

‘Country’ in Representations of Speech and Thought in Australian Contemporary Verse Novels

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Introduction

The utility of the verse novel for social and cultural critique became apparent in Early Victorian times, and influenced the development of the form. The move to portraying everyday life for didactic purposes required a shift from overblown emotion to ordinary feeling, greater emphasis on the psychological, and greater narrative momentum (Bose 20–21). The more successful verse novelists of the period, according to Bose, also adapted their writing to incorporate fictional imperatives such as ‘character and incident’ (36). The changed cultural circumstances of the late-twentieth-century in turn prompted verse novels in English to adopt the novelistic preference, noted by Lars Sauerberg, for ‘strong narrative drive, mimesis of the world-as-we-know-it, and a foregrounding of the subject (human agent) as part of the cast and or in a narrative stance’ (446–47).

Verse novels written in English today arise in a range of cultural contexts. The scope of this paper restricts itself to three acclaimed contemporary Australian verse novels which provide political and social critique. Research is yet to describe how stylistic preferences help shape social commentary in such verse novels. To redress this neglect, this paper offers a close reading of representations of speech and thought in Lisa Jacobson’s *The Sunlit Zone* (2011); Judy Johnson’s *Jack* (2006); and Geoff Page’s *Freehold* (2005). Central to each of these verse novels is a preoccupation with discourses of ‘country.’ Australia, a continent completely surrounded by water, is the setting for each narrative, so ‘country’ necessarily encompasses and may refer to the mainland, coastlines, islands or seas. ‘Country’ in *Jack* and *Freehold* is additionally synonymous with colonial perspectives of ‘nation.’ Country-as-commodity is prominent in the futuristic narrative of *The Sunlit Zone*. In all three texts, ‘country’ evokes connections between people, landscape, belonging, identity and subjectivity. The intermingling of discourses of country in this paper reflects these multifaceted invocations.

The chosen texts also share a stylistic preference for representations of speech and thought that are close to ‘naturally’ occurring oral communication, and which incorporate vernacular, regional idiom, and colloquial diction. This is not to suggest that the texts are representative of all Australian verse novels in these respects, or indeed, of verse novels per se. Other Australian verse novels use vernacular, regional idiom, and colloquial diction; Les Murray’s *Fredy Neptune*, for instance, is distinctive for those very features; yet in terms of genre Murray’s verse novel varies considerably from those of Page, Johnson or Jacobson, and this difference accounts for its exclusion. Other Australian verse novels depict relationships to land from non-Indigenous (*The Scarring*, Page 1999; *Dispossessed*, Hodgins 1994) and Indigenous (*Ruby Moonlight*, Cobby Eckerman 2012) perspectives.

The rationale for the three chosen verse novels lies more particularly in their use of first person homodiegetic narration and the immediacy of mediation that this narrative situation affords. In *Jack* and *The Sunlit Zone*,¹ first person present tense discourse, also called simultaneous narration, is the overarching tense and point of view; it directly presents the narrators' thoughts, feelings, speech and actions in a synchrony of narrating and experiencing. In *Freehold* too, direct speech and direct thought predominate; even the letters in its epistolary sections, which, like memoirs or journals traditionally imitate discursive genres of real life, serve to foreground direct discourse. In all three verse novels, therefore, presentations of speech and thought are close to 'naturally' occurring oral communication. A further feature these verse novels share, expressivity markers, help correlate speech acts with verisimilar evocations of utterance, and create reality effects in their narratives. This paper will provide evidence of how all three verse novels maximise use of expressivity markers²—subjective expressions that indicate the education, beliefs, and convictions of the minds they arise from, and which include attitudes toward people, events, things, identity, value judgements, terms of endearment and disparagement, and expletives.

The focus on the 'natural' in these particular verse novels tends to recess more artificial poetic elements such as anaphora, alliteration, and prominent rhyme schemes, while still ensuring rhythm and sound repetition. This configuring provides an opportunity to understand the interplay between poetic elements and narrative elements in the delivery of the discourse.

These discursive techniques and stylistic preferences contextualise the questions this paper will address and the disciplinary boundaries they straddle: How does narration in these texts contribute to discourses of country? How does the interplay of poetic and narrative elements in each verse novel enable such discourse?

Inheritance, Indigeneity and Dispossession in *Freehold*

Geoff Page's *Freehold* is a fictional history of a five-generational pioneer family. The verse novel interrogates the forgotten history of the dispossessed: the Aboriginal people of the Clarence River region. This region, a rural grazing district, provides the setting of the storyworld for each of the verse novel's three parts.

Colonial discourses of the mid-nineteenth-century shape part one of *Freehold*. The political and social values of the period are made manifest in the expressivity markers of two narrators, Edward Coaldale, and Cindy Tindall, who each present five epistolary, first person homodiegetic free verse poems. As a newcomer to the Clarence River region, the first narrator, Edward Coaldale, simultaneously embraces and resists its dominant culture; he subscribes to local values of land ownership and development, yet resists the suppression of the region's Indigenous population. He writes to his mother in Kent, communicating his expectation of positive black-white relations through use of the British colloquial expression 'to rub along quite well'—which means to have a satisfactorily friendly relationship, or to cope or manage without undue difficulty—as the following excerpts from the first poem in part one illustrates:

Koorungal is the name I'll keep
following the natives
who say that that's the term they use

a half day up and down the river.

I've had some good acquaintance with
the Bundjalung from when I worked
with Ogilvie at Yulgibar
those two short years ago. (9)

...

I'm hoping I can hire a few
of these fine Bundjalung young men
to help me with the fencing.

...

I'm hopeful that relations here
between us white and black
will be as good as Yulgibar's—
or even rather better.
I think we'll rub along quite well. (10)

In the correspondence of the second narrator in part one, Cindy Skinner, née Tindall, the daughter of a local grazier, to her friend Amy, expressivity markers convey her attitude toward Coaldale as a newcomer to the region: 'The rumour is he speaks quite well— / and likes to wear a dinner suit / if manners should require it' (12); 'The only problem so far is / his attitude to blacks' (13).

Coaldale's positive attitude to the Indigenous population is deemed 'problematic' by established settlers: he has a 'reputation for / consorting with his natives' (25); 'likes the darkness' (23); is 'besotted with his natives' (30); and is 'soft with the blacks' (19). Indeed, Coaldale refers to local Aboriginal people as 'my dark friends' (17), and as a white landowner with no heirs, he faces repudiation by his community when he tries to bequeath his land to their tribe.

Not only is part one replete with expressivity markers that convey the contrasting social values, attitudes and beliefs of the narrators, stylistically part one maximises its capacity to differentiate perspectives by assuming a form that is multi-modal—that adopts both epistolary and poetic modes. In layout this form presents as letter *and* poem. The epistolary mode has long been an effective means in fiction to offer differing perspectives, and the ten letter-poems in part one capitalise on this benefit. Each includes authenticating salutations (Dear Mother; Your loving youngest, Edward) that assert the epistolary modality yet also maintain poetic arrangement on the page. As poems, in composition they are uniform to the extent that they are left-margin-aligned, and organised in stanzas (though many of these stanzas are of no fixed dimension). Each poem varies in line length: most common are lines with eight syllables and an iambic stress pattern, though some lines have as few as five syllables, and others nine or ten. The syntax regularly enjambes over two or more lines, and often over entire stanzas, and this enables a more prosaic style of speech. In Edward Coaldale's narration, use of occasional end-stopped lines serves to clip the syntax and thus convey the elevated diction of its gentrified speaker, reflecting his sociolect and standing.

Other poetic elements recede in the multi-modal form. Tropes are kept to a minimum, and word play and schemes such as anastrophe, anaphora, chiasmus or epistrophe are absent. These devices tend to give prominence to particular words and meanings, and thus their absence is probably a

concession to narrative progression. While *Freehold* utilises assonant sound patterning to great effect, it does not utilise a fixed rhyme scheme in its poetic arrangement, and restricts the use of end-rhyme and perfect rhyme to part one—where the multi-modal discourse can more readily accommodate it—in occasional stanzas such as in the following:

Some months must pass before you read this
snug beside your fire in Kent—
and think of me beside the Clarence,
sitting up by candle-light,
penning in my first-night tent. (11)

Land ownership and discourses of territoriality—native title claim; land as a site of contestation; the aspiration to own land; and sense of entitlement to land—shape part two of *Freehold*. The story resumes centuries after Edward Coaldale bequeathed his land to Jimberoo; the land has since been sold back to remaining white settlers in the region. The central narrator, Raymond Whitby, is a descendant of the Whitby family whose land originally bordered that of Edward Coaldale. Whitby contacts Jimberoo's relative, Tommy Jimroo, for assistance with the history of the region's clan for his PhD research.

With the change of narrator, the epistolary mode of the text cedes to a dynamic combination of direct and indirect speech and thought representation, and the discourse shifts to acknowledge past colonial abuses and to recognise the challenges of reconciliation. The narrator, Raymond Whitby, gives voice to 'The Great Forgetting' in relation to Aboriginal peoples in local history. When his doctoral research uncovers massacres in the Clarence River region, he is surprised to learn that his own ancestor, William Whitby, was responsible for the murder of an Aboriginal family in 1843. In an attempt at personal reconciliation, Whitby acknowledges past injustice; he invites Tommy Jimroo to his house for a beer, and places a memorial plaque on the Whitby property. These acts of reconciliation meet with considerable family and community resistance. Whitby's relatives censure him for wanting to 'dredge the past' (50) and claim that he 'besmirches' the Whitby name, a name that 'stands for something along the Clarence' (60).

Whitby's narration retains a focus on his contestation of dominant discourse, and does not gloss over the ways that his family positions, isolates and disinherits him, as a result of his principled stance and action. Whitby critiques the longevity and resilience of dominant discourse such as the colonial rhetoric used when the property is auctioned: a 'chance to buy a piece of history' (122).

Land rights, access to land and disputes over land are prominent in the discourses that shape part three of *Freehold*. A dozen numbered sections of narrative set in the late twentieth century, seventeen years after the memorial plaque was erected, trace the negotiations between Whitby family members which lead up to the sale of Whitby Downs. Expressivity markers in direct and indirect speech, reported speech and thought, and free indirect discourse in this section effectively convey diverse viewpoints that include: Hilda: 'That land up there's been Whitby land / since 1841. / . . . / Keep it in the family somehow. / Keep the Whitby name up there. / That word means something on the Clarence / although you may not know it' (111); Lyle: 'He feels a certain sort of anger / and sees his sons around a table, . . . the four of them on how much Dad / was 'getting past it now' / . . . / Not that they could bloody do it' (93); and Bill, second son of Lyle: 'Already he could hear the speeches . . . / "Pioneers of the Clarence Valley" and all that

style of hype' (103). The eleventh of these narratives presents the views of Tommy Jimroo on dispossession and native title claim:

'Custodial,' . . .
 a word grown more familiar as
 year by year the case runs on.
 It has a resonance about it
 he hadn't understood at first
 but knew it had been something done
 by elders in a fading tongue
 he had his twenty words of, maybe.
 . . .
 but no one's cut a deal as yet.
 And so the struggle struggles on,
 the bureaucrats behind their desks,
 each one unfailingly polite,
 the desks themselves the relics of
 the 1830s free-for-all
 when London burglars with a ticket
 became the first whites on the Clarence
 sawing up the cedar. (146–47)

Through the juxtaposition of these viewpoints, *Freehold* enables its readership to consider how entrenched dominant discourses pertaining to land are, and how challenges to the maintenance of these discourses meet continuing resistance and are slow to effect attitudinal change.

The fourth and final part of *Freehold* invites attention to the creation of discourse, and to the act of composition. It makes explicit the thematising of discourses of inheritance and dispossession in its fiction by means of a frame narrative, and by positioning Raymond Whitby as the implied author. This implicit representation of an implied author in the text, who until that point has been composing the narrative behind the scenes, reveals who is responsible for its design and for the values and cultural norms it adheres to:

The Whitbys had outlived themselves,
 the Jimroos still were dispossessed,
 and I was down in Melbourne weather
 patching this whole thing together,
 line by line and night by night,
 swimming in the present tense
 and singing the iambics,
 recalling what I thought I knew,
 inventing what I didn't (166–67)

So now, at last, in Carlton here
 I'm tapping out these final lines— (168)

Of note are several metapoetic and metanarrative comments about the verse novel's methods of composition: 'patching this whole thing together / line by line'; 'swimming in the present tense / and singing the iambs' (167–68). These metapoetic and metanarrative comments which signal intended self-referentiality further serve to assert and authenticate the discourses the verse novel set out to interrogate.

Indigenous and Asian Australians, Orality and Literacy in *Jack*

Judy Johnson's verse novel, *Jack*, set in 1938, is named after its narrator, the ageing opium-addicted captain of a pearling vessel in the Coral Sea. *Jack* begins with the utterance: 'Nothing but wormy dogs, / dusty tracks, / and wilting coconut palms. / I wouldn't give two bob / for this piece of flea-bitten rock / that calls itself an island' (2). The utterance is 'telling,' most obviously because it makes manifest that the narrative will engage discourses pertaining to 'land,' 'sea' and 'country.' Yet it is also 'telling' in that it conveys a 'natural,' idiomatic and vernacular vocal rhetoric embedded with expressivity markers such as 'I wouldn't give two bob' which afford the immediate insights: Australian, historical novel, pre-decimal currency; likely set in the early decades of the 1900s. The 'flea-bitten rock / that calls itself an island' which the narrator derides, is also telling of his disposition, and his attitude to country, linked to colonial discourse.

Foremost in the discourses of land, sea and country in *Jack*, are discourses pertaining to orality and literacy. Orality, according to Grossman concerns 'Talk' and 'can signal a range of forms and registers from 'primary oral' languages to vernacular constructs and practices of speech' (xxvi). Grossman refers to a 'frontier zone' in which 'Indigenous people [are] located as the authentic traditional producers of "talk" and [in which] non-Indigenous people [are] positioned as the gatekeepers and arbiters of "text"' (xxx), a position Grossman maintains 'is complicit with the structures of containment and exclusion that characterise colonialist and neo-colonialist discourses of Indigeneity more broadly' (xxx). Grossman points out that 'literacy has been pervasively associated with the rise and development of Western modernity' (xxi), to convey the transition from 'primitive' to 'civilised' societies (xxi), including the transition that Clifford (118) terms 'oral to literate.'

Excerpts from *Jack* reveal traces of colonial thinking and suggest the complexity of contemporary Indigenous ways of being literate. 'He can't read too well / but the missionary school / taught him enough / to fumble along' (Johnson 39); 'Where'd all the magazines come from? . . . Show it to me. . . . Reluctantly he hands over / the one he's reading from . . . Just as I thought, Yankee pulp. / I toss it back. / The pages flap like a bird with an injured wing. / Waste of time and energy if you ask me' (40–41). Here, Jack's response to Georgie's collection of Hollywood magazines represents a control of Indigenous engagement with modernity and literacy that forces readers to consider the impact of English as a standardised and literacy-governed language on Indigenous populations.

Jack's attitude toward 'oral culture' does not conceive of it as a dynamic social practice. He derides Indigenous modes of talk, and is suspicious of any language other than English, as is evident in the following example: 'I just don't like the way / their heads are always together, / him and Georgie / getting stuck into / their Island lingo / and laughing' (200–01). In response to

Takemoto's comment, 'You know he don't speak velly good English' (92), Jack mimics, 'I also know he don't tender velly well' (92).

In *Jack*, Indigenous modes of speaking exemplify their historical construction as 'deficient' or 'lacking' when measured against the yardstick of normative communication and representation, as the following excerpt from the poem *Complaints to the Cook* suggests:

Any bloke with half a brain

knows you don't insult
the *babbling brook*

unless you've an appetite

for piss, shit, hair
and toenails
in your tucker.

But it seems Takemoto
hasn't quite got half a brain

which is half as much again

I'd guess

as that dopey-looking tender of his. (27)

The rhyming slang *babbling brook*, that is, a cook, 'especially one cooking for a number of men, as in the army or in the outback' (Wilkes 8), has its origins as early as 1919 (*Digger Dialects*). According to Wilkes, 1940s usage holds 'all bush cooks are touchy' (8), as the narrator intimates when racial tensions flare:

'You cook Queen Mary
all I care . . . no Japanee
tell Ah May how make rice.'

He picks up an onion,
puts it on his wooden block
and starts chopping.

'That rice too hard,'
Takemoto insists.

‘Also not enough soy.’

Ah May is suddenly very still.

‘Too hard, eh? Not enough soy, eh?’

His right arm starts flapping

which wouldn’t be a problem

if he didn’t still have the cleaver in it.

Takemoto takes a step backwards.

He’s about to learn

these Chows

have two speeds

‘laid back’ and ‘full throttle.’ (28)

Expressivity markers such as ‘that bloody Jap’ (23), ‘some itinerant Malay’ (23), ‘these chows’ (28), ‘the nongs’ (26) reveal that the way the narrator engages with ‘orality’ is bound up with ideas about the ‘authenticity’ of Indigenous identities and cultures. Jack’s essentialist framework presumes the ‘natural direction of change’ is from orality to literacy, and from Indigenous languages to Standard English. *Jack* enables its readership to consider how, through this ideology, Aborigines and other outsiders were expected to achieve ‘transformation from Indigenous ‘other’ to European ‘self’ . . . through shifts in language and . . . communicative practice’ (Grossman xxv). In the poem *Libation*, Jack proposes a toast to the voyage: ‘To the gods of good weather / and abundant shell,’ I intone. / The nongs don’t seem to realise / what’s called for next. / Only Sandy, / that Badu lad, / who’s been to Sunday School / knows a cue / when he hears one / and says “Amen”’ (Johnson 26). Wilkes lists ‘nong’ as a derogatory term for ‘someone stupid or ineffectual’ (233). Dating to as early as 1865, its usage revives in WW2 slang from New Guinea and the islands, and for a time refers specifically to the Japanese during the Occupation, although its usage through the 50s and 60s generalises to mean ‘a simpleton or fool’ (233).

The narrator’s denigration of non-English speakers is exemplified further in the use of the slang word ‘yabber,’ contained in the poem *Takemoto Rubs It In*: ‘He’s yakking away at my back / like a bird pecking at a rhinoceros./ . . . / All I need now is an oriental / boasting session. / No doubt about it, I say heartily. / You’re fucking miracles, / the lot of you. / . . . some / yabbering Jap / will have to come up / with a better story than that / to impress me’ (150–52). ‘Yabbering,’ meaning to talk, first emerges in written usage as ‘yabber-yabber’ in 1855, then as ‘yabber’ in 1901 in the *Bulletin Reciter*. The *Australian Magazine* of 1908 deems it an Aboriginal word, ‘likely to remain in the category of slang’ (Wilkes 366–67). Through the narrator’s denigration of non-english speakers, *Jack* enables its readership to consider the ways that dominant culture oppresses Indigenous languages, traditional knowledge and customs.

The poems *Jellyfish* and *Buying a Dog* reflect the narrator's resentment of the Japanese divers who dominate the pearling industry, as the following excerpts illustrate: '. . . on most Jap-run luggers / every member of the crew / is somebody's relative / and every one of them goes diving, / stripping the waters of shell' (Johnson 50); 'This ground's just about cleaned out / anyway, thanks to your overzealous mates . . . Are there any working grounds / you Japs / haven't had a go at yet?' (110). *Seagulls* conveys the narrator's use of national cultural stereotypes regarding greed and competitiveness, in stating: 'I hate them, / blatant opportunists, / scavenging / a gullet-full / of someone else's / hard work. / . . . One of them / has Takemoto's eyes' (184); and elsewhere the narrator asserts: 'It must be in the Asian blood this determination to have it all' (154). The narrator's nationalist discourse resonates in the lines: 'Look, these blokes / come to our country. / They have to live by our rules' (236), and gains support from the use of the expressivity marker, 'cobber' in the following poem: 'Us Australians know all about it. / It's called giving a cobber / a fair go' (155). The meaning of 'cobber' as friend or mate dates earlier than the period in which *Jack* is set, to 1895, with subsequent usage by Henry Lawson in his 1910 prose *The Rising of the Court* and in 1916 in *The Anzac Book* which lists 'cobber' as 'a well tried and tested pal' (Wilkes 83).

Jack incorporates vernacular idiomatic expressions of overseas origin such as 'I'm not one / to beat around the mulberry' (Johnson 18); probably English in origin, as well as distinctly Australian vernacular expressions such as 'Don't get maggoty with me, Charlie' (158); the adjective 'maggoty' meaning angry, bad-tempered, first appears in 1919 *Digger Dialects* (Wilkes 210). Colloquialisms mark the discourse as natural, yet their usage also serves to demarcate linguistic and cultural difference.

In *Why I like Blake* (Johnson 144) the narrator's assertion of authority and superiority over his crew reveals the ideology shaping his distinctions between the races. He positions the Aboriginal mission boys as innocent and naïve, and thus presumes they will respond to his 'cautionary tale,' that is, his use of literature as a tool to assert power and control: 'the boys . . . like sponges / soaking my words up / . . . how Jesus made the lamb, / the little black boy / waits / to become the lamb, / and while he's waiting, / the Tyger eats him / chomp / chomp / chomp' (144).

English language both arises in and upholds colonial power structures in *Jack*, aligning with tropes of civilisation and culture. The Papuan deckhands 'can hardly speak English' (22) and are 'crazy with superstitions' (22). In the poem *Teasing*, their attempts to speak English attract ridicule and contempt: 'Those Papuan boys understand / *tokboi*, / a kind of pidgin English / you might use / with a two year old / and they can parrot back / more complicated phrases, / but they really / don't have a clue. / So who / could blame me / for my bit of harmless / teasing? / Calling their mothers dingoes, / watching them smile and nod / then repeat it back to me' (55). The narrator, Jack, positions the Islanders' ancestors as savages against the moral Christians: 'The shells when they're closed / look for all the world / like the skulls / those Island boys / used to impale on sticks / before the "Coming of the Light"' (33); 'I tell them / there is no demon, / there is no mouth / in the sky / to swallow them whole. / Still the Papuans / beat empty jam tins / on deck / and wail their fear / into song' (66).

The minds and identities of the narrator and the characters in *Jack* are further shaped by the hegemonic discourse of the White Australia Policy which defined and upheld colonial power structures in Australia at the time the story is set. The Pearl Shelling Industry was the only

industry that was exempt from the White Australia Policy. The recruitment of Torres Strait Islander, Papuan and Aboriginal people for labour on the pearl luggers was subject to the *Native Labourers' Protection Act*. A Royal Commission in 1916 determined that 'the White Australia Policy will be neither weakened nor imperilled by allowing the . . . industry to be worked by Asians' (McQueen 69). By 'Asians' the Commission meant primarily the Japanese divers who dominated the industry. The Commission stated that 'diving for shell is not an occupation which our [European] workers should be encouraged to undertake' . . . and the 'life [is] incompatible with what a European worker is entitled to live' (69).

As a work of fiction, *Jack* does not re-envision colonial narratives of Indigeneity. The narrator's colonial perspective remains dominant in his consciousness as conveyed through speech and thought, via expressivity markers that leave no doubt as to his sense of superiority and entitlement. The verse novel depicts his views as deeply flawed. The text's representations do not sidestep the complex ways in which Indigenous Australian and Asian characters embrace and resistance dominant discourse or their complex reasons for doing so. Georgie, Bing Tang, and Takemoto are 'entangled subjects' (Grossman) within various discursive formations of Indigenous Australian and Asian Australian histories and identities.

In the numerous vignettes which convey antagonism between subjects with opposing perspectives, in poems such as *Complaints to the Cook*, *At the Diver's Club*, *Teasing*, *Ah May and Takemoto Are At It Again*, and *My Left Hand Man*, to name just a few, poetic segmentation generates productive tension. Segmentation proves particularly effective to build suspense and surprise in the narrative. Lines consisting of single words, of gapped words, and of cascading words serve to delay temporal progression of the discourse; to withhold, to emphasise, to dilate in a moment before release, to create anticipation, to heighten the tenor of the narrator's discourse. Examples include the surge of rising anger or growing apprehension. Poetic segmentation is also an effective way to bring closure, to attenuate activity, to mitigate the tenor of the narrator's discourse, to assuage or wind down emotion, to defuse tension, to restrain reaction—that is, it is not merely decorative but shapes the delivery of the discourse. A focus on the constructedness of the poem illustrates the productive role of segmentation, the vital contribution of its arrangement to the narrative encounter.

Technology, Ecology, and the Speculative Future in *The Sunlit Zone*

The Sunlit Zone, set in a future Melbourne circa 2050, is narrated by North, a genetic scientist who is still grieving the loss in childhood of her twin sister, Finn, a hybrid girl born with gills. Environmental discourses shape this speculative narrative of a future Australia beset by environmental problems, where attitudes to land, sea, and country are, at best, contingent and provisional.

Writ large in these discourses is the effect of human intervention on nature. *The Sunlit Zone* offers a fictional critique of how artificially modifying genetic expression—through the production of cloned species that breed too fast or crossbreed—impacts on species' diversity and upsets the food chain:

More urgent problems intervene,
like the Coronation Star in tank thirteen

released to control the Crown
of Thorns that plagues the reefs.
No one reckoned on crossbreeding,
a stuff-up caused by some scientist
who was clinically deranged, they said.
From every severed star fish leg another
baby monster buds. The coral's dead
and choking with the buggers. (38)

The discursive flexibility of *The Sunlit Zone* owes much to its free verse form. The poetic arrangement preserves natural stresses found in speech by breaking lines of dialogue midway through the syntactic unit—phrase, clause or sentence. Additionally, in the passage cited above, the recurrent digraph ‘ea’ creates a patterning of end rhyme, and rhyme that falls mid-line: at the smallest unit of sound, the words ‘intervenes,’ ‘thirteen,’ ‘released,’ ‘reefs,’ ‘crossbreeding’ and ‘clinically’ help give the verse novel buoyancy at a phonemic level, and also importantly create a sonic resonance of beeping *e*'s, as if to signal ‘emergency.’

The inclusion of expressivity markers lends additional force to the emphasis on the ‘natural’ throughout: examples include the slang terms ‘stuff up’ (to make a mistake), and ‘the buggers’ (though not recognised as distinctly Australian, being etymologically linked to the pidgin term, ‘bagarup’ from Papua New Guinea (Wilkes 58), the term is nevertheless present in Australian colloquial speech).

The narrator’s discourse on the destruction of species suggests that declines and losses of animal and fish populations are a global problem with complex local factors: ultraviolet radiation, habitat modification, environmental acidity and toxicants, diseases, changes in climate or weather patterns. *The Sunlit Zone* enables its readers to consider the effects of these factors on biodiversity:

That was the year when Devil Flu
struck Tasmania, killing wombats
and wallabies too. No animals live
there now unless they’re immune. (55)

Through the perspectives of its narrator, *The Sunlit Zone* also prompts its readership to consider the impact of mutated creatures, both genetically modified species and the unexpected outcomes of environmental problems:

All God’s creatures once, I think,
now cloned, spliced, split
and salvaged from extinction’s pit. (37)

There’s been lots of weird fish in the last
five years since a tsunami hit Gen Corp’s
laboratories and washed its experiments
into the Tasman Sea. (60)

Furthermore, *The Sunlit Zone* enables its readers to contemplate how new technologies such as genetic engineering can lead to commodification of modified life forms, and the ethical issues that this might engender. ‘Inland’ for example, is a place ‘where the seas are artificial ones / for millionaires to trawl exotic / quick-growth species’ (65).

In *The Sunlit Zone*, access to commodified species is economically differentiated, available only to ‘millionaires,’ so readers can consider the impact of new technologies such as genetic engineering on existing social and economic inequalities. Boyce points out that ‘social and economic inequalities—based on class, race, ethnicity, gender, and age—often translate into environmental inequalities’ (2). Boyce additionally posits that those with more power and wealth experience disproportionate benefits from the degradation of the environment; those with less power and wealth experience disproportionate losses (5). The following example is illustrative of how the discourse links inequality to environmental protection:

. . .
 triton shrimps that munch
 on Coronation Stars like kids on chips.
 Some twit from Queensland wants
 to breed the tritons bigger, but I smell
 money behind all this. Cane toads,
 rabbits, nano bees, fluorescent foxes,
 GM leaks . . . (38)

Through the perspectives of its narrator, *The Sunlit Zone* enables its readers to consider the impacts of resource allocation and inequitable distributions of environmental burdens such as pollution, and the right to protection from environmental hazards such as toxic sites. Central to this is the narrator’s concern about environmental laws and regulations, planning for development, and the efficacy of sustainability measures such as water restrictions.

Poetic elements in *The Sunlit Zone* work in conjunction with narrative strategies to imbue the narration of these discourses with emotion. The placement of modifying adjectives and adverbs at line ends to enjamb clauses or sentences often serves to create aporia which defer meaning and enable the narrator to express doubt, making narration provisional or uncertain. Syntactic choices in the poetic layout thus shape the insecurity and anxiety being communicated in *The Sunlit Zone*’s speculative discourse, as illustrated by the following excerpt from part four, in which the narrator ruminates on her sister’s hybridity:

. . . In my sister
 Finn I have always seen what others
 saw much later than me: something
 intangible that dissolves swiftly
 on the perimeter of thought beyond
 place or speech, like a word that strays
 beyond utterance or name, outside
 memory. (44)

This stylistic use of aporia in presentations of speech and thought in *The Sunlit Zone* enhances its social and environmental discourses. As a rhetorical strategy, it can allow readers time to think over and contemplate these discourses. It can also elicit reader sympathy for the narrator's doubt or perplexity, and for the dilemmas in which she finds herself.

How humans interact with nature is intimately linked with how humans interact with each other. Readers of *The Sunlit Zone* engage with this discourse through speculative contemplation of a future world of dream-genes, skinfones, cyberdrugs, thought-coding, and designer babies:

Designer embryos had been novelties,
expensive options for the privileged
and popular among celebrities
until a local company slashed
the cost for each firstborn
and threw in a new electric Ford.
Dream Genes were spawned.
Wistful parents could tick a box
and order in a child who would excel
in law, be strong or fast or just pretty
like little Cello Green next door
born three months before Finn and me.
She got her face on a swag of zines.

Dream Babies, they called them on iTV.
Fertility Clinic and other soaps like this
sprang up quickly on *Quantum*
and *60 Minutes*, the older scientists
thrashed it out with the newest wave
of graduates, already rich on GM profit.
Genetic, Robotic, Nano, Info Tech.
Whatever it was, my mother ignored it. (18–19)

Ultimately the narrator deplors the state of this 'broken thing we call / the world and its almost untenable / future' (80) and declares 'we still haven't learnt from history' (38).

Conclusion

The representation of country is central in each of these verse novels: the eco-discourses of *The Sunlit Zone*; the discourse of dispossession in *Freehold*; the colonially grounded assumptions about people, land, and sea in *Jack*. The novelistic benefits of a cast of characters and the prolonged treatment of subject matter enables these verse novels to be used as platforms to present a diverse spectrum of political and ethical positions and viewpoints. The stylistic preference of these verse novels for the 'natural' foregrounds the use of vernacular and colloquial diction which enable opinions and beliefs to emerge.

Clearly these stylistic choices are considered as efficacious ways of conveying discourses which are inextricably linked to human experience, but what premises shape these preferences in the

present day? The stylistic preference in these verse novels for the ‘natural’ likely reflect late-twentieth-century verse novel preferences for mimesis of the world-as-we-know-it, and likely trace too, to Early Victorian preferences for contemporaneity of verse novel subject matter. Whether these ideological preferences from previous eras marginalise understanding of postmodernist verse novels and their engagement in political and social critique is a legitimate scholarly concern.

In these verse novels, the recession of particular poetic elements accompanies an emphasis on the ‘natural.’ This is not to suggest that verse novels ought to, or need to recess poetic elements. The decisions shaping which *particular* poetic elements are incorporated in any verse novel links to their perceived poetic-narrative interplay, and their value to the writer’s intended themes and effects. The suite of poetic elements deployed in each of these verse novels works integrally and compatibly with narrative elements to convey the discourse.

The emphasis on the ‘natural’ however, makes apparent the need for poetic templates used by verse novels to receive close scholarly attention, as less artificial poetic elements—obscured in the foregrounding of the narrative template—may be prone to theoretical neglect.

NOTES

¹ In *the Sunlit Zone*, seventy-seven pages utilise simultaneous narration; sixty pages utilise conventional retrospective narration.

² Cf. Monika Fludernik’s term, ‘expressive markers.’

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