

Reflection

If you were to look up the words “Aboriginal” and “postcolonialism,” the results would be spare. And that, of course, is why I absolutely had to write about it.

Indigenous Australian authors have won the prestigious Miles Franklin award on numerous occasions – authors such as Alexis Wright¹ and Kim Scott^{2 3} make their own debuts in my essay. However, despite this recognition, there is virtually no criticism that connects this integral form of national prose to perhaps the largest movement of non-European writing: postcolonialism. The first postcolonial textbooks I scrounged from my school library mentioned Australia only once, and did not deign to include the word Aboriginal at all. My earnest searches in University of Sydney library catalogues were equally fruitless, unearthing only dry history books.

This clearly wasn’t going to do. There was a hole in Australian criticism that little old me, with nothing but a half-formed proposal for something called an Extension 2 Major Work, could fill.

My critical response, *Native Titles*, set out to evaluate the extent to which Indigenous Australian literature qualified as postcolonial. The scope of such a brief was both exciting and daunting – how was I meant to summarise two gargantuan literary movements in five thousand words? Moreover, I also had to have a judgement regarding how far we should consider Indigenous Australian writing postcolonial, which needed criteria for evaluation, which would require some evidence, which would need texts, essays, articles, criticism, biographies. The stack of books by my bed began to reach giddy heights, and as it grew, so did my essay.

¹ Wright, Alexis. *Carpentaria* (2006). Giramondo, Sydney.

² Scott, Kim. *That Deadman Dance* (2010). Picador, Sydney.

³ Scott, Kim. *Benang: From The Heart* (1999). Fremantle Press, Fremantle.

If that wasn't enough, the intriguing dynamics of both my target audiences made *Native Titles* an even more interesting prospect. The first, more secondary audience, is the Australian reading public, those who would read critical responses in a literary journal such as *Overland*. However, my purpose was not just to inform a generic audience about the merits of the books twenty-seven spots down their Dymocks wish list. It had a more targeted purpose, opposing a long literary tradition of misrepresenting colonised peoples, up to and included Indigenous Australians. One could consider the field of my essay to encompass similar ground to Edward Said's *Orientalism*⁴ in 1979, except centred on Australia and with one hundredth of the scholarship. The confronting reality of *Native Titles* is its political nature. It assumes certain things about Aboriginal Australians that some in the audience may disagree with, such as the right of Indigenous people to their land, the brutal nature of colonialism and the ongoing nature of that dispossession. So yes, my first audience is the literary reading public, but it is a dynamic relationship that seeks to subvert the expectations some may hold towards the objectivity of Aboriginal representation in colonial and postcolonial literature.

My second audience – and perhaps the most important one – is Indigenous Australians themselves. It is obvious that they should be the ones to determine the nature of their writing. As a result, all I can hope is to offer a possible alternative that this audience can adopt or reject at their discretion. Why could mine have relevance? The *raison d'être* of my Major Work is that one can better understand literature when its characteristics are compared to a pre-existing tradition with standing criticism and defined metrics. The postcolonial literary school provides such a standard. By ascertaining the extent to which Aboriginal writing qualifies as postcolonial, I hope that Indigenous audiences have another piece of scholarship, however humble, that allows them the choice to make such a comparison. Through such a comparison,

⁴ Said, Edward. *Orientalism* (1979). Random House, New York.

I strove to provide a new platform from which they can engage with writing about them – to appreciate, challenge, critique, respond to or be inspired by Aboriginal authors and texts.

It has not been lost on me that, in the same way colonial texts imposed assumptions upon Aboriginal people, so too do I as a non-Indigenous person impose my own unconscious assumptions upon Aboriginal literature. There is a piercing irony in the fact that, in trying to alleviate literary exclusion, I may contribute to it from my own position of privilege. Many indigenous writers, such as Anita Heiss, do reject the term postcolonial as “meaningless to Aboriginal people, bearing in mind the political, social and economic status we currently occupy.”⁵ However, it would be equally inappropriate for me to adopt an alternative form of Aboriginal criticism that is totally detached from Western scholarship, as that would amount to an appropriation of the tools of interpretation as well as the texts themselves. As the most important audience is the Indigenous one, I have striven for a sensitive tone that increases the access of this marginalised audience to the wealth of their own writing.

My investigation crystallised into an essay divided into eight sections: an excerpt; an introduction; ‘writing back’; the use of language; cultural reclamation; passivity; self-determination; and conclusion. I chose the form of a critical response because it possessed the analytical accuracy needed to elucidate the differences between postcolonial and Aboriginal literature, contrasting with the interpretative ambiguity of a creative. It also allowed for a volume of references to paint a fitting portrait of two vast critical schools, although of course one was far larger than the other.

I used a variety of evidence to achieve my purpose. A large part was drawn from direct quotations from texts, traditional analysis as one would expect from, say, a Module B English Advanced essay. However, this absolute base level of evidence was complemented by a

⁵ Heiss, Anita. *Dhuuluu-Yala: To Talk Straight* (2003). Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra.

multitude of essays and critical works by seminal postcolonial authors, such as Nigeria's Chinua Achebe^{6 7 8} and Saint Lucia's Derek Walcott⁹, as well as Aboriginal authors such as West Australia's Kim Scott¹⁰ and New South Wales' Gerry Turcotte.¹¹ This not only stemmed from the skills of critical analysis born from my studies of Textual Dynamics in English Extension I, but also drew from the postmodern questioning of grand narratives explored in that elective. As postcolonialism has historically been a tool of revision, I think it was fitting that it tied into my complementary English studies.

At the end of the work, I found the answer to my query: is Indigenous Australian literature postcolonial? Yes – but in its own way. I think the best way to express my findings is to go through the essay, section by section, and explain what I discovered.

Firstly, I established a definition of postcolonialism – not an easy feat – through its preference for intracultural discourse between colonised peoples over an active responsiveness to colonial literature, such as the English canon. I then differentiated Aboriginal writing as favouring the latter, justified by its close proximity to another racial class. The twin essays of *From Drill to Dance*¹² by Kim Scott and *Black Australia Writes Back to the Literary Traditions of Empire*¹³ by Danica Cerce were of invaluable help in this section. This hypothesis was further explored in the second section, exploring language. Again, Indigenous authors favour writing in English as part of an “overtly political”¹⁴ authorial drive, informed by my own reading of West

⁶ Achebe, Chinua. The Novelist as a Teacher (1965). *The New Statesman*, January 29. Magazine.

⁷ Achebe, Chinua. *An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness* (1977). *Massachusetts Review*, vol. 18, Amherst.

⁸ Achebe, Chinua. *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987). Heinemann, Portsmouth.

⁹ Walcott, Derek. *The Muse of History* (1974). Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, New York.

¹⁰ Scott, Kim. *From Drill to Dance* (2014). *Cross/Cultures*, issue. 173.

¹¹ Turcotte, Gerry. *Jack Davis: The Maker of History* (1994). Angus & Robertson, Sydney.

¹² Scott, Kim (2014). Op Cit.

¹³ Cerce, Danica. *Black Australia 'Writes Back' to the Literary Traditions of Empire* (2017). *Comparative Literature and Culture*, vol. 19, issue. 4.

¹⁴ Scott, Kim (2014). Op Cit.

Australian playwright Jack Davis¹⁵ and Aboriginal poets such as Alf Taylor¹⁶ and Romaine Moreton.¹⁷ I contrasted this with the mixed choices of transcultural writers, with some (Western-educated) authors favouring English and others their native language.

The essay then became more thematic, discussing which school best engages in cultural reclamation. I shifted this section from a postcolonial slant – drawing from Caribbean writer Derek Walcott¹⁸ - towards a more indigenous angle through Larissa Behrendt¹⁹ and others. I conglomerated a large swathe of postcolonial writers – Achebe,²⁰ Naipaul,²¹ Rushdie²² – to outline the problematic cultural representation present in their texts. While the same importance was present with indigenous writers, I cast the latter's cultural representation as less blurred but equally problematic given its proclivity to define culture in relation to its resistance to whiteness. I extended this with an adjoining discussion of form.

The penultimate section, on undermining passive tropes, was a brief moment of conciliation – finally, something they could both agree on something. By comparing the motif of ships in Kim Scott's *That Deadman Dance*²³ and Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*,²⁴ I optimistically concluded that Indigenous writing had significant postcolonial elements as both strove to undermine colonial depictions of powerlessness. The marriage, however, was not to last. The final point of comparison, on the representation of self-determination, showed how indigenous writers defined autonomy in terms of freedom from a white mainstream, forever warning against the dangers of white metrics such as native title in *Mullumbimby*²⁵ or property rights in

¹⁵ Davis, Jack. *No Sugar* (1986). Currency Press, Sydney.

¹⁶ Taylor, Alf. *Singer Songwriter* (1992). Magabala Books, Broome.

¹⁷ Moreton, Romaine. *Post Me to the Prime Minister* (2004). Jukurrpa Books, Alice Springs.

¹⁸ Walcott, Derek (1974). Op Cit.

¹⁹ Behrendt, Larissa. *Home* (2004). University of Queensland Press, Brisbane.

²⁰ Achebe, Chinua (1965), (1987). Op Cit.

²¹ Naipaul, V.S. *Miguel Street* (1959). Vintage Books, New York.

²² Rushdie, Salman. *Midnight's Children* (1981). Jonathan Cape, London.

²³ Scott, Kim, (2010). Op Cit.

²⁴ Ghosh, Amitav. *Sea of Poppies* (2008). John Murray, London.

²⁵ Lucashenko, Melissa. *Mullumbimby* (2013). University of Queensland Press, St Lucia.

Namatjira.²⁶ By contrast, postcolonial texts focused on the problems of independent nations, the political malaise left by colonialism.

My essay is expansive in its research and scope – perhaps too expansive. I think that the scale of the movements means that the descriptions are at times reductive, and do not do justice to their complexity. However, no essay will be perfect, that's for sure. I set out to take something unfamiliar and approach it from a familiar perspective. Having looked at Aboriginal authors up, down and sideways, I think that's what I achieved. In that sense, my Major Work is a personal success, one that I took great joy in creating, and feel a great sense of achievement in concluding.

²⁶ Rankin, Scott. *Namatjira* (2011). Currency Press, Sydney.