





















to hold US editions alone. That wider distribution does seem to depend on there being a separate American release.

My list of titles (Table 1) could suggest a thickening of presence for Aboriginal literature in the US from around 2010 following the publication of *Carpentaria* and *That Deadman Dance*. Table 1, as noted, lists twelve titles since 2010 compared to seven over the previous four decades. But it would be easy to overestimate or misinterpret this development. Wright's and Scott's own follow-up books are picked up in the US, but there is little evidence to suggest that the books' status as Aboriginal or Indigenous literature was significant in their publication or reception. And once again the absence of reviews is striking, perhaps the most striking aspect of this whole history.

With *Carpentaria* we have a prize-winning and commercially successful novel in Australia being published by a major US house, but no major reviews. Again, where the novel was noticed is in the trade and professional journals—*Kirkus Reviews*, the *Library Journal* and *Publishers Weekly*—and, indeed, noticed with the kind of praise that should have brought the book to the attention of the mainstream review pages. For *Kirkus Reviews*, *Carpentaria* was a 'stately epic . . . a dreamlike novel of a dreamtime interrupted,' recalling Márquez but with the magic of Aboriginal mythology: 'A latter-day epic that speaks, lyrically, to the realities and aspirations of aboriginal life.' *Publishers Weekly* referred to Wright's 'latest masterpiece,' suggesting some knowledge of earlier work, and via a weird comparison—'the drama unfolds with all the poetry and eclecticism of a Bob Dylan song' (and this was before the Nobel Prize!)—the review concludes with high praise: 'Rarely does an author have such control of her words and her story. Wright's prose soars between the mythical and the colloquial.' The *Library Journal* goes even further: 'a sprawling, surreal anti-*Odyssey* in which time and space contract and expand and experience takes place in the Dreamtime, on the sea, and on and under the continent of Australia.' The book offers 'one of the most compelling literary protagonists since Odysseus and will surely stand as a masterpiece of modern English-language literature (Matthews 85, 86).' The reviewer was from Washington State University Library.

While *Kirkus Reviews* was lukewarm about *That Deadman Dance*, the *Library Journal* was extremely positive, and well informed in framing its reading: 'This well-written, insightful novel will be enjoyed by readers interested in Australian historical fiction, indigenous literature, and post-colonial fiction in general' (Vredevoogd). The novel 'deserves notice from a broader international audience.' Again the reviewer is a university librarian, here from Marymount University, Virginia; influential in one sphere, certainly, but not necessarily in the New York book world. As later examples suggest, New York's centrality has been somewhat diffused by the multiplication of online and popular media platforms, by new local publishers and emerging book markets; yet it remains the largest and most influential publishing, contracting and reviewing hub.

The one 'big hit' in the influential New York papers following *My Place* is an article that appeared in the *New York Times Book Review* in November 2007 under the heading 'Letter from Australia: Aboriginal Lit'—not a review or critical essay, but a relatively detailed feature article on Wright's success with *Carpentaria*, its Miles Franklin Award and the appearance of other Aboriginal writers, all in the context of the Northern Territory intervention. The article was by the *Times*'s London correspondent, Jane Perlez, a London-born, Pulitzer Prize winning journalist who had been educated in Australia before pursuing her career in journalism internationally (Osborne and Whitlock 4). More to the point, she was known to Giramondo publisher Ivor Indyk (through his brother, the author and former diplomat Martin Indyk). He

gave Perlez a copy of the novel and no doubt plenty of encouragement to bring it to the attention of readers—and editors. Indyk’s intervention can perhaps be seen in the pointed parenthetical statement in the article that the book had yet to find an American publisher.

In fact *Carpentaria* had been doing the rounds in the US ever since its Australian appearance in 2006, and an offer was eventually made by Barbara Epler at New Directions.<sup>12</sup> But a rival offer appeared more attractive. Perlez’s agent, Gloria Loomis, who was also Martin Indyk’s agent, took the book on and eventually caught the interest of Judith Curr, an Australian editor in charge of the Atria imprint at Simon & Schuster. Curr, in Indyk’s words ‘was trying her hand at developing an international list.’ If that’s the good news, the results were less positive: ‘Alexis got a good advance, but it was the wrong imprint and the book sank without trace, not having scored a single print review’ (Osborne and Whitlock 10). New Directions, Indyk believes, would have been a more appropriate publisher and would have known how to market this challenging book; in my terms, they may have been able to activate a more clearly defined field for this literary novel’s marketing and reception. For Wright’s *The Swan Book*, American publisher Little, Brown had world rights through the UK edition but did not offer to publish the novel in the USA. Eventually it followed *Carpentaria* to Atria. And once again no reviews have been located outside the professional journals (and *O, The Oprah Magazine*).

#### 4

The one-off nature of the publishing described thus far means there is no single, recurring set of institutional arrangements or professional linkages sustaining the transference of Indigenous texts into the American publishing industry. The partial exception to the rule, and one of increasing importance, is where we see the power of *genre* pulling titles across copyright territories into new markets, into nameable generic fields. Most significant here is the YA dystopian fantasy of Ambelin Kwaymullina: her ‘Tribe’ series in the mode she calls ‘Indigenous futurism,’ a term picked up in *Kirkus Reviews* (which had labelled the first volume in the series Fantasy, but used Kwaymullina’s term after that) and also in the *School Library Journal* (Gruver). The praise in these venues is high, and alert to Aboriginal inflections: ‘Kwaymullina’s rich world-building, which incorporates the worldviews and ancient stories of Australia’s indigenous people, makes this series stand out in the crowded field of YA dystopian fiction’ (Oluonye).<sup>13</sup> Kwaymullina is published locally by Walker Books Australia and in the US by Candlewick Press, a division of Walker that specialises in children’s and YA books.

The repeatable YA connections that work for Kwaymullina’s books through the federated company structure of Walker Books and the global genre of YA fantasy is something of a special case as indicated. And yet there are connections to *Carpentaria* and *The Swan Book*, pulled into a cognate generic field, and to Claire Coleman’s extraordinary novel *Terra Nullius*, a book that manages to be about colonial pasts and dystopian futures at the same time. *Terra Nullius* made its way into the American market by accident (not unusually), through the special interest of its US publisher, Gavin Grant, the co-founder of the independent Small Beer Press based in Easthampton, Massachusetts. Small Beer Press specialises in science fiction and mystery but has a wider interest, in Grant’s own words, in ‘books that move across generic borders.’<sup>14</sup> Grant read a review of the novel in the UK *Guardian* and said to himself ‘I have to read this book.’ Having done so he emailed Hachette Australia and a deal was done. Although resident in the US for 25 years, Grant himself is originally from Scotland, and it is tempting to hypothesise about the difference his background might make. Either way, it was the speculative/dystopian genre framing that was dominant in ‘locating’ the book, although, no less critically, this did not efface its presence as Aboriginal writing.

While the American edition locates the novel through a blurb that places Coleman in the company of Ursula Le Guin, Margaret Atwood and Octavia Butler (written by the Press's co-founder, sci-fi/fantasy author Kelly Link), the cover not only repeats the Aboriginal imagery of the Australian original but adds the colours of the Aboriginal flag. Further, while the US edition reproduced Hachette's setting, it added a Reader's Guide to 'help break down barriers for American readers,' as Grant puts it. This consists of an interview with Coleman by fantasy author Jenny Abeles in which Coleman locates her novel within the broader context of colonialism, linking America and Australia, and offers a list of other Indigenous authors for American readers. Then there's a set of Reading Group Discussion Questions, some bland about sympathetic or unsympathetic characters but others directly about colonisation, followed by an Author's Note in which Coleman explains the concepts of terra nullius, slavery for Indigenous workers, and the Stolen Generations. She also thanks the Press's owners for taking her book 'out to another part of the world.'

This complex framing of *Terra Nullius* had its effects, perhaps the kind of effects Indyk saw for *Carpentaria* if published by New Directions. The publisher's website offers a long list of quotable quotes, not quite from the mainstream press but from National Public Radio (Best Books of 2018), online sites *Book Riot* and *Locus* (where it was reviewed by prominent sci-fi author Gary K. Wolfe), *Kirkus Reviews* again, and starred reviews in the *Library Journal* and *Publishers Weekly*.<sup>15</sup> There's also a link to an interview in the *LA Review of Books*, which had earlier interviewed Kim Scott (Wood 2017, 2018). In Grant's view, the book was read positively by the YA and sci-fi communities but also as a book by a 'queer woman of color.'

According to the publisher, *Terra Nullius* by mid-2019 had sold 'more than a couple of thousand copies' (and the Reader's Guide had been downloaded almost 700 times); not best-selling, but its impact has been significant. After its appearance, Small Beer Press saw a sudden increase in submissions from Australian agents, not least from Kim Scott's US agent regarding *Taboo*. Small Beer Press published *Taboo* in September 2019, and Scott visited the States, meeting his publisher and appearing at a forum held at the Library of Congress. Again the Press's website offers a generous selection of excerpts from reviews, Australian and American, including from the *Boston Globe*, as well as *Publishers Weekly* and *Kirkus Reviews*.<sup>16</sup> In this instance, the specific histories of settler/Aboriginal relations are unavoidable.

The final example I have of a book's journey into the American marketplace is Ali Cobby Eckermann's memoir *Too Afraid to Cry*, sourced from a two-page article on book and author in *Publishers Weekly* (Werris). In 2017, for this book Cobby Eckermann won the important Windham-Campbell nonfiction prize administered by Yale. When the award was announced, American author Adam Fitzgerald happened to be in Australia. They met and she gave him a copy of her book; he passed it to Norton Liveright editor-in-chief Robert Weil, who lobbied for its publication based in part on his experience of publishing Native American authors such as Russell Means and Leonard Peltier: 'I know a good bit about "adoptions" of native American infants in the US . . . So I was especially drawn to Ali's wrenching personal story' (Werris 31). Eckermann also attracted the interest of a US agent.

The rare link explicitly made here between Australian and American First Nations people was also revealed in Osborne and Whitlock's 2015 mapping of consumption patterns via Amazon around the US edition of *Carpentaria*. *Yasiv.com* maps the links between purchases of specific books in relation to a selected example. The graphic showed *Carpentaria* in close proximity to Louise Erdrich's *Tracks* and a number of Native American anthologies, as well as a node of South Pacific writing—a representation of a 'transnational Indigenous literary network' that

was even more pronounced in the graphic generated by Amazon's Canadian market but largely disappears for the British equivalent (1–2).

When I repeated this experiment in mid-2019 a revealingly different set of reading relations emerged.<sup>17</sup> The closest links at this point in time were to the novels of African-American sci-fi author Octavia Butler. On one side, the book is in proximate relation to other African, black and postcolonial figures including Jamaica Kincaid, J.M. Coetzee, Salman Rushdie, Zadie Smith and Sudanese author Tayeb Salih. On the other, it connects to Atwood in post-apocalyptic mode and a cluster of works, fiction and non-fiction, on climate catastrophe. Another line connects *Carpentaria* to Scott's novels, and, in the opposite direction, to Australian authors such as Peter Carey, Tim Winton and Kate Grenville. But the key point is the new global visibility of sci-fi, cli-fi and dystopian fantasy as major genres being registered in the novel's consumption.<sup>18</sup> While there is a transnational cluster of race and postcolonial interests, it does not appear to be tied primarily to indigeneity.

Osborne and Whitlock also trace the changing fortunes of the book through its covers. As we have seen already with *My Place*, as a 'book moves offshore and into transnational literary space'—or rather into a different domestic marketplace—'the cover art responds by creating different thresholds of interpretation' (7). The US hardback edition of *Carpentaria* reproduced the serpent image used for the Australian edition, but with a more generic 'red centre' background rather than the country-specific landscape of the original. As well as quoting from *Kirkus Reviews*, the *Library Journal* and Perlez's article, the publisher sought an endorsement for the cover from another Simon & Schuster author, the African-American mystery writer Walter Mosley (positioning the book as black genre fiction perhaps, although Mosley's comment points elsewhere).<sup>19</sup> The paperback edition delocalises the novel even further, invoking a far more predictable generic image of anonymous Aboriginal people on country, but not Wright's Waanyi country, offering a kind of empathetic primitivism but suggesting nothing of the novel's own complex modernity.<sup>20</sup> The cover for *The Swan Book* shifts register again, reproducing an Aboriginal painting (from publisher Judith Curr's own collection) which is embellished with an enthusiastic exclamation from *O, The Oprah Magazine*: 'Astonishingly inventive.'<sup>21</sup>

In conclusion, we can point to degrees of thickening or quickening of engagements with Australian Indigenous writing over the last decade and even more so the last four or five years. Connections with black writing are still potent, now in more complicated ways than when *My Place* appeared, through networks of transnational black, minoritarian or postcolonial writing, alongside some links to Native American writing but constellated around issues of race perhaps rather than indigeneity. The most powerful transactional category in recent years has been that of futurist fantasy or dystopian speculative fiction. This could be seen negatively, as effacing the particularities of Indigenous narratives, dissolving the specificities of Aboriginal experience into easily transferable, global generic modes. But I would argue optimistically about the potential such framings have for opening up the texts to much wider sets of connections and modes of reception, not so much effacing Indigenous literature as connecting it into complex networks of interpretive formations, scales of readability, and, no less important, industry mobilisations.

West-Pavlov notes a slightly different, more literary, but complementary potential for *Carpentaria*:

*Carpentaria* is out there in the European and American markets. Its place in the global publishing scene is admittedly precarious, yet precisely that precarity may give it a crucial ‘minor’ status, in Deleuze and Guattari’s sense of the word. That ‘minor’ tenor entails the capacity to generate—on the margins of that field of cultural production—‘lines of flight’ within the collective fabric of linguistic life. By virtue of their constitutively unforeseeable trajectories, such ‘lines of flight’ will surely take *Carpentaria* to future junctures, where audiences will be more able to recognize and respond to it as a work of world literature. (43)

Transnationalism remains a powerful conceptual lever for tracing the mobility of texts across borders and breaking open the hold that national framings of literatures still exert, both historically and heuristically. ‘Indigenous transnationalism’ remains an essential tool for reading contemporary Indigenous fiction. And yet when we follow the actual transit of books across borders, when we trace the circulation of books as books (and as bundles of rights), we soon bump up against the barriers to such movement, the limits of transnational or transnodal exchange in the power dynamics of culture and commerce. What we find is less the transcendence of borders than their often difficult negotiation, as works are transported from one domestic market, industry or copyright territory into another, seldom emerging unmarked from the process, and, in this case, seldom producing sustained patterns of transference or reception.

The transfer of Australian Indigenous writing into the American marketplace thus remains small-scale and dispersed despite the more recent developments, nothing that yet constitutes a field of Australian Indigenous writing beyond one corner of the academic sphere. This is not surprising given that we can scarcely talk of Australian literature as a field in the American marketplace. At the same time, it is not too difficult to conceive of the time when Australian Indigenous writing becomes recognised as a field in this sense before or beyond Australian literature itself. After all, that is already the case for contemporary Aboriginal art in relation to the broader field of Australian art.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Much of the Anglophone criticism of Casanova’s *The World Republic of Letters* as Gallocentric reveals the critics’ own Anglocentricity. While the absence of significant attention to London and New York is notable, much of Casanova’s analysis of the role of Paris in the international careers of writers such as Joyce and Faulkner remains persuasive. And for many cultures and languages beyond English, Paris, not London or New York, remains the key centre for translation and international circulation.

<sup>2</sup> Children’s books, usually picture books, were much more prominent than fiction in the years to 2000 in the USA: thirteen titles with at least an Indigenous illustrator on the creative team. Authors included Dick Roughsey, Percy Trezise, and, from 1993, Sally Morgan. Only four titles in this area have appeared since 2000. Data here and throughout derived from AustLit.

<sup>3</sup> The books’ release in paperback would have limited access to the reviews pages. Mudrooroo’s identification as Indigenous was first questioned in 1996. Angus & Robertson editions of Oodgeroo Noonuccal’s *Stradbroke Dreamtime*, Wongar’s *The Track to Bralgu* and Mudrooroo’s *The Master of Ghost Dreaming* were reviewed together in the *LA Times*, 27 June 1993. Sam Watson’s *The Kadaitcha Sung* (1990) is listed as published by Penguin Australia and Viking Penguin (USA) but the latter was not a separate edition. No reviews have been located.

<sup>4</sup> Wongar (Sreten Božić) was born in Serbia, moved to Australia in 1960, and lived with an Aboriginal group in Australia’s Tanami desert for ten years. His non-Aboriginal identity was revealed in 1981 in Australia. While his publishing under an Aboriginal name has provoked controversy, his writing itself has also been critically defended. His US editions are *The Track to Bralgu* (Little, Brown, 1978), *Barbaru* (U of Illinois P, 1982), *Walg* (Dodd,

Mead, 1983; Braziller, 1990), *Bilma* (Ohio UP, 1984), *Karan* (Dodd, Mead, 1985; Braziller, 1991), *Gabo Djara* (Dodd, Mead, 1987).

<sup>5</sup> There is no record of the contracts or negotiations in Oodgeroo Noonuccal's papers in the Fryer Library, University of Queensland (UQFL 84). No records for Citadel Press have been located. Jacaranda was primarily an educational publisher though with a growing general list. It had expanded from its Brisbane base by the mid-1960s, establishing offices in Victoria and NSW (Blaxell 36). The book's price in the USA was a cheap \$1.

<sup>6</sup> Alex Haley's novel *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* was first published in 1976. The enormously successful TV miniseries went to air in 1977 with a sequel in 1979.

<sup>7</sup> Oddly the stamp bears the German word 'Australien' over the shape of the continent. I have been unable to identify any actual stamp from 1988 with that design.

<sup>8</sup> For these covers see: [https://www.thriftbooks.com/w/my-place\\_sally-morgan/334496/all-editions/](https://www.thriftbooks.com/w/my-place_sally-morgan/334496/all-editions/)

<sup>9</sup> The brief review appeared twice, in April 1991 under the heading 'Children's,' and in May as 'Non-Fiction.' The book was categorised as 'Autobiography 12+.'

<sup>10</sup> As one of the reviewers of the present essay suggested, perhaps *That Deadman Dance*'s whaling stories had a particular resonance in the US; but no evidence for this has been found in reviews or correspondence.

<sup>11</sup> Personal communication.

<sup>12</sup> Personal communication.

<sup>13</sup> In support of my earlier point that public libraries were likely to hold copies only if there had been a US edition, the two reviewers for the *School Library Journal* (of the print and audio editions of *The Disappearance of Ember Crow*) were librarians from the Burlington County Library, NJ, and the Shaker Heights Public Library, OH, respectively.

<sup>14</sup> Personal communication.

<sup>15</sup> <https://smallbeerpress.com/books/2018/09/18/terra-nullius/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://smallbeerpress.com/books/2019/09/03/taboo/>

<sup>17</sup> A later search around *Carpentaria* (March 2020) gave less prominence to the dystopian/speculative fiction and non-fiction works and more to a very diverse range of 'world literature' texts and authors: New Zealand, Pacific, African, Vietnamese, Asian-American, African-American, Indian etc.—plus *Terra Nullius* and Peter Carey's *Oscar and Lucinda*. But results for *The Swan Book* were closer to the earlier results for *Carpentaria*, showing close proximity to a range of Margaret Atwood and Octavia Butler titles, as well as Asian American and African-American authors.

<sup>18</sup> And in August 2020, the *New York Times* published an article on American Indigenous/First Nations authors' engagement with science fiction and fantasy genres: Alter (2020).

<sup>19</sup> 'Wild and filled with strange beauty and hardship, *Carpentaria* celebrates the mythic and the pedestrian of Aboriginal life in Australia's heart. Inventive and epic, the novel reveals the complex connections between land and human, public and private life, class and destiny, faith and modernism. Alexis Wright weaves a magical tale with characters that will live on long after the last page is turned' (Cited in Osborne and Whitlock 7).

<sup>20</sup> Indyk complained at length about this cover and asked the publisher to revert the rights in the book, without success. Personal communication.

<sup>21</sup> For the Australian edition, Giramondo had the courage or confidence not to use a recognisably Aboriginal image for the cover, but rather a line drawing of a swan by designer Darren Gilbert.

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