

## ANTI-NATIVISM IN AUSTRALIAN INDIGENOUS LITERATURE

What in today's literary discourse are the reality and the world created by the words: *nativism, nativity, the native, native?* Why do we still speak and communicate with them and use them in different contexts, even though we know that these words often carry a negative emotional meaning load, taking us to spaces, times, and experiences of colonial suffering, despite their basis in academic arguments. In Australia such issues have been addressed by many Indigenous writers, amongst them — M. Langton, A. Moreton-Robinson, Mudrooroo, C. Watego, T. Birch, F. Bayet — Charlton, to name just a few.

For many people the concepts of nativity and indigeneity are strongly entwined. It seems that when one speaks about nativity one thinks about attachment to place, identity, nationalism, love of country and cultivating one's soil. Such an interlock of terminology and concepts leads to breakages of meaning and conflicting definitions. In Australia, the descendants of settlers dispute *nativity* in relation to *indigenesness*; they see themselves in a 'native-born' category. Furthermore, motifs of land and identity in National Literature are still cultivated by non-Indigenous Australian writers, manifesting in strong determination by non-Indigenous Australians to truly express belongingness to the land where they were born or where they have chosen to root themselves. In this light the paradigm of literary *nativism* in Australia becomes problematic. Problems mount if one sees cultures and literatures, thus peoples' minds, in constant dialectics.

As generally agreed, nativism urges a return to native traditions, puts up strong resistance against white culture's modernity and exploitation of the land, embraces anti-mainstream debates, and registers various narrational techniques to romanticise and alleviate spaces in which characters root themselves to find their identity and cultural stability; thus 'usefulness' of the text is seen as the most important value. At the same time these themes can be found formless and indefinite in the Aboriginal literary milieu in Australia, because Indigenous authors practice rhetorics of ununiformed Aboriginality, anti-traditionalism, showing Indigenous cultures in constant movement, while speaking about spirituality as different to the common European understanding of religion;

a spirituality deeply interrelated with Indigenous concepts of land, Dreaming and Dreamtime. Noticeably, there are traps and shortages in nativist applications to Aboriginal Literature, as shown throughout the texts discussed in this article.

At the very beginning of my discussion, I would like to draw attention to the fact that Indigenous writers hardly use the word *native*, as it bears negative connotations. The word *native* is mostly seen in legal Land Titles together with other pertinent terms, such as *land* and *bush*, and it pertains to a white coloniser's description of *terra nullius* and not at all to Indigenous omnipotent multilayered meanings of Land. Indigenous writers of Australia dispute the concept of nativism and its derivatives, seeing it as a white form of racial, sociopolitical and cultural discrimination against Indigenous Peoples. *It is white scholars who have long been positioned as the leading investigators of the lives, values and abilities of Indigenous people. Indigenous scholars are usually cast as native informants who provide 'experience' as opposed to the knowledge about being indigenous or white* (Moreton-Robinson, 2004, 85). Indeed, within the context of Indigenous history since the British invasion, nativity (-ism) is a twofold concept for many reasons. It evokes abuse of Indigenous Peoples implemented through sociopolitical, cultural and lingual subjugation and oppression. Counter-placed to Australian nationalism, ideological movements of 'native Australians' and 'Native Australian Literary Ethos', nativism is fixed with long detested racial anthropological descriptions of *savage natives*, land dispossession, memories of multiple relocations, social and family structure devastation, tragedies of the Stolen Generation, deaths in Custody and discriminating racist legislations. A loaded term, nativism is not a welcome category among contemporary Indigenous writers (people), who undeniably crave to ensue the continuity of Indigenous cultures, but do not wish to be contained within representations of white discourses, especially since (as Indigenous authors seem to imply in their texts) Aborigines live (as all Australians) in today's highly developed, modern, and changing Australia.

Anita Heiss's statement expressed in *The Protocols* has gained in this respect a reverential status: *We have now mastered the same language that was once used against us — describing us as barbaric and savage — and we have empowered ourselves to tell our stories, in our styles, for our people* (Heiss, Protocols 30). Irrefutably, this edict can be encompassed by the *nativist paradigm*, although Indigenous written literature does not pretend to be, or to be classified, as *native*; evidently, Heiss' words are not about being *native*. She talks about the

appropriation of English with which Indigenous authors tell Indigenous stories, stressing empowerment to self-representation and authority to speak. More importantly, Aboriginal literature has been discussed by a number of writers within the context of the Australian national model. The issues raised by Heiss work as guiding points for the Indigenous literary production and its implementation within the Australian cultural mainstream, as well as prevent against cultural appropriation and distortion of indigenous myths and traditions.

In the anthology *Blacklines: Contemporary Critical Writing by Indigenous Australians* (Grossman, 2003), tensions between *blacks* and *whites* in current Australia are best seen in works by Indigenous academics. Authors *re(de)fine* and assert Aboriginality and Indigeneity along constructs such as ‘urban’ and ‘non-traditional’. Representations of Indigenousness highlight the misuse of the term *native* in its literary, cultural and political sense. The reader of *Blacklines* learns that the adjective *native* and the noun *the native(s)* retain negative connotations and remain a tool for othering the Indigenous people as objects of nothing more than ethnographic interest. Marcia Langton evaluates Aboriginal ‘poetic revenge’ on curators for racism in the 1970s and 1980s who prized only ‘primitive stereotypes’. Jeannie Bell, in turn, sees ‘language revival’ as crucial in representing and preserving Indigenous cultures. The English terms such as *land, tribe, native, dispossession, kinship, aboriginality, indigenusness, myth, history, dreamtime* need to be thoroughly reevaluated and critically assessed as to their political and cultural underpinnings. The landscape understood by whites as ‘the wilderness’ is disputed too; Fabienne Bayet-Charlton elaborates on Aborigines’ presence and fulfilment of their obligations to the land, while placing contemporary wilderness legislation within postcolonial political debates on the second wave of dispossession. *Blacklines* is a crucial postcolonial discussion that moves the colonial and postcolonial stereotypes and meanings of terminology. It shows that in Australia, unlike the USA, *native* refers most often to plants and animals.

A thoughtful modification of terminology is urgently needed, so as to mark the dynamic changes in culture, including the culture mistakenly considered traditional and off the path of modernity. Indigeneity is such a potentially capacious term, additionally released from the confines of national identity. In contemporary Australian sociopolitical practices, *the native* is re-presented by *the Aboriginal* or *the Indigenous*. If the word *native* is

used in Indigenous literature, it calls up links and affiliations with Nature and Land; therefore it is used within contexts and meanings emphasised by Indigenous writing.

Aboriginal literature stages Indigenous protagonists who speak diverse languages, have a history of multiple cultural origins and are situated in various territories. These texts challenge stereotypes and prove that there is no such thing as *the native* locked within primitive timelessness and traditionalism. Characters belong to named communities and relate to mapped/named places. Indigenous texts promote identities of Indigenous contemporary Australia in which all communities (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) are diverse, complex, recent, and changing, so by sheer force of this the *paradigm of nativism* is undone. For example, romanticisation of Indigenous life is not at all eminent in most Aboriginal texts, nor are there any suggestions of fixed Indigenous physical or mental spaces. Likewise, none of the texts champions political agendas or force a literary resistance to the system.

Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* (2006) is one of the most prominent Indigenous texts that capture issues of representation and multiculturalism, timelessness and cultural fixity. The novel speaks about cultures and their people that flourish in various spaces and times. The themes are many but Land is a strong literary creation within which inspiring and ambiguous Indigenous and non-Indigenous worlds (of spirits, ancestors, their spirituality and beliefs) are evoked in intermixed — realistic, oral and phantasmagoric — narratives that revolve on diverse levels. The story runs in the Indigenous voice, which I propose to read as a strategy of reclamation for the sake of (folk) storytelling and Indigenous people. Not accidentally, there are diverse voices inscribed in the text — among them — the *voice of the multicultural*, the *voice of those attracted to the white world*, and the *outsiders*. Demonstrating cultural transitions, *Carpentaria* pushes readers to realise that Indigenous cultures and societies are in a constant progress, therefore there is never a possibility for *the native* to stay unaffected by modernity, cultural developments and technologies. Although some of Wright's characters are well fixed in supernatural behaviours and conventions that would read through the nativist paradigm, they transgress conservatism and stereotypes. In this way, *the native* becomes revitalised into *the contemporary Indigenous*, a lucid message for readers to avoid any superfluous reading and expectations. Elaborating on myths, superstitiousness and inscriptions of the natural cause, weaving them into historical and contemporary events, *Carpentaria* becomes an artistically autonomous challenge to any

expectations of ethnographic stereotype and exotic curiosity. The so-called *native* is just the same as the migrant, ethnic, white, the motorcyclist or a fisherman; s/he is just a human, greedy or generous, or perhaps... *Santa Clause coming to town* (Wright, 2006, 58), a person welcome in society but, *What if the man is dangerous, contagious..., a maniac and a menace? What if he is a spy, collecting data on our confidential capacities to defend ourselves? What if he is an alien?* (Wright, 2006, 73).

One may argue that within its paradigm, nativism allows inclusions of white culture. Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity gives useful explanations in this regard. But Desperance, a 'contact zone' is culturally multifaceted; the characters are of many cultural and also subcultural backgrounds, thus they exceed the boundaries of postcolonial/nativist theorising. Moreover, the character of Angel Day complicates the nativist representation, as her deeds do not necessarily prove that she consciously acts to preserve traditional uniqueness of her culture. Either that or she is not really a hybridised character. She is frantic and desperate in the very way Bertold Brecht's *Mother Courage* was. She is not only a symbol of human survival in cataclysmic earth-shaking times, and indifferent to her culture dying out, rather — she signifies the matriarchal/ human might and hope. Angel simply protects life. Similarly, as *Carpentaria* reveals the strengths of presented Indigenous cultures, and that modern unknown is not feared (but calculated by some), there is hardly a question of threat by *the other*. Reinforcing the strategy of showing Indigenous culture as transgressing conventionality, the novel utilizes literary syncretism. I refer to Wright's extraordinary characters and their mysterious origins. Elias Smith enters the scene by coming out from the sea while all towns' inhabitants *stood together on the foreshore* amazed with his *white hair and beard, walking in the sea* (Wright, 2006, 48). Undoubtedly, the scene has connotations of the Roman Neptune or the Greek Poseidon, or perhaps, with some Christian images as well. This is only one of many literary visions which connects two different worlds within the novel's plot, as well as Indigenous cultures' tropes with the outside culture readers.

Stephen Muecke's observation that *Present-day non-Aboriginal Australians still do not know the extent to which they have been formed by Aboriginal discourses* (Muecke, 1992, 7) is a constructive one within the context of Australian numerous cultures — each of a different origin — representing inimitable concepts of which not many are universal. People (in Australia) seem to understand that literature creates history but the problem is

that there is a lack of acknowledgement that the history of colonialism and post-colonial time (as it progresses) go far beyond our imagination of what traumas Indigenous Peoples have dealt with (Stolen Generation is an ongoing one). One needs to relinquish traditionalism in thinking and language that postpones comprehension of sociocultural unfamiliarity, as inscribed in Indigenous literary representations. Apparently, Indigenous history articulated in texts does not quite yield to linear chronology. Main and episodic characters who constantly travel in/between spaces of time and mind are flexible and dialectic; possibly, to be able to forget diasporic experiences and events, and yet, to console themselves by reaching out for the future. In fact, stability can be achieved by securing human imagination. This imagination plays a significant role in the construction of *Carpentaria's* characters whose minds appear to be the only 'place' that offers peace in times socially and naturally determined dilemmas. In reality, interpreting the present day of Indigenous Australia is complex, as communities do not live in pristine traditional conditions. Reading Indigenous Literature only through the nativist paradigm would acutely disadvantage interpretations of novels akin to *Carpentaria*. Although they use myths, they are full of fantasy, subconscious imaginary and represent cultures, cultural transition and the changeable histories of lands and people. The point is that Indigenous Australia/Literature has as much progressing history and conceptual terminology thoroughly inscribed in texts, as there is anywhere else. Regrettably, nativist (and postcolonial) theories seem to overlook sociocultural, literary-historical aspects of Aboriginal texts by treating them as if their only aim were to engage in empire-periphery tension, while discarding the formative: historical and natural courses of Aboriginal literary and cultural production.

Sam Watson's *The Kadaitcha Sung* (1999) fulfils the theoretical characteristics of nativism. The novel starts with a literary reconstruction of a myth and shows *the native* who fights for his own growth and revenge on the evil whites whilst initiating mythological powers. All seems to be in a perfect theoretical bind until images of *the native* are distorted by the reader's lack of presupposed cultural and historical knowledge. Firstly, counter-sited to traditional images are *the antinative* ones which inevitably are members of the Australian Native Police. Secondly, protagonists — historical and mythical — are not only *the idealistic natives*, but they are also wicked beings who steer ancient and present-day fights. Fuzzy as it is in its unrealistic reality and realistic peculiarity, the novel deconstructs

Aboriginal (traditional/tribal) unity and goes beyond the nativistic descriptions of fixed culture or longing for it. By showing the intercultural diversity of ancient Ancestors, *The Kadaitcha Song* connects with many cultures and their mythological heroes and plots. Although exclusive and pertaining to Aboriginal Culture, Watson's work represents multicultural facets and re-reads within frames of universal literary motifs and characters. As such, the novel also crosses boundaries of genre, namely — magic realism and places itself within fantasy works, promoting the literary/ film motif of an ordinary young man becoming the elected one; a hero and his alter-ego fighting malevolencies interweaved into their lives.

Herb Wharton's *Unbranded* (1992) tells the story of a friendship of three men who had established their individuality against their skin differences and simply lived out their own dreams, regardless of natural environments and hostile sociopolitical situations. More than anything else, *Unbranded* is about opportunity and acceptance (if not collaboration); also, about an approval of new multidimensional progress. Through realistic descriptions of Indigenous and non-Indigenous heroes, *Unbranded* discards the motif of *the naive native and a pure blood native*. Alternatively, the text acquaints readers, mainly those unaware of (post-)colonial situations of *the native/other*, with the Australian picturesque outback; its history and a new Indigenous literary motif (the flock and the rodeo). Such novels, even though they may be read in terms of their direct usefulness for Indigenous cultures, are by no means flat vignettes of Indigenous life. When Aileen Moreton-Robinson writes: "the traditional woman is the woman against whom all Indigenous women are measured, yet in her pristine state she does not exist" (Moreton-Robinson, 2004, 88), her observation underlines the fact that realities inscribed in Wharton's novel must not be standardised, idealised, sentimentalised and traditionalised because what we read are contemporary changeable experiences of Indigenous characters, such as Mulga, whose "thoughts roved across the world. He pondered on the uneasy peace between the Arabs and the Jews, Germany with its reunification, unrest in Russia, the strife of political and religious groups everywhere. He thought of the past, of how much his own life had changed over the years,(...). Things regarded as essential items today, had been luxuries in the old days. His world had changed, and for the better" (Wharton, 1992, 184).

At the core of the contemporary self-representation of Aboriginal literature is the refusal to be an object of somebody else's knowledge, like in a poem by Jackie Huggins: *I detest the imposition that anyone who is non-Aboriginal can define my Aboriginality for me and my race. Neither do I accept any definitions of Aboriginality by non-Aboriginals, as it insults my intelligence, spirit and soul, and negates my heritage* (459). Such is also the voice of Tony Birch's poetic words: *I turn to see/ myself/ I am decapitated/ limbless/ my body -/ re-assembled/ in gubbah discourse* (158). This conflicting dialogue is also present in a moralist approach in Anita Heiss's book: *Not meeting Mr Right*. The novel is a witty chick literature text in which a well educated and sophisticated feminist heroine is all but *the native*. Heiss' narrative sets up a fashionable motif of a girl who after a long run finds her love. Aptly, Alice is an Indigenous history teacher who stands for truth in Australia education. The heroine is independent and mindful of her position within various social groups. This novel is also unique in its absolute assertiveness with English, a clear signal that the language which once was a tool of oppression serves as an important role of strengthening the cultural and artistic autonomy of the Indigenous people.

Voices against the white understanding and stereotyping of *the native* and its correspondents — *nativity*, *primitiveness* and *backwardness*, which are linked to images of irrationality and superstition — are found in Indigenous autobiography, life-story or autobiographical novels. Brodie and Langford reflect on white men's attitudes to these concepts. Foolishness, laziness and other diminutive notions (that have been held about blacks in Australian history and literature) are pictured, and glanced off by Indigenous authors. In fact, "the native speaks back". As such, Indigenous autobiography relates to the postcolonial theoretical realm of *nativity*; the protagonist of Sally Morgan's *My Place* battles with her family to come to an understanding of her Aboriginal origins. In Kim Scott's novel *True Country*, Billy comes to a remote far north settlement to detect his history. His search is successful. Although the place is contemporary, an isolated governmental outpost, Billy finds his place of belonging, which happens to be the novel's 'third space' not only for the urban Aborigine to be absorbed but for two cultures to interact; yet again, progressively, and un sentimentally.

The narrative, which not only dismantles cultural and literary stereotyping of Indigenous texts, but also offers an innovative imagery and creation, is present in the poetry of Lionel Fogarty. By taking apart ideas of timeless tribal violence that originated

in ancient times, and by philosophical, satiric and symbolic reflection, Fogarty creates subjects forbidding sociocultural and philosophical ignorance of readers. At times Fogarty's poetry is ironic, identities broken, language disturbed and crippled, but *the native* is self-conscious and certain of his roots. The lyrical subject, *the contemporary Indigenous*, is full of ritual ancient songs and dance. S/he is spiritual and aligned with Nature, yet — cynical of 'the other' who in this poetry as in Heiss', happens to be white. Consequently, it is 'a man' who is associated with principal destinations and purposes; *the native's* modern life is shaped by cities, markets and states, and sociocultural differences of people. In this world concepts of *nativity* do not prevail. Who is native and where? Well aware of different contexts in which *the native* can be re-read, the poet uses the term to show its weakness and transgressions. The texts and contexts, once securely known as white representations of *the native* to white readers, do not belong to these readers any more. As a matter of fact, Fogarty's poetry hardly belongs to any readers. Forced to be attentive to the messages and unusual language this poetry creates, readers are invited to participate in creating *the new*; the new wor(l)d order, not inevitably exclusive to *the Indigenous*, but imagined within non-predictable poetic systems, values and concepts. Like the prose, this poetry does not support the nativist discourse on language. The language and its structure are extremely adaptive and experimental, thus Fogarty's poetics not only melts down traditionalism, but also refutes the nativist interpretation. Through profound concepts, Fogarty creates new sequences of language usage and sense, opening endless translations/interpretations. The principle of nativity, which says that writers are essentially coding meaning and sense in their history and native idioms, can barely be applied to Fogarty's poetry. By creating a syntax that reflects and "dances" habitually around words and sketching no line between individual and collective voices, Fogarty creates *the antinative*: *Am we lonely these days/ Am I grief in the wind/ Am us friend to nature/ well hooked me up and/ we'll fish/ ... Am we lovin' in these days/ Am I sadden these nights/ Forever it possesses you man/ something must tell/ Am I me or you am us (16)*.

During the past half-century Australian mainstream policy has moved from the assimilationist doctrine to multiculturalism and then again, in today's Australia — to the mainstream policy. *The native* has negative implications for Indigenous communities and ambivalence of this concept/ term is analogous to the ambiguous position of Indigenous Literature within the Australian literary mainstream (Podemska-Abt 3-4). In effect,

Indigenous discourses relegate the *concept of nativity* and texts hardly illustrate or explain *the native*. Indigenous literature clearly demonstrates how the continuing and historical anguish of Indigenous Peoples in Australia renounces slogans. In his speech: *Australia's continuing Neurosis: identity, race and history*, Kim Scott quotes an elder, and his father: 'you can't trust wadjilas (a white person)... You let people know you're Noongar. Be proud of yourself. We're proud of you. You got Aboriginal in you, that's the best part of you.' But then he finishes: *A racist way to talk perhaps, and politically naive. Yes, it's a flimsy basis for any sort of identity. What kind of the identity is native? Is it what white people call you? Or is it what you think about yourself?* Certainly, Scott's query into the term *native* shows its prevalence only within the white discourse; it does not mean anything for Indigenous persons.

In Australia one has to consider whose and what aspects of cultures are reproduced. While recognising goals and functions for Indigenous Literature depicted by Indigenous authors, it is important to remember their comments on the mainstream literary critique and notice the above mentioned Indigenous Literature's unsteady position within Literary History and Institutions. Not represented up to its miscellaneous aptitudes, Aboriginal literature (within literary discourses and social forms of organisation) engages with various systems of signs in the production of texts. These very texts replicate the meanings of a culture, which must be seen as ever changing. Assuming exclusiveness, and inclusiveness of Indigenous Literature, this article's intention has been to dismantle the perspective of theoretical nativism in the case of Australian Indigenous Literature. It has been also to forewarn that if any nativist interpretational strategy is applied to this literature, a careful re-consideration of nativism as pragmatic and theoretical approach to Indigenous texts is necessary; particularly, if various aesthetic and imaginary characteristics of Indigenous texts, with which they attract non-English speaking readers in Australia and afar, are deliberated. Australia is a society where the term *native* has been in transit for a long time. Nowadays the Indigenous flag does not signify *the native* but rather a symbol of Aboriginality. Consequently, an unreasonable query whether *panaboriginality* is *native* or not would have to arise. There is no doubt that pan-aboriginality can be pictured as a nativist movement. But in his article — *Past and Present: The Construction of Aboriginality*, Robert Ariss, similarly to Kevin Gilbert (40-41), emphasises the political nature of Aboriginality, which clearly contrasts white constructions of *the native*. According to Mudrooroo (78), Aboriginality must be lived and learned, as it is a

cultural practice, not a given form of being. Indigenous literary practices and ideology are in constant transition, the unifying questions are many — Indigenous authors unify on such issues as: Who owns the Indigenous culture and literature? What are the political, social, and economic implications of the literature one produces? Clearly, none of these questions can be disregarded by contemporary theories that are to open discussions and stir creative thinking. Paradoxically, within all literary categories the authors illustrate the life of their communities and environments regardless of theories, shifting and changing complex ideas that are imposed by them. Indigenous authors challenge theoretical discourses and alert readers to value Aboriginal texts for what they are, and not for what they have been represented by literary and theoretical criticism.

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