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## **Transformative Fictions: Postcolonial Encounters in Australian Texts**

**Clare Bradford**

Within postcolonial theory over the last decade, a discursive shift has been evident in which terms such as “transculturation”, “hybridity” and “transformativity” have attained pre-eminence over discourses of struggle, oppression, victimisation and dispossession. Mary Louise Pratt’s *Imperial Eyes* (1992) was an influential text in this shift, and argued that rather than seeing colonisation in terms of adversarial confrontation, the history of colonised countries evidences a two-way relationship involving a mutual transformation of colonised and colonisers. In this view of a postnationalist world culture, hybridity is seen as a textual phenomenon by which peoples formerly colonised deploy narrative and discursive strategies identified with western culture; the other side of the coin involves the deployment, by colonising groups, of some of the features and forms of non-western textuality. What is at stake here is the transformative effect of language, the idea that to move outside the forms and conventions of one’s culture by engaging with words, symbols or genres deriving from another culture is at the same time to engage in a shift of consciousness enabling one to imagine the world differently.

The assumption frequently made in postcolonial theory (for example, by Ashcroft *et al* in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*) is that hybridity constitutes the most enlightened and progressive response to racial and colonial oppression, and that on the other hand oppositional textuality practised by indigenous peoples merely perpetuates the old binaries of black/white, margin/centre, and encodes what Ashcroft *et al* describe as “the political trap of essentialism” (214). I am not so sure that western scholars are in a

position to fulminate against what they label as essentialism when the processes of recovery and reconstruction of indigenous traditions are often slow and painful, complicated by the multiple dislocations of colonialism—in Australia, for instance, when Aboriginal people were summarily removed from their country and resettled in alien places, and when children were taken from their families to be de-Aboriginalised. Aboriginal responses to such experiences of displacement frequently lament the loss of traditions and articulate anger at the colonial régime which caused such loss. As Leela Gandhi notes,

if the language of hybridity is to retain any seriously political meaning, it must first concede that for some oppressed peoples, in some circumstances, the fight is simply not over. Hybridity is not the only enlightened response to oppression.  
(136)

Nevertheless, there is a powerful utopian attraction about hybridity, because of the appeal of a genuinely transcultural and interracial engagement between peoples, and because at the beginning of the third millennium the effects of jingoistic and divisive nationalisms are so disturbingly evident. Moreover, indigenous knowledges and especially systems of belief and spirituality seem to propose antidotes to contemporary unease in the face of features of modernity such as environmental degradation and psychic emptiness. But dangers lurk behind these apparently benevolent cultural shifts, and they reside especially in the ethnocentrism of western desire. All too often, indigenous traditions become merely sites of abundance and meaningfulness which supply western consumers with

what they lack, and in this way hybridity shades into neocolonial appropriation (see Bradford 145-52).

Notions of hybridity and transculturation are caught up in a dialectic between Marxist approaches to nation and colonisation on the one hand, and poststructuralist and postmodern formulations on the other. Gandhi usefully summarises this ongoing debate: she refers to the “competing claims of nationalism and internationalism, strategic essentialism and hybridity, solidarity and dispersal, the politics of structure/totality and the politics of the fragment” (ix). On the one hand, postmodern concepts of multivalent and decentered meanings seem to gesture towards what Suvendrini Perera refers to as a discourse of “happy hybridisation” (17), a mixing and mingling of signs, meanings and texts; on the other hand, Aboriginal traditions typically insist upon local and particular connections between stories, place and people. Celebratory treatments of hybridisation and transculturation readily stumble into a “premature political amnesia” (Gandhi, 1998: 140) which obscures the ethical and political questions of postcolonialism. In the Australian context, discourses of transculturation and hybridity jostle against the sorry facts of Aboriginal disadvantage, which manifest across all indicators: high infant mortality, high unemployment, appalling rates of youth suicide, levels of incarceration far in excess of those for the general population.

Many contemporary Australian books for children and adolescents recycle colonial and Aboriginalist ideologies in their representations of indigenous culture (see Bradford *passim*).<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, there are some texts which race ahead of the slow and uncertain progress of Australia’s formation as a decolonised nation—that is, a nation in which its original inhabitants have attained recognition, compensation and autonomy—

and which imagine a culture where engagement between indigenous and non-indigenous people is based on the recognition and valuing of difference and on relations of mutuality and reciprocity. The three texts I propose to discuss, Phillip Gwynne's *Nukkin Ya* (2000), Melissa Lucashenko's *Killing Darcy* (1998) and Meme McDonald and Boori Pryor's *Njunjul the Sun* (2002), trace many of the tensions which I have outlined. All three are Young Adult novels in which race relations are represented through interactions between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal characters. *Nukkin Ya*, the sequel to the well-received novel *Deadly Unna?* (1998), was written by a non-Aboriginal Australian;<sup>2</sup> *Killing Darcy* by a Murri author (that is, from the Queensland region), of European and Aboriginal descent; and *Njunjul the Sun*, the third in a sequence of novels, following *My Girragundji* (1998) and *The Binna Binna Man* (1999), was produced collaboratively by an Aboriginal (Pryor) and non-Aboriginal author (McDonald). My discussion focuses on two interlinked questions: the extent to which these novels advocate transformative politics advocating new modes of engagement between indigenous and non-indigenous cultures; and whether they can be regarded as hybrid texts, incorporating an interplay of Aboriginal and western concepts, forms and narrative strategies.

All three novels feature representations of intersubjective relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal characters. In *Killing Darcy*, a young Aboriginal man, Darcy Mango, is given temporary work at the farm of a white family comprising Jon Menzies and his two adolescent children, Cameron and Filomena, and with them attempts to solve a mystery involving a relationship which occurred in colonial times, between a white man, Hew Costello, an ancestor of Cam and Fil, and his Aboriginal common-law wife. *Nukkin Ya* traces the relationship of a white boy, Gary Black

(nicknamed Blacky) and an Aboriginal girl, Clarence, in the setting of a coastal town in South Australia. And Njunjul, the eponymous protagonist of *Njunjul the Sun*, moves from his Aboriginal community in the country to the city of Sydney, where he engages in interpersonal relations with a white woman and with the racially-diverse group of men with whom he plays basketball. While the three novels are set in contemporary Australia, the past is powerfully present through the memory of colonial events and power relationships and their impact on race relations. *Njunjul the Sun* traces Njunjul's sense of "becoming Aboriginal", while *Nukkin Ya* is centred in the dominant Anglo-Australian culture, its first-person narration tracking the experience of a non-Aboriginal character as he reaches across racial boundaries to form relationships with Aboriginal characters, and encounters the prohibitions against such relationships which exist within both white and Aboriginal cultural formations.

The narration of Lucashenko's *Killing Darcy* is filtered through a variety of focalising characters, including Jon Menzies, Cam, Fil, and Darcy in addition to an omniscient narrator external to events. This flexibility of narrative allows for comparisons between characters' attitudes and beliefs at the same time that it traces the development of relations between Cam, Fil and Darcy. For Darcy, on parole for crimes of theft and assault and far from his home country and from the influence of tribal elders, the experience of living with a white family involves the necessity of decoding signifying systems which are foreign to him. Lucashenko's Aboriginality—and her insight into Aboriginal cultural practices—crucially informs her depiction of Darcy's perspective. For instance, consider the following exchange early in the novel, when Cam and Darcy engage in a tentative conversation:

“I had [a car] once for a little while, but a real deadly one,” [Darcy] reminisced.<sup>3</sup>

Cam brightened. He wasn't a revhead, personally, but if Darcy was he could talk cars ... “Oh, yeah ... what sort?”

“Commodore. Oh, it was a fucken beauty, eh. Red. V8.”

“Oh yeah, they're excellent,” Cam agreed matily.

Darcy shot him a sly glance. “... but then they caught me.” He and Cam burst out laughing together. *He's cool*, thought Darcy in relief. *He's funny*, thought Cam. It didn't occur to the younger boy that Darcy hadn't been joking. It didn't cross Darcy's mind that Cam might think he was. (78-9)

Darcy's “but then they caught me” alludes to the fact that he was arrested for vehicle theft, a meaning lost on Cam, whose cultural background leads him to expect that drivers of cars are also their owners. The contrast of subjectivities underlined in this exchange, and Lucashenko's construction of the boys' mutual incomprehension, are achieved through the use of dialogue in conjunction with external narration commenting on the perspectives of both characters, a strategy which contributes to the novel's larger network of comparisons between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultural practices. Lucashenko's capacity to switch convincingly between the perspectives of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal characters makes *Killing Darcy* an unusual Australian novel; such fluidity of perspectives across cultures is rare in children's texts by non-Aboriginal authors (although there are a few exceptions),<sup>4</sup> because, as Richard Dyer says, white representations of blackness are apt to work towards the formulation of white identities,

through a discourse that “implacably reduces the non-white subject to being a function of the white subject” (13).

An aspect of cultural experience foregrounded in *Killing Darcy* is the incursion of sacredness into everyday life in Aboriginal culture, a key contrast with white secular culture and its firm distinctions between the sacred and the profane. The plot of the novel turns on a colonial episode involving the killing of a young Aboriginal boy. The catalyst for the contemporary recovery of this event is Fil’s discovery of an old camera in the derelict cottage which once belonged to Hew Costello, and the mysterious capacity of the camera to show pictures of past times. Against the wishes of local Aboriginal people, Costello had built his cottage on a *bora* ground—that is, on land made sacred because it was used for ceremonial practices, and in order to recover the truth of the boy’s identity and death, Darcy must return to colonial times and to the bora ground, assisted by Granny Lil, the elder or “boss woman” of the Yanbali people of the area.

Viewed by Cam and Fil, these mysterious events are disconcerting, grounded as they are in Aboriginal epistemologies utterly different from those which apply in western culture. The following comments, by the anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose, refer to the beliefs of the Yarralin people of the Northern Territory, but they apply to Aboriginal beliefs more generally:

Yarralin people’s cosmos includes other worlds and beings which Westerners might describe as supernatural but which Yarralin people believe have their origins in this earth. Natural in this sense, they are also extra-ordinary in that they are not subject to the same laws of birth and death as are ordinary species.

They, too, interact with us. (92)

In *Killing Darcy*, Cam and Fil are at first apt to judge Aboriginal beliefs in the light of western distinctions between the natural and the supernatural, the ordinary and the mysterious. By tracing their transition from scepticism to acceptance as they come to learn about the spirit world and about ritual communication between spirits and humans, Lucashenko proposes that westerners such as Cam and Fil can, to some degree, understand Aboriginal belief-systems, provided that they are open to cultural difference and engaged in interpersonal relations with Aboriginal people. For it is through learning to understand and value Darcy's perspectives that Cam and Fil begin to move outside their habitual modes of thought and valuing. As Teya Rosenberg points out in her discussion of magical realism, many postcolonial theorists see magical realism as "a reaction against colonial power and paradigms, represented both by political realities and by the cultural imperialism of European realism" (16). Lucashenko's treatment of the mysterious presence of the past in *Killing Darcy* accords with such contestations of colonial power, at the same time that she relies for plot structure on popular genres such as the detective novel. This dialogic interplay of western narrative practices and of the contestatory strategies of magical realism makes *Killing Darcy* a hybrid text, poised between cultures and playing one off against the other.

The process whereby Darcy learns to engage in relations of friendship with non-Aboriginal people is complicated both by his keen awareness of the effects of colonisation on his people, and of his experience as an Aboriginal youth marked by white culture as a criminal and hence as a powerless player in relations with policemen, parole

officers and prison guards. More than this, he is made aware by Granny Lil of the necessity of maintaining a distance between himself and the Menzies family. Darcy's vision of the past reveals that Hew Costello was the loving father of the Aboriginal child who was killed, and while he does not know the circumstances of the child's death, Darcy is reluctant to believe that Costello killed his own child. The following exchange between Darcy and Granny Lil dramatises the role of memory in shaping race relations:

Darcy shook his head weakly. "But Granny, it feels wrong. Like maybe [Costello] didn't kill him, even. It don't feel right."

Granny snorted sceptically. "You bin hangin' around them whitefellas too long, startin' to believe they all angels, that's your problem."

Darcy said nothing. Was she right? Was he starting to lose his culture, turn into a black-hating black, a coconut? (196-7)<sup>5</sup>

Granny Lil's belief is that Darcy's friendship with the Menzies family causes him to forget that all white people "got blood on their hands", an extreme view which he finds difficult to reconcile with the relationships he is forging with Jon, Cam and Fil.

The transformative significances of the text are explicitly present in the novel's dénouement, when Granny Lil announces her discovery of the truth of the child's identity and death: that he was one of a pair of twins born to Hew Costello and his Aboriginal common-law wife, that he was killed by a horse which Hew Costello then shot, that his mother returned to her people with her remaining son, and that Darcy was descended from the same nation, the Agadja, and was therefore related to the Menzies family

through Hew Costello. A colonial relationship between a white man and a black woman, traced through collaborative effort on the part of their descendants, is thus transformed in contemporary Australia into new relationships based on respect and empathy.

When, in the novel's final scene, Jon, Fil, Cam and Darcy ride their horses to the beach at dawn, cultural exchange is encoded through dialogue and specifically through the exchange of words. Thus, Cam tells Darcy that the word "Aonbar", the name of his father's farm, refers to the magic horse of Irish mythology, and Darcy gives Cam an Aboriginal word in return: *Yarraman*, the term for "horse". Another instance of lexical exchange encodes Fil's growing sense of the potency of the colonial past. Throughout the novel Darcy has used the term "migloo", an Aboriginal term meaning "white person", in a variety of senses, and finally, when Cam asks Fil if she has recovered following an argument with her father, the following exchange occurs: "'You OK?' Cam asked her gently ... 'Yeah. As OK as a bloody migloo ring-in'll ever be,' she said, looking straight at Darcy" (227).<sup>6</sup> Her glance and her ironic self-description acknowledge the primacy of Aboriginal culture and her sense of herself as living "on Aboriginal land". The young characters in *Killing Darcy* learn that they are not condemned to play out colonial inequalities of power and knowledge, but can forge intercultural and interracial relations where language both symbolises and enacts the possibilities of cultural exchange.

The narrative of *Njunjul the Sun*, like that of *Killing Darcy*, foregrounds the experience of a young Aboriginal man who feels oppressed by a sense of his powerlessness in relation to white culture and institutions. Njunjul's family have scraped together the money required for him to travel to Sydney, the "big smoke",<sup>7</sup> to stay with his Uncle Garth and Aunty Emma (Garth is his mother's brother; Emma is Garth's non-

Aboriginal partner), so that he may recover from an incident when he has been severely beaten by a group of racist white policemen. What is implied by the anxiety of Njunjul's family is the possibility that if he remains in the Aboriginal community of Happy Valley he may succumb to the culture of alienation, substance-abuse and self-harm which affects young men in this community. Deeply traumatised by the physical and psychological abuse he has experienced, Njunjul feels himself to be "a no-good blackfulla. Garbage dumped on the edge of town" (27), and he sees no future in pursuing "the old ways"(11), the traditions of narrative and ritual which will induct him as an Aboriginal man.

Interspersed into the novel's narrative are anecdotes and jokes told by Njunjul and his uncle. One effect of these anecdotes is that they construct a sense of how narratives structure interpersonal relations within Aboriginal culture. Thus, at the beginning of the novel during Njunjul's long bus trip to Sydney, he recalls the moment when he spoke with his Aunty Milly about the necessity for him to leave Happy Valley, and her insistence that despite Njunjul's negative experience, white policemen are not uniformly racist. This analeptic interlude then modulates into a sequence in which Aunty Milly reminds Njunjul of an event still further back in time, when Njunjul was a small child, and when Aunty Milly's unroadworthy vehicle, loaded with children, broke down some distance from Happy Valley. Two policemen on their patrols noticed the car and stopped, warning Aunty Milly about the necessity of wearing seat-belts and reminding her of regulations governing the maximum number of passengers in a vehicle. As they departed, Aunty Milly requested their help to push her car up the road, and they did so, providing the children in the car with the unexpected experience of watching "two bulleymen pushing our beat-up blackfulla car up the road, all us inside" (31).<sup>8</sup> The laughter shared

by Aunty Milly and Njunjul as they remember this episode, juxtaposed with darker memories, constructs humour and storytelling as a means by which Aboriginal people defend themselves against racism and poverty. In addition, the way in which these stories lead one to another, shifting back and forth in time, models modes of storytelling which rely on connections between people and the accumulation of significances as stories are retold. A third effect of Aunty Milly's reminiscences about the two policemen is that they demonstrate that Aboriginal narratives work indirectly; instead of remonstrating with Njunjul about his negative attitude toward the law, Aunty Milly tells him a story which implicitly demonstrates the unwisdom of generalising about members of any ethnic group, including white policemen.

The framing narrative of *Njunjul the Sun* draws on western models of the psychological development of the individual, and specifically on the *bildungsroman* narrative which traces a character's progress from adolescence to adulthood; in Njunjul's case from a state of alienation and depression to a more positive and enabled mode of being. To western eyes, embedded stories such as the ones I have identified may seem disruptive, but they play the symbolic function of locating Njunjul's identify-formation within the context of a specifically Aboriginal frame of reference, which emphasises the communitarian and ritual functions of narratives.

Traditionally, Aboriginal narratives focus less on the psychological development of individuals than on actions and events involving representative figures. Njunjul's progress toward self-realisation is plotted through his relationships with characters in various settings: the apartment of his white neighbour, Rhonda; the school which he attends for a short time; the basketball court where he tries out for a place in a team. In

each of these settings his encounters with non-Aboriginal characters model relational modes which point to issues surrounding relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in contemporary Australia. Njunjul's friendship with Rhonda, which slides into a sexual relationship, turns on Rhonda's romanticised and sentimental view of him as representing a universalised Aboriginal victimhood, an Other onto whom she can project her New Age beliefs. When Njunjul realises that Rhonda values him for what he represents to her, he leaves this relationship behind, focusing instead on learning about the beliefs and traditions of the Kunggandji nation to which he belongs.

Soon after his arrival in Sydney Njunjul enrolls at the school where Emma teaches. Accustomed to the more ethnically homogeneous setting of a country town, where relations between Anglo-Australians and Aborigines are conducted according to long-observed protocols whereby "we keep to our own places" (43), Njunjul finds himself in a school population which is ethnically diverse and multilingual. The school setting constitutes a homology of the nation, where diverse cultural and ethnic groups incorporate an "Australia" in which Aboriginal culture is rendered invisible and where the nation's multicultural mix conceals its settler origins and its colonial foundations. Njunjul's sense of being out of place in this setting is conveyed through his reflections on the welcome sign in the school office, which is written in the many languages of the students:

Then I'm looking at that sign up above the front desk. I can read "Welcome", that's it, but. I'm trying to get my head around all these other languages written up there. What is this place? The United Nations?

I'm starting to get it. Aunty Em teaches English as a second language. That's 'cause no one talks the same first language. Now I'm wishing I had my language. Mine got taken away, but. (62)

Njunjul's reflection on the punishments meted out to Aboriginal people who spoke their languages during colonial times produces a sharp contrast between the promotion of diversity in the contemporary school setting, and the weight of colonial and assimilationist regimes: "Down here, . . . you can hear these kids talking their different ways all over the place. Even the asphalt looks like it's got its own language. Makes me sad as. Gives me that death feeling like I got nothing of me left" (63). Within these oppositions of presence to absence, vitality to death, speech to silence, Njunjul is seen to align himself with the second term in each case, and when he refuses to attend school the text evokes a fractured selfhood, of which part is "back [in Happy Valley] in those broken up pieces", while in his life in the city he is "still travelling, not arrived nowhere" (83).

When Njunjul returns to a school setting toward the end of the novel, it is as his uncle's apprentice in a performance of dance and stories. This episode symbolises Njunjul's recuperation of Aboriginal traditions and offers a corrective to the earlier representation of the school as a place where Aboriginal culture is invisible. After he and his uncle have performed Kungandji narratives, one of the youngest children approaches Njunjul and asks the question, "How long you been black?" (147) Njunjul's response is, "I reckon I was born black. . . I'm glad you asked me that, but, 'cause I reckon it's taken

me a long while, maybe right up till now, to know that” (147). The enthusiastic response of the children to Njunjul and his uncle represents more than mere affirmation:

Back in the car, we don’t talk. I’m not even thinking how flash I’m looking, paint still on, sunnies, and cruisin’ in the Merc. More I’m sorting through the treasures I got in my heart. All the things the kids were asking. I’m not sure what I might have given them. I know what they’ve given me, but. They’ve given me back a part of myself. (148)

Njunjul’s experience of racism, his sense of himself as a “no-good blackfulla”, the marginalisation of Aboriginal culture in national formations—these negatives are answered by the response of young children who have not learned the lessons of racism, and who readily engage with a version of Australianness which acknowledges the primacy of Aboriginal culture, its powerful presence in the land and its capacity to inform the lives and value-systems of non-Aboriginal Australians. Njunjul’s reflection “They’ve given me back a part of myself” constructs the children as a signifier of hopefulness, their engagement with and respect for Aboriginal culture metonymic of a changing Australia where the colonial past is acknowledged and the land’s original inhabitants honoured. The closure of the narrative, where Njunjul looks forward to returning to Happy Valley to visit his family, marks the end of a psychological journey and is thus consonant with the *bildungsroman* schema. But the manner in which Njunjul’s journey is traced, as a series of encounters with characters (Rhonda, Aunty Emma, the basketball players, the schoolchildren) who play out roles representative of

various modes of interaction between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians, also places *Njunjul the Sun* within Aboriginal narrative traditions. In this way, the novel works as a hybrid text promoting the ideal of an Australia transformed by new forms of relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.

Phillip Gwynne's *Nukkin Ya* is in narrative terms a less complex text than *Njunjul the Sun* or *Killing Darcy*, and is not in the same sense a hybrid work — that is, it does not evidence an interplay of western and Aboriginal tropes and narrative strategies. Indeed, it is true to say that across Australian literature for children most truly hybrid texts are by Aboriginal authors and artists, or by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal producers in collaboration (Bradford 182-190), as is the case with the work of McDonald and Pryor. The reason for this is, I think, that the experience of living “in between” is endemic to Aboriginal people as they negotiate the spaces between cultures, and hence dialogic interplay frequently manifests textually, whereas for most authors of Anglo-Celtic origins, western culture and western textual practices are givens, and mediate how Aboriginal culture is represented.

In *Nukkin Ya*, the focus is on Blacky's subjectivity, as his sense of self and his experience of self-other relations is transformed through his romantic relationship with Clarence. The first-person narration of the novel exposes the limitations of Blacky's understanding of the racial dynamics of the town, which is divided into zones: the Port, inhabited by white people (Goonyahs); and the Point, by Aboriginal people (Nungas), and traces his tentative progress from ethnocentrism toward an appreciation of cultural difference. At the same time, Gwynne's strategy of focalising the narrative through Blacky ensures that Aboriginal subjectivities remain elusive and largely unrepresented in

*Nukkin Ya*, except through dialogue, and in this way the text offers fewer challenges to non-Aboriginal readers than *Killing Darcy* or *Njunjul the Sun*, which are situated either within Aboriginal culture (*Njunjul*) or within a variety of non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal perspectives (*Killing Darcy*).

When Blacky falls in love with Clarence he breaks the town's interdiction against interracial romance, an interdiction which seeks to maintain the binary oppositions on which colonial discourse is based. Gwynne's treatment of the relationship of Blacky and Clarence is informed by a pervasive reflexivity as Blacky comments on his own narrative processes. Obsessed by words and their meanings, he is keenly attuned to the nuances of Clarence's Aboriginal English and the snatches of *language* which she uses.<sup>9</sup> His friendship with Clarence unfolds through the exchange of words, in a manner reminiscent of the final scene of *Killing Darcy*, and similarly functions as a marker of cultural exchange. Like Darcy, Clarence engages in wry verbal humour, as in the following stretch of dialogue, which occurs during an early encounter between the two characters:

Clarence ... took a paper bag from her sports bag.

"Got us some bush tucker 'ere, Blacky."

"Really?"

... She handed me the bag. "I dunno, Clarence. I'm not really used..."

I said, thinking of witchetty grubs.

"Go on, Blacky," she said. "Plenny good tucker that" ... (154-5)

What Clarence produces, instead of “bush tucker” (traditional food gathered in the bush), is a packet of chocolate biscuits, the Tim-Tams prized by Blacky. Her deployment of the phrase “plenny good tucker” and its parodic suggestion of white stereotypes of Aboriginality, turns such stereotypes on their heads in a playful move exemplifying the postcolonial mockery which Homi Bhabha sees in hybridity (1994). But the exchange of words in *Nukkin Ya* also suggests a shift of consciousness on Blacky’s part, and thus gestures not only toward a destabilisation of dominant discourses but to the transformative effects of cross-cultural relations on individual subjects. After the two eat the Tim-Tams which Clarence has brought, Blacky musters the courage to kiss her:

We sat like that for ages, until Clarence softly said, “You ever kissed a chick before, Blacky?”

“Yeah, course I have,” I said. I lied.

“Ever kissed a Nunga chick?”

“On the lips?”

“On the lips.”

“No, not really.”

“Well, do you wanna?”

“Kiss a Nunga chick on the lips?”

“Kiss this Nunga chick on the lips.” (157)

The colonial stereotype of the sexually-available Aboriginal woman is suggested in Clarence’s self-description as “a Nunga chick”, a stereotype overturned by playfulness as

she persuades Blacky to kiss her. When Blacky walks home following their meeting, his reflections incorporate Clarence's language: "I could taste that Nunga chick on my lips and I skipped. My life, which had seemed so boring, had suddenly opened out" (158). In Bhabha's terms, "the *menace* of mimicry is its *double* vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority" (88). Thus, as Clarence mimics the derogatory treatment of Aboriginal women in colonial discourse her use of the term "Nunga chick" disrupts those binary oppositions which imply a contrast between promiscuous, immoral and uncontrolled Aboriginal women on the one hand, and pure, restrained white women on the other. In *Nukkin Ya*, a further step is taken in Blacky's mimicry of Clarence's words, which enacts a doubleness of reference—that is, *to* colonial discourses and *by* a white subject who borrows the language of the Other, thus disrupting colonial distinctions.

Blacky is brought sharply up against the potency of colonial discourses in the Port when he is warned off his relationship with Clarence by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal characters. His brother Team-man<sup>10</sup> cautions him that "there's people here in the Port wouldn't be too happy if they knew you were rooting a darkie" (162), and advises him against having sex with Clarence, on the grounds that "you don't know what sort of diseases they've got" (163). The crass racism of the phrase "rooting a darkie" offends Blacky, who nevertheless does not have the courage to defend his friendship with Clarence. Just as Team-man uncritically repeats the phrases he has heard from the white men in the town, so Lovely, Clarence's cousin, rehearses a similar set of terms when he confronts Blacky about his relationship with Clarence. Lovely reveals that Blacky's father, with a group of friends, habitually visits the Point to engage in sexual relations

with Aboriginal women, and he accuses Blacky of reproducing these exploitative dealings: “Seems to me both of youse don’t mind a bit o’ black velvet. Must be in the blood, eh” (217). Lovely’s appropriation of the term “black velvet”, a colonial euphemism for the sexual abuse of Aboriginal women by white men, implies that the colonial intersection of gender and power—the Aboriginal woman as object of a white male gaze—applies inevitably to all interracial sexuality. What Team-man and Lovely have in common, despite the fact that they see themselves as inhabiting utterly different social and cultural worlds, is their unthinking obeisance to colonial ideologies, and their incapacity to move beyond them.

When Blacky realises the extent of the town’s hypocrisy, which tolerates interracial sexuality within a climate of silence and concealment, he commits the crime of disclosure, exposing his father’s history of sexual relations with Aboriginal women. His transgression is a double one: he seeks a relationship with Clarence which is more than merely sexual; and he voices what the town knows but cannot acknowledge. The novel’s closure, when Blacky decides to leave the town, encodes his rejection of the racism and sexual hypocrisy endemic in the Port, and his resolve to seek interpersonal relations not determined by the old binaries of colonialism. As Blacky leaves the Port by coach at the end of the novel, he uses the Nunga term of farewell, “Nukkin ya!”, and his use of Aboriginal language encodes his capacity to engage imaginatively and through empathy with Aboriginal culture. As I have noted, the novel’s focalisation through Blacky restricts its representation of subjectivities, and to this extent the novel adheres to a narrative pattern in which a non-Aboriginal character benefits from his relationship with an

Aboriginal character, while no equivalent benefits are experienced by Aboriginal characters.

Earlier in this essay I referred to Leela Gandhi's warning concerning the language of hybridity, which she maintains loses its political meaning if it ignores the fact that "for some oppressed peoples...the fight is simply not over" (136). While hybridisation and transculturation carry with them the dangers of foreclosing on the ethical and political questions which permeate postcolonial nations such as Australia, the novels I have discussed rehearse the oppressive consequences of colonialism upon Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal subjects. As I have said, the narration of *Nukkin Ya* is located within western culture, from where the first-person narrator engages with Aboriginal culture, and is not a hybrid text in the same sense as *Killing Darcy* and *Njunjul the Sun*, with their interplay of western and Aboriginal narrative modes. Nevertheless, all three novels disclose a complex sense of the dialogical relations between individuals and their cultures, and promote a mutual transformation of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal identities. In this way they model the possibility of new forms of engagement between races and cultures and encode the processes of decolonisation necessary if Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people are to break free from the weight of the colonial past and its lingering influence on signifying practices.

## Notes

1. Aboriginalism is the Australian version of Orientalism, and is characterised by an insistence on the part of white people upon *speaking for* Aborigines, who are assumed to be childlike, innocent and without agency.
2. “Nukkin Ya” is an Aboriginal term meaning “See you later”. The title of Gwynne’s novel *Deadly Unna?* deploys the Aboriginal English expression “deadly”, meaning “good” or “highly prized”, which together with the question marker “unna” means “Good, isn’t it?”
3. As above, “deadly” means “good” or “highly prized”.
4. For instance, Diana Kidd’s novel, *The Fat and Juicy Place* (1992) and Pat Lowe’s *The Girl with No Name* (1994). The latter does not focalise through Aboriginal characters but uses dialogue to encode Aboriginal perspectives.
5. A “coconut” is an Aboriginal person who has internalised the ideologies of the dominant culture, and who is thus dark on the outside but white inside, like a coconut.
6. A “ring-in” is an idiomatic Australian term for a substitute or fake.
7. “The big smoke” is an idiomatic term for the city, generally compared with “the bush” (rural regions of the country).
8. “Bulleyman” is an Aboriginal English term for “policeman”.
9. The word “language” as it is used in Aboriginal English and increasingly in Standard Australian English refers to any one of the many Aboriginal languages spoken in various parts of Australia.
10. Team-man derives his nickname from the fact that although he is not a skilled football player, every year at the distribution of awards to the local football team he receives the prize for “best team-man”.

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