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Art, Pain, Children: Utopian and Dystopian Discourses in Picture Books

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It is often assumed that picture books are intended for young children and that they are therefore mainly concerned with safe and reassuring stories, say, about home and family, friends and starting school. There are many picture books which fit within this category, but the form itself, a 32-page format which developed during the 1960s from illustrated books, has always been peculiarly open to experimentation and has enlarged its audience to include older children and adults. Unlike the novel, the picture book is not weighed down by the practices and conventions of the past; and the combination of verbal and visual texts makes for a particularly complex genre as it constructs ideas through dialogical relations between words and pictures.

My concern here is with a group of picture books which thematize painful and traumatic episodes in the histories of postcolonial nations: Canada, Australia, the United States. These texts, which imply child readers, produce narratives about children who experience displacement and separation from homes and families: the forced removal of the Stolen Generations in Australia, in Down the Hole (2000), by Edna Tantjingu Williams, Eileen Wani Wingfield and Kunyi June-Anne McInerney; the establishment of western-style education at Papunya in the Papunya School Book of Country and History (2001); the institutionalisation of children in Residential Schools in the United States and Canada, in Home to Medicine Mountain (1998), by Chiori Santiago and Judith Lowry and in George Littlechild’s This Land Is My Land (1993); and in Allen Say’s Home of the Brave (2002), the incarceration both of Japanese children in the Second World War and Native American children in Indian Schools.

What these picture books have in common is their contestation of the narratives of progress and ameliorisation through which child readers of postcolonial nations have tended to learn about the past; and their disruption of self-serving national fantasies such as that Australia is the land of the ‘fair go,’ or that the United States is the ‘land of the free and the home of the brave.’ For the narratives of these picture books are political and politised, positioning contemporary child readers to engage with stories of loss and pain experienced by children. But they are not concerned merely with telling
sad stories to contemporary children; rather, they propose new social and political arrangements through which cultural transformation is enabled. In their shifting representations of pain and recovery, loss and affirmation, they are informed by both dystopian and utopian discourses.

A characteristic of many picture books is the spareness and apparent simplicity of the verbal text, a strategy which allows for visual text to dominate semiosis. The first-person narratives of the texts discussed take this further, engaging in strategies of understatement whose quietness shocks. For instance, in the *Papunya School Book of Country and History*, Smithy Zimran Tjampitjinpa, an Anangu elder, tells of his induction into Western-style education as follows: "I shifted to Papunya, where I began my schooling. It was there I began to understand the way things were. I realised we were living in a different world now. It was someone else's world" (2001: 30).

In *This Land is My Land*, George Littlechild describes the system of residential schooling which Native American children experienced:

> For many years, up through the 1960s, the government took Indian children away from their families and forced us to live in boarding schools. If our parents hid us or refused to let the Indian agent take us away, they were jailed (1993: 18).

If these verbal narratives and many like them evoke shock by describing terrible events in a matter-of-fact way, the visual images which accompany them build up a sense of emotional and psychic pain through metaphor rather than through representational images of pain. George Littlechild’s painting "Red Horse Boarding School" has at its centre the looming presence of a school, before which appears a dismembered red horse emblematic of the Plains Indian children who were torn in half, ripped away from the homes, families and places from which they derived a sense of self. The gold stars on the roof of the school and in the sky signify the stars by which students were graded: "The gold stars were for the best students. The lowest stars were red, which meant failure. Those are the stars I remember getting most" (1993: 18).

In a somewhat similar way, the illustration from the *Papunya School Book* which accompanies the words of Smithy Zimran Tjampitjinpa makes concrete and particular what is implied by "I realised we were living in a different world now. It was someone else's world" (2001: 30). In its deployment of straight lines, its emphasis on uniformity and its juxtaposition of the institutional building against the red desert earth, this painting evokes an opposition between freedom and constraint by its insistence on the absence of the former. Whereas country is the centre of learning for Anangu children, it is here displaced by European styles of learning and European knowledge.

*Home to Medicine Mountain* traces the journey of two young brothers, Stanley and Benny Len, of the Mountain Maidu and Hamawi Pit-River people, who in the 1930s were sent by train on a two-day journey from their home in the mountains of northern California to a residential school in the south of the state. The cultural boundaries crossed by Stanley and Benny Len when they arrive at the boarding school are imbricated within habitus. The "hard, stiff leather shoes" which the children wear activate Benny Len’s memory of how the earth feels back home, "comforting beneath his feet" (1998: 7). At the school, shoes are worn to separate the self from the earth, and the children are taught to march in lines and perform sharp turns, actions
contrasted with the home setting where "people danced in circles to honor the earth" (1998: 7).

The dystopic settings represented in these illustrations are filtered through the memory of narrators who describe childhoods disrupted by colonial and assimilationist policies. In the *Papunya School Book*, narrative voices are in the main those of adult Anangu, many of them elderly, who reflect on their childhood experiences, and the same is true of *Down the Hole*, in which a plural narrative voice is used: "We’re talking about the early times — not the people-that-came-lately-to-Coober-Pedy-times... We’re talking about our time — when we was little kids" (2000: 6). Similarly, the story of Stanley and Benny Len’s escape from the residential school in *Home to Medicine Mountain* is one passed on within their family, its retelling interpreted by the book’s illustrator Judith Lowry, who is Benny Len’s daughter.

In *Home of the Brave*, memory and the retrieval of memory is personified by an unnamed man who rides in a kayak down a river, is swept down a waterfall and into an underground river. He climbs up a shaft and finds himself in a desert where he sees two children, with luggage labels around their necks. The three come to "a row of buildings made of wood and tarpaper" (2002:18), and, when he enters one of the houses, the man sees on the floor a luggage label like those around the children’s necks and finds that it bears his own name. Later, he finds another label carrying his mother’s name. The dialogue between past and present implicit in this sequence promotes the idea that painful and traumatic events in the past are not only fit topics for children’s narratives, but that the representation and interrogation of the past contributes to the development of new kinds of subjects who can see beyond the strategies of labeling and hierarchization through which dominant groups in nation states have defined their Others.

When the man in *Home of the Brave* turns from the house, he finds himself facing "a group of children...like one large body with many eyes" who cry "Take us home!" (2002: 22). Following an exhausted sleep, he wakes to see that he is lying by the side of a river and that a group of children are standing by a boat which he recognises as his kayak. In this scene, Say connects two groups of objectified child Others: the Japanese American children interned during World War II and the Native American children institutionalised in the United States from 1879, when the Carlisle Institute was founded, through to the 1960s. This narrative strategy runs the risk of lumping together two ethnic groups, one of which comprises Indigenous children, and so of constructing a dehistoricised Other. Nonetheless, the two groups of children are so differentiated in relation to their appearance, stance and clothing that the emphasis of the narrative falls on the processes whereby racist ideologies are rendered natural and normal. The book’s title, *Home of the Brave*, ironically suggestive of the phrase, ‘land of the free’ (which preceedes it in "The Star-Spangled Banner") thus unsettles the givens of American nationalism through its implication that it is the man and the children who are brave and that they are denied freedom because of their positioning as the nation's excluded.

The dystopian discourses of the *Papunya School Book, This Land is My Land, Home of the Brave* and *Home to Medicine Mountain* manifest in representations which emphasize a physical and psychic disjunction between homely and institutional spaces, between the natural world and built environments depicted as cold, prison-like and inhuman. I have said that these texts propose new social and political arrangements,
and I want to look now at how they represent the possibility that narratives of pain and loss can be transformed. In *Home to Medicine Mountain*, the narrative is framed by two peritextual references. In the book’s introduction, Judith Lowry (1998) describes the residential school system, which, she says, was governed by “the idea that [Indian children] needed to unlearn their Indian ways and live as the settlers did.” The material on the final page of the book includes photographs of Stanley and Leonard (Benny Len) as elderly men, standing between railroad tracks at Susanville, their childhood home and the place where they now live. Taken together, these pages insist not merely on the historicity of the events of the narrative but on the capacity of Indian people, metonymised by the figures of Stanley and Leonard, to resist incorporation into the settler discourses represented by the boarding school. *Home to Medicine Mountain* is thus as much about the present as about the 1930s, and it claims a place for stories of resistance which model strategies for maintaining cultural and family connections. The counter-discursive force of the story of the boys’ escape is qualified by a reminder that “the dominant dominates,” as Richard Terdiman (1985:57) puts it.

For the rest of the summer, and for many years after, Benny Len and Stanley told the story of their adventure on the train. They told it to their children and their grandchildren. Always, one of the children would ask: ‘Did you have to go back to the boarding school?’

‘Yes,’ Benny Len or Stanley would answer, remembering. They didn’t mind the long journey so much after that. They were sure they would be back for the bear dance every year, because now they knew the way home (1998: 30).

The vast distance between home and school is attributed different significances following the boys’ journey because this geographical space, having once been crossed, is now assailable. What is implied by the peritextual information of the book’s final page is that the boundaries between cultures are also assailable, as Benny Len and Stanley are described as having had “distinguished careers in the U.S. armed forces” (1998: 32). This information implies the boys’ capacity to negotiate between concepts and institutions in a mixture and fusion of influences where subjectivities are formed both within and between cultures.

A striking feature of *Home to Medicine Mountain* is that a sign of colonising power is reconfigured as it takes on positive meanings associated with the recuperation of Indigenous identities. Thus, while the train is a sign of industrialisation and the reach of capitalism, it is also the means by which Stanley and Benny Len return to Medicine Mountain; indeed, to Benny Len, it seems that the train wheels sing his name, the signifier of his selfhood: “Benny Len, Benny Len, Benny Len. He felt so free that he raised his arms to the sky. He felt as if he were flying” (1998: 25).

In *Home of the Brave*, too, the luggage labels which the children wear, and which fix them as objects of what Althusser terms ‘ideological State Apparatuses’ (1984), are reconfigured in the transformative moment when the man at the centre of the narrative flings them into the air:

Suddenly the cloud of nametags seemed to turn into a great flock of birds. The man and the children watched until they disappeared over the
mountains.
‘They went home,’ said a child.
‘Yes, they went home,’ the man said.
And the children nodded (2002: 30).

The statement ‘They went home’ is culturally dense and loaded with emotion. As it is used here, it is also imbued with doubt and uncertainty because Say’s representations of displaced children suggest that ideas and experiences of ‘home’ are contingent, and that they bear uneasy relationships to notions of the nation which is, or ought to be, ‘home of the brave.’

Of all the books I’ve discussed, the one which resists the dystopian-utopian antitheses which I’ve suggested is Down the Hole, whose narrative deals not so much with children’s escape from an institutional site, or from the negative effects of loss and pain, but rather their escape into country, a trajectory which accords with Aboriginal traditions in which one’s country is indistinguishable from one’s body, and where, in the words of the poet and elder Bill Neidjie, "earth is my mother or my father" (1989: 170). The title of Down the Hole continues on the title page as: up the tree, across the sandhills...running from the State and Daisy Bates, in an evocation of movement through and into country and beyond the reach of bureaucratic control.

The hole of the book’s title, used by the children’s parents to conceal them from the authorities, is one of many shafts and tunnels created by settlers mining for opals. In these holes, light-skinned children passed entire days while their parents kept watch for ‘the State people’ and lowered food by ropes when it was safe to do so. The cover illustration of Down the Hole shows a group of five children clinging together, placed within a circle of light as if discovered by the beam of a flashlight. The three older children in the illustration enfold the two younger in their arms, but this signer of connectedness and support is disrupted by the searching eyes of the child second from right as she looks anxiously toward the source of light. Appropriating the shaft, a sign of the capitalist enterprise of mining, the children journey into the womb of the earth which is, at the same time, their ancestral home and the source of individual and communal identities.

In Down the Hole, then, what is foregrounded is not the children’s experience of displacement but their steadfast attachment to place. The very off-handedness of the narrative’s reference to institutional life is metonymic of the narrators’ refusal to enter the discursive domain of colonialism: "Yes, if they catch us fair kids, they put us in a home then—in Ooldea. I never lasted a month or two months in there. I was only in that home there for two weeks. And then I was gone!" (2000: 38).

The communal and kinship associations which construct particular tracts of land as home are signalled in a crucial illustration which shows Daisy Bates alighting from the train at Ooldea Siding. Resistance to colonial and assimilationist policies are inscribed in bodies as "our old mothers and fathers" (2000: 26) call out "Run away, run right away, you fair kids and keep running!" at the same time gesturing toward home country. The figure of Daisy Bates, a metonym for the incursion of colonial discourses into country, functions in this illustration as a signifier of the dystopic settings represented in the other texts I have discussed, but the children’s escape undercuts the power of the
State, as is clear from the next illustration, where the communal nature of their children’s resistance is encoded in the way their bodies are spatially linked within the enveloping space of the tree.

In *Down the Hole*, the final illustration incorporates a reflexive strategy as an adult shows a group of children one of the pictures in the book. Here, memory of the children’s escape into country and of the resistance of their parents is woven into a triumphant assertion of communal survival and continuity; the text opposite reads “I been still hiding away—and here I am today” (2000: 42). The meanings of this illustration are similar to those of George Littlechild’s painting "Indian Artist Visits New York, New York," in which a photograph of the artist is placed near the towers of the city. Photographs of colonised people were of course a prominent mode of colonial representation of the Other, and here Littlechild at once invokes and inverts the homogenising and orientalist discourses of many such photographs, the red horse shown earlier in the painting "Red Horse Boarding School" here represented as engaging with the cultural and artistic richness of the city. That the transformative effects of such dialogue are to be seen in hybrid artistic practice is clear in the verbal text alongside this painting:

And the art! It was amazing. There were paintings that had photographs in them. Others had fabric and buttons. There were paintings on canvas with wood and straw. When I returned home I began to experiment with mixed media. My paintings became multi-layered, with beads, feathers, and photographs. In ten days my world had changed (1993: 26).

The *Papunya School Book of Country and History*, like *Down the hole*, celebrates cultural survival and reaffirms ancient connections of kinship, country and people. Whereas the illustration discussed earlier represents Anangu children attending a school which constitutes ‘someone else’s world,’ the narrative recuperates Anangu traditions and incorporates them into a key illustration showing the Papunya School Vision Painting. One of the narrative strands of the *Papunya Book* deals with the history of the Papunya School, which was boycotted by parents from 1992 to 1993 when the community grew dissatisfied with the style of Western teaching provided by the school. In an expression referring to the ritual journeys undertaken by Anangu people, the School Vision Painting is said to "show everyone the way forward" (2001: 40).

The honey ants visible around the middle of the drawing refer to Anangu stories about the honey ant dreaming tracks which converge at Papunya, represented as a system of concentric circles. The patterns at bottom left and top right symbolise movement between "home and the bush" (2001: 40), both settings showing how children (the smaller shapes within the circle) learn about "their dreamings, their language, their ceremonies, their country" (2001: 40) from the elders (the larger shapes). The circle at top left shows Tjulkura, white people, sitting within the group and teaching Anangu children Western ways, the model of education resisted through the boycott of the school. The lower right-hand figure shows the white people sitting outside the circle where learning occurs, attending to the teaching provided by Anangu elders and supporting it. The painting refers to and reinvokes the narratives of the Dreaming, which is the "constant supplementary signified of all Aboriginal narratives" (Muecke, 1992: 95); in this case, stories of the honey ants whose progress through country brought into being Anangu languages, places and people.
These texts model for child readers strategies not merely for surviving experiences of individual and collective suffering, but for transforming pain through memory, through acts of artistic resistance and particularly through the transmission of narratives embodied in the books themselves. As they do so, they promote strategies of resistance which refuse to accept the givens of the colonial powers which sought to institutionalise economies of power and knowledge privileging Western over Indigenous traditions, ideologies and sociality.

REFERENCES


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