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Writing on common ground: the lyric essay as a decolonising form

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Abstract

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Is it possible for Australian settler writers to decolonise their writing, and if so, what form might this writing take? This paper explores the challenges facing settler writers who wish to respectfully acknowledge the sovereignty of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and to participate in the movement towards a ‘fair and truthful relationship’ (‘Uluru statement from the heart’ 2017). The value of the lyric essay as a poetic form that resists straightforward answers – but rather allows for links to be drawn between the past and the present, complicity and healing, and the land and our experience of it – is explored.

Biographical note:

Christine Howe is a writer and academic who teaches at the University of Wollongong. Her poetry and other short works have appeared in journals such as the *Griffith review*, *Cordite* and *Law, text, culture*, and her first novel, *Song in the dark*, was published by Penguin.

Keywords:

Decolonisation – lyric essay – Indigenous and non-Indigenous visions – unsettled perspectives – respect

Writing on common ground: the lyric essay as a decolonising form

In his introduction to the ‘Decolonisation and Geopoethics’ edition of *Plumwood Mountain*, Peter Minter suggests that ‘Decolonisation can be shared by everyone, not least the hegemony, for everyone needs to take responsibility for imagining their own unique kind of transformation’ (2016). For Minter, this includes settler writers decolonising their own writing in a transformation of both content and form, participating in an emerging ‘existential common ground’ shared between both Indigenous and settler cultures (2016). However, Evelyn Araluen contends that this call for settler writers to be responsible for searching for new ways of writing into this shared space has been ‘misconstrued as an invitation to cultivate Aboriginal associations for political and poetic capital, rather than as a call for material solidarity’ (2017). I wonder, as a non-Indigenous writer, whether it is possible for me to decolonise my writing in such a way that I don’t appropriate or misrepresent? Is it possible for my writing to become a form of material solidarity, and if so, what kind of transformation would it need to undergo? This paper explores the qualities of the lyric essay as a decolonising form – a form that resists straightforward answers, but rather allows for links to be drawn between the past and the present, complicity and healing, and the land and our experience of it. Given the nature of this research, which is both personal and localised, centered in a particular place and engaging with a particular experience of country, personal reflections are woven throughout the article to illustrate key points. I will also refer to one of my own (unpublished) lyric essays, ‘Breath’, as a case study.

Soenke Biermann outlines what he terms ‘three compelling reasons to decolonize’: solidarity and social justice; the fact that ‘colonial systems of oppression diminish everyone’s humanity, including and especially the oppressor’s, necessitating resistance by those who are systematically *privileged*’; and the fact that Indigenous knowledges and philosophies could help all of us to develop a better understanding of contemporary challenges (2011: 387; emphasis original). For Irene Watson, colonisation presents a continuing threat, not only to her ancestral lands, but to the planet as a whole:

Today our ancient relationships of caring for country remain challenged by the forces of colonialism, that, in their contemporary guise, are responsible for climate change and other ecocidal events occurring across the Earth (2018: 119).

If, as Biermann suggests, it is crucial for those who have been systematically privileged by colonial systems of oppression to decolonise, and if the continuing effects of colonialism – in the form of climate change and mass extinctions – present a threat to all people, the question of *how* to decolonise becomes important.

Engaging with this question, as a settler author, is fraught. Historically, many Australian writers did not acknowledge the presence (let alone the sovereignty) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and those who did address Indigenous themes or characters in their work often did so without a deep knowledge or experience of Indigenous cultures. As Michael Griffiths states, ‘Australian settler colonialism, with its literary and cultural nationalisms, is structured around appropriation, exoneration, and replacement’ (2018: 9). The damage caused by misrepresentation and appropriation has been addressed by many Aboriginal authors. As Jeanine Leane points out, ‘Literary representations are never just benign descriptions; they enter into and shape our national

discourse' (2016). Alexis Wright summarises the two positions often taken by settler authors: 'In Australian literature we have remained almost invisible or often at the mercy of being misrepresented by others' (Wright in Heiss 2003: 13). Melissa Lucashenko puts it even more bluntly:

It's an interesting question whether Australians will ever stop fantasising about us and deciding that it's critically important to world history that they tell their stories about us, whom they dispossessed and murdered and now want to pity or exploit on the page. (2018: 27)

What might it look like for settler writers to decolonise their writing, in a context where '[t]he powerful legacy of settler representations is now being challenged by Aboriginal storytellers and scholars' (Leane 2016)? Is it even possible for settler authors to attempt to decolonise their writing without further appropriation or misrepresentation?

Kim Scott, in his introduction to Anita Heiss's *Dhuuluu-yala: to talk straight* (2003), suggests that only when the truth of our shared history is accepted will we be able to 'move on to more sophisticated discussion and sharing of stories which belong here, and which empower us all' (2003: i). This necessarily involves settler authors acknowledging their own complicity in this history, and its continuing legacy. Lisa Slater, drawing on the work of Mackey, suggests that:

At the very least, to take responsibility for one's complicity in the colonial project, and to work towards decolonisation, requires settlers to bear uncertainty and anxiety: the strangeness, meaninglessness, loss of self and place. (2018: 23)

Slater suggests that settler anxiety often shuts down any possibility of transformation when settlers are confronted with Indigenous political will. If, however, 'one stays connected, implicated in the political', there is the potential for something new to develop (Slater 2018: 103). Identifying a form of writing that allows settler authors to experience the discomfort of uncertainty, anxiety and complicity, without either ignoring the truth of our shared history or engaging in misrepresentation or exploitation, may begin to answer the question of whether (and how) it might be possible for settler authors to decolonise their writing.

Writing on common ground

One model I have for this process is poet Judith Wright. While Wright addressed Indigenous themes in her poetry, she also wrote *The cry for the dead* (1981), *We call for a treaty* (1985), and *Born of the conquerors* (1991), all of which directly address the need for greater understanding and acknowledgement of the injustices of Australia's colonial past, and their influence on the continuing oppression of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. In addition to this work, Wright formed a close friendship with poet Oodgeroo Noonuccal. Their relationship was informed by a shared love of poetry, their involvement in environmental and Aboriginal rights activism, and a sense of mutual respect clearly evident in the poems each wrote for the other (Wright's 'Two dreamtimes' (1994), written for Oodgeroo, and 'Sister poet' (1994), Oodgeroo's response). Wright was acutely aware, however, of the position she occupied as a 'free settler daughter who grew up burdened by the cross-generational guilt of her ancestors'

(Minter 2015: 63). In 'Two dreamtimes', Wright acknowledges the complexity of her relationship with Oodgeroo: 'A knife's between us ... / I am born of the conquerors, / you of the persecuted' (1994: 316).

A shift occurs in Wright's poetry after she meets Oodgeroo – her poetry addressing Indigenous themes changes from a lament to a more complex search for new ways of relating. One of her earlier poems, 'Seven Songs from a Journey', published in 1955, includes the lines: 'Carnarvon Creek / and the cliffs of Carnarvon, / your tribes are silent; / I will sing for you' (1994: 134). While grief is expressed here, there is also a sense of inevitability about the 'silencing' of the people of Carnarvon, which reflects the 'dying race' ideology prevalent at the time. Thirty years later, after meeting and spending long hours in conversation with Oodgeroo, in addition to co-founding the Aboriginal Treaty Committee in the 1970s, this sense of a 'dying race' is noticeably absent. In 'Words, Roses, Stars', one of the poems published in *Phantom dwelling* (1985), Wright does not 'sing' for a lost people, but weaves together different ways of perceiving the world. The lines 'Baime bends beside his crystal stream / shaded beneath his darker cypress-tree' (1994: 410) exist alongside 'Astronomers and physicists compute / a mathematic glory in the sky' (1994: 410). Both images are given equal weight, suggesting that it is possible for these different ontological interpretations of the world to coexist, as different articulations of a common humanity.

As a settler poet, Wright occupied a very different position to Oodgeroo. Anne Collett suggests that, 'Where Oodgeroo can be forthright and outward looking, Judith is always forced back into herself – questioning her responsibility, her liability, her complicity ...' (1995: 11). Wright's approach to writing about the relationship between Indigenous and settler peoples – informed on the one hand by her close friendship with Oodgeroo and by her activism; and on the other by an acknowledgement of her own complicity in the colonial history she was working to expose – offers one model for settler writers to engage with Indigenous themes in their work. Wright's relationship with Oodgeroo was based on mutual respect, as well as a genuine desire for deep connection across acknowledged cultural and historical barriers. This relationship informed Wright's poetry, even as she wrestled with her complex position as a non-Indigenous poet carrying the burden of ancestral guilt.

Over the last year, I have been very privileged to be involved in the University of Wollongong's Jindaola program, facilitated by Yuin educator Jade Kennedy. This program is designed to embed Aboriginal knowledges, experiences, ways and perspectives into the curriculum, and is based on the principles of respect, responsibility and reciprocity (Kennedy et al. 2018: 6). The program, which has been a shared experience of walking and talking together, has offered me an insight into what it means not simply to 'make up' and 'get along', but, as Biermann suggests, to seriously reconsider our relationships with each other and with the land we live in (2011: 394). The opportunity to build reciprocal relationships based on mutual respect has highlighted the importance of trust, vulnerability and responsibility. Meeting together regularly, in a pattern of formal and informal gatherings, has provided the opportunity for a genuine community to develop, encompassing Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants from a range of disciplinary backgrounds. Through the Jindaola program, I have had the opportunity to participate in building a community where each

contribution is valued – including my own. I have been given permission to make mistakes and to experiment with new ways of relating, learning, teaching, and writing.

In a recent essay published in *Meanjin*, Tony Birch suggests that although the ‘work of getting under the skin of white Australia is the job of Aboriginal writers’ (2019: 32), the ‘work of justice must include not only the right of Aboriginal people to control and speak our own stories, but also the beginnings of a genuinely postcolonial dialogue with non-Aboriginal people, the forging of new and productive narratives’ (2019: 27). Relationships built on respect, responsibility and reciprocity – Oodgeroo and Judith Wright’s friendship, for example, or the relationships facilitated by the Jindaola program – offer opportunities for genuine dialogue to develop. In 2018, Alexis Wright called for a greater vision for Australian literature. The challenge for us, according to Wright, is to ‘build a visionary literature for our times’, one that transcends geographical, intellectual and historical barriers (2018: 212). She encouraged Australian writers to move beyond ‘repeatedly introducing ourselves to each other’ (2018: 211), towards a point where we might ‘draw strength from our combined heritages, to grow stronger imaginatively and more creatively’ (2018: 212).

The lyric essay as a decolonising form

This kind of visionary literature, able to transcend geographical, intellectual and historical barriers, requires, as Minter suggests, a transformation of both content and form (2016). The lyric essay, as a form, sits on the boundary between poetry and the essay. In their definition of the lyric essay, Deborah Tall and John D’Agata suggest that:

The lyric essay partakes of the poem in its density and shapeliness, its distillation of ideas and musicality of language. It partakes of the essay in its weight, in its overt desire to engage with facts, melding its allegiance to the actual with its passion for imaginative form. (1997: 7)

While many lyric essays are presented in prose form, there also are notable exceptions presented in verse – Anne Carson’s ‘The glass essay’ (1995), for example. One of the strengths of the lyric essay – whether presented in verse or prose – is that the form itself resists straightforward answers, pushing the boundaries of what is possible in terms of structure and voice. The lyric essay’s non-linear structure may offer one small way of resisting the continuing impact of the colonial machine, which names, maps, mines, strips, writes over, negates, displaces, and disregards the sovereignty and authority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. In addition, positioning the narrator of the lyric essay as a listener rather than an authoritative speaker resists offering straightforward answers to complex, relational questions, and allows space for these questions to resonate with the reader.

Irene Watson suggests that one of the key differences between Aboriginal and colonial relations to land is that, in contrast to Aboriginal ‘obligations to care for country as one would care for oneself’, colonial legal systems ‘treat land as property and a mere commodity’ (2018: 119). There is a linearity to this: when perceived as a commodity,

land becomes a means to an end. Watson suggests that this way of perceiving the land legitimised the colonial project:

The machine of *terra nullius* was fitted with Eurocentric paradigms of “progress”, whereby the British assumption of title to Aboriginal lands was sanctioned by various ideologies, namely that Aboriginal peoples were “backward” and “uncivilized”, did not wear clothes or till the soil, and therefore were unfit to “own” land. The progress paradigm provided the legitimacy for the foundation of Australia, where the Crown’s underlying absolute or radical title to Aboriginal lands is assumed. (2018: 127)

In a context where the legitimacy of the foundation of Australia is provided by a progress paradigm which is essentially linear in nature, challenging this legitimacy also involves challenging the paradigm itself. If colonialism is underpinned by a ‘trope of linear progress’ (McClintock 1993: 292), decolonising my own writing practice involves searching for narrative and poetic structures that resist linear development, that resist offering neatly packaged, watertight answers to complex, relational questions.

As Jennifer Sinor suggests, the lyric essay, as a poetic form, resists linearity:

What is so compelling about a lyric essay is that the meaning derived by the reader is often one filled with questions, hesitation, and unknowing. Unlike linear structure, which suggests to the reader that the subject has a beginning, middle, and end, a lyric structure implies the subject cannot be fully known at all. (2014: 190)

The lyric essay presents problems in ideas and images rather than attempting to explain or solve them. It allows for multiple expressions of voice (personal, historical, political, analytical), rather than presenting the illusion of one objective voice. It allows for the personal and the political to exist in the same space, without denigrating or lessening the importance of either. It allows the author to sit in an uncomfortable place of not-knowing, without succumbing to the urge either to run away and ignore the legacy of the past, or to posit a solution that once again imposes one perspective, one paradigm.

Instead, the lyric essay allows for an exploration of ideas, an interlocking collection of images that speak to each other. Tall and D’Agata suggest that:

Loyal to [the] original sense of essay as a test or a quest, an attempt at making sense, the lyric essay sets off on an uncharted course through interlocking webs of idea, circumstance, and language – a pursuit with no foreknown conclusion, an arrival that might still leave the writer questioning. While it is ruminative, it leaves pieces of experience undigested and tacit, inviting the reader’s participatory interpretation. (1997: 7)

In this definition, the lyric essay emerges as a literary form that encourages a relational response. If there is no foreknown conclusion, if even the writer is still left questioning, the reader is invited into a space where, potentially, something new may emerge. These qualities of the lyric essay intersect with Biermann’s definition of decolonisation as ‘the active unraveling of assumed certainties and the re-imagining and re-negotiating of common futures’ (2011: 394). Perhaps, in the very form of the lyric essay itself, in its

lack of a foreknown conclusion, its immediacy, its complexity, lies a way of writing that is able to participate in this unravelling of assumed certainties and re-imagining of common futures.

For many years, Indigenous writers have emphasised the importance of listening. In 1989 Oodgeroo called for ‘White Australians’ to ‘accept that it is time for them to be the listeners and learners’ (203). In 1994 Mandawuy Yunupingu wrote, ‘Non-Aboriginal people need to take time and make the effort to understand the logic of Aboriginal knowledge’ (1994: 10). More recently, Leane suggested that in order ‘to achieve empathy one must know those they are seeking to represent – and not just through limited and controlled observation, or through a state archive, or someone else’s research. Rather, they must know through social and cultural immersion’ (2016). Birch, reflecting on political and cultural debates around identity politics and cultural appropriation, called for ‘less talk, less commentary by the genuinely privileged, and more patience and ability to listen’ (2019: 27). These calls for deep listening, for entering into a relationship based on responsibility, reciprocity and respect, are echoed by Biermann’s reflection on the conditions necessary for decolonisation:

Being exposed to and respecting and engaging with Indigenous philosophies is a crucial element to not only recognize and reaffirm the sovereignty of Indigenous peoples but to generate the decolonizing conditions for the creation of shared knowledges, processes and relationships. (2011: 394)

In her article ‘Listening the lyric essay’ (2018), Corinna Cook suggests that the ‘I’ of the lyric essay, its narrator, can be understood as a *listener*, rather than a speaker (2018: 4). In her analysis of Maggie Nelson’s *Bluets*, Cook suggests that Nelson’s narrator is not simply a speaker, and that her position is more complex: ‘While the narrator might speak (that is, she posits “stable, lasting truths”) at the line level, she hasn’t narrated an identifiable, overarching, speakerly truth in the project as a whole’ (2018: 7). Cook turns to the work of Steven Field, ethnomusicologist, anthropologist and linguist, in her search for a theory of listening that might unravel some of the complexities in the position of the lyric essay’s narrator. She describes how Field explored a concept of listening, ‘lift-up-over-sounding’, that he encountered among the Kaluli in Papua New Guinea in the 1980s and 1990s (2018: 8).¹ In lift-up-over-sounding, listeners are not passive – they do not simply ‘listen in’ or ‘overhear’. Instead, in the Kaluli’s rainforest context, ‘lift-up-over-sounding’ refers to ‘the experience of clearly hearing one sound among many, as if that sound “lifted up” above the indistinguishability of ongoing, simultaneously occurring ones’ (2018: 9). Listening then becomes ‘a defining feature of the listener’s embeddedness in the soundscape, directly correlated to the listener’s relationship to the embodied and sonorous world (2018: 8-9). Cook applies this theory of listening to the lyric essay, suggesting that the lyric essay’s narrator ‘listens to a density of sounds and discerns individual threads of this permeated soundscape as certain strands of ‘lift-up-over’ (2018: 10). In her analysis of various lyric essays, including the work of Maggie Nelson, Lia Purpura, David Shields and Joni Tevis, Cook suggests that it would be more productive to interpret the work of these essayists not as voice, but as ‘a sustained act of listening’ (2018: 13).

One of the key decolonising aspects of the lyric essay, then, lies in its narrative voice – the positioning of the ‘I’ as a listener rather than as a purveyor of a single, ‘objective’ truth. The different strands of a lyric essay – the braided threads of ideas, analysis, emotional resonances and personal experiences – lift up at various points, while other threads remain simultaneously beneath. The coexistence of various strains of thought, experience and emotion resists the position of the narrator as a single, coherent voice. If the narrator is positioned as listener, an openness to new ideas, new ways of seeing, emerges. This way of narrating not only positions the narrator as an active listener – it also requires the reader to listen for the significance of each braided thread, to draw connections between ideas and images, to be able to sit with questions that may not be given a clear resolution. As Sinor suggests, one of the reasons why the lyric essay is so compelling is that ‘the meaning derived by the reader is often one filled with questions, hesitation, and unknowing’ (2014: 190).

Analysis of ‘Breath’

This experience of deriving meaning from hesitation and unknowing, rather than from a clearly defined question-and-answer exchange, is one of the principles that underpins the lyric essays I have been working on over the past year. One of these essays, ‘Breath’, offers an example of how the decolonising aspects of the lyric essay form play out in practice. Four main threads run through the essay: the experience of walking through the Wollongong Botanic Gardens on my way to work; my relationship with my two-year-old daughter; my response to Melissa Lucashenko’s *Mullumbimby*; and Australian and global politics, including the after-effects of the Iraq war and my complicity in the ongoing effects of colonisation. While each thread is quite personal, they all intersect with larger questions around what it means to live in this place as a non-Indigenous person – specifically a woman and a mother. The essay is framed by the presence of Mt Keira, a significant place of learning that forms part of the Illawarra escarpment. There is no overarching thesis, no logical progression of a central argument in the essay. Rather, ‘Breath’ explores questions that have no easy answers, that require an engagement with the consequences of political activity I have not condoned, but am still implicated in. I, as the narrator, am positioned as a listener, not only in terms of the ‘lift-up-over-sounding’ narrator, drawing on different threads of ideas as they unfold simultaneously, but also in terms of my textual analysis and my position in relation to the landscape.

The non-linear composition of ‘Breath’ allows for my own personal, embodied experiences to exist alongside broader political and historical events. As Amy Bonnaffons suggests

The lyric essay, with its associative logic and its openness to visuality as a tool of meaning-making, may in fact be more suitable than other forms for expressing embodied truths – especially those previously neglected, those experienced in the gaps between sanctioned “facts.” It may offer unique tools for expressing the presence of absences. (2016)

In 'Breath', the 'embodied truth' of the intimacy of childbirth is explored alongside the knowledge of the suffering experienced by mothers who have been subjected to political and colonial violence:

still Iraqi children are born
with lead in their baby teeth
cerebral palsy, leukemia, club feet
[...]

I breathed her out
I was in a clean, warm bath
she slipped into the world like a seal

with all her limbs intact
I ache for those mothers
those Iraqi mothers, and those other mothers

whose land I stand on,
whose babies were taken
whose precious, warm-skinned babies

In 'Breath', the personal sits alongside the political, the global alongside the local, the intimacy of birth alongside the violence of war and the weight of colonial policies that have ruptured generations of relationships between mothers and their children. No answers are offered, no absolution given: I am left sitting with the knowledge that my own experience of motherhood takes place in a broader context, in which the anguish of mothers subjected to colonial violence is not simply an historical fact, but a deeply felt, ever-present reality.

The narrator of 'Breath' is positioned as a listener, which allows for the exploration of a deepening realisation of my own *unknowing*, rather than a movement towards the acquisition of knowledge. In her essay 'Bewilderment', Fanny Howe suggests that:

One definition of the lyric might be that it is a method of searching for something that can't be found. It is an air that blows and buoys and settles. It says "not this," "not this," instead of: "I have it." (2003: 21)

The lyric 'I' in 'Breath' does not speak with a sense of authority, but rather articulates the process whereby my own knowing becomes unravelled as I read Lucashenko's *Mullumbimby*, and, in response, attempt to listen more attentively to the land I inhabit:

... I realise this book is taking me deeper
I think I know what's going on

and then I don't; I think I know again

but I don't; all my assumptions are toppled
fairy wrens, lyrebirds, eagles speak
if you know how to listen – but it's not magical

it's a living, layered, breathing thing
a brush turkey scratches in the cacti as

I stop at the top of the hill ...

Positioning the 'I' as a listener, particularly in relation to demonstrating how my own experience of the land is informed by the reading of Lucashenko's novel, is one of the key decolonising aspects of this essay. Leane, drawing on the work of Iseke-Barnes, outlines the value of non-Indigenous writers participating in ongoing 'cross-cultural engagement through "deep and informed readings" of Indigenous texts' (2016). In the lyric essay form, the narrator-as-listener is well positioned to explore the sensation of disorientation and reorientation that can occur through encounters with texts written by Indigenous authors.

'Breath' was first shared publicly at a Jindaola gathering, offered as one contribution to a larger ongoing conversation about embedding Aboriginal knowledges in the University of Wollongong curriculum in ways that are sustainable, meaningful, and aligned with 'local Aboriginal philosophies, values and customs' (Kennedy et al. 2018: 4). This particular lyric essay, then, was written in the context of a cross-cultural, relational community. It sits uncomfortably as an individual expression of the continuing effects of colonialism, and an acknowledgment of my own complicity as someone who has benefited from the dispossession and displacement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It also represents an attempt to move through this complicity towards genuine relationships characterised by deep listening, and, concurrently, a desire to deepen my understanding of the land in terms of its relational value, rather than as property or commodity. The tension between my complicity and my desire to build respectful, reciprocal relationships is not easily reconciled. The final lines of 'Breath' demonstrate this tension:

My daughter's feet smell like the earth
when she's been playing in our garden
and when we finally convince her into bed

she sleeps quiet as the mountain
blue blanket escarpment rising and falling
breath in, breath out

Linking my daughter with the mountain acknowledges the relational value of the land: this living, breathing country is not seen as a means to an end, but, like my daughter, is recognised for the value it has in and of itself. However, as a ‘settler’ author, what right do I have to claim kinship with this particular country? Is relating my daughter to the mountain yet another instance of appropriation? What responsibility do we bear to this country that sustains us, and what responsibility do we bear to each other? The value of the lyric essay form lies in the fact that these questions, which are complex and perhaps have no definitive answer, can be asked and left to resonate with the reader. In Amy Bonnaffon’s words, ‘At its best, the lyric essay accurately locates the writer in the “great soup of being” – the confusions of lived time, the jagged shape of thought, the betrayals and silences of the body’ (2016).

Conclusion

In an essay recently published in *Meanjin*, Bruce Pascoe writes that Australia’s history of dispossession affects both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. He suggests that ‘If we are to make a nation rather than a mere economy we have to absorb the history’ (2018: 68). In listening to this history from many different perspectives, in absorbing it and sitting with the horrors of it, the form that has come closest to enabling me to offer something of value into this shared space is the lyric essay. Mark Tredinnick suggests that lyricism is ‘less of a way of turning out words than a way of being in the world – a way of moving, wide awake, somewhere on earth, within the lively, patterned materiality of place-in-time’ (2005: 14). The lyric essay expresses another way of ‘being in the world’ – one that recognises the limitations of my knowledge and lived experience, but that also takes seriously the call to offer what I can, in a spirit of responsibility, reciprocity and respect.

Endnotes

1. Cook recognises that taking a Kaluli concept out of context and using it to analyse Western literature can be problematic – she suggests that it ‘carries both the violence of coercion and the potential for transformation, kinship, and responsibility’ (2018: 11).

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