

## “White Nativity”: Reinscribing Aboriginal Land in the Poetry of Evelyn Araluen and Alison Whittaker

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*We gotta own ‘em, now, those white-fella marks on paper. We gotta take them marks and make ‘em run together like the dots and circles, the tracks and rivers and beings that live together on that bark. We gotta show that’s who we are, how we live. Them white-fella pages Tjukurrpa too, now, because it’s us mob that’s making the marks on ‘em—markings of ourselves like we’ve always been, like we’ll go on being, tracing our tracks on the paper. . . . That’s how we gotta speak our place in that world where people paint the journeys by writing on pages.* (Martiniello 94)

Oodgeroo Noonuccal and the success of the first edition of her collection *We Are Going*, cemented a strong legacy of First Nations’ literary production as both visible and activist when the anthology was published in 1964. The collection yielded an unprecedented commercial response: it sold out before it was launched, and seven more editions were released within the following year (“Recording the Cries of the People” 18). The historical significance of *We Are Going* also lies in it being the first commercial literary publication by an Aboriginal author in Australia, not just of collected poetry, but of literature in any form.<sup>1</sup> In a short biography, Karen Fox draws upon Noonuccal’s reflections on her work’s success: “Oodgeroo sometimes suggested that her Aboriginality increased interest in her poetry. She commented in an interview in 1988 that *We are Going* ‘sold mainly out of curiosity value’” (Fox 60). “Curiosity” as a motivator for non-Indigenous readers to consume First Nations literature is fraught—in its most generous form, it can provide a bridge across difference, and, in its most exploitative guise, it can become literary cannibalism (more on this to follow). Nevertheless, Noonuccal’s ongoing success ushered in an era of strong voices. Other contemporaries of Noonuccal’s era (and ones who followed) include Kevin Gilbert, Jack Davis, Lisa Belleair, Kerry Reed-Gilbert, and Lionel Fogarty. However, these prominent and prolific voices of the twentieth century are often relegated to the realms of “protest poetry.” Whilst it is reductive to classify all Aboriginal poetry as such, I am reminded of the words of Noonuccal, when asked to confirm that there is no such thing as non-political writing: “That’s right! If you talk about a hole in the street up there that’s politics. And this old clichéd business of saying we are non-political. If you’re non-political, man, you’re dead, you’re not even thinking” (“Recording the Cries of the People” 19). Anne Brewster also makes a distinction between modalities of poetic voice: “[N]ot all Aboriginal poetry is protest poetry; moreover, a poet who produces poems which could be characterised as “protest” might also write equally powerful poetry which does not fit into this category” (245). Wiradjuri writer, researcher and educator Jeanine Leane takes this further, describing the term protest poetry as “a tired and reductionist descriptor of First Nations poetry that denies such works both literary merit and the capacity for nuance” (“Staring Back”). Leane continues:

It’s a move which fails to acknowledge the deep entanglement of First Nations writers in settler literary traditions and our unique ability to be able to turn the “master’s tools” back at the master. We can make the introduced language our

own at the same time as mounting a substantial and sophisticated critique of the invaders that forced their language on us in the first place. (“Staring Back”)

This is a vital distinction to make, as it reflects the expectations that non-Indigenous readers can have when consuming First Nations writing. It is from this purview that poetic craft is recentred on its own merits, via two young, contemporary Aboriginal writers: Alison Whittaker and Evelyn Araluen. Their creative (and critical) works directly address a “necessary entanglement” in the inheritances of settler textual production, whilst, with incisive precision, “reinscribing” its impositions from a positionality of sovereign embodiment (Araluen). As a person with a creative practice that accompanies my critical writing, my positionality as a *palawa* descendent entangles me in these inheritances too. The scholarly interest in the two collections (and other texts like them that are writing resistance) inform the ongoing project of locating myself as living on stolen land; a process that negotiates and renegotiates the Indigenous, migrant, and convict strands of my ancestry.

The title of this essay is from a line in Gomerioi poet and legal scholar Alison Whittaker’s poem “a love like Dorothea’s” and I chose it to draw attention to the ways that Aboriginal poets articulate observations of the performance of settler desires to continue to be “reborn” in the process of naturalising oneself on stolen land. I see this as having several intertwined aspects: firstly, literary cannibalism (the act of *consuming* Aboriginal writing); the continuum of writers whose reinscribing practices resist a settler gaze; and then “white nativity” as it operates in concert with consumption and inscription. As such, Whittaker observes attempts at settler “naturalisation” to be something of a detached process—perhaps even a cognitive dissonance—that can be measured by the proximity a settler reader may place themselves in relation to an Aboriginal writer’s work. Whittaker suggests this occurs when reading becomes a “moral act”:

There is no way that my poem about fingering another Aboriginal woman was important to Brenda from the Sydney Moet and Poet Society, but the Moet and Poet Society did feel like they’d happened upon some big important Aboriginal secret and that was vindicating for them. (“F Word Address”)

This comment illuminates an explicitly pornographic relationality implicit in the settler gaze, and one that Whittaker is acutely aware of. By drawing attention to responses to this poem in particular, Whittaker aligns a white/settler gaze with a desire to enact voyeurism, an engagement that bears witness to lived experience from a different and marginalised positionality. This is an impoverished attitude to bring to reading, and its lack of generosity suggests a desire to displace guilt, to consume writing as a “moral act.” Whittaker agrees, saying that it feels “awful to have an audience that mostly reads you to clear their conscience” (2019, p. 2). This connects to (and performs) the “settler moves to innocence” that Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang have written about, where institutional calls for substantial and structural changes are rendered in ways that absolve the settler from accountability and meaningfully reconciling with the past. They state:

Settler moves to innocence are those strategies or positionings that attempt to relieve the settler of feelings of guilt or responsibility without giving up land or power or privilege, without having to change much at all. In fact, settler scholars may gain professional kudos or a boost in their reputations for being so sensitive or self-aware. Yet settler moves to innocence are hollow, they only serve the settler. (10)

There is a way of reading First Nations writing whereby it functions as an act of *consumption*; a slippery and pernicious way of engaging with writing that above all seeks the innocence afforded by absolution.

Having outlined a settler gaze that consumes writing as a “moral act,” Jeanine Leane likens the process to the shucking of an oyster; the white settler reader pries open the shell, to tear the flesh from inside and to consume it (Personal communication). This act of separating the “edible” or consumable part of the whole to make it ingestible has a disarming and disabling effect on Aboriginal writers and their writing. Whittaker also refers to a specific type of gaze that consumes—that “eats”—and, through an accumulation of her own experiences, targets a middle-class-white-women literary festival crowd: “[T]hey made me think of Dorothea Mackellar all over again, surveying my country and thinking about how much she loved it, even as it resisted her and in a way, that’s the price we pay for publication” (“F Word Address”). This reference to Dorothea Mackellar will be drawn out further in my analysis below of Whittaker’s poem “A Love Like Dorothea’s” but for now I draw attention to Whittaker’s suggestions that Aboriginal authors are perceptive of an inevitable consumption by the settler gaze and present their writing with this knowledge in mind. There is a texture to the relationality here, where work is already being “coded” while under construction, being crafted with an acute awareness of how writing can be received by a white settler audience while simultaneously and intentionally addressing an Aboriginal audience through linguistic cues.

Bundjalung poet and researcher Evelyn Araluen says, “Aboriginal poetry is not obliged to respond to the colonial canon,” but there is a “power and perception that Aboriginal voices bring to the institutions and textures of Australian literature’s cultural dominance” (“Too Little” 41). Whittaker echoes this assertion: “[F]or as long as the English language has turned up on this continent, First Nations women have been using it to push back against colonisation” (“F Word Address”). A term that I will be using throughout this essay—and what I see as a creative and literary practice of resistance—is “reinscription.” Indeed, there is no obligation to be “writing back” to settler literature and literary cultures, but there is fertile ground in a method of reinscription, where the “writing back” is scraping back, then layering over existing textures and tones, creating the effect of a palimpsest. The palimpsest effect is critical, as it acknowledges the preceding layers of inscription, namely the stories of Country, predating colonisation by millennia. This process isn’t simply a literary one, it has deeply political considerations. Araluen suggests that

[b]y invoking . . . inscription and reinscription, as a form of radical historicism in our engagement with Aboriginal women’s resistance to colonial representations, we are better situated to place Aboriginal women in active and embodied roles both in the consequences of these images and ideologies. (“Silence and Resistance” 494)

I do not want to suggest that Whittaker or Araluen are the inventors of a practice of “reinscribing”; they are in fact knowingly and intentionally picking up and carrying a continuous thread that has been held across generations.

The 2022 annual ASAL conference (and its companion journal special issue) was themed “Coming to Terms, 30 Years On: The Mabo Legacy in Australian Writing.” When considering a response to the theme it felt imperative to engage land and its presence in writing. However, instead of focusing on the social and cultural reverberations that followed the landmark case, I chose instead to attend to Country as an integrated system of knowledges, of which land is only one component. It is a reinscription of the original inscriptions, as Auntie Jenni Martiniello describes:

The Ancestors moved across the land, inscribing the tracks of their journeys in the hills and plains, the mountains, deserts, forests, lakes, the creeks and rivers that they created . . . These places are spirit, sacred life, source, being. They are creation and continuum, they are story without end, the earth their living library. (94)

Martiniello goes on to name colonisation as “the imposition of alien topographic reinscription. Erasure” (94). The process and practice of Aboriginal writers’ (re)reinscription then, is one of scraping away. It is a method that reveals layers made through a palimpsest effect and, as is detailed in the excerpt in the opening epigraph, is making and remaking marks, making visible the ghostly imprints of settler impositions over the original text—Country. Further to this, in a reading of Gamilaraay/Wiradjuri poet Lorna Munro’s writing, Araluen points out Munro’s undermining of the idea that place functions “as a passive surface of settler reinscription” (“Shame” 119–20). Therefore, acts of (literary) reinscribing by Indigenous writers draws attention to Country being a text in and of itself. The knowledge and stories of Country remain steadfast, as a continuum, and First Nations writers scrape away the “alien topographies” that settler literary production has sought to impose upon the land.

The nature of settler-colonial writing as a performance of “white nativity” is implicated and interwoven with these literary cannibalisms, and the First Nations writing and reinscription that resists it. As stated above, the essay’s title refers to an insidious and nuanced desiring to be “(re)born” on Aboriginal land, and therefore deliver settler naturalisation through textual production as one of its mechanisms. By engaging in close readings of poems from Alison Whittaker’s second collection *Blakwork* (2018) and from Evelyn Araluen’s Stella Prize-winning debut collection *Dropbear* (2021), I aim to illuminate the individual lived experiences of two young Aboriginal women writers and their place on the literary continuum that Auntie Jenni Martiniello outlines in her essay, as referenced above. This lineage of writing re-weaponises the tropes of the settler canon in a rich body of distinct and successful work, whilst holding a magnifying glass to settler cultural and literary production. This reiterates the assertion that “Aboriginal poetry is not obliged to respond to the colonial canon” (“Too Little”). It is also deeply unproductive to attempt to quantify such works against a settler colonial measurement of literary merit. Araluen asserts a similar position stating, “the attempt to assess or engage Aboriginal writers through western paradigms of competence can only be patronising, arbitrary, and specious” (“Shame” 121). By attending to the resistances and refusals enacted within dissections of settler colonial tropes, she repositions them as fundamentally incompatible with Country.

For this end, I have decided to emphasise Alison Whittaker’s use of the term “white nativity.” As a concept, it produces, as pantomime theatre might, a performance of self as a settler, in attempts to naturalise oneself on stolen land. I see this outward performance as intertwined with the cannibalism of reading as a moral act—an attempt to internalise a relinquishment of guilt. I also see it as applying to the construction of settler literary texts and their tropes, again, as they attempt to naturalise the settler. As responses to these literary dress rehearsals, firstly, Alison Whittaker resists, refuses and reclaims through rewriting settler poetry through her own voice, and her own embodied experience. Evelyn Araluen interrogates settler appropriations of native flora and fauna through literature as constructed attempts to naturalise themselves to the land and make claims to inheritance of the future of the colony.

The two case studies that were chosen for this essay exemplify a mode of writing that “scrapes away” at tropes—particularly those located in and of Country—as superficial contributions to rendering a façade of Australia through its literary imaginaries. While I would suggest that all poetry written by Aboriginal people undertakes this kind of work explicitly or

implicitly, I also suggest that the unique positions that Araluen and Whittaker occupy dually as poets and scholars give an interrogative edge to their work. The tools gained by moving through the academic industrial complex of the university system allow an intimate knowledge of the settler-colonial impulses that inform the knowledge produced *about* us. These tactics have been deployed by the poets and afford them the surgical precision with which to rupture, to reveal beneath not only the veneer that covered over stories and knowledge from time immemorial, but also the stories that are still present in the continuation of these bloodlines.

### **Blakwork**

*Blakwork* is the second collection from Gomerioi poet, legal scholar, and activist Alison Whittaker. It is a demanding collection, politically and emotionally. Even the book itself as an object is demanding more from its user, as some works are oriented in different directions on the physical page, where the reader must turn the book in order to read the poems. The book is separated into twelve sections, each with a title: “work,” “whitework,” “bloodwork,” “storywork,” etc., and three prose memoir style sections. In her review of *Blakwork*, Jeanine Leane notes, “Audre Lorde said that the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. And they won’t. But Blak writers like Whittaker use these tools to carve out their own spaces to build other story—to re-story Country with the old stories, and to create new ones” (“Ultima Thule”).

Part of a paradox in writing poetry for Whittaker is that it is a practice undertaken in the language of the coloniser, a tension she uses to challenge and interrogate as an inheritance (“A Means of Resistance”). However, it is also from language that Whittaker draws power; its malleability, its ability to circumvent its own meaning, its leaving “meaning in a vacuum, creating stirring and nameless feelings, or coax the reader to make meaning” (“Confronting Multiplicity”). The interworking of traditional language into works composed in English by Whittaker (as well as many other contemporary First Nations poets) invokes Tracey Bunda’s “sovereign Aboriginal woman.” Bunda branches from the usual confines of sovereignty discourse as relegated to law, policy and history through the reminder that “Indigenous people write from their sovereign positions as owners of their land” (75).

I have chosen to focus on a poem from the “whitework” section called “A Love Like Dorothea’s.” The poem was originally published in a special issue chapbook commissioned by Australian Poetry and edited by Toby Fitch. The special issue, titled “Transforming My Country” invited fourteen poets to respond to Dorothea Mackellar’s poem “My Country” (titled on first publication as “Core of My Heart”). From a scholarly perspective, the poem, “A Love Like Dorothea’s,” feels like low-hanging fruit, but the haunting of its resonance continues to be stuck like a splinter under my skin. Many people I have spoken with remember having to study Mackellar’s poem, “My Country,” in primary school, as the curriculum facilitated the rehearsing of the “naturalisation” of the settler through the verse. Exploiting the familiarity and ubiquitous legacy of this poem is tactical on Whittaker’s part. The “uncanny truth” is told through replicating the formal structure of Mackellar’s “My Country,” and then furthermore by transmitting a sense of what is “tangible, known and felt,” Whittaker is refusing *terra nullius* and settler claims to land through an embodied subjectivity. Through the act of reinscribing in this very particular way, Whittaker is able to reveal what is beneath the veneer of colonial appropriation of Country.

Whittaker makes explicit the intentions behind her choice to reinscribe this poem specifically: “Dorothea Mackellar lay on her lush properties in the Kurrumbede homestead and wrote ‘My Country,’ a poem about how my country, Gomerioi country, resisted her and how she loved its untameable power anyway as she tried to tame it” (“F Word Address”). The gaze of the settler is turned back on itself in this work. We, as Aboriginal people, are gazing back,

not only from the perspective of the poet subjectively, but also a gaze returning from Country and from the ancestors. Due to the poem falling under the section “whitework,” it is indicative that Whittaker is deeply aware of and interacting with a settler gaze and she is gazing right back. In fact, the poem explicitly states this: “Yet onto which Mackellar’s gaze turns rivers into sand.” Whittaker names Mackellar’s poem as a “fetish verse,” where the image of “rivers into sand” indicates that a literary fetishisation is the symbolic limit to which Mackellar can lay claim to what is Aboriginal Country (“A Love Like Dorothea’s” 5). Reading further into this also illuminates that without the land management and custodianship of the traditional owners, the environmental impact of a reciprocal absence is having devastating effects. The poem continues, to further this point:

I love white nativity  
that digs its roots and ticks to suck the floodplains and the sea—  
the love that swept those sweeping plains from Nan, from Mum, from me (5)

This excerpt references the matrilineage that has returned the gaze, in spite of the environmental costs of dispossession. However, “the love” that Mackellar writes of is indeed just a “nativity:” a staged production where white settler claims to country are able to be birthed (and rebirthed, and rebirthed). This process of appropriation, reflected in Whittaker’s poem, renders Country unrecognisable and inaccessible to its First People, particularly the extractive relationship that the settler has to country, land and landscape. This renders a paradox, of extracting land-based resources, but also romanticising the same landscape, both of which take a possessive standpoint. A poem like “A Love like Dorothea’s” calls attention to not only physical, land and Country-based dispossession, but also to literary dispossession, where the likes of Mackellar reinscribe Indigenous country with settler claims to its inheritance. By replicating the structure and rhythm of Mackellar, Whittaker makes a direct address to settler readers, exploiting its familiarity to make her own re-inscription of the literary colonisation of Country. Through weaponising its ubiquity, Whittaker reveals and exposes the layers that the colonial project seeks to apply as literary impositions on Indigenous lands.

### ***Dropbear***

Where Whittaker is concerned with the settler “eating the other” through consuming writing, the work of Bundjalung poet and researcher Evelyn Araluen appears to be interested in the settler’s writing that consumes the landscape for aesthetic exploitation. Her debut collection *Dropbear* (2021) speaks with fullness and assertiveness to the embodiment of ongoing resistances to such appropriations of landscape and of flora and fauna in the production of literary aesthetics. In a post-text “Notes” section, Araluen asserts:

Intertextuality, and the time in which it is presented, should be read with the understanding that the material and political reality of the colonial past which Indigenous peoples inherit is also a literary one. Our resistance, therefore, must also be literary. (*Dropbear* 99)

Whilst the works within Araluen’s collection are engaged in conversation with history—particularly literary histories—it would be a mistake to reduce the collection as merely “writing back.” As detailed above in the contextual preamble, Araluen is knowingly and intentionally drawing from a continuum of poets and writers and their literary toolkits.

One of the motifs that pulses gently but fiercely through Araluen’s collection is making visible settler colonial appropriation of Aboriginal lands in literary traditions. Araluen’s essay

“Playing in the Pastoral” (2019) prefaces the collected poetry in *Dropbear*, by establishing modes of appropriation of the landscape—in particular the gum tree—in literary placemaking and literary attempts to reinscribe Aboriginal land:

If Aboriginal presence is considered in such work, it is a representation predominantly concerned with symbols of atavistic inconvenience to the colonial project, charged with psychic significance in the symbolic evocation of a ghostly spectre haunting land lost to Aboriginal people, but which ultimately clears space for the discovery and cultivation of that land by the appropriate settler. (“Snugglepot”)

In this critical work, Araluen traces the lineage of colonial entanglements and appropriations that underpin the experiences informing the collection. Appropriation, in this instance, comes in the form of “settler responses to, and representations of Aboriginal land and its custodians” (“Snugglepot”). Araluen suggests that “the Australian pastoral is a site of conflict between the alluring but resistant aesthetics of the land, and the familiar but incompatible languages of the traditional form” (“Snugglepot”). The transposition of a European pastoral—both in the agricultural sense of land use and in its production in an artistic, aesthetic sense—highlights this incompatibility.

The proliferation of the ghost gum as shorthand for all species of eucalyptus reflects the notions outlined above of the settler “nativising” through appropriation for the creation of a national imaginary. Araluen contends, however, that the “tropes and strategies of settler nativism are nowhere more explicit than in Australian children’s literature” (“Snugglepot”). The settler imaginary passes the project of “indigenisation” on to the children, the inheritors, “naturalising their claim to the land” (“Snugglepot”). But the innocence of the child is twofold. The image of the child represents the innocence of the inheritors of the settler project. With a desire to nativise and indigenise, childhood innocence is framed as being an emblematic projection of the overarching and unsettled anxieties that plague adults. Araluen notes the “anxiety and displacement of the European body and psyche beyond the idyllic safety of the European pastoral,” particularly

the trope of the lost child in the bush—the symbol of repressed settler fears that the bush, so closely associated with the enigmatic threat of native savagery and primitive spirituality, is essentially untameable and thus un-homely. (“Snugglepot”)

The folding of native flora and fauna into children’s literature draws on the tensions of taming the wilderness to mitigate feelings of the “unhomely.” Araluen suggests, “these texts exemplify models of mutually determined belonging for both settler humans and Indigenous animals in their rejection of the ‘untameable and thus un-homely’ presence of Aboriginal bodies and practices in the bush” (“Snugglepot”).

Joanne Faulkner explores the cultural footprint that May Gibbs has left, suggesting that the ongoing appeal of her cute and kitschy renderings of anthropomorphic native flora,

is the manner in which it “terraforms” the Australian bush into a habitat for white settler-colonial communities, where the enduring presence of First peoples implicitly problematises the settler-coloniser belonging. (955)

As Araluen has alluded to in her accompanying essay, she is engaged in rupturing this effect that Gibbs has created with the world of Snugglepot and Cuddlepie. Faulkner continues,

suggesting: “Gibbs restages cultural and political scenes within a miniaturised bush setting, and thus she domesticates the bush—transforming an environment that was formerly considered hostile to colonisers into a place of familiarity” (955–56). In contrast to the use of the Gothic to assuage settler unbelonging, this “miniaturised” version of the Gothic landscape, cute and pocket-sized, bequeaths the inheritance of the colony to the future in children’s literature. The appropriation of native flora locates stories and characters specifically in Australia, further affirming this.

*Dropbear* is grouped into three sections, the first of which is titled “Gather.” In “The Ghost Gum Sequence,” the first of many prose poems throughout the collection, Araluen is setting up the reader—or gathering threads—for many of the themes to follow in the remainder of the book. It begins, “There’s ghosts in the reserve,” and there is something spectral about the liminality of the detritus of modernity left defunct on Country: “a rusted windmill and water tank, old concrete feeding troughs and burnt-out cars that crawl with the living—goannas, stray dogs, panthers” (*Dropbear* 4) The familiarity that guides the meditation on the scrub comes from driving its thoroughfare: “it spills through the suburbs, which swallows the correctional complex to the west and edges up to the cattle station on the east” (4). There is a pointed gesture to the proximity of the bush moving from scrub to border the correctional facility, the jarring juxtaposition of traditional homelands colliding with the current iteration of the colony in the prison-industrial complex. Araluen continues, “I’ve seen the South Creek swell this plain they’re cutting up for lines of neat houses all along this way, but they’ll never come for the scrub. *They need this scrub to keep the ghosts in*” (4, emphasis added). As detailed above, Araluen takes both a scholarly and creative interest in the colonial literary imagination of the “haunted” and “unhomely” of the bush.

“The Ghost Gum Sequence” continues, “*Why don’t they build something there? A sunset profile picture asks on the community Facebook group where grumpy homeowners gather to buy and sell and complain. There’s nothing in that field but a tree*” (5). As Araluen says herself, “there’s a lot to say about that,” to fill the liminal space with use, to cover over Country with projects of modernity. With only small gestures of description, Araluen captures a type of outer suburban dweller and there is a familiarity in the genericness of such an online presence that a “sunset profile picture” evokes. Araluen responds, “there’s a lot to say about that,” and there is much to be said in the poem’s suggestion that there is a settler/modernity mindset that takes discomfit in the liminal spaces such as the one described (5). The poem had opened, “there’s ghosts in the reserve,” and perhaps it is this haunting that fuels the desire and/or compulsion to cover over not just the scrub, but the reminders of what lingers more spectrally (4). Araluen writes:

The Cumberland Plains of Blacktown and the Hawkesbury are drenched in a history of settler violence and forgetting that goes unspoken when we squabble over heritage. The bridge, the dairy, the statue—competing heirlooms for the pastoral squattocracy now crowded by mid-density suburban sprawl.  
(*Dropbear* 6)

The poem locates itself geographically in order to demonstrate the histories of place, covered over with violent superficialities of land use, even to the extent of claims to ancestry. But Araluen rewrites from her embodied positionality to make visible these histories and to legitimise them, refusing to forget knowledge land holds as the poet drives the roads that run through it. Araluen folds in intertextuality as she says, “when Watkin Tench stood at Prospect Hill in 1798, he soliloquised Miltonic visions of this place he looked upon as a wild abyss” (*Dropbear* 6). Yet this “wild abyss” was “carved up by fence and crop and hoof” to become “a magic pudding for the settlers to eat, and eat, and eat” (6). Indeed, there is something of the

Miltonic, when considering from a First Nations perspective, a paradise lost to pastoralism and cultivation of land.

The poem ends, “In the way I know all times are capable of being, Tench’s gaze is still there—but so is ours, staring back” (*Dropbear* 7). The gesture of the gaze as it is returned is a potent symbol of resistance. Tench stands in as the metonym for settler colonialism, and his notions of the “Miltonic” can only bring to Country the limitations of his Eurocentric lexicon. Araluen locates this notion within the body too, as she says earlier in the poem, “somewhere in all this tabula rasa and terra nullius my black and convict ancestors met” (6). The allusion of the “blank slate” of Country draws attention to the appropriative nature of transposed settler literary modes, unable to make sense of and interpret ancestral homelands and the fundamental erasure of First Nations bodies and knowledges. Attempts to reinscribe the landscape only create the effect of a palimpsest; there is the knowledge of time immemorial that always has and always will be known and knowable, always present. As Jeanine Leane says in her review of *Dropbear*:

Araluen calls this for what it is—the illiteracy of settlers to read Country and their eagerness to belong on stolen land through attempting to inscribe their own myths over the deep storied Countries they have invaded. (“Staring Back”)

Whilst Araluen’s poetry resists the colonial legacies of reinscribed and imposed narratives and interpretations, her work more importantly draws attention to the notion that for Aboriginal people Country is already known and knowable and ongoingly resists and refuses any nationalist imaginary interventions that settler colonial appropriation seeks to apply. In this spirit she offers a provocation: “A more realistic recollection of the iconographies of nation-building would return to the supposed central anxiety of the settler subject: does the land actually want you?” (“Snugglepot and Cuddlepie”).

## Conclusion

The political potency of First Nations poetry—whether spoken or on the page—remains as strong as it ever was. While *We Are Going* marked a watershed in the lineage of textual resistances, it also functions as a reminder of the voices who came before, whose works are left unrecorded. Furthermore, the precedent set by publication means that books, for example, become a conduit through which stories (both traditional/cultural, and ones of resistance since invasion) may be passed along through generations. It is such an important detail to continue to emphasise: Aboriginal (women’s) writing is embedded in a strong lineage, a continuum of textual production, as politically resistant as it is reciprocal. And so, as responsible, duty-bound practitioners, Whittaker and Araluen in their writing acknowledge, build upon, and pay tribute to the writers who have come before. The literary continuum they—and I, engaged here in a critical practice—write into is not neglected. In fact, its continued presence is foundational and instructive; it is a living body of work that honours and is honoured across time and place.

However, Whittaker and Araluen’s poetry carries out resistance work in the present moment, where, on the literary continuum, it is precipitating its future legacy. First Nations writers are creatively addressing relational, political, and material conditions in real time through their/our works. I see the emergent qualities that are defining this literary iteration as a twofold process. In the first instance, Whittaker and Araluen rupture settler claims to Country by asserting presence as embodied Aboriginal women. With this standpoint and positionality as a fundament basis, there is clarity and precision with which their work can articulate these settler desires to “eat” Aboriginal writing, to consume it. Uniquely, an embodied position also intersects with training received from institutions of higher education. The academy, its

archives, its methods, and its ossified legacies have ordained an academic paradigm steeped in reductionism that has produced knowledge *about* us as Aboriginal people, *without* us as its authors. It is through the intimacy of these encounters—the embodied reconnaissance missions made within the annals of coloniality’s knowledge production—where the paragons of western thought are upheld, and where we gather the intelligence of its operations.

The coupling of creative practice and the critical tools sharpened by studies in higher education has generated two collections of poetry that reinscribe the settler-colonial literary legacies that have been inherited under duress. Through crafting texts in awareness of the malignance of these inheritances, Whittaker and Araluen refuse the imposed tropes and draw attention to their appropriation of Country. In this way, their work punctures and ruptures the pastoral veneer transposed from European romantic traditions, as the settler-colonial project sought to plant its roots and lay claim to Aboriginal land. As alluded to in the previous paragraph, the poetics of resistance are made malleable, persevering with reflexivity as cultural shifts occur across time. In this current moment, there is a heightened visibility of and sensitivity to inequities faced by First Nations peoples as the result of present and historical erasures. As settler Australians grapple with shouldering the weight of these incredibly dark pasts, books and writing function as an accessible interface for relationalities. However, to engage with a different lived experience via literary testimonial there remains a slipperiness between acts of bearing witness and acts of *consumption*. Reading like this is an undertaking that chews and swallows the “other,” short circuits its intended gesture of deep listening and instead passes through, undigested.

By creatively and textually reinscribing Country from an embodied subjectivity—an act of resistance and refusal in itself—First Nations writers attend to the extent to which literature and literary production functions as one of the more underhanded—yet equal in its intent to decimate—limbs of the colonial machine. By drawing attention to such machinations, a writing practice of reinscription can reveal literature’s capacity of also enacting the violence of dispossession. These textual artifacts produce imaginaries necessary to supersede First Nations custodianship of Country, to consummate desires to be naturalised on stolen land, and to thus realise the cultivated myth of a white nativity.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> However, David Unaipon’s *Native Legends* (1929) must be acknowledged as a precursory publication to Noonuccal. Despite its place in First Nations literary histories in Australia, the publication is contested on the grounds of its copyright and intellectual property status.

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