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CHAPTER 2

When Everything Old Is New Again: Aboriginal Texts and the Politics of Renewal

Clare Bradford

When the British invaded Australia in 1788, there were probably around a million Aboriginal people spread unevenly across the continent, speaking well over 200 languages and affiliated into several hundred groupings. Their belief systems were based on the Dreaming, which in the words of the anthropologist William Stanner (1979: 24) is “a kind of logos or principle of order” instituted when creative beings walked about the universe and produced landforms, animal and plant species, and humankind. Not only this, but they created the Law that governs relationships between the constituent parts of the universe, and ensures that balance is preserved. It should not be imagined that Aboriginal cultures prior to 1788 were static or impervious to change, because over a span of perhaps sixty thousand years, Aborigines witnessed dramatic changes in the land and its inhabitants, described by the archaeologist John Mulvaney (1989: xvi) as follows: “In the face of fluctuating climates, contrasting environments, creative insights and cultural innovations, populations increased, people shifted residence and countless meetings occurred between groups of people when ideas or goods were exchanged.” Such environmental and cultural shifts were managed and accommodated within rituals and practices that referred to and enacted the Law as established in the Dreaming.

The colonial relations that operated after 1788 effected a massive assault on Aboriginal cultures as the land was occupied and gradually appropriated. The starkest indicator of the effects of colonial rule is the fact that from 1788 to 1901, the Aboriginal population decreased from around a million to something like 66,000. Entire clans were wiped out, languages became extinct, and ritual practices and narratives died with them. Throughout the colonial period and for much of the twentieth century, the doomed race theory held sway,

until by the 1940s it became evident that Aboriginal cultures stubbornly refused to die out, despite the effects of colonialism and assimilationist policies. The renaissance of Aboriginal culture that occurred in the 1970s was marked by a sharp increase in cultural production by Aboriginal artists and authors, whose work reflected and produced meanings around political issues such as the struggle for land rights.

Within the field of children's literature, another renaissance has been unfolding over the last decade, and in this chapter I consider some recent children's texts produced by Aborigines and through the collaboration between indigenous and nonindigenous Australians. These texts relate to the theme of change and renewal through the strategies by which they address tradition, history, and political and cultural questions alive in contemporary Australia. Their agendas can be summarized as follows:

Recovery and retelling of traditional narratives.

Recovery and deployment of Aboriginal languages, including Aboriginal English.

Rewriting of historical narratives from the point of view of indigenous people.

Narratives featuring the experience of Aboriginal people in urban settings.

Engagement with contemporary cultural and political questions.

Production of hybrid texts incorporating indigenous and nonindigenous traditions.

New forms of collaboration between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.

The texts I discuss have been produced by indigenous publishers and, in one case, by a TAFE college; that is, an institution for vocational training. They emerge at a time when relations between indigenous and nonindigenous Australians are marked by contradictory and opposing discourses. To sketch some of these contradictions: a series of reconciliation marches in major cities during 2000 attracted many thousands of Australians. At the same time, the conservative Howard government had wound back the processes whereby Aboriginal clans could seek the restitution of ancestral land. A far-right backlash against Aborigines manifested during the late 1990s in what Gelder and Jacobs (1998: 65) called "postcolonial racism," the effect that occurs when non-Aboriginal people who feel themselves to be disadvantaged blame Aborigines for having too much, in the form of government programs, land rights, and even attention and sympathy. Aboriginality has never been more important to Australian self-representation, at the same time that Aboriginal people are massively overrepresented in all the markers of poverty and social disadvantage: low life expectancy, high infant mortality, rates of incarceration out of all proportion to their population, and appallingly high rates of youth suicide.

As a solution to these problems, the Howard government proposes what it calls "practical reconciliation"—that is, the provision of health and welfare services to Aboriginal people. On the surface, these seem like commonsense

measures, but they address only the symptoms of postcolonial unease. The priorities of Aboriginal communities typically have to do with the reclamation of culture and the re-establishment of associations with the land. The recovery of traditional stories is central to these priorities, because narratives derive from and are enacted on particular stretches of country. The story *Kupi-Kupi and the Girl* (2000), written by Daphne Punytjina Burton and illustrated by Carolyn Windy, originates from Areyonga in the Northern Territory and was published as a dual-language text (Pitjantjatjara and English) by the indigenous publishing company, Magabala Books.

Earlier versions of traditional stories typically recast them into Western genres such as the *pourquoi* tale, the hero legend, or the fairy tale. In contrast, *Kupi-Kupi and the Girl* is situated within its country (that is, the region in which it is told) through peritextual information, which includes a map of language and cultural groupings and a guide to the pronunciation and orthography of the Pitjantjatjara language. In other respects too, *Kupi-Kupi and the Girl* makes a claim for a set of traditions and cultural meanings particular to its origins. The girl of the title is taken by the *kupi-kupi*, a sudden wind that “sucked her up and took her a long way across the country to another place” (Burton and Windy 2000: 7). Finally, it throws her into a waterhole, where she is taken captive by the *wanampi* or watersnake that inhabits the waterhole. She is rescued by a witchdoctor who carries her on his back away from the waterhole; but the *wanampi* is angry and sends a flood over the country to look for her. The flood cannot find her, and returns to the waterhole; the witchdoctor restores the girl to her parents, she marries him, and they live happily together.

It is easy enough to imagine how such a story might have been recast into a Cinderella schema within assimilationist publishing practices, but Burton’s retelling foregrounds the significance of a number of elements particular to Pitjantjatjara traditions. The first of these is the reaction of the girl’s parents to their loss: “Because they were unhappy they left their home and went to a different country to live with some other people”; to leave one’s country is the most extreme way possible to demonstrate grief, because it involves a loss of identity. Secondly, the witchdoctor’s rescue of the girl is constituted by her restoration to her parents, a move that reinstates her as a member of the clan and therefore as a person. Finally, the girl’s marriage to the witchdoctor adheres to a highly complex set of traditions that define rights to a country and rules concerning relatedness. Carolyn Windy’s collage illustration of the episode when the witchdoctor carries the girl back to her parents dramatizes the fissure between Western paradigms of romantic love, and marriage practices that are retained in many Aboriginal communities, as the young (that is, prepubescent) girl of the story is carried to her country by the man who is to be her marriage partner.

If *Kupi Kupi and the Girl* recuperates an ancient story for a contemporary audience, Pat Lowe and Jimmy Pike’s *Desert Cowboy* (2000) writes back to

colonial first-contact texts, which invariably privilege the perspectives of white children observing Aborigines who are represented as primitives or savages. The focal character in *Desert Cowboy* is Yinti, a young boy whose family is among the last of the desert people to “come out” of their ancestral homelands in order to live and work on cattle stations in Western Australia. In fact, Jimmy Pike and his family were among the last of the Walmajarri people to leave the Great Sandy Desert when Pike was an adolescent, and in this sense *Desert Cowboy* conforms with the category of text known in Kriol as *trustori*, an account of events authorized by someone who was present when they occurred.¹ *Desert Cowboy* is the product of collaboration between Pike and his non-Aboriginal partner Pat Lowe, and exemplifies a new wave of intercultural production.

Lowe and Pike defamiliarize Western practices by representing them from the point of view of Aboriginal people. For instance, a story in *Desert Cowboy* (2000) about kangaroo hunting begins with these words: “The kartiya people at Wynyard Station didn’t like kangaroos. They didn’t hunt them and eat their meat. Instead they ate the meat of their own sheep” (83). To Yinti, then, it seems extraordinarily wasteful to take the trouble to introduce animals only to kill and eat them, when there are abundant native animals to be used as food. Western practices such as wearing clothes, working for money, and betting on horse races are made strange as they are observed in relation to Yinti’s knowledge of life in the desert.

What the anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose says about the stories of the Yarralin people in the Northern Territory is true of Aboriginal narratives more generally: that they “bring past and present, specific and general, individual and collective into a shared matrix” (Rose 2000: 30). In *Desert Cowboy*, Lowe and Pike maintain the narrative practice in which a story gathers meaning in relation to others, in a chain of signification. One sequence of stories concerns colonial violence and its repercussions in the time of the book’s narrative. The first story in the sequence celebrates practices usually invisible to non-Aboriginal people, when Western modes of thought and behavior are subjected to parodic mimicry. Yinti and his companions are working on a large cattle station called Fairvale, where the manager and his wife are unkind and demanding. Every morning when the young men leave to round up cattle, the manager’s wife reminds them that they must work hard if they expect to be fed:

Danny, one of the Fairvale boys, made fun of the boss’s wife.

“Remember, boys,” he’d say in an artificial kartiya voice, “Plenty cattle, plenty food; not much cattle, not much food!”

This had the other stockmen falling about in their saddles with laughter. (103)

The comedy of this episode lies in Danny’s mockery not merely of the meanness of the boss’s wife, but of her bad impersonation of Aboriginal En-

glish. Following this parodic narrative, Yinti is told a story whose function is to remind him (and readers) of a more sinister history of relations between Aboriginal and white people. The story is about a particular hill, the site of a colonial massacre:

“That’s a bad place, boy,” [Danny] said. “Lot of black people were killed over there.”

“What for?” asked Yinti. Danny shrugged.

“Might be they were spearing cattle. Might be for nothing. Kartiya used to kill a lot of blackfellas in the early days.” (103)

Danny’s bald and evasive telling refers to, but does not explain, this incident of colonial violence. Deborah Bird Rose (2000: 29), describing her experience of living with the Yarralin, explains that “verbal learning, although it may seem straightforward, is often opaque to the newcomer,” because to understand one story it is necessary to be familiar with others, and with broader social processes. In *Desert Cowboy*, Yinti is observed undergoing such verbal learning, which must be informed by the reading of country and of the physical traces of the past.

In the third story, the manager gives Yinti a gun to kill a rogue bull, and, having carried out his task, he visits the hill that Danny has shown him. As he reads the contours of the land, he can tell that people once dug for water at a waterhole, which is now dried up. On the red sand are white fragments, neither wood nor stone, and when Yinti picks some up he realizes that they are shards of bone. He replaces them on the sand so as not to disturb the ground, and returns to the homestead. The fourth story gathers up the previous three although in an indirect and allusive way; in it, Yinti returns to the homestead with the manager’s gun. It is dark and he looks inside the house to where the manager and his wife sit at the kitchen table after their meal. Yinti lifts the gun to his shoulder and aims first at the manager, then at his wife. He stands for a long time in this posture, but does not press the trigger. Then he lowers the rifle, hangs it in the rack, and returns to the camp.

Beneath the deceptive simplicity of this sequence lies a set of complex meanings, encompassing colonial relations, the need for reticence in referring to events like the massacre, the connections between the past and the present, and questions of retribution and of compensation. Similarly, Pike’s illustration of the homestead story, with its emphasis on the figure of Yinti and the possibilities open to him, locates the key players against a ground suggesting country, the site of personal and collective identity, but a version of country in which the homestead, the windmill, the farm shed, and the utility iconically represent the pastoral industry and refer to the colonial appropriation that transformed country into bundles of land owned by white people. The collaborative work of Lowe and Pike, like that of Boori Pryor and Meme McDonald, produces narratives that “reclaim the past in order to liberate the

present" (Rose 2000: 234) and model new forms of engagement between cultures.

Finally, I want to refer to texts produced by Aboriginal students: a set of books, under the general title "Once Upon a Koori Time," produced by Aboriginal tertiary students in Mildura, in northern Victoria; and *Goanna Jumps High*, a book created and illustrated by primary school children at Urandangi on the border between Queensland and the Northern Territory. The six "Once Upon a Koori Time" titles come from a region where pastoralism had an early and drastic effect on Aboriginal people, resulting in rapid depopulation. The Aborigines who now live in and around Mildura generally come from other places, so that several of these stories are tales of migration, loss of homelands, and the formation of Aboriginal subjectivities forged between traditional and new associations. Thus, the story *My New Home*, by Kylie Atley, compares two experiences of swimming: "When it is hot we go swimming in the brown Murray River, and I miss the clear blue sea. The Murray River is only very small compared to the sea" (Atley 2000: 10). Here, the conjunction of place and identity is complicated by the overlay of memory on the experience of life in new country. The split of subjectivity dramatized through Atley's representation of the two stretches of water is balanced by the rueful smile of the narrator as she swims in the brown river and dreams of the blue sea. Elsewhere, the narrative alludes more directly to an identity formation wrought between places and people: "At my new home in Mildura, Aboriginal people call themselves Koories. In Tasmania we call ourselves Palawa people. I don't know much about my mob but I am learning more each day" (Atley 2000: 7). Aboriginal children are trained in knowledge of country and kin, these being the two axes around which identities are formed; and *My New Home* argues that contemporary Aboriginal children undergo training in the same fields of knowledge, although in forms complicated by colonial history.

Aborigines are, as I have noted, essential to Australian self-definition, because "their art, their archaeological remains, their concepts of the sacred, and their physical presence are appropriated to fuel images of national identity" (Rose 2000: 2). Allan Harris's book, *My Olympics* (2000), inverts this relationship by Aboriginalizing the Olympics. The crowd scenes show a mix of ethnicities with an Aboriginal flag displayed alongside other national flags and near a sign proclaiming "Oi Oi Oi," the chant deployed by Australian crowds at sporting fixtures. Native animals (identified by their names in the Wiradjuri language) are seen winning various events, as in the following two examples: "The barrandharr won the rowing. The dhanguurr won the fifty-meter freestyle swimming" (4–5); and the climactic moment of the narrative occurs when "I danced in the Corroboree" (11). The global significances of the Olympics are here reconfigured into a view from within Aboriginal culture, which incorporates Australianness into its production of identities. The chant that precedes "Oi Oi Oi" is always "Aussie Aussie Aussie"; thus, what

My Olympics imagines is a claim to identity going far beyond the tokenistic deployment of Aboriginal culture at public events.

The text *Goanna Jumps High* was produced through funding by the State and Federal Governments for remote country areas. The program makes it possible for artists and authors to visit schools in such areas and to enable children to produce texts that are normally printed as in-house reading material, because English is a second language to children in remote communities. The eight children named as the book's authors and illustrators ranged in age from 6 to 17; all were Aboriginal except for one boy, the publican's grandson. Daryll Bellingham, a white storyteller, and the white artist Narelle Oliver worked with the children to develop the narrative and a sequence of illustrations produced as linocuts. The narrative concerns a goanna, a large lizard described as follows:

Now a goanna's not a very handsome sort of animal. It's got a tail, four legs, a belly and back, a head with a wicked-looking mouth, two eyes and a long tongue. . . . It can eat grasshoppers as fast as you blink, but it couldn't jump to save its life. One year though, the kids at Urandangi proved all the experts wrong. (3)

In the narrative that follows, the Urandangi kids train a goanna to jump by feeding it grasshoppers until "it start[s] to jump like one" (9). The goanna wins the high jump event in the regional school sports, beating the kangaroo entered by the children of Dajarra school. After the goanna appears on local television, "someone down in Brisbane" sends a fax to Urandangi asking the children and their goanna to appear on national television. The children train the goanna to jump over the smoke stack in Mt Isa, the mining town. It succeeds in this feat, but at a cost.

What is most striking about this narrative, and especially its ending, is that its style and content are so clearly congruent with traditions of Australian bush narrative: the understated, wry tone; the emphasis on action; the combination of the tall tale and a schema in which country people go to the city (always a site for comedic comparisons). To some degree, this can be explained by Daryll Bellingham's influence on the development of the narrative; but there are more complex cultural moves going on in this story. The last sentence of the narrative, "At least we can have a good feed of goanna," was contributed by one of the youngest of the Urandangi children.² In its shift from the fantastic to the mundane, and its humorous undercutting of the dramatic moment, it dramatizes the interplay of traditions and the effects of Aboriginal modes of thought and expression on cultural formations.

In his essay, "The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity," Stuart Hall reflects on what he terms "the return to the local," and the "struggle of the margins to come into representation" (1997: 183). Contemporary Aboriginal textuality fits within his description of the "new subjects, new genders, new ethnicities, new regions, and new communities [that] have emerged

and acquired through struggle, sometimes in very marginalized ways, the means to speak for themselves for the first time" (1997: 183). The children's texts I have described do not evoke a return to an imagined utopia prior to colonization, but make a claim for Aboriginal subjectivities formed in the spaces between languages and cultures, and through new forms of cross-cultural collaboration that emphasize reciprocity and mutuality. In doing so, they formulate cultural meanings capable of contributing to the processes of decolonization that will address the "historical imbalances and cultural inequalities produced by the colonial encounter" (Gandhi 1998: 176).

NOTES

1. Kriol is an English-based creole language used by Aboriginal communities in the northern regions of Australia.
2. Bellingham, Daryll. 2001. Telephone interview by author. Melbourne, 7 August.

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- St Tom and the Dragon*, 67, 68, 70
 subversion, 38
 supernatural, 101
 Svensson, Conny, 119, 122, 128
Sword in the Stone, The, 37
 symbols, 173–74
- Tales from Moominvalley*, 82, 141
Tarzan and the Golden Lion, 122
Tarzan in the Attic, 119, 126–27
Tarzan in the Book Devouring Age, 119, 122
Tarzan i slukaråldern, 119, 122
Tarzan Lord of the Apes, 120–22
Tarzan of the Apes, 119, 123, 126
Tarzan på loftet, 119, 126
Tarzan the Male Animal, 122
 Tenniel, John, 119, 178
Tiger, Tiger, 40–41
 time, 10–12
 “Tinderbox, The,” 95
 Todorov, Tvezan, 101, 104
To Every Thing There Is a Season, 177
 Tolkien, J.R.R., 103, 195
Touch me, 61–66
 traditional stories, 19
 transgender, 59–66
 transgression, 35–44, 47–57, 59–66
Translating for Children, 171, 178
 translation, 171–80
- True Story of My Life, The*, 92
 Turner, Ethel, 67, 75
- Uchida, Yoshiko, 13
- values, 79–86
 Vargas Llosa, Mario, 79, 86
 verbal/visual, 171–79
 violence, 72, 74–75
 visual/verbal, 171–79
Voices in the Wash-house, 68–69
Voyage of the Dawntreader, The, 44
 voyeurism, 67–76
- Warner, Marina, 36–37, 165
Where the Wild Things Are, 173
 White, T. H., 37
 Whitman, Walt, 196
 Willard, Nancy, 194–95
 Williams, Michael, 26–32
 Wilson, Jacqueline, 114
 Windy, Carolyn, 18
Wir pfeifen auf den Gurkenkönig, 83–84
Witches, The, 39, 42, 131–33, 134, 137–39
Woman in the Wall, The, 44
- Yolán, Jane, 13
- Zipes, Jack, 95
 Zitawi, Jehan, 175