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Indigenous Australian Texts in European English Departments: A Fence, a Bridge and a Country as an Answer to the Debate over Multiculturalism

Summary

Though non-canonical Anglophone courses in the curriculum of European English departments are no longer seen as oddity, they are often regarded as “marginal” in comparison to the British and American canon. However, courses focusing on the cultural output of postcolonial voices, moreover of the most marginal of postcolonial voices, do not only challenge the extent to which we have managed to shift from Eurocentrism in literary theory, but also reveal the complexities of the current cultural trends, such as the frequently evoked policy of multiculturalism. The paper argues that courses which include texts by Indigenous Australian authors reveal the story of survival in a country that is literally multicultural, and stress the importance of one's own place of utterance, which is as local as it is global. The above issues are exemplified by the works of the famous Aboriginal writers Doris Pilkington/Nugi Garimara (*Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, 1996), John Muk Muk Burke (*Bridge of Triangles*, 1994) and Alexis Wright (*Carpentaria*, 2006).

Key words: Anglophone alternative, multiculturalism, global and local, Doris Pilkington, John Muk Muk Burke, Alexis Wright

Avstralska besedila domorodcev na angleških oddelkih v Evropi: ograja, most in dežela kot odgovor na razpravo o multikulturalnosti

Povzetek

Čeravno so danes nekanonizirani anglofonski predmeti v študijskih programih angleških oddelkov v Evropi nekaj povsem običajnega, so še vedno deležni obrobne pozornosti v razmerju do britanskega in ameriškega kanona. Ne glede na to predmeti, ki se osredinjajo na kulturni domet postkolonialnih glasov, da ne rečemo najbolj obrobni postkolonialnih glasov, ne le da predstavljajo izziv stopnji, do katere se nam je uspelo odmakniti od eurocentrizma v literarni teoriji, marveč tudi razgaljajo zapletenost trenutnih kulturnih teženj, kot je npr. pogosto izražena politika multikulturalnosti. Članek dokazuje, da tisti študijski programi, ki vključujejo besedila domorodnih avstralskih avtorjev, razkrivajo zgodbo o preživetju v deželi, ki je dobesedno multikulturalna, in poudarjajo pomen osebnega izrekanja, ki je lokalno in hkrati globalno. Tovrstna vprašanja tematizirajo dela znamenitih domorodnih avtorjev: Doris Pilkington/Nugi Garimara (*Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, 1996), John Muk Muk Burke (*Bridge of Triangles*, 1994) and Alexis Wright (*Carpentaria*, 2006).

Ključne besede: anglofonska alternative, multikulturalnost, globalno in lokalno, Doris Pilkington, John Muk Muk Burke, Alexis Wright

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1. Introduction: is there an indigenous australian text in the class?

Graham Huggan opens his 2007 study *Australian Literature. Postcolonialism, Racism, Transnationalism* by raising the kernel question: Why study Australian literature? Though Huggan claims that this very direct question “deserves a direct answer”, such an answer is hard to provide. However, discussing this issue in a specifically Australian context, Huggan points out that apart from being national (typically Australian), postcolonial (having themes similar to other, what he simply calls, “settler literatures”) and transnational (with Australian writers “belonging” to the world), Australian literature offers a genuine “Anglophone alternative” (Birns 2002): a refreshing challenge to the imagined supremacy of British and American literatures, and to the high-handedness and parochialism that continue to underlie the teaching and study of English literature at many schools and universities, both in Australia and elsewhere” (Huggan 2007, 3).

But as Huggan further asserts, this is not enough to settle a “deep-seated anxiety over the future of Australian literary studies” (ibid., 3), since Australian universities recently started replacing the so-called “elitist Australian *literary* studies” with more “socially representative *cultural* studies” (ibid.). While this issue has more to do with a growing presence of the corporate world on university campuses in Australia, the same issue raised in the European context is somewhat removed from the market economy and still remains closer to the economy of promoting a specific selection of Anglophone knowledge.

Today, Australian studies in Europe exist as self-standing university programmes and divisions (sometimes called centres),¹ specialized individual courses or as topics incorporated in postcolonial literary courses, once called in an equally benign manner courses in Commonwealth literatures or new literatures in English. Most frequently simply included in the English departments which also “simply” denote literatures in English, Australian literary courses very frequently have to fight against the “traditional” literary courses in English that focus what David Williamson (1995), one of the most distinguished Australian playwrights, would call “dead white males”, such as Shakespeare, Milton, or Blake – that is, on the imperial reminder that Australian literature lacks “the dream of the rod”² in comparison to the British or American measuring rod. Hence, accepting Australian courses within English departments might sometimes follow the same uneasy trajectory as accepting Australian literature in the late 19th and early 20th century, when Australian literary works were offered to the British book market made of the “refined” metropolitan readership as “quaint colonial curious” (Huggan 2007, 7).³ Due to its locality and globality in English, or we could say “glocality”,⁴ Australian literature and culture may or may not fit into English departments and into a course on anything literary/cultural in English, be it a self-standing course or one most frequently bearing the

¹ For instance, the Centre for Australian Studies at the University of Copenhagen, which is the biggest and best equipped centre of this kind in Europe.

² The allusion is to the famous anonymous OE poem from the 8th century “The Dream of the Rood”.

³ For a historical survey of a specific relationship between publishing houses and Australian literary works, see Nile 2002.

⁴ Coined from the term “glocal imagination,” which refers to “transglobal multiple exchanges of global and local factors that encompass economic, social and political aspects as much as cultural ones” (Riemenschneider 2005, 16). A more common term is trans/national.

prefix of postcolonial. We know that in reality introducing any “non-canonic” specialized course usually depends on accumulation of specific scholars or the appearance of a strong individual scholar interested in, e.g., Antipodean matters, which might be quite random, or it may also depend on the extent to which a given local English department feels elitist.

A step further in this equation would be to include Indigenous Australian literary materials into the English department. In Australia Indigenous Studies represent a self-standing research field which means that “things ‘Aboriginal’” (Langton 2003, 119) are not found within the English and Australian Studies departments. One of the reasons is that very frequently Indigenous Studies offer courses on burning issues within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders’ communities, such as contemporary politics, health issues, sustainability, and education – in other words topics which are not primarily literary or, for instance, cinematic.⁵ Another reason may be found in the book stores in Australia, which often place Indigenous writing – as a rule including Indigenous prose fiction – on the bookshelf marked “Australiana”. One of the reasons for using “Australiana” can be found in a popular definition when it implies any cultural heritage and production made in or in relation to Australia, or what we may call “things Australian”. However, the official definition of Australiana is stricter and implies “items, especially of historical interest, originating in or related to Australia, as early books, furniture, painting etc.” (*The Macquarie Dictionary* 2001, 132). As a result, Aboriginal cultural production belongs to the past, which is why it is attributed a specific Australian historical interest. Another less patronising reason for such a curious labelling might lie in the remarkable diversity of forms and contents of Aboriginal writing, fictional and nonfictional alike, that resist easy classification. No matter what the case may be, Indigenous writing is never listed under “Aboriginal literature” or “Aboriginal fiction”.⁶

In Europe, and for all our archetypal position of privilege, scholars can more easily include Indigenous Australian materials in the courses offered at English departments because, ironically enough, we tend to feel more removed from the specifically Anglo-Australian shame of whiteness, which is why it is possible to combine mainstream Australian literature with Indigenous literary production in a single course.

However, the question for introducing such content into the classroom very much reflects Huggan’s question in relation to the purpose of teaching and studying Australian literature: Why should we introduce Indigenous Australian content into European English Studies, and, moreover, why should this be worthwhile in the contemporary moment? One of the most recent reasons for doing so lies in the fact that Indigenous writing has been tackling the problems of the very word that was appropriated in 2011 in an uneasy context in Europe, and it concerns all of us. The word “multiculturalism” was used by German Chancellor Angela Merkel, former French President Nicolas Sarkozy and British Prime Minister David Cameron in the context of failure. This came from the countries that opened up their borders to former colonial subjects and migrant workers from all over the world, whose stories, by now, should have entered the representational codes of their imagined communities (Anderson 1983). One of the most interesting reactions to this sudden burst of an un-metaphorical Western European honesty came from a country which takes pride

⁵ E.g., the Indigenous Australian Studies programme at the Koori Centre at the University of Sydney offers courses which are very versatile and range from the notion of land and culture, health issues and community, identity politics, gender and knowledge, to offering introductory courses on Aboriginal literature. At the same time, Australian Indigenous Studies at Murdoch University in Perth offers courses on politics, popular culture, history, spirituality, but also Indigeneity and critical theory, with no courses on Indigenous literary output. What may not come as a surprise is that these centres are mostly aimed at Indigenous Australians. Cf. <http://sydney.edu.au/koori/> and <http://www.murdoch.edu.au/Courses/Australian-Indigenous-Studies/>.

⁶ Based on the author’s field research in 2006 and 2007 in Perth, Fremantle and Sydney.

in its policy of multiculturalism from the 1970s – Australia. With a convenient delay in relation to the proclamation of the powerful European trio, the then Australian Minister for Immigration and Citizenship, Chris Bowen, came up with the text broadcasted nationwide as “the genius of Australian multiculturalism”. This text functions as an appendix to the diplomatically revised policy of multiculturalism entitled *The People of Australia*, which was announced in 2011. In this document we read that “Australia is a multicultural nation. In all, since 1945, seven million people have migrated to Australia. Today, one in four of Australia’s 22 million people were born overseas, 44 per cent were born overseas or have a parent who was and four million speak a language other than English. We speak over 260 languages and identify with more than 270 ancestries. Australia is and will remain a multicultural society” (*The People of Australia* 2011, 2).

This might mean that Australia, unlike Europe, got it right when it comes to multiculturalism. However, for those in the know, who are aware of the Indigenous, migrant and refugee situation in Australia, especially when it comes to the so-called “boat people”, or what is now being called “irregular maritime arrivals”, the European reaction suddenly seems quite polite and honest, especially when one reads in Bowen’s proclamation that Australia’s multiculturalism is “underpinned by respect for traditional Australian values” (Bowen 2011). Though *The People of Australia – Australia’s Multicultural Policy* is a more tactfully constructed text in which the noun “value” is preceded only by adjectives such as “democratic” and “shared”, the text still reveals slippages in the policy by introducing the establishment and implementation of a new National Anti-Racism Partnership and Strategy designed to deliver an anti-racism strategy. This implies that there are still forms of racial discrimination in Australia that need to be eliminated. Suddenly, a country that is literally multicultural in its demographic makeup is not really that different from Europe, though it is far more exquisite in verbalizing the outcomes of its multicultural approach.

In the context of globally shattered multiculturalism, inclusion of Indigenous Australian writing into English Studies in Europe becomes additionally valuable because, apart from its cultural and literary merit, this writing becomes engaged in a very specific manner. Interestingly enough, the adjective that has been following Indigenous cultural production as a satellite from the 1960s to denote alleged lack of aesthetics is now back with a vengeance because not only does this writing help them survive, but it can help us survive as well. Since they are Australia’s first “boat people” before Anglo-Celtic and more contemporary mariners, their writing can tell us how to handle, survive and reconcile multiculturalism when multiculturalism is a condition and a regulated policy. The answer their writing offers is that multiculturalism is not achieved by a simple recipe “add Indigenous peoples and stir” (Worby et al. 2006, 444), though one would think that Bhabha’s academic-culinary verbiage introduced already in *The Location of Culture* (1994) would suffice. Suddenly their writing seems to be giving the answer to the question that Jean-Pierre Durix posed in 1998: “Is there such a thing as a hard core of culture which the individual will refuse to give up and which constitutes the limit of the multicultural play in which he/she frequently indulges?” (Durix 1998, 149). After all, we do live in a world that is growingly becoming glocal, where “in an individual or in a given group, several systems of reference cohabit” (ibid., 150). When the answer comes from Indigenous Australians, whose traditional culture was so unbecoming for the European measuring rod that it was regarded as acultural, maybe we should listen because the fact that they have survived and are surviving implies that, instead of representing them as “objects – as the ‘known’” – we should start representing them as “subjects as ‘knowers’” (Moreton-Robinson 2004, 75).

2. Enter a fence, a bridge and an imagined country

This brings us to the story of a fence, a bridge and an imagined country or more specifically Doris Pilkington's (Nugi Garimara's) *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* (1996), John Muk Muk Burke's *Bridge of Triangles* (1994) and Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* (2006). Though from the late 1980s there has been a considerable rise in publication of Indigenous prose fiction, drama and poetry due to a series of socio-historical reasons,⁷ the above mentioned three works are selected because they belong to very different prose genres, and show different mechanisms of survival on various levels of a nation's multiculturalism.

Pilkington's critically acclaimed work can be presented to English students not because it is an easy work to deal with, but rather because there are many sources available enabling the outsider to comprehend better the socio-historic complexities behind it. If the information from the available historical books cannot really convey the impact of the assimilation policy, currently the best source for learning about the context of Pilkington's story is a famous documentary series *First Australians: The Untold Story of Australia* (2008, dir. Rachel Perkins), especially the fifth episode entitled "Unhealthy Government Experiment" in which Doris Pilkington herself talks about her experience at the Moore River Native Settlement and how she later found her mother. The documentary series is destined for cultural outsiders, which makes its application in the class refreshingly simple. Students become acquainted with the overpowering gaze of the Chief Protector of Aborigines, forceful removal of children of mixed descent, negation of Indigenous motherhood and limitation of basic human freedoms, which as a rule triggers discussions about human rights in general, as well as how it was possible that this colonial genocide was swept under the carpet, or what enabled, what is historically known as, the "Great Australian Silence" (Stanner 1979, 320–9). This is, in effect, one of the basic issues raised in this episode of the documentary: not whether the Australians knew about the Stolen Generations but whether they cared. Discussion can also include the notion of race being a social or historical rather than biological category, especially in the context of the launching of the Human Genome Project students are usually familiar with.

If Pilkington's work is presented in combination with Phillip Noyce's 2001 critically acclaimed film *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, what gets revealed is something that the reader – "not being properly encoded" (Brooke-Rose 1981, 124) – may overlook in Pilkington's narrative, thus feeling free to "read everything, anything and therefore also nothing, into the text" (ibid., 124), including the aridity and sheer vastness of the landscape the three girls had to walk through. Stating that the three girls, Molly, Daisy and Gracie, walked about 1600 km for nine weeks from the Moore River Native Settlement north of Perth, where the girls were forcefully removed from their mothers, to Jigalong does not mean much to the European student. However, stating that it would mean walking on foot from, e.g., Ljubljana to Oslo, and imagining that the landscape is semi-arid as the Gibson Desert in Australia the girls had to traverse, means putting the whole journey into perspective and not taking the sheer numerology of their journey at face value. The vastness and layout of the landscape is best revealed in the opening scene of the film, which shows an endless horizon of a flat dry landscape, as is so often evoked in Australian literature and cinema. The opening scene also reveals that this is just one of the many stories that constitute the narrative of Stolen Generations and that even in Doris Pilkington's family forceful removal happened at least twice: Doris's mother Molly was abducted from her mother as a child, which is the main plot behind Pilkington's work, and some 10 years later Molly, who narrates in the opening and

⁷ The 1988 Bicentenary celebration propelled publication of Indigenous works from 1987 to the mid-1990s. For current problems in publishing Indigenous Australian works, see Heiss 2003, 48–125. This is currently the only systematic source on the topic.

closing scene of the film, lost both of her daughters due to the same policy. While it took over 20 years for Pilkington to trace her mother in Jigalong, the second daughter, Anne, it seems, has been lost for good. This second story is narrated in Pilkington's next work, *Under the Wintamarra Tree* (2002), while the loss of her sister Anne due to successful assimilation into the mainstream society is revealed in Pilkington's text "The Hurtful Legacy of Racism" (2000), in which, having found the address of her lost sister, Pilkington sent her a parcel with her two novels and paper clippings of their mother's 1931 journey, only to receive it back with the markings "rejected by the addressee" and "return to sender".

Pilkington's work also makes it clear that no matter how aesthetically nicely written her work is not really what the Eurocentric theory would define as auto/biography or auto/biographical fiction but a very specific genre of indigenous women's narratives critics have tried to identify as life(hi)story (Somerville 1991), transformation of life-talking into life-writing (Van Toorn 2000, 35), Aboriginal women narrative (Sabbioni 1996), Aboriginal women's autobiographical histories (Brewster 1995, 5), life stories (Van den Berg 2005, 3), or a broader genre that has recently been generally acknowledged as life writing (Smith and Watson 2001).

One of the prevailing motifs in the text and accompanying film is the fence, a freestanding structure which stereotypically denotes limiting freedom or creating a visible boundary between the insider and the outsider. In Pilkington's work the fence can be analysed as a specific, if not comic then certainly ironic relief as well as an emblem of hope. Detecting the fence as comic relief presumes knowing the bizarre story of how rabbits came to Australia, which was, as Pilkington says "a typical response by the white people to a problem of their own making" (Pilkington 2003, 109). This is the well documented story of a certain Thomas Austin who released 12 rabbits that had just come from England into his backyard in Victoria in 1859. Due to 50 million years of isolation that left Australia without a single predator or parasite and in combination with a not really a highbrow fact that rabbits tend to breed with a certain keenness, the erection of the longest fence on the other side of Australian continent had to be initiated as early as 1901. Finished in 1907 and consisting of three connected fences approximately 3,500 km long, the fence, today known as the "state vermin fence", is still in use in some parts of WA and SA because, judging from the fact that the total number of rabbits in Australia exceeds 300 million, there are some twelve of Austin's bunnies hopping around each Australian.

Apart from dividing the space into agricultural and rabbit-infested land, the fence is overwritten with a positive meaning and brings hope into the darkest of places. The fence functions as an "important landmark to everyone, including the Mardjudjara people migrating from the desert regions. Once they reached the rabbit-proof fence they followed it to Jigalong" (Pilkington 2003, 32). For the three girls, that which limits the space does not only represent a landmark but also a "yellow brick road" which leads them back to their community. As Pilkington puts it, the fence becomes a "symbol of love, home and security" (ibid., 109). Sticking to a man-made object which has been unnaturally inserted into the landscape, the girls in effect appropriate Western tools because the very fence helps them reach the country they know and the country they can read without the fence. This also shows that Pilkington does not use the motif of Indigenous reading of the landscape as some generic or abstract ability, but rather stresses that the moment the girls enter *their* country they are able to read the landscape because the country belonging to their people represents the "familiar landscape of the red earth, the dry spinifex grass and grey-green mulga trees" (ibid., 123).

Pilkington's work covers the period of Australia when the country was already multicultural with a considerable Asian population that came during the gold rush in the second half of the

19th century. At the same time, the country was without a national policy of multiculturalism. Pilkington thus reveals the thorny path of survival of the “invisible” minority who manage to transgress monocultural fences by following the often mentioned paradigm of survival of those who are not in a position to choose: the paradigm of adopt-adapt-adept. Hence, the fence for the Indigenous girls is not just a freestanding structure but also a structure of freedom. In Europe many walls and fences have been pulled down since the end of 1989 to reinforce our sense of freedom but it seems that we still have not quite figured out how to adapt in order to reach the level of adeptness.

Another lesson of Indigenous coping and survival in an ambivalently multicultural space comes from the novel *Bridge of Triangles* (1994) by John Muk Muk Burke.⁸ Unlike Pilkington’s work, whose international fame has been rendered possible primarily by the film, and subsequent translations of her work into other languages,⁹ *Bridge of Triangles* is known exclusively in the Australian context. However, in contrast to Pilkington’s text, which needs special preparatory work to introduce it in the class, Burke’s novel is set in a contemporary moment and mimics a form that non-Indigenous students might find easier to grasp.

The novel is divided into three parts: the life of the boy Chris(topher) Micky Leeton in a small town in NSW where the traditional and contemporary Aboriginalities meet; the second part follows Chris and his brother being taken by their mother to Sydney without the consent of their Irish father, and the two brothers ending up in a welfare home. The final part is narrated by Chris, who decides to leave the welfare home and search for his mother. While the text is simple on the story level, the discourse level is more complex owing to the presence of two distinct narratorial voices. The heterodiegetic narrator anticipates grim future events, and the autodiegetic narrator, Chris, uses interior monologues to blend the present and past events, thus creating an illusion of “atemporality” or a contemporary Indigenous example of “everywhen” (Stanner 1979, 23–4) which underpins the traditional Dreamings.

Both focalizations construct the protagonist Chris in opposition to others in his struggle to cope with “his sense of unbelonging” (Burke 2000, 6), or with coming to terms with his shifting identity. And this is where the biggest trap of this work lies. Since “boundaries between the self and the world, boundaries that reduce *all* spaces to ‘not us’ and thus homogenize them, have often served as one of our litmus tests of modernism” (De Lange et al. 2008, xi), students might conclude that this novel most likely represents an example of modernist and existentialist writing, that it reflects more Camus’s *The Outsider* and Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. Ironically enough, this was the reason for the editors of a very distinguished Australian publishing house, QUP, to try to persuade the author to make his story “more interesting” (See Heiss 2003, 74), even though this type of existentialist writing was the very reason why Australian publishers accepted and praised the alleged first Indigenous novel in English published over forty years earlier.¹⁰ The apparent modernist and existentialist nature is where the mimicry of the novel lies, since Chris’s interior monologues, which are based on personal impressions which passively construct the external world, might

⁸ John Muk Muk Burke (1946) was born in Narrandera, New South Wales, and on his maternal side belongs to the Wiradjuri community while his father is of Irish descent. He has taught in primary schools in the Northern Territory and New Zealand, lectured history and English literature at the Centre for Aboriginal and Islander Studies at the Northern Territory University from 1992 to 2001, and has recently worked as a teacher at the Goulburn Correctional Centre with Aboriginal inmates. His fiction *Bridge of Triangles* won the 1993 Unaipon Award. He is currently working on his next novel.

⁹ Just a fraction of the fictional works by Indigenous Australian writers have been translated into other languages. The translated authors include Mudrooroo, Sally Morgan, Philip McLaren, Alexis Wright, Melissa Lucashenko, Kim Scott and Bruce Pascoe. The reason for listing Mudrooroo goes beyond the scope of this paper.

¹⁰ The reference is to Mudrooroo’s first novel, *Wildcat Falling* (1965).

pander to European or American modernist prose. However, the source of the defragmentation of this alleged Indigenous Sisyphus is not of the protagonist's own making but stems from the contemporary condition of the urban-dwelling Indigenous Australians.

Chris's initial point of departure, or what he calls the "other knowledge", is reduced to a "painful memory of a memory" (Burke 2000, 17). He represents generations of Indigenous Australians that are moving further away from the initial place of dislocation from their tribal communities, whose fate is often being moulded by forces beyond their control. However, what connects him with the reader who is a cultural outsider is his belief that moving to a bigger urban space might solve his issues by making him anonymous. What he soon learns is that "unbelonging could never take firm hold of his soul" (ibid., 17), and Sydney, the urban space which epitomises multiculturalism, is a fallacy often represented in Indigenous contemporary fiction with the metaphor of "the big smoke". Rather, what keeps his hope alive is that one day he might make a full circle and establish his "vision of oneness" (ibid., 104). This shall be achieved through a man-made object. As the girls in Pilkington's work stick to the fence, so does Chris stick to the bridge in the place where he grew up. Since the bridge functions as the traditional boundary between his grandmother's Wiradjuri community and the small town where he spent his childhood with his mother, Chris cannot choose "sides". Rather, he needs to acknowledge that he is that very bridge with *white* triangles, that he is that link between the Wiradjuri community and contemporary Aboriginality with Irish blood coming from his father's side. His inability to choose is solved by his accepting that he does not have to choose, which should be the very essence of multiculturalism. As Anne Phillips argues, "We need our cultures in order to become autonomous beings" (Phillips 2007, 105), and Chris needs both of his cultures to become a strong individual capable of agency. This would enable him, as the narrator anticipates, to "feel and see and touch [his country] again and then he, the boy, would remember that there was his home and he would return because he had never really left" (Burke 2000, 104).

However, the fact that the novel does not close with the end of the journey but rather with an indication that Chris is on his way home implies that the journey lying ahead is long and that the wayfarer must be patient. If the bridge represents multiculturalism, the waters under the bridge are muddy and crossing the bridge, though apparently simple, might prove to be quite an endeavour.

The last Indigenous text here proposed to be included into the English Studies classroom is Alexis Wright's¹¹ critically acclaimed novel *Carpentaria* (2006), which won the 2007 Miles Franklin Award, the most prestigious Australian literary award.¹² The work equally woke up Australian critics who were in a state of slumber from the mid-1990s with their scanty publications on Indigenous fiction. Reviews of *Carpentaria* point to the novel's alleged proximity to some other famous Anglo-Australian canonical works such as Xavier Herbert's *Capricornia* (1938) (e.g., Renes 2001, 107-9) and *Poor Fellow My Country* (1974) (e.g., Devlin-Glass 2008, 397), and Patrick White's *Tree of Man* (1955) (e.g., Syson 2007, 85). Other reviews place it in the framework of vibrant Indigenous women's writing (e.g., Ferrier 2008). The accumulation of different reviews has motivated Alison Ravenscroft to come up with a critique of the very critical corpus deconstructing the novel's hidden meanings, entitling it "Dreaming of Others. *Carpentaria* and its Critics" (2010), thus evoking

¹¹ Alexis Wright (1950) is from the Waanji people from the highlands of the southern Gulf of Carpentaria in the NT and Queensland. She has worked extensively in government departments and Aboriginal agencies as a professional manager, educator, researcher and writer. She held speeches against the Howard Government's Northern Territory Intervention in 2007. Her other books include *Grog War* (1997), a study of alcohol abuse in the outback town of Tennant Creek, and the novel *Plains of Promise* (1997).

¹² The only other Indigenous Australian who won this award is Kim Scott. In 2000 Scott shared the first prize with the novel *Benang. From the Heart*, and in 2011 he was awarded the first prize for *That Deadman Dance*.

Tolkien's famous paper on Beowulf.¹³ As if anticipating such a reception, Wright's novel starts with the words: "A NATION CHANTS, *BUT WE KNOW YOUR STORY ALREADY*" (Wright 2006, 1, italics in the original).

What enables an easy inclusion of this voluminous labyrinthine novel into the European classroom is its very genre: magical realism, identified by many scholars as the most important aesthetic merit of the novel. Relying on Indigenous oral tradition the textual landscape is not purely imaginary, but rather represents an inscription of the native place of Alexis Wright, the Gulf of Carpentaria. Spreading across the Top End of Queensland and the Northern Territory, and located a bit above the Tropic of Capricorn, the region is exposed to the exchange of dry and wet seasons. The low-lying areas of the Gulf's hinterland are reminiscent of the shots being sent to us by Curiosity from Mars, though they do become flooded during the wet season. Prone to extreme weather conditions, Wright's country becomes an excellent canvass for constructing a world in which "it is probable that many improbable things may happen" (Aristotle 1982, 65),¹⁴ which is the key condition for interweaving magic in a matter-of-fact manner into everydayness.

Accordingly, Wright's imaginary town of Desperance, named after Captain Matthew "Desperance" Flinders, who was the first European to circumnavigate Australia, and the first to map the Gulf of Carpentaria, functions as Márquez's Macondo in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967). It is inhabited by different peoples, each representing a specific menagerie. There are the Uptowners who glorify the place in the name of pioneer history and bush eccentricity, and reflect the "three Ms of the Top End: missionaries, mercenaries, and misfits" (Devlin-Glass 2007, 82). The margins of the town are inhabited by a variety of shattered Aboriginal communities: the Western Pricklebush mob lead by the Phantom family; Joseph Midnight's Eastend mob living in car bodies on the eastern side of town; a team of underage scholars, urged by their elders to adopt literacy in order to find out the secrets of the Uptowners; a group of separatists led by Big Mozzie Fishman, who follow the dreaming tracks from across the Northern Territory border in battered Holdens and Fords, two Australian car makes. This group is loosely affiliated with another led by a young Indigenous guerrilla warrior, Will Phantom, the character based on a the real life persona, Murandoo Yanner, the famous activist and voice of Gulf Aboriginals.

Every single character, including those with cameo appearances, represents a specific amalgam of several cultural codes: Norm(al) Phantom is a man of the sea who in his alchemical workshop transforms dead fish into jewel-like objects. His wife Angel Day, is the "queen" of garbage, collecting screws and other metal parts in Heinz tins, and performs an Indigenous makeover of a statue of the Virgin. Unlike Angel, whose fate is more embedded in the realism of the Top End, Norm eventually embraces his cultural heritage. There is also Elias Smith, a prophet-like figure who emerges from the sea and is returned to it. Will Phantom, the son of Norm Phantom, starts as a guerrilla warrior in the attempt to blow up the mine, but eventually appropriates a more pacifistic activism. There is also Mozzie Fishman, a shamanic practitioner of Aboriginal belief who goes on walkabouts in a Mad Max procession of vehicles. Furthermore, white characters also have a dose of quirkiness: Lloydie is in love with a mermaid trapped in the timber in his bar; Father Dan is

¹³ Tolkien's 1936 lecture "The Monsters and the Critic", reprinted in *The Monsters and the Critic and Other Essays* (2006), is the most important text in the history of *Beowulf* scholarship. It breaks with the established studies of *Beowulf* and offers a new model of interpretation.

¹⁴ In the context of the place where a high level of improbable things might happen, according to recent research this vast area might have also been the setting of a crucial event in the ancient history of mankind: it is allegedly the location where two giant meteorites crashed around AD 500 causing a tsunami and global cooling on the Earth, as recorded in tree-ring data from Asia to Europe (see Lovett 2010).

an Irish pilgrim and a boxer who uses his car as a cathedral; Truthful is a quiet constable whose pet plant will destroy the building, while Bruise, the town major, is a more stereotypical character, constructed as a bigot and a murderer.

This multicultural circus of Desperanca meanders through the pages of the novel as the ancestral serpent with which the novel starts. Every character in this trickster place is itself a trickster because magical realism as a mode or as a genre does not create binarism but rather expands the reality, or alternatively the text constructs the “magical” and the “real” as subjective and cultural experiences available in *any* cultural location. The technique of achieving this effect is defined as a realistic description of the unreal and an unrealistic description of the real, or what Scarano describes as “the naturalization of the unreal, and the supernaturalization of the real” (Scarano 1999, 17). As the narrator states in the closing pages of the novel: “But miracles did not automatically happen to anyone unless they already had the key” (Wright 2006, 514). Hence, magic and realism lay in the hands of the beholder. In *Carpentaria*, each and every character holds a special key for a different type of magic. Owing to its multiplicity of voices, the novel can be described as the ancestral serpent from the beginning of the novel: as “laden with its own creative enormity” (ibid., 1). This perpetual creative zest appears in the closing chapters of the novel, when the town gets flooded. As in the physical Gulf of Carpentaria, flooding only enables the renewal of Desperanca, making this remote town brim with *esperança* (Portuguese for hope).

Though quite visibly written from the Indigenous cultural code, Wright herself has destined her novel for a wider audience because the ideas inserted in the text concern anyone:

I wanted to question the idea of boundaries through exploring how ancient beliefs sit in the modern world, while at the same time exposing the fragility of the boundaries of Indigenous home places of the mind ... The fundamental challenge I wanted to set myself, was to explore ideas that would help us to understand how to re-imagine a larger space than the ones we have been forced to enclose within the imagined borders that have been forced upon us. (Wright 2007, 94)

Instead of appropriating the Indigenous “singing the world into existence”, Wright decides to search for a song that “should be sung in recognition of our national collectivity” (2007, 92). Quite unsurprisingly, the “great Australian novel”, multifarious in its stories and codes, has come from the pen of an Indigenous author, ironically enough, at a time when Wright’s very country was once again undergoing discipline by the former Howard government.¹⁵ Wright’s novel reveals that culture is not a misnomer but that it matters “as part of the way we give meaning to our world, as an important element in self-ascribed identity, [...] It correlates with differences of gender, race, ethnicity, and national origin, and does so in a structured manner that goes beyond questions of identity or choice” (Phillips 2007, 15).

3. Conclusion

In the context of the contemporary political debate wrapped in an overly relaxed transnational cosmopolitanism, multiculturalism

appears not as a cultural liberator but as a cultural straitjacket, forcing those described as members of a minority cultural group into a regime of authenticity, denying them the

¹⁵ At the time of the publishing of the novel, the then Australian Prime Minister John Howard launched the notorious Northern Territory intervention. For repercussions of the intervention on the reception of the novel, see Shoemaker 2008.

chance to cross cultural borders, borrow cultural influences, define and redefine themselves. If the accusations are correct, they threaten to remove the very basis for multicultural policies, for if culture imputes a false stability to experiences that are intrinsically fluid, what exactly is left to be recognised, accommodated, or equalised?

(Phillips 2007, 14)

The three texts selected to be included in the European English Studies reveal the true anatomy of multiculturalism by challenging what Phillips identifies as a “cultural straitjacket” as well as “aculturality”, warning us that before any solution there is a long walk home during which we should not be scared of fences and bridges but rather make do with what we have. It seems that the overpowering narrator of *Carpentaria* offers a possible solution:

ONE EVENING IN THE DRIEST GRASSES IN THE WORLD, A CHILD WHO WAS NO STRANGER TO HER PEOPLE, ASKED IF ANYONE COULD FIND HOPE.

THE PEOPLE OF PARABLE AND PROPHECY PONDERED WHAT WAS HOPELESS AND FINALLY DECLARED THEY NO LONGER KNEW WHAT HOPE WAS.

THE CLOCKS, TICK-A-TY TOCK, LOOKED AS THOUGH THEY MIGHT RUN OUT OF TIME. LUCKILY, THE GHOSTS IN THE MEMORIES OF THE OLD FOLK WERE LISTENING, AND SAID ANYONE CAN FIND HOPE IN THE STORIES: THE BIG STORIES AND THE LITTLE ONES IN BETWEEN. SO... (Wright 2006, 12)

This we should include into the English Studies classroom because such texts may help us realise that multicultural should no longer be “synonymous with Martian” (Safransky 1992, 204), but rather a more *down to earth* phenomenon.

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