

Chapter 3 Indigenous Discourse

*Current writings by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people belong within a cultural and historical continuity that predates the invasion whilst utilising, adapting and challenging the written genres and forms of the colonising culture.*⁸⁶

David Unaipon is regarded as the earliest pioneer of Aboriginal writing and publishing and is commonly thought to be the first Aboriginal writer in Australia. Unaipon published *Native Legends* in 1929 and wrote articles for the *Daily Telegraph* during 1924. Apart from Unaipon's work it is also generally accepted that written Aboriginal literature did not fully develop into a distinct genre until the 1970s, 80s and 90s. Penny van Toorn qualifies this generally accepted view commenting that, "Aboriginal people began using the technologies of alphabetic writing and print far earlier than the dominant literary historical narrative would suggest."⁸⁷ She points out that this writing and printing was in fact used as early as 1796 when Bennelong dictated a letter to Lord Sydney's steward. Van Toorn notes that letters, poems, essays, pamphlets, newsletters, newspaper articles, petitions, speeches and traditional stories written and printed by Aboriginal people have been overlooked as legitimate forms of literature and publishing.⁸⁸

Non-Indigenous academic, Stephen Muecke, also argues that Aboriginal people considered to be 'illiterate' have always read or written in the broad sense, but that these forms of writing have simply been valued differently by other, (mostly colonising) peoples.⁸⁹ Muecke draws on Paddy Roe, (from whom he recorded *Gularabulu: Stories from the West Kimberley* [1983]) as an example of an author who uses an "abstract signifying system of lines, dots, circles and so on," as a form of writing⁹⁰, and asks, "do we fail to call it writing because it is kept from white people?"⁹¹ Van Toorn and Muecke show that literature and publishing do not simply include printed works in book form, but can range from dots and circles in the sand to letters, essays, articles, pamphlets and so on.

Jennifer Biddle also discusses the use of Aboriginal artwork as story-telling, particularly in the form of the art book, *Kuruwarri: Yuendumu Doors* (1987). This work highlights the historical literary creativity of Aboriginal people who combine art and language to communicate stories to the broadest possible audience.⁹² For example, many Warlpiri people cannot read Warlpiri when it is written in the 'English style' but they can *read* the painted stories. By way of comparison, many Europeans could not *read* these paintings. The skill of portraying a story and comprehending it, adds, I think, another dimension to the concept of 'literacy'.

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The late Judith Wright, as early as 1988, described ‘Black writing’ as, “a literature in its own right”.⁹³ With the dawning of this new understanding, came the rise of a new set of literary questions and issues. By whose standards would *this* writing be judged? Who would be most likely to review and assess such work? Wright posed these questions:

Do we go on talking from our critical heights, as though our standards are necessarily to be accepted even by those who have no cause to thank us for them? And do we continue to dismiss Black writers unless they somehow contrive to keep a lowly and conventional stand?⁹⁴

Furthermore, by whom and how would this new literature be defined? At the outset it could be argued that any definition of Aboriginal writing should be coming from Aboriginal writers themselves. While the diversity within Aboriginal Australia might make Aboriginal literacy difficult to define, there is consensus among writers that a work must at least be written or co-authored by an Indigenous person for it to be an Aboriginal work. Direct input to the work by an Aboriginal person will result in the work being able to be construed stylistically as, Aboriginal.

Huggins and Bell find it relatively easy to define Aboriginal literature. Huggins sees it as something, “holistic, all-embracing, and written by an Indigenous person.”⁹⁵ Bell defines it as a way of telling our side of the story in our characteristic style: “we were oral people, so literature wasn’t something to worry about sixty years ago, but we’ve come a long way.”⁹⁶ In this way, Aboriginal literature can be defined and judged by *writers* in terms of what has driven the production of a work and the way a work reflects the real life experiences of Indigenous people.

Alexis Wright comments that the experience of the Aboriginal writer will influence the writing of a work and that as a result, a distinct Aboriginal literature can be identified because,

We see the world differently, our experience of the world differs from the rest of the population, and our linguistic expression will differ from what is accepted as Standard English. If Aboriginal writing causes unease it is because it challenges non-Aboriginal perceptions of standard English, or white concepts, values and ways of describing events, places, people etc.

What we do as Aboriginal writers is try to second guess the world of literature, we don’t enter into the discourse because our experience does not allow it. There are many people who will not share their knowledge through writing because historically, literature was used against us. They say, why bother trying to explain to them, because they would not understand so our knowledge is wasted on them.⁹⁷

However, poet Lisa Bellear questions whether or not there is actually something that can be defined as Aboriginal literature. She says that if it does

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exist it is being primarily judged by non-Aboriginal people, the very people Judith Wright suggested should not be judging it. Bellear raises these contemporary questions:

Is it Aboriginal literature because it's written about an Aboriginal person? Or is it Aboriginal because it's written by an Indigenous person about Aboriginal characters? Or is it Aboriginal just because it's written by an Aboriginal person, even if it's about someone surfing down Byron Bay.⁹⁸

Bellar is, however, adamant that she would not describe anything written by a non-Aboriginal person writing about Aboriginal culture as 'Aboriginal literature'.

Cathy Craigie also feels that it is hard to define Aboriginal writing, but says at the very least works should be by Aboriginal writers and reflect Aboriginal culture, (which relates, in turn, to how one defines 'Aboriginality'). Craigie comments,

The thing that binds us as Aboriginal people—[though] we have different languages and cultures, there's a general essence of what Aboriginal is and it's the way that you set things up. It's your thinking. I would expect Aboriginal people to understand land issues a lot easier [than whites]. It's the content really, the way you handle the content.⁹⁹

Agreeing with Craigie, Melissa Lucashenko doesn't see Aboriginal writing as a separate genre, but more an issue of content, and that in order for her to define Aboriginal literature she needs to consider the definition of Aboriginality. As she points out,

To me there are people who are biologically white, but culturally Black and people who have lived in the communities for donkey's years and basically see the world through Black eyes. But they're not the people who are likely to write books, so that complicates it a bit. Aboriginal writing to me at the moment is a protest literature I suppose and it's centered around land and social justice and legal stuff.¹⁰⁰

Non-Aboriginal academic, Kateryna Olijnyk Longley, admits that it is hard to sum up the body of Aboriginal writing specifically arising from Western Australia. Referring to the work of the writers Glenyse Ward, Jack Davis, Jimmy Chi and Sally Morgan, she says the writing, "accommodates many distinct cultural groups and literary (or anti-literary) approaches," and that, "Aboriginal literature has done more than any other writing to change the direction of literary history in Western Australia over the last few years."¹⁰¹

While Aboriginal writers have not generally complained about being boxed into exclusively Aboriginal categories, most *are* writing on Aboriginal issues and experiences. Sandra Phillips points out, though, that we sometimes want it both ways commenting,

We, as Aboriginal people involved in writing and publishing, want people to recognise the connections between our work and the common basis of

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Aboriginal writing or writing by Indigenous people. We want that recognition. At the same time we want recognition of our difference; so we want it both ways and we need to be able to articulate why we can be believed in both ways. The UQP Black Australian Writers Series is chock-a-block with diversity. There would be few titles that I can think of that are the exact same style as others.

The similarities though to my mind as an editor having worked on titles in the last two years is the complete rootedness in this country—Australian characters, mannerisms, landscape depictions, it's from here, and you don't get enough of that sort of sense from many Australian writers. So it's Aboriginal from here but it's also in terms of its non-Indigenous characters from here.¹⁰²

Opposing the previous definitions of Aboriginal literature, Herb Wharton answers the question, "What is Aboriginal literature?" with another question: "What is Aboriginal literature? It's a bit like defining Evonne Goolagong-Cawley, she's an Aboriginal tennis player. Does she play Aboriginal tennis? She's a great tennis player, full-stop."¹⁰³

Is there an Aboriginal style?

At the time of his outing as Wanda Koolmatrie, Leon Carmen claimed that he perpetrated the fraud to show that there were no differences between Black and white writing, or men's and women's writing.¹⁰⁴ After speaking with a number of Aboriginal writers, editors and readers, however, it is clear that Carmen's claim is unfounded.

Throughout the history of Aboriginal Australia, most aspects of Aboriginal society, culture, religion and history were passed on to family and community via an oral tradition that included approximately 200 distinct Aboriginal languages spoken by 600 Aboriginal nations. This involved storytelling to pass on information over generations and this practice endures today. Storytelling was the oral literature, the artform likened to dance, performance and visual arts (which also pass on information). It is this storytelling, or 'oral' technique, that contributes to a distinct Aboriginal style of writing.

The oral tradition is still very evident in Aboriginal writing today. Many authors use 'Aboriginal English' out of respect for its speakers and so as to reach Aboriginal readers. Rather than using Standard English (which they may not be trained in) or an Aboriginal language (which they may not be able to speak or want to write down), many Aboriginal writers choose Aboriginal English. Aboriginal English is an Aboriginalisation of the English language and often needs to be translated to aid understanding by non-Aboriginal audiences. The use of Kriol in Aboriginal writing, (for example, Lionel Fogarty's works), is also common. Kriol is believed to have developed as a common language during the period of first contact as a result of the need for communication between

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Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.¹⁰⁵ There is a great difference between what is spoken and what is written in the Anglo world, but in Aboriginal society, spoken and written traditions are more closely aligned. Many writers do not want their manuscripts Anglicised (or ‘gubbarised’¹⁰⁶) by editors, who often seem fixated with ‘correcting’ Aboriginal expressions of English.

Kenny Laughton acknowledges what many writers also affirm, that Aboriginal people tend to write how we speak: “so it’s not the Queen’s English or remotely Edwardian or Shakespearean, it’s Blackfella lingo.”¹⁰⁷ But Laughton also acknowledges that Aboriginal writers can ‘play the game’ when required, being articulate in a variety of styles and able to write what audiences want. He adds,

We have also developed our own literary language in a sense, our slang some white linguists call, ‘Aboriginal English’. I don’t necessarily agree with this label as it only makes the white interpreters (who wrote on Aboriginal English) as the experts, once again. But I admit that we do use our own slang, and even though our language and tribal groups (whether you be bush or urban) are diversely different, we still link up through some of this common (equally recognisable) slang (i.e. Koorie, bunji, gammon, etc).

Alexis Wright also comments on the significant linguistic differences between Aboriginal languages and English,

Early colonial observers chose to denigrate Aboriginal languages as being like gibberish. In fact, Aboriginal languages have a great complexity, which derives from the genius of our people to describe their complex relationships with each other and within their world. Each language contained about 10,000 words which is about the same as any average citizen in any country of the world.¹⁰⁸

Wright gives an example of her own recording of oral literature for an anthology of land rights stories and essays for the Central Land Council published by IAD Press:

One exceptional memory man from the Tanami Desert region, wanted to do two tape recordings of the exact same story, one for himself for his particular local audience, and another one for me. There was no saying, “I will send you a copy.” He wanted the two recordings there and then.

So we sat down in the spinifex one windy night and he went through his story in Warlpiri. It was about 40 minutes long. Then he went through it again as soon as the first tape was finished and told the exact same story, 40 minutes, and that was for me. He said he did not call himself boss, that is, the senior traditional owner, yet I believed he knew everything about his country. These are our great orators who can recall thousands of site names in their head, each with a sacred song, a Dreaming, and an inter-connected sacred history over vast areas of land. And they might say to you, I cannot read or write, but I got it all along in my brains and I have to say it straight and the right way.¹⁰⁹

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Another example of the recording of oral literature (done well) is contained in the highly regarded, *Gularabulu: Stories of the Kimberley* by Paddy Roe and Stephen Muecke, first released in 1983. Muecke, as scribe, discusses the differences between the people who analyse material and the storytellers: the first set consider material that needs to be studied in an academic sense, and the second tells a story in a traditional sense. Understanding the significance of the storyteller, and he himself as the listener, Muecke says that to represent Roe's works honestly, the stories were presented in the text word for word, from taped recordings. Muecke also included Roe's hesitations as well as his own interventions to show that there could be no doubt as to the authenticity of Roe's stories. He also explains to the reader how he transcribed the storytelling and Roe's use of Aboriginal English. Muecke believes this was the first time that an Aboriginal narrative had been presented in its true form, explaining the common effects of editorial changes that had impacted on works in the past. He says,

Presenting the stories as narrative art is a way of justifying a writing that tries to imitate the spoken word. When language is read as poetic, it is the form of the language itself, as well as its underlying content, which is important. Just as it would be unjustifiable to rewrite a poet's work into 'correct' English (in other words to take away the poet's 'license'), so it would be unjustifiable to rewrite the words of Paddy Roe's stories.¹¹⁰

Muecke also explains that, while some parts of the text might be difficult to understand, it is important to not only listen to the language but the content of Roe's story. When Aboriginal people express themselves without intervention and speak out clearly like Roe does, then the culture will live on, even as times and people change. The integrity of Muecke's work is also found in the fact that Muecke acknowledges the importance of 'Aboriginal English'. Muecke comments that,

Aboriginal English is a vital communicative link between Aboriginal speakers of different language backgrounds. It also links Blacks and whites in Australia, so, as it is used in these stories, it could be said to represent the language of bridging between the vastly different European and Aboriginal cultures.¹¹¹

The reader can open any page of *Gularabulu* and see an example of Roe's story-telling technique and use of Aboriginal English. Here's just a sample from the story 'Living Ghost':¹¹²

*Well this fella used to look after that trough he had –
oh he had childrens too –
he had childrens –
he had about five or six children –
and an old lady –
mother for the children –
old man –*

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*so this old man had a bicycle –
you know he gotta go back to station to get his tucker
every Friday –
he must go and get his tucker –
he carried, ration in the bicycle (laugh) –
hard work –*

Aboriginal speech patterns put into the written form provide Aboriginal writing with character, passion, authenticity and humour. An example of the great effect of Aboriginal English is Alf Taylor's characterisation of Barney in his story *The Wool Pickers*:

Um gunna take Auntie Florrie to dat French River Place, somewhere. And next we be goin' to see that Nyoongah bloke. You know, he was locked up in jail for twenty years an' come out to run his own country. Wass his name?¹¹³

Another great storyteller and an author whose writing is largely based on the oral form, Ruby Langford Ginibi says Aboriginal writers choose Aboriginal English as a way of writing because,

We, Aboriginal people, come from an oral tradition, where our legends, and laws, were handed down by word of mouth, from generation to generation, it is we, who have always had to conform to the standards of those invaded, learn the Queen's English, so us Mob can write our stories so you Mob can comprehend what we are on about.¹¹⁴

Colin Johnson believes that oral literature is often relegated to the status of children's stories and hacked to pieces by editors who do not pause to think why oral stories, (commonly referred to as 'Dreamtime stories'), even existed and what they signified.¹¹⁵ He points out that oral literature is important, though, as it "describes Aboriginal life in Australia before invasion."¹¹⁶ He also notes that generally when Aboriginal oral literature has been collected and published,

Little or no regard has been paid to how it was told, that is to the discourse of the story. Content was considered more important. Sometimes the very ones at fault have been academics, linguists who should have known better. Other whites were exploiters after a quick quid. They obtained a version of a story, then rewrote it for publication as a children's story.¹¹⁷

In his first book on Aboriginal writing, *Writing from the Fringe*, Colin Johnson warns Aboriginal writers that if they write according to white styles, in white genres and with white theories, then they run the risk of being judged by white standards. However, as Perth based poet and journalist Rod Moran points out,

At the heart of this book there is a paradox. While issuing this warning Mudrooroo himself is employing some of the most ratified 'white', indeed colonial, literary theory. It includes French phenomenology, deconstructionism and semiotics. He nowhere reflects on this paradox and what it might mean for his aesthetic overall.¹¹⁸

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A number of Aboriginal writers suggest it is the language and the use of it that gives their writing an Aboriginal style. Sandra Phillips, editor of books by Lisa Bellear, Jeanie Bell, Alexis Wright and Melissa Lucashenko, notes that there are obvious differences in language between Black and white writers. She comments, for example, “Jeanie Bell’s sentences weave and flow rather than being manipulated to suit conventional sentence structure. They match the language to suit the style of communication.”

A wide reader, Melissa Lucashenko, also notes the familiarity Aboriginal works have for her, compared to non-Aboriginal works. She says, “It strikes a chord. Language, and the way people are socially, would tell me if an author is Aboriginal or not. The details could give it away.” But she also adds that when you have whitefellas who have lived a Black life then they could write a book that was, to her, for all intents and purposes, Aboriginal-sounding. Lucashenko comments,

A lot of older white writing is about landscapes and it feels dry and false to me. More modern [Aboriginal] writing is more oral and is closer to what I call an Indigenous style. It’s about standing back and noticing what people are doing and slotting it into an Indigenous context. The little details.

In terms of her own personal style Lucashenko says she can write in different styles including academic and ‘street-style’. She adds, “I think the style that’s closest to my real style is short words, short sentences, very clear, very direct and fairly confronting but again, acknowledging that it’s a complex work.”

Jackie Huggins who can and does write in many styles, (for example academic, biographical and autobiographical), admits there is a definite style inherent in Aboriginal work compared to non-Aboriginal work, “it’s grammatical too, syntax, how we write. It can be the slickest writing, but you can still tell that it’s Indigenous.”

Known for her hard-hitting political poetry, Kerry Reed-Gilbert says that it is the use of colloquial language that sets Aboriginal writers apart from non-Indigenous writers who more often employ a ‘high’ literary language, especially in their poetry,

I think in relation to poetry itself that a majority of non-Aboriginal people write in a way that people can’t understand what they are talking about. When there is a language barrier anyway amongst people it is a lot harder to understand what a person is trying to say when you can’t understand the words they are saying. I find they use words that are jargon or so big and they end up losing their audience. Now me, I lose them cause they don’t like what I’m saying, that’s different to not being able to understand me.¹¹⁹

Gilbert’s views are supported by van den Berg, who says Aboriginal writers often have a more straightforward style of writing, “that denotes a people who are not really into the ‘posh’ English of white writers. Much like my own style of

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writing. I don't like using big words to describe things or to tell a story when simple words are just as clear and easier to read".¹²⁰

Supporting both van den Berg and Gilbert, John Muk Muk Burke believes that Aboriginal writers are very rarely academic in their writing but often very deep saying, "most of us don't use big words in our writing. Some of us write what looks like very simple stuff but it is in fact very serious and very deep and layered and layered."¹²¹

Laughton uses the contrast between white and Black writing to define an Aboriginal style saying that non-Aboriginal authors also have a distinct cultural advantage, having used the written form of recording language for hundreds of years longer than our writers,

Our stories were an unwritten form. Translated and passed down through many generations by story telling and the corroboree. So in a sense, the art of writing as a means of saving or at least recording our language, culture, history, in comparison to say the European or Asian cultures, is a relatively new medium for Aboriginal people.

Kombumerri writer, lecturer and consultant in Aboriginal matters, Mary Graham offered the Australian Publishers' Association Residential Editorial Program in 1999 some basic differences between writing based on oral storytelling and European writing. These differences include:

- 1) A different logic between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal thinking. All perspectives are valid and reasonable in Aboriginal society with no absolutes, where even contradictory things are negotiable.
- 2) There is a different sense of time for Aboriginal people, with the idea of beginning/middle/end being a foreign concept, meaning the Aboriginal view is not linear.
- 3) An individual is a member of a group, and while Europeans would say this leads to 'conformity', Aboriginal people see this as not being isolated from their community.
- 4) Stories don't 'belong' to an individual in Aboriginal society as they do in non-Aboriginal societies and it is against lore to tell someone else's story. And regardless of geography, all stories are traditional.
- 5) The place for authority is well defined in Aboriginal society and the older people in communities work out of a distinction between power and authority. Grey hair is a good thing, denoting authority, and it is a good thing to have children and grand children.
- 6) Land is the basis of all life for Aboriginal people and the relationship between land and people sets the tone for the relationship between people, and for this display of manners. All the creative process, culture, comes out of land itself.

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- 7) Decolonisation is demystifying and defining Aboriginality is a new concept. There is a notion of universal ‘assumed knowledge’ in our culture, which means there is no necessity to describe.
- 8) Contradiction is an issue for the writer, that is, the editor should emphasise craft in editorial comments rather than the ‘utopian’ idea of perfection. There is not utopia in Aboriginal culture. The pure/spontaneous thing is natural to an Aboriginal writer.¹²²

The differences described by Graham contribute to defining an Aboriginal style of writing.

Another example of an Aboriginal style of writing is given by Sandra Phillips who cites a manuscript she read as part of the David Unaipon Award,

I read it and said I think this is a non-Aboriginal woman. It can be quite easy to read something and figure it out. I have no doubt that it’s not an Aboriginal person. It comes through in the language of the cover letter. And when people are Aboriginal they say I’m from here or there, this is who I am. That’s the identifier. But you can’t base statements like that on total credibility either, but that’s part of the picture of the presentation. These are the sorts of things that a non-Indigenous editor mightn’t pick up.

Cathy Craigie, who mixes different styles in her writing, says she prefers using Aboriginal English. So too does Alexis Wright. In an interview with Alison Ravenscroft Wright comments that she writes the way she speaks, and that this comes from her attachment to traditional land in the Gulf of Carpentaria. She adds that Aboriginal people generally need to be able to write their own work their own way saying, “we need to choose our own voices.”¹²³

Along with all the arguments which say that Aboriginal voices are distinctly different to white styles of writing—partly due to the use of Aboriginal English, and partly due to the content of the writing—it must also be recognised that within the editorial processes of Aboriginal publishing houses, new styles are actually being created. Two books released by Magabala Books in 1999 used the form of storytelling for the purposes of autobiography. The books were *Jinangga* by Monty Walgar (as told to Cloud Shabalah) and *Holding up the Sky: Aboriginal Women Speak*, an anthology of nine women from around Australia. Both books, even though telling the stories of ten different people, are written in the same style—short, simple sentences, occasional Aboriginal English, and little dialogue—with content based on experiences of Aboriginal people living in a variety of situations and locations. More noteworthy in this context is the anthology of women’s writing whose nine stories are by women from such different locations as Broome, Beagle Bay, Perth, Yarrabah and northern New South Wales.

The voice in each of these stories is so similar to the next and it is, at times, difficult to tell the authors apart. Having followed closely on the release of

Walgar's life story, one must ask if these works are really in a 'Magabala House Style' as opposed to an Aboriginal style.

In what genres do we excel?

Considering the number of published poets and autobiographers we have, it would be hard to ignore these as our main genres for writing, but as we move more into fiction, and even erotica, this is changing. Aboriginal writers are telling their stories through the printed word in poetry, fiction, autobiography and biography, essays, histories, short stories, plays and film scripts. But we are still categorised and known largely for life-writing. (See Appendix A for a Catalogue of Aboriginal Literature.)

Editors, Josie Douglas and Marg Bowman, from the Institute of Aboriginal Development Press in Alice Springs, believe that when Aboriginal writing first began to emerge during the 1960s, poetry was the most popular genre,

Aboriginal people were writing in a time of great political change and activism, land rights and the right to vote were all part of this era. Poetry at this time carried the voice of protest and was used as a political tool. Aboriginal poetry today still carries a political message. Even those themes that might normally be considered apolitical can't escape the political nature of Aboriginal people's experiences. Black poetry is a commentary on Black lives, showing the diversity and range of the Aboriginal experience.¹²⁴

Regardless of why the poetry is being produced, non-Aboriginal, Werner Arens says there is no way that you can by-pass the contribution that Aboriginal poets make to a, "new consciousness in the white and Black community with regard to Australian self-image."¹²⁵ He cites the poetry written over two decades by Kath Walker, Jack Davis and Kevin Gilbert as the force behind bringing to public attention the existence of, "a second cultural tradition in Australia."¹²⁶ *In Writing from the Fringe*, Johnson sees the practicality of writing and publishing affecting the genres in which Aboriginal people appear, noting the costs of publishing a novel are far higher than running off short photocopied manuscripts of poetry through a community organisation.¹²⁷

Although Jackie Huggins acknowledges that poetry is a popular genre with Indigenous writers, she points out that, "the life-story, biography and autobiography will always be around because for most writers, that's the first book that they write." Autobiography is a genre in which Aboriginal people throughout Australia are choosing to write, documenting their life experiences and expressing both their own anguish and the anguish of their fellows. 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 either written down or recorded accurately. Autobiography is a key place for Aboriginal people to start writing, empowering us to use (and at times

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change) the English language, a language that was once used against us, describing us as ‘barbaric’ and ‘savage’.

This type of writing plays a number of roles, not only because 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. Perhaps most importantly, it also makes available first hand accounts of sometimes disturbing and hitherto hidden aspects of Australian history. Lisa Bellear bases much of her poetry on first hand experiences and comments that the genre of autobiography is also a very important component of our culture, “given that for 208 years we’ve been silenced and told that our stories aren’t of worth.”¹²⁸

One of the most widely read autobiographies in Australia is Ruby Langford Ginibi’s *Don’t Take Your Love to Town* which has appeared on the NSW Higher School Certificate Curriculum for many years. Ginibi says that she decided to pick up a pen in 1984 to write her autobiography because she realised there was nothing taught in the school curriculum about Kooris:

I thought if I wrote about my experiences as an Aboriginal person, it might give the other side, the ‘white side’, some idea of how hard it is to survive between the Black and white culture of Australia, and they might become less racist and paternalistic towards our people.¹²⁹

Some autobiographies cross into biographies as life-stories are retold to family members or trusted writers. Biographies are also a vehicle for writing about history and recording facts about significant Aboriginal people, communities and moments in time. Authors published in the genre of biography include Jeanie Bell, (*Talking About Celia*), Mary Coe, (*Windradyne—A Wiradjuri Warrior*), Eric Wilmot, (*Pemulwuy: The Rainbow Warrior*) and Rosemary van den Berg (*No Options, No Choice- the Moore River Experience*).

Due to the profile of co-author Jackie Huggins, one of the more well-known biographies is *Auntie Rita*, a book of dialogue between mother and daughter and the first of its kind. The story tells of Rita Huggins’ forced removal from her traditional lands as a child, her resettled life on Cherbourg Aboriginal reserve under the Aborigines Protection Act, right through to the rise of Aboriginal political activism in the 1960s and her life in Brisbane.

Regardless of genre, ‘rewriting history’ can be an appropriate phrase for much of the work currently being penned by Aboriginal writers in recent years. Aboriginal authors are rewriting the history books that have conveniently left out the facts around invasion, colonisation and attempted genocide. Aboriginal people today are documenting the history of a people misrepresented, or not represented at all in history books of the past. As Langford Ginibi comments,

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We are writing our histories too. We are telling our stories, and saying the same things about our dispossession in the hope that people will understand us better. And the writing of our stories, our biographies, and autobiographies are our documentation of our histories and stories. From our Aboriginal perspectives, and they need to be read, and heard all over this great land, because for too long, we have had other people defining, and telling us who we are.¹³⁰

In *Us Mob* Johnson agrees that so many Indigenous historical narratives are being written because he believes that while Indigenous people have no 'true' past, they can have no 'self'.¹³¹ He adds, "It is our [sic] past and only we can write it, for in a sense we need history and it is not 'ours' until we do the writing ourselves, giving importance to those stories which now matter to us."¹³²

Another cultural and historical work published as part of UQP's Black Australian Writers Series is Jackie Huggins' *Sister Girl*, a long-awaited collection of the author's writings over ten years. In this, her first book to follow *Auntie Rita*, Huggins gives 'an Aboriginal view', (as opposed to 'the' Aboriginal view which is a much misused phrase) on a wide range of political and personal topics that have directed her in her life's work. The first line of the first chapter opens discussion on a very important topic: "is it possible for white Australians to write 'Aboriginal history'? Obviously not when you consider, as Huggins points out, that there still exists the missing written history of Aboriginal women and their role as pioneers in Australian colonial society—a role defined and substantiated by testimonies of six Aboriginal women interviewed by Huggins who proved that they, and their 'sister girls' lived through times where, "the Black woman's entire day seemingly revolved around catering for the white family's needs."¹³³

Sister Girl is classified in the genre of history and essays, but because of Huggins' real life experiences, roles and responsibilities as an Indigenous woman with a profile and power in Australia, it is also an autobiographical work giving a very real insight into the psyche of a contemporary Murri woman and the society from which she comes. In *Sister Girl* Huggins points out what most of us as Blackfellas often say, that when you are born Aboriginal, you are born political, and her writings in *Sister Girl* are testament to that belief. As Huggins says, "political awareness and action is a way of life."¹³⁴

Within the non-fiction genre there are also Aboriginal writers who are publishing academic books. Authors like Aileen Moreton-Robinson have published writings in the area of native title, whiteness, race, and feminism in anthologies and journals, nationally and internationally. Her book *Talkin' Up to the White Woman*, is a thesis which interrogates feminism and its practices in relation to Indigenous women of Australia and provides a new standard in Indigenous non-fiction writing in Australia (UQP 2000).

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While these kinds of works are written, styled, structured, directed at, and reviewed largely by white-mainstream academic institutions and individuals, they are indeed defined as Aboriginal literature. While the 'style' and 'language' may be regarded as colonised, it is the message of the work, and the delivery of that message on issues such as whiteness or race, that provides the obvious 'identifier' or clue as to whether the book has been written by an Aboriginal person or whether the book has entailed consultation with Aboriginal people as to the content and 'tone' of the message presented. It can perhaps be claimed that to some degree there is an overarching 'Aboriginal ideology' that can be identified in Aboriginal writing, in particular in the policy orientated statements that generally emanate from public institutions. For example, compare, "Aboriginal people should assume responsibility of their health care", with, "The Aboriginal community should retain the control of their health care". Obviously the latter phrase is more likely to have resulted from consultation with Aboriginal people because it avoids the paternalism inherent in the first phrase. However, it is also the case that the rhetorical perspectives of either phrase position 'the Aboriginal' in ways that majority interests in Australia could never be positioned. However, without our own voices in and out of literary genres, our influence on the public policies of the State are diminished.

Although much Aboriginal history and real life experience is written in the non-fiction genres, there is a growing pool of fiction writers that touch on the politics of being Aboriginal and the realities of Aboriginal experiences in their novels. While we have a smaller, yet growing pool of writers in the area of fiction than other genres, there is a strong core of published authors making names for themselves and their works can be found on university reading lists and course guides around the country.

Alexis Wright says that what she is doing in the novel as an Aboriginal writer is trying to make sense of her own world: "I care and I don't care about genres, discourse, standard English, expectations or assumptions, reality or chronology. If I challenge the lot it does not really matter because I have nothing to lose."¹³⁵ Unless she is asked to write otherwise, she says she chooses to write fiction because she feels she would fail if she tried to write factual history.¹³⁶ In writing *Plains of Promise*, for example, Wright says she tried to create a set of characters that are very real to her, and although a lot of the story comes from her own experience, the characters are not from her real life. Wright says fiction is the one way of saying all the things that need to be said to the reader, without exposing people from her traditional area to the kind of scrutiny that a conventional history book would have risked.¹³⁷

Other fiction writers that include personal experience in their work include Doris Pilkington, John Muk Muk Burke, Melissa Lucashenko and Steven McCarthy.

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As the pool of fiction writers grows, so does the pool of Aboriginal playwrights, who also include Aboriginal politics and experiences in their genre. And while it is true to say that few Australian plays appear in print, it is also true that even fewer Aboriginal plays are published. That does not mean they are not being performed and work-shopped however. The published works include those of Roger Bennett, (*Funerals and Circuses*), Jack Davis, (*Kullark, The Dreamers, No Sugar, In Our Town, Honeyspot, Barungin, Moorli and the Leprechaun*), Kevin Gilbert, (*The Cherry Pickers*) and Robert Merritt (*The Cake Man*). Other plays like Craigie's, *Murri Time* and *Koori Love* are not published but have been work-shopped and toured throughout New South Wales and Queensland, while Owen Love's, *No Shame* has toured Queensland and was performed at the 7th Festival of Pacific Arts in Samoa in 1996.

Jack Davis believed that theatre offers an opportunity to use all the talents of speech and body movement present in Aboriginal oral literature and dance since time began. He was not surprised that his Aboriginal background was a great asset in theatre, saying,

The Nyoongah language was always full of humour and music. Theatre in a bush arena, is the very essence of an Aboriginal corroboree and performances there are often full of brilliant dance and mime. There was and is great opportunity for theatre to draw upon the rich Aboriginal oral literature.¹³⁸

Eva Johnson is another playwright who has made a huge contribution to the representation of Aboriginal women, and was the writer/director of the First National Black Playwrights Conference in Canberra in 1987. She is the author and co-director of the play, *Tjindarella* which debuted at the First Aboriginal Women's Arts Festival in Adelaide in 1984. The play examines Aboriginal oppression and highlights the effects of government policy on the forced removal of children from their parents and culture.

Kooemba Jdarra Indigenous Performing Arts in Queensland has also been very successful with its production of *The 7 Stages of Grieving* performed by AFI Award winner Deborah Mailman. The story of an "Aboriginal Everywoman", the play has been staged in Sydney, Melbourne, Tasmania, Canberra, Western Australia and Brisbane. *The 7 Stages of Grieving* was also published by Playlab Press and the publication includes the script, reference material, support articles and the national tour program.

Bran Nue Dae, a piece of musical theatre also showed the success of Aboriginal writing for performance as did Wesley Enoch's, *Sunshine Club* musical that graced the stage at the Sydney Opera House in 2000. Katherine Brisbane, co-founder and publisher of Currency Press, the main publisher of Australian plays, commented in her paper to the IDEA'95—2nd World Conference of Drama/Theatre and Education that,

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Bran Nue Dae in 1989 was a turning point in the short history of Aboriginal writing for theatre. Twenty years of evolution: in writers, political activists, actors, dancers, singers and song-writers, preceded it... Encouraged by the public statements [of the 60s], individual voices began to be heard. Poetry and song came first; drama followed.¹³⁹

Brisbane now feels that the most important new Australian voice in drama, and one that will in due course be widely heard in other countries, is the Aboriginal one.¹⁴⁰

Just as the theatre provides a mechanism for appealing to large audiences because of its entertainment value, so too do children's books by Aboriginal authors and illustrators. These books are increasingly being used in education, to teach young people, (and indeed older people with literacy problems), about Aboriginal society and culture and in particular about Aboriginal creation stories. Perhaps the more marketable Aboriginal works, are in fact, those in the area of children and juvenile literature because of the large educational market. Well known names from various states and territories and Aboriginal nations grace the covers of many award-winning children's books.

Although better-known for his political poetry, Lionel Fogarty also writes children's stories and published *Booyoburra: A Story of the Wakka Murri* in 1993. Fogarty says,

My own initiative to write this story was to bring truth to the children's eyes and truth to the children's minds. With a little bit of information or a little tiny bit of a story from back then, you can bring it into the reality of today, because those stories are thousands and thousands of years old, and are still the essence of knowledge today.¹⁴¹

Authors like Narelle McRobbie, (*Who's That Jumbun in the Log*), use Aboriginal words and illustrations to get messages across to children. She says her love of writing short stories for children has been furthered by her commitment to keeping languages alive. McRobbie says it was her mother, (to whom the book is dedicated), who instilled traditional language into her thoughts.¹⁴²

Other writers whose family background and fluency in language affected their work include the late Daisy Utemorraah whose first collection of stories, *Do Not Go Around the Edges*, won the Australian Multicultural Children's Book Award in 1992 and was also short-listed for the Children's Book of the Year in the same year.

Margaret Dunkle published, *Black in Focus: A Guide to Aboriginality in Literature For Young People* in 1994, which focuses on books for young people on Aboriginal themes from 1960 onwards. Nearly 1000 titles by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal authors were culled to 300 books with Aboriginal themes that were appropriate for young people. The books were reviewed with the assistance of Pat Torres, Jackie Huggins and May O'Brien, all with young Aboriginal people in mind as

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readers. The reviews highlight the large number of inappropriately written books in one genre alone.

With the exception of Melissa Lucashenko's novels for young adults and my book, *The Diary of Mary Talence*, we are lacking in books in the young adult range, as our major focus has been children's books and adult fiction.

The short story form, though, continues to be popular with Aboriginal writers. In the anthology, *Across Country* (ABC Books, 1998), names such as Herb Wharton, Alf Taylor and Alexis Wright give strength and credibility to this collection compiled by non-Indigenous editor Kerry Davis whose 'specialties' include 'Indigenous literature.'¹⁴³ What you'll find in *Across Australia* is 30 short stories by 18 Indigenous writers from across Australia except Tasmania, which is a noticeable gap: a few yarns from story-teller and author Ida West or Jimmy Everett would have added flavour to the collection. *Across Country*, unlike glossy *Indigenous Australian Voices*,¹⁴⁴ not only showcases established writers such as Bruce Pascoe, Herb Wharton and Alexis Wright, but also provides a forum for many new and emerging writers to showcase their work in a collection that will gain wide coverage. New writers like Fabienne Bayet, Harold Hunt and Janice Slater mix their blend of writing with those that have been published for years.

Although Aboriginal writers are clearly writing across all genres, the question of whether or not there is an 'Aboriginal genre' or 'Aboriginal discourse' as such is not as clear. Sam Cook (ex-Magabala staff member) says she finds it difficult to categorise Aboriginal writing as she does not agree with pigeon-holing Indigenous publications into western genres. She says this is because,

Our works are so much more. For example most of the titles considered children's books should also be considered art books and even cultural literacy resources. I see no reason why we cannot extend the definition of the genres to accommodate our differences.¹⁴⁵

Aboriginality and writing

Kerry Reed-Gilbert whose poetry in, *Black Woman, Black Life* is heavily influenced by her identity, is clear about the role of Aboriginality in writing, saying, "Aboriginal identity is who we are as writers, as people. We live our lives as the Indigenous people of this land, we write as Indigenous people of this land."

Jeanie Bell agrees that Aboriginal identity plays a definite role in the way she writes and in the reasons for Aboriginal authors writing,

It [identity] gives you an opportunity to write, to look at your own position and how you feel about yourself and where you see yourself in relation to history, and your community in terms of the bigger picture. But it also reaffirms who you are, and it's a statement to the world of, "This is who I am and I'm proud of who I am."

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Kenny Laughton says it is important to retain our Aboriginality in our writing, believing that we have a moral obligation to be role models, proving that, “we as Aboriginal people can not only achieve but mix it with the best of them, in any field, be it sport, work or writing.” Finally Alexis Wright is adamant that she doesn’t want her Aboriginality separated from her writing as it is, she says, “what’s producing the writing. Without it I wouldn’t be able to write the way I do.”¹⁴⁶

As publisher at FACP, Ray Coffey says the number of autobiographical works, family and community histories by Aboriginal writers is evidence that through personal testimony, there is an obvious attempt to establish and project a sense of Aboriginal identity.¹⁴⁷

The concept of Aboriginality is certainly a difficult thing to grasp for contemporary Australians; indeed, sometimes even for Aboriginal people themselves, especially those who have been denied access to family, culture and community due to government policies of the past. The effects of the differing experiences of Aboriginality, though, are nevertheless evident in writings by Aboriginal people, regardless of genre. The act of writing often becomes more than something creative for some Aboriginal people who seek to use the process as a vehicle for analysing, processing, determining, understanding and asserting their identity. The process of writing also allows individuals, like Sally Morgan for example, to follow their journey of discovering their Aboriginality and document it for their own and other’s benefit.

The way in which Aboriginal people have been categorised by race in terms of where they fit into literature is no different to the way in which they have been defined in sports, history, the arts and politics. Although many would like to be regarded and critiqued for their writing, rather than their race, ‘Aboriginal author’ is also a cementing of identity for the writer, and a categorisation that doesn’t offend most Aboriginal writers. Most writers are proud of their identity as well as their ability to write in a profoundly white world, because, in the words of Ruby Langford Ginibi, “we are reclaiming our history, our heritage, and our identity, and that’s very important to our cause.”¹⁴⁸

As to whether or not publishers are more wary since the Johnson/Sykes controversies, Ray Coffey, speaking for FACP, says they probably aren’t, “because we have always been fairly careful.” As a publisher of only Western Australian writers Coffey says it is perhaps easier for them to check on the credentials of writers who present as Aborigines, “we are perhaps more easily able to determine whether an individual is known and recognised by the local Aboriginal community as being Aboriginal”.

In response to the never-ending questions around whether or not a particular writer is or isn’t ‘Aboriginal’, Bruce Pascoe raised some interesting points at the 1998 Spring Writing Festival, when in the “Land, Life and Literature” session he

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asked if Bryce Courtney was really South African, or ‘just jumping on the bandwagon’ and whether or not David Malouf was really Lebanese or ‘just trying to sell books.’¹⁴⁹ He taunted the audience with, “I’m surprised you haven’t put that question to him because it’s a crucial literary concern”.¹⁵⁰

Post-Colonial—NOT!

In terms of the academic world, the literature of African countries, Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, Caribbean countries, India, Malaysia, Malta, New Zealand, Pakistan, Singapore, South Pacific Island Countries and Sri Lanka, are often defined as ‘post-colonial literatures’. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin suggest,

The term ‘post-colonial’ is used generally to describe all cultures affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonisation to the present day. It is also considered as the most appropriate term for the new cross-cultural criticism which has emerged in recent years and for the discourse through which it is constituted.¹⁵¹

They go on to say that the idea of ‘post-colonial theory’ is a reaction to equate European theory with what they term as post-colonial writing.¹⁵² But it might also be suggested that the term ‘post-colonial’ is simply a term used to describe much contemporary writing.

In terms of defining Aboriginal writing as post-colonial literature, it appears that there are two distinct views. Firstly, that of the literary establishment who use the term as a way of describing a genre in which Aboriginal people write; and secondly, that of most Aboriginal writers who see the term implying that colonialism is a matter of the past and that decolonisation has taken place, which of course is not the case. In this way, most writers do not even consider the term in relation to their writing at all, which makes this discussion difficult.

As comments by writers below show, the term ‘post-colonialism’ is largely meaningless to Aboriginal people, bearing in mind the political, social and economic status we currently occupy. Kathryn Trees, in a joint paper with Colin Johnson, asks the questions,

Does post-colonial suggest colonialism has passed? For whom is it ‘post’? Surely not for Australian Aboriginal people at least, when land rights, social justice, respect and equal opportunity for most does not exist because of the internalised racism of many Australians.

In countries such as Australia where Aboriginal sovereignty, in forms appropriate to Aboriginal people, is not legally recognised, post-colonialism is not merely a fiction, but a linguistic manoeuvre on the part of some ‘white’ theorists who find this a comfortable zone that precludes the necessity for political action.

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Post-colonialism is a 'white' concept that has come to the fore in literary theory in the last five years as Western nations attempt to define and represent themselves in non-imperialist terms.¹⁵³

Unlike some other Pacific Nation writers who accept the term 'post-colonial',¹⁵⁴ claiming to write from a post-colonial experience, there are few, if any Aboriginal Australian writers who agree with or use the term at all, least of all in relation to their writing. Its relevance to Aboriginal people appears to be non-existent. As high numbers of Aboriginal people continue to be incarcerated and die in prison, and the community still experiences infant mortality rates the same as Third World nations, and we continue to need government assistance in attaining housing, education and basic health care, it is apparent that colonisation, as Aboriginal people interpret it, is alive, even before considering the current Liberal Government's approach to Native Title, and its failure to acknowledge the damaging effects of government policies that led to the Stolen Generations.

Sandra Phillips quite strongly believes that we are still colonised and that it makes those in the literary and publishing community feel better to think we're post-colonial. She adds,

But if only they'd realise the way in which they carry themselves in society today still is colonial. They take an ownership stand, saying if we didn't colonise these people they wouldn't be able to create this stuff.

Jackie Huggins is offended by the term post-colonial, preferring the term 'neo-colonial' but feels that, along with the term 'post-modernism', they are all just yuppie buzz words which,

Convolute the whole process of writing that says there isn't a colonial mentality still in existence. In Queensland for sure you can see it. I think because we live so close to a certain member of Parliament here it's exacerbated unusually.¹⁵⁵

Lisa Bellear is straightforward in her reaction to the term, saying,

I know that if you are widely read and well-travelled then you would see the total inappropriateness of using that word [post-colonial] and the more that you try to justify using that word in a sense that you offer the definitions and framework, theoretical constructs, the more full-of-shit you are... . How can people use it when you know what's going on in this country.

Herb Wharton acknowledges the term but says he doesn't worry too much about or agree with a lot of the things academics say because,

When they're describing Australian literature, there's no cut-off date for the history of Australia. The literary history or the recorded history. 1788 is when Europeans came. But Australian history and its literature and stories were there all the time.

Cathy Craigie like myself, thinks it's hard to believe there is any such thing as post-colonial when you are the people who've been colonised:

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We're still in Aboriginal time, Murri time, we're still in there doing the same things. For me it's a continuation of a culture that's thousands and thousands of years old. It's not something that you cut off because white man has come in.

For Craigie the term post-colonial only fits the white system, rather than acknowledging our own time-frame. She explains, "my definition of time is endless, it's past, present and future."

In contrast, both Lucashenko and Laughton agree that their writing reflects the effects of being colonised. Lucashenko, who was born in 1967, says that everything in her life, including her writing, is touched by or has risen out of colonialism, not being able to grow out of anything traditional. She dissects the issue of post-colonialism, saying,

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

Although not accepting the use of the term, Kenny Laughton can see why Aboriginal writing has to be called post-colonial. He says,

Let's face it, prior to the arrival of white man, our history, everything about us was recorded by mediums other than the written word. But our ancestors were prolific storytellers, they must have been; for these stories to be passed on from generation to generation, for hundreds of thousands of years. So the 'post-colonial' label is one that would sit comfortably with the anthropologists and the linguists and the historians, maybe even with some of our Aboriginal 'academics' as they would have been the first to use pen and paper to form their opinions on Aboriginal Australia.

But I don't necessarily accept it. Not as an Aboriginal author, especially knowing the depth, the intricate knowledge, and the elaborate ceremonies that were the blue prints for the Dreamtime generation stories. Our first form of written history may be classed as 'post-colonial' but our stories could almost be described as 'post-history'.

In her book *Literary Formations: Post colonialism, Nationalism and Globalism* (1995), Anne Brewster says post-colonialism may be,

Useful when describing certain aspects of post-invasion culture in Australia, (such as the relationship between Australia and the United Kingdom or the West), as a discourse it has not been scrupulous in distinguishing between the

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very different formations of colonisation and the decolonisation in ‘settler’ and Indigenous cultures.¹⁵⁶

Brewster understands fully the irrelevancy of the term post-colonialism to Aboriginal people generally, and writers specifically, and says that through her own studies she realised that, “the discourses of post-colonialism and feminism diverged from that of Aboriginality.”¹⁵⁷

Muecke agrees saying, “Australia seems to be caught in a post-colonial syndrome, because, unlike America, independence has not been fully achieved either historically, through war for instance, or symbolically: the Fourth of July.”¹⁵⁸ And while some advocates of the definition, like Samoan writer Albert Wendt,¹⁵⁹ write out of what they say is the experience of being colonised, it is hard not to agree with Bruce Pascoe who says that, “All our writing is influenced by the stories and culture which have developed for 200,000 years. Colonial we aren’t. Colonised we are.”