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"All are implicated": Violence and Accountability in Sam Watson’s *The Kadaitcha Sung* and Alexis Wright’s *Plains of Promise*

*Kate Hall*

Just like historians, writers of fiction have evinced an enduring fascination with the Australian frontier. In and around the decade of the 1990s, writers seemed particularly interested in Tasmania as a place distinguished by its antipodean isolation, and by the bloody violence of its colonial history (see Mudrooroo 1991; Castro 1994; Flanagan 2001). Equally violent, though less geographically remote, the Queensland frontier is vividly evoked in two novels from the 1990s: Sam Watson’s *The Kadaitcha Sung* (1990) and Alexis Wright’s *Plains of Promise* (1997). Both novels are by Aboriginal writers, and they both represent, in different ways, the uneasy, ambivalent and often violent connections between their Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal characters. Watson’s novel assaults the reader with visceral descriptions of murder, rape, and other forms of violence, between and amongst white and black individuals and communities, in late twentieth-century Brisbane. At the same time, the text details the massacres of Indigenous populations in colonial Queensland (and other states) with a lack of restraint that recalls U.S. writer Cormac McCarthy’s depiction of frontier violence in *Blood Meridian* (1985). *Plains of Promise* foregrounds the horror of stolen children and the myriad forms of violence and abuse against women (by white and black men) that occurred in missions and institutions from the mid nineteenth century up until at least the 1970s in Australia. The Aboriginal mission is a significant ‘frontier’ place in the Australian psyche, in part, perhaps, because of its remote or ‘outback’ setting, but also because it represents a place where a clear boundary exists to demarcate Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultural groups. In examining evocations of the frontier in Australian fiction it is helpful to remember that the frontier is, among other things: a literal (historical) space describing a specific geographical region, an actual or imagined boundary line, a discursive concept and a metaphor. In whatever context it is used the frontier inscribes a boundary between a number of familiar Manichean oppositions: savagery/civilisation, black/white, wild/tamed, us/them, and so on. And, just as the historical and geographical frontier shifts with the creep of colonial expansion, so the figurative frontier of Australian history is an unstable and shifting construct. Australian historiography has, of course been renegotiating this frontier for some time, and it is useful to recall that the recent history wars “were preceded by a long, complicated and strongly contested process of historiographical transition” (Veracini 439). It is an encouraging mark of progress that, during the history wars of the 1990s, right-wing combatants such as historian Keith Windschuttle and former Prime Minister John Howard found themselves in the minority, railing against what they saw as “poses of political correctness” (Howard 23) as the frontier they knew was radically redefined by historians intent on providing “counter-narratives of the nation”. I’ve used Homi Bhabha’s much borrowed phrase from *The Location of Culture* because it applies equally well to historiographical and fictional retellings of the past, and because writers
of fiction and historians seemed equally interested during the 1990s in interrogating history. Wright and Watson are just two of a number of Indigenous novelists (see, for example, Kim Scott and Bruce Pascoe) who were producing historical counter-narratives of the nation during the 1990s, from 'the other side of the frontier'.

"Counter-Narratives" and "Narrative Historians"

_The Kadaitcha Sung_ was published at the beginning, and _Plains of Promise_ near the end, of a decade characterised by a range of heated debates over Australia's past. In an article examining the so-called "black armband" and "white blindfold" versions of Australia's post-invasion history, Anna Clark quotes conservative historian Robert Murray's claim that left-wing histories "have now become so commonplace that they threaten to rewrite the national story in the public mind" (3). This perceived threat to "mainstream" narratives of history is intimately connected to the ways in which such interrogative accounts of Australia's past question the authority of white nationalist perceptions of identity and belonging. The unsettling effects of black armband historiography on what Ghassan Hage (1998) calls the "white nation fantasy" may be seen in the conservative backlash against the work of progressive historians like Henry Reynolds and Lyndall Ryan. Keith Windschuttle's _The Fabrication of Aboriginal History_ (2002) pointedly attacked the work of these and several other prominent historians, who, he argued, had misrepresented, made erroneous assumptions about, even "fabricated", evidence pertaining to the massacre of Aborigines by British settlers. Windschuttle's repressive denial of the number and scale of massacres on the colonial frontier is fuelled by a right-wing anxiety that the historiographic recognition of the atrocities of Australia's colonial past and of the concomitant existence of continuing social inequalities and injustices might "endanger the national narrative" (Clark 3). In their interrogative approach to history in general, and to the atrocities and injustices of Australian colonial history (and its legacies) in particular, the novels discussed in this essay are aligned with black armband histories in endangering, in various ways, narratives of the nation in Australia. Although these are works of fiction, and not historiography, they may also be seen to resonate with the recent counter-narratives being produced by those writers that Greg Lehman calls "narrative historians". A descendent of the Trawulwuy people of Tasmania, Lehman celebrates the "partisan" support of non-Indigenous historians like Henry Reynolds in confronting some of the grim silences and deliberate omissions of Australian history. On the other side, the non-partisan or white-blindfold historians are working against the progressive redefinition of history by producing authoritative discourses based on a conflation of historical fact with truth. Lehman argues (generously) that Keith Windschuttle is "a technical historian. He is involved in the search for truth. Something factual and immutable. The sort of thing that might be useful in a court of law or a native title tribunal" (178). Windschuttle and other neo-conservatives are "horrified", writes Lehman, to find that

the partisan ranks are now swelling with narrative historians. Their interests are not just restricted to the contents of archives, but involve them in the contents of people's lives — the meaning that human beings conjure from the past and the processes that take them
into the future. For the narrative historian, perhaps the most fascinating terrain exists in the spaces between historical sources. The gaps between fact and fiction. This is the stuff of our dreams, our pain and our aspiration. It is where our identity resides. (177–178)

Wright and Watson are particularly concerned with what might be found in those “gaps between fact and fiction” and their novels trouble the distinction between history and fiction to the extent that it becomes difficult, and sometimes impossible, to locate the boundary between them. In their novels, Watson and Wright appropriate historical evidence and use it to counter the kinds of historical denial (by white-blindfold historians, but also by conservative to extreme right-wing politicians like the One Nation Party’s Pauline Hanson) that were gaining an alarming amount of public support during the 1990s in Australia. It is worth noting here also that these novels do not cast their Aboriginal characters as passive victims of colonisation and frontier violence. Watson actually recasts the event of colonisation within an Aboriginal cosmology, and posits a radical reworking of the question of accountability, to which I will return. Wright’s novel shows us the immediate and long-term effects of child removal and the destruction of culture, and reminds us that gender and race are intertwined in situations of unequal power relations. But Plains of Promise also moves beyond the binary thinking that characterises cultural relations in Australia as a perpetual struggle between black victims and white oppressors. By writing the figures of Chinese migrants, ‘mixed-race’ people and Aboriginal women back into the novel’s historical setting Wright destabilises a number of ideological assumptions about cross-cultural conflicts in and on Australia’s ‘other’ frontiers: the Aboriginal missions and the cattle stations of the early twentieth century.

The Kadaitcha Sung is, in many respects, a ‘payback’ novel; one that links the atrocities committed by the Native Mounted Police in Queensland to the social injustices that plague the displaced Aboriginal population of 1980s Brisbane. Like Mudrooroo’s The Promised Land (2000), which repeatedly provides gruesome details of massacres in Western Australia, Watson’s novel uses graphic depictions of violence to shock a white readership out of its complacency: “I wanted to make a statement and I wanted to get into the hearts and minds of the great, unwashed Australian masses [...] and say, this is what the fuck you’ve done to my land and my people” (1994, 590). In fact, The Kadaitcha Sung is more complex than this statement suggests, not least because its ‘mixed-blood’ protagonist feels deeply ambivalent about white people, and because the novel is sympathetic to several of its white characters. In both Watson’s and Wright’s novels the protagonists are of mixed (Aboriginal and white) descent and the tensions, struggles and ambivalences that attend hybridised cultures seem to manifest themselves in the questions each character asks about his and her own hybrid identities. Both The Kadaitcha Sung and Plains of Promise use a range of narrative modes, including what, for want of a more fitting term, may be called magical realism. Magical realism is, of course, a hybrid narrative mode, one that juxtaposes the ordinary and the extraordinary, and the mythic with the mundane, and so it lends itself to representations of cultural hybridity through processes of metaphor and metonymy. While neither novel is magical realism proper, both contain a mixture of social realism and mythic, otherworldly depictions of another, partially hidden, reality. This ontological mixing is similar in its effects, and its politics, to some of the canonical texts of magical realism,
such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) and Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981), in which different, co-existing layers of narrative reality affect one another, often in unexpected ways. This textual hybridity provides fertile ground for the other kinds of hybridisation – of cultures and identities – that both novels represent. In a metaphorical sense, then, the textual worlds of these novels exist as frontier spaces, where the known and the unknown, the familiar and the uncanny, and black and white temporalities exist uneasily alongside (and make frequent incursions into) the other’s space.

**Hybridity and Dialogic Relations**

Frontiers are boundary places, and like all boundaries, the demarcating lines that frontiers draw up are always destabilised by the processes of hybridisation. This chapter attempts to map some of these processes in Watson’s and Wright’s novels, and it also aims to demonstrate how these novels refigure the ‘frontier’ of Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultural relations as a dialogic space. The reason for attending to dialogic relations is so that we can open up the possibility of discussing cross-cultural interaction and communication, without becoming mired in agonistics or resorting to a prematurely celebratory model of multicultural unity. The dialogic relation, as Mikhail Bakhtin first formulated it, is a mode of connection that is radically unstable, a liminal space that encompasses both conflict and commensurability (see Bakhtin 1981). I use Bakhtin’s dialogic principle to extend the theoretical concept of hybridity – to redirect attention from the hybrid formation itself, to those points of connection and interpenetration that occur at the intersections of previously demarcated cultures, identities and textual elements. For Bakhtin, there are two distinct forms of hybridity. “Unconscious” or “organic” hybridity may be defined as the everyday mixing and merging of languages/cultures throughout history that, as Robert Young puts it, “gives birth to new forms of amalgamation rather than contestation” (21). “Intentional”, conscious, hybridity on the other hand represents and highlights “the collision between differing points of views on the world”, and it is this kind of contestatory hybridity that manifests itself (most obviously) in forms of artistic expression that have an “essentially dialogic quality” (Bakhtin 1981, 360). These two forms of hybridity – the unconscious and the conscious – operate at the same time within a given society, but the processes of everyday, unconscious hybridisation are very different from the interventionist politics of the conscious hybrid form. While unconscious hybridity produces changes that are, in Bakhtin’s words “pregnant with potential for new world views” (360), these changes are not intentional. The conscious or intentional hybrid however, sets out to effect change through a deliberate mixing of voices/cultures, a juxtapositioning that does not resolve into a seamless fusion of parts, but rather produces a dialogic tension.

Rita Felski notes that “metaphors of hybridity and the like not only recognise differences within the subject, fracturing and complicating holistic notions of identity, but also address connections between subjects” (12). One way of tracing such connections, not only within or between subjects, but also between discourses, texts and other modes of representation, is to attend to the dialogic relations that occur in the interstitial spaces created by unlikely or unexpected juxtapositions. Magical realism is a
mode that provides ample opportunity for dialogic relations, because the magical realist text is itself an interstitial space, in which the modalities and conventions of different literary genres co-exist. In the hybrid space of the magical realist narrative, diverse entities and elements engage with one another to form relationships that, whether harmonious or hostile, redefine notions of the purity of categories of difference such as race, gender, class, culture or any other demarcating concept. By bringing such elements into what Bakhtin would call “relations of simultaneity” (Holquist 19), magical realist narratives create the conditions of possibility for dialogic understanding, a mode of perception that transforms received and static notions of difference into “multiple, interconnecting axes of affiliation and differentiation” (Felski 12). The concepts of dialogue and hybridity are interdependent metaphors; together, they may be used to reveal and to deconstruct boundaries, divesting authoritative discourses of their power by foregrounding the heteroglossic context in which such discourses exist. Hybridity disrupts boundaries by bringing together things that were previously demarcated, and the hybrid construction helps us to identify invisible, normalised or occluded boundaries by alerting us to their existence as unstable and permeable constructs. Dialogism focuses on the connections between the previously demarcated elements of the hybrid construction once they are brought together in the same space. The understanding that comes from the recognition of such connections is also linked to the recognition of the relations between the hybrid construction, its context, and the contexts of its constituent parts.

Novels such as The Kadaitcha Sung and Plains of Promise, in their use of a polyphonic (many-voiced) and hybrid narrative mode, challenge the reader’s resources of cultural recognition and invite participation in dialogic understanding through their deployment of certain strategies of translation. By ‘translation’ I do not mean that these texts operate as “a bridge between limiting assumptions of white ‘rationality’ and black ‘intuition’” (Castro 2002, 247), or that their politics are directed towards the edification or education of a white readership. The whole point of the polyphonic text is that its strategies of translation move in more than one direction; its purpose is profoundly dialogic. The texts examined here make certain aspects of different cultures accessible to one another through their sustained juxtaposition of voices, languages and world views. They foreground the problems of hybridised cultures, but they also point to several possibilities for social change and renewal by encouraging dialogues between differently positioned subjects. Such texts are important. They refuse to segregate cultural groups based on an assumption of an essential/essentialised separateness, or of a presumed inability to understand one another. They are not afraid to balance the seemingly incongruous on an ontological level and the apparently incommensurable at the level of culture. By foregrounding a range of cross-cultural dialogues these texts promote dialogic understanding and the translation of the other’s word into what Bakhtin (1981, 345) calls “internally persuasive discourse”. “When we translate from one language to another”, writes Brian Castro, “we not only reinvent ourselves but we free up the sclerotic restrictions of our own language” (1997, 2). Through the translation of the “other’s word” into “internally persuasive discourse” the reader is encouraged to reshape her or his ideological perceptions of the world. Novels like Plains of Promise and The Kadaitcha Sung are examples of Bakhtin’s “conscious” hybridity. The juxtaposition of social realism with Aboriginal cosmology and customary narratives is
part of the politics of these texts, which show us worlds hidden behind the surface of, or existing uncannily alongside, the one we recognise. Lydia Wevers writes that in *The Kadaitcha Sung*, for example, “the surface of the land is fluid, like time: beings appear through the earth, its elements dissolving and enacting spiritual and psychic forces; human dramas are surrounded by and part of vaster, more complex systems that can only be partially apprehended” (126). Such hybridised textual worlds offer the reader a way of apprehending that the space of the nation and its innumerable intersecting lives might be very different from her or his previous imaginings.

**“An inescapable hybridity”**

If living in the “complicated entanglement” produced by the contemporary processes of cultural hybridisation means negotiating, as Ien Ang writes, “the limits of and partiality involved in all forms of communication and affiliation across lines of cultural division” (1997, 2), how are we to approach the complex interrelationships of cultural difference in texts that also contain interactions between human characters and a host of non-human, or otherworldly entities? In an essay on authenticity and identity in Aboriginal poetry, Dennis McDermott expresses the ways in which cultural hybridity problematises representations of the authenticity of Aboriginal identities: “We are, then, in an Australia that has evolved over generations of what Thompson calls a personal and cultural ‘entanglement’. We are dealing with an *inescapable* hybridity” (277). Here we have a definition of cultural hybridity as an unavoidable condition of contemporary existence in Australia. This condition can be seen, to use Alan Sinfield’s term, as an “imposition” in the negative sense of that word; something that encroaches and makes demands on Aboriginal peoples and communities. But the “inescapability” of hybridity may also be seen as an “opportunity” to “spark fresh patterns of neural connection” (280) in the relationship of “entanglement” between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, and so hybridity is part of the *process* of cross-cultural negotiation and dialogue in Australia.

The concept of hybridity is, however, exceedingly problematic within discourses on Aboriginal identities. It conjures images of cultural inauthenticity and of being caught between two worlds, without ever properly belonging to either. Unlike the range of hyphenated names by which non-Aboriginal Australians of mixed cultural heritage may be defined, such as ‘Asian-Australian’, or ‘Anglo-Celtic Australian’ for example, the term ‘hybrid’, with its biological and ethnographic connotations, is often seen as an offensive marker of identity when used to describe Aboriginal people of mixed parentage. Suvendrini Perera and Joseph Pugliese argue, for instance, that the term ‘hybrid’ is a racist appellation, “by which white Australia has attempted to manage and contain Aboriginal identities [...] The ‘hybrid’ signifies the fractured and the polyglot Aboriginal who is the synthesised product of colonial assimilation; as such, the ‘hybrid’ is the inauthentic and degraded” (17). In an article on ethnographies of the assimilation era, Tasmanian critic Ian Anderson argues vehemently against the use of the term hybridity to define cultural identity:
As I am an Aborigine, I inhabit an Aboriginal body, and not a combination of features which may or may not cancel each other [...] How I speak, act and how I look, are outcomes of a colonial history, and not a particular combination of traits from either side of the frontier. (1994, 121)

The dangers of uncritical or prematurely celebratory uses of hybridity loom large in these quotations, and it is difficult to imagine a negotiable path through the negative associations of hybridity and Aboriginality. However, the relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal individuals and groups need to be thought through in terms of possible connections if, as Jonathan Rutherford writes, “the interrelationships of difference” between cultures and identities are to be marked not by incommensurability, but by “translation and negotiation” (26). The lives and experiences of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people are intertwined in contemporary Australia. So how do we come to terms with, and what terminology should we employ in our attempts to understand such an ‘inescapable hybridity’? Texts like The Kadaitcha Sung, I suggest, respond to the social realities of cultural intermixture by actively engaging with the concept of hybridity as a necessary, if problematic and unwelcome, element within articulations and enunciations of Aboriginal identities. As Anderson (1995, 35) explains, to refuse the appellation ‘hybrid’, with its racist associations, is not to deny the historical realities of the “horrific violence” which characterised colonial miscegenation. Rather, this “active disidentification” (Ang 2001, 196) reinforces the importance for many Aboriginal people of reclaiming agency through modes of cultural identification/disidentification and self-definition. As Anderson puts it, “I fail to feel positive about this British cultural tradition. Nor do I see it as mine. I simply acknowledge its impact” (35).

**The Kadaitcha Sung**

Watson’s novel expresses the anxieties and contradictions of an inescapable hybridity through its representation of the discordant effects of cultural and racial intermixture between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal characters. The Kadaitcha Sung tells the story of Tommy Gubba, a sorcerer of mixed (Aboriginal and white) descent, and the last of the Kadaitcha. In an interview with *Meanjin* Watson explains that The Kadaitcha man is a powerful figure in “traditional Aboriginal society” who functions as “tribal executioner, tribal sheriff, tribal bounty hunter, who would take up your cause for you and pay back, visit revenge upon your enemies” (1994, 590). Tommy embarks on a quest to destroy the evil Booka Roth, who by stealing the magical Kundri stone (the heart of the Rainbow Serpent) is directly responsible for the British invasion of Australia: “The evil one caused the veils of mist to lift from the land, so other mortals would see its wealth and abundance [...] The fair-skinned races gathered beneath Booka’s standard and the horde laid waste to Biamee’s garden” (33). Tommy has vowed vengeance not only on Booka Roth, but on all the *migloo* (the whites), and is “committed to ensuring that the English blood paid dearly for their crimes against his people” (182). But the issue of racial identity is fraught with ambivalence, particularly for Tommy, who anxiously wonders in one scene, “who are my people? [Tommy’s
mother] is white [...] I carry her blood in my veins, so these white maniacs here are my tribe as well. Do I have two camps?” (182). Tommy’s identity is further complicated by the conflict between his two “occupations”. As an Aboriginal translator in a court run by racist white men Tommy feels relatively powerless. But as a Kadaitcha his powers of metamorphosis, flight, invisibility and healing add a supernatural, superhuman level to his identity. Cultural and ontological incommensurability have a metonymic relationship in this text; the problems of Tommy’s “mixed-race” heritage in the human realm are mirrored by his “mixed” (human/deity) identity in the mythic realm. In a typical exchange Tommy expresses his frustration to his spirit guide, Ningi: “I am nothing but a mongrel hybrid. I am nothing. I am the lowest of Biamee’s sorcerers [...]” (251). The contradictory statements which Tommy makes to himself and to the other characters about his own identity, and about black and white relations generally, oscillate uneasily between resigned acceptance and angry denial, and in this they mirror the general politics of the novel, which, as Gareth Griffiths notes, “veers, often sharply and inconsistently, between modes of uncompromising vengeance and of reconciliation” (478). Tommy’s desire for the deaths of all the migloo is at odds with, but not necessarily inconsistent with, his grim realisation that the whites are not going to go away. Compare, for instance, the statement: “no migloo who walks this land is innocent. They are all guilty! [...] They are a mongrel-bred race Ningi, and the land could only survive if every one of that breed were dead!” (131), with: “The migloo could not be put back into their ships and cast into the sea [...]” (261). Of course, Tommy’s “migloo blood” makes it difficult for him to sustain the fury and enact the vengeance he desires, and there are several episodes in which he assists white characters, even using his magic to heal a white barmaid who has been cursed by her black boyfriend: “He sang a low song, burnt a pair of red leaves and passed the bone over the pale flesh beneath him. In a matter of seconds Sugar’s body relaxed and her breathing steadied” (108).

Watson declares in an interview with Meanjin that Tommy’s hybrid (racial) identity is designed to “lay open to white Australia the fact that Aboriginal people wear this white blood that’s in us as a mark of Cain. We wear it because we failed. Our only real tribal duty was to protect this land from invasion and we failed”. The interviewer comments: “So that’s why it makes sense to frame the whole thing within Aboriginal mythology. Because it is all a question of responsibility and failure, as opposed to victimisation by some superior force” (1994, 596). While it might be a good way to reinscribe a form of historical agency for Aboriginal Australians, the idea of an Aboriginal responsibility for the colonial invasion (which Watson acknowledges is extremely “unpopular” from an Aboriginal perspective) does not, of course, obviate white responsibility, and this message comes through very strongly in the novel, where the processes of racial and cultural hybridisation are represented as the result of violent impositions, no matter how much agency is accorded the Aboriginal gods and spirit elders. A good example of this is the ambivalence Tommy feels about his own identity: “The police did not look kindly upon blacks who were too well dressed and he was glad he had not worn one of his good suits to the court. The fact that he was mixed blood did not even give him the basic respectability of racial purity” (59). In one of the many dialogues between Tommy and his friend, the white lawyer Jack Finlay, Tommy explains the differences between himself and Bully Macow, the condemned man he is
assisting: "Bully’s a full-blooded tribal man, trained in a number of mysteries [...] but me, I’m a half-breed" (80). This admission of perceived cultural inauthenticity and lack of agency is contradicted by the power Tommy possesses as Kadaitcha man, and the tension between these two positions is never resolved in the text.

At the beginning of the novel we learn that Tommy’s father, himself a powerful Kadaitcha man, has used sorcery to confine Booka Roth to the immediate vicinity of Brisbane, but, by inhabiting the body of a white prospector Booka acquires for himself a white body, and a white identity as the captain of the Native Mounted Police. Watson plays with notions of racial identity by exploring the idea of accountability. Booka Roth is a powerful Aboriginal sorcerer who masquerades as a white villain in order to inflict more harm on other Aboriginal people. It is hard not to read this character as a direct allegorical comment on the culpability of those Aboriginal troopers who donned the trappings of a European paramilitary force: clothing, guns, and horses, and then used their bush skills to hunt down those groups and individuals marked for death by the white captains. This reading is made even more suggestive by the choice of character names. Booka Roth, for instance, is most likely a fictionalised version of Dr Walter Roth, Protector of Aborigines in Queensland 1898–1906 (see Evans 56). We are introduced to Booka Roth as he and his assistant, Sambo, cruise the streets of Brisbane in their NMP van:

The van travelled slowly through the storm and the two men seemed to draw some strength from the metal and glass cocoon that gave them protection. ‘Didn’t we box that bunch of Jagara here, boy?’ Booka looked hard at the bitumen crossroads. ‘You remember? It was somewhere around here, wasn’t it?’ ‘That’s right. We bin killim the biggest mob of blackfullah that day.’ (43)

That the NMP is still functioning in 1980s Brisbane is one of many instances of the particular splitting, layering and condensing of different historical temporalities within the novel. In one of the early chapters a trio of NMP men have been sent by Booka to keep watch on Uluru. While camped in the desert one of the older men recalls a number of massacres in which he took part, and these are narrated in sickening detail: “the gins were screaming and the friggin’ piccaninnies were bellowing. There was blood and shit flying everywhere. I stuck to the kids, like, because I was pretty buggered by then” (15). This and other, even more gruesome, accounts of massacres on the colonial frontier are interspersed with acts of violence in the novel’s present, as the three NMP members assault Worimi, the “camp gin”, and are killed, in turn, by Tommy, mounted on a giant flying dingo. It is disorientating for the reader that the NMP men tell each other stories of frontier massacres that they witnessed, and participated in, in the recent past, but that they have been dispatched to the desert from 1980s Brisbane. The peculiar compression of time is characteristic feature of The Kadaitcha Sung. Watson says that “he took the entire history of white settlement and compressed it into living memory” (1994, 591). This device allows him to point out that even though massacres by the NMP and other authorities are officially recorded as having stopped in the late 1920s, the horror remains, thinly veiled by the present.

The Kadaitcha Sung acts like a distorting mirror; the world represented in the narrative is recognisable as the one we live in, yet it is also a world in which the cross-
currents of magic, myth, and social realism are continually in flux. This narrative structure produces a hybrid spatiality and temporality in which the setting of 1980s Brisbane and surrounding areas is but one level of reality, existing uncannily alongside the otherworldly reality comprised of mythic and magical elements, as well as a host of intertextual references from SF, Westerns and popular culture. Watson's text is a good example of what Rawdon Wilson (following Roland Barthes) calls "stereographic space" (226). "The plural worldhood of magical realism", he writes, "reflects and exemplifies the textual theory of inscriptibility: one world lies present, though hidden, within the other, just as one text lies latent within another text" (227). In order to extend this line of thought we might add that the "stereographic" space of the magical realist text also contains palimpsestic layers of historical intertexts. The action of the story occurs within a condensed time frame that places historical events and characters on the same diegetic level as those represented in its contemporary setting. This point is a crucial strategy within the novel, as it allows Watson to draw explicit comparisons between white violence in the past, specifically in the genocide that "cleared" the land for white settlement, and the contemporary violence of Aboriginal deaths in custody, police brutality and racism. Griffiths suggests that this aspect of the novel "collapses the objective distance which causal linear narratives maintain between 'then' and 'now' [...] which permit modern white Australians to distance themselves from the actions of their ancestors" (474).

By creating a narrative "space of simultaneity" in which the past and the present can co-exist, Watson's novel brings the horror of that past painfully into view. In doing this, The Kadaitcha Sung insists that frontier violence does not sporadically resurface in the present as a "return of the repressed", but rather persists as an undercurrent of unease within the present, and so cannot easily be archived, covered up and forgotten. Like Plains of Promise, Watson's novel reminds us that although contemporary cultural hybridity is the result of colonial violence, this "inescapable hybridity" necessitates dialogues between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, not least because the division between self and other cannot be maintained when hybridity intrudes upon the subjectivity and the social environment of the self.

Plains of Promise

Alexis Wright's Plains of Promise deftly juxtaposes the differing and often conflicting voices, Weltanschauungen, and belief systems of its Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal characters. Although this is not, strictly speaking, a magical realist novel, the hybridisation and interanimation of the human and spirit realms throughout this text may be read as a dialogising technique that is similar in its effects to the magical realist narrative conventions that Watson uses in The Kadaitcha Sung. Plains of Promise is a novel about the Stolen Generations, but it also includes embedded stories about Chinese migrants, and the interaction between the White missionaries, the Chinese and the Aboriginal characters, that illustrate the long history of the complexities of intercultural interaction and communication in Australia. This aspect of Australian history is all too often elided by the demarcating influences of governmental multicultural policies, the "black armband/white blindfold" schism within Australian history, and the persistence
of racially and culturally essentialist approaches to identity. Wright’s novel contains elements from Aboriginal and Chinese ontologies, such as ghosts and death spirits, who represent aspects of these cultures that are not ordinarily accessible to outsiders. Like *The Kadaitcha Sung*, *Plains of Promise* depicts a hybridised textual world consisting of “a network of incommensurable, but occasionally intersecting, temporalities and spatialities” (Perera 14). *Plains of Promise* also foregrounds the ways in which the missionaries use aspects of Christian mythology as tools with which to manipulate the Aboriginal people under their control. The representation of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal voices and points of view in the novel creates a narrative space in which dialogic relations are shown to be uneasy, fraught with conflict, but also pregnant with the possibility for mutual understanding and exchange. As one commentator rightly notes,

*Plains of Promise* is unflagging in its insistence that readers attend not to colonialist impositions or Aboriginal resistances as discrete or exclusive categories, but look instead at the ways in which these have worked in relation to each other at various points of pivot and interregnum in the history of Australian race relations. (Grossman 1998, 85)

Having access, through shifts in focalisation, to the thoughts and emotions of characters such as head missionary Errol Jipp actually reinforces the evil of their actions; something that essentialist, stereotypical representations of the “bad missionary” cannot achieve. *Plains of Promise* vividly highlights the violence within Aboriginal society too, from the beatings Ivy receives at the hand of her husband Elliot, to the dysfunctional relationship Ivy’s daughter Mary has with her partner Buddy in the latter part of the novel. Grossman rightly notes that “Wright does not shy from exploring the ways in which the sources of women’s marginalisation, abuse and rejection have stemmed not solely from the incursive exploitation of white men”, but also from the violent and exploitative actions of Aboriginal men within the artificially contrived “families” of mission life, and, more generally, from the “shifting gender politics by which Aboriginal women’s experiences have been governed and contextualised” (86).

Wright’s novel is set in the far north of Australia, around the Gulf of Carpentaria. The first two-thirds of the story are focalised through the character of Ivy Koopundi, who is stolen from her mother as a child and raised in St Dominic’s mission. The last third takes up the story of Ivy’s daughter Mary, who is stolen from her at birth because she is half white, the product of head missionary Errol Jipp’s sexual abuse of the teenaged Ivy. The novel actually spans four generations of Aboriginal women, including Ivy’s mother, who commits suicide at the beginning of the novel, and Mary’s daughter Jessie, who is still a young child at the novel’s end. From the beginning of her life Ivy’s mother is considered an outcast, by both the white station-owners (Ivy’s father among them) at the station where she grows up, and the Aboriginal people who work on the station: “She was too different, having grown up away from the native compound in the whitefella’s household. And having slept with white men […] That makes black women like that really uppy, they said (12). Due to an assault charge Ivy’s mother is sent from the station to St Dominic’s, where, even after her daughter is taken to live in the mission school, she is similarly shunned by the Aboriginal people who consider her
"not right", an assumption that appears to some members of the community to be borne out when one night she pours kerosene over herself and sets herself alight. Other people are more sympathetic, but this sympathy does not extend to the child Ivy, who, in addition to being regularly sexually abused by Jipp, is also ridiculed and tormented by the other mission girls, and when a string of suicides (also by self-immolation) follows that of Ivy’s mother, she is blamed by the Aboriginal community for each one. Wright explains that in creating her ostracised, alienated female characters she was interested in exploring the reasons people come to be in such situations: “Nobody knew their story. These are the people who don’t talk and are treated like they don’t exist. I was concerned about how this could happen and what it meant to be a person who falls outside of life” (2002, 13). Ivy’s continual victimisation, by the missionaries, the Aboriginal people, even by a pair of “evil spirit eyes” (22) that hover over her head on the nights that people commit suicide, causes her to withdraw further into herself, and with no friends or advocates she becomes the archetypal scapegoat, the locus of evil and harbinger of death in the eyes of the Aboriginal people, and yet another “sly half-caste” (23) to the whites. Because a large part of the novel is narrated from Ivy’s point of view, we understand that she is not the embodiment of an evil death spirit, as the Aboriginal people believe, nor does she “have the devil in her” as the missionaries insist. She is simply a lonely and frightened child who “cultivated a look on her face as if she was about to cry. She wanted people to feel sorry for her” (23). Even when she becomes pregnant to Jipp she refuses to let Old Dorrie “help” her: “Ivy continued to refuse with ‘no’s’ and ‘no thank you’s’, not saying anything more. She trusted no one. She was bearing a Christian child [… ] Ivy believed that the missionaries, Mr Jipp in particular, would not allow any harm to come to her or her baby” (132). When the baby is born it is, of course, immediately taken (while Ivy is unconscious) and adopted by a white family far away.

In exploring the relationships between Aboriginal, White and Chinese people occupying the same geographical spaces, Plains of Promise opens up another area of ideological contestation which, like the experience of Aboriginal women, has often suffered from historiographical silence. Perera argues that “dominant theorisations of Australian history” present cultural relations in Australia as either “a drama of binary black/white relations, or, as is often the case where questions of multiculturalism are acknowledged, as an unequal triangle in which ‘migrants’, and especially ‘Asians’ form a kind of belated third, or supplement, to the central conflict of black vs white” (11–12). Through the character of Pilot Ah King, a Chinese man married into an Aboriginal community, the historical basis of such exclusions and omissions is held up to scrutiny. Pilot, who comes from a family of “brilliant doctors” in China, has chosen to live “in the bush with the Aboriginal people, whose culture of traditional ownership he had no difficulty in understanding. In their country he behaved always as a guest who has been showered with the very best hospitality” (138). He is murdered at the mission, and at Pilot’s burial, conducted hastily by the Aboriginal “lay preacher” Delainy, the elders see the spirits of Pilot’s relatives coming from China to collect him. As the spirits already occupying the graveyard carry Pilot’s soul up through the dirt, an old Aboriginal man called Noah hears Pilot say to him: “Draw no simple conclusion, my friend. All are implicated” (140). A heated debate ensues between the living attendees at the funeral, in which Delainy tells the other elders who have not converted to Christianity that he will
be on the lookout for any criminals who may have committed the murder: “And when I find them I won’t try to expel any devil, I’ll make sure the police come to take them away to a proper court of law” (143). Noah retaliates by reminding Delainy that the Aboriginal law has not been destroyed by the imposition of White laws and religions: “You are looking at the true Law, your Government, right here. For this land and our people there is only one Law and this is it” (144). The complexities of the co-existence of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultural systems is revealed through episodes such as these, and also in the dialogic relations that occur in the many similar juxtapositions of the temporalities of the living and the dead, or of the earthly and spirit realms, throughout the novel.

At various points in the narrative Ivy is symbolically associated with crows as metaphors for death-spirits. From the introductory paragraphs in which a large and ill-omened black crow, nicknamed “The Timekeeper” haunts the tree outside the mission every time somebody dies, to the pet crow called Norman, kept by Ivy’s daughter Mary, the metaphorical associations of crows with those who are doomed, reviled and outcast is a recurrent theme that threads through the narrative. The novel ends with a story told by a now elderly Elliot to Mary and her daughter Jessie, concerning the crows and waterbirds who share a great inland lake in the country from which Ivy’s mother was taken. When the waterbirds left the lake on the annual migration, one little waterbird was left behind, who discovers the secret of making the water return each season to fill the lake. “The crows, greedy and evil” controlled the waterbird and made her do whatever they wanted, and over time,

the waterbird’s children’s children’s child went mad, because she lost her daughter in a terrible place. And the secret of the lake was lost because the crows were too interested in evil things and could not control the waterbird’s madness. So the great lake dried up and is no more. (304)

The symbolism of this story is difficult to read: are the evil crows the white people who control the destinies and destroy the lives of the Stolen Generations, or the Aboriginal communities created from the forced co-habitation of different language groups and families from different parts of the country? Does the drying up of the “great lake” symbolise the loss of Aboriginal traditions and cultural practices? Who, exactly, is responsible for such a devastating loss? Perhaps the question of responsibility is best answered by the last words of Pilot’s ascending spirit: “all are implicated”. Like the metaphors captured in this parable, Wright’s novel demonstrates the difficulty of separating the diverse and conflicting strands of a complex co-existence. In the end, as Wright (1998, 81) affirms, reconstructing the lives of those left on the outside may provide a means for untangling the intersecting stories that comprise Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal history, and fiction may be “a better way of telling the truth” about our past.

While The Kadaitcha Sung confronts the reader with unimaginable details of frontier conflict, Plains of Promise is a novel that foregrounds the “other”, less well documented kinds of historical violence; the violence with which the “half-caste” Aboriginal children were stolen from their mothers, the violent grief of those children and those mothers, and the many untold stories of suffering and abuse that fill to
overflowing those “gaps between fact and fiction” because progressive historiography cannot hope to document all of them and turn them into “truth”. Many of these untold stories come from the outback cattle station, a frontier place that enjoys an iconic status in white Australian mythology as the home of some of its pastoral heroes: the stockman, the shearer and the drover. In frontier myths the cattle station exists as a bastion of “civilisation” and “Christian values” amid the vastness of the untamed “Never-Never”, and this myth has proved curiously resistant to revision in the popular nationalist imagination. Plains of Promise undermines this myth by reminding its readers that outback stations were often built and maintained by Aboriginal slave labour:

Those enslaved were the Aborigines who had escaped the whiteman’s bullet, his whip, his butchering and trophy collections – the sets of severed ears decorating the lounge-room wall. There was the Aboriginal girl, not killed with all the others, young enough to tame, brought back to the property to work. “Strap her to a tree and leave her there until she’s tame enough to start.” How long did it take? One month? Or two? (133–4)

In an interview published not long after Plains of Promise Wright acknowledges that she wrote her novel as “a call for mercy, for understanding” of the plight of Aboriginal people in Australia: “There are things that have happened to people, especially over the last hundred years, that need to be said and said very strongly if we are to get any change in this country” (1998, 79). By giving a voice to those silenced by the omissions of official or authoritative historiography Wright opens up a space for the kinds of dialogic relations that might help to combat historical denial; dialogues that respect the “otherness” of others.

Bakhtin talks about self/other relations in terms of “distance (outsideness) and respect” (1996, 145). The recognition of otherness “as otherness” means respecting the fact that we will never fully understand the subjective experience of the other, or be able to see the world exactly as others see it, just as the other will never fully comprehend our world views and experiences. The reason that the existence of cultural incommensurability does not preclude dialogic understanding between different cultures is that there is usually some form of common ground, a shared space, or a degree of overlap between world views that makes communication worth the effort it takes to negotiate “the apparently impossible simultaneity of incommensurable realities” (Ang 1997, 62). In bringing a range of “incommensurable realities” together and placing them in dialogue with one another, the novels discussed in this chapter create hybrid narrative spaces that challenge our understandings of the contemporary discursive frontier of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultural relations. The colonial frontier itself will always be a place of unspeakable violence. Novels like The Kadaitcha Sung and Plains of Promise should be read as important “counter-narratives of the nation” for the ways in which each text opens a narrative space in which recollecting and reimagining the frontier becomes a dialogic co-authorship of a painful, but shared, history.
Works Cited


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