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Anne Collett

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Front Cover: Kurt Brereton, ‘Kuradji Embassy No 1’ (detail), oil on canvas, 167cm x 121 cm, 2007.

*Kunapipi* refers to the Australian Aboriginal myth of the Rainbow Serpent which is the symbol of both creativity and regeneration. The journal’s emblem is to be found on an Aboriginal shield from the Roper River area of the Northern Territory of Australia.
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EDITORIAL

Like so many students who come to Caribbean poetry with the sound and cadence of Shakespeare’s sonnets or Keats’ ‘Nightingale’ or Tennyson’s ‘Lady of Shalott’ or Yeats’ ‘Second Coming’, Miss Lou’s poetry on the page was a struggle: I couldn’t make sense of the words, I didn’t have a feel for the rhythms, I couldn’t hear it in my head nor give voice to anything but a very bad approximation — I stuttered and stumbled. But then I heard Louise Bennett perform ‘Colonization in Reverse’ and I was hooked: the wit and the vitality — the pungency — of her verse was an exhilarating experience that encouraged me to seek out more. It was the language of Caribbean English that had me in thrall, and to which I remain a devotee today. I still don’t read it well and often feel like a bad imitation of various recordings I’ve heard over the years, and some live performances; but Miss Lou opened up a new world for me in which I have become a resident, although I have yet to visit the Caribbean. Louise Bennett died in July 2006 but Miss Lou lives on in me as in many others who love her poetry.

Not only the words of Miss Lou, but a recording of Kamau Brathwaite reading ‘Nametracks’ from Mother Poem and a video of a performance of ‘Negus’; a tape of John Agard hamming up ‘Oxford Don’, punctuated by the raucous laughter of colleagues at the University of Aarhus; Mikey Smith talking with CLR James and reciting ‘I cayan believe it’ in Kingston and Shelley’s ‘Song for the Men of England’ in Westminster Abbey, are part of my treasured collection and staples of my teaching: the tapes are getting scratched and stretched from so much playing, but the voices are unstoppable, speaking across generations and cultures. If I have to admit somewhat shamefacedly to mono-lingualism, at least my native language is multiple and various — my Englishes talk to and against each other in my head and in my teaching. The words and lives and histories of others enlarge me and make me what I am as much as the small world of family into which I was born. May all translators be praised for the work they do and the worlds they reveal to me that otherwise would be unknown and largely unknowable. Louise Bennett, Kamau Brathwaite, Mikey Smith and John Agard translate Englishes and in so doing they create connection between discrete and separate lives in the English-speaking world. Like all writers, they make the world a bigger and a smaller place.

Reading is a curious and potent thing whose effect, despite a long, intimate and consuming engagement, can still surprise me. Michael Jacklin recently gave a seminar at the University of Wollongong on the collaborative book, Stolen Life, by Yvonne Johnson and Rudy Wiebe. Inspired by his paper, I not only encouraged him to submit the essay to Kunapipi, but I read the book — or rather I attempted to read the book. I read perhaps two-thirds of the way through and found myself reluctant to continue. This is not a criticism of the quality of the writing, the value of the story, or the capacity of the writers to engage my interest; but rather it is
an indication of the power of the relationship established by the authors between writer and reader. The violence of which the book speaks is so powerful and became so real to me, that I began to feel myself to be a participant in that violence. I felt myself in some way, by the act of reading, to perpetuate abuse through my increasing desire to know more. The more I read the more I engaged in what I felt to be a violence done to Yvonne, by me personally. It was a disturbing experience, because it was not so much disgust I felt for the abuse or the abusers (although I also felt that), but disgust with myself for what I believed to be an indulgence in someone-else’s pain. I was an intruder in an intimacy that felt like a violation. I had not experienced this before.

This caused me to reflect not only on the nature of reading as an experience that is more than vicarious but that might have some kind of ‘real’ impact not only on myself but on others, or on the spirit of others; but also on the effect of the lyrically descriptive passages in the opening chapter of the book, written by Wiebe. As Rudy’s voice diminished and the spaces available for contemplation decreased, I began to feel increasingly unable to cope with what I was hearing/reading. Too much was coming at me too fast. I came to recognise the value and perhaps the need for lyrical writing that I had not recognised before. Such writing in an emotionally powerful and demanding text, allows the reader a space in which to breathe, to pause — to reflect. I realised that for me, this was not only a literary need but an ethical one. I stopped reading; but I am determined to continue once I have taken pause for thought. I hope the essay and the interviews Michael conducted with Rudy and Yvonne encourage you to read the book — it is a remarkable personal and literary achievement. I would also ask you to bear in mind that a transcribed interview can never do justice to the interaction that took place between the people involved. Not only are the visual connections missing, but the quality of tone and all the various nuances of verbal expression are also missing. The transcription of an interview can only be a bad translation of the original. On first reading the interviews, I was particularly struck by the closeness of relationship between Yvonne as speaker and writer, and the distance between Rudy’s written and ‘spoken’ voice. This not only says something about the linguistic and literary cultures that moulded them, but also gives you a feel for the differences that are negotiated and bridged in the collaborative act of translating ‘a life’.

Anne Collett