

The Politics of the Voice: Ethnographic fetishism and Australian literary studies

Richard J. Martin
The University of Queensland

Introduction

The politics of representing Aboriginality is a focus of debate in numerous academic disciplines. This is particularly so in Australian literary studies. To quote the prominent Aboriginal lawyer Mick Dodson in his foreword to the recent *Macquarie Pen Anthology of Aboriginal Literature*:

[L]iterature can be and is used as a powerful political tool by Aboriginal people in a political system which renders us mostly voiceless. It can give us confidence and pride to raise our voices through the silence. (xiii)

In a website supplement to that anthology the co-editor, Aboriginal academic Anita Heiss, argues similarly:

Indigenous literature provides a platform for this country's First Nations people who are essentially still voiceless in the 21st century. Our poetry, our novels, our life-stories are all saying 'this is who we are, this is what we aspire to, this is how we want to be identified, this is how we can work together, and this is why the history of this country is important to all of us.' (n.p.)

While the proposition that Aboriginal people are politically 'voiceless' is questionable given the prominent speaking position occupied by Aboriginal people like Mick Dodson and Anita Heiss (as well as Noel Pearson, Marcia Langton, Warren Mundine, Bess Price and others), these comments highlight the importance attached to the idea of 'voice' in discussions of the politics of representing Aboriginality in Australia. Notwithstanding this, the idea of voice characteristically receives scant attention by literary analysts approaching Aboriginal representations and self-representations, tending to be understood solely in relation to the ethics of authorship and appropriation. Much of this criticism rests on the simplistic assumption that texts created by collaboration including uneven collaboration are not in some respects voiced by their subject or subjects. As a result, anthologies like the *Macquarie Pen* have tended to exclude texts that are associated with the efforts of non-Aboriginal writers and scholars. Against this, a more critical approach to the idea of voice reveals alternative formulations of Aboriginal literature, facilitating new readings of old texts, including transcribed and translated accounts of the Aboriginal songlines of Australia.

Dodson's and Heiss's quotations above reflect the connotations of authenticity attached to the idea of voice as a direct manifestation of Aboriginal feeling. Voice is also presented in many discussions of Aboriginal literature as more closely connected to the discourses of the Dreaming from which Aboriginal literature is said to arise (Westphalen), as in Heiss and Minter's assertion that 'Aboriginal literary writing grew directly from a complex and ancient wellspring of oral and visual communication and exchange' (2). In this context, it is curious that accounts of this Dreaming produced by anthropologists in collaboration with Aboriginal people are often excluded from consideration as Aboriginal literature. This paper discusses two popular texts about Aboriginal ceremonial songs or 'songlines' with reference to the idea of the voice, reading them as forms of writing which challenge binarisms about Aboriginal

and non-Aboriginal literature, and indeed about voice and text: Bill Harney with A. P. Elkin's *Songs of the Songmen: Aboriginal Myths Retold* (1949); and John Bradley with Yanyuwa Families' *Singing Saltwater Country: Journey to the Songlines of Carpentaria* (2010). Alongside T. G. H. Strehlow's magisterial work *Songs of Central Australia* (1971) and similarly popular considerations of the same theme (by Bruce Chatwin, Stephen Muecke and others), these texts illustrate the challenge of locating or producing an accurate transcription and translation of something that is classically spoken or sung. Both texts therefore focus attention on the complex relationship between voice and text, particularly insofar as both are also the products of collaboration by the anthropologists Elkin and Bradley with, on the one hand, a non-Aboriginal 'Protector' and popular writer (Harney), and, on the other, the subjects of the ethnography themselves (that is, Yanyuwa Families). As I argue, the shifting ways in which the songlines of northern Australia are voiced in *Songs of the Songmen* and *Singing Saltwater Country* provides insights into the politics of representing Aboriginality in Australia, and the forces that have historically affected it, including what I describe as 'ethnographic fetishism.' The close analysis of these texts focuses attention on the role of such fetishism—for the exotic and authentic—within the changing context of cultural production in Australia, where Aboriginal identity and culture is increasingly entangled in the evolving social imaginary of multiculturalism, as well as the global structures of the world system (Povinelli, *Cunning*). Insofar as such fetishism is reproduced within the ideology of creation in literature, which 'directs the gaze towards the apparent producer and prevents us from asking who has created this "creator" and the magic power of transubstantiation with which the "creator" is endowed,' it is relevant to a reassessment of the politics of the voice in Australian literary studies (Bourdieu, *Rules of Art* 167).

The Authority of Anthropology and the Expertise of the White Aborigine

On 4 April 1944, Sydney University Professor of Anthropology A. P. Elkin wrote to William E. (Bill) Harney at the Native Affairs Branch in Katherine in the Northern Territory to inform him that the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) in Melbourne was putting on a series of talks about 'the romance of North Australia' and had requested a talk 'on the Aborigines' and their 'future' in Australia. Harney had worked as Acting Patrol Officer and Protector of Aborigines for the Native Affairs Branch in Katherine since 1940. In 1941 he began to publish in *Bulletin*, *Walkabout* and *Overland*, before Elkin helped to arrange publication of a selection of short stories entitled *Taboo* (1943). While Elkin's *The Australian Aborigines: How to Understand Them* (1938) was the first and at that time the only scholarly publication to deal with Aboriginal cultures across the continent, the ABC's first choice was Harney. As Elkin put it in another letter dated 12 April 1944: 'They thought that you might be able to give this talk [but] if you cannot do it, then I will write it instead.' As it happened, Harney was able to put together a short script on aspects of Aboriginal culture, which Elkin agreed to 'dress up' and read on air for the broadcast. Afterwards, Elkin wrote to Harney to enquire as to whether he listened to 'our broadcast' (in a letter of 23 June 1944), noting: 'It came over very well, though I didn't recognise my own voice.'

Elkin's comment about not recognising his own voice probably relates simply to the de-familiarising experience of hearing himself on the radio. However, Elkin's choice of the word 'voice' focuses attention on the complex impact of collaboration on a text. Although he is more or less forgotten today, Harney was an extremely popular writer of short stories and novels about Aboriginal life during the era of assimilation in Australia. On the strength of his first publication *Taboo* and with the support of people like Elkin he became something of an authority on Aboriginal issues, able to parlay his first-hand experience of Aboriginal society to non-Aboriginal Australia. Harney was one of a number of non-Aboriginal men who co-

habited (illegally, according to the laws of the time) with Aboriginal women at Borroloola in the late 1920s and 1930s, when he held a stake in a cattle station called Seven Emu in Garawa country and a salt mine situated on Yanyuwa country at Manangoora station. Subsequent to this, Harney worked for the Native Affairs Branch in Katherine, where he was able to exploit his knowledge of inter-racial relationships around the Gulf to harass some of his erstwhile associates for cohabiting with Aboriginal women.¹ On a visit to Sydney in the late 1930s, he met Professor Elkin. Thereafter, he and the Professor corresponded intensively about Aboriginal Australia. This correspondence demonstrates the gradual development of a collection of Aboriginal songs that was later published as *Songs of the Songmen*. At first, Harney sent Elkin his handwritten work; later, Elkin arranged to have the material typed and began to suggest changes, from which the idea for a co-authored collection emerged. For example, in a letter on 27 February 1946, Elkin offered the following comments on a poem entitled ‘As Songmen Sing’:

The 6th line, if you remember, ends with the words ‘beyond compare.’ This, I find, is a very hackneyed phrase. The 4th line ran ‘the mountains there,’ but ‘there’ is, of course, only padding, and I am not happy about the last line with ‘queer, fantastic ways as dreams’ I have therefore made an attempt to alter it, while keeping the same rhyming effect which you had.

The extent of Harney and Elkin’s creative licence is evident here, with the requirement to maintain regular metre and doggerel rhyme overcoming ethnographic considerations about accuracy. Nevertheless, elsewhere in the same letter, Elkin suggests a dedication be added to their work, entitled ‘Our Dreaming,’ in which the authors claim to have ‘caught/The simple grandeur of their thought’ (Harney and Elkin, *Songs* 2nd edn 2). Here the Aboriginal concept of the Dreaming is appropriated by these non-Aboriginal men to describe their own work, which is presented as a kind of tribute to Aboriginal people (albeit a tribute phrased in language that might nowadays be considered offensive). Revealingly, the authenticity of the text is presented in this dedication in terms of an essence, which is understood as Aboriginal, rather than in terms of its form, which was clearly shaped by the efforts of Harney and Elkin.

Songs of the Songmen therefore differs from anthropological publications on the same theme, such as Carl Strehlow’s translations of Aranda and Loritja verses into German produced between 1907 and 1920, or indeed T. G. H. Strehlow’s later *Songs of Central Australia*. Elkin’s former students R. M. and C. H. Berndt’s roughly contemporaneous work on an Arnhem Land song-cycle published in *Oceania* in 1948 provides another example, presenting a direct transcription and a metered adaptation (which was afterwards intriguingly utilised by Les Murray in the Buladelah-Taree Holiday Song Cycle poem in *Ethnic Radio*, which replicates the style and metre of The Moon-bone Song). However, notwithstanding the literariness of Harney and Elkin’s work, *Songs of the Songmen* received the imprimatur of numerous professionals associated with Aboriginal Australia when it eventually came out, in 1949, being applauded by the linguist Paul L. Garvin, who described it as ‘[a]n excellent way of presenting the Australian “black fellow” to his white fellows’ (306). *Songs of the Songmen* also sold well, leading to a 1968 reissue. However, by the time of its reissue, Harney had been dead for years and Elkin had begun to attract criticism from Aboriginal activists and others for his interference in their affairs. As his biographer Tigger Wise argues, Elkin was temperamentally at odds with activism in general, and suspicious of rallying cries which ‘smacked dangerously of all he had worked to avoid: divisiveness, separatism, apartheid’ (254). With the growth of Aboriginal activism, new kinds of political sensitivities had emerged by 1968 that were probably unthinkable in the 1940s, although Elkin himself reports

a ‘stirring of Aboriginal feelings’ in this direction after the 1937-38 formation of the Aborigines’ Progressive Association (Elkin, *Australian Aborigines* 5th edn 373). As the quotations from the *Macquarie Pen* anthology suggest, these political sensitivities have heightened in the years since then. While non-Aboriginal people continue to publish collections of Aboriginal ‘song poems’ and other cultural material, the politics of authorship and the ethics of appropriation that Harney and Elkin more or less ignored in 1949 (and indeed in 1968) have come to preoccupy editors, publishers and critics in the years since then (see, for example, Dixon and Duwell’s *The Honey-ant Men’s Love Song* and *Little Eva at Moonlight Creek*, which name the owners/performers of songs as well as the recorders/translators). By 1968, Harney and Elkin’s work was somewhat anachronistic.

In contrast to modern conventions, Elkin’s concern in the ‘Personal Note’ produced for the 1968 reissue of *Songs of the Songmen* relates to the role of Harney as primary authority rather than any concern with cultural property or propriety: ‘every alteration to, and rewriting of, lines and verses began only as a suggestion from me, which Mr Harney either accepted or if not, sent back a rendering that he liked better’ (Elkin 11). One passage in this Personal Note is particularly revealing:

Mr Harney sensed that some of his southern literary acquaintances would say that I had altered or rewritten much of the text ‘off my own bat’.... A few individuals, remembering the ruggedness of the Harney declamations of some Songs, said or implied that the printed versions were anaemic compared with what they thought were the originals.... I, for one, hear his voice in this our version of the Song of the Songman. (11)

This concern with ‘voice’ echoes that which Elkin remarked following his earlier collaboration with Harney for the ABC. Critically, this ‘voice’ is thought to come from non-Aboriginal people who had closely interacted with Aborigines, rather than from Aboriginal people themselves. In this Personal Note, Elkin describes Harney as ‘[a] bushman [who] had a deep understanding of Aborigines, of how they thought as well as of what they did’ (7). In a biographical note for the 1968 edition, Harney’s friend the journalist Douglas Lockwood (whose 1962 publication *I, the Aboriginal* raises similar issues to Harney and Elkin’s work) similarly asserted that Harney could ‘think like an Aboriginal’ (Lockwood 5). Harney’s supposed facility with what Lockwood calls ‘Instant Poetry’—‘begin[ning] at once and recit[ing] several stanzas which not only had rhyme but told a story’—was thereby reconfigured as the vatic extemporizing of a non-Aboriginal man in touch with a numinous spiritual force (Lockwood 5). While this numinous spiritual force is associated with Aboriginality its relationship with Aboriginal people is arguably more complex, highlighting a peculiar yoking together of Aboriginality and Whiteness in what Ian McLean dubbed ‘the White Aborigine.’ It is this strange subject position that authorises the songs presented in *Songs of the Songmen*.

Tied to a belief in the cultural disintegration of Aboriginal society, White Aborigines were thought to be able to take over from Aborigines as the custodians of Aboriginality, becoming in some respects more Aboriginal than contemporaneous Aborigines, who were thought to have been corrupted by contact with non-Aboriginal people (Rose 120-121). While Harney and Elkin were unusually sympathetic to Aboriginal people for the period, the figure of the White Aborigine upon which their co-publication partly relies for its authoritative depiction of Aboriginality represents a troubling position with regard to Aboriginal people themselves. This is conveyed in the epigraph to *Songs of the Songmen*, entitled ‘Native Saying’:

‘Mordja Amari Boaradja
Ngu Borngga Amari Mordja.’

Literal Translation:

‘Forgotten I lost dreaming
Country I left forgotten lost.’

Paraphrase:

He who loses his dreaming is lost. (Harney and Elkin, *Songs* 2nd edn 1)

The quotation which begins this epigraph comes from an unidentified Aboriginal language.² While the structure of this epigraph suggests that this language is translated in the second and third parts of this piece, it is important to emphasise that Harney roved extensively across the Northern Territory, and likely lacked the ability to communicate with Aboriginal people in anything other than Aboriginal English and/or Kriol. Hence, presuming that the first quotation comes from an actual language, there was likely to have been an additional act of translation in the performance and documentation of this ‘saying’ which is not indicated here: that between this unknown Aboriginal language and Aboriginal English or Kriol. Regardless, from the transliterated Aboriginal language (which seems to have been spelt phonetically without the use of a recognisable linguistic convention), the meaning in English emerges increasingly succinctly in this poem. In the first ‘Literal Translation’ (i.e. the second stanza of the poem) the repeated emphasis upon forgetting and loss is reminiscent of a-grammatical aphasia (‘I lost dreaming ... I left forgotten lost’), which creates an impression of fractured identity. In the second translation (i.e. the third stanza, entitled ‘Paraphrase’), the grammatical persons involved in the utterance shifts from the speaker or addressee (i.e. ‘I lost dreaming ... I left’) to a translator or over-hearer who is not directly involved in the event but is nonetheless privy to its meaning (i.e. ‘He who loses his dreaming is lost’). While the paraphrase arguably lacks the expressive force of the literal translation, this pronominal shift illustrates the broader project of the book as a whole, namely the distillation of ‘the simple grandeur’ of Aboriginal thought in English. Unlike the speaker in the ‘Literal Translation,’ the translator or over-hearer of the third stanza is more composed, his voice more assured. However, more than a distillation of meaning, the third stanza appears to have changed the meaning of the second. This is especially accomplished through the elision of the deictic centre or origo of the utterance, namely the speaker’s reference to country. In the literal translation, the spatial and temporal paradox of the Dreaming is suggested through the use of the word ‘country,’ which is multi-referential in Australian English (see Stanner 58-63). However, more than the customary estate of the speaker (i.e. his or her ‘country’), the deictic centre of this statement might be understood to have originally been the particular time and place in which it was uttered, or performed. By withholding any reference to this place, the ‘Native Saying’ is transformed into a simple lament for a lost Dreaming, understood as a reified article of Aboriginal culture. Culture, in other words, has become art (Acciaoli 1). As Webb Keane argues apropos early anthropological translations of ritual texts in Indonesia: ‘[t]he substitution of lexical meanings with equivalents in the vocabulary of another language captures everything but what counts,’ ‘focusing on the obvious,’ ‘misdirecting [our] attention from the real import ... of a ritual text’ (42).

More composed than the aphasic ‘I’ of the literal translation, the White Aboriginal translator of this ‘Native Saying’ advances his claim to understand Aboriginal thinking even as he (mis)represents it as art. While highly valued and even honoured by Harney and Elkin,

Aboriginality is aestheticised, even apotheosized here in support of the colonial mythology that Aboriginal Australians were fated to die out. While both Harney and Elkin worked to promote support for the proper provision of medical services, education, wages and social service payments to Aboriginal people through public statements like that which Elkin read for the ABC, the figure of the White Aborigine which *Songs of the Songmen* partly relied on was premised upon the forgetting and loss by Aboriginal people of classical Aboriginal culture. Forgotten, lost—‘he who loses his dreaming is lost’—Aboriginal culture might thereby be thought to have passed into the control of those non-Aboriginal people who remember: anthropologists, and other non-Aboriginal ‘experts.’³

A few years after the reissue of *Songs of the Songmen*, in Elkin’s 80th year, 1971, Australia’s first land rights case *Milirrpum and others v. Nabalco Pty Ltd and the Commonwealth of Australia* was heard by Justice Blackburn in the Supreme Court of the Northern Territory. Presented with evidence by the anthropologists R. Berndt and Stanner as well as ten Aboriginal witnesses, Blackburn found that native title was not part of the law of Australia. In this case, the court’s use of anthropological accounts of Aboriginal culture failed to enable the recognition of Aboriginal claims to property, disclosing the difficult political context within which reified anthropological knowledge would thereafter circulate, removed from the contexts of local practice and even from the discipline of anthropology (see Myers, *Painting Culture* 13).⁴ In this context, it is unsurprising that Harney and Elkin’s work, as well as those of other ‘experts’ attracted critique. While the Royal Commission established after this decision led to the eventual recognition of Aboriginal land rights, Elkin reportedly remained sceptical though not directly opposed to land rights until the end of his life, awkwardly managing the transition to this new world (Wise). As Wise argues, Elkin’s interpretation of Aboriginal self-determination stressed inclusion and assimilation rather than separation, although this did not exclude political representation. As he put it in the fifth edition of *The Australian Aborigines*: ‘Aborigines are Australian citizens and must be their own voice’ (376). However, as Elkin’s collaboration with Harney demonstrates, the challenge of being or becoming one’s own voice is complex, particularly in the changing context of cultural production that accompanied the profound political upheavals associated with land rights and later native title in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s.

The Last of the Ethnographers and the Changing Context of Cultural Production

Some forty years after the reissue of Harney and Elkin’s collection, John Bradley with Yanyuwa Families’ *Singing Saltwater Country: Journey to the Songlines of Carpentaria* was published to similar acclaim. Like Harney, Bradley has extensive first-hand experience of Aboriginal society in the southern Gulf, having worked with Yanyuwa people around Borroloola since he arrived in that town as a young primary school teacher in the early 1980s. As *Singing Saltwater Country* records, Bradley became fascinated with the songlines (*kujika* in Yanyuwa) which link the Sir Edward Pellew group of islands with the Australian mainland, including those which travel through Manangoora station (or *Manankurra* in Yanyuwa), where Harney (and others) operated a salt mine with Yanyuwa assistance in the 1930s. Like Elkin, Bradley is a trained anthropologist, whose PhD focuses on Yanyuwa connections with the land and particularly marine environments. However, unlike Harney and Elkin’s collaboration on *Songs of the Songmen*, *Singing Saltwater Country* is presented as the result of collaboration with ‘Yanyuwa Families.’ The non-Aboriginal Bradley describes the book as part of a ‘reciprocal deal’ with Yanyuwa people, enabling him to learn ‘language, country and *kujika* [italics added]’ in return for translating Aboriginal knowledge into ‘a form that could be preserved for the future’ (Bradley xvi). Insofar as this book emerged in response to the stated desire of Yanyuwa people to translate songlines into an alternate form it is

clearly distinct from Harney and Elkin's publication and the issues of authorship and appropriation that attended it—the result of research determined by Aboriginal interests rather than non-Aboriginal ones. Bradley's collaboration 'with Yanyuwa Families' is critical here in reinstating Aboriginal people to the role of cultural authorities in place of the anthropologist and the White Aborigine as expert. Nevertheless, related concerns with voice are apparent in Bradley with Yanyuwa Families' work. This is particularly so as Bradley, like Harney, was partly enculturated by Aboriginal people, in this case the Yanyuwa.

With *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (1986) and other publications throughout the 1980s and 1990s, anthropology's claims to absolute knowledge and objective authority were critiqued. While holistic ethnographies of Aboriginal societies continued to appear—including Myers' now-classic 1986 monograph *Pintupi Country, Pintupi Self*, reviewed by Peter Sutton as 'an elegant work of English literature' as well as an exemplary ethnography (588)—such representations were increasingly categorised as anachronistic publications by 'the last of the ethnographers' (Michaels), particularly when anthropological constructions of Aboriginality contradicted Aboriginal re-inventions of tradition. One response to this critique was a reflexive turn, whereby anthropologists grappled with the challenge of 'being in culture while looking at culture' (Clifford, *Predicament* 9). *Singing Saltwater Country* reflects this context. In describing his first meeting with a Yanyuwa couple who would later become key informants, Bradley with Yanyuwa Families utilises the pronoun 'I' to place his younger self at the centre of the drama:

I was introduced to [Jerry and Elma], but sat down with Eileen [another Yanyuwa person] so I could continue my Yanyuwa lesson. I was trying to make sense of male and female dialects, as I had received comments that I was speaking 'too much like a woman.' Eileen, because we were at school together every day, saw it as her task to get me to speak like a man. (123)

Given the collaboration signalled by Bradley's co-attribution 'with Yanyuwa Families' it is relevant to ask: who is the 'I' here? The answer is clearly Bradley or 'Bradley': the anthropologist as author-function whose voice at this time sounded 'too much like a woman.' With colourful episodes like this, Bradley dispels the elegiac mood of the earlier ethnographers Harney and Elkin, while abdicating the authority of the White Aborigine (who was necessarily male) as the narrating older self of the text intrudes on the observations of his younger self. The tone is also leavened by humour, as Bradley continues:

As Eileen and I talked, Jerry said loudly and suddenly, 'Me! I'm number one singer [i.e. of *kujika*] myself!' Without hesitation, Elma bluntly responded 'Bullshit!' For the next half an hour the dialogue between the two increased in noise and passion. (123)

Critically, throughout the narrative that links the songs, *Singing Saltwater Country* presents a sense of the character of people like Jerry, who later sings the following verses:

Warrakiwarraki
Warrakiwarraki
Kakami kakamayi

Well-made stone blades
Discarded flakes lie scattered. (132-133)

Like Harney and Elkin (or indeed T. G. H. Strehlow whom Bradley arguably more closely resembles with his sophisticated command of an Aboriginal language), these verses are laid out on the page like poetry. However, rather than simply presenting them as reified and removed from the contexts of local practice, *Singing Saltwater Country* reinstates them within local life, highlighting the role of anthropology therein while explaining the significance of these few lines at length. Bradley with Yanyuwa Families thereby challenges readers ‘to come to feel something about it [i.e. this context surrounding the *kujika*] like these old men [like Jerry] did’ (134). The resulting text offers insights into the Rainbow Serpent, Tiger Shark, Brolga, Groper, Spirit People, Sea Turtle, Crow and Spotted Nightjar, and Hammerhead Shark *kujika* in the distinctive Aboriginal voices of the southern Gulf while simultaneously describing Bradley’s personal journey into the Gulf, where Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal lives are characteristically represented as separate.

Nevertheless, the politics of the voice emerge in relation to *Singing Saltwater Country* in a related way to Harney and Elkin’s *Songs of the Songmen*. Despite its record of a formidable number of Yanyuwa *kujika*, there is always a suggestion of more that have been lost: the *bangadirrinjarra kujika* or ‘broken songs’ which are no longer remembered in their entirety (171). Ironically, the loss of Yanyuwa cultural knowledge about *kujika* corresponds to an increase in Bradley’s status as a kind of archivist anthropologist, pictured in a photograph towards the end of *Singing Saltwater Country* with a transcribed and illustrated *kujika* spread out on the ground in front of him, as the Yanyuwa descendants of his original informants peer at it over his shoulder. Reflecting upon his own role in Yanyuwa society, Bradley writes:

I don’t really know at what point it was that the Yanyuwa old people decided they were going to need a medium of communication between them and posterity—or that it was me who might possibly have that role. My thirst to learn Yanyuwa language took them by surprise, and my desire to ‘go bush’ in Yanyuwa country became a starting point. (xv-xvi)

Singing Saltwater Country concludes with the death of most of the old men and women who taught Bradley, ‘[which] meant that there were only three other old Yanyuwa people left [not including Bradley] who could speak with full authority about song, country and ceremony’ (253). The reality of cultural loss which Harney and Elkin’s ‘Native Saying’ suggested is strongly felt here. While younger people’s interest in *kujika* is on display throughout the text, the anthropologist has become central to the reproduction of this aspect of Yanyuwa society. *Singing Saltwater Country* is indeed one manifestation of Bradley’s work in this cultural role, a role which includes the collaborative production of animated *kujika* at the University of Melbourne for use at the Borroloola school. Of particular interest is the use of recordings of Bradley singing *kujika* in these animations, with the enthusiastic support of Yanyuwa people: the anthropologist’s voice fulfilling the role of the old people in singing the country, helping to educate young people in the traditions of their forebears.⁵

The changing contexts of cultural production on display here—illustrative of what Lea describes as ‘the radical collaborative potential ... [of] multimedia anthropology’ (195)—highlights the need for a more sophisticated approach to the idea of voice, moving beyond the present focus on the politics of authorship and the ethics of appropriation to reflect the way in which Aboriginality and indeed Whiteness function as signifiers in contemporary Australia. As the slippage between the author-functions of ‘Bradley’ and ‘Yanyuwa Families’ in *Singing Saltwater Country* suggests, the voice of this text is truly collaborative, reflective of entangled contemporary forms of indigenous cultural politics. In this context, Bradley with

Yanyuwa Families' assertions about the stark separation of 'Yanyuwa' and 'Western' systems of categories is curious:

[Yanyuwa] understandings, and the understandings of many of the men and women who have mentored me, have nothing to do with Western systems of categories; rather their knowing was, and is, about the relatedness of humans, non-humans and objects, and the potential of power to move between them. On that day at Kalkaji [a site on Yanyuwa country], Jerry [a senior Yanyuwa man] was concerned about regenerating his relationship to that country, and the authority he derived from the matrix of interconnectedness that was Yanyuwa law [by singing *kujika*]. (134)

Here the anthropologist rejects all representations of Aboriginality which are not created by Aboriginal people as inadequate, including anthropological ones, positing the radical alterity and even incommensurality of Yanyuwa understandings to Western ways of thinking. This poses an interesting dilemma for the reader of Bradley with Yanyuwa Families' text, or indeed any text about Aboriginal Australia, particularly Aboriginal songlines: how is it possible to understand them? This position has attracted support from some critics in Australian literary studies, who assert that texts about Aboriginal Australia are 'very precisely *unreadable* to ... white [i.e. non-Aboriginal] reader[s]' (Ravenscroft 215). While critics in support of this position tend to argue that such texts should be read, this may amount to a partial explanation for the neglect of texts like *Singing Saltwater Country*. For Ravenscroft:

[E]thnography and anthropology can offer literary critics something very important, and this is a sense of our own profound bewilderment, the places where our own knowledge, our own senses, our own capacities to see and imagine as another does, must fail. (216)

However, while calling attention to the methodological challenges that confront critics in Australian literary studies with an interest in Aboriginal themes, this response is overly simplistic, approaching indigeneity as essentially about primordial, esoteric 'knowledge' and ignoring the pragmatic contemporary ways in which indigenous cultural politics are articulated (Clifford, *Articulations* 472). This response also paradoxically presents Aboriginal cultures as beyond knowledge, positing knowledge as a hidden term for contemporary cultural power, which is therefore indubitably of the West—ironically disempowering the subject of the process, speaking for them even as it claims not to be able to speak for them.

More productive approaches to the problem of interpretation have been developed in terms of Foucault's concept of 'singularities,' Derrida's concept of 'undecidability,' and Benjamin's approach to the task of the translator (see Povinelli 323). William Pietz also offers a valuable insight with his work on cultural fetishism. For Pietz:

Fetish is not of any one of the two cultures coming into contact. It is a concept-thing (an idea and a material thing at the same time) that arises in the gap that comes about at the moment of contact between the two cultures/languages. It becomes imbued with power to carry meaning across borders. (Cited in Povinelli 234; see also Apter and Pietz)

Texts like transcribed and translated songlines are aptly conceived as (at least partly) fetishistic insofar as they are generated on the border between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal

Australia, accruing power as a signifier that depends on yet erases its signification. In presenting the genealogy of this fetish Bradley with Yanyuwa Families problematises the praxis of making. This is effective insofar as the genealogy of the fetish that Bradley with Yanyuwa Families presents calls attention to the fetish powers of ethnography (Taussig 224). Collaborative ethnographies like *Singing Saltwater Country* blend ethnographic fieldwork with the ethnographic product, bringing the voices of researchers and subjects together in ‘fields of cultural production’ whose histories, purposes and structures become subjects of analysis alongside the propositional context of the text (Bourdieu, *Fields*). Within this context, the connotation of authenticity attached to the idea of the Aboriginal voice remains active and powerful only insofar as it hides its history of production, but in place of such authenticity emerges a more sophisticated understanding of the forces, institutions, values and policies affecting Aboriginality and indeed Whiteness in Australia. While this analysis necessitates the critique of some existing modes of representation and self-representation by and about Aboriginal people (with and without non-Aboriginal collaborators), it arguably revives other possible presents and futures, where the subject/object reversals that the fetish entails gives way to something else, to new forms of creativity and consciousness (Graeber).

The increasing social valuation of Australian Aboriginal culture and identity poses new problems for postmodern critiques of representation, particularly those focused on deconstructing the ways in which ‘the primitive’ and ‘the Other’ have been represented by non-Aboriginal people. The current system of recognising and reinforcing cultural and subcultural identities that were previously presumed to be threatened by the expansion of capitalism under neo-liberalism requires engagement with the framework that fosters and reinforces such identities, including within the canon of Australian literature and criticism. Analyses that focus on the politics of authorship and the ethics of appropriation risk reproducing an outmoded ethnographic fetish for the exotic and authentic, failing to address more interesting questions about contemporary articulations of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal identities in Australia. In this context, Aboriginality manifests itself in Manichaeic conflict with a monolithic West, leaving little room for more nuanced understanding. As I have argued, a more sophisticated approach to the idea of voice is necessary particularly insofar as it impacts on the reading of collaborative texts. As I have argued, such texts offer intriguing insights into the politics of the voice in Australia and the broader intercultural zone within which cultural difference is produced.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professor David S. Trigger, Professor Gareth Griffiths, and Associate Professor Debra McDougall for providing valuable feedback on earlier drafts. Dr. Andrew Sneddon and Dr. Martin Thomas also provided feedback. I would also like to thank Dr. Ilana Mushin for assisting in the attempt to identify the transliterated Aboriginal language presented in Harney and Elkin’s epigraph ‘Native Saying,’ and University of Sydney archives for access to Elkin’s papers. Research including fieldwork in the southern Gulf country was supported by The University of Western Australia’s Hackett scholarship, the Ernest and Evelyn Shacklock scholarship and the Graduate Research and Training Scheme award and subsequently by the Australian Research Council Discovery Project Number 1201 00662 on which I collaborate with David Trigger. Finally, I would also like to thank the Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature’s anonymous reviewers for constructive comments.

¹ Lenin Anderson, interview June 2008. Lenin Anderson is the current lessee of Manangoora station. Lenin is of mixed Garawa and European descent; his father Andy Anderson was an associate of Bill Harney around this time.

² Harney and Elkin's 'Boaradja' is likely a transcription of the word *buwaraji*, which is used in numerous languages around the Gulf region including Garawa to refer to Dreamings inherited from the mother, but also sometimes for Dreamings more generally (David Trigger, pers. comm. 30 October 2013). However variations of the word 'Boaradja' are also found in other languages around the Northern Territory including Wardaman (Ilana Mushin, pers. comm. 30 October 2013). Note that Harney has one surviving son who identifies as Wardaman via his mother (Bill Yidumduma Harney, interview July 2011).

³ At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the reality of cultural loss felt by anthropologists and other non-Aboriginal people with knowledge of the great challenges impacting on Aboriginal people as a result of colonization into the present. The awareness of such cultural loss may also have motivated the putative Aboriginal speaker of this 'Native Saying.'

⁴ Nancy Williams' discussion of this case highlights issues with 1960s and early 1970s anthropology's approach to the relationship between economic and religious rights in land which contributed to the court's finding that Yolngu ownership was a matter of religious belief without economic significance. Here the Aboriginal stress on the primacy of religious belief understandably led anthropology to stress the same. Later anthropology by scholars including Elizabeth Povinelli clarified the relationship between labour and land rights.

⁵ Jack Green, interview May 2012. Jack Green is a senior Garawa man resident at Borroloola in the Northern Territory.

Works Cited

- Acciaoli, Greg. 'Culture as Art: From practice to spectacle in Indonesia.' *Canberra Anthropology* 8.1 (1985): 148-172.
- Apter, Emily, William Pietz, eds. *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell U P, 1993.
- Berndt, R. M. 'A 'Wŋguri-'Mandzikai Song Cycle of the Moon-Bone.' *Oceania* 19.1 (1948): 16-50.
- Bradley, John. *Singing Saltwater Country: Journey to the Songlines of Carpentaria*. Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2010.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on art and literature*. Ed. Randal Johnson. Cambridge, U.K.: Polity Press, 1993.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *The Rules of Art: Genesis and structure of the literary field*. Trans. Susan Emanuel. Stanford, California: Stanford U P, 1996.
- Clifford, James, George E. Marcus, eds. *Writing Culture: The poetics and politics of ethnography*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: U of California P, 1986.
- Clifford, James. *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-century ethnography, literature, and art*. Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard U P, 1988.
- Duwell, Martin and R. M. W. Dixon, eds. *The Honey-ant Men's Love Song and other Aboriginal song poems*. St. Lucia, Qld: U of Queensland P, 1990.
- Duwell, Martin and R. M. W. Dixon, eds. *Little Eva at Moonlight Creek, and other Aboriginal song poems*. St. Lucia, Qld: U of Queensland P, 1994.
- Dodson, Mick, 'Foreward.' *Macquarie Pen Anthology of Aboriginal Literature*. Eds. Anita Heiss, Peter Minter and Nicholas Jose. Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2008. xi.
- Elkin, A. P. *The Australian Aborigines: How to understand them*. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1938.
- . 'Letter to Bill Harney.' Elkin Papers, P.130, Series 8, Item 2. Sydney: University of Sydney, 4 April 1944.
- . 'Letter to Bill Harney.' Elkin Papers, P.130, Series 8, Item 2. Sydney: University of Sydney, 12 April 1944.
- . 'Letter to Bill Harney.' Elkin Papers, P.130, Series 8, Item 2. Sydney: University of Sydney, 23 June 1944.
- . 'A Personal Note'. *Songs of the Songmen: Aboriginal myths retold by Bill Harney and A. P. Elkin*, 2nd edn. Eds. W. E. Harney and A. P. Elkin. Adelaide: Rigby Limited, 1968. 7-11.

---. *The Australian Aborigines*, 5th edn. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1974.

Garvin, Paul L. 'Review of *Songs of the Songmen: Aboriginal myths retold*.' *Books Abroad* 24.3 (1950): 50.

Graeber, David. 'Fetishism as social creativity: or, Fetishes are gods in the process of construction.' *Anthropological Theory* 5 (2005): 407-438.

Harney, W. E. *Taboo*. Sydney: Australasian Publishing Co., 1943.

---. 'Letter to A. P. Elkin.' Elkin Papers, P.130, Series 8, Item 2. Sydney: University of Sydney, 15 March 1945.

---. 'Letter to A. P. Elkin.' Elkin Papers, P.130, Series 8, Item 3. Sydney: University of Sydney, 8 June 1949.

Harney, W. E., A. P. Elkin. *Songs of the Songmen: Aboriginal myths retold*. Melbourne: Cheshire, 1949.

---. *Songs of the Songmen: Aboriginal myths retold by Bill Harney and A. P. Elkin*, 2nd edn. Adelaide: Rigby, 1968.

Heiss, Anita, Peter Minter. 'Aboriginal Literature.' *Macquarie Pen Anthology of Aboriginal Literature*. Eds. Anita Heiss, Peter Minter and Nicholas Jose. Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2008. 1-8.

Heiss, Anita. 'Introducing Anita Heiss.' Press release, 2009. 1 December 2011: <http://www.macquariepenanthology.com.au/AnitaHeiss.html>.

Keane, Webb. 'Knowing One's Place: National language and the idea of the local in Indonesia.' *Cultural Anthropology* 12.1 (1997): 37-63.

Lea, Tess. 'Contemporary Anthropologies of Indigenous Australia.' *Annual Review of Anthropology* 41 (2012): 187-202.

Lockwood, Douglas. *I, the Aboriginal*. Adelaide: Rigby, 1962.

Lockwood, Douglas. 'Bill Harney.' *Songs of the Songmen: Aboriginal myths retold by Bill Harney and A. P. Elkin*, 2nd edn. Eds W. E. Harney and A. P. Elkin. Adelaide: Rigby Limited, 1968. 5-6.

Murray, Les. *Ethnic Radio: Poems*. London and Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1977.

Mclean, Ian. *White Aborigines: Identity politics in Australian art*. New York: Cambridge U P, 1998.

Michaels, Eric. 'If 'All Anthropologists are Liars...: A review article.' *Canberra Anthropology* 10.1 (1987): 44-62.

Myers, Fred R. *Pintupi Country, Pintupi Self: Sentiment, place, and politics among Western Desert Aborigines*. Canberra, and Washington, D.C.: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies and Smithsonian Institution, 1986.

Myers, Fred R. *Painting Culture: The making of an Aboriginal high art*. Durham: Duke U P, 2002.

Povinelli, Elizabeth A. *Labor's Lot: The power, history, and culture of Aboriginal action*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1993.

Povinelli, Elizabeth A. 'Radical Worlds: The anthropology of incommensurability and inconceivability.' *Annual Review of Anthropology* 30 (2001): 319-334.

---. *The Cunning of Recognition: Indigenous alterities and the making of Australian multiculturalism*. Durham, N.C.: Duke U P, 2002.

Rose, Deborah Bird. *Reports from a Wild Country: Ethics for decolonisation*. Sydney: U of New South Wales P, 2004.

Stanner, W. E. H. *The Dreaming & other essays*. Melbourne: Black Inc., 2009.

Strehlow, T. G. H. *Songs of Central Australia*. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1971.

Sutton, Peter. 'Review of *Pintupi Country, Pintupi Self: Sentiment, place, and politics among Western Desert Aborigines*.' *American Ethnologist* 14.3 (1987): 588-589.

Taussig, Michael. 'Maleficium: State fetishism.' *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*. Eds. Emily Apter and William Pietz. Ithaca and London: Cornell U P, 1993. 217-247.

Westphalen, Linda. 'Deadly Lives: Palimpsests in Aboriginal women's life-histories.' PhD Thesis, Adelaide: Flinders University of South Australia.

Williams, Nancy. *The Yolngu and their Land: A system of land tenure and the fight for its recognition*. Canberra, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1986.

Wise, Tigger. *The Self-Made Anthropologist*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1985.