, social and cultural circumstances, while engaging with the subject
matter. Ensuing chapters will further investigate the reader’s participatory role, and
what the fusion of the horizons between text and reader consists of.

The next chapter examines another primary way in which traditions of literary
analysis may distort how Indigenous Australian texts are read in a way which makes
it difficult to understand them. This is that literary analysis tends to focus upon
written rather than spoken texts. Chapter Two considers what happens when songs
and stories initially shared in oral contexts and spoken-word story-telling traditions
are transformed into written works on paper. It also looks at how a recent novel,
*True Country*, examines the complexity of issues involved in identifying different
cultures as “oral” or “literate”, and how, in contemporary times, orality and literacy
are practiced in remote Australian communities.
CHAPTER TWO

Writing and Speech in Indigenous Australia

The first part of this chapter will focus upon questions surrounding the literary engagement with Indigenous Australian texts as written pieces, considering works designed from the outset to be read as well as works which have been translated to the page from oral narrative and song. Initially, I will look at some of the issues raised when oral pieces are transcribed and transformed to become written literature in a discussion of a Dyirbal song.

This also raises questions about the seemingly natural opposition between the written and spoken word. Accordingly, I will examine the age-old distinction between writing and speech, how it has been yoked to the characterisation of societies (as "oral" or "literate") on the basis of whether or not they possess writing, and how this opposition in recent times has been rendered more complex by Astri Heen Wold, Ruth Finnegan and others. These scholars insist that assertions about the differences (and purported relative strengths) of what is written or spoken are always embedded
in particular contexts, which we ignore at great cost. Through studies of actual situations, they draw attention to the fact that the ways in which writing and speech are used and how they are deployed in relation to one another differ between cultures and sub-cultural groups. Revealing the situational basis in which speech and writing are used, they openly query the long-held philosophical assumption that writing and speech are fundamentally different modalities of communication. Intriguingly, this is also the terrain covered by Kim Scott’s first novel, *True Country*, which will be extensively considered in this chapter. In particular, I am interested in how Scott utilises the written word to evoke qualities of the spoken word: what I call here “orality-in-writing”.

Gadamer also addresses the speech-writing divide. Although he inherits the conventional philosophical view that writing and speech differ profoundly, it is significant that his account moves toward de-prioritizing these differences to concentrate upon their similarities and the needs of the “living voice”. This account renders differences between the written and the spoken word secondary factors in the real challenges facing understanding.

After outlining these scholarly arguments about writing and speech, I will return to a novelistic consideration of these issues, in how *True Country* explores the negotiation, in present-day Australia, between oral and literate ways of remembering and recalling the past.
“Shifting Camp”

The following is a short song text in Dyirbal, taken from an oral performance by the late Tom Murray.95

Yilmburrinyu yirri
Galbarrayarranyu
Gunggarimu janggirr
Jarrugan bunangan
Gunggarimu janggirr
Jarrugan bunangan
Yimanbangu gabi
Gulnggangu barrbandal
Yidiny-yidiny guwal
Jayanu yadanyu
Walmbinamu julnggay

Walmbinamu julnggay
Ngawaru Yidinyba
Guwal balan Mamu96

There are some initial points about this song – left untranslated for the moment – worth dwelling upon. The first is that even though this is in an unfamiliar language for most, it displays suggestive textual elements. It is spaced on the page – arranged – in what is readily recognisable as some kind of poetic form. There are repetitions: the lines “Gunggarimu janggirr” and “Jarrugan bunangan” occur twice, as does “Walmbinamu julnggay”, which is repeated after what seems to be a pausal break.

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95 The Dyirbal language is spoken by six contiguous tribes south of Cairns: Ngajan, Mamu, Jirrbal, Rieeu, Gulngay and Girramay. Each tribe traditionally had several local groups with their own dialect (which to the local people are different languages). Tom Murray was born in around 1920 in Jirrbal territory. When this was recorded in the 1960s songs were still being sung and composed by middle aged and older people, though transmission to younger people was faltering. The song text represents an act of preservation of song traditions which are in danger.

Immediately, then, even with an unfamiliar language from an unknown place and time, we start to approach it in a certain kind of way; filtering it through the lens of poetry.

Now here is Robert Dixon’s translation.

_Shifting Camp_

Dragging leaves for its nest
Calling out, after nest building
As daylight fades from the north
The scrub-hen, travelling far
As daylight fades from the north,
The scrub-hen, travelling far
Shakes the branches of the fig-tree
Women, like the tree, bear fruit
Talk Yidiny all the time
Strangers, who scarcely recall their parents’ tongue
Crossing borders, travelling on

Crossing borders, travelling on
They speak Yidiny with one voice
And Mamu with another.

“Shifting Camp” refers to a Mamu girl seized by the Yidiny people and taken to live with them (these are neighbouring tribes of the Dyirbal area), where she learns the language of her husband. As she speaks mostly Yidiny in her new country (she has a new “voice”) her own language grows more unfamiliar. The girl’s situation is likened to the life of a scrub-hen, a rainforest bird which constructs a high mound to incubate its eggs and each season moves to a new place in which to build its nest. In the evenings, after a day of nest-building and searching, it shakes fig-trees for food. The girl, like the scrub-hen, is a fruit-gatherer and traveller over long distances. Like
the fig tree she is also able to bear “fruit”, conjuring allusive associations between ripe figs and female fertility (or green fruit and a young girl). These connections between the bird, woman and fig occur in “Shifting Camp” through its tripartite structure: beginning with observations about the scrub-hen, hinged in the middle in the metaphoric association between a fig tree and a woman, and ending with a reference to women who cross borders and speak multiple languages (Yidiny and Mamu).

In this chapter, “Shifting Camp” is being presented as written poetry, and interpreted with the tools of literary analysis (looking at metaphors, allusions, repetitions and the sounds of words) but in its initial context the song comes from an oral tradition. It is a Gugulu or “love song” in the Jangala style, one of three love song styles from the Dyirbal region in tropical north-Queensland near present-day Cairns. These songs originally do not have titles (the English title was conferred in the translation process). Some words are special song words which may come from nearby dialects and languages or be of unknown origin and meaning, and which serve to give the song a sense of being distinct and remarkable.

But songs do not possess just words; they are composed of sounds and rhythms and accompaniments to the voice. Jangala have a specific form. Their rhythmic stress patterns fall into six-syllable lines (which can be a two syllable and four syllable word combination, two three-syllable words, or one six syllable word), and each word is stressed on the first syllable. These may be repeated in varying order, so


98 For an extended discussion of special song words, see Dixon and Koch, *Dyirbal Song Poetry*, 26-34. There is a list of song words in “Shifting Camp” on page 51.
each performance is slightly different even in its verbal utterances. The song is sung to the sound of clapping sticks (which are called Gugulu, from whence this love song style derives its name), which make a resonant sound when held vertically and hit with a piece of cane.

Even in translation the song conveys a strong and repetitive sense of movement: the scrub-hen is “travelling far” and the woman crossing both linguistic and territorial borders (Walmbinamu julnggay) as she is “travelling on”. This song, too, has crossed multiple borders. Having started its life in a performative oral tradition, it has travelled far, having undergone a translation into English, transposition to the page, a re-formatting in poetic form, and a slotting into different social contexts.

There are, then, obvious and vast differences between its meaning for its initial audiences and for readers of it; distances of language, of cultural practice, and of forms of artistic expression. In all this border-crossing, in this chapter it is the transposition to the page that is of concern.

There is a shifting mixture of strangeness and familiarity in the above text. There is the strange: this song is read in translation (unless one speaks Dyirbal), and the particular metaphors and connections made within it may be relatively unfamiliar. There may be, as in many songs, layers of secret meaning which are known only ever to a limited number of people, which is one of the characteristics of Aboriginal oral traditions which go beyond the limits of literary analysis. There is also the familiar: since it appears before us as a written text, it offers us something to understand. Initially, when “Shifting Camp” was presented in untranslated form, it was possible, despite the barrier of language, to identify the textual markers of

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99 Poetic styles are discussed in Duwell, ed., *The Honey-Ant Men’s Love Song and Other Aboriginal Song Poems*, 13; and Dixon and Koch, *Dyirbal Song Poetry*, 207-75. There is a discussion of this particular song on pages 249-252.
poetry. Separated thus from the immediacy of its spoken situation by being “fixed” in writing it is potentially unlimited in reach across cultural horizons as well as swathes of time; it is distanced and decontextualised, and the need for interpretation arises.

Whether distance from an initial situation and fixity is ultimately a phenomenon unique to writing will be considered below. Here, I would like to identify some immediate hazards that one encounters in transposing the oral word to writing, the situation generated when songs like “Shifting Camp” are translated to the page. The risk involved in presenting it as poetry is that this can result in the glossing over of very real differences between Indigenous song traditions and literary traditions (and literary criticism) developed in the West.\textsuperscript{100} Akin to the impoverishment of the range of Indigenous authorial practices when these are unselectively mapped onto the conventional, Romantically-derived conception of authors discussed in the last chapter, an impoverishment of the rich oral situation of the songs and stories occurs in transference to the page. One consequence of encountering such songs in poetic form severed from their oral roots is that a bias toward the “literate” or written is perpetuated. This is unavoidable; while bringing out the verbal or linguistic aspect of “Shifting Camp”, the holistic performative situation from which it comes is necessarily obscured. Catherine Berndt notes, that transliterating songs limits our understanding to the words, but, she rightly emphasises, Indigenous performance is never “a matter of words by themselves: it is a matter of songs, dance, drama, graphic and plastic representations.”\textsuperscript{101} The communal settings in which songs are

\textsuperscript{100} See also the extended discussion of similar questions in relation to Native American literatures in Arnold Krupat, \textit{Ethnocriticism: Ethnography, History, Literature} (Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford: University of California Press, 1992), 175ff.

\textsuperscript{101} Catherine Berndt, “Traditional Aboriginal Oral Literature,” in \textit{Aboriginal Writing Today: Papers from the First National Conference of Aboriginal Writers Held in Perth, Western Australia, in 1983},
performed and which make vital contributions to their meaning undergo a radical transformation in the “audience” of a piece of writing, who tends, in contemporary times, to be one person sitting alone in silence. This is an important point, since one of the productive tensions continually being explored in this thesis is how understanding Indigenous Australian texts as literature can enable and extend, but also circumscribe the appreciation of them by non-Indigenous readers.

Understanding Aboriginal oral song texts as written forms of literature, in other words, transforms them in such a way that, although it makes them accessible to broader audiences, also transforms (or perverts) the quintessential orality of the songs – their performative quality, situatedness in a particular kind of communal environment, the variable tones, stresses and pauses of the spoken and sung word. Rather than attempt to erase this tension, or adopt the view that oral songs are incompatible with literary analysis and appreciation, one of the aims of this chapter is to look at how the tensions manifested by transposing oral forms to the page and treated as literature can be productively examined.

**Orality and literacy debates**

Humans are both oral and literate beings, with speech and writing deployed in an extraordinary variety of ways. The above identifies one relatively common occasion when a sense of the difference between writing and speech is pronounced – when a song produced in an oral environment like “Shifting Camp” is transferred to the

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ed. Jack Davis and Bob Hodge, 91-103 (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1985), 92. This process is not limited to the province of the sung or spoken word. Howard Morphy engages in a similar enterprise when he translates Yolngu painting and visual arts practices into Western aesthetic and spiritual categories, in Howard Morphy, “From Dull to Brilliant: The Aesthetics of Spiritual Power among the Yolngu,” in The Anthropology of Art: A Reader, ed. Howard Morphy and Morgan Perkins (Malden, USA, Oxford, UK, and Carlton, Australia: Blackwell, 2006).
written page. Roman Jakobson identified this carrying-over of sense between mediums as a special form of "intersemiotic translation".  

The poeticisation of "Shifting Camp" highlights some more apparent differences in the way the mediums of speech and writing may function, while also elucidating an influential and paradigmatic division between the two. This suggests that oral situations occur as face-to-face encounters, where situational context is important and there is feedback from each party which helps to shape what occurs. Speech includes input from verbal markers such as tone and intonation and from non-verbal markers such as gesture, facial expression and physical demonstrations. Written communication on the other hand appears to have to be "linguistically explicit" as there is no chance of feedback, with a gap between writer and reader which – as in the case of this song-poem – may entail the reader being far from the scene of the speech-act in time, geographical space, and cultural familiarity.

It is pivotal to this discussion to note that identifying such differences is not merely an act of neutral description. While the differences between speech and writing have been the subject of age-old philosophical speculation (defining the special qualities of speech and writing has been a philosophical issue at least since Plato raised the problem of writing in the *Phaedrus*), with modernity and the expansion of the colonial enterprise the perceived specificities of speech and writing took on particular topicality. There, the identification of "typical" facets of writing and speech became part of an evaluatively-laden discourse, and their differences were generalised to fit a range of different cultural contexts. The identification of people

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102 Jakobson's essay was published in 1959. In "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation," he makes the influential distinction between three types of translation: the interlingual (across languages), the intralingual (rephrasing in the same language), and the intersemiotic (translation between different modes of expression). It is reprinted in Daniel Weissbort and Astradur Eysteinsson, eds., *Translation - Theory and Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 113-18 [18].
from different cultures as either “oral” or “literate” led to evaluative claims about the comparative level of development of these cultures. In the meeting points between Europeans and the cultures they made contact with in the long period of European exploration and expansion, being literate was equated – by Europeans – with being “more” civilised. Although more modest in scope, a number of recent scholars have also argued that oral cultures are fundamentally limited in their ability to engage in abstract thought or complex cultural activities, such as Walter Ong’s assertion, that

without writing, human consciousness cannot achieve its fuller potentials ... orality needs to produce and is destined to produce writing. Literacy... is absolutely necessary for the development not only of science but also of history, philosophy, explicative understanding of literature and of any art, and indeed for the explanation of language (including oral speech) itself.

This suggests that oral societies and those with writing have not only fundamentally different means of self-perpetuation, but fundamentally different capacities and capabilities. Self-perpetuation of oral societies occurs by memory and repetition, and this requires physical closeness. As a result, some argue (including Ong, above) that such societies lack the capacity of critical distance. Societies possessing writing, having been released by script from the need to hold the social tradition in people’s

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103 Some intriguing work is being done to re-examine whether Indigenous peoples viewed shared the European view of the potency of literacy in contact situations: did they really perceive writing as bestowing magical powers on the Europeans as received wisdom avers? Peter Wogan’s analysis of contact with North American Huron Indians suggests scepticism is warranted at least in some instances, as in this area there is evidence that these Indigenous peoples do not seem to have been as enamoured of writing as European accounts claimed. See Peter Wogan, “Perceptions of European Literacy in Early Contact Situations,” Ethnohistory 41, no. 3 (1995).

memory allow, Ong argues, have developed a more "objective" sense of the past, and a sense of its radical difference to the present.\footnote{See also Jack Goody and Ian Watt, "The Consequences of Literacy," in *Literacy and Traditional Societies*, ed. Jack Goody (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1968), 30-34, and Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge, New York, Oakleigh: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 75ff.}

Ong's views are representative of one of two major ways of thinking about orality and literacy, which holds that the introduction of the technology of alphabetic writing systems radically changes societies, orality eventually and inevitably giving way to literacy. Other than Ong, the work of Eric Havelock, some sections of the work of Goody and Watt, and Marshall McLuhan's popular thesis of "hot" and "cold" media have all exerted a strong influence in this area. The positions they develop – labelled "Great Divide" theories by Ruth Finnegan since they focus on the greatest differences between speech and writing and distilling the quintessential attributes of "oral" and "literate" cultures – have not only the appeal of simplicity but also seem to corroborate and re-enforce commonplace beliefs.\footnote{The key texts here are Goody and Watt, "The Consequences of Literacy"; Eric Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963); Albert Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960); Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*; and Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964).}

It is often unnoted that Great Divide theories came about, in one sense, through efforts to rehabilitate orality. A primary effect of the influential work of Eric Havelock, Milman Parry and Albert Lord earlier in the twentieth century was actually to demonstrate the spoken basis of much earlier Western literature (such as the Homeric epics and early European texts such as the Song of Roland) that had been obscured by a long period of study of these texts in which it was believed that they had a fixed written form. This innovative research rediscovered the oral nature of the "classics" of Western literature and placed the spoken word squarely at the
centre of Western literary traditions. Even Shakespeare, that apotheosis of European literariness, has been reassessed as a member of an oral and manuscript culture. In these instances, as in “Shifting Camp” above, appreciating the spoken environment from which these texts come opens up avenues of appreciation and understanding that are obscured if one limits understanding simply to what is written down.

The excavation of the oral roots of Western literary traditions was an important impetus for twentieth century understandings of literary and textual history, but even in the midst of this, an ambivalent relationship toward orality developed. Simultaneous with a renewed appreciation of the oral basis of Western cultures, was the formation of the idea of there being a progressive transition from such orally-based cultures to literate ones, and a sense of there being a great distance between the two. Walter Ong, for instance, as well as making comments about the inevitable transition from oral to literate cultures in the extended quotation above, elsewhere locates the final death-knell of the oral tradition in Europe in the Romantic movement and its “deep interiorization of print.” This is intriguing, since it suggests a link between Romantic hermeneutics and its concern with affixing

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107 Eric Havelock identified wide-ranging changes in Ancient Greece with the introduction of literacy. Milman Parry and Albert Lord generated renewed understandings and re-interpretations of the Homeric sagas, Guslar oral epics from the Balkans, and early European texts such as Beowulf by examining their oral and formulaic nature.


meaning to the working of an author's mind (discussed in Chapter One), and an essentially privatised mode of receiving the word through the mass-produced printed page.\textsuperscript{110}

So, although Great Divide schemas have facilitated a rich appreciation of the oral heritage of Western literature, they also, paradoxically, assume the superiority of literate forms, and re-enforce and consolidate assumptions that there are inevitably great differences between writing and speech. More recent scholars such as Ruth Finnegan, Brian Street and Astri Heen Wold, to whose work I now turn, argue that such models are beset by insurmountable problems, and, in their work, draw attention to the complexity of situations where speech and writing are used relative to cultural formations.\textsuperscript{111}

One of the unfortunate effects of theorising a Great Divide between what are seen as fundamentally different types of society, these latter scholars argue, has been the overemphasis on an essentially linear and progressive model, where oral societies at some point evolve to more sophisticated literate ones: writing replaces speech. This tends to exaggerate differences and obscure areas where written and spoken forms overlap.

\textsuperscript{110} While Ong's line of inquiry is suggestive, however, it is again salutary to acknowledge again that Romanticism was composed of many competing impulses. Consider the concern apparent in Schleiermacher's acknowledgment that spoken encounters (just as much as written texts) involve hermeneutic problems, and the concern of early Romantics such as Wordsworth in the \textit{Lyrical Ballads} and the many other balladeers of the period to write down vernacular forms of speech.

Another unfortunate side effect they note is that cataloguing the major differences between societies leads to a downplaying of differences within societies. Internal differences, though, are often highly pronounced, such as in Europe in the Middle Ages where certain legal, state and church matters were conducted in writing but the life of the majority of people was orally-based. Internal differences also abound in the contemporary world. How useful is it, after all, to say that SMS text messages employ the “same” kind of literacy in advanced technological societies as a court document, or that a chat on the bus is the “same” kind of orality as a telephone conference?

As can be seen in this example, the decontextualised writing scenario typified in theories of a Great Divide and the inwardness suggested by the idea of a “deep interiorization of print” generate misleading stereotypes about the actual situations in which writing and speech are employed. Astri Heen Wold argues that characterising speech as a face-to-face dialogue and writing as a medium which promotes distance and abstraction has resulted in a warped picture of the myriad ways in which speech and writing are encountered every day.\(^{112}\)

The introduction of writing per se is not the driver of radical changes in societies according to this second stream of thinking; rather, radical changes in social and political organisation often occur during situations of crisis, and it is in these periods that new technologies including writing are often introduced. This is to say that times of new contact or conflict with other societies include but cannot be reduced to

\(^{112}\) Astri Heen Wold further argues that taking these two situations as the prototypical instances ultimately represents an unexamined bias toward prevailing middle-class views about writing and speech; that “written language should serve the needs of logically stringent communications, while intimacy and closeness can be obtained though the oral medium.” Astri Heen Wold, “Oral and Written Language: Arguments against a Simple Dichotomy,” in The Dialogical Alternative: Towards a Theory of Language and Mind, ed. Astri Heen Wold (Oslo, Oxford, New York: Scandinavian University Press, 1992), 179ff.
the fact that an orally-based culture has come into contact with writing systems.

There are multiple and fecund ways in which literacy, even once it has been introduced, co-exists with orality rather than simply displacing it. Critics of Great Divide theories accordingly advocate wariness in identifying milestones on “the path” to literacy as if there is a uniform progression in the way that literacy has been taken up and practiced. In this view, writing and speech are treated as social practices which are always embedded in historically differentiated situations from which it is not really possible to extrapolate general principles. The specific circumstances and practices of the culture newly exposed to writing – including social factors like secrecy, religious belief, and degree of social movement – appear in these studies to be more relevant to how literacy is ever practiced.

In an Australian context this more recent, critical work on actual situations involving speech and writing has been invaluable, since it enables an evidence-based response to the claims Walter Ong makes about writing, quoted above. It simply is not true, for instance, that writing is required for the “explicative understanding of literature and of any art” since not only do dances provide more information about songs, but songs and stories from classical Aboriginal cultures (such as “Gudurrrugudurr” (Nyularn’s Nurlu), discussed in Chapter One) are often directly connected to long-established, though usually non-formalised, practices of exegesis and interpretation.\footnote{See also Margaret Clunies Ross, “Holding on to Emblems: Australian Aboriginal Performances and the Transmission of Oral Traditions,” in Who Needs the Past? Indigenous Values and Archaeology, ed. Robert Layton (London, Boston, Sydney, Wellington: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 167.} Explication occurs in this environment for two reasons. Firstly, there are many oblique references which are only revealed to people who are initiated to the song: i.e. they have access to hidden meanings. A second facet of explication which may pertain to open (available to everyone) or closed (restricted)
meanings, is that many of the words which are sung are not easily understood and must be explained. Sounds may be warped to fit the rhythm, and songs often include archaic words, words preserved from other languages, unusual and ambiguous word orders, syllables used as "fillers" (to assist in maintaining rhythm) or, alternatively, the elision of words (again for the requirements of the rhythm).114

More recent studies have thus identified the boundaries between what literate and oral cultures are capable of as inextricably blurred, bringing into question the whole model of a gulf between the literate and oral. In turn, this has enabled a critical re-examination of blindspots in previous studies of literate and oral cultures. For instance, the assumption that until the recent present Indigenous Australians were an exclusively "oral people" meant that the huge range and wealth of Indigenous writings from the times of early contact was obscured from view. In response to this situation, studies like Penny van Toorn's monograph Writing Never Arrives Naked have begun to identify a range of ways in which Indigenous people have been utilising script for their own purposes and needs since the early colonial period.115

This is a good point at which to widen the scope of the discussion to look at the complex and critical representations of the domains of writing and speech in the novel True Country. In this novel, the characters themselves meditate upon how these are shifting in remote Aboriginal communities at the present time, and discuss

115 Penny van Toom, Writing Never Arrives Naked: Early Aboriginal Cultures of Writing in Australia (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2006). See also Penny van Toom, "Indigenous Texts and Narratives," in The Cambridge Companion to Australian Literature, ed. Elizabeth Webby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); and her article, "Early Aboriginal Writing." Related to this is Ian Anderson's demonstration that Indigenous Australians have used writing since early on in the colonial period. He traces contemporary critical writings back to March 1847 when a petition to the Secretary of State for the Colonies was used as a tool of political intervention by eight Tasmanian Aborigines. Ian Anderson, "The Aboriginal Critique of Colonial Knowing," in Blacklines: Contemporary Critical Writing by Indigenous Australians, ed. Michele Grossman, 17-19.
the problematic issue of how to better represent the qualities of the living voice in written form.

**True Country**

Many of the characters in Kim Scott's first novel, *True Country* are preoccupied with how to sensitively navigate the changing relationships between forms of oral and written culture, while also attempting to conserve and vindicate the area's rich oral heritage. The novel is set primarily in Karnama, a small and isolated community of Noongar people located next to a mission in the Kimberley region of North-Western Australia, where Billy Storey and his wife Liz arrive to be schoolteachers. Here, Billy is confronted by some intractable topical issues including the ongoing problems of poor literacy skills among the Indigenous population (which sets them at great disadvantage in contemporary education and employment situations) and the status of oral testimony relative to more conventional means of historical work (the interrogation of written documents).

When Billy and Liz arrive, the township is in a state of protracted crisis. The young people of the community are not terribly interested in being introduced to the cultural practices of their elders yet are also disinterested in learning anything else, there is widespread unemployment, illicit substance and alcohol abuse which fuel frequent acts of violence, and there is a dysfunctional division between the white bureaucrats and missionaries who work in Karnama and the local Indigenous people. The collective Indigenous voice which weaves the novel together sets the scene,

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reflecting the concern of older people about what is happening to the settlement’s youth:

Tell us, we learn anything from white man yet? Nowadays people make mistake. Maybe tired. Little by little Aborigine going down. Drinking and dying. Making circles, littler and more little. We don’t like looking, and seeing it that way. We want to fly up again.

They can’t forget about our roots, they can’t leave behind and go to the whiteman roots. That no good...

What are 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 what Billy should write down and show those kids. (TC 124-5)

Karnama is a community in abrupt transition, and one of the transformations that is occurring is from being a predominantly “oral” society where cultural transmission occurs through the face-to-face situations of speaking (and rituals and performances associated with speech and song) to increased attention to the written word.

In True Country, there is suspicion as well as interest in literate forms, not because of anything magical about writing itself, but because of resistance toward what is identified as the questionable option of taking on “whiteman roots” (as the collective voice states in the passage quoted above). While they embrace some of the possibilities opened up by writing, the local people do not want the oral basis of the local culture to be replaced or dislodged by written forms but seek to be selective about what is needed to rejuvenate and reinvent traditional forms of knowledge transference.

Although the settlement is caught up in a situation of “normalised” crisis, there are those who identify possibilities for hope. Billy meets up with Gabriella, a young woman from the community who has returned during university holidays. She feels a
need to bring together the pieces which remain of her Indigenous heritage, in a
creative act of recovery, to

Put the pieces together like one of the paintings. You know, how I’ve been brought
up, I don’t know anything of the old ways; a few words, this and that. But there’s
something there, that’s what I reckon. Should we try and put it all together and
believe in it? Or try and rediscover things, like that Renaissance thing? Do like they
say Walanguh could, you know, sing for this new world. (TC 82)

The Renaissance is a redolent metaphor for such an endeavour, with the exuberant
reinvigoration and rediscovery of classical culture during the sixteenth century
leading to new forms of invention and creativity in areas such as painting and
architecture. It was a period which moved forward by looking back; times of rapid
change and innovation which took the distant past as their exemplar. Similarly, the
idea of “singing” for a new world is a rich oral metaphor, linking song-creation to
world-creation, which gives their project a link to established Indigenous practices
and beliefs.

While Gabrielle and Billy are interested in “singing” for a new world and utilising
the now-fragmented knowledge of the past to reinvigorate the present and future,
they are also concerned about how legitimate literate forms can emerge from cultural
practices which still concentrate predominantly around oral forms. Their questions
are about how to “indigenise” the written word, reflecting the preoccupation of a
number of Indigenous intellectuals with this question over recent decades. Jack
Davis argued that the question itself requires some interrogation, since even stating
the issue this way includes assumptions about what “writing” is (and that Indigenous
people before contact with Europeans did not have it). Davis agrees that, if one
defines writing as an alphabetic or pictographic arrangement of signs (a more limited
definition) then Australia’s Indigenous peoples were illiterate prior to contact with
Europeans because they possessed no specific alphabet or pictographic repertoire. But if one defines “writing” in a broader sense, as the inscription of a trace which can be “read” by others, or as a means of recording which extends what is encoded beyond the individual moment, he argues that classical (pre-contact) Indigenous peoples in Australia unquestionably possessed rich and varied means of writing. These include sand drawings, paintings, hair string belts, carvings and scarification marks. To account for these cultural products and to embrace writing as a “traditional” or “native” Indigenous communicative form, Davis polemically called for wider acknowledgment that the concept of “writing” extends beyond marks on a page.117

**Orality-in-writing in *True Country***

*True Country* tentatively proposes other answers to the question of indigenising the written word, by utilising what I call “orality-in-writing”.118 To encourage literacy among the schoolchildren in Kamama (who are having difficulties in obtaining reading skills), Billy embarks upon a multifaceted project to tape and transcribe “true stories” from local people in the Aboriginal English they speak, retaining some of the storyteller’s individual quirks. The project is embraced by the older people of the community, who are concerned that the children spend more time playing video

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117 See Jack Davis, “Aboriginal Writing, a Personal View,” where he writes: “We, the Aboriginal people, have been recording our history for thousands of years. Our medium has been stone, hair, wood, the walls of caves; and the flat surface of rock has been the canvas of our ancestors. Hair string manipulated by fingers can tell a myriad of stories and the land was our drawing board.” Jack Davis and Bob Hodge, eds., *Aboriginal Writing Today: Papers from the First National Conference of Aboriginal Writers Held in Perth, Western Australia, in 1983*, 11-19 (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1985), 11.

118 Orality-in-writing, in which markers highlighting the verbal situation are transferred to the written medium, has its counterpart in the famous studies of rhetoric by Frances Yates who showed that the rhetorical practices of the Classical and Middle Ages preserved many of the features of writing in verbal speech. Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966).
games than listening to and learning Noongar histories, songs and stories. To the elders, recording and transcribing their accounts of past events (some which relate to events well before the storyteller was born) is a means of creating a store of knowledge and a legacy which may assist in revitalising the community. This is often cited as a primary ground for writing and publishing by Indigenous Australians – as for instance by people of the Mornington Peninsula who were involved in the project *Paint Up*. These activities do not only provide motivation and guidance in the short term, but are writing-based initiatives which act as a future archive for the communities, whatever external readership they may gain.  

Billy’s transcripts and the *Paint Up* project use writing in a particular way: as a transliteration or reproduction of the spoken word. Although inevitably mediated through the editor, such transcriptions attempt to display fidelity to the origins of writing in the *verbal* situation, and since the transcripts are also to be used locally, this diminishes the distance and decontextualisation that is considered typical of the written word in Great Divide approaches.

Beyond the use of transcripts to represent speech, *True Country* painstakingly represents other elements of the face-to-face verbal encounter in writing. Perhaps the most intriguing of the ways that orality-in-writing is exhibited is in the frequent interjections of a *collective Indigenous voice* (formed by the older men Sebastian, Walunguh and Samson).  

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119 *Paint Up* is one of a number of recent high-gloss publications which consists of Aboriginal English text descriptions next to images consisting of painted designs on bodies and canvas. One can read the text, but also for those who are capable, it is possible to “read” the painted lines and circles stories on the skin. Amanda Ahern and The Mornington Island Elders, *Paint Up* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2002).

120 This intersects in an interesting way with the concerns raised in Chapter One, which identified the common function of authors to be representatives of – and responsible to – their larger community and tribal groups. In *True Country*, Billy does not only identify with the Indigenous residents of the settlement, he is accepted by them as a spokesman. The end of the first section of the novel suggests
person, thereby placing him or her in direct relation to the speakers, moving closer to
the intimacy of speech. This plural “we” voice at the novel’s opening engages in a
welcoming protocol to land – extending an invitation to its visitors to see the
richness of the place they are about to enter as they circle in a light aircraft above,
with its rich natural environment and plentiful food, school, store and mission. The
plural voice, highly unusual in Western story-telling forms, also ends the novel with
the following comments:

See? Now it is done. Now you know. True country. Because just living, just living is
going downward lost drifting nowhere, no matter if you be skitter-scatter dancing
anywhere like mad. We gotta be moving, remembering, singing our place little bit
new, little bit special, all the time.

We are serious. We are grinning. Welcome to you. (TC 255)

This collective Indigenous voice advances a friendly yet sober invitation to readers
to engage with it in mutual negotiation of common ground. One thing this does is
reaffirm the presence and power of Aboriginal people and their ability to act as
agents who are capable of taking responsibility for their lives and “sing” their own
futures. The voice also provides a critical running commentary throughout the novel
on the actions and attitudes of the younger members of the community at Karnama,
and the white teachers, administrators, and builders who work at the settlement.

In True Country, a sense of orality-in-writing is further generated by the interruption
by individual voices, speaking Aboriginal English, into the collective ruminations of
the older men. The following exchange occurs when the raft of new teachers, having
arrived at the air strip, are driven into town in the back of a ute.

‘Who them gardiya?’

that, far from the individual author as creator of original works, Billy’s writing should ultimately be
conceived as a collective activity: “Billy is doing it with us now ....We might be all writing together,
really.” (TC 85)
‘Teachers.’

‘Look out, ’m fall off not careful.’

‘Wave ’em, look at ’m they wave. Think they pope, or what?’ (TC 18)

This exchange is composed of a polyphony of rapidly changing voices, and it is not clear who speaks. One of the effects of having so many different voices speaking sometimes in unison, sometimes in counterpoint, is the need to attentively listen. If reading involves what we might think of as a kind of conversation in which the text speaks in another voice, in order to hear these voices what is needed is to slow down and attend to moments where it is not possible to define who exactly is speaking. The play of voices in a community of sounds has more than a superficial relevance in this novel. As Rich Pascal remarks:

A single voice, or even a succession of such voices clearly demarcated from one another, both reflects and further empowers the culturally inculcated presupposition that individual experiences, thoughts, and emotions are the true loci of what is most valuable in human experience. In this narrative, by contrast, it is as though the predisposition of most readers to attend to a single textual voice at a time is shouted down by a crowd of narrators, not merely a succession. The host of narrative voices and perspectives tacitly casts into relief the modern Western valorization of individualism over communality.121

Indeed, the predisposition of novel-readers schooled in Western traditions to give privileged attention to a single voice is further eroded in True Country because, as noted above, the reader is explicitly brought into in the web of relations in the novel. At times – such as in the novel’s closing lines – the reader is directly addressed in the second person, and so is required to take definite stances relative to what is said. At other moments, the reader is implicitly aligned with the plural “we” voice of the

older Indigenous men. This, as Penny van Toorn notes, has a curious effect: "There are moments in *True Country* where when readers are enlisted as active co-creators; there are other moments when we are required simply to shut up and listen."\(^{122}\) As a result, the reader cannot adopt the privileged position of a vicarious observer of the action, but is enticed and elicited to take up a number of positions, none of which have any total or absolute answers to the questions the novel poses.

Direct forms of address which contribute to a sense of orality-in-writing are not limited to recent novels like *True Country*. They feature in many Indigenous Australian texts, like the significant genre of poems where the speaking voice directly addresses the reader as one who must hear the voice of Aboriginal grievance. Here is an excerpt from “Still You Keep Asking Asking” by Nimbaliman:

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This is my grandfather's country—
We've been here from the beginning—
And yet you come to argue with us—
You've kept asking and asking for a long time—
Still you come at us—
What are you going to give us?—
You can offer us nothing!—
And you still keep asking, asking—
and pushing all the time—\(^{123}\)
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In this poem the sense of someone speaking is underscored by its conversational tone, its direct address to white readers, by run on lines and hyphen-ended lines which create a flow-on rhythm; and other punctuation markers such as question

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\(^{123}\) Jack Davis et al., eds., *Paperbark: A Collection of Black Australian Writings* (St Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1990), 343. A number of poems in Anita Heiss’ latest collection also directly address a white readership in a confronting, conversational style. Anita Heiss, *I'm Not Racist, But...* (Cambridge, UK: Salt, 2007).
marks and exclamation marks which (like a hand gesture or that most potent of verbal elements, a pause) add emphasis to the words.

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Orality-in-writing in *True Country* serves to emphasise the closeness of the interpersonal and communal aspects of life at Karnama, and to speculatively fabricate a form of writing capable of conveying some of the characteristics of speech. Billy’s use of transcripts to impart reading skills to the children he teaches also acknowledges this by trying to bring the written word closer to them, utilising it to represent some of the characteristics of the local vernacular.

Contrasting with Billy’s use of writing, the written word as it has been conventionally received by the residents of Karnama is quite alien. Most uses of writing are official or bureaucratic; there are the headmaster’s journals, the missionary history of the settlement, and the sign on the town’s outskirts which instructs visitors that Karnama is a “dry” (i.e. alcohol-free) community. To Murray, the new headmaster at Karnama, it is these latter uses of writing which are paradigmatic and he prizes their removal of vernacular peculiarities through grammatical and lexical standardisation. It is through such standardisation that Murray considers that what he hears only as verbal irregularities in the local dialect can be tamed; in snide comments he refers to Billy’s capability to “fix up” the speakers’ English in his editing of the transcriptions (*TC* 102).

Gabriella identifies the kind of writing Murray prioritises as being at the opposite end of the spectrum to speech. She notes how estranging she found the fruits of such writing when younger, comparing it to how the older people in the township relate stories:
She said they gave her Aboriginal Literature to read. Her voice inserted quotation marks. She said it was dreaming stories, and they weren't so good to read, not like being told them. Or they were in a language that she didn’t understand and then in English, which made them sound silly, or as if they were only for little children. Or it was history stuff. Or sometimes just like any old story, but with black people. Or off-white people. We laughed.

We agreed that English as people spoke it here was good for talking, and that the old people told stories well. But it wasn’t good for writing, maybe? There were not enough words, different words. You needed to hear the voice. And other people couldn’t do that so well. And you needed other things; like hands waving in space, and lips pointing, and drawings in the sand. *(TC 78-79)*

This pinpoints a significant problem, raised also by “Shifting Camp” at the start of the chapter. It is fundamentally a hermeneutic problem: how to convey what is special about the spoken word in the alien medium of writing? Billy and Gabriella are speculating about the ways speech situations differ from writing, echoing the typical markers identified in Great Divide theories: the context of speech is often one where the response of the listener and role of the speaker are constantly being exchanged, and the shifting sands of conversation are accompanied by gestures, the confirmatory noises of the listener, half-sentences, tones of voice, pauses, silences and so on. Some of these, Billy and Gabriella suggest, may be preserved (albeit transformed) in the translation to other media, but many are not, and Gabriella identifies this as a major limitation on the practice of recasting of Indigenous Australian stories as myths and legends in ways which simply ignore their emergence from a primarily oral environment.¹²⁴

¹²⁴ *Gularabulu*, a joint effort by the Aboriginal storyteller Paddy Roe and the non-Indigenous scholar Stephen Muecke in the early 1980s, is another gesture toward what is possible in relation to presenting orality-in-writing. It attempted to get across a sense of Roe’s words as they were spoken including dashes for pauses and supplementary notes about the tone of voice and loudness, explicitly attempting to convey some of the oral qualities of the storytelling environment in a written format. Paddy Roe and Stephen Muecke, *Gularabulu: Stories from the West Kimberley* (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1983). This was extended in a later collaborative effort between Roe, Muecke, and
While Billy and Gabriella’s discussions confirm some of the apparent differences between speech and writing, importantly, they also significantly undermine the extent of these differences. Billy’s transcripts show that writing does not necessarily need to be devoid of the particularities of the spoken word. The transcripts also demonstrate that people may adopt writing in ways which do not exactly correlate to the “typical” decontextualised writing situation which is so fundamental to Great Divide theories. And further, Great Divide claims about the uniqueness of writing (represented by the headmaster Murray’s statements), importantly, are presented in the novel as only one of a number of views about writing, its uses and its benefits.

The novel itself, qua written text, further undermines and questions the idea of a great gulf between the domains of writing and speech. True Country is surely one of the most sensitive, persuasive and successful efforts to represent orality in written form, with the novel presenting itself capable of conjuring the sense of when and how people tell stories in Noongar society. Billy, as we have seen, is particularly attuned to the problems of “capturing the voice” in his transcriptions. And in its own representations of the spoken word, such as its use of the rolling cadences and rhythms of Aboriginal English, and the polyphony of voices, the novel demonstrates that the written word can convey many (though not all) of the particularities of speech.

the French visual artist Krim Benterrak, in Benterrak, Muecke, and Roe, Reading the Country. Muecke’s work is a simplified adaptation of the ethnopoetic work of Dennis Tedlock and Jerome Rothenburg in North America. Tedlock’s and Rothenburg’s reflections on interpreting and transcribing stories of North American Indigenous peoples led to their attempts to develop “total translation”, a way of creating visible records in the form of librettos which still retain qualities of the oral performance (such as the internal timing of the performance and accompanying events, duration, and various nuances such as tone of voice, pauses, loudness, word distortions, and meaningless vocables). See works such as Dennis Tedlock, The Spoken Word and the Work of Interpretation (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983); and Dennis Tedlock, “Towards an Oral Poetics,” New Literary History 8, no. 3 (1977).
A similar desire to represent the word as it is actually spoken is at play in Mudrooroo's second novel in the *Wild Cat* series. *Wild Cat Falling* investigates the life of a young, disaffected Indigenous man who is searching for something to do and somewhere to be upon being released from the notorious Fremantle gaol for petty crime.\(^{125}\) After *Wildcat Falling*, came *Doin' Wildcat: a Novel Koori Script* and finally *Wildcat Screaming: a novel*. While the first novel in the series followed predominantly realist parameters, *Doin' Wildcat: a Novel Koori Script* is a postmodern fantasia.\(^ {126}\) As the title suggests, it is a novel about making a film of *Wildcat Falling* ("Koori" is now generally limited to Aboriginal people in the southeastern states, but at the time it was being promoted as a replacement for the general term, "Aboriginal"). It incorporates large sections of (fictional) film script and some of the dialogue of the novel re-presented in scripted form. This creates a revisionary commentary on the earlier novel, incorporating a critique of the practices of publishing and the making of films. *Doin' Wildcat* is not only an intriguing re-writing, critique, and extension of more conventional novels such as *Wildcat Falling*. Like *True Country* it is also a fictional exploration of possible means of using the written word to convey a sense of orality, as the following brief passage indicates.

> Yuh know, I'm what's called institutionised, bin in one place or another most of me life, an it appened from the age of nine when I found meself in Swanview. There I done me basic trainin on ow to exist ina institution. Yuh got two fists an add to it a thinking brain an yuh survive.\(^ {127}\)

\(^{125}\) See the Introduction for a discussion of the question of Mudrooroo's identity and my rationale for including him in this study.


*Doin’ Wildcat* concentrates predominantly on developing a written form in which to represent words as they are spoken. *True Country* develops an appreciation of orality in distinct though related ways. Above, I discussed Billy’s use of the transcripts and the representation of collective and individual voices in *True Country* in ways which highlight how words are used in conversation to interject and to directly address others. Another way orality is highlighted in *True Country* seeks to address the issue of the impoverishment of the contextual situation of the spoken word in writing is by explicitly representing the relationship between the speakers and listeners and their world through close attention to the environmental surrounds of conversations. The intense physicality of the surroundings is lavishly described; the sounds of frogs, noises from the darkness, the look and feel of plants, humidity, rain, and the smells of sewerage, mould and mud. In this lies an effort to vividly dramatise not just the social contexts of people’s speech and conversation but also their changing position in space, place and seasonal time.

A final way in which the richness of the oral situation is gestured toward in the novel is by highlighting emotional affect and pleasure. Sebastian expresses the pleasures of certain kinds of speech and the range of physical gesture and proximity it encompasses when he says that “[t]he old people, they couldn’t read or write, but they had their stories in their mouths and they had them in their hands. They danced and they sang all their stories” (*TC* 247). When Billy is using a tape recorder to collect stories to transcribe from Fatima they are both overwhelmed by powerful emotional responses, becoming involved in strongly imagining the feelings of the story being told – such as the fear felt by a young girl in a first contact situation with the missionaries. This engagement makes them feel light-headed, as stories put them in a powerful position above the action which is being recounted:
I think we were enjoying the re-creation of the story. It is hard to explain this. We were like two demi-gods perched on a mountain-top, or cloud, and the two of us narrating a story as it was simultaneously performed by the tiny mortals far below us. (TC 40)

Most of the storytelling pleasure depicted in *True Country* occurs when stories are orally told. Significantly, however, Billy's transcriptions are an attempt to bring this pleasure to reading the written word, and the reader of *True Country* receives pleasure (and the recounting of the pleasure of the spoken word) through a written novelistic form.

*True Country* suggestively brings the written word closer to speech and the texture of the spoken environment in a number of ways. Despite some clear differences in their use, many forms of writing and speech are thus shown to overlap and be interdependent, establishing that the separation between their domains is by no means unequivocally defined.

**Philosophical Hermeneutics: the “living situation” of dialogue**

Thus far in this chapter I have noted problems in transposing songs which come from spoken-word traditions to the page, and traced some of the ways in which writing and speech are represented in Kim Scott's *True Country*, with a particular concern for how the novel intermingles Indigenous oral traditions with writing (“orality-in-writing”). I have also situated these concerns in relation to scholarly debates about the differences between speech and writing and oral and literate cultures. Below, I will examine *True Country*’s representations of the comparative reliability of oral and written ways of remembering or recalling past events. But
before this, I would like consider some of the ways in which speech and writing have been understood in hermeneutic traditions, and how, in particular, these are situated by Gadamer.

Hermeneutics from antiquity onwards has tended to focus upon the interpretation of writing. This focus is residual in two of the key words of this thesis: “literature” and “text”, both of which initially and predominantly refer to what is written.

“Literature” derives from the Latin word for “letters”, and (until the nineteenth century when “oral literature” began to be noticed) traditionally referred to writing and books. “Text,” from textus, means “written account” although more recently it has been extended to incorporate spoken words which appear in print.

For centuries written texts (as discussed above in the “typical” writing and speech situations) have seemed to be in greater need of interpretation than the spoken word because they have been taken to be more autonomous of the environment in which they were produced. This came about especially with the recognition of the need to interpret and re-translate older written documents so they could be understood.

Something spoken often appears to be more embedded in its immediate circumstances and more readily admit the possibility of avoiding miscommunications because it involves a situation of direct dialogue. The writing-centredness of hermeneutics shifted somewhat with German Romanticism, and its development of the insight that understanding and interpretation are involved in situations which extend beyond writing. Schleiermacher was exemplary in this, as he extended the province of hermeneutic inquiry to speech:

Hermeneutics is not to be limited to written texts. I often make use of hermeneutics in personal conversation when, discontented with the ordinary level of understanding, I wish to explore how my friend has moved from one thought to
another... the task for which we seek a theory is not limited to what is fixed in writing but arises whenever we have to understand a thought or series of thoughts expressed in words.\textsuperscript{128}

Dilthey later explicitly recognised that understanding may be of actions and life-expressions of any kind. This continued in the early work of Paul Ricoeur, in his studies of the text-like qualities of actions and activities. It is the case, however, that hermeneutics remains heavily shaped by the traditional focus of its inquiry: written texts, and it continues to deal mostly with what is written (as indeed does this thesis).

This is a useful point from which to consider Gadamer's questioning of speech and writing, which in many ways continues the hermeneutic tradition.\textsuperscript{129} On first glance, his work does not seem far removed from the Great Divide theories considered above, where writing and speech are considered to be utterly different modalities. He states, for example: “[t]he written word and what partakes of it – literature – is the intelligibility of mind (\textit{Geist}) transferred to the most alien medium.” (\textit{TM} 163/ \textit{GW} 1 168-9). Indeed, he calls this (following Plato) the “ideality” of writing, which means that it has been detached from speaking and the necessary repetitions of oral traditions which make cultural transmission possible. Ideality is “what raises everything linguistic beyond the finitude and transience that characterise other remnants of past existence” (\textit{TM} 390/ \textit{GW} 1 394).\textsuperscript{130}


What interests me about Gadamer’s approach to the issue is how he re-connects the concerns of writing with speech; indeed, to overcome the alienation of writing he urges that what is necessary is to bring it back to speech. When one understands something written it is unlike anything else that comes to us from the past or from another culture; unlike physical or material artefacts which weather and erode away, something which is written “once deciphered and read, is to such an extent pure mind that it speaks to us as if in the present” (TM 163/ GWI 169).

None of this involves making any claims about the capacities of societies which are more “literate” or “oral”, and neither does it involve conceiving speech and writing as separated by a chasm of difference. The point, for Gadamer, of bringing writing back to speech is not because speech has a foundational priority, but because:

Nothing is so purely the trace of the mind as writing, but nothing is so dependent on the understanding mind either. In deciphering and interpreting it, a miracle takes place: the transformation of something alien and dead into total contemporaneity and familiarity. (TM 163/ GWI 169)

Bringing writing back to speech transforms something alien into something contemporaneous and living. For Gadamer the written word is brought back to speech in being deciphered and read, and thus it appears to the reader as a partner in a present dialogue. Thus, in being actualised what is read becomes close and intimate in a way that material artefacts do not.

Written literature is a live dynamic or event which requires an engagement to become realised and actualised in a play of appearing (some meanings become manifest) and concealment (other aspects are unactualised and remain hidden). Even reading silently is like a live oral performance of a kind; it is an “inner speaking”,

and Richard Palmer, 180-81; and Risser, Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other: Re-Reading Gadamer’s Philosophical Hermeneutics.
effected by an “inner ear”. For Gadamer then, a book discarded underneath a rock may have a material physicality, but it does not exist as a work of literature as it is not understood. Reading with understanding – either when reading aloud or silently – always involves:

a kind of reproduction, performance, and interpretation. Emphasis, rhythmic ordering, and the like are part of wholly silent reading too. Meaning and the understanding of it are so closely connected with the corporeality of language that understanding always involves an inner speaking as well. (TM 160/ GW 1 165-66)

Writing, which falls prey to ideality and distance, needs to be brought to living speech in the process of understanding. It is important to note, however, that ideality is not merely an aspect of what is written (although it seems more obvious there). Gadamer repeatedly points out that ideality is an aspect of language, and not of merely one modality of its expression. Inasmuch as its content can be separated from the concrete speech act and reproduced – in extreme cases in a different historical age or a different cultural setting – speaking also requires effort in order to be understood. In True Country Fatima’s and Billy’s utilisation of the tape recorder to record their conversations represents such an event, and this occurs commonly with television and radio or also simply with the delay incurred when we report another’s words.

Gadamer suggests that when we read or hear a sound recording and understand, what has been previously fixed in words is brought into what he calls “living speech”. But this return is not a mere reconstruction of something now gone (such as the “author’s

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131 As he writes elsewhere; “Reading lets something be said to us.” And further, “When we speak of hearing and seeing in reference to reading, it is obviously not a question of having to see in order to decipher writing but rather of having to hear in order to see (i.e. understand) what the writing says.” Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Hearing - Seeing - Reading,” Language and Communication 10, no. 1 (1990): 87-88. See also Gadamer, “Philosophy and Literature,” 247-48.

132 This is clearly stated in a later essay, where he writes, “Ideality ... befits not only the written structure but also original speaking and hearing insofar as their content can be separated from the concrete speech act and can be reproduced.” Gadamer, “Philosophy and Literature,” 247.
intended meaning”). Nor is it the spelling out of words in an abstracted fashion (such as might occur if I read a foreign language with which I am not familiar, or read words whose meaning I cannot glean). Rather, meaning occurs as a communicative, dialogical, “living” event which involves a process of questioning and answering, whether I seek to understand what someone is saying to me right now, to understand a written text or a podcast, or to understand something which I hold in my memory. Thus there is a performative dimension at work in any interpretation, as the models for the experience of understanding discussed in Chapter One (the back and forth of conversation, the to and fro of play, and application) also highlight. This performance or event, as Gadamer conceives it, is bringing the word to living speech in order to let that which appears alien and distant speak in a new, and clearer voice though the fusion of horizons. The challenge of reading, just as much as listening, is to return the word to this relational, participatory exchange.

We need to clearly situate Gadamer’s argument, because one of Jacques Derrida’s implied criticisms of the concept of “living speech” is that it is “phonocentric”. Phonocentrism involves the claim of the “absolute proximity of voice and being, of voice and the meaning of being, of voice and the ideality of meaning.”¹³³ This is the assumption that speech can provide closeness in contrast to the distancing and deferral of writing: if spoken words are symbols of our mental experiences, then written words seem to be a copy of a copy (the symbols of what is spoken), and are even more distant from thought. As Derrida notes, writing has often been the subject of suspicion, perceived as ambiguous in intent and meaning, and confined to “a

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secondary and instrumental function: translator of a full speech that was fully present (present to itself, to its signified, to the other, the very condition of the theme of presence in general).”

This opposition between the plenitude of speech and the insufficiency of writing, Derrida demonstrated, is untenable since it cannot be advanced consistently. In his inimical way, he reversed the terms, showing the non-reducibility of writing to speech. What about differences in writing that cannot be heard? Derrida’s formulation of difference is exemplary of this. Difference is a portmanteau word meaning difference and deferral (through the scribal addition of the acute “e”), but this distinction cannot be spoken and heard but only seen, i.e. written.

The question is whether hermeneutics is susceptible to phonocentrism, by privileging the voice and presence, and assuming that there is a proximity which can be gained through speech which is barred to writing. Certainly Gadamer does not think so, for the following reason. In the late essay “Dekonstruktion und Hermeneutik” Gadamer highlights what I started to outline above (as I did in Chapter One), that Gadamer never claims that speech has the capacity to express absolute plenitude or ideal presence because the word in hermeneutics is always a word in dialogue, a two-sided word between people and so never fully present to anyone. “It is the word, that one person says and the other understands,” he writes. “How can that imply presence? Who listens to his own voice? And who understands, if he only listens?” Gadamer for his part queries “what is writing, if it is not read?” (my emphasis). The significance of bringing the word to speech for Gadamer has nothing to do with

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134 Ibid., 8.
achieving some unreflexive or immediate “presence” (which is what Derrida criticises in phonocentrism), but because it is here that it can speak and be heard.

To read a text with understanding requires not only to have decoded the signs and given these sound, but to translate this visual information to sound and silence, “to bring the text to speaking, and that means, that it is read in a modulated and articulated way that is appropriate to its form and stresses its sense.” But this word is never totally manifest; meaning is never totally realised. Gadamer’s concept of the “inner word” as Jean Grondin recognises, is never totally laid out in the word which is actually spoken; “language lives in this unsatisfied yearning, the irreducible difference between word and meaning.”

There is, then, no fundamental “Great Divide” for Gadamer, where speech and writing are difference modalities, or where societies with oral traditions could be considered as possessing fundamentally different mental capacities to those possessing writing. Nor is the implication warranted that his work is phonocentric, prioritising a purely-present speech. Rather, both spoken and written words – and oral and literate traditions – are susceptible to the danger of distance, strangeness, non-understanding, lies, loss of clarity, of becoming mere sounds and falling into empty words. They are also both equally as capable of closeness and of speaking (provisional) truths, and the hermeneutic task is in recognising the former, and drawing the latter out.

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136 Ibid.
137 Grondin, Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics, 137.
138 Gadamer asks, for instance, “whether the inner connection between hermeneutics and writing is not to be regarded as a secondary one. It is not the fact of its being written as such that makes an idea need interpretation, but the fact of its being in language; but that includes the universality of meaning from which, in turn, follows the possibility of its being written down.” (TM 520/ GW2 402)
Orality and literacy in *True Country*

I'd like now to return to *True Country*. The discussion of the novel above concentrated upon how forms of alphabetic literacy are being taken up and legitimised by some members of a society which has customarily perpetuated itself orally and continues to do so despite the increased use of writing. Here, I will look in more detail at how the novel interrogates the reliability of oral and written ways of referring to past events.

There is one particular episode in the novel that focuses directly on these questions. This is when Billy, while gathering stories for his transcription project, gives Fatima a book written up from early journals of the history of the missionary settlement. On one level, the discussions between Fatima and Billy about the book represent a seminal encounter between accounts of the past which are based upon oral traditions and those which refer to written records. While they look at the pictures in the missionary account and Billy reads and paraphrases what is written, Fatima relates stories from the orally-transmitted Indigenous history of the missionary settlement. These stories articulate how the people of the area perceived events during early contact and initially interpreted what was totally unfamiliar, how, for instance, they took rice to be maggots, and white people as *djimi*, ghosts (*TC* 39).¹³⁹

If one of the superior attributes of “writing” is that it is a means of giving an event a continued existence beyond an evanescent instant, then some forms of orality seem to possess this quality. Fatima’s stories of events which happened before she was born represent a form of spoken discourse which is not “spontaneous” but functions

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¹³⁹ In Chapter Six, in the first part of the section on *Doctor Wooreddy’s Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World*, I discuss the process of interpreting the absolutely unfamiliar as, initially, one of “necessary misunderstanding”, which then forms the platform for subsequent revisions.
as a means of preserving aspects of the past. Fatima’s orally-transmitted history is able to act as a supplement to written documents, adding information to create a more complete picture of the early contact situation. It gives a cohesive account and reasoning for events that in the missionary records were perceived either as incomprehensible or understood in a radically different way. One of these is the Noongar recollection of a particularly tense time of relations between the local people and missionaries that culminated in the spearing of one of the priests. While the missionaries found (or reported that they found) this inexplicable, according to the stories received by Fatima the tension was initiated when the missionaries shot someone’s pet dingo.

Fatima also identifies silences in the missionary text, most tellingly in that the killing of an Indigenous woman finds no mention in the written records. Fatima’s oral accounts, in this sense, do not merely add additional information but also criticise the written accounts, mapping local Aboriginal orally-transmitted cultural memory onto the written records of the past to interrogate their perspectivism and silences. If Fatima’s oral text is accepted as a supplement which fills in some of the gaps of the written missionary account while also offering a contrasting perspective on these past events, though, the question remains of whether the written and oral accounts can be simply added together to produce a fuller, more truthful history. The difficulty with this, as Derrida amply demonstrates, is that supplementary information does not only add to, or expand the field of investigation, but that these additions have consequences for how the entirety of the field then appears. Supplements, in Derrida’s words, displace and change the “centre”: by accepting
supplementary oral accounts of the past, at some point we must acknowledge that our whole picture of the past has been dramatically changed, and its frame altered.\textsuperscript{140} Implicit in the relativisation of written history which accompanies such an acknowledgment is the recognition of a need to rethink the view of history which written accounts bestow, and to see perspectives on the past as themselves sources of conflict. In \textit{True Country} this recognition is not granted. Most of the non-Indigenous figures in the novel are uninterested in learning of Indigenous people’s orally-perpetuated accounts of the past, and they open disparage Fatima’s stories. More importantly, they do not perceive her stories as potentially imparting truth, but as tall tales and attention-seeking gambits. When Billy asks about story-tellers who may be potentially interested in being involved in the transcription project, one of the priests at the mission says that Fatima knows many stories, and that she “might even colour things up a bit, ham it up if you give her enough attention for it. They’re like that” (\textit{TC} 24). This approach to Fatima’s words does not allow any space in which the missionaries might consider the plausibility or truth of her stories, and it identifies a conundrum. As the long traditions of rhetoric show, all oral accounts, relying as they do on the audience’s perception of the veracity of the speaker are susceptible to attack in terms of reliability. If the \textit{credibility} of the speaker is regarded as one of the keystones of the persuasiveness of an oral account, how can Indigenous people possibly convince white people of the truth of what they say when their words, from the outset, are accorded no authority?\textsuperscript{141}

\textsuperscript{140} One widely-known work in which he discusses this is his account of the supplement of writing in Rousseau, in Derrida, \textit{Of Grammatology}, 144-64.

\textsuperscript{141} This issue will be taken up in more detail in Chapter Six. Fatima is also treated here by the missionary simply as an individual, and individual memory is undeniably fallible and faulty. The memories inscribed in communal and oral traditions are not fallible in the same way.
One of the intriguing points that Billy raises in his comment that the missionary account "tells you only what one eye saw" (TC 40) is that written accounts suffer from precisely the same problem. Simply by virtue of being taken down at the time, Trevor Lummis notes that documentary accounts from a period "give a certain specious aura of being trustworthy accounts of that period". 142 Fatima expresses a similar insight, when she declares: "you might find lies in this book. Or you might find things true" (TC 43).

Indeed, the Canadian essayist John Raulston Saul provocatively argues that writing may in fact be more prone to lies, because as they are told and retold, orally-transmitted stories are continually heard and criticised by others within the reach of the community, whereas in writing, one person can present misleading or untruthful accounts to an absent or distanced audience, and so their words are not subject to the same rigors. In reference to Australia this has obvious resonance, with clear discrepancies between what was happening "on the ground" in the early colonial period and the contents of the reports which were being sent back to England. 143

Leaving aside the question of whether it is intentionally misleading or not, in True Country the credibility of the written account is blatantly put into question through positioning it beside Fatima's stories. These reveal some of the potential for silences, gaps, elisions and omissions with the written word: especially telling is the missionary account's silence about the account of the killing of the Noongar girl, and the general absence of the names of any of the Noongar people from the mission.


It is notable that Fatima points out the potential bias and unreliability of what is written by bringing the written word back to the speech situation. She does not treat the spoken and written word as totally distinct in the kinds of truth they can impart, or avow that one is somehow innately more truthful and accurate than the other. Rather, in the way Fatima approaches this issue, whether lies or true things are imparted cannot be ascertained at the outset, but only through further (spoken or written) engagement, as Gadamer also suggests.

This issue of the reliability and possible truthfulness of oral accounts relative to written documents has correlations with recent legal and social justice debates, in which archival documents have been interrogated by utilising the critical attitudes opened up through oral histories. Perhaps the most widely-known instance of this in Australia has been in the gathering together of the oral testimony of hundreds of people in the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families which resulted in the well-known “Bringing them Home Report” of 1997. The Inquiry resulted in public awareness and eventual acknowledgement of the “stolen generations”: hundreds of children of mixed parentage (at the time called “mixed bloods”) who were removed from their communities throughout the twentieth century to be brought up in institutions or adopted into white families.

The “Bringing Them Home” report relied heavily upon oral testimony because it identified insurmountable problems in using only documentary evidence to construe the past. Written records proved piecemeal or faulty, with many written records lost.

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Others were never kept, such as when the Indigenous heritage of light-skinned children who had been removed was, as a matter of routine, not recorded.

Yet the public course of the stolen generations debates confirms the mainstream bias toward writing and the assumption that it is more neutral or objective than speech interrogated in True Country. Even when it is shown to be faulty, written documentation remains a powerful measuring stick. Publically, over the course of the stolen generations debates (the debates, and stolen generations accounts will be considered in Chapter Five), many questioned to what extent oral “history” is ever admissible and its truth value became a prime item of contestation throughout the highly politicised “stolen generations” and “new history” debates in Australia in the 1990s and turn of the millenium. The idea that if something is orally transmitted it is potentially more changeable and open to suggestibility (since it is not “fixed” in writing) was seized upon, with suggestions that the stolen generations were suffering from false memory syndrome. Oral accounts in the absence of written documents have not borne fruit in legal cases to date, and lack of written documentation has been cited on at least one occasion as reasons for dismissing plaintiff’s claims.

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145 Examples of claims of false memory can be found in the influential conservative magazine Quadrant. See, for instance, P.P. McGuinness, “Aborigines, Massacres and Stolen Children,” Quadrant 64, no. 11 (2000); and his “Poor Fella My ‘Stolen Generation’,” Quadrant 43, no. 11 (1999): 4. In the latter editorial McGuinness writes, “There is almost an element of false, confabulated memory, and perhaps even a degree of deliberate fabrication, in the sad histories related to the HREO/Wilson inquiry.” In the government’s official submission to a Senate Inquiry into its response to the Bringing them Home Report, Senator John Herron reiterated his claim that the evidence for any child being forcibly removed was “only anecdotal” (my emphasis). John Herron, “Federal Government Submission to the Senate Legal and Constitutional References Committee ‘Inquiry into the Stolen Generation,’” (2000).

146 In August 2000 Justice Maurice O’Loughlin rejected Lorna Cubillo’s claim that she was wrongfully removed from her family, specifically referring to the absence of written documentation to support her case. Valerie Linow from NSW became the first member of the stolen generations to receive compensation for mistreatment under state care in 2002. She was able to bring the case forward because she had managed to obtain letters written by police and Aborigines Welfare Board at the time, and was awarded $35000 by the Victim’s Compensation Tribunal as compensation for thrashings with barbed wire and repeated rape when placed in domestic service. The respective weights given to oral testimony and written forms of evidence have also been a major point of contention in Native Title cases, such as the Yorta Yorta decision in 2002.
Forms of writing and speech, in this context, are not neutral mediums of expression whose relative strengths and weaknesses can be impartially weighed. In a society in which writing is the benchmark for historical understanding of the past, those who perpetuate historical memory through spoken means are structurally disadvantaged. *True Country* tacitly reflects this wider state of affairs in its representation of how poorly the narratives of the past told by Fatima and other elders in the community are regarded by most of the settlement's non-Indigenous residents. It also presents an alternative. The figure who mediates between oral and written textual modalities is Billy, and he becomes the conduit for the reader to potentially reassess his or her assumptions. With him, the reader undergoes a process of learning or awareness-raising. What is offered through Billy's coming to understand his own previous assumptions and prejudices better (a theme to be developed in Chapter Four) is a crash course on learning how to hermeneutically listen to what the other person is saying, and we learn, with Billy, to listen to Fatima's words and to question his (and perhaps our own) embedded pre-judgments.

At a number of moments, including the discussion he has with Fatima about the mission book, Billy starts to recognise his bias toward seeing written archives as more truthful and neutral than orally-transmitted accounts. Re-listening to the tape recordings made at the time of the discussion with Fatima, Billy is struck that the initial reason he got excited about what she said is because it confirmed the written missionary report (*TC 37*). Again in hindsight, Billy comes to realise that during this conversation he was too obsessed about flicking through the pages to find the location of a particular story about a red scarf and the trivial detail of ascertaining what particular piece of material it was to actually listen to differences between the missionary account and Fatima's narrative. This is the key moment she relates the
story of the shooting. Note the “orality-in-writing” of the quoted Aboriginal English (where often a person’s gender is rendered by the generic “he” and “him”):

‘But her sister, she run away and they want to frighten her. You know? But they got ’im and shot ’im!’ Her voice had changed, was impassioned. I suppose she sat upright. As the tape reveals to me, I didn’t notice.

‘Ah, yeah.’ Still searching through a book not listening properly, still removed and hovering over the text.

Fatima repeated herself, spat out the words, ‘Shot her!’

I didn’t notice the change in her manner, and spoke as if to the book. ‘Yeah, that’s right. Yeah, something like that. I’ve only read this book once, so lots of things I forget, from it.’

‘I never read it,’ said Fatima. ‘I can’t read, so good.’

Her voice sounds dispirited. She would have looked around the room, and through the window to the mango trees in the front yard as I continued, still, skimming across the pages. I said, ‘Yeah, when I read it I didn’t know any of the names, so I don’t remember it very well.’

Fatima grunted, ‘No?’ and yawned. She said, ‘It’s not in this book but, the shooting, not in this mission book.’ (TC 38)

Through these encounters between Fatima and Billy, memory and the variable role of recording devices in different cultural settings are juxtaposed. Whereas Billy can say “I’ve only read this book once, so lots of things I forget,” in comparison Fatima’s memory is prodigious although she admits she finds it difficult to read lettered words. Here what is at issue is the potential longevity of oral knowledge against the forgetfulness allowed – or even fostered – by writing.

The distinction of writing as a more permanent recording device which preserves a trace or record in the absence of the speaker (one of the cornerstones in the orality – literacy divide) is further eroded by the current technologies that Billy is using. The tape recordings of Fatima’s speech are potentially just as permanent a recording
device as paper, and more suitable for “catching” the voice. Fatima’s attraction to the tape recorder (she takes it home with her, leaving the book behind) may be seen as a way of retaining oral transmission of culture but altering it so that physical proximity is not needed. It offers a means of preservation at a time of fracture in the community, which is under too much pressure to be able to continually rehearse the forms of repetition and memorisation required for the oral transmission of culture and memory. In this, Fatima preserves a semi-traditional form of storytelling and knowledge bestowal, creating a new formation that itself over time may become “traditional”.147

As a final comment, the scene where Billy and Fatima are discussing the mission book shows that highly diverse and interdependent modes of communicating are used by everyone regardless of their cultural traditions in *True Country*. It is interesting just how diverse these forms and genres of storytelling are: there are the written journals of the missionaries which have been edited to form a book. This book is being verbally paraphrased by Billy, who is also looking up direct quotes for more detailed information. Fatima is giving the account which she has received through oral transmission in the Indigenous community, which reflects and comments upon the missionary account. The whole scene is being recorded on tape, which Billy later listens to, transcribes and edits. He is commenting in the novel on his responses to listening to the tape after the actual encounter, while re-interpreting

147 Walter Ong notes a secondary (post-typographic) form of orality, such as radio programmes, which he suggests are orality grafted onto (and therefore ultimately derivative of) writing. I have difficulties with Ong’s notion of secondary orality also because it attributes cause and effect in a questionable way. Just because recording technologies such as tape recorders came after writing and share some (but not all) features in common, Ong concludes that they were *caused* by writing, an assertion I find unconvincing and impossible to test. In addition, the kind of orality being practiced by Fatima as she speaks into the tape recorder does not fit into Ong’s model, since Fatima is not literate (in the sense of being able to read alphabetic writing) and nor does she have any interest in being so. Ong, “Literacy and Orality in Our Times.” See also “The Literate Orality of Popular Culture Today” in *Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology*, 284-303.
what went on. This single event is incredibly richly layered, and could be extended further to include the reader, in this case myself, who not only has read the novel but made notes and has given a new account including paraphrasing and the interpretation currently being read.

*True Country* sensitively examines the multiple ways mediums of speech and writing are used in ordinary situations and this puts it in league with recent critical interrogations of Great Divide theories. The novel shows the complex ways forms of oral and written communication interact and co-exist in a community in transition, and that these interactions are dependent upon social and historical factors rather than special qualities which are inherent in the mediums of speech or writing themselves.

At the beginning of the chapter I looked at what occurs when stories and songs initially shared in oral contexts and spoken-word storytelling traditions are transformed or translated into written works on paper. The phenomenon of "translation" is another way of approaching the engagement with a text, which provides a means of exploring the opportunities and limitations of understanding. The next chapter will look at the whole phenomenon of translation in more detail, moving on to discuss the primacy of the particular languages we speak for all and any experience of the world.
CHAPTER THREE

Translation as bridge and barrier

The hermeneutic and literary motif this chapter will explore is translation. A translation represents a fusion of horizons between two languages. The translation may make the translated text seem closer to or further away from the language into which the translation is being made; translations may be "domesticating" or "alienating." There are consequences to either approach, but in each case translation operates as both a bridge and a barrier. It is a means of enabling understanding between languages where otherwise there would be incomprehension, but is also a highly selective bridge in which not everything from the initial language is able to be transferred or transfigured into the receptor language.¹⁴⁸ These themes will be discussed in the first section of this chapter.

¹⁴⁸ Rather than using the common terminology of source language and target language, I will use source language and receptor language, since I agree with Willis Barnstone that this is a less belligerent metaphor. Willis Barnstone, *The Poetics of Translation: History, Theory, Practice* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 228.
In the second section I will begin to examine questions which any meditation on translation leads to: questions about language. What does a language tell us about our world? What are the limits of language (if any)? This section will consider some Yolngu languages of the Northern Territory in relation to two aspects of language Gadamer prioritises: the capacity of language for world-disclosure, and its essentially communicative or interpersonal dimension.

The final section of the chapter looks at the politics of translation and how this is evinced by the presence of untranslated words from Indigenous languages in English-language texts. I regard these "embedded words" (as I call them) as being highly significant. They operate in two directions; on the one hand as a means of highlighting the legacy of colonialism in Australia (which has included the devastation of most Indigenous languages), and on the other hand as a means of revitalising the language and linguistic traditions that do remain in signalling the formation of a new or rejuvenated social and linguistic community.

"Domesticating" and "Alienating" Methods of Translation

Certain themes have recurred over the centuries whenever translation is considered, such as those introduced in the following comments by the Roman orator, philosopher, and statesman Cicero about his own translation practices.

I have not translated like a mere hack, but in the manner of an orator, translating the same themes and their expressions and sentence shapes in words consonant with our conventions. In so doing I did not think it necessary to translate word for word, but I
have kept the force and flavour of the passage. For I saw my duty not as counting out words for the reader, but as weighing them out.\textsuperscript{149}

Cicero notes that all translation is not equal: standards range from a slipshod approach to the use of rhetorical art. He contrasts word-for-word and sense-for-sense translation, a distinction which has been highly influential, since the flow of individual words in one language does not usually directly map onto another language. He also provides a criterion for good translation; it is a means of bringing themes, styles and phrases into "words consonant with our conventions" (my emphasis). What is here brought to the foreground is the language into which the translation is being made, where fidelity is shown to the sense of the initial passage but not necessarily each individual word.

In this short paragraph, Cicero articulates one of two major aims of translation, suggesting that successful translation involves transporting the flavour of the source passage into the receptor language. In his own discussion of translation, Friedrich Schleiermacher refers to this aim as that of "bringing the author to the reader." In a discussion about translating something into his native German tongue, Schleiermacher suggests the translator "drags [the author] directly into the world of the German readers and transforms him into their equal ... the author has changed himself into a German." This is a transformation of the source text which shifts the author's words towards the language into which they are being translated and its prevailing codes of understanding. What occurs is a "domestication" of the source text in Lawrence Venuti's memorable depiction of this kind of approach.\textsuperscript{150}


\textsuperscript{150} Domestication has been the favoured method of translation into English since the late seventeenth century according to Lawrence Venuti, "Translation as Cultural Politics: Regimes of Domestication in English," \textit{Textual Practice} 7 (1993). This is also followed up in Lawrence Venuti, "Translation,
In the lectures titled “On the Different Methods of Translating” which took place in 1813 at Berlin’s Royal Academy of Sciences, Schleiermacher also outlined the inverse process; the act of “bringing the reader to the author.” Here, something translated from one language should not seem the same as something translated from another, but rather, the special features of each source language should be allowed to “bend” the language into which the translation is being made. The translation of a Dyirbal song from the Cairns region in Queensland and a poem in Greek should each be distinct when translated in English – unlike a work originally written in English, and also dissimilar to each other, since their languages and the societies in which they were produced are diverse. In this approach, “the translator leaves the author in peace as much as possible, and moves the reader towards him,” trying to communicate to the readers “the same image, the same impression he himself has gained – through his knowledge of the original language – of the work as it stands, and in doing so he tries to move the readers towards his point of view, which is essentially foreign to them.” This “alienation” of the text (Venuti refers to this as a “foreignizing” approach) is one which brings out the quintessential foreignness of the source language and the culture from which it comes. To do this requires the translator to explore using words in a different way to what is normal in the receptor language, thus “bending” the language.151

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151 Schleiermacher, “Über die Verschiedenen Methoden des Übersetzens,” 47; Schleiermacher, “On the Different Methods of Translation,” 9-10. Schleiermacher realised that bringing out the foreignness of a text includes not just the difficulty of finding appropriate words which have different ranges of connotation in the two languages, but also the difficulty of being able to convey when an author is being conventional or fresh in their use of concepts, and – in the case of poetry – of expressing
It is the translator who decides to what extent to bring the author to the reader or the reader to the author, determining whether a translation is domesticating or alienating in relation to the receptor language. His or her role is especially important for translations of Indigenous Australian texts from Aboriginal languages, since the overwhelming majority of non-Indigenous readers have minimal or no acquaintance with these languages and are also quite unfamiliar with what is expressed in those languages, and so are heavily reliant upon the translator’s skill. To illustrate some of the differences in how domesticating or alienating approaches characterise the source language and its speakers I will discuss three texts aimed at broader (i.e. non-specialist) reading audiences: W.E. Harney and A.P. Elkin’s *Songs of the Songmen: Aboriginal myths retold* from the 1940s, and the more recent collections *The Honey-Ant Men's Love Song and other Aboriginal Song Poems* and *Little Eva at Moonlight Creek* edited by R.M.W. Dixon and Martin Duwell.¹⁵²

*Songs of the Songmen* is an example of a “domesticating” method of translation, in a populist attempt to promote wider understanding of Indigenous songs in a white community largely ignorant of Indigenous Australia. This text (which has as yet received minimal critical attention) comprises a number of song-chants gathered from a wide range of areas and peoples. Its introduction states that the collection aims at presenting in verse “the beliefs, myths and customs of the Aborigines” for non-Aboriginal Australians in order to promote “new experience and fellowship” with Indigenous people. To achieve this aim, Elkin admits not only to translating the songs and rendering them as poetry but also to altering, inserting, and substituting rhythm and rhyme as well as the semantic aspects of the original (since these are vehicles for the expression of meaning in the source language).

lines. Indeed, which lines are invented by Elkin and Harney and which are actual translations from any Indigenous language is unclear. Although the language of the song which inspired the poem is usually stated, with few exceptions the owners of the initial songs and the singers are not.

The domesticating project of *Songs of the Songmen* is partially a response to (as well as a manifestation of) the policies of assimilation which dominated the Australian political scene from the 1930s to 1960s. Assimilationism, broadly understood, involved the attempt to incorporate Aboriginal people into wider Australian society, and came about with the shift away from earlier beliefs that Aborigines would simply "die out" and their remnants would be "absorbed" into the mainstream population. When it became clear that Aborigines would not behave as projected, assimilation became the favoured discourse, but as is the way with complex and changing terms - this often meant conflicting things to different people. In contention were what kind of assimilation was favoured and how this was to be achieved.

One dominant variant of assimilationism which is frequently taken as representative of all assimilationist thinking and policy was the obliteration of any distinctive Indigenous identity or way of life with Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders encouraged to adopt Western mores, lifestyles, and customs. A.P. Elkin, who edited *Songs of the Songmen* and who was professor of Anthropology at the University of Sydney, strenuously resisted this model in favour of the "social assimilation" of Aborigines. This recognised that Aborigines formed distinct social, communital and familial groups, and identified this as a source of potential strength rather than something to be suppressed. Elkin promoted the integration of these groups into broader society through a form of what he called "cultural blending", with the
transformation of Indigenous cultures aiming to “safeguard for them their ties to the past, to the land, to one another, and to the ‘eternal dream-time.’” His was a conception of Aboriginality retaining distinctive characteristics yet with Aborigines able to co-exist with non-Indigenous Australians in the social structures of a national polity. Elkin also envisaged that Aboriginal people would be able to be self-directed (requiring, however, management, guidance and direction from anthropological “experts” such as himself). Occurring before the inroads made by post-colonial critiques later in the century, this was progressive thinking, since it did attempt to acknowledge and safeguard the customary beliefs and practices of Indigenous people.

Given Elkin’s attitude toward assimilation, the domesticating method of translation used in Elkin and Harney’s transitive adaptations can be regarded as a demonstration of “cultural blending”. The collection offers a reassuring example of Indigenous Australian themes mixed with European-derived poetic structures and storylines: these poems are transformed to wholly favour English cultural and poetic conventions, and the white reader’s prior expectations of what “bush poetry” consists of. However, Elkin’s ambivalence about the extent to which differences between Aboriginal and European cultures were in fact to be taken seriously for their own sake, or whether cultural blending should entail some kind of change for white Australians, is also apparent. This is not only evident in the fact that the songs are

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153 Quoted from A.P. Elkin’s 1934 article “Anthropology and the Future of the Australian Aborigines,” in Russell McGregor, “Wards, Words and Citizens: A.P. Elkin and Paul Hasluck on Assimilation,” *Oceania* 69, no. 4 (1999): 246. McGregor’s article presents a detailed comparison of Elkin’s and Hasluck’s views on assimilation, the assumptions which underlie them, and the kinds of policy they endorsed as a result. It is important to note that Elkin, however much he stressed the need to work with and acknowledge the cultural difference between Indigenous Australians and the white mainstream, did not celebrate this difference as a welcome form of cultural pluralism, but saw it rather as a pragmatic response to the then-current situation. Elkin argued that to deny the importance of the social, familial and communal aspects of Aboriginal people’s lives would be to invite chaos and disintegration rather than a progression toward (European-defined) “civilisation.” McGregor, “Wards, Words and Citizens: A.P. Elkin and Paul Hasluck on Assimilation,” 250.
wholly translated into the English language, but that the translations of *Songs of the Songmen* reinforce a sense of the backwardness of Aboriginal cultures and their incompatibility with European-styled modernity. They do so in two striking ways: by producing a sense of the "pastness" of the "Aboriginal lore" and traditions, and by generating a sense of their childishness.

The way the collection translates the Dreaming or Dreamtime is one means by which a sense of pastness or superannuation of Aboriginal cultures is conveyed. Two of the three poems heading up the collection (Harney’s and Elkin’s own creations) reiterate a sense of this key concept as both something unreal and dreamlike, and as something cut off from the present in a distant past. “Our Dreaming” begins “Together now we chant the ‘old time’ lays./ Calling to mind camp-fires of bygone days” and it recounts singing and dancing around a campfire, before the final stanza:

‘Tis not of these we muse today:
For the “Dreaming” comes, and we drift away
Into myth and legend where we’ve caught
The simple grandeur of their thought.

Further on in Elkin’s introduction, although at one point he refers to the Dreaming as “a faith in a life-giving past which is expressed in the present, in nature, and in man and his laws,” a few pages later he again underscores a sense of its unreality by calling the Dreaming a “condition or state of life and activity which is not limited by conditions of space and time ... much akin to our ordinary nocturnal dream-experience” (my emphasis).154 As we shall see in Stephen A. Wild’s translation of Thomas Jangala’s singing of “The Honey-Ant Men’s Love Song,” there are other

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154 Harney and Elkin, *Songs of the Songmen: Aboriginal Myths Retold*, 7, 17. A buran is a boomerang. It is curious that Elkin, in this work for a popular audience defines the Dreaming as he does; his anthropological works are quite different. See, for example, A.P. Elkin, “Elements of Australian Aboriginal Philosophy,” *Oceania* 40, no. 2 (1969).
ways of presenting this kind of information which represents the Dreaming differently, emphasising that it not only refers to events which happened in the past, and in a “timeless” cosmological stage, but also consistently underscoring (as Elkin actually does in his extensive anthropological writings) that it equally refers to the present and contemporaneous world.

In Songs of the Songmen, a sense of pastness is further generated also by the deliberately archaic quality of the songs. One such instance is from “The Dancing Boomerang.”

List to the tale that I will tell,
How from this pool where spirits dwell,
Badjo each morn would go away,
And leave behind throughout the day
His surplus burans and adze of stone ...

These lines resound with antiquated-sounding phrases such as “List to the tale”, “each morn”, “Burans and adze of stone”, and is linguistically characterised by the inversion of the typical sentence patterns of modern English: “Badjo each morn would go away”, rather than “Each morning Badjo would go away”, and “adze of stone” instead of “stone adze.” All these features contribute to a sense that these tales are relics. One major effect of this use of language is that the songs appear as dead – albeit grandiose – artefacts, and not living speech or living ideas. These are verses which are ancient and other-worldly, a perception encouraged by Elkin’s announcement that he and Harney are translating the Indigenous Australian songs as “myths” and “legends”.

155 Harney and Elkin, Songs of the Songmen: Aboriginal Myths Retold, 85.
The reference to myths and legends is revealing, alluding to more than a sense of age and distance since myths and legends incorporate the senses of being made up, untrue and primarily suited to children. A sense of childishness and infantilism is unmistakable, coming through in the selection of words and rhymes in these verses, and this further contributes to a sense that the cultures of Indigenous Australians are rudimentary and naive. Here is the first stanza of the “Song of the Oven”:

How tasty is food when it's cooked in the stones
In the ways of our fathers of old!
How tasty the flesh, how sweet are the bones!
So follow this way as it's told.

Elkin, in his introduction, makes a point of stating that the translations attempt to preserve the source-language chant rhythms (in this case a Bangal rhythm from western Arnhem Land), yet fails to note that the rhythms and rhyming schemas and simplicity of lexicon are highly reminiscent of English-language ballads, nursery songs and children’s verses.

The Honey-Ant Men’s Love Song and Other Aboriginal Song-Poems and its companion Little Eva at Moonlight Creek offer a vivid contrast to Songs of the Songmen. While these collections are also directed at non-specialist reading audiences, and, like the earlier collection, the forms of the compositions have been transformed into the verses and lines of the European poetic tradition, from this point the collections diverge.

156 Fitting the songs into the matrix of myth and legend without comment also misrepresents other significant underlying factors. Stephen Muecke notes, for instance, that instances of transformation in Aboriginal narratives do not follow the typical path of Western myths. Transformation is reflexive, never transitive; “people transform themselves, they are not transformed by witches or frogs.” Muecke, Textual Spaces: Aboriginality and Cultural Studies, 83.

157 Harney and Elkin, Songs of the Songmen: Aboriginal Myths Retold, 111.
Songs of the Songmen, I suggested, is a domesticating translation which brings the Aboriginal songs it translates wholly into the idioms of a backward or childish speaker of English. In contrast, the more recent collections, both of which have been obviously influenced by the critique representational forms brought to bear by post-colonialists in the intervening decades, highlight the difficulties inherent in their project, with R.M.W. Dixon drawing the readers' attention to the fact that "compromises are necessary" in making the poems available "within a European framework". Noting that "the original symbolism should still be apparent but its impact will inevitably be muted," he outlines some basic differences in understanding based on the disparate "cultural norms, fears, beliefs and expectations" of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.  \[158\] From the outset, then, the collection is framed in a certain way, with Dixon openly inviting questions about just how much understanding can possibly be achieved by its readers, and emphasising the very real limits to comprehension which emerge from the fact that these are song-poems from very different cultural settings to what non-Indigenous readers are accustomed to.

Although not extreme examples of "bringing the reader to the author", the editing strategies in the Dixon – Duwell collections display many "alienating" or "foreignizing" elements. A different logic to the versification and poetic style is preferred by each translator, drawing attention to the fact that these are palpably different songs from discrete areas and language groups, performed in a number of styles in their original languages: there is no promotion of a generalised or pan-Aboriginal poetic sensibility. The collections are also organised with a prominent sensitivity shown to the initial authors and their environments, with notes on the

\[158\] Duwell, ed., The Honey-Ant Men's Love Song and Other Aboriginal Song Poems, xiv.
singers who performed the songs (as well as the translators) featured at the beginning of each book and the singer and year noted after each song. These are further arranged according to the four areas from which they were selected – in *Honey Ant* these are Dyirbal, Central Australia, Anbarra, and Wangkangurru – with maps of the area, a brief introduction to the area and the various song styles, their major themes, and how and where they would normally be sung. *Little Eva At Moonlight Creek* follows this same method, presenting songs from the Yanyuwa, Yolngu, Broome and Southern Central Australian areas. Unlike the generic folkloric quality of *Songs of the Songmen*, each song-poem is related to the specific area from which it emerges and to which it often refers. As indicated in the brief excerpts below there is an attempt by translators and editors to impart some of the publically available significance and relevance of different elements of the songs (such as the use of hair-string and body painting) rather than “translate” these into something more consonant with the rituals of wooing that non-Indigenous readers are more accustomed to (there is, understandably, no mention of hidden meanings, meanings which are understood only by a limited number of people in the closed, immediate circle of those initiated into different levels of secret or protected knowledge). Finally, each of the songs also appears in its initial language with the English translation on the facing page. To further encourage readers to engage with the source language rather than simply reading the translated text, the explanatory notes are either interspersed within the song in its original language, or placed at the bottom of this page.

All of these elements of “alienating” the translated text can be seen in the “Honey-Ant Men’s Love Song”, sung in Anmatjarra by Thomas Jangala in 1971, from the area around Lajamanu, (reprinted in full in Appendix A). It is, as its introduction
explains, a *yilpinji*; a love song which is sung to "activate Dreaming power to attract women to men," using the imagery and characters of Dreaming ancestors. Honey-Ant, the Dreaming ancestor, is one of the main figures. It begins with his journey:

1. Wurnata pardakijana,
   Wurnata pardakijana,
   Wurnata winpirriyana.
1. He departed with thoughts of home,
   He departed with thoughts of home,
   He departed towards another place.

In Honey-Ant’s travels, he performs a ceremony and sends a special envoy, the Red Bird Messenger to a woman he encounters. She is "struck by magic" and compelled to him, leaving her own country to settle with him in his. This Dreaming journey has its parallels in the actual situation in which the song is sung, since one of the singers is seeking through the song to attract a particular woman whose name he calls out during the song while performing related activities such as spinning hair string. As Stephen A. Wild, the translator of the "Honey-Ant Men’s Love Song" notes, the song has meaning on at least two planes:

> [t]he song words constantly shift between objective and subjective points of view, as if the singer is sometimes taking the part of each character and at other times taking the part of an outside observer. This shifting perspective reflects the fact that the singer is both singing *about* ancestral events and participating *in* the ancestral events as an actor in the process of attracting a woman ... human beings are both products of the Dreaming and participants in it, and the Dreaming existed in a far-distant past as well as continuing to exist in an ever-present reality.159

This oscillating perspective is preserved in the translation in "verses" 38 and 39. In verse 38 the song is in the third person, and the words describe the actions occurring

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159 Ibid., 49-50. The song-poem is on 52-69. “Gudurrugudurr” (“Nyulam’s Nurlu”) and Paddy Roe’s comments upon it from *Little Eva at Moonlight Creek* (discussed in Chapter One), is another “alienating” translation.
in the performance, with the singer spinning hair-string (usually his own hair) around a stick.

38. Mirrjpjjirji mungkarla,  
Tanyilingi latupatu.  
38. Honey-Ant spun hair-string  
Honey-Ant struck the ground with the spinning-stick.

The spinner strikes the stick on the ground after taking a ball of hair-string off the stick, at the same time calling out the name of the desired woman. In the next verse this third-person perspective moves to a first-person focus as he sings about his own desirability and power:

39. Minyirawirra malkara  
Ngajina lajapirrpini.  
39. My beautiful body-paint  
Will bring her to me.

In the “Honey-Ant Men’s Love Song” the Dreaming is expressed concurrently in the past activities of creative ancestral beings and in contemporary lives. The limitations of the English words “Dreaming” or “Dreamtime” to translate this concept – jukurrpa or tjukurrpa, the word in the Warlpiri area – are realised here, since what is being referred to has a far more encompassing set of references than night-time dreams, or a floating sense of reality. Jukurrpa incorporates beliefs of fundamental importance about the nature of the universe and its origins, the nature of being and reality, and provides the foundations for knowledge within the overlapping time-frames of the present and eternal present, which W.E.H. Stanner so memorably called “everywhen.”

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Translation as a bridge to understanding

Whether translation brings the author to the reader or brings the reader to the author, whether the relationship between source and receptor languages is one which tends more toward domestication or estrangement, all translation involves some kind of transformation as Samuel Johnson’s definition in his celebrated *Dictionary of the English Language* of 1755 indicates. To translate, he writes, is “to transport; to remove ... To transfer from one to another; to convey; to change; to interpret to another language; to change into another language retaining the sense.”161

Translation involves movement; it is a carrying over from one to another, and also from one medium to another, as the Latin roots of this word convey: *trans*, across, and *latus*, the past participle of *ferre*, to carry.162 But what is “carried across”? And what is not able to be transferred? How is translation even possible?

In the debate which took shape between Hans-Georg Gadamer and Jürgen Habermas in the late 1960s and 1970s the characteristics of translation became clarified in a useful way, with their agreement about the possibilities – and limits – translation

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Translation is also related to “metaphor” which comes from the Greek word for “transfer” (from *meta* “change” and *pherein* “to bear, to carry [across]”)
offers forming the basis from which more significant differences were explored.163

These differences, specifically in how each understands the scope of language and, accordingly, what they understand by “tradition”, “prejudice” and the capacity to shape the course of a society by the critical use of reason will be examined in Chapter Four. What concerns me here are their similarities: their complementary views on translation.

Gadamer’s ideas on translation in Truth and Method comprise of a short (albeit significant) section at the beginning of Part Three, “The Ontological Shift of Hermeneutics Guided by Language.” There, it is figured as an explicit form of disruption of understanding, where attempts to come to terms with the unfamiliar are necessary. What is remarkable about translation, Gadamer suggests, is that it works, and it works in a way which resists any form of universalisation: translation offers us an example of a form of mediation between languages which makes a phenomenon in one language intelligible in another without relying on some ideal situation, some


transcendental position, or some third person perspective beyond the points of view of those whose languages are involved. The cross-cultural encounter which translation epitomises is a specific link between two or more languages at a particular historical point; in the terminology being used in this thesis, it represents a “fusion” between two language horizons. Since it is the case that translation is always linked to a finite and particular situation, there can never be a perfect translation or one which fits all situations – translation (like any instance of horizons fusing) is never an absolutely definitive or final act. Habermas’ review of *Truth and Method* draws out the social, cultural and cross-cultural implications of this, extending Gadamer’s own writings of the time, which were primarily oriented toward the experience of art, the phenomenology of play, historical understanding, and the understanding of texts written in the past.

But even though translation is always linked to a finite situation (the context in which it is made and the translator’s own relationship to the original text), this does not make it simply a wilful or arbitrary activity on the part of the translator. Rather, the translator’s task is to find a language which “gives voice to” the original or to the subject matter in a new language and new social environment. Each translation is one particular expression of the cultural and historical intersection between text, translator and audience, one particular echo of the initial text in a new voice. Willis Barnstone expresses this attempt well when he compares the translation of an initial text to an estranged familial relationship, where the child begins a new life elsewhere, yet (to varying degrees) remembers its origins:
Translation is an art BETWEEN tongues, and the child born of the art lives forever BETWEEN home and alien city. Once across the border, in new garb, the orphan remembers or conceals the old town, and appears new-born and different.\textsuperscript{164}

Translation, in Gadamer’s account, mediates what otherwise would be incomprehensible. It acts as a bridge between tongues where some form of understanding is achieved though this is never identical to understanding in the source language. And it demonstrates that forms of life are not static and self-enfolding, but porous and permeable. Users of a language are capable of producing new awarenesses as well as new grammatical and linguistic forms, and of reaching out toward even the most foreign and remote. The possibility of translation indicates that, not only do the users of a language have the capacity to be reflexive about language, they also inherently possess an openness towards other languages and forms of life, which Habermas calls a “self-transcendence embedded in a linguistic practice.”\textsuperscript{165} The relevance of this is that since every language does not only define a specific form of life but also defines that form of life against others, the totality of the “world” in any particular language also from the outset includes some inherent ability to engage with that which is unfamiliar, foreign, or alien.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s metaphor of language as a home offers a similar vantage-point on the interrelationship between languages:

For all of us, being at home is wonderful. But a home which has no connection with other homes would simply become a prison. A prison is a restriction between one dwelling place and others. So a home is defined as a particular entity by its connection with other homes. The security of the home, the safety you feel in your own house, is actually linked to the fact that your home is connected with other homes. By itself, your home would provide the same kind of security that prison

\textsuperscript{164} Bamstone, \textit{The Poetics of Translation: History, Theory, Practice}, 265.

Thiong’o describes translation as a connection between houses, which prevents the house of one’s own language from being a prison. What Habermas and Gadamer add to this is an appreciation that one’s house is not static but is constantly undergoing change. This connection between languages occasionally involves bringing something from another house into one’s own home, subtly altering it, and being altered by it. It is this facet of translation which reveals a genuine human capability, in that it “highlights a productive achievement to which language always empowers those who have mastered its grammatical rules: to assimilate what is foreign and thereby to further develop one’s own linguistic system.”

**Translation as a reflection upon limits**

What does it mean to “assimilate the foreign” in developing one’s own linguistic system, since isn’t this surely just appropriating that which did belong to another without acknowledgment? Certainly it is meant in this sense by Schleiermacher. What lay behind Schleiermacher’s endorsement of the “alienating” method of translation was the idea that “bending” the receptor language (in this case German) by the influence of the source text was important since it conceptually enriched the German language. The following passage outlines Schleiermacher’s conviction that it is only in contact with the foreign that the potential of his own tongue can become more robust:

> Just as our soil itself has no doubt become richer and more fertile and our climate milder and more pleasant only after much transplantation of foreign flora, just so we

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166 Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o and Uzoma Esonwanne, “From the Garden of Languages, the Nectar of Art: An Interview with Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o,” *Postcolonial Text* 2, no. 2 (2006).
sense that our language, because we exercise it less owing to our Nordic sluggishness, can thrive in all its freshness and completely develop its own power only through the most many-sided contacts with what is foreign.\textsuperscript{168}

Schleiermacher (in characteristically Romantic vein) continues on to express his hopes of creating a unity of the world's linguistic treasures in German: "to carry all the treasures of foreign art and scholarship, together with its own, in its language, to unite them into a great historical whole." The great potential of the German language is that it can become a universal vehicle capable of being the receptacle of the best of all languages, with the German vernacular taking over the role hitherto occupied by Latin at the apex of a linguistic hierarchy. In contrast, for Habermas and Gadamer the significance of translation is more circumspect. It is not oriented toward the absorption of other linguistic worlds for the sake of the German \textit{Volk} or the German language in general but rather toward offering an account of the possibility of revision and expansion in the ways in which each individual understands herself and her world. Translation is important since it shows how, from a \textit{first-person point of view}, one may shift from an initial perspective to be instructed or informed not only by that which is close, but by something unfamiliar.

"Assimilating the foreign" points toward the possibility that one's self will be required to adapt and change through the translational encounter. "The limits of the world that it [language] defines are not irrevocable," says Habermas, "the dialectical confrontation of what is one's own with what is foreign leads, for the most part imperceptibly, to revisions."\textsuperscript{169} Even moreso than Habermas, Gadamer emphasises the element of possible transformation of the self in the exposure to the other through the fusion of horizons, as the following chapters will examine in more detail.


\textsuperscript{169} Habermas, "Review of Hans-Georg Gadamer's \textit{Truth and Method}," 339.
For both Habermas and Gadamer the capacity for inter-language translation to lead to a reflection upon, and revision of, the limits of one's own language and one's own life in language is exemplary. It is exemplary because it is not restricted to what happens when understanding is upset because the conversants speak different languages, but is what happens in any and all understanding: "[t]ranslation is only the extreme variant of an achievement upon which every normal conversation must depend." The salient point here is that understanding something in one's own language is not always immediate, but may require a bridging of distances akin to what is implied in the translation from foreign languages.

In this bridging or breaching between another horizon and one's own, one may be faced by the limits of one's world and led to some revision of these limits. "Translation" is a useful figure or motif for encounters with others (including cross-cultural engagements) regardless of whether these involve actual inter-language translation or involve interpreting experiences rendered in a shared tongue.

Translation as a barrier to understanding

Concomitant to doing justice to the ability of translation to operate as a bridge to what would otherwise be incomprehensibly foreign is an acknowledgment of the precariousness and the limitations of such an undertaking. Translation may be a bridge, but it is also ineludibly a barrier to understanding. Gadamer admits in *Truth and Method* that finding other words in the act of translating is not easily

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170 Ibid., 337. Translation has connections to the Greek *hermēneuein* and *hermēneia*. These have three meanings: "(1) to express aloud in words, that is, 'to say'; (2) to explain, as in explaining a situation; and (3) to translate, as in the translation of a foreign tongue." Richard Palmer, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969), 13. It was the role of Hermes, the messenger of the Greek gods to human beings and honorary figurehead for hermeneutics, to make the strange world of the Gods and their wishes intelligible to human beings; his task was a radical form of translation.

accomplished. The translator's difficulty involves the difficulty of application (discussed in Chapter One): she or he "must preserve the character of his own language, the language into which he is translating, while still recognising the value of the alien, even antagonistic character of the text and its expression" \((TM\ 387/GWI\ 390)\). This is in some respects an impossible task. There are real and unassimilable differences involved between the source and receptor languages in any translation and so translation straddles "a gap that can never be completely closed," with a "fundamental gulf" remaining between the languages and the worlds they articulate. Such irreconcilable differences mean the translator is not able to express in his or her language all the dimensions of the text to be translated \((TM\ 384/GWI\ 388)\), so inevitably does the text a disservice. In every translation, which succeeds inasmuch as it brings out and voices some aspects of the source text in a particular situation, there are also many silences.

In the face of such hindrances, the translator's accomplishment can only ever be a selective expression of the initial text in the receptor language, so that

A new light falls on the text from the other language and for the reader of it. The requirement that a translation be faithful cannot remove the fundamental gulf between the two languages. However faithful we try to be, we have to make difficult decisions. In our translation if we want to emphasise a feature of the original that is important to us, then we can do so only by playing down or entirely suppressing other features. But this is precisely the activity that we call interpretation.

Translation, like all interpretation, is a highlighting. \((TM\ 386/GWI\ 389)\)

A translator is an interpreter: she does not merely reproduce or reconstruct a text in another language but, crucially, re-creates it according to her interpretation of it. This interpretation also appears in a different cultural context, a different language- and life-world, and is rendered there in a specific way. This is why Gadamer says
that translations are always clearer and flatter than the "original" text: some elements are brought out at the expense of others.\textsuperscript{172} Elkin and Harney's translations discussed above tend to bring out the general folkloric aspects of the songs they render, also generating a sentimental mood which situates these in a nostalgic past, while Stephen A. Wild's translation of Thomas Jangala's singing of "The Honey-ant Men's Love Song" draws out, by oscillating between grammatical tenses, aspects of the song that are about ancestral events (the actions of the Dreaming ancestor Honey-Ant) \textit{and} simultaneously the quest of the contemporary singer to attract a woman. In both translative enterprises some elements are brought forward and others recede: a translation, to build on a metaphor used above, is not a clone of the original but an orphan child.

\textbf{The limit case of poetry}

While there is always some kind of gap or limitation in any translation due to the fact that translations offer a "highlighting" or a particular and selective interpretation of a source text, in poetry the qualities of the word itself are an indispensible and irreducible element of what is meant. The poetic word is a limit case for translation (Gadamer writes that "the ideal of poetic practice fulfils itself in untranslatability"), since "it is word to such an extent that it becomes impossible to separate its significance (\textit{Bedeutung}) from its sound (\textit{Klang})."\textsuperscript{173} This is the sense in which poetry is an "eminent text", discussed in Chapter One: one does not read it and leave the words behind because its information has been received as one may do with


forms of communication where it is simply important to “get the message” (for example, instructions). Poetry returns language to its voice, with sound, silence, tone and rhythm all part of what a poem is about. Nothing else is akin to just this set of words, in this order, with these sounds and rhythms, in the poetic use of language (epitomised in lyric poetry, poetic uses of language may on occasion extend to novels or other creative works). By insisting upon the primacy of its own expression, Gadamer suggests that poetry orientates itself in a counter-direction to the bridging function of translation, revealing language’s outer limits: the untranslatable, self-revealing word.

“Joowindoo Goonduhmu/ Quick Sing (Translation)”

The remarkable poem titled “Joowindoo Goonduhmu”/“Quick Sing (Translation)” by the contemporary poet Lionel Fogarty illustrates and extends the above points in an interesting way. Fogarty comes from Wakka Wakka land around Brisbane, and has Yoogum and Kudjela tribal affiliations. There are two connected versions of this song-poem, and it oscillates between two languages, that of Murri creole and English.

Joowindoo Goonduhmu

Ngujoo nye muyunube
Little black buree
You must respect golo
You must praise to junun
You must seek love with googee
Little black buree hear your
song ‘nuyeeree munu juwoon’
The gender will bring the message
The googuhgu will laugh when you cry sad
to make your world happy
Gugun gugun buree ‘gukoore doongge’
Wake up little buree your
old gulung boome
all gnumgnin to
love mooroon gunggen ge
Oh little buree goonduhmu sing
goonduhmu the feelings of
gurring ina narmee, gurring ina narmee
nha gun goon na nhorn goo
yea little buree our binung love
your sounds in the boorun
now miremumbeh and
monu goondir helps
little black gukoore your gumeeloves you. Even mumu love you.

Here now is Fogarty’s own “translation” of the song.

Quick Sing (Translation)

I can see a lot of people coming
Little black baby
You must respect the moon
You must praise the sun
You must seek love with the star
Little black baby hear your
song: ‘That’s our country’
The willy wagtail
will bring the message
The kookaburra
will laugh when you cry sad
to make your world happy
Baby crying
Wake up little baby
old good catch
all me and you to
love a man singing out
Oh little baby sing
sing the feelings of
what I am doing in this flat country
I come from not here but long away
yea little baby our ear love
your sounds in the wind
now rain coming and
that clever doctor helps
little black kid your auntie
loves you. Even uncle love you

"Joowindoo Goonduhmu/ Quick Sing (Translation)" is a nursery song sung to stop a baby from crying, while urging the baby to “sing” along with the male speaker of the poem. In addition to crooning reassurances of love it is peppered with the kind of reminders that adults continually use to gradually instruct children in the necessary arts of life: here the speaker urges the child to respect and pay attention to the heavenly elements (sun, moon, star), and listen to the song which identifies its ancestral lands. These are aspects of life which many Aboriginal people identify as important, functioning as markers of individual and group identities.

Each of the languages used in the poem draws attention to its own particular aural qualities, with the heraldic bird companions kookaburra and willy wagtail echoing

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175 Fogarty is well-known for the ways he uses the “sign-systems of his Murri community” (as Mudrooroo calls them) throughout his work. There is a discussion of this in Mudrooroo Narogin, *Writing from the Fringe: A Study of Modern Aboriginal Literature* (Melbourne: Hyland House, 1990), 50-54.
the similarly onomatopoeic names gendergender and googuhgu. “Our binung love/ our ear love,” whatever other allusions it may suggest, is a delightful means of drawing attention to the sense of hearing, and to the song’s crooning sound.

“Joowindoo Goonduhmu” invites one to speak it aloud, including incantatory rhythms such as “goonduhmu sing / goonduhmu the feelings of/ gurring ina narmee, gurring ina narmee /nha gun goon na nhorn goo” (examples of the doubling or reduplication of words common across Indigenous Australian languages). In “Quick Sing (Translation)” this is rendered as a poignant and emotional lament without using commensurate sounds or syntax: “sing/ sing the feelings of / what I am doing in this flat country/ I come from not here but long away.”

This poem appears in the collection *New and Selected Poems: Munaldjali, Mutuerjaraera*. There, it contrasts vividly with the political themes of most of the poems, covering such topics such as Black deaths in custody (Fogarty’s eighteen-year old brother, Daniel Yock, to whom the collection is dedicated, died in a police van in 1992), alcoholism, prison suicide, the continued ravaging effects upon Indigenous people of colonialism, and the call for Land Rights. These poems often convey senses of frustration, dispossession and anger, with the opening of “Come Over Murri”, another of the new poems in the collection, a typical example:

> I just remember Murris not only you die
> in prisons or from poor conditions
> Over other countries they’re dying too and imprisoned for surviving

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176 When only half the doubled phrase is used, these tend to have no meaning; i.e. the double phrase is necessary. “Gurring ina narmee” is a traditional Wakka Wakka chant which Fogarty opens his poetry readings with. Sabrina Paul Hopfer, “Re-Reading Lionel Fogarty: An Attempt to Feel into Texts Speaking of Decolonisation,” *Southerly* 62, no. 2 (2002): 55.

The contrasting quietness which “Joowindoo Goonduhmu/ Quick Sing (Translation)” expresses is striking. While Fogarty often utilises Murri vocabulary and Aboriginal English in his poems, this poem offers a rare occasion where Murri creole is used in a sustained way throughout, displaying the versatility of this distinct form of language. Its theme and its understated tone serve as a reminder of the restorative power of language, its ability to provide a source of stability and positive identification when passed on to ensuing generations. In this sense it is an anthem for the language-revival projects being currently undertaken throughout Australia.

While displaying the words and concepts appropriate to an emotional cradle song-poem about a relative’s love for an Aboriginal baby, and referencing a common belief about the central role language plays in providing positive sources of identity, “Joowindoo Goonduhmu/ Quick Sing (Translation)” is also, and very overtly, a fundamentally split poem. In Murri creole with a connected translation, this is a poem which exists in, and draws attention toward the in-between space translation epitomises. Its two interlinked manifestations show the continual oscillation and non-exact cross-referencing between languages, swinging between familiarity and strangeness with the original and the translation placed side by side on the page. The Murri creole “original” exists independently yet in symbiotic connection to the English “translation”, and so stubbornly resists being simply the original version which can be superseded by the translation and the translation used in its stead.

“Joowindoo Goonduhmu” comes along too, to accompany “Quick Sing (Translation)” on all its travels; rather than being an orphan child sent to an alien land (a translation in the receptor language), this is an example of parent and child travelling together. The parent has taken on some of the garb of the new land (it has become a “creolised” English) yet retains the distinctive fashions of its initial
country, and these can still be identified (though they are muted) in the child-translation. So, while the child-translation has adopted the “clothes” of the country of immigration, these, interestingly, are not all in Standard English, with Aboriginal English evident in the lines “I come from not here but long away” and “Even uncle love you” (Standard English adds the third-person “s” ending to the verb). Joowindoo Goonduhmu/ Quick Sing (Translation) represents the fusion of horizons in its ambivalent fruitfulness: the translation forms a bridge between different tongues and so enables understanding to occur in the place of incomprehension, and reveals the porousness of horizons of language. This double-barrelled poem also erects an extra barrier to being too-easily understood, and perhaps being mistaken for “assimilated” English. The yoking together of the Murri creole and translated version draws attention to the fact that the language of the latter is not totally domesticated to Standard English patterns. It encourages us to perceive how, even when something is apparently “Anglicized”, or rendered into English, that there are other linguistic and cultural traditions which lay behind it, and to which we need to be attentive. This is significant vis-à-vis the politics of language (to be discussed towards the end of the chapter).

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Questions of translation are intimately connected to beliefs about language, its limits and its scope. Not unsurprisingly, language was placed by Gadamer at the very centre of his philosophical hermeneutics, with translation positioned in relation to questions of language in general and the language-relatedness (Sprachlichkeit, or

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178 Fogarty seems to recommend this as a reading practice for all his poems in the following comments. “I think what people should do is read my poetry, in an Aboriginal way, take the Aboriginal side of my language, and then reflect back on the English side. That’s the only way you’re going to get a balance of understanding.” Lionel Fogarty and Philip Mead, “Interview with Lionel Fogarty,” Jacket 1, no. October (1997), http://jacketmagazine.com/01/fogartyiv.html.
linguisticality) of human being. Since it is pivotal in understanding both his views on translation and on tradition and prejudice (the latter to be examined in coming chapters) it is worth outlining here the main features of Gadamer’s view of Sprachlichkeit (linguisticality) relevant to this thesis: language’s capacity of world-disclosure, and its communicative dimension.

The Centrality of Language in Philosophical Hermeneutics

Language is the universal medium in which understanding occurs (TM 389/ GW1 392)

Being that can be understood is language (TM 474/ GW1 478)

Gadamer’s work on Sprachlichkeit or linguisticality takes up and extends the German Romantic philosophy, which can be traced to the ways Hamann, Herder and Wilhelm von Humboldt engaged with the thought of Immanuel Kant. These thinkers prefigured ideas about the universality of language which were taken up and furthered by Heidegger and Wittgenstein in the early twentieth century to become one of the central philosophical motifs of our time in the “linguistic turn.” Herder made comments two centuries ago typical of this turn toward language which we have not yet gone beyond excavating: “If it is true that without thoughts we cannot think and that we learn to think through words, it follows that language determines the entire scope and limits of human knowledge.”

179 This is from his On Recent German Literature. Fragments of 1766-68, II, 17, quoted in Michael Morton, Herder and the Poetics of Thought: Unity and Diversity in On Due Diligence in Several Learned Languages (University Park and London: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989), 127. Andrew Bowie admirably demonstrates the connections between Romantic German philosophy
association with this tradition (and investigates his connections at length throughout his works) in statements such as the following: “in all our thinking and knowing we are always already biased by our linguistic interpretation of the world (sprachliche Weltauslegung).”

The Romantic view of language highlights the way it operates as a means of world-disclosure: language is never simply reflective of, or secondary to, our experience and understanding of the world but is vitally constitutive of the experiences of the world we have and how we reflect upon them. Rather than designating something out there which exists independently, in the sense of being an instrument which names pre-linguistic thoughts, this view holds that language essentially tempers thought itself. This is what Gadamer means by the well-known formulation that “Language is not one of man’s possessions in the world; rather, on it depends the fact that one has a world at all.” (TM 443/ GW1 446).

Sprachlichkeit (linguisticality), Gadamer argues, is universal for human beings. It is universal because there is no way of distancing ourselves from it: all and any thinking about language is itself drawn back into language. Even young infants (as Fogarty’s poem above shows) and babies in the womb are “in” language by virtue of


180 This is my translation of the phrase in “Mensch und Sprache,” in Gadamer, Gesammelte Werke Band 2: Wahrheit und Methode, Ergänzungen, 150; “Man and Language,” Gadamer, Philosophical Hermeneutics, 64.

181 The critique of the view of language as an instrument or tool was most famously mounted by Martin Heidegger in Being and Time. While Gadamer adopts much of Heidegger’s later views on language, there are also significant differences between them, particularly in his stressing of the communicative dimension of language. Some discussion of Heidegger’s account of the fore-structure of meaning will be made in Chapter Four.
being in a world where language saturates their environment with meaning.\[^{182}\] This
does not mean that there is no reality or experience outside language, or that
“everything is language”, because there are obviously many non-verbal experiences
such as dance, love and hunger, there are half-groped at thoughts and experiences
which seem somehow beyond words, and there is that supreme example of non-
speaking, silence. What it does mean is that all experiences can potentially be
rendered in language, or brought to speech, however fitfully. Understanding is
precisely the seeking of words for these experiences.\[^{183}\]

The world comes to exist as “world” or totality with a holistic structure to us in and
through language, yet, as the instance of translation demonstrates, this is not a
limited prison but a source of possibility, with any finite language capable of an
infinite realm of potential expression. Alan How characterises the translational
encounter, accordingly, not just as an estrangement of language but as an
estrangement of one’s world.

Our language is not one view among others on a naked world which stands before it,
it does not present us with a world-view, but is the world for us. Indeed, our capacity

\[^{182}\] Habermas, in distinction, argues that there is a gap between interpretive intelligence and language,
since it appears that language develops in children after intelligence. He also identifies non-linguistic
forces such as labour and social domination, which although linguistically mediated and
communicated, are not solely about language, but which may themselves be the powerhouses of
change. If this is so, there are limits to language, which is why Habermas claims that Gadamer’s idea
of \textit{Sprachlichkeit} is an “idealism of linguisticality”. This disagreement takes on content in Habermas’
and Gadamer’s disagreements about tradition and prejudice, and so will be examined in Chapters
Four and Five. Some further differences are drawn out in Shaun Gallagher, “Language and Imperfect
Consensus: Merleau-Ponty’s Contribution to the Habermas-Gadamer Debate,” in \textit{Merleau-Ponty,}

\[^{183}\] Jean Grondin expresses this well when he says: “The dimension of language is universal and forms
the universe in that all understanding and human existence occur within it. This does not mean, of
course, that an expression for everything already exists in language. The universality of language
consists not in creating what is to be said but rather that language can always be sought.” Grondin,
\textit{Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics}, 122.
to translate alien languages, depends not on learning a new set of rules, but of re-finding the now strange world anew in others.¹⁸⁴

This is a good way of describing what translation reveals to us about language. What Lionel Fogarty’s poem “Joowindoo Goonduhmu/ Quick Sing (Translation)” and the forms of alienating or foreignising translations considered earlier do is preserve this sense of the strange world which one needs to find again; they highlight rather than conceal the disrupted moment which calls for a translation to be made.

Alongside language’s capacity for world-disclosure, there is a second capacity of language which Gadamer prioritises, and which is a major line of inquiry in this thesis: language’s communicative and intersubjective dimension. Language is essentially itself only in conversation. Significantly, then, it is always shared between people; the world that is linguistically disclosed is a social and historical world, saturated with speech and conversation.

The two facets of the human capacity of Sprachlichkeit are related as follows. In the instance of translation (like in everyday conversation) when we seek to establish a “common language” with our discussion partners (Verständigung), one does not encounter the completely alien, but is always supported by shared assumptions and beliefs which are contained within the world-view of our language. This is language as world-disclosure, which recognises that there are innumerable ways in which, even when we disagree with someone, we are already much in agreement by virtue of sharing a language with them which discloses the world in a particular way. This

¹⁸⁴ Alan How, The Habermas-Gadamer Debate and the Nature of the Social (Aldershot, Brookfield, Hong Kong, Singapore, Sydney: Avebury, 1995), 133. The analytic philosopher Donald Davidson says something very similar in “Seeing through Language”: “Language is not a medium through which we see; it does not mediate between us and the world ... Language does not mirror or represent reality” but is reality.” Donald Davidson, Truth, Language and History (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), 127-41[30]. Davidson goes on to say “we do not see the world through language any more than we see the world through our eyes. We don’t look through our eyes, but with them.”
is not static however. On top of the *common language* which we already share with other speakers of our language, it is only through the explicit processes of conversation and dialogue that a shared or *common perspective* can emerge: understanding is also something which is continually being produced, which must be worked at. “Every conversation” including a face to face conversation or a conversation with a text in the act of reading “presupposes a common language, or better, creates a common language,” Gadamer says in *Truth and Method*. Creating a common language occurs when we are “transformed into a new communion in which we do not remain what we were” (*TM* 378-9/ *GW* 1 383-384). Language, and the ever-present engagement with others that the concept of “linguisticality” draws attention to, includes, from the outset, the possibility of *becoming-otherwise* or transformation through this engagement.

Bearing in mind the capacities of language for world-disclosure and its communicative dimension, components of language which will be returned to in the following chapters, I will now start to plot out how this view of language may be fruitful when considering the languages of the Yolngu people in the Northern Territory.

**An Indigenous Australian view of language: the Yolngu**

Friedrich Schleiermacher tied the capacity of human language to always extend beyond its current boundaries to the empire-building project of his age (the height of the colonial enterprise). His was an attempt to establish a linkage between an expansionary political project with the integrative qualities of a specific language, German. This conveys a view of the relationship between a language and the world which came to the fore in European modernity, where the distinct national identity of
a polity is defined (to some extent at least) through the possession of a common spoken tongue. It is a project which continues to resonate in the present, explaining such intriguing oddities as the translation of French texts into Québécois in Canada. Ignoring the overwhelming grammatical and lexical similarities between Québécois and French, such translations occur in order to promote the idea that Québécois identity is a distinct cultural, political and linguistic entity.185

If our language discloses the world for us in a substantive way, as Romantic hermeneutics from Hamann, Herder, von Humboldt and Schleiermacher onwards affirms, then the understandings which people have of their languages are instructive about the tacit relationships they have in and to their world. It is therefore illuminating to contrast the above assumptions of a correlation between language and national or ethnic identity to the strikingly different assumptions about relationships between language, people and world incarnated in Indigenous Australian languages.

Aboriginal peoples in Australia were, and in many areas (particularly in remote and rural areas) still are, multilingual, knowing the origins of their languages as well as how these relate to one another. While different areas have distinct ideas about the origin and interrelationship between languages, often these make reference to ancestral travels. An example of this is the Dhuwa moiety of the Yolngu of north-east Arnhem land, who trace the languages and territorial boundaries of the different clan groups of the area to the travels of the Djan’kawu (or Djan’kawu) sisters.186 In

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185 See a discussion of this by Annie Brissett, “The Search for a Native Language: Translation and Cultural Identity,” in Translation - Theory and Practice. She writes that the role of translation in these instances seems to “vouch for the existence of the language of translation, and in doing so, for the existence of the ‘Québécois people’” (347). Another well-known instance is the insistence upon the difference between Norwegian, Danish and Swedish by their speakers, despite linguists’ categorisations of them as variations of a single Scandinavian language.

186 “Yolngu” is a recent invention which refers to people who come from north-eastern Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory. Initially there was no blanket term for these peoples, though earlier anthropologists referred to sections as “Murungin,” “Wulamba,” and “Miwuyt.” Nancy Williams notes
this region of Arnhem Land, stories and songs about them are related frequently in everyday settings as well as at special ceremonies.

The Djan’kawu were powerful ancestral beings who travelled across the land (in some versions accompanied by a brother) from the island of Burralku in the east to the coast of the mainland and then further westward as they followed the morning star. Their travels gave the land form. In this creation journey (*Wangarr*) where they put digging sticks (*Garninyirdi*) into the soil, water sprang out. Intimately tied to the creation of the geographical features of the land, water also represents Yolngu knowledges, song and law. From the Djan’kawu and their travels come many of the region’s laws, knowledge, art, *manikay* (songs), dances, *bunggul* (ceremonies which enable people to tap the sister’s ancestral power), designs and *rangga* (sacred objects associated with different body parts of the sisters). From this it can be seen that the Djan’kawu are implicated in many, if not most, areas of Yolngu understandings of life, including their laws, relationship to land and creative endeavours.

From the Djan’kawu’s travels also come the region’s languages and dialects. Every time the Djan’kawu sisters spoke, their language changed, marking their crossing from one territory to the next. At Guluruna they spoke Rirratjinu, at Yannubi they spoke Naymil, and at Golna they shifted to Datiwuy. The western edge of Yolngu territory, Ramingining (Maningrida) marks the place where the sun set and their

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that the Yolngu themselves tend to group themselves by reference to which moiety they belong to. Williams, *The Yolngu and Their Land: A System of Land Tenure and the Fight for Recognition*, 20 and footnote 6 on page 34. Another ancestor, Barama (Ronald Berndt names him Laintjung with a son Banaitja) gave birth to the languages of the other moiety of the area, the Yirritja. Whether one is of Yirritja or Dhuwa moiety is agnatic: it is inherited from the father’s and paternal grandfather’s side of the family, and one marries someone from the opposite moiety. Anthropological studies of the Yolngu and Djan’kawu which I have referred to include Ronald Berndt, *Kunapipi* (Melbourne: F.W. Cheshire, 1951); Ronald Berndt, *Djanggawul* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952); Williams, *The Yolngu and Their Land: A System of Land Tenure and the Fight for Recognition*; and Helen Moran, “A Story About Doing ‘the Dreaming’,” *Postcolonial Studies* 7, no. 2 (2004).
travels ceased. Importantly, while they created the features of the land they also bestowed names upon these places, and named local animals, plants, birds, fish, and the Dhuwa moiety people whom they bore. The act of naming remains important in the story and song of the area.

These Yolngu beliefs relate language and the region’s linguistic diversity to ancestral travels which imbued the whole environment with meaning; the origin of language is associated with the creation of the physical and social world by spirit-beings.

Through the travels of the Djan’kawu boundaries were demarcated, but so too were systems of interrelation: groups are linked through shared beliefs in the cosmology of the Djan’kawu as well as owning songs about them. “In terms of human beings,” Nancy Williams comments, the journey of the Djan’kawu was one which bestowed kinship relations and relations between neighbouring groups; it is the path taken by the spirit ancestors “which links groups of people in whom the spirit-being vested land.”

187 Until recently anthropologists have called these dialects, and there is still a tendency to call them “clan languages” since from the point of view of programmatic linguistics they function as varying dialects of a language. This linguists’ definition though fails to register that how its participants characterise and categorise “a language” is a key to the way they view their own existence and their relationship to different peoples around them, as the example of Quebeçois in the main text attests. An opposing counterpart can be found in the relations between Nyangumarta and the Western Desert languages to its south and east. Although linguists consider these to be structurally different, speakers of all these languages intermarry, conduct ceremonies together, and socialise daily in many other ways. This leads one to conclude that although grammatically and lexically distinct languages are spoken, linguistic differences are not what forms the cohesive structure of the communities. See R.M. Dixon, *The Languages of Australia* (Cambridge, New York, and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 33ff.


Songs about the Djan’kawu are called *birlma* (clap-stick songs), and refer to the Djan’kawu journey through first-person imagery (the section on the “Honey-Ant Men’s Love Song” in the main text at the beginning of the chapter discusses part of the significance of this). There are examples of *birlma* in Duwell, ed., *Little Eva at Moonlight Creek and Other Aboriginal Song Poems*, 159-69.
These links between language, place and people generate a site-specific view of language and the interrelations between neighbouring languages which contrasts quite dramatically to the linkage between language and nation described above for European languages. There, a pre-existing language is often viewed as a means of identifying boundaries between nation-states or territories, and functions as a unifying force for a polity. For the Yolngu, in distinction, although there are relatively few speakers, linguistic diversity is a norm, with more than one language spoken in any one area. Among these languages, Yolngu claim a special relationship to one particular language or “ownership” by virtue of their descent (tending to be through the father’s side).\textsuperscript{189} The Djan’kawu stories inscribe particular interrelations between languages, people and places across a large geographical area, and normalise a complex system of language diversity.

This short sketch has outlined some of the ways in which language, for the Dhuwa moiety of the Yolngu is representative of an enmeshed understanding of themselves within their environment, and through which the world is disclosed in a unique way.

I will return to the issue of language as world-disclosure in the next chapter. But, before moving on, another aspect of the world-disclosive capacities of language to note is the \textit{range} of normal linguistic behaviour in different languages. Indigenous languages have special uses of language which are either underplayed or absent in English. These include the use of different varieties of the language for men and

\textsuperscript{189} I am indebted in this discussion to Peter Sutton’s observations about Indigenous Australian languages. He insists that we try to understand the complexities of Aboriginal multilingual practices, arguing against the tendency for linguists to try to map Indigenous languages onto Western cultural assumptions which hold that each person belongs to one language group with well-defined boundaries between them. Sutton notes that people will tend to have a primary right to one language but also have “secondary” rights to the language of the mother and other relatives, or due to circumstances such as having lived somewhere for a long period of time. People may also claim special affiliation to more than one language, particularly on the boundaries between areas. Peter Sutton, “Language in Aboriginal Australia: Social Dialects in a Geographic Idiom,” in \textit{Language in Australia}, ed. Suzanne Romaine (Cambridge, New York, and Port Chester: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 50.
women. Children often initially learn their mother's speech, and at adolescence the boys learn male forms. Special uses of language also include extensive and highly developed uses of sign language, secret languages among initiated men in some tribes, and the use of what is variously called avoidance language, respect language, and "mother-in-law language." Here, a different register comprised of a distinct vocabulary is employed when in the presence of certain relatives as a marker of respect.190

"Wangelanginy" and the politics of untranslated words

This chapter has considered how translation allows some kind of communicative event (albeit a necessarily limited one) to emerge where otherwise there would be total incomprehension. This is what Gadamer was concerned to demonstrate, and is a factor which has been curiously taken for granted in the most prominent areas of translation studies in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. For Gadamer, translation demonstrates that openness to new experiences is an inherent aspect of any language because languages are porous. To this extent the existence of translation positively establishes the possibility of human intercultural interaction.

The main areas of translation studies in recent years (aside from synthesising "translation studies" itself as a loosely connected body of inquiry across a range of disciplines) trace their point of departure to post-colonial critiques, and have been involved in developing structures to enquire about the contexts in which translation

190 There are numerous accounts and discussions of sign languages and avoidance language (which tends to have a similar grammatical structure to the ordinary language but often very different vocabulary). The most accessible include Dixon, The Languages of Australia, 58-68; and Barry Alpher, "Out-of-the-Ordinary Ways of Using a Language," in Language and Culture in Aboriginal Australia, ed. Michael Walsh and Colin Yallop (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1993).
occurs: the politics, and also the ethics, of translation. The kind of questions they ask are: what are the relative powers of the target and source languages, and what kind of relationship pertains between the users of the languages? Do the languages represent dominant or marginalised social groups? How does language – and translation to or from other languages – serve to enable or hinder the aspirations and claims of cultural, or social identity, or assumed status for the people involved? In short, these are questions about the political implications of the moments of production, translation and reception of a text given that translation frequently occurs between languages (and peoples) of unequal status. As Gayatri Spivak succinctly puts it, “[t]he status of a language in the world is what one must consider when teasing out the politics of translation.”¹¹

All this springs from the observation that translation frequently occurs as a dialogue between languages (and peoples) who do not relate in free, equal and reciprocal exchange. Sometimes the asymmetries of the communicative situation are very obvious, like the translation of Indigenous texts into English, which occurs within the legacy of colonialism, and continues to be seen by many as a symbol and instrument of domination. In Australia, English has been the master language in a devastating colonial situation in which Indigenous languages were marginalised and prohibited, and their speakers often displaced or killed by introduced diseases, territorial wars, massacres, and voluntary and involuntary relocation. The brutal success of the colonial project in Australia is borne out by the fact that many Aboriginal authors speak English as their first and only language, with many languages, such as the languages around Brisbane where Lionel Fogarty lives.

existing now in piecemeal form or in creolised versions. Indeed, of the estimated 250 Indigenous languages spoken in Australia at the time of colonisation, by 1990 half were extinct or nearly so. Seventeen languages remain vibrant and actively spoken, with another 70 used widely, though with interference from English and with a weakening of intergenerational transmission. Of the other remaining languages there are only a few, elderly speakers.\textsuperscript{192} Writings in English by Indigenous Australian authors and translations into English from Indigenous languages retain this ambivalent heritage as their condition of production and reception. So, too, does Aboriginal English, which despite the efforts of linguists who argue for its status as a distinct dialect of English with its own systematic rules (and therefore “different” but not inferior) is routinely dismissed as being simply grammatically “wrong”.\textsuperscript{193} Given these factors how can writings in English by Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders or translations from Aboriginal languages sway the dominance of English – and the dominance accompanying the world-views disclosed in English? In such a situation just how “strange” or “different” can Indigenous Australian words and worlds rendered in English actually appear to English-speakers? And how can a translation truly speak, calling English-speakers to “re-find the now strange world anew”, to paraphrase Alan How’s words? How, in other words, can a sense of difference be preserved in which the translated “other”, or the Indigenous “other” who by


\textsuperscript{193} See Margaret Bowden, “Australian Language Issues Depicted in Literary Works by Aboriginal Authors,” \textit{CRNLE Reviews Journal}, no. 1 - 2 (1995). A sense of the distinctness of Aboriginal English can be discerned in the collection \textit{Kayeteye Country}. This includes, in one column, stories from the Dreaming, stories which have been handed down, and contemporary stories told in Aboriginal English. The adjacent column has a Standard English translation, and there is also a glossary of Aboriginal Language words, Aboriginal English, and unusual English words used in the area. Grace Koch, ed., \textit{Kayeteye Country: An Aboriginal History of the Barrow Creek Area} (Alice Springs: Institute for Aboriginal Development Press, 1993). “Sunburnt Man” by Michelle Carr is an example of poetry in Aboriginal English, with its refrain “Dat red man, he bin come/ he bin take my son.” Roger Bennett, ed., \textit{Voices from the Heart: Contemporary Aboriginal Poetry from Central Australia} (Alice Springs: IAD Press, 1995), 15.
necessity speaks English as his or her first language, is not co-opted or appropriated into the dominant language?

Since the differential power of English as a language with a complex colonial heritage, a global language, and the international language of business is so dominant, whether a translation into English is domesticating or alienating takes on a renewed significance. Bringing an Indigenous author to an English-speaking reader by a domesticating means of translation (such as Elkin and Harney's *Songs of the Songmen*) may reinforce this dominance, because it assumes but does not draw attention to the different statuses of the languages in question. Indeed, it may well be the case that the translation results in a comparatively stronger sense of domestication than would, for instance, a translation between two Indigenous Australian languages, or an Indigenous Australian language and Estonian.194 We need to recognise, though, that “alienating” or “foreignizing” translations, which seek to preserve a sense of the difference of the world-views of the initial languages being translated, by “bending” the receptor language and creating a sense of distance and difference within the translated English (like “The Honey-Ant Men’s Love Song”, above) do not offer a solution to these differential power relations. What they can accomplish is rather more like a highlighting, drawing attention to the differences in status and power of languages, and the complex histories behind this.

194 See also Sukanta Chandhuri’s comments about non-interactive or non-relational translation scenarios between Indian languages in Sukanta Chaudhuri, *Translation and Understanding* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 36.
Embedded Words

It is the act of drawing attention to the differential power relations involved in the languages we speak which is particularly interesting in a large and growing body of works by Indigenous authors, in the incorporation of words from Aboriginal languages into an English-language matrix. Lionel Fogarty’s poem above, “Joowindoo Goonduhmu/ Quick Sing (Translation),” is one very powerful example, as is the beginning of Under the Wintammarra Tree, a memoir by Doris Pilkington (who also writes under her tribal name Nugi Garimara):

When the sun was high and the heat uncomfortable, the Mardudjara women returned to camp, their wirnis filled with wamula. Tjirama Garimara and his sons arrived and cooked kangaroo and a couple of bungarras to add to their collection. After the meal of kangaroo meat, bungarra and wamula everyone rested, as was the custom.  

Although predominantly composed in English, the “foreignness” or difference of the lives of the Mardudjara people is highlighted with the embedding of Mardudjara words in the sections of the life narrative detailing their tribal lives. This contrasts quite strikingly with the later sections relating Pilkington’s life at Moore River where she was taken after being forcibly removed from her family, which contain few Mardudjara words. Like many others with relatively lighter coloured skin Pilkington was removed from her family in order to be “assimilated” into the white population, which meant being trained to take on menial tasks such as becoming a home help, maid, or stockwoman.

195 Doris Pilkington Garimara, Under the Wintammarra Tree (St Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 2002). The Mardudjara words are Bungarra – goanna; wirni – dish; and wamula – bush tomatoes.
Later, as she reflects on her earlier life at Moore River, Pilkington uses quotation marks to highlight the presence of common, racially derogatory terms of the time and mark a distance from them, as she says:

we weren’t allowed to speak ‘black-fella’ language... we had no contact with Mardu people, who were then referred to as ‘full bloods’. That was very difficult for me, because I grew up with my people, my father was Mardu, and I talked language. But at Moore River they belted it out of me.\(^\text{196}\)

Thus to start the book with Mardudjara words woven into the English prose can be seen as an act not only of rebellion but an act of reclamation: it is to again speak and record what she can of her father’s language, overcoming the earlier imperative, backed up by force and intimidation, to keep this language silent. Doing so also functions as a reminder (as Pilkington’s explanation of the lack of acceptance of Indigenous languages at Moore River makes explicit) that the relative status of the languages involved and the status of the speakers of these languages was not — and is not — equal.

The embedding of Mardudjara words into a matrix of English at the beginning of *Under the Wintamarra Tree* is a composite linguistic construction. Similarly, words from Indigenous languages have been embedded into a matrix of English or Aboriginal English in a large number of poems, life writings, plays and novels. To list just a small sample: these can be found in plays by Jack Davis such as *No Sugar* (Noongar); the works of Herb Wharton (Murri); and the life writings of Glenys Ward (especially *Unna You Fullas*, Noongar) and Ruby Langford (Bundjalung).

\(^{196}\) Ibid., 204.
"Nguwarri Minyma (Pretty Woman)", by Alf Taylor from Western Australia, is a poem in which the embedded words are limited, but it is striking in the multilingual ease it implies. The first verse scans

You are a Nguwarri Minyma
Nguwarriest Minyma
I ever seen
Not in movies
Television
Or glamour
Books
But a
Nguwarri Minyma
In a community
Next to
Desert sand.\textsuperscript{197}

In this case, the embedded words are Noongar, and these are embedded into the grammatical and poetic patterns of Aboriginal English (with the present perfect "I ever seen").\textsuperscript{198} In "Nguwarri Minyma (Pretty Woman)" this creates a teasing lyrical hybrid as Noongar vocabulary is grafted onto the superlative grammatical form –est.

It is, I think, tantalisingly suggestive to consider affiliations between the embedding of words in such recent texts and the very long history in Aboriginal song traditions of embedding songs with words from other Indigenous languages. In Indigenous song traditions embedded words function in a variety of ways, such as to restrict access to the meaning of songs. They also demonstrate, as in Taylor's song, above,


\textsuperscript{198} An overview of the variety of Aboriginal Englishes, and some of their typical grammatical, lexical and phonological features can be found in Susan Kaldor and Ian G. Malcolm, "Aboriginal English – an Overview," in \textit{Language in Australia}, ed. Suzanne Romaine (Cambridge, New York, and Port Chester: Cambridge University Press, 1991).
that the singers and listeners are highly literate in a number of languages, and enjoy
the play of multiple tongues.\footnote{A.P. Thomas discusses the use of “prestige words” from other languages of the area as a means of demonstrating the linguistic sophistication of singers and their listeners from the Pilbara region of Western Australia in his “Introduction” to Brandenstein and Thomas, eds., \textit{Taruwu: Aboriginal Song Poetry from the Pilbara}. For a discussion of using words from other languages as a means of restricting access see Rosenfeld, “Structural Convergence in Arrernte Art and Song,” 180. See also Dixon and Koch, \textit{Dyirbal Song Poetry}.}

Another, more obvious effect of using Aboriginal language words embedded into
English is to make a political point about the inequalities between languages, as is
suggested by the Italian-Canadian poet, Mary di Michele, in her comments about the
utilisation of Italian words in her poetry:

\begin{quote}
the untranslated word from another language is like an outcrop of bedrock, more
physical in its texture than the rest of the text, thick and indecipherable, it is the
body of the poet asserting itself to the English mind. On another level it may also
marginalise the reader to the text in a similar way to which the writer is marginalised
by the language of the tradition in which she writes.\footnote{Quoted in Keith Green and Jill LeBihan, \textit{Critical Theory and Practice: A Coursebook} (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 105.}
\end{quote}

The way “Nguwarri Minyma (Pretty Woman)” incorporates untranslated words is
seductive, rolling off the tongue and offering a “translation” or transformation of
Indigenous experience to a non-Indigenous readership while not being totally
assimilated in language or in content to non-Indigenous frames of reference. This, I
suggest, is a distinct practice to the “bending” of the receptor language with the
“alienating” forms of translation suggested by Schleiermacher. It is more akin to an
\textit{eruption} of the source language into the receptor language, to reveal and resist the
ways which the assimilationist insistence upon speaking English has functioned to
silence and prohibit Australian Indigenous languages.

The final text to be considered in this chapter, a recent poem by Kim Scott, explicitly
meditates on these concerns, examining the experience of invasion and suppression
of language suffered by the Noongar people of south-west Western Australia. It is both a lament for the large-scale loss of Noongar language (including by his own immediate family) and a hopeful acknowledgment of recent attempts by Indigenous Australians to re-learn the languages of their parents and ancestors. It also vividly dramatises the sense, discussed above in the section on Yolngu views of the origin of language, that language is not only a source of personal or collective identity, but that it has intricate, ancient and living ties to the land itself. I reproduce most of it here, and a complete version is to be found in Appendix B.

Wangelanginy

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

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

Though one, two, kept their tongue between their teeth. Their song inside. Fortunate, too, that they waited.
Waited for proper ones to listen
even as the noise of strangers moved in close,
closer and closer. This closure around them.
...
Braced by headphones,
my vision technologically sharp, black and bright,
I gathered shattered moonlight,
went tracking,
searching, slyly hunting,
going backward, going inward.
following, pursuing a sound...

And thought it was my own breath fluting
over sharp-edged sedge and rocky beds,
that led me to a briney stream, and
the shrivelled sinews – or so it seemed – of a tongue.
But bathing such strings in pools
of tears, dragging them one to the other,
I felt an old desert wind, a sea breeze,
and knew it was not me, or mine,
but this land which still breathes.
...
Something moves in dark caves,
and creeks push to the sea.
Our mouths are choked and barred,
and yet there is this swelling, this welling
within the many cavities
of chest and cheek, of lungs and hollows of bone.
Wangelanginy.
Together;
Wangelanginy.
Now;
Wangelanginy.
Speaking ourselves back together again\textsuperscript{201}

Here, the untranslated word “Wangelanginy” functions as a talisman of hope as well as an indictment of the circumstances which have led to the current situation. The verb stem “Wanq” means “to speak, to say” in the poem’s epigraph (which cites the Noongar elder Hazel Brown). This poem, then, is a beginning to speak and say what in the past became silent, with the loss of listeners and speakers of Noongar, and the loss of the community formed by language. Scott imagines them “feeling their tongues shrivel,/ their sound not returning.” The poem creates a remarkable sense of a language and a people under siege, beleaguered, threatened and confined with the encroachment of Europeans and their “noise of strangers” as they “moved in close,/ closer and closer.” It develops two alternatives to this new situation. Some have engaged with the white colonists, offering their tongue in the way of a “frog or reptile”, both animals renowned for their self-transformative abilities. The result of this sharing of knowledge becomes brittle and desiccated but also – perhaps – preserved “like parchment” on paper and in archives.202 A few others have kept their own counsel and disengaged from trying to communicate when there is no echo from increasingly fewer Noongar or reciprocation from white people (two meanings of “their sound not returning”); they have “kept their tongue/ between their teeth. Their song inside,” while they wait “for proper ones to listen.”203

It is the rejuvenated interest and need of younger generations who go searching for this sound which leads them to “the shrivelled sinews” of the language. What is able

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202 Scott’s novel Benang which was written at the same time as this poem (and which will be discussed in detail in the next chapter) also contains reference to “parchment skins.” These are the wedding certificates of Sandy Mason and Fanny, and Danny Coolman to Harriette Mason. Kim Scott, Benang: From the Heart (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1999), 346-47. The wedding certificates (and the weddings themselves) are considered to be a possible form of protection for Fanny and Harriette from unscrupulous men.

203 Glenys Collard talks about the reluctance of some speakers of the Noongar language still to pass on their knowledge, since “[t]hey feel it could be abused and not given the status, respect or appreciation it deserves. There are those who would look at Noongar Mythology as katakata [lies] or fairy tales.” This is from the Introduction to Kura, transcribed stories from William Thomas Bennell (1991), quoted in McCarron, “Noongar Language and Literature.”
to revivify the tongue and offer a certain kind of optimistic hope for the future in the
poem is the emotionally-directed excavation of these sinews and piecing them
together. Learning to speak Noongar is a *relearning*, which is also a reformulation of
a certain body politic, a “speaking ourselves back together again.” This is a forward-
looking desire; the embedded word in “Wangelanginy” trumpets a call for a
community to form. This is a community defined in its striving together toward the
future possibility of communicating in Noongar. In this, “Wangelanginy” offers us a
quite literal example of the communicative dimension of language discussed above:
it both assumes a common language while also seeking to *create* a common
language.

Despite the hiatus between the time of the “old people” and the “proper ones” of the
present, ultimately “Wangelanginy” recognises that Noongar is not an artefact or
thing. It cannot be simply re-established or plugged in through the use of
contemporary technologies like special headphones and ways of improving the
physical senses, but requires the effort to re-locate and re-form that which has
endured in spite of suppression. The speaker ties this endurance to the land: “I felt an
old desert wind, a sea breeze,/And knew it was not me, or mine,/But this land which
still breathes”, and articulates a view of the deep relationship between land and
language which is similarly evident in Yolngu cosmology, described above.

This Indigenous view of language, land and people as interdependent and mutually
imbricated in a common fate offers a sense of fragile hope in the poem. What is
being launched is a rear-guard action to save a language (and by extension a people
and a land) in peril. The poem gestures toward the reforming of specifically Noongar
communities, complete with the revivification of the language and deep connections
to the land and natural environment itself, finding linguistic and geographical places for Noongar to dwell.

Notably, this revivification also involves a recognition that revitalisation is not simply reconstruction but *transformation* of the language. Whatever the "[s]peaking ourselves back together again" comprises, it will not be a return to an Indigenous polity in isolation, or a language which can be divorced from its contact and intermingling with white European languages, heritages, and the changed life of its speakers. The hopefulness of "Wangelanginy" (and similarly "Joowindoo Goonduhmu/ Quick Sing (Translation)") is not a complete decoupling of languages or of the now-interwoven lives of Indigenous and settler people in the future, but a "fusion" of languages and traditions which still preserves a very real sense of their agonistic and often conflicted relationship.

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This chapter has considered a number of aspects of translation and how it operates as a resonant emblem of the hermeneutical encounter. It may involve the translation between languages or be a motif for considering the transformations and transfigurations which occur within languages. Whilst rendering something in other words may indeed result in a negative appropriation of the source text through a banalisation of differences, Habermas and Gadamer both focus on the positive possibilities that translation presents in the tense attempt to let the alien speak in one's own language. They suggest, echoing Schleiermacher, that what occurs is an extension of the language into which the translation is made. But rather than merely resulting in appropriation, importantly, transformations or challenges to the forms of life, thought, and grammar of the host language may emerge through the self-revision which may be awakened in this encounter (a point I will examine more
thoroughly in the following chapters). The latter part of the chapter has explored ways in which embedded words, left untranslated from Indigenous languages, can draw attention to the relative status of languages, as they erupt into the dominant language, English, establishing the residual existence of a language and its community despite the ravages of the colonial process, and at the same time calling for (and linguistically enacting) the formation of newly-invigorated kinds of community.

Translation is a motif for the hermeneutic encounter, in a fusion of horizons across languages. The next two chapters consider understanding in relation to time. Chapter Four considers a number of ways in which the past is conceived relative to the present in popular beliefs about "tradition" and Indigenous Australians, and how some poems address these beliefs. It then looks at Gadamer's account of the workings of prejudice and tradition in a detailed case-study of how revisions to one's self-understandings may be prompted by the fusion of horizons, and illustrates this with reference to Kim Scott's second novel, *Benang*. Chapter Five continues this theme, detailing Gadamer's account of *Wirkungsgeschichte* (effective-history) in relation to stolen generations narratives.
CHAPTER FOUR

Understanding the relation between the past and the present

Traditionalist accounts of Aboriginal cultures

To this point I have been discussing the need to contextualise and situate Indigenous Australian texts in a number of ways. I have suggested that contextualising Aboriginal authoring and creative practices facilitates awareness of a different relationship between creator, those around them and the world they inhabit to that which is inscribed in single-author approaches to texts which concentrate on the author's intentions. I argued that philosophical hermeneutics helps with this, because it allows us to begin to appreciate the range and variety of Aboriginal authoring-creative practices, while also noting that the meanings of the texts which result necessarily involve the reader's activity. I have suggested that contextualising Indigenous Australian texts is important in recognising the ongoing influence of orality in Aboriginal cultures, and assists in identifying how uses of "writing" and
“speech” are changing in some remote communities in the present. Again, a Gadamerian approach is useful, because it facilitates an appreciation of the dynamic nature of Indigenous cultures and social formations, and thus overcomes more static structural models. I have further suggested that contextualising Indigenous Australian texts is important in order to appreciate issues of translation and language which are raised in, and by, them, such as forming a richer understanding of the common phenomenon of words from Indigenous languages being embedded into English-language texts.

In the final three chapters I shift emphasis. Here, I will investigate my belief that many Indigenous Australian texts rehearse and illustrate key hermeneutic ideas, by representing the fusion of horizons between past and present (Chapter Four), the ongoing alteration of tradition (Chapters Four and Five), and evocatively exploring relations between the self and other which can occur when horizons meet (Chapter Six).

Chapter Four discusses how we may become aware of the tacit and embedded lenses through which we view and act in the world (our “prejudices” or “pre-judgments” – Vorurteile), by looking at the character of Harley in Kim Scott’s Benang. It examines how the fusion between different horizons can result in a transformation of these prejudices, and how Harley achieves a new orientation in the present by forming a different understanding of the past. In this chapter and the next, the horizons which come into relationship are historical horizons: the present and the past.

Further, Chapter Four relates Gadamer’s conception of prejudice to the related idea of tradition (Überlieferung), which characterises tradition as constantly undergoing
evolution and change as elements of the traditionary past are selectively applied (or not), and thus perpetuated (or not) in the present. This dynamic view of the relation between past and present, I believe, is especially important, because it shakes common depictions of Indigenous societies as static and unchanging ("traditional"), and therefore incompatible with, modernity and change.

Chapter Five broadens the discussion of the constant evolution of tradition as different parts of traditions become manifested in the present to look at one very powerful explanation of how and why understandings of literary texts change over time. This is Gadamer’s conception of *Wirkungsgeschichte* or effective-history, and I will focus on stolen generations narratives to illustrate this idea.

The final chapter looks at the key hermeneutic idea of what is involved in understanding or misunderstanding others. It looks at how three different novels represent Indigenous and non-Indigenous horizons as distinct, though intermeshed, and investigates how they represent what occurs when horizons “fuse.”

In all these chapters, while I am exploring how Indigenous texts reflect and illustrate some key hermeneutic ideas, the aim is to show how engaging with such texts can provide an important means for readers to become aware of, and actively reflect on, some of the prejudices that they bring to the texts.

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First, in this Chapter, I want to critically examine a particularly prevalent, and particularly problematic view of Indigenous Australians: that they are embodiments of the “traditional.” Such a view is evident in what the anthropologist Francesca Merlan calls a “traditionalist account” of Indigenous peoples, “a vision of the world in which at least some portions of it, some peoples of it, remain customary,
unchanged, and therefore different from ‘us’, inherent and unreflective in their relation to their ‘culture’. What I will call traditionalism, adopting Merlan’s definition, is the assumption that Indigenous societies are unchanging and characteristically monolithic cultural entities against which modernity and change are ranged.

This depiction of the relationship between past and present is that they are effectively decoupled. In this view, the idea of something which is “traditional” is static: the traditional is backward-looking; fixated upon preserving a defunct past, and is therefore radically separated from the contemporary and changeable present. Because traditionalism is often applied to Indigenous cultures, it is worth, at the beginning, identifying typical traditionalist expressions and some primary ways Aboriginal poets have responded to it.

To introduce what I mean by traditionalism in its most blatant and simplistic form, consider the following letter to the editor of a major Australian newspaper:

Let’s be realistic. Aboriginal culture is a Stone Age variety and it, along with the Bronze and Iron ages, has had its time and is no longer valid. They must forget old times, as we in the West no longer live in the past. Western civilisation and culture are today’s way of living.

This letter, equally as dismissive of the richness of the Western past as it is of the Aboriginal present, suggests that “Aboriginal culture” is an entity whose time has come and gone, and although it admittedly may have a claim on people’s affections

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204 Francesca Merlan, Caging the Rainbow: Places, Politics, and Aborigines in a North Australian Town (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1998), 4. This is similar to what Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra call “Aboriginalism.” Hodge and Mishra, Dark Side of the Dream: Australian Literature and the Postcolonial Mind. Eva Rask Knudsen aptly sums this up in her portrayal of Aboriginalism as “an order of rules which defines the Dreaming as an innocent mystical domain inhabited by the only real Aboriginals ... An Aboriginalist considers the Dreaming to be a static domain unaffected by the dialectic of tradition and innovation. The concept of cultural transformation is presumptuously guarded as the monopoly of the dominant culture.” Knudsen, The Circle and the Spiral: A Study of Australian Aboriginal and New Zealand Māori Literature, 14.

and memories this claim should be cast aside, put out of memory so that Indigenous people can “get with the times” of the present. What interests me about such statements are the assumptions about cultural stasis and change which underlie them. Against “Western civilisation and culture” which are identified as “today’s way of living” and contemporary, “Aboriginal culture” is defined by its lack of change; it is essentially a static, “Stone Age variety,” and any Aboriginality in the present can only be a shadowy residue of the past.

Traditionalism is not only apparent in negative depictions of Indigenous cultures. In some forms it appears with a positive gloss, in the idealisation of traditional Aboriginal cultures as exotic keepers of mysteries. Mario Morgan’s Mutant Message Downunder (on best-seller lists in the United States for many months and selling far in excess of a million copies) is one example which capitalises on the idea that customary, unchanged “others” exist, in order for “us” in the West to receive hitherto unknown wisdom from them. Morgan claimed her book was a true account of her experiences of being kidnapped by a nomadic central desert tribe she called the “Real People” (and, alternatively, the “Wild People” or the “Ancient Ones”) amongst whom she lived for a short period of time. From them she undergoes a spiritual awakening, learns to live off the land and endure physical hardship (like eating without utensils!), is instructed in the secret art of disappearing and encouraged to communicate through mental telepathy. Although after protests by Indigenous Australian elders who confronted Morgan in the United States and in Japan about the truth of her purported encounter the text is now marketed as fiction, an aura of authenticity still continues to attach itself to the work (helped along by
Morgan's own ambiguous statements). This air of specious authenticity lingers in part because of a desire to believe that "others" exist who embody a way of life and system of values which offers an "uncivilised" yet moral counterpoint to contemporary Western existence. In *Mutant Message Downunder* this is provided by "primitive people in the so-called never-never land of Australia." The "Real People" offer Morgan a point against which to situate and evaluate historical progress in comments like: "I thought about how far humankind has come in so many ways, and how far away we have drifted in so many other aspects." This positive gloss on traditionalism seems to be particularly appealing with greater distance from the Indigenous culture being referenced: Morgan's book has not had much success in Australia, and speaks more to markets in the United States.

The above are easily identified because they are extreme cases, and perhaps for this reason easily dismissed – the one, a ranting letter, the other, a book of new-age answers to life's existential problems. Traditionalism, though, is not so easily avoided. The residual belief in the lack of modernity of Indigenous cultures, and their backward-looking orientation – whether this is positively or negatively coloured – has been incredibly influential. Not only was it formative in establishing the discipline of anthropology in the nineteenth century, it continues to play a role in the Australian legal system in land-rights claims. Commenting on the disputes

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206 Mario Morgan, *Mutant Message Downunder* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994). The Preface added to the 1994 edition ostentatiously describes the book as a "fiction", but includes claims that *Mutant Message Downunder* is "inspired by actual experience ... It is sold as a novel to protect the small tribe of Aborigines from legal involvement." (xiii)

207 Ibid., 73.

208 Ibid., 82.

209 Bernard McGrane observes that early anthropologists conceived of the difference between Europeans and their others as a historical difference, which was mapped over newly-conceived evolutionary assumptions about human societies (with the emergence of Social Darwinism). Bernard McGrane, *Beyond Anthropology: Society and the Other* (New York: Columbia Uni Press, 1989), 93-94. Land claims are based on being able to establish the enduring nature of customary law, and connect beliefs and behaviours of the present to those preceding contact with Europeans. While it has
surrounding the controversial decision to build a bridge to Hindmarsh Island/
Kumarangk from 1994 onwards (which had been opposed by some local Indigenous
women on the basis that the Island was the site of secret women’s business) Diane
Bell makes this relevant observation:

Why are records of ‘tradition’ by early observers deemed ‘authentic’ whereas more
recent accounts can be so easily dismissed as ‘inventions’? Both rely on oral
accounts but the closer to the point of contact, the worthier the source it seems ...
That the earlier accounts may be partial, from a perspective that paid little mind to
women, is dismissed by those sure that the traditional culture is past tense. The
expectation of stasis and the requirement that customs to be authentic must be
different, mystical, remote in time and place set a standard of ‘tradition’ which has
come to tyrannise Indigenous people whose lives have been interwoven with the
settler population for close to two centuries.210

Bell’s comments draw attention to a number of biases. She notes how more value is
attributed to written records even when these display overt gender blindness, with
oral histories or those not fixed in writing at some point considered less legitimate
(see further discussion of such issues in Chapter Two). Bell further identifies the
overvaluation of (biased) written records as going hand in hand with traditionalist
beliefs about the remoteness and difference of “authentic” Aboriginality. She
suggests this ignores the reality that the past two centuries have been times of
interaction, with the interweaving of Indigenous and settler lives. It is any change in

been a source of positive outcomes, for those tribal groups who have been most affected by
colonisation, establishing these links has proved highly problematic. The effects of what I refer to as
traditionalism on judicial decisions have been examined by Manuhuia Barcham and Bruno David. In
his essay, David examines how despite explicitly rejecting a “frozen-in-time” approach to Aboriginal
cultural identities, Australian courts assume authentic and legitimate cultural continuity only occurs
through enduring connections to pre-contact practices. This, he argues, was evident in the land rights
statutes of the 1970s as well as the Wik and Mabo land rights decisions of the 1990s. Manuhuia
Barcham, “The Social Effects of Native Title: Recognition, Translation, Coexistence,” in The Limits
of Recognition, ed. Benjamin R. Smith and Frances Morphy (Canberra: ANU EPress, 2007); Bruno
David, “Indigenous Rights and the Mutability of Cultures: Tradition, Change and the Politics of
Recognition,” in Boundary Writing: An Exploration of Race, Culture, and Gender Binaries in
Contemporary Australia, ed. Lynette Russell (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2006).
Indigenous customs through contact and involvement with others that is ignored and tacitly discredited in the avowals of traditionalism I outlined above. There, both “Western civilisation” and “Aboriginal culture” are assumed to be monolithic and resolutely segregated entities which have not communicated, cross-infected or cross-fertilised.

The prevalence and ongoing potency of traditionalist beliefs is tellingly revealed in the lack of an established vocabulary with which to describe the processes and results of the past two centuries of interaction between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples (what Edward Said calls “shared histories”). It remains surprisingly difficult to adequately communicate the “difference-yet-relatedness” of distinct groups of Indigenous Australians, or the “difference-yet-relatedness” of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians in ways which do not fall back into traditionalist paradigms. For instance, remote communities are often labelled “traditional”, thus implying that all other ways of living (in country towns and urban settings) are tradition-less, implying further that those in “remote” communities are steeped in the traditional past to the exclusion of the modern or contemporary (they are remote in time as well as in geographical space). This contributes to maintaining what Marcia Langton identifies as an “insidious ideology of tribal and detribalised Aborigines” which proposes that “traditional” and “tribal” Aborigines are authentic, while Aborigines in urban areas are on the verge of “assimilating” into the White population. What is highlighted in these instances are contemporary difficulties in adequately recognising and expressing the variety and range of relationships between

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211 The phrase “difference-yet-relatedness” comes from the introduction to an issue of Oceania in which all the articles explore various ways of talking about this interrelationship. See Melinda Hinkson and Benjamin Smith, “Introduction: Conceptual Moves toward an Intercultural Analysis,” Oceania 75, no. 3 (2005).

Indigenous people who live in, and move between, a number of areas. They also seem inadequate in expressing the intermeshed and complex interactions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in each of these environments.

**Poetic engagements with traditionalist accounts**

Since the effects of traditionalism have been far-reaching and profound it is not surprising that many poets and authors implicitly or explicitly address the tenets of such beliefs. One possible lead (which will continue to be relevant in the discussion of Gadamer’s ideas, below) is provided in the comments of celebrated Noongar writer, critic, and playwright Jack Davis:

> I don’t believe that culture died in 1829 or when Captain Cook landed on the eastern seaboard. I believe that culture is a growing thing, it’s a growing entity and what we’re talking about today is just as important as the culture of our forefathers, before the white man came here, because that culture is still growing. Of course it’s changed.213

Fred Penny’s “The Urba-rigine” is one of many recent poems concerned with the theme of cultural adaptation and change in urban environments, which satirically interrogates the idea that those who do not live “traditional” lives with roots to pre-colonial times have somehow “lost” or inconveniently misplaced their culture.214

Starting with the line “You are black, you are brown and sometimes white” which acknowledges that Aboriginal people have a diversity of physical characteristics, the poem’s final stanzas run:

They say to you, ‘Speak to us some language’
You say, ‘What you talkin’ ‘bout man?’
I am speakin’ my language

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213 “Aboriginal Writing: a personal view,” in Davis and Hodge, eds., 17:
I talk same like you, white man

You’re stuck on a fence, you’re in between
‘Be like a black man’ they tell you
And when you do and can be seen
They say, ‘Go away, blacky, your way’s not true’

Let me tell you the road is hard
...
Take pride in who you are
You are the Urba-rigine!

“The Urba-rigine” of Fred Penny’s poem takes up and inverts the evaluation made in the nineteenth and early to mid twentieth centuries of the “in-between”, in which miscegenation was regarded in popular and scholarly circles alike as producing what Rudyard Kipling called “monstrous hybridism.” Rather than seeing himself in negative terms as “stuck on a fence” and “in-between” since he cannot produce the kinds of characteristics being demanded in order to be labelled “authentic”, and rather than accepting a negative evaluation of his manifestation of Aboriginality and Aboriginal culture as a way which is “not true”, Penny celebrates the “Urba-rigine” in a positive and proud manner.

Penny’s poem parodies the assumption that Indigenous people necessarily speak an Aboriginal language, comically lampooning the paradoxical demands of a white-dominated society for a “black man” to behave as an exotic “other,” while authentic or “true” Aboriginality is defined by white people. It pointedly draws attention to the speaker’s life as being both decidedly Aboriginal and definitively involved in “Western civilisation”.

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The late Lisa Bellear’s poem, “Beautiful Yuroke Red River Gum,” also originates in a belief in cultural continuity and survival in a particular geographical location despite the dramatic – and devastating – changes wrought on people and land with colonisation. It is set in the heart of one of the most populous cities in Australia, Melbourne.216

Sometimes the red river gums rustled in the beginning of colonisation when Wurundjeri, Bunneron, Wathaurin and other Kulin nations sang and danced and laughed aloud

Not too long and there are fewer red river gums, the Yarra Yarra tribe’s blood becomes the river’s rich red clay

there are maybe two red river gums a scarred tree which overlooks the Melbourne Cricket Ground the survivors of genocide watch and camp out, live, breathe in various Parks ‘round Fitzroy and down Town cosmopolitan St Kilda

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and some of us mob have graduated
from Koori Kollij, Preston TAFE,
the Melbin Yewni

Red river gums are replaced
by plane trees from England
and still
the survivors
watch.

Bellear’s poem presents a concentrated set of imagery which evokes a sense of
dramatic alteration to the land around Melbourne and the occupations of the Kooris
there – whether living in parks or being educated in technical colleges, university, or
“Koori Kollij” (by life itself) – yet also encodes these as possessing elements of
continuity with the past. The practices and ways of life may have changed and the
native trees may no longer remain, but a relationship to the past is woven in and
through the memories of “survivors” and their acute awareness of what has gone
before. Memory and the act of commemoration of the frontier wars is where
Bellear’s poem suggests cultural continuity lies, not in the nostalgia for certain
“traditional” practices which ignore the realities of colonialism and its consequences.

Despite their obvious differences in tone and subject-matter, “The Urba-rigine” and
“Beautiful Yuroke Red River Gum” are both responses to the traditionalist beliefs
discussed in the beginning of this chapter. Aboriginal culture is not forgotten or
displaced in “today’s way of living” but is today’s way of living, and is just valid
and just as meaningful – although transformed from earlier times, and continuing to
undergo transformation – for those living in the present.

The third poetic response I will consider shifts the ground somewhat. “The Past” by
Kath Walker (Oodgeroo Noonuccal in later life) creates a sense that the present is
totally infused and determined by the "tribal memories" and "thousand campfires in the forest" of previous times.

Let no one say the past is dead.
The past is all about us and within.
Haunted by tribal memories, I know
This little now, this accidental present
Is not the all of me, whose long making
Is so much of the past.
...
a thousand campfires in the forest
Are in my blood
Let none tell me the past is wholly gone.
Now is so small a part of time, so small a part
Of all the race years that have moulded me.217

In Walker's poem the sense of continuity with what has gone before is overwhelming: "The past is all about us and within." The poem's content dwells on the way in which the past overwhelmingly infuses the present. "This little now" of the "accidental present", says the speaker, "Is not the all of me." This is a poem which rhetorically aligns itself with almost an unflagging flow of continuity in the face of any claim of a radical disjunction between the "traditional" past and the "modern" present.

Although the speaker proclaims that the present is a direct channelling of the vast seas of the past and as "so small a part of time" seems almost totally determined by what has gone before, the relationship between past and present it represents is complex. While the content of the poem dwells on the way the past radically determines and infuses the present in more ways than ever could be individually detailed, it is actually present circumstances which determine how the past is

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articulated by the speaker. This is a contemporary, blank-verse poem in English, oriented toward as large an audience as possible, and launched (like all poems in Walker's oeuvre) with an overt political appeal. In this way, "The Past" expresses a seamless interdependency between classical and more contemporary forms of Indigenous Australian life, even while it lays emphasis on the importance of the residual presence of "tribal memories." This establishes legitimacy and adds rhetorical weight to the poet's claims of a strong and resilient cultural identity. The poem operates almost as a manifesto of survival for a sense of identity under threat, and a warning that forgetting of tradition will lead to becoming susceptible to the perils of being subsumed, directionless, into the oh-so "accidental present."

The three different poems considered in this section display a range of ways recent Aboriginal poets have invoked the past and situated its legacy in relation to the present, which nonetheless reject any simple binary between a purportedly static, superannuated and "traditional" (Aboriginal) past, and the changeable and "modern" (Western) present. I will now look at how past and present are conceived in Gadamer's description of the workings of tradition. It, similarly, does not consider the past to be finished, and conceives no culture to be static but rather, suggests that tradition is an ongoing force, which affects us innumerable ways without our knowing, and which is interpreted in a variety of ways to constantly shape and inform the present (and future). In Gadamer's portrayal, the movement of tradition relates past and present in a "fusion of horizons", a situation which brings different aspects of tradition to light.
Gadamer's account of tradition

The previous chapter discussed how the phenomenon of translation exemplifies the possibilities of mediation between strange and familiar linguistic and cultural situations. Translation is both a bridge and barrier to understanding, making some facets of the foreign text intelligible in the transference between languages, while inevitably allowing others to recede. But mediation does not only occur between cultures. Another way mediation occurs is between generations and epochs through tradition, and is internal to a culture. Gadamer describes how tradition, far from being a static and unchanging remnant of the past (as asserted in the traditionalist beliefs outlined above), constantly undergoes renewal and transformation as people interpretively (i.e. selectively) encounter the contents of their traditions, and apply them in present circumstances.

Gadamer's description of the traditionary perpetuation and renewal of human social life is one of his major contributions, and has been one of most contested areas of his thought. Gadamer's account of tradition relativises the horizon of the present and the past by situating them in necessary relationship to one another. This means that one of the primary ways that the present becomes aware of its prejudices and limits is through the encounter with the contents of the past. In what follows, I will look at how "tradition" (Überlieferung) relates to the controversial term "prejudice" (Vorurteil) in philosophical hermeneutics, tracing both to Heidegger's account of the forestructure of understanding. I aim then to examine how this account of prejudice and tradition contributes to an understanding of the accomplishments of Kim Scott's Miles Franklin Award-winning novel, Benang.
Heidegger's account of the forestructure of understanding

The phenomenological concept of horizons and Martin Heidegger's account of the forestructure of understanding are both influential on Gadamer's discussion of prejudices, upon which his account of tradition is based. In his consideration of the tripartite fore-structure of expectations, Heidegger develops an analysis of the composite makeup of the horizons of human being. This suggests that before one consciously tries to interpret anything whether it is a text, an object, or the words of another person, much understanding has already taken place in terms of fore-having, fore-sight and fore-conception (Vorhabe, Vorsicht, and Vorgriff). Each of these terms, although related, has a distinct meaning. "Fore-having" or Vorhabe refers to the totality of one's past experiences, involvements, and cultural practices which enable interpretation to occur by orientating or contextualising various possibilities of understanding. The point of view or specific interpretation one gives to this range of possibilities is called "fore-sight" (Vorsicht). And finally, one's perspective is oriented through a conceptual framework. This is "fore-conception" (Vorgriff).

Before explicitly interpreting anything, Heidegger shows that one has already tacitly oriented oneself toward it by contextualising it relative to past experience, approaching it in a certain way, and conceiving it. Taken together, these form our orientation in the pre-given world into which we are embedded and thus are what constitutes the very possibility of understanding. In Chapter Two I looked at an example in "Shifting Camp": this song appears as a written poem, which not only is what allows interpretation to occur, but also orientates and determines any explicit interpretation that may be given.

According to Heidegger, we are “thrown” in the world; any understanding of meaning arises out of one’s situation which is already saturated with foremeanings which serve to orientate one in that situation. This is the case whether one is approaching texts, other people, different societies, or objects: an anticipatory element on the part of the interpreter is always involved. In “Understanding and Interpretation”, Chapter 32 in Part One of Being and Time, Heidegger puts it this way:

In interpreting, we do not, so to speak, throw a ‘signification’ over some naked thing which is present-at-hand, we do not stick a value on it; but when something in the world is encountered as such, the thing in question already has an involvement which is disclosed in our understanding of the world, and this involvement is something which gets laid out by the interpretation.\(^{219}\)

Here he develops the idea that interpreting is not somehow choosing to “stick a value on” something, but bringing to explicit rendering of that which is generally implicit in the taken-for-granted prior orientation that characterises our ability to participate in any particular linguistic, historical and social environment. Rather than something that human beings do, interpreting is a fundamental element of what human beings are, and only occasionally this is made explicit through formal practices such as literary criticism and commentary.

The other element of Heidegger’s thinking which is relevant to Gadamer’s account of understanding is how he (like Husserl before him) shows that horizons are not possessed by individual consciousnesses only but are shared, consisting largely of elements which exceed the awareness of any one person. The Lebenswelt is always a communal world in which we are involved with others with whom we share activities, ideas, and presuppositions: Dasein (Being-there) is also primordially Mit-

\(^{219}\) Heidegger, Sein und Zeit, 150; Heidegger, Being and Time, 190-91.
sein, Being-with. 220 This pre-existing world which we share in common with others is essentially historical, social, and linguistic: speakers of different languages and members of different cultures or sub-cultures will be involved with others and things in the world in distinct (yet partially overlapping) ways. In the last chapter this was discussed in relation to Gadamer’s concept of the fundamental Sprachlichkeit (linguisticality) of human beings, and the idea of the “world-disclosive” function of language.

Gadamerian “prejudices”

Gadamer’s account of prejudices (Vorurteile) is his reformulation of the tripartite forestructure of understanding as developed by Heidegger, and is his way of talking about the situated involvement we always have in the world. Gadamer uses the word “prejudice” in quite a specific way: in philosophical hermeneutics prejudices are the non-transparent assumptions, presumptions, attitudes, and orientations that are formed by and amidst our involvement from infancy to adulthood in irreducibly social and historical situations. They “constitute the initial directedness of our whole ability to experience” and, Gadamer writes, are inescapable “biases of our openness to the world. They are simply conditions whereby we experience something – whereby what we encounter says something to us.” 221 We are always within situations without total knowledge of all their possibilities and ramifications. The word “prejudice” used in this way is a far cry from the sense of bigotry with which it

220 Heidegger writes: “[B]ecause Dasein’s Being is Being-with, its understanding of Being already implies the understanding of Others. This understanding, like any understanding, is not an acquaintance derived from knowledge about them, but a primordially existential kind of Being, which, more than anything else, makes such knowledge and acquaintance possible. Knowing oneself [Sichkennen] is grounded in Being-with, which understands primordially.” Heidegger, Sein und Zeit, 123-24; Heidegger, Being and Time, 161.

is often associated. Gadamer's definition of it emphasises the incompleteness of our knowledge, as a "prejudice" is a necessary pre-judgment (Vor-urteil) or "a judgement that is passed before the final examination of all relevant, determining elements of a situation" (TM 270/ GW I 255).222

According to Gadamer, prejudices or pre-judgements are irreducible aspects of human existence which reflect human finitude and temporality. The value of his account, as I shall discuss in relation to Benang, below, is that it demonstrates that while having prejudicial horizons is inevitable and inescapable (we cannot choose the prejudices of the world we are born (or, in Heidegger's word, "thrown") into), it also elucidates how elements of these are up for questioning and revision. What Gadamer's account encourages us to do is to accept that whilst we may be historically and socially determined by prejudicial horizons – and inescapably approach everything including literary texts in this way – how each person and generation relates to the content of these horizons is, in some respects, open to free determination. Prejudices are not prisons: people are constantly making changes and alterations in how they regard the contents of their traditions, and these result in a gradual transformation of prejudices. This chapter and the next detail how this movement occurs.

222 The word "prejudice" in general usage remains an overwhelmingly pejorative term for unacceptably biased opinion or bigotry. Gadamer associates this pejorative definition with the Enlightenment's "prejudice against prejudice" in promoting the use of critical reason, against which, he suggests, the Romantics advanced an uncritical and dogmatic prejudice toward prejudices. Gadamer seeks to re-inscribe the word "prejudice" with more neutral connotations, and tries to show that there are prejudices – biases, prejudgments and relationships toward authority – which are not arbitrary, negative and irrational but which stand the test of rational criticism and can be found to be true and reasonable. At the same time he is deeply sceptical that in the area of human existence, reason untainted by prejudice and affection is possible. He puts it in these words in Truth and Method: "our finite historical being is marked by the fact that the authority of what has been handed down to us – and not just what is clearly grounded – always has power over our attitudes and behaviour." (TM 280/ GW I 285)
The working of tradition and the transformation of prejudices

Up to this point I have given a preliminary account of how Gadamerian prejudices map onto Heidegger's examination of the forestructure of understanding. Gadamer's account of tradition is an attempt to set this conception of prejudices and prejudicial horizons in motion across time. In the self-perpetuation of human societies over generations, prejudices and anticipatory judgements are reflective of a generation's relationship to its traditions. There is a circular aspect to this (the circularity will be discussed in Chapter Five, and the problems of breaking out of this circle will be discussed in Chapter Six). We receive our traditions through the prejudicial horizons of the social formations in which we are embedded – aspects of a tradition will be visible at some times and invisible at others; and prejudicial horizons are formed through our relation to traditions. Importantly, traditions need to be applied in particular circumstances. The demands of the present require the contents of tradition to be adapted, sometimes in a minor way, sometimes with major revisions. Because the present applications of tradition necessarily include changing and altering the tradition, the formative, anticipatory judgements which traditions provide (our prejudices) accordingly are undergoing continuous change and transformation. Gadamer calls this the "untiring power of experience", the fact that "in the process of being instructed, man is ceaselessly forming a new preunderstanding."

This way of conceiving tradition, and its relations to the embedded prejudices through which our world appears to us, does not assume that tradition will

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223 Gadamer's views do not exactly align with Heidegger's. In my understanding of Gadamer's account of tradition, prejudice and authority, he attempts to wed a Heideggerian account of forestructures and foremeanings with a Hegelian conception of historical consciousness. Heidegger, for instance, would say that we are simply and necessarily conditioned by our past, not that we can learn from the past by becoming more aware of it, and that this can facilitate change.

necessarily possess some kind of linear or progressive scheme, or any single, unified front, but, conversely, insists that tradition is multifarious: it appears only insofar as aspects of it are taken up and applied (or not) by people in the differing historical and social circumstances in which they live:

We accept the fact that the subject at hand presents different aspects of itself at different times or when approached from different standpoints. We accept that these aspects do not simply cancel one another out (aufheben) as research proceeds, but are like mutually exclusive conditions that exist by themselves and unite only in us. Our historical consciousness is always filled with a variety of voices in which the echo of the past is heard. Only in the multiplicity of such voices does it exist: this constitutes the nature of the tradition in which we want to share and have a part ...

We have a new experience of tradition whenever the past resounds in a new voice. (TM 284/ GW 1 289)

To Gadamer, the echoes of the past that are heard are avowedly multiple. The emphasis here is on the clamour of different voices and traditionary elements, where the unity formed by the present interpretation of tradition is a provisional one. What the unity of a tradition like literature comprises can be summarised in the statement that at any given point one can (potentially) articulate a historically and culturally situated description which unifies some of the different voices of literary traditions by bringing them into relation with one another. At the same time it is important to admit that this idea of the tradition ("literature") is itself evolving and undergoing substantial revision and modification by the different traditionary elements which are highlighted from this perspective. This occurs especially as parts of the tradition which had been silent, silenced, unaccentuated or obscured, come into clearer view.225

225 For more on this see the discussion of the hermeneutic circle and of the Wirkungsgeschichte of stolen generations narratives in the next chapter. This view of literature refutes the privileging of any
The relationship formed between aspects of the past and present as they are brought together in a provisional moment of unity, wherein a manifestation of tradition occurs is another example of horizons “fusing”, about which Gadamer writes:

There is no more an isolated horizon of the present in itself than there are historical horizons which have to be acquired. *Rather, understanding is always the fusion of such horizons supposedly existing in themselves…* In the workings of tradition this process of fusion is continually going on, for there old and new are always combining into something of living value, without either being explicitly foregrounded from the other (TM 306/ GWI 311).

With the fusion of horizons Gadamer stresses that understanding anything from the past (which may be something as specific as a text or as apparently nebulous as customary forms of behaviour and attitudes) necessarily occurs in relation to the present situation: there is never direct or unmediated access to the “past itself” (nor indeed, to the present “in itself”). It is in the combination or interaction of the two (the present, which has been shaped by the past, and the “past” which is interpretively understood by the present) that Gadamer suggests something of “living value” is created.

In what follows, I will make the discussion above more concrete, by illustrating and expanding upon these ideas in a discussion of Kim Scott’s *Benang*. I interpret the novel’s characterisation of Harley as a primary example of the constant creation of tradition; how the fusion of horizons between past and present can make us aware of embedded prejudices and so be transformative in and of the present, which then effects or shapes a different future.

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one position as having absolute priority: thus, “literary canons” and the evaluative principles upon which they are based, are always up for revision.
Benang and tradition

Benang presents the story of Harley, a young man who has been brought up by his white grandfather, Ernest Solomon Scat (Em). It is a portrait of a person whose pictures of the past and present are undergoing radical reorientation. Harley comes to learn that Em is a relative of A.O. Neville, who was the Chief Protector of Aborigines (1915-1936) and then Commissioner for Native affairs (1936-1940) in Western Australia earlier in the twentieth century, and a convert to his racial beliefs. The novel tells the disturbing story of Harley’s discovery, and subsequent interrogation, of the minutiae of Neville’s and Scat’s eugenicist obsession with biological and social absorption of “fractions” of Aboriginality (those who were not “full-bloods”) into white society. Playing out their obsessions on different stages, each has pursued his aims by forcibly severing people’s ties to culture, language, family and place. Neville’s is a public and bureaucratic project, while Scat’s pursuit is personal, involving his own descendants in a plan which has involved selectively “breeding” his children and grandchildren in an effort to produce “the first white-man born”. The apparently successful product of his endeavours is Harley. On learning this Harley sets off on a quest to know more about his and his families’ history, and he learns about how his Noongar relatives have been affected by his grandfather’s grandiose scheme and how it intersected with official assimilation policies in the early to mid twentieth century.

Scott, Benang: From the Heart. Page references will be given in the main textual body.

“A.O. Neville has become a much-interrogated historical figure. He appears in plays such as Jack Davis’ No Sugar and Kullark, and novelistic life narratives like Doris Pilkington’s Follow the Rabbit-proof Fence and Sally Morgan’s My Place. There are also numerous references to him and excerpts from letters he sent in Susan Maushart’s Sort of a Place Like Home, and Anna Haebich’s Broken Circles: Fragmenting Indigenous Families 1800-2000.”

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226 Scott, Benang: From the Heart. Page references will be given in the main textual body.

“Nyoongar” is the spelling used in the novel, and is retained for direct quotes; otherwise I use “Noongar”.

227 A.O. Neville has become a much-interrogated historical figure. He appears in plays such as Jack Davis’ No Sugar and Kullark, and novelistic life narratives like Doris Pilkington’s Follow the Rabbit-proof Fence and Sally Morgan’s My Place. There are also numerous references to him and excerpts from letters he sent in Susan Maushart’s Sort of a Place Like Home, and Anna Haebich’s Broken Circles: Fragmenting Indigenous Families 1800-2000.
A major part of Harley’s project is his attempt to understand the significance of being “the first white-man born”. As he interrogates the past Harley learns (and the reader with him) that it involves legal, aesthetic, and social dimensions. Legally many of Harley’s more recent ancestors are considered “black” though they are of partial, mixed heritage descent. This has had serious ramifications on their lives: “You could be moved anywhere, told who to marry, where to live, had to get a permit to work, not allowed to drink or vote ... It separated us all” (Benang 216).

These legal and bureaucratic definitions are accompanied by an associated lexicon of “full-bloods,” “half-bloods,” “quadroons” and so on through the spectrum of fractions. Anchored in biological beliefs about blood and race, the end point of these permutations, Harley, whereby the blood is considered to be diluted enough, is a “white man.” And yet, in spite of the scientific-sounding logic of this, Harley learns that ultimately what is considered white is determined by legislation: it is an arbitrary label. Benang dwells upon the consequences wrought in people’s lives by legislative changes in classifications of Indigeneity, such as the parliamentary Acts of 1905 and 1936. An effect of this shift of laws was the thwarting of Ern’s ambitions in one generation for Harley’s father Tommy who, according to the older definition, would have been “white” (while Tommy’s sister Ellen is legally white, as a female she also falls outside the exalted category of “white man”).

The aesthetic dimension of Ern’s project is physical appearance. Ern, just as much as Neville, is involved literally in a project of “breeding out the colour.” It is by stumbling across Ern’s notes on his family that Harley first learns of his

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228 The change in legislation categorised as “Aboriginal” all people of part and full Aboriginal descent regardless of their lifestyle with some exceptions: “quadroons” over the age of 21 unless classified as native by magisterial order, and persons of less than a “quadroon” descent born before 31 Jan 1936. They were prohibited by law from associating with “natives” regardless of the nature of their relationship. Anna Haebich, Broken Circles: Fragmenting Indigenous Families 1800-2000 (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2000).
grandfather’s project and his own place in it. Here, he finds captioned photographs and notes, all of which is reminiscent of the selective breeding of animals for desired physical traits. Harley is struck by the odd description of his father, Tommy as “octroon grandson (mother quarter caste [No. 2], father Scottish). Freckles on the face are the only trace of colour apparent.”(Benang 26). He is shocked to find his own childhood face at the end of different pictorial sequences, and to see a number of “sharply ruled diagrams” which all end in his own name.

Ern’s Indigenous “wife” Topsy takes this obsession with colour even further. Topsy is a pitiful figure, wearing white clothing and endlessly scrubbing floors, aping what she believes is the behaviour of white women. Forced to stay out of the sun and remain housebound to avoid tanning, she also takes horrifically disfiguring bleach baths as a means of lightening her skin. These are revealing bodily practices. In How Societies Remember, Paul Connerton discusses how, alongside more formal situations like commemorative ceremonies and by inscribing practices such as writing, bodily practices maintain traditions and propagate social forms of memory. Benang shows that bodily practices may be mobilised, not just in maintaining social memory, but in negating it. The practices the novel describes – bleaching one’s skin and breeding the colour of future generations of children – are ones which seek to whiten out and obliterate any physical trace of blackness in people of mixed heritage, fostering memory’s opposite: forgetfulness and unknowing.

In addition to the legal and aesthetic dimensions of Ern’s project is its social and traditionary dimension. In this, Harley’s ancestors are also perceived in negative terms. Ian Anderson notes that until recently, people with parents and grandparents
of Indigenous and European descent were not regarded as bridging cultures or even as cultural "hybrids" but as "having no tradition", and he refers to the historian N.J.B. Plomley's comments (as recently as 1977) that

structurally, physiologically and psychologically, hybrids are some mixture of their parents. In social terms, [these people] belong to neither race (and are shunned by both), and lacking a racial background they have no history.230

According to this way of thinking, "authentic" cultural identity is identified with purity of biological or "blood" heritage. People of mixed parentage are regarded as having impure blood and therefore classified as "non-authentic" Aborigines.231 It is instructive to relate Plomley's comments to the beliefs that Ern, Neville, Sergeant Hall and the other white figures of *Benang* espouse. The novel shows how such beliefs about race and culture have a tendency to be devastatingly prophetic, acting as an impetus for individual action and institutional activity. Believing it is a situation they are merely describing, Ern and the other men actively facilitate the above situation. They assume people of mixed Noongar and European heritage to be without tradition and inauthentic, and so think nothing of dislocating people of lighter skin from their relatives. Selectively choosing some of his offspring, Ern takes these children from their families and sends them to boarding schools for education whilst enforcing a reign of ignorance about their familial heritage. As a result, Harley grows up like his father Tommy without knowing his Aboriginal relatives, stories or language, and on the other side, also knowing very little of his non-Indigenous heritage. He feels rootless and without substance, and the lack of "Nyoongar language. Culture ... I thought of all the things I did not have. Unsettled,

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231 Biologically-based theories of race have been largely discredited over the course of the twentieth century, displaced by understandings of race as involving socially and historically based practices, self-identifications, and identifications by others.
not belonging – the first white man born – I let myself drift. I gave up, and drifted” (Benang 109). Harley’s initial reactions to his quest to understand the past are embittered and quite ambivalent, as he becomes desperately aware of his present situation: being the “first white man born” has, as a major consequence, a terrible lack of awareness of any past, especially of Noongar culture and traditions and his Indigenous relatives. But this, he comes to realise, is only one way of viewing the relationship between the present and past, and the novel presents Harley’s attempt to remedy this lack, by re-tracing his family’s experiences over four generations. In so doing he relates the horizons of his present and the past in a different way.

**Listening back to past voices**

Kim Scott said in an interview that writing Benang required him to “listen back to past voices,” and it is clear that the endeavour of understanding the past – a hermeneutic endeavour – is one of Harleys, and the novel’s, primary aims. Benang listens back to Indigenous Australians in nineteenth and twentieth century Western Australia, white bureaucrats, and graziers, townspeople and police officers in the areas in which Indigenous people lived and moved. Scott traces, through many generations, the fragmented relationship of Harley’s ancestors to older Indigenous formations and the corresponding loss of certain kinds of knowledge and language. This also involves tracking the highly strained relationship Harley and his family have toward the figures with European heritages in the novel. Fragmentation and, at times, obliteration of entire families and cultural traditions has taken place through

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massacre, forced relocation, widespread rape of Indigenous women, removal of lighter-skinned children, and continuous bureaucratic interference.\textsuperscript{233}

In “listening back” to, and scrutinising a lesser-known chapter of Australian history, \textit{Benang} is one of a large number of recent texts which seek to critically re-interrogate Indigenous people’s experiences of the past. Others examining complex historical realities from an Aboriginal perspective include plays by Jack Davis like \textit{Kullark}, \textit{No Sugar}, and \textit{The Dreamers}, Mudrooroo’s \textit{Master of the Ghost Dreaming} trilogy and his \textit{Doctor Wooreddy’s Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World} (the latter novel will be discussed extensively in Chapter Six). These narratives are all part of an imaginative recuperation of some of the past’s multiple echoes, demonstrating the hermeneutic insight that any subject will present different aspects of itself from different standpoints and at different points of time: traditions have plural expressions.

Until the early 1970s these aspects of the past remained mute in what W.E.H. Stanner so memorably identified as “The Great Australian Silence.” At the time, the lack of histories of Australia sympathetic to Aboriginal viewpoints was so pronounced that he declared:

\begin{quote}

inattention on such a scale cannot possibly be explained by absent-mindedness. It is a structural matter, a view from a window which has been carefully placed to exclude a whole quadrant of the landscape.\textsuperscript{234}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{233} Responses to these situations for Harley’s relatives range from stoicism, to emotional pain, to being so devastating that the means with which some deal with events is to suppress them in silence. Not only what \textit{was} actually vocalised is part of Scott’s listening back, but also what – significantly – \textit{was not}. Similar concerns with teasing out some of the telling silences which lay behind speech in country Australia motivate Vivienne Cleven’s novel, \textit{Her Sister’s Eye}, and Alexis Wright’s \textit{Plains of Promise}.

This lack of engagement with issues concerning Indigenous Australians and
disengagement with the brute realities of the frontier and establishment of white
settlement determined how the past was perceived – and this is the legacy of silence
that Harley receives. More recent works like *Benang* open the past up to renewed
scrutiny and examination, and in so doing they generate new perspectives, in this
case by focusing upon the lives of those affected by assimilationist governmental
policies and the eugenicist beliefs about race these were based upon in Western
Australia. Such creative works function as a means of presenting past horizons in a
new way, and of voicing what in earlier understandings of Australia’s traditions
(taken from the perspectives of non-Indigenous people) had been passed over in
silence. In so doing, in the critical context of the past decades, they tap into the
postcolonial critique of the one-eyed view of colonial experience which had
previously related only the perspective of the colonists.

Listening back to such a range of voices is not easy, and neither is recovering a sense
of different past horizons which are marginalised by more mainstream
understandings of the past. *Benang* uses various means to generate awareness of the
difficulties involved. It gathers together a cacophony of different echoes, which,
taken together, contribute to a sense that the period being considered is not (and was
not) monolithic. The sheer difficulty of understanding the unruly, heterogeneous past
is replicated in Harley’s difficulties in teasing out a coherent narrative from the often
confusing pieces of information and new characters which keep appearing during his
research. It is almost half-way through the novel that two important main characters,
Dinah and Pat Coolman, are introduced, and Harley admits that he worries at the
“late and sudden introduction of characters” to the story, antecedents of whom he
himself has not yet heard (*Benang* 168).
Harley writes, in part, to make sense of the bewildering amounts of information he receives. Writing leads him to extraordinary flights—quite literally—which often leave him stranded in awkward places such as clinging to the clothes line with his toes or drifting in the sky, anchored only by some fishing line. But even as he seeks to make sense of the information he discovers, Harley is unsure of precisely what the end result is. Is it: “A family history? A local history? An experiment? A fantasy?” (Benang 33) This blurring of genres reflects the difficulties about content Harley faces. Benang is a hybrid construction combining realist fiction with magical realism whilst also incorporating “real” historical figures such as A.O. Neville and citing reams of archival material such as newspaper articles, letters and statements from official logs.

The novel’s very distinctive and unusual narrative form further compounds an awareness of the plural facets of the past, the difficulty of disentangling hitherto unheard and underheard voices from amidst more established accounts, and of representing them appropriately. The narrative is many-stranded, with Harley’s potted account of his own life intertwined with episodes from the lives of his relatives from different periods of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It represents an extremely disorienting situation, where neither the present nor the past will stay still. This gives the novel a meandering, palimpsestic quality. It is often not immediately clear whose story is being taken up, in what era an event is occurring, or what period in the character’s own life the episode relates to as episodes and eras are intermingled without special textual markers, so much so that at times the slippage between time periods and characters is disorientating. The chapter “almost a grave orgasm” (Benang 337-353), for instance, consists of multiple and confusing shifts in time and place. Beginning with the patchy recollections of Uncle Will about
his childhood and his grandfather Sandy One Mason, the narrative moves forward to Will’s father Daniel and descriptions of the onset of his mouth cancer. It then shifts to Daniel’s memories, as in his illness he dwells on a last “spree” by local white men in which his daughters Dinah and Harriette were caught and raped. This disturbing scene gives way to an account of Harriette’s marriage to Daniel Coolman, and then shifts to the “present” as Harley refers to himself as a possible future of Sandy One. The chapter continues to shift between past episodes and Harley’s intermittent commentary upon these in the present.

Harley, as the ultimate source of these different recollections (in his imaginative perspective-taking of previous generations) notes this style is circumlocutory, what he calls a “snaking narrative” (Benang 22) in which he meanders toward “things close to home and heart.” At one point he admits:

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. (Benang 367)

Here, the unusual form the novel takes offers an ironic comment upon the structure of the conventional narrative form, with its definite sequenced storyline moving toward a climax and ending. Harley’s comments associate Benang’s confusion of characters and time periods with a more fundamental scepticism about ideas of historical inevitability and progress, in which successive and discrete pasts are built upon in the present toward what is believed to be a more developed or advanced future. For Harley and his Indigenous relatives, as much as things change, as much they remain the same.

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The idea of a postcolonial "writing back" which challenges mainstream versions of Australia's past is now quite familiar, although it is interesting to note how *Benang* takes it in fresh directions by palpably representing the difficulty of identifying alternative or non-dominant perspectives from the past in its multi-layered form, mixture of genres, and frequently-confused narrator. What Gadamer's hermeneutics adds is an appreciation that traditions always have plural expressions, and that even here there are voices and perspectives that remain unaddressed. It also adds an appreciation that altering the impression we have of the past, and understanding the traditions from which we come differently, affects both the present and the outlook we have to the future. And its concern with first-person or participant-focused perspectives in understanding contributes to an appreciation of Harley's difficulties, as he seeks to make sense of, and integrate, the new and disturbing facets of past events that he uncovers.

In what follows, I would like to shift emphasis (as indeed, the novel does) to look at how the latter occurs, in the novel's representation of how Harley's prejudices are undergoing re-formulation in the present. One of the questions he seeks answers to in *Benang* is not just how to identify the hitherto submerged or unnoticed past, but how this changes his self-understanding. After stumbling across his grandfather's multi-generational project of "breeding out the colour", he discovers an entire Indigenous heritage which had been hidden from him as the "first white man born", but what relevance does this have?

**The role of risking prejudices in shifting perspectives**

In this section I will look at Harley as an example of someone whose prejudices and whose self have been illuminated in a new and fresh light through the encounter with
a past horizon, and how, through becoming aware of his embedded prejudices, these are transformed in a way that affects future possibilities. This offers us a model for a process which occurs whenever understanding is attained, whether the different horizon encountered is the past, another culture, another person, or a literary text.

After discovering his grandfather’s project, Harley initially becomes bitterly aware that his world view has been almost entirely inculcated by Ern and represents a perspective from which Indigenous people are perceived in a limited and unsympathetic way. A primary metaphor which runs throughout the novel, the description of people’s reflections in mirrors, traces the pernicious effects of the ways the present has been conditioned by such perspectives. “So many of us have considered ourselves in my grandfather’s various mirrors,” Harley says at one point, “trying to see what Ern and others see” (Benang 158). Topsy, Kathleen, Jack and Harley have all viewed their reflections through the warped mirror in Ern’s bathroom which reflects only patchily. Harley identifies other kinds of reflection of Indigenous people which are as malformed and incomplete as his grandfather’s mirrors: white cultural artefacts representing Indigenous people’s images on the cover of tins, in books, and in newspaper articles.

It is through questioning the contours of past – and four generations of relatives – that Harley finds assistance in gaining the means to shift this reflection. Through exposing and critiquing the racially-biased prejudgements embedded in the horizons of actors like his grandfather Ern, he comes to shrug off the nagging desire to be reflected in his grandfather’s mirrors, learning to become sceptical of what he sees reflected from others. After the shock of learning of Ern’s project and ambitions for him, his anger at learning that his relative’s fates were routinely subject to outside
control, and a car accident which renders him greatly debilitated, Harley seeks to
discover what it might mean to orientate himself anew, apart from such reflections.

Harley’s shifting appreciation of the past, in other words, opens up a different
understanding (and set of goals and interests) in the present, and this is highly
significant. As Gadamer’s description of the fusion of horizons makes clear, our
understanding of the present is necessarily affected by the appreciation we have of
the past and the traditions from which we come. The fusion of horizons describes an
ongoing process where “old and new are always combining into something of living
value” (TM 306/ GW 1 311), and Benang demonstrates that the horizon of the past
stands in relation to the horizon of the present through the connections it makes
between Harley’s rediscovery of the past and his own self-transformation.

Before looking specifically at just how Harley’s sense of the present is changing, it is
necessary to clarify in general terms how the fusion of horizons describes the way
one’s prejudices can come up for question and alteration through the encounter with
tradition. Above I outlined how traditions are transformed through the selective
application of elements of tradition to current circumstances. But how does this lead
us to become aware of our prejudices and possibly set about changing them?

Gadamer writes that encountering the past may facilitate an interrogation of the
present. It is through the experience of tension between the past and present that we
may become aware of aspects of our habitual prejudices or prejudgements.

Becoming aware of these prejudices enables us to test or “risk” them:

[T]he horizon of the present is continually in the process of being formed because
we are continually having to test all our prejudices. An important part of this testing
occurs in encountering the past and in understanding the tradition from which we
come. (TM 306/ GW 1 311)
This is to say that the experience of tension between the past and present described by the “fusion of horizons” is productive; it is not something to be overcome or covered over, but consciously dwelt upon. Becoming aware of the traditionary biases through which one encounters the world and making assessments and judgements about them is part of the way the present situation transforms these prejudices.

The process of becoming aware of prejudices and risking or testing them, Gadamer suggests, is a crucial part of the constant movement of tradition. When elements of a tradition or customary behaviour appear strange or estranged, it is then that people really become aware of them, and of their own relationship to them. Theodore Kisiel paraphrases this in the following way: “(e)xplicit understanding begins only when this challenging event happens to us, creating a distance between us, the interpreters, and the transmitted message.”

For Harley, who begins to painstakingly re-examine his familial history, this involves a protracted and often difficult process of becoming aware of what had been hitherto taken for granted in his unreflexive attitudes toward the world and others. In becoming aware of some background beliefs and attitudes (in bringing them to the foreground), he is in a position to critically reflect further upon them.

As he does this, Harley finds that it radically shakes up his sense of who he is. By listening to different voices from his family’s past, this facilitates new interpretations of this past and his present; most dramatically in Harley’s changing understanding of what he has, in fact, inherited from the past. Rather than simply agreeing with and adopting his grandfather’s view of racial progress in which he is identified as the “first white-man born”, Harley comes to identify this as an unwarranted prejudice.

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By being able to critically reflect upon the beliefs he has, until this point, tacitly accepted without even realising it, he learns to begin to see differently, and to appreciate the fragmentary elements of continuity he still possesses with his indigenous forebears. This process, where Harley learns to see continuity where he had previously only seen abrupt beginnings and endings, is what I shall now discuss.

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As this thesis has investigated in a variety of ways, any mediation, including the mediation involved in “listening back” to past voices, involves interpretation, which selectively casts light on the subject matter under consideration. Upon first learning of his grandfather’s project and own place within this scheme, Harley becomes obsessed with the prolonged process of “ending” Aboriginality in Ernest’s singular aim of assimilation and absorption of Aboriginal people into the white mainstream. He says at one point:

I ... felt impoverished, weakened, reduced. It appeared that in the little family history my grandfather had bequeathed me options had disappeared. It seemed an inexorable process, this one of we becoming I. This reduction of a rich and variously shared place to one fragile, impoverished consciousness. (Benang 31)

Ern’s family history has replaced the languages, histories and traditions of Harley’s Indigenous ancestors with alternative traditions identifying Aborigines as a dying race, exemplified by Ern’s quest to create “the first white-man born”. Harley initially sees his grandfather’s project as a successful one, which has led to a dead end – himself.

It is whilst interrogating his fascination with ends and beginnings – shared by the white characters and their attempts to “end” Aboriginality – that Harley comes to realise that these violent actions have actually served to obscure less obtrusive
elements of continuity. In *Benang* some of these are ambivalently treated, such as the utilisation of generations of Indigenous women as poorly-paid housemaids. But there are also other, more positively-represented forces of continuity which have been developed and maintained in opposition to the imposition of power. *Benang* investigates, as Lisa Slater comments, a variety of “historical figures who resisted their present.” What Harley undertakes in his rummaging through the family past is the imaginative recovery and iteration of a very strong, continuing *counter-tradition* of Aboriginal resistance and resilience, exemplified by the attempts of Sandy One Mason and Fanny to conduct meaningful and dignified lives despite encountering hardships and multiple restrictions.

An explicit contrast in the gestalt differences in the way events can be framed and perceived (as ends and beginnings or as continuation and transformation) occurs a number of times in the novel. At one point Sandy One and Fanny are confronted by a dramatic image: they see a naked Noongar man wearing a hairbelt and carrying an envelope, who appears incongruously anachronistic even to them. Yet is it so strange? The tracks they are travelling on are very old tracks, “linked by the very oldest of stories.” Previously used exclusively by Indigenous people, many of these are now rutted with hoofprints and wheel-marks. Others have been tarred over or become the paths of telegraph or railway lines (*Benang* 356-357). But beneath the appearance of newness and radical change, older formations survive and still fulfil similar roles – in this case a line of communication – in what appear to be very

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237 There are cross-overs between individual memory, cultural memory and tradition: an item of tradition would seem to require some kind of memory and repetition in order to be perpetuated or regarded as significant, yet traditions also involve more than common or collective memories (practices and beliefs, for instance). It is beyond the scope of this thesis to examine this relationship, but the work of Maurice Halbwachs, and Jan and Aleida Assman is certainly relevant, as they look at how the construction of (collective) identities is a function of memory practices.
different societies. The Noongar man carrying the letter similarly is a figure who incorporates newer forms of communication into older traditions, merging (but not obscuring the great distances between) the “old” with the “new”.

Harley also draws parallels between his growing appreciation of the qualities of continuity and survival (displacing the abruptness of beginnings and endings) in the way he understands the past, and his changing motivation for writing. “Was it for my children?” he asks. “For me? For all of us? I had thought I was an end, and had wanted a beginning, but that is to think of it in the wrong way. It is continuation, survival” (Benang 177-178). This leads him to a revisionary understanding of his whole project. Just as Ern sought to determine the paths available to future generations in his project of assimilation and “ending” mixed heritage Aboriginality, by using his understanding of the past to re-conceive his present, Harley re-determines the paths open to those faced with a similar situation to himself. Part of this redetermination entails a rejection of his grandfather’s goals. So, later on in the novel, in a chapter emphatically titled “not beginning”, Harley declares “A first white man is not the beginning of anything much” (Benang 456, italics in the original). The title of the novel’s final chapter underscores the new view that Harley comes to adopt as he traces the echoes of his past relatives: it is called, simply, “continuing.” It is here that Harley starkly presents the two alternative ways of viewing the past that the novel as a whole shifts around: “A world gone? Changed ...” (Benang 478). As he begins to identify hitherto submerged elements of the past, Harley comes to put more store in continuation and reinvention (even if this is in fragmentary form) over and above a despairing obsession with beginnings and endings.
At this point I would like to return to Kim Scott’s first novel, *True Country* (considered more fully in Chapter Two) since the difficulty Harley faces in *Benang* rather intriguingly reflects upon the earlier novel’s ending. Interestingly, there are two common, but opposing readings of *True Country*’s ambiguous final pages. One reflects a view of the recent past and present as a period of rupture and the demise of traditions, and the other focuses upon continuity and Indigenous people’s creativity in response to re-inventing themselves during difficult historical times. In an interview, Scott noted that whilst *True Country* was well-received, he was perplexed that reviews tended to emphasise the representation of the destruction of Noongar culture in the novel, whereas he himself thought about it in a more nuanced way, as “confronting the things that were the results of historical processes.”238 This gestalt difference in understanding where the emphasis of the novel lies has consequences for how readers understand the end of the novel. Many readers who perceived the novel as a whole to be “about” the decline of Noongar culture read the novel’s ending pessimistically: Billy either dies in the end as he is caught in rising floodwaters, or the personal transformation he undergoes is a limited individual redemption amidst the more pervasive ongoing tragedy of dysfunctional remote communities. Other readers have an alternative view: that there are wider resonances in Billy’s transformation as he goes through rites of passage and initiation, to finally fully embrace his Indigeneity. As he is swallowed by a snake formed by river-water and surrounded by images of Indigenous people and his dead relatives, to these

readers it signifies the potential rejuvenation of Indigenous traditions for new
generations.  

I am not suggesting we adopt either of these alternative readings of the novel's ending as the "correct" reading: what interests me is what these alternative readings reveal about how the preconceptions and preunderstandings that readers bring to a work. In *True Country* such preconceptions quite dramatically determine what is detected and understood; what protrudes into the foreground and what recedes unnoticed. Readings which highlight the destruction of culture occurring in Karnama, while certainly a valid response, owe much to long-established beliefs in non-Indigenous Australia in which Aboriginal cultures are routinely assumed to be in decline and subject to impending destruction. This occurs, as alternative readings of *True Country* intriguingly demonstrate, to the expense of identifying just as prominent elements of vitality, continuity, permutation, and transformative renewal.

It is precisely the habitual bias towards understanding Aboriginal culture as a dead end that Scott's second novel, *Benang*, exposes and interrogates, by showing how its protagonist Harley, who starts from such a position, becomes aware of and starts to meditate upon why he is so obsessively drawn to identifying endings and beginnings. The different horizon that Harley encounters, through which his own becomes illuminated from a different perspective, is the horizon of his own family's past (in

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239 These two views are quite dramatically represented by two early reviews. A pessimistic perspective is articulated by Randolph Stowe, who describes the detailed ways the novel represents an almost entirely "dysfunctional community" and who notes that at the end there is "little light ahead for the community. Drink and violence, materialism and apathy will continue to rule the roost." The opposite view is given by Veronica Brady, who notes that Karnama is an unusual location in that in it, Indigenous and non-Indigenous people meet on relatively common ground, and highlights the optimism generated by Billy's and Gabrielle's interest in utilising Indigenous traditions to secure a more hopeful future. Randolph Stow, "Review of True Country," *Australian Literary Studies* 16, no. 3 (1994); Veronica Brady, "Review of True Country," *Westerly: a quarterly review* 38, no. 2 (1993). These two different ways of reading the ending of the novel appear to be quite common, with both raised in tutorials and web logs by students of a first-year Australian literature course in 2009, conducted by Julieanne Lamond at the Australian National University.
other cases, it may be an encounter with another horizon like that of another culture in the present). Harley comes to realise that to interpret the relationship between past and present only in terms of rupture and loss is ultimately to ignore what has been constantly renewed and the creative formation of new aspects of tradition – possessing both positive and negative qualities – which have occurred at this same time.

**Hermeneutic debates**

**Criticism One: Gadamer prioritises awareness of the continuity of tradition over rupture**

Interestingly, the two different ways Harley regards the contents of tradition in *Benang* (as containing starkly defined beginnings and endings, or as revealing abiding elements of continuity) display similarities to an ongoing debate about Gadamer’s work. Right up to his later work on technology and health Gadamer tends to emphasise hermeneutic continuity by bringing out underexplored ways people share things in common with others (and even in common with animals), the provisional community formed in the processes of coming to agreement, and unacknowledged points of continuity with older formations which are carried through into what appears radically new. Gadamer gives good reasons for looking at continuity:

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240 Gadamer frequently seeks to identify un-noted elements of continuity with the past in the seemingly radically new – such as modern art’s break with artistic traditions in *The Relevance of the Beautiful* – but this is not to extol a homogenous or monolithic view. His commentary about art, for instance, involves a detailed analysis of conflicting beliefs about art and its contexts in different historical times. Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*. The German version of the long essay “The Relevance of the Beautiful,” is Gadamer, *Die Aktualität des Schönen*. 
Things that change force themselves on our attention far more than those that remain the same. This is a general law of our intellectual life. Hence the perspectives that result from the experience of historical change are always in danger of being exaggerated because they forget what persists unseen (die Verborgenheit des Beharrenden) (TM xxiv/ GW1 3-4)

Acts of cultivation and preservation of traditions are “inconspicuous” when compared to planned innovation or radical breaks with the past, Gadamer notes, since the latter – erroneously – appear to be much more active areas for reason and reflection. This, as discussed above, is an insight that Harley also develops in *Benang*. His is the awareness that even with the dramatic changes to Noongar social formations over the fractious course of Western Australia’s settlement, more of the old forms have been preserved and perpetuated than has been realised.

However, it is precisely Gadamer’s disclosure of un-noted or undernoted elements of continuity with the past, and the way he draws out ways in which our experiences of tradition can make the past speak or sing in a new voice that has been a subject of major criticism by those who note that conflicts and incommensurability are just as much a part of a tradition as unity and continuity, and who criticise Gadamer for concentrating predominantly on the latter. The focus on conflict and rupture by Jacques Derrida, John Caputo and Terry Eagleton (who refers to Gadamer’s conception of tradition as a “club of the like-minded”) calls into question the “unity” of tradition. In its examination of the plural, different faces traditions take on over time, they suggest that philosophical hermeneutics ignores traditions’ ever-present internal incoherencies, contradictions and differences.²⁴¹

There is some aptness to this characterisation (which I will discuss further in Chapter Five), but I suggest it is important not to take this opposition too far. After his 1981 meeting with Derrida, Jean Grondin notes that Gadamer started to draw out aspects of philosophical hermeneutics which attempt to address this issue.\textsuperscript{242} From this time on he gives more weight to the idea that for philosophical hermeneutics there is no final meaning (or deep unity) to a tradition, but rather that traditions are subject to unpredictable vagaries and only perpetuated through historically contingent circumstances. The encounter with our histories and traditions is itself a present activity, that itself becomes past the moment it occurs, and this all affects the future.

The example of language, for instance, accentuates the idea that tradition is not something passively received and passed on in a unified way. Language traditions are perpetually shifting, irreducibly fecund and multifaceted. The evolution of a language tradition may involve its modification to such an extent that it warps into a distinct vernacular, creole, or language. Languages also may shift drastically, or become dead in the sense that they no longer have the ability to speak to us. However, even dead language traditions can be resurrected and revitalised when the tradition is again perceived to be relevant to people’s lives (Latin is a good example, as is the attempt to revitalise Noongar evinced by the poem “Wangelanginy” in Chapter Three). As elaborated in Chapter Three, whilst we are formed and informed by the traditions of our languages, the possibility of expressing and conceiving otherwise means that we are not hopelessly bound within traditions, even traditions of our culture and own mother-tongue. Languages are both incarnations of tradition and also simultaneously the means of embracing the radically new. In Gadamer’s hermeneutics and to turn it back to the fold of metaphysics” (5), by still possessing a notion of the “deep unity” of tradition (111).

\textsuperscript{242} Grondin, Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics, 327-28.
words "tradition only exists in constantly becoming other than it is;" any transmission of tradition involves transformation.\footnote{Gadamer, "Replik – Reply to My Critics," 288; "Replik zu Hermeneutik und Ideologiekritik," 268.}

Such an appreciation, that multiple voices from the past inform the present and at any time only selective aspects of these voices are heard, to my mind does not generate a sense of tradition as a "club of the like-minded", but the contrary, as it encourages attentiveness toward all unheard or under-heard voices. In the past thirty years Australian traditions (and Australian literary traditions) have sounded anew as Indigenous perspectives on the past, like Kim Scott’s accomplishment with _Benang_, have come to occupy the consciousness of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians alike – in large part through the struggles to be heard and to articulate their experiences of Aboriginal Australians themselves. The great value of Gadamer’s account of tradition, I suggest, is that it indicates how challenges to the dominant literary tradition made by Indigenous texts in the past decades have in fact generated a changed understanding of it – including the appreciation that Australian literary traditions are far more plural and multifaceted than frequently acknowledged. Since Gadamer’s account also encourages us to constantly "guard against overhastily assimilating the past to our own expectations of meaning," (TM 305/ _GW1_ 310) and because it stresses that traditions are continually being produced (as prejudices come to light through encounters with the past or with others, are assessed, and the new understanding which is generated forms the basis for new pre-understandings), it also encourages us to always be open to listening further still, to the possibility of apprehending other as-yet under-heard, misheard or unheard voices.
Criticism Two: Gadamer's view of tradition is conservative

Another criticism of Gadamer's view of tradition was launched by Jürgen Habermas. By writing favourably about what we can learn from tradition's underheard voices, Habermas argues that Gadamer assumes that our relationship to the past is more comforting than alienating. To Habermas, Gadamer's account of tradition overemphasises its benign and positive elements – it is conservative – and this, he claims, amounts to endorsing the contents of tradition (the status quo of what already exists) and crucially ignores the possibility of rationally criticising and rejecting what tradition and authority have bestowed. Traditions may be oppressive as well as liberating, Habermas reminds us, and would take up unlikely company on this point with Nietzsche, whose cheeky answer to the question "What is tradition?" is "A higher authority which one obeys not because it commands what is useful to us, but because it commands."244

It is undeniable that Gadamer in general writes favourably of what can be learned from tradition and authority. And it is also true that the picture which Gadamer generates tends to suggest that alterations to traditions which occur in their prolongation and transmission are generated from decisions made freely from within the tradition concerned in the establishment of points of interest and porous openness to another customary tradition; a sanguine fusion of horizons, where differentials of power don't have an effect. It is unfortunate that Gadamer did not pay more attention to the circumstances in which traditions are handed down, because at first glance his account does appear somewhat naive when one looks at traditions, like Harley's in Benang, which have been handed down under pressure. Aboriginal culture over the

past 200 years has been produced and perpetuated within a repressive and often highly racist setting of colonisation and white settlement. Traditions have been lived, altered, and handed down under duress and in response to pressure from without, in an environment in which power is distributed unequally.

Perhaps the reason for this seeming lack of sophistication is that Gadamer does not distinguish between endogenous or internal factors which change traditions and factors which are exogenous to the tradition. This distinction, which I adopt from Edward Shils, is useful in locating the driver of change. People enact endogenous changes from within the traditions themselves as “an outgrowth of their own relationship to the tradition” – as corrections, innovations and improvements (although others within the tradition concerned may not agree that these are improvements and may resist them). Exogenous factors in changes to customary behaviours represent outside influences: factors such as dramatic climate changes or the force of a colonising culture. While (Gadamer would claim) ultimately the effects of exogenous factors are incorporated into ongoing traditions through the interpretive and integrative actions of its members, how this occurs is an important point to consider. But it is a point which Gadamer’s work passes over, in that it displays a remarkable lack of differentiation or interest in appreciating the sources or impetuses of change.

There remains, then, a legitimate question of whether the Sache or subject matter of philosophical hermeneutics necessarily amounts to legitimising a conservative following of tradition for its own sake. Is Paul Ricoeur’s characterisation of Gadamer’s position as a tradition-embracing “hermeneutics of faith” which stands in

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opposition to Habermas’ tradition-criticising “hermeneutics of suspicion” justified\textsuperscript{246}

Whilst he readily admits that he has a predeliction to favour “the assimilation of the past and of tradition” in his own writings, Gadamer explicitly denies that his is an un-suspicious “hermeneutics of faith.” In the “Foreword” to the second edition of \textit{Truth and Method} he makes it a point to state that we can always criticise authority and the way things are and break with tradition: “Understanding certainly does not mean merely appropriating customary opinions or acknowledging what tradition has sanctified” (TM xxxvii/ GW2 447). This is an acknowledgement that any relationship to tradition is not only consensual and integrative but that it is also possible to become \textit{critical} of certain traditions of our predecessors and estrange ourselves from them. Harley in \textit{Benang} embodies this as he becomes critical of the traditions in which Indigenous people’s sense of value is reflected from white perspectives, and starts to distance himself from inherited attitudes\textsuperscript{247}.

For his part, Gadamer criticises Habermas for creating a false dichotomy by placing the acceptance of what has been handed down in tradition in opposition to the possibility of criticism. To Gadamer, the relationship between customary forms of behaviour formed through tradition, on the one hand, and critical reason, on the other, is more ambivalent. A prejudice, like a tradition, may, once we have become


\textsuperscript{247} A related discussion of this point is in Mark Bevir, “On Tradition,” \textit{Humanitas} XIII, no. 2 (2000): 34-35. Although Bevir recognises both the inescapable influence of tradition as our multi-stranded inheritance as well as our ability to become aware of, and change it, he overemphasises the decisive, deliberating aspect of tradition. To Bevir, when we become aware that we have traditions, we are suddenly liberated to make conscious choices in \textit{all} ways about perpetuating or changing the contents of the traditions we have inherited, which does not display enough awareness of the repeated, unreflexive or semi-aware actions and habits which Gadamer suggests make up the bulk of our relation to tradition.
aware of it, on further reflection (including rational reflection) be affirmed. Or, on further reflection it may be discovered to be false and discredited. What may result from becoming aware of prejudices and how they inform the traditions in and by which we live, Gadamer suggests, is not pre-determined:

If a prejudice becomes questionable in view of what another person or a text says to us, this does not mean that it is simply set aside and the text or the other person accepted as valid in its place. ... In fact our own prejudice is properly brought into play by being put at risk [es selber auf dem Spiele steht].... (TM 299/ GW 1 283)

Benang represents both ways of relating to prejudices and traditions and shows how decisions about whether a tradition is oppressive or not need to be made in specific circumstances, and cannot necessarily be decided in advance. Harley reflects upon his grandfather’s desire to create “the first white-man born” and finds its embedded assumptions illegitimate and unreasonable. Parodying the social Darwinist beliefs latent in this aim Harley depicts his grandfather’s and A.O. Neville’s projects in unflattering and monstrous terms:

These two hairy angels wished to seize people in their long arms and haul them to their own level ... These hairy angels, scratching at their groins. Belching. Drinking beer. (Benang 75)

At the same time, as I discussed above, Harley discovers something more inconspicuous but equally as powerful in the continuity of traditions of intergenerational resistance by his and other Indigenous families to these bureaucratic projects.

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248 Gadamer suggests further there are many relationships and customary forms of behaviour in which we engage, such as voluntary cooperation and love, which it actually seems damaging to subject to a demand for critical reflection. Gadamer writes: “Authority is not always wrong. Yet Habermas holds it as an untenable assertion ... to say that the act of rendering transparent the structure of prejudgements in understanding should lead to the acknowledgement of authority. Authority is by his definition a dogmatic power.” See Gadamer, “On the Scope and Function of Hermeneutical Reflection,” 33; “Rhetorik, Hermeneutik und Ideologiekritik. Metakritische Erörterungen zu Wahrheit und Methode,” 43.
Criticism Three: Gadamer’s understanding of tradition cannot diagnose systematically distorted communication

Habermas also mounted a third, major criticism of Gadamer’s account of tradition. While he agrees with Gadamer that any relationship to tradition involves the capacity to express distance as well as prolongation, he argues that this does not enable us to get far enough away from the tradition in question. Hermeneutics as conceived by Gadamer, he suggests, stops before the process is complete and remains caught within relative idealism:

The objectivity of a “happening of tradition” that is made up of symbolic meaning is not objective enough. Hermeneutics comes up against the walls of the traditional framework from inside, as it were. As soon as these boundaries have been experienced and recognized, cultural traditions can no longer be posed as absolute.249

Habermas argues that a further movement of critical reflection is required which goes beyond the limits of the tradition in question. His debate with Gadamer hinged on the question of whether this movement is either necessary or possible.250

Habermas had clear concerns in raising the questions that he did. Gadamer, Habermas argues, does not pay enough attention to the reliability of the interlocutors in the hermeneutic exchange. His concern is that Gadamer’s account has difficulty in identifying forms of tradition which are systematically skewed in favour of one or another participant. There are situations where even though some sort of coming to a consensus on the subject matter may occur, this is better seen as a pseudo-dialogue


250 In Knowledge and Human Interests, Habermas identified three separate knowledge-constitutive interests: instrumental knowledge which is gained by the empirical-analytic methods of science, hermeneutics which has an interest in the practical knowledge expressed by intersubjectively-reached understanding, and emancipatory knowledge which uncovers the ideological formations that skew open communication. Jürgen Habermas, Knowledge and Human Interests trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro, 2nd ed. (London: Heinemann Educational, 1978).
because force and violence are so inscribed as to not even be noticed by the actors in
the communicative event: a situation Habermas calls "systematically distorted
communication." One doesn't have to look far for instances where this is at issue.
Consider the circumstances of Indigenous Australians in the past (like those Benang
represents), who because of systematic biases could not participate in public life or
learn particular kinds of skills and who were often barred from living among other
Australians or getting employment. In this case, white people may appear "naturally"
to have authority and have superior skills and knowledge, and Indigenous peoples
uncultivated and uneducated. Racism is perpetuated in and through traditions and
customary behaviour, and if we agree with Gadamer's claims that humans are totally
enmeshed in the hermeneutic horizons of their traditions, it often seems difficult to
discern what is a legitimate rather than a distorted conversation and, indeed, how
critical attitudes toward what is taken for granted might emerge. In short, the concern
Habermas has is about the ability of those involved to internally come to a reflexive
or critical enough position toward the racial inequalities ideologically inscribed in
their societies.

Habermas therefore makes a number of attempts to preserve Gadamer's insights on
tradition while also—he believes—going beyond them. Once we become aware that
what had been accepted as traditional or authoritative is questionable (as historically
and culturally relative) Habermas argues that the balance between authority and
prejudice on the one hand, and reason on the other, shifts. Habermas attempts to
describe ways in which it is possible to take the non-participative stand of an
external observer in order to diagnose processes of ideological and distorted

251 See Habermas' discussions of these points in his essay from the "Festschrift" for Gadamer's 70th
birthday, translated as Habermas, "On Hermeneutics' Claim to Universality," especially 302-05; and
part three of Habermas, Knowledge and Human Interests.
communication through the exercise of rational thinking. Rational reflection upon the tradition via “controlled distanciation (Verfremdung)” he suggests, can make criticism methodologically and theoretically sophisticated, raising understanding “from a prescientific experience to the rank of a reflected procedure,” in a movement towards a more enlightened and emancipated stance. Accordingly, he develops accounts of the critique of ideology (Ideologiekritik) and psychoanalysis as a “depth hermeneutics” (Tiefenhermeneutik) to show there can be a kind of understanding that is methodological, objective and explanatory, that can get behind false consciousness and that can practise critique in the name of undistorted communication and emancipation.

If Habermas accuses Gadamer of understating the possibilities of critical reason, Gadamer again accuses Habermas of overstating these possibilities, of falling prey to repeating the artificial separation made in Romanticism and the Enlightenment between reason and authority, the “dogmatism of asserting an opposition and separation between the ongoing, natural “tradition” and the reflexive appropriation of it.” As we have seen above, Gadamer denies that such a stark opposition exists, just as he is sceptical of the claim that it is possible – or indeed desirable – to submit all inherited authority to the demand for rational justification. What we have received from tradition is simply too pervasive. Morality, education, all institutions and attitudes, even revolutionary consciousness are all handed down without being clearly grounded by rational reflection at every point.

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252 Habermas, “Review of Hans-Georg Gadamer’s Truth and Method,” 355. In both Knowledge and Human Interests and The Theory of Communicative Action Habermas attempts via such arguments to develop a hermeneutic awareness within the social sciences that can also be methodologically reproduced. Habermas’ own project is in part an attempt to bridge the apparently sharp opposition between truth in the human sciences and scientific methods.

There are a couple of points worth reiterating here. To Gadamer reflecting on an issue can never enable the kind of distance from it that Habermas claims is possible, precisely because we participate from within the traditions that we criticise. This is to admit fundamental limitations to our ability to distance ourselves through the application of thought from all the contents of our heritage and current action. In *Benang*, Harley does not only abstractly reflect on his family’s situation from without, but is also part of ongoing traditions of understanding, and so there are limits to his reflective ability. This, I think is decisive. In saying this, Gadamer is calling into question the idea that the depth hermeneut or ideology critic could possibly locate a legitimate position from which to inform a group that doesn’t feel sick that it is infected with false consciousness. As Gadamer argues, in globalising his or her role, the depth hermeneut takes up a falsely privileged position of being “the keeper of public information” which has dubious claims to authority, since unlike the closed analytic situation of psychoanalysis, the critic of ideology is also unavoidably a participant in society.\(^\text{254}\)

Critique and change, Gadamer argues, generally do not result from being imposed on a tradition from without after arising from some theoretical position oriented toward emancipation, but are generated internally through repeated negotiation and practical action (they are an aspect of *Zugehörigkeit*). Australians, for example, did not require a previously-developed theoretical understanding of freedom from racial discrimination in order to start a critique of national traditions; rather, theoretical reflection has emerged out of life praxis and the questions which have been raised in the sticky and combative business of living. Subsequently, life praxis and theoretical

reflection inform and spur one another. What is pivotal here is that we do not need to
jump out of the murky puddle of the participant viewpoint in order to become aware
of, and criticise larger ideological structures. The criticisms generated by participants
are not only authentic, but they offer criteria of value and what emancipatory action
may mean for the participants involved in a way that a critical theorist or depth
hermeneut cannot. This is because tradition involves not only slavishly handing
down but also betrayal and change: “[a]lteration of the existing conditions is no less
a form of connection to tradition than is a defense of existing conditions. Tradition
exists only in constantly becoming other than it is.”

It is important to realise that Gadamer’s position goes further than arguing that it is
not necessary to reflect out of the participant’s viewpoint in order to gain critical
leverage: he argues it is also not possible to reflect beyond the hermeneutic
situation. As Joel Weinsheimer remarks “Gadamer’s argument for the universality
of hermeneutics implies that there can be no critique of tradition that is not itself
traditional, no falsification of another’s opinion that does not presuppose a common
language in which the dispute is carried out.” This gets to the heart of
disagreements between Gadamer and Habermas about language, which were
mentioned but not investigated in Chapter Two. For Gadamer there is no position
“behind language” where the critical theorist (or any theorist or individual) could


256 I am aware that I am simplifying the complexity and nuance of Habermas’ position, for Habermas
also agrees that there can be no really absolute knowledge derived from thinking alone. His models
are always deeply communicative. But he also argues that rational discourse can guarantee truth by
the normative appeal to a fictional “ideal speech situation” where agreement is reached without
constraints or dominance on anyone’s part. The knowledge and truth that Habermas appeals to, then,
is only ever possible or hypothetical.

257 Joel Weinsheimer, Gadamer’s Hermeneutics: A Reading of Truth and Method (New Haven and
find purchase; instead, any and all modifications of world-views occur through experience and within language.

In concentrating on the inevitable participant-perspective of those involved in traditions, Gadamer draws attention to the limitations of our ability to understand them, as well as the always-specific social arena in which the contents of tradition are assessed, negotiated and communicated. Habermas’ account of the critique of ideology is problematic since he seems to imply that it is possible, at least in principle, to define in advance of any particular situation and any particular society what is emancipatory and what isn’t.  

Hermeneutic openness

The crux of the matter lies, I believe, in the open-endedness of the engagement with prejudices, authority and tradition in Gadamer’s account. In Gadamer’s account, when we are confronted by contents of a traditionary form, authority of any kind, or any different horizon (whether it be a person from a different culture, a poem, or a language) the hermeneutic situation brings the structure of our prejudices (Vorurteil) or pre-judgements (Vor-Urteil) to the open. In so doing, as I have outlined in this chapter, we may affirm or criticise these prejudices, and the traditions that they inform. But this is always limited, since inasmuch as some prejudices or a particular relationship toward tradition are made manifest, others will remain silent. Certain parts of a tradition will be seen as questionable at some times, but not at others, and at no stage can everything be up for question.

In the face of this realisation, the hermeneutic position Gadamer develops encourages the cultivation of a certain attitude, which recognises in advance the possibilities of difference. As he writes in another essay:

hermeneutic philosophy understands itself not as an absolute position but as a way of experience. It insists that there is no higher principle than holding oneself open in a conversation. But this means: Always recognize in advance the possible correctness, even the superiority of the conversation partner's position.259

This encourages a particular awareness rather than a methodology or technique, incorporating the recognition that human life and the judgements and knowledge involved in human meanings are dynamic and undergoing constant change. Gadamer suggests that this is the real power of hermeneutic consciousness – the ability to hone in upon that which “opens up possibilities, and keeps them open” (TM 299/ GWI 304), which can’t necessarily be given in advance of, or outside of, particular situations.

As the above suggests, the hermeneutical attitude Gadamer elucidates emphasises the need for continual openness to the possible correctness of the other partner, if this encounter is to become the kind of present experience that changes our prejudices and future possibilities. When meeting up with the strange this is an attitude of challenging and reconsidering the self, which occurs in the testing and evaluating of prejudices which have come to light in the encounter. It is this element of philosophical hermeneutics which James Risser suggests is decisive in assessing Gadamer's account of tradition. Through tradition, voices of the past appear as an other who makes a claim toward truth. Those who criticise Gadamer's examination

259 Ibid., 189.
of the continuity of tradition, Risser suggests, fail to recognise that this occurs "for the sake of an openness that has been excluded." 260

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Hermeneutic openness and the challenges to the self that occur through the relativisation of one's own horizons in the "fusion" with another horizon are important ways of thinking about what the encounter with a literary text may involve, especially for non-Indigenous readers approaching works by Indigenous Australians. Chapter Six will return to the idea of hermeneutic openness, as it details this as one of a number of ways we may relate to others represented in Mudrooroo's *Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World*.

The next chapter continues to unpack Gadamer's understanding of tradition by broadening it to a larger context. There, I argue the idea of *Wirkungsgeschichte* (effective history) is a fruitful way of appreciating changes in stolen generations narratives and interpretations of them over the past two decades.

This chapter has contrasted two ways of viewing the relationship between the present and the past. In the first, which I labelled "traditionalism", the past and present are conceived as radically separate. All too often, traditionalist ideas place Indigenous Australian cultures on the side of the "past" and in doing so deny their contemporaneity, and the ongoing, changing transformation involved in *any* culture. The second way of conceiving the relationship between present and past is that they form a complex interrelationship, and I gave an example of this in Gadamer's conception of tradition. In Kim Scott's *Benang*, Harley's attempt to understand himself and his historical situation expresses the key elements of this view. First, the

past is never considered to be truly dead or decoupled from the present, since
different aspects of the past appear in new lights through the asking of new questions
and the opening up of new perspectives in the present. Harley's excavation of the
past is an attempt to discover familial experiences excluded by the interpretation of
tradition he has been bequeathed by his grandfather, and to show how these
experiences have affected his present, despite his previous lack of awareness of
them. Second, although it is a view which regards the past, and what we inherit from
tradition, as shaping and informing the present, these never totally determine the
present. This is because what is inherited from the past needs to be applied anew in
the unique situation in which we find ourselves in the present moment. As he
becomes aware of them, Harley sifts through the prejudices and prejudgments he has
about his family and himself, and makes reasoned yet passionate decisions about
their relevance: he puts them at risk. Third, and finally, Benang expresses another
element of the relationship to tradition: what Gadamer and Heidegger both talk about
as "futurity" [Zukünftigkeit], or our outlook towards the future.261 By reconstructing
the life of his ancestors Fanny Benang and Sandy One, Harley imaginatively
construes the past for a present need, and this reorients and redirects the scope of the
future. This is resonant in the novel's title, "Benang," which is both the surname of
Harley's great-grandmother Fanny, and also means "tomorrow" in Noongar (464).

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261 See, for example, "The Universality of the Hermeneutic Problem," in Gadamer, Philosophical
Hermeneutics, 8-9.; "Die Universalität des hermeneutischen Problems," Gadamer, Gesammelte Werke
Band 2: Wahrheit und Methode, Ergänzungen, 224. Edward Shils reasonably suggests that a tradition
requires at least three consecutive generations to be formed; but generations have different longevities
-- e.g. a scholastic generation may only be a few years, whereas a social generation a number of
decades. Shils, Tradition.
The closing sentence of the novel hauntingly brings all three senses of time together in five words: "We are still here, Benang."\textsuperscript{262}

CHAPTER FIVE

Affecting the future, affecting the past: *Wirkungsgeschichte* and Stolen Generations narratives

The previous chapter examined the constant creation of tradition, as elements of the past are selectively taken up by each generation, which perpetuates or alters them. In Kim Scott’s novel *Benang* I looked at how this occurs for an individual character, Harley. Harley shows how certain embedded prejudices which comprise traditions (and which are the inevitable filters via which we understand at all) may become questionable to us, and it is the space that this opens up that fosters a process of testing these prejudices, as we make decisions about their validity and whether to perpetuate them or not. Harley’s long and difficult self-transformation shows that prejudices, like traditions, are not static but shift as the need of the historically changing circumstances of each present either lets them remain in a tacit background or brings them up for question.
This chapter will continue on from the last chapter and examine the workings of interpretive traditions of literature and how prejudicial horizons shift more broadly. It will investigate Gadamer’s conception of *Wirkungsgeschichte* – the “history of effects” or “being-affected by history”, which draws attention to the fact that questions and attitudes brought to bear on the past are *themselves* determined by the traditions from which they emerge. I will relate this to Gadamer’s formulation of the hermeneutic circle, and to illustrate this idea I will use textual examples from literary texts by Indigenous Australian authors, which quite clearly demonstrate the fact that the platform of present understandings is constituted by the continuing re-formulation of the pre-understandings which we bring to a text. In particular, I will look at shifts in understanding what have become identified as stolen generations narratives (in the realm of life writing and fiction) in recent decades. The works I primarily focus upon are Sally Morgan’s *My Place* and Tara June Winch’s *Swallow the Air*, published almost 20 years apart. I am also interested in the changes wrought with the widespread (and relatively sudden) acceptance, in the 1990s, of the systematic nature of the removal of Indigenous children from their families in the twentieth century, and the effect of the coining of the phrase, “stolen generations”.

First, it is necessary to fill in some detail about the hermeneutic circle. What I will specifically focus upon is the historical movement from regarding the hermeneutic circle as a specialised interpretative doctrine towards understanding the whole of human existence and relationship to time and tradition in its light.
The Hermeneutic Circle

This section will clarify different understandings of what is meant by the term, “the hermeneutic circle’. Although hermeneutic and interpretive ideas have been around for a very long time and are often traced to Greek and early Christian allegory, hermeneutics emerged as a word and a discipline in the Reformation. At this time Matthias Flacius Illyricus (in his influential Clavis Scripturae Sacrae of 1567) and other Protestant theorists sought to codify a systematic theory of hermeneutic interpretation in challenge to the prevailing reliance on church authority and tradition in biblical interpretation and exegesis. Flacius asserted that the scriptures contained an inner coherence by virtue of which they are interpretable, and was arguably the first to discuss understanding as a circular movement, with each individual passage explicable in light of the whole scriptures. One means of explication utilised the practice of elucidating obscure passages in relation to parallel passages whose meaning was clearer; a “hermeneutic circle.”

In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the role of the hermeneutic circle was reconceived by both Schleiermacher and Dilthey. For each, the anticipatory movement of understanding a part in terms of the whole and simultaneously the whole by virtue of its parts was eventually extended beyond the explication of written texts to become considered a model for all interpretative acts.

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264 Grondin, Introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics, 4, 39-44.
For Schleiermacher, hermeneutics is unduly limited if it relates only to questions of understanding sacred or classical texts. The principles of hermeneutics, he suggested, are just as applicable to any and every work, whether a classical text, a private letter, or a newspaper article.265 Schleiermacher’s vision of hermeneutics expands to encompass anything expressed linguistically: interprettive problems, he realises, may beset texts which are oral or written, modern or ancient, in one’s mother tongue or in foreign languages. The hermeneutic circle is constantly operating in all of the above, with any understanding underpinned, he argued, by an anticipation of the completeness or coherence of the text, in which the reader initially projects a sense of unity on the whole. In written texts, for example, a sentence is grammatically understood in terms of the individual words, but it is equally the individual words, taken together, which make up the sense of the whole sentence. This circular, to-and-fro movement also operates at the level of the interplay between sentences and larger sections of a work. Likewise, single texts are to be understood in relation to the author’s oeuvre or in relation to the established literary genres to which they conform. Even more broadly, individual works need to be understood with reference to their historical and social contexts; yet in a circular fashion it is also the case that our appreciation of these very contexts is enabled by our reading of the individual works concerned. Gadamer, as we saw towards the end of the last chapter, has been accused of according priority to the sense of a text’s unity over and above its ruptures and incoherencies. The reason he does so is evident here – in order to preserve this conception of the hermeneutic circle, it is basically necessary that there is an initial attribution of coherence and unity to a sentence or work so that either

265 One place Schleiermacher discusses this is in his first address to the Prussian Academy of Sciences in 1829. Schleiermacher, Hermeneutics: The Handwritten Manuscripts, 181. The manuscripts were initially edited in German by Heinz Kimmerle.
sense or nonsense can be made of the words. Gadamer refers to this as the *Vorgriff der Vollkommenheit*: the “foreconception of completion”. Thomas Böning aptly refers to this as *Vollkommenheitskredit* (a credit toward completion).\(^{266}\)

To Schleiermacher, the oscillating movement between part and whole in the operation of any hermeneutic circle suggests that there is always some degree of approximation in understanding. Accordingly, there is an inevitability to hermeneutic engagement; Schleiermacher realises that “[u]nderstanding is an unending task.”\(^{267}\) In Chapter Six I will discuss further how this idea of the ongoing task of understanding has a corollary in that it recognises an increased potential for misunderstanding. Misunderstanding is not just an occasional event, where something obscure simply requires clarification, but assumes a default position and becomes the general rule against which rarer instances of understanding take place.\(^{268}\)

Over half a century after Schleiermacher’s death, Wilhelm Dilthey again re-oriented the scope of the hermeneutic circle to embrace all the many and varied expressions of human life (i.e. objective or outward manifestations of inner acts and feelings), whether these expressions take the form of words, actions or systems like financial markets. Dilthey invokes the hermeneutic circle in a number of ways. One

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\(^{266}\) Böning, in Heinrich Bosse and Ursula Reiner, eds., *Literaturwissenschaft: Einführung in Ein Sprachspiel* (Rombach: Freiburg im Breisgau, 1999), 164. In an article elucidating three socio-cultural “reading frames” (premodern, modern and postmodern), Aleida Assmann argues that the axiom of unity and completeness of a text is the most important point which differentiated modern hermeneutics from older forms of understanding that prevailed in the early Christian, Greek philosophical and Jewish traditions. In these previous reading frames, understanding required text, reader, and the intervention of a guide or co-reader. The early protestant tradition insisted upon the sufficiency of the text and the ability of the reader to discern its meaning alone. See Assmann, “Im Dickicht der Zeichen: Hodegetik-Hermeneutik-Dekonstruktion”; whose title translates as “In the Jungle of Signs: Hodegetic – Hermeneutics – Deconstruction”.


\(^{268}\) Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics and Criticism and Other Writings*, 22.
description he gives is of temporal human existence, which possesses the character of a whole and its parts, where different experiences hang together and are meaningful because they refer to a person or life of which they are a part. Likewise, individual memories function as a way of relating to the self or to others which holds significance for the whole of one’s life.\textsuperscript{269}

Because it could describe expressions of life, Dilthey proposed that hermeneutics could provide the humanities (\textit{Geisteswissenschaften}) with a methodological basis they seemingly lack when compared to the natural sciences (\textit{Naturwissenschaften}). Dilthey sought to mitigate the challenge posed by the rise and overwhelming success of the natural sciences in providing certain kinds of explanation and control over the natural world by establishing, for the humanities, a similarly rigorous foundation. He nonetheless considered the methods of the natural sciences to be unsuited to the historical and changing objects of the humanities, which depend upon someone specific doing the interpreting, a factor which always has consequences for interpretation.\textsuperscript{270}

\textsuperscript{269} Dilthey, \textit{Gesammelte Schriften, Band VII: Der Aufbau der Geschichtlichen Welt in den Geistesswissenschaften}, 243-44; \textit{Selected Writings}, 244.

\textsuperscript{270} As is to be expected for such an influential and complex figure, Dilthey’s thought is far too wide-reaching to be dealt with adequately here, and so too are the differences between his earlier ideas (which were more psychological) and his latter thought (which develops more of a consideration of cultural systems and organisations of knowledge – including language – into which the existence of individual beings is embedded). His later work includes \textit{Der Aufbau der Geschichtlichen Welt in den Geistesswissenschaften}, translated as \textit{The Construction of the Historical World in the Human Sciences}. There, Dilthey examines how the different subject matters of the \textit{Geisteswissenschaften} and \textit{Naturwissenschaften} require different methods (\textit{Verstehen} – understanding – as opposed to \textit{Erklären} or explanation), examines the importance of our everyday experiences and engagements for knowledge of the human world, and develops his account of \textit{Verstehen}. He further argues that hermeneutics can provide the orientation for the sciences of the mind, as it studies the expressions (or “objectifications”) of human lives, which can be traced back to reveal their structural coherence and inner meanings. Dilthey, \textit{Gesammelte Schriften, Band VII: Der Aufbau der Geschichtlichen Welt in den Geistesswissenschaften}, 77-348. A large section is translated in Wilhelm Dilthey, \textit{Selected Writings}, ed. H.P. Rickman, trans. H.P. Rickman (Cambridge: C.U.P, 1976), 170-245.

Unfortunately this thesis has neither space nor scope to trace the undoubted relationship between Dilthey’s description of \textit{Wirkungszusammenhang} (the system or context of effective interactions) and his discussion of the “acquired mental structure” we have in which older experiences underlie the absorption of novel experiences, and Gadamer’s \textit{Wirkungsgeschichte}. 
By tracing the trajectory of the hermeneutic circle, one inevitably tracks historical shifts in the domain of hermeneutics, and, as can be seen, what is regarded as potentially in need of interpretation has shifted quite dramatically over the centuries. Dilthey’s work set the scene for another shift in the twentieth century, with a turn toward investigating the insight that human beings’ knowledge and understanding of the world of human meanings begins, not by establishing general principles, but in the practices of everyday life. For Heidegger, and for Gadamer after him, hermeneutics is even more far-reaching than as a foundation for humanistic interpretative activity. Heidegger’s version of the hermeneutic circle casts it as an ontological structure, which stresses that in order to understand anything we have already been oriented towards meaning in the anticipatory movement of fore-understanding (described in the previous chapter). The hermeneutic circle as characterised by Heidegger is involved in any and every occurrence of understanding: “[I]n every understanding of the world, existence is understood with it, and vice versa.”\textsuperscript{271} With Heidegger, the practice of interpretation thus moves away from preventing misunderstanding, developing rules for correct understanding, or laying the foundation for the human sciences, and takes a new direction toward laying out, explicating, or giving expression to the pre- or prior-understandings (Vorverständnisse) which are already contained within one’s existence.

Gadamer develops this insight in a new direction and draws attention to its practical dimension when he describes the hermeneutic circle as the relationship between a living tradition and any instance in which it is interpreted. Any interpretation, he suggests, is itself shaped, oriented, and influenced by tradition, yet this particular

\textsuperscript{271} Heidegger, \textit{Sein und Zeit}, 152; \textit{Being and Time}, 194. He goes on to say “Any interpretation which is to contribute understanding, must already have understood what is to be interpreted.” As is well-known, Heidegger argues against it being thought of as vicious circle, claiming it is better understood descriptively.
interpretation also has an influence upon how the tradition as a whole is perceived.

The hermeneutic circle
describes understanding as the interplay of the movement of tradition and the
to movement of the interpreter. The anticipation of meaning that governs our
understanding of a text is not an act of subjectivity, but proceeds from the
commonality that binds us to tradition. But this commonality is constantly being
formed in our relation to tradition. Tradition is not simply a permanent precondition;
rather, we produce it ourselves inasmuch as we understand, participate in the
evolution of tradition, and hence further determine it ourselves. Thus the circle of
understanding is not a ‘methodological’ circle, but describes an element in the
ontological structure of understanding. (TM 293/GW 1 277)

New experiences, Gadamer suggests, change the way the past and tradition is
understood and the way we look towards the future. However, these new experiences
do not exist in a vacuum: they are at the same time situated and understood by us in
relation to our prior, and “common” background of involvements and engagements.
We understand “on the basis of expectations of meaning which are created by our
own previous relation to the subject matter” (TM 294/ GW 1 278), which form the
anticipation of meaning we bring to a text at the outset. Gadamer gives a specific
terminology to this experience: Wirkungsgeschichte, the history of effects, which
describes the way that any understanding enacted in the present is oriented and
conditioned by what has been already understood.

The history of effects (Wirkungsgeschichte), or Being-
affected by history

The history of effects (Wirkungsgeschichte) is a compelling way of talking about
how we understand a text (or indeed anything) that grants primary recognition to the
fact that we never come to understanding cold. It attempts to draw out the
implications of being-historical. *Wirkungsgeschichte* goes beyond simply implying that, when reading a text, I will be *consciously* influenced by previous interpretations of it. Following on from the themes considered in the last chapter, it is to suggest that the overlapping traditions in which a text is embedded, and the forms of interpretation that have developed in and through these traditions, are what enables any interpretation of a text to occur in the first place. As Schlegel put it in a striking, ruminative metaphor, it comprises following through the implications of "the idea that the previous contemplation of the digestible is determinant in the process of digestion."  

Theodore Kisiel makes the circular motion of this clear: "we interpret a tradition from within a tradition. Tradition provides the basis for interpretation and invites new interpretation, and this renovating interpretation keeps the tradition alive." The horizon of the text and the horizon of the interpreter are mutually imbricated: the text is part of the historical matrix of evolving and changing traditions that support the way the reader approaches the text and what he or she finds there. Kisiel makes the decisive point that this circular action is not limited to the movement between author and interpreter, or even text and reader, but subsumes each of these into a larger historical situation. Understanding occurs "between human existence and the unique historical situation in which it is already involved."  

The recognition that understanding is always primed and directed by the historical situation in which it occurs and the various traditions in which it is embedded, is unusual enough for Gadamer to give it its own term: *wirkungsgeschichtliches*

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Bewusstsein, or awareness of the effective-historical situation. This means “on the one hand the consciousness effected in the course of history and determined by history,” and “on the other hand the very consciousness of being thus effected and determined” (*TM* xxxiv/*GW* 2 444). *Benang*, the primary text considered in Chapter Four, dramatises these twin senses of the term *wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein* through its characterisation of Harley. The uncomfortable narrator of the novel experiences the present, and has experienced much of his life, as dissatisfying and alienating, with no awareness of his familial or ancestral past: this is the historically-effected consciousness he begins the novel with. But rather than just being unconsciously conditioned by the past, Harley is also exemplary of someone who displays the second kind of *wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*, or hermeneutic awareness. After his accidental discovery of being “the first white man born,” in a project of “breeding out the colour” initiated by his grandfather but mirroring the institutional processes going on around Western Australia at the time, Harley fitfully develops a reflective awareness of some of the myriad ways the events of the past have shaped and permeate his present, as he traces some of the various steps which led to his situation.

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274 *TM* 341/*GW* 324. Other terms I will use are “consciousness of the hermeneutic situation,” (*TM* 301/*GW* 305) and “consciousness of the history of effects,” even though these emphasise the sense of consciousness of being affected by history over the consciousness which is developed through being-historical. The English translation of *Truth and Method* by Weinsheimer and Marshall emphasises this latter sense, rendering it as “historically effected consciousness,” and at times I will employ this term also. It must be pointed out that none of the English translations of this phrase is universally accepted or really very adequate. Yet another suggestion is to use “consciousness of the history of influences.” I do not like this latter term, however, because it suggests more of a similarity to the conscious and limited uses of poetic influence, and is thus more indicative of the stance of someone like T.S. Eliot.

Although Gadamer codifies the idea of *Wirkungsgeschichte* and develops our appreciation of it in novel ways, it is itself not a radically new idea. Walter Benjamin, for instance, suggests that “the history of the great works of art ... tells us about their antecedents, their realisation in the age of the artist, their potentially eternal afterlife in succeeding generations.” Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (London and Glasgow: Fontana, 1970), 71.

275 James Risser puts this succinctly when he defines *wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein* as “both a consciousness effected by history and a consciousness of history’s effects.” Risser, *Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other: Re-Reading Gadamer’s Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 79.
In what follows I will develop a more extended example of Wirkungsgeschichte – being-affected by history/ the history of effects. To do so, I will start with surely the most popular book by an Aboriginal author to date for a non-Indigenous readership, Sally Morgan’s My Place.  

*My Place*

*My Place* is an example of “life writing”, a blend of memoir, autobiography, and biography. In terms of Western literary categories, it is a hybrid genre. Life writing, it was noted in Chapter One is frequently a collaborative venture, either composed by a number of people or with stories explicitly told on behalf of a community or a family. These are not “autobiographies” in the sense of the writing (Greek *graphein*) of the life (*bios*) of an individual self (*autos*) by that self, which have been prevalent since the fifteenth century and which have enjoyed special popularity in the past two hundred years. Rather, Indigenous life writings start from the tacit assumption that selves are only understandable amidst a broader nexus of involvements, relationships, responsibilities and affiliations. Eva Rask Knudsen puts this succinctly when she remarks that in Morgan’s intergenerational life stories, “‘my place’ becomes synonymous with ‘our place’.”

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276 Sally Morgan, *My Place* (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1987). Page references will be given in the body of the text. *My Place* has, to date, sold well in excess of half a million copies, and been translated into many languages. One indication of its popularity was the fact that it had to be reprinted beyond the initial 5000 copies two weeks after publication, which was a highly unusual situation for the publisher, Fremantle Arts Centre Press. This, and other details of the publication and promotion of *My Place* are discussed in Beverley Thompson, “Fremantle Arts Centre Press: The West’s Niche Arts Publishing House,” in *Innovative Arts Marketing*, ed. Ruth Rentschler (St. Leonards NSW: Allen and Unwin, 1999).

277 Eva Rask Knudsen, “Fringe Finds Focus: Developments and Strategies in Aboriginal Writing in English,” in *European Perspectives: Contemporary Essays on Australian Literature*, ed. Giovanna Capone, Bruce Clunies Ross, and Werner Senn (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1991), 42. Rosanne Kennedy’s discussion of *My Place* instructively re-aligns the text with the genre of
*My Place* starts off with a memoir of Sally Morgan's childhood and youth in Perth, Western Australia, in the 1950s and 60s. Tales of her childhood exploits, vividly imagined, are accompanied by the reporting of an increasingly pressing desire to know about her origins. Initially told her family is from India, Morgan comes to put together various clues about her background despite being met with silence, evasions, red herrings and diversions on the part of her mother (Gladys) and grandmother (Daisy). Yet the pieces, in her early life, do not click together. It is only when Daisy, in an uncharacteristic letting down of defences says, "You bloody kids don't want me, you want a white grandmother, I'm black. Do you hear, black, black, black!" (*MP* 97), that the fifteen-year old Sally begins to truly reflect about her grandmother's skin colour – and her own – and begins to intimate the stigma her grandmother experiences. Yet, even then, Sally cannot comprehend her mother's and Nan's reticence about the past and why they are so secretive about their background. As she says, "I could see no reason why they would pretend to be something they weren't" (*MP* 105).

As an adult, Sally continues her investigations, seeking answers to some pivotal questions. Who is her mother's father? Who is her grandmother's father? And what are her grandmother and mother hiding? These questions lead her to investigate this history, asking questions of her great-uncle, Arthur, of the family of her grandmother's ex-employer, the Drake-Brockmans, and of the Aboriginal people she meets on a car trip with her mother, husband and children to the Port Headland area where Daisy was born. In this way, Sally not only builds up an impression of her testimonio or testimony literature rather than autobiography, since it, like this genre which emerged in Latin America in the 1960s, deals not with an individual self but with documenting collective, and often traumatic, social experiences. Rosanne Kennedy, "The Narrator as Witness: Testimony, Trauma and Narrative Form in *My Place*" *Meridian* 16, no. 2 (1997).
families' past; she also re-establishes contact and connections for her own immediate kin with the area her grandmother came from and the people there.

The second part of Sally Morgan’s text involves the answering of Sally’s questions through a multi-generational narrative linking life stories told by her uncle, Arthur Corunna, her mother, Gladys, and her grandmother, Daisy (all of which have been transcribed and edited from tape recordings). Through this, it illustrates what the doctrines of absorption of the early twentieth century and the assimilation policies of the late 1930s to 1960s meant in the daily lives and destinies of this one family.

It is over twenty years since My Place was first published. What interests me are the different ways it has been understood even in this short amount of time – especially with reference to place, personal identity, and twentieth-century practices of child removal – and how these different understandings represent broad interpretive shifts in the understanding of its subject matter. I am especially interested in comparing its initial reception to the distinct appreciation of it generated since the “stolen generations” became the subject of common public knowledge, and how both of these interpretive moments set the scene for later works such as Tara June Winch’s Swallow the Air which will be considered below.

Sally Morgan’s book first appeared during the lead-up to the 1988 bicentennial of European settlement in Australia, a period which included conspicuous Aboriginal activism centred on what Indigenous people regarded as “Invasion day” (January 26th). One primary focus of the protests was land rights, which have been a major issue in black Australian political movements since the 1960s. These culminated in the ground-breaking native title land-claims of the Merriam people and the resolution of the decade-long Mabo legal case in 1992. With Mabo, the High Court
rejected the assumption of terra nullius, or that Indigenous people’s rights or claims
to land had been ceded with the annexation of land by the British early during
settlement. The court found that native title could be shown to exist through ongoing
customs, practices and Indigenous laws which represented a form of land
“ownership” prior to British settlement, and which has continued, in many places, to
the present. This opened the way for land rights claims all across Australia. The
title of My Place ties it to ideas of land and place yet the “place” that Morgan seeks
refers more to a sense of comfort and feeling of belonging than advancing any
specific and tangible claim to land rights. Critics have noted that through its
optimism, its focus on injustices that are located in the past, and its lack of interest in
substantive contemporary land rights issues, My Place references these then-current
controversies in an oblique, and for the benefit of white Australians, a reassuring
way.

The 1980s was also a period when constructing family genealogies and tracing roots
– Sally Morgan’s professed project in My Place – was an extremely popular activity
in Australia for the general public as well as for scholars tracing “histories from
below”. This was another primary context in which the book was initially received:
as a text about discovering one’s identity through uncovering the familial past. Sally
Morgan’s own early comments contributed to this. She suggests that connecting to
her Indigenous heritage in the process of researching and writing the book

278 See also Felicity Collins and Therese Davis, Australian Cinema after Mabo (Cambridge and New
York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 1-10; and Ken Gelder and Paul Salzman, After the
279 See, for example, Wenche Ommundsen, “Engendering the Bicentennial: Sally Morgan, Mark
Henshaw and the Critics,” Span: Journal of the South Pacific Association for Commonwealth
Literature and Language Studies 36 (1997); and Edward Hills, “‘What Country, Friends, Is This?’
Sally Morgan’s My Place Revisited,” Journal of Commonwealth Literature 32, no. 2 (1997), who
comments that the “place” Sally finds (metaphorically, and literally the area her grandmother came
from) is somewhere she wants to know about but not to live in. (109)
engendered a stronger sense of self for her. One comment she made was: "[b]efore, I didn’t know myself and I had a very confused identity." She also stated that "[i]t wasn’t until I went back and met my grandmother’s aboriginal [sic] relatives that I thought, 'This is the real me.'" Morgan positions her reclamation of Aboriginality as a way of identification with her grandmother and also as a means of establishing a “place” in the world. This place is established in large part through relating herself to others. So it is that, when they meet up with some of their relatives at Yandeeara and are told their skin groups, she feels that this is an integral part of “belonging” (MP 231-232).

Initial critical discussions of My Place took up this concern with identity and finding one’s place by focussing on how the text rhetorically constructs identity and the tacit beliefs underlying this construction. Although very successful with a popular audience, it created controversy in scholarly circles. My Place tends to construe Aboriginality as a timeless essence to be discovered rather than a historically-construed existence, and this apparent essentialism rendered it a target at a time of post-structuralist preoccupations with the construction and making of identity.281

280 Janette Turner Hospital, “The Whitefellas Don’t Understand,” New York Times, February 19 1989. Sections of the book such as the incident where Morgan, after accepting an Aboriginal study scholarship is challenged to defend her claim to it, explicitly raise these kinds of questions. She ponders at this point: “Had I been dishonest with myself? What did it really mean to be Aboriginal? I’d never lived off the land and been a hunter and a gatherer. I’d never participated in corroborees or heard stories of the dreamtime. I’d lived all my life in suburbia and told everyone I was Indian. I hardly knew any Aboriginal people. What did it mean for someone like me?” (141) A similar point about the importance of identity as it is forged in the book is made by Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith, “Conjunctions: Life Narratives in the Field of Human Rights,” Biography 27, no. 1 (2004): 16.

281 Criticisms of Morgan’s invocation of Aboriginality and identity include Bain Attwood, “Portrait of an Aboriginal Artist: Sally Morgan and the Construction of Aboriginality,” Australian Historical Studies 99 (1992); Muecke, Textual Spaces: Aboriginality and Cultural Studies; and Jackie Huggins, “Always Was, Always Will Be,” Australian Historical Studies 25, no. 100 (1993). Anne Brewster presents a defence of Morgan by arguing that critics tend to have a particular view of what authentic Aboriginality and what appropriate Aboriginal writing is (as well as a suspicion of “confessional” works which are more often written by women), and by this yardstick find her account lacking. See Anne Brewster, Literary Formations: Post-Colonialism, Nationalism, Globalism (Carlton South, Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 1995), 28-38; and her Reading Aboriginal Women’s Autobiography (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1996), 14-29. Brewster also suggests that
Whether one accepted or rejected how it positioned Aboriginality and how it formulated identity, *My Place* was initially understood primarily as an exploration of individual or personal identity and belonging. In the 1990s something happened to extend and alter this understanding of Morgan’s narrative. One important sense in which events subsequent to its publication in 1987 have altered our appreciation of this text is in seeing it (and works by many other writers and storytellers which were initially understood differently) as a “stolen generations” narrative. I will expand on this idea below, after first sketching in some background to the stolen generations.

**The stolen generations**

The practices of removing Indigenous children from their families have been under widespread scrutiny since the historian Peter Read first coined the term “stolen generation” in the early 1980s. Read’s early archival work collated evidence revealing the massive scale of the removal of Indigenous children of mixed descent from their families and placement in missions, orphanages, and foster-homes.²⁸² His work was significant because it linked together many localised accounts of the removals of Indigenous children from their families by authorities and began to demonstrate the extent and intent of bureaucratic policies intended to control the fates of Indigenous individuals, families, and communities across Australia.

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In *A Rape of the Soul So Profound*, Read observes that what happened to him personally was a gestalt shift from understanding the Wiradjuri life histories he was looking at as unconnected, individual human tragedies towards appreciating the broader context in which such “wasted lives were intended to happen.”

Accounts of removal had been circulating prior to Read’s work, of course (identification of these has been a project of more recent research) but these accounts had not been treated by scholars, bureaucrats or the general public as being part of a significant *general* pattern. As Kay Schaffer has noted, before the 1980s stories of child removal had “no efficacy in the public domain, no legitimacy within official discourses of the nation, few ears willing to listen.”

It took ten years for Read’s evocative label to become widely used, a period of time which saw the establishment of bodies such as Link-Up to reunite separated families. The stolen generation (or, more commonly, stolen generations) eventually became the subject of national and international recognition through an inquiry launched under the umbrella of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission (HREOC) which culminated in 1997 in the release of the controversial “Bringing them Home” Report. The report had an immediate and extreme public impact in Australia. Its contents are sobering. “Bringing Them Home” identified and detailed a range of policies and practices that systematically removed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children of mixed descent from their families and communities from the late 1800s to the 1970s (current research estimates that between twenty to twenty-five thousand children were removed over this period). Although reasons for

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285 Wilson, “Bringing Them Home: National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families.”
individual removals varied (and some were for what are still regarded as legitimate reasons, taking the child away from harm) the primary goal of authorities was to solve the social ill (as it was regarded) of the existence of children of mixed heritage. Attempted “solutions” involved implementing policies oriented toward absorbing or assimilating lighter-skinned children into the white community (the intergenerational fate of Harley’s relatives discussed in the last chapter). Individual experiences varied, with some reporting happy outcomes and loving foster families, but removal impacted heavily on the majority, with scores of testimonies at the Inquiry relating ongoing trauma from neglect, overwhelming senses of loss in being deprived of family and language, and often brutal experiences while in care and when later sent out to work. The Inquiry also examined some of the myriad flow-on effects of child removal for those left behind, the extended families and Indigenous communities across Australia from which children were taken.

While it is not my intention here to examine the politics of public history, sketching some of the tensions in play in the wake of the publishing of the report’s findings will be useful in the discussion which follows, since it indicates the dramatic public impact of the stolen generations narratives as well as the great divide in their reception. Introducing their report, the commissioners of the HREOC Inquiry state:

The truth is that the past is very much with us today, in the continuing devastation of the lives of Indigenous Australians. That devastation cannot be addressed unless the whole community listens with an open heart and mind to the stories of what has happened in the past.\textsuperscript{286}

This appeal held resonance for many, with the experiences of the stolen generations central to popular Reconciliation movements including bridge marches in 2000 and the signing of Sorry Books by well over two million people. On 13\textsuperscript{th} February, 2008

\textsuperscript{286} Ibid., 3.
the first act of federal parliament under the newly elected Labor government led by Kevin Rudd was a belated implementation of one of the key recommendations of the Report – a national apology to the stolen generations, their families and their communities. This signalled an apparent shift from the approach of the previous government, which had refused to apologise, had rejected many of the over 500 individual testimonies given to the Inquiry, and disputed significant parts of the Report itself.

Between 1996 and 2007, a conservative coalition government (of the Liberal and National Parties) led by John Howard held power in Australia. It received (but did not commission) the “Bringing them Home” Report. In opposition to the Report’s claims, the then-government tended to highlight the ways in which past and present should be decoupled. It highlighted the gap of temporal distance between the times when children were removed and the present. It claimed, too, a moral distance from actions of past generations, stating on a number of occasions that “it is impossible to evaluate by contemporary standards decisions that were taken in the past.” Whilst conceding that individual Indigenous Australians may continue to be adversely affected by the ongoing effects of past policy, it suggested that mainstream Australia has changed so radically that present Australians cannot see themselves as in any way related to how previous generations treated the Indigenous population – and therefore are not in a position to apologise.

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287 One of the influential arenas this occurs is in Herron, “Federal Government Submission to the Senate Legal and Constitutional References Committee ‘Inquiry into the Stolen Generation’.”

288 The government’s first response to Bringing them Home was tabled by Senator John Herron, the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs on 16 December, 1997.
terminology of the “stolen generation”, on the reasoning that “the proportion of separated Aboriginal children was no more than 10 percent.”

One effect of the government’s position was to cast doubt on the veracity and historical accuracy of the stolen generations accounts whilst downplaying the scale and impact of removal. This found resonance with other sceptical and influential voices in the public domain which characterised the stolen generations as a pernicious myth and a “big lie”. Attacks on the very idea of the stolen generations occurred through contestation about a range of seemingly unrelated topics: for instance, how oral accounts of the past were to be assessed, with the claim that orally-transmitted forms of personal and cultural memory are less trustworthy than written records. By the year 2000 the government of the time was promoting its own highly contentious view of the aims of those involved in removing Indigenous children, with key governmental figures stating that the “nature and intent” of “past policies and practices” had been misrepresented in the “Bringing them Home” Report, and that “the treatment of separated Aboriginal children was essentially lawful and benign in intent.”

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290 See for instance, McGuinness, “Aborigines, Massacres and Stolen Children.”

291 Herron, “Federal Government Submission to the Senate Legal and Constitutional References Committee ‘Inquiry into the Stolen Generation’,” iv. Many critiques of the government’s claims have been published. Marilyn Lake examines then-contemporary controversies about the removals, such as the Adelaide Sun newspaper’s coverage of a removed child in 1924 to show that there was never blanket approval or simply one “intent” involved. Robert Manne reminds us that the intent that can be verified in many removals is emphatically not that of a benign “social welfarist” nature, but, as the last chapter examined, the pursuit of the perceived “problem” of mixed-heritage children, and Anna Haebich’s research has uncovered documented evidence of Indigenous resistance to policies allowing removal. See the essays by Robert Manne and Marilyn Lake in Carmel Bird, ed., The Stolen Children: Their Stories (Sydney: Random House, 1998), 136, 43; and Haebich, Broken Circles: Fragmenting Indigenous Families 1800-2000. Robert Manne also has a passionately-argued piece called “The Stolen Generations” in Peter Craven, ed., The Best Australian Essays 1998 (Melbourne: Bookman Press, 1998), 23-36.
The brief account above reveals two interwoven facets of the debates: the controversies surrounding the stolen generations were about how contemporary Australians understand the content of the nation’s past (as formative of a collective national memory), and they were also about how to understand the persistence or survival of that past in the present. In a dramatic way, the stolen generations debates indicate the controversy which always is potentially attendant upon people’s reflection on their traditions: what occurs when elements of a tradition are interpreted very differently by different groups within the tradition? These battles show that understanding the tradition from which one comes cannot be divorced from the question of whose experiences and perspectives are taken to be exemplary.

The whole question of tradition in Australia has frequently revolved around whether the experiences of Australia’s Aboriginal peoples are to be considered separate or as an integral part of the nation’s self-understanding.

**Stolen generations narratives**

Since the official, though controversial, “event” through which the existence of the stolen generations was publicly acknowledged, dozens (if not hundreds) of narratives about removal have been published. These included excerpts from the “Bringing them Home” Report itself and oral archives gathered afterwards. Indigenous

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292 12000 copies of *Bringing them Home* were sold by 2000 (highly unusual for a government publication), when the Commonwealth withdrew copies from sale “ostensibly on the grounds of cost and because it was available on the internet.” Bain Attwood, “‘Learning About the Truth’: The Stolen Generations Narrative,” in Bain Attwood and Fiona Macgowan, ed., *Telling Stories: Indigenous History and Memory in Australia and New Zealand* (Crows Nest, Australia: Allen and Unwin, 2001), 208 note 5. There is a significant collection of accounts by stolen generation members as well as those directly involved in removal in *Many Voices*, which is a broad collection of interviews from the *Bringing them Home* oral history project which operates under the auspices of the National Library and which also includes a number of accounts on CD. Anna Haebich and Doreen Mellor, eds., *Many Voices* (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2002). Some of the shorter statements and longer narratives in the *Bringing them Home* report were anthologised for a popular market in Bird, ed., *The Stolen Children: Their Stories*. Anna Haebich work gives a national and historical overview of removal practices in Haebich, *Broken Circles: Fragmenting Indigenous Families 1800-2000*. 
people's experiences of removal, the experiences of those involved in the removal process, and the effect upon families and communities in which removal occurred have also been related through a plethora of life writings.\(^{293}\)

In addition to life writing, the stolen generations have also been examined or are a part of many other kinds of expressive work. A small sample includes novels such as Larissa Behrendt’s *Home* (2004) and Romayne Weare’s *Malanbarra* (1997), Anita Heiss’ fictional autobiography, *The Diary of Mary Talence, Sydney, 1937* (2001) and poems like Helen Moran’s “Stolen Children’s Dreaming.” Songs, like Archie Roach’s “They Took the Children Away” and Bob Randall’s “Black Skin Baby” have reached Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences. There have also been films including the commercially successful *Rabbit-Proof Fence* directed by the non-Indigenous director Phillip Noyce from the semi-fictional memoir by Doris Pilkington (Ngugi Garimara) (1996), short films including *Back Seat* by Pauline Whyman (2007) and *Bloodlines* by Jacob Nash (2007), and theatrical pieces such as the recent *Yibiyung* by Dallas Winmar (2008), *Nailed* by Caleb Lewis (2005), *King Hit* by David Milroy and Geoffrey Narkle (1997), and *Stolen* (2000) by Jane Harrison. The Bangarra Dance Company included the stolen generations in their 2001 work, *Corroboree*. A recent piece by the company, *Mathinna* (2008), relates the story of a very early instance of child “removal” in its piece about a young girl who was taken into the household of Sir John Franklin (the Governor of Tasmania) and his wife. Feted by them while they were in Tasmania, Mathinna was left in an

\(^{293}\) Wayne King’s *The Hours* (1996), Bob Randall’s *Songman: the story of an Aboriginal elder of Uluru* (2003), and Rosalie Fraser’s *Shadow Child: a memoir of the stolen generation* (1998) are examples of the latter, as are Donna Meehan’s *It is No Secret* (2000), Stephen Kinnane’s *Shadow Lines* (2003), *Too Many Tears: An Autobiographical Account of Stolen Generations*, by Heather Vicenti and Deborah Dickman (2008), and *File #28 / E.D.P.* (2005), by Rene Powell and Bernadette Kennedy.
orphanage in 1843 when the Franklins returned to England. She was ultimately sent into exile to Oyster Island with other Indigenous Tasmanians.

The confronting details of the “Bringing Them Home” Report as well as the public controversies which played out in its wake have both certainly contributed to the central position the stolen generations have come to occupy in recent creative activities and self-representations by Indigenous Australians. Stolen generations narratives and other creative endeavours representing their experiences continue to be published, related, and performed at a prolific rate. There is no sign of this abating; indeed, the National Library is currently undertaking a major project which will see the oral histories it has gathered made freely accessible online. What interests me here is the effect all this has had on the understanding of *My Place*.

**My Place and the stolen generations**

In the lead-up to, and especially in the controversies which played out in the wake of the “Bringing Them Home” Report, *My Place*, like many other earlier texts, has been re-read and reinterpreted. The disputed “fact” of the systematic policies of child removal of earlier decades is part of the anticipation of meaning or pre-understanding that readers currently approach the text with. As a result, certain characteristics of the memoir have come to the foreground with its re-situation in a context enabling hitherto unremarked similarities to experiences related in other stolen generations narratives to be discerned, gauged, and named. One of the aspects of *My Place* which has taken on a different hue is the situation facing Gladys and Daisy, and the possibilities and options available to them.

Attention has become more attuned to the continual threat from white authorities Gladys and Daisy experience, the removal of Daisy and her brothers from their
homelands, and the far-reaching decisions made on their behalf by others, especially by the owners of the station on which they were born (the Drake-Brockmans). 294

Both of Daisy’s brothers were sent away, ostensibly to be educated, with one returning after falling ill. She, too, accompanied the Drake-Brockmans to Perth as a girl of fourteen or fifteen, but instead of receiving schooling (as reportedly promised to her mother) was given the tasks of a servant, and so she spent much of her life. At that point she left two sisters behind, neither of whom she ever saw again. In Perth, Daisy was not permitted to decide where or how to live (at one stage in her life not going to live with her brother Arthur, since she would require official permission to do so) and was unable to keep her children when they are born. One was removed at birth, never to be reunited with her or located, and the other, Gladys, living with Daisy in the Drake-Brockman house only to the age of three. After that, Gladys grew up in a children’s home called Parkerville in the 1930s and 1940s where, she recalls, it was difficult for Daisy to visit. Visits were on rare Sundays, and Daisy had to have a travel permit with her at all times.

The continuous sense of threat that Daisy and Gladys experienced did not end when, after a lonely childhood, Gladys eventually got a job in a flower shop, married, had children, and brought her mother to live with her. Gladys’ marriage was not a happy one, with her white husband haunted by his experiences in the Second World War, and often violent and drunk, or in hospital, before finally committing suicide. With his death the women became subject to periodic visits by officious and intimidating

294 Articles which consider My Place as a narrative of child removal and its consequences started around the time the “Bringing Them Home” Report was tabled, and include: Edward Hills, “What Country, Friends, Is This?” Sally Morgan’s My Place Revisited”; Kennedy, “The Narrator as Witness: Testimony, Trauma and Narrative Form in My Place.”
welfare officials, and Nan still remained fearful of leaving the house, spending much of her time, as she always had done, in the kitchen.

By keeping Gladys' children ignorant of their Aboriginal heritage, Gladys and Daisy attempt to spare them from the lack of control over their destinies which has shaped their own lives. What Sally's sleuthing into the family history accomplishes, Anne Brewster observes, is the casting of an eye over the past by a younger woman for whom Aboriginality is "a badge of pride rather than of shame." Morgan enacts a re-visioning, re-conception and recuperation of her family's experiences.

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Above, I mentioned that the generally accepted (though controversial) "fact" of the existence of the stolen generations has led to a shift in understanding earlier texts by Indigenous authors. Works published before the stolen generations were generally acknowledged (earlier, too, than My Place) have been rediscovered and reread for the light they shed upon the practices and effects of child removal. These include Monica Clare's Karobran (1977), Jack Davis' Kullark (1979), and Ellie Simon's Through my Eyes (1978).

It is important to recognise that the shift which has occurred is not a matter of current readers merely projecting new beliefs on the past in an arbitrary and unwarranted way. Since, as Gadamer suggests, the horizons of past and present are inextricably relative to one another, as an understanding of one horizon changes, the other

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295 Brewster, Reading Aboriginal Women's Autobiography, 17.
horizon changes, too. He writes: "horizons change for a person who is moving. Thus, the horizon of the past, out of which all human life lives and which exists in the form of tradition, is always already in motion" (TM 303/GWI 308). The past, in this reckoning, is not finished or decoupled from the present, as those who downplayed the scope and extent of child removal in the public controversies of the early millenium were attempting to establish. Rather, as our understandings of our traditions change – like with the changed understanding of the Australian past that awareness of the stolen generations has brought – our understanding in the present is reoriented and re-situated.

This is one explanation for why re-reading works like *My Place* after an interval of time has elapsed often produces such different understandings. There have been shifts in the horizons of the world in which the reader lives – in this case to include knowledge about the stolen generations. The horizons of the reader or interpreter accordingly differ from earlier understandings through shifts in his or her anticipatory prejudices or prejudgements. And, as a result, the questions which arise in relation to a text or historically or culturally distanced event differ. Importantly, the new interpretations that form on the basis of these questions are not arbitrary impositions of meaning onto the text, because reading occurs on the basis of what comes to light in the movement of tradition, and tradition is beyond any individual mind; it is *shared*. David Linge calls this the trans-subjective composition of understanding. He writes "what takes place in understanding is a mediation of past and present that transcends the knower's manipulative control." This limits the potential for arbitrariness: since I understand something on the basis of a shared

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history of interpretations of it, my response cannot be totally idiosyncratic or arbitrary.

All this has undeniably important effects on how texts are read and understood. From the vantage point of the present, it now seems impossible to read *Karobran*, *Kullark*, or other earlier tales such as the moving short story, “Flight”, by the white writer Katherine Susannah Pritchard, without noticing how they reference the stolen generations and comparing them to more recent narrative accounts by Indigenous Australians. Rather than being considered an isolated and melodramatic vignette, in the light of more recent works “Flight” appears to be a sober, first-hand look at the complex experiences of those involved in child removal. First published in 1944, it details the feelings of Constable O’Shea, a white policeman who is charged with the “rotten business” of removing three young “half-caste girls” from their families and sending them to government institutions. He himself admits that “the object of the drive was to separate the children from their aboriginal parents and environment.” O’Shea is instructed to make up new names for them. He settles on Molly, Polly and Dolly, then scrounges around for surnames which are as outlandish as they are inadequate. Highly critical of what he himself feels is the “kidnapping of children”, as he goes about his task O’Shea also contemplates the feelings of a woman having “her kids yanked away from her, knowing quite well the chances were she would never see them again.” The girls escape during the night but return to the lockup in fright at things they see in the darkness, and there they await their fate.

“Flight” displays a casual knowledge of child removal and its intended consequences in a way which demonstrates that some people in the wider community at least, were

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well aware of what was happening in the 1940s and that they found it morally dubious. It also shows the complexity of the practices of child removal – that even some of those involved in removing children from their Indigenous homes did not unquestioningly embrace its necessity or desirability.

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Thus far I have traced how different assumptions, interpretive preoccupations and reinterpretations of historical realities which have developed since the publication of *My Place* (the acknowledgement of the “stolen generations”) have contributed to an altered understanding of it and other, related works. Contextualising *My Place* as a “stolen generations narrative” is part of its ongoing afterlife, and this new context, in turn invites new interpretations. I have linked this to the more general phenomenon of a text being re-read differently in the light of shifts in the anticipation of meaning one brings to a text (through the alteration of one’s prejudicial horizons). With reference to *My Place*, a different lens has evolved through the widespread acceptance of the prevalence of child removal and its basis in ultimately racist policies aimed at eliminating the “half-caste problem.” This has led to accounts which circulated prior to the 1990s being understood differently to when they first appeared. And it has led to some works, like “Flight”, which had been virtually forgotten, coming to greater prominence.

It is in the area of inviting new, non-arbitrary interpretations of texts that there is a further aspect of *Wirkungsgeschichte* relevant to this discussion. What I seek to examine below is how works such as *My Place*, alongside other changing contextual factors like an increasingly complex understanding of personal identity, and public events like the stolen generations controversies, themselves form the basis for and
shape how subsequent texts are constructed and construed. Let’s look at how this can be identified in a recent novel, Tara June Winch’s *Swallow the Air*.

**Swallow the Air and My Place**

*Swallow the Air* was first published in 2006 and is a suburban *Bildungsroman* about the growing pains of a teenager, May Gibson. Having experienced the suicide of her mother when young and then moving to live with her aunt, who, although a sympathetic figure, is addicted to alcohol, gambling and a parade of violent men, May’s adolescence is beset by difficulties. In flight from a disappointing past, she sets out from her aunt’s house in Wollongong to find her father, following the footsteps of an older brother who also runs away from home.²⁹⁹

Many of the themes of *My Place* and *Swallow the Air* are almost identical, with *Swallow the Air* tacitly commenting and building upon the themes explored by the earlier text. May Gibson, like Sally Morgan, undertakes numerous journeys to find family members or family substitutes in continual attempts to bring other people or a sense of her past closer. Each chapter temporally shifts backwards and forwards in the experiences they relate, centring on the memories of a teenage girl quite obviously searching for a place in which to belong. She also seeks to make sense of what she experiences problematically as her Indigenous heritage, reporting that when her mother died she felt as though she stopped being Aboriginal (*STA 97*). Yet, in stark contrast to Morgan’s travels in *My Place*, all May’s journeys end in disappointment and estrangement: she travels to find her father only to find him repellent when she locates him, her friend and substitute brother Johnny is killed in a

²⁹⁹ Tara June Winch, *Swallow the Air* (St Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 2006). Page references will be made in the main textual body.
police car chase, and Joyce, the mother substitute who rescues her in the Block in Redfern advises her to leave the city and seek her own kin.

One of the intriguing aspects of *Swallow the Air* is how, through comparison with *My Place*, it makes manifest shifts in the political, social and scholarly understanding of identity in the last twenty years. Since the publication of *My Place*, general readers and scholars have gained a greater appreciation of identity’s multifaceted and pluralistic aspects. This has involved a movement away from conceiving identity as an essence which can be recovered toward appreciating that any nominal identity covers a huge range of potentially contradictory experiences. *Swallow the Air* reflects these conceptual developments. May, it seems, while seeking something similar to Sally Morgan in her quest, cannot simply repeat or reconstruct Morgan’s solution. Instead, she is faced with a multiple, non-unified and ambivalent sense of self and cultural belonging, and despite her best attempts, cannot discover, uncover, or reconnect with a primal Aboriginality. Rather, May learns to actively forge her own sense of identity through her travels and the narrative she herself creates about her life and background.

One of the primary ways the self-creation of identity through the contingency of concrete experience is suggested is through the novel’s investigation of the ties between memory and one’s sense of identity. Memories are powerful and yet often fragile, as the repeated *leitmotif* of bubbles implies in the novel. Good memories of May’s father at one point “all came back then, bit by bit, shiny little bubbles, quick, sharp. Just before they split open and disappear again, clear” (*STA* 46). But memories, as May herself recognises, are not necessarily a matter of one’s choosing, with some having the overwhelming propensity to return at unexpected moments: “Some things you never ever forget. The way your dead mother used to smile. The
way sunrise flashes against the tabletop of the ocean. My brother’s scared eyes looking up from the kitchen floor” (*STA* 85). This recognition of the power of particular memories (especially painful ones) to overwhelm and make themselves again present – to re-present themselves – occurs at a number of crucial points in May’s tale. One of these is when May comes to the desultory end of one of her searches, as she stumbles across her father by accident after travelling thousands of kilometres to find him. As she looks at him, she is taken away from the immediate brutality of the bare-knuckle fight they are watching and suddenly remembers her father as “the monster I’d tried to hide”, with “his anger face” that she recalls at some stage became his “always face” (*STA* 86). As the past becomes present to her by an act of this unwilled remembering, a horrific episode of his domestic violence toward her mother is related in the present continuous tense.

Different conceptions of the make-up of identity are also expressed through contrasting narrative logics. Again, a comparison between Sally Morgan’s memoir-novel and *Swallow the Air* is illuminating. *My Place* reads as a book with a definite beginning, middle and ending. Morgan’s life narrative is told as a linear story of her childhood, teenage years, marriage, and adulthood (her relative’s own life stories, which are incorporated in the final section, generally follow this pattern too, albeit with significant silences). *Swallow the Air* suggests a much more chaotic and unsettled relationship to the facts of one’s own life. The arrangement of individual vignettes or chapters of the novel are suggestive of the jumble of memory, ranging back and forward in the age of the narrator and the memories and actions she relates (some of which relate to family events before May was born). Individual chapters include both flashbacks to previous events and flash-forwards or prolepses. There are often disorientating changes of focus, where memories from different times segue
into one another, not necessarily in linear sequence. These qualities of the novel disclose a more existential understanding of time and memory, and the non-linear and nebulous sense of self-identity which is formed through acts of remembering. The novel also explores identity, like the earlier *My Place*, in the quest of the main character to establish who she is through who she is related to, in a journey to find relatives of her mother near their traditional lands. What results is an ironic reversal of similar situations in the earlier work. In *My Place*, Sally Morgan reports being unreservedly welcomed and aided by the people she meets on her trip north, such as in this first encounter with Billy Moses:

Suddenly his face lit up with a heart-warming smile and he said, ‘You my relations! Yes, you’ve come to the right place. You my people. I am your Nanna’s cousin.’ There were tears in his eyes... We walked back to his house and sat down for a chat. Billy said, ‘I can’t believe it. Some of my people coming all the way from Perth just to visit me. You always come here. You can come and live here. I’m the boss. This is your place, too, remember that.’ We began to talk about the old times and Billy explained how he, too, was taken away at a young age. (*MP* 233)

May’s encounter with her mother’s cousin Percy in *Swallow the Air*, on the other hand, is not so salubrious. In the penultimate scene of the novel which relates May’s trek to Lake Cargellico there is little of the triumph of Morgan’s family trip; indeed, in a supremely deflationary moment Percy quizzically asks her “What ya come here for?”

I was expecting to find, I dunno, some family or something...

Stories, ha! What do you want to know? Where ya get ya skin from, ya tribal name, ya totem, ya star chart, the meaning of the world? Thought us Gibsons’d give ya the

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300 My analysis here compares the experiences of the protagonist of *Swallow the Air* with Sally Morgan’s textual presence as the narrator of her own story in *My Place*. It is this textual presence which sets up and frames how we read the narratives of her uncle, her mother, and finally her grandmother. Considered separately, the stories told by Daisy and Gladys are far less positive or redemptive than Morgan’s.
answers, ha! ... The thing is, we weren't allowed to be what you’re looking for ... 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 180, italics in original)

Where Sally Morgan seeks – and gains – a sense of a unified self in her travels by being able to establish ancestral links and being welcomed by her relatives, May is less fortunate. Percy, a member of the stolen generations who had himself been taken from his mother at a young age and placed on a mission, is more interested in his upcoming game of golf than his family’s past. Keyed up with anticipation of happy fulfilment, May instead is confronted with the painful reality of loss. Like Harley in Kim Scott’s _Benang_, May does not find her delving into the familial past positive; but highly equivocal. In each of these later novels, there is ambivalence on the part of the person seeking, as well as those whom they seek assistance from about what it is precisely that establishing connections with Indigenous relatives might ultimately accomplish.

Rejected by her cousin Percy, May reassesses the situation. Being gravely disappointed by this meeting, it is at this point that May’s prior expectations actually take on some form of clarity for her. May is struck by the realisation that many of her journey’s goals have in fact been wishful fantasies based on an unsustainable daydream that in the reunion with her mother’s family she would achieve some final apotheosis of belonging:

my mum would be there too, they’d all be there, around a fire, cooking goanna. I imagined them whispering stories ... Peeling back my skin, my blood against theirs. Family. My people. My mob. (STA 161)

Like in the workings of a classic hermeneutic circle, May has gone through episodes which she believes can give clues to who she is – following her father, Indigenous
heritage, and her mother’s family – and she finally returns home with a different and more complete understanding of both these parts and the whole of her life. The denouement of the novel is where May returns to her aunt’s house in a chapter aptly called “Home”, which is in many respects a return to the beginning with a difference: having an increased awareness of what Aunty, Billy and “The Gong” (the city of Wollongong) mean to her. Along the way she has gained an appreciation of some of the many different kinds of Aboriginality people may embody (from urban living in The Block in Redfern, to ex-mission life in New South Wales). The novel ends on a note of optimism, with a new table cloth for the kitchen table, and May prepared to face the next steps of her young adulthood.

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The stolen generations are explicitly referenced only once in *Swallow the Air*, in the meeting between Percy and May, in the excerpt above. Why, then, consider *Swallow the Air* – as I do here – as not only informed by shifts in our appreciation of the constitution of individual identity but also as revealing something about the *Wirkungsgeschichte* or effective-history of stolen generations narratives?

Although it is such a seemingly small part of the novel, Percy’s revelation, quoted above, is a significant moment. It ends May’s travels and retrospectively alters May’s and the reader’s understanding of her whole family, including providing a greater insight into her mother’s torment and suffering. In this moment, which occurs quite late in the novel, May’s story ceases to be a typical story about the growing pains of any young woman from the suburbs and appears, irreducibly, as something else; it becomes a narrative of how the practices of child removal continue to affect ongoing generations of Indigenous and partially Indigenous people, even (and
perhaps especially) when they are not aware of their familial heritage. Acts of child removal in her family’s past are seen to vitally affect and predetermine May’s more obvious search for a sense of stable identity and belonging, and they affect her without her knowing. In consequence, child removal and the stolen generations form an important contextual lens through which the novel can be understood even though the novel’s actual references to child removal are limited.

Here, it is useful to revise the two ways of understanding *Wirkungsgeschichte*. One way is to understand it as the *history of effects*, the (to some extent) traceable ways in which echoes of the past continue to be taken up in the present and directed toward the future. Another is to understand *Wirkungsgeschichte* as *being-affected by history*; that the very outlooks we have in our subjectivities, social life, and in all of our means of interpreting the world are enabled by the possibilities opened up from our historically-determined horizons. This operates, for the most part, without our awareness. In his work, Gadamer tries to show how that which is understood has a "persuasive power which takes part in the development of new convictions," and these convictions themselves offer, in a spiralling (or circular) fashion, a different vantage point from which to look at the earlier understanding.301

These two related aspects of *Wirkungsgeschichte* are evident in the relationship between *My Place* and *Swallow the Air*. On the one hand, it is possible to trace the *history of effects*, how the echoes of concerns with identity and belonging, and the ongoing legacy of the stolen generations are taken up distinctly in the two texts, with *My Place* forming part of the platform or the assumed basis from which *Swallow the Air* starts. The similarities and differences between *My Place* and *Swallow the Air*

indicate, at the very least, shifts in the understanding of identity in the past decades (as discussed above), as well as indicating the wide range of possible and actual experiences that people have when seeking to forge lost family connections. *My Place* may be the most widely known of these narratives for non-Indigenous readers but *Swallow the Air* offers a salutary reminder that its optimism may be unusual and its reconstructive endeavour unavailable to many. Their divergences also reflect geographical and temporal differences. Attempts by people to trace their heritages in the heavily populated, and early-settled state of NSW (such as Winch’s character, May), meet distinct difficulties in comparison to rural and outback Western Australia, where to some extent there is a stronger continuity with older Indigenous cultural formations.302 *Swallow the Air* is also about a young woman coming to maturity in the early twenty-first century, whereas Sally Morgan relates the experiences and desires of a different decade. Even though this is not a huge gulf in historical time, it is a decisive element, as even in the second section of *My Place*, the majority of people who could help Sally rediscover her family history have died. By the time *Swallow the Air* and similar narratives come about twenty years later, many older people, their cultural knowledge and memories are simply no longer alive, and the removal – in many instances of generations of children from their families and communities – have left the “community” itself fragmented and frayed.

The second sense of *Wirkungsgeschichte* delineated above is also relevant: the outlook one has by being-affected by history, where that which is understood has a

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302 Tara June Winch herself raised this in an early interview, when she said: “All that culture has been dispossessed. It might be intact in the Pilbara and up in the Kimberley but in places that were first contact ... Well, the Wiradjuri were wiped out pretty much completely... Of course there’s not going to be a strong link there... I’m from a broken link. So what do you do? You realise that what you are looking for, trying to find your Aboriginality, your Aboriginality is in you. It’s not necessary to go and find it. But that’s a journey [May] has to take.” Sunanda Creagh, “Woman of the World: Interview with Tara June Winch,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, May 13 2006.
persuasive – though generally tacit or non-conscious – influence upon the
development of new ideas, opinions and beliefs. This is the sense that Gadamer
draws out when he states:

what I have called the \textit{wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein} is inescapably more \textit{being} than consciousness, and being is never fully manifest.\textsuperscript{303}

Winch’s novel is, in a real sense, \textit{able to be generated} as a result of the success of
texts such as \textit{My Place} and the formation of a body of Indigenous writings and
receptive public which have provided a ground for more recent writings. In addition,
and importantly for this chapter, the setting in which \textit{Swallow the Air} occurs is one
where official and popular acknowledgment of the stolen generations, albeit
contested, is now part of the pre-understood fabric of Australian society. Percy
doesn’t have to explain in detail why he was “taken away”, and what this meant,
because many others have already done so. He is able to name an experience – being
one of the stolen generations – which identifies the source of removal in the
bureaucratic policies of the state and their implementation. His anger is different to
the shame and secrecy of Sally Morgan’s relatives, to whom constant intervention
into their lives had no names by which to identify it.

\textit{Wirkungsgeschichte} and other approaches to narrative change

The above seeks to relate \textit{My Place} and \textit{Swallow the Air} by referring to the twin
ideas expressed in the word \textit{Wirkungsgeschichte}: effective history and being-
affected by history. At this point I would like to briefly look at the historian Bain
Attwood’s alternative discussion of the changing shapes of the narratives told about,
and by, members of the stolen generations. In “‘Learning About the Truth’: The

\textsuperscript{303} “On the Scope and Function of Hermeneutical Reflection”, 38; “Rhetorik, Hermeneutik und
Ideologiekritik,” 247.
Stolen Generations Narrative,” Attwood refers to a cumulative process of “narrative accrual” or “narrative coalescence” in stolen generations accounts. In the mid 80s to early 90s, Attwood argues that the stolen generations “came to constitute a collective memory and to be a vehicle for the construction of identity” as they became a symbol for the broader suffering and dispossession of Indigenous peoples. Alongside this, Attwood identifies a flattening of nuance in the stories being told; ironically, the complexity of narratives about the stolen generations was inversely proportional to their prominence and importance in the public realm.

Attwood identifies a number of factors which contribute to the “narrative accrual” of stolen generations narratives, including the existence of pre-prepared ground (provided by various “histories from below” and the public discourse of “reconciliation”). But while he recognises the process of narrative accrual as an inevitable and common outcome, he just as equally considers it to be unfortunate. With the coalescence of narrative accounts, he identifies a co-incident shift in narratives told in the 1990s toward a “harsher and more accusing” tone, away from more eclectic memories in stories from the 1970s.

As I discussed above, I agree that there has admittedly been a palpable shift in recent years in the way the past is referenced in many Indigenous stories, and in our understanding of these references – including those concerned with the removal of children. However, I am not convinced by Attwood’s claim that it is as a result of something peculiar about stories, and that they have a tendency to flatten and cohere

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304 Bain Attwood, “‘Learning About the Truth’: The Stolen Generations Narrative,” in Telling Stories: Indigenous History in Australia and New Zealand, ed. Bain Attwood, and Fiona Magowan (Crows Nest, Australia: Allen and Unwin, 2001), 206. Interestingly, most commentary on these narratives has come from the disciplines of history and women’s studies: very few literary scholars or critics have engaged in these questions.

305 Ibid., 199.
when they become part of a whole range of "narratives" rather than more isolated instances. The problem is that Attwood seems to assume that there is a "real" meaning of the stolen generations which is not just beyond politics, but beyond current circumstance and the actual ways in which the stolen generations are referred to and understood. He identifies this genuine meaning with accounts which were published before the coinage of the term "stolen generations" and which were written before the public controversies which erupted with the publication of "Bringing Them Home". It seems to me, however, that the different reconstructions, interpretations and narratives which have emerged as the plight of the stolen generations has become more widely known can be plausibly attributed to two other factors. These do not characterise more recent accounts — as Attwood does — as being paler versions of more genuine, earlier narratives because of a process of narrative coalescence, but relate the stolen generations stories being told and the interpretation of all such works, to the broader context in which they appear.

The first factor to consider is a facet of the unfolding Wirkungsgeschichte or effective-history of the telling of the stories of the stolen generations. As the stolen generations have become more and more central to general accounts of Australian history, stories have become told less to the already-interested initiates of a specialised body of literature (early stolen generations accounts were hardly best-sellers), and have become relatively popular. There has thus been a growing and more diversified audience with a corresponding need and desire for less "complex" stories, such as stories for children and young adults. This, I think, is borne out by the publishing of a number of such works including Anita Heiss's fictional autobiography of Mary Talence and shortened and simplified versions of My Place.
and *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, all of which are targeted at younger readers.\(^{306}\)

Alongside these simpler stories, there remains what will always be a smaller market for complex narratives with a more nuanced approach to memories of the past, and which cite good and bad consequences of child removal (Stephen Kinnane's *Shadow Lines* from 2003 is one example).

The second factor to consider is the *Wirkungsgeschichte* or the unfolding, effective-history of awareness of the stolen generations. Crucially, recent accounts of child removal have been published and interpreted within a different public environment to that of earlier works from the 1970s. Attwood ignores the fact that the very battles he himself engaged in as a public intellectual over many years to establish the existence of the stolen generations and veracity of their experiences, against very powerful and public voices expressing doubt, have had a significant impact upon the kinds of stories about removal being told, how they were told, and how they were heard in the 1990s and early twenty-first century in Australia. The effect of the open hostility between influential public figures (including the then-Prime Minister) who were openly sceptical of the extent, intent, and impact of child removals, on the one side, and equally forceful public intellectuals like Robert Manne and Indigenous figures such as Mick Dodson and Lowitja O'Donahue, on the other side, cannot be underestimated. This observation is corroborated by Heather Goodall, who argues that what she also identifies as a simplification of the multidimensionality of stolen generations narratives is due to the politicisation of the past in Australia at the time the works were published, where the "adversarial nature of political struggle has transformed what were complex personal and collective memories into simplistic

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\(^{306}\) Anita Heiss, *The Diary of Mary Talence*, Sydney, 1937 (Sydney: Scholastic Australia, 2001). The younger reader's edition of *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* is published under the title *Home to Mother. My Place* has been divided into three shorter books for young adults by Sally Morgan and Barbara Kerr Wilson: *Sally's Story; Arthur Corunna's Story; and Mother and Daughter.*
polemics." In such a polarised public climate, it seems understandable that the ambiguities of lived experiences were somewhat simplified to suit this environment.

To these observations about the rhetorical environment of recent narratives like *Swallow the Air* which incorporate stories of child removal I would further add another, which also questions the adequacy of Attwood’s characterisation of many recent works as being “flattened” relative to accounts which existed prior to the giving of a name to systematic practices of child removal, due to a process of “narrative accrual”. Are the earlier pieces actually more “accurate” because they display a wider range of emotion and tone? What would accuracy mean in this case?

What Attwood identifies as the more “balanced” tone of works published in earlier decades can be just as easily identified as simply indicative of a different rhetorical environment. The relationship between writers from the 1970s like Monica Clare and

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307 Heather Goodall, “Too Early yet or Not Soon Enough? Reflections on Sharing Histories as Process,” *Australian Historical Studies* 118 (2002): 13. Goodall’s observations come from field work on another project from the mid-1990s, where grazing families in north-western New South Wales began speaking defensively about their Aboriginal “apprentices”, with Aboriginal accounts during this time being pared down to the most basic elements for a public audience. Anticipating disbelief and hostility, and fearing being blamed themselves for what occurred if there was any element of doubt, what had been in more informal settings recounted with degrees of nuance and complexity, became unequivocally and unambiguously stated in public stories which stressed the injustice suffered by many Aboriginal people. The “details of the accounts brought into the glare of public debate are accurate, but what have changed are the focuses and the emphasis ... These no longer focus on the difficulties of unmarried and abandoned young mothers. Now the more common narratives in wider use are those of the testimony of the trauma survivor and the victim of child sexual abuse.”

308 Gillian Cowlinshaw identifies another historically contingent reason for a sense of convergence or “flattening” in stolen generations narratives. She suggests that in the public acceptance of the stolen generations, a translation of local experiences for a national audience occurred. While making Indigenous people’s stories of their experiences more widely known, this required Indigenous storytellers to fit in with the major historical narratives of the present in order to be heard. These, she suggests, are narratives which “construe Aborigines as the nation’s victims, with massacres in the past, and social disadvantage in the present,” and have “forced whole communities to reformulate local knowledge and memory in the light of the wider, national narrative of dispossession and culture loss.” Gillian Cowlishaw, “On ‘Getting It Wrong’: Collateral Damage in the History Wars,” *Australian Historical Studies* 127 (2006): 185. Kay Schaffer discusses how this also occurs as a result of the privileging in the academy of stories associated with traumatic memory and suffering, which are not relevant to the many, many stories which do not invoke these tropes, and is certainly not the only way people relate to child removal. Schaffer and Smith, “Conjunctions: Life Narratives in the Field of Human Rights.”
Margaret Tucker and the audiences they were addressing (and even Sally Morgan in the 1980s) differed to more recent writers. Like the poetry of Oodgeroo Noonuccal and Jack Davis in the 1970s, these writings are in forms and genres where Indigenous people had not been published before, and certainly not published in large numbers. It may be that what Attwood describes as the more neutral tone in earlier works is just as effectively understood as a different rhetorical strategy speaking toward, and effective in, different social and political times. Indeed, where Attwood identifies these writers as more “balanced” because they point out good and bad consequences of their experiences, others might see an effort to placate and cajole a nascent audience of non-Indigenous readers, which more recent writers, having more established readerships (created by the earlier works), and writing, publishing and initially being read within an extremely adversarial public environment, do not have as great a need or desire to do.

The important point I would like to draw from this is the following. The problem with Attwood’s account is that it seeks to examine the shifts in the ways stolen generations narratives have been told (before and after the “event” of public acknowledgement of the systematic nature of twentieth century child removal policies in Australia) from a position which itself is purportedly objective and which identifies in earlier works a relatively more neutral reporting of people’s historical experience, which in later accounts are subject to the simplifications of a process of narrative accrual. However, to my mind this does not take adequate account of the specific rhetorical environments of earlier and later narrative contexts, and neither does it take into consideration Attwood’s own entanglement in the ongoing, unfolding effective history or Wirkungsgeschichte of the stolen generations debates and the unfolding understandings of their narratives.
The importance of Gadamer’s account of understanding, in contrast, as the extended
discussion of this Chapter indicates, is that it suggests how the very questions that
we raise when confronted in dialogue with texts of the past are part of the shared and
changing heritage of “the tradition”. This recognises that the “meaning” of accounts
of the stolen generations continues to be generated as successive attempts to
understand are made possible, and given direction, by previous understandings, and
by the contexts which these previous understandings help to forge. Jean Grondin’s
gloss on this is as follows:

To understand something means to have related it to ourselves in such a way that we
discover in it an answer to our own questions – but ‘our own’ in a way that these
questions, too are assimilated into a tradition and metamorphosed by it. Every act
of understanding, even self-understanding, is motivated, stimulated by questions that
determine in advance the sight lines of understanding.309

Inexhaustibility versus undecidability and the
Gadamer-Derrida encounter

The discussion of *Wirkungsgeschichte*, above and how it can be related to shifts in
the relating of stolen generations narratives, on the one hand, and to interpretations
of stolen generations narratives, on the other, characterises how textual meaning
continually unfolds, as new interpretations are made, and as new contexts for
interpretation are formed – in part, through the influences of previous texts and their
interpretations. I would like, finally, to relate this to another of the seminal
questionings of philosophical hermeneutics, which occurred through Gadamer’s
engagement with the person and the thought of Jacques Derrida.

Engaging with Derrida’s thought was one of the defining points in Gadamer’s intellectual life. They met in Paris in 1981, and Gadamer wrote numerous essays about deconstruction and hermeneutics in the 1980s and 1990s, including some of the final pieces he ever published. The meeting (or lack of a meeting, which Derrida later appropriately called an “unheimlich ... encounter”) between hermeneutics and deconstruction is undeniably important: Chapter Two discussed the question of phonocentrism and Gadamer’s account of the living voice; Chapter Four discussed the discord which emerged in the different weighting that each accords to the unity or the incoherencies of a tradition; here, I shall briefly consider this latter disagreement from a different angle, because it shows up some of the remarkable similarities, as well as the large differences, between these two key twentieth century thinkers.

One of the major differences between Gadamer and Derrida is in their attitude toward the idea of “lived context”, which again returns to the issue of whether unity or rupture is anticipated as a result of extending the area discussed under this nebulous term. According to Gadamer we are thoroughly traditionary beings who are continually taking up, applying, transforming and at times becoming critical of elements of our traditions: we have a shifting “lived context” on which our cognition and practical activity depend. But, at the same time, this context, Gadamer insists,


defines us in more ways than we ever can be aware of, and so what “context”
embraces can never be fully made the subject of conscious reflection. The last
two chapters have examined this in different ways; how different aspects of the
subject matter are revealed and are made manifest in each and every interpretation of
the tradition, but by no means have all the prejudices or prejudgements which
constitute our ability to understand or act been brought to conscious reflection.

Derrida, for his part, asked a slightly different question; querying whether the limits
of “context” can ever even be delimited. “What,” he asks, “strictly speaking, would
be an ‘enlargement of a context?’ Would it be a continual expansion, or a
discontinuous restructuring?” Derrida, as is well known, focused his attention
upon the consequences of the discontinuous moment, where new items cannot be
added in a supplementary fashion to enlarge any given field, but force a “breach” or
aporia that restructures the whole field and decentres the (supposed) centre.

One example of this is in “Signature, Event, Context,” where Derrida argues that
writing does not simply extend the communicative domain of speech, but enacts a
force de rupture – it breaks with its spoken context – and is readable even in the
absence of any information about what the author consciously wanted to say. Writing is readable beyond the death or absence of the intended receiver; it can be
iterated (repeated) in the absence of author and reader. This means that it can be
grafted onto other context-chains (it can be read in different contexts), and, as a
result, that “no context can entirely enclose it.” Derrida then traces these qualities of
writing to all kinds of oral communication: all language is capable of being cited and


therefore repeated in the absence of the initial speaker, it is capable of enacting a
break with this (and any other) given context, and it is capable of being grafted onto
other contexts.

These observations are familiar from the outline of Gadamer's discussion of the
living voice which was discussed in Chapter Two. I have chosen this example
because it shows that Derrida and Gadamer (broadly) have a lot in common, such as
an acknowledgement of the limits of authorial meaning, an appreciation of the
primacy of language, the recognition that speech and writing both share essential
"deferring" characteristics, and that they both seriously consider the consequences of
the fact that a text (whether spoken or written) can appear in many different
environments.314

What differs are the conclusions they draw. The consequence Derrida draws from
the ability of speech and writing to be distanced from their initial utterance and
grafted into new situations is that "there are only contexts without any centre or
absolute anchoring"; there is a radical undecidability and indeterminacy involved in
any word.315 Because he does not privilege the context of the initial speaker at all
(apart from the important factor of repeatedly demonstrating that what the text
"says" is not identical to the author's - putative - intentions) in Derrida's
interpretation of interpretation "there is nothing original to interpret, and hence the
very distinction between the message of the original text and the message bearing of
hermeneutics breaks down. Writing and reading are ensnared in each other. Every

314 To many critics, of course, the similarities between Gadamer and Derrida (as thinkers of the
"language turn") far outweigh their differences. See, for example, Leonard Orr, "The Post-Turn Turn:

text resonates with other texts, 'originals' no less than 'commentaries.' The task of interpretation is to keep this movement or play at play, by not again falling back into "metaphysics" whereby the play is halted and the system centred and stabilised.

Where Derrida is led to undecidability, Gadamer is led to inexhaustibility: there is a potentially unlimited number of (historical and social) contexts in which a text is understood (it is inexhaustible), but these are not in principle indeterminate. Since the task of becoming aware of all aspects of the situation of effective history or of being-affected (Wirkungsgeschichte) is never totally complete, teasing out all the facets of our historical determination, even at just one point, is not realisable (see TM 301-2/ GW1 307). Similarly, in the approach to texts,

[the discovery of the true meaning of a text or artistic creation never finishes; it is in fact an infinite process. Not only are fresh sources of error constantly excluded, so that all kinds of things are filtered out that obscure the true meaning; but new sources of understanding are continually emerging that reveal unsuspected elements of meaning. (TM 298/ GW1 303)]

Gadamer’s recognition of the inexhaustibility of a text places emphasis on the temporal unfolding of understanding in the specific situations where it is read, while avoiding the sceptical consequences of Derridean free-play. Being confronted by a text such as a literary work, Gadamer recognises, is the beginning of a long and often repeated effort to understand. “Every reading that seeks understanding,” Gadamer writes, “is only a step on a path that never ends. Whoever takes up this path knows that he or she will never be completely done with the text: one accepts the blow, the

316 Caputo, Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project, 118.
thrust, that the text delivers.” So it is with the texts considered in this chapter. In
the novels and life narratives considered, the fusion of horizons between the text and
reader generates a concrete and definite meaning, though the “meaning of the text” is
by no means used up or fully actualised by this particular instance of understanding.
The concept of Wirkungsgeschichte or effective-history is an attempt to describe
how the engagement with texts at different historical moments necessarily results in
a changed understanding of them, and that this is not an illegitimate imposition onto
the text, but an essential description of how the event of meaning occurs.

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It is now possible to return to Derrida, and his provocative questioning of whether
“enlargement” of a context results in a continuation or a radical breach. Some, like
John Caputo, charge that in philosophical hermeneutics breaches are ultimately
smoothed over by a renewed – but unchallenged – unity (it recognises that a text
may have manifold, unfolding meanings but there is still, at the end, an idea of “the
text”). He argues that Gadamer’s notion of “play” unlike Derrida’s is thereby made
safe by the constraints of unchanging truth; with a limitation placed on the kind of
“play” one may have with texts. 319

318 Gadamer “Reply to Jacques Derrida,” in Michelfelder, ed., Dialogue and Deconstruction: The
Gadamer-Derrida Encounter, 57.

319 Caputo, Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project. Neither
Caputo nor Derrida give any reasons for preferring free play (le jeu) to what Caputo calls the
“postcard always addressed,” and neither can they. Their views on free play have sceptical
consequences, meaning that their own words cannot be considered as trying to aim at “truth”. This is
one of the underlying issues at stake in the Gadamer-Derrida encounter. For instance, in “Honest Acts
and dangerous Supplements,” Miranda Johnson also adopts what she claims is a Derridean
argumentative strategy to criticise Gadamer, stating: “the model does not allow for difficulties in
communication; for the ways in which participants might engage these difficulties for strategic
reasons, and even withdraw the possibility of dialogue. Nor does it allow, cross-culturally for gaps in
and Historical Practice in Settler Societies,” Postcolonial Studies 8, no. 3 (2005): 268. The difficulty I
have is in seeing how Johnson – or Derrida – can possibly recognise that another is “engaging these
difficulties for strategic reasons” or is withdrawing totally from dialogue without some kind of idea of
Gadamer's response to this is instructive. Undeniably, Gadamer argues that the grounds of possibility of any understanding include "solidarities", or some kind of unity or commonality. Having some kind of shared similarity – no matter how tenuous – is for him a condition not only for possible understanding but, importantly, it is this which enables the possibility of encountering limits and differences. As he states:

[n]ow certainly I would not want to say that the solidarities that bind human beings together and make them partners in a dialogue are sufficient to enable them to achieve understanding and total mutual agreement. Just between two people this would require a never-ending dialogue. And the same would apply with regard to the inner dialogue the soul has with itself. Of course we encounter limits again and again; we speak past each other and are even at cross-purposes with ourselves. But in my opinion we could not do this at all if we had not travelled a long way together, perhaps without even acknowledging it to ourselves. All human solidarity, all social stability, presupposes this.20

The experience of encountering limits – for instance in being "struck a blow" by the experience of otherness in a text – has to be predicated on some form of commonality (most commonalities are so embedded into the fabric of who we are that we are unaware of them); otherwise, Gadamer suggests, the whole experience would be incomprehensible and chaotic.321

But, while some kind of "solidarity" has to be assumed, Gadamer repeatedly insists that the actual engagements we have with a text or another person in the process of the fusion of horizons (an example of "enlargement of context") is "necessarily"...
neither radical breach nor continuation. Derrida’s question cannot be answered in advance; the enlargement of a context is not predetermined as either entailing a breach or continuity. So, to the question of what results from an enlargement of context Gadamer returns to the need to be attentive to the demands of the dialogical event, and he says, “I can only answer that I myself never know. Can I know this? Isn’t the next word of my partner something I can’t anticipate or control?”

This is to say that, despite the fact that there is – to some extent – an assumed common language which forms the prior basis for any conversation to occur (discussed above, and in the section on language in Chapter Three), this commonality or unity is by no means absolute; it does not determine the conversation which occurs on its basis, or that any agreement on the subject matter will eventuate. The experience of actual conversations is where shared or common perspectives are forged or, alternatively, radical ruptures take place, and this cannot be decided in principle, but only through being engaged in the conversation.

Again, we are led to the demands of hermeneutic openness and being attentive to the next word of my partner. Gadamer encourages us to be always-attentive to what a text says, and to realise that it is the requirements of the actual situations in which we encounter texts that co-determine what readers understand in them. Hermeneutic openness is one of the themes of the next, and final chapter. There, I will situate this attitude in relation to two other, primary ways that Gadamer suggests we encounter others. I will outline all three with reference to Doctor Wooreddy’s Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World, and the various relationships between characters this novel represents. Doctor Wooreddy presents the whole gamut of relationships –

non-comprehension; understanding another as an object to be controlled; understanding another only insofar as they conform to one’s prior expectations; and that relationship which Gadamer refers to as properly hermeneutical, a relationship in which one is truly open to hearing, and being potentially instructed by the voice of another.

To begin with, the first section of Chapter Six will concentrate in some more detail about how two novels evoke and explore the distinct horizons of Indigenous and non-Indigenous characters and their points of meeting or “fusion”.
CHAPTER SIX

Fusion of horizons and varieties of understanding

In this final chapter I will consider three novels: Sam Watson’s underground classic, *The Kadaitcha Sung*; Alexis Wright’s award-winning *Carpentaria*; and Mudrooroo’s seminal *Doctor Wooreddy’s Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World*. What I wish to focus upon more closely are “horizons” and the “fusion of horizons” (*Horizontverschmelzung*); how disparate cultural horizons are represented in these novels and what occurs at the meeting points between horizons.

In the first two novels I will look at representations of how people’s appreciation of geographical space (their “world”) is itself an extension of linguistic and traditionary understandings: it is enculturated and social. *The Kadaitcha Sung* and *Carpentaria* most clearly demonstrate this through their representations of the partially overlapping yet strikingly non-congruent mental and social environments inhabited

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by the Indigenous and non-Indigenous characters. One of the supreme achievements of each of these texts is in generating a palpable sense of distinct world-pictures coming into abrasive contact. The first part of this chapter will examine how the representations of such distinct horizons are formed and what occurs at the interstices in their points of “fusion”.

Moving on to Mudrooroo’s novel, the second section of the Chapter will pursue a slightly different tack. Whereas the first section focuses primarily upon how the contours of divergent cultural horizons and their points of meeting are represented in recent texts, the second section will look more closely at relationships to the other which are manifested by the fusion of horizons.

Initially, I will follow a question Walter Veit asks about contact scenarios: “[w]hat if misunderstanding is the first step in overcoming non-communication?” Mudrooroo’s comic representations of the contact situation confirms this idea, as, in the initial phases of contact both European and Aboriginal characters at first necessarily misunderstand the other, as they relate the radically new to what they already understand (the platform formed by their previous understandings and preconceptions).

Misunderstanding, this suggests, is vitally important: it launches the process of relating to very different others. Doctor Wooreddy continues on to pursue the kinds of relationships which can eventuate, as the diverse people who have come into contact have a more prolonged engagement. I will consider these relationships as examples of the three ways of relating to others Gadamer identifies in Truth and

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324 Walter Veit reflects upon this question in an article on Forster’s journals on his Voyage Round the World with Captain Cook from 1772-5, in Walter Veit, “Misunderstanding as Condition of Intercultural Understanding,” in Cultural Dialogue and Misreading, ed. Mabel Lee and Meng Hua (Sydney: Wild Peony, 1997), 164.
Method. How, from a first-person perspective, can the primary ways characters relate to others be catalogued in this novel, and what can this teach us?

Doctor Wooreddy shows that the encounter with others most often tends to fall into the first two forms of relating to another Gadamer discussed: it is experienced as a form of self-relation which seeks to control the other, or which confirms the prejudices one already possesses. One of the many difficulties with such ways of relating to others is that initial misunderstandings of the other persist. The third form of relating to others, where misunderstandings may be replaced and corrected by better understandings – which Gadamer calls “hermeneutic” – is a relatively rare event. Wooreddy’s relationship to Waau, an Indigenous elder from another tribal group, provides my major example of this third form, as Wooreddy is confronted by an alternative horizon to his own, which makes elements of his own horizon become questionable, and he recognises the partiality and limitedness of his own previous understandings.

Competing perspectives on the city of Brisbane in The Kadaitcha Sung

In Sam Watson’s The Kadaitcha Sung, the commonly-shared space of contemporary Brisbane is a site where Indigenous and non-Indigenous histories, social memories, and spiritual traditions overlap. It is equally the city as it is taken for granted by urban non-Indigenous (and predominantly white) Australians, and a place where humans and spirits play out Dreaming events. It is this latter sense of Brisbane as a Dreaming space which is introduced in the narrative which prefaces the action of the novel.
The novel’s opening pages relate a creation story, detailing the advent of the universe and the Great South Land by the creator spirit Biamee before he departs to the camping ground in the sky. To oversee what happens on earth, Biamee leaves behind the Kadaitcha men (clever men). Biamee’s departure sets in place a tense family drama. When Kobbina, the first Kadaitcha, is chosen to follow the creator spirit to the camping ground in the sky, he must appoint another Turwan (high man) in his place: his eldest son. Trouble looms, however, since of his two sons, it is not clear which is the eldest. When Kobbina selects Koobara to be the next Kadaitcha rather than his brother Booka, the enraged Booka kills his parents and wages a protracted war against his brother. During the war, Booka closes up the entranceway of Biamee to the mortal plane which had been accessible through a bora ring under Uluru (Ayer’s Rock) in Central Australia.

The constant presence of spirit-beings alongside human characters, and the wielding of powerful magic by humans and spirit-beings are aspects of *The Kadaitcha Sung* that signal a striking departure from European ways of categorising the phenomenal world. What is so unusual about it is the sustained, pervasive sense it conveys of the interaction between spirits, human beings, and the realm of Aboriginal magical beliefs. Within the novel these provide cogent means of explaining historical events, and the pains of European occupation and settlement are frequently portrayed as simply minor scenes in more cosmic battles. The following gives an indication of how this functions. Utilising the grandiose language of myth, the newly-arrived “fair-skinned ones” (the Europeans), it suggests, invade and destroy an Edenic paradise at Booka’s behest:

Booka waged a long and terrible campaign against his brother, and great was the devastation and loss of life. The evil one caused the mists to lift from the land and
other mortals saw its wealth and abundance; they came in their hordes and they slaughtered the helpless tribes with a monstrous lust. These new tribes came from all corners of the outside world and from all the families of man, but they did not know Biamee and they did not know of his laws. The fair-skinned ones laid waste to the garden and the chosen people. (TKS 3)

Koobara’s response also plots the process of invasion and colonial settlement in parallel with cosmic, Dreaming events. Koobara uses the few magical powers he has retained to perform appropriate dances and rituals which confine Booka to “a thin strip of coastal land that housed a new village called Brisbane, and there he stayed … Booka raged within his gaol…” (TKS 3-4). Booka’s gaoling in Brisbane is contiguous with its birth as a penal settlement for recalcitrant British convicts – the notorious Moreton Bay penal colony – in 1824: ironically Brisbane is a place of incarceration in both European and Indigenous explanatory matrices of the cities’ past.

After the defeat and murder of his father, Koobara’s son Tommy Gubba is left to continue the resistance against Booka, and it is Tommy’s short and violent life – set in near-contemporary Queensland and largely in Brisbane – which forms the primary focus of the novel’s action. Tommy’s life telescopes such topical issues as rape, physical violence, police brutality, the overrepresentation of Aboriginal people in prison, endemic racism, and institutionalised disadvantage. He is a deeply contradictory figure, who Maggie Nolan calls a “heroic mongrel”; possessed by great desires for vengeance intermingled with quiet reconciliatory moments, and the ambivalence of his relationship to white people. Of mixed parentage, and with a

325 "Gubba" is a derogatory word for white person and comes from a shortening of "government man." Some sources trace it to the word "governor."

tender relationship toward his mother, Tommy, for the most part, is vehemently critical of Anglo-Celtic Australians and what they have wrought.

_The Kadaitcha Sung_ moves effortlessly between mythical time and the recent present, and throughout, continues to play on conventional understandings of Australian historical realities by expounding a sustained, alternative Dreaming explanation for the actions and motivations of its Indigenous and non-Indigenous characters. This is important. Eva Rask Knudsen has argued that, by eliminating or downplaying examination of the sacred and magical in works by Indigenous writers (where Indigenous and non-Indigenous beliefs often greatly differ) literary criticism tends to be Eurocentric and assimilative. _The Kadaitcha Sung_ vehemently (and, given the shocking brutality it represents, one is tempted to say, violently) resists such assimilation.\(^3\)

What purpose do such clearly-delineated differences between the ways Indigenous and non-Indigenous characters apprehend and act within their world serve in _The Kadaitcha Sung_? In her discussion of the novel, Suzanne Baker identifies the presence of Dreaming explanations for historical and contemporary events as the strategic use of magical realism as a means through which to criticise colonialism.\(^4\)

The Dreaming narrative which pervades the novel as an alternative explanatory lens is undoubtedly used as a critical fulcrum to gain leverage to disrupt the typical story of European colonisation in Australia. Moreover, I suggest that it does not only serve a negative or critical function in displaying the brutalities of the colonial process and

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\(^3\) Knudsen, _The Circle and the Spiral: A Study of Australian Aboriginal and New Zealand Māori Literature_, 12. In Knudsen’s extended discussion of the novel she calls it a “complex myth-story about aboriginal mindscape, tribal and urban, past and present.” (271)

continuing inequalities and injustices, but that it displays a positive dimension as well.

This positive element is in the way that the novel generates a sense of the presence of an Indigenous Australian horizon (whether representing a real, partially real, or imagined horizon) at odds with non-Indigenous perspectives, which exists in the midst of contemporary Australia. The disparate horizons of Indigenous and non-Indigenous characters are located primarily in an urban space in this novel, in the city of Brisbane. They exist, in other words, in a space that non-Indigenous Australians assume to be relatively homogenous, one they are “at home” and belong in, and one which holds few surprises for them.

This brings into question the certainty non-Indigenous Australians have about the “knownness” of environments like Brisbane; the environments in which most Australians live. It shakes embedded prejudices or prejudgements (in the sense Gadamer uses these terms) about people’s relationships to this place and the world they experience in this space, by revealing another way of living in it. People do not, as The Kadaitcha Sung so dramatically demonstrates, experience modernity or contemporary urban life in the same ways. Its achievement, like Carpentaria, the next novel to be considered, is to suspend non-Indigenous senses of certainty about the lived environment and upset the tacitly-held conviction that others within this environment apprehend and conceive of it in roughly the same way. And this facilitates an examination of the prejudices or prejudgements contained within such convictions.
Carpentaria and horizons

Carpentaria is set in Australia’s North country, in the small, isolated town of Desperance in the Gulf of Carpentaria. This is a tall tale of Australia’s top-end, a vast, difficult country filled with larger-than-life characters, where magic is possible, the dead occasionally return to interact with the living, and where stories grow larger with each telling. Desperance is a town which is physically and metaphysically divided. The novel maps, over the course of some years, the goings-on of the Indigenous people who live in the town’s outlying areas (the “Pricklebush”), and those who occupy its centre, the predominantly white “Uptowners”. The Pricklebush people and the Uptowners possess distinct senses of place, space, human existence and history, all evident in their differing interpretations of the phenomenal world, natural signs and human relationships (the latter including the social and political relations of the township and the Gurfurrit mine nearby).

It is instructive to examine how these distinct horizons are posited, expressed and mediated in the novel, because, like the Dreaming framework of The Kadaitcha Sung, these provide a means of asserting the presence and vibrant continuation of unique Indigenous cultural perspectives at odds with mainstream Australia and its European-oriented world view.

Attitudes toward the phenomenal world

The clearest area of cultural difference Carpentaria explores is in Indigenous and non-Indigenous attitudes toward what constitutes the everyday phenomenal world. The Uptowners, like many secular, non-Indigenous people, for the most part tend to identify the realm of the spiritual and supernatural as being entirely separate to
material existence. The people of the Pricklebush, in contrast, live comfortably with spirit beings and with the actions of dead ancestors and their repercussions. So much is the existence of spirits and the continual presence of the ancestral dead a part of the daily lives of the Indigenous people that Mozzie Fishman senses them engaged in that most ordinary of activities, gossiping (365). Material phenomena, such as the massive cyclone which utterly destroys the town toward the novel’s end, are regarded as powerful weapons wielded in ongoing ancestral wars (470). Norm Phantom, the novel’s flawed hero, engages with spirit beings constantly, as does his enemy Joseph Midnight, and his estranged son, Will.

The Pricklebush people do not separate the sacred and spiritual from the quotidian and ordinary, but experience all these as interwoven parts of everyday existence. This is evident from the novel’s opening pages which magisterially relate the creation of the landscape by the ancestral serpent, a being with ongoing existence whose breathing conditions the sluggish tidal movements of the river water.

The ancestral serpent, a creature larger than storm clouds, came down from the stars, laden with its own creative enormity ... The serpent travelled over the marine plains, over the salt flats, through the salt dunes, past the mangrove forests and crawled inland. Then it went back to the sea. And it came out at another spot along the coastline and crawled inland and back again. When it finished creating the many rivers in its wake, it created one last river ... This is where the giant serpent continues to live deep down under the ground in a vast network of limestone aquifers. They say its being is porous; it permeates everything. It is all around in the atmosphere and is attached to the lives of the river people like skin.

The tidal river snake of flowing mud takes in breaths of a size that is difficult to comprehend ... To catch this breath in the river you need the patience of one who can spend days doing nothing. (1-2)

Over time, Desperance’s Indigenous residents have also developed equally distinctive forms of knowledge. From their understanding of the moods and
movements of the river serpent on its creation journey and its present state of rest, the Pricklebush people know how to find underground water and when the trade winds come. Like his father Norm, Will Phantom possesses expertise in reading the country. Will, we are told, “knew how the tides worked simply by looking at the movement of a tree, or where the moon crossed the sky, the light of day, or the appearance of the sea. He carried the tide in his body” (401). This intimate knowledge of the natural environment and skills in reading the countryside possess practical value – Will continuously eludes those who would kill him for his protests against the Gurfurrit mine, Norm survives weeks at sea after being blown off course, and Mozzie Fishman’s group is able to disappear into the contours of the landscape after setting the fire at the mine, amused at the attempts to find them because, as they laconically retort, “Who’s going to find us? We know this country like the back of our hand” (443).

Accounts of spirit beings and the ancestral dead provide an important and primary means through which the Indigenous characters orientate themselves as social and cultivated human beings. They offer guides for appropriate behaviour and provide direction in unfamiliar situations. Dreams, story and song fulfil vital social functions, imparting all of what is meant by decorum in the following passage.

Men such as Norm Phantom kept a library chock-a-block full of stories of the old people stored in their heads. They called it decorum – the good information, intelligence, etiquette of the what to do, how to behave for knowing how to live like a proper human being, alongside spirits for neighbours in dreams. In the local stories handed down through the generations, the sea woman was a death angel. She appeared from nowhere in her endless search to take men back to her dark, empty world in the deep waters at the bottom of the ocean. Norm knew what this world looked like because he saw it in his dreams. (246)
Norm Phantom proves himself to be adept at "reading" the natural signs of the weather, seasonal behaviours of animals, and the movements of the sea and stars. He is an unusual map-reader, with his self-orientation relying upon intimate knowledge of constellations, sea currents, the movement of birds, the development of cloud patterns and seasonal markers like monsoons. Occasionally, though, even Norm's profound understanding of his environment is subject to disturbance. This is Norm's state of mind after being sent hopelessly off course after burying his murdered friend Elias at sea and then stranded on a beach.

The mighty sea heaved and sighed. Waves regardless of talk crashed on the beach. The wind whistled past overhead. The sea birds sang their songs here and there in their nooks and crannies late in the afternoon. Surveying the beach like a fugitive searching for a possible escape route, Norm muttered on, convincing nobody but himself of his deeply held convictions about his close relationship with the sea ... In this state of mind he started to see signs like neon lights sitting on signposts jutting out from the ocean. Road signs the equivalent of those on the highway south of Desperance – Drive Slow. Slow Down. Cattle crossing. Seasonal flooding to be expected. He read all the signs and tried to interpret them as messages from the spirits. He watched tiny insects devouring rotten fish flesh and he interpreted them as messengers, or disguised spirits. He ... was drawn to particular specks of sand on the beach which he thought might have originated from Desperance. Each speck was as insignificant as the other. He aligned the specks into a map for it was his normal way of understanding the world. His eyes darted from one sign to the other, as he tried to link them into a lifeline, a map which would give him reason (271-272).

Disorientated, bedraggled and dehydrated after a long sea voyage to an unknown part of the coast, Norm's desperate mind unsuccessfully attempts to impose meaning on the signs and the natural phenomenon around him, conceiving them as messages from the spirits. What occurs is like an analogy for any process of understanding. Norm, at first, imposes a preliminary sense of coherence on the strange environment he encounters, and tries to glean from it his usual patterns of seeing, by creating a
map. He attempts to make sense of this unfamiliar and disturbed landscape by relating it to more familiar sights – sand from Desperance, and road-signs near the town. This is not surprising. Friedrich Schleiermacher argued that the capacity to understand the new relies on the basis of being able to compare it to something we already know and understand: comprehending the unknown comes on the back of the known. Gadamer, similarly, suggests that it is on the basis of commonly shared understandings that new understandings may take place. He writes:

There is already a world already interpreted, already organized in its basic relations, into which experience steps as something new, upsetting what has led our expectations and undergoing reorganization itself in the upheaval...Only the support of familiar and common understanding makes possible the venture into the alien, the lifting up of something out of the alien, and thus the broadening and enrichment of our own experience of the world. 329

In this case, the sense of coherence Norm projects onto his surroundings proves to be pre-emptive, since despite his efforts the grains of sand do not provide him with any readable message; the spirits have not spoken.

Although unsuccessful, however, Norm’s initial attempt at interpreting his environment is not without consequence, as it serves as a comparative anchor point for the re-interpretation of the night sky which follows. It is interesting (and appropriate given the importance to many Indigenous communities of dream-given songs which was discussed in Chapter One) that Norm does not actually make further observations of the night sky, but waits for the stars to take on known shapes and constellations in his sleep.

329 “The Universality of the Hermeneutic Problem,” 15; “Die Universalität des hermeneutischen Problems,” 230. There was also a discussion of this in relation to the hermeneutical conception of the Vorgriff der Vollkommenheit in Chapter Five, and it will be discussed further below.
In his dreams, he began sorting out the star patterns, viewing one and then the next, after which he jumbled them up again and waited, while some tumbled back into place, others slightly realigned themselves, and he travelled along the new settings, memorising his route, then way into the heart of his sleep, the way home...

No broken-down man, one who had lost the belief in his own strength, should follow any route until he saw the stars illuminated in his dreams like streetlights, safely showing him the direction to travel. (286)

Norm is able to navigate vast distances by reading the sea currents and stars, yet at this moment he is struck with wonder and astonishment as he is confronted by his limitations. Even for such a great weatherman as himself total control and predictability proves ever-elusive: “Nobody knew how the weather would turn out” (285).

The question of belonging

Desperance’s Indigenous and non-Indigenous residents differ in cosmology, knowledge, senses of propriety, and structures of belief. They also occupy vastly different positions within the town’s social hierarchies and spaces within its boundaries. The Indigenous people occupy the fringe areas on the town’s outskirts and participate little in the town’s civic and political life – they truly epitomise what is meant by the phrase, “fringe dwellers”. Materially, they are impoverished, and rummage through the town’s rubbish dump to construct makeshift houses from what the Uptowners discard. The Uptowners, for their part, reside in the town’s central regions and occupy the major roles in local bureaucracy and business.

Dissent and disagreement are rife in Desperance, and this comes through at the most basic and fundamental levels of what the town consists of, who belongs in it, and who does not. Reflecting these different attitudes, two alternative forms of mapping Desperance exist. The Indigenous residents clearly divide the town into Uptown and
the warring East and West Pricklebush families (there are internal and very powerful
divisions between the Indigenous residents); and these families have been in conflict
for centuries over which group has the correct claim to the land and waters. Just how
deeply set the internal divisions between Uptown, and the East and West Pricklebush
are, can be discerned from this tableaux:

there it was ... fringe camps sandwiching Desperance, and nothing better to do with
themselves than to sit about watching white folk of Uptown going about their
business. It was hard to imagine something being so ingrained it cannot be scrubbed
away like ink stains on a carpet. It was like blood stains. This was exactly what it
was like. (54)

Conversely, the descendants of the white pioneer families in Uptown, although they
endlessly discuss what to do with the Indigenous residents – and how to get rid of
them – do not acknowledge the legitimacy of their presence. To the Uptowners, “the
aboriginal was really not part of the town at all” (4, italics in the original). This
statement denies that the Pricklebush people are part of Desperance and subsumes
them under a depersonalised and universal category. It does not name particular
people such as Norm Phantom, the leader of the Pricklebush clan, or his stalwart foe
Joseph Midnight, but dispossesses a whole, homogenised cultural group (“the
aboriginal”), after first objectifying them, and rendering them individually nameless.
Uptown’s attempt to preserve a distance between itself and the town’s aboriginal
residents is reinforced by a physical barrier between Uptown and the Pricklebush
humpies. This is a north-Australian version of an apartheid wall, a “gap of
wasteland, half a mile, called the distance of tolerance, that surrounded the town and
where black people were allowed to live on the other side.” (100)

In Carpentaria, these two alternative ways of mapping the town and drawing its
borders for the most part co-exist without comment or note – they are simply taken
for granted. Only rarely are they made explicit, as when Desperance’s Indigenous residents call upon the local council to extend the system of town surveillance called the “safety net” widened out to include their homes, or when Mozzie Fishman causes great perturbation by insisting upon residing in Uptown when he travels through.

The play on ideas of “belonging” and “not belonging” continues in *Carpentaria* as an extended theme. One of the primary components of what it means to belong is a sense of comfort in one’s surroundings. As the very beginning of the novel establishes, the Indigenous residents of Desperance trace their origins to the ancestral serpent which permeates everything and is “attached to the lives of the river people like skin” (2). The likes of Norm (or Normal) Phantom, the quintessential river man, whose knowledge of the water is legendary, and Mozzie Fishman, whose ability to find water and sanctuary in the dry, arid landscape is renowned, are products of such a sense of ease and integration in one’s physical environment. On the other side, the Uptowners’ relationship to their surroundings is far more conflicted. They trace their origins to more recent ancestors, to an “original forebear, a ghostly white man or woman” who “simply turned up one day,” with their ties and claims of belonging based on “a memory no greater than two life spans” (57). The Uptowner’s relationship to the area is described as involving perpetual combat. Existence in Desperance for them is an ongoing and “precarious battle”, and it is they who set up the paranoid system of monitoring the town’s boundaries (the “safety net” or “neighbourhood watch” which incorporates the town’s centre but not the shanty fringe) with these limits policed zealously at regular intervals.

The competing interests of the Indigenous and non-Indigenous residents of Desperance, as they quarrel over who has valid claims to belong in the town are starkly contrasted in the following passage. This is about Norm’s wife, Angel Day,
who proves a formidable opponent to all who oppose her. Angel Day possesses an extraordinary will, facing down Norm, the other Pricklebush families and the residents of Uptown, to literally build the family house, “an igloo made of rubbish” (15), out of scraps from the local garbage tip. For convenience of access to the garbage dump she locates it close by. In this shanty construction, she manages to clothe and feed seven children and get them off to school with only intermittent interest from Norm. Plucking through the rubbish she one day finds papers from the local council, where

she may have been fortunate enough to stumble eventually across correspondence relating to her own family and how their poor state of wellbeing was becoming an issue, for the Council at least. Especially ‘the house’ the mother built. All the fringe people thought it was such a good house, ingenious in fact, and erected similar makeshift housing for themselves. *Why couldn’t they have waited for a government grant?* But pay no neverminds for hooraying Angel Day for economic independence. Mrs Angel Day’s dream house was considered an eyesore by Uptown. All them humpies popping up all over the prickly bush would have to go.

(20-21)

The various voices which cut across this extract express contrasting opinions about the humpy dwellings. Whilst the Indigenous people of the fringe emulate Angel Day, finding it “such a good house”, the voices complaining to Council refer to “the house” and “the mother” – another act of linguistic distancing which separates, objectifies and depersonalises. What from one viewpoint is a marvellous display of economic independence and a creative, empowering response to a chronic situation of lack of adequate housing and infrastructure is from another regarded as an eyesore and the presumptiveness to act rather than wait for the far-away government – eventually and in its own time – to provide adequate shelter.
The passage quoted above presents a common literary device in *Carpentaria*. Here, as elsewhere, two (and often a number of) contrasting perspectives and interpretations of the meaning of one action – in this case the erection of the humpy – are contained in a single passage. The focus shifts back and forth through free indirect speech, which preserves the dissonance of the situation in a textual form, evoking the sense of voices at loggerheads. In the language more commonly used in this thesis, this passage reveals the tension between conflicting horizons in an extremely compressed way, articulating competing attitudes towards the “same” geographical space and differing evaluations of an action. In so doing, the scene functions as what Mikhail Bakhtin refers to as a “hybrid construction.” In his influential “Discourse in the Novel”, Bakhtin identifies a hybrid as

an utterance that belongs, by its grammatical and compositional markers, to a single speaker, but actually contains mixed within it two utterances, two speech manners, two styles, two “languages,” two semantic and axiological belief systems ... the division of voices and languages takes place within the limits of a syntactic whole, often within the limits of a simple sentence.330

With an “intentional hybrid”, discussed later in the same extended essay, he suggests the important activity is not so much

the mixing of linguistic forms – the markers of two languages and styles – as it is the collision between differing points of views on the world that are embedded in these forms ... an intentional artistic hybrid is a semantic hybrid... that is concrete and social.331

331 Ibid., 360. I will not examine Bakhtin’s views in detail or those of the postcolonial theorists, such as Robert Young and Jacquie Lo, who take up and extend his work on hybridism. I note, though, that there are significant shared themes and concerns between Bakhtin’s work and philosophical hermeneutics (both of which have interesting affiliations with the work of Herder and Wilhelm von Humboldt). Hans Robert Jauss frequently attempts to negotiate a rapprochement between philosophical hermeneutics and Bakhtin’s ideas.
Passages like the one quoted above in Carpentaria are what Bakhtin calls semantic hybrids, revealing the collision between different views of Desperance’s segregated spaces, and the different social realities they represent.

Language and the act of naming in the novel reveal further differences in the world-views of the town’s Indigenous and non-Indigenous residents, as it contrasts two kinds of naming, which reflect different kinds of relationship between language, people and place. The primary white settler attitude to naming things in Carpentaria bears out the observations of postcolonial critics, who have noted how the act of attributing English names to places has linguistically defined and differentiated such spaces according to the needs and desires of the colonising people. In Carpentaria, for the most part names are titles bestowed (or taken away) for short-term political expediency. In preparation for what many foretell to be a mining boom, someone proposes changing the name of the local river from that of a British queen to “Normal’s River.” This is a time when, for the sake of expediting the establishment of the Gurfurrit mine, largely tokenistic deals are being made with the Indigenous people of the area, in which “[m]eaningful coexistence could now accommodate almost any request whatsoever, including changing a river’s name to Normal” (8). So the river is renamed. But renaming, importantly, does not imply any recognition of ownership, rights or longevity of association.

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332 See also the section on language and linguisticity in Chapter Two. There, I discussed how the naming of things, people and relationships in language is pivotal in relation to a people’s particular form of world-disclosure, and looked at the example of the Yolngu, where creation stories are tied to the languages they speak. Chapter Two also discussed the conflicted relationship many Indigenous writers and storytellers have with the English language by virtue of its legacy as an integral part of the colonising process.

333 References to some interesting detailed studies of the utility of naming to the processes of colonisation have been collected together in the section on “Place” in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, eds., The Post-Colonial Studies Reader (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 391-422.
The Indigenous residents of Desperance hold another view of names. These official moves to change the river’s name generate much mirth among the Indigenous residents, because it is an irrelevant exercise. The Uptowners, by their actions, reveal themselves to be ignorant of the river’s genuine and abiding name. During a pompous ceremony to confer a new name on the river

traditional people gathered for the event mumbled, *Ngabarn, Ngabarn, Mandagi,* and so did Normal in a very loud and sour-sounding voice over the loud-speaker in his extremely short thank-you address, although those who knew a salad full of abuse in the local languages knew he was not saying *Thank you! Thank you!* and belly-laughed themselves silly because the river only had one name from the beginning of time. It was called *Wangala.* (9-10) [334]

*Wangala,* significantly, is the Waanyi word for Dreaming (the Waanyi are the traditional owners of the region in the Gulf of Carpentaria where the novel is set, and with whom Alexis Wright is affiliated). The river, *Wangala,* is a reminder of the creation journey of the ancestral snake related at the novel’s beginning, and represents a powerful link between the country, the ancestral snake who formed the landscape, and the particular groups of people it bestowed them upon during the creative era, a link which is said to have been forged at the very beginning of time.

*Carpentaria* is a novel which is populated with symbolically significant names (including the ironically-named policeman, “Truthful”, and the appropriately-named mayor, “Bruiser”). There is, amidst this, one other name which stands out: the name of the town itself. “Desperance” is a combination of despair and the French word for hope (*espérance*), and sounds like a word to describe most of the characters of the

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[334] The Waanyi words at the beginning of the passage literally mean “Whiteman, take/ bring” or “Whiteman, carry.” Mary Laughren, in private correspondence, provided this translation.
A mixture of hope and despair aptly describes the complicated feelings of all those who live in Desperance towards their home, a struggling remote township, tenuously hanging on to existence. Initially founded as a river port, Desperance is like a joke that has fallen flat, having been left beached when the sands of the mighty river shifted: it has become a port town without any water.

As a cognate word from mixed languages, the name “Desperance” also draws attention to the complexity and ambivalence of the colonial experience. No town and no group of people is ever absolutely isolated, nor is it totally “pure” or uncontaminated. Even such a remote and xenophobic community as Desperance is constantly peppered with outside influences, including the Afghani camel drivers who set up the early trade routes, a castaway from the sea who cannot remember his earlier life who is given the name Elias Smith, or the international mining consortium which comes to dominate the town with the establishment of the mine.

**Carpentaria and the fusion of horizons**

I have spent some time exploring how *Carpentaria* develops a sense of distinct world-views or perspectives in and on a country town in northern Australia. These distinct perspectives are manifestations of the different horizons of the non-Indigenous Uptowners and the Indigenous Pricklebush people, “horizons” being the term used in this thesis for the limited but expansive viewpoint offered by a particular set of eyes within a shared, complex, socially and historically evolving

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335 Hope, as the story goes, was the only thing left in Pandora’s famous jar (or box), which when opened let out all the evils and disasters that beset the world, and is the name of a major character in *Carpentaria*. Xavier Herbert’s novel *Capricornia*, first published in 1938, which *Carpentaria* very obviously references, has a main character of mixed Indigenous and Anglo-Celtic heritage with a similar name to Normal Phantom. *Capricornia*’s character is named “Norman” (originally “Naw-nim”) for “No-name”. This also contains a Greek allusion, in this case, to Odysseus, who, in outwitting the Cyclops Polyphemus, calls himself “outis”; “Noman” or “no man/ no one”.
life-world. What, though, about the interstices where such horizons meet? The novel's dramatisation of distinct horizons for the Indigenous and non-Indigenous residents of Desperance presents their engagement largely in terms of an ongoing struggle between contrasting viewpoints. These groups for the most part show very little interest in forging any kind of accommodation with the other. Is there any common ground to be found or created here in this specific, complex set of situations and antagonistic relationships?

It is worth noting that, although distinct in the ways detailed above, the horizons of understanding of the Uptowners and Pricklebush residents are not totally alien. It is clear that they share much. They live in the same isolated area, continually observe one another and interact, frequently unite together against the perceived interference of outsiders from the south, and share many similar aspirations in relation to doing work, the desire for material comfort, and the need for adequate shelter and security in which to raise their children. There are innumerable areas of similarity and commonality in their lives, as they all negotiate existence, the legacies of colonialism, and their own personal and familial histories, in early twenty-first century outback Australia.

There are similarities, but these are people who focus on their great differences, and on preserving and maintaining them. For their part, the white Uptowners of Desperance vehemently resist any rapprochement with the Pricklebush people, and display no desire to put their prejudices at risk in the venture to understand the Indigenous residents of the town. The Indigenous fringe of the town, in comparison, is positioned as constantly trying to survive the constant threat posed by Uptown and the Uptowners, and to do so it also actively asserts and seeks to maintain a sense of opposition and difference. The novel dramatises cultures in ongoing conflict, with
very little "fusion" occurring in the attempt to negotiate new understandings with one another. The cycles of violence and indifference toward the other's fate between the groups may ebb and flow, but does not alter in its fundamental structure.

In spite of all of this, there are intriguing, if rare, moments in *Carpentaria* which do generate a sense that the horizons of the white residents of Uptown have been strongly affected through their interactions with the Pricklebush people. Such moments provide a clear indication that the fusion of horizons may not indicate a gentle or happy occasion. This occurs most dramatically in a series of dark episodes two-thirds of the way through the novel, when the intrigues surrounding the establishment of the Gurrfurrit mine are deepening.

When Gordie (the man who takes over the neighbourhood watch service from Elias) is found murdered, three young petrol-sniffers who hail from the Pricklebush are blamed. The mayor, Bruiser, inflames the passions of the Uptowners present, who are fed up with the boys' petrol-stealing habits and he and Truthful track the boys down. The men take Luke and Tristrum Fishman, and Aaron Ho Kum to the local gaol-house where the boys are badly beaten by Bruiser (who, it appears later, could actually have been Gordie's murderer). At the same time Norm's son Kevin is lynched and set alight by a mob of vigilante youths from Uptown, and seriously maimed. This is Uptown in open revolt against Desperance's black residents. And it gets worse.

In the midst of these violent events, Truthful hears a knocking sound at his door in the middle of night. Upon opening it, he is surrounded by ghostly Aboriginal people with grey skin, who carry the dead, fishy smell of the sea. They remind him of the boys in the lock-up, who he then finds dead. In their confused state, not even having
been informed why they have been imprisoned, the young petrol-sniffers have
hanged themselves in the police cell.

The boys' deaths have a profound effect on even such a blatantly materialistic and
unimaginative man as Bruiser. He "sees" the dead boys running after him after he
barrels into the gaol to see what has gone on, and, in the immediate aftermath, when
Bruiser speaks, something unusual happens:

what he had heard was the thin voice of a boy coming out of Bruiser's mouth.
Everyone heard Bruiser speak like a boy and thought it was a horrible miracle ... those boys were working like angels -- it was the only way of explaining it in the
white man's tongue. But it was nothing to be frightened about, because their poor
little spirits had gone to the sea. (362)

This is a rare moment, in which Bruiser and Truthful are both momentarily
confronted -- indeed haunted -- by the spirits of the three dead Aboriginal boys. In
spite of their efforts to keep the Pricklebush people and their beliefs at a distance, the
white residents of Uptown cannot totally insulate themselves from their neighbours.

Even the conflict about who truly belongs in Desperance is one where strict
boundaries cannot be enforced. At root, the conflict between Uptown and the
Pricklebush is shown to be based on a contradiction. Although barely tolerated on
the town's slum outskirts by the Uptowners, the people of the town's Indigenous
fringe are shown to be paradoxically necessary for Uptown's ongoing existence.

Since the town's inception they have been a vital part of the town's economy,
employed to do the unattractive jobs of carting effluent and collecting rubbish. These
low-prestige jobs are essential for any adequately functioning municipality. And the
white families of Uptown, seeking some meaning for the town to exist after its
failure as a port town and the end of the Second World War (with its threat of
Japanese invasion from the North), it seems, have ultimately come to understand their very *raison d’être* as one of bearing witness about “their” Indigenous people.

The town still had to be vigilant ... [and] comment on the state of their blacks. To do so was regarded as an economic contribution to State rights, then, as an afterthought, to maintaining the decent society of the nation as a whole. (4)

Despite the endless policing and monitoring of boundaries and barriers which obsesses Uptown Desperance, the fates of its black and white residents are interlinked, just as much as their lives are interwoven.

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Novels like *Carpentaria* and *The Kadaitcha Sung*, I believe, should not be assessed by how closely the Indigenous or non-Indigenous horizons they represent correspond to “reality”, although both undoubtedly dramatise seminal current problems and questions within imaginative frameworks. Rather, what these novels do is to represent characters at odds with one another, testing out ways in which their horizons intertwine and relate through their now-shared histories — and, equally significantly — articulate ways in which they remain separate. In one of her discussions of *Carpentaria*, Alexis Wright underscores the importance of this antagonistic relationship. She argues that it is necessary for Indigenous writers to offer hope and new directions by going beyond what she calls “the known country of colonialism”, positioning such writing as a means of keeping options and alternatives alive in a period where these would seem to be disappearing.

*Carpentaria*, she writes, portrays:

the resilience of ancient beliefs overlaying the inherited colonial experience, while the almost ‘fugitive’ future is being forged as imagination in what might be called the last frontier — the province of the mind ... When faced with too much bad reality, the mind will try to survive by creating alternative narratives and places to
visit from time to time, or live in, or believe in ... Carpentaria imagines this cultural mind as sovereign and in control, freely navigating through the known country of colonialism to explore the possibilities of other worlds.336

I think it is significant for this reason that Carpentaria, like The Kadaitcha Sung, is set in contemporary Australia. Each novel sets up a situation in which the reader is confronted by intractable differences in a way which does not reduce but highlights their complexity, and is reminded of the high stakes involved — cultural survival for Aboriginal people in the highly conflictual present.

Thus far this chapter has limited itself to the ways in which two recent novels develop a sense of the distinct and incommensurable cultural horizons of their Indigenous and non-Indigenous characters, and the chafing of these horizons as they meet. At this point I will refocus on the question of horizons in a slightly different way. Specifically, I want to look at the various ways Gadamer suggests horizons may meet, and, in association, when horizons meet what kinds relationships with others may occur. As a case study I have selected another novel with, this time, a historical setting, Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World.

The fusion of horizons in Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World

The rest of this chapter will examine the “fusion” or meeting of horizons. “Fusion” implies some kind of transformation in the interstitial meeting points between different horizons, but when very different horizons come into contact, as they do in the contact situation evoked in Doctor Wooreddy, misrecognitions and

misunderstandings of the other proliferate. Is this situation purely negative, or productive? And how does it change over time? This latter question will be raised as I look at the relationships to others formed by the characters in the novel, and map these over the three different relationships between self and other that Gadamer develops in *Truth and Method*.

**Understanding and Misunderstanding**

Like the other novels discussed in this chapter, *Doctor Wooreddy* is a powerfully imagined realisation of Indigenous and non-Indigenous world-views at odds. This novel is situated in the historical moment when the invading colonists and convicts started to establish themselves in Australia’s south and came into protracted conflict with the Aboriginal people whose land they were taking possession of. *Doctor Wooreddy* gives voice to the contact situation: the aspirations of the new British arrivals, and the experiences of dispossession and annihilation of tribal Aboriginal groups in nineteenth-century Tasmania (then a penal colony called Van Diemen’s Land by Europeans) and the Victorian mainland. The novel suggestively represents the historical figures of Truganini (the character Trugernanna), for a long time held to be “the Last Tasmanian”, her husband Woorraddy (Wooreddy), and George Augustus Robinson, to whom both their lives become closely linked.\(^337\) G.A. Robinson was a settler in the early colony of Van Diemen’s Land, who travelled between 1829 and 1839 on missions to “conciliate” between Europeans and local tribes during what became known as the “Black War”, before moving to Port Phillip on the mainland (present-day Melbourne) to continue his endeavours. Along with Robinson, Wooreddy is the novel’s central figure, and it follows him as he witnesses

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\(^{337}\) Truganini (also Trucanini) lived ca. 1812 to 1876. Her husband Woorraddy (Wooreddy) is reported to have actually died when Truganini was in her twenties.
the rape, murder and death by disease of most of his tribal people – misfortunes which are repeated throughout his travels to other tribal areas – as he seeks to be a witness of what he firmly believes is the ending of the world.

Wooreddy’s conviction that he is stoically documenting the world’s end comes from a revelation he has after stepping on a poisonous fish as a youth. Fish, beings from the sea like the ships the Europeans come in, are, in the cosmology of his Bruny Island people, evil, and only evil things, he believes, could possibly happen in relation to them. In this moment, he realises:

Nothing from this time on could ever be the same – and why? Because the world was ending! This truth entered his brain and the boy, the youth and finally the man would hold onto it, modifying it into harshness or softness as the occasion demanded. His truth was to be his shield and protection, his shelter from the storm. (4)

He bases his life on this millenarian idée fixe that the ending of world is nigh.

Wooreddy is also an intellectual, an Indigenous “doctor of philosophy.” He spends much of his time observing, pulling things apart and wondering about the reasons for things, so much so that this habitual disposition is what he adopts when he comes across his second wife-to-be, Trugernanna being gang raped by four white men. In this moment of shock, “he donned the cloak of numbness and observed the scene with all the detachment of a scientist,” looking with minutely-attuned interest at the four “ghosts”, speculating about their white penises, wondering about the forms of language the ghosts are using and why they cover their bodies with skins rather than the grease used by his people to keep out the cold (20-21).

What I want to pursue in what follows involves the most persistent and repeated way the contact zone is represented in the novel: as a zone of misrecognition and the failure to adequately understand the other. In *Doctor Wooreddy* this misapprehension of the other is not just a sign of failure, but appears to be actually necessary for any encounter to occur.

It is striking just how much misunderstanding takes place, with the boundaries between Indigenous people and the white invader-settlers strewn with misperceptions. These are often quite comic, as when Wooreddy and Ummarrah conduct a comparative analysis of European and Indigenous worlds since they are still unsure of whether the “num” or “ghosts” (Europeans) are humans like themselves or not. On the face of it the num do not appear to be human: they do not speak civilised language but mumble a form of simple gibberish, and are greedy, violent and foolish. This effects an ironic reversal of the sentiments of early settlement narratives written by Europeans, which were highly influenced by damning early depictions, like William Dampier’s, of Australia’s Indigenous people as the “miserablest People in the world” who “differ little from Brutes.” In *Doctor Wooreddy* it is the British who appear in comparison to the highly reflective and cultivated Indigenous peoples as “irredeemably primitive” and brutal. Yet, despite how animalistic the actions of the British are, Ummarrah and Wooreddy persist in attempting to identify aspects of culture in their social organisation. They make observations and try to synthesise and speculate on the basis of what they actually see. Here are Ummarrah’s tentative conclusions:

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339 William Dampier, *A New Voyage around the World* (London: The Argonaut Press, 1927 [1697]), 312. It is also an interesting recasting of European debates such as those conducted by the Spanish in the fifteenth centuries about whether the Indians were barbaric or civilised. See J. Edward Chamberlain, *If This Is Your Land, Where Are Your Stories? Finding Common Ground* (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf 2003), 11-12.
They have families as we do, but they are not very important to them. Instead they leave such natural groupings to cling together in clans called ‘convicts’; ‘army’; ‘navy’, and so on. You can identify which group they belong to by the colour of their coverings. (61-62)

After this, in detached anthropological fashion, Ummarrah speculates about the relative roles of these groups and the settlers, and their respective power in the schema of num social order.

From the other side, the Europeans also consistently misperceive and misunderstand their Indigenous interlocutors. For his part, George Augustus Robinson is so deeply entrenched in eighteenth and nineteenth century European conceptions of the picturesque and exotic that, from the very first meeting, he incessantly fetishises Wooreddy’s second wife, Trugernanna, as a nubile and willing Island temptress.

George Augustus Robinson, destined by God to make the Aborigines the most interesting and profitable part of his life, leered at the forbidden fruits of the bare-breasted maiden who conjured up romantic visions of beautiful South Sea islands where missionaries laboured for the salvation of delightful souls (32).

Even after long acquaintance Robinson continues to see Trugernanna as a “child of nature, naked and free in her savage state” (149), and in heavily sentimental and Romanticised terms. It is these impulses which lead him to bestow new names on his “sable friends”, using exotic monikers such as the ridiculous “Count Alpha” (Wooreddy) and unlikely “Lalla Rookh” (Trugernanna). This idealisation stands at the opposite end of a spectrum of ways the European figures in the novel regard the Indigenous people, with most just as locked into their perceptions of the Aborigines they encounter as dirty and decidedly ignoble (a picture not infrequently shared by Robinson himself).340

340 Bernard Smith, in his Boyer Lectures of 1980, makes the acute observation that “at the heart of the Australian experience lay a sexual tragedy of enormous historical dimension in which love, mockery
Doctor Wooreddy reveals and investigates how misunderstandings of the other, far from being unusual, are the norm at the early stages of contact between Indigenous and settler peoples in Australia. And indeed, how could it be otherwise? Nancy Williams asks the question in a way which gets to the heart of the difficulty: “How does communication develop between people who begin with mutually unintelligible languages and whose cultural backgrounds are even more divergent than their languages?”

Above, I looked at how, in *Carpentaria*, Norm seeks to understand the very new and unfamiliar coast-line he lands on after the storm at sea on the basis of what he already knows. Gadamer calls this the “support of familiar and common understanding” which “makes possible the venture into the alien”. This has direct applicability to the situation of early contact for Wooreddy and his compatriots as well as for the Europeans who came to settle on Australia’s shores. In each of the encounters described above, Ummarrah and Wooreddy on their part, and Robinson on his, are shown to be attempting to understand very different others on the basis of what they already know: their embedded pre-judgements (their “prejudices”), and the cultural, linguistic and historical horizons provided by their tradition and their relation to it.

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and hatred battled for the mastery, and that tragedy was performed across the bodies of Aboriginal women.” Bernard Smith, *1980 Boyer Lectures: The Spectre of Truganini* (Sydney: ABC, 2001), 31. The prevalence of reports of rape in *Doctor Wooreddy* show it to be an absolutely normal way in which white men approach indigenous women, and the novel presents the devastating impact on the fabric of Indigenous people’s society it has. In Mangana’s family alone, his wife is raped and murdered, his two older daughters are abducted, and the first sighting Wooreddy has of Mangana’s youngest daughter, Trugemanna, is as she is being gang raped. Aboriginal women’s bodies do not just become a site of representing and enunciating competing European views of Indigenous peoples (as “children of nature” or savages), but a site upon which frontier violence is acted.


But what if the alien is just too different, and there is not enough familiarity to support any foray into the new? In its characterisation of the old man, Mangana, *Doctor Wooreddy* suggests that the trauma of contact, with the bewildering deaths by disease that frequently preceded any actual meeting, and the abrupt cataclysm and crisis in tribal traditions and customs that resulted, was for many, simply too overwhelming. For Mangana, what occurs is totally chaotic and outside the realm of understandability. The world ceases to make sense in the established ways of customary knowledge, and the utter fragmentation of familiar ways of experiencing the world does not enable any platform from which to understand the seemingly inexplicable behaviour of the Europeans. Mangana has nothing to compare this new situation to, and the novel states his quandary clearly: “The old ways and customs were dead or dying and without this underlying stratum things had little meaning ... the times had changed and never would the old ways prevail again” (71). New understandings to bridge over the enormous gap between the established, traditional forms of behaviour, and the demands of the new situation are desperately and quickly required, but these come too late for Mangana. His response is a seemingly inevitable movement toward bewildered madness and death.

Mangana is not alone in his inability to cope. The cataclysmic situation *Doctor Wooreddy* details is one whose horrors remain incredibly difficult to comprehend. It represents the absolute annihilation of Wooreddy’s tribal people on Bruny Island and most of the diverse peoples of mainland Tasmania during the early 1800s. After Mangana’s death, Wooreddy, like the others who remain are removed to Flinders Island with its rampant disease and misery, and there they are subjected to G.A. Robinson’s attempts to Christianise them, as he forbids them to practice their traditional forms of life.
Unlike Mangana and so many others, Wooreddy survives. It appears that he is in large part capable of surviving because the events of his life corroborate his conviction that the world is ending so perfectly that the upheavals brought by the num, while traumatic and novel, are not totally beyond his capacity to assess and integrate. But this raises a problem; namely, if it is the support of the familiar which allows the venture into the alien, then the converse is also the case: the alien is only ever revealed through engaging the pre-conceptions and prejudices we already possess. Wooreddy’s prior conviction that the world is ending, is part of the set of prejudices through which his encounters with the invading Europeans are filtered, and their actions confirm his beliefs. But doesn’t this create a self-referential circle, where the necessary support of the familiar in any meeting with the strange actually reconfirms and reinforces the prejudices through which we encounter the other in the first place? The comic satire of the novel effectively plays on this idea: all the events of Wooreddy’s life confirm rather than disprove the apocalyptic idea of the world’s fate he develops as a youth.

Wooreddy’s seeming inability to break out of the self-confirming circle of his beliefs is the problem Gadamer acknowledges in relation to our relation to the foremeanings through which we approach anything. This problem is: “how can our misunderstandings ... be perceived at all if there is nothing to contradict them?” (GW1 273/ TM 268) Gadamer argues that misunderstandings only show up as such when they are met by enough contradictions which force one into a process of revision and reflection. This is what eventually happens to Wooreddy, in a scene with Waau, an Indigenous elder from a tribe on the Australian mainland (to be discussed below). It is also what happens as Wooreddy and Ummarah come to appreciate that their earlier impressions of the Europeans were misunderstandings.
Although their culture is for the Indigenous characters extremely difficult to engage with, throughout much of the novel they continue to speculate about who the *num* are, and continue to develop their impressions and revise misunderstandings as they become apparent. When Ummarrah and Wooreddy are discussing whether the *num* are savage or human by interrogating their language and social customs, this builds on still-earlier speculations about whether the *num* are the ghosts of their ancestors or whether they are the ghosts of their enemies.

In all this it is clear that misunderstanding is not just a negative case of understanding, but a major possibility inherent in any anticipation of meaning. Whatever the quality of the frequently-noted misunderstandings involved in the contact situation, these misunderstandings have a role to play. The possibility of misunderstanding, in fact appears to be necessary for any understanding to occur. Misunderstanding, as Walter Veit writes, is expressive of the liminal, in-between moment when something or someone is between strangeness and familiarity.\(^{343}\)

Taken in this way, misunderstandings and misapprehensions are immensely productive, and may, as detailed above, over time form part of the platform from which "better" (i.e. less contradictory) understandings are produced. This introduces the element of falsifiability in hermeneutic experience; where "[a]n interpretation becomes false whenever the Sache [subject-matter or matter under consideration] breaks through in conversation to show itself other than it first presented itself."\(^{344}\)

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Three ways one encounters others

All the above indicates one of the common possibilities which occur in the contact between the horizon of the self and that of another, especially when the distances between them are great: misunderstanding. Misunderstanding is, in this sense, productive. It overcomes total non-communication, and keeps the possibility open for future revisions of one’s understanding.

I’d now like to broaden this discussion to look at Doctor Wooreddy’s presentation of a variety of relations we may have with others. An “other”, generally speaking, is someone or something which presents a different perspective to one’s self. What is necessary, Gadamer suggests, is a “space of difference” between the I and the other where there can be “a real questioning and conversation.” He writes:

The otherness of the other is constituted by the differences in prejudices that form the horizon of the other with respect to my prejudices, i.e. my horizon. In order to call a prejudice into question one requires a different perspective as radical as the ‘depth’ of the prejudice to be questioned.

Thus the other presents from the outset something that can potentially change me.

Even before she opens her mouth to speak, “[i]t is the other, who breaks my I-centeredness, by presenting me something to understand.”

A “space of difference” can be presented by a person, a text, or even, Gadamer suggests, “thinking to oneself” where one projects an other to speak against oneself.

In this chapter the “others” I will discuss are the human characters in Doctor Wooreddy, though, interestingly, Wooreddy and his people have a richer

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346 Ibid.

understanding of language-possessing others than their European counterparts: linguistic others include animals, and there is also conjecture that trees and the wind have language, too (21).

Both the societies of Indigenous peoples and Europeans are profoundly changed through the encounters Doctor Wooreddy relates. Yet there are adequate and inadequate ways of relating to the other’s speaking, and most changes in Doctor Wooreddy result from situations of vastly unequal power in encounters with others which are forced. In what follows I will use examples from Doctor Wooreddy to illustrate the three major ways Gadamer suggests we relate to others in Truth and Method.348

The first way of relating to another is what amounts to a one-sided dialogue. This is a relationship “that tries to discover typical behaviour in one’s fellowmen and can make predictions” (GW1 364/ TM 358). Here, the other is “reduced to an object within empirical science”, and is subsumed as an example of a universal rule which the I has previously discovered. A prime example of this is the eugenicist “breeding” programme of the early twentieth century designed to control the Indigenous population initiated by A.O. Neville in Western Australia depicted in Kim Scott’s Benang (discussed in Chapter Four). In Doctor Wooreddy it is the attitude of Robinson when he attempts to learn some words of Indigenous languages with the

348 This occurs in Gadamer’s discussion of one’s relationship to tradition and texts from the past, and is couched in the language of the relationship between the I and the Thou (see GW1 364-367/ TM 358-361). Gadamer (although he does not explicitly acknowledge this) adapts Martin Buber’s influential investigation of the I-Thou relationship. In my reading of these passages I follow closely the reasoning of Lawrence K. Schmidt in his essay “Respecting Others: the hermeneutic virtue.” Gadamer’s discussion centres on a face-to-face encounter, but keep in mind that dialogue is a model for relating to written texts for Gadamer (this section of Truth and Method details possible ways of relating to the past) since in both writing and in speech we are concerned with understanding what is said. See also Risser’s extended discussion in Risser, Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other: Re-Reading Gadamer’s Philosophical Hermeneutics, 177-78; and the whole chapter entitled “The Voice of the Text”.

sole purpose of Christianising his Indigenous interlocutors and bringing them under his sway. It is also Robinson’s response during his first contact with the Indigenous peoples of the West Coast Nations. At the close of a tense initial meeting where Wooreddy and Trugernanna intervene to assist, Robinson pins ribbons and medals onto the men’s chests. After this confusing flurry, as they leave Robinson is consumed by the happy thought of “capturing such unique specimens” (93). In all these cases, the other is related to the self only with the intent of bringing him or her under control. In this kind of relationship there is no space for the recognition of any kind of difference the other person may pose.

The second kind of relationship between the I and Thou seems more promising. The I recognises the other as distinct, yet in spite of this, the relationship still retains the form of self-relatedness. This occurs because although I acknowledge that the other is capable of presenting his or her own opinions, I remain in a superior position, claiming to know the other from his or her position. It is the sense of saying to another: “I know exactly how you feel and what you think”, but listening to what he or she says only in order to confirm these pre-fixed ideas. And this takes away any real difference the other may pose. “In understanding the other,” Gadamer notes, “to claim to know him, robs him of any legitimacy for his claims” (*GW* 366/ *TM* 360).

The Indigenous academic and statesman Michael Dodson puts it more forcefully in an Australian context:

> Indigenous peoples have rarely come into a genuine relationship with non-Indigenous peoples, because a relationship requires two, not just one and its mirror. Our subjectivities, our aspirations, our ways of seeing and our languages have
largely been excluded from the equation, as the colonising culture plays with itself.\textsuperscript{349}

What ensues in such a situation can only be a struggle for recognition, since although the other has nominally been recognised as "different" he or she is then immediately forced either to comply with one's own preconceptions about what this difference entails, or combated and overcome.\textsuperscript{350}

Now this, unsurprisingly, is the primary mode of encountering others which underpins most white-indigenous relations in \textit{Doctor Wooreddy}. The convicts and colonists "know" that Aborigines are savage, primitive, warlike, and - most commonly - childlike. Much of the novel's satire is directed toward these forms of the colonising culture's unshaken confidence that they have accurately assessed Aboriginal people. Scenes in which this occurs are lavishly described, like when the overseer Willis and Robinson and are sitting inside a house, cosily dissect the "problems of conciliating" with the recalcitrant Indigenous people, while the people with whom they apparently want to conciliate are left shivering outside in the frost (111). Such scenes dramatically portray the obvious inability of the Europeans to consider the Indigenous people they encountered to be significant others with complex, though different, horizons. Wooreddy voices just this thought to Ummarrah just before the latter is hung; "[y]ou know, they don't even believe that we can speak like this or choose our own destiny" (204).

\textsuperscript{349} Michael Dodson, "The End in the Beginning: re (de) finding Aboriginality," 37.

\textsuperscript{350} James Risser compares this level of understanding the other to "the inauthentic dialectical relationship in the quest for mutual recognition that characterizes the master-slave relationship in Hegel's \textit{Phenomenology}. That is to say, it is a level that lacks the genuine reciprocity of mutual recognition." Risser, \textit{Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other: Re-Reading Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics}, 93.
The tragedy of the novel, which reflects the historical tragedy on which it is based, is that in Australia’s early contact period both sides have limited ability to engage with the strangeness of the other, although many of the Indigenous people quickly learn to accommodate these new occupants of their lands. The Europeans in particular remain content with their misunderstandings and find little to challenge the embedded prejudices through which they approach their Aboriginal counterparts, and so their self-perceptions remain intact and unthreatened in their encounter with Indigenous Australia.

This leads us to the third relationship Gadamer discusses in *Truth and Method*, the one he refers to as properly hermeneutic. Here, the other is recognised as an equal other *who says something to me*, to which I must listen. Not only must I take the other seriously as having something potentially meaningful and coherent to say, but I even must be self-critical when listening to the other. The other must also be free to disagree with me: “Openness to the other, then, involves recognising that I myself must accept some things that are against me, even though no one else forces me to do so” (*GWJ* 367/ *TM* 361). Lawrence Schmidt suggests that Gadamer’s invocation of Plato’s “*eumeneis elenchos*” or “friendly questioning” can lead us in the direction this points. “Friendly questioning” involves not just trying to win the argument by the force of one’s superior reasoning but the opposite: to strengthen the other’s case so that “what the other person has to say becomes illuminating.”³⁵¹ Yet while also strengthening the other’s case so that its strengths can become clearer, this also, just as importantly, does not entail simply adopting the other’s belief as my own. “[J]ust as in a conversation, when we have discovered the standpoint and horizon of the

³⁵¹ See Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Reply to Jacques Derrida,” 55. Gadamer rejects the idea that this is an appeal to ethics. He sees it, rather, as a necessary attitude one must take in order to understand, since one can be moral or immoral and still try to understand another.
other person, his ideas become intelligible, without our necessarily having to agree with him," Gadamer writes (GW I 274/ TM 269).

To make the other’s case as strong as possible, Gadamer suggests that we need, at the outset, to attribute coherence and truth to what they are saying: this is the Vorgriff der Vollkommenheit or foreconception of completeness which was discussed above, and in the section on the hermeneutic circle in Chapter Five. While I may ultimately decide that what is spoken or written is incoherent or false, if there is no prior conception that the other is possibly speaking a truth and an initial notion of the text (or other) as a coherent whole, it is difficult to see how one would establish whether inconsistency arises as a result of one’s interpretation of the text or is, indeed, part of the text itself. This presupposition thus appears to be required if the other is to make any real sense to us at all, and if misunderstandings are to be identified (since they fail in coherency or “completeness” at some point). This is what Gadamer calls the “good will” to understand.

In Doctor Wooreddy there are rare moments when this occurs. I described one above, as an example of how misunderstandings can be replaced by better understandings, in Ummarrah’s and Wooreddy’s repeated discussions about who or what the num are. Unlike the satisfaction of Robinson with his static, idealised picture of “his savages”, Wooreddy and Ummarah return again and again to the question of the ghosts or num. The “dialogue” they engage in with the Europeans is an inquiry in which they seek to attribute proper use of language (the use of correct forms of address and honorifics), and moral actions and behaviours to the

352 See Warnke, Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason, 83. Deconstructionist critics argue that such a presupposition overlooks the inconsistencies and incoherences of any text, but Warnke reminds us that, even for such deconstructivist readings, a sense of coherence is required in order to gauge what is incoherent.

Europeans: although the Europeans appear to be brutes they treat them as cultured actors, and, over time, their views of what the *num* are change.

The most acute instance of this third, hermeneutic form of relating to another in the novel is Wooreddy’s relationship with Waau, an Indigenous leader from a tribe on the mainland, and it is significant because it shows just how multi-layered the contact zone was. Not only were Indigenous people and Europeans coming into close contact for the first time, at this time there was also unprecedented closer contact *between* Indigenous groups, whose languages, food, beliefs, cosmology, clothing styles and practices often differed greatly.

Further, Wooreddy’s encounter with Waau shows how, as one comes up against a horizon which presents a different standpoint to one’s own, that the process of comparison it sets into play can facilitate a process of self-discovery, transformation and transfiguration.235 When he meets Waau, Wooreddy is confronted by something new: here is someone he respects, whose views differ to his own, and who has a distinct but powerful means of conceiving the nature of the cosmos. Waau takes Wooreddy to a sacred cave where stalactites and stalagmites are slowly inching, over the long, slow centuries, towards one another, and here Wooreddy becomes aware of limits to his personal philosophy and outlook, based as these are on a conviction about the antagonism between opposed forces in the world. In a flash of insight and

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235 An example of how this can inform written storytelling can be found in “(Re)membering in the Contact Zone: Telling, and Listening to, a Massacre Story,” where Margaret Somerville offers a reflective response in discussing how her understanding of Red Rock in Gumbaingirr territory on the mid northern coast of New South Wales changed as she engaged repeatedly with the elder Tony Perkins. Perkins acted as both a representative of the Yarrawarra Aboriginal Corporation and a keeper of the stories of his grandmother who witnessed a massacre there as a young child. Margaret Somerville and Tony Perkins, “(Re)Membering in the Contact Zone: Telling, and Listening to, a Massacre Story,” *Altitude* 6. The critically much-discussed *Gularabulu* which seeks to textually preserve the dialogue between the story-teller and the listener who seeks to understand is another (slightly problematic) instance of this. Roe and Muecke, *Gularabulu: Stories from the West Kimberley*. 
enlightenment he comes to see that there is, in fact, a higher union behind appearances (197), which corrects (or expands) his earlier beliefs. He suddenly comes to see these earlier convictions as one-sided: that they have emphasised the power of the negative and evil force of the sea, Ria Warrawah, encouraged an obsession with death, and fostered his fixation on what the sea brought – the European ships. He comes to think that “all that he had believed, the scheme that had supported his life, had been but part of the truth” (196). Wooreddy experiences a moment of intense spirituality in the cave which offers a point of contrast with his own established beliefs, and which is facilitated by meeting Waau and his tribal people, in an area still relatively uninhabited by the invaders, and who still live largely intact, custom-based lives.

Tired, old and broken, Wooreddy dies soon after this spiritual epiphany, which reorientates how he thinks about the nature of the world and his life. In principle, though, as Chapter Five examined in the workings of Wirkungsgeschichte, or effective-history, this process continues, as his new understanding forms the platform which enables subsequent understandings to occur.

The process Wooreddy undergoes is akin to Harley’s in Benang (discussed in Chapter Four), who similarly – but much more slowly – becomes aware of some of his taken-for-granted assumptions and prejudices through the encounter with the “other” (in Benang, this is the horizons of the past), and is transformed in the prologued engagement this sets in play.

Like Scott’s novel, with respect to understanding the voices of Australia’s past, Mudrooroo’s novel itself plays with different ways of understanding the other. Through its engagement in a critical dialogue with the events of the historical past,
and with previous interpretations of these events, *Doctor Wooreddy* gives utterance and novelistic life to the marginalised voices of Indigenous Tasmanians. It is quite significant that Truganini, who is a seminal yet shadowy emblematic figure in broader public consciousness, lamented in story and song for over a hundred years as “the Last Tasmanian” is not the central Indigenous character in this novel.\(^{355}\) Neither is Trugernanna a particularly accessible figure. Moving Truganini away from centre stage has the effect of leading us to be aware that historical understanding, like understanding others, can take the second form of understanding others described by Gadamer: we think we understand the other (in this case, the past), but cannot hear from it anything other than our own projections, so our misunderstandings remain intact. Having Truganini as a minor character illuminates the Romantic echoes of the potent idea of “the last Tasmanian” that are frequently (despite the fact that Indigenous Tasmanians are flourishing) still associated with her. It acts to displace the sense that this is a story from Australia’s past whose meaning (and outcome) is already well-known. It shows us what it is like to be attentive when listening to the other – here, the past – with an openness to hearing different stories which are told from different perspectives.

By doing all these things, Mudrooroo’s novel reveals that understanding what happened in the early contact and colonial situation in Tasmania is an ongoing activity. It thus situates the misunderstandings of the frontier, through which Europeans and Indigenous people first approached the other, as having palpable and

\(^{355}\) There are numerous paintings and sketches of Truganini, as well as major historical studies. In terms of imaginative engagements, there are films, songs (such as Midnight Oil’s *Truganini*), and literally dozens of writings spanning over a century, including novels, poetry, and criticism. The following is a short list of novels, where Wooreddy is often a minor figure. These include Hume Nisbet, *The Savage Queen: A Romance of the Natives of Van Dieman’s Land* (1891); Mrs W. I. Thrower, *Younah: A Tasmanian Aboriginal Romance of the Cataract Gorge* (1893); Nancy Cato and Vivienne Rae-Ellis, *Queen Trucanini* (1976); Robert Drewe, *The Savage Crows* (1976); J. P. Roberts, *Jack of Cape Grim: A Victorian Adventure* (1986).
ongoing effects and relevance for present ways Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples see and conceive each other. The challenge and the question the *Doctor Wookorddy* poses to its readers is how to apply this awareness to a fuller understanding of Australia’s present, in a way to redirect the future.

**Bernasconi’s criticism of Gadamer’s account of understanding the other**

In this and previous chapters, I have proposed that philosophical hermeneutics provides fruitful insights to the reading of literary texts by Indigenous Australians. I have repeatedly talked about “hermeneutic openness,” the attitude that an appreciation of the situated, finite and interpretive nature of understanding fosters. This is one of attentiveness to the other, what they say, and the space of difference they present, both because what they say may be different to the meanings I (necessarily) initially project onto them and it is only through attentiveness that I will realise this, and because what they say may challenge my own self-understanding, by presenting my own horizon and prejudices in a different light.

This, as I discuss in the Conclusion, I believe is a profoundly interesting and important way of conceiving the engagement and possible relationship between non-Indigenous readers and texts by Indigenous Australians. But, as other-orientated, as self-reflective, and as sensitive as Gadamer’s account might be, some scholars still have reservations.

The major criticism of Gadamer’s account of the third, hermeneutic kind of engagement with another – the attitude of hermeneutic openness – is contained in Robert Bernasconi’s question about how Gadamer’s hermeneutics can deal with the claim, made by someone who is currently oppressed, that “you don’t know what I’m
talking about.” Bernasconi is concerned that Gadamer’s hermeneutic account may still may be deaf to the kind of alterity which announces: “You cannot be yourself and understand me.” In this statement the I called upon to change, but there is, simultaneously, an acknowledgement that this change will not or cannot take place. To claim that one does, in fact, know what the other person is talking about would be an instance of the second kind of relation to the other detailed above, and while a hermeneutically aware or hermeneutically open person would not make this claim, he or she would still, Bernasconi notes, be committed to the positive idea of the possibility of an ultimate agreement or understanding, and it is precisely this possibility that is being refused. This denies that there is a common language that “is established in advance in a common accord which unites us from the outset”, as well as denying that a common language can, in fact, ever be formed. It thus involves a questioning of “whether the otherness of the other is respected in the fusion of horizons and in the coming to be in agreement at the end of a specific conversation.”

Here, Bernasconi expresses a residual uneasiness about Gadamer’s account of the other: doesn’t ultimately talk of a “fusion” of horizons, and the coming together in agreement in creating a “common language” through dialogical engagement, at some point tend toward appropriation, with one side having to give way (give up its alterity)? Isn’t it also the case that the contemporary problem, because of the effects of modernity, and more recently, the processes of globalisation, is precisely that we cannot assume the support of common languages or traditions for us and the people with whom we are engaging? Thus, the support of tradition through which new

forms of engagement can be forged, on which Gadamer's hermeneutics is based, is perhaps not capable of performing the job of contingent grounding he wants it to. These are important queries. To see how an answer to them might be possible, Lawrence Schmidt, I think correctly, focuses on the provisionality and incompletion expressed in Gadamer's account of the experience of meaning – this is an element I have repeatedly highlighted throughout this thesis. Hermeneutic experience, for Gadamer, decidedly does not move toward a Hegelian dialectical synthesis: the I does not come to understand itself better through the appropriation of the other. Engagement is not a way of making the other the same as myself, because it is limited to whatever is being discussed (the Sache or “subject matter” can be anything). And, by being confronted by another horizon through this discussion it is the I who is up for question, with a “continually recurring temptation to engage oneself in something or to become involved with someone. But that means to expose oneself and to risk oneself ... it exposes oneself to one’s own doubt as well as to the rejoinder of the other.”

Further, and crucially, we need to recall that the fusion of horizons never arrives at a final or definitive answer for either the I or the other about the subject matter under discussion, rather both recognise their finitude, no matter whose or what prejudice is found to be correct. Gadamer writes that “hermeneutic experience is always a correction of one’s previous understanding ... [so] its result, the fusion of horizons, is always limited and incomplete” (GW1 364/ TM 357). The resting point represented and manifested by the fusion of horizons is limited since “there is always a potentiality for being other [Andersseins] that lies beyond every coming to

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agreement about what is common.” Now this does not erase the other’s difference, but emphasises that even in the integrative movement of coming to agreement in a conversation, there is potential discord, and one should never presume to “know” the other or how she will respond. Some differences have been brought to the table of conversation between speakers from two different horizons (whether these are two people or a text and its interpreter), but there is an overwhelming range of other differences which have not. Accordingly, Gadamer’s discussion of the possibility of “coming to agreement about a subject matter” (which hermeneutic openness assumes), presents a far more limited, provisional, and circumspect picture of what “agreement” is than Bernasconi’s characterisation of the issue.

Admittedly, Gadamer’s talk about needing to assume a common language, on the basis of which a common language can explicitly be formed (see above, and Chapter Three), sounds problematic. Again, Gadamer’s point, I believe, is more subtle than the assimilative sameness implied in the idea of needing a “common language,” and the sense of unity in the idea of creating a common language. What the idea of necessarily assuming some kind of “common language” implies, is that even where people are very different – as were those involved in the initial encounters in the contact zone – we share some similarities, even though, as the misunderstandings of the contact situation show, these may be very difficult to identify. It is Ummarrah’s and Wooreddy’s conviction that the num, even if they are ghosts or animals, have some kind of language and therefore some kind of customs, even if those languages and customs differ, which leads them to further engagement: and this engagement is where explicitly-forged common languages may be created. The contemporary

world, in which it is less and less possible to assume that one has a shared or common language and tradition with one’s interlocutors, is, in this regard like the contact zone represented in *Doctor Wooreddy*: it makes creating common ground, and engagement which builds bridges of understanding a more evident and urgent problem.

To create this “common language” through the conversation with another, whether it is a text or a person which confronts me, though, requires constant and reiterated struggle. In the fusion of horizons between the Indigenous people of *Doctor Wooreddy* and the Europeans, a shared, common language was only intermittently sought: Robinson’s sporadic interest in Indigenous languages is rare among the Europeans, and mostly the Indigenous characters are forced to take on the language of the invaders in order to communicate.

But, to take an ideal case, even if both sides engage with a hermeneutic attitude of openness toward understanding, Gadamer admits that the fusion of horizons may very well result in failure. There is no guarantee that a common language will, in fact, be formed through hermeneutic engagement. Another may pose a challenge to me without any understanding occurring. It may, for instance, be someone speaking a language I cannot comprehend, or it may well be the claims of the oppressed saying “you don’t know what I’m talking about”. Schmidt suggests that, although philosophical hermeneutics is committed to the possibility of provisional agreement or understanding in the fusion of horizons, that again, here, it is the finitude of any possible understanding we may form, and the need to keep engaging further, which are stressed. To the extent that the claim that “you don’t know what I’m talking about” enters language and is thought about, it does not remain on a non-linguistic level, and so *something* is understood. And, when confronted with another speaking
a foreign language, at the very least I may recognise that there is another person there, that they are speaking, and that they are speaking to me, even if I do not understand the content. In such situations the hermeneutically aware person will at least make an effort, perhaps by acting differently or trying different means of communication. To do so at least keeps the possibility of coming to an understanding alive. This is the possibility of a limited and finite future understanding, rather than any idea of "ultimate agreement", and it exists against the alternative of lapsing back into one of the two other ways of relating to others Gadamer describes: that of trying to control the other, or relating to the other only insofar as they confirm the preconceptions about them I already hold.

For these reasons, to refer to a fusion of horizons between texts by Indigenous Australians and non-Indigenous readers, is not necessarily going to result in a cosy translation or appropriation of Indigenous people's experience, with the erasure or overcoming of difference to fit these into non-Indigenous explanatory matrices. In earlier chapters I explored the need to contextualise and situate Indigenous creative practices in such a way that they reflect upon literary questions and the common ways non-Indigenous readers approach texts, as a means of aiding the creation of a "common language" which recognises that the engagement between the two will necessarily result in a transformed understanding of literature. In this Chapter, the three novels that I have looked at all offer reminders of the immense barriers and the difficulties of negotiating common ground between Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspectives. And, such explorations, for all the difficulties they represent, are invaluable as part of the present creation of common ground. For non-Indigenous

readers, hermeneutically engaging with Indigenous Australian texts means being engaged in a conversation that facilitates and promotes the possibility of intercultural understanding.

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Throughout this thesis the fusion of horizons has been a recurrent theme. In this final chapter I have been discussing representations of shifting, partially overlapping and interdependent, yet conflicting cultural horizons in three recent novels. I have looked at what occurs when distinct horizons “fuse” or meet and suggested that often when two very different horizons come into contact, misunderstanding is a common result.

When ongoing contact is established, there are two possibilities. The first entails stopping at the level of misunderstanding by trying to predict and control the other as a kind of object (the first way we may relate to another) or refusing to acknowledge that the other may say and do things that are different to the preconceptions I have about him or her (the second form of relation). Alternatively one can initiate or engage in a dialogue which may set up occasions of better, less inconsistent forms of understanding, through being attentive to what the “other” says. This has a number of suggestive resonances for the reader’s engagement with a text and why engaging with texts by Indigenous Australians is important for non-Indigenous readers. It is these I will look at in the concluding remarks which follow, as I seek to draw together the major threads of the previous pages.
CONCLUSION

This thesis has been an investigation into the value of reading literature. One of my un-argued assumptions is that individuals and societies derive real value from encountering differences. And reading literature is quintessentially an encounter with difference. It is with the problem of bridging the chasm of understanding between the reader and the distinct worlds presented in and by works of literature that this thesis has been concerned.

My aim has been three-fold. First, at the most basic level, my objective was to illuminate Indigenous Australian texts through literary analysis, and offer textual exegesis and interpretation of a variety of works. Reciprocally, my aim was to test the limitations of this literary analysis: to ask how Indigenous Australian texts challenge the relevance of mainstream literary analysis and reveal some of its embedded assumptions. To achieve this I investigated a number of common issues in literary study, such as: the role of the author; the differences between the spoken and written word; and translation. This led to my third aim. By using the example of
Indigenous texts, I have attempted to outline and demonstrate the practical application of hermeneutic insights by developing an extended account of how new understandings may be forged through the fusion of horizons. Here, I have been concerned with how hermeneutic engagement fosters the development of self-understanding.

How does this occur? One of Gadamer’s great insights is that a text’s meaning is only ever actualised through the mediation of the interpreter. Reading is an activity which brings the particular historical and cultural horizon of the reader and that of the text into a relation with one another, and this has important consequences for any understanding. The hermeneutic idea of horizons “fusing” describes the liminal space this relationship creates, which is a space between familiarity and strangeness. Literary engagement, thus, may foster greater self-understanding as one’s own horizon becomes situated relative to another, and appears in a new way. It is through the new perspective offered by the contents of a different horizon that one becomes aware, and perhaps critical, of previously taken-for-granted assumptions and prejudices, in the negotiation of fresh understandings.

Literature, then, is able to facilitate a reflection on one’s self, and this, by extension, is what all humanities study cultivates. Geoffrey Harpham puts it in the following way: “the humanities have the text as their object, humanity as their subject, and self-understanding as their purpose.”360 Gadamer similarly writes that “[k]nowledge in the human sciences always has something of self-knowledge about it.”361 Self-

knowledge, in this context, means the experience gained through being confronted by something, being provoked in a way that leads us beyond ourselves.

In the previous pages I have outlined how this may occur through the non-Indigenous reader’s engagement with texts by Indigenous Australians. I have spent so much time developing this account, because I believe it to be an important, though under-examined, consequence of literary engagement, and one which provides a suggestive model for broader processes of intercultural engagement, such as for those in Australia who are interested in reconciliation between its Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.

While literary engagement may facilitate self-reflection and renewed and altered self-understanding, however, it is important not to overstate this claim or its potential benefits. Geoffrey Harpham cautions against going progressing from the more circumspect idea that literary engagement may aid processes of self-knowledge as one comes up against foreign horizons, to the larger belief that we necessarily become better or more moral people as a result of literary engagement (or through any other kind of engagement with alternate horizons), because this is obviously not the case.

Gadamer helps us see why this is so. In his account of the three different ways we relate to others (considered in Chapter Six), there are two common forms of relating to others in which I am not in a situation to learn anything: all I want is either to

fully what this self-understanding is, and how it relates to the development of different forms of community, and to practical, situated activity as constitutive of those communities. He writes in Truth and Method that the “human sciences ... are “moral sciences”. Their object is man and what he knows of himself. But he knows himself as an acting being, and this kind of knowledge of himself does not seek to establish what is. An active being, rather, is concerned with what is not always the same but can also be different. In it he can discover the point at which he has to act. The purpose of his knowledge is to govern his action.” (TM 314/ GWI 319-320) See also Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Practical Philosophy as a Model of the Human Sciences,” Research in Phenomenology 9 (1979).
control the other, or for the other to confirm my previous expectations. When these relations hold between a reader and a text, one cannot speak of new unfolding of meanings, or increased self-understanding occurring as a result of an engagement with the text.

It is only Gadamer's third form of relating to others and to texts – "hermeneutic openness" – that describes a process of increasing self-understanding. Hermeneutic openness is where I place myself in a position from the outset to listen to, and potentially learn from, the other. This occurs by according worth and priority to the other's voice, including potentially contrary or radically different claims. Often this involves as little as recognising that their position is coherent. It is this attitude, I have suggested, which provides important insights into the specific subject-matter of this thesis: how non-Indigenous readers can engage with texts by Indigenous Australians. The importance of hermeneutic openness, unlike the other two kinds of relationship, is that it involves and engages the interpreter, who does not relate to the text merely as a spectator or objective onlooker. Critically, it folds the questions asked by literary texts back onto the interpreter: it is the reader who is being questioned, and the limits of his or her horizons which are being probed. In seeking to understand, the reader becomes aware of similarities and differences between what the texts say and the reader's own understandings. For non-Indigenous readers, engaging with texts by Indigenous Australians means encountering different horizons, which shed a different light on the situation, and which enable the reader to see the subject matter anew, with "new eyes" as it were. This is a transformative process, since through becoming aware of (some of) one's prejudices and assessing them, one has developed a richer and more nuanced understanding of the issues.
involved, and is then in a better position to decide about whether, and how, to change one's life.

Through such engagement, the reader's own senses of certainty are risked by exposing one's prejudices to the input and challenge posed to them by the contents of other horizons.\footnote{Georgia Warnke is one of the commentators on Gadamer who considers thinking that the other or the text knows something we don't as a moral phenomenon (thus relating ethics and hermeneutics) in her article "Literature, Law, and Morality," in Bruce Krajewski, ed., \textit{Gadamer's Repercussions: Reconsidering Philosophical Hermeneutics} (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2004), 82-102.} This is vitally important, because it suggests how reading texts by Indigenous Australians with an attitude of hermeneutic openness provides an occasion for non-Indigenous readers to read and listen to what Indigenous people say in a way that reflects upon the reader's horizons, which may shake the dominance, self-certainty and complacency that all-too often plagues non-Indigenous views of Australian realities.

Further, the attitude of hermeneutic openness, like the specific, limited, event-like nature of the fusion of horizons, acknowledges that I may have misunderstood what is going on, or may not be really hearing what the other or the text is saying, and so always need to keep listening. It also acknowledges that this is a process which is never finished. Another interpretation, another reading from a different historically or socially situated perspective, engaging and exposing prejudices and prejudgments in a distinct way, and casting fresh light on the text, can always occur. When Gadamer talks of cultivating "hermeneutic openness", the attitude he is describing is one which is attentive to the possibilities of difference which are inscribed in every situation.

It seems to me that there is great value in fostering and encouraging the attitude of continued openness to the possibilities of the other interlocutor in the hermeneutic
exchange. In listening to Indigenous voices, it means that non-Indigenous readers involve themselves in a reciprocal process where meaning is negotiated in the to and fro of an unfolding dialogue, with the recognition that this is necessarily a transformative process. This does not erase difference, but attempts to forge bridges of understanding. Such an attitude ultimately goes beyond reading literary texts into the everyday life-worlds we all inhabit, where, in an increasingly globalised world we meet up with difference again and again, and sometimes these differences appear vast, despite the elements of commonality and interdependence we share with others. It is my belief that the attitude of hermeneutic openness that Gadamer’s work encourages, is an attitude which may well help build the bridges necessary in Australia for better intercultural engagements between its Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.
The Honey-Ant Men's Love Song

1. He departed with thoughts of home,
   He departed with thoughts of home,
   He departed towards another place.

2. He rose to go,
   Joyfully he went,
   Sank down when he was tired.

3. Departed, he went,
   Made ready to go,
   Camped at the next place.

4. He called out to his host,
   Wind whistled at dawn.

5. Women passed by on business,
   All stayed close together,
   Mindful of their business.

6. He admired their painting stick,
   How strong and true they painted.

7. Red Bird Messenger
   Aroused a woman struck by magic.
   They travelled on, the woman aroused.

8. She followed a blue butterfly
   Looking out from a flower.
Yurrampi Yilpinji

1. Wurnata pardakijana,
   Wurnata pardakijana,
   Wurnata winpirriyana,

2. Wirangku-wirang,
   Kinirrilanu,
   Mardijalaridikirri.

3. Wurnatijingka,
   Lardajilmarrra larda,
   Larrinipini.

4. Wirrpijangka,
   Warlpajanangka.

5. Ngawilyipilyi larrana,
   Mayapirrkanata,
   Ngarraljaparra larrana.

6. Mijipi jarrana,
   Makurrungu danarra.

7. Manitirripi-tirrpi,
   Pirrinyurrpi lininyurrpi.
   Mirrarirra pirrinyurrpi.

8. Mitnilyapi-lyapi
   Mungkarrku parrku.
   *The singing of verse 8 affects the shirt of the singer if the shirt is coloured or patterned. (Verse 14 – below – refers to a white butterfly and affects a white shirt.)*
   *The shirt is imbued with power which in turn affects the woman to whom the power is directed. The woman follows a blue (or white) butterfly which leads her to the affected shirt. When she sees it she will be irresistibly attracted to the owner of the shirt.*
9. Abdomen swollen, Honey-ant emerged from a hole,
    Went well satisfied,
    With eggs laid.

10. Devil came with evil intent
    Came fast, directly.

11. Sacred objects came close,
    Sacred objects, like dog ears.

12. He looked different, rib-bones,
    Walked a special way.

13. He followed her tracks,
    Followed her tracks where they led,
    Watching intently.

14. She followed a white butterfly,
    Which travelled fast,
    The white butterfly
    Travelled fast.

15. Red Bird Messenger
    Aroused her, as Honey-Ant approached
    Walking slowly, the woman aroused.
Yanupa mankinja,  
Larritingi.

10. Mawilpawilpa lananapana  
Makarta-karta, lananapana.  
In verse 10 Honey-Ant saw a devil approaching the women’s ceremony. It is believed that devils are attracted to ceremonies because the participants are in a state of spiritual vulnerability.

11. Lima pirrintalpirri,  
Lima, marlikitarli.  
The sacred objects referred to in verse 11 are string crosses (sticks bound together at right-angles to each other in the form of a cross, with hair-string threaded diagonally between adjacent arms of the cross spiralling in a single direction – clockwise or counterclockwise – from the centre of the cross outward) which the ceremonial actor wears on each side of the head, making the crosses look like dog’s ears. Small string crosses worn in such a manner are used in men’s yilpinji ceremony.

12. Malkara, ngapanja,  
Kayirrpilanu.  
In verse 12 a woman notices that the man who has performed yilpinji for her, looks and walks differently, and she guesses why. They reference to rib-bone seems merely to be a detail of the man’s appearance, although rib-bones are often highlighted in Warlpiri ceremonial designs.

13. Makiwi nyampa,  
Makulpa dirrpa,  
Rrayulpa-rralyu.

14. Mawatilarti,  
Lanupa yanu,  
Pirlkirrimpirlki  
Lanupa yanu.

15. Manitirrpi-tirrpila  
Dintinila ralpilparlpi,  
Lamurru-lamurru, dintinila.
16. Red Bird Messenger
   Saw the glistening design
   On Honey-Ant, glistening

17. Then flew off on a long journey,
    Sorrowfully, a long journey.

18. He spoke after his long journey,
    He flew off on a long journey.

19. Anxious, she went anyway,
    Nothing will happen, slowly and anxiously she went.

20. Ngapangardi- Ngapangardi
    Danced all the way.

21. Napanangka- Napanangka
    Danced all the way.

22. A large hole she dug for Honey-Ant,
    Deeply she dug for Honey-Ant,
    From the deep she retrieved from the hole.

23. Dug a hole as she journeyed,
    Squatting to dig, she journeyed.

24. Deeply she dug as she journeyed,
    Squatting to dig as she journeyed.

25. Extracted the stick as she journeyed,
    Squatting to dig, she journeyed.
16. Manitirrpi-tirrpi  
   Ngalura-ngalura kujuna  
   Minanji, ngalura-ngalura.  
   Verse 16 refers to the natural design on honey-ants, and to the design applied to a 
   yilpinji performer. The body of the performer is first rubbed with fat, and natural 
   ochres are applied to the greased skin, giving it a glistening appearance.  
17. Malijalija lajjipirni,  
    Mangkulurrura, lajjipirni.  
18. Wangkangurrula lajjipirni,  
    Malijalija lajjipirni.  
19. Karrana, lirdurdumana,  
    Najirti, purrkaru karrana.  
20. Dapinga-dapingata  
    Dapirrintirri.  
21. Dapinangka-pinangka  
    Dapirrintirri.  
   Napangardi (Dapingata) and Napanangka (Dapinangka) (in verses 20 and 21) are 
   the female names of two social categories in Warlipri society which may also be 
   used to address or refer to individuals in those categories. Honey-Ant would be 
   related to members of each category in a different way, which would determine 
   whether they are permitted wives or lovers, depending on his own category.  
22. Manima laru palpinyi,  
    Japal manima laru palpinyi,  
    Japal mardana lary palpinyi.  
23. Mankalijanka lanupayanu,  
    Mawunpurrunyu, lanupayanu.  
24. Mintirrinjila lanupayanu,  
    Mawunpurrunyu lanupayanu.  
25. Mintirrirrinti lanupayanu,  
    Mawunpurrunyu lanupayanu.
26. Slowly she walked,  
    Hobbling, limping,  
    She journeyed.

27. Resting in shade, she sat  
    And slept.  

28. Lover, lover,  
    Lover,  
    Snared, entrapped.

29. Lover, lover,  
    Mother-in-law,  
    Snared, entrapped.

30. Close-cousin loved,  
    Resisted,  
    Forbidden love.

31. Red Bird Messenger journeyed,  
    Flew a long distance, journeyed.

32. Red Bird Messenger returned underground,  
    Flew a long distance, returned underground.

33. Carrying the sacred object horizontally,  
    Red Bird Messenger danced,  
    Red Bird Messenger held it, danced.
26. Makarntarrngawu,  
Miltardimarra,  
Lanupayanu.

27. Yungkupu, yunarrinarra  
Yunarripunju.

28. Nyanuwa, januwaji,  
Nyanuwajilina,  
Jirdilkirdilkila.

29. Nyanuwa, januwaji,  
Yamurajilina,  
Jirdilkirdilkila.

30. Narrumpa jilina,  
Jijilkiwilki,  
Waljilajilina.  
*Verses 29 and 30 convey the fact that love ceremonies may result in illicit or immoral unions, either between a man and a woman, who is in the relationship of mother-in-law to him, or between a man and a woman who are genealogically close cross-cousins (father's sister's daughter/son or mother's brother's daughter/son). In the latter case, genealogically distant cross-cousins, that is those who call each other “cross-cousin” but cannot trace any actual genealogical relationship, may legitimately marry, but sexual relations between close cross-cousins are forbidden.*

31. Manitirrpit-tirripi lingampi-lingampilpinyi  
Marawingara, lingampilpinyi.

32. Mantirrpiti lanpanya-panya,  
Marawingara, lanpanya-panya.

33. Makurn pakurn,  
Palata lampanya-panya,  
Manangkiji palala, lampanya-payna.  
*In a men's love ceremony, a string cross is pointed horizontally in the direction of the desired woman, directing the power of the ceremony at her. In verse 33, it is Red Bird Messenger who points the string cross at her as he dances.*
34. Making the way clear,
   Red Bird Messenger held it,
   Dancing.

35. Admired her shapely legs,
   Admired her loins and eyes.

36. Eyes looked at the visitor,
   Lovesick.

37. The woman left
   Her country,
   Heavily.

38. Honey-Ant spun hair-string,
   Honey-Ant struck the ground with the spinning-stick.

39. My beautiful body paint
   Will bring her to me.

40. Red Bird Messenger flew away,
   Talked to her.

41. She searched, only half-sleeping,
   She watched, she searched.

42. Heavy eyes,
   Sleepless eyes.
34. Manu yurulpa,
   Manangkiyi palala,
   Lampanya-panya.

35. Mirrijinji ridilanu,
   Mawa nupa ridilanu.

36. Lipamarra matilatila,
    Matutala.

37. Wuna jirrpilpa
    Malparranjipa,
    Ngalarangala.

38. Mirrijipirrji mungkarla,
    Tanyilingi latupatu.

   Hair-string is spun onto a stick with a shorter cross-member lashed to it (verse 38).

   The stick is twirled between the thigh and the open palm of a hand, the other hand
   feeding a twisted strand of hair around the cross. The spun hair-string and cross
   member are pulled off the end of the stick as a ball of string entwined on the cross-
   member. Hair-string is spun during men's love ceremonies, and after the spinner
   takes the ball of string off the stick he strikes the spinning stick on the ground while
   calling out the name of the desired woman. Since the hair being spin is usually the
   spinner's own hair, the spinning stick is imbued with his own Dreaming power
   which, together with the power of the song, is directed at the woman.

39. Minyirawirra malkara
    Ngajina lajarrpini.

40. Manitirrpi-tirrpi mawalyangka,
    Lirra-lirra.

41. Ngitinja, lungkarrkuparrku,
    Nganyili, ngitina.

42. Milpala jatarr-jatarri,
    Pilpali milpala.
43. Dancing, her spirit visited
   The initiated man.

44. Plain-country person
   In mid-morning.

45. Friends, tired,
   They sat.

46. He searched for the sacred place,
   Undecided whether to take the sacred objects.

47. Digging for honey-ants,
   She dug deeply for honey-ants.

48. They embraced lovingly,
   Her thoughts filled with him.

49. Thoughts filled with him, enraptured,
   Ensnared, enraptured.

50. Initiated man
   Has captured her forever.

51. Walked away, sat down,
   I sat down.

52. Wind blew, a hole dug,
    Digging, a hole dug.
43. Luyunguparti, junjunkuruntu-kuruntu
Marrapirarrapara.
*Male initiation in central Australia is marked by two physical operations, circumcision and subincision. Verses 43 and 50 refer to subincision, the second operation, indicating that Honey-Ant is fully initiated.*

44. Yapupanyiki martikijikijji
Kajuntuluwarra ya.

45. Nyilpirta, karlpatali,
Nyinari-nyinari-la.

46. Manamalajala lyirrarilyarra,
Manamalajala mangkala lananyapanya.
*In verse 46 Honey-Ant debates within himself whether to take sacred objects from their secret hiding place (maralypi in Warlpiri) as he sets out to look for the woman. This verse may appropriately occur earlier in the song depending on whether it refers to Honey-Ant’s initial search for the woman or to looking for his wife in the ordinary round of domestic life.*

47. Nama kila-kila,
Namaluntau-namaluntuma.

48. Miljalulili kalpinyika,
Mawanjilali.

49. Mawinja, tajatupatu,
Kirrinpingi, tajatupatu.

50. Mangkawurru manin-manin
Tangkawu-tangkawu.

51. Tijantawirri, tawirrilima,
Najitala tawirrilima.
*The singer explained verse 51 as referring to the woman having left her own country (a place called Yulumu) and settling in her husband’s country.*

52. Mayawurrrnga, mIRRkilinti,
Manimaya, mIRRkulinti.
53. Watching warily as he worked,
    He went to and from his hole.

54. He looked at his back,
    He looked out from his hole.

55. She walked along, getting a digging stick,
    Sat down to dig.

56. She walked unburdened,
    She rested.

57. Bush tomato,
    He sang about it.

58. She extracted the honey
    After Honey-Ant fell into the empty hole.

59. Honey extracted, she returned home,
    Immediately she returned home.

60. He asked for honey,
    Not enough honey.

61. Grass around the ant-holes,
    He threw out stones as he dug,
    Discovering another honey-ant.
Honey-Ants extract sugar from bush tomato (yawakiyi).
62. He searched for another place
   As he went,
   And found one.

63. He decorated for a love ceremony
   As he went,
   String crosses like dog ears.

64. Honey-Ant listened
   Before going hunting.

65. At Honey-Ant's hole
   She sat down
   To dig.

62. Makamarungka  
Lanupayanu,  
Mintirrinjila.

63. Mangirrijalatuka  
Lanupayanu,  
Marlikitali.

64. Mangitilyi-tilyi ngirriwankalyarra  
Winanji ngayaturrpi-tirrpi.

_in verse 64 Honey-Ant listens for humans, one of his main predators, before going in search of food._

65. Manamalajala.  
Lirrijari-jari  
Lananyapanya.
The oldest languages of all must have been highly synthetic – verb-forms and noun-forms of great length.

(Anthony Burgess, *Language Made Plain*, 1964)

“Wangq: to speak, to say...”

(Hazel Brown, *Noongar language speaker*)

Was it that the old people,
each thinking himself herself the last,
and feeling their tongues shrivel,
their sound not returning...

Was it that each offered their tongue
in, say, the way of frog or reptile?

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

Though one, two, kept their tongue
between their teeth. Their song inside.
Fortunate, too, that they waited.
Waited for proper ones to listen
even as the noise of strangers moved in close,
closer and closer. This closure around them.

(So...
Say I went down the cliffs by the sea,
and swam, but whether wading out from ocean or
springing from blowholes far inland,
many people turned away from me, not knowing.

Marking traces of my own people,
I sang a funeral song,
struck leaves against the hut and the moon,
and, hearing an old sound, wondered: is it for me?
Is it for me that they spoke, that they speak?)

Braced by headphones,
my vision technologically sharp, black and bright,
I gathered shattered moonlight,
went tracking,
Searching, slyly hunting,
going backward, going inward.
following, pursuing a sound...

And thought it was my own breath fluting
over sharp-edged sedge and rocky beds,
that led me to a briney stream, and
the shrivelled sinews – or so it seemed- of a tongue.
But bathing such strings in pools
of tears, dragging them one to the other,
I felt an old desert wind, a sea breeze,
and knew it was not me, or mine,
but this land which still breathes.

(Yes, trees will whisper
birds fall silent,
cock their heads when we call out)

Almost a stranger, I push back rushes.
With the heel of my hand I brush away sand,
(There!) and settle in the footprints of country,
with my tongue between my teeth...

Something moves in dark caves,
and creeks push to the sea.
Our mouths are choked and barred,
and yet there is this swelling, this welling
within the many cavities
of chest and cheek, of lungs and hollows of bone.
Wangelanginy.
Together;
Wangelanginy.
Now;
Wangelanginy.
Speaking ourselves back together again

Kim Scott
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