

# ***Empathic deterritorialisation: Re-mapping the postcolonial novel in creative writing classrooms***

**AMANDA JOHNSON**

University of Melbourne

## **Introduction: the liberation of the intercultural approach**

Torres Strait Islander Arts Board Director and playwright Cathie Craigie has suggested that the ‘great Australian Novel’ must include:

Aboriginal undercurrents, acknowledgments or whatever. If you want to show the psyche of Australia you’ve got to do that. For me I think that all Australian writers have to be able to put that stuff in, but there are certain things they can’t talk about. (Quoted in Scott, ‘Foreword: Publishing Indigenous Literature’ ii)

Craigie’s remarks, in both their heroic and cautionary senses, align with Indigenous Studies Professor Marcia Langton’s thought in broadly defining a postcolonial contemporary literature made by Indigenous and non-Indigenous writers. Craigie also proposes confidently that the postcolonial novel is capable of speaking back to the hegemonic culture by virtue of a necessary engagement with issues of Indigenous representation. This powerful intercultural stance, with its clear emphasis on intertextuality, may strike a chord with writing students struggling to consider how they might mine archival information, including oral testimonies, objects and images, in an imaginative and ethical manner, without recourse to political correctness and forced, reconciliatory storytelling.

Indigenous commentator Michael Dodson underscores Craigie’s remarks when he states that the ‘repossession of our past is the repossession of ourselves’ (Dodson, ‘The End in the Beginning: Re[de]finding Aboriginality’) in relation to Indigenous subjects and their histories, yet discussions as to how white writers retrieve Australian pasts have often been repressed by agonistic identity debates, and/or often deferred to Indigenous commentators for framing commentaries. This has sometimes served as a gesture of reverse racism, typecasting Indigenous writers, nativistically, as the ‘feeling ones’, trapped in a perpetual and undifferentiated grief in relation to experiences of colonisation. Vehement stoushes between the disciplinary cousins of history and literature have also erupted in recent years as part of the so-called “history wars” debates. In hindsight, these seemingly ‘emotional’ yet supra-rational debates, focusing righteously on entitlement and access to colonial archives, often lacked emotional intelligence, downplaying the ways in which the creative process can forge powerful intercultural explorations.<sup>1</sup>

In this essay I aim to show that despite the often problematic inheritance of public and critical debates, many historians, novelists and cultural critics (Marcia Langton, Elspeth Probyn, the late Greg Denning, Kate Grenville, Kim Scott and others) have rigorously

contested and (re)presented colonial archival material without repudiating emotional involvements with ‘the Australian past’ in order to maintain scholarly distance. These thinkers lead the way in suggesting and/or demonstrating how postcolonial novels can be taught and made. Each aims to understand, in relation to the experience of colonial dispossession and in Langton’s powerful phrase, that ‘some of us have lived through it, are living through it. This is not an exercise in historiography alone, and therefore presents problems beyond that of traditional historiography’ (Langton, ‘Marcia Langton Responds to Alexis Wright’s *Breaking Taboos*’).

In a recent critique of Germaine Greer’s review of Baz Luhrmann’s 2009 film *Australia*, Langton castigated Greer’s doom-laden prophecy about the social and professional future of the film’s young Indigenous star, Brandon Walters. She attacks Greer’s implicit assumption that ‘Aborigines are doomed to failure, to misery ... I know that many thousands of Australians are praying for a bright and happy future for Brandon. I also pray that he does not suffer any more of Greer’s cleverly disguised contempt for Aboriginal victimhood and nefarious white attempts to oppress us’ (Langton quoted in Morton 12). For anthropologist John Morton, this is part of Langton’s ‘rejoinder to the old Left, whose concept of Aboriginality, she suggests, rests on a desire—and a racist desire at that—to keep Aborigines in some non-modern place’ (Morton 12).

In her passionate analysis, Langton foregrounds the need for Indigenous people in remote communities to engage with modern economies of knowledge and business. Morton agrees with Langton when he states that ‘there has been a willful blindness in an ideological climate that prefers to view Aboriginal culture as benign or sets it in opposition to an entirely predatory colonial culture’ (13). I think that Morton is right: how can more artists, filmmakers and writers reconsider images of a shared past with imaginative, intertextual boldness where such attitudes remains entrenched?

The film *Australia* may not have been an altogether successful or sufficiently boldly parodic re-assembly of film intertexts and colonial story. But Langton champions Luhrman’s rather over-heated period piece as an attempt to leap ‘past the ruins of the history wars’ (quoted in Morton 13) in which arguments between left and right factions of politics were in danger of effecting a humourless, unimaginative pulse in the creativity camp. It is Langton who has mostly clearly signaled a way out of impasses of postcolonial political correctness and avoidance of postcolonial concerns. In regard to the former, witness Thomas Keneally, who in 1991 spoke publicly of his decision to desist from writing Indigenous characters altogether, a comment made nearly two decades after the publication of his seminal novel *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1972). In contrast, witness Murray Bail’s 1998 fable of Federation Australia, *Eucalyptus*, which elided mention of Indigeneity completely.

Langton’s definition of Aboriginality as a field of ‘intercultural subjectivity’ (‘Aboriginal Art and Film’ 118) helps form a bridge between Kristevan notions of the ‘transposition’ or ‘intertext’ and its cultural and social application in an Australian colonial context. In her terms, ‘Aboriginality’ is thought of as:

[...] a field of intersubjectivity in that it is remade over and over again in a process of dialogue, of imagination, of representation and interpretation. Both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people create ‘Aboriginalities’ [...] (‘Aboriginal Art and Film’ 119)

In an Australian context, Langton’s emphasis on ‘the need to test imagined cultural models against each other’ (119) may not presuppose an easy ‘fit’ or a simple, binaried exchange. In fact it may pave the way for thinking about a more disjunctive and chaotic coming together of cultural forms in the radical postmodern sense of an ‘ironic and problematising play of enunciation and context’ (Hutcheon 78). Her use of the word ‘model’ also points to the created, constructed aspect of Aboriginalities, to the transient and fluid nature of ‘imagined models’—models that are continuously altered and owned in public, group and individual imaginations rather than forming a series of *idée fixe* in relation to whiteness and blackness. Langton and, more recently, Indigenous critic Sonia Kurzer (181) have provided frameworks for a discussion of the ‘fictions’ of Aboriginality that have been introduced to Indigenous cultures by the white coloniser. These fictions embody particular ideological and representational cultural histories. Therefore, accumulated bodies of material (colonial texts of every kind) act as an important site of constraint and generativity for both black and white writers seeking to contribute to a postcolonial novelistic discourse.

What is most interesting about Langton’s thought is that it frees teachers, students and creative practitioners to engage with the historical gamut of images pertaining to Aboriginality—the good, the bad and the ugly can be gathered up ‘intertextually’ by the cultural creator and set down differently within the novel as a way of effectively historicising colonial racist representations.<sup>2</sup>

### **Throwing away the map: no one road for the postcolonial novel**

To date, the creative re-mapping of Australian historical content in the postcolonial novel has been scattered rather than consistent, erratic rather than uniform. The results have sometimes been orthodox and/or didactic, as the novel has been variously influenced by expressions of identity politics. No road map has been given for individual cultural forms that might be loosely gathered, even now, under the broad and still contested banner ‘postcolonial’. This is how it should be, for orthodoxies of approach are to be avoided at all costs. When a student sets out to write an Australian historical novel, I advise, perhaps self-evidently, that there is no such thing as a postcolonial formula for the novel *per se*. That is, we cannot determine exactly what the form of a ‘good’ postcolonial historical novel might be, even though historiographic metafiction, parody, multiple voice and other formal narrative techniques have been convincingly argued for by Linda Hutcheon, Ihab Hassan and others as modes that best serve any writerly impetus to deconstruct monological historical canvases.

As Gelder and Salzman once noted, many Australian historical novels have unashamedly imagined ‘true history’ as nationalist myth, romanticised and patriotic, while others ‘have been about “true history” and imaginative possibility, both reconstructive, and self-

consciously deconstructive' (*The New Diversity* 140). The latter variations 're-deploy' or reconfigure the conventions of the historical novel as postcolonial historical narrative. James Bardon's *Revolution by Night* (1991), Kate Grenville's *Joan Makes History* (1988) and Kim Scott's *Benang: From the Heart* (1999) are formative embodiments of the latter; they variously embody reconstructive and/or deconstructive approaches, revealing diverse experiment with the genre conventions of the historical novel.

Yet, with the exception of Kim Scott's novels (and of theatre scripts such as Jimmy Chi's *Bran Nue Dae* (1990 dir. Andrew Ross) and the Scott Rankin/Albert Namatjira Family collaboration *Namatjira* (2010 dir. Scott Rankin), novelists' embrace of such techniques has been tentative in Australia. Richard Flanagan and Murray Bail have at least, if not always successfully, raised the bar for narrative experimentation in their respective novels of colonial and federation origins, *Gould's Book of Fish* (2001) and *Eucalyptus* (1998). Women novelists deploying postmodern techniques to render postcolonial revisionings of history are thin on the ground. Novelist Alexis Wright may not be narrowly confined to the definition of historical novelist *per se*. But her burlesque novel *Carpentaria* (2006) shows deft formal experimentation that enables it to violently unpick the seamless appearance of colonial discourses. Equally bold is Glenys Osborne's much-acclaimed *Come Inside* (2009), a lyrical, multi-voiced revisioning of tropes of colonial shipwreckery set in the Australian town of Colego in 1887. Like Scott, Osborne picks over actual archival sources, actively deploying traces of these within her narrative.

Kate Grenville's burlesque, satirical feminist revision of the story of Captain Cook, *Joan Makes History* (1988), now twenty-four years old, was created at the height of postmodern cultural experimentation and bicentennial 'celebration of a nation' fervour. These days, Grenville has traded this rather stagey formal experiment for the poetic realist montage of *The Secret River* trilogy (2005, 2008, 2011) in which telos and tale are comfortably yet compellingly intertwined. She may not ever be the darling of the postmodernist critic but her millennial trilogy is nonetheless a boldly fashioned depiction of intercultural engagement between the Indigene and the settler that leaps past the old Keneallyesque prohibitions on portrayals of Indigenous subjects. The blurb for Grenville's second book in the trilogy, *The Lieutenant*, is deceptive:

Lieutenant Daniel Rooke sails into Sydney Cove with the First Fleet, hoping to advance his career. Instead his life is unimaginably changed.

A young Aboriginal girl visits and begins to teach him her language. As they learn to speak together, they build a rapport that bridges the gap between their dangerously different worlds. Then Rooke is given a command that forces him to choose between his duty as a soldier and the friendship that's become so precious to him.

Yet on the page, as James Bradley also observes (85–9), this relationship is never mawkishly romantic nor romanticising. The story does not project millennial driven dreams of reconciliation; difficulties of engagement between settler and Indigenous characters are not smoothed away.

On examining these writers' diverse textual strategies, one thing becomes clear. Novelistic re-mapping must involve more than a clinical response to the orderly materials uncovered in the official archives. The guiding uprush of moral empathy experienced by the creative researcher in the archive, carefully distilled and shaped, can produce something *disorderly*, something *off* the map—a stylish, suggestive, re-mapping of complex emotional histories excised from master narratives of Australian history.

Consider these lines from the scholar-narrator Harley in *Benang*, Kim Scott's bitter tale about the colonial legacies of miscegenation:

I began where the paper starts, where the first white man comes [...]. [...] there it was, in that dry and hostile environment, in that litter of paper, cards, files and photographs that I began to settle and make myself substantial. A sterile landscape, but I have grown from that fraction of life *which fell*. (32)

*Benang* deals directly with how the creative researcher engages with the archive but also move beyond it. Harley, the scholar-narrator, becomes a witness of the Nyoongar elders' suffering. He dreams repeatedly of this suffering in order to obtain redemption from his pro-miscegenation grandfather. He can research all he wants, but he can only obtain redemption 'from the heart', in a place *beyond* the 'paper, cards, files and photographs' of white colonial discourse. That is, in Scott's ambiguous phrase, he must fall from the life from which he fell in order to stand back from the archive and rethink his self in/as history.

As a teacher of the novel in a creative writing program, I find it interesting to compare Grenville and Scott's different approaches to language and narrative techniques; to invite students to examine how specific techniques perform moral empathy and particular kinds of political stance. Taking into account that these writers' historical novels are separated by a decade and therefore rise from very different political and cultural contexts, a comparative analysis of such texts in the classroom offers a dynamic way of showing how the novel speaks back to colonial foundation myths *over time*. Each of these novels differently tackles portrayals of Indigenous pasts—that endlessly thorny cornerstone of postcolonial contestation.

### **The historian of emotions versus the emotional historian: other approaches to mining the past**

Which other commentaries support students in their critical and creative approach to the postcolonial novel? Marcia Langton's has not been the only voice seeking to transcend the cultural inheritance of dogged identity debates, the history wars, and the additional spectre of a deterministic national curriculum for history that was touted under the Howard Government.<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that the work of many historians, novelists and cultural critics (Elspeth Probyn, the late Greg Denning, Kate Grenville, Kim Scott and others) resist the *grand guignol* of Inga Clendinnen's excoriating attack on historical novelists ('The History Question', 2006). These writers sit valuably with Langton's

seminal ideas of intercultural subjectivity in relation to the framing of the postcolonial novel.

Historian Greg Dening wrote that the first realisation that the past belongs to those on whom it impinges, rather than to those who have the skill to discover it, was felt by the history camp as a ‘kick in the stomach’ in the 1990s (45). In colonial Australia, he observes, the salutary lessons of Franz Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth* took time to be digested. As Dening recorded:

In a world of victims of colonisation, he [Fanon] wrote, there are no innocents. No-one can mediate between the dispossessed living and the voiceless dead. Suddenly we ‘Strangers’ felt intruders writing about the victimised cultures of our first peoples. At conferences and seminars, indigenous scholars attacked us. How could we know their past? They asked. How could we speak for them? (45)<sup>4</sup>

These were hard times, Dening notes, and ‘we each had to give our own answer’ (45). He thought that he could not give life to the dead or justice to the victims in the past. But he nevertheless believed that he could change history:

The function of my history is not just to understand the world. It is also to change it. If my history by story or reflection disturbs the moral lethargy of the present, then it fulfils a need. I haven’t silenced anyone’s voice by adding mine. (46)

Despite the mildly defensive, unprovable aspect of Dening’s last sentence, his sentiments (like his imaginative narrative practices) stress *engagement* rather than *disengagement* with the archive, while also emphasising engagement with living Indigenous Australians. To that end he warmly observed the rise of honouring Indigenous Australians in their past ‘whenever we speak of them’; at ceremonies of every kind, the honouring of people and country is now common, perhaps the result of such creative disturbances of general moral lethargy (45). Dening’s ideas transcend suggestions of glib universalisms in relation to intercultural relations between black and white culture. Most interestingly, in relation to the creative retrieval of past events, he brings his own sense of impossible translation to bear by asking: ‘[...] is there any other way history should be written?’ (48).

Historians such as Dening, Stuart Macintyre and Alan Atkinson have also spoken about the role of moral empathy in retrieving the past, with the latter placing considerable emphasis on scrupulously observed, but *formally imaginative* tellings of the past. For them, the imperative of an emotional and moral dimension in reading the past is no particular barrier to reading difference. Macintyre observes that Atkinson refutes the idea of dispassionate history, insisting that ‘compassion is in fact good history’s main motive [...] a moral discipline that enlarges our understanding of humanity and extends our human sympathy’ (Macintyre 7–8). Atkinson notes that in 1985, historians Peter and Carol Stearns ‘looked forward to a type of scholarship which took full account of feeling’; and that they ‘joked in passing about “the historian of emotions” and “the

emotional historian” as if the two were utterly distinct’ (Atkinson 23). Macintyre also suggests that ‘emotions provide a point of entry into history, a way of engaging with and responding to the past’ (8). Most importantly, for both Macintyre and Atkinson, history is also an *art*.

Historian Tom Griffiths has also weighed into recent debates, stating in relation to Judith Wright’s deployment of history in her poetry and fiction:

I think many of us have faced similar decisions—about the kind of truth we want to express, and about the kind of art we will need to do it. History is as much an art as fiction is, and it does not need to borrow fictional techniques to achieve that. In fact, history’s commitment to verifiable truth—to evidence that can be revisited—increases the writer’s opportunities exponentially. (30)

Griffiths appeared as a voice of interdisciplinary moderation in the context of the recent stoush between historians, and the offshoot stoush playing out between novelists and historians. He champions novelist, poet and historian alike, and also appears respectful of any shared territories of narrativisation and metaphor between the disciplines. Clear-headedly, Griffiths sees that historians always have two stories to tell: ‘what we think happened, and how we think we know what happened’ (30). He also writes, perhaps with implicit reference to the provocation of Windschuttle’s *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History, Vol. 1, Van Diemen’s Land 1803–1847* (2002), that in the last decade the conservative critique of frontier violence has presented a challenge to the historical scholar:

[...] it has mimicked the method without the morality; it has made a farce of footnotes; it has mistaken accuracy for truth; and it has sacrificed meaning for accountability. I think that, were she still alive, Judith Wright, in such a climate, might make a different decision to the one she made in the 1970s, and that like Kate Grenville, she might well turn back to fiction to tell her truth. (30)

Denying, Griffiths, Atkinson and Macintyre affirm that it behoves writer and historian alike to comb the competing historical testimonies on offer and diligently *examine* these. But they also affirm that the writer should not only *imagine* the circumstances and contexts in which formal and informal colonial archives were generated, but *feel* them. Even if only a partial reclamation of historical information occurs, this may at least be accompanied by a productive undertow of elegy and melancholy, or what Elspeth Probyn has called the redemptive power of ‘shame’.

Probyn has argued, somewhat controversially, that the acknowledgement and expression of different types of shame might be used to resolve conflicts between colonial oppressors and oppressed. On the one hand, ‘the shame of being out-of-place can ignite a desire for connection’, which ‘In the Australian context is called Reconciliation. It is an inspiration for modes of coexistence between non-Indigenous and Indigenous that can succeed only if we acknowledge different types of shame and interest’ (xvi). On the other

hand, the shame of the white colonialist has the potential to compel ‘an involuntary and immediate reassessment of ourselves: Why am I ashamed? Why did I say or do that? Can I rectify the actions that have either brought shame upon myself or caused someone else’s shame?’ (xii).

The recuperative potential of shame may offer an additional dimension in support of Marcia Langton’s notion of intercultural subjectivity, as well as supporting reconciliatory rhetoric in general. But critics replying to Probyn have said that:

[...] simply understanding the cultural meanings of racism, and being able to ‘feel’ the pain that such meanings produce, will not end racist oppression or the meanings and feelings it produces. [...] It will only, at best, provide a momentary ‘salve’ for the oppressed subject while also providing an ideological cover for failing to transform the relations that produce racist oppression. (Tarrant 14)

For Julie Tarrant, and for many Indigenous critics of postcolonial theory, Probyn and others offer no tool of intervention into colonial oppression; they only propose:

‘[...] in an updated language, liberal ideas about the power of human ‘caring’ and ‘love’ for others in overcoming historical conflicts which we do not need to ‘understand’ but rather simply, affectively ‘respond to’. (Tarrant 4)

Probyn (and by implication Denning and Macintyre) may well reduce history ‘to the history of tears and not class struggle’ according to Tarrant’s strict Marxist determinations (Tarrant 12). But a discussion of the emotions in history surely amounts to more than a ‘recuperation of “bad” affects that has become a trend in cultural studies, including feminist and postcolonial cultural studies’ (Tarrant 1).<sup>5</sup>

In a context where the historian’s subjectivity often continues to be a troubled ‘subject-non grata’, Denning’s and Probyn’s differently nuanced emphases upon emotional readings of the past may be as brave as they are provocative. Unlike Tarrant, Denning champions empathetic history as a force for activism; he concedes that while he ‘can’t give life to the dead, or justice to the victims in the past [...] I am with Karl Marx. The function of my history is not just to understand the world. It is also to change it’ (45–6). Atkinson has also insisted, less romantically and in light of the Windschuttle debate, ‘that compassion is in fact good history’s main motive’ (paraphrased by Macintyre 7). This is something that Kate Grenville (*Searching for The Secret River*, 2006) has also claimed as central to her aspiration in writing *The Secret River*. Atkinson asks, in the best Levinasian sense of encounter with (an)other:

What then is the importance of humane feeling within the humanities? This is barely an ideological issue at all. It is a moral one. It goes to the foundation of intellectual life and beyond that, as Burke would say, to the character of civil society. (26)



In a colonial context, the retrieval of archival materials is still endlessly loaded; the reframing of such materials must be carefully thought about. Kim Scott pays close attention to this in *Benang*, as do many other artists and writers. Historian and novelist, for their different ends, retrieve the talisman, the official record, and the oblique fragment as symbols of the greater passing of time, as memorials to places populated by loved ones, enemies or strangers. The retrieval of the fragment, or ‘notation’, as Roland Barthes (84–9) defines it, helps us imagine the whole.<sup>6</sup> Despite the weighty moral difficulties underpinning creative and scholarly ‘retrievals’ of colonial archival materials, this problem can nonetheless be creatively negotiated in endlessly interesting ways.

Historian Fiona Paisley notes that while engagement with historical material of this nature automatically implicates the historian in the very settler colonial relations she or he may seek to illuminate, ‘in order to illustrate the implications of assimilation, for example, it is necessary to provide graphic evidence of its dreadful power’ (123). She cites photos drawn from the Western Australian Chief Protector, A. O. Neville’s own account of his pro-absorption vision for Indigenous people. Neville’s *Australia’s Coloured Minority* (1947) contained a series of highly offensive and distressing ‘before and after’ photographic testimonials of Indigenous peoples. These images, Paisley notes, paired the ‘bush waifs’ Neville claimed to have discovered alone and unprotected, with later photos of their grown-up selves, women who smile benignly for the camera as they live under his ‘protection’.

Paisley’s immediate problem as a historian was to consider under what circumstances these unindividuated, unnamed images were taken and captioned to celebrate each sitter’s supposed proportion of white blood, an absurd quantification that had purportedly enabled each sitter’s triumphal ‘ascendance into civilisation’ (124). Paisley asks: ‘Should such images be used by historians [and by implication, writers and artists] to explain the biological absorption promoted by Neville and others amongst his peers?’ Why reproduce and circulate Neville’s cruel vision all over again, even in a partial sense, when his ‘testimonial’ relies on types, ‘mobilised in an account of their own demise as a race’ (124).

One solution to these concerns is proposed by Wiradjuri Scottish artist Brook Andrew. Andrew overscales colonial images of Indigenous subjects for the gallery setting so that cultural and administrative ‘records’ are parodically tackled, and individual figures are each given a monumental visual memorial. His recent series *The Island* draws on Prussian naturalist Wilhelm Blandowski’s etchings of Australia from the 1850s. These images were sourced from The Haddon Library, Cambridge, UK. Similarly, the *Gun-Metal Grey* series (Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation, Sydney, 9 July - 18 September 2010) depicts portraits of forgotten Aboriginal people from the archives of anthropological institutes. Andrew at least partly redeems the subjects of colonial objectification. This has some parallels with what Kim Scott does as a novelist in seeking redemption, in *Benang*, for his character Harley. Harley contests the *construction* of a painful past in order to find and inhabit a more complex self-hood.

Historian Heather Goodall also supports Langton’s idea of a culturally shared space that

provides possibilities for writing about histories of place and identity across historically distanced communities. Within such a space, people may find certain ‘parallels in attachment to place, objects and memories’ (Paisley 124, discussing Goodall). So in the Australian cultural setting Barthes’ sense of the notation, in the writing of history and historical novels, must be qualified in the ways that Goodall, Craigie and Langton advocate. The proviso is that in the shared intercultural space, writers cannot simply inscribe notations from a lofty omniscient distance. They cannot close historical distances between communities by, to use Goodall’s term, ‘forensically’ drawing upon places, memories and objects. Writers implicate themselves in the intercultural shared space in order to find ‘parallels in attachment’. Goodall’s language is implicitly emotional here and redolent of Levinas when he states, humanistically, that: ‘The condition of time lies *between* humans, or in history’ (Levinas, *Time and the Other* 79, my italics).

Levinas also influentially underpins Langton’s thinking when she speaks of ‘a field of intersubjectivity in that it is remade over and over again in a process of dialogue [...]’ (Langton, ‘Aboriginal Art and Film’ 119). Levinas’ thinking may be similarly socially abstract (he does not reference the particular world of the novel as metaphor for worldly discourse and engagement), but his galvanising insistence upon intersubjective relationships as pivotal might be thought about as a form of address, of dialogical call and response:

The situation of the face-to face would be the very accomplishment of time; the encroachment of the present on the future is not the feat of the subject alone, but the feat of the intersubjective relationship. (Levinas, *Time and the Other* 79)

So it is that the ‘condition of time’ in all its rich dimensions and constructs—past, present and future—‘lies in the relationship between humans, or in history’ (*Time and the Other* 79). There is a kind of nakedly human engagement emphasised here, a profound articulation of the emotional imperative to write and communicate with others.

### **Conclusion: the feat of intersubjectivity in creative research**

For some observers there may be a euphoric cast to Langton’s thinking around intercultural engagement. For some Indigenous writers it continues to be unacceptable for white writers to define themselves as ‘anti-colonial’ (Heiss 197). It is important to note that Craigie’s open and inclusive remarks, in tandem with the ground-breaking narrative examples of Scott, Grenville and others, have not suddenly created a template for how other novelists should portray Indigenous subjects. The road evolves for white historical novelists and theorists, even those sensitive to the social and political upheavals wrought by colonial predations and upheavals.

In recent years, political battles for the cultural control of the archives and the story of history have eclipsed discussions as to *how* the archives can be dramatised. In a literary setting, debates about the ethics of portraying Indigenous subjects and subject matter have almost been superseded by circular debates about ‘true’ Australian history and who

has the right to tell it. This has been disappointing in a context of the morally and formally imaginative speculations of historians such as Griffiths, Paisley and Dening, and also in a context of Langton's and Goodall's evidently too-hopeful calls for the activation of a shared cultural space.

How, then, are young creative writing students to proceed, born well after the onset of postcolonial theorisation within the academy and the concomitant intensification of identity debates, from the 1970s through to the 1990s? They can firstly be invited to consider older arguments in context and to engage with selected primary texts that were created in response. They can be invited into discussions of the intercultural as these have been put forward by Langton, Dening, Craigie, Goodall and others. Notably, the detailed, nuanced commentaries of these writers were sidelined in sensationalist media discussions attending the recent history wars imbroglio.

Secondly, and most importantly, students can be exposed to many different types of postcolonial cultural responses across genre. The Jimmy Chi script *Bran Nue Dae*, the script and performances of Big hART's *Namatjira*, Richard Flanagan's novel *Gould's Book of Fish* and Glenys Osborne's *Come Inside* differently beguile with their clever, intertextual re-stagings of historical cultural material, their parodic cultural appropriations and skilful use of poly-vocality.

Studying seminal examples of postcolonial novels reveals that laughter is the necessary flipside of moral empathy. Humour is an invaluable political tool for the postcolonial novelist. Consider, finally, how Kim Scott's oppressed black constabulary officer, the character Sandy Two Mason, turns the tables on Constable Hall in *Benang*, satirising Hall's poor result at a handwriting test which Sandy himself has passed with flying colours.

Constable Hall was a writer.

Sandy Two was a reader, and in the newspaper he read:

*Your character, as told from your handwriting, is the truest index of your future. The tail of your J may betray a meanness, whilst the forming of a T may show your generosity.*

[...]

Sandy Two showed the advertisement to Constable Hall several weeks later and told him he'd taken the liberty of sending some scraps of the constable's handwriting to the good professor. It was mail day, and Sandy Two—indicating an envelope on Hall's desk—said, 'You've got your reply, by the look of it.'

Constable Hall was ever alert. It was his training, see.

‘Oh yeah, I got my own results back,’ said Sandy. “‘Creative, and confident”,’ he quoted at Hall, grinning, “‘Destined for great things”.’

‘Oh yeah?’ said Hall. ‘You heading out of town yet?’(250–51)

Scott’s discomfiting metafictional devices permit a rereading of the ways in which language has enmeshed historical colonial power structures. He plays with the literary archive, the archive of (meta)fictional forms *in order* to deconstruct the language of the colonial archive. Look, for example, at the counterpointed terms that appear in italics (my italics): ‘Constable Hall was a *writer*’. Scott follows up swiftly with the devastatingly ironic: ‘Sandy Two was a *reader*’. That is, the character, Sandy Two, is by implication a consumer and passive recipient of the white man’s legal, journalistic, and bureaucratic and literary letters—never one who inscribes or dictates the textual terms, and never becoming a subject who might have his own cultural inscriptions read willingly, legibly and capably by the white man.

The white man, Constable Hall, historically *fails* to read the black man—this is the message Scott promulgates as the metafictional ironies build. Scott has defined *Benang* (which the writer translates as Nyoongar for ‘with light; tomorrow’) as being ‘about the language of the archives [...] and *how* our shared history is written’ (Scott, in conversation with creative writing students at the University of Melbourne, Department of English with Cultural Studies, 6 August 2002, quoted in Johnson 263). What better ironisation of white administrivia and the colonial will-to-archive? Absurdity and irony are surely never far from the novelist’s approach to the thick-walled archives.

These are not the only ways of invigorating classroom discussions on what the postcolonial novel might be in the contemporary educational setting. But emerging novelists may be imaginatively and emotionally liberated by what Levinas names, empathetically, epically, as the ‘feat of the intersubjectivity’, even taking into account Craigie’s proviso that within the local intercultural space some things cannot be written about. The feat of intersubjectivity remains the central progressive plank of a Langton-influenced intercultural roadmap. Such uncompromising, humanistic framing, in conjunction with a bold use of narrative techniques, can galvanise approaches to the novel of history and enliven its outcomes.

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<sup>1</sup> These excesses have been variously commented on by Paul Salzman (in Gelder and Salzman, *After the Celebration*) and James Bradley (24). See also my article 'Archival Salvage: History's Reef and the Wreck of the Historical Novel' at <[www.nla.gov.au/openpublish/index.php/jasal](http://www.nla.gov.au/openpublish/index.php/jasal)>. For an extended discussion of the contemporary historical novel in relation to Australian identity politics, see my PhD thesis, University of Melbourne 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Langton's notion of testing imagined models is broadly drawn in this essay; she does not offer any suggestions or analysis as to how this testing is achieved in relation to individual art forms. Perhaps, implicitly, she is suggesting that this should be left to each individual writer, artist and producer to determine.

<sup>3</sup> By the early 2000s, the Liberal government had intimated its desire to create a national 'story of history'. John Howard's 'headland speeches' were only the beginning in that regard. By 2006, this had formally translated into investigations into the curricula on the teaching of Australia history. The Australian History Advisory Reference Group, often dubbed the 'Blainey Panel' and without a serving teacher as a member, was set up in April 2007 to review the findings of the 2006 National History Summit. This had been called with the purpose of finding a way to renovate the history syllabus as it had been taught thus far in schools, with a view to proposing a unified national curriculum for the teaching of history.

<sup>4</sup> Following Fanon's third stage of decolonisation, the cultural critic Homi Bhabha posited his somewhat ideal notion of a 'third space of enunciation', whereby intercultural engagement is seen as capable of transcending cultural binaries to produce a third space of/for meaning. For Bhabha, a 'third space' represents (self-consciously) both the general conditions of language and the specific implication of the utterance in a performative sense. That is, a space where any cultural enunciation that occurs in a specific time and space, can be (re)viewed through a third space that permits the articulation of cultural difference. Re-reading colonial history, for example, may reveal these articulations. According to Bhabha, black critique also aims at transforming the conditions at the level of the sign—where the intersubjective realm is constituted—rather than simply setting up new symbols *per se*. Strategies of mimicry and cross-cultural borrowing occur within the designated 'third space'. The question of who has access to such a 'third space', and why this may be so, is not easily answered in Bhabha. (Bhabha 24, 36, 37–38, 247)

<sup>5</sup> Julie Tarrant writes that Probyn assumes that:

[...] shame has the potential to intervene in colonial oppression, and specifically the (white) colonialist's complicity with colonial oppression, because it can compel the (white) colonial subject to question her (race-based) cultural training ('cultural

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norms') and the way it has led her to take up practices that are complicit with the colonial 'other'. (4)

<sup>6</sup> See Ankersmit, 'The Reality Effect in the Writing of History' and 'The Rise and Fall of Metaphor' in *History and Tropology* for cogent summaries and critiques of Barthes's theories of historical notation and prediction.