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## 8. Radio writes back: Challenging media stereotypes of race and identity

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**Abstract:** Post-colonial theory has become an important but not uncontested lens through which a range of literary works have been analysed and the engine for the production of a range of creative works. This article looks at two concepts from *post-colonial* theory: 'the colonisation of the mind', and Salman Rushdie's notion of 'writing back to the centre' and how they might be applied to an analysis of journalistic texts. The article explores the usefulness of post-colonial theory as both a heuristic device and a framework for the production of journalism in the context of the recent media coverage of the federal government's intervention in the Northern Territory Aboriginal communities. Specifically it analyses a recent ABC radio documentary, Carmel Young and Tony Collins' *The Writers Train*, as an example of an innovative journalistic 'writing back'. This contemporary, oral history style documentary interweaves stories, spoken word performances and workshops from Indigenous poets, playwrights, musicians, recorded on the 'writers train', a trip on the Ghan through outback Australia from Darwin to Adelaide.

**Keywords:** colonisation, indigenous, oral history, post-colonial theory

As the police and troops began arriving in Mutijulu in the Northern Territory, the media moved in en masse with them. (*Media Watch*, ABC TV, June 2007)

The typical media images of Indigenous people in remote communities after allegations of child abuse in 2006 and 2007 were of old women in groups outside or inside ramshackle community centres, children wandering along dusty roads or standing in small groups outside spartan houses, children playing footy or cricket with makeshift balls and bats in the red dirt.

The stories were about adult male child abusers, unemployed youth, the number of child sexual abuse cases before the court and other acts of drug and alcohol deviancy, the stories were also of older community women crying for help.

When the government declared its intention to intervene in Territory matters and rushed legislation through Parliament, the broadcast images were of government ministers and their apparatchiks shaking hands with Indigenous community leaders in red dusty towns, children happily donning the t-shirts handed to them by camouflage wearing soldiers; images that invoked the first 'fall' of Baghdad as camouflage wearing American soldiers handed out bags of water to the Iraqi children.<sup>1</sup>

The Indigenous people in the Northern Territory communities had been 'saved'. Media stories and images, while mostly positive about the intervention, tended to reinforce stereotypes of remote Indigenous people and Indigenous people in general. They were different, 'other,' unable to control their own sexuality, and implicit in this: unable to control their destinies. The stories and images also served to remind people in Indigenous communities that they were and are still under the yoke of colonial control whereby concessions, privileges and agreements can be revoked at any time with or without consent and consultation.

In this article I will argue that a cultural studies analysis of journalism can provide a lens to analyse the production of meaning in contemporary events and their reportage. *Post-colonial* studies along with post-structuralist theory offers tools to analyse media discourse, examine its semiotic and linguistic arrangements and explore its narrative functions. While these methods have largely been used to analyse literary texts, this paper will extend their use to the analysis of contemporary journalism.

First I will look briefly at identity construction under the rubric of post-colonial theory and how it has been used to analyse Australian Indigenous issues; I will pay particular attention to notions of 'colonisation of the mind' and how this serves to propagate or, allow for, the existence of early colonial stereotypes. Secondly, I will examine a contemporary radio text which attempts to redress these stereotypes by using a multiplicity of narratives suggestive of dynamic evolving cultures. Finally, I will

consider the colonial 'journey' trope, in the journey to the centre of Australia and how this is deployed as a means to 'write back' to the canon.

### **Fixing Indigenous identity**

Paul Nursey-Bray and Pal Ahluwalia<sup>2</sup> note that for early post-colonial theorists Franz Fanon and Edward Said, the 'colonisation of the mind' is more pervasive and dangerous than physical domination in the colonial world. They write: 'The physical presence of the coloniser can be removed but the mental presence is harder to dislodge' (Nursey-Bray, PF & Ahluwalia, 1997, p. 27).

Colonisation of the mind occurs, according to Bill Ashcroft, when a dominant narrative locks the non-European subject into a Western world view. This Western world view Ashcroft describes as a 'false symmetry of a history', which is linear in its progression and 'conceals the many histories, the many narratives which constitute social life' (Ashcroft, 2001, p. 99).

Evidence of the West's persistent construction of representation through a dominant and colonial discourse is showcased in Edward Said's groundbreaking work *Orientalism*, which explores the discourse of power inherent in the objectification of the Orient. *Orientalism* critiqued the knowledge that circulated in western literary forms about the Orient. It revealed how Europeans constructed the other—through naturalising a wide range of Oriental stereo types and assumptions. Said relied on Foucault's concept of discourse—as the intersection of knowledge and power—to reveal the connections between the visible and the hidden—specifically the subjective nature in which literary and cultural forms were interpreted and represented (Loomba, 1998, p. 47).

Bain Attwood<sup>3</sup> applied this Foucauldian analysis of knowledge and power to the construction of Aboriginality:

In following Foucault and Said then, our contention is that power, knowledge and Aborigines are mutually constitutive—they produce and maintain one another through discursive practices which can be known as Aboriginalism. (Attwood, 1992)

Key literary texts alluding to colonisation, fix Indigenous: people as 'the other' as 'untouchable', 'savage', native, 'the blacks'. These descriptions featured in literature even before the explorers, invaders, settlers arrived.

'New world natives' have been projected as birthed by the European encounter with them: accordingly a discourse of primitivism surrounds them. On the other hand the East is constructed as barbaric or degenerate (Loomba, 1998, p. 108).

When they embarked on the arduous journey to the centre as anthropologists and imperialists and missionaries, the colonisers, settlers and convicts did so with these 'fixed' notions of the Indigenous inhabitants (Loomba, 1998). The journey—a frequent trope in early colonial literature—became not only an ethnographic journey to explore the terrain and 'map' country, but also to categorise its inhabitants and scour the land for mineral deposits and material wealth. That the country was labeled 'terra nullius' or, no man's land by the early explorers: and the Indigenous encountered on the journey, a 'doomed race', was imperialism's justification to plunder (Lloyd, 2000).

Europeans who traveled outwards took with them certain images of the people they expected to encounter. The actual encounters necessitated both the continuity and a re-shaping of these images—continuity because previously held notions about the inferiority of non-Europeans provided a justification for European settlements, trading practices, religious missions and military activities—and reshaping in order to adjust images to specific colonial practices. (Loomba, 1998)

In Australian colonial texts stereotypes are abundant. In an article titled 'Thinking the Unthinkable; the imaginary white Savage of TGH Strehlow', Shane Hersey analyses the early colonial writings of anthropologists Strehlow, Spencer and Gillen. He finds in their work the invocation of an imaginary Aboriginal savage:

Spencer, Gillen, Strehlow created the personalities that they were comfortable with then projected that image onto Aboriginal people with whom they came in contact...they created, supported and documented that collective imaginary savage. (Hersey, 2001, p. 143)

Hersey also places these imaginary personalities under the rubric of *Aboriginalism*, which he attributes to Stephen Muecke's work in this field. 'That is, just as the west imagined the Orient and within it the Oriental, so too people like Spencer, Gillen and Carl Strehlow imagined the Aboriginal savage' (Hersey, 2001, p. 143).

This stereotype of the imagined Aboriginal is embedded in a range of early colonial writing as well as canonical literary texts. In *The Tragedy Track*, a journalistic popular history of the Northern Territory's Granites Mines, F.E. Baume, traces the discovery and construction of the gold mine in the early 1930s. Baume also uses the text to vent his fear and project his imaginary savage onto the Indigenous peoples he encounters. Although they come from a variety of language groups and cultures, Baume reduces Aboriginals to just one: one culture, one 'black', one 'he'. In this process he renders the Aboriginals he encounters, mute, sometimes quite literally as in the following example:

The difference between the treatment of the natives by new chums out here and the few old prospectors left is apparent. When Joe the Nark or Jack Dempsey or O'Leary or Simon Rieff tell a native to do anything, he does it quickly. There is something in the tone which demands action, and there is no conversation apart from the order. 'You bin takem this feller drum gettem quadja (water)' is the order. There is no smile, no word wasted: the water is got. But the new chum smiles at the black and 'yabbers' with him. The black giggles and becomes contemptuous, taking twice as long to do the job for the new chum as for the prospector or bushman, and then, the job done, he squats by the camp and pleads for boots, jam, onions or tobacco- and gets what he wants...The desert black is cruel and treacherous and unstable...' (Baume, 1933, p. 92)

This book was reprinted in 1994 to 'commemorate a milestone in one of Australia's greatest mining success story—the pouring of the one millionth ounce of gold from North Flinders Mines limited Tanami Desert deposit.' What the book also commemorates, in its failure to qualify images and text, is an acceptance of Indigenous stereotypes, which remain harsh, brutal and dehumanising.

The type of informal colonial relations exemplified by Baume's 'old prospectors' was institutionalised in a range of policies from the early attempts at segregated reserves to the supposedly more enlightened attempts at 'assimilation'. However the colonialist assumptions underlying these various policies and various texts are strikingly similar. For example, Genevieve Lloyd argues that the justification for South Australian State Children's act of 1895, an example of early assimilation policy, can be found in two dominant fictions one being terra nullius and the other, that Indigenous were part of a 'doomed race':

The removal of Indigenous children was brought, early this century, under the provisions of the general child welfare laws of the *State Children's Act* of 1895. It was only on grounds of 'neglect' or 'destitution' that a child would be removed, but a child could be deemed 'neglected', according to the definitions of the Act, if he or she 'sleeps in the open air, and does not satisfy the Justices that he or she has a home or a settled place of abode', and 'destitute' if he or she has 'no sufficient means of subsistence' and is in the care of people who are 'in indigent circumstances and unable to support such a child.... As such Acts were applied in practice, being a child of mixed descent would suffice to be treated as neglected. So, in practice, children were removed because they were Aboriginal'.

The protection policies, bankrupt in their refusal to recognise the lives of the Indigenous, and replete with colonial assumptions, resulted in what we now know as 'the stolen generation'. But this policy resulted in more than one generation of displaced children: it occurred for the best part of a century.

However, the various practices of colonialism and colonial discourse did not necessarily work as European colonisers hoped. Loomba argues that anti-colonial movements often drew upon western ideas to challenge colonial policies:

Indeed they often hybridised what they borrowed by juxtaposing it with their Indigenous ideas, reading it through their own interpretative lens, and even using it to assert cultural alterity or insist on an unbridgeable difference between colonised and coloniser...Thus Ghandi's notion of non-

violence was forged by reading Emerson, Thoreau and Tolstoy, even though his vision of an ideal society evoked a specifically Hindu version... (Loomba, 1998, p. 174)

The 'post' in *post-colonial* seems to imply the process of colonisation—of a people and place—is over. However this is a fiercely contested proposition, and post-colonial theorist Ania Loomba argues the best way of defining post-colonialism is in fact as a contestation: '...coming literally after colonialism and signifying its demise, but more flexibly as the contestation of colonial domination and the legacies of colonialism' (Loomba, 1998, p. 12). Post colonialism is less about 'after' colonialism than acknowledgement that the centre no longer holds.<sup>4</sup>

Ashcroft also makes a similar point reminding us that Shakespeare's slave, Caliban, uses Prospero's imposed language to undermine his master's power. He argues that such contesting narratives are 'a rewriting of history (and) an important strategy in the process of discursive resistance' (Ashcroft, 200, p. 102).

Jorge de Alva urges scholars to go beyond the linear historical model of colonisation and view it in a post-structuralist context. Implicit in this is the acceptance of a 'multiplicity of conflicting and frequently parallel narratives' (de Alva in Loomba, 1998, p. 13). Postcolonial theorists and writers also advance the creation of new hybrid spaces in-between, in which other identities beyond the colonial binaries might be found. '*Cultural identities are both fragmented and in a constant state of flux*' (Driechal in Ratcliffe and Turcotte, 2001, p. 212).

In this sense post-colonialism is not just a method of analysis but a method to re-imagine past and present representations of culture. To quote Ashcroft again:

The postcolonial seeks to coin a method by which the profusion and hybridity of post-colonial reality can be stated within the spaces opened up by history, and in this way redirect it. This method is fundamentally a political contestation of imperial power. But it is one that works through, in the interstices of, in the fringes of, rather than simple opposition to, history. (Ashcroft, 2001, p. 102)

### **The Writers Train**

So how does this theory and method work in the context of contemporary journalism? How does the media contribute to the fixing of the 'other' in Indigenous identity construction and how can a knowledge of *post-colonial* theory and the tools of *post-colonial* analysis lend itself to a media discourse that moves away from perpetuating negative, reductive stereotypes of Aboriginals as 'other' and the essentialising of Indigenous culture?

Fixing identity and relying on stereotypes is inherent in a range of media practices associated with the assemblage of normative information. The need for quick descriptions for time dependent news stories often leads to stereotypes being adopted as 'labels' which function to familiarise an audience with a subject. In doing so they also reduce the complexity of the subject.

I will briefly examine a radio documentary that does move away from this predominant style of media discourse and the negative, colonial stereotypes. By using a trope in colonial discourse- the journey—to reimagine the country, its histories and its multilingual and multicultural identity, and by using this form of journalism: radio to tell the story, this innovative piece of journalism creates a counter discourse.

*The Writers Train*, broadcast on ABC *Radio Eye* in August 2007<sup>2</sup>, is a documentary based on a multiplicity of narratives from a number of culturally different voices. The 'Ghantastic Writers Tour' was organised by the Northern Territory Writers Centre. It took screenwriter Andrew Bovell, poet Sam Wagan Watson, oral historian and children's story teller Leonie Norrington, playwright John Romerill, pioneer of Aboriginal thriller, Phillip McLaren, and singer songwriter Leah Flannagan through the outback and some of the remote communities at the heart of the governments intervention strategy.

It is important to mention that *Radio Eye*, a weekly programme devoted to long-form radio documentary and features, has been producing similar work for more than 15 years. Its form is derived from a tradition of cultural radio where documentary and radiophonic techniques are used extensively. Virginia Marsden has traced the history of this 'cultural radio' to British and European public broadcasting post-World War 11 which, she says, does not fall into the 'limited permutations of the announcer-music track newsbreak-commercial format which has been given every appearance of being

“natural to radio””, but rather, uses extensive and intensive forms, a myriad of production techniques and the voices of real people, ‘radiophonics’; actuality and sound scape, in a process that is as committed to the time it takes to make these documentaries (months), as it is to providing a regular timeslot to broadcast.

While cultural radio requires greater resources of the average talkback or programme music station Marsden says this kind of documentary radio form: ‘has been able to provide an ideal instructional matrix for the evolution of public broadcasting as an instrument of democratic and civil society.’

The producers of the *Writers Train*: journalists Carmel Young and Tony Collins, following in this tradition of cultural radio use sound to evoke emotion and place to create sonic sites of cultural exploration, and to re envision places and historical moments. They travel with the writers and record their observations, stories, anecdotes and interpretation of the desert towns, landscape and it’s people. The effect of this sonic, multi-layered story-telling ruptures notions of them and us, the borders between black and white, and interpolates dominant representations of Australian colonial history with the voices of the present. This kind of radio documentary story-telling challenges outmoded representations, and clichés by challenging notions of ‘the other’ in and going to the ‘in-between spaces’ it explores the borders of hybridity and difference, revealing a number of distinctly different Indigenous and non Indigenous perspectives on place and history. The documentary also ‘writes back’ by juxtaposing early colonial texts (in voiceovers) with contemporary spoken-word narratives.

*The Writers Train*, which went to air just after the federal government’s intervention in the territory, followed a group of writers on a train journey on the Ghan from Darwin to Adelaide in August 2006. The two-part, two-hour documentary recorded the writers as they stopped at remote communities for spoken word performances. It also documented their personal stories growing up in various parts of the country. Interspersed throughout the text are voiceover readings of two colonial texts that helped shape colonial discourse: *We of the Never Never* and Xavier Herbert’s *Capricornia*. These personal and appropriated texts are in turn juxtaposed with the actuality of events like the screening of *Strictly Ballroom* in the multidialectal town of Ali Curang and with award winning poet, Sam Wagan Watson’s reflections and poems of urban Indigenous life in Brisbane.

The documentary does not adhere to chronologies or linear narratives rather, it is an aural palimpsest: layered, fragmentary accounts of lives, history, story, culture and country as the writers chug along the steel tracks from remote north west, through Arnhem land and to the centre.

In the remainder of the paper, I would like to highlight three aspects of this documentary and its relationship to the *post-colonial* theories I have been discussing. Firstly, the documentary highlights the hybrid identities of the performers, secondly I will argue that this celebration of hybridity is a ‘writing back’ to the center and finally I will look at how this documentary re-conceptualises the journey trope that is at the heart of much colonial discourse.

## Hybridity

Post-colonial studies have been preoccupied by issues of hybridity. Loomba links this to the central contradiction at the heart of colonialism: the need to both ‘civilise’ and fix Indigenous people in a ‘perpetual otherness’. In this sense ‘*colonial empires both fear and engender biological as well as intellectual hybridities*’ (Loomba, 1998, p. 173).

*The Writer’s Train* confronts these twin desires of colonial discourse through a celebration of the diversity of contemporary Aboriginal life. The writing of Brisbane poet Sam Wagan Watson of Bundjalung, Birri Gubba, German, Scottish and Irish descent, who grew up in an activist household in Brisbane, makes an interesting contrast to the 19th century musings of Aenus Gunn. It also serves to highlight Watson’s hybridity and the politics of being urban, Aboriginal.

‘Hotel Bones’, the title of one of his pieces, is both the country and the place where he finds himself physically, culturally and intellectually. His alterity, separates him from the white mainstream and links him to other marginalised groups:

these white stucco walls, I imagine, once carried a vision of pearl  
now a gourd for asylum seekers  
Iraqi, Indonesian, Sri Lankan  
and one crazy Aboriginal... who lives with a typewriter  
but not with the brevity of a visa on my head; no,  
my longevity was guaranteed before I was born  
in the 1967 referendum  
the freedom to practice the voodoo of semantics  
within the marrow of Hotel Bone  
existence only 2 minutes walk  
from some of the best latte lounges in the city  
yet, white faces don’t come down here  
until they’ve been classified, unfit for duty  
no longer permitted upon the chorus line  
of the cappuccino song  
where multi-culturalism is in an airline format  
first-class, business and economy seating  
(Watson, *Radio Eye*, 2007)

Just as Wagan Watson understands and relates to his cultural hybridity, Darwin singer songwriter, Leah Flanagan also describes her culturally and historically diverse background:

I come from a very big family all mainly living up in Darwin now. My grandmother is from this country. She was born in Utopia and was part of the stolen generation so she was taken up to Garden point mission. That’s where my family is based so we’re all over the place, we’re everywhere and it’s funny always meeting a new member of your family because everyone was so disjointed. My grandmother grew up on Melville Island and came down to Darwin and married my grandfather who is from Venice. Yeah...I’ve got lots of Aunties and Uncles...

The mainstream media represent Indigenous people in Australia as one identity, one Indigenous, one desert, one mob. This, as we hear in *The Writers Train*, is far from the case. Innovator of the Aboriginal thriller genre, Phillip McClaren, a Kamiliroi man—tells how working with Indigenous in Canada became the catalyst to understand his own Indigenous identity :

There’s a lot of things in life that come out of angst or some kind of turmoil. When I was living in Vancouver in Canada I was working for the CBC on a television program that involved an Indigenous boy from the Swanitch or the seashell people ...and I realised by the time we got to the end of doing that series for the CBC that I knew more about the HyderIndians than I did about my own people—the Kamiliroi people- back in Australia and I really got annoyed about it- really pissed off and I was really angry.... ...Looking out over the Pacific I realised on the other side of that ocean was Australia and it was emotional—we had had a really good shoot—but I had to question why I knew more about this guys tribe than I knew about my own...then this light bulb went off in my head—I’ll be the one to go back and write about my people—that’s when I decided I would become this writer person...(McClaren, *Radio Eye*, 2007)

The hybridity of the participants, their views of the country, their upbringing, their bicultural/multicultural lives acknowledges the vast difference that exist within Indigenous communities around the country—interpretations of history, diversity of lives—urban, rural, remote, varied ideological positions, all serve to confound the binaries between black and white, urban and remote and allow for an appreciation of different differences. The personal accounts of histories, professions, aspirations lives and subjective interpretations of country rupture stereotype and create the subject out of the object.

### Writing back

The phrase, writing back (to the canon) was popularised in the early 1980s after Salman Rushdie's play on the name of the *Star Wars* sequel *The Empire Strikes Back* in a newspaper article on racism entitled, 'The Empire writes back with a vengeance' and critically examined in a ground breaking text, 'The empire writes back: theory and practice in post-colonial literatures' in the early 1990s.

The notions of 'Writing back' and 'counter discourse' are intended to challenge dominant discourses on race, class gender and nation. One of the ways of doing this was to interpolate contesting narratives into history/literature as intertext. Ashcroft puts it this way:

Interpolation is not so much 're-writing' ...inserting the marginal histories that have been excluded...but 'writing back'. The model for this is 'counter discourse' which is not a separate oppositional discourse but a tactic which operates from the fractures and contradictions of discourse itself... (Ashcroft, 2001, p. 102)

The producers of *The Writers Train* clearly use a range of intertextual and radiophonic strategies that effectively write back to the colonial canon. They begin the documentary with a voiceover from Aeneas Gunn's *We of the Never Never*. As the Northern Territory writers embark on *their* train journey, so too Aeneas Gunn's protagonist 'The little Missus' is on her way to the Never Never. Traveling with her husband, 'the Maluka', 200 km from Darwin to a pastoral station, she recounts 'making merry' by pelting Aboriginals with watermelon:

From sunup to sundown on Tuesday the train glided quietly forward on its way to the Never Never and from sun up to sundown the Maluka and I experienced the kindly consideration that it always shows to strangers. It boiled a billy for us at its furnace, it loitered through the pleasant valleys; smiled indulgently and slackened speed whenever we made merry with the blacks by pelting them with chunks of watermelon, and generally waited on us hand and foot. The man in charge pointing out the beauty spots and places of interest and making tea for us at frequent intervals.

As the writers traverse the desert from Darwin to Barrow Creek from Ali Curang to Alice Springs we also hear extracts from Xavier Herbert's *Capricornia*. As the journey approaches Coniston, a dramatised voice-over recounts a version of the Coniston massacre:

Two employees, Jane Stapleton and John Franks were killed in an attack by the Kadesch men on the Barrow Creek telegraph station on 23 February 1874. Another man, Ebenezer Flint, was seriously wounded. The *Adelaide Advertiser* accurately predicted that a 'punishment would doubtless be given to the blood thirsty rascals which will be remembered for years to come'. Constables Samuel Gassen from Barrow Creek and 10 volunteers were away for six weeks but took no prisoners. While an undisclosed number of Kadesch were shot so too were a great many of their innocent neighbours the Amajera, including at least one entire camp, as well as Warramungu, Aluwarra and Warlpiri people.

The interpolation of these stories serves to situate the listener at the colonial juncture in the past and inscribe this with the present. In the telling of the Conniston massacre we have the story told first in the colonial voice, then referred to by the narrator of the documentary, and finally retold by playwright John Romerill through the eyes of a young woman. This is an attempt to write back and interpolate dominant discourse- to give a voice to the Indigenous at the scene of the massacre:



(Obedience watches a large camp preparing for evening meal- kids down at the waterhole, old men waiting...)

They heard the shots coming from the other way. They looked to see a group of eight white men on horses crossing the river. The two girls that had gone for the children were the first to be shot. Several younger children fell quickly after. The women ran toward the children and were shot in turn. The men ran for their weapons and were cut down. One woman managed to grab a small child and managed to hide her in the bush when she went back for another—she too was shot. When the full brunt of the shooting was over 22 people lay dead; 12 of them were children; another 14 were injured eight had managed to escape into the bush. The old woman had been spared to old to run and too old to shoot. she sat down by the fire and wept. The white men got down from their horses and shot the wounded. They made a pile of the bodies and burnt them. There was one white death—the man who had come to the camp to warn them. This is our history.

### **The journey: Reading place through counter discourse**

A reappropriation and reimagining of the colonial ‘journey’ trope is one of the key strategies that allows *The Writer’s Train* to go beyond traditional media representations of Aboriginal culture and place. The traveling out and to, the mythical *Never Never*, is re-fashioned and configured outside of the linear narrative, to arrive in a aural mash-up of past and present. Radio, known as the theatre of the mind, allows for the re-conceptualization of not only the space being described and defined but also the space the listener discovers.

So, we have the writers and radio producers on *The Writers Train* retracing Aaneus Gunn’s colonial footprints, re-reading the desert space and reinvesting it with a multitude of stories and histories. As Fredric Jamison acknowledges the: ‘*cognitive mapping of spaces allows oppositional cultures to emerge*’. (Jamieson, 1991). This multiple inscription opens up alternative views of the desert and allows both the audience and the writers to make their own history beyond the dominant discourse.

In their reading of the significance of the Adelaide oval as a colonial trope of power and a centre for discourse as well as a contemporary site for reconciliation Hemmings and Rigny (2003) refer to dialectical understanding of space. It is integral to politics and ideology not merely a backdrop. They argue that the continual ‘making and remaking of knowledge connected to space... allows us to move beyond the notion of legacy and into the practice of possibility as sites are reconceptualised’ (Soja, 2003).

The narrator of *The Writers’ Train* takes us to a cultural event in Ali Curang not that far from the massacre at Coniston and here we have a moment of surreal collision between race, culture, place and for the non-Indigenous listener, a collision and rupture of stereotypes and expectations:

Watching *Strictly Ballroom* on the oval at Ali Curang with the descendents of those who survived the early intrusions of white settlers and their police, was a surreal moment, something like setting up a cinema screen on a vacant lot in an urban ghetto and inviting the residents out for a barbeque and a comedy film. The broken houses and abandoned cars seemed cliched and the black population who struggle with English seem foreign until you realise that you are an intruder and yes this is Australia. But we all laughed together and ate sausage sandwiches and had a good time...’. ( *The Writers Train*, Radio Eye, 2007)

The layering of the text creates an aural dissonance—the past and the present collide and the audience; both listening and at the scene, find themselves in the unromantic, lively, vibrant present. Radio, specifically this kind of radio documentary; using soundscape, narration, actuality, performance and other radiophonic and documentary techniques, can do this more readily than any other form of journalism. And, it is this form that Virginia Marsden turns to when discussing radio’s continuing ‘potential to communicate across human difference and through diverse cultures to make productive contact and listening possible between peoples and individuals’.

Broadcast during the early weeks of the governments intervention into this region, when images of ‘one Indigenous’ one ‘he’ were pixilated and scatter gunned through the media, a multiple narrative challenged the dominant discourse and acknowledged that there is no one way of examining this issue, there is no one truth just as there is no one people and no one cultural group representing Indigenous voices. The construct, of one group, freezes Indigenous identity in mainstream discourse and this in turn allows for justification of policies without broad and extensive consultation.

While ‘who speaks for whom’ particularly in the multilingual and bicultural Indigenous communities in the central desert is still a very pertinent and political question; portraying an array of Indigenous perspectives on place and culture breaks up perceptions of the essentialised Indigenous other. Pam Johnston, (Johnston, 2001) says many Aboriginal people living in Australia today ‘strongly contest the idea we are now in a post-colonial state, saying this term makes people too complacent to the effects of colonialism on Indigenous people in Australia’.

The recent government intervention in the Northern Territory and the images and text that flowed from this event represented a bleak return to the Manichean binaries of black/white good/evil and: the essentialised other. We are dealing, again, with the problems of identity and representation, and the need to a deconstruction mainstream discourse, to challenge the predominance of the noble savage, the vulnerable Indigenous woman and the white do-gooder/saviour. Pam Johnston, sees the identity problem this way:

Indigeness is not a represented part of Australian daily life. What can be seen is not a representation of our oral traditions, our communities and cultures as contemporary people so much as a romanticised or stereotyped interpretation. The colonisers observe Aboriginality, and so Aboriginals become the observers of the observers; forever waiting to be told who we are. This has stripped Aboriginality of much identity. (Johnston, 2001 p 97)

ABC Radio National programmes like *Radio Eye* have been instrumental in providing cultural radio as distinct from mainstream journalistic text, that explores and challenges stereotypes.

In John Tebbutt’s transnational perspective of the ABC, Tebbutt makes the point that this kind of spoken word arts programming begun in Australia when the ABC finally began to move away from a narrow ‘nationalistic’ style in the 1970s to an ‘internationalisation’ of spoken word programming—as European ideas and concepts began to flow through the ABC. This in turn resulted in a shift away from largely BBC-influenced ‘text’ based material to a radiophonic style popular with Europe broadcasters like Radio France’s ‘Atelier de Creation Radiophonique.’ Equally the movement and flow of ideas from Europe and around the world has denationalised Australian ‘white-man’ perspective.

Still, mainstream and commercial journalism seems to lag behind the evolving practices of ‘cultural radio’. Some ways of addressing this in failure in mainstream and commercial journalism involve avoiding all kinds of stereotypes, clichéd images, text which reinforces binaries in antagonistic ways and fails to address diversity not just of identity but also of views. A National Indigenous media, as well as other Aboriginal media, is expected to further challenge and balance the images and texts produced by the mainstream. A construction of alternative identities including a multiplicity of identities in various, texts and narratives and contexts as well as a re-reading of place reconceptualise history and contest dominant discourse.

## Notes

1. Articles appearing in *The Australian*, *Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Age*, *The Courier Mail*, the *Adelaide Advertiser* and smaller regional newspapers during June, July August and September 2007 carried images of children and women in remote Indigenous communities. ABC TV’s *Media Watch* on 2 July 2007 in *Shadow Images* (episode 18) and *Child Protection* documented the media’s use of clichés, stereotypes and the unethical use of close-up images of children (the children were not named in captions nor was permission sought or granted to use the images) during the arrival of troops and government to Mutijulu in June 2007. In *Shadow Images*: ‘As the police and troops began arriving in Mutijulu in the Northern Territory the media moved in en masse with them.’ Television images of ‘children of Mutijulu play on their sacred ground.’ Channel Nine News, 27 June 2007. Most commercial and non commercial TV print media organisations carried similar images at this time.

2. *The Writers Train*, *Radio Eye* [www.abc.net.au/rn/radioeye/features/2007/train/default.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/rn/radioeye/features/2007/train/default.htm). Broadcast, Saturday, 1 September, and Saturday, 8 September 2007. *Radio Eye* produces documentaries and features examining events, ideas and trends in Australia and overseas. The forms of radio range from social documentaries, docu-dramas, cultural features, on-the-road-radio trips, audio essays, radio verité ... ‘As varied as these forms may be, the emphasis is on evoking experience, emotion and place rather than the delivery of “information”. Sound is seen as a crucial element in the telling of these stories, particularly when it evokes a strong sense of location.’ These

programmes are generally production-intensive and make use of elements which include actuality, music, sound environments, performance and script. [www.abc.net.au/rn/radioeye](http://www.abc.net.au/rn/radioeye)

3. Virginia Marsden makes the point that the producers of these extended feature and narrative style radiophonic programmes, 'cannot be easily categorised and sit in the space reserved for the media and the scholar being both artists, writers and media producers as well as "public" intellectuals.'

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