The Case of Children’s Literature: colonial or anti-colonial?

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ABSTRACT Since Jacqueline Rose published The Case of Peter Pan in 1984, scholars in the field of children’s literature have taken up a rhetorical stance which treats child readers as colonised, and children’s books as a colonising site. This article takes issue with Rose’s rhetoric of colonisation and its deployment by scholars, arguing that it is tainted by logical and ethical flaws. Rather, children’s literature can be a site of decolonisation which revisions the hierarchies of value promoted through colonisation and its aftermath by adopting what Bill Ashcroft refers to as tactics of interpolation. To illustrate how decolonising strategies work in children’s texts, the article considers several alphabet books by Indigenous author-illustrators from Canada and Australia, arguing that these texts for very young children interpolate colonial discourses by valorising minority languages and by attributing to English words meanings produced within Indigenous cultures.

The case of Jacqueline Rose’s influence on children’s literature scholarship is an instructive one, demonstrating how ideas and language circulate within scholarly fields and how they come to be regarded as ‘true’. In this article I consider Rose’s references to and deployment of concepts of colonialism and colonisation in her influential book The Case of Peter Pan or The Impossibility of Children’s Literature (1984).[1] In my 2001 study Reading Race: Aboriginality in Australian children’s literature, and later in Unsettling Narratives: postcolonial readings of children’s literature (2007), I grappled with Rose’s influence on discourses of colonisation in children’s literature research. In this article I build on my earlier work, extending it by considering the ethical questions which arise when scholars use terms such as ‘colonised’ to apply to non-Indigenous child populations. In the second section of the article I consider some of the strategies whereby Indigenous author-illustrators engage in strategies of decolonisation in alphabet books addressed to very young readers. These strategies, in my view, constitute a powerful counterbalance to the shallow and unreflective approaches to colonisation which have haunted children’s literature scholarship.

When The Case of Peter Pan was published in 1984 it immediately attracted the attention of scholars in the United Kingdom and the United States, setting off a flurry of reviews and responses.[2] During the three decades since its publication, The Case of Peter Pan has frequently been cited in children’s literature scholarship, to the extent that it would be difficult to find a discussion of conceptions of childhood or about the field of children’s literature which did not refer to Rose’s work. The book’s continuing influence is evident in the fact that in 2010 the Children’s Literature Association Quarterly published a special issue, ‘The (Im)Possibility of Children’s Fiction: Rose twenty-five years on’. Most citations from The Case of Peter Pan do not engage closely with the book’s arguments, but assume a priori that a quotation from Rose represents an ineluctable truth. Thus, Roderick McGillis says: ‘As Jacqueline Rose and others have noted, children are colonial subjects’ (1999, p. xxvii). The implication here is that it is enough to refer to Rose (and unnamed others) to justify the contentious claim ‘children are colonial subjects’. Another approach used by children’s literature scholars is to treat what Rose has said as a rule to which specific texts might be
regarded as exceptions. Thus, Michelle H. Phillips (2009) argues that the children’s magazine *St Nicholas* departs from ‘normal’ conditions of textual production for children because, in contrast to Rose’s view of a model where ‘the adult comes first ... and the child comes after’ (Rose, 1984, pp. 1-2), the child-adult interplay which characterised the production of *St Nicholas* was conducted along democratic and collaborative lines. Rose’s dictum that neither adults nor children occupy the ‘space in between’ (1984, p. 2) is presented as a fact about children’s literature, and the exceptionalism of *St Nicholas* as a notable departure from what is normal.

When *The Case of Peter Pan* was published it represented a sharp break from the models of critique which had dominated children’s literature up to this time: the close reading approach espoused by New Criticism, whose formalist approach treated the text as a self-contained object; empiricist and historicist models which interpret children’s texts in the light of ‘real-world’ events and phenomena; and reader-response criticism, conventionally forged out of close observation of a small number of child readers and their responses to texts. Rose’s emphasis on the slipperiness of children’s literature and its propensity for incorporating imaginings of childhood into its representational and narrative forms was a useful intervention into children’s literature criticism, but this alone is not sufficient to explain why *The Case of Peter Pan* has maintained its influence in the field of children’s literature in Britain and the United States.

In 1984, Rose’s psychoanalytical and poststructuralist orientation must have struck children’s literature scholars as a heady, daring intervention in a field of critical work dominated by humanist assumptions about the stability of identity and the worthiness of children’s literature. I say ‘must have struck’ because, like most Australian scholars in the field, I have not drawn upon *The Case of Peter Pan* as a foundational critical work.[3] This is not because I object to the poststructuralist orientation of Rose’s discussion or to her argument that children’s literature is imbued with the preoccupations and desires of adults and their imaginings of childhood. First, I distrust the book’s propensity for over-generalisation: Rose’s observations about children’s literature are based, in the main, on the example of J.M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan* and a small sample of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels. Citing these, and referring to a few twentieth-century authors (Maurice Sendak, Enid Blyton, Alan Garner), Rose generalises about children’s literature as though all texts for children, in all times and places, are shaped by common motivations on the part of the adults who produce and disseminate them; and as though all texts for children are British, with the exception of *Where the Wild Things Are*. Her use of the first-person plural pronoun ‘we’, particularly in conjunction with the term ‘culture’, seems to claim universality for what I see as a peculiarly British set of preoccupations and cultural norms. Thus, when Rose refers to ‘how our culture constitutes and reproduces its image of the child’ (1984, p. 112), and describes *Peter Pan* as the ‘cultural emblem of our time’ (1984, p. 144), ‘our’ seems to incorporate vast swathes of western culture into its enunciation of Britishness.

A second problematic aspect of *The Case of Peter Pan* is that Rose’s discussions of narratives for children slide between (and, arguably, confuse) terms in ways which often merge real and implied children, real and implied authors, narrators and authors. Discussing writers for children, Rose says:

> The demand for better and more cohesive writing in children’s fiction ... carries with it a plea that certain psychic barriers should go undisturbed, the most important of which is the barrier between adult and child. When children’s fiction touches on that barrier, it becomes not experiment ... but molestation. (1984, p. 70, italics in original)

When *The Case of Peter Pan* was published, the idea that children’s fiction might be regarded as a kind of molestation, to use Rose’s overheated language, perhaps struck a particular chord with British and North American readers in the light of the moral panics over child abuse which erupted in Britain and the United States in the 1980s and early 1990s. There exists an extensive scholarly literature on these moral panics, which, according to Nancy Schepet-Hughes & Howard F. Stein, are prone to occur at times of economic conservatism such as the years of the Reagan administration, when health and social welfare services, especially those directed to the poor, were dismantled or reduced. Schepet-Hughes & Stein (1987) argue that ‘the time of greatest public outcry against child abuse is also the time of the widespread, official planning of sacrifice of children in public policy’ (p. 342). A similar argument is made by Harry Hendrick, who notes that the child abuse cases of the 1980s in Britain ‘exemplified the dilemmas of the state and its
professionals’ (2003, p. 193) at a time when social services to families and children were cut by Thatcher’s government. Read literally, Rose’s claim that children’s literature might be regarded as a form of abuse (‘molestation’) seems, shockingly, to imply that the entire apparatus of children’s literature and children’s literature criticism is tainted by illicit desires.

Possibly the provocativeness of Rose’s language is enough to explain why she is so often quoted: citations from The Case of Peter Pan demand attention, often either standing in for authors’ own arguments or providing a launching pad for contrary positions. In their introduction to the Children’s Literature Association Quarterly anniversary issue, David Rudd & Anthony Pavlik note that certain quotations from the book have ‘become like mantras, obviating, it would seem, further engagement’ (2010, p. 225). They list four such quotations, but not the one which most interests me: ‘Literature for children is ... a way of colonising ... the child’ (Rose, 1984, p. 26). Rose refers here to J.M. Barrie’s representation of children’s literature in The Little White Bird, not to children’s literature more generally; later, discussing Rousseau’s Emile and Thomas Day’s The History of Sandford and Merton, she claims that the depictions of childhood innocence in these texts are analogous to colonial conceptions of the childlikeness of ‘primitive’ cultures. She takes this unremarkable analogy further in her analysis of the novels of W.H.G. Kingston, G.A. Henty and R.L. Stevenson, but she does not exactly say, as McGillis claims, that children are colonial subjects.

When Rose says that children’s literature is a ‘way of colonising ... the child’, her language again slides between implied and actual child readers. Thus, despite her insistence that she does not address ‘the child’s own experience of the book’ (1984, p. 9), the meaning she attributes to the terms ‘the child’ and ‘children’ is ambiguous. The same ambiguity is evident in the work of many of the scholars who cite Rose, notably Perry Nodelman, whose influential 1992 essay ‘The Other: orientalism, colonialism, and children’s literature’ argues that children’s literature deals with childhood and children as Orientalism deals with the Orient. Throughout this essay, Nodelman draws on Edward Said’s characterisation of Orientalists, using the pronoun ‘we’ much as Rose does in order to produce a homogenised and hypostatised adult. Thus, ‘we’ adults are said to love gazing at children and so objectifying them, becoming ‘very angry indeed when [children] dare to gaze back’ (Nodelman, 1992, p. 30); ‘we’ silence children by speaking for and about them; and ‘we’ dominate children by exerting power over them. Like Rose before him, Nodelman constructs a unified child and sets this child against adults assumed to possess a common fund of motivations and desires in regard to children – apart, that is, from Nodelman and Rose, who distance themselves from those ‘colonising’ adults who produce children’s books and intervene in children’s lives.

Nodelman bolsters his argument by citing Rose as an authority who ‘works from the premise that children’s literature is a form of colonisation’ (Nodelman, 1992, p. 29). The phrase ‘a form of’ implies that children’s literature and colonisation occupy the same ontological category; and Roderick McGillis’s statement ‘children are colonial subjects’ (1999, p. xxvii) subsumes ‘children’ within the category ‘colonised peoples’, at the same time collapsing the terms ‘colonial’ and ‘colonised’. Dispensing with terms such as ‘metaphorical’ and ‘analogous’, Rose, Nodelman, McGillis and many others perform a sleight of hand whereby ‘children’ become indistinguishable from peoples colonised during the many waves of imperialism which have affected vast swathes of the world’s population. The children of whom Rose and Nodelman write are those who consume children’s books – that is, the readers to whom mainstream publishers direct their products. Through analogies presented as fact, this largely middle-class population of children is, bizarrely, referred to as a colonised and oppressed group.

As I have argued previously, analogies between colonisers and children’s authors, colonised peoples and child readers are hopelessly unsound:

children’s authors were once themselves children, and so the children for whom they write are not wholly Other ... . The gulf between colonisers and colonised is of a different order, because colonial discourses are informed by the assumption that the colonised occupy quite a different ontological space from the colonisers, and that no matter how assiduously they mimic their ‘betters’, they will never quite measure up to them. Secondly, the comparison between child readers and colonised peoples breaks down completely when texts are produced by colonial writers for the children of colonisers, who are inscribed within these texts as young colonisers, as ‘us’ rather than ‘them’. (Bradford, 2001, p. 12)
I hasten to say that I am by no means the only scholar who has contested the use of metaphors of colonisation in relation to children and child protagonists. For instance, Caroline Webb argues that Rose’s treatment of the ‘colonised child’ fails to account for the propensity of Alice, in Alice in Wonderland, to ‘reflect the imperialist vision’ (Webb, 2010, p. 7) in her attitude to the creatures she encounters in Wonderland; and Jackie Stallcup takes issue with Nodelman’s propensity to sweep all child-adult relationships up in the metaphor of colonisation, arguing that ‘we can acknowledge and address the troubling, asymmetrical power relationships between adults and children and, at the same time, explore the possibility of sharing power with children in mutually beneficial ways’ (2002, pp. 144-145). It is, however, far more common for scholarly work in children’s literature to draw upon Rose’s and Nodelman’s arguments unreflectively.

I want to take the argument further by considering the extent to which the ‘children are colonised’ rhetoric in children’s literature scholarship is problematic in relation not only to logic but also to ethics. By conflating children with colonised peoples, scholars who use this language seem to condone a strategic forgetting of the materiality of colonisation, its deleterious effects on the lives and cultures of colonised people, its repercussions in the present. The gently reared middle-class children who comprise the bulk of readers implied by mainstream children’s literature are very far removed from the Indigenous peoples who endured the massacres, dispossessions and privations of colonisation in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the Philippines, India, Algeria and many other nations. To refer to children’s literature as a site of colonisation is, then, to mute, to downplay, even to trivialise the effects of colonisation on Indigenous peoples.

A more general ethical issue concerns how regimes of power and influence play out in both children’s literature and the scholarship of children’s literature. As Linda Alcoff has observed, ‘the practice of privileged persons speaking for or on behalf of less privileged persons has actually resulted in many cases in increasing or reinforcing the oppression of the group spoken for’ (Alcoff, 1991-92, p. 7). The scholars who write about children’s literature as a field of colonisation and children as a colonised population do not refer in these passages to actual colonised peoples. But they lump together colonisation/children’s literature, colonised peoples/children in such a way that the colonised are merely figures, ‘the colonised’, with whom ‘children’ are compared; and in this way they treat colonisation as a time or set of circumstances so remote from the present as not to possess its own particularity in relation to peoples, places and politics. Established scholars are privileged because their educational achievements and their occupation endow them with prestige and authority. When they speak about marginalised others (or refer to them as emblems, metaphors or analogies) they benefit from these less-privileged people, who do not speak for themselves. And they leave intact the relations of power whereby some people are privileged and others are not.

Among less-privileged people are the descendants of those colonised populations so glibly associated by Rose and others with the children who read mainstream children’s literature. Since the 1960s, several of the Indigenous publishing houses which have emerged in the settler societies of Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the United States have accorded priority to the production of children’s texts because of the pressing need to provide Indigenous children with reading material which proceeds from Indigenous cultures and which treats as normal and usual the values and practices of these cultures. In contrast, mainstream perspectives of Indigeneity generally naturalise the values of dominant cultures, either representing Indigenous people and cultures as marginal and different, or insisting on what bell hooks refers to as ‘the liberal belief in a universal subjectivity ... the myth of “sameness”’ (1992, p. 167). Indigenous textuality for children, in contrast, actively works toward processes of decolonisation by foregrounding the diversity and complexity of Indigenous cultures and by contesting the colonial discourses which persist in modern, post-colonial cultures. Using the forms and genres of mainstream children’s literature, Indigenous authors and artists adopt the tactic described by Bill Ashcroft as interpolation, which, he says, ‘redefines the nature of “resistance” by revealing the diversity of subjective agency within the dominant territory’ (2001, p. 53).

A striking example of interpolation in Indigenous publishing over the last decade has been the emergence of Indigenous alphabet and counting books for pre-school children. These texts include local publications such as the *Kaurna Alphabet Book* (Gale & Watkins, 2006), produced through collaboration between the Kaurna elder Cherie Watkins and the non-Indigenous linguist Mary-Anne Gale, and trialled at the Kaurna Plains School in South Australia in conjunction with a
program aimed at regenerating Kaurna, an at-risk language. Evelyn Ballantyne’s *The Aboriginal Alphabet for Children* (2001), in contrast, takes a pan-Aboriginal approach by drawing on various Canadian Aboriginal languages and cultures, incorporating Inuktitut terms such as *kamiik* (snow boots), the Great Plains word *tipi* (tent) and various Aboriginal English words such as ‘bannock’, ‘sweat lodge’ and ‘fiddle’. Given that alphabet books introduce young children to language and cultural concepts, the choice of words in alphabet books is informed by authors’ and illustrators’ judgements as to which objects are likely to be familiar to children, or at least familiar enough for children to match a word with a picture of the object signified by the word. As Nodelman remarks, the puzzle-solving dimension of alphabet books – the matching of words to pictures – ‘is an important means of inserting [young readers] into the shared meanings that define our sense of what our world means and who we are ourselves’ (2001, p. 247). Nodelman’s ‘our’, however, overlooks the cultural and ideological strategies whereby alphabet books normalise notions about who is included and who is excluded from the audiences they imply.

Rather, alphabet books have often reflected and promoted racially charged hierarchies. The entry ‘I is for Indian’ in North American alphabet books, for instance, frequently evoked representations of Indians described by Michael Dorris as ‘whooping, silly, one-dimensional cartoons’ (1998, p. 19) which veered between comic relief, savages bent on the murder of white people, or stereotypical figures, either saintly or cute. Early Australian alphabet books too ensured that the white children who were their implied readers were positioned to assent to colonial discourses. In *The Young Australian’s Alphabet* (1871), the rhyme accompanying the letter ‘b’ is: ‘B is the black-fellow/ We can all see,/ Lazily sleeping/ Under a tree’ (in O’Conor, 2009, p. 11). This entry, which is accompanied by the image of a ragged Aboriginal man sleeping soundly under the shade of a tree, his boomerang and throwing-stick at his side, conforms with Rose’s observation about how colonial discourses represent Indigenous people as carefree children of nature. However, the idea that the white Australian children implied by *The Young Australian’s Alphabet* might also be regarded as a colonised population collapses under the weight of the implications of ‘B is the black-fellow’. The supine figure in the illustration is, by implication, the antithesis of the active, organised white man, whose clothing and actions mark him out as the member of a superior race. The children implied as readers are positioned, too, to assent to the idea of their superiority, and of their good fortune in possessing that superiority.

The alphabet books and counting books published by Indigenous authors and artists over the last decade adopt tactics of interpolation by exploiting the possibilities of a form deeply implicated in the production and reproduction of the values of dominant cultures, a form directed to the youngest children, engaged in building repertoires of knowledge, values and affect. These Indigenous books for the young are, like Indigenous texts for children more generally, directed toward two audiences: Indigenous children for whom the objects and names introduced in alphabet books are embedded in cultural systems into which readers are inducted; and non-Indigenous children who may, even at a very early age, sense that they are to some degree outsiders to the world of these books. Answering back to the colonising discourses of early alphabet books, Indigenous texts function as decolonising texts, throwing off the baggage of colonialism and reclaiming language and identity.

These decolonising agendas are strikingly present in Julie Flett’s *Li Yiiboo Nyaapiwak lii Swer: L’Alphabet di Michif*, its title translated as ‘Owls See Clearly at Night: a Michif alphabet’ (2010). The book’s introduction, intended for adults, alludes to the complex history which produced the Michif language, the unique combination of French, Cree and Ojibway spoken by the Métis people of the Canadian and Northern US prairies, and formed when French and Scots newcomers intermingled with the Cree and Ojibway inhabitants of these territories. Like Kaurna from South Australia, Michif is an endangered language. Flett’s strategy of placing the Michif words first on the page and in coloured fonts next to English translations in black foregrounds Michif as the language of the book, and indicates that English is its translation. To Métis children, who may or may not be familiar with Michif, the language of the book itself enunciates Métis identity, even before readers have perused its pages. To non-Indigenous children, the appearance of Michif, its unfamiliar blending of vowels and consonants, instantiates difference and gestures toward the culture from which language derives. Because Michif is the primary language of the book, the alphabetic system subtly disrupts the primacy of English. Thus, the letter ‘ɛ’ features *Li Eentikooìís*, the ant; ‘h’ stands for ‘La Haruzh’, the red willow; the letter ‘t’ is for *taanshi*, ‘hello’; and the letter ‘o’ stands for
Ohpaha!, for an entire utterance, ‘Fly up! Fly away!’ The effect of these language features is exactly what Ashcroft means by interpolation, in that they ‘make use of aspects of the colonising culture so as to generate transformative cultural production’ (2001, p. 47). In Lii Yiiboo Nayaapiwak lii Swer the Michif language and culture is interpolated into a form formerly dominated by the English language and populated by signifiers valued by the dominant culture. This strategy is not merely one of resistance, but rather claims power by generating a new kind of alphabet book – a post-colonial text which asserts the survival and specificity of Métis culture.

The objects, animals and people featuring in Lii Yiiboo Nayaapiwak lii Swer signal key aspects of Métis cultural practices and their relationships to place. Thus, the buffalo, the red willow and the pheasant signify Métis connections to the land and to pursuits such as hunting; the book’s emphasis on environmental phenomena (snow, wind, Northern Lights, water) speaks of a culture steeped in knowledge of the natural world. The letter ‘g’ stands for La Galet, or bannock (flat bread). The illustration for ‘g’ emphasises that the domestic and the natural world are not separate domains: rounds of bannock cook on a grate placed over a fireplace in a forest clearing, while a tree stump serves as a table, set with a white cloth, a red teapot and a round of bannock. Behind a tree a bear peers out, planning to steal some bannock. This illustration, like those throughout the book, is deceptively simple, with its limited palette of red, black, greys and browns against a white ground, but rewards close investigation of its telling details of Métis life. The humour with which the bear’s stance is depicted, the brightness of the teapot, the spareness of the picture’s elements focus attention on the interpenetration of the natural world and cultural elements, creating a strong sense of Métis experience and its relationship to place. When illustrations refer to Métis practices (jigging and fiddling) and decorative arts (such as the elaborate beading used to make moccasins), these practices and arts are always placed in outdoor settings where plants and animals function not merely as background details but as elements integral to human activities.

If Lii Yiiboo Nayaapiwak lii Swer valorises local and specific features of Métis life, the Bundjulung artist Bronwyn Bancroft evokes the dot-painting techniques of the desert peoples of the centre of Australia while developing her own artistic and stylistic strategies. Bancroft’s alphabet and number books comprise An Australian 1, 2, 3 of Animals (2007), Possum and Wattle: my first big book of Australian words (2008b), and W is for Wombat: my first Australian word book (2008a), a board book for the very young with illustrations selected from Possum and Wattle. In these books Bancroft constructs an Australia defined by Aboriginality. In W is for Wombat and Possum and Wattle, the words she has selected often refer to animals, birds and plants (ants, cockatoos, dingoes, emus, flies, goannas, hawks), depicted in lustrous colours and dot-painted in patterns which echo the shapes of plants and of design elements in Aboriginal art. Whereas words signify a vast range of possibilities, illustrations tie them down to particular times and places. Bancroft takes English words such as ‘island’, ‘river’, ‘sun’ and ‘tree’ and renders them Aboriginal. In W is for Wombat, for instance, the word ‘tree’ is accompanied by an illustration featuring the boab tree, a species of which grows in the Kimberley region of Western Australia and in the Northern Territory. The boab, a distinctive bottle-shaped tree, is native to Madagascar, Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, but Bancroft’s depiction, evoking the X-ray techniques and dot painting of Aboriginal desert art, draws attention to the boab’s peculiar and majestic form, and its prominent place in Aboriginal history and culture.\[5\] While readers may have in their minds more conventional images of trees, Bancroft’s boab painting alludes both to Aboriginal art and also to the cultural practices and belief which are inseparable from it. Her depiction of the word ‘sun’ is more directly political: her design echoes the Australian Aboriginal flag, designed in 1971, and which represents the sun, bright yellow, against a background of black and red, which represents Aboriginal people and the red earth of the desert regions. The Aboriginal flag has been and remains a powerful sign of Indigenous presence in Australia and of contemporary Indigenous political action.

Bancroft’s Possum and Wattle (2008b) boldly announces itself as ‘my big book of Australian words’. The radical story Bancroft tells is that ‘Australia’ can be understood only in relation to the cultures and practices of its Aboriginal inhabitants. As Sally Morgan explains in her introduction to the book, before Europeans came to Australia, around 250 Aboriginal languages were spoken across the continent. Although many of these languages have been lost, a number of them survive or are now being revived; in addition, many Aboriginal words are used in Australian English; examples from Bancroft’s book are ‘boomerang’, ‘dingo’, ‘galah’ and ‘numbat’. Other words, among them ‘didgeridoo’ and ‘possum’, were applied by Europeans to the new phenomena they
encountered: ‘didgeridoo’ is thought to have been derived from a word heard by settlers and mistakenly applied to the instrument; and the ‘possum’ was thought to be similar to the North American opossum. But it is in her treatment of English words – the language of the colonisers – that Bancroft most forcefully re-appropriates Aboriginal meanings. In her depiction of ‘home’, for instance, the land itself incorporates home: its trees, waters, groundcover, creatures, sky. The small bark shelter depicted in the illustration is only one element of the complex of signs which make up home. Near the shelter a figure is viewed bearing a coolaman, a carrying dish made from the bark of the red gum trees, the shape of which is evident in two of the trees from which bark has been carefully cut. Just as the trees provide the coolaman, so ancestral land provides its Aboriginal inhabitants with sustenance, meaning and identity.

Bancroft’s approach relies on strategies of defamiliarisation, as viewers first think they are familiar with the meanings of common English words, and then experience them as Aboriginal terms. The word ‘flames’ may appear to refer to the bushfires which threaten large areas of Australia during hot summers, but the book’s glossary explains that Bancroft’s depiction of flames refers to the ancient practices of communication, hunting and land management which Aboriginal people carried out prior to colonisation. As represented by non-Aboriginal authors and artists, Aboriginal cultures and practices have commonly appeared as marginal to ‘Australia’, an aesthetic or decorative add-on to a ‘real’ Australia associated with Britishness. In Bancroft’s *Possum and Wattle*, however, Aboriginal ways of seeing are central to how ‘Australia’ is figured, teaching child readers how to view the land and its creatures. It might perhaps be argued that Bancroft here engages in a kind of reverse ‘colonisation’ by insisting on the primacy of Aboriginal cultures within the nation. However, like most claims of ‘reverse colonisation’ or ‘reverse racism’, this argument founders on its assumptions about the relationships between texts and the discursive contexts in which they are produced. For, as Alcoff observes, ‘the discursive context is a political arena’ (1991-92, p. 15) underwritten by structures of power and influence. Since European culture occupies a position of privilege in the Australian nation, and Aboriginal books for children comprise a small fraction of books overall, there is nothing ‘reverse’ about Bancroft’s approach. As Alcoff notes, discourse functions as ‘an event, which includes speaker, words, hearers, location, language, and so on’ (1991-2, p. 26). Conceptualised as an event, *Possum and Wattle* thus speaks from the margins, claiming recognition and respect for Aboriginal cultures.

Children’s literature has always engaged in representations of colonisers and colonised peoples, from the texts of adventure and exploration of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to the many contemporary texts which address colonial histories and thematise relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people (Bradford, 2007). The significance of texts such as the alphabet books I have discussed is that they undermine the easy assumptions of dominant cultures by claiming a space for minority languages and by demonstrating that the meanings of words derive from the ways in which they are used. As the Métis scholar Emma LaRocque remarks, English is now the language of many Indigenous people, and can serve to ‘decolonize and so unite Aboriginal peoples’ (1990, p. xxvi). There is, as LaRocque also notes, a degree of poetic justice about this fact. Given the power of children’s texts to work toward decolonisation, the time has, I think, passed for scholars to deploy the tired and unstable rhetorics which treat children’s literature as a form of colonisation. The innovative work of Indigenous authors and artists offers its own eloquent argument. Far from seeking to colonise children into the values of the dominant culture, Indigenous alphabet books seek to engage very young readers in actively producing meaning. It would be fanciful and insulting to claim that the implied readers of these books are colonised subjects. Whether Indigenous or non-Indigenous, the young children implied as readers are open to difference and alive to the adventure of engaging with Indigenous beliefs and practices.

Notes

[1] I thank the two anonymous reviewers of this article for their incisive and helpful comments.

[2] The Case of Peter Pan was Rose’s first book and her only publication on children’s literature. She went on to write on sexuality, feminism and politics from a psychoanalytical perspective, and is best known for her study of Sylvia Plath, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (1991).
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[3] The Australian scholar John Stephens says that Rose’s *The Case of Peter Pan* represents an early deployment of literary theory in children’s literature scholarship, along with Zohar Shavit’s *Poetics of Children’s Literature*, but that although Rose ‘has proved the more quotable in subsequent criticism ... the contribution of the book to the theoretical conceptualisation of children’s literature is in fact minimal’ (Stephens, 2000, p. 19).

[4] By ‘Indigenous’ I mean autochthonous peoples and cultures in nations and regions colonised by more powerful groups. I use the upper case out of respect and to distinguish colonised people and their descendents from the term ‘indigenous’ as it is used to refer to all people born in a nation or region regardless of their ancestry. When relevant I use the names of specific Indigenous clans and nations.

[5] Boabs were used for food, water and medicine and to make twine. A particularly large boab tree in Western Australia was used during the colonial period as a cell to temporarily hold Aboriginal prisoners who were being transported to the town of Derby for trial and imprisonment.

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