

Representing Indigeneity: Aborigines and Australian Children's Literature Then and Now

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WHEN THE FIRST fleet of convicts and soldiers arrived in Australia in 1788, they took possession of a land which had been inhabited by Aboriginal nations for more than 40,000 years. The raising of the British flag at Sydney Cove signified that Australia was now incorporated into the British Empire as a fledgling member, and that from this moment Aborigines were no longer owners of the land of their ancestors.

The legitimacy of white settlement and of the development of Australia as a nation thus depends on and derives from an act of invasion, and this fact has been and is of fundamental importance to Australians' sense of national identity. In Australian colonial texts, one discursive strategy which addresses the problem of legitimacy is that of denial, which often takes the form of silence about Aborigines and Aboriginal culture, and which appears in the doctrine of *terra nullius*, the legal fiction which proclaimed Australia before white settlement as a land belonging to none, an empty land needing to be filled by diligent, godfearing white settlers. Another discursive strategy is that of creating new versions of the myths of foundation and settlement. The invasion of Australia must be rendered legitimate, moral and even godly, and this is effected through an emphasis on the heroic deeds of white settlers and explorers and a downplaying of the legitimacy of Aborigines as owners of the land. After all, many colonial texts point out, Aborigines failed to exploit the possibilities of the land—they did not mine it or clear it for pastures or build cities, and so demonstrated their unfitness to be owners.

Australian children's texts, like other Australian texts, are products of a colonial history. They are "postcolonial" in the sense that they are products not of a brave new world "post" colonization, but of social, cultural, and political realities grounded in colonization. My definition of the term "post-colonial" is that used by Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin in *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), as referring to "all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day" (2). In my discussion of the representation of indigeneity in Australian children's literature then and now, I intend to focus on three texts which serve to punctuate the history of colonization in Australia. The first is *A Mother's Offering to Her Children by A Lady Long Resident in New South Wales*, the first Australian children's book, published in Sydney in 1841, 53 years after the first fleet arrived in Botany Bay. The second text, *The Australia Book*, published in 1951, was written by Eve Pownall and constitutes a history of Australia for young Australians. These two are canonical texts for different reasons: the first because of its position in the history of Australian children's literature, the second because it was received on its publication and for many years afterwards as the definitive version of Australian history for children. The third text, *Tjarany Roughtail*, was published by an Aboriginal publishing house, Magabala Books, in 1992.

A Mother's Offering to Her Children is framed as a catechism, with Mrs. Saville and her four children, Clara, Emma, Julius, and Lucy, sitting together as their mother tells stories about the beginnings of the colony and about its flora and fauna. The children function as props, asking questions and making comments to advance the narrative; occasionally they utter pieties, such as "How thankful they must have been" or "How terrible," which underline the moral intent of the narrative. The colonial children, present within the book as audience, constitute models for the colonial children outside the book—models demonstrating the attitudes, values, and moral codes appropriate to the children of colonizers.

Nineteenth-century Australian texts for children demonstrate a range of attitudes towards the indigenous people of the coun-

try. At what might be called the soft end of discourse about Aborigines are texts which represent them as fixed in a permanent state of childhood, infants to the colonizers' adults. Consider, for example, the following exchange, from *A Mother's Offering to Her Children*, between Mrs. Saville, Julius, and Lucy, in which they discuss a tree native to Australia:

Julius: The Natives find the Bangalee very useful. You know their little baskets are bits of bark of the Bangalee, tied up at each end; and their canoes are just the same, only larger.

Lucy: How droll they look paddling along so fast. Their little oars look like fishes' fins.

Mrs. S: So they do, Lucy. (13)

Julius and Lucy here represent "the Natives" as children, a meaning constructed through the repetition of "little" and through the implication that such activities as making baskets and paddling canoes are in themselves childish, having more to do with play than with work. The fact that the comments made here are by the Saville children serves to accentuate the gap between childish (native) adults and mature (white) children and to allow for the latter treating the former like indulgent adults observing children at play. When Lucy remarks, "How droll they look," she evokes the gaze by which the colonizer finds the colonized less than adult and less than white, objects of amusement or condescension reinforcing the superiority of the colonizer.

What I am suggesting is that what may appear in *A Mother's Offering to Her Children* to be nothing more than a somewhat condescending mockery of the indigenous is in fact a discursive strategy which seeks to reinforce those sturdy binaries on which colonization depends: white and black, civilized and savage, adult and child; often, as well, male and female. In another episode from *A Mother's Offering to Her Children*, the officers of a trading vessel meet a group of Torres Strait Islanders, off the far north coast of Australia:

Mrs. S: There were women among [the natives], who came on board without hesitation. They were not remarkable for youth nor beauty. Being without clothing, the officers undertook to dress out one, and the boatswain another.

Emma: Had they women's clothes, Mamma?

Mrs. S: They had nothing but male attire; but the ladies were not fastidious. The old lady the boatswain had undertaken to adorn was unfortunately somewhat stout, and being encumbered with a huge bunch of strong coarse grass, there was some difficulty in getting her into the dress; she could not be prevailed on to part with the grass, so the boatswain was obliged to pipe for more hands, and by dint of squeezing and shaking, she was fairly crushed into the trousers, which not being intended, as the boatswain said, to carry much stowage, had a most ridiculous effect.

Julius: Ha! ha! ha! How I should have laughed to have seen the horrid old creature.

Mrs. S: I have no doubt of it. (56-57)

What is most striking in this passage is its treatment of the colonized as a bundle of deficiencies. The native women, first of all, come on board "without hesitation," so demonstrating their lack of social and sexual propriety. The "old lady" dressed by the boatswain "unfortunately" lacks a delicate feminine form and any kind of dress sense, clinging as she does to the elemental "strong coarse grass" which marks her as uncivilized. On the other hand, Mrs. Saville's narrative, filled with the discursive markers of a refined, fastidious and feminine tone, constructs her as the paradigmatic example of those qualities so conspicuously lacking in the native women. When the boy Julius responds to his mother's narrative ("How I should have laughed to have seen the horrid old creature"), he demonstrates for the child reader the position proper to the colonized and colonizing child; in particular, to the male child for whom the black woman is objectified as a "horrid old creature," evoking a laughter mixed with horror because of the confusion and conflation of gender involved in this episode. Here and elsewhere in *A Mother's Offering to Her Children* the female native is doubly disadvantaged, for she is not only black but also unladylike; worse, she is unwomanly, this being spelled out in relation to her lack of capacity to be a good mother.

The story of the black woman Nanny and her child Sally constitutes an object lesson about the indigenous woman as "bad mother." The name given to her, "Nanny," is redolent with ironies, being associated with the surrogate motherhood embod-

ied in the figure of the English nanny. The narrative describes how Nanny gave her child Sally to a white woman, whose own child had recently died. The child fretted and cried for her mother, and the narrative evokes from Lucy, the youngest of the Saville children, the following remark: "Lucy: Oh! Mamma that is just what I should do, if I lost you: cry as loud as ever I could; and be so very, very sorry!" (200). After some time, Nanny returns with her tribe to the area where Sally lives with her new family, whereupon, as Mrs. Saville recounts, the child

immediately recognised her; and you my dear children, can judge, better than I can describe, the joy she felt at again seeing her. The poor little babe rushed into its mother's arms; but the unnatural mother sent her child from her. Poor little Sally screamed and was refractory; when her mother whipt her severely, and left her. (201)

The child Sally, that is, knows more about the duty of motherhood than does Nanny her mother, a phenomenon explicable in terms of race. For Sally is half-white, the product of Nanny's habit of cohabiting with white men, and so she displays characteristics which the Saville children recognize as like their own; not that these are enough to save Sally from her untimely death when she is crushed by a heavy beam of wood.

The representation of Aborigines in *A Mother's Offering to Her Children* is built on a set of oppositions between white settlers (always heroic, resourceful, godfearing, and intelligent) and the indigenous, generally represented as cowardly, indolent, savage, and stupid. In these ways, it is similar to many nineteenth-century Australian texts; the particular focus of *A Mother's Offering to Her Children*, however, is on the ways in which the contrast between colonizers and colonized is played out in relation to parenthood and to the treatment of children by adults. One of the most gruesome episodes in the narrative is concerned with a shipwreck whose survivors include several children. One such child, a particularly handsome boy, has his head cut off and placed on the front of a canoe; others are abducted and terribly mistreated. Through these narratives the good white mother educates her child readers, within the book and outside it, about the dangers associated with the Other, about the "unrestrained passions" (197) which prevent Aborigines from being good parents. The

twin messages which operate here are fear of the Other and justification of colonialism, for if the indigenous cannot care for helpless children, so the argument goes, neither are they suitable custodians of the land, which must therefore come under the benign rule of the colonists.

The second book, *The Australia Book*, comes from the 1950s, a decade in Australia of peace and growing prosperity, when Elizabeth was crowned Queen of the UK and of the Commonwealth, and when the Olympics were held in Melbourne. What I notice most in *The Australia Book* is its lack of doubt, its unequivocal praise of progress, its certainty about the future, its sense of an *Australia Felix*, a fortunate land full of resources. In this context, the indigenous people belong to the past, to a time before progress, having nothing to do with the "Australia" of modernity. In the stories of exploration, settlement, the growth of cities and the development of industry which form the basis of *The Australia Book*, Aborigines are treated as onlookers or, here and there, as obstacles to progress; most of all, as I have already said, they are linked with a discontinued past. Here are the opening paragraphs of the book:

The first Australians had been in the land so long that no man, not even the oldest, could say how they first came here.

They were a thin, dark people and the land gave them all they needed. From its plants they made their simple medicines. The seeds of its grasses made flour for their cakes. Their few garments came from the skins of its animals, and their mia mias, their shelters, from its trees and bushes. (7)

"The first Australians" are represented here as a group unified by a single culture, a "they" reducible to two descriptors, "thin" and "dark." Their medicines are "simple," their garments "few," their needs supplied by the land. For 1950s Australia, this is a fairly orthodox picture of Aborigines, and it is easy enough to demolish its framework of "fact": there were, for example, not one but about 600 distinct clans of Aborigines, each with its own language and culture, and material conditions varied widely in different parts of the country. More important for my argument, this text continues many of the colonial ideologies of *A Mother's Offering to Her Children*, in particular its focus on the simplicity of indigenous life, which contrasted with the rich complexity of

European civilization equates indigeneity with "the primitive, the archaic, the pre-human" (Hodge and Mishra 46).

Eve Pownall's description of the lives of the Aborigines before white settlement draws on the discourse of myth rather than of history:

The sun looked down as their women and children filled the dilly bags with berries and roots. . . . The rain filled the rivers where they stood patiently to spear fish for their fires. . . . The moon watched their feastings, their corroborees, their lean bodies painted queerly as they danced and sang. (7)

Whereas in *A Mother's Offering to Her Children* the indigenous are, though unwelcome, part of the narrator's present of white settlement, in this text of the 1950s they are relegated to an ahistorical past inscribed as mythic. In their 1990 study *Dark Side of the Dream: Australian Literature and the Postcolonial Mind*, Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra discuss what they term, following Said, "Aboriginalism." Like orientalism, aboriginalism works in two directions at once, seeming to honour the Other while denying its capacity to speak for itself. By locating indigeneity in a mythical past, *The Australia Book* draws on the aboriginalist contrast between a primitive, instinctive, mystical culture and the advanced, rational, technological culture of modern Australia. The double movement of aboriginalism here works through Pownall's celebration of the simplicity of Aboriginal life, and a sense of melancholy at its inevitable demise. This is, in fact, a benign form of denial. What it denies is the possibility of change on the part of the indigenous, who are deemed incapable of developing their own strategies of resistance and subversion.

These colonial meanings are nowhere more evident in *The Australia Book* than in an illustration, by Margaret Senior, which depicts an episode in the history of white settlement in Western Australia. The settlers brought with them many goods wildly inappropriate to the material realities of their new lives, and in the scene here a grand piano remains stranded on the beach, while Aboriginal children caper around it and play on its keys. The cove where this scene occurs is separated from an orderly scene of settled land, ploughed fields and neat cottages, by a series of sandhills on which grow the native plants called "black-

boys." These serve as a divider between conceptual opposites: black and white, primitive and civilized, nature and culture. But the most revealing contrast is that involving the grand piano, an icon of the European drawing room, here placed on the sand, on the wrong side of the divide between primitive and civilized. The child reader, who is assumed to know what the piano means, is here invited to derive a superior enjoyment from the reaction of the Aboriginal children who do not know this meaning; these children, metonymically representing the indigenous, carry the common association of "Aborigine" with "child" and enact the gulf between colonized and colonizers.

My last example from *The Australia Book* concerns the settlement of Tasmania, in the south of Australia, where a guerrilla war of great ferocity raged for many years:

. . . the blacks and the whites were at war. The natives used waddies and spears, the whites had muskets. Governor Arthur wanted to stop the fighting. He spread a line of men across the island, hoping to drive the aborigines to one part. But they slipped through and escaped.

Then Arthur sent George Robinson, who was a friend of the natives, to tell them the Government wished only to help them. George Robinson . . . brought the aborigines to a place the Government gave them for their own. (20)

The ironies of this account are manifold. It highlights the beneficence of Governor Arthur, who after all only "wanted to stop the fighting," and the generosity of the Government in giving the Aborigines a place "for their own." The place so given was Flinders Island, a remote outpost far from the traditional lands of the Aborigines. Here they were desperately unhappy; many died, others escaped, until eventually the settlement was abandoned. *The Australia Book* legitimizes for its child readers the dispossession visited on the indigenous by underscoring the good intentions of the colonizers and by the implication, just below the surface, that the Tasmanian Aborigines tacitly acknowledged the superior wisdom and goodness of their white masters and assented to the work of colonization.

The illustrations which accompany this text inscribe these and other colonial meanings; the association of "Aborigine" with the category "animal" is a very common one in Australian colonial

texts, deriving from versions of Darwinism which locate Aborigines at the bottom of the evolutionary ladder. In this illustration, Aborigines are positioned in contrast to the soldiers, who, being white and British, display their evolutionary superiority by striding manfully through the bush. The second illustration clearly demonstrates a point I made earlier, about the colonial claim of Aboriginal complicity with the colonizers.

Hodge and Mishra distinguish three stages in the history of the formation of the Australian colony. The first comprises the foundation event, the arrival of the first fleet and the claiming of the land as colony; the second they call "the genocidal phase," a strong expression, but one accurate enough if we consider that the Aboriginal population decreased from something like 300,000 at white settlement to 60,000 by the year 1921 (38). *A Mother's Offering to Her Children* and *The Australia Book* are both products of the genocidal phase, representing different versions of the colonial desire for legitimation. At the time *A Mother's Offering to Her Children* was published, genocidal policies were implemented through warfare, bounty hunting, and dispossession; by the 1950s, when *The Australia Book* was produced, they were manifested through laws and regulations controlling Aborigines and, most shamefully, through the forcible removal of thousands of Aboriginal children from their families.

The third phase of Australian colonial history, which Hodge and Mishra term "Aboriginal resurgence," is represented by my third text, *Tjarany Roughtail*, by Gracie Greene, Joe Tramacchi, and Lucille Gill. This work is the product of Magabala Press, an Aboriginal publishing house which was established to promote the work of indigenous writers and illustrators. It combines the conventions of picture book production and traditional forms of Aboriginal narrative, disproving Eve Pownall's relegation of the indigenous to a mythic neverland untouched by technology. On the contrary, it shows Aboriginal cultural production to be eclectic, adaptive and capable of the radical transformation by which ancient stories take on new forms.

The title and contents pages of *Tjarany Roughtail* enact otherness and resist homogenization, ascribing to the Kukatja language a status at least equivalent to the English text; in the words

of Gracie Greene, "We speak Kukatja, you speak English. . . . You've got your own language. It's good, and so is mine. These two languages together" (viii). Throughout the opening pages of the book, the stories are located in a specific place and culture by way of cartographic references in which one kind of mapping is juxtaposed against another, the totems and the walking tracks of the Kukatja next to the conventional Western map. However, the colonial dominance of English is subverted through the privileging of Kukatja names; thus, the Kukatja name "Malam" takes precedence over "Lake Gregory," "Wangkatjungka" over "Christmas Creek." In this way the history of white settlement, for so long read as the history of Australia, is placed against the background of the 40,000 years of Aboriginal history which preceded it.

In the discourse of the narratives collected in *Tjarany Roughtail* we can read many of the cultural meanings of the Kukatja. Consider, for example, the opening of "The Roughtail Lizard Dreaming":

A long time ago in the Dreamtime, there lived a Roughtail Lizard man who had a lot of Dreaming and songs he kept to himself.

One day he was sitting by a waterhole called Ngarmarlu, when some men, who were staying by the water, heard him singing. (2)

This is a story about storying, about the beginning of the songs and dances of the Kukatja. Like many Aboriginal narratives, it relies on various kinds of prior knowledge; specifically, of the nature of Dreamtime, the association of kinship groups with totems, the links between place and narrative. The Roughtail Lizard man paints his audience with white ochre and gives them his songs, a different one for each man, and in these actions narrative and ritual coalesce.

As well as these social and cultural meanings, *Tjarany Roughtail* also carries broader political meanings about history and about Aboriginal cultural production. In the figure of the Roughtail Lizard man we read the survival of the indigenous, not merely by outlasting the colonizers but by strategies of resistance and subversion, and by those delicate negotiations through which indigenous cultural production appropriates Western forms and technologies, at the same time maintaining its Aboriginality. If *A Mother's Offering to Her Children* and *The Australia Book* sought

to socialize their Australian child readers as colonists and to construct ideologies which affirm colonization, *Tjarany Roughtail* offers a very different range of possibilities. For Aboriginal readers it makes available a voice and a speaking position from within indigenous culture; for non-Aboriginal readers it offers narratives which both inscribe otherness and make it accessible. This is especially true of the visual narratives of Gracie Greene and Lucille Gill, which appear in two forms, as paintings and as maps plotting the dynamics of form and colour.

Tjarany Roughtail, like many other Aboriginal works, uses the language of the colonizers in order to challenge imperialist versions of indigeneity; specifically, it resists the homogenization of Aboriginality which prevails in *The Australia Book*, it contextualizes ritual and customary behaviour; it contests views of Australian history which ignore what happened before 1788; most of all it demonstrates what Hodge and Mishra describe as a key quality of Aboriginal cultural production: "a particular way of combining extraordinary innovation with a kind of serene stability" (92). *A Mother's Offering to Her Children* and *The Australia Book* represent indigenous people through narrative strategies which legitimize colonization; in *Tjarany Roughtail*, the indigenous represent themselves, and this self-representation, inscribing as it does the hybrid nature of indigenous textuality, offers the most powerful challenge to those imperialist ideologies which survive in the postcolonial culture of contemporary Australia.

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