Essays on the Production and Reception of Anita Heiss's Writing

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Thesis Certification

I hereby declare that this thesis is entirely my own work and that to the best of my knowledge it contains no material published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text. This thesis has not been submitted in whole or in part for a degree at this or any other university.

23/08/2019

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Date

Abstract

Dr Anita Heiss is a Wiradjuri author from Central NSW. Heiss was one of the nine applicants in *Eatock v Bolt*, the 2011 court case where Justice Mordecai Bromberg found *Herald Sun* journalist Andrew Bolt to have contravened Section 18C of the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* (Cth). Heiss later published a memoir entitled *Am I Black Enough for You?* in which she spoke to notions of Aboriginal identity and authenticity raised by the case. As she decisively put it in the opening pages of *Am I Black Enough?*: "I am an urban, beachside Blackfella, a concrete Koori with Westfield Dreaming, and I apologise to no-one". Alongside her involvement in the court case, Heiss is well known as the author of 'choc'-lit, a distinctive brand of popular women's fiction that retains the chick lit genre's focus on career, friendship, sex and shopping, but with a twist: Heiss's writing features urban Aboriginal Australian women as the main characters. Heiss's 'choc'-lit further differentiates itself from normatively white articulations of the genre in its intent to educate a non-Aboriginal audience.

The memoir genre, litigation in the Federal Court and 'choc'-lit would appear to have little in common. Yet, Heiss pursues the same argument through each: that the rich diversity of contemporary Aboriginal identity far exceeds the limited stereotypes that dominate the Australian imagination. Until now, there has been very little scholarly interest in Heiss's writing. My thesis recognises Heiss as a unique and important author whose writing broadens the available spaces for Aboriginal writers in Australian public life. I present my doctoral research as a thesis by compilation. The main body consists of five journal articles: three have already been published and two are under review. My papers move between two modes: literary analyses of plot, theme and character; and online reception studies. By paying attention to the way Heiss puts an ostensibly escapist genre to serious political ends, my research presents the first sustained academic account of Heiss's published writing. Equally, I focus on online reception and amateur reviewing practices to highlight new ways of thinking about engagement and impact through popular literary forms.

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To my mother Rosemary Metz, my sister Alexandra Mathew and my father Sandy Mathew (1923-2003), I love you.

Note on the Text

Except where elsewhere indicated, I follow the naming conventions set out by Anita Heiss in *Am I Black Enough For You?*. I use the terms 'First Peoples', 'First Nations' or 'Aboriginal' instead of 'Indigenous' "to clarify the original inhabitants of the land mass now known as Australia" (*Am I Black Enough?* 4).

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

Peta Tully, the Aboriginal heroine of Anita Heiss's 2008 novel *Avoiding Mr Right*, is "authentic-Australianed out". She's been killing time at Melbourne's Vic Markets and the novelty of 'authentic Australian' products made in China has well and truly worn off. Amidst tacky souvenirs and "generic dot-painted *everything*" (246, original emphasis), Peta stumbles upon the "pièce de résistance":

> An Aboriginal statue in full chocolate brown, red loincloth, holding a spear and, just in case I didn't know what I was looking at, a bronze plaque reading: 'Australian Aborigine'.
>
> 'Fifteen dollars for you, Miss.' The seller didn't see how ridiculous it was to try to sell it to me. For him, I was clearly alive and there as a customer, but not as an Aboriginal person. It was so kitsch I was tempted to buy it – it would be useful in discussing stereotypes and identity in cross-cultural training in the department – but I couldn't bring myself to even pick it up, so I moved on.
>
> 'You tell me your best price, Miss, we can do a deal.' He winked as I walked away. He was cute, but I didn't want to engage in a cross-cultural awareness training workshop there and then – no time, and not for free, and not even for his very cheeky smile. (247)

This excerpt crystallises the complex mix of playfulness and pedagogy behind Heiss's distinctive brand of chick lit. Peta—ambitious, glamorous, and totally self-assured—finds herself face-to-face with what contemporary Aboriginal artist Tony Albert would call 'Aboriginalia' (Kelada 19), racist kitsch that depicts Aboriginal Australians "as naïve figures idealised through the notions of 'noble savage' or 'dying race'" (Warren 58; see also Franklin; Shaw). If Aboriginalia signifies "what was often entirely absent, denied or undermined in the everyday political and policy spheres" (Franklin 203), Peta's encounter at the Vic Markets demonstrates the complex ways in which Aboriginality is simultaneously absent and present in twenty-first century Australia.

The interaction between Peta and the seller highlights not only the invisibility of contemporary expressions of Aboriginal identity, but also the degree to which racist representations of Aboriginal identity continue to overshadow these expressions. As Adrian Franklin writes, "much of Aboriginalia appears to lock an *authentic* understanding of Aboriginal people into a primitive and Stone Age *past* (rather than a contemporary Australian culture)" (205, original emphasis). Peta may very well be "alive" and "there" in front of the

seller, but at that moment in time—in front of this particular individual and in light of the wares he sells—she does not exist as an Aboriginal person.

The text does not elucidate whether the seller's misrecognition of Peta's identity is intentional or not. Peta, for her part, supposes that the seller wouldn't try to sell the statue to her if he knew she was Aboriginal. But she may be too generous in her estimation of the seller's racial sensitivities – for all we know, the seller might try to sell it to anyone, irrespective of their identity. As it stands, any attempt to sell the statue to Peta functions as evidence, to her mind, that she is neither seen to be, nor recognised as, an Aboriginal person.

What Heiss treats light-heartedly in this excerpt is anything but when the misrecognition of Aboriginal identity is deliberate and defamatory. Such was the case in 2009, when *Herald Sun* journalist Andrew Bolt wilfully mischaracterised Heiss's identity and professional career in a series of newspaper articles ("It's So Hip"; "White Fellas"). When Bolt looks at images of Heiss, he sees a white person pretending to be Aboriginal: a "white Aborigine", he asserts; a "political Aborigine" ("It's So Hip"). In 2011, Bolt's newspaper articles were found to have contravened Section 18C of the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* (Cth) by the Federal Court of Australia.[1] Andrew Bolt and the Vic Markets seller illustrate different kinds of misrecognition. One is innocuous—if slightly frustrating—with a hint of flirtation creeping through the edges. The other is snarling, crude and designed to disenfranchise.

The seller's blindness to Peta's Aboriginal identity may frustrate her, but this does not prevent sexual attraction sparking between the two. She sees him as sexually available and sexually desirable: he winks at Peta; she thinks he's cute. She enjoys his cheeky smile, and a faint—but perceptible—frisson of attraction flashes between them. This presence of the romance plot in Peta's interaction with the anonymous seller (or the highly eroticised version of it in *Avoiding Mr Right*, where a series of lust-worthy men parade past Peta) is a familiar element to Heiss's chick lit, as well as the chick lit genre as a whole.

In Heiss's chick lit, a key indicator of a potential suitor's eligibility is his receptiveness towards Aboriginal identity and culture. When we encounter Peta the morning of her trip to the Vic Markets, there are two men already on her romantic radar: she's in a long-distance

[1] The Australian Human Rights Commission explains that "Section 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act makes it unlawful for someone to do an act that is reasonably likely to 'offend, insult, humiliate or intimidate' someone because of their race or ethnicity" ("At A Glance").

relationship with a Sydney beau (James) while also trying to keep an attractive police officer (Mike) at arm's length. Mike shows himself willing to be educated by Peta about Aboriginal identity; James, by contrast, resists any attempt to improve his dim view of Aboriginal people. Heiss ultimately shows that Mr Right is the one who models receptive and sensitive engagement with Aboriginal culture and people. While a man's receptiveness to education helps Peta choose between suitors, there is a limit to how much time and energy she's willing to put into such an exercise. In the excerpt above, Peta intuits that a flirtation with the seller would involve "cross-cultural training" to help him perceive the offensiveness of the statue. The trope of 'cross-cultural awareness training' recurs throughout Heiss's *oeuvre*. In *Tiddas*, Xanthe delivers cross-cultural awareness training as a freelance consultant to companies across Australia (27-8). As Heiss jokes about past relationships with non-Aboriginal men,

> Every date becomes an exercise in cultural awareness training, and I end up explaining everything from Indigenous protocols to community politics. In the past I've had to insist on 'Indigenous-free days' just so I could feel like something other than a personal tutor. I want romance. If I'm going to educate you over dinner and dessert, then I'm going to invoice you in the morning! (*Am I Black Enough?* 265)[2]

While a note of humour frequently attaches itself to the invocation of 'cross-cultural awareness training' to explain interracial dating, this trope also references the emotional burden of such an undertaking. Peta provides several reasons why she disengages from any contact that would occasion such training: "*no time, and not for free, and not even for his very cheeky smile"* (247, emphasis added). It takes time, energy, and requires an emotional commitment that Peta is unprepared to give.

This comment on "cross-cultural awareness training" leads to a larger point about the theme of education running through this excerpt. When Peta encounters the statue, she immediately grasps its usefulness in her professional practice: "it would be useful in discussing stereotypes and identity in cross-cultural training in the department". Peta's repurposing of the statue is a small but compelling example of the pragmatic approach Heiss takes to the chick lit genre. By this I mean that Heiss made a deliberate and strategic decision to begin writing the in the chick lit genre. She gives many reasons for doing so, from the typically humorous ("I wanted to purge myself of some disastrous dates with some very

[2] See also Anita Heiss's TEDx Talk 10:35-11:02 https://youtu.be/1f8ew23tLl0

unlovable men") to the more serious ("I wanted to challenge some of the notions of what it means to be Aboriginal in the 21st century … I wanted to show the similarities between us as women" ["International Women's Day Speech - Shanghai"]). In this thesis, I am most interested in the serious aspects of Heiss's chick lit, especially her use of the genre to educate readers about life as an Aboriginal Australian woman in twenty-first century Australia.

Anita Heiss was born in 1968 to Elsie (née Williams) and Joe Heiss. Elsie was one of the Stolen Generations. Like many whose lives were torn apart by the *Aborigines Protection Act 1909* (NSW), Elsie grew up on the Erambie Mission in Cowra (*Am I Black Enough?* 17). In her early twenties, Elsie moved to Sydney. She met Joe Heiss around the same time, and after a courtship of several years, they married in 1960. One of the most riveting parts of Heiss's memoir is the story of her parents' romance and life together (*Am I Black Enough?* 12-76). It is no exaggeration to say that Heiss's parents' relationship strongly shaped her view of romantic relationships. When Heiss looks at photos of her parents' wedding day, she sees "images [that] symbolise … the absolute truth of unconditional love and that real love knows no boundaries, least of all race" (*Am I Black Enough?* 25).

The relationship between a "scarily thin" Aboriginal woman (22) and a 'New Australian' from Austria who spoke no English had a lasting influence on Heiss: interracial relationships and romance feature regularly in Heiss's *oeuvre*. In *Not Meeting Mr Right*, Heiss models her protagonists' ancestry on her own: Alice Aigner has an Austrian father and an Aboriginal mother (*Not Meeting Mr Right* 52; see also *Am I Black Enough?* 218). Other novels follow a similar pattern: in *Tiddas*, Xanthe has a Greek father and an Aboriginal mother; like Heiss, Xanthe describes herself as "bicultural" and professes a love of "roovlaki" (163).[3] And in *Barbed Wire and Cherry Blossoms*, Mary, the young Aboriginal heroine, falls in love with an escaped Japanese prisoner of war. As with most relationships, these interracial relationships do not always go smoothly: Peta Tully dismissively informs Mike that she'd never date a police officer (especially not a *white* police officer); Xanthe's friends tease her about shacking up with "the coloniser"—by which they mean Xanthe's husband, Spencer, an English-born whitefella (*Tiddas* 35-6). But racism and prejudice cut both ways. Elsie's Aunty Mary

[3] Heiss often riffs on the linguistic and cultural possibilities of kangaroo meat. Heiss seldom cooks, but when she does she makes "chili con kanga and kanganese (roo Bolognese)" (Heiss "Frequently Asked Questions").

disapproved of their relationship: "Be careful of those *New Australians*. They carry knives; you don't know what they'll do" (*Am I Black Enough?* 23, original emphasis). Teasing aside, Heiss's characters treat interracial love with maturity and respect. Heiss herself, the product of a loving interracial relationship, proudly calls herself a 'bicultural blackfella'. She values her Austrian and Aboriginal heritage equally and states, unequivocally, that she is the "proud daughter of a whitefella who only ever let me be me" (*Am I Black Enough?* 191), a sentiment further cemented in her poem 'Bicultural Blackfella': "I am who I am. / I am a bicultural Blackfella / And I apologise to no one" (*Token Koori* 7).

The suburban contours of Heiss's Sydney childhood serve as creative, not to mention political, inspiration for her writing and public interventions. As she puts it, "My heart—and my urban homeland—is strategically placed between the Long Bay jail, Malabar sewerage and Orica industrial estate" ("Homelessness" 3).[4] Heiss commits to urban spaces as sites of renewal, growth and understanding for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians alike. Her life experiences are fundamentally informed by these spaces:

> When I write my novels, I want to use my storylines to challenge the notions of what it means to be Aboriginal in the twenty-first century, with a focus on urban experiences because they are what I know best, having lived in Sydney, Canberra and on the Gold Coast. (Took n.pag.)

Heiss repeats this point on a number of occasions, for instance noting that "as a Koori living in the city I am not unlike many others today; 32 per cent of Indigenous Australians live in urban centres and enjoy all the experiences and changes that city life brings". This important demographic statistic gestures towards the burgeoning Aboriginal middle class (Behrendt "Who's Afraid of the Indigenous Middle Class?"; Langton "Indigenous Exceptionalism and the Constitutional 'Race Power'"; Wahlquist) which has brought with it concomitant changes in how Aboriginal Australians see themselves. As Larissa Behrendt observes:

> [one of the consequences] of the increase in participation in professional and political life has been the elevation in socio-economic position of Indigenous people and their families, who have been able to access education, enter the workforce and find well-paid employment. (Behrendt "Who's Afraid of the Indigenous Middle Class?")

Membership of the Aboriginal middle class may sometimes be worn as a badge of honour by Heiss's fictional characters: Izzy in *Tiddas* loves her "sleek, fast, no-good-for-passengers silver

[4] Heiss repeats these lines often: in speeches ("It all Starts with a Conversation"), in interviews (*The Garret Podcast*), on her website ("Frequently Asked Questions") and in her memoir (*Am I Black Enough?* 1).

convertible" (7). But it is not just non-Aboriginal Australians who harbour suspicions toward contemporary expressions of Aboriginal identity. Changes in class and wealth are often experienced uneasily and ambivalently by many Aboriginal people. Izzy's luxurious convertible "had caused one or two Blackfellas to accuse her of selling out, becoming white, turning too flash" (7). And Libby Cutmore in *Paris Dreaming* finds herself derogatively referred to as a "Bourgeois Black" by others in her community.[5] Heiss's "first experience [of] Black-on-Black prejudice" came about when a young Aboriginal man questioned her Aboriginal identity because she wore lipstick and her mum drove a Pajero (*Am I Black Enough?* 183). In this, we see the high price of asserting an urban Aboriginal identity: both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians alike readily associate such declarations with inauthenticity, "selling out, becoming white, turning too flash" (7).

Even though the young man's attitude dismays Heiss, it doesn't stop her from pursuing her message of the plurality of Aboriginal identity through a diverse array of channels. Two key characteristics of the success of Heiss's public interventions are her pragmatism and her polyvalency. Heiss's pragmatism lies in her ability to use whatever means possible to bring her argument to a wider public, irrespective of its perceived cultural value. Her polyvalency lies in her ability to communicate skilfully and proficiently across vastly different media (from social media to academic writing) and demographics (from teaching primary school-age children through to occupying senior management roles in not-for-profit organisations). The common thread across these interventions is Heiss's desire to challenge stereotyped images of Aboriginal Australians and show that contemporary Aboriginality is far more diverse than the limitations of the colonial imagination. Heiss stridently argues that the vast majority of Aboriginal Australians have little, if anything, in common with the statue of the 'Australian Aborigine' at the Vic Markets.

This thesis acknowledges the myriad roles Heiss plays in the Australian public sphere, but the primary focus is on Heiss's role as an author of popular fiction and memoir. Even when analysis is restricted to Heiss's published work, her output is astounding in terms of volume and the number of genres in which she publishes. In the following pages, I provide an

[5] "I knew I sounded like a Bourgeois Black. I didn't like the label and I wasn't the only one in our group who would get tagged with it. Lauren never said it, but she was a target also, as were Emma and Caro. It was a common practice in our community: any educated woman with an interest in fashion and world travel had to deal with tall-poppy syndrome - oddly enough, the ones trying to cut us down were other Black women" (43).

overview of her published output. Heiss's writing career began in short verse form: *Sacred Cows* (1996), *Token Koori* (1998), and *I'm Not Racist But…* (2007). Reading these early works, it is clear that Heiss used the verse form to develop her distinctive writing style that would develop into the conversational tone of her chick lit and later find further resonance over social media.

When Heiss published her first chick lit novel in 2007, *Not Meeting Mr Right*, she added an Aboriginal Australian voice to the growing global genre of non-white chick lit. *Not Meeting Mr Right* tells the story of Alice Aigner, a twenty-eight-year-old Sydneysider who realises she's in danger of remaining single well into her 30s. This unhappy realisation prompts a series of dates with Sydney's least eligible bachelors, until Alice realises that her true love was there all along, in the figure of—yes—her local garbage collector, Gary. Alice's exploits follow a similar path to those taken by the protagonists in *Bridget Jones's Diary* or *Sex and the City*, albeit with an important difference: Heiss's characters, like Heiss herself, are all proud Aboriginal women. Such was the success of *Not Meeting Mr Right* that Heiss followed with three more chick lit novels: *Avoiding Mr Right*, *Manhattan Dreaming,* and *Paris Dreaming*.

Together, these four novels form something of a quartet: each chronicles the life of financially and sexually independent Aboriginal women. These women wield their racial sensibility with finesse; their finely-tuned understanding of race relations in Australia informs their search for love, professional ambitions and their relationships with friends and family. By writing the stories of Alice, Peta, Lauren and Libby, Heiss challenges both popular understanding of the chick lit genre and of Aboriginal people more broadly. If there is an assumption that *only* white women live in trendy apartments, enjoy facials and drive fancy cars, Heiss's novels unequivocally show the opposite. Heiss is quick with words, and happily took up the moniker "Koori Bradshaw", a nod to *Sex and the City*'s main character, Carrie Bradshaw. Heiss's writing has come to be known as 'choc lit', a term which again references her subversion of the chick lit genre.[6]

[6] In an interview with the blog *Capital Letters*, Heiss recalls that "the term was coined by broadcasters at Koori Radio 93.7FM in Sydney when my first novel, *Not Meeting Mr Right*, came out in 2007" https://actwritersblog.com/2014/05/07/an-interview-with-anita-heiss/

Heiss's fifth novel, *Tiddas* (2014) sits within this broad context of novels that intertwine the lives of urban Aboriginal women with a search for love and professional fulfilment. That said, *Tiddas* also reflects a number of changes in Heiss's evolution as a writer: it is a stand-alone novel, rather than one in a series. The female protagonists are slightly older than their *Dreaming* and *Mr Right* counterparts. And instead of focusing on individual women (with a group of friends sitting largely on the sidelines), *Tiddas* tells the story of a community of five women. In 2016, Heiss published her sixth novel, *Barbed Wire and Cherry Blossoms*. The romance plot still sat at the heart of Heiss's writing, but it was encased within a historical framework – *Barbed Wire* draws on Heiss's family history and the events of the 1944 Cowra Breakout, when interned Japanese soldiers broke free from a prisoner of war camp near Cowra in NSW. Mary, a young Aboriginal woman living on the Erambie mission, falls in love with Hiroshi, an escaped Japanese prisoner of war. Mary's life is severely circumscribed by the *Aborigines Protection Act*; while her actions are far from the sexual antics chronicled in the *Dreaming* and *Mr Right* series, Mary shares with Heiss's other heroines the same desire for independence and love.

Alongside Heiss's chick lit, her young adult (YA) fiction is one of the largest parts of her published *oeuvre*. Her most recent YA novel, *Our Race for Reconciliation* (2017), tells the story of Cathy Freeman's Sydney Olympic Games victory through the eyes of a young Aboriginal girl. *Matty's Comeback* (2016) and *Harry's Secret* (2015) are shorter stories that focus on young Aboriginal boys playing sport. Earlier, in 2001, Heiss published *Who Am I? The Diary of Mary Talence*, in the Scholastic 'My Australian Story' series. Mary Talence is a member of the Stolen Generations; she has been removed from her family and placed in Bomaderry Aboriginal Children's Home before being assigned to a white family. The novel addresses younger readers on a matter of acute historical importance, and has been translated into French, Farsi, Chinese and Spanish. One of the most striking aspects of Heiss's YA fiction is the collaborative spirit in which Heiss undertakes her authorial role. A number of her YA novels have been authored with school children as a product of Heiss's author visits: *The Deadly Sisters of Worawa* (2018), *Apmere Atyenhe Ltyentye Apurte* (2017), *Shock 'Em: Stories of the Big River Hawks* (2016) *Nginingawila Ngirramini* (2015), *The Tightening Grip* (2012), *Demon Guards the School Yard* (2011) and *Yirra and Her Deadly Dog, Demon* (2007). Her collaborations extend into YA non-fiction. In 2016, Black Inc. published *Kicking Goals with*

Goodsey and Magic, an extended conversation between two celebrated Sydney Swans footballers, as told to Anita Heiss. Heiss adopts a similar, collaborative approach when she writes fiction and non-fiction for adults. She has edited or co-edited a number of collections, including *Growing up Aboriginal in Australia* (2018), *The Intervention: An Anthology* (2015) and *The Macquarie PEN Anthology of Aboriginal Writing* (2009). She has also contributed essays to collections edited by others, such as *Making Waves* (2006), *The Simple Act of Reading* (2015) and *She's Having a Laugh* (2015).

Heiss is an accomplished scholar; despite her scepticism towards academia (in an interview with Martin Flanagan, she describes academia as "an elitist wank" (2); see also *Am I Black Enough?* 130-44), she has made significant scholarly contributions to the field of Aboriginal literature and publishing. Before she was known as a chick lit author, she attained a Doctorate in Communications and Media from the University of Western Sydney. Her monograph *Dhuuluu-Yala (To Talk Straight): Publishing Indigenous Literature* (2003), arose out of Heiss's doctoral research, a transnational study of publishing practices around Indigenous literature in Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand and Canada. As a scholar, Heiss has contributed to edited collections on Australian literary studies ("Aboriginal Children's Literature"; "Writing Aboriginality"; "Indigenous Book Publishing") and scholarly journals ("Blackwords: Writers on Identity"; "Homelessness, Homelands, Human Rights"). In mid-2017, Heiss was appointed as a Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Canberra; her work for the University's Collaborative Indigenous Research Initiative will "build knowledge and foster the appreciation of Indigenous studies and the cultural and social significance of writing" (Pham). Heiss has previously held academic positions at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) as an Adjunct Professor at the Jumbunna Indigenous House of Learning, and at Macquarie University as an Adjunct Professor and Deputy Director of the Warawara Department of Indigenous Studies.

I conclude this sketch of Heiss's background and published *oeuvre* with a comment on her para-authorial activities. By para-authorial, I mean the many writing-related activities Heiss undertakes to extend the reach of her writing. These activities again highlight the diversity of Heiss's interventions in the Australian public sphere, as well as the extent of her commitment to literature as a means of creating social change. They span a range of different formats and genres. First, Heiss's fictional characters are generally enthusiastic

readers, and Heiss uses her writing to draw attention to the work of her peers. In *Tiddas*, the walls of Izzy's Brisbane apartment are lined with "acclaimed Australian writers like Alex Miller, Kate Grenville and Thea Astley" and "those who wrote about her own country, like Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Alexis Wright and Jack Davis" (*Tiddas* 121). Equally, Heiss mentions Terri Janke's *The Butterfly Song* in three of her novels: in *Tiddas*, the group of friends read *The Butterfly Song* for one of their monthly book clubs (*Tiddas* 109-11); Alice Aigner reminds her students to read *The Butterfly Song* for their end-of-year exams (*Not Meeting Mr Right* 70), and Libby Cutmore attends a book launch of the French translation of *The Butterfly Song* in Paris (*Paris Dreaming* 180-3). Second, Heiss has been instrumental in developing a set of writing protocols to ensure the ethical representation of Aboriginal people in Australian literature (*Protocols for Producing Indigenous Australian Writing;* "Writing About Indigenous Australia"). Third, her stake in responsible and ethical engagement with Aboriginal writing is further highlighted by the way she regularly facilitates writers' workshops which build intercultural competencies among non-Aboriginal writers.

Moving beyond textual production, Heiss is an important advocate for the Australian literary industry, and those with whom the field engages. In her capacity as a Lifetime Ambassador for the Indigenous Literacy Foundation, she works with Aboriginal children and educators to promote the benefits of reading and boost literacy rates among Aboriginal children. Finally, she was also appointed to the Australian Society of Authors (ASA) committee in 1998—the "first Indigenous writer", as *The Canberra Times* noted, "to hold a position on the ASA committee in its 35 years of operation" ("A Writer's Life in Fiction and Politics"). She was later awarded the ASA under-35 medal (in 2003) and went on to chair the organisation in the late 2010s. Add to this her central role in developing the Austlit BlackWords database, her regular speaking engagements, author visits, academic appointments and so on, and Heiss contributes significantly to the scholarly theorisation and codification of the field of Aboriginal Australian literature. Moreover, she has had a hand in creating many of its primary materials.

My thesis uses traditional literary close readings to understand how Anita Heiss's writing functions in the Australian literary, social, and political spheres. My readings concentrate on two of the many genres in which she writes (popular women's fiction and memoir), in addition to online responses to her writing. My thesis treats the production and

reception of Heiss's work as complementary, in that Heiss seems to approach the writing process with an audience and intention in mind. More specifically, because Heiss's textual productions often summon an ideal reader into being, the question of how her real-life readers react to such an interpellation is rich in analytic complexity. My papers add a further layer of nuance to this question by positing Heiss herself as a reader of a certain set of gendered and racialised expectations. As Janice Radway puts it,

> Writers, after all, are always already readers, and in materializing their creations they work with phrases, narrative conventions, character types, plot devices, genres, and other literary forms they have encountered in the materials they have previously read. ("What's the Matter with Reception Study?" 339)

Whether I am examining her chick lit or her memoir, my thesis structure is such that I begin with one or two journal articles that present a close textual analysis of Heiss's writing, followed by a journal article that looks at the reception of that same genre of writing.

I preface my five journal articles with an extended literature review. I begin with the figure of Anita Heiss: despite her staggeringly large published *oeuvre* and mastery of different genres, there has been little academic interest in her writing; my research addresses this gap. I also make a broader claim for the intellectual value of Heiss's literary interventions. My earliest two journal articles, "'The Pretty and the Political'" and "Educating the Reader", are the first to pay sustained academic attention to any aspect of Heiss's published work. I contextualise the intellectual value of Heiss's writing against two fields of literary production: Aboriginal Australian literature and the chick lit genre. By identifying Heiss's writing as an intellectual intervention into debates about identity and representation in contemporary Australia, I draw attention to the often limited ways in which both Aboriginal Australian writing and genre fiction tends to be received and understood. My interest in Heiss's writing extends to its reception by online amateur reviewers.

My first journal article is entitled "'The Pretty and the Political Didn't Seem to Blend Well': Anita Heiss's Chick Lit and the Destabilisation of a Genre". It was published in the *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature* in February 2016. My article was highly commended by the judging panel of the A.D. Hope Prize (awarded to the best postgraduate essay by the Association for the Study of Australian Literature). It concerns the question of what happens when the typically white, middle-class protagonist at the centre of the chick lit novel is an Aboriginal Australian woman. I address this question with reference to

Heiss's first four chick lit novels (*Not Meeting Mr Right*, *Avoiding Mr Right*, *Manhattan Dreaming,* and *Paris Dreaming*). My essay shows that when the race of the heroine is changed, other aspects of the chick lit genre also change. Unlike white chick lit heroines, Aboriginal heroines must contend with racism and systemic discrimination in their romantic lives, professional career and friendships. For Heiss's novels to reflect the day-to-day experiences of Aboriginal women, she must include experiences of racism and discrimination. However, Heiss is also faced with integrating these issues into a formula that presents a diverting, escapist read. My paper explores how Heiss navigates between two competing imperatives: accurately portraying the reality of urban Aboriginal women's lives, while at the same time adhering to the recognised formula of chick lit, which includes everything from adopting a humorous tone to documenting women's lives aged roughly 18-40.

"Educating the Reader in Anita Heiss's Chick Lit", the second journal article included in the thesis, was published in 2016 in *Contemporary Women's Writing*. It revisits the question that animated my first article, but with greater focus and direction: I show that when the race of the protagonist changes, the chick lit novel takes on an additional function as an advice manual. My first two journal articles tackle essentially the same question, but one is more exploratory and open in nature, while the other is more focussed. This second article argues that Anita Heiss puts her chick lit to the specific and defined purposes of educating her non-Aboriginal readership. I situate this purpose within the field of both Aboriginal Australian writing and the chick lit novel genre. In terms of the former, I show how the ascription of an educative function to Aboriginal literature coheres with the broader field of Aboriginal Australian literary production. Regarding the latter, I draw closely on the work of Caroline Smith, who first elucidated the link between the chick lit novel and advice manual genre. My article uses evidence from five of Heiss's chick lit novels (the four used in my first article plus *Tiddas*) to illustrate the different ways in which Heiss uses the chick lit genre to educate her readers. I argue that three of the main ways she goes about this are: encouraging consumption of Aboriginal cultural production providing a style guide for language usage and profiling different kinds of behaviours towards Aboriginal people. This article was shortlisted for the inaugural *Contemporary Women's Writing Essay Prize*.

My two close-reading papers are followed by an exploration of how Heiss's chick lit has been received by the online reading public. "On the Guilty Displeasures of Aboriginal

Australian Chick Lit" explores the reception of Heiss's 2014 novel, *Tiddas*. Here, I examine the reception of one book rather than the reception of her entire chick lit *oeuvre* (or even her first four novels, which, as I mentioned earlier, function as a cohesive group). My reason for focussing on *Tiddas* relates primarily to the way the novel foregrounds a set of 'ideal' reading practices in its textual and paratextual material. The five women at the novel's heart are best friends and avid readers. Their book club meets monthly, and the novel recounts the fierce and passionate debates that animate each book club meeting. Further, Heiss includes book club questions and suggested further reading in *Tiddas's* back matter. I use this as a starting point to explore how Heiss's real life readers respond to her novel by examining a corpus of online reviews. I show that Heiss's readers are sympathetic to the political agenda Heiss pursues in her fiction but don't always agree with the manner in which it is presented within the novels. This paper is currently under review with *Australian Literary Studies*.

My fourth journal article, "Concrete Koori, Not 'Professional Aborigine': How Anita Heiss's *Am I Black Enough for You?* Contests Andrew Bolt's Repressive Authenticity" has been submitted to *Journal of Australian Studies*. My article puts Heiss's memoir into dialogue with Andrew Bolt's newspaper articles. My analysis examines how Heiss uses her memoir as an educative device. I argue that her educative agenda is directed towards two goals: Andrew Bolt's wilful misrepresentation of her life and career and the broader Australian public sphere. My article suggests that Andrew Bolt's characterisation of Heiss fits within Patrick Wolfe's framework of 'repressive authenticity'. I discuss how Wolfe's application of the term repressive authenticity is apt in the way it captures the tone and ideological bent of Andrew Bolt's articles, but it is also limiting in that it denies Heiss's agency and individual subjectivity. In consequence, I use Tim Rowse's concept of 'Indigenous heterogeneity' to describe the plurality and diversity woven into Heiss's self-representational acts.

My fifth journal article, "Reviewing Race in the Digital Literary Sphere: A Case Study of Anita Heiss' *Am I Black Enough for You?*" was published in the November 2016 edition of *Australian Humanities Review*, part of a special issue on book reviewing culture in Australia. My article is situated within the field of digital literary studies. In particular, it looks at the way different reviewing platforms both promote, and facilitate, different reviewing strategies. I am particularly interested in the way in which *Am I Black Enough?* occasions two very different types of reviews, and then, how these reviews tend to be apportioned by

platform. On the one hand, people who reviewed *Am I Black Enough* on Goodreads and personal blogs tend to view Heiss's memoir in positive terms: bloggers comment on how reading *Am I Black Enough?* prompted an "epiphany" into their own identity or revealed their own *lack* of understanding about Australia's First Peoples. Reviews on Amazon, however, were the opposite. They are disparaging and mocking of Heiss and see the book reviewing space as an opportunity to further the negative trolling of Heiss that occurs elsewhere on the web. I consider the question of whether Amazon reviews of *Am I Black Enough?* should properly be considered reviews at all, but I end up making the point that these are best considered 'not-readers', and the reviews as 'not-reading practices'.

The five journal articles collected in this thesis enact a constant shift in focus between the conditions of production of the text itself, and the text's subsequent reception by its Australian reading public. My articles highlight some of the many distinctive aspects of Heiss's interventions in the Australian public sphere: her weaving of the politics of gender, sexuality, race and class into popular women's fiction; her ability to connect readers through the digital literary sphere; and her use of legal and autobiographical forms to respond to racial discrimination. Such shifts in perspective notwithstanding, all five articles demonstrate an ongoing concern with how Heiss's writing circulates and gains meaning in the Australian public sphere. Here, the concept of reception resembles what Janice Radway calls "the cultural network of capillary action", a process "by which a society talks to itself about its conditions of existence, thereby transforming itself in the process" ("What's the Matter with Reception Study?" 339). Following on from Radway, my papers understand Heiss's work as part of a broader cultural exchange about what it means to be Australian and Aboriginal Australian in the early twenty-first century. Two of my journal articles, "On the Guilty Displeasures of Aboriginal Australian Chick Lit" and "Reviewing Race in the Digital Literary Sphere" focus on reception in "text-to-reader" terms, a relationship "which understand[s] readers as the site where textual meaning is realized and/or where the effects of a text are registered affectively and ethically" (Willis 32). The more traditional literary studies approach taken in "The Pretty and the Political", "Educating the Reader" and "Concrete Koori, Not 'Professional Aborigine'" can also be seen as a form of "text-to-text reception", the "study of texts which draw on, appropriate, allude to or rewrite earlier texts" (Willis 32).

For the analysis of Heiss's fiction and non-fiction undertaken in this thesis, my methodologies are primarily those of literary studies. However, my position as a non-Aboriginal researcher writing about an Aboriginal author has also led me to reflect on the role Indigenous research methodologies play in this thesis. More specifically, I turn to Martin Nakata's concept of the cultural interface to understand the disciplinary, methodological and cultural tensions at play in this thesis. Nakata paints the cultural interface—his term for the meeting place between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians—in richly evocative terms:

> It is a multi-layered and multi-dimensional space of dynamic relations constituted by the intersections of time, place, distance, different systems of thought, competing and contesting discourses within and between different knowledge traditions, and different systems of social, economic and political organisation. It is a space of many shifting and complex intersections between different people with different histories, experiences, languages, agendas, aspirations and responses. As much as it is currently overlaid by various theories, narratives and arguments that work to produce cohesive, consensual and co-operative social practices, it is also a space that abounds with contradictions, ambiguities, conflict and contestation of meanings that emerge from these various shifting intersections. (199)

On a theoretical level, one of the "competing and contesting discourses within and between different knowledge traditions" in this thesis is the tension between traditional literary studies and Indigenous research studies. The former generally requires minimal—if any—consultation with the author. Indeed, traditional literary studies and its primary modality of close reading understand the meaning of the text to exist independently of the author. In contrast, Indigenous research studies—by acknowledging the agency of Indigenous peoples—foregrounds the importance of community consultation and collaboration in academic research. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith knowingly writes, "from the vantage point of the colonized, the term 'research' is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism" (30). Such 'research', especially when carried out by non-Indigenous academics,

> … [holds] the power to distort knowledge to make invisible, to overlook, to exaggerate and to draw conclusions, based not on factual data, but on assumptions, hidden value judgements, and often downright misunderstandings. [Non-Indigenous researchers] have the potential to extend knowledge or perpetuate ignorance. (290)

Thus, "culturally sensitive approaches" (290) are preferred when non-Indigenous academics engage in research about Indigenous peoples. Such approaches, or processes, as Smith call them, are "expected to be respectful, to enable people, to heal and to educate. They are

expected to lead one small step further towards self-determination" (218-9). With this in mind, an Indigenous research studies approach to this thesis would invite the participation of the author in some fundamental way.

Alongside the question of community consultation when undertaking research about Indigenous peoples, this thesis also sits at another, equally important intersection: that of non-Aboriginal Australians writing about Aboriginal Australian topics and people. My experience of this intersection was discomforting: I was concerned that my research, simply by virtue of being written by a non-Aboriginal person, had the potential to cause harm to Heiss and the broader population of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. In time, I came to see this discomfort as productive rather than limiting: it is appropriate for non-Aboriginal Australians to exercise caution and self-reflexivity when navigating the challenges of the cultural interface. But it is also appropriate for non-Aboriginal Australians to commit to interacting with Australia's First Peoples in terms that are respectful and mindful of difference. The question of whether this research project needed authorial participation in order to be ethically rigorous led me to interview Heiss in December 2016. The interview, though useful, replicated what was already part of the existing public record. It also reinforced my initial belief that this particular text-focused research project did not need direct authorial comment in order to stand as an academically rigorous and culturally sensitive scholarly intervention. My experience of the cultural interface through writing this thesis has led to bigger questions about how literary studies methodologies can be combined with the more sociologically-minded Indigenous research methodologies. These questions, though important, extend beyond the primary remit of this thesis, which is to offer a first investigation into the production and reception of Anita Heiss's writing.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Scholarly Work on Anita Heiss

I begin my literature review with scholarly research into the figure of Anita Heiss. Until I began publishing my research on Anita Heiss, her writing had received little scholarly attention. When I say Heiss's writing, I mean *any* aspect of her published output – poetry, chick lit, Young Adult (YA) fiction. It is not as if some parts of her published writing languished in obscurity while others have received scholarly attention; rather, her writing as a whole has been neglected by academics. My research recognises the important work Heiss's writing does in the Australian public sphere, and my earliest two journal articles ("Educating the Reader"; "'The Pretty and the Political'") are the first to pay sustained academic attention to any aspect of Heiss's writing.

When I began my doctoral candidature, Wenche Ommundsen's 2011 article, "Sex and the Global City: Chick Lit with a Difference" was the only piece of scholarly research into Heiss's writing. Ommundsen's article offers a comparative study of three chick lit authors: Annie Wang, Rajaa Alsanea and Anita Heiss. Ommundsen investigates the way in which Wang, Alsanea and Heiss take "classical chick lit themes" established by *Bridget Jones's Diary* and *Sex and the City* and apply them to "vastly different social conditions, gender roles, and cultural concerns" (108). Wang is Chinese; Alsanea Saudi Arabian; and Heiss Aboriginal Australian. Despite the differences in nationality and culture, Ommundsen shows how all three use the chick lit genre to express the complexity of their daily lives: gendered or racial exclusion is often experienced alongside the search for love. While a certain degree of contradiction seems to be an inevitable part of the chick lit genre, Ommundsen concedes that Heiss's fiction "does strain belief and suggests that the perfect marriage of politics and consumer culture may be as difficult to achieve as any marriage her lovesick heroines dream of" (108). Ommundsen's analysis set the course for my subsequent journey into Heiss's chick lit; her article provided a finely-tuned set of critical tools to advance further investigation into the nexus of "the pretty and the political" (*Not Meeting Mr Right* 253).

Recent years have seen increasing scholarly interest in Heiss's writing, though it remains a niche area of research. In 2019, Lauren O'Mahony published a chapter on Anita Heiss's chick lit in the edited collection *Theorising Ethnicity and Nationality in the Chick Lit*

Genre ("More Than Sex, Shopping and Shoes"). O'Mahony reads Anita Heiss's chick lit against certain established 'formulas' of the romance novel, such as the those set out by Pamela Regis in *A Natural History of Romance*. Regis proposes "eight essential narrative elements of the romance novel" (27): "society defined" (31), "the meeting" (31), "the barrier" (32), "the attraction" (33), "the declaration" (34), "point of ritual death" (35), "the recognition" (36) and "the betrothal" (38). Of these, O'Mahony finds two to be especially pertinent to understanding Heiss's chick lit: "society defined" and "the meeting" (46). For example, "society defined" speaks to the context "where the romance occurs" (O'Mahony 46). In Heiss's chick lit, this is "especially important" because 'society' encompasses "the contemporary Australian cultural context where racism and cultural ignorance [are] commonplace" (O'Mahony 46). O'Mahony's chapter gestures towards the valuable political work that chick lit can achieve: O'Mahony finds that Heiss's writing "encourages reflection on Aboriginal culture" and "develop[s] intercultural competence in readers" (45).

Christian Lenz's 2016 monograph *Geographies of Love* concerns itself with the spaces, literal and metaphoric, of the chick lit and lad lit genres. Lenz, like Ommundsen, situates Heiss's writing in a comparative context, examining her writing alongside examples of the genre drawn from around the globe. While Lenz does not explicitly take up Ommundsen's thematic of a global cosmopolitanism in non-white chick lit, he nonetheless examines the way Heiss uses global (Manhattan, Paris) and local (Sydney, Melbourne, Canberra) settings to foreground the complexity of Aboriginal identity.

Lenz, O'Mahony and Ommundsen are the only three writers to exhibit interest in Heiss's chick lit. Academic discussion of other areas of her writing is even scarcer. Alongside her chick lit, academic discussion has availed itself most readily of her 2012 memoir, *Am I Black Enough for You?*. Heiss's memoir has been discussed either in relation to contemporary Aboriginal autobiography (McDonald; Whitlock *Postcolonial Life Narratives*) or in the context of the *Eatock v Bolt* court case and its aftermath (Griffiths; Gelber and McNamara). I position my reception paper on *Am I Black Enough?*, published in *Australian Humanities Review*, as "the first sustained consideration of a memoir (and its reception) whose importance has been hinted at but never directly addressed. … When Heiss' memoir does surface in scholarly writing, it is as a single instance – a footnote, a sentence, a paragraph at most" (Mathew "Reviewing Race in the Digital Literary Sphere" 67).

The lack of scholarly attention accorded to Heiss is perplexing given the sheer scale of her *oeuvre*. For example, the Austlit database, an online database that collects information on Australian literary culture, production and history, lists 229 works by Anita Heiss (as of 5 December 2018). Her role as an author predominates: she is listed as the author of 189 works, an interviewer in 19 works and a compiler in 10. The database distinguishes between the different forms her writing takes. Some of the most common are poetry (92), criticism (31), interviews (20) and reviews (20). Austlit lists five autobiographical forms, eight novels, seven prose works and six works of children's fiction. The sheer amount of her writing and literary output is one of the challenges of offering an overview of Heiss's *oeuvre*.

2.2 Aboriginal Australian Literatures

Alongside the chick lit genre, I contextualise Anita Heiss's writing within the lively and dynamic field of Aboriginal Australian literary production. Established and emerging Aboriginal writers are supported through writing fellowships, awards, professional networks and festivals. Aboriginal Australian writing is supported through independent Aboriginal publishing houses such as Magabala Books and Aboriginal Studies Press; Aboriginal writers are also well-represented by non-Aboriginal publishing houses such as Freemantle Press and University of Queensland Press (see Heiss *Dhuuluu-Yala* 51-65; Henningsgaard). The scale and dynamism of Aboriginal Australian writing is further illustrated by BlackWords, a subsidiary collection of the Austlit database. BlackWords recognises the unique contributions made by Australia's First Nations writers, poets and storytellers. In an interview with *The Garret* podcast, Heiss describes BlackWords as "a research community for Indigenous writers and storytellers", available to all Australians to use and peruse. The database catalogues over 23,000 works by more than 6,000 Aboriginal Australian authors.

Aboriginal writers have received major awards and commendations in the broader field of Australian writing: Noongar writer Kim Scott won the Miles Franklin Literary Award in 2000 for *Benang* and in 2011 for *That Deadman Dance* and Waanyi writer Alexis Wright won the Miles Franklin in 2007 for *Carpentaria*. Wright, easily one of the most lauded contemporary Aboriginal writers, won the 2018 Stella Prize and 2018 Magarey Medal for *Tracker*, her biography of Tracker Tilmouth. Aboriginal Australian poets, from Oodgeroo Noonuccal to Ali Cobby Eckerman, have achieved immense critical acclaim and popular

appeal. The Australian Dictionary of Biography notes that "sales of [Noonuccal's] poetry were claimed to rank second to Australia's best-selling poet, C.J. Dennis" (Abbey; see also Heiss "Black Poetics"; Lehman) while Eckerman was a 2017 recipient of the prestigious Windham-Campbell Prize, awarded by Yale University.

My literature review of the field of Aboriginal Australian writing highlights the polyvalent and adaptive nature of Aboriginal literature. Indeed, that Aboriginal Australian literature reads and re-reads the land, its peoples and its times is a sign of its resilience. As Penny van Toorn puts it, "the history of Aboriginal writing might have various beginnings, depending on how we answer questions such as: What counts as 'writing'? What counts as authorship? And Who counts as Aboriginal?" (*Writing Never Arrives Naked* 2, original capitalisation). Van Toorn's scholarship represents an important step in understanding the shape and form of Aboriginal Australian literature. Through a range of journal articles ("Transactions "; "Early Aboriginal Writing"), book chapters ("Early Writings"; "Indigenous Texts and Narratives") and a monograph (*Writing Never Arrives Naked*), van Toorn decentres Western notions of the text and "what counts as writing" ("Transactions " 226). She argues for an expanded notion of Aboriginal literacy and literature that goes beyond the written word and beyond European arrival. Further, she argues that Aboriginal people were producing and authoring Western-style texts not long after the arrival of the First Fleet. A case in point is Bennelong's 1796 letter to Mr Philips, Lord Sydney's steward. His letter represents the earliest recorded use, by an Aboriginal person, of the Roman alphabet. It is also widely considered a literary text in its own right (Van Toorn "Indigenous Texts and Narratives" 22); "a seminal work in Australian Aboriginal literature and … the first time that an Aboriginal author has appeared in print" ("The Bennelong Letter"; see also Heiss and Minter "Introduction" 7).

The Macquarie PEN Anthology of Aboriginal Literature, edited by Anita Heiss and Peter Minter, powerfully documents how Aboriginal literary forms have changed and adapted in the centuries following European invasion. Heiss and Minter select a range of documents authored by Aboriginal Australians to illustrate the extraordinary malleability of Aboriginal literatures as a means of resistance and contestation. They start their anthology with Bennelong's letter and go on to provide extracts from David Unaipon's *Native Legends* (1929), the Yirrkala Bark Petition (1963), Archie Roach's song writing, and contemporary

fiction by Tara June Winch. Underlying this anthology is the knowledge that at the same time that "Aboriginal people were dispossessed of their lands" (2), they were also "prevented from speaking their native languages". Jane Simpson observes that "in 1788 there were between 300 and 700 Indigenous languages spoken across Australia by millions of people" (n.pag.). But, as many of these languages withered under colonial rule, "the use of English became a necessity [to] survive colonisation" (Heiss and Minter "Aboriginal Literature" 2).

The title of Lawrence Bamblett's 2013 monograph, *Our Stories are Our Survival* is particularly apt in this context. Bamblett ostensibly chronicles the representations of Aboriginal Australians in sport, but the book's heart lies with the people of the Wiradjuri nation, especially those from Erambie mission. Bamblett writes:

> Storytelling at Erambie is part of the community's oral history tradition. There is repetition and continuity … Photographs are read like books and young people were expected to read them too … the origins of the community are taught alongside family histories and connections to peoples and places. (172)

Bamblett, like van Toorn and Heiss and Minter, characterises Aboriginal literatures as a shifting and fluid set of practices; further, he attributes the resilience of Aboriginal literary forms to these qualities of adaptability and fluidity. This thematic is repeated again and again throughout scholarly writing on Aboriginal literature. Anne Brewster emphasises continuity between oral and written forms in Oodgeroo Noonuccal's poetry ("Oodgeroo"). Brewster urges us "to see Noonuccal's writing as part of a continuum of Aboriginal cultural production which extends from the traditional orator, singer and storyteller to the contemporary activist and writer" ("Oodgeroo" 103). Brewster makes this case through reference to work by Jack Davis and Stephen Muecke. She quotes Jack Davis, who writes:

> What we call 'writing' need not always be defined by the Gutenberg tradition of script on paper which has been reproduced by the printing press. In a broader sense writing is definable as any sort of meaningful inscription, and in the case of Aboriginal Australia this would include sand paintings and drawings. (Davis et al. 3)

Stephen Muecke, along with co-authors Jack Davis and Adam Shoemaker, makes a similar point:

> Oral production remains the major means of cultural transmission and maintenance for Aboriginal peoples in Australia. This 'literature', to use the term loosely, is vast and diverse, spanning not only the continent and its 200 or so language families, but also the range of contemporary and traditional cultures; from Radio Redfern in central Sydney to initiation ceremonies, from the lyrics of country and western songs to the *Djanggawul* song cycle of Arnhem Land. (Muecke, Davis and Shoemaker 27)

More recently, Sandra Phillips has brought to light the way Aboriginal literature embodies the unyielding strength of Aboriginal Australian peoples:

> If resilience is a hallmark of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, evident in their survival beyond centuries of colonisation and oppression, brandishing the pen—or any of its modern equivalents—can be understood as a key resilience and survival strategy. Writing ourselves into contemporary and future existence is a complex act of cultural translation; it involves speaking to others through a technology from a foreign culture. (99)

Thousands of individual creative works comprise the macro history of Aboriginal Australian literatures. As Brewster hints at above, Oodgeroo Noonuccal's career provides an individual example of Aboriginal Australian literatures as an adaptive and resilient set of practices. Noonuccal—revered, venerated and loved—was a bestselling poet and activist, capturing the Australian public's attention in the 1960s and 1970s as she fought for Indigenous Australian rights. *We Are Going*, a collection of Noonuccal's poems published in 1964, is commonly held to be a pivotal moment in *Australian*—not just Aboriginal—literary history. As Greg Lehman observes, *We are Going* "sold out in three days, selling better than anything since C.J. Dennis' *Moods of Ginger Mick* in 1916". Similarly, Heiss notes in *Meanjin* magazine that *We are Going* "met with great sympathy and understanding on the part of the white community, running through seven editions and selling 500 copies in one day alone" ("Black Poetics" 180). On sales figures alone, then, to say nothing of the public's reaction, Oodgeroo was extraordinarily successful. Critical response, on the contrary, was tepid: as Karen Fox documents in her study *Maori and Aboriginal Women in the Public Eye*, Oodgeroo's poetry was criticised for being too simple; prefixes 'first', 'female' and 'Aboriginal' were frequently—and condescendingly—applied to her work (110).

Admiration for Oodgeroo Noonuccal permeates Heiss's published *oeuvre*. The Introduction to her memoir begins with the first three lines of Noonuccal's poem 'I Am Proud': "I am black of skin among whites, / And I am proud, / Proud of race and proud of skin." (*Am I Black Enough?* 1). She then goes on to name Noonuccal as "one of [her] greatest writing role models" (*Am I Black Enough?* 5) and "an inspiration" (O'Brien). In interviews, she elevates Noonuccal as one of the pre-eminent figures in Australian literary history.[7] Heiss

[7] Talking to SBS news, Heiss says: "I always go back to Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Kath Walker, and she changed her name in 1988 as a protest against the Bi-Centenery [sic] … I have an original hard cover of *We Are Going*, which was the first book of Aboriginal poetry published, and the Charter of Aboriginal rights, which is still relevant today" (Heiss qtd. in Armbruster).

owns a first edition, hard-cover copy of *We Are Going*; such is its significance that it is one of the few things she'd save in a fire (along with a photo of her parents and a draft of her latest book [Heiss *The Garret*]). Heiss's chick lit protagonists express similar appreciation of Noonuccal's politically-infused poetry. For example, *Avoiding Mr Right*'s Peta Tully, like Heiss, owns a first edition of *We Are Going* in hard cover (*Avoiding Mr Right* 37). In *Tiddas*, a quiet moment of contemplation takes Izzie back to the "joy of studying Oodgeroo Noonuccal's poetry" as an undergraduate at Charles Sturt University. "It was when [Izzy] first read 'Aboriginal Charter of Rights' that [her] political consciousness was awakened" (*Tiddas* 126). Not only was Oodgeroo famous in her own right, but Heiss, through regular expressions of admiration, lays claim to Oodgeroo's literary legacy. While this could be seen as a deliberate and strategic act of positioning on Heiss's part, it is not too much of a stretch to see the resemblance between Heiss and Oodgeroo: both have a history of public activism and have achieved mainstream literary success.

In *Dhuuluu-Yala: To Talk Straight*, Anita Heiss celebrates the range of Aboriginal literary production: "Aboriginal writers are telling their stories through the printed word in poetry, fiction, autobiography and biography, essays, histories, short stories, plays and film scripts" (*Dhuuluu-Yala* 35). This undeniable proficiency across a wide range of genres comes with an important caveat: for better or worse, Aboriginal writers "are still categorised and known largely for life-writing" (*Dhuuluu-Yala* 35). Indeed, when Heiss published *Am I Black Enough for You?* in 2012, she joined a long line of Aboriginal women telling their life story through the memoir genre. As far as theorising specific genres or modes of writing within the field of Aboriginal Australian literature goes, a temporal and thematic cluster around the genre of life writing or autobiography in the late 1980s and early 1990s is immediately noticeable.[8] The focal point of this cluster is without doubt Sally Morgan's *My Place*. It is hard to deny the significance of this memoir, described by many scholars as a "watershed"

[8] As Brewster points out, the chronology of Aboriginal women's life writing comprises two distinct parts, the first in the 1970s and the second emerging in the time period listed above (*Reading Aboriginal Women's Life Stories* xvii-iii). Gillian Whitlock, in her survey of Australian biography and autobiography, writes that "until 1970 ethnobiographic representations of Aboriginal Australians far exceeded autobiographical writing; since then there has been a decisive shift so that the latter is increasingly dominant, in fact overwhelmingly so by 1985" ("From Biography to Autobiography" 242). For Oliver Haag, the history of Aboriginal autobiography is "distinguished by uneven developments". Haag "ascertain[s] two different phases in the evolvement of Indigenous autobiography: from 1951 to 1987 … and from 1988 to 2004" ("Margins to the Mainstream" 8).

publication.[9] Published in 1987, the year before non-Aboriginal Australians celebrated the bicentenary of European arrival, *My Place* brought to the fore questions of identity (repressed and discovered) and dramatised the emergence of Aboriginal politics into the largely white mainstream. *My Place* was followed by the publication of a number of autobiographies by other Aboriginal women, including Glenyse Ward's *Wandering Girl* (1987), Ruby Langford Ginibi's *Don't Take Your Love to Town* (1988), Alice Nannup's *When the Pelican Laughed* (1992), Rita and Jackie Huggins' *Auntie Rita* (1994) and, later, Ruth Hegarty's *Is That You, Ruthie?* (1999).

Aboriginal Australian autobiographical texts have received significant scholarly attention. While it is true that a substantial portion of this attention focuses on *My Place* (even a cursory bibliography would include writing by Bain Attwood, Anne Brewster, John Docker, Jackie Huggins, Rosanne Kennedy, Marcia Langton, Tim Rowse and Russell West-Pavlov among many others), this attention has not been to the detriment of the broader field of Aboriginal Australian autobiographical forms. When explaining the appeal of the genre to Aboriginal Australian writers, Heiss stresses its historical value and truth-telling properties. She writes:

> Autobiographies are the history and text books of Aboriginal Australia. Writing autobiography is a way of retrieving and reclaiming a past that in many parts has not been written down or recorded accurately. Autobiography is a key place for Aboriginal people to start writing, empowering us to use (and at times change) the English language … it provides a vehicle for the author to learn to write about their own history, but also because it educates and often entertains a wider audience who may have a narrow perspective on Aboriginal Australia (Heiss *Dhuuluu-Yala* 35-6)

Aboriginal Australian autobiography continues to be a popular genre today. The year 2018 saw the publication of *Growing Up Aboriginal in Australia*, an anthology of short autobiographical vignettes edited by Anita Heiss.

In highlighting the pragmatism and resilience of Aboriginal literary forms, I do not wish to deny many of the other important aspects of Aboriginal literary production, such as

[9] Van Toorn writes that *My Place* is a "watershed publication in being the first Aboriginal-authored bestseller" ("Indigenous Texts and Narratives" 36). Jennifer Jones assesses *My Place* in similar terms: "Sally Morgan's best-selling life narrative *My Place* (1987), a watershed in Australian Aboriginal publishing" (37). Maggie Nolan acknowledges the significance of *My Place* whilst also contextualising it within a broader tradition of Aboriginal women's writing: "Although Sally Morgan's *My Place* (1986) [sic] is often seen as the watershed for [Indigenous life writing in Australia], Indigenous writers in Queensland – especially women writers – began writing their own personal and cultural narratives of loss and survival under the 'act' a decade earlier" (Nolan "Migloo Crap" 39).

its aesthetic qualities, literary value and political acumen. Rather, this framework helps to contextualise the place Anita Heiss's genre fiction occupies within the broader field of Aboriginal writing. Heiss made the decision to write chick lit for highly pragmatic and deliberate reasons: "my strategy in choosing to write commercial women's fiction is to reach audiences that weren't previously engaging with Aboriginal Australia in any format" (*Am I Black Enough?* 214). In the same chapter from her memoir ("On Being Koori Bradshaw"), Heiss goes on to name and enumerate her "intentions" (215) as well as the effects she hopes to enact in the Australian public sphere: "I want to use my storylines to challenge the notions of what it means to be Aboriginal" (216); "the point I'm making in my novels is about identity" (217). Without the framing context of Aboriginal Australian literature as a pragmatic set of practices and techniques, it would be easy to see Heiss's chick lit as an outlier that challenges Aboriginal Australian literary production rather than in harmony with it.

Even in this view, though, Heiss would still join a small—but not insignificant—group of Aboriginal Australian genre fiction writers, for example the crime novelists Philip McLaren and Nicole Watson. Ken Gelder and Paul Salzman, in their 2007 survey of Australian literature *After the Celebration*, note that McLaren's "second novel, *Scream Black Murder* (1995), was celebrated as a fine Australian example of Indigenous crime fiction" (Gelder and Salzman 58). Interestingly, Gelder and Salzman point to McLaren as "exceptional" in that he does not deal in the "conventional" matter of Aboriginal fiction, namely "autobiography and genealogy" (Gelder and Salzman 58). While Gelder and Salzman were writing in 2009 about Australian literature in the decades after the 1988 bicentenary, their assessment illustrates the way that autobiographical forms have, until very recently, dominated conceptions of the field of Aboriginal Australian literary production.

Alongside crime fiction, Aboriginal Australian genre fiction has also been gaining traction in the realm of science fiction and speculative fiction. Ambelin Kwaymullina, a Palyku author from Western Australia, has written *The Tribe* series, a collection of Young Adult fiction set several hundred years into a dystopian Australian future. *The Tribe* has been praised for the way Kwaymullina "ground[s] [her] post-apocalyptic speculative young adult series in Aboriginal Australian epistemologies" and "challenges preconceived and often narrow mainstream ideas of what Aboriginal cultures and literature offer the reader" (Herb, Collins-Gearing and Huijser 110; see also G. J. Murphy). Iva Polak's 2017 book *Futuristic*

Worlds in Australian Aboriginal Fiction, alongside research by Gillian Polack and Brian Attebery, signals exciting scholarly investigation into Aboriginal Australian speculative fiction. It is worth noting, though, that speculative fiction is not necessarily the same as 'genre' or 'popular' fiction. For example, Alexis Wright and Ambelin Kwaymullina can both be considered writers of speculative fiction, even if the stories they tell are parsed in separate literary vocabularies.

2.3 Chick Lit

When *Not Meeting Mr Right* was published in 2007, Heiss's entry into the chick lit genre may have appeared incongruous to those familiar with her previously published writing. At the time, she was an established author and academic, but none of her previous publications hinted towards an interest in popular women's fiction.[10] A 2008 interview with *Bookseller + Publisher* magazine addresses this seeming incongruity: "Your female-centric book *Avoiding Mr Right* is a far cry from editing the *Macquarie PEN Anthology of Aboriginal Literature*—has the genre of 'chick-lit' always appealed to you?". Heiss agrees that the two appear to have little in common. But she immediately adds that "both books speak not only about the evolution of our stories but of our writing and publishing abilities" ("The Multi-Tasker" 53). Heiss's answer reflects the argument taken up in the preceding section of this literature review, that the field of Aboriginal Australian literary production is sensitive to—and dialogues with—political exigencies of the day. Heiss's answer also joins her development as a writer to that of her peers and forebears in a shared act of evolution and progression. In the same interview—and in response to the same question—she goes on to explain: "I've never been a reader of chick-lit, in fact, I didn't even know that's what I was writing when I wrote [*Not Meeting Mr Right*]" (53). More recent interviews flesh out Heiss's inspiration for writing chick lit and suggest that her decision to add Aboriginal heroines to an increasingly global genre was both strategic and deliberate.

[10] Academic manuscripts (*Dhuuluu-Yala: To Talk Straight*), poetry and social observations (*I'm Not Racist But…*, *Sacred Cows*, *Token Koori*), young adult fiction (*Who Am I? The Diary of Mary Talence*) and editing the *Macquarie PEN Anthology of Aboriginal Literature*.

In a 2011 interview with ABC Radio, Heiss was again asked to comment on the seeming incongruity between the direction her writing took pre- and post-*Not Meeting Mr Right*. Host Anita Barraud commented: "your first [chick lit novel] was published in 2007, but you're an academic and you've written non-fiction, poetry and books for kids. Why did you decide to tackle chick-lit?". Similar to the interview with *Bookseller + Publisher* magazine, Heiss resists attempts to quarantine her genre fiction from the rest of her published *oeuvre*. She responded, firstly, with the reflection that "It's interesting because I had already published cross-genre". Here, Heiss acknowledges that to the untrained eye, her chick lit may seem anomalous in the context of her published catalogue. She is adamant, though, that the diversity of her published output has its own logic and continuity. Heiss then goes on to share with Barraud how inspiration struck:

> I was lying down at Maroubra Beach over a summer reading some of my favourite Australian authors, Rosie Scott and Georgia Blain and Linda Jaivin whose works I admire and respect, and with fabulous female characters. But what I realised is on the Australian literary landscape there weren't any Aboriginal women like me who lived in urban centres, who were educated and had businesses, but also had relationships like other Australian women. I didn't set out to write a chick lit novel, as it were, I just took this idea that I wanted to have some Aboriginal women in normal life in the city, and I also had 10 years of bad dates that I needed to purge myself of, and I ended up with this fun novel about *Not Meeting Mr Right*.

While Heiss seems to frame her move into popular women's fiction as serendipitous ("I didn't set out to write a chick lit novel, as it were"), there are good reasons to view her decision to write chick lit as strategic and deliberate. When Heiss realised that the Australian literary landscape was devoid of Aboriginal women like herself, this was no idle observation. Rather, this was a critique of the field of Australian literature based on extensive practical experience as an author, and theoretical knowledge as a scholar. Further, Heiss had the intellectual resources and practical nous to fill the gap.

I think that all of this says something important not just about Anita Heiss, but about the chick lit genre and how it travels across time and space to arrive in Heiss's consciousness at the opportune moment. Even if Heiss didn't immediately recognise what she was doing as chick lit, and even if she hadn't read the genre beforehand, the genre nonetheless provided an apt template that allowed her to make a specific argument about Aboriginal identity. Thus I want to say that there was something about the chick lit genre that could be adapted to Heiss's needs as an author, and the specific geopolitical exigencies of twenty-first century

Australia. By the time it dawned on Heiss that what she was writing was chick lit, the genre had been a feature of the global literary sphere for more than a decade. Such was its popularity that Heiss didn't necessarily need to have read a chick lit novel in order to understand the contours of the genre. Not only was the notion of single women living stylish and independent lives in the big city a well-established trope, but this formula perfectly encapsulated the lifestyle and aspirations of Heiss and other Aboriginal women like her.

There is no disputing that in 2019, chick lit has developed into a sizeable body of work in its own right, replete with iconic texts and a growing corpus of academic monographs, edited collections and journal articles. Cris Mazza and Jeffrey DeShell lay claim to coining the term 'chick lit' in their 1995 anthology *Chick Lit: Postfeminist Fiction* (followed by a second edited collection in 1996, *Chick Lit 2: No Chick Vics*). These collections were conceived with "ironic intent" (Mazza "Who's Laughing Now?" 18); the title and the short stories collected in these two volumes demonstrated the imaginative depth and self-deprecating breadth of contemporary female writing. "The trash of life *can* be funny, especially when, as writers, *we're* the ones in control" (Mazza "What Is Postfeminist Fiction?" 9). What the editors didn't anticipate, though, was that the term 'chick lit' would soon slip loose of its avant garde moorings, and come to designate a distinctly different set of values and ideologies aligned with mainstream consumer culture.

Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary*, published in 1996, is widely seen by many as the first—not to mention quintessential—chick lit novel. *Bridget Jones* displays many of the features that have come to be associated with the genre: a humorous, irreverent tone; a relatable heroine; a cosmopolitan setting; and, in varying proportions, the pursuit of love, friendship and career development. If we were to take *Bridget Jones* as a paradigmatic example of the genre—as many do—we would see that it is in many respects an Anglophone phenomenon, not to mention a very white and heterosexual one. In the two decades following its initial publication, *Bridget Jones's Diary* sold millions of copies worldwide and it has been adapted into a multimillion-dollar film franchise starring Renee Zellweger, Colin Firth and Hugh Grant. A multitude of authors following in Fielding's footsteps shared in the literary goldmine she had uncovered. On both sides of the Atlantic, authors Sophie Kinsella, Marian Keyes, Jennifer Weiner, Lauren Weisburger, Cecelia Ahern and Candace Bushnell are closely linked to the chick lit genre.

The first scholarly text to consider the phenomenon of chick lit at length was Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young's *Chick Lit: The New Women's Fiction*. It was published in 2006, ten years after the publication of *Bridget Jones's Diary*. Ferriss and Young's collection offers fourteen original scholarly essays that discuss chick lit's origins, varieties, and relationship with feminism. Collectively, the essays included in *Chick Lit: The New Women's Fiction* model a respectful and thoughtful engagement with the oft-derided genre. As editors the put it, "even if chick lit's popularity were to diminish, the body of work amassed over the past decade alone raises issues and questions about subjectivity, sexuality, race and class" (12). Ferriss and Young's edited collection was followed by Caroline Smith's *Cosmopolitan Culture and Consumerism in Chick Lit*, in 2007. Smith's work explores the ways in which the chick lit genre dialogues with popular media forms, especially the advice manual. Smith's work shows that far from being something of a consumer culture dupe, the chick lit genre critiques, derides and satirises various mediums which attempt to regulate women's behaviour and relationships. Stephanie Harzewski's 2011 monograph, *Chick Lit and Postfeminism* delves further into the genre's relationship with its literary antecedents, from the novel of manners to the Harlequin romance.

If we date academic discussion of the chick lit genre to Ferriss and Young's edited collection, already we see concerted attempts to decentre and disrupt the hegemonic whiteness that had solidified around the genre. Lisa Guerrero's work is especially important in this context. Guerrero's chapter in *Chick Lit: The New Women's Fiction*, "Sistahs Are Doin' It For Themselves: Chick Lit in Black and White", explores how Terry McMillan's 1992 novel *Waiting to Exhale* predates *Bridget Jones's Diary* by four years as the original 'chick lit' novel. Guerrero forcefully argues that black chick lit—"sistah lit", in her words—is not simply "chick lit in black face" (88) but a distinctive genre in its own right that encapsulates the tone, thematics and historical specificity of writing by and about Black American women. Guerrero's research demonstrates that "race socially, politically and historically informs the ways in which the two powerhouse genres and their heroines diverge, especially in their attitudes toward and relationships to men, marriage, and the struggle for worth, fulfilment and respect" (88). Guerrero's work urges us to see multiple points of origin for the chick lit genre, and to resist the white gravitational pull that *Bridget Jones's Diary* exerts over much chick lit scholarship. Guerrero's work is highly significant because she signals alternative ways

of viewing the chick lit genre from its inception onwards, but few scholars, save Cecelia Konchar Farr and, more recently, Erin Hurt ("The White Terry McMillan"), have fully grasped the import of Guerrero's words.

Alongside Guerrero's discussion of McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale*, I identify Pamela Butler and Jigna Desai's co-authored article, "Manolos, Marriage and Mantras: Chick Lit Criticism and Transnational Feminism" as an equally important scholarly intervention into the realm of non-white chick lit. When Butler and Desai consider more than a decade's worth of chick lit criticism, they see that critique of the genre is "typically limited to a framework that understands the genre as a sign or symptom of 'postfeminism' in the U.S." (1). In consequence, scholarly and mainstream media treatment of chick lit tends to "reflect and re-enact the limitations of hegemonic U.S. feminist thought" (2). Butler and Desai further point out that the majority of chick lit criticism treats it as "a homogeneously white normative genre to be read primarily for its relationship to feminism and femininity, to the exclusion of other forms of social difference" (2). Butler and Desai's analysis showed that scholars and mainstream critics alike rarely, if ever, engaged with the genre's depiction of race, despite its pervasiveness in some of the quintessential texts of the genre, such as *Bridget Jones's Diary*.

Where white chick lit is often read "as an 'apolitical' genre driven by blind and uncritical consumerism and individualism" (Butler and Desai 2), non-white chick lit is—and has to be—political in ways that white chick lit can easily avoid. I take up Butler and Desai's point in my first article, "'The Pretty and the Political'":

> Consideration of the chick lit heroine's racial identity (whether white or non-white) is more than enough to politicise the genre. … However, Heiss goes further: in addition to emphasising an Aboriginal Australian female subjectivity, she infuses her narrative with a keen—and explicit—political consciousness. Her novels canvas issues ranging from the topical (Keith Windschuttle and the history wars; the 2004 Palm Island death in custody) to the technical (copyright issues for academics and writers working with Aboriginal communities; capitalisation of the 'a' in Aboriginal). (3)

While much of my thinking on Heiss's chick lit centres on the political and intellectual engagement at work in her writing, this is not always the case. Take, for example, a 2004 article by Lola Ogunnaike entitled "Black Writers Seize Glamorous Ground around Chick Lit" which documents the rise of non-white popular women's fiction in America. Her take on the genre diverges significantly from my treatment of Heiss's chick lit:

> Six years after Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* established the genre that has come to be known as chick-lit -- and just in time for beach-book season -- black chick-lit appears to have arrived. While the books are aimed at African-Americans, the publishers and authors hope to score a crossover success with white readers of chick-lit.
>
> Like its white counterpart, black chick-lit often centers on single women with dream jobs, precariously balancing the personal and professional. Similarly, too, these new authors write with insiders' knowledge about the glamorous worlds they chronicle.
>
> Neither racially charged nor didactic, these books seem meant to be read on sandy shores from Sag Harbor to St.-Tropez. The protagonists, educated and decidedly middle to upper class, effortlessly mingle with both black and white characters. Love, not privilege, is the only real speed bump.
>
> "There is no momma figure acting as the conscience; spirituality is not at the core of these books," said Patrik Henry Bass, books editor at *Essence*, the leading African-American women's magazine. "You won't find any church scenes."

This extract highlights white audiences as one of the key reading publics for African-American-authored chick-lit. It is interesting that both the journalist and the editor worry about alienating white readers through a number of stylistic, rhetorical and thematic elements that could be perceived as 'too black'. These include tone ("didactic"), ideology ("racially charged"), thematic concerns ("spirituality") and tropes ("church scenes", "momma figure acting as the conscience"). At the same time that Ogunnaike and Bass sketch out what would make a 'bad' African-American chick lit novel (presumably one that included a mix of all the elements listed above), they are anxious to reassure their potential readership that none of these problematic elements, which presumably have the power to discomfort a white reader, are present in this new incarnation of chick lit.

This extract from Ogunnaike's article is all the more pertinent given the obvious parallels with Heiss's writing. Heiss too writes books to be read on "sandy shores": in *Am I Black Enough?*, she explains "I was driven to write a book that other Australian women like me would read in the bath, on the beach or the train or bus and so forth" (213). Not only does Heiss imagine a specific physical backdrop against which her books might be read, but these contexts are conducive to a certain type of reading: "I read for escapism in these places" (213). Further parallels abound. Just as the protagonists of African American chick lit are "educated and decidedly middle to upper class", Heiss's characters are "urban, educated, articulate, career-minded" (215) and describe themselves (albeit ambivalently) as "Bourgeois Black[s]" (*Not Meeting Mr Right* 237; *Paris Dreaming* 43). In this respect though, class differences persist between African Americans and Aboriginal Australians. Despite a

burgeoning Aboriginal middle class, an upper class Black elite remains largely an American phenomenon. These parallels make the "racially charged" and "didactic" elements to both non-white expressions of chick lit all the more intriguing. Where Ogunnaike reassures the potential reader that these elements are absent from black chick lit, Heiss makes no such promises. She describes her female protagonists as "very politicised" and she is clear on the educational intent of her writing: "I want readers to learn" (*Am I Black Enough* 199).

In subsequent years, this scholarly conversation has expanded to consider non-Anglophone chick lit from a variety of countries, geo-political areas and religions. Even a cursory survey uncovers a startling diversity of academic interest in Muslim chick lit (Newns; Abdullah and Awan), Turkish-German chick lit (Benbow; Eichmanns Maier), Italian chick lit (Balducci), Hungarian chick lit (Sellei), 'chica' lit (Hedrick; Herrera; Hurt "Cultural Citizenship and Agency"; "Trading Cultural Baggage for Gucci Luggage"; Morrison) and Chinese chick lit (Chen "Shanghai(ed) Babies"; "*Shanghai Baby* as a Chinese Chick-Lit"; Ommundsen "From China With Love"; Thoma; Tse). The cultural diversity evident in this list is further buttressed by scholarly works which discuss the broader category of global chick lit including newspaper articles (Donadio), book chapters (Ponzanesi) and edited collections (Hurt *Theorizing Ethnicity and Nationality in the Chick Lit Genre*). Cumulatively, this research attests to the myriad ways that "global chick lit … propagate[s] the idea of a neoliberal, global sisterhood of chic, empowered, consumerist and individualistically minded women who find freedom through consumption and progress in following Western commodities and values" (Chen "Shanghai[ed] Babies" 215).

These works are also notable for the way they treat postfeminism. The chick lit genre (especially in its white articulations) is commonly held to typify what Gill and Herdieckerhoff describe as a "post-feminist sensibility". In such manifestations, "feminism is not ignored or even straightforwardly attacked … but is simultaneously taken for granted and repudiated" (498-9; see also McRobbie). A postfeminist sensibility also implies a certain sexual freedom and agency. While women still form romantic attachments (of an overwhelmingly heterosexual variety, to be sure), they pick up and discard men with ease. The front cover of *Not Meeting Mr Right* provides a striking visual representation of this attitude to sex and dating. A bored-looking woman sits suspended from the 'o' of *Not Meeting Mr Right*; she dangles her legs above a conveyor belt of identical, cookie-cutter men. The men pass,

unseen, below her; without even bothering to pick one up, she lets them fall straight into a rubbish bin. This conveyer-belt approach to dating coheres with postfeminism's "[frank encouragement of] women's sexual pleasure and agency" as "part of a consumer lifestyle and attitude" (Arthurs 85). While it would be easy to dismiss postfeminism (and, by extension, the chick lit genre) as complicit with larger systemic structures that work to disenfranchise women, such a critique ignores the knowing, often satirical tone in which many chick lit novels are written. It also ignores the way that chick lit novels, "like contemporary women's lived experiences, are saturated with neoliberal ideology" (Hurt "Conclusion: Reading Neoliberal Fairytales" 212). In introducing the nexus between chick and postfeminism, I am mindful of the critique advanced by Butler and Desai that a "singular focus on 'postfeminism' also ignores larger … questions about how popular culture operates in relation to broader political and economic contexts" (6). In other words, while chick lit may indeed exemplify a post-feminist sensibility, to discuss it solely in these terms is to "dismiss and ignore the very salient ways in which popular culture both participates in forming, and provides insight into, national and global citizenship" (6).

As much as it can be discussed on its own terms, chick lit can also be understood in a number of other literary-historical contexts. For example, the chick lit novel is frequently seen as emerging out of the popular romance novel. Stephanie Harzewski, in her 2011 book *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, gives a detailed account of the family resemblance between the chick lit genre and popular romance fiction; the two may be "close cousins" (25) but they are definitely not twins. The chick lit novel "dramatically revises" (25) the romance novel, offering itself as a "postfeminist alternative" (26). In essence, "chick lit is a partial parody of Harlequin romance modifying the latter through greater realism and a different representation of the hero" (26). Harzewski was not the first to ask these questions: Rosalind Gill and Elena Herdieckerhoff's 2007 article "Rewriting the Romance: New Femineities in Chick Lit" also explored the development of popular women's fiction. Their work has been influential in theorising the relationship between the chick lit and romance genres. Drawing on research by Lynne Pearce and Jackie Stacey, Gill and Herdieckerhoff locate "the enduring significance of romance as a discourse … in its ability to *adapt* or mutate" (493). It is this feature, they suggest, that threads together the two genres: the romance discourse raises insistent questions about race and class, sexual identity and systemic power. Yet for Gill and

Herdieckerhoff, the chick lit genre represents something of a squandered opportunity: they acknowledge that chick lit updates the tropes of the romance genre, "but not in ways that allow for complex analyses of power, subjectivity, and desire" (500). Gill and Herdieckerhoff's work, though influential and widely-cited, also illustrates an approach to the chick lit genre that Butler and Desai would be sceptical of: by minimising chick lit's importance on the basis of a postfeminist sensibility, they foreclose any possibility of seeing the way the genre may well analyse "power, subjectivity, and desire" with complexity.

Histories of the chick lit genre and romance genre both emphasise a lineage with roots in nineteenth-century fiction and beyond. Tania Modleski, for example, straightforwardly asserts that "[the Harlequin romance novel] can be traced back through the work of Charlotte Brontë and Jane Austen to the sentimental novel and ultimately … to the novels of Samuel Richardson" (15). Jane Austen is regularly cited as one of the literary forebears of the chick lit novel. Helen Fielding makes no secret of the way she "stole" plot elements (not to mention characters' names) from *Pride and Prejudice* (qtd. in Smith, *Cosmopolitan Culture* 7). Further, the title of a 2006 collection of essays edited by Jennifer Crusie proclaims *Pride and Prejudice* to be 'the original chick lit masterpiece'.[11] The relationship between Jane Austen's writing, *Bridget Jones's Diary* and the chick lit genre has proved a fruitful field of analysis for scholars (Scholz; Nandy; O. Murphy), especially when connected to the larger field of 'Austenmania'[12] and scholarship on the diverse filmic, televisual and literary adaptations of Austen's work.

Much of the discussion around Jane Austen's relationship to the chick lit genre turns on the question of literary credibility, with each benefitting from something the other has to offer. Chick lit, vulnerable to the assertions of vacuity that troubles much of women's writing, bolsters its literary credibility when read in the light of a canonical author such as Austen. "The Regency author's name," Stephanie Harzewski notes, "perform[s] the function of a quality brand in chick lit's lexical register" (20). Likewise, the visual tropes attached to the chick lit genre (pastel colours, cursive writing, and a cascade of love hearts, flowers, handbags, martinis, chocolates, cupcakes and so forth) are thought to render Jane Austen

[11] While the title unequivocally claims Jane Austen as a chick lit author, the essays contained therein seem to hold little interest in reading *Pride and Prejudice* within the terms of the chick lit genre.
[12] A term coined by Roger Sales in his 'Afterword' to *Jane Austen and the Representation of Regency England*; Sales uses the word 'Austenmania' to denote the proliferation of Austen adaptations in popular culture that was already apparent in 1996.

more attractive to a younger generation of readers.[13] Juliette Wells makes an important contribution to this debate, asking whether "chick lit belong[s] in the company of Jane Austen and Edith Wharton, Charlotte Brontë and Frances Burney" (67)? Are these "esteemed … literary figures" truly the "'mothers' of chick lit?" (67). In answer, Wells separates literary value from traditions of women's writing and reading. While there may be continuity between contemporary chick lit novels and writers of Jane Austen's ilk in terms of the latter (women's writing has been, and will most likely continue to be, dismissed as "silly" [Eliot] and "froth" [Bainbridge]), there is no such continuity in terms of the former: "chick lit amuses and engrosses, but it does not richly reimagine in literary form the worlds that inspire it" (67).

2.4 Reception Studies

Let's return to the reason why Heiss writes. In the first pages of *Am I Black Enough for You?*, Heiss explains that her motivation as an author stems from a desire

> to reclaim pride in our status as First Nations peoples, to explain the diversity of Aboriginal experiences (particularly in urban environments), and to demonstrate the realities and complexities of being Aboriginal in the twenty-first century. (*Am I Black Enough?* 5-6)

Not only is Heiss unlike many writers today in the way she so categorically sets out her intentions, what she hopes to achieve through her writing, but she also delineates specific audiences for her writing. In particular, the first of these reasons—"to reclaim pride in our status as First Nations peoples"—sets out a specific audience for Heiss's writing, namely, the Aboriginal Australian reading public. In contrast, the latter two reasons—"to explain the diversity of Aboriginal experiences" and "to demonstrate the realities and complexities of being Aboriginal"—interpellate a non-Aboriginal audience, especially a non-Aboriginal audience who may be curious about, but largely ignorant of, what it means to be Aboriginal in twenty-first-century Australia.

Heiss places a premium on *how* her work is received by Aboriginal readers,[14] but, as she wryly puts it, "there are not enough Blackfellas to sustain *any* publishing venture, least of all an entire genre" (*Am I Black Enough?* 214 original emphasis). Thus, Heiss very consciously

[13] In 2006, the Telegraph reported that the publishing house Headline planned to launch new editions of Austen's novels with "glossy, pastel covers designed to appeal to women put off by the idea of reading a 19th century writer".

[14] "Author, historian, academic and my friend Jackie Huggins from the Bidijra nation tells me that *Sacred Cows* was for a long time her son John Henry's favourite book, and that's the feedback that is important to me" (*Am I Black Enough?* 189).

targets her books towards non-Aboriginal women, a demographic with the means and interest to sustain a publishing venture such as hers. For commercial reasons alone, then, Heiss is compelled to address an audience of Aboriginal *and* non-Aboriginal readers. Much of Heiss's fiction assumes that her non-Aboriginal readers have little knowledge of Aboriginal culture, politics or history, nor, for that matter, of what it is like to be an urban Aboriginal woman. In this, we can detect that Heiss's intentions go far beyond the standard chick lit claims to entertain or divert; Heiss wants to *educate* her readers.

The question of *who* Heiss is writing for is an important one when we talk about Heiss's chick lit and the production of her work more generally. Heiss has given the question of readership a great deal of thought; she is the first to admit that her works "are targeted to particular audiences" (*The Garret*). She is keenly aware that Aboriginal audiences, especially younger readers, should have access to Aboriginal stories written by Aboriginal authors. And that this is as much an issue of equity in literacy as it is about representation: "one of the reasons we have literacy issues—and there are many reasons—but one is we need to be providing resources where kids see themselves on the page" (*The Garret*). Heiss is unequivocal on this point: "I want people to read, I want the resources so brown kids can see brown kids on the page" (Heiss qtd. in Hardy "Similarities"; see also Hardy "All Sisters").

Heiss vividly recounts travelling to a remote community and seeing that Aboriginal children were reading *Harry Potter*. The manner in which Heiss tells this story to Nic Brasch on *The Garret* (cited below) recalls her acumen at finding niches and gaps for innovation. To be sure, her *Harry Potter* story is an additional genesis story that complements her moment of inspiration on the beach. This is how we get to *Harry Potter*: First, Heiss says:

> I published the PhD, I published the book of poetry, and then I get asked to write a kids novel for Scholastic about the Stolen Generations. And that was my first foray into… And then I just kept getting ideas and I could see the gaps in the classrooms, because I was talking to teachers all the time and you could see what was missing. (*The Garret*)

This extract highlights just some of Heiss's qualities as a productive and innovative author. She talks to those around her (in this instance, teachers) and openly receives new ideas. Combined, these qualities mean that Heiss finds inspiration everywhere: "I just kept getting ideas"; "I could see the gaps"; "you could see what was missing". Heiss balances this ability to see what is missing with the theoretical knowledge she has gained through academia:

> In doing my PhD seeing the issues for writers, looking at… you know, developing lists of where we've published, and what's missing, and looking at the fiction side of things, and wondering

> why our books aren't at the airport and they're not in department stores, and there's like a small niche section in independent stores and why aren't we? Everyone else… (*The Garret*)

Until finally it all came together one day:

> And I thought, well… I was up in Port Hedland running writing workshops in 2001 and I saw *Harry Potter*, on a desk in a demountable in an Aboriginal community, and I don't know who was reading that book but I thought 'Someone here is reading commercial fiction, so we should be writing it'. (*The Garret*) [15]

This quotation shows that Heiss's academic training and pragmatic approach combine to exert a strong influence over the way she conceptualises her audience. Or, to put this another way: Heiss has carried out careful market research, even if she doesn't phrase it in those exact terms.

The notion of an audience is thus crucial to understanding Heiss's writing and the creative process that produces it. It is not too farfetched to argue that Heiss writes first and foremost for an audience. She says as much in an interview with ABC radio: she regards herself as someone "who wasn't particularly writing for a genre but writing for an audience". Later on in the same interview, she reiterates: "I write for audiences, I'm not writing for reviewers, I am not writing for the academy, I'm not writing for … [a Booker Prize]" ("Chick Lit: Beneath the Pastel Pink Veneer"). Indeed, if the audience Heiss envisages doesn't already 'exist', she will happily create it. As Heiss writes of *Not Meeting Mr Right*: "I had, with one title, apparently managed to create a new genre … and a whole new audience of readers nationally" (*Am I Black Enough?* 214).

Given that Heiss spends so much time cultivating and addressing specific readerships, it is natural to want to know how readers respond to being so directly interpellated through Heiss's work. It is with this question in mind that I turn to the field of reception studies. As Ika Willis notes in her Introduction to *Reception*, "a broad range of approaches, disciplines, and political and critical orientations have contributed to the field of reception" (31). It is beyond the scope of this thesis to give a full account of the various prehistories and contemporary articulations of the field of reception, which encompasses classical reception studies to

[15] This anecdote is also recounted in a 2012 interview with the *Sydney Morning Herald* (Elliott) and in *Am I Black Enough?*. Heiss writes "In 2001 I was in a community school in the Pilbara, north-western Western Australia, and saw a copy of *Harry Potter* sitting on the desk of a demountable classroom where I was running a writers' workshop. I was immediately happy—if not a tad surprised—and smiled because I didn't and don't care what our people are reading as long as they are reading. I realised then that if our people read commercial fiction then why shouldn't we write it?" (213).

postcolonial reception, as well as approaching the question of reception through the text as well as the reader. Instead, my literature review addresses two specific sub-categories of "text-to-reader" reception (Willis 32), namely cross-cultural reception and online reception.

As stated above, Heiss writes primarily for a non-Aboriginal audience, irrespective of whether this audience is explicitly gendered (as in the case of her chick lit). Thus, in contemplating the theoretical framework for research into the reception of Heiss's work, I look first and foremost to the field of cross-cultural reception. Here, I take my cue from Kimberly Chabot Davis, who examines "white consumers of contemporary African-American fiction" ("White Book Clubs and African American Literature" 156); in the following pages, my inquiry into cross-cultural reception explores the non-Aboriginal Australian reception of Aboriginal Australian writing. In an Australian context, research into how race inflects contemporary book reviewing practices is most strongly associated with the work of Robert Clarke and Maggie Nolan. Their 'Fictions of Reconciliation' project "examines the reception of recent works of Australian fiction that focus on Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations" ("Reading Groups and Reconciliation" 19). Over a series of three linked papers ("Book Clubs and Reconciliation"; "Reading Groups and Reconciliation"; "Reading *the Secret River*"), Clarke and Nolan use close textual analysis and book group interviews to compare academic and popular responses to Kate Grenville's *The Secret River*. Their research pivots on the question of "[what the responses of 'ordinary' or 'lay readers'] might tell us about the ways in which historical fiction might or might not be mobilised in understanding contemporary race relations in Australia" ("Reading Groups and Reconciliation" 19). Clarke and Nolan's formulation provides a valuable theoretical model for the reception studies undertaken in this thesis: in terms of both Heiss's fiction and non-fiction, I investigate how the act of reviewing allows the reading public to participate in debates about contemporary race relations in Australia.

Despite this shared interest, my work differs from Clarke and Nolan's in a number of respects. My primary material consists of online reviews rather than face-to-face interviews and the genre of the book in question is a non-fictional memoir rather than a work of historical fiction. More important is the race of the author: Heiss is a Wiradjuri woman from central NSW while Grenville is a non-Aboriginal Australian woman. When discussing the field of Aboriginal Australian literature, or the more amorphous 'Fictions of Reconciliation', race

matters. According to Heiss, the way non-Aboriginal authors write about Aboriginal people and culture profoundly influences the kinds of representations that circulate in the Australian imagination ("Writing About Indigenous Australia" 197). There has been a "long history of appropriation and exploitation of Aboriginal culture and identity in Australia" by non-Aboriginal writers and a pervasive assumption "that there is no difference between 'black' and 'white' writing" (*Dhuuluu-Yala* 2). Clarke and Nolan exemplify the latter tendency by situating their research within the tradition of cross-cultural reception ("Reading Groups and Reconciliation" 21-2; see also "Book Clubs and Reconciliation" 124), a field which concerns the (homogenously white or racially mixed) reception of non-white authored texts. Clarke and Nolan's object of study, however, is the reception of a *white*-authored text, even if it does explore race relations. Thus, while it may be tempting to describe Clarke and Nolan as inaugurating the field of cross-cultural reception studies in Australia (and they ask that their work be read in these terms) such a move erases the inescapably white authorship of *The Secret River*.

With these qualifications in mind, the body of work that investigates non-Aboriginal reception of Aboriginal Australian-authored texts shrinks further; what remains has been primarily formulated in a European context. Oliver Haag has written numerous articles examining the translation, sales, marketing and cover art of Aboriginal Australian literature in German-speaking countries (for a small sample, see "'Bumping Some Bloody Heads Together'"; "Indigenous Australian Literature in German"; and "Representations of Aboriginality in German Translations of Aboriginal Literature"). Similar enquiries have been conducted against Italian (Di Blasio), Slovenian (Čerče) and European (Čerče and Haag) backdrops. While these studies are valuable for the insights they provide into the European reception of Aboriginal Australian cultural production, these insights are not readily transferable to a specifically Australian reading context.

Instead, the most fruitful place to seek theoretical guidance for my research into the reception of Anita Heiss's writing comes from transnational articulations of cross-cultural reception. This body of work opens onto a number of geographic vistas: New Zealand (as theorised in the work of Michelle Keown), America (in the work of Kimberley Chabot Davis and Catherine Burwell) and the United Kingdom (in the work of Anouk Lang and James Procter). The 2015 issue of the journal *Reception* anchors "the study of literary reception in a

dynamic multicultural environment" (Schweickart and Goldstein 4) and *Reading Across Worlds* (Procter and Benwell), also published in 2015, commits to a deep and sustained analysis of cross-cultural reception across the European, African and Northern American continents. To date, there has been little attempt at understanding how cross-cultural reception operates in an Australian setting, particularly the question of how Aboriginal-authored texts are read and reviewed by Australian readers.

With the exception of Keown, the works mentioned above are alike in their preoccupation with book groups and 'real-world' reading practices. This is consonant with the bulk of literary reception studies, which ranges from Janice Radway's romance readers in the pseudonymous American town of Smithton, Elizabeth Long's Texan book groups, the UK (as studied by Hartley and Turvey) and beyond. The 'Devolving Diasporas' project (culminating in the publication of *Reading Across Worlds*, mentioned above) is a comparative study of reading groups in the UK, Canada and Jamaica. The 'Discourse of Reading Groups' project concentrates on the discursive and linguistic features of book group talk (Swann and Allington; O'Halloran); 'Beyond the Book' is a transatlantic investigation into Mass Reading Events (also known as 'One Book, One City' events) carried out by Danielle Fuller and DeNel Rehberg Sedo ("Reproducing "the Wow Factor"?"; *Reading Beyond the Book*).

The field of reception studies offers many methodologies for understanding how Heiss's writing might be received by her reading public: face-to-face interviews, facilitated reading groups, questionnaires, even ethnographic analyses. However, I decided to gather data on the reception of Heiss's books from online sources, principally blogs, commercial bookselling websites (Amazon) and community reviewing websites (Goodreads, LibraryThing). There are a number of reasons why it makes a lot of sense to use online reviews of Heiss's work for a reception study. These range from the pragmatic (such as the accessibility and ease of data collection) to reasons that are unique to Heiss. In terms of the latter, Heiss proficiently uses online tools—especially social media—to connect with her readers. She writes: "I love tweets from people all over the country (and the world) who want to just send a line to connect" ("The Art of Connectivity"). These tweets are often from people who have read her work; in turn, Heiss readily acknowledges the people who devote their time and money to her writing: "the least I can do is respond to a tweet or Facebook

comment. I do my best to respond to as many as possible each day" (Heiss "The Art of Connectivity").

This interaction between author and reader is one of the many unique affordances of what Simone Murray calls the "digital literary sphere". Murray has been influential in documenting the transformation of reading practices—and the wider book publishing industry of which they are a part—as they move into the online sphere. Murray first articulated these ideas in "Charting the Digital Literary Sphere", a 2015 journal article. She subsequently expanded these ideas into a full-length book in 2018, simply entitled *The Digital Literary Sphere*. Murray's work explores how

> The Internet offers an abundance of what in earlier print- and broadcast-dominated eras was collectively termed "book talk": book review websites, self-cataloguing library networks, author home pages, publishers' portals, online book retailers, archived writers' festival sessions, and recorded celebrity author readings. ("Charting the Digital Literary Sphere" 312)

My two reception papers respond to Murray's call for greater scholarly engagement in this field. Murray uses the digital literary sphere as an "umbrella term" intended to encompass "the broad array of book-themed websites and other digital content whose focus is contemporary literature and its production, circulation, and consumption" ("Charting the Digital Literary Sphere" 313). Murray identifies a number of scholarly lacunae, not least

> The vast range of contemporary literary discussion that takes place at the liminal zone between print and digital, such as online discussion of predominantly print texts or examination of how digital technologies publicize, market, and retail fiction which is then read (perhaps) in print, only for readers to then reconnect online through book clubs, fan sites, personal library cataloguing sites, book review blogs, and so on. ("Charting the Digital Literary Sphere" 319)

Several of these websites and social phenomena have been analysed on a site-by-site, or platform-by-platform, basis. This includes—but is in no way limited to—Goodreads (Nakamura; Thelwall and Kousha; Driscoll and Rehberg Sedo), e-readers (Barnett; Rowberry; Cameron), Amazon (Finn; Steiner "Private Criticism"; Allington), LibraryThing (Pinder), book blogs (Steiner "Personal Readings"; Nelson) and online reading challenges (Foasberg). These are but some of the nooks and crannies that research into the digital literary sphere has illuminated; but, as befits such a broad and rapidly mutating field, this list is inevitably partial. For instance, in recent years the "market-dominating Goodreads" has "largely subsumed or … eclipsed rivals Shelfari and LibraryThing" (Murray "Reading Online: Updating the State of the

Discipline" 373). Equally, early features of the digital literary sphere (such as listserv reading groups, as discussed by Barbara Fister) have largely disappeared. Murray's research provides a comprehensive snapshot of these platforms; her primary aim is to identify the manifold components of the digital literary sphere rather than engage in a sustained analysis of any one in particular. For this, she defers to the research undertaken by the scholars mentioned above.

My research into online reception studies also makes a case for qualitative analysis of online reviewing practices. The growing academic discipline of digital humanities foregrounds quantitative approaches to the typically large datasets associated with online reviewing. The three articles on Amazon book reviews listed above are a mere taste of the kinds of quantitative research carried out by scholars using Amazon data. This research may appear in digital humanities journals such as *Digital Humanities Quarterly*, but it is equally likely to appear in computer science or business journals (*Journal of Marketing Research*, *Journal of Economic Behaviour & Organisation*, *Trends in Artificial Intelligence*). Research that makes use of Amazon data will employ a range of statistical and algorithm-based methodologies to evaluate the utility of reviews, ratings and recommendations (see for example Mudambi and Schuff; Chevalier and Mayzlin; Hu and Liu). Amassing and analysing quantitative data from Amazon reveals, for example, that the type of product influences reviews and their perceived helpfulness (Mudambi and Schuff). In contrast, qualitative analyses of Amazon reviews (and online reviews in general) are thin on the ground. Thus, my research into the online reception of Anita Heiss's writing innovates on the qualitative focus of the digital literary sphere, as well as its reliance on single-platform analysis.

2.5 The Plurality of Contemporary Aboriginal identity

The plurality of contemporary Aboriginal identity is a thematic touchstone throughout Heiss's public interventions. Indeed, the chief argument Heiss pursues throughout her published *oeuvre* relates to the plurality of contemporary Aboriginal identity. As she states on the opening page of *Am I Black Enough?* "I am an urban, beachside Blackfella, a concrete Koori with Westfield Dreaming, and I apologise to no one" (1). Heiss's chick lit characters, like Heiss herself, confront what it means to be an Aboriginal woman living in the urban heart of twenty-first century Australia. As much as Heiss's characters struggle to find love or pursue

their career aspirations, they also struggle to have themselves taken seriously as Aboriginal women. For Heiss's protagonists, as for Heiss herself, the plurality of contemporary Aboriginal identity is not simply a lived reality; it is hard-won and carved out in opposition to preconceived notions of Aboriginal authenticity or identity. Establishing a contemporary Aboriginal identity is an oppositional process, as Peta's encounter with the 'authentic Aborigine' statue makes clear: Peta is determinedly *not* what she sees in front of her, but she is no less an Aboriginal person because of it.

Heiss is aware of the various stereotypes that precede her as an Aboriginal Australian; such are their potency that Heiss must continually articulate her difference from them. The impact is often restrictive, as seen in her relationship with alcohol: "I rarely … drink alcohol before I speak at an event. Even at my own book launches. I'm paranoid about being perceived as the nasty stereotype of the 'Black drunk', even though in my head I know that I shouldn't be held as a representative of all Aboriginal people" (*Am I Black Enough* 147). Even when Heiss appears to be celebrating her difference as an Aboriginal woman, her words are tinged with frustration:

> I don't wear ochre – the naturally tinted clay worn on the body for ceremony. Instead I wear Revlon, or Clinique or Max Factor. I don't go 'walkabout' – the term used for Aboriginal people who travelled for business, ceremony and food. Instead I drive a sports car – because it's faster than walking. I don't speak my traditional Wiradjuri language because it was outlawed and then all but died as part of the colonisation process. Instead, I speak the coloniser's language that of the English [sic]. I don't tell time by the sun – I tell time by a gorgeous Dolce and Gabbana watch. But I do … hunt kangaroo three times a week – in the supermarket, where most urban dwellers shop for food. I make an excellent kangaroo stir-fry and kangaroo curry. ("International Women's Day Speech - Shanghai")[16]

Here, Heiss addresses non-Aboriginal expectations of Aboriginal identity: that all Aboriginal people go walkabout, speak language, wear ochre and read the country around them. It would easy—but exceedingly facile—to equate Heiss's insistence on the plurality of contemporary Aboriginal identity with disdain for those who *do* maintain traditional aspects of their heritage. Caroline Overington's critique is a case in point:

> Like most authors, [Heiss has] a little speech that she regularly gives, in which she makes clear that she's not like those desert and camp-dweller Aborigines they might have seen in the newspapers; she's a thoroughly hip, urban girl.

[16] See also *Am I Black Enough?* 120-1.

> "I get my kangaroo from Coles!" she says. "I don't collect berries; I collect jewellery from Tiffany! I don't wear ochre; I wear Revlon!'' The jokes get a few laughs, which is fair enough, although I'm told that some Aboriginal people would find them offensive, since daubing ochre is an important and serious part of Aboriginal dance, and hunting traditional food sources is one way of keeping Aboriginal culture alive.
>
> The jokes don't offend me, but I do think they reveal something important: the experience of being Aboriginal in Sydney, particularly when you are educated, comfortable and articulate, is vastly different from the experience of being Aboriginal in a remote town camp, where you may not have access to even the most basic services.

In this quotation, Overington acknowledges that the experience of Aboriginality differs according to location. And she—unlike Bolt—seems willing to concede that Heiss's Aboriginal identity is authentic, rather than a political expedient. Yet derision tinges Overington's description of Heiss: Heiss is "a thoroughly hip, urban girl" who has "a little speech" she seemingly whips out of her back pocket. The insertion of exclamation marks into Overington's paraphrase emphasises the impression that Heiss is unfeeling towards those less fortunate than her. The pervasiveness of the deficit discourse that surrounds Aboriginal Australians means that any Aboriginal Australian who does not experience extreme hardship is expected hide their privilege (or, as I will show in the following paragraphs, publicly justify this privilege).

Further, Overington frames Heiss's exuberant embrace of contemporary consumer culture as a stinging (not to mention selfish) betrayal of the many emergencies facing Aboriginal Australians. But Heiss is well aware of the seeming 'privilege' that comes with being "educated, comfortable and articulate". In her memoir, Heiss writes:

> In the Aboriginal community I'd be regarded as privileged because I've long had access to education, quality health services, housing and the right manage my own affairs and income (unlike those living under the NT Intervention) … Always conscious of the social advantage I have over others in the Aboriginal community, I try to use my speaking and writing opportunities to bring about change for those who have been denied a comfortable, wholesome, dignified life. (*Am I Black Enough?* 145)

Elsewhere in *Am I Black Enough*, Heiss explains:

> I am the top 1 per cent of the bottom 2.5 per cent of Australian society, and that's only because I have an education, a job and a car. In a non-Indigenous context, having these things would not rank me as anything out of the ordinary, but in an Aboriginal context I am completely privileged. (*Am I Black Enough?* 122)

Thus, when Heiss talks about wearing make-up by Clinique and driving a sports car (*Am I Black Enough?* 120), it is not to snub those who are suffering, but to challenge the way non-Aboriginal Australians infer "disadvantage" as "a signifier of Aboriginality" (Carlson 240).

At the same time as Aboriginal identity is presented as a series of oversimplified binary oppositions (black or white; urban or remote; traditional or modern etc.), it has also been subject to minute gradations. For example, the concept of blood quantum as a determinant of Aboriginal identity has bequeathed a genetic hierarchy of Aboriginal identities. This is expressed in the highly pejorative terms of full-bloods, half-castes, quadroons and octoroons. These terms, and the derogatory meaning that accompanies them, still hold enormous sway today, as *Eatock v Bolt* made abundantly clear. The arbitrary application and inconsistent delineation of Aboriginal identities is made abundantly clear by a widely-cited vignette from historian Peter Read:

> In 1935 a fair-skinned Australian of part-indigenous descent was ejected from a hotel for being an Aboriginal. He returned to his home on the mission station to find himself refused entry because he was not an Aboriginal. He tried to remove his children but was told he could not because they were Aboriginal. He walked to the next town where he was arrested for being an Aboriginal vagrant and placed on the local reserve. During the Second World War he tried to enlist but was told he could not because he was Aboriginal. He went interstate and joined up as a non-Aboriginal. After the war he could not acquire a passport without permission because he was Aboriginal. He received exemption from the Aborigines Protection Act—and was told that he could no longer visit his relations on the reserve because he was not an Aboriginal. He was denied permission to enter the Returned Servicemen's Club because he was. (qtd. in Gardiner-Garden 3)

The dizzying back-and-forth between 'is' and 'isn't' Aboriginal is no mere relic of the past. Heiss testifies to the intellectual and emotional disorientation engendered by this constant shift in definition. As she documents in her memoir, she has experienced racial harassment for being fair-skinned *and* for being dark-skinned:

> One of the most surprising impacts [of Bolt's articles] is that only since [their] publication have I been referred to as a 'light-skinned Aborigine' or a 'white Aborigine'. I was always the dark one when compared to whitefellas. Now whitefellas are not comparing me to themselves but to other Blackfellas, and all of a sudden I'm 'light-skinned'. Does that mean they now accept me as one of their own? Will they be moving the boundaries again anytime soon in an attempt to remove me altogether from any connection to my family and history? (*Am I Black Enough?* 80)

Thus, to speak of Aboriginal identity is to speak of definitions that limit, restrict and regulate. "One of the most powerful technologies of settler colonialism", Sarah Maddison observes,

"has been to name and contain the original inhabitants of the colonised territory" (289). Aboriginal identity tends to be defined in exclusive, rather than inclusive terms and bound to a specific set of physical and socio-economic markers. The history of European invasion has left a "bewildering array" (McCorquodale 7) of definitions in its wake. Such is their proliferation that legal scholar John McCorquodale's "analysis of 700 separate pieces of legislation" uncovered "no less than 67 identifiable classifications, descriptions, or definitions" of Aboriginal identity (9). A similarly comprehensive survey undertaken by John Gardiner-Garden highlights a number of different "fashion[s]" when it comes to defining Aboriginal identity: first blood quantum, then race and more recently a three-part definition. The 'three-part' definition highlights ancestry, self-identification and community acceptance as key markers of Aboriginal identity: "An Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander is a person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent who identifies as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and is accepted as such by the community in which he (she) lives" (qtd. in Gardiner-Garden 3). This definition developed out of a 1981 report on a review of the Administration of the Working Definition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. The three-part definition, as Gardiner-Garden notes, is not without its problems, but is widely accepted as a 'working definition' of Aboriginal identity (4).

Heiss's self-presentation emphasises her enmeshment within—and enjoyment of—a growing Aboriginal middle class (Behrendt "Who's Afraid of the Indigenous Middle Class?"; Wahlquist; Langton "Indigenous Exceptionalism and the Constitutional 'Race Power'"). But Heiss is also acutely aware of the relative 'privilege' that such participation entails. For those who construe Aboriginal identity in binary, exclusive or absolute terms, Heiss's self-presentation may read as contradictory, cynical, even confused. A wealth of scholarly research, however, emphasises that "Indigenous identity", as one of many "innumerable types of human identity" is "fluid and contextual … over time and place" (Paradies 356; see also Carlson; Nakata; Rowse "Indigenous Heterogeneity"). This body of work may employ different terminologies (Martin Nakata's "cultural interface" [195-212]; Bronwyn Carlson's "variant selves" [171-3], Marcia Langton's "field of intersubjectivity" ["Aboriginal Art and Film" 119]), but all get at a similar idea: that Aboriginal people occupy multiple discursive positions—which may be plural, contradictory and heterogeneous—which eclipse strict and binary oppositions.

3. "'The Pretty and the Political Didn't Seem to Blend Well'"

This article argues that the race of the chick lit heroine profoundly influences the expression of the chick lit genre as a whole. While race may be taken for granted – or is rendered invisible – in normatively white expressions of the genre, it cannot be ignored when the heroine has darker skin. I make this case through reference to examples from Heiss's first four chick lit novels: *Not Meeting Mr Right*, *Avoiding Mr Right*, *Manhattan Dreaming*, and *Paris Dreaming*. "'The Pretty and the Political'" knits together two separate pieces of analysis. I presented an early version of the first section at a September 2014 Association for the Study of Australian Literature (ASAL) mini-conference entitled "The View from Above: Cosmopolitan Culture and Its Critics". My paper explored the difficulties of using chick lit to promulgate a cosmopolitan rendering of Aboriginal identity. I addressed the seeming incongruity between Heiss's progressive political agenda as it relates to Aboriginal people, and her conservative take on sexuality and gender roles.

The second section to this article also began life as a conference presentation, this time at the 2014 ASAL annual conference. The conference invited discussion of Australian literature in the global realm through the theme of 'Worlds Within'. My paper was entitled "Dreaming of a National Aboriginal Gallery: Australian Chick Lit in Transnational Space". I began my paper by noting that, in *Manhattan Dreaming* and *Paris Dreaming*, Heiss repurposes Australia's Old Parliament House as the National Aboriginal Gallery (NAG). The NAG is a vibrant, dynamic space dedicated to Aboriginal art and culture; Heiss imagines it as the antipodean counterpart to America's National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI). My paper showed that by aligning an imagined gallery with an institution that exists in the real world, Heiss invites a transnational celebration of Indigenous culture. Yet, this celebration must be balanced against the bittersweet acknowledgement that the institutional recognition offered by the NMAI remains unrealized in Australia. Heiss's uneasy relationship with the chick lit genre forms the common thread between these two sections. Both examples underscore an apparent dichotomy in Heiss's fiction; that while Heiss's politics appears progressive in some areas (especially as it relates to Aboriginal identity and culture),

in other areas (such as sexuality and gender), she seems surprisingly traditional. As I write, "Heiss's attentiveness to racial politics brings other, more conservative aspects of the chick lit genre into sharp relief" (2).

In February 2016, the *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature* (*JASAL*) published the essay I developed from these two conference papers. At the 2015 ASAL conference, my article was highly commended for the A.D. Hope Prize, an annual award given to the best postgraduate paper. My article has since been cited by scholars in the field of non-white chick lit (Fasselt; Hurt "Introduction"; O'Mahony "More Than Sex, Shopping and Shoes"). My paper makes an important contribution to theorisation of the field of non-white chick lit and the more specific instantiation of Heiss's contribution to the genre.

Australian National University

Statement of Contribution

This thesis is submitted as a Thesis by Compilation in accordance with https://policies.anu.edu.au/ppl/document/ANUP_003405

I declare that the research presented in this Thesis represents original work that I carried out during my candidature at the Australian National University, except for contributions to multi-author papers incorporated in the Thesis where my contributions are specified in this Statement of Contribution.

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‘The Pretty and the Political Didn’t Seem to Blend Well’: Anita Heiss’s Chick Lit and the Destabilisation of a Genre

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Since the runaway success of Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary* in 1996 (and arguably before then),[1] chick lit has become a ubiquitous—if not always celebrated—feature of the contemporary literary, social and cultural landscape. Some typecast the genre as a series of clichés, castigating readers and authors alike for their embrace of pastel-pink covers, cursive font and plots designed to ‘lull you into a hypnotic state with their simple life lessons’ (Dowd, ‘Heels over Hemmingway’; see also Dowd, ‘Liberties’; ‘Bainbridge Denounces Chick-Lit’). These assessments ignore not only the diversity of the chick lit genre, but the many different types of political engagement at work within it. A growing body of academic and mainstream criticism (Butler and Desai; Chen; Donadio; Ommundsen; Sellei) documents the increasingly global appeal of chick lit. Collectively, these theorists argue that the chick lit genre affords non-Western authors (those authors who occupy ‘positions within, but marginal to, the global cosmopolis’ (Ommundsen, ‘Sex and the Global City’ 110)) a means of appropriating—and undercutting—Western narratives of romance in late capitalist consumer culture.

In Australia, Anita Heiss is one of the genre’s preeminent and prolific practitioners. Since 2007, she has written five chick lit novels, the most recent, *Tiddas*, published in March 2014. A Wiradjuri woman from Central NSW, Heiss is a veritable one-woman industry, writing poetry, memoir, academic monographs and young adult fiction. She maintains an ever-expanding social media presence and speaks regularly at local, national and international literary events. Moreover, she is unique in her position as an Aboriginal Australian author writing commercial women’s fiction for a mainstream, middleclass audience. Heiss is fond of quipping that her decision to write chick lit was prompted as much by the need to ‘purg[e] [her]self of 15 years of bad dates as it was about writing urban Aboriginal women into mainstream Australian fiction’ (Heiss, ‘Why Chick Lit?’; see also Heiss ‘From “Chick Lit” to “Choc Lit”’; Meyer). Cleansing properties aside, the chick lit genre easily lends itself to the depiction of young, urban Aboriginal women living lives as glamorous as Carrie Bradshaw, and as humorous as Bridget Jones.

By foregrounding a non-Western, non-white subjectivity, Heiss joins a growing number of authors worldwide who appropriate the genre for their own use (Ommundsen ‘Sex and the Global City’ 110). In these reworkings, the protagonist is still young, female, and wedded to her consumer lifestyle, but she is no longer white (Ommundsen; Chen; Butler and Desai; Sellei). She is just as likely to be South Asian (as in Kavita Daswani’s chick lit), Latina (Alisa Valdez-Rodriguez’s chick lit), Chinese (Annie Wang), Saudi Arabian (Rajaa Alsanea), Eastern European (Zsuzsanna Rácz), African-American (Sister Souljah), or, as Heiss demonstrates, Aboriginal Australian. The ease with which the chick lit formula can be modified to accommodate non-Western subjectivities suggests a plasticity that transcends, or at the very least, counterbalances, both the genre’s inherent conservatism and the conventions that govern its narrative and structure. In its traditional articulations, the chick lit genre is heteronormative, white, and middleclass; traditional gender binaries are taken seriously and living the big city, consumer culture dream shapes the narrative arc.

Wenche Ommundsen, one of the only critics to discuss Heiss's work in an academic context, draws attention to the cracks, discrepancies and stresses that are produced when non-Western authors write themselves into the global flows and discourses of chick lit. 'Going global,' Ommundsen notes, 'chick lit not only becomes more heterogeneous in terms of its social and cultural coordinates; it also strains at the limits of the genre' ('Sex and the Global City' 110). This paper, in turn, builds on Ommundsen's work, delving deeper into the question of how chick lit 'strain[s] at the limits of the genre.' While it is certainly possible (not to mention necessary) to challenge and subvert chick lit's reliance on a hegemonic white subjectivity, this is not as simple as turning one switch on while leaving all the others off; activate one, and the rest are affected too. Accordingly, in this paper I argue that changing one aspect of the chick lit genre, such as the race of the heroine, destabilises the genre as a whole. In making this argument, I aim to give a fuller account of Heiss's popular fiction: despite her mainstream success (or perhaps because of it), Heiss is yet to receive sustained scholarly attention.

The first section of this paper approaches Heiss's destabilisation of the genre through a theoretical lens, examining how recent accounts of the chick lit genre attempt to explain the growth of non-Western subjectivities. I then undertake a close reading of two of Heiss's chick lit novels, *Not Meeting Mr Right* and *Manhattan Dreaming*. In *Manhattan Dreaming*, Heiss repurposes Old Parliament House as the National Aboriginal Gallery (NAG). This move boldly inverts established structures of white power, but it comes at a price: other expressions of Aboriginal political will, such as the Tent Embassy, are subsumed by the NAG. Likewise, *Not Meeting Mr Right*'s apparent celebration of strong, independent Aboriginal women is underwritten by a surprisingly traditional subtext, particularly in its treatment of gender and sexuality. In both examples, Heiss's attentiveness to racial politics brings other, more conservative aspects of the chick lit genre into sharp relief. Additionally, by attending to racial politics, Heiss has no choice but to enter into an explicitly politicised space that white chick lit can blithely skip over and ignore.

Even Heiss's mischievous sense of humour, alternatively ironic, playful and witty, is affected by her destabilisation of the genre. Humour is as much a part of chick lit as its high-spirited heroines and bustling consumer lifestyle. As Stephanie Harzewski confirms, 'chick lit deliberately aims for a humorous effect . . . the protagonists' self-deprecating humor, readers claim, lends the novels an identifiable, friendly voice and approachable comfort level' (38). Yet this must be viewed as a particular kind of humour: *white* chick lit humour. While Heiss's novels may appear to possess a similar comedic energy to that identified by Harzewski, her use of humour is in fact highly selective. If there are some subjects that Heiss treats humorously, others are strictly off-limits. This division is drawn along racial lines: when Heiss's Aboriginal characters are speaking, they make cheeky jokes about themselves (as blackfellas) or others (as whitefellas). This corresponds with Angelina Hurley's observation that 'indigenous peoples worldwide note humour existing as a resistance to oppression, an expression of identity, a means of survival and a tool for healing.' It also suggests a certain sensitivity: the whitefellas who populate Heiss's fictional universe could not make the same jokes about blackfellas. There is good reason for this—despite the work of Heiss and many others, Indigenous Australians are still subject to ongoing racism, oppression and colonisation in Australian society. Consequently, laughter *at* Indigenous Australians retains its ability to hurt, humiliate and offend. How then does Heiss adhere to the generic requirements for humour whilst simultaneously protecting her Aboriginal subjects from becoming an object of humour themselves? While Ommundsen suggests that 'the political messages of [Heiss's fiction] have been tailored to suit the overall tone of cheerful banter' (Ommundsen, 'Sex and the Global City' 119) I come to a different conclusion. As I will explain over the course of this paper, Heiss balances these competing impulses by displacing humour onto other subjects that are ordinarily subject to social taboo, such as homophobia.

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Despite the evident diversity of the chick lit genre in the mainstream literary marketplace, and despite the slowly expanding body of critical work that documents its significance, the dominant theoretical mode of chick lit criticism, post-feminism, characterises the genre in overwhelmingly negatively terms. If post-feminism describes the gradual erosion of 'feminist gains of the 1970s and 80s' (McRobbie 255), chick lit (along with its cinematic counterparts, the rom com and the chick flick) is held up as emblematic of this decline. The young, single women who populate the post-feminist universe are dismissed as the ungrateful and undeserving heritors of feminism; not only, so the complaint goes, do they take the hard-won 'gains' of feminism for granted (for example, the right to sexual, economic, political, social independence) but they explicitly reject these gains in favour of old fashioned, 'pre-feminist' sexual and gender roles.

As Pamela Butler and Jigna Desai point out, post-feminism is itself a highly problematic and contentious term, reproducing the idea that chick lit is both a 'homogenously white normative genre' and politically neutral (2). As they see it, the proliferation of chick lit subgenres that foreground non-Western subjectivities and epistemologies do a far better job of critiquing the 'neoliberalism, heteronormativity, and racism' (2) at play within Western chick lit than many critiques emanating from the academy and mainstream media. Accordingly, to claim that Heiss's chick lit is political solely because it features Aboriginal female protagonists is to make an implicit assumption that chick lit featuring white female protagonists is apolitical. Butler and Desai draw attention to, and undo, such assumptions, arguing that all chick lit needs to be read as political, especially—and most urgently—if the protagonist is a white, middle-class, neo-liberal woman. It is nonetheless true that Heiss's divergence from the chick lit norm is what makes her fiction more obviously political and therefore remarkable, even if in an ideal world this should not be the case.

As Butler and Desai show, consideration of the chick lit heroine's racial identity (whether white or non-white) is more than enough to politicise the genre. Heiss's fiction certainly enacts the call of critical whiteness studies to 'make [whiteness] visible' (Moreton-Robinson 87). However, Heiss goes further: in addition to emphasising an Aboriginal Australian female subjectivity, she infuses her narrative with a keen—and explicit—political consciousness. Her novels canvas issues ranging from the topical (Keith Windschuttle and the history wars; the 2004 Palm Island death in custody) to the technical (copyright issues for academics and writers working with Aboriginal communities; capitalisation of the 'a' in Aboriginal) (see also Ommundsen 'Sex and the Global City' 117). This is fraught terrain, and Heiss's readiness to pull the genre into unfamiliar territory testifies to her willingness to take on various narrative, structural and ideological challenges that most chick lit authors would be happy to leave unquestioned.

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Not Meeting Mr Right, Heiss's first chick lit novel, follows two years in the life of 28-year-old Alice Aigner, a young, urban, Aboriginal woman. She's got the job ('the head of the history department at a private Catholic girls school' (2)), the friends (a close-knit group of three other women), the lifestyle (alcohol-fuelled nights out with the girls, facials, sunbaking and shopping) and the happy confidence of a sun-kissed Sydney-sider; everything it, seems, apart from a man. After enduring a traumatising high school reunion where everyone is happily married except for her, she realises she needs a man, and quick. A series of

unsuccessful dates leaves Alice increasingly dispirited; when she has all but given up, she realises that Mr Right was there from the very beginning, in the form of her friendly neighbourhood garbage collector, Gary (affectionately nicknamed Gary-the-Garbo).

This quick sketch of *Not Meeting Mr Right* is enough to highlight just how fundamental female Aboriginal subjectivity is to Heiss's political agenda. Alice and her friends are strong, sexy and educated women. They confidently and humorously assert their Aboriginal identity, revealing a finely-nuanced political awareness. Alice describes herself as a 'Bourgeois Black,' explaining that 'it wasn't hard to be in the Aboriginal community—you just had to have a job and own your own car and you were regarded as middleclass' (237). If Alice and her friends were white, it would be fairly unremarkable for them to enjoy the benefits of a well-paid job and disposable income. Yet the fact that they, as Aboriginal women, partake in white, middle class rituals is a pointed political statement: while it may be easy to condemn chick lit for its reliance on late capitalist consumer culture, this culture nonetheless works to exclude non-white subjects. Participation becomes an act of subversion and resistance: 'the 'right to consume' may be of significance to women of colour as a way of negotiating racial, class and gender inequities in relation to ethnic and national communities, as well as a way of claiming citizenship' (Butler and Desai 14).

It should be clear, then, that Heiss's female characters represent a radical departure from the traditional chick lit heroine. Not only are they proud Koori women, but they entertain a lively political engagement and are forthright in their assertions of sexual, financial and emotional independence. Moreover, in an Australian context, the deliberate insertion of Aboriginal women into mainstream Australian fiction is significant simply by virtue of the fact that Aboriginal people are systematically ignored and rendered voiceless by the existing power structures within Australia. Nonetheless, Heiss's fiction is surprisingly conservative in many respects, displaying a staunch adherence to gender roles and a squeamish repudiation of homosexuality. Take, for example, the central plot device of *Not Meeting Mr Right*, Alice's search for a man. Of the many possible benefits she associates with being in a relationship (love, companionship, regular sex), the one she prioritises above all else is having a man around the house to fix things for her. As it stands, she relies on her father to do odd jobs:

> He often replaced light globes for me, fixed leaking taps, hung pictures and screwed, nailed and hammered things when needed. He was the reason that I hadn't really noticed not having a man around. I was a feminist, but I was also quite comfortable with not having to swing a hammer or turn a screwdriver. I knew what I was good at, and it wasn't home maintenance. (51)

Alice repeatedly describes these as 'boy jobs' (53, 190), believing that 'most men can just fix stuff like that' (276). Alice never goes on to elaborate what 'girl jobs,' the unspoken corollary to 'boy jobs,' might in fact be. Her silence on this matter could be interpreted as tacit acknowledgement that such a re-inscription of gender roles is sexist; to insist on a division of girl and boy jobs would threaten her vision of female agency by placing women back in the realm of the domestic.

Alice's investment in traditional gender roles also explains her reluctance to pay for any of her dates or to drive her dates around. This reluctance surfaces almost every time she goes on a date. It is depressing enough that Charlie, one potential Mr Right, has 'bad dress sense' and 'dreadful skin'; his prospects sink even further when Alice finds out he has no car: 'Oh god, I was going to have play [sic] chauffeur to this fella if we dated. That was not an attractive

option at all. I wanted to play passenger occasionally' (85). Making her way home on the train after another disappointing date, Alice dreads the 'thought of having to play chauffeur and banker for a guy who couldn't drive or manage money' (158). One man is viewed considerably more favourably solely because 'he drove a car' and was unlikely to ask Alice 'for milk money' (109). She practically squeals with delight when she makes the acquaintance of Paul, the hunky engineer with a 'sporty silver Peugeot coupe.' Alice exclaims: 'I loved that I was a passenger for the first time in a long time' (205). Her repeated and emphatic assertion that men must play 'chauffeur and banker' (coupled with her aversion to occupying this role herself) highlights a very specific set of gender expectations that are both rigid and unyielding. Men—not women—pay for the meals, drive the cars, fix the light globes and take out the rubbish.

The conservative rendering of gender in Heiss's fiction is matched by an equally conservative view of sexuality. *Not Meeting Mr Right*, like most chick lit perhaps, is firmly focussed on the highs and lows of heterosexual dating rituals: Do I ask *him* out? Should I sleep with *him* on the first date? Will I ever find *Mr* Right? The strongly heteronormative bias that pervades the storyline of *Not Meeting Mr Right*, is, in itself, nothing unexpected, merely a recognition of the genre conventions of chick lit. What *is* surprising, though, is Alice's extreme paranoia about the possibility that she will be mistaken for a lesbian because she is single. This fear surfaces primarily in conversation with, or in reference to, her mother, who repeatedly cautions Alice: 'people are going to think you're a lesbian if you don't start spending time with men' (57). Exasperated, Alice responds that she is not a lesbian, adding that her 'mantra for the day seemed to be *I'm not a lesbian, I'm not a lesbian*. As much as my mother enjoyed saying the word, I didn't' (57; original emphasis). Alice is 'determined to prove to [her] family that [she is] not a lesbian' (63) but is resigned to the thought that 'others probably thought I was a lesbian' (64); she frets that even her gay male friends 'probably all thought I was a lesbian too,' a realisation that prompts her to get her (straight) act together: 'Shit, I really did need to get some dating happening—not just to meet Mr Right' (64). These passages represent a small sample of the many paranoid and feverish framings of lesbian identity sprinkled throughout *Not Meeting Mr Right*.[2]

To be mistaken for a lesbian clearly mortifies Alice and Heiss plays this to comedic effect. Indeed, by *over*-emphasising Alice's sexual paranoia, Heiss could well be advancing an ironic critique of homophobia. Alice's paranoia is, after all, so laughably over-the-top that it is difficult to take seriously. But when we laugh at Alice's homosexual paranoia, what exactly are we laughing at? Are we laughing because Alice's sexual neuroses are blatantly misplaced, or is there a sharper political edge at work? Does Heiss humorously expose a particular kind of homophobia in order to denounce it? Though the distinction between these two possibilities may appear slight, it nonetheless requires closer examination. I believe that while the text certainly exaggerates Alice's paranoia to comedic effect, this is not to evince an ironic comment on homophobia; rather, I take this as evidence of Heiss's destabilisation of the chick lit genre. Heiss's humour operates at one remove (the text makes clear that Alice is patently heterosexual) but not two (that Alice's homophobia is a matter of concern). More specifically, Heiss's dedication to depicting the lived reality of women like her not only delimits a space sensitive to humour but creates a political hierarchy where humour is displaced onto other subjects. As homosexuality has no bearing on the lives nor sexual identities of Heiss's fictional creations, it suddenly becomes available as a site of humour.

Through a number of narrative and structural techniques, Heiss signals to the reader that Alice is unambiguously heterosexual. As highlighted earlier, the chick lit genre is predicated on

heteronormative forms and rituals. While Heiss alters some of the variables associated with the genre, most notably the racial identity of her heroines, she retains and accentuates its intensely heteronormative outlook. Similarly, the central trope of *Not Meeting Mr Right* is resolutely heterosexual: Alice dates man after man in her search for Mr Right. Finally, the narrative presents Alice as lustily, aggressively and unequivocally heterosexual. Her numerous (though invariably short-lived) relationships with other men are the stuff of legend amongst her friends, and she repeatedly shares her appreciation of men with the reader. Her feverish imagination paints a basketball team made up of 'Fit men. Tall men. Sydney men. Most likely straight men. Hot, sweaty, sexy men!' (93). A game of touch footy ignites similar cravings: 'there was so much eye candy I could feel myself putting on weight just looking at the sweet, sweaty men' (73). With so much overt heterosexual signalling at so many different levels of the novel, Alice's fear that she is a lesbian seems grossly unfounded.[3] To be sure, the humour stems from dramatic irony but in a limited sense—we know she's attracted to men and her fear of being mistaken for a lesbian is played for laughs because it is so obviously mistaken.

Heiss's treatment of homosexuality and feminism is overlaid by an implicit grading system, and they are accorded significantly less value than her primary concern with writing the experience of women like her into the collective Australian imagination. In my reading of Heiss's fiction, I attribute this disparity to her destabilisation of the chick lit genre: by altering one variable, other features of the genre take on a sharper (and in this case, more conservative and more humorous) cast. Interestingly, there are moments in Heiss's fiction that gesture towards the importance of a pro-feminist, anti-homophobic politics: her characters react with distaste when their beliefs are expressed by others. Despite her paranoia at being mistaken for a lesbian, Alice sees herself as adhering to an anti-homophobic agenda: when she encounters homophobia in others, she rejects it. At her ten-year high school reunion, Alice is disgusted that one of her former friends would support a political party with a 'homophobic and sexist' platform (8). Likewise, when drawing up her list of 'Essential selection criteria for Mr Right,' the man of her dreams is 'non-racist, not-fascist, non-homophobic believer in something . . .' (37). In similar fashion, Alice's embrace of traditional gender roles seems at odds with her marked intolerance of the same attitude in others. For instance, she dismisses the pre-wedding ritual of the kitchen tea as 'sexist' for making the assumption that the kitchen is an exclusively female space: '[W]hy doesn't the man have a kitchen tea to receive appliances *he* can use in the kitchen? It was such a fifties concept' (149, original emphasis). Alice's stringent expectation that others take a socially progressive approach to gender roles and homosexuality (whilst simultaneously perpetuating entirely different beliefs herself) confirms that the text's feminist consciousness and attentiveness to sexual diversity is ultimately secondary to its racial politics. Or, put another way, there is a degree of flexibility and lenience in Heiss's treatment of these matters that is simply not optional when it comes to racial politics.

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Heiss's depiction of Aboriginal female subjectivity is one of the many ways she injects her own political agenda into the chick lit genre. In the second half of this paper, my interest is drawn to a different, yet equally important, articulation of her racial politics. The imaginary (but entirely realistic) National Aboriginal Gallery (NAG) functions as a central motif that orders the narrative in both *Manhattan Dreaming* and *Paris Dreaming.* Libby Cutmore (protagonist of *Paris Dreaming*) and Lauren Lucas (protagonist of *Manhattan Dreaming*) are best friends and senior staff at the NAG. In each novel, the central protagonist is sent overseas

to represent the NAG at an equivalent overseas institution: Lauren Lucas wins a visiting fellowship to the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) at the Smithsonian in New York, while Libby curates an exhibition of Aboriginal art at the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris.

In the opening pages of *Manhattan Dreaming*, Lauren Lucas talks the reader through the complex negotiations that led to the creation of the National Aboriginal Gallery. The NAG occupies the entire grounds of Old Parliament House and its existence dates back to 2006; while the government of the day 'would never hand it over for an Aboriginal embassy,' Lauren explains that the government 'could be persuaded to hand it over for a national gallery' (48). This does not necessarily represent a triumph of the aesthetic or the symbolic: instead, money talks. The decision to establish a National Aboriginal Gallery is attributed, firstly to the 'success of [the Aboriginal] visual arts movement internationally' and secondly, 'the revenue [Aboriginal] artists were bringing into the country every year' (48). Though it has only been in existence for a few years at the time *Manhattan Dreaming* opens, the NAG is presented as a dynamic and energetic organisation, brimming with ideas and enthusiasm: 'the gallery now had a staff of over sixty, a growing team of curators and a number of exhibitions running concurrently, with an exhibition schedule right into the next decade' (48).

The NAG is framed in overwhelmingly positive terms, representing long overdue and whole-heartedly welcome institutional recognition of Aboriginal art and culture. By housing the NAG within Old Parliament House, Heiss dislodges monolithic narratives of European possession and dispossession in order to (re)install the continuing (and never ceded) history of Aboriginal possession and connection to country. Opened on 9th May 1927, the strikingly white exterior of what was then the only Parliament House reflected a building designed to serve the interests of Australia's white settler population. It is true that successive governments occupying Old Parliament House enacted a limited amount of legislation that aimed to 'help' Aboriginal people, or 'advance' their rights (the 1967 Referendum, for example, or the Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1976). Nonetheless, these acts occurred against an oppressively racist backdrop. Indeed, the white, racist power structures embedded within and emanating from Old Parliament House could only be made possible by the invasion of sovereign land and the attempted annihilation of its First Peoples. In Heiss's chick lit, Aboriginal appropriation of this thoroughly white power institution symbolises a potent 'taking back' of land, power and dignity.

Unlike European arrival in 1788, the NAG's move into Old Parliament House did not displace its existing tenants: they had already left in 1988 for new Parliament House. Old Parliament House subsequently reopened as the Museum of Australian Democracy in 2009, but not before it was home to the National Portrait Gallery (where it was housed from 1998 to 2008). That the physical space of Old Parliament House can be adapted to accommodate other national institutions certainly provides a compelling precedent for it to be considered the home of the National Aboriginal Gallery, even if this remains a shadow history in each novel, never explicitly articulated nor referred to. For those readers of Heiss's fiction who are aware that Old Parliament House currently houses the Museum of Australian Democracy, the NAG's move into Old Parliament House becomes a pointed comment that there could be no finer acknowledgement of Australia's democratic system than to inaugurate a national institution dedicated to Aboriginal art.

In Heiss's history of the NAG, the Tent Embassy is moved inside from its position outside Old Parliament House: 'as soon as we moved in [Emma, the Gallery's director] invited the

Tent Embassy mob to take up residence in the old Country Party Rooms, which overlooked the original Tent Embassy site, where only a flagpole and plaque stood now' (48). In the non-fictional history of Australia, the Tent Embassy was established on January 27 1972 by four Aboriginal activists (Michael Anderson, Billie Craigie, Bertie Williams and Tony Coorie), erecting a beach umbrella on the lawns opposite Parliament House. They were protesting the McMahon government's denial of Aboriginal land rights and quickly became a potent symbol of Aboriginal resistance to the repression and violence enacted by the State. In 2015, the Tent Embassy remains outside Old Parliament House, symbolising the fight for land rights, constitutional recognition and Aboriginal sovereignty. Importantly, it is not a historical artefact—as a symbolic site of Aboriginal political resistance, it will stay at the foot of Old Parliament House until such time as Aboriginal sovereignty is properly implemented and recognised.

If the history of the Tent Embassy affirms that any move away from its current site can only occur under certain conditions, how then are we to interpret Heiss's re-visioning of Australian history? In line with the discussion of humour followed throughout this paper, Heiss's treatment of the Tent Embassy could simply be another instance of her ironic impulse at play. It is no coincidence that the Tent Embassy is moved into the old Country Party Rooms. If Old Parliament House symbolises the imposition of white colonial power and the usurpation of an unceded Aboriginal sovereignty, the old Country Party rooms epitomise its most conservative voices. Thus, in the same way that locating the NAG within Old Parliament House allows Heiss to dislodge hegemonic narratives of white supremacy and reinstate Australia's First People at the centre of power, repositioning the Tent Embassy in the old Country Rooms briskly (and humorously) sweeps away any remaining ghosts of the past.

Alongside this arresting note of irony, however, there is the potential that Heiss's humour transgresses other potent political taboos, chiefly the substantial symbolic heft associated with the Tent Embassy's position *outside* old Parliament House. Uprooting the Tent Embassy without a concomitant change in Australia's political or social landscape could indicate that it has fallen prey to the more conservative political elements of Australian politics that see it as unnecessary and redundant. While it is certainly true that the Tent Embassy's movement inside the NAG is positioned as a happy and wholly welcome corollary of the NAG's creation, neither *Paris Dreaming* nor *Manhattan Dreaming* imagines an Australian political landscape filled with the markers that bespeak sovereignty. Heiss's Aboriginal characters certainly act with agency; they are independent subjects, proud of who they are and possessed of a well-calibrated political consciousness. Yet, neither restitution and reparation for past injustices, nor the enactment of a treaty, nor the right to self-determination, nor constitutional recognition are present in Heiss's chick lit. Consequently, the NAG and its absorption of the Tent Embassy could best be thought of as a fictional parenthesis in an otherwise realistic depiction of recent Australian history, rather than signalling a significant shift in the political status of Aboriginal Australian people.

Moreover the creation of the NAG is framed as obviating the need for the Tent Embassy: the arts are held to subsume and replace more explicit expressions of political will. The history of the NAG, recounted at the beginning of *Manhattan Dreaming*, suggests that the arts are the primary currency in which Aboriginal people must conduct their political transactions: while the government flatly refuses Old Parliament House as a state-sanctioned space for an Aboriginal Embassy (48), it is far more amenable to its use as a gallery. This privileging of the arts over politics reflects Heiss's own decision to channel her political agenda through literature. For Heiss, 'the only real platform for a voice in the mainstream as I see it is our arts

sector, which has a longstanding strong foundation' (*Am I Black Enough?* 161); she goes on to reiterate that 'the arts are a fantastic tool not only for expressing identity and politics but also for learning about them' (*Am I Black Enough?* 164).

Though Heiss's treatment of the Tent Embassy can be explained by her preference for the arts over politics, consideration of the broader generic framework in which the Tent Embassy is located is equally necessary. As argued throughout this paper, using the chick lit genre to promulgate an explicitly political message is, perhaps inevitably, an exercise in compromise. Stretching the genre in terms of its racial politics means that other aspects, often subject to social or political taboo, take on a heavier, ironic tone. Just as Heiss's fiction treats homophobia as a political issue of secondary importance (thus making it available as a source of humour), Heiss's memorialisation of the Tent Embassy is a move laced with heavy irony. The Tent Embassy, though part of a proud history of Aboriginal endurance and opposition, represents an out-dated model of resistance for someone like Heiss and her fictional counterparts: their resistance to white cultural hegemony is expressed through appropriating and laying claim to mainstream markers of success. Heiss enjoys informing readers and audiences 'I don't wear ochre, I wear Revlon or Avon, or Clinique . . . I don't tell the time by using the sun; rather, I tell the time by Dolce and Gabbana' (*Am I Black Enough*? 121). These sentiments, keenly present in Heiss's female protagonists who share her love of nice cars, sparkling jewellery and designer clothes, epitomise a new form of resistance that locates itself within mainstream Australian culture, rather than by protesting outside.

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On Valentine's Day, *Not Meeting Mr Right*'s Alice Aigner receives an extravagant bunch of red roses. Searching her crowded office for a place to put them, she is struck by a note of dissonance: '[the roses] looked a little out of place with the NAIDOC posters on the wall and the Aboriginal flag draped on the door …' (252). Reflecting further on the aesthetic incongruity the roses threaten to create, she reasons to herself that 'the pretty and the political didn't seem to blend well, but there was no reason why they shouldn't' (253). Though Alice resolves her dilemma readily enough, this is not so easily settled within the broader context of Heiss's fiction. By pulling the pretty (taken here as shorthand for the chick lit genre) into the political arena, other, more conservative elements of the genre come sharply into view, and humour is displaced onto subjects generally treated as taboo or politically sensitive.

The destabilisation of the chick lit genre explored in this paper bears witness to the difficulties involved in blending the pretty with the political, particularly when humour is a necessary generic feature. Yet this is perhaps not as remarkable as I have made out. The chick lit novel, for one, is a profoundly contested space. Post-feminist critiques highlight concerns with the type of gender politics foregrounded by the genre. For their part, Butler and Desai use critical race theory to problematise post-feminism's preoccupation with gender, to the exclusion of race. And the chick lit novel is frequently brought into ongoing debates about the value of women's writing. This paper, by revealing the depth and complexity of Heiss's fiction, puts forward the case for further scholarly engagement with her work. Heiss's fiction also forms the basis for a larger claim pursued in this paper, namely that the chick lit genre is surprisingly elastic in its ability to accommodate an eclectic mix of voices and values, providing a commercially viable way for the marginal to appropriate—or at the very least, engage with—the mainstream. This elasticity nonetheless has its limits: stretch the genre too far, and it snaps back with unexpected force.

NOTES

[1] Lisa Guerrero and Cecilia Farr contest the critical tendency to link the genesis of the chick lit novel with *Bridget Jones's Diary*, arguing for Terry McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale* instead. As Farr puts it, 'despite [*Waiting to Exhale*'s] chick lit themes of sisterhood and identity, fashion and romance; despite its privileged, professional main characters; and despite its fabulous commercial success, McMillan's 1992 novel is bypassed for Bridget Jones, published in 1996' (203).

[2] Elsewhere in her oeuvre, Heiss permits a more complex view of homosexuality. The main protagonist in *Avoiding Mr Right* becomes close friends with Josie, a lesbian parking inspector who confidently saunters the streets of St Kilda. A far cry from the limited stereotypes of lesbianism presented in *Not Meeting Mr Right*, Josie's subjectivity is fleshed out and developed. It could be however, that this character was written to defray the damaging stereotypes of homosexuality perpetuated in the first *Mr Right* novel.

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4. "Educating the Reader in Anita Heiss's Chick Lit."

Where "'The Pretty and the Political'" looked at the limits of a popular literary genre when it is asked to accommodate political imperatives, my second paper, "Educating the Reader in Anita Heiss's Chick Lit", explores how Heiss expands the genre by incorporating a pedagogical agenda into her writing. This paper arose from a certain feeling of dissatisfaction with my *JASAL* paper. It seemed to me that my analysis in "'The Pretty and the Political'" was limited by the way I knitted together what had been two separate pieces of analysis. "Educating the Reader", by contrast, develops and complicates the argument of "'The Pretty and the Political'" by approaching Heiss's fiction with a more direct and focussed question: how, and why, does Heiss attempt to educate the reader of her chick lit? I take inspiration from Caroline Smith's work on the advice manual as a chick lit intertext. Smith's 2007 monograph, *Cosmopolitan Culture and Consumerism in Chick Lit*, argues that the chick lit genre is in constant dialogue with "women's advice manuals", a genre that comprises "women's magazines, self-help books, romantic comedies and/or domestic advice manuals" (5). Smith contends that the chick lit genre not only satirises these mediums but also rails against the strictures they impose on women.

My article notes that Smith's argument, though a valid intervention in the field of chick lit studies, is directed exclusively towards *white* chick lit. My article is premised on the observation that when the chick lit novel is written from a non-white perspective, its relationship with the advice manual undergoes radical transformation. More specifically, I show that Heiss's usage of the 'advice manual as intertext' differs from the framework set out by Smith because of the differing political exigencies at work in non-white chick lit. Further, Heiss incorporates functions traditionally associated with Aboriginal Australian literature, such as educating a non-Aboriginal public that is largely illiterate with respect to Aboriginal Australian culture, into the chick lit genre. Heiss's novels do more than simply dialogue with the advice manual; they function *as* advice manuals; they provide much, if not all, the information the naïve, non-Aboriginal reader needs in order to interact respectfully with Aboriginal culture and people. Thus, I view Heiss's chick lit as fictional versions of other

advice manuals such as *Indigenous Australia for Dummies* by Larissa Behrendt and *The Little Red, Yellow, Black Book* by Bruce Pascoe.

I presented an early version of this paper at the April 2015 Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association national conference in New Orleans. Following that, I decided to pursue publication in *Contemporary Women's Writing* (*CWW*) because the journal offered a global platform—under the aegis of the well-respected Oxford University Press—to bring Heiss's work to the attention of an international scholarly audience. Additionally, *CWW* had previously published Wenche Ommundsen's influential article "Sex and the Global City" in 2011: Ommundsen was the first to discuss Heiss's chick lit in a scholarly context and her article illustrated the potential for further research into Heiss's work. Finally, *CWW* had also recently inaugurated the *CWW* Essay Prize, an award designed to encourage new scholarship among PhD students and early career academics. I entered my paper for consideration, hoping that the peer-review process would provide a supportive environment to develop further as a scholar. I was immensely pleased that my paper was selected for special commendation by the *CWW* judging panel.

CWW published my article online in August 2016. A few days later, Heiss's sixth novel, *Barbed Wire and Cherry Blossoms* was released. When I read *Barbed Wire*, I saw that many of the educative elements I commented on in my *CWW* essay were woven through the narrative of *Barbed Wire*. The timing meant that I couldn't include examples from *Barbed Wire* in my journal article itself, but I still wanted my analysis to contribute to the public discussion of the novel. To that end, I wrote a short, 800-word review of *Barbed Wire*, which was published on the website of the Australian edition of *The Conversation* on 7 September 2016. It focussed on how Heiss's pedagogical agenda played out within this new novel, and is included as an appendix to my thesis.

Australian National University

Statement of Contribution

This thesis is submitted as a Thesis by Compilation in accordance with https://policies.anu.edu.au/ppl/document/ANUP_003405

I declare that the research presented in this Thesis represents original work that I carried out during my candidature at the Australian National University, except for contributions to multi-author papers incorporated in the Thesis where my contributions are specified in this Statement of Contribution.

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Educating the Reader in Anita Heiss's Chick Lit

IMOGEN MATHEW

Abstract

In this essay, I use a close reading of Anita Heiss's five chick lit novels to argue that racial identity profoundly affects the relationship between the chick lit novel and advice manual genre. In Cosmopolitan Culture and Consumerism in Chick Lit*, Caroline Smith contends that the chick lit novel critiques and satirizes regimes of female control through its engagement with the domestic advice manual. This relationship, however, does not always work in the way Smith assumes because the protagonist is not always white: she may be Latina, Chinese, South-East Asian, or, as Anita Heiss shows, Aboriginal Australian: Heiss's fiction serves as an advice manual, designed to expose readers to the correct norms and behaviors for interacting with Australia's First Peoples.*

A self-described "creative disruptor" (Adelaide 218), Anita Heiss is a dynamic and forceful agent of change across multiple facets of Australian public life. Her influence can be felt in the classroom, on social media, at writers' festivals, or in the courtroom. She is a prolific author with a literary output spanning poetry, memoir, academic writing, Young Adult, and, most importantly in the context of this essay, commercial women's fiction. Her chick lit heroines have all the sass, fun, and gloriously messy love lives of their American and British sisters, but with a uniquely Anita Heiss-style twist: like her, they are glamorous and assertive Aboriginal women. By bringing chick lit into the fold of Aboriginal Australian literature, Heiss highlights the serious subtext to a traditionally escapist genre and expands the way Aboriginal Australian literature addresses itself to the world. In

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this essay, I argue that Heiss's chick lit functions as an instructional text, exposing readers to new perspectives on contemporary Aboriginal culture and identity.

Common to Heiss's interventions in the public sphere is the desire to make visible a population that mainstream Australia seems bent on disappearing. Aboriginal Australians only figure on the "national identity radar" when their skin is black and they are viewed as "a problem to be solved or an exotic fantasy" (Heiss, *Am I?* 160). Without discounting the myriad difficulties Aboriginal people face, from a lack of formal constitutional recognition to "violence against women, child sexual abuse, systemic poverty, lack of access to services, substance abuse, [and] high youth suicide rates" (Behrendt, *Achieving* 13), Heiss's chick lit firmly refuses the discourse of deficit that characterizes mainstream representations of Aboriginal people. Instead, her fiction celebrates the lives and careers of urban Aboriginal women for whom countering racism and finding Mr. Right are the same thing. The attractiveness of the chick lit genre to minority writers such as Heiss is twofold: it offers a commercially viable formula for challenging common stereotypes of (and about) Aboriginal people. Moreover, its readership (mainstream, middle-class, non-Aboriginal women) is precisely the demographic Heiss seeks to educate.

In this essay, I approach the pedagogic aspects of Heiss's work through the lens of the advice manual, drawing primarily on the work of Caroline Smith (*Cosmopolitan*; "Living"). Using Heiss's five chick lit novels as a case study, I argue that nonwhite or minority chick lit engages with the advice manual model in strikingly different (or additional) ways to those set out by Smith. Heiss's fiction styles itself as a credible and authentic source of instruction, dispensing advice that is not only accurate but immediately applicable to the real world of the reader. Read in a fictional register, her chick lit honors the single-girl, big-city model popularized by Helen Fielding and Carrie Bradshaw. Read on a nonfictional register, however, and a different set of characteristics emerge: Heiss's pedagogic ambitions are shared with the larger field of Aboriginal Australian literary production. Similar to instructional texts such as Bruce Pascoe's *Little Red, Yellow, Black Book* (2012) or Larissa Behrendt's *Indigenous Australia for Dummies* (2012), Heiss's chick lit functions as a densely packed inventory of names of Aboriginal artists, writers, singers, and filmmakers; it instructs the reader in culturally appropriate language conventions; and it models exemplary modes of behavior toward Aboriginal people.

The chick lit novel inherits several related literary forms. For Rosalind Gill and Elena Herdieckerhoff, it remakes the romance novel, even if these rewritings forgo "complex analyses of power, subjectivity, and desire" (500). Others enthusiastically proclaim Jane Austen "the mother of all chick lit" (Mlynowski and Jacobs 11; Crusie). Fielding proudly "stole" the plot of Austen's 1813 classic *Pride and Prejudice* (qtd. in Smith, *Cosmopolitan* 7), and *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996) is almost universally recognized as the genre's "urtext" (Ferriss and Young, Introduction 4). Lisa Guerrero and Cecilia Konchar Farr are two dissenting voices (203), arguing

that this distinction more appropriately rests with African American author Terry McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale* (1992). Common to these genealogies is the recognition of the genre's extraordinarily successful – not to mention adaptable – commercial life and the emotive responses it elicits from readers and scholars alike. Cris Mazza, one half of the duo who devised the phrase *chick lit* with determinedly "ironic intention," wonders confusedly how the genre has "morphed into books flaunting pink, aqua, and lime covers featuring cartoon figures of long-legged women wearing stiletto heels" (18). In the mainstream media, Maureen Dowd exercises similar irritation at the "sisterhood of cartoon women, sexy string beans in minis and stilettos, fashionably dashing about book covers with the requisite urban props – lattes, books, purses, shopping bags . . . ." Stéphanie Genz and Benjamin Brabon more moderately assess chick lit as "female-oriented fiction that celebrates the pleasures of feminine adornment and heterosexual romance" (76), whereas Smith designates it the province of "young, single, white, heterosexual, British and American women in their late twenties and early thirties, living in metropolitan areas" (*Cosmopolitan* 2).

Chick lit, as Stephanie Harzewski points out, is one of postfeminism's "most culturally visible forms" (8). Consumption and consumerism lie at the heart of both: financial freedom and participation in the labor market beget sexual independence and the accumulation of objects from shoes to men. Yet this vision of female autonomy is highly unstable. Feminist critiques of postfeminism (and by extension, the chick lit genre) can be brutal. Angela McRobbie, for instance, "understands post-feminism to refer to an active process by which feminist gains . . . come to be undermined" (255). Others are more circumspect. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, paraphrasing the work of Sarah Projansky, acknowledge that "postfeminism deploys a variety of positions with respect to feminism," some "celebratory," others less so (8). Similarly, Genz and Brabon avoid "implementing a single frame of definition," instead preferring to "discuss diverse manifestations of postfeminism in order to highlight the term's multiplicity" (2).

Smith's was one of the earliest voices to defend the scholarly value of chick lit. In her view, the genre's abiding feature is its interrelationship with the advice manual (defined by Smith as "women's magazines, self-help books, romantic comedies, and/or domestic advice manuals" [*Cosmopolitan* 2]). All four aim to regulate and instruct a female audience in correct modes of behavior, grooming, and housekeeping. More than simply a "presen[ce] in the text," Smith reveals that instructional "mediums heavily influence the protagonists [of chick lit novels]" (5). Yet it would be wrong to view this "influence" as either mute acquiescence or passive obedience. Rather, fictional chick lit heroines and real-life authors alike are alert to the "prescriptive" and "instructional formula[s]" that animate the advice manual genre (12). Smith contends that the chick lit novel uses many strategies, principally satire, to parse its insistent critique of the advice manual genre.

However, this relationship does not always work in the way Smith assumes because the chick lit heroine (and indeed, the chick lit author) is not always

white. Despite the growth in nonwhite chick lit by the time her monograph was published in 2008 (featuring Latina, African American, Chinese, South-East Asian, and, in Anita Heiss's case, Aboriginal Australian protagonists), Smith focuses on white articulations of the genre from Britain and America.[1] Any acknowledgment of the genre's diversity is kept strictly to the margins: her observation that "chick lit texts have travelled across the globe . . . traded across the Atlantic and around the world" (*Cosmopolitan* 9) collapses into a discussion of the American and British marketplace. Similarly, a more detailed treatment of the genre's expanded "racial and geographic boundaries" (136) is relegated to one paragraph in the afterword. Smith's emphasis on white chick lit raises the question of whether her argument applies to all chick lit, or one kind (namely, that which is written by and about white women).

While acknowledging the significance of Smith's work, this essay challenges both her argument (that chick lit is antagonistic toward the advice manual) and her focus (white protagonists written by white authors). By drawing attention to the way Heiss fashions her chick lit as an advice manual, I contribute to a small but growing body of work theorizing nonwhite chick lit (Butler and Desai; Chen; Donadio; Hedrick; Ommundsen; Thoma). Heiss's fiction illustrates the ways in which nonwhite chick lit both conforms to and transforms the genre. Mapped over textual (financially independent single women navigating the urban metropolis) and paratextual (cover art and titles) coordinates, Heiss's fiction is recognizably chick lit. However, it also expands the genre through its emphasis on the lives of Aboriginal women. Racial politics, latent in normative articulations of the genre, rise persistently to the surface when the protagonists are Aboriginal and influence everything from connection to country, career, family, friends, and the search for Mr. Right. Heiss's adoption of the moniker Koori Bradshaw to describe herself (Heiss, "Shopaholic"; Warburton) and choc lit to describe her work (Heiss, *Am I?* 215; "Chick-Lit") exemplify her complex entanglement with the genre, at once intimate and unfamiliar.[2] Nonetheless, this destabilization of the genre (Mathew) should not be a cause for concern. As John Frow reminds us, "texts work upon genres as much as they are shaped by them, genres are open-ended sets, and participation in a genre takes many different forms" (28).

Across the five chick lit novels surveyed in this essay, Heiss emerges as an authoritative and trustworthy source of advice. Her lived experience as an Aboriginal woman, not to mention her impressive academic credentials and longstanding advocacy for Aboriginal people legitimize the information she dispenses. "I want readers to hear an authentic voice when they read about us. By authentic voice I mean an Aboriginal voice" (*Am I?* 199). What goes for Heiss also holds for her fictional heroines, each of whom is the literal embodiment of an educator, professionally engaged in the task of disseminating information about Aboriginal people and correcting racist attitudes in the process. In *Tiddas* (2014), Xanthe runs her own business as a freelance cultural trainer (28), and Izzy "host[s] the news channel for Queensland Arts and Culture" (3). Alice in *Not Meeting Mr*

1 Her corpus includes Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary*, Sophie Kinsella's *The Secret Dreamworld of a Shopaholic* (2000), Melissa Bank's *The Girls' Guide to Hunting and Fishing* (1999), Laura Zigman's *Animal Husbandry* (1997), Candace Bushnell's *Sex and the City* (1996), Carol Wolper's *The Cigarette Girl* (1999), and Anna Maxted's *Getting Over It* (2000).

2 As Heiss explains in *Am I Black Enough For You?* (2012), *Koori* is "a generic term primarily used by Aboriginal people of New South Wales and Victoria (Koorie) to identify as traditionally belonging to the south-east of the Australian mainland" (339).

Right (2007) is "the head of the history department at a private Catholic girls school" (2). Lauren Lucas in *Manhattan Dreaming* (2010), Libby Cutmore in *Paris Dreaming* (2011), and Peta Tully in *Avoiding Mr Right* (2008) all hold public-facing roles that are primarily concerned with educating the Australian mainstream.

Styling her characters as educators reinforces the pedagogic aspect of Heiss's fiction, reassuring readers that they can trust the advice that is given. All the above-mentioned women are, like Heiss, Aboriginal and wholly committed to achieving what respected Aboriginal activist Gary Foley terms "Aboriginal agency and self-determination" (x). As I will show in the next section, much of the Aboriginal Australian literary field as a whole (not simply the authors who occupy it) is premised on instruction and learning, aiming to expose readers to alternative – and often suppressed – histories. But this is a sensitive move to make. Heiss loathes the facile and simplistic equation that "educated" plus "Black" equals "expert" in anything and everything Aboriginal. Jackie Huggins, an Aboriginal historian and activist, echoes Heiss's frustration, "The constant demands placed on Aboriginal people to be educators is tiring. Surely, it is time for non-Aboriginal people to begin their journey of discovery by themselves. It is too much to be expecting Aboriginal women to be continually explaining their oppression . . ." (x). The dilemma articulated by Heiss and her contemporaries (and dramatized in her fiction) is an urgent one: how are Aboriginal people to establish themselves as legitimate and authoritative sources of knowledge about their people and culture, while simultaneously setting limits on the extent of that knowledge? The contradictory position Aboriginal people occupy has, in many respects, been forced upon them by over two centuries of colonial oppression. The only solution, as Huggins underlines, is for non-Aboriginal people to "begin their journey of discovery by themselves," involving anything from acknowledging the way whiteness shapes power relations in Australia to listening when Aboriginal people tell their stories.

The seriousness with which Heiss regards her pedagogical project is underscored by the tone she employs when dispensing advice. For Smith, rejection of the advice manual is frequently conveyed via satire. In her reading of *Bridget Jones's Diary*, "humor [is deployed] as a means of deconstructing the consumer ideologies of women's magazines" (*Cosmopolitan* 36). This satirical mode is present (albeit far more ambivalently) in nonwhite chick lit: Wenche Ommundsen, for instance, wonders whether there is "a strong element of irony, or even satire" in Annie Wang's 2006 *The People's Republic of Desire* (113). Likewise, Paula Ana Farca correctly points out that humor in Aboriginal Australian literature, including Heiss's, can be used to "create understanding, and promote social change" (137). My reading, however, emphasizes the shift in gears when Heiss delivers a lesson: the standard narrative realism of the chick lit novel switches to exposition that is almost didactic in tone. Further, Heiss's advice is not to be satirized, nor is it an object of humor; aimed at both the reader and the fictional interlocutors of the heroines, it is advice to be taken seriously (Mathew 2).

The interpretive lens of the advice manual model implicates a specific segment of Heiss's audience, namely the non-Aboriginal female reading public. Heiss unambiguously designates this group as her primary audience for ideological as well as economic reasons. Not only is it the "largest . . . because of population size" (*Am I?* 199) (she quips, "there are not enough Blackfellas to sustain any publishing venture, least of all an entire genre" [214]), but it is an audience in need of reeducation: "I want people to be challenged, to think about their role in the world and how their behaviour impacts on other people, particularly Aboriginal people. I want readers to learn . . ." (199). As she goes on to explain, "I wanted to reach an audience of non-Aboriginal Australian women – largely aged between eighteen and forty-five years of age – who may not have . . . cared about Aboriginal women in Australia before" (215). If Heiss aims to challenge perceptions held by non-Aboriginal Australians, her writing affirms, through the act of representation, the lives and experiences of upwardly mobile Aboriginal women living in urban centers. Consideration of her Aboriginal audience, however, casts her fiction in a different light: the urgency of ideological reeducation recedes and issues around codifying and celebrating the achievements of Aboriginal people become more prominent.

Aboriginal Australian Literary Production

In the almost 230 years since the "epic drama" of European invasion, life for Australia's First Peoples has been one of "relentless oppression – by the gun and application of administrative law" (P. Dodson vii). Colonial violence and successive waves of racist policy have pushed Aboriginal people to the margins of the Australian political system, culture, and society. At best, the non-Aboriginal mainstream remains ignorant of the realities facing Aboriginal Australians and, at worst, continues to perpetuate insidious and pervasive forms of racism. It should come as no surprise, then, that Heiss warmly endorses the maxim adopted by Jackie Huggins: "when you are born Aboriginal you are born political" (*Dhuuluu-Yala* 37). This politicization spills over into the field of Aboriginal literary production. As Mick Dodson notes in his foreword to *The Macquarie PEN Anthology of Aboriginal Literature*, "[literature] can be and is used as a powerful political tool by Aboriginal people in a political system which renders us mostly voiceless" (xiii).

Mick Dodson's point is echoed by Heiss and Peter Minter in their introduction to the same collection. Surveying Aboriginal literary production since European arrival in 1788, they find that "the nexus between the literary and the political" represents one of the "persistent and now characteristic elements of Aboriginal literature" (Introduction 2). Using English to write is political: "[w]e have now mastered the same language that was once used against us – describing us as barbaric and savage – and we have empowered ourselves to tell our stories, in

our styles, for our people" (Heiss, qtd. in Janke 1). Stories of Aboriginal survival and resistance are political: white-authored "history books . . . have conveniently left out the facts around invasion, colonisation and attempted genocide" (Heiss, *Dhuuluu-Yala* 36). Representing the diversity of Aboriginal lives and experiences is political: Aboriginal people have "been misrepresented for too long by misinformed people" (Ginibi and van Toorn 158), and the "Australian media" relies disproportionately on "two stereotypes of Aboriginal Australians: one is the man in the desert with the spear, the other the out-of-control Redfern rioter" (Flanagan).

In interviews and reviews, as well as in her own published work, Heiss repeatedly draws attention to the way Aboriginal literature is not only political but pedagogic. She approvingly assesses an anthology of Aboriginal Australian writing as "an ideal education tool," adding, "Aboriginal autobiographies, biographies, even many works of fiction are our history books . . ." ("From the Heart"). The same can be said of Aboriginal children's literature ("Aboriginal") and life-writing (*Dhuuluu-Yala* 35). Like Heiss, Ruby Langford Ginibi writes "to educate [the white world] so they will know more about us and be less racist in their dealings with Aboriginal people" (Ginibi and van Toorn 158). Yet ascribing an educative function to (or identifying one in) Aboriginal Australian literature is not without its dangers. Reviewing Behrendt's *Home* (2004), Heiss finds that Behrendt's "rich writing" was "hindered by the slabs of lectures that appeared throughout the book" ("Anita Heiss Reviews"). Warming to her theme, Heiss observes, "there were too many obvious history lessons thrown in along the way and a noticeable change of language as we were lectured on the role of the Church, Aboriginal involvement in the war [and so on]"(square brackets in orig.). With a sigh, she concludes, "it is a common flaw in Indigenous literature, one I am guilty of as well, as Indigenous authors often feel the need to get every Indigenous issue they can into the one text." Heiss's repeated assertion of the educative value of Aboriginal literature may seem at odds with her assessment of Behrendt's fiction. This apparent contradiction, however, merely illustrates the ongoing tensions at the heart of Aboriginal Australian literary production: the minority status of Aboriginal Australians renders the insertion of instructional agendas both necessary and limiting.

Consumption

Feminist critiques of a postfeminist sensibility tend to view the chick lit novel's imbrication with consumer culture as evidence of its morally suspect character (Gill and Herdieckerhoff). While indeed "much of chick lit imagines its heroine's agency through their desires and actions as part of a [global] consumer culture" (Butler and Desai 13), consumption need not necessarily signal women's oppression. Pamela Butler and Jigna Desai reference Jane Arthurs and Jessica Lyn

Van Slooten as two scholars who present "women's commodity consumption [as] a source of pleasure and conscious self-fashioning that can potentially resist male control" (10). Translating this view into the field of nonwhite chick lit, Butler and Desai hold that nonwhite women's commodity consumption is further inflected or "mark[ed]" by "struggles with racial, national, and cultural belonging" (14). Butler and Desai's argument is influenced by Marilyn Halter's *Shopping for Identity*. As much a history of marketing in America as a history of the formation of various ethnic identities, Halter's research demonstrates that the advent of "segmented marketing approaches" was accompanied by an increased emphasis on marketing to specific ethnic communities, including Irish, Jewish, and African American (5). This cuts two ways: ethnic identity "increasingly [made itself] manifest through self-conscious consumption of goods and services" (7).

The work of Halter and Butler and Desai is premised on ethnic engagement with *mainstream* consumer culture, either from the perspective of the nonwhite subject immersing herself in Western consumer culture, or mainstream, normatively white American companies targeting specific ethnic communities. Heiss's fiction certainly conforms to the chick lit genre in its embrace of commodity consumption, and it could be read in the terms set out by Halter and Butler and Desai. However, her fiction also opens up alternative ways of envisioning nonwhite engagement with consumer culture, particularly its emphasis on the consumption of objects *outside* the mainstream. For example, Lauren Lucas eagerly listens to an iPod packed with music from "Sharnee Fenwick, The Last Kinection, Charlie Trindall, Street Warriors, Munkimuk, Radical Son, Emma Donovan, Shauntaii, Geoffrey Gurumul Yunupingu and Jessica Mauboy" (*Manhattan* 87). Heiss's characters passionately read and debate literature by Alexis Wright, Oodgeroo Noonuccal, and Terri Janke; they are moved by Warwick Thornton's 2012 film *Samson and Delilah* and gift one another ecofriendly products from the Aboriginal-owned and operated company Indigiearth.

That the world of Heiss's heroines is furnished by these and many more real-world musicians, authors, films, and companies is no accident. Heiss explains that her chick lit is designed to "showcase as many diverse Aboriginal creators as possible" (*Am I?* 222). She goes on to add, "I'm not embarrassed to say that I have unashamedly plugged some of my favourites," affirming that the "inclusion" of so many different visual artists, musicians, writers, and filmmakers is a matter of "recognition and praise" (222). While Heiss may intend "recognition and praise" to be primarily a matter of giving little-known or unfamiliar names greater currency in the Australian public sphere, this section expands the notion of "recognition" to include training the reading public to recognize the vast universe of Aboriginal cultural production.

Janet Malcolm characterizes the *Gossip Girl* (2002–09) books as an "education in label recognition," suggesting that "you will never walk into a department store again without feeling a little surge of pride as you recognize Christian Louboutin and John Fleuvog and Michael Kors." Substitute designer labels for the names of

Aboriginal creators, and Heiss's fiction pivots on an identical logic. Though lacking the multimillion-dollar clout and global reach of their mainstream counterparts, Heiss wields these "brand names" as if they do, assuming a familiarity with the artists she namechecks usually reserved for Gucci or Prada. Of course, the insertion of the names of Aboriginal creators serves a purpose within the narrative of Heiss's fiction. In their personal lives, Heiss's protagonists read books in bed, hang paintings on the wall, and attend poetry readings. In their professional lives, they curate exhibitions and interview artists. That said, Heiss's sustained focus on naming the constituent parts of the Aboriginal artistic economy could be interpreted with equal force as a catalogue destined for the readers of her fiction, alerting them to the existence of cultural production beyond the familiar and directing future consumption patterns. Heiss's invocation of the catalog as intertext parallels Smith's identification of Williams-Sonoma catalogs and "*Martha Stewart's Living* magazine" as "instructive text[s]" engaged in the subtle act of "guid[ing] their readers" (*Cosmopolitan* 12). White chick lit, in Smith's view, is alert to – and critical of – catalogs of consumption, particularly those that proclaim, "a properly equipped home . . . is one complete with all necessary accoutrements" (12). A properly equipped understanding of Australia's First Peoples, by contrast, can only be achieved through the consumption of objects curated by Heiss.

Heiss's advocacy for consumption from the margins is perhaps no better illustrated than in her novel *Tiddas*.[3] *Tiddas* follows the lives of five women (three of whom are Aboriginal) over the course of a year as they navigate divorce, pregnancy, depression, and alcoholism. Their friendship group, doubling as a book group, lies at the heart of the novel. As the women talk books, they drink wine, swap bawdy gossip, provide shoulders to cry on, and trade catty comments. Talking books, moreover, is not a diversion from the main storyline; it is the main storyline, the fulcrum of narrative action. It also has a wider ideological function: the women are categorical in their desire to read works by Aboriginal authors or about Aboriginal themes. They energetically discuss their choices with insight and passion, teasing out the novels' cultural importance and observing parallels (or dissonances) with contemporary Australian society. Within the fictional world of *Tiddas*, these books boast considerable currency and they are treated as highly desirable objects of consumption. Their significance, however, reaches beyond the world of the text to that of the reader: they are positioned as "further" or "recommended" reading once *Tiddas* is finished and the search for the next book begins. It is at this point that Heiss stages her most explicit call for consumption, providing bibliographic details in *Tiddas*' back matter of the books read within the narrative. This move underscores the seriousness with which Heiss takes her role as an intermediary between mainstream and marginal cultures. Lest any doubts linger, *Tiddas*'s back matter conducts the reader to "Anita's Black Book Challenge," one of the most popular posts on her blog consisting, as the title suggests, of an extended list of Aboriginal-authored texts ("The Art").

3 *Tidda* is an Aboriginal term of endearment meaning "female friend" or "sister"; in the book, the women often refer to one another as "tiddas."

The reading list is a paradigmatic expression of middlebrow literary consumption, and it has received considerable scholarly attention. Janice Radway makes clear that Harry Scherman's focus on book selection for the Book-of-the-Month Club was one of the pillars of its success: his monthly reading lists "assured his subscribers that they could keep up with the tempo of modern cultural production without sacrificing their appreciation for distinction" (170). For Joan Shelley Rubin, book reviewing in nineteenth-century American periodicals responded to "the demands of a middle-class readership eager for education without excessive effort" (37). In an Australian context, the *Australian Women's Weekly*'s "promotion of good reading was . . . both genuinely civilizing and ideologically conservative" (Buckridge 42), carried out through a variety of techniques including "lists of books . . . with incisive commentaries" (39). Radway, Rubin, and Buckridge all traverse similar terrain, demonstrating that reading lists are a trustworthy and convenient source of instruction on how, and what, to read.

The reading list in *Tiddas*', back matter replicates this function while simultaneously questioning traditional notions of "good reading" and what it means to be "well read." In the textual and paratextual worlds of Heiss's fiction, this state can only be attained through fluency in Aboriginal Australian literary production. Thankfully for Heiss's readers, this process has already begun, having finished the first of what is hoped to be many books by Aboriginal authors. For all this to happen, though, Heiss must establish a commercially viable place for her work in mainstream consumer culture. The equation is simple: "the more books sold, the more people reached" (*Am I?* 214). So is the idea: use the mainstream marketplace to agitate for consumption from the margins and, in the process, bring the margins into the mainstream. In this formula, genre matters. Heiss writes commercial women's fiction – popular fiction – a mode of literary production premised on large sales and readerships (Gelder). Though popular fiction (and women's fiction in particular) is often "derisively" regarded "as capitalism's most perfect literary form" (35), it is a pragmatic choice for Heiss, providing a mainstream platform with a large audience from which to advocate for alternative consumption.

Style Guides and Cultural Protocols

In *Cosmopolitan Culture and Consumerism in Chick Lit*, Smith's analysis is structured by a series of comparisons, with each chick lit novel read against its advice manual intertext. These intertexts range from women's magazines to romantic comedies and self-help guides. In each case, the intertext pertains to the personal sphere, articulated in terms of domestic upkeep, personal appearance, and intimate relationships. Heiss's fiction challenges this model by foregrounding instructional modes that relate primarily to the professional sphere. Alongside catalogs and inventories, her intertexts are style guides and cultural protocols, particularly

those which outline conventions governing reference to Australia's First Peoples. Two of the three examples discussed in this section anchor the style-guide-as-intertext in a professional context; the third (situated in the private sphere) suggests that professional modes of advice exert equal influence on personal interactions. Heiss's advancement of the "professional" advice manual also speaks to the exigencies at play in nonwhite chick lit: where advice for white protagonists is figured primarily in relation to the domestic, nonwhite protagonists shoulder a heftier range of competencies covering the domestic and professional spheres.

Heiss is an expert when it comes to style guides and cultural protocols. Independently ("Writing About"; "Australian Copyright"; *Dhuuluu-Yala*) or with others, Heiss has produced a number of "best practice" guidelines for authors when writing about, or in collaboration with, Aboriginal Australians. Within her fiction, this manifests itself in a heightened sensitivity toward language. As Heiss's involvement in the 2011 court case Eatock vs. Bolt attests, language, particularly when used in relation to Aboriginal Australians, retains its ability to "offend, insult, humiliate or intimidate" (Racial Discrimination Act).[4] In *Avoiding Mr Right*, the word *mission* strikes a discordant note for protagonist Peta Tully. Peta is a newly appointed manager in the "Department of Media, Sports, Arts, Refugees and Indigenous Affairs" (1). Arriving in Melbourne, Peta's assistant Sylvia happily promises to make it "[her] personal mission to open [Peta's] eyes and ears to the wonders of eco-poetry and the spoken word community in Melbourne" (37). Peta's testy response reveals her frustration at the lack of cultural awareness among non-Aboriginal Australians, even in places where this should be the norm: "Okay, but can you refrain from using the word mission, please Sylvia? Hasn't anyone around here told you that it brings back terrible memories of mission managers and mission life for a lot of Aboriginal Australians?" (37). In much the same way that Heiss assumes a familiarity with the names of Aboriginal artists, there is no accompanying explanation of what a mission is, nor why mention of it may prompt "terrible memories." Instead, both the reader and the fictional interlocutor are alerted to the way language can be unexpectedly sensitive for Aboriginal Australians and are urged to tread carefully as a result.

Likewise, elements of the style guide are woven into the narrative of *Paris Dreaming*, Heiss's fourth chick lit novel. Libby Cutmore, the novel's high-achieving and driven protagonist, works as a "manager of educational programmes" at the National Aboriginal Gallery (NAG) (70); the action takes place in Paris, where she curates an exhibition of Aboriginal art at the Musée du quai Branly. The chief pleasures of Parisian life (men and pastries, obviously) are tempered by the tedium of teaching ignorant colleagues about Aboriginal Australia. In one altercation, Libby relates how Adrien, the obnoxious administrator at the Musée,

> . . . had emailed me a press release with "aboriginal" in lower-case throughout. It was an exercise in grammar and diplomacy to finally have him accept the need to capitalise it to "Aboriginal."

4 In 2009, *The Herald Sun* journalist Andrew Bolt published a series of articles claiming that fairer-skinned Aboriginal people were dishonestly identifying as Aboriginal. When several of those named, including Heiss, took him to court, he was found guilty of Racial Discrimination under the Racial Discrimination Act.

> I printed out the style guide from the NAG for him and highlighted the bits relevant to our current disagreement so he understood the need to use initial capitals for Aboriginal and Aborigine as an adjective and noun in relation to the First Peoples of Australia. Then he should use the word "aborigine" as a generic term referring generally to indigenous people from anywhere in the world. (149)

As in the example from *Avoiding Mr Right*, what may appear as a small footnote to a non-Aboriginal person is freighted with meaning for Libby. Frustratingly, her embodied knowledge as an Aboriginal woman is not enough to convince Adrien that the distinction between upper- and lowercase *a* is both correct and necessary. Libby must supplement her own authority through reference to secondary sources, in this instance a style guide. Ideally, it should be the first thing that non-Aboriginal people consult when they have a query relating to Aboriginal Australian language conventions rather than their Aboriginal colleagues. Failing that, the style guide is a useful support for Aboriginal people when pushed into explaining basic concepts to others, offering an external and objective reference point that avoids continual and unnecessary investment in Aboriginal bodies as the primary unit of knowledge.

In *Tiddas*, the distinction between Indigenous and Aboriginal is a sticking point between the five central protagonists. Veronica, one of the group's two non-Aboriginal women, naively asks her Aboriginal friends, "[a]ren't you all Indigenous to Australia?" (112). Izzy jumps in to set Veronica straight: "'I prefer Wiradjuri, Koori or Aboriginal if need be." "Knowing the conversation inside out," Izzy goes on to clarify, "I rarely say Indigenous because we're different to Torres Strait Islanders" (112). Echoing Izzy's sentiments, Xanthe "respond[s] in training mode, calmly and diplomatically, 'We are the first peoples of Australia. The Torres Strait Islands were annexed to Queensland in 1879 by an act of Parliament. The truth is, they could easily have been annexed to Papua New Guinea instead' (112). Izzy completes the exchange, confirming Xanthe's potted history with tired, rehearsed patience, "Yes, Vee, we are different peoples, different cultures, different identities. I'm a bit sick of being clumped in with another group all the time simply because of some bit of old legislation" (112). Unlike the previous two examples where the style guide and cultural protocols are referenced in a professional context, cultural ignorance is just as pervasive in the personal sphere, but it can be remedied just as readily with the application of professional advice.

The frequency with which culturally appropriate protocols and guidelines are referenced within Heiss's fiction adds weight to the argument that her chick lit is an advice manual, rather than simply in dialogue with it. More often than not, Aboriginal women shoulder the responsibility of education and correction, so much so that the protagonists could easily be coded as "advice manuals" within the fictional world of the narrative. The recipient of this knowledge is invariably non-Aboriginal; this holds true within the narrative and beyond it. In the extract

from *Tiddas*, Veronica voices a question many readers may be privately thinking but unsure of how, or whom to ask. Heiss's fiction both anticipates these kinds of questions and responds to them. Moreover, her fiction models the best practice deployment of respectful cultural protocols: not only do reader and fiction interlocutor alike learn why *Aboriginal* should be capitalized and *mission* avoided, but Heiss's fiction is designed to be read as exemplary in this regard.

This instruction carries obvious benefits for the non-Aboriginal interlocutor, but it comes at a cost for the women involved. The female protagonists invariably register fatigue and irritation at constantly having to educate those around them. Peta snaps at her deputy, exasperation cracking her voice as she drags the colonial overtones of *mission* to light. The psychic toll of constantly picking up others' mistakes is plastered across the trite politeness in Libby's response to Adrien: "it was an exercise in grammar and diplomacy. . . ." A weary, practiced patience creeps into the words of Izzy, Ellen, and Xanthe as they are forced to switch from the friendly banter of intimates to addressing the mistakes of their friend. In each example, Heiss draws attention to the dilemma faced by many Aboriginal women (including herself). They are right to insist on the respectful and correct use of language, but their bodies should not be the frontline of this battle: documents already exist in the public sphere to do that job.

Modeling Correct Behavior

As a consequence of reading Heiss's fiction as a style guide and as a set of cultural protocols, I have suggested that Aboriginal women in Heiss's fiction could be viewed as the physical embodiment of the advice manual. However, non-Aboriginal characters in Heiss's fiction are also animated by instructive potential. More specifically, Heiss uses her non-Aboriginal characters to explore different modes of interaction with Aboriginal people, with some classed as exemplary and others assuming a more cautionary hue. Frequently, the endorsement (or otherwise) of non-Aboriginal behavior is bound up in the norms and tropes of the chick lit genre, namely romantic fulfillment and female friendship. For instance, a non-Aboriginal character who respectfully expresses solidarity with Aboriginal people is likely to be rewarded by the narrative with good fortune and personal fulfillment; conversely, a character who fails to see beyond their position of privilege may attract censure or misfortune.

In *Avoiding Mr Right*, two male love interests (one current and the other eventual) orbit protagonist Peta Tully. When the novel opens, Peta is in an ongoing and committed relationship with James, her boyfriend of eight months. Though she is the envy of her friends, she feels smothered. James, a non-Aboriginal man, is almost too perfect. He wants to marry Peta, have kids with her, provide for her, and love her. Peta is not nearly as enthusiastic and seizes the opportunity to move from Sydney to Melbourne for a new job. Her misgivings and ambivalence toward

James are amplified when he visits her in Melbourne. Their much-anticipated night out disintegrates quickly into querulous disagreement. When Peta pushes him to confront the topic of Aboriginality, his ignorance of how to interact with Aboriginal people extends to an inability to use respectful terms of address (highlighting, once again, the need for the kind of instruction provided by Heiss's chick lit). He plaintively defends his antiracist credentials by pointing out "our office did hire a Blackfella but it didn't quite work out. He kept going walkabout and the partners couldn't bring themselves to hire another" (162). "What the fuck!" splutters Peta, outraged. "What are we doing here, Aboriginal Studies 101?" (162). The problem? James relies on Peta to educate him about issues relating to Aboriginal Australians instead of taking the initiative to find out for himself. He treats her as a "walking, talking Aboriginal encyclopaedia" (*Am I?* 132), and the results are predictable: anger and rejection.[5]

To be fair to James, though, he is not the only love interest unsure of how to interact with Aboriginal culture. Mike, the affable policeman with terrible pick-up lines, is similarly confused. On their first night out together (Peta is reluctant to call it a date), she is aghast to discover that Mike wears a blue wrist band in (misguided) support of "due process" in the recent case of a "policeman who killed a Black man up on Possession Island" (144).[6] His standing is further diminished by his occupation. In Peta's hierarchy of acceptable jobs, Mike is the lowest of the low: "a Blackfella dating a cop is like a Jew dating a Nazi. It just can't happen" (124). To her surprise though, it does. Mike, unlike James, is a respectful and curious interlocutor. He never wears the wristband again and reads, at Peta's behest, Simon Luckhurst's *Eddie's Country* (2006), a book that "explain[s] the history of relations between the cops and Kooris" (236; 145).[7] He marches against the Intervention (237),[8] listens to Koori Radio (138), and hangs out with Blackfellas at the pub (236). He shores up another "date" with Peta with the promise that "[he's] been doing [his] homework and reading [the book Peta recommended]" (269). Mike is attracted to Peta because of her commitment to a pedagogical agenda. Unlike James, though, Mike does not rely on Peta for education. He likes her because she makes him want to *do* better and *be* better. As he rushes to explain an impromptu kiss, cultural instruction is braided into sexual attraction: "you make me think about things I should be thinking about. And you were there right in front of me being really smart, and dangerously sexy . . ." (272).

More than simply providing a platform for Heiss to stage, and then resolve, various interactions aimed at educating the non-Aboriginal reader, the romantic entanglements of the chick lit plot allow Heiss to reward different types of engagement with Aboriginal culture. *Avoiding Mr Right* ends in a scene of domestic bliss, with Peta carefully ironing Mike's blue shirts. Though she returns to Sydney and James at the expiration of her yearlong secondment, it does not take her long to head back to Melbourne and Mike. The message is unmistakable: a character's receptivity to learning is by far the most accurate method of separating the hero from the chump, outweighing either money or a flash lifestyle; "Mike was still

5 This formulation recurs throughout Heiss's oeuvre, voiced by Heiss and her protagonists. Other instances appear in her fiction ("I always hated being expected to be the walking talking Aboriginal encyclopedia at home" [*Manhattan* 262]) and on her blog: Heiss regrets giving "[time] . . . to white people who think [she is] a walking talking Aboriginal encyclopaedia" ("Bless").

6 Though the names and locations are fictional, this is a thinly veiled reference to death of Aboriginal man and Palm Island resident Cameron Doomadgee, who died while held in custody by Chris Hurley, a Queensland police officer. Blue wristbands inscribed with Hurley's police registration number were sold by the Police Union to support his successful appeal of the initial court case. For a full account, see Chloe Hooper's *The Tall Man* (2008). *The Tall Man* is one of the books read in *Tiddas* and listed in its bibliography.

7 Unlike the fictitious rendering of the events on Palm Island, the book Peta refers to can be purchased and read by Heiss's readers.

8 Shorthand for the 2007 Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER), an unprecedented intervention by the Howard government into the lives of Aboriginal people living in remote communities in the Northern Territory. It was criticized by many as a paternalistic and heavy-handed response to reports of child abuse.

reading books I brought home and reports related to anything on Indigenous issues and policing . . . he loved it, but he didn't do it just to support me. He said he did it for himself, 'to be a better man'" (355). There is an implicit lesson for the reader here too: offered a choice between passive (James) or proactive (Mike) modes of engagement, the reader is encouraged to follow the path chosen by Mike.

Alongside heterosexual dating rituals, Heiss uses the chick lit genre's focus on female friendship to distinguish between different modes of expressing solidarity with Aboriginal Australians. Veronica and Nadine, *Tiddas*'s two non-Aboriginal protagonists, are a case in point. When we meet Veronica, she is in emotional turbulence following a recent divorce. A cheating husband has left her with a gold Lexus and a nice house in an affluent suburb, but "no real sense of herself" (23). Low self-esteem aside, Veronica is held up throughout the novel as an exemplary non-Aboriginal woman: "she was the perfect example of reconciliation at work: the appreciation of and respect for Indigenous Australian cultures" (46). Veronica is conscious of her standpoint as a white, non-Aboriginal woman and carefully avoids speaking for others. At one book club meeting, the narrative reports that "Veronica finally found a place she could contribute, not always knowing when it was okay for her to comment on 'Black' issues when she was a whajin, or migloo, as they said in Queensland" (110). Just as Mike's cultural awareness is rewarded through romantic fulfillment, so too is Veronica's diligence in learning about Aboriginal people and culture. Although she must work to regain her self-confidence, her future beckons brightly: when the novel ends, she has moved into a city apartment with a wardrobe full of new clothes and a new life as a visual arts student.

Unlike Veronica, Nadine sits far more ambivalently within the narrative of *Tiddas*. Nadine is a wildly successful crime novelist with a personal trainer and a posh, secluded house in the Brisbane hills. Despite her fierce protectiveness of interracial marriage (she is married to Izzy's brother, Richard), her commitment to reconciliation rests on shakier grounds than Veronica's. Izzy, the group's "self-appointed lit critic," perceptively notes that "there were no Blackfellas in any of Nadine's books" (11); Nadine's unconvincing defense is that she would have to make her tiddas either "the murdered or the murderer" (11). Later on, Nadine "[feels] a pang of guilt" at her failure to include "Kooris – or Murris, as Blackfellas called themselves in Brisbane – in her own novels"; she reasons weakly to herself that "she never really knew how to" (47). Additionally, Nadine is chastised for referring to herself and her tiddas as "easy-going natives" when trying to come up with an alternative wording for the acronym VIXENs (an amalgam of their first names: Veronica, Izzy, Xanthe, Ellen, and Nadine) (22). The accumulation of these small but significant references to Nadine's dubious racial politics mean that she is never put forward as a model non-Aboriginal citizen worthy of emulation. Moreover, Nadine is an alcoholic and her addiction worsens over the course of the novel. It threatens her friendship with the tiddas and subtly marks her

questionable character. All the tiddas enjoy a drink, but Nadine's drinking problem is freighted with deeper undertones, singling her out as a cautionary model of engagement with Aboriginal people.

Fusing the chick lit genre to the field of Aboriginal Australian literary production forges new terrain that is at once uncertain and exhilarating. The weightiness of Heiss's pedagogic agenda regularly threatens to destabilize a genre premised on breezy, irreverent escapism. Yet even in its white articulations, the chick lit novel (and postfeminism more broadly) is a "concept fraught with contradictions. . . . confound[ing] and split[ting] critics with its contradictory meanings and pluralistic outlook" (Genz and Brabon 1). These fissures deepen when chick lit depicts the lives and subjectivities of women "[who occupy] positions within, but marginal to, the global cosmopolis" (Ommundsen 109). Heiss writes of the "incredibly difficult space" she must navigate "as a minority in mainstream publishing" (*Am I?* 215). Ommundsen sensitively documents the "complex pressures and temptations" confronting writers who translate "between the norms of a global (largely Western) consumer culture" and the "alternative modernities" that shape "their daily lives" (108).

These tensions are written into and over the bodies of Aboriginal women, whether imagined (Libby, Alice, Peta, and Izzy) or real (Heiss and Huggins). Yet the genre remains a fertile site of expansion and possibility: in Heiss's hands, the standard tropes of female friendship and heterosexual romance index a character's literacy in Aboriginal affairs (and, by extension, their suitability as a friend or life partner). The genre also offers commercial and ideological advantages: as an object circulating within the marketplace, the chick lit novel speaks to a wide, mainstream readership "who may not have . . . cared about Aboriginal women in Australia before" (Heiss, *Am I?* 215). My reading of Heiss's fiction demonstrates that for nonwhite authors, instructional mediums are considerably more central to the chick lit genre than previously imagined. Far from an object of critique or satire, the advice manual performs an important educative function from exposing readers to cultural production beyond the mainstream to outlining correct language conventions.

The urgency animating Heiss's pedagogic agenda should not be underestimated. Contemporary Australian society is dangerously *illiterate* about its First Peoples:

> A vast number of Australian do not know any Indigenous people, do not mix with Indigenous people socially; they rarely live within Indigenous communities, whether rural or urban. This lack of contact, coupled with a lack of education about experiences and perspectives, allows Indigenous communities to become invisible, appearing only to fill negative (or positive) stereotypes. (Behrendt, *Achieving* 76)

As Behrendt suggests, this illiteracy has profound and far-reaching effects. It results in the ugly booing that has dogged Sydney Swans footballer Adam Goodes, the heavy-handed government intervention into the lives of Aboriginal people

(see note 8), and the belief that fairer-skinned Aboriginal people choose their identities for financial gain (Bolt; see note 4). A skilled educator, Heiss believes "a basic understating of Australia's history and current issues/demographic in relation to Australia's First Peoples should be . . . a basic expectation of students, teachers and employees" (*Am I?* 118). "Such an introduction," she continues, "would ensure that misrepresentation and misinformation about Aboriginal people would not appear in mainstream forums" (118). The Australian education system (primary, secondary, and tertiary) remains woefully inadequate in this respect. Consequently, it falls to "[the Aboriginal] arts sector, which has a longstanding strong foundation" to be "the only real platform for a voice in the mainstream" (161). As I have argued in this essay, it remains the only viable platform for schooling mainstream Australia in the norms, culture, and history of Aboriginal Australians.

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5. "On the Guilty Displeasures of Aboriginal Australian Chick Lit"

This paper presents a close reading and reception study of Anita Heiss's fifth chick lit novel, *Tiddas*, published in 2014. *Tiddas* follows the lives of five 40-something women (the eponymous tiddas, an Aboriginal term that affectionately denotes close female friends) living in Brisbane. The women's friendship group doubles as a book club, and over the course of their monthly get-togethers, they discuss books by—or about—Aboriginal Australians. Heiss devotes considerable narrative space to the tiddas' book club discussions, and this narrative emphasis on reading forms the first plank of my argument: that Heiss foregrounds certain 'ideal' reading practices in *Tiddas'* textual and paratextual materials. Moreover, I suggest that these materials form an implicit interpretative framework for her real-life readers. My paper then moves from close reading to a reception study of the novel. I look to the digital literary sphere, as theorised by Simone Murray, for a corpus of online *Tiddas* reviews published on blogs, the community reviewing site Goodreads, and Mouths of Mums, a Yahoo-7 affiliated website where Australian mums receive products to test and review online.

When I began collecting and surveying *Tiddas* reviews, I hypothesised that readers would report a reading experience more or less in line with Heiss's intentions; namely, that Heiss's readers enjoyed the experience of being educated, that they learned something about Aboriginal Australian identity, and so on. My work on the reception of *Am I Black Enough for You?* gave reasonable grounds for this hypothesis: in online reviews, *Am I Black Enough?* readers endorsed the educative experience of reading Heiss's memoir. Further, many reported that Heiss's memoir had deepened their understanding of Australia's First Peoples. What I found instead was that *Tiddas* produced strongly divergent responses amongst the online reading public. For instance, some aspects of *Tiddas* regularly came in for praise (such as the relatability of the characters and the setting) while other aspects of the novel, particularly those concerning intercultural relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians, were described as being "pushed too hard" or "a little forced".

I presented my early thinking on *Tiddas*' reception at the 2015 Literary Studies Convention. In November 2016, I submitted a full version of my paper to *Australian Literary*

Studies (*ALS*). I completed the first set of revisions in June 2018. These revisions focused on differentiating Heiss's ideological agenda from the manner in which she presents that agenda. *ALS* responded in September 2018 with a request for further revision on a number of aspects of my article. In the introductory section, this includes clarification of my argument, a more clearly defined research question and further methodological detail. In the main body of my paper, the peer reviewers rightly request that I modify my treatment of *Tiddas* reviews so as not to give the impression that online reviews "give us unmediated access to readers". As it stands, I don't differentiate online reviewers from Heiss's broader reading public. The essay I present in the following pages takes into account the first set of revisions (from June 2018) but I have not yet implemented the further revisions requested in September 2018. When I revise this essay following submission of my thesis, one of the challenges will be to identify a clearer link between the reading practices Heiss outlines in the novel itself, and the reading practices at work in *Tiddas* reviews. Once I have done this, though, I suspect that I will better able to articulate my argument, especially as it relates to online reviews. This approach will also help me to present readers' opinions without supposing "unmediated access" to their interiority.

Australian National University

Statement of Contribution

This thesis is submitted as a Thesis by Compilation in accordance with https://policies.anu.edu.au/ppl/document/ANUP_003405

I declare that the research presented in this Thesis represents original work that I carried out during my candidature at the Australian National University, except for contributions to multi-author papers incorporated in the Thesis where my contributions are specified in this Statement of Contribution.

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On the Guilty Displeasures of Aboriginal Australian Chick Lit

Abstract

In recent years, non-white chick lit has been the subject of close textual analysis (Butler and Desai; Mathew; Ommundsen; Thoma). Yet there's little academic research into the reception of these novels, either locally or internationally. This essay puts forward a reception study of Anita Heiss's 2014 novel *Tiddas* as a corrective to this central but hitherto overlooked question. Heiss is well-known as the progenitor of 'choc'-lit, a wry take on the chick-lit genre that transforms a formula most closely associated with white women to depict the lives of urban Aboriginal Australian women. *Tiddas* alternates between the perspectives of its five protagonists as they navigate divorce, pregnancy, alcoholism and 'reno-dating' tradies. The ebb and flow of their friendship is anchored by monthly book group meetings. I begin this essay by demonstrating how these book group meetings foreground a certain set of reader responses to Aboriginal Australian-authored texts. I then look to a corpus of book reviews, drawn from the mainstream media and digital literary sphere (Murray), to compare the reception of Aboriginal Australian writing between Heiss's fictional and real-life readers. I argue that, while some of Heiss's readers respond favourably to the novel's didactic intentions, others experience an emotional conflict between ideological and aesthetic concerns. This latter group is sympathetic to her political agenda but are put off by its mode of presentation within the novel.

On April 28th 2014, a Goodreads reviewer offered her blistering assessment of Anita Heiss's novel *Tiddas*: 'Dumb. So dumb. Unrealistic, flat, undynamic characters. Cliched [sic] writing. I feel dumber after reading this!'. A few months later, Heiss reposted the review on her public Facebook page, with her thoughts added as a comment below:

> I love this review of TIDDAS on Goodreads - the reality is you can't please everyone all of the time. And as long as I make people 'feel' something then I'm happy. I'm sorry she 'felt' dumber, but at least she felt :):)

Heiss's upbeat response triggered an outpouring of support from fans and friends, garnering over 70 'likes' and more than 20 comments ranging from supportive to admiring, offended and sarcastic. As the *Facebook* conversation lengthened out and neared its end, Heiss addressed the subject of negative reviews: 'I have a lot of people who don't like the content of my novels, which makes me laugh, because they complain about Aboriginal themes and issues, but that's what I do'. Yet the review cited by Heiss made no mention of 'Aboriginal themes and issues'. The reviewer strongly dislikes *Tiddas* but the only features she singles out for critique are Heiss's writing style and characters. What then are we to make of Heiss's

attribution of negative reviews to dubious racial politics, even when the reviewer's dislike is directed toward other aspects of Heiss's writing? Or: how do reviewers express their *dislike* of a book that wears its racial politics on its sleeve while avoiding the charge of racism? This question is central to my reception study of *Tiddas*.

Heiss is a Wiradjuri woman from Central NSW. Her chick lit novels depict the lives of financially and sexually independent Aboriginal women in cities from Paris to New York and, in the case of *Tiddas*, Brisbane. *Tiddas* alternates between the perspectives of five women in their mid-forties as they navigate divorce, pregnancy, alcoholism and the perils of 'reno-dating' tradies. Through all of this, they commit to monthly book group meetings. The title, *Tiddas*, references an 'indigenous [sic] term for sister or friend' (Heiss 'Snapshot' 7) used affectionately throughout the novel.[i] Heiss's emphasis on urban Aboriginal women—and their relationship with non-Aboriginal Australia—sets Heiss apart in the Australian literary marketplace:

> I don't think Aboriginal women appeared in commercial Australian fiction until I put them there . . . That's one of the reasons I write, to put us into the Australian literary landscape, across genres (Heiss 'From 'Chick Lit' to 'Choc Lit'').

Heiss was already an established academic when she published her first chick lit novel, *Not Meeting Mr Right*, in 2007. She had an academic monograph to her name (*Dhuuluu-Yala*), a doctorate in marketing and communications, and she had already published several volumes of poetry (*Token Koori; Sacred Cows; I'm Not Racist, But...*). Her decision to move into chick lit was strategic: it provided a suitable template for depicting the lives of women like her and illustrating her key message regarding the diverse life trajectories of Aboriginal Australians, many of which are played out against an urban backdrop.

In this paper, I draw on a corpus of reviews published online and in the mainstream media to present two intersecting lines of argument. The first examines how *Tiddas* appears to foreground certain readings and interpretive stances. I argue that Heiss uses structure, plot and paratext to construct a specific reader and delineate specific reading conditions: *Tiddas* addresses the question of *what* to read (namely, Aboriginal Australian-authored literature) and *how* to read it (with sensitivity, self-awareness and a willingness to be educated). *Tiddas* presents such an attractive case study because it facilitates comparison between Heiss's textual attempts at directing the book's reception and the attitudes and dispositions of her real-life readers. The second line of argumentation I pursue in this paper relates to readers' critical encounters with *Tiddas*. I argue that readerly assessment hinges on the ability to navigate

between ideological and aesthetic concerns. It's one thing to support the political agenda Heiss pursues in her fiction, especially as it relates to the diversity of Aboriginal identity in 21st-century Australia. Enjoyment of the *expression* of that same agenda, as my research shows, is a vastly different matter. Heiss's readers are largely receptive to her racial politics, but some of them find its articulation intrusive and didactic. Convention holds (white) chick lit to be a guilty pleasure enjoyed by those who read it (Rowntree et al.: 'Certainly the idiom 'guilty pleasure' captures the emotional register of responses by women [who report ambivalent enjoyment] of the genre'). My paper argues that the inverse is true for non-white articulations of the genre. I borrow the term 'guilty *dis*pleasure' from Carl Wilson to show that Heiss's readers guiltily—and hesitantly—disclose that they liked the book far less than they felt they ought to.[ii]

Non-white chick lit insistently questions race, gender, sexuality and consumption in ways that normatively white chick lit easily sidesteps or ignores (Butler and Desai; Mathew 'Educating'; 'Pretty'; Ommundsen; Thoma). Heiss's writing is a case in point. On one hand, she strives to amuse her reader through entertaining stories of love and friendship. On the other, her fiction reflects a strong pedagogical bent (Mathew 'Educating'). As Heiss put it at the 2011 NSW Premier's Literary Awards:

> I write because I want to make social change. I want Australians to learn and think about their First Nations people . . . I want those who buy commercial women's fiction to also engage with the stories of urban-Aboriginal women's lives and our place in Australian society. ('Rights = Responsibilities')

The educational and escapist elements of *Tiddas* often rub up against one another, generating uncomfortable narrative pressure. Wenche Ommundsen writes that 'tensions appear . . . in the juxtaposition of astute observation on racial relations with the heroines' otherwise rather trivial thoughts and opinions' (118). There is a tangible 'shift in gears when Heiss delivers a lesson: the standard narrative realism of the chick lit novel switches to exposition that is almost didactic in tone' (Mathew 'Educating' 338; see also Mathew 'Pretty' 9-10). This is a persistent criticism of Heiss's fiction. The qualitative analysis of print and online responses to *Tiddas* undertaken in this paper demonstrates that non-academic readers are as sensitively attuned to these frictions as Heiss's scholarly readers.

Heiss stresses the 'non-Indigenous female market' as the 'key audience' for her chick lit (*Am I Black Enough?* 214). In terms of gender, we see a strong correlation between the imagined and real reader of *Tiddas*. Scholarly work on reading groups consistently identifies

women as the biggest consumers of literature, as well as the demographic most likely to meet and talk about books.[iii] All five of the tiddas are women, and Heiss's online reviewers are predominately female too. While it may be fairly straightforward to determine the gender coordinates of Heiss's reading public from usernames and biographical details (for example, many readers self-identify as mothers), racial identity is less easily apprehended. Heiss prioritises her Black polity (VIPs, or Very Indigenous People, as she would say ('Homelands' 11)) and three of the five tiddas are Aboriginal. That said, the reality of her reading public is another matter: 'let's face it, there are not enough Blackfellas to sustain *any* publishing venture, least of all an entire genre' (Heiss *Am I Black Enough?* 214, original emphasis). I suggest that Heiss seeks to engage a non-Indigenous female audience for ideological and commercial reasons and that this audience is, in turn, the most likely to review her books online.

Currently, we know little about the reception of non-white chick lit in Australia or beyond. The closest adjacent field, cross-cultural reception studies, has received significant scholarly attention from scholars based in the United Kingdom and United States (Anouk Lang, Kimberley Chabot Davis, Bethan Benwell and James Procter) but Aboriginal Australian-authored literature remains largely unexamined. Extant studies are set against a European backdrop (Čerče; Čerče and Haag; Di Blasio; Haag ''Bumping''; 'Indigenous Australian') or focus on the reception of *white*-Australian writing that deals with themes of reconciliation (Clarke and Nolan 'Book Clubs'; 'Reading Groups'). That said, two journal articles published in 2016 indicate a recent uptake of interest. First, Imogen Mathew's online reception study of Heiss's memoir *Am I Black Enough for You?* ('Reviewing') argues that Heiss's *non-fiction* readers are willing to be educated in ways readers of her fiction resist (73). Second, Derek Attridge's model of 'literal' and 'allegorical' readings furnishes Maggie Nolan with the critical vocabulary for understanding the 'tentative' and 'open-ended' bookclub responses to Kim Scott's *That Deadman Dance* (1).

The majority of *Tiddas* reviews were produced for—and circulate in—what Simone Murray calls the 'digital literary sphere'. This constantly mutating space is characterised by a 'broad array of book-themed websites and other digital content whose focus is contemporary literature and its production, circulation, and consumption' (Murray 313). Murray's work, exhaustive in detail and encyclopaedic in scope, sounds a clarion call for greater scholarly engagement with this field.[iv] Extant accounts of the digital literary sphere are chiefly concerned with unveiling the machinations of a distinct platform or phenomenon, from

Goodreads (Nakamura, Thelwall and Kousha) to electronic reading devices (Barnett; Cameron; Rowberry). Unlike previous scholarship, I approach online reviewing practices through the lens of a single text to facilitate comparison between platforms. The main sources for *Tiddas* reviews are the mainstream media, personal blogs, Goodreads and the Yahoo-7-affiliated website Mouths of Mums. I work with a small dataset of approximately 90 reviews; size is therefore a major determinant in my decision to privilege qualitative analysis and close reading techniques in a field increasingly characterised by large datasets and distant reading methodologies. The inclusion of reviews from Mouths of Mums further expands our understanding of the digital literary sphere to include commercial ventures with no obvious connection to reading or literary culture.

Tiddas is premised on, and shaped by, monthly book group meetings. The act of reading, the combative nature of literary discussion, and social norms associated with book group participation (food, wine, venue etc.) are integral to the novel. Further to this, I contend that book group meetings function as instructional examples for Heiss's real-life readers. Heiss models key dispositions and behaviours, such as how white readers should approach non-white authored texts and how Australian readers should read Aboriginal Australian-authored texts. I further contend that the tiddas' book group interactions are held up as exemplary interactions designed to initiate *Tiddas*'s real-life reader into 'correct' modes of reading. I find evidence for this claim in the meetings themselves as well as in *Tiddas*'s paratextual material (the novel's back matter; and blog posts, articles and interviews authored by, or featuring Heiss).

Despite its importance to the narrative and the women who participate in it, the book club is introduced with disavowal. Veronica is 'the only one who took the meetings . . . seriously' (23); she reads 'every book twice before each meeting, simply because she ha[s] the time' (23). Far from a pleasurable activity undertaken by a keen bibliophile, Veronica's stake in the book club is explained away as the lonely pastime of a divorced, single mother. In a similar vein, Izzy muses that

> [they always had] a bevy on book club night because it was the one guaranteed night a month they all got together—using the book as an excuse—to catch up on each other's lives. Izzy knew of other book clubs that functioned in the same way. She also knew women who used their book club as an excuse to get away from their husband or partner or kids for a few hours each month, to drink, goss and have a laugh. (12)

While this extract certainly emphasises the book club's dual role in providing a social and literary structure to the tiddas' lives, it also imposes a hierarchy that prioritises non-literary 'fun' over the dull worthiness of book talk.

Nevertheless, Heiss and her fictional creations take the book club far more seriously than these initial scenes have us believe. The book club is *not* an expendable device designed to fill the gap between the 'juicy' narrative action of casual sex, blossoming romance and alcohol-fuelled tantrums. Rather, literature is the subject of earnest and passionate debate.[v] The women's book club banter frequently segues into biting intellectual engagement. They dive fearlessly into longstanding issues in, and about, Australian literary studies. They deem Terri Janke's *The Butterfly Song* 'the closest thing to the great Australian novel' (110). Melissa Lucashenko's *Mullumbimby* leads Veronica to further ponder 'what constitutes the great Australian novel[?]' (280). The tiddas are keenly aware of the idiosyncratic nature of literary value. As Izzy says, 'it's all subjective. Everyone will define it in a different way, especially anyone in academia' (281). This doesn't stop the tiddas from advancing their own criteria for identifying and evaluating the great Australian novel: 'it should be something that's political and philosophical . . . and it should challenge the reader's values as Aussies'. 'It certainly needs to be something that can entertain while providing a message'. 'And it most definitely should include Indigenous themes and characters' (281).

Contemplation of the subjective nature of literary value does not end there: the women note with curiosity their differing interpretations of the same novel. For Ellen, Janke's *Butterfly Song* '[is] a love story, a legal lesson, and a comment on modern Blackfellas like us' (110). Nadine 'love[s] that it was a treasure trove of eloquent writing' (110) while Veronica's 'reconciliation mind' alights on Janke's educative agenda: 'I really appreciated getting a simple understanding of native title and the Mabo decision. I want to be able to articulate it better when I meet people who are racist' (111). In contrast, *The Tall Man* by Chloe Hooper elicits a more uniform reaction:

> With the book talk over, the women were quieter than usual, silenced by the reality that institutional racism still rendered most Blackfellas powerless in the big scheme of things. (320)

The tiddas' book club meetings model considerate and considered responses to Aboriginal-authored literary fiction. Irrespective of whether they agree with one another, the tiddas greet each other's opinions with respect and sober solemnity. Interpretative differences are

welcome but there are no 'bad' textual readings – each woman's interpretation is as valid and legitimate as the next.

Here, I wish to draw attention to the way Heiss threads her pedagogical agenda into the tiddas' book club discussion. Take the women's reaction to *The Tall Man*, quoted in the paragraph above. We need only read the first part of the sentence to understand how upsetting and confronting *The Tall Man*'s themes of police brutality and Indigenous incarceration proved for the tiddas: 'With the book talk over, the women were quieter than usual . . . ' . *The Tall Man* is introduced as a book that 'affected them all' (318), and Izzy says 'I cried when I read this book. The story . . . was so disturbing, I had nightmares' (318-9). By the time 'the book talk [is] over', it seems unnecessary to step outside the women's interiority—and outside the narrative itself—to expound on 'the reality [of] institutional racism' when it is already starkly clear. Heiss doesn't want the reader to miss the message—that's for sure—but in so expounding on this 'reality', she breaks the fourth wall of the chick lit narrative. It is this feature of her writing, as I will show in my analysis of *Tiddas* reviews, that so irks many of her readers and leads to repeated criticisms of her writing as 'didactic' or 'forced'.

I also want to comment here on the character of Veronica and her 'reconciliation mind'. Veronica is presented as an exemplary white reader of Aboriginal-authored texts. And her identity coordinates (female, white, Australian) are shared by many of Heiss's imagined (and, as it turns out, real) audience. Veronica models 'best practice' when it comes to reading Aboriginal-Australian authored texts, and, by extension, *Tiddas*. When she says that Janke's explanation of 'native title and the Mabo decision' will help her in her interactions with 'people who are racist', her declaration is as much for the benefit of Heiss's real-life reader as it is for her tiddas assembled within the text. (As we will see later on, Veronica's warm appreciation of education through literature is replicated in the Mouths of Mums reviews.) Veronica is also keenly aware of her subject position and how this may shape her reception of Aboriginal texts. For example, the narrator praises her hesitancy to speak up: she '[didn't always know] when it was okay for her to comment on 'Black' issues when she was a whajin, or migloo, as they say in Queensland' (110).

Heiss's attempts to shape the reception of her writing continue beyond the narrative to the novel's peritextual material (Genette). 'The Vixens' Book Club List', inserted among *Tiddas*' back matter, lists every book read and discussed by the tiddas over the course of the novel. Heiss explains:

> I chose the book club [for *Tiddas*] because I wanted to be able to write into my own novels the books that I think all Australians should read. They are books by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal authors that have touched me in some way, and, importantly, include this country's First Nations people within their stories. ('Not All Writers Began as Readers' 104-5)

In this, Heiss attempts to shape reader responses not simply through role-modelling reception within the narrative (i.e. outlining *how* to talk about these books) but by guiding subsequent reading choices.[vi] A good reader, in other words, not only responds appropriately to the book itself, *à la* Veronica, but also prioritises certain themes and authors in subsequent reading choices. Reading—and finishing—*Tiddas* means that Heiss's real-life reader has cleared the first hurdle: she has demonstrated her critical and political discernment by electing to read an Aboriginal writer over non-Aboriginal Australian authors. Yet Heiss's reader cannot rest on her laurels for long. The inclusion of a bibliography in *Tiddas*'s back matter immediately presents the next challenge: to continue to be a good reader, the next book (and the one after) should be written by an Aboriginal Australian author.

My reception study of *Tiddas* encompasses reviews published on personal blogs, Goodreads, mainstream media and Mouths of Mums (a Yahoo-7 affiliated website where Australian mums road-test various consumer products). I find that Heiss's readers are acutely aware of the pedagogical agenda she pursues in her fiction. Indeed, the reception of Heiss's fiction often depends on how readers respond to her pedagogical agenda. In my analysis of *Tiddas* reviews, I divide Heiss's readers into two broad groups: those for whom the experience of reading *Tiddas* is *enhanced* by the inclusion of a pedagogical agenda, and those for whom the reading experience is *diminished* by the same agenda. I begin by providing an overview of each platform before analysing the reviews themselves.

I analyse eighteen *Tiddas* blog reviews. Many of these were written in conjunction with the *Australian Women Writers Challenge*. Of the reviews examined in this paper, blog reviews are the lengthiest at an average of 610 words. Blogs are also used to showcase content related to *Tiddas* but which fall outside the category of a review: commentary on Heiss's promotional tour and interviews with Heiss are popular alternatives to reviewing the book itself. As a group, bloggers take reviewing more seriously than the other amateur reviewers studied in this paper. Unlike Amazon or Goodreads, where reviews are deposited in a standardised list, the blog extends its author's individuality into the digital realm. Reviewers build the blog themselves, typically through WordPress, and use a distinctive title, theme and

layout (as well as integration into other social media platforms) to enrich the crafted and carefully constructed nature of their review.

Interestingly, not all blog reviewers review *Tiddas* on their blog. One well-respected blogger within the blogging community leaves a short, thirteen-word review on Goodreads ('Nothing wrong with this book, I just wasn't in the mood, that's all'). Goodreads is home to an active and engaged reading community, but this review underscores its auxiliary function as an outlet for dedicated bloggers, a space where they can throw in a briefly-worded opinion without crafting it into a longer blog post. Unlike *Tiddas* blog reviews, where wholly positive evaluations are rare and tightly guarded ambivalence dominates, Goodreads *Tiddas* reviews are a far more even mix of negative, positive and ambivalent responses. They are generally shorter than blog reviews and their most striking feature is a frank clarity of opinion. Irrespective of their evaluative stance, reviewers are more forthright in their opinions than their blogging counterparts. This is despite the fact that Goodreads reviewers constitute a roughly comparable demographic to those found on blogs. I suggest that the platform enables this kind of response: compared to blogs, Goodreads is a low-stakes reviewing space where readers quickly deposit their thoughts without extended self-reflection.

The Mouths of Mums website (conveniently shortening to the acronym MoM) features recipes, celebrity gossip, and the opportunity to test consumer products. Although the site styles itself as a community hub, its primary purpose is to connect companies with an influential segment of the Australian buying public. Simon and Schuster, *Tiddas*'s publisher, has an ongoing commercial relationship with Mouths of Mums and they provide members with copies of new releases. These books are dispensed with the expectation that they will be reviewed honestly on the website (but not always positively). There are 27 Mouths of Mums *Tiddas* reviews and they are the shortest of the amateur reviews, averaging 100 words. Far from adopting the pose of studied ambivalence favoured by their blogging sisters (or even the breezy self-confidence of Goodreads readers), Mouths of Mums reviewers genuinely enjoy the book and revel in an unashamedly affective engagement with it. They report a deep pleasure in the physical experience of reading *Tiddas*: 'I can't wait to finish it all curled up with a cuppa on the lounge'; 'I have the afternoon to myself . . . and I am looking forward to a warm cuppa with a cookie or two and sinking my teeth back into this novel'. Even one of the more dissatisfied readers still finds that she 'looked forward to reading [it] each night before bed'.

Mainstream media coverage of *Tiddas* is small compared to its online reception. Of the thirteen articles (excluding syndication)[vii] comprising this dataset, five are capsule reviews (Blaauw; Ferguson; Hope; Mackinnon; Southernwood).[viii] Seven are features-type articles, mixing discussion of the book, interviews with Heiss and promotion of upcoming public appearances (Brodnik; Hardy 'All Sisters'; 'Similarities'; 'Sisters'; Heiss 'Snapshot'; Merlet-Shaw; Milsom; Topp; Walker).[ix] *Tiddas* is mentioned twice in the context of reading for diversity (Govinnage 'I Read Books by Only Minority Authors for a Year; 'What Defines the 'Great Australian Novel' as Great?'). Dianne Dempsey, a regular contributor to Fairfax Media's arts and culture pages, is the only journalist to engage in a more thorough and extensive review of *Tiddas* ('Adding Political Flavour to 'Choc-Lit''; ''Choc-Lit' Flavoured with Activism'). Her review was syndicated across *The Canberra Times*, *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age*, averaging a relatively short 443 words.[x] In terms of total number of articles published and the length of these articles, the mainstream media is by far the smallest sphere of engagement with *Tiddas*.

I contextualise my close reading of *Tiddas* reviews with reference to two areas of reception studies: chick lit reception and cross-cultural reception. The small body of work examining chick lit reception foregrounds reader ambivalence towards the genre; however, this is expressed in terms of gender and feminism rather than race. Research by Margaret Rowntree, Nicole Moulding and Lia Bryant confirms that chick lit readers exhibit 'an ambivalent structure of feeling towards [the genre]'; 'for the majority of respondents, the reading experience is an ambivalent one' ('Women's Emotional Experiences of Chick Lit'). They attribute this ambivalence to a mismatch between enjoyment of the chick lit genre and tightly-held feminist beliefs. In other words, the readers surveyed by Rowntree et al. enjoy exactly the type of novel that second-wave feminism tells them they should not.

The field of cross-cultural reception also emphasises ambivalence, albeit in terms of white reception of non-white or minority-authored texts. Anouk Lang, for example, argues that UK participants in the 2007 *Small Island* Read (a mass-reading event to mark the 200th anniversary of the passing of the *Slave Trade Abolition Bill*) oscillate between positions of 'pleasure and discomfort' as they progress through Andrea Levy's *Small Island* (''Enthralling''). Further, Lang finds that 'hedging around lexical items connected to ethnicity and slavery suggests that . . . readers came to *Small Island* with a marked reluctance to discuss these topics' ('Reading Race' 316). Bethan Benwell locates a 'delicate (and arguably defensive) stance' among *Small Island* readers: '[they] appear to need to establish their anti-

racist credentials and dispel any possibility of being deemed racist in discussions of fictional texts that portray racism' (311).

I arrange my analysis according to how the reader views the pedagogical agenda within *Tiddas*. The majority of Heiss's readers are keenly aware of—and often sympathetic to—Heiss's pedagogical agenda. Nonetheless, many find its expression within the novel frustrating and irritating. For those who dislike Heiss's pedagogical agenda, reading *Tiddas* becomes a guilty *dis*pleasure: they feel that they 'ought' to like *Tiddas* more than they actually do. In contrast, I identify a smaller—but still discernible—group of readers who report that Heiss's pedagogical agenda *enhanced* their reading experience. The discomfort many readers experience reading *Tiddas* leaves its traces in reviewers' syntactic and thematic choices: tortured circumlocutions, clause-laden sentences and heavy hedging are common, as is a tendency to alight on (and amplify) less politically sensitive aspects of Heiss's fiction, such as the characters' relatability and the Brisbane setting.

Bloggers, in particular, are likely to find that Heiss's pedagogical agenda detracts from, or unsettles, the experience of reading *Tiddas*. Take the example of Carissa.[xi] She rates the novel 4/5 ('I loved this book!') and identifies with many of the characters: 'I could most relate to and empathise with Izzy and Xanthe . . . perhaps because I work in the perinatal field . . . I could also relate to Izzy and Xanthe's emotional experience when Izzy announces her unplanned pregnancy'. Nevertheless, the 'strong presence of Aboriginality' disorients her initial encounter with the novel:

> I really enjoyed this aspect of the story and even though it did feel a little forced in the beginning, I did enjoy the more relaxed undertones that emerged through the book and the challenges that these women faced.

Carissa's review, as I will show, is typical of many *Tiddas* reviews, where warm evaluation of some elements of the novel (usually character or setting) counterbalance dissatisfaction with the alienating presentation of those same elements.

Assessment of the novel's Aboriginal content as 'forced', 'preachy' or 'pushy' recurs consistently within the corpus of *Tiddas* reviews. Like Carissa, Leslie cautiously evaluates Heiss's braiding together of the 'everyday female experiences the women face' with Aboriginal 'cultural values'. She concedes: 'at times I felt that [Heiss's] agenda was pushed too hard, but there were other times I appreciated the insight. It's certainly thought provoking'. On other counts, though, Leslie enjoyed *Tiddas*. She confidently engages with the

trope of the book club ('reading Tiddas left me with a renewed desire to get my book club sorted once and for all!') and the setting:

> Heiss gave me a snapshot of a vibrant city that I now want to visit . . . The West End sounds great! Likewise, her descriptions of Mudgee were warm and inviting, and I look forward to tasting Mudgee wines one day.

Edwina parses her assessment of the novel in parallel terms to Leslie and Carissa. She relies on the phrasing 'it feel[s] a little forced' to convey a broader criticism of the novel:

> The set up of the club, the references to Indigenous issues, and the exploration of some personal issues of the women . . . feel a little forced in the first few chapters but once the reader is fully involved in the plot, the style of the novel flows more naturally.

Though Edwina is aware of the socio-political subtext animating Heiss's fiction, she prioritises the setting in her review: 'the best thing about this novel is the celebration of [Brisbane], which is rarely the feature of Australian fiction'.

This structure, whereby concerns about the way Heiss presents her material are tucked discreetly into one or two lines mid-way through an otherwise positive appraisal, is also apparent in Catherine's review. She begins by endorsing the relatability of the characters: 'these are women we can likely relate to in one way or another . . . I thought their personal journeys, and their sisterhood, to be portrayed realistically'. Her conclusion is equally effusive: 'An engaging, warm and amiable novel this is a lovely novel [sic]. I enjoyed spending time with the Tiddas, just as I do with my own friends'. As Catherine wraps up her review, she reports that '[she] did sometimes feel a little overwhelmed by Heiss's socio-political agenda'. She is willing to accept that 'the emphasis on Aboriginal issues is integrated in some contexts' but maintains that Heiss's presentation of these 'issues' comes across as 'intrusive, even preachy, in some instances'.

Nicola reaches a similar conclusion to the reviewers discussed above, even if she approaches the 'preachy' tone from a different perspective. Nicola praises *Tiddas* on many counts: 'I love so much about this book'. The scenes set in Mudgee allow an 'insight into Aboriginal families and dynamics, something I hadn't really experienced before'. *Tiddas*' ability to expose the reader to new identities is reiterated in the next line: 'most books I've read featuring Aboriginal characters or issues are historical – I haven't read much about modern Aboriginal life so I did find this aspect of it quite interesting'. It is telling though, that Nicola identifies—but quickly distances herself from—the didactic tone Heiss can take when

engaging the reader on issues related to Aboriginal Australia: 'the format of exploring issues through friends discussing them . . . lessens the feeling of being preached to'. Nicola politely avoids direct critique of *Tiddas* but the implication is clear. Heiss *does* preach to the reader. This understanding hovers over Nicola's review, unmissable but unsaid.

These reviewers feel duty-bound to say that they found some aspects of Heiss's writing heavy-handed, but they also want to do this in as polite and discreet a manner as possible. Sometimes, it is easier to ignore Heiss's pedagogical agenda completely. For example, most of Kerry's short review is taken up by the publishing blurb. Her opinion, briefly expressed, bypasses race: 'I loved how the women are portrayed'; 'I really liked the fact that the book is set mostly in Brisbane, but also in Mudgee'. Character and setting return to the fore but any indication that the novel deals with Aboriginal characters or issues is absent. Likewise, Lynne locates diversity solely in the depiction of older—rather than Aboriginal—women. 'Love that the main characters of this novel are slightly older than what is standard in this genre . . . This book fills a big fat gap that has just been waiting to be filled'. Lynne's reframing of diversity coheres with Lang's findings:

> Group participants [at *Small Island* Read events] would characterize audiences as 'diverse' in terms of age and gender, and it was only when probed about ethnicity that they mentioned the ethnic homogeneity of the audience. (321)

The closest Andrea gets to discussing *Tiddas*'s Aboriginal content is her proclamation that 'friendship is colour-blind'. Like many other bloggers, she states that her primary engagement with the novel is through character and setting: 'I immediately felt connected with the characters and most certainly connected with the setting of Brisbane (having lived there myself for a few years many moons ago) – and Mudgee'.

Tiddas's structure troubles some bloggers. Susie's review is a case in point:

> 'When I finished 'Tiddas' I felt a bit cheated. The point of view didn't stay long enough with one particular character … And then I realised: that was the point'.
>
> ''Tiddas' is a well written book that includes references to current affairs and popular culture, references that I know will date, but which reaffirm the ephemeral, spinning feel of the book'.

Susie is not alone in her dissatisfaction with *Tiddas*' structure. Beverley raises 'one small criticism' of *Tiddas*, namely 'fragment[ation] … as the point of view changed from one to another of the women'. Overall though, Beverley holds '*Tiddas* [as] a thoroughly enjoyable

read by a warm and funny writer' and considers herself 'delighted … to find references to Aboriginal poets, singers and rich social commentary'. Here, the pedagogical content more than makes up for distracting plot fragmentation. Prudence, too, finds that 'the plot is meandering rather than focused' and identifies 'Heiss's writing style [as] a problem … being very much prone to telling rather than showing'. Despite her reservations about Heiss's tendency to editorialise, Prudence still praises *Tiddas*' representational politics: 'It's also wonderful to read a book in which Aboriginal culture, and Aboriginal characters, are given such prominence'. Like many of the reviews surveyed, the Brisbane setting enriches Prudence's enjoyment of *Tiddas*: 'I was delighted … to find a novel set in my home state. That hardly ever happens!'.

It is noticeable just how much reviewers enjoy *Tiddas*'s setting and the relatability of the five main characters. To a certain extent, this effect is willed by the author. Heiss happily elaborates on her love of Brisbane for local Brisbane media outlets (Brodnik; Heiss 'Snapshot'): 'The entire landscape that makes up greater Brisbane', she explains, 'found its way onto the pages of the book' ('Snapshot'). She adds: '*Tiddas* is my tribute to the place that taught me to appreciate life more, and the girlfriends who helped me master it' ('Snapshot'). Heiss's 'tribute' touches on another major theme in *Tiddas* consistently praised by readers: the depth and strength of female friendship. Heiss's fiction in general—and *Tiddas* in particular—uses the trope of shared humanity in its depiction of female friendship. 'As women what makes us the same is that we value our friendships . . . It's about being human beings. When we think about it, we've got more in common than we haven't' (Hardy 'All Sisters' 12). Heiss lovingly crafts her fictional characters and the world they inhabit. Her readers respond enthusiastically to both. Even though Heiss takes equal care to draw pertinent lessons relating to Aboriginal identity and culture from her material, readers respond in a markedly different register. I want to suggest here that readers' animated response to Heiss's setting, and repeated exclamations of identification with the characters, could also be because they represent enticing aspects of the novel that are not as explicitly about 'race' as other aspects of the novel.

Goodreads reviewers adopt a similar stance towards Heiss's pedagogical agenda as bloggers. Shannon found 'the indigenous element . . . a little forced as if the writer needed to push that aspect of her personality and background'. She concludes, 'I was a little disappointed'. Disappointment recurs often: the plot summary provided by Merri ('the story is based around a reading group, who only read Aboriginal stories') proves a spring board to her

own vexation: ‘disappointed that it could have been better if it was less polemic’. Merri goes on to emphasise that *Tiddas* contained ‘too much preaching, too little good writing’. Claudia’s review is almost wholly negative; she too finds the presentation of ‘Aboriginal issues’ irritating: ‘it seems to me that the author got a little too carried away with wanting to platform Aboriginal issues and forgot about the necessary structure of the promised storyline’. Sally’s 40-word review sits somewhere between offensive, funny and honest:

> Gawd if I drank every time they mentioned being aboriginal I would be drunker than Nadine. I felt like I was being brainwashed by the agenda coming up over and over in a condescending way. Totally overshadowed the book’s narrative.

Here, Sally not only identifies an ‘agenda’ at work in *Tiddas*, but labels it ‘brainwash[ing]’ and ‘condescending’. She sets the notion of an ‘agenda’ in opposition to Heiss’s ‘narrative’. If an agenda carries with it the same idea of preachiness and didacticism identified by other *Tiddas* reviewers, Sally’s review suggests that the narrative could have been tenably enjoyable, had it not been for the shadow cast by Heiss’s agenda. Although Sally links Heiss’s agenda to an unwelcome emphasis on ‘being aboriginal [sic]’, it seems that she objects to the tone (‘condescending’) as much as the content itself.

Dianne Dempsey reviews *Tiddas* for Fairfax media. She—like many—grapples with Heiss’s eager desire to educate her audience. Dempsey identifies Heiss’s intentions (‘[she] is obviously keen to lift the image of Aboriginal women’) but judges them unfulfilled: ‘as far as choc-lit goes, like chic-lit [sic], *Tiddas* is pretty run-of-the-mill’. In Dempsey’s view, the novel ultimately fails because its representational politics, though laudable, remain bogged down by genre. A portion of her review unhappily relates Heiss’s pedagogical agenda: ‘scattered among this novel . . . there are several mini-lectures and vignettes on Aboriginal politics and culture’. For Dempsey, this misdirected pedagogical impulse is compounded by the marginalisation and trivialisation of its white characters. Dempsey warns the potential (white) reader that though ‘Heiss may be striving for a sense of levity’, it often falls flat: ‘you’d want to be very careful before taking the mickey if you are an outsider’. Dempsey nominates *Tiddas* as the fictional corollary to Heiss’s 2012 memoir *Am I Black Enough for You?*: ‘while Heiss may be using choc-lit as a means of entertaining her readers, she is deadly serious, as are some of her characters, about her role as an Aboriginal activist’. The comparison between Heiss’s fiction and non-fiction leads Dempsey to a decidedly downbeat conclusion: ‘while *Tiddas* may at times have a didactic tone, it is this political subtext, the subversive nature of the book, that provides any interest or edge’. Here, when Dempsey talks

about ‘this political subtext, the subversive nature of the book’, she refers to Heiss’s role in the 2011 court case, *Eatock v Bolt*, where journalist Andrew Bolt was found to have contravened Australia’s *Racial Discrimination Act*. If readers wish to extract the maximum value from *Tiddas*, Dempsey advises them to read *Tiddas* as ‘activist’ fiction (for its ‘political subtext’) because it fails to deliver the expected pleasures of the chick-lit genre.

Dempsey’s critique brings into focus an important point about *Tiddas* reviews. When readers have access to a critical frame of reference, they are far more likely to be comfortable and assured in their treatment of *Tiddas*. This is especially true of bloggers. Dolores, for example, has a background in genre fiction and her review attends closely to Heiss’s negotiation of genre. Dolores introduces Heiss as the ‘creat[or]’ of a ‘whole new genre in fiction – Koori chick-lit’. She then warmly appraises Heiss’s political project: ‘Her novels are about smart, urban, Aboriginal women who like to shop but are also socially aware and deeply rooted in their culture’. Similarly, Melissa works in academia and specialises in business management and marketing. Her review places *Tiddas* within the framework of Indigenous cultural leadership. She appreciates the way Heiss ‘platforms . . . the complexity of status anxiety Aboriginal women experience in Australia in 2014’ and she endorses Izzy, Ellen and Xanthe as ‘positive role models’. These two reviews stand out from the majority of *Tiddas* blog reviews because there is less emphasis on the presentation of Heiss’s fiction and more on the political and social interventions made by Heiss’s novels.

Indeed, it would seem that positive reviews gravitate towards the rich cultural lessons made available through Heiss’s fiction. This is particularly true of Mouths of Mums reviewers, who welcome the chance to learn more about Australian history, culture and identity through reading *Tiddas*:

> ‘It’s not clear from the book cover or even the first few pages but this book is also a glimpse into modern Australia for aboriginal [sic] women. I’ve never read a book with Aboriginal characters before and I’ve been challenged and educated as to why that might be. The insights into Aboriginal life in this book have been well explained yet the book has also shown how issues that women an [sic] friends face aren’t limited by culture or nationally [sic]’.
>
> ‘Have learnt a lot about the aboriginal heritage and racism that i [sic] did not realise. This insight to their life is a real eye opener’.
>
> ‘Growing up in an aboriginal community myself, I think I learnt more reading this book then [sic] from my own past about our native history’.

The pleasure and enjoyment Mouths of Mums readers take in reading *Tiddas* extends beyond its Aboriginal content. Many describe *Tiddas* as deliciously addictive. The verb 'immerse' conveys readers' absorption: 'a story that the reader can suddenly become immersed in'; 'I look forward to delving into this book and 'immersing' myself into the lives of these ladies'. Readers' affective engagement with the book is furthered by the frequency with which it is referred to as un-put-down-able:

> '[I was] unable to put it down most nights'
>
> 'This book is very hard to put down'
>
> 'After a few chapters I couldn't' put it down'
>
> 'This book is great! I really can't put it down'
>
> '. . . it's been a long time since I had a great read. I mean a read you can not put down'

This receptiveness towards *Tiddas*'s educative agenda and its Aboriginal heroines stands in stark contrast to the reticence shown on blogs and in the mainstream media. For Mouths of Mums reviewers, reading *Tiddas* is seen as a reward or a treat. It may well be that the provision of a free book predisposes Mouths of Mums readers to a positive reading. But positive reviews are not mandatory. For some Mouths of Mums readers 'the characters are a bit flat and clichéd . . . It's an ok book . . . Not something I'd recommend'; 'overall I found the writing lacking substance'; 'not something I would be overly excited about enough to recommend to others'. The conditions of reception (i.e. the platform), as opposed to provision of a free book, offer a compelling explanation of differences in reviewing practices**.**

We also see a number of positive mainstream media reviews, though these are limited to capsule reviews. Some capsule reviews warmly and unambiguously endorse Heiss's project. Rachel Mackinnon concludes her affirming review with the following words: 'I loved this book. I could relate to the characters and it reinforced how friendship can triumph despite any obstacle' (34). Others navigate the novel's racial politics more awkwardly and turn to the setting for reassurance: '[*Tiddas*] reveal[s] Aboriginal women as intelligent, sassy, gutsy and loving a good romance. Just like white women actually. It is set in Brisbane, and one longs to stroll the lovingly described suburbs' (Blaauw *Cairns Eye* 36). The 'very feminine story' at the heart of *Tiddas* leaves Ross Southernwood a little queasy: '[c]hick lit perhaps, yet [it is an] enjoyable and human story . . . ' (*Sun Herald* 13). Southernwood ends his review by reiterating the positives of *Tiddas*: 'this enjoyable and human story is impressively interwoven with historical and contemporary Aboriginal issues' (13). If uncertainty flickers

briefly in capsule reviews, it invariably flowers into a warm-hearted and genuine endorsement of Heiss's fiction. For example, Southernwood goes out of his way to endorse Heiss's educational project while Blaauw, for her part, expresses pleasant surprise at the many commonalities between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women.

Heiss's desire to 'create awareness of social and cultural issues [facing those in her community]' (Ommundsen 118) is clear to all who read her fiction. Yet the reception and interpretation of that intent varies among her readership. For those within the scholarly community, Heiss's fiction presents an intriguing set of problematics that reflect the difficult position occupied by urban Aboriginal women in Australia today. Ommundsen puts it well: non-white chick lit, such as Heiss's,

> explore[s] the complex pressures and temptations arising in the clash between the norms of a global (largely Western) consumer culture and those of the alternative modernities in which authors and protagonists negotiate their daily lives. (108)

Ommundsen goes on to observe that 'race politics' may well be 'clearly and intelligently articulated' by Heiss's fictional heroines but 'their psychological insight is shallow and their gender politics remarkably muddled' (118). Heiss's non-academic readers, like Ommundsen, value *Tiddas*'s race politics, but it's not the characters' self-absorption, nor Heiss's gender politics, that gets to them. Rather, Heiss's tone disrupts the expected guilty pleasures of chick lit, transforming many readers' experience of *Tiddas* into a guilty *dis*pleasure.

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Wilson, Carl. *Let's Talk About Love: Why Other People Have Such Bad Taste*. Bloomsbury, 2014.

[i] For example: '[Izzy] loved her tiddas; they were her closest friends, they were her sistas in an Aboriginal sense, even though Nadine and Veronica were white' (6-7).

[ii] At the beginning of his treatise on Céline Dion's music, Wilson writes: 'If guilty pleasures are out of date, perhaps the time has come to conceive of a *guilty displeasure*. This is not like the nagging regret I have about, say, never learning to like opera. My aversion to Dion more closely resembles how put off I feel when someone says they're prolife or a Republican: intellectually I'm aware how personal and complicated such affiliations can be, but my gut reactions are more crudely tribal' (18-9, original emphasis). As Wilson nears the end of *Let's Talk About Love*, he modifies his stance to reach the following conclusion: 'Unwittingly, I seem to have converted Céline from a guilty displeasure into a classic guilty pleasure, a category I thought I'd thrown away long ago' (138).

[iii] In the United States, women's book groups have been meeting since at least 1813 (Long 591) and continue to do so in growing numbers: 'in cities and small towns throughout [the U.S.], hundreds—perhaps thousands—of groups of middle-class women gather every month in members' homes to discuss books' (591). Jane Missner Barstow acknowledges that 'book groups in twenty-first-century America come in a variety of forms' but 'the vast majority are all women' (4). The typical profile? 'White . . . middle-aged and middle-class' (5). Frances Devlin-Glass (and Marilyn Poole writing after her) found little change in the Antipodes. Both examine reading groups organised through the auspices of the Council for Adult Education: '95 percent are all-female groups' (Poole 264) and 'reading group membership in Australia is made up mostly of women' (263). Jenny Hartley's survey of UK reading groups found that 69% are 'all-female' (25). Women form the primary constituency of Maggie Nolan's focus groups: Group A contains mostly 'middle-class, white women over the age of 55' (5). The members of Group B are all women (5). Group C 'consists predominantly of middle-aged, middle-class women' (6).

[iv] Her call was echoed—but not directly referenced—by Daniel Allington and Stephen Pihlaja's Introduction to the August 2016 special issue of *Language and Literature*

[v] The tiddas are anomalous in this regard: 'dismissing women's reading as superficial is a common cultural trope' (Driscoll 110). Beth Driscoll cites a scene from *Desperate Housewives* where the central characters try—and fail—to kick-start a book group. They 'engag[e] only frivolously with literary works. They prioritise companionship and gossip over detailed examination of the texts' (110).

[vi] Heiss is not the only author to focalise her narrative through book club meetings: Karen Joy Fowler's *The Jane Austen Book Club* (2004) is a well-known example; in Australia, Krissy Kneen's *The Adventures of Holly White and the Incredible Sex Machine* (2015) depicts a book club that reads erotic fiction.

[vii] Dianne Dempsey, Ross Southernwood, Bev Blaauw and Karen Hardy all have *Tiddas*-related content published in more than one mainstream media outlet.

[viii] Ross Southernwood and Bev Blaauw are the two authors with syndicated capsule reviews. Southernwood's review in *The Sun Herald* contained a full by-line but his review in *The Examiner Newspaper* was signed RS. Given that the two texts were identical and the initials match, I have attributed authorship to the same person.

[ix] Karen Hardy's article is syndicated across three Fairfax publications with slightly altered headline and text.

[x] Dempsey's reviews in *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age* appeared under the same headline and with the same word count.

[xi] I have assigned pseudonyms (or quoted anonymously, as the case may be) to the lay reviewers of *Tiddas*. All other names have been preserved and are listed in the 'Works Cited' section

6. "Concrete Koori, Not 'Professional Aborigine'"

My paper on *Tiddas*'s reception concludes the first section of my thesis. The second section, which moves from the chick lit to the memoir genre, begins with the paper, "Concrete Koori, Not Professional Aborigine: How Anita Heiss's *Am I Black Enough for You?* Contests Andrew Bolt's Repressive Authenticity". In this article, I read Anita Heiss's 2012 memoir, *Am I Black Enough for You?*, as a critique of the repressive authenticity displayed by journalist Andrew Bolt. Heiss's memoir was written in the aftermath of *Eatock v Bolt*, the 2011 Federal Court case in which Bolt was found to have contravened Section 18C of the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* (Cth). Bolt infamously characterised Heiss as belonging to a class of 'professional Aborigine[s]' who trade cynically on their Aboriginality for financial gain and career advancement. The memoir genre provides a space outside the courtroom for Heiss to assert her right to self-identification. She writes "I am an urban, beachside Blackfella, a concrete Koori with Westfield Dreaming, and I apologise to no-one". In this article, I argue that Heiss's memoir functions as an educational corrective designed to counter the racist misinformation deliberately propagated by Bolt and others like him.

Bolt's journalistic signature is hard to miss: he writes with a strong voice and unstinted confidence. One of the challenges of this paper was contextualizing my argument in terms of Bolt's writing without letting his voice overpower Heiss's. For example, it is easy to characterize Heiss's memoir as a 'response' to Bolt's articles. There are references to the court case throughout *Am I Black Enough?* and Heiss addresses many of the themes in Bolt's articles such as choice and authenticity. However, this framing would imply that Heiss's course is determined by others, Bolt specifically, rather than the outcome of her own agency. It was important for me to show that, while Bolt's newspaper articles may have been the immediate prompt that gave rise to her memoir, Heiss had long been fighting the type of racism displayed by Bolt, and her engagements in the public sphere extended well beyond him.

The essay included in the following pages was submitted to the *Journal of Australian Studies* (*JAS*) in January 2019. I chose *JAS* because its interdisciplinary scope fits well with this

article's inquiry into the contested nature of Aboriginal identity and representation. Equally, I consciously decided *against* publication in a literary studies or autobiography studies journal in order to better explore the thematic of contemporary Aboriginal identity both within, and beyond, the memoir genre. The peer review reports, received in mid-2019, advocate for a more nuanced engagement with Heiss's memoir: one reviewer comments that my article reads as "a fairly uncritical celebration of Heiss's memoir", while the other notes that my "sympathetic effusions … do not contribute to a better understanding of Heiss's text". A further point for improvement lies in better integrating Justice Bromberg's judgment into my analysis. As I am currently in the process of revising my manuscript in line with the advice outlined above, the article presented here takes the form of my original submission to *JAS*.

Australian National University

Statement of Contribution

This thesis is submitted as a Thesis by Compilation in accordance with https://policies.anu.edu.au/ppl/document/ANUP_003405

I declare that the research presented in this Thesis represents original work that I carried out during my candidature at the Australian National University, except for contributions to multi-author papers incorporated in the Thesis where my contributions are specified in this Statement of Contribution.

Title: "Concrete Koori, Not 'Professional Aborigine': How Anita Heiss's *Am I Black Enough for You?* Contests Andrew Bolt's Repressive Authenticity"

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Delegated Authority – Print Name	Signature	Date

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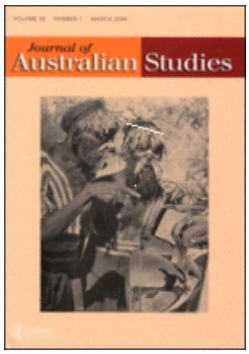

How Anita Heiss's Am I Black Enough for You? contests Andrew Bolt's Repressive Authenticity

Journal:	*Journal of Australian Studies*
Manuscript ID	Draft
Manuscript Type:	Original Article
Keywords:	Anita Heiss, Aboriginal memoir, Eatock v Bolt, Repressive Authenticity
Abstract:	This article reads Dr Anita Heiss's 2012 memoir, Am I Black Enough for You? as a critique of the repressive authenticity displayed by journalist Andrew Bolt. Heiss's memoir was written in the aftermath of Eatock v Bolt, the 2011 Federal Court case where Bolt was found to have contravened Section 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act 1975 (Cth). In a series of syndicated newspaper articles, Bolt characterised Heiss as a 'professional Aborigine' who traded cynically on her Aboriginality for financial gain and career advancement. In her memoir, Heiss asserts her right to self-identification. She writes "I am an urban, beachside Blackfella, a concrete Koori with Westfield Dreaming, and I apologise to no-one". In this article, I argue that Heiss's memoir functions as an educational corrective designed to counter the deliberate, racist misinformation (especially narrow conceptions of what 'authentic' Aboriginality looks like) promulgated by Bolt and others like him.

Concrete Koori, not 'Professional Aborigine': How Anita Heiss's *Am I Black Enough for You?* contests Andrew Bolt's Repressive Authenticity

Abstract:
This article reads Dr Anita Heiss's 2012 memoir, *Am I Black Enough for You?* as a critique of the repressive authenticity displayed by journalist Andrew Bolt. Heiss's memoir was written in the aftermath of *Eatock v Bolt*, the 2011 Federal Court case where Bolt was found to have contravened Section 18C of the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* (Cth). In a series of syndicated newspaper articles, Bolt characterised Heiss as a 'professional Aborigine' who traded cynically on her Aboriginality for financial gain and career advancement. In her memoir, Heiss asserts her right to self-identification. She writes "I am an urban, beachside Blackfella, a concrete Koori with Westfield Dreaming, and I apologise to no-one". In this article, I argue that Heiss's memoir functions as an educational corrective designed to counter the deliberate, racist misinformation (especially narrow conceptions of what 'authentic' Aboriginality looks like) promulgated by Bolt and others like him.

"Hear that scuffling at the trough? That's the sound of black people being elbowed out by white people shouting 'But I'm Aboriginal, too'".[1] So writes Andrew Bolt in his crude characterisation of fairer-skinned Aboriginal Australians. This quote comes from one of a series of newspaper articles, published in 2009, in which Bolt purported to uncover "a whole new fashion in academia, the arts and professional activism to identify as Aboriginal".[2] He accused fairer-skinned Aboriginal people of cynically trading on their Aboriginality for financial gain and career advancement. He egregiously described Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue AC CBE DSG, Prof Mick Dodson AM, Prof Larissa Behrendt and many other high-profile Aboriginal Australians as "professional Aborigines" and "official Aborigines" whose "self-

[1] Andrew Bolt, "White Fellas in the Black," *Herald Sun*, 21 August 2009.

[2] Andrew Bolt "It's So Hip to Be Black," *Herald Sun*, 15 April 2009.

identification [is] driven more by politics than by any racial reality".[3] Nine of those named by Bolt filed a complaint about his articles with the Australian Human Rights Commission. Mediation failed, and the case went to trial in the Federal Court of Australia. On the 28 September 2011, Justice Mordecai Bromberg found that Bolt had contravened Section 18C of the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* (Cth).

Dr Anita Heiss was one of the prominent Aboriginal Australians named in Bolt's articles. She was part of the class action, and her witness statement is recorded in Justice Bromberg's judgment.[4] Bolt's attack on Heiss was intensely personal. He mocked her membership of the Wiradjuri nation. He distorted her genealogy. He accused her of opportunistic career advancement. He condemned her for taking "plum jobs reserved for Aborigines".[5] At the time Bolt's articles were published, Heiss was already a successful scholar and published author of commercial women's fiction, poetry and young adult fiction. But she did not comment publicly on Bolt's attack until Bromberg J's judgment was handed down on 28 September 2011. She released a statement endorsing Bromberg J's findings and reiterating her formidable professional qualifications.[6] Yet this wouldn't be her final word on the subject. Bolt's false claims about Heiss, her family, and the wider community of fairer-skinned Aboriginal Australians prompted an equally personal response from Heiss, which took the form of her 2012 "memoir on identity", *Am I Black Enough for You?*.[7]

[3] Bolt "It's So Hip".

[4] Justice Bromberg, *Eatock v Bolt* (2011) FCA 1103, 24-5.

[5] Bolt "It's So Hip".

[6] "What Mr Bolt failed to mention is that I am an established writer and highly qualified with a PhD in Media and Communication, and that in fact *none* of the jobs he mentioned were actually 'reserved' or identified Aboriginal positions, and the Koori Radio role was actually voluntary and unpaid". Anita Heiss, "My Statement on Today's Win in the Federal Court!," *Anita Heiss*, 28 September 2011. https://anitaheiss.wordpress.com/2011/09/28/my-statement-on-todays-win-in-the-federal-court/.

[7] Anita Heiss, *Am I Black Enough for You?* (North Sydney: Bantam Australia, 2012), 334.

In his newspaper articles, Bolt takes it upon himself to adjudicate Heiss's identity. Heiss, in turn, uses the law—and the memoir genre—to assert *her* right to determine *her* identity. In this paper, I argue that Heiss's memoir serves two primary purposes. On a personal level, Heiss's memoir corrects Bolt's willful misrepresentation of her career and her character. On a broader cultural level, Heiss uses the memoir genre to counter the powerful racist myth of the "professional Aborigine" promulgated by Bolt (but in no way limited to him). My paper begins with a close reading of Bolt's articles. I then critically examine what constitutes a 'response' to these articles: the court case and Heiss's memoir are both, in their own ways, responses to Bolt's articles. The 'Bolt case', as it is widely known, has attracted significant scholarly attention regarding notions of free speech, racial discrimination and the Australian media.[8] The Bolt case has also been discussed in relation to the narrow (and often negative) portrayal of Indigenous identity in the Australian public sphere.[9] Far less attention has been accorded to the role Anita Heiss played in the case and its long aftermath despite the important role she played in both. Thus, in a similar vein to Imogen Mathew's 2016 "affirm[ation]" of *Am I Black Enough?* "as a subject worthy of academic [i]nquiry",[10] this article focusses on the way Heiss's memoir inevitably responds to—but also refuses and

[8] Bibhu Aggarwal, "The Bolt Case: Silencing Speech or Promoting Tolerance?" in *More or Less: Democracy & New Media*, ed. Helen Sykes (Albert Parke: Future Leaders, 2012); Chris Berg and Sinclair Davidson, "Section 18C, Human Rights, and Media Reform an Institutional Analysis of the 2011–13 Australian Free Speech Debate" *Agenda: A Journal of Policy Analysis and Reform* 23, no. 1 (2016); Katharine Gelber and Luke McNamara, "Freedom of Speech and Racial Vilification in Australia: 'The Bolt Case' in Public Discourse" *Australian Journal of Political Science* 48, no. 4 (2013); John William Tate, "Free Speech, Toleration and Equal Respect: The Bolt Affair in Context" *Australian Journal of Political Science* 51, no. 1 (2016).

[9] Michael R. Griffiths, "The White Gaze and Its Artifacts: Governmental Belonging and Non-Indigenous Evaluation in a (Post)-Settler Colony" *Postcolonial Studies* 15, no. 4 (2012); Sarah Maddison, "Indigenous Identity, 'Authenticity' and the Structural Violence of Settler Colonialism" *Identities* 20, no. 3 (2013); Bronwyn Carlson, *The Politics of Identity: Who Counts as Aboriginal Today?* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2016).

[10] Imogen Mathew, "Reviewing Race in the Digital Literary Sphere: A Case Study of Anita Heiss' *Am I Black Enough for You?*" *Australian Humanities Review* 60 (November 2016): 67.

moves beyond—Bolt's narrow and ill-informed prescription of what constitutes authentic Aboriginal identity.

My discussion of Aboriginal identity in this paper is strongly informed by Patrick Wolfe's definition of 'repressive authenticity' and Tim Rowse's later call for a greater focus on 'Indigenous heterogeneity'. Wolfe argues that the Australian settler-colonial state is founded on the logic of elimination, "a sustained institutional tendency to eliminate the Indigenous population".[11] By adopting this viewpoint, Wolfe brings into relief his much-cited take on the "Australian colonial project", namely that "invasion is a structure not an event".[12] European invasion, in other words, is ongoing and continuous, maintained not only by the legislative authority of the Australian Federal Government, but repeatedly instantiated through diverse instruments of legislation (the *Northern Territory Emergency Response Act 2007* [Cth], for example), its institutions (of incarceration, welfare and the like) and its policies (of protection, assimilation, self-determination, reconciliation).

Wolfe names 'authentic Aboriginality' as one of the many apparatus of invasion, "an official way of talking about the repression of Indigenous people".[13] "Authentic Aboriginality", Wolfe continues, "is everything 'we' [non-Aboriginal Australians] are not and vice versa".[14] These constantly shifting boundaries mean that repressive authenticity may be "mobilized [by] the figure of the 'full-blood' to construct an official polarity that licensed child-abduction".[15] Equally, the construct of repressive authenticity may be used to "convert

[11] Patrick Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology: The Politics and Poetics of an Ethnographic Event* (London: Cassell, 1999), 163.

[12] Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism*, 163.

[13] Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism*, 179.

[14] Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism*, 179.

[15] Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism*, 183.

invadedness into a welfare issue".[16] Wolfe's concept of repressive authenticity presents a useful framework for understanding Bolt's argument. Indeed, the ideological and rhetorical moves that Bolt rehearses in his articles seem to exemplify Wolfe's description of repressive authenticity. For instance, Bolt's construction of authentic Aboriginality as geographically distinct coheres with Wolfe's description of the settler-colonial mindset ("the Aborigines are always somewhere else"[17]). And Bolt's antagonism towards people of mixed ancestry identifying as Aboriginal bears out Wolfe's explanation of the way the settler-colonial project equates "'part-Aboriginal'" with "'non-Aboriginal'".[18] That said, Wolfe's conception of repressive authenticity—just like Bolt's articles themselves—tends to obscure Aboriginal agency, sophistication and plurality.

Tim Rowse, by contrast, introduces Indigenous heterogeneity as an alternative to Wolfe's repressive authenticity. By attending to "the geographical variety of Australia's colonial history", Rowse brings into view the "diversity of Indigenous identities",[19] identities which would otherwise be obscured by the emphatic historical periodisation of Aboriginal history. He links this latter tendency to the influence of work by Patrick Wolfe and those writing after him, such as Lorenzo Veracini and Ed Cavanagh. As Rowse puts it, Wolfe's "settler colonial paradigm" means that "all representations *of* Indigenous Australians and all self-representations *by* them are subject to the suspicion that they are best understood as the tactical moves of a deeply cunning settler colonial governmentality".[20] This paradigm, in other words, leaves no space for Indigenous agency or sophistication; everything is reducible to the colonial state apparatus. Instead, Rowse urges us to "see history [and the expression of

[16] Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism*, 183.

[17] Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism*, 173 and 179.

[18] Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism*, 183.

[19] Tim Rowse, "Indigenous Heterogeneity," *Australian Historical Studies* 45, no. 3 (2014): 297.

[20] Rowse, "Indigenous Heterogeneity," 300, original emphasis.

Indigenous identities within a historical framework] as less predictable, messier, more surprising and occasionally more hopeful".[21] This is the spirit in which I situate my reading of Anita Heiss's memoir, and her expression of authenticity more broadly.

Close Reading of Andrew Bolt's articles

In his judgment, Bromberg J takes the measure of Bolt's public profile: "Mr Bolt is a journalist of very significant public standing and influence. His evidence suggests that his columns are popular and widely read".[22] Bolt is a long-time writer for the *Herald Sun*, a Victorian tabloid newspaper owned by News Corp Limited. The *Herald Sun* promotes itself as "Melbourne's biggest selling newspaper" with "a proud history of leading the agenda and advocating for Victorians"; it reaches "4.348 million people in print and digital every month with an additional audience across social media of more than 1.2 million".[23] Bolt's political influence, not to mention his popular following, is such that he routinely sets the agenda of public debate throughout Australia.[24] What Bolt says matters; his words carry real weight and meaning in the Australian public sphere. The court case thus functions as a tacit acknowledgement of the political, social and rhetorical power Bolt wields: he shapes *and* reflects the values of his large readership. To let his words go uncontested would be tacit acquiescence to his authority.

[21] Rowse, "Indigenous Heterogeneity," 301.

[22] Bromberg J, *Eatock v Bolt*, 421. Additionally, in his construction of an 'ordinary person' Bromberg J writes "She will have been conscious of Mr Bolt's standing as a popular columnist writing in a highly popular newspaper" 294.

[23] "About Us," *Herald Sun* https://www.heraldsun.com.au/help/about (accessed 29 January 2019).

[24] To illustrate the extent of Bolt's influence, consider Heiss's description of the morning "It's So Hip" was published: "[Elsie, Heiss's mum] hadn't seen the article, but she had been called by a contact in the Aboriginal Catholic network who wanted to see if she knew about it. That call had come from Adelaide: the story was national." Heiss, *Am I Black Enough?*, 10.

It would be easy, as many do, to dismiss Bolt out of hand. "Imbecilic", Alecia Simmonds declares; an ignorant demagogue "who never made it past first-year uni".[25] His sensational writing style and sarcastic tone certainly add weight to Simmonds's complaint. But to treat Bolt in this way is to obscure the powerful sway—not to mention the deceptively persuasive—construction of his arguments. Jeff Sparrow's rebuttal of Simmonds's assessment is instructive on this point:

> Bolt's a talented prose writer, adept in the tabloid genre. He's a powerful speaker (as anyone who has seen him ruthlessly destroy academic critics in public debates would know) and an extraordinarily effective populariser of ideas. Andrew Bolt is conservative and many of his ideas are repellent. But it's ridiculous to call him stupid on the basis of how many university degrees he does or doesn't possess.[26]

Gillian Whitlock's 2004 treatment of Bolt's role in the Norma Khouri affair adds further nuance to this debate.[27] Whitlock balances Bolt's status as a "rogue critic" with the question of whether he voices broader public sentiment, thus functioning as a self-fashioned truth-teller in a censorious age.[28] Whitlock acknowledges that "if Bolt's [approach] … is crude and cynical, it is also astute".[29] My close reading of Bolt's articles bears out this duality: his

[25] Alecia Simmonds writes: "[The Australian] public sphere harbours ill-educated members (like the imbecilic Andrew Bolt who never made it past first-year uni)." Alecia Simmonds, "Why Australia Hates Thinkers," *Daily Life*, 13 May 2013. http://www.dailylife.com.au/news-and-views/dl-opinion/why-australia-hates-thinkers-20130513-2jhis.html/.

[26] Jeff Sparrow, "Why Andrew Bolt Is Not an Imbecile," *New Matilda*, 15 May 2013. https://newmatilda.com/2013/05/15/why-andrew-bolt-not-imbecile/.

[27] The Norma Khouri affair refers to the revelation that Khouri's bestselling 2003 memoir *Forbidden Love* was a hoax. The memoir purports to describe the author's life in Jordan and the honour killing of her best friend but it was later revealed by Australian journalist Malcolm Knox to have been almost entirely fabricated.

[28] Gillian Whitlock, "Tainted Testimony: The Khouri Affair," *Australian Literary Studies* 21, no. 4 (2004): 166.

[29] Whitlock locates Bolt's astuteness in his identification of "the commodification of the veil and the vogueish ethnic biography". Whitlock, "Tainted Testimony," 166.

rhetorical style may read as blunt on the surface, but it is driven by a selective and intricate logic.[30]

"It's So Hip to be Black" appeared in *The Herald Sun* on 15 April 2009. A second article, "White Fellas in the Black", was published in the same newspaper on 21 August 2009. The substance of these articles formed the basis of the claim filed by the nine applicants (Graham Atkinson, Wayne Atkinson, Larissa Behrendt, Geoff Clark, Bindi Cole, Pat Eatock, Leanne Enoch, Anita Heiss and Mark McMillan) initially with the Australian Human Rights Commission and then the Federal Court of Australia.[31] Bolt's argument, developed over both articles, begins with the observation that many fairer-skinned people in Australia have ancestry that comprises a heterogeneous mix of countries, races, religions and ethnicities. His list includes European, Anglo-Saxon, South East Asian, Middle Eastern, Jewish, Catholic and Aboriginal. It angers Bolt that so many people who could "join any one of several ethnic groups" because of their fair skin and mixed ancestry instead choose to identify as Aboriginal.[32] He contends that such identification is dishonest and motivated by financial gain. Further, he worries that the "stress" placed on "pointless or even invented racial differences" is "divisive"[33] and threatens to "fractur[e]"[34] Australian social and political cohesion.

Bolt's construction of identity privileges notions of authenticity, visual appearance, and choice. He yokes authenticity to visual appearance through skin colour: skin colour

[30] See Luke Buckmaster, "Why ABC's 'Recognition: Yes or No?' Proves Andrew Bolt Can't Be Beaten" *Daily Review*, 16 September 2016. https://dailyreview.com.au/abcs-recognition-yes-no-proves-andrew-bolt-cant-beaten/49133/.

[31] The Australian Human Rights Commission handles complaints under the Racial Discrimination Act; in the event that mediation between parties fails, the case goes on to the Federal Court of Australia.

[32] Bolt "It's So Hip".

[33] Bolt "It's So Hip".

[34] Bolt, "White Fellas".

denotes authenticity. If you *look* white—if your skin colour is white—you *are* white. Bolt holds white skin colour as emphatic and incontrovertible evidence that you are *not* Aboriginal. A number of other attributes, all linked to a discourse of deficit,[35] round out his version of authenticity. Aboriginal students must be "hard-struggle black students".[36] Aboriginal artists must be "real draw-in-the-dirt Aboriginal artists".[37] Indeed, Bolt speculates that it is precisely the enticing existence of "serious perks and Aboriginal-only benefits" that explains why so many ostensibly 'white' people would choose to identify as Aboriginal.[38]

Bolt's argument proceeds from what he can see. He complains of the "institutionalis[ation]" of "racial differences you cannot detect with a naked eye".[39] His eye—which he universalises as the "naked eye"—is neutral and truth-divining. Because Larissa Behrendt "look[s] almost as German as her father", she is white.[40]. Because Pat Eatock "look[s] as white as her Scottish mother, or some of her father's British relatives", she too is white.[41] Because Daniel Browning "look[s] more like one of his West Indian ancestors",[42] he cannot be Aboriginal. Danie Mellor and Mark McMillan identify with the "thinnest … strand" of their genealogy, "the one that's contributed least to their looks".[43]

[35] Cressida Fforde et al., "Discourse, Deficit and Identity: Aboriginality, the Race Paradigm and the Language of Representation in Contemporary Australia," *Media International Australia* 149, no. 1 (2013): 162-73.

[36] Bolt, "White Fellas".

[37] Bolt, "White Fellas".

[38] Bolt, "White Fellas".

[39] Bolt "It's So Hip".

[40] Bolt "It's So Hip".

[41] Bolt "It's So Hip".

[42] Bolt "It's So Hip".

[43] Bolt "It's So Hip".

Repeated invocation of lexical items related to appearance and sight cement their primacy in signifying identity and reinforce the "objectif[ication] of Aboriginal identities".[44]

The photographs accompanying Bolt's articles heighten the primacy of visual appearance. Of the seventeen individuals named in 'It's So Hip', Bolt provides photographs of eleven. While these photographs are not included in some of the publicly accessible versions of the articles (for instance, the *Herald Sun* or *Media Watch* websites), they formed part of the original articles as published in *The Herald Sun*, and they are reproduced in the appendix to Bromberg J's judgment. In 'It's So Hip', the images are spread across two pages and take up a third to a half of the space allotted to Bolt's column. 'White Fellas' similarly takes up two pages and features three photographs: there's a large image of Danie Mellor standing in front of his Telstra Award-winning artwork; a smaller image of Larissa Behrendt is inset into the text, and a portrait image of Mark McMillan sits underneath a highlighted quotation. These photographs "solicit" further "racialized gazing", positioning fairer-skinned Aboriginal people as objects to be visually classified by Bolt's readership.[45]

The lexical emphasis on 'choice' throughout Bolt's articles reflects his belief that claims to Aboriginal identity by fairer-skinned Australians are performative, costumes cynically adopted for economic and political expediency. The words 'choose' or 'choice' recur frequently in his articles, implying that identification as Aboriginal is personally motivated rather than socially or culturally determined. He laments the growing number of people who "sign up … as white Aborigines".[46] It is a "fashion" or a "decision … to identify as Aboriginal".[47] Anita Heiss "could identify as a member of more than one race, if joining

[44] Christine Hansen and Kathleen Butler, "Introduction" in *Exploring Urban Identities and Histories*, ed. Christine Hansen and Kathleen Butler (Canberra: AIATSIS Research Publications, 2013), 1.

[45] Griffiths, "The White Gaze and Its Artifacts," 417.

[46] Bolt, "White Fellas".

[47] Bolt "It's So Hip".

up to any at all was important".[48] This 'choice' so mystifies Bolt that the only plausible explanation for its popularity is opportunistic and cynical financial gain.

Response

Bolt does *not* present his view as subjective, nor as one opinion among many. Rather, he inflates his opinion until it takes the form of an incontrovertible truth. When Bolt looks at a photograph of Heiss and declares her to be of fair complexion, he assigns her immediately and definitively to the category *non*-Aboriginal. In Bolt's estimation, Heiss's opportunistic assertion of Aboriginal identity nullifies her career, genealogy and achievements. In response, Heiss could have remained silent. She could have written a letter to the editor of *The Herald Sun*, given a public lecture, or even addressed Bolt through alternative media outlets. Instead, she—and the other applicants—used the Australian legal system to assert their case. And even here they found themselves at a decisive juncture: they "had the option of pursuing [their] cases individually under the long-established Australian defamation laws" but they chose to pursue their claims under the *Racial Discrimination Act*.[49] Heiss explains:

> I saw the RDA as being the best forum to deal with an issue such as ours that affected a broader group of people. The defamation laws are largely based on the 'harm' done to the reputation of individuals, and this was not just about my reputation. While I needed to clear my professional name, I was more concerned about the greater ramifications for my own community at large […] I was never interested in monetary compensation, which a defamation case would have sought to achieve. I wanted the publication of under-researched, race-based misinformation to end.[50]

[48] Bolt "It's So Hip".

[49] Heiss, *Am I Black Enough?*, 168.

[50] Heiss, *Am I Black Enough?*, 169.

Bromberg J's findings may have vindicated the applicants' decision to pursue their case under Section 18C of the RDA[51] but Bolt was unrepentant from the beginning of the trial to its end, and long after that too. He never apologised. ("Right up until we left the building I was hoping Andrew Bolt's lawyers would convince him that it was best to just make the apology and move forward, and the whole case could be settled. That never happened.").[52] Tellingly, Bolt did not pursue a legal challenge to Bromberg J's findings;[53] instead, he "commenced a vigorous – and highly successful – campaign in the court of public opinion to subvert the judgment".[54] The subsequent media campaign regarding the alleged 'loss' of free speech—spearheaded by News Corp-owned newspapers *The Australian* and the *Herald Sun*—transformed what could have been a relatively open and closed matter into a protracted public saga. To put this another way: though the case represented a sound legal response to Bolt's articles, the outcome did not, as the applicants hoped, go on to facilitate a more respectful public discourse regarding Aboriginal identity in the Australian media. Thus, I want to look briefly at how the court case functions as a response to Bolt's articles, and why the 'failure' of the court case necessitated still further responses, such as Heiss's memoir.

Bromberg J takes great care to ensure that his judgment does not "[unnecessarily stifle] freedom of expression".[55] He is explicit on this point at 461:

> It is important that nothing in the orders I make should suggest that it is unlawful for a publication to deal with racial identification including challenging the genuineness of the identification of a group of people. I have not found Mr Bolt and HWT [the *Herald and*

[51] Bolt could not argue the defence provided by Section 18D of the *Racial Discrimination Act*; among several reasons outlined by Bromberg J, his articles were not written in good faith (Bromberg J, *Eatock v Bolt*, 451-2.)

[52] Heiss, *Am I Black Enough?*, 226.

[53] "No Appeal over Bolt Ruling," *Herald Sun* 20 October 2011, 6.

[54] Alan Austin, "But Andrew Bolt IS a Racist: In Black and White" *Independent Australia*, 19 March 2014. https://independentaustralia.net/politics/politics-display/but-andrew-bolt-is-a-racist-in-black-and-white,6292.

[55] Bromberg J, *Eatock v Bolt*, 460.

> *Weekly Times*, Bolt's employer] to have contravened s 18C simply because the Newspaper Articles dealt with subject matter of that kind. I have found a contravention because of the manner in which that subject matter was dealt with.

To put this another way: there's nothing to stop Bolt—or anyone else, for that matter—from having an opinion on racial identification or skin colour. Bromberg J goes out of his way to emphasise that this is legitimate public comment. There are, of course, compelling reasons to put Bolt's claims under intense intellectual scrutiny, as I show in this essay. But a weak argument is not against the law. Bromberg J finds a contravention "because of the manner in which that subject matter was dealt with",[56] not because of the subject matter itself.

Legal scholar Adrienne Stone argues that the real-world consequences of Bromberg J's findings were "notably insubstantial".[57] The respondents (Bolt and his employer, the *Herald and Weekly Times*), were not "required to apologise, to pay damages, or — crucially — to remove the material from the internet".[58] "The remedy imposed in *Eatock v Bolt*", she continues, "was predominantly *expressive* rather than coercive".[59] Stone shows, in no uncertain terms, that Bolt got off exceptionally lightly.[60] Nevertheless, Bolt's posturing in the days following the verdict deliberately distorted the terms of Bromberg J's judgment. He used the front page of the *Herald Sun* to decry himself the innocent victim of censorship. Headlines ranged from the self-pitying ("Silencing Me Impedes Unity") to the portentous ("This is a Sad Day for Free Speech"). His campaign ran through News Corp media, and soon found its way into Australian politics. Following *Eatock v Bolt*, twice the Australian

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[56] Bromberg J, *Eatock v Bolt*, 461, emphasis added.

[57] Adrienne Stone, "The Ironic Aftermath of *Eatock v Bolt*" *Melbourne University Law Review* 38, no. 3: 938.

[58] Stone, "The Ironic Aftermath," 939.

[59] Stone, "The Ironic Aftermath," 939, original emphasis.

[60] See also Sarah Joseph, "Free Speech, Racial Intolerance and the Right to Offend: Bolt before the Court" *Alternative Law Journal* 36, no. 4 (2011): 228.

Liberal / National coalition government tried to alter the wording of Section 18C in parliament and twice those changes were rejected.[61] Bolt's disregard for—and distortion of—Bromberg J's findings meant that the case was not the end of the matter; his disregard prompts a further response by Heiss in the form of a memoir

Authenticity

In his articles, Bolt invests considerable energy in classifying, defining and then deriding those he believes to be fake, "official", or "professional" Aborigines. By contrast, he allocates comparatively little editorial space to a discussion of what he believes constitutes an 'authentic' Aboriginal identity. Bolt's disproportionate emphasis on 'fake' Aboriginal identity demonstrates his reliance on unspoken "stereotyped images that exist in the popular imagination" to make his argument for him.[62] The only instance where Bolt broaches the subject of 'authenticity' directly is his treatment of Aboriginal art. Bolt argues that when Danie Mellor won the 2009 National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art Award (otherwise known as the Telstra Award), Mellor effectively excluded (or in Bolt's terms, "pushed aside"), "real draw-in-the-dirt Aboriginal artists such as Dorothy Napangardi, Mitjili Napanangka Gibson and Walangkura Napanangka" from consideration for the prize.[63] Here, as in his articles as a whole, Bolt displays a narrow (not to mention patronising) conception of Aboriginal identity and art. He appears to valorise the work of Napangardi, Gibson and

[61] Heath Aston, "Tony Abbott Dumps Controversial Changes to 18C Racial Discrimination Laws," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 05 August 2014. http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/tony-abbott-dumps-controversial-changes-to-18c-racial-discrimination-laws-20140805-3d65l.html; Katharine Murphy, "Senate Blocks Government's Changes to Section 18C of Racial Discrimination Act," *Guardian*, 30 March 2017. https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2017/mar/30/senate-blocks-governments-changes-to-section-18c-of-racial-discrimination-act.

[62] Yin C. Paradies, "Beyond Black and White: Essentialism, Hybridity and Indigeneity," *Journal of Sociology* 42, no. 4 (2006): 355.

[63] Bolt, "White Fellas".

Napanangka but his evocation of their artistic practice as "real draw-in-the-dirt" is not only factually wrong (they paint with acrylics) and derogatively associated with dirt, but holds to a condescending logic whereby physical location and skin colour ("a black Aboriginal artist from the bush") determines identity.

For the most part, Bolt's articles rely on anachronistic constructions of Aboriginal identity, measured primarily by adherence to—or deviation from—what Yin Paradies calls "the pernicious fantasy of the 'Indigenous look'".[64] This 'look' has been used to oppress darker- and fairer-skinned Aboriginal people alike. Mick Dodson argues that this 'look' has two aspects:

> Initially we appeared as the noble, well-built native, heroic, bearded, loin-clothed, one foot up, vigilant, with boomerang at the ready. Later, after we had fallen from grace, we appeared bent, distorted, overweight, inebriated, with bottle in hand.[65]

Particularly the former image plays on a seemingly endless loop in the mainstream media. "The stereotype of the hunter-gatherer, crystallised in the image of the spear holder standing on one leg … [has become] the identity of *the* Aboriginal Other in the eye of the settler society".[66] Bromberg J knowingly references this 'look' when he writes that "the perception of many Australians of an Aboriginal person will no doubt be influenced by stereotypical images of dark skinned Aboriginal persons in outback Australia".[67] Additionally, reference to the 'Indigenous look' is invariably anchored within a discourse of deficit, "a mode of thinking … that frames Aboriginal identity in a narrative of negativity, deficiency and

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[64] Paradies, "Beyond Black and White," 359.

[65] Mick Dodson, "The End in the Beginning: Re(de)finding Aboriginality," *Australian Aboriginal Studies* 1 (1994): 3.

[66] Alexandra Sauvage, "Between Law and Science: Australian Museums Dealing with Aboriginal Critique" in *Rencontres Australiennes: Regards Croisés sur l'Identité d'un Peuple et d'une Nation*, ed. Pierre Lagayette (Paris: Presses de l'Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2008), 60, original emphasis.

[67] Bromberg J, *Eatock v Bolt*, 190.

disempowerment".[68] Bolt locks darker-skinned Aboriginal people into a discourse of deficit through the assumption that, in Heiss's sarcastic summary, "the blacker you are, the poorer, needier and more disadvantaged you are".[69]

Bolt's insistence on a single—and thus all-encompassing—version of Aboriginal authenticity falls within a long history of attempts to define and control Aboriginal identity. His articles bring to mind the words of Bruce Ruxton, former president of the Victorian Returned Services League. In 1988, Ruxton requested that the Federal Government "amend the definition of Aborigine to eliminate the part-whites who are making a racket out of being so-called Aborigines at enormous cost to taxpayers".[70] The unnerving similarity between Ruxton's petition and Bolt's articles over two decades later points to "a representational tradition" of Aboriginal identity that dates back to European invasion.[71] In the words of Mick Dodson: "Since their first intrusive gaze, colonising cultures have had a preoccupation with observing, analysing, studying, classifying and labelling Aborigines and Aboriginality".[72] This classifying impulse has received considerable attention within the scholarly literature. John McCorquodale's 1986 analysis of Australian legislation uncovered "no less than 67 identifiable classifications, descriptions or definitions" of Aboriginal identity,[73] while John Gardiner-Garden's Current Issues brief for the Australian Parliament identifies four definitional phases of Aboriginal identity since 1788.[74] Salient to both Gardiner-Garden's and

[68] Fforde et al., "Discourse, Deficit and Identity," 162.

[69] Heiss qtd. in Flip Prior, "Heiss Maintains the Rage," *West Australian*, 26 June 2012. https://au.news.yahoo.com/thewest/entertainment/a/14043017/heiss-maintains-the-rage/.

[70] Bruce Ruxton qtd. in Dodson, "The End in the Beginning," 3.

[71] Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism*, 170.

[72] Dodson, "The End in the Beginning," 3.

[73] John McCorquodale, "The Legal Classification of Race in Australia," *Aboriginal History* 10 (1986): 9.

[74] John Gardiner-Garden, "Defining Aboriginality in Australia," Department of the Parliamentary Library (Current Issue Brief No. 103) February 2003.

McCorquodale's inquiries into definitions of Aboriginal identity is that this is a complex and multi-faceted area; they are two of many scholars who have rightly argued for "the fluid and contextual nature of Indigenous identity over time and place".[75]

My reading of Heiss's memoir suggests that she does not do away with discourses of authenticity; rather, she expands the range and diversity of what constitutes Aboriginal identity. As with Rowse's focus on a diverse array of "indigeneities",[76] *Am I Black Enough?* demonstrates that there is more than one way of being Aboriginal in twenty-first-century Australia. One of the most compelling examples of this argument occurs in a chapter entitled "If you are a Black woman, you should…".[77] A series of epithets give form to this chapter, each epithet setting out an expectation associated with being a Black woman ("If you are a Black woman you should… be strong and not ask for help" [255], "… be angry" [260], "… be married up" [262], "… have kids" [266] etc.). Under each sub-heading, Heiss demonstrates how the opposite is true for her: she is good at asking for help; she chooses a positive mindset over anger. However, divergence from these dictates does not dilute her identity as a Black woman.

To give another example: over the years, Heiss has formed a productive and close working relationship with life coach Geraldine Starr. "Some might say life-coaching and vision boards are not very 'Black' things to do. But they are very 'Anita' things to do. And seeing as I am Black, then it *is* a Black thing to do".[78] This, to me, more than any other moment in the book, exemplifies Heiss's commitment to showing that the individual, lived

[75] Paradies, "Beyond Black and White" 356; see also Carlson, *The Politics of Identity*.

[76] Rowse, "Indigenous Heterogeneity," 301.

[77] Heiss, *Am I Black Enough?*, 253-75.

[78] Heiss, *Am I Black Enough?*, 259.

experience of being Aboriginal is at once unique, while also forming part of a larger group identity.

Am I Black Enough? weaves a constant dialogue between Bolt's primitivist expectations of Aboriginal identity and the lived experience of Aboriginality in twenty-first-century Australia. It is hard to go past Heiss's blunt statement on the memoir's back cover: "I'm Aboriginal. I'm just not the Aboriginal person a lot of people want or expect me to be." When Heiss asserts her identity through the memoir genre, part of her agenda is about setting the facts straight against Bolt's wilful misrepresentation of her identity. But it is also, equally, about claiming a space for herself and her right to identify as Aboriginal. Heiss is recognised and accepted by her community as an Aboriginal woman; so when she asserts her Aboriginal identity and heritage, she rightly expects it to be honoured. As she puts it on the first page of *Am I Black Enough?*, "I am an urban, beachside Blackfella, a concrete Koori with Westfield Dreaming, and I apologise to no-one".[79] In contrast to the contemptuous phrase 'professional Aborigine', a strong sense of self-respect imbues Heiss's words. The term 'concrete Koori' works pleasingly on multiple levels. Not only does it reference the physical surrounds of Heiss's childhood (the paved, industrialised Sydney suburbs of Malabar and Matraville) but the material qualities of concrete convey a sense of settledness and emphatic groundedness; it is firm and unwavering, tough and resilient. Heiss adds further meaning to this term when she writes about how her "experiences and everyday life belong to a land whose sacred sites are now covered in tar and concrete".[80]

[79] Heiss, *Am I Black Enough?*, 1.

[80] Anita Heiss, "Aboriginal Writers on the Significance of Space, Sense of Place and Connection to Country" in *Making Waves: 10 Years of the Byron Bay Writers' Festival*, eds. Marele Day, Susan Bradley Smith, and Fay Knight (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2006), 68.

Education

Looking back through her career, an autobiography—or, at the very least, an autobiographical novel—had long been a possibility for Heiss. From 1998, there are multiple references to Heiss working on an autobiographical novel entitled *Kissed by the Sun*.[81] But it was the publication of Bolt's articles—and his unrepentant stance following the outcome of the court case—that provided the immediate impetus for writing *Am I Black Enough?* As Heiss tells it, her decision to write her life story was motivated, in part, by the *lack* of adequate classroom resources that discuss the heterogeneity of Aboriginal life, identity and history. In an interview with Bri Lee for *Kill Your Darlings* magazine, Heiss outlines how her experience as an educator informed her decision to write her memoir:

> What I was seeing was this huge gap in knowledge about who Aboriginal people are today […] There needed to be a resource, quite simply, for teachers to be able to read and use themselves, and for the classroom, for breaking down stereotypes.
>
> So I'd already started penning some work around that, and then of course I wake up on 15 April 2009 to headlines like 'The New White Face of Black Australia' and 'It's Hip To Be Black', and I go, 'oh my god.' And so as a consequence of all of that, I

[81] A review of *Token Koori* in the *Koori Mail* states that "Heiss is continuing work on an autobiographical novel *Kissed by the Sun* while researching her PhD area of Aboriginal literature and the publishing industry". Todd Condie, Rev. of *Token Koori*, *Koori Mail*, 17 June 1998, 20. https://aiatsis.gov.au/sites/default/files/docs/digitised_collections/the_koori_mail/178.pdf. "Anita is currently working on an autobiographical novel, entitled *Kissed by the Sun*". "Anita Heiss Working Note", *How2* 1, no. 5 (March 2001). https://www.asu.edu/pipercwcenter/how2journal/archive/online_archive/v1_5_2001/current/special-feature/heiss.html. The Austlit database references *Kissed by the Sun* as "A chapter from an autobiographical novel," published in the periodical *Ulitarra* https://www.austlit.edu.au/austlit/page/C521024 (accessed 29 January 2019).

> started to think, 'maybe if I had this book in the classroom, the fallout from that wouldn't have been as harsh or as racially violent as it was'.[82]

Of particular note in this quotation is the way Heiss frames her memoir in educational terms; as a classroom resource, her memoir has the potential to foster future generations of Australians less susceptible to the type of racist misinformation spread by Bolt. Heiss expresses similar sentiments in the conclusion of *Am I Black Enough?*, where she aligns the importance of education and identity with the memoir genre:

> Writing my memoir on identity has been a significant and challenging personal process, but as someone who sees the need for resources in the classroom I also felt a responsibility to provide answers to inquiring minds.[83]
>
> I hope that by unravelling my own forty-plus years of life as an Aboriginal person that the general Australian reading public and students in our schools and colleges come to appreciate without criticism or concern, the diversity and complexity of Aboriginal identity in the twenty-first century, […].[84]

Reference to a specific physical space ("the classroom") and a specific group residing within it ("inquiring minds", "students in our schools and colleges") helps Heiss to situate her memoir within the Australian education system. In this, I want to point out that there is something remarkably positive and future-facing about *Am I Black Enough?*. The title mocks Bolt and the content may often convey a sense of frustration at the limited ways non-Aboriginal Australians view the First Peoples of this land. But ultimately this is a memoir about hope. If Heiss anticipates that it will be used in the classroom to educate the *next*

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[82] Bri Lee, "Memoir at any Age: Anita Heiss," *Kill Your Darlings*, 07 September 2017. https://www.killyourdarlings.com.au/2017/09/memoir-at-any-age-anita-heiss/.

[83] Heiss, *Am I Black Enough?*, 334.

[84] Heiss, *Am I Black Enough?*, 335.

generation, she surely cannot think that everything is lost. The future holds a promise that Heiss activates in the present through the publication and distribution of her memoir.

When Heiss's memoir is viewed as an educative tool, several different audiences come into view. One of these audiences is Heiss's non-Aboriginal readership. Heiss's non-Aboriginal Australian audience may know very little about Australia's First Peoples. Such an audience may be susceptible to the misinformation disseminated by Bolt. Equally, this audience may be hungry—not to mention grateful—for the type of instruction Heiss provides in her memoir.[85] Creating change through the Australian education system is Heiss's best hope of encouraging a better informed public sphere. Heiss clearly sets out her pedagogical agenda in *Am I Black Enough?*:

> I don't think *any* Australian student should be graduating from *any* Australian tertiary institution without having done at least one unit on Indigenous Australia […] A basic understanding of Australia's history and current issues/demographics in relation to Australia's First peoples should be considered, in my view, a basic expectation of students, teachers and employers.[86]

She continues with what would appear to be a direct comment on *Eatock v Bolt*: "Such an introduction would ensure that misrepresentation and misinformation about Aboriginal people and identity would not appear in mainstream forums".[87] Further, "general knowledge" pertaining to Australia's First People's (the 1967 Referendum, the meaning behind the

[85] See Mathew, "Reviewing Race" 68-73 on this point.

[86] Heiss, *Am I Black Enough?*, 118, original emphasis.

[87] Heiss, *Am I Black Enough?*, 118.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags etc.) should be something "that all Australian students […] have in their grasp".[88]

Heiss consistently calls for her memoir—and Aboriginal Australian memoir more generally—to be taken up as an educational resource. For example, in her 2003 academic monograph *Dhuuluu-Yala*, Heiss writes that "autobiographies are the history and text books of Aboriginal Australia".[89] She makes a similar claim for the broader field of Aboriginal writing: "[Aboriginal Australian] writing is used as a tool to educate non-Aboriginal readers in understanding Aboriginal Australia better, which in turns aids race relations between Black and white Australians".[90] This pedagogical aspiration animates her other publishing efforts, such as *The Macquarie PEN Anthology of Aboriginal Literature*. Heiss co-edited this anthology with Peter Minter in 2008. In *Am I Black Enough?*, Heiss glosses the anthology as "a collection of Aboriginal writings presented in an accessible way for teachers, researchers and students to use as a springboard for greater exposure to our voices".[91] She concludes this part of *Am I Black Enough?* with a statement on the anthology's success as a teaching device: "Orders for the *Anthology* by both colleges and school suppliers suggest the book has been set as recommended reading and is used in both universities and schools around the country, with an increase in educational use in 2011".[92]

[88] Heiss, *Am I Black Enough?*, 196. Heiss also makes a similar call in her discussion of why 'Aboriginal history' must be taught as 'Australian history': "it is all *Australian history* and [it] needs to be taught as part of the national Australian history curriculum," *Am I Black Enough?* 101, original emphasis.

[89] Anita Heiss, *Dhuuluu-Yala (To Talk Straight): Publishing Indigenous Literature* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2003), 35.

[90] Anita Heiss, "BlackWords: Writers on Identity" *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature* 14, no. 3 (2014).

[91] Heiss, *Am I Black Enough?*, 198.

[92] Heiss, *Am I Black Enough?*, 198.

Heiss places considerable faith in the Australian education system's emancipatory potential for Aboriginal people, as well as its ability to change non-Aboriginal perceptions of Aboriginal Australians. She supports a national curriculum;[93] she has developed teaching resources through her involvement with the Austlit BlackWords database and she performs regular author visits to schools. Her efforts within the classroom have produced a number of young adult fiction novels, co-authored with primary and secondary school students. Further, education represents a way out of poverty and a "key to self-determination [for Australia's First Peoples]".[94] Despite this, Heiss holds serious misgivings about the Australian education system. Education in Australia has been—and in some cases, continues to be—a colonial enterprise that disenfranchises Australia's First Peoples. The Australian education system is thus the site of a particular set of dualities: it offers hope and enfranchisement at the same time as it has traditionally been used to exclude the Aboriginal peoples of Australia.

Heiss's conflicted feelings towards the Australian education system reach their full expression in Chapter 6 of *Am I Black Enough for You*?, "Epista-What?". This chapter recounts her frustration with academia, especially its elevation of certain types of knowledge over others (typically, western forms of knowledge over that produced by First Nations peoples). Things come to a head at the 2006 Pacific Epistemologies Conference held in Suva, Fiji, where Heiss is troubled by the way academic language excludes many of the First Nations peoples in attendance. Heiss experiences this as an acute internal conflict. She has unwittingly become the educated, sophisticated 'other', a respected academic with strong qualifications and publications to her name. At the same time, she is a First Nations woman for whom racism cannot be abstracted but remains a daily, lived reality. These two things

[93] Heiss, *Am I Black Enough?*, 197.

[94] Heiss qtd. in Emily Baker, "Author Anita Heiss Delivers University of Canberra Ngunnawal Lecture," *Canberra Times*, 21 September 2017. https://www.canberratimes.com.au/national/act/author-anita-heiss-delivers-university-of-canberra-ngunnawal-lecture-20170920-gykx3u.html.

shouldn't be mutually exclusive, but they are at times at odds with one another, especially in the public perception of Aboriginal people and, as Heiss shows, sometimes in their own self-perception. Heiss made a decision to leave academia at the Pacific Epistemologies Conference. If her decision makes her a "failed academic",[95] so be it. While Heiss's suspicions of the academy are certainly valid, it also offers tremendous opportunities. Elsewhere in *Am I Black Enough?*, she proudly describes herself as the "first Black doctoral graduate" from the then University of Western Sydney in 2001[96] and in mid-2017 she took up a post-doctoral position at the University of Canberra.[97]

Heiss's non-Aboriginal readership, though large, is by no means her sole—nor primary—readership. When Heiss addresses the Aboriginal community through *Am I Black Enough for You?*, the notion of 'education' takes on a very different set of meanings. In this view, I conceptualise 'education' in terms of providing an Aboriginal role model who unapologetically embraces her identity. I also view Heiss as instilling pride in communal identity and community achievement. This is especially important given that the harm caused by Bolt's articles encompasses the reputation of specific individuals as well as the broader community of fairer-skinned Aboriginal Australians.[98] As Bromberg puts it, a member of this community is "likely to be sensitive about attempts by non-Aboriginal persons to define Aboriginal identity" (292);[99] she may "think twice about asserting her Aboriginal identity in

[95] Heiss, *Am I Black Enough?*, 132.

[96] Heiss, *Am I Black Enough?*, 107.

[97] Kim Pham, "Indigenous Author Anita Heiss Opens New Chapter at UC," *University of Canberra*, 02 June 2017. https://www.canberra.edu.au/about-uc/media/monitor/2017/june/anita-heiss-opens-new-chapter-at-uc.

[98] Bromberg J, *Eatock v Bolt*, 280-99.

[99] Mathew, "Reviewing Race in the Digital Literary Sphere."

public generally" in light of Bolt's articles,[100] especially "if she is young or otherwise vulnerable in relation to challenges to her Aboriginal identity".[101]

Conclusion

Today, *Am I Black Enough* is taught in schools and universities across Australia. A second edition was published for the American market by the University of Hawai'i Press.[102] Heiss's memoir was awarded the 2012 Victorian Premier's Literary Award for Indigenous Writing and nominated for the 2012 Human Rights Award for Literature. Many reviews of *Am I Black Enough?* praised Heiss's courage; her readers value the educative elements of her memoir and treat reading *Am I Black Enough?* as a valuable prompt to ethical reflection.[103] Heiss can be rightly proud of all that she achieved both in and out of the court room. But all of this came at an immense personal cost. Bolt's attack on Heiss left her bewildered and uncomprehending: "What had I done to deserve this rant from someone who had never met me, had clearly never read any of my work, and hadn't bothered to call me to check any of his facts?".[104] Heiss describes how challenging it was to "read all the comments attached to the online publication of [Bolt's] article".[105] For her, "it was one of the most emotional and traumatic experiences of the whole case. I sat at my Rosebery office and sobbed".[106] She adds: "the hatred and misinformation continued to be spouted by commenters on [Bolt's]

[100] Bromberg J, *Eatock v Bolt*, 296.

[101] Bromberg J, *Eatock v Bolt*, 296.

[102] Anita Heiss, *Am I Black Enough for You?* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2014).

[103] Mathew, "Reviewing Race in the Digital Literary Sphere."

[104] Heiss, *Am I Black Enough?*, 8.

[105] Heiss, *Am I Black Enough?*, 169-70.

[106] Heiss, *Am I Black Enough?*, 169-70.

blog, and it just got nastier and more venomous as time went on … I felt sick and unsafe".[107] Heiss had hoped that the court case would lead to a better-informed Australian media and stop the negative representations of Aboriginal Australians.[108] Instead, the court case—and subsequent publication of her memoir—brought with it a further wave of online trolling, this time on the memoir's American Amazon page.[109]

The distress caused by Bolt's articles is real and ongoing. When Bri Lee interviewed Heiss in September 2017, she asked if Heiss had any plans for a follow-up memoir. From Heiss's response, it was clear that the court case and its seemingly endless afterlife in the public sphere had taken an enormous toll:

> Honestly, in hindsight if I'd known how traumatic the court case and everything was going to be, I probably wouldn't have gone through it. I had no idea what was going to happen. … I'm so sick of it … I'm just done.[110]

She reiterated these sentiments in an interview with Fairfax media:

> Had I known [the court case and its aftermath] was going to be so emotionally traumatic, I don't know if I would have gone through with it. I've been an advocate for authors' rights for a long, long time. We have a responsibility and an accountability - as readers, we have a right to expect that what is written is true.[111]

It would be easy, using Patrick Wolfe's notion of repressive authenticity, to view Heiss's fatigue as the structure of invasion simply collecting its dues and reasserting its relentless dominance. But I want to end on a more hopeful note. However exhausting and painful the

[107] Heiss, *Am I Black Enough?*, 171.

[108] Heiss, *Am I Black Enough?*, 169.

[109] Mathew, "Reviewing Race in the Digital Literary Sphere."

[110] Lee, "Memoir at Any Age" *Kill Your Darlings*.

[111] Kerrie O'Brien, "The Good Life" *The Age*, 21 July 2018, 4.

process, the Aboriginal applicants—and Heiss chief among them—achieved something extraordinary in the Federal Court of Australia when Bromberg J found against Andrew Bolt and the Herald and Weekly Times. *Am I Black Enough for You?* reinforces and expands on this win; it shows, in no uncertain terms, that Indigenous heterogeneity continues to flourish in twenty-first-century Australia.

7. "Reviewing Race in the Digital Literary Sphere"

Monash University's Centre for the Book presented a cross-industry workshop entitled "Critical Matters: Book Reviewing Now" in April 2015. The workshop spoke directly to my research interests; however, I was unable to attend because I had already committed to two conference presentations in America at the same time. A few months later, the workshop convenors issued a call for papers for a special issue of *Australian Humanities Review*. The special issue would address the theme of book reviewing in Australia, especially new technologies of reviewing and amateur reviewing practices. I knew that the reception of Anita Heiss's 2012 memoir *Am I Black Enough for You?* would feature prominently in my research project, and the energy around book reviewing practices in Australia, exemplified by the Centre for the Book's CFP, gave added impetus to pursuing this piece of research in peer-reviewed form.

My article uses a cross-cultural reception studies framework to contextualise the memoir's reception, showing that for many reviewers on *Goodreads* and in blogs, reading *Am I Black Enough?* provided a welcome opportunity to reflect on past behaviours and assumptions about Aboriginal people. I contrast this warm embrace with the angrier reviews on Amazon, where the book review became a space for Bolt's supporters to continue debate on the fallout from *Eatock v Bolt*. This paper offers the first scholarly treatment of cross-cultural reception in an Australian context; additionally, by looking at online reviews rather than face-to-face book group discussion, it brings cross-cultural reception studies into the digital literary sphere.

Another of the paper's interventions is its discussion of book reviews in terms of 'not-reading' practices and 'non'-readers. These practices are often explored in relation to book-related controversies such as Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*. 'Non'-readers will announce their refusal to read a certain book, and the explanation that often follows can closely resemble the form of a book review. 'Not-reading' may appear difficult to study because it is negative, rather than positive; however, Amazon reviews of *Am I Black Enough* show that the internet contains rich archives for understanding such practices.

Of my five journal articles, this paper stands out as the product of strong scholarly feedback and mentoring. I presented a shortened version of this article at the 2016 'Capital-Empire-Print-Dissent' Association for the Study of Australian Literature conference. My presentation allowed me to engage in face-to-face dialogue with scholars who had also written about *Eatock v Bolt* and *Am I Black Enough?*, such as Michael Griffiths. Equally, the editors for the special issue of *Australian Humanities Review* provided ongoing guidance about their requirements, and directed me through the peer review process. I also sought out the opportunity to work with the historian Frank Bongiorno on this paper. Frank had reviewed *Am I Black Enough* for *Inside Story* and in previous writing he had discussed Andrew Bolt. The success of this paper can ultimately be judged by the way the editors elevated it in their Introduction to the special issue, and listed it as the lead article in the table of contents.

Australian National University

Statement of Contribution

This thesis is submitted as a Thesis by Compilation in accordance with https://policies.anu.edu.au/ppl/document/ANUP_003405

I declare that the research presented in this Thesis represents original work that I carried out during my candidature at the Australian National University, except for contributions to multi-author papers incorporated in the Thesis where my contributions are specified in this Statement of Contribution.

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Reviewing Race in the Digital Literary Sphere: A Case Study of Anita Heiss' *Am I Black Enough for You?*

Imogen Mathew

1. Introduction

WITH HEAD TURNED DOWN AND EYES RAISED IN SCEPTICISM, ANITA HEISS ISSUES AN unmistakeable challenge from the cover of her 2012 memoir: *Am I Black Enough for You?*. The reader, in turn, is drawn into the ugly cultural and racial politics that characterise life for many Aboriginal Australians. Awarded the 2012 Victorian Premier's Literary Award for Indigenous Writing and nominated for the 2012 Human Rights Award for Literature, Heiss' memoir has its genesis in the 2011 court case *Eatock vs. Bolt*. In a syndicated article entitled 'It's So Hip To Be Black', *Herald Sun* journalist Andrew Bolt accused Heiss, along with several other prominent Aboriginal Australians, of choosing to identify as Aboriginal for financial gain. He was subsequently found guilty of racial discrimination under Section 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act (RDA). Justice Bromberg's application of the RDA would push questions about protections from vilification, freedom of speech, journalistic integrity and the alleged 'right to be a bigot' onto the public agenda from 2011 to 2016.[1]

This paper highlights book reviews of *Am I Black Enough?* as a crucial—though hitherto unexplored—juncture in public discussion about the court case. I argue that the book review becomes a key site where the social, political and cultural ramifications of the court case (and the racial politics it brought to the fore) were, and continue to be, debated and contested. While some of these reviews were published in the mainstream media, the highest proportion were recorded on

[1] The initial focus on Aboriginal Australians widened to include many marginalised community groups. The January 2015 *Charlie Hebdo* shootings in Paris, alongside the Abbott government's ultimately unsuccessful bid to repeal the 'Andrew Bolt Law', have kept debate about the RDA alive for several years.

'digital-native' platforms (Murray 322) by 'popular' or 'lay' readers (Guillory; Procter). My approach is grounded in qualitative analysis, despite the critical reflex to associate this type of enquiry with the quantitative. I engage in a close reading of reviews posted on Amazon, Goodreads and personal blogs, asking what the reviewing practices surrounding *Am I Black Enough?* reveal about contemporary race relations in Australia. My emphasis in this paper is on the reviewing platform, not the reviewer's racial identity. This is a tricky methodological crux: omission of racial identifiers does not necessarily constitute evidence of whiteness; nor can race be neatly divined by evaluative stance. This important question deserves deeper exploration than the present enquiry allows: my chief concern is to map the transformations book reviewing practices undergo when they appear on non-traditional platforms by non-professional readers.

The first section of this essay explores how reading and reviewing *Am I Black Enough?* enriches the reader's knowledge of Aboriginal Australian culture and people, often leading to an interrogation of attitudes towards, and beliefs about, Aboriginal Australians. I contrast this warm embrace, prominent on blogs and Goodreads, with the hostile reaction found on Amazon, particularly in the days following *Am I Black Enough?*'s publication in 2012. Amazon reviews are stridently negative in their assessment of the book and use the book reviewing platform to pursue what Benwell, Procter and Robinson would call 'not-reading' practices, namely continued debate about Heiss' role in *Eatock vs. Bolt*. As such, I ask if commentary masquerades as reviews on Amazon.

Mainstream media coverage (encompassing traditional print outlets and digital-native news platforms) provides a foil to popular readings of *Am I Black Enough?*. Heiss was interviewed about the memoir by several news outlets (Elliott; Prior) and from 2012 onwards, *Am I Black Enough?* became something of a cultural reference point, invoked regularly in discussion of Aboriginal identity (Cooper; Dangalaba; Johnson; Overington, 'Not So Black and White'; Overington, 'It's Not About Being Black Enough'; Russell-Cook). Traditional book reviews may differ in their attitude towards *Am I Black Enough?*, from the disapproving (Connor) to the appreciative (Bongiorno; Funnell; Maxwell; Stafford) and the moderately ambivalent (McGirr, 'Black', 'Challenging') but they are alike in their shared critical distance from the text. Personal identity is by no means erased, but the reviewer is positioned as a professional, evaluating an object circulating in the literary marketplace. My analysis of popular reviews, however, emphasises the way *Am I Black Enough?* sits in a far more intimate relationship with the reviewer. Indeed, non-traditional reviews are so distinctive because they record intensely personal reactions to the book, ranging from searching self-reflection to angry repudiation. Tantalising parallels, sitting beyond the scope of this essay, could be drawn between the foregrounding of readerly affect in online amateur reviews and that

found in female book clubs (Long) and among female readers of popular romance (Radway).

Though the autobiographical project that became *Am I Black Enough?* was commissioned prior to the court case, it was published in April 2012, almost seven months after Justice Bromberg's judgement was released. Apart from a brief statement marking the victory, Heiss had been silent in the intervening months, promoting her latest chick lit novel but refusing to be drawn on *Eatock vs. Bolt*. *Am I Black Enough?* thus represents Heiss' sustained and eloquent response to the court case. Five short chapters recounting Heiss' involvement in the trial structure a narrative that combines family history with political manifesto. Heiss is a prominent figure in the Australian public sphere and *Am I Black Enough?* exhaustively catalogues her work as an academic, activist and author. She is best known for her commercial women's fiction, 'choc' lit as she playfully calls it, which blends *Bridget Jone*s-style humour and *Sex and the City*-style friendships into the lives of glamorous and assertive Aboriginal women.

Common to Heiss' interventions in the public sphere is the belief that

> … self-representation in the public domain is not only desired but also essential for self-respect and dignity in Australian society today. Definitions of Aboriginality from outside the community—sometimes through media commentary—continue to provide the motivation for many authors to pen responses and reactions. ('Blackwords' n.p.)

Am I Black Enough? works to reframe public debate about the court case after the initial wave of press coverage, addressing the question of who gets to define Aboriginal identity and on what terms. If Bolt's articles attempt to hold Aboriginal people to a narrow and outdated logic, premised on the idea that skin colour determines identity, Heiss' act of self-representation emphatically reclaims that territory. Moreover, the digital literary sphere opens up a space for the (not-)reading public to engage with diverging accounts of identity. From a scholarly perspective, these reviews provide an insight into how racial difference is negotiated and the machinations of online book reviewing across multiple platforms.

In setting forth this investigation, I affirm *Am I Black Enough?* as a subject worthy of academic enquiry. This paper presents the first sustained consideration of a memoir (and its reception) whose importance has been hinted at but never directly addressed. It is telling that academic book reviews remain the most fulsome site of scholarly engagement with *Am I Black Enough?* (Milatovic; Quick). When Heiss' memoir does surface in scholarly writing, it is as a single instance: a footnote, a sentence, a paragraph at most (Anthony 19; Birns 118-9; Carey and

Prince 277; Gelber and McNamara 473-4; Mathew, 'Pretty' 9; 'Educating'; Schwartzman 206; Whitlock 197). The memoir and its reception are notably absent from accounts of the social, legal and media repercussions of *Eatock vs. Bolt* (Aggarwal; Griffiths; Maddison; Stone). Additionally, this paper responds to Simone Murray's call for greater engagement with the digital literary sphere (echoed by Daniel Allington and Stephen Pihlaja in 'Reading in the Age of the Internet', a 2016 special issue of *Language and Literature*). Several of the websites and social phenomena comprising the digital literary sphere have been analysed on a case-by-case basis, including Goodreads (Nakamura), e-readers (Barnett; Cameron; Rowberry), Amazon (Allington; Finn; Steiner, 'Private Criticism'), LibraryThing (Pinder), blogs (Steiner, 'Personal Readings'; Nelson) and online reading challenges (Foasberg). By following *Am I Black Enough?* as it is reviewed across the digital literary sphere, this paper emphasises the analytic insights to be gained from using a single text to draw comparison between reviewing platforms.

2. Education, Empathy and Ethical Reflection

For the segment of Heiss' reading public found on Goodreads or blogs, reviewing *Am I Black Enough?* is a tripartite exercise in empathy, education and ethical reflection. These reviewers typically isolate and identify the educational aspects to Heiss' memoir before demonstrating what they have learned through extended ethical reflection. This approach eschews the professional reviewer's assumed objectivity in favour of a more personal relationship with the text. While these reviews lack the imprimatur of an established media masthead, there are compelling reasons to consider Goodreads and blog reviews *as* reviews. Heiss' memoir remains subject to critique and evaluation. The criteria (Accessible? Enjoyable? Enriching?) may vary from those applied by professional reviewers, but this should not exclude Goodreads and blog reviews from the category of book reviews. Rather, it demonstrates the new and often unexpected characteristics book reviews acquire when they are published in the digital literary sphere by non-professional readers.

Studies of cross-cultural and cross-racial reception have consistently shown that reading and talking about books is a site of self-reflexivity and knowledge production. This subset of reception studies concerns the (homogenously white or racially mixed) reception of non-white authored texts in a variety of geographic locations: New Zealand (Keown), America (Davis, 'White Book Clubs', 'Oprah's Book Club'; Burwell) the United Kingdom (Lang, '"Enthralling"', 'Reading'; Procter) and beyond (Procter and Benwell). Yet the reception of Aboriginal-authored texts by Australian readers has received scant attention. Extant research is either set against a European backdrop (Haag, 'Bumping', 'Indigenous'; Čerče; Di Blasio) or investigates the reception of white Australian-authored texts (Clarke and Nolan 'Reading Groups', 'Book Clubs'). To inaugurate a cross-cultural reception studies

framework in an Australian context, this paper marks out the importance of studying reader responses to Aboriginal-Australian authored-texts.

Examining reading practices in white book clubs ('White') and on television ('Oprah's'), Kimberley Chabot Davis counters the prevailing view of cross-racial empathy as inherently colonising and hegemonic. According to her, white reception of African-American-authored texts demonstrates that 'empathetic identifications' can be an effective method of 'galvanizing anti-racist political sensibilities' ('White' 157). In the UK, Anouk Lang explores the 'transformative potential' of cross-cultural reception ('"Enthralling"' 137) among readers of Andrea Levy's *Small Island*. She finds that preconceived notions of British colonialism are often 'relativized and destabilized' (129): '[readers are prompted] to interrogate their own perceptions, however briefly' (130). Davis, like Lang, reports that some 'white female [Oprah] fans … experienced transformative identifications with black subjects and a reflective alienation from white privilege' ('Oprah's' 399). Davis and Lang hint at, but never fully express, the educative possibility of cross-cultural reception. This section makes that possibility explicit.

Pedagogy, education and race are encoded within the narrative of Heiss' memoir. At primary school, she is appraised as '"[…] a good counter for an 'abo'"' (85). High school is a mercifully 'racist-free safety zone' (90-1); as an undergraduate, the discovery that 'the government considered animals more valuable than [her] mum' provides the impetus for her Honours thesis on the 1967 Referendum (100-1). Her time as a doctoral candidate in Media and Communications (106-14) marks the transition from educat*ed* to educat*or*. She is subsequently 'appointed deputy director of the Warawara Department of Indigenous Studies at [Macquarie University]' (114) and declares 'I don't think *any* Australian student should be graduating from *any* Australian tertiary institution without having done at least one unit on Indigenous Australia' (118; original italics). This extends to primary and secondary schools: 'many Australian students at the age of fifteen still don't know the basics about Aboriginal society or culture' (196). Thus, when Heiss conducts 'what should be a standard author visit', it 'ends up becoming a crash-course in cultural awareness workshop' (197). Heiss also devotes a chapter to explaining the pedagogical subtext to her 'choc' lit (211-25). Education, in other words, forms a recurring theme in *Am I Black Enough?* and is refracted in multiple directions through the prism of Heiss' life. Moreover, the memoir—as a text circulating in the public sphere—aims to educate others about the diversity of Aboriginal identity in twenty-first-century Australia.

Am I Black Enough?'s 2014 entry into the American marketplace was shepherded by the University of Hawai'i Press, a publishing house that 'strives to advance knowledge through the dissemination of scholarship' ('About'). Here, the editorial philosophy and institutional affiliations underpinning *Am I Black Enough?*'s trans-

Pacific debut reinforce its pedagogical overlay.[2] In Australia, Michelle Carey and Michael Prince applaud the memoir as an ideal learning tool for Murdoch University's Australian Indigenous studies major:

> … students are asked to write a review of Anita Heiss' 2012 book *Am I black enough for you?* [sic] This exercise teaches students the critical skills required to undertake a book review, while introducing them to an emerging genre in Indigenous literature, namely 'Choc Lit'—and how it might be juxtaposed against related genres such as 'Chick Lit' and 'Sistah Lit' (Guerrero, 2006). It also engages them in recent debates about Indigenous diversity and freedom of speech (Aggarwal, 2012). (277)

The ease with which Heiss' memoir integrates into the classroom highlights its relevance as an educational aid and the fact that student engagement is evaluated through the genre of the book review is similarly remarkable, suggesting that the act of reviewing magnifies and solidifies insights gained through reading.

The use to which Carey and Prince put *Am I Black Enough?* is not unusual. Many reviewers on blogs and Goodreads comment on the memoir's value as an educational resource, primed for use in the secondary or tertiary classroom.[3] Rosamond, in her blog review, hopes that '[Heiss'] book is seen on secondary school reading lists in the near future'. Chris Gordon, writing for the independent bookseller *Readings*, similarly confirms that 'every high school in Australia should be ensuring this book is on its curriculum'. Goodreads reviewers are even more expansive in their comments on *Am I Black Enough?*'s suitability as a teaching aid, with many stating that they plan to use it in their classroom or that they are already: Pam, a 'soon to be high school teacher', felt that *Am I Black Enough?* contained 'some great "teachable moments"'. For Beverley, not only should *Am I Black Enough?* be 'required reading' but 'it certainly will be, at least parts of it, for [her] own students'. Becca doesn't identify as a teacher, she is keen to see *Am I Black Enough?* 'in the Secondary Schools books Curriculum' [capitals in original]. Evidence of its suitability lies close to home: 'I have two teenage boys and I already have one of them reading this book'.

Goodreads users were also the most likely to comment on the educational aspects (and the pedagogical experience) of reading *Am I Black Enough?*. 'Read this. Learn from it'; 'very educational, entertaining and well worth the read'; 'brilliant,

[2] This is further reinforced by the University of Hawai'i Press' focus on postcolonial and autobiographical writing.
[3] All Goodreads, Amazon and blog reviewers have been given pseudonyms but the names of reviewers from mainstream media outlets and online magazines have been retained. Bibliographic details for the latter group can be found in the Works Cited.

educational and challenging'; 'a genuinely fascinating book, from which I learnt a lot'; 'an entertaining read that informs, challenges and, hopefully, opens the reader up to a new way of viewing Aboriginal Australia'; 'a relatable tone that is both appealing and educating'. Others praise the memoir through an enumeration of what they learnt: 'the main lesson I learnt from Anita was…'; 'the book taught me more than I had previously known'; 'I learnt a lot, which is the very reason the author wrote it in the first place—to teach, to share knowledge'.[4] Ethical reflection is likewise present: 'a thought provoking and often light hearted read'; 'a wonderful text that provokes much thought, challenges prejudices through her words and experiences'; 'forces self reflexivity of the best kind'; '… an easy yet thought provoking read'; 'thoughtful, engaging and humorous this book gives me a perspective I had not contemplated before'. While an emphasis on the thought-provoking aspects of *Am I Black Enough?* account for the majority of ethically reflective responses on Goodreads, some reviewers offer a more personal take. Fay, for one, admits 'I can never work [sic] a mile in the author's shoes, but I have a much greater appreciation of how those shoes feel now'. Caitlin testifies to having been 'moved [by the book] in a place so deep [she has] yet to find the words to describe it'. In these examples, ethical reflection may be prompted by *Am I Black Enough?* but the interior work of such reflection takes place off-stage, outside the book review.

A number of readers are, however, willing to use the book reviewing space to submit to uncomfortable and potentially unflattering moral examination. This often manifests in a dawning awareness of the reviewer's *white* racial identity. Take Susan Righi's Goodreads review: 'heck, I'd gotten sick enough of the racism of my upbringing & the privilege of my (white) life'; '[Heiss] also managed to correct some common (mostly white) misconceptions & offer the beginnings of an education'; 'Heiss made me think it was possible to say that I am white & often quite ignorant—but I'm willing to learn'. Here, education and ethical reflection are laminated together: learning does not happen separately to ethical reflection but they are one and the same thing. Secondly, if the political project underpinning Heiss' literary output coheres with the objective of critical whiteness studies (to 'make [whiteness] visible' (Moreton-Robinson 87)) Righi's repeated references to herself as a white woman suggests that Heiss has done more than simply *educate* people about the diversity of Aboriginal Australian experience: Heiss demonstrates, with withering clarity, that *white* Australians cannot be exempted from racial politics. They sit at its deeply entangled heart.

A similar operation is at play in blog reviews by Jeffrey Winton and Linette Webster. In both cases, reading and then reviewing *Am I Black Enough?* acts as the

[4] Future research could explore this in relation to long-running debates about the educative value of literature and literary studies more broadly.

impetus for re-visiting behaviour and beliefs about Aboriginal people. Some parts of Winton's review praise the educative elements of Heiss' memoir ('[she] is right on the money about how little we are taught about the history or even presence of Aboriginals in Australia'; 'I want to keep learning. Anita Heiss has just stimulated that desire even more. And there is plenty to learn.'). Other parts credit it as an effective framework for re-evaluating the past:

> In reading Anita's book, I found myself feeling embarrassed, even perhaps a little guilty at times. I was never a deliberate racist, a white supremacist piece of garbage, but in reviewing those times as a lot younger and possibly (probably?) stupider, I realise just how I viewed Aboriginals as different and not necessarily in a positive way.

This sensitive and frank disclosure of the reader's lack of knowledge about Aboriginal Australians is echoed by Linette Webster. She begins her review by painting the racial climate of her childhood: '… I was blessed with a few teachers who taught me to respect the ways of the original inhabitants of this wide brown land, but at the same time, Aboriginal jokes were still told … names such as abo, coon and boong were also in use'. The present, in contrast, has brought partial improvement: '… abo jokes might be relatively easy to stamp out, [but] it is the inadvertent and inherent racism that is much harder to get rid of. The racism that is paved with good intentions.' She then goes on to list some of her own well-intentioned thoughts that could be construed as racist. In all three examples, reviewers welcome the experience of being educated, and the act of reviewing the book is inextricably linked with the act of reviewing the self.

Just as 'theatrical norms of [authorial] performance and conscious self-fashioning increasingly infiltrate the literary sphere' (Murray 328), so too are online book reviews a carefully mediated and cultivated public performance. It seems unproblematic to designate online reviewing, particularly on blogs and Goodreads, as a foundry for the creation of a well-read, considerate and critical literary persona. However, when the memoir under review wears its racial politics on its sleeve as overtly as *Am I Black Enough?*, the performative nature of the review is correspondingly amplified. If, on Amazon, this takes the form of trolling and hyperbolic grandstanding, Goodreads and blog reviewers overwhelmingly present themselves as liberal-minded, sensitive and politically-engaged citizens, eager to learn about Aboriginal people, culture and history. While I have no qualms interpreting these reviews as genuine expressions of learning and ethical reflection, they nonetheless remain performed acts for an imagined, public audience.

The correlation between thematic emphasis on 'education' in Heiss' memoir, amateur reviewing practices, and Goodreads/blog reviews goes deeper still. *Am I*

Black Enough? is not only *about* education, but the *act* of reading it, as previous surveys of cross-cultural reception have shown, can be transformative, destabilising, and most importantly, educative. (For an explanation of how this didactic impulse drives Heiss' fiction, see Mathew, 'Educating'). Viewed from the perspective of online amateur reviewing practices, the ability to identify and reproduce pedagogical aspects of *Am I Black Enough?* becomes a way for non-professional readers to demonstrate their reviewing competency and critical literacy. Genre plays a role here too. The desire to be educated—and reader's concomitant gratitude for Heiss' guidance—sits in stark contrast to the reception of Heiss' 'choc' lit. Readers of *Tiddas* (2014) constitute roughly the same demographic as readers of her memoir and populate the same reviewing spaces. They are markedly less enthused, however, at the prospect of being educated while reading a genre premised on escapist fun. This suggests that the non-fiction genre of the memoir is more likely to be read—and accepted—as an educational text. Or, given that most works by Heiss have a pedagogical overlay, this is likely to be received more positively in her non-fiction than her fiction.

3. Amazon Reviewing Controversy

The desire to educate others forms a frequent refrain in *Am I Black Enough?*: 'I want people to be challenged, to think about their role in the world and how their behaviour impacts on other people, particularly Aboriginal people. I want readers to learn …' (199). From the evidence presented above, Heiss appears to have been successful. Yet this tells only half the story. At the time of its publication, Heiss' memoir was reviewed extensively on Amazon; these reviews are remarkable for their insistent negativity and their obdurate focus on the court case and Heiss at the expense of reviewing the book itself. Moreover, they occupy the porous boundary between reviewing and commentary; in these reviews, 'not reading' practices and 'non-readers' (Benwell, Procter and Robinson) play a crucial role in generating controversy.

Amazon reviews have been the focus of both mainstream and scholarly analysis. The former frequently parses its coverage using the language of scandal and controversy—and not without reason. The historian Orlando Figes and crime writer R.J. Ellory have both admitted to 'sock puppetry', the practice of using reviews to pseudonymously praise their own writing while panning the work of rivals. Amazon has pursued legal action against web users who offer to review books for a fee and the case study offered by this paper precedes more recent accounts of 'activist' reviews, whereby proponents of a particular cause (such as those who believe that the 2012 Sandy Hook massacre was staged by the American government) use the Amazon book reviewing space to discredit or attack their opponents, invariably flooding the book in question with negative, one-star reviews. The mainstream media generally portray book reviewing

practices on Amazon as one limb of a multi-tentacled, ethically dubious empire: Amazon is equally notorious for its tax evasion, anti-competitive practices and poor treatment of workers. Scholarly accounts, by contrast, are chiefly interested in Amazon as a source of data. This research appears in computer science or business journals and employs a variety of statistical and algorithm-based methodologies to evaluate the utility of reviews, ratings and recommendations. In contrast, this paper contributes to the small body of work that treats Amazon reviews as a qualitative source of analysis for literary studies. Through reference to earlier scholarly treatments of scandals of reception (namely Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*) this paper takes the mainstream media's focus on Amazon book reviewing scandals as a matter of academic concern.

The Amazon reviewing controversy surrounding Heiss' memoir has its origins, much like the court case itself, in the work of Andrew Bolt. Hot on the heels of *Am I Black Enough?*'s release in early April 2012, Bolt published a blog post asking 'Are We Censored Enough for You?'. The text of this particular post has disappeared from the web, but remaining fragments available on *Crikey* or Bolt's Goodreads blog, coupled with media reportage at the time, suggest that its most salient feature was a link to the Amazon website for *Am I Black Enough?*, accompanied by the disclaimer 'I am not trying to incite anyone into attacking Heiss's book' (Bolt qtd. in Sear). Bolt was responding to the closure of the comments section on several Australian-hosted *Am I Black Enough?* webpages after they had received heavy trolling traffic. That *Am I Black Enough?* could still be reviewed on the American Amazon website was designed to demonstrate the limits of 'free speech' in Australia and the comparatively greater civil liberties enjoyed across the Pacific. A few days after Bolt's blog post went live, Saffron Howden, a Fairfax journalist, wrote a pair of articles questioning Bolt's response ('Racist', 'Bolt'). Her work was later subject to a complaint to the Australian Press Council. Bearing this snarled history in mind, I focus on Amazon reviews published on the main US website; the local Australian shopfront opened for business in late 2013, when the lion's share of *Am I Black Enough?* reviews had already been recorded on the American website. Although *Am I Black Enough?* continues to be reviewed on Amazon (.com and .com.au) my analysis centres on reviews from early April 2012.

To borrow Bethan Benwell, James Procter and Gemma Robinson's terminology, the reviewing practices that comprise *Am I Black Enough?* Amazon reviews could productively be viewed through the framework of 'non-readers' and 'not-reading'. Not only do 'non-readers' (as opposed to the more far more commonly encountered category of 'readers') represent an under-theorised but highly

necessary area of reception studies,[5] but also they tend to emerge in controversies that, perhaps not incidentally, implicate contested religious, racial or ethnic identities. Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988) represents the high-watermark in this regard, followed more recently by the furore that erupted on the publication of Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003) and its adaptation into film. I formulate my investigation into the *Am I Black Enough?* Amazon reviews using the terms provided by Benwell, Procter and Robinson, that 'the values attached to reading, not reading, and the choices between them [are] variously attached to notions of freedom, tolerance and democracy…' (84). Moreover, like Benwell, Procter and Robinson, I treat 'not reading' as a 'fertile and contested site of meaning production that still has much to teach us about the significance of recent book controversies' (84).

As I have shown in the preceding section, book reviews posted on personal blogs and Goodreads tend to produce certain types of discourse about race, where reading about race becomes a site of learning and ethical reflection. While race still forms the basis of the majority of *Am I Black Enough?* Amazon reviews, it is parsed in language filled with derision, scorn and outrage. These reviews hold Heiss up as a 'hypocrite', 'a grotesque hypocrite' and a 'coward'. She asks '… a bold, rhetorical question, smug in her knowledge that the last person to answer it publicly was persecuted by law' and embodies 'Aboriginal tokenism by a token aboriginal [sic] living off the public teat'. Her Aboriginal heritage is so small as to be negligible: Heiss is '[a member] of the professional aboriginal [sic] class', 'predominantly of European descent' and 'obviously white'. Reviewers lament their inability to express their opinions on an Australian website ('I am using this forum as it would be illegal for me to express these views in Australia, such is the curtailment of freedom of speech'; 'I believe freedom of speech still exists in the US; it no longer does in Australia'). The only possible reason anyone may want to purchase Heiss' memoir is to use it as toilet paper ('This balderdash as a paperback has one use. Take it with you on a [sic] Everest climb and use it page by page each whenever the need calls'). Or not: 'I wouldnt [sic] even buy this book to wipe my ??? [sic]'.

The fact that so many of these reviews are written by non-readers who use the Amazon reviewing space to parade their not-reading practices presents an important question: are the *Am I Black Enough?* Amazon reviews actually reviews at all? The answer, as I will show, is both a yes and a no. On one hand, they bear far greater resemblance to commentary than to any traditional conception of a review. This can be indexed in several ways. First, they mirror the online comments section still available in other fora, such as Andrew Bartlett's blog

[5] For a tongue-in-cheek take on not-reading practices, see Pierre Bayard's *How To Talk About Books You Haven't Read*.

review of *Am I Black Enough?* and an interview with Heiss on the ABC's Radio National. Second, most of the Amazon reviewers have not read *Am I Black Enough?*: while this is implicit in most of the reviews, some staunchly assert their 'not-reading' ('I have not read this book and have no intention of doing so'; 'As a clear caveat up front, please note that I have not read this book, nor do I intend to'; 'i [sic] will not even bother reading the book (and I state that now without any pretence) so i am unable to critique its contents as a body of work'; 'I read the first few pages for free (thanks Amazon) - what a load of self serving [sic] dribble'). Third, most of the reviewers pursue a line of enquiry that has little to do with the book itself, and more to do with Heiss as public figure ('a professional grievance monger'; 'yet another race huckster'), a perceived silencing of civil liberties ('In Australia we don't have the freedom of speech that enables us to answer [her] question') and the waste of taxpayer's money ('using the mis deeds [sic] of the past to feather your own nest in the present on the taxpayers dime is a disgrace').

When Amazon reviewers do discuss the book, this is generally limited to a disputation of the titular question before digressing quickly back to the court case. Those who have read *Am I Black Enough?* are scathing: '[a]fter having read this book, I am surprised it was ever published. In a triumph of the middling with a nod to mediocrity, the book is dull and uninspiring, no great literary work and leaning heavily on the victimhood angle'; 'As for a work of literary merit, I'd place it up there with "Mein Kampf" and "The Little Red Book"'. Fourth, a number of reviewers echo Bolt's frustration at the closure of the *Am I Black Enough?* comments section on several Australian websites. The Amazon reviewing space represents a refuge for those whose desire to continue discussion of the memoir has been curtailed on Australian-hosted websites. In this light, Amazon reviews are perhaps more appropriately characterised as transposed commentary. Finally, the comments section under each Amazon review provides additional space for vigorous interaction with the preceding review. The number of comments sitting under one review can be astronomically high, with some (mostly the few positive *Am I Black Enough?* reviews) registering between 80 and 100 comments. In this sense too, *Am I Black Enough?* Amazon reviews more closely approximate bitter and protracted online flame wars than book reviews.

For all the reasons I incline to read Amazon reviews as comments, there remain some sticking points. An argument could be made, for example, that the Amazon reviews *are* reviews because they appear under a particular rubric designated as a reviewing space. Even if a close reading of the content would suggest otherwise, the fact that they are presented and labelled as reviews deserves credence in a discussion of their relationship to the reviewing genre. Further acknowledgement of the sway 'review' holds as a label or generic marker is demonstrated by my choice in this paper to refer to the Amazon reviews as reviews, in spite of the concerns I raise in the preceding paragraphs. Finally, if a book review is designed

to help readers decide whether a particular book merits their investment of time and money, there should be no doubt that Amazon reviews fulfil this purpose too. Reviewers respect the conventions of the review by giving *Am I Black Enough?* a starred rating (usually one out of five) and they are adamant that this book should not be bought: 'Don't waste your money…'; 'Do not get it'; 'I recommend you DON'T buy this book' [capitals in original]; 'Spend you [sic] money elsewhere on an author more deserving'.

Unlike reviews appearing on other platforms, the *Am I Black Enough?* Amazon reviews cannot be discussed without addressing the charge of racism: were they racist or simply tough and unsparing? For critics of Andrew Bolt, sympathetic to Heiss' writing and her role in the court case, the Amazon reviews are 'predictably nasty' (Bongiorno); these commentators respect Heiss' 'courage' in the face 'hate mail and racist comments' (Windisch), rue their own 'misfortune' at having witnessed the 'racist and derogatory comments' to which Heiss was subject (Foster) and stand in solidarity with her 'after another internet backlash from trolls' (Prior). On the other hand, those supportive of Bolt and disappointed with the outcome of the court case reject any charge of racism. This is a no-brainer for Andrew Bolt: '… none of the reviews I'd seen when I linked [to Amazon] were racist by any sane definition' ('Race' n.p.). Caroline Overington concedes that the reviews 'bristle… with criticism of Heiss' decision to publish her book, some of it moderate, some of it quite cruel' but avoids any discussion of racism ('It's Not About Being Black Enough' n.p.).

The racial politics at work in the *Am I Black Enough?* Amazon reviews cannot be ignored, nor dismissed as simply harsh critique. They rest on the same logic voiced by Bolt in his original newspaper articles, that Heiss' claims to Aboriginal identity are spurious and that her identification as an Aboriginal woman is motivated by financial gain. Heiss is everything Aboriginal people are assumed not to be: fairer-skinned, articulate, financially secure and professionally successful. The public discussion of racial politics on Amazon anticipates the more recent booing that has dogged Sydney Swans footballer Adam Goodes.[6] Waleed Aly's succinct and devastating summary ('the minute an Indigenous man stands up and is something other than compliant, the backlash is huge… We boo our discomfort')[7] provides a disturbingly apt framework for reading Amazon reviews of *Am I Black Enough?* as an index of our discomfort when an Aboriginal woman refuses to be complicit in stereotypes perpetuated by people such as Bolt. Of course, many who read and reviewed *Am I Black Enough?* treated this process as an opportunity to learn about Australia's First Peoples and reflect on their own attitudes towards Aboriginal

[6] Goodes is an Aboriginal man who has denounced racism on and off the sporting field. When he was booed by opposition spectators at Australian Football League matches in 2015, it was justly interpreted by many as racist.
[7] I thank Monique Rooney for bringing Aly's commentary to my attention.

Australians. At the risk of giving too much weight to those who shout the loudest, the Amazon reviews measure just how deeply contested racial politics and Aboriginal identity remain in contemporary Australian society.

4. Conclusion

The reception of Anita Heiss' *Am I Black Enough for You?* should leave no doubt that racial politics hold tremendous sway over online reviewing practices. If, in some corners of the digital literary sphere, reviewing race is a process of learning and reflection, in others it is a space scorched with anger and indignation. When this terrain is appropriated *en masse* to denounce a book, its author, and the events preceding its publication, the line between commentary and reviews is confusingly blurred. Despite the many differences between the two types of reviews discussed in this paper, what is perhaps most remarkable are the points on which they converge. As Benwell, Procter and Robinson point out, 'reading' and 'not reading' alike are profoundly fertile sites of meaning-making that start with the book but often end up in another place altogether. This paper has shown that the book review, as a genre and as a site of online literary engagement, opens up vistas that far exceed the book itself, travelling inwards towards the self or opening outwards towards the Australian psyche and its constituent parts.

Am I Black Enough for You?, is, admittedly, an extreme example. It sits at the confluence of a unique and unprecedented set of events in Australian literary, legal and political history. It implicates an extraordinary range of actors, from the private reader to the Prime Minister. Its reception brings to light the entangled racial politics of the nation as a whole, encompassing deep reservoirs of goodwill and animosity. Yet the very things that make Heiss' memoir attractive as a case study of racial politics in the digital literary sphere and beyond also mark out its limitations. Its sensational beginnings in Andrew Bolt's articles and subsequent court case, its provocative title and controversies of its reception all give weight to the question of how representative a case study it truly is, and how applicable any findings extracted from it may be. Such doubts are legitimate but misleading. They ignore the influence one book can have in provoking and rekindling a debate about freedom of speech, protection from vilification and an individual's right to identify with their cultural, racial or ethnic origins.

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8. Conclusion

Peta Tully, resplendent in her watermelon pink coat on a dreary Melbourne morning, bumps into a literal manifestation of authentic Aboriginality at the Vic Markets. And after years of racist abuse ("coco-pop, chocolate drop, abo, boong and coon" [*Am I Black Enough?* 88]), Anita Heiss wakes up in April 2009 to find that she's too white for the Australian tabloid press. The "Authentic Aborigine" in "full chocolate brown, red loincloth [and] holding a spear" (*Avoiding Mr Right* 247) may seem a far cry from Andrew Bolt's "professional Aborigine" of mixed ancestry and fair skin. But both illustrate the restrictive and limited ways non-Aboriginal Australians imagine the nation's First Peoples. This thesis has explored some of the many strategies Anita Heiss uses to expand the ways Aboriginal Australians figure "on the Australian identity radar" (Heiss "On Being Invisible" 256).

The five journal articles presented in this thesis address separate but interrelated questions regarding the production and reception of Anita Heiss's writing. My research project adds to the growing body of work on Anita Heiss's writing, as well as contributing to broader debate about the plurality of contemporary Aboriginal identity in twenty-first century Australia. My thesis investigates two of the many genres in which she writes, publishes and is reviewed. At one end sits the genre in which she has carved a niche for herself: bold and energetic, Heiss's chick lit is an utterly original intervention in Aboriginal, Australian and world literatures. When Heiss published her 2012 memoir *Am I Black Enough for You?*, she joined the well-theorised and well-populated field of Aboriginal women's life writing. Differences in size (a field of one versus a field of many) and cultural value aside, Heiss's writing is thoroughly cosmopolitan in its outlook (Ommundsen "Sex and the Global City") and thoroughly global in its ambition. In terms of the latter, Heiss aims "to write Aboriginal people into the Australian literary landscape, which then goes into an international landscape" (*The Garret*).[17]

Heiss often calls herself a "creative disruptor" (Adelaide 218) and it's easy to see why. She is, variously, an author, academic, educator, entrepreneur, Indigenous literacy advocate

[17] In the same interview, Heiss states "I don't just create literature, I create a cultural product, as Australian writers do, because we are reflecting to the world who we are as a nation".

and activist. And sometimes many in one day. Her calendar for 2019 includes a spot at the Jaipur Literature Festival in India, a presentation on a 1,258-guest cruise ship, a writer's residency at Geelong Grammar and a keynote presentation at the Aboriginal Early Childhood conference in Sydney (Heiss "Upcoming Appearances"). The incredible diversity of her public engagements is buttressed by an extensive social media presence. By January 2019, Heiss had posted over 100,000 tweets and retweets and she counted more than 24,800 followers on Twitter. These numbers continue to grow. She uses Instagram, Facebook, a professional website and a blog to connect with her audience. This could be dismissed as window dressing, but as Heiss explains on her blog, her use of social media influences, creates and extends her readership ("The Art of Connectivity").

Though Heiss's writing constitutes just one part of her multi-faceted public persona, it too is characterised by heterogeneity, polyvalency and pragmatism. Indeed, it can be difficult to reconcile some of the many facets of Heiss's published writing, such is its heterogeneity. The casual observer may well be justified in asking what business a PhD in First Nations Literature has in talking about "right-wing fuck-knuckle[s]" (*Not Meeting Mr Right* 56) or depicting a protagonist's earring caught in the penis piercing of her lover (*Avoiding Mr Right* 73-7). As jarring and incompatible as these examples seem, one of my efforts in this thesis has been to highlight the common threads woven through Heiss's writing, especially her commitment to representing the diversity of Aboriginal identity.

One of the main themes to emerge over the course of this thesis is the way Heiss actively seeks to shape and influence public opinion regarding the plurality of Aboriginal identity. In my published writing, I refer to this as Heiss's 'pedagogical agenda'. In many ways, discussion of Heiss's pedagogical agenda complements my argument about the plurality of contemporary Aboriginal identity; in my reckoning, Heiss uses her public interventions, especially her literature, to *educate* the Australian public about the diversity of Australia's First Peoples. Thus, my journal articles can all be seen to delineate the various textual strategies Heiss uses in her fiction and non-fiction to educate her non-Aboriginal readership about Australia's diverse population of First Peoples.

This theme is at its most subterranean in my first journal article; I investigate the many and varied ways Heiss's chick lit poses intellectually challenging questions about literary value, race, gender, sexuality, identity and culture. While "'The Pretty and the Political'" is

alert to the different political uses to which Heiss puts her chick lit, I don't identify a specific pedagogical agenda as such. Although I was proud to have my first article published, I had the sense that I hadn't quite grasped what was going on in Heiss's fiction. It was this feeling of dissatisfaction that prompted the more focussed enquiry in my second journal article, "Educating the Reader in Anita Heiss's Chick Lit". From the title to the conclusion, this article addresses the thematic of a pedagogical agenda in the most detail, and at the greatest length, of all my articles.

Janice Radway's 1984 study of American romance readers significantly furthers the connection between the pedagogical benefits of women's popular fiction reading practices. The women in Radway's study "cite the educational value of romances" as one of the chief attractions of the genre (*Reading the Romance* 108). Romance publishing houses, in turn, "are all very aware of the romance reader's penchant for geographical and historical accuracy" (108). Radway further observes that "romance reading is worthwhile because the stories provide pleasure while the activity of reading challenges [readers] to learn new words and information about a world they find intriguing and all too distant" (116). In Radway's analysis, the possibility of education through reading is one of a constellation of attractions associated with the genre, alongside escapism, relaxation, and self-care. Education through reading is certainly encouraged by various romance publishing houses, but Radway does not present this as ideologically driven, nor as the publishing houses striving to impart a particular political message to romance readers. My analysis of Heiss's writing, by contrast, highlights the way that the author intentionally seeks to educate her readers on a number of issues directly related to the experience of being Aboriginal and Australian in the twenty-first century.

It was only with the publication of "Reviewing Race in the Digital Literary Sphere" that education started to emerge as a thematic touchstone in my research, rather than the topic of one discrete article. "Reviewing Race" is divided into four sections; the subheading of the second again returns us to the theme of education: "2. Education, Empathy and Ethical Reflection". Save for Amazon, online reviews of *Am I Black Enough?* repeatedly make reference to the pedagogical experience of reading Heiss's memoir. Reviewers report having learned from Heiss, and many praise her memoir as an ideal teaching tool in the classroom. In seeking to explain how and why Heiss's memoir evinced such a strong response in relation

to the theme of education, I considered a range of interrelated explanations. The first relates to genre, in the sense that readers may approach non-fiction (and Aboriginal women's life writing in particular) with a view to learning rather than just entertainment. When I was revising "Reviewing Race", the editors suggested that the performative nature of online reviewing could mean that the emphasis on education in reviews could be a way of signalling good reading practices. This is especially pertinent given that Heiss is the kind of author who is likely to retweet, repost, and comment on reader reviews.

Heiss parses much of the content of *Am I Black* Enough in explicitly educational terms. For instance, Heiss documents her journey through the Australian education system and her concomitant transition from a consumer to a producer of knowledge. Heiss comfortably takes on the mantle of educator: her memoir recounts her initiatives to lead discussion of the plurality of Aboriginal identity within the public sphere. Additionally, she regularly visits primary and secondary school classrooms around the country, where "what should be a standard author visit where I talk about a book … ends up becoming a crash-course in cultural awareness workshop [sic] where I discuss basic historical and demographic information" (*Am I Black Enough?* 197). I expand the idea of Heiss's memoir as an educational text in my fifth journal article, "Concrete Koori, Not 'Professional Aborigine'". The time spent studying the reception of *Am I Black Enough?* strongly informed my decision to present the memoir as an educational tool—or educational corrective, as I put it—in my close reading of Heiss's memoir. Perhaps the difference with this article is that I return more fully to the text itself, and think about the various audiences Heiss seems to be creating and then addressing through the memoir: I argue that Heiss's memoir addresses both the figure of Andrew Bolt and the wider context in which his ideas hold powerful currency.

As much as the idea of a pedagogical agenda helped me to think about my project, it also led me astray. This is most obvious in the development of my *Tiddas* reception paper. Before beginning this part of my research project, I hypothesised that readers would appreciate the educative experience offered by Heiss's fiction. When I began reading through the reviews, however, and realised that very few (if any) displayed my imagined response, I developed an alternative explanation. This went along the lines of: readers strongly disliked Heiss's educative agenda but were unwilling to publicly express this dislike, for fear of being labelled a racist. Their dislike, then, was suppressed in their reviews, and left its traces in an

ambivalent attitude towards *Tiddas*. This was also not the case either. As I've worked through the revisions to this article, I have come to see that my emphasis on a pedagogical agenda, though entirely consonant other pieces of research in this thesis, hindered my reading of the reviews I had in front of me.

When I began my research candidature, Wenche Ommundsen's comparative study of Heiss's *Mr Right* series was the only published scholarly writing to discuss Heiss's work. This thesis, in turn, builds on Ommundsen's research by contributing the first full-length journal articles to discuss the production and reception of Heiss's writing. The thesis by compilation format means I have been able to circulate my research findings from the early stages of my doctoral candidature. In so doing, I have drawn attention to the importance of Heiss's work in three separate fields: Australian literary studies, the global phenomenon of non-white chick lit, and cross-cultural reception studies. My thesis has broken new and important ground by attending to the intellectual interventions woven through Heiss's writing; additionally, I have brought Heiss's work to an international scholarly audience by prioritising journal article publication in my research agenda.

The scholarly research on Heiss at the beginning of my doctoral candidature, compared to what is available now, demonstrates increasing interest in Heiss's writing. For example, Erin Hurt's introduction to her 2018 edited collection *Theorising Ethnicity and Nationality in the Chick Lit Genre* makes detailed reference to Heiss's chick lit and the way Heiss constructs her identity. Hurt quotes Heiss's 2008 International Women's Day speech, where Heiss underscores the specificity of her Aboriginal identity: "I don't wear ochre … I wear Revlon, or Clinique, or Max Factor"; "I don't tell time by the sun – I tell time by a gorgeous Dolce and Gabbana watch"; and so on (Heiss qtd. in Hurt "Introduction" 4). Later on in the same volume, Lauren O'Mahony discusses Heiss's chick lit in the chapter "More than Sex, Shopping and Shoes: Cosmopolitan Indigeneity and Cultural Politics in Anita Heiss's Koori Lit". It is pleasing to think that my published writing may have played a role in the elevation and expanded scholarly interest in Heiss's writing.

A further innovation offered by my research is the incorporation of reception studies methodologies. By studying the online reception of Heiss's fiction and non-fiction, I put forward a means of understanding the impact of her work that moves beyond the boundaries of the physical (or electronic) book while remaining within the realm of book culture. My two

reception articles respond to the call made by Simone Murray for greater engagement with the digital literary sphere ("Charting the Digital Literary Sphere"; *The Digital Literary Sphere*). The digital literary sphere comprises a diverse and evolving range of phenomena, from literary festival hashtags to online book clubs. My research explores the phenomenon of amateur reviews posted on community reviewing websites, personal blogs and commercial bookselling websites such as Amazon. One of the key findings to emerge from my two reception studies papers is that amateur book reviewing practices are shaped by the affordances of the platform and the genre of the book.

The growth of interest in Heiss's fiction highlights that this is a rich field for further research. Some of the tantalising ideas that I noted—but was unable to pursue—over the course of this research project include Heiss's treatment of queer Aboriginal identity; the representation of motherhood; class politics; and Heiss's authorial presence in the digital literary sphere. Looking beyond the chick lit and memoir genres discussed in this thesis, another aspect of Heiss's writing that I came to see as increasingly important—but severely lacking scholarly attention—was her Young Adult fiction and advocacy around Indigenous literacy. Aboriginal children's literature, Heiss writes, "explore[s] aspects of Australian history and society not regularly covered in other areas of Australian children's book publishing or in the education system" ("Aboriginal Children's Literature" 102). Expanding this view, Heiss's writing demonstrate the importance of Aboriginal Australian intellectual interventions in the public sphere. A more expansive study than the one undertaken in these pages could contextualise Heiss as part of a larger historical shift: as one of many public figures arguing for the plurality of contemporary Aboriginal identity (such as Adam Goodes and Stan Grant) or who use popular forms such as hip hop (see the work of Chiara Minestrelli, for example) and television series to bring a political message to the mainstream Australian public.

Finally, comparison with writers such as Oodgeroo Noonuccal and Sally Morgan would bring a deeper historical context to how Aboriginal writers use popular literary forms to create change in the Australian public sphere. This was the subject of "Middle Ground as Battle ground? Rethinking Indigenous Literary Success", a paper I presented at the 2015 American Association of Australasian Literary Studies (AAALS) conference. In this paper, I begin by observing that Noonuccal, Morgan and Heiss all achieved considerable mainstream literary success; as Heiss notes in *Dhuuluu-Yala: To Talk Straight*, such success is all the more

noteworthy given the structural and institutional difficulties Aboriginal Australian writers face (90-9). In drawing this comparison, I suggest the following recalibration of Aboriginal Australian literary lineages: if mainstream literary success represents an effective tool of political action, it also foregrounds Heiss as the inheritor of a tradition that runs from the venerable, much-loved Noonuccal through the more problematic and contested Morgan. There was limited scope to pursue this idea beyond the paper I presented at the AAALS conference, however this kind of literary-historical contextualisation remains an open question in accounts of Aboriginal Australian literature.

In his Foreword to Anita Heiss's *Dhuuluu-Yala: To Talk Straight*, Kim Scott writes that Heiss "provides a very comprehensive discussion of what Indigenous writing has been". As he reflects on the future of Indigenous writing, he continues: "of course we don't yet know what it might become, and I'm glad [Heiss] has resisted saying what it should be" (iii). Heiss's—and, for that matter, Scott's—reluctance to set out a future path for Aboriginal Australian literature is a refreshing and much-needed tonic in an already over-defined field: as I have shown through this thesis, too many elements of Aboriginal Australian life and identity are already over-determined by pre-conceived notions. Indeed, Heiss doesn't need to say what the future of Aboriginal Australian literature looks like; in the intervening fifteen years since *Dhuuluu Yala*'s publication, she has been busy creating it.

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Appendix: "Love in the Time of Racism: *Barbed Wire and Cherry Blossoms* Explores the Politics of Romance"

THE CONVERSATION
Academic rigour, journalistic flair

Love in the time of racism: 'Barbed Wire and Cherry Blossoms' explores the politics of romance

September 7, 2016 3.06pm AEST

Anita Heiss' latest work presents unsettling questions for the non-aboriginal reader.

Author

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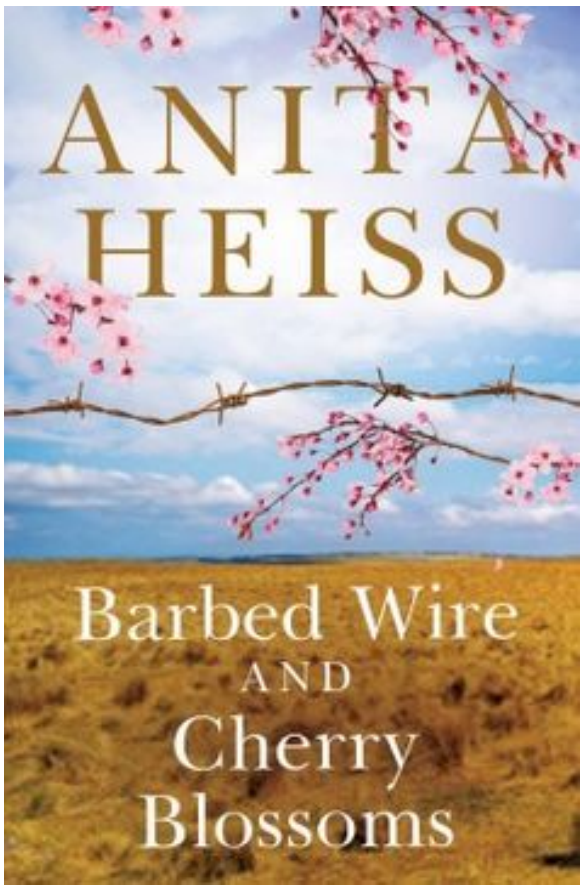
Popular media forms, from Oodgeroo Noonuccal's poetry to the dystopian sci-fi television series Cleverman, have often been used by Aboriginal Australians to inform and entertain. The latest example of this type of political and artistic endeavour is Wiradjuri author Anita Heiss' new work Barbed Wire and Cherry Blossoms.

Set in Cowra during the second World War, her novel recounts a love story between a young Aboriginal woman, Mary, and an escaped Japanese POW, Hiroshi.

Hiroshi has been given food and shelter by Mary's family, despite the considerable risk their kindness involves – they live on Erambie Mission under the Aborigines Protection Act 1909, with no rights, scraps for clothes and barely any food. Their very existence depends on the whim of the station manager, King Billie.

Heiss is well-known as the author of five "choc"-lit novels and her writing takes inspiration from the genre made famous by Bridget Jones's Diary (1996). What sets Heiss apart are the avowedly political ends to which she puts her popular fiction. She wrote in Am I Black Enough For You? (2012):



Barbed Wire and Cherry Blossoms by Anita Heiss Simon & Schuster AU

> *I want people to be challenged, to think about their role in the world and how their behaviour impacts on other people, particularly Aboriginal people. I want readers to learn...*

The importance of Heiss' fiction as an educational device should not be underestimated: the recent example of Bill Leak's cartoon in The Australian is simply the latest of many shameful examples that highlight mainstream Australia's ignorance of Aboriginal culture, politics and people.

This cultural illiteracy is neither abstract nor theoretical: as Chelsea Bond (and the hashtag #IndigenousDads) argue, it hurts Aboriginal people, it hurts communities and it hurts Australia.

It's a pretty dismal picture. Heiss is a realist, but an optimist. On one hand, her popular fiction aims to instruct the reader in Aboriginal culture, history and politics. On the other, it captures the day-to-day life of Aboriginal women, whether they live on the mission or in the Big Apple, in a style that is entertaining and accessible.

Barbed Wire can, and should, be read as a romance. Heiss' sensitive portrayal of Mary and Hiroshi's growing attraction is one of the novel's chief pleasures:

> *their first kiss is full of everything the war lacks: love, compassion, respect. It lasts only seconds but will linger with them both for a long time after.*

With deftness and a lightness of touch, Heiss accords her protagonists privacy in their intimate moment. The war is unshakably present, but it recedes into the background without overpowering the shy advances of her two protagonists.

Heiss' strengths as a writer are on full display: the blossoming romance between Hiroshi and Mary refuses an "us vs. them", "goodies vs. baddies" mentality, instead presenting a complex view of cross-cultural relationships. Japanese, Italian, Aboriginal and white identities are brought into sometimes uncomfortable proximity.

It would be selling Heiss short to say that love erases race, but she goes to great pains to show that respect and trust, patience and compassion far outweigh skin colour in matters of the heart.

The genre of popular romance, long associated with female readers, also allows Heiss to make a broader point about similarities between women. Commentary on her 2014 novel Tiddas still rings true:

> *As women what makes us the same is that we value our friendships, we treasure the relationships with our mothers and our sisters, and so forth. … It's about being human beings. When we think about it, we've got more in common than we haven't.*

But Heiss refuses to sugarcoat the past for the reader. Questions of enmity and friendship are snarled and unpleasant: who is fighting whom?

Author Anita Heiss. AAP Image/Random House

If white Australia has declared war on its First Peoples at the same time as enlisting Aboriginal men to die for the British Empire, where should Mary's loyalties lie? With the nation? With her people? And, more disquieting still for the white reader, are the Japanese and Aboriginal Australians united by a common enemy?

These questions are designed to unsettle the non-Aboriginal reader, destabilising conventional historical narratives and challenging the reader to learn their country anew through the eyes of its First Peoples.

Re-learning the nation, though necessary, comes at a cost. It is worn on the bodies of Aboriginal women, who frequently (and not always willingly) find themselves cast in the role of educator. Over seven pages, Mary explains to Hiroshi the degradations and deprivations of living under the Protection Act. When she stops, finally, "she takes a deep breath, exhausted by what feels like schooling".

The psychic toll extracted by this “schooling” is immense, wrought firstly by living through the Protection Act and secondly by explaining it to others. Heiss’ fiction comes with a warning to the non-Aboriginal reader: don’t expect Aboriginal people to do the hard work for you. But it is also offers hope for the future: education can create change.

Although Barbed Wire is set in 1944, it presents an unerringly apt commentary on contemporary Australian society, because it precisely identifies the racism that sits at the heart of the Australian psyche. Heiss recently wrote, referring to Manus Island, Nauru and revelations of abuse in Don Dale:

> *I wanted Australians generally to realise that while we treated the POWs here in the 1940s as we were meant to under the Geneva Conventions, we have gone backwards as a nation today …*

Work in the same vein as Leak’s will continue to be produced, printed and defended, and Indigenous youth will continue to be disproportionately incarcerated, until something fundamental shifts in Australia.

For that shift to happen, it’s incumbent upon non-Aboriginal Australians to educate themselves about the past and present of Australia’s First Peoples. A vital first step is listening to Aboriginal voices.

Review **Indigenous art** **Romance novels**