Abstract
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Kunapipi is a bi-annual arts magazine with special but not exclusive emphasis on the new literatures written in English. It aims to fulfil the requirements T.S. Eliot believed a journal should have: to introduce the work of new or little known writers of talent, to provide critical evaluation of the work of living authors, both famous and unknown, and to be truly international. It publishes creative material and criticism. Articles and reviews on related historical and sociological topics plus film will also be included as well as graphics and photographs.

The editor invites creative and scholarly contributions. The editorial board does not necessarily endorse any political views expressed by its contributors. Manuscripts should be double-spaced with notes gathered at the end, and should conform to the Harvard (author-date) system. Wherever possible the submission should be on disc (soft-ware preferably Microsoft Word) and should be accompanied by a hard copy. Please include a short biography, address and email contact if available.

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Kunapipi

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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
One question that people ask me is: which writers would you say have influenced you? I used to explain that I don’t think of myself in this way, as one who served an apprenticeship to particular practitioners of the craft, and therefore properly owes them a debt. That is not to say that I am intensely original; rather, it is to say that, being a greedy puppy, I have lapped up things from all the books I’ve ever read, and so could not begin to name the writers to whom I am obligated.

But the questioners are insistent, and over time I have come eventually to confess that there are a few writers whose works I know so well that they are as close as breath, as the pulsing of blood along my veins. Of that small number — perhaps four — the Hon. Louise Bennett-Coverley, is assuredly one.

If that seems theatrical, I must plead that it is only the truth, and that it does indeed have to do with the theatre. I was born in Kingston, Jamaica, in an ancient house at the bottom of Elletson Road, near Kingston Harbour — ‘the sea’ — and around the corner from ‘prison’ — the General Penitentiary on Tower Street. At age four, I began school with the nuns at Convent of Mercy, Alpha Academy, on South Camp Road. I never attended any another school. (In much of my time, Alpha was composed of several schools, of which the preparatory school and academy were only two. Others were the Boys’ Approved School, the Girls’ Approved School, the primary and elementary schools and the secretarial school.) The Alpha institution was important for the arts, I would learn decades later. Many famous Jamaican dancers and musicians have come from Alpha, and as Errol Hill writes in his seminal work on Jamaican Theatre, Alpha Cottage was one of the places where, towards the end of the nineteenth century, indigenous theatre first developed (164–65).

In my time, there was still plenty of acting and singing and dancing going on at Alpha, with students taking part in all kinds of recitals and plays. Every year we entered the All Island Speech Festival, the All-Island Schools Drama Festival, sometimes the Music Festival and sometimes the French Drama Festival, if we had enough thespians with good French accents.
To get ready for the All Island Speech Festival, we had an internal competition to find out which people were good enough to represent the school at the different age levels and in the various categories. The tryouts were in the big school but in the beginning, the two schools, big (the Academy) and little (the Preparatory) were in the same location, and anything going on in the big school, little school children knew about. So, I think that is perhaps where, by the time I was eight...
or nine, I seriously ‘bucked up’ Miss Lou’s poetry and discovered that, working the warp and woof laid down by Claude MacKay and Una Marson, Miss Lou was weaving poems, and then the tapestry of a genre, a tradition of writing in Jamaican Creole of which I am now proud to be a part.

Early in the twentieth century, Claude McKay had published *Songs of Jamaica* and *Constab Ballads*, both collections of poems in Jamaican Creole. The books earned for him the reputation of ‘Jamaica’s Bobbie Burns’. McKay left Jamaica for the USA in 1912 and, though he intended to, he never returned. Una Marson also wrote poetry in the vernacular, a notable example being ‘Kinky Hair Blues’. Though these two poets were important forerunners, it is Bennett who, from her earliest years as a writer and performer, consistently affirmed Jamaican Creole as a language for literature as well as for living. She wrote and performed poems as well as radio commentary, skits, stories, songs and plays in Jamaican Creole, helping to shoulder into being, especially through the Jamaican pantomime, a tradition of theatre in the vernacular, and also promoting the writing of poetry in the demotic.

In the course of tryouts for speech festival, I heard poems like ‘Cuss-Cuss,’ ‘Candy Seller’ and ‘Me Bredda’, ‘Roas Turkey’ and ‘No Lickle Twang’ performed again and again by the likes of Marceline Cameron, Noelle Hill Chutkan and Monica Hill Ogilvie, who were brilliant actresses and among the finest exponents of poetry and the dramatic monologue. I was never one of the superior talents selected to go forward as an exponent of dialect verse, but that didn’t stop me from learning the poems and reciting them again and again at home so that, at a certain point, my father thought I was in danger of losing the English language, and warned me that in order to avert that dread fate I had better stop. I don’t think there was any real danger of Miss Lou’s inspired poetic extravaganzas depriving me of the English language, nor do I think Papa was serious. He probably was simply looking for a way out of the unremitting noise of my ‘performances’. I need to say this because on previous occasions when I’ve mentioned that my father issued this warning, some people have rushed to appoint it as an example of the resistance of the middle classes to Louise Bennett’s poetry.

Such resistance was real enough on the part of many of the movers and shakers at the time. Miss Lou herself has said so (Bennett 1968), and there is the evidence of letters to the press to that effect. That digging-in of claws by the Status Crow (Brathwaite 1982) must have been extremely difficult to deal with when Miss Lou, a young black woman in a world run by white and light-skinned men, was daring to do something that had not been done before. Worse, the negative attitudes towards black people’s skin colour and hair, and the presumption of ‘black-people-bad-behave’, were shared not only by the lights and whites, but by many brown and black people as well. Helping to dismantle all of that was a big part of Miss Lou’s contribution.
Louise Bennett at a Jamaica school of dance workshop concert.
(Courtesy of the National Library of Jamaica.)
Still, for whatever it’s worth, I witness now to the way a school of multi-hued girl children who were more or less middle class — at least by Walter Rodney’s definition — took to Miss Lou’s poetry. More than that, when the finalists from schools across the islands met in the lecture hall at the Institute of Jamaica to compete, it was clear to me that the level of enthusiasm for Miss Lou’s ‘dialect verse’, the utter revelling in it, was not shared by the exponents of the lyrical and dramatic pieces penned by other wordsmiths. (I was one of the lyric performers.) So though Monica, Noelle and Marceline recited other poems and interpreted the Bard it seemed to me that none of them, nor indeed any of the finalists from Alpha or from secondary schools all over Jamaica, enacted the works of those other writers, native or foreign, with the élan that they brought to reciting poems by Miss Lou.

This enthusiasm for her work belonged to the schoolers of the time, who weren’t moving or shaking anything, the irony being that our enthusiasm, however great, could not have done much to break down the towering walls of prejudice. Well, maybe and maybe not, for had someone pointed to it, the loud cheers of this up-and-coming horde might have counted for something. In truth, one of our difficulties has been that, until reggae and dub rose up and laid firm hands on the culture, those who pronounced on these things had scant regard for the great mass of un-movers who certainly were enthusiastic fans of Miss Lou’s poems and stories from the start.

Miss Lou’s appeal was not only confined to school children and the ‘rootsier’ working and peasant classes, however. Carol Wong, representing the Tsung Tsin Association, a Hakka Chinese association in Scarborough, Ontario, said in her tribute to Miss Lou, at a memorial service held in Toronto:

Our parents arrived in Jamaica speaking only Chinese language and they learnt their English from the local Jamaican customers in their shops, hence their ‘Ching-lish’ was Jamaican patois with a Chinese accent…. While they toiled in the shops, we were rocked to sleep, as babies, with songs Miss Lou sang, and as we grew up, we were mesmerized with Anancy stories, Rollin’ Calf and Duppy Market … we thought in and spoke Miss Lou’s colourful patois fluently….2

Perhaps because I loved performing, the practising for Speech Festival remains with me as a scintillating point of contact, a numinous ritual moment when Miss Lou’s views, humour and nuanced social commentary became mine, became ours; when our mouths and hers, our minds and hers, became one; when she claimed us and we claimed her.

Tryouts for the All-Island Speech Festival could not have been where I first heard Miss Lou’s poetry — that must have been at a much earlier time, most likely on the radio. As for seeing her in the flesh, I cannot remember where or when that first occurred, but it may have been at a Christmas morning concert, or at the 1949 panto, ‘Bluebeard and Brer Anancy’, co-authored by Miss Lou and Noel Vaz, in which Miss Lou featured as Nana Lou. I had by then reached the age
of reason and knew that Miss Lou and her poetry and pantomime performances were pearls of great price.

So, though there must have been a first time, it seems, looking back, that I have never not known the sound of Miss Lou’s voice in my ears, as I have never failed to enjoy reproducing the words of her poems in my mouth. Hers is an oeuvre I admire — no, not just admire, revere — as she was a person about whom I have never had any ambivalent feelings. She was splendid in all the things that she did, and she did so many things, her body of work encompassing folkloric research; social work through drama; radio commentary and performances; pantomimes and other stage productions (the Bard’s included); movie roles; and television programs and presentations. It was my privilege to be there some of the time, to see her and hear her, to run into her going into the studios at JBC to tape the ‘Ring Ding’ children’s programs, as I was on my way in to record ‘Saturday Magazine’ or ‘Bambu Tambu’ programs for JIS-TV.

Inseparable from her commitment to doing many things well, and, I think, more important than it, was Louise Bennett’s spirit. More than anyone I have ever known, she enabled us Jamaicans to look at ourselves to see and celebrate what was good and right, and to discern and identify what was wrong and in need of changing. She had a grand vision of what we could accomplish: among other things, she encouraged our going abroad — in her envisioning, to England, but we knew it was wherever we might choose to go — and daring to effect ‘colonization in reverse’ (Bennett 1966 179–80):

What a islan! What a people!
Man and woman, old and young
Jusa pack dem bag and baggage
An tun history upside dung!

***

Wat a devilment a Englan!
Dem face war and brave de worse,
But I’m wonderin’ how dem gwine stan’
Colonizin’ in reverse.

She always invited us to do better, for not only was she convinced that we could, she looked forward, with faith, to the fact that we would.

Writers have responsibilities. One question that I ask myself is whether I did my share to affirm and celebrate Louise Bennett’s work while she was still with us. *Jamaica Woman* (fruit of a project to collect an anthology of women’s poetry that I conceived and asked Mervyn Morris to share), which has been described as important in Caribbean publishing, was dedicated jointly to Miss Lou and Edna Manley. The book first appeared in 1980. I like to think of that joint dedication as a sort of serendipitous oiling of the waters, for the early editions of the important literary journal, *Focus*, which Manley edited, did not include any of Louise’s
poetry. Mervyn Morris (2006), who has often emphasised the initial resistance to her work, commented in a remembrance published shortly after she died:

Her poems were always popular, but critical acknowledgement of their worth was slow in coming … her work did not appear in the important Jamaican magazine *Focus* (edited by Edna Manley between 1943 and 1960), and she was ignored by the Jamaica Poetry League. In 1962 she was included in the *Independence Anthology of Jamaica Literature* (edited by A.L. Hendriks and Cedric Lindo), but not in the section for poetry. (2006 online)

We owe a lot to Morris where Miss Lou is concerned. The first piece of writing that does address Bennett’s work is a critical essay he published in 1963 called ‘On Reading Louise Bennett, Seriously’, in which he asserts that Louise is ‘a poet, and, in her best work, a better poet than most other Jamaican writers. However, I have to question Morris’s caveat, ‘in her best work’; other Jamaican writers have work that is not their ‘best’, so why the qualification about Miss Lou’s poetry?

Morris fails to mention a later edition of *Focus* produced in 1983 by Caribbean Authors Publishing in an effort to revive the journal, which he edited and in which Miss Lou does take her proper place. Without wishing to detract from the worth of that issue, one is nonetheless tempted to say that allowing Miss Lou that rightful position may well be the most important thing that it accomplished. No other edition of *Focus* appeared thereafter.

There had been significant developments in the study of Jamaican language and its use in our literature in the two decades between political independence in 1962 and the new issue of *Focus* in 1983. Among these developments were the appearance of a grammar by Beryl Loftman Bailey, called *Jamaican Creole Syntax: A Transformational Approach*, in 1966; the holding of the first Creole Linguistics Conference at the Mona campus of The University of the West Indies in Jamaica in 1968; the formal establishment of the Society for Caribbean Linguistics in Trinidad and Tobago in 1972 and the publication of the *Dictionary of Jamaican English* edited by Frederic Cassidy and Robert Le Page in 1980. The dictionary has since been republished (in 2002) by the University of the West Indies Press and is currently available.

By 1983, word was abroad that ‘dialect’ had been deemed a language in its own right, with words and grammar — morphology and syntax, the linguists called them — and a proper patois way in which to call the words — phonology, the linguists said. Jamaican Creole had arrived, and we were finally allowing, officially, that Miss Lou was writing in a fully elaborated code, not a broken version of English or anything else; and that she was writing not ‘merely’ verse, but poetry.

Also in the period between 1962 and 1980, Dennis Scott had published his prize-winning collection, *Uncle Time*, with a title poem that would thereafter be pointed to as a classic example of the fact that ‘the dialect’ could be used for
writing serious poetry. The tribute was by no means undeserved for ‘Uncle Time’ is a remarkable poem, and Scott was to follow it with others in Jamaican Creole; for example, ‘Love Storey’, ‘Riversong,’ and ‘Birdwalk’ in *Strategies* (1989). However, this is perhaps where the critics failed to come forward and clarify Bennett’s contribution. Many of Bennett’s poems, never mind their consistent comic slant, tackled serious topics seriously. Miss Lou had discussed this with Dennis Scott in ‘Bennett on Bennett’ (Bennett 1968 97; 101). She had long used the sugar coating of a reputation for comic verse to make us swallow pills like ‘Dutty tough’, an uncompromising study of poverty:

Sun a-shine but tings noh bright;  
Doah pot a-bwile, bickle noh nuff;  
River flood but water scarce, yaw;  
Rain a-fall but dutty tough!  
Bennett (1966 120)

Never mind that it rains — the poet offers an increase of one pound sterling (in use in Jamaica at the time) on a person’s pay packet as an example of such metaphoric ‘rain’ — ‘dutty’, the dirt, the earth, remains ‘tough’ because that one pound increase can’t stretch to cover the ten-pound increase on the cost of food or the ten-pound rise in the rent bill. (This is not the place to expand on the many significances of ‘dutty’, but it would be an explication well worthwhile.) If we failed to recognise the gravity of the ailment because the pills prescribed were so efficacious, the doctor is hardly to be blamed.6

The dedication of *Jamaica Woman* (1980) was a tribute. The introduction to *From Our Yard: Jamaican Poetry Since Independence* (1989) afforded more space in which to speak about Louise Bennett’s contribution:

Unabashedly deploying the language of Jamaicans to poke fun at their foibles, at the same time as she asserted and assented to all aspects of the way of life of ‘Jamaican people’, Louise Bennett in effect recited a tradition into being. It was the continuation of the Jamaican custom of home grown entertainment, of Christmas concert and dinky-minnie, and tea meeting. In her response to the everyday topical Jamaican circumstance, conceived in verse and dramatized to audiences directly and then through the mass media, Bennett was among the first of the modern ‘roots’ artists. Hers was a poetry of protest before the ska and reggae lyricists took up the burden. Hers was a verse infused with Jamaican rhythms before the recent phenomenon of ‘dub’ arose as a ‘version’ of the reggae complaint. Her poetry was a unique contribution to the articulation of the rising political and cultural awareness. (Mordecai 1989 xviii)

Some fifteen years later, as I struggled to conceive of a theme, some overarching aspect of Jamaican writing with which to anchor the chapter on ‘Literature’ in *Culture and Customs of Jamaica*, a reference work co-authored with my husband, Martin, it occurred to me that there was no better framework to use for articulating a vision for Jamaican writing than the idea of nation-family that underpinned the works of Louise Bennett Coverley.
In the third paragraph of that chapter we write of Miss Lou: ‘… she lighted the way for the literature, joining an oral tradition from Africa and a literary tradition from England, in a unique body of work that … insists on our Jamaican “generation”, never mind where we came from…’ (114). We decided it was appropriate to begin a discussion of the literature with Miss Lou because ‘she reconciles, in her person and her work, an endless variety of family bruck-up — fragmentations of color, class, mores, and language. [She] not only gathers Jamaicans into a family, she also calls them to their “best behaving”’ (115).

Louise Bennett’s work has, albeit belatedly, begun to receive critical attention, and one looks forward to more studies of this seminal oeuvre. Certainly, dub poets, as well as many other poets and authors, have again and again acknowledged the debt that they owe her. If Jamaican literature has grown up around her, there is no better person to have raised it.

All the writing about Miss Lou that I have seen since her death has steered steadily clear of another question: If Jamaicans valued her as we say we did, why did she and her husband emigrate? (Leaving in 1980, she and Eric Coverley went first to the US, and from there to Canada in 1987.) I do not think it’s hard to guess at the reasons why they had to leave, and the fact that they went first to the US and then came to Canada perhaps lends credibility to the speculations. Might it have had to do with the plight of the self-employed, those who, as the joke says, do not retire (having no provision for a pension) but expire? With the need to be assured of adequate health care, as they grew older? With a government pension and old age benefits to anyone above the age of sixty-five? With the assurance of support for seniors where, among other things, transportation and home care are concerned? The corollary of this question is of course, if Miss Lou was the icon we say she was, the National Hero some are proposing that she should be, why didn’t we make it possible for her to remain in Jamaica?

Finally, and this last question confounds me, where, over all these years, have been the conferences to celebrate her contribution and study her work? Ironically enough, had we held them, we might have created circumstances enabling, if not a return to Jamaica, then at least extended stays, as Visiting Writer at one of our several universities, for example; or Research Director for projects in some area of cultural studies; or Distinguished Visiting Lecturer in one course or another. That, in its turn, might have led us to a greater awareness of the importance of preserving our literary and cultural history, and initiatives to secure important records and materials, some of which have been irretrievably lost.

I leave the saddest story for the last. A Jamaican friend of mine, a teacher and teacher-mentor now resident in Canada, went home recently to volunteer at a primary school in Kingston. When she asked the students about Louise Bennett and her poetry and stories, they said that they had never heard of her. They maintained too that they had never heard of Brer Anansi, and knew no Anansi stories. I assured her that they were ‘fooling her up’. She insisted that
they weren’t. Whichever was the case, it would undoubtedly be a pity if the time came when nobody knew about Miss Lou and her contribution to the literature, including her retelling of many of the tales of Brer Anansi, our fabled trickster spider. Perhaps that alone is an excellent reason for making her a National Hero. For certain, she has my vote.

NOTES
1. At a lecture at Howard University, Washington, DC, in 1972, the late Guyanese historian and activist, Walter Rodney, resolved the ‘Who is middle class?’ dilemma. He told his audience that anyone who had attended secondary school was middle class.
2. I am indebted to the author for her generosity in making available, at short notice, an electronic copy of the tribute.
3. Miss Lou hosted ‘Ring Ding’, a series of weekly television programs for children in which the children performed and learned songs, dances, proverbs, ring games and other elements of Jamaican folk culture, between 1970 and 1982. Between 1965 and 1980, along with substantive jobs (in teaching and then as Publications Officer in the Faculty of Education at UWI, Mona, Jamaica), I worked part-time for JIS-TV, anchoring various magazine-style TV programs including ‘Saturday Magazine’ and ‘Bambu Tambu’.
4. See, for example, Michael Calderado, ‘An Interview with Lorna Goodison’.
5. An important event predated Independence by one year: in 1961, Frederic Cassidy published *Jamaica Talk: Three Hundred Years of the English Language in Jamaica*.
6. Louise Bennett was, in fact, awarded an honorary doctorate of letters in 1982 from the University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica, and an honorary doctorate by York University in Toronto, Canada, in 1988.
7. The anthology presented poems by twenty-eight Jamaican poets that had been published since Independence in 1962. The book was the second in a series conceived by Edward Seaga, Prime Minister of Jamaica at the time, and intended to celebrate the nation’s achievements across a variety of disciplines and cultural areas, on the occasion of the nation’s achieving its majority ‘voting’ age of twenty-one.
8. Among these are tapes of the ‘Ring Ding’ program, previously mentioned, which have been scrubbed. One thinks too of the Sistren Theatre Collective archive, much of which was lost in the fire at their headquarters at Kensington Crescent in Kingston in 2004. The fire may not have been averted, but systematic replication of documents or, alternatively, an attempt to lodge originals in a safer place may have saved some of this important collection. In this regard, news of the recent opening of The Harriet Tubman Resource Centre on the African Diaspora, located at York University in Toronto, is encouraging. The Centre (http://www.yorku.ca/nhp/intro.htm) is a digitalised research facility that focuses on the history of the African diaspora and the movement of Africans to various parts of the world, particularly the Americas and the Islamic lands of North Africa and the Middle East. Directed by Paul Lovejoy, it is operated as a collective with partners in these areas, in support of document preservation, accessibility of primary materials, training and research.
WORKS CITED


MICHAEL JACKLIN

‘What I Have Done, What Was Done to Me’: Confession and Testimony in *Stolen Life: Journey of a Cree Woman*

The truth and reality of my life is in the existence I live now, in this prison with this sentence. I won’t be ashamed of what was done to me in my life any more. I accept my faults, I’ve learned to wear my own shame, but I refuse to wear anyone else’s — and I give back to my abusers the shame that is theirs and theirs alone. What I have done, what was done to me, that will never silence me again.

(Wiebe and Johnson 23)

Yvonne Johnson’s life narrative, written over a six-year period in collaboration with Rudy Wiebe, tells the story of how Johnson came to be the only First Nations woman in Canada serving a life-twenty-five sentence for first degree murder. *Stolen Life: Journey of a Cree Woman* (1998) relates the circumstances of Johnson’s involvement with three others — Dwayne Wenger, Ernest Jensen and Shirley Anne Salmon — in the killing of Leonard Charles Skwarok in Wetaskiwin, Alberta in 1989. In a night of excessive drinking, the two men and two women participated in the confinement, beating, sexual abuse, strangulation and killing of Leonard Skwarok, a man they barely knew, but whom they believed to have molested children and who, Johnson feared, was a threat to her own young children. The murder was brutal. Of the four, Johnson was found guilty of first degree murder, while the others received lesser sentences.

As well as this account of her crime, the book also traces Johnson’s recovered narrative of repeated sexual abuse which she recalls being inflicted upon her by family members, acquaintances of family and strangers from the earliest years of her childhood. Born with a cleft palate, as was her grandmother, and as her daughter would be, Johnson was unable to voice her pain or explain what was being done to her. As a child she had ‘few communicating sounds’ (78), and consequently the sexual abuse continued for years. Shame and the associated guilt that victims of abuse feel led her as a teenager into what would become cycles of alcohol abuse. She struggled as well with suicidal urges, and experienced rape repeatedly, including on the night of the killing.

*Stolen Life* is a confronting book and a deeply unsettling reading experience. It shocks in its descriptions of the abuse Johnson has suffered; it also shocks
in its accounts of the crime she committed. Testimony and confession appear
troublingly proximate in this text, and the claims each makes upon us provoke
conflicted responses. Understanding these claims and recognising that trauma is
involved in both can help readers understand the power of this text and see Stolen
Life as a spirit bundle, a Cree power object needing to be handled — to be read —
with caution, care and respect.2

The spirit bundle, or medicine bundle, is a central image in the first letter that
Johnson wrote to Wiebe from prison. Johnson is a great-great granddaughter of
the Plains Cree chief Big Bear. While in Prison for Women (P4W), in Kingston
Ontario, she read Wiebe’s 1973 book, The Temptations of Big Bear, and was
impressed by his detailed and extensive knowledge her family’s history. In her
introductory letter to Wiebe, she relates this history in terms of the legacy of
colonial dispossession which followed Big Bear’s imprisonment: she mentions the
‘hell’ of Indian school which her mother attended; she writes of her older brother’s
death in police custody; her mother’s involvement with AIM, the American Indian
Movement; and the subsequent breakdown of her parents’ marriage. ‘I just hate
reality, it’s so cruel and unkind. But I hold history responsible for that as well,’
she writes. ‘I need to fight, I need to know where I come from and why our race
suffers so from the hands of my White brothers’ (5). In the final paragraph of her
letter, she asks Wiebe for his assistance:

Please help me share what it is you know, and how you got it. How is it you came to
know as much as you do? Were you led? What was the force behind you? Who are
you? Why did you choose Big Bear to write about? What sparked your interest in this
powerful man of long ago? I wish to clear his name and to recover his medicine bundle
as I try to find my lost family, and only under our Bear Spirit will it ever be true. We
have not guarded it as we should have, and now we have suffered long enough; now
is the time to heal and to return to the land and reclaim our rightful place and to meet
my family that has been sent all over the four winds. We need to come together as Big
Bear wished. (9)

Johnson’s emphasis on the medicine bundle must have struck Wiebe with
exceptional force. As part of his preparation for the writing of The Temptations of
Big Bear, Wiebe had travelled to New York City to visit the American Museum
of Natural History, where Big Bear’s bundle is held in its collections of historical
artefacts. In his published account of this visit, Wiebe makes the point that to the
Cree the medicine bundle was ‘not so much historical as sacred’ (Wiebe 1995
173). The bundle is a ‘spirit gift’ (168), whose design came to Big Bear in a vision
given by the Great Parent of Bear following a period of fasting and prayer. The
bundle signified Big Bear’s relationship with the Bear spirit. It was an object of
power that could be opened only with respect for the proper protocols. At all other
times it remained wrapped and covered to protect it: to protect its contents from
harm and, at the same time, to protect the unprepared from its power.

Following Big Bear’s death, his relations were separated and scattered over
several reservations in Western Canada, but his spirit bundle was guarded by
family members living on the Battle River Reserve in Saskatchewan. In the 1930s, the bundle passed out of Cree hands when it was acquired by David Mandelbaum, an American anthropologist funded by the American Museum and undertaking PhD research among the Battle River reserves. In an upstairs room in the museum in New York, Wiebe was allowed to handle and to open the sacred bundle. He was aware that he lacked the authority or the knowledge to do so — ‘I am no proper person,’ he writes — yet open it he does. He knows that ‘[t]he bundle was to be opened only when its core was to be worn either in battle or in ceremonial dance’ but, Wiebe declares, ‘I do intend to go into battle: against all the variegated and clotted ignorance of myself and my people about our past. Having held his story in my hand’ (171).

The equation here between bundle and story is significant but especially so, I want to argue, in terms of the power and the effects that continue to circulate around the reading of *Stolen Life*. To understand *Stolen Life* as a bundle is to understand the text not only in terms of empowerment — its narrator’s testimony of recovery of identity and restoration of her personal integrity following a lifetime of abuse — but also in terms of the potential for, and perception of, harm. Narratives, like the objects within a spirit bundle, can make medicine and that medicine can be healing but also dangerous. When Yvonne Johnson says, ‘What I have done, what was done to me, that will never silence me again,’ Wiebe replies, ‘Yes — but it’ll be hard. There are so many people in your life, no story is ever only yours alone’ (23–4), to which Johnson responds: ‘Maybe not only my story — but it is mine’ (24). Both Wiebe and Johnson at this point in their text are referring to the difficulties involved in narrating events of sexual abuse occurring within a family and the consequences that will follow to each member of that family. The anxieties, however, extend much further than family. *Stolen Life* was entangled with public anxieties over prison writing even before its publication. In February 1998, Wiebe appeared before the Standing Senate Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs representing seven writers’ associations from across Canada to present their concerns regarding Bill C-220 which had passed unanimously and without debate through the Canadian House of Commons the previous November.3 The bill, similar to the 1982 American ‘Son of Sam’ Bill, was designed to expropriate copyright, and consequently, financial gain, from writers convicted of crime whose work depicted, portrayed or was in any way based on the circumstances surrounding the crime they had committed. Moreover, it extended from writers convicted of crime to anyone assisting or collaborating with convicted criminals to write an account of their crime. Wiebe, in his presentation, argued that prison writing had a long history of providing a means for prisoners to find their redemption and in doing so, contribute to both literature and society’s understanding of ‘its own frailties and failures.’ Johnson, addressing the Senate committee through a letter read by Wiebe, reiterated this redemptive function. She wrote:
I am a survivor of numerous types of abuse, both afflicted by myself and by others upon me. I have been silenced by my abuse over the years, however, the process of writing has helped me to break that painful spell. If Bill C-220 were in effect, I would suffer in silence forever, along with other people who might heal through this avenue. (‘Proceedings’ 1998 para. 38)

As well as the concern for freedom of expression and literary creation, Wiebe pointed out that prison writing has played a significant role in the release of wrongly convicted prisoners. This is not unconnected with Stolen Life (although the book was not yet released), as the final chapters build towards an argument that Yvonne Johnson’s sentence of first degree murder was a ‘travesty of justice’ (419). The words in the book are attributed to the lawyer appointed to take Johnson’s appeal to the Supreme Court, and they echo the opinion of Clayton Ruby, a highly respected criminal lawyer, whose view of the Appeal Court judgement which preceded the Supreme Court appeal was that is was ‘an outrageous miscarriage of justice’ (419).

Although Bill C-220 did not pass through the Senate, its support in the Lower House is indicative of the degree of anxiety surrounding writing from prison. H. Bruce Franklin, in Prison Literature in America (1989), claims that in the 1980s readers became deeply unsettled with the autobiographies of convicted criminals (xii–xiii). Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith make a similar point when they open the chapter on prison writing in their book, Human Rights and Narrated Lives (2004), with a recount of Nelson Mandela and Ruben Carter sharing a stage in Melbourne, Australia in 2000 (153–56). Both men wrote prison narratives. Mandela’s book, Long Walk to Freedom (1994), is read globally as an exemplary text of political commitment, as dissident writing and testimony to a lifelong struggle to bring about change in an unjust society. Carter’s book, The Sixteenth Round (1974), which inspired support that generated a campaign for his convictions for murder to be reviewed, resulting, eventually, in his release, is illustrative of prison writing leading to exoneration. Yet Carter’s case provokes ambivalence, Schaffer and Smith claim:

For many people, Carter is a former political prisoner of a racist justice system, who has dedicated his life to helping others wrongfully convicted. For others, Carter remains a naively lionized criminal, whose gritty life narrative spoke to leftists, intellectuals, and celebrities only too eager to discredit the American justice system as racist. (156)

The ‘doubled projection’ operating upon Carter’s case ‘confuses the roles of victim and perpetrator’ (156), Schaffer and Smith argue, a confusion which I believe is pertinent to reader response to Johnson in Stolen Life as well.

Upon its publication, Stolen Life enjoyed substantial critical acclaim. It won the Edmonton Book Prize; the Saskatchewan Book Award; the Writers’ Guild of Alberta Award for non-fiction; and the $10,000 Viacom Canada Writers’ Trust Non-Fiction Award. It was also a finalist for the Governor-General’s Award for non-fiction. By far the majority of newspaper coverage and book reviews were
laudatory, with both non-Indigenous and First Nations writers praising the book for its ‘insight to the injustices done to Native people and the overwhelming effects of violence and abuse’ (Francis 8). Two exceptions to this positive reception appeared in the popular media, and one appeared in the academic journal *Canadian Literature*. Each of these objected, with varying emphases, to the extent to which *Stolen Life* deflected attention away from Johnson’s responsibility for the death of Skwarok. One of the articles also criticised the numerous positive reviews of *Stolen Life* which neglected to mention the name of the victim, or dismissed him as an alleged child molester and it is this aspect of *Stolen Life*, its portrayal of Leonard Skwarok, which has arisen in the media most recently.

In 2007, Wiebe’s autobiography, *Of This Earth: A Mennonite Boyhood in the Boreal Forest*, was published, again to critical acclaim, winning the $25,000 Charles Taylor Prize for non-fiction. As with *Stolen Life*, the vast majority of the press has been favourable. One report, however, carried a quote from Karen Chaboyer, who just prior to Leonard Skwarok’s death had been living with Skwarok in a defacto relationship. She claims that the attention Wiebe now receives returns her thoughts to *Stolen Life*, which she says, ‘makes her skin crawl’ (Landry online). Two years previously, Chaboyer with her two daughters and son had attended a hearing circle for Yvonne Johnson at which they presented victim impact statements describing not only how the death of Skwarok has impacted upon their lives, but also ‘how they felt victimized every time they read her book’ (‘Controversial Killer Gets Closer to Freedom’ 3). These victim impact statements have been posted on a website titled ‘In Memory of Leonard Charles Skwarok,’ and in their statements Chaboyer and her children write of the trauma they experience in relation to the book and, they fear, a movie based on the book which is reportedly in development. They object to the portrayal of Skwarok in the book, especially as his representation is created only through the words of those who contributed to his death. They object that he is identified as ‘white,’ though in fact he, like Johnson, has both European and Cree ancestry. They object to statements that he hated children. They object to descriptions that make him seem threatening, unstable, and lacking connections to family. They do not directly deny the allegations of abuse; in fact, Chaboyer writes that Johnson’s descriptions of abuse are powerful precisely because they relate the experiences of so many families. Cree writer, Heather Hodgson, agrees with this assessment of the book’s power, saying that ‘exposing the poison is essential to healing’ (156). However, where Johnson has found the chance to heal, Charboyer objects that her family, through Skwarok’s death, has been robbed of that possibility. Clearly, Johnson’s narrative of lifelong sexual abuse which culminates in a killing is a narrative of trauma whose victims are multiple.

Trauma permeates the pages of *Stolen Life*. Johnson’s understanding of her own trauma began in prison, when for the first time, as she says, she had no access to alcohol, with which for years she had distanced herself from any possible
memory of what had happened to her (360). Similar to other victims of trauma, she reports the first emergence of her traumatic memories into language being triggered by a single word. ‘Is something the matter?’ a guard in P4W in 1992 asked her. ‘You walk around all day like a zombie’ (332). Johnson then writes:

It was the name Leon always used on me. And suddenly I just blurted out, ‘I’m having these terrible — not nightmares … sort of pictures … things about when I was little, that have always been there, somewhere, but more and more, I don’t know, I can’t stop them’. (332)

What Yvonne remembers, and here begins to put into language, are the repeated acts of sexual abuse that her brother Leon committed upon her, the first time at the urging of a male babysitter left to care for the Johnson children when Yvonne was between two and three years old. She was also raped by the babysitter who, as a friend of the family, was often at the house. Leon continued to rape her and she remembers as well being raped by her father, and his father. Her silence from the beginning of her experiences was due to her age and the impairment of her cleft palate, which was only corrected through extensive operations later in life.6 Her silence was also a sign of her trauma, in which pain and fear and incomprehension were sealed beyond language:

When I was first attacked, I could not speak to be understood, I did not know what happened to me, just pain and scared emotions and thoughts of pain recalled…. At that age I had nothing to compare, that act is all I had. You learn something because people tell you the story around it — well, this was not my case. I had no story. I registered what happened to me as pain, hate, bitterness, yelling, crying, mass confusion with no explanation. (337)

This is an extract from a thirty page witness statement that Johnson made detailing her memories of sexual abuse, and which Wiebe mentions in interview that she sent him early in their collaboration.7 ‘The statement was written a few months following the trigger event, cited above: the word ‘zombie,’ which Leon used on her, the ‘on’ implying that the violence of the word was felt like a weapon. The statement is the more immediate response, however, to a conversation with Yvonne’s sister, Karen, who told her that Leon had raped her earlier that year, and had beaten their other sister Minnie when she told their mother of the rape. This is when Yvonne decides: ‘I will not let this violence in our family continue any more without a fight. I will speak out loud. I will write it down’ (334). It is only two weeks after writing this witness statement that Rudy Wiebe received that introductory letter from Yvonne, asking for his help.

The trauma to which Stolen Life testifies is primarily this: the trauma of chronic sexual abuse that is Yvonne’s experience, but not hers alone, nor that of her family alone. When Yvonne spoke to the prison guard about the images that were plaguing her, the guard, a Native woman, shed tears as she replied, ‘I was raped and molested when I was a baby. My siblings, when they were older, they confirmed it. It happens, yes’ (332). Yvonne later writes: ‘In prison most women
understand my story; it’s so much their own’ (338). Wiebe, in interview, has said that on the book tour a Native woman in Winnipeg told him that every single Native woman that she knew had a story of some kind of vicious abuse in her life. If it wasn’t happening now with her husband, it had happened in her past, either from acquaintances, or on the Reserve, in her family with her uncles, her cousins, her brothers, her father, whoever. This is horrible. Every Native woman she knew … and she must have known hundreds.

Like so many other testimonial texts, the principal narrator’s story is offered as representative of many, as standing in for all those who cannot — due to circumstance, due to trauma — speak for themselves. *Stolen Life*’s accomplishment, achieved by both Wiebe and Johnson, is that of providing language, providing a narrative, where language and narrative — public language, public narrative — did not exist before.

In her essay ‘Language as Skin’, Ann Scott emphasises the power of language with relation to trauma. ‘Sexual abuse and the memories associated with it concern a breach in the membrane of the body,’ she writes, ‘and I am suggesting that there is a close relationship between words and sentences, or sentence fragments, and the subject’s sense of bodily integrity, especially the integrity of the skin, the body’s container’ (72). Just as memories of traumatic experiences can be triggered by a word, so words can heal and Scott draws the analogy of skin closing over a wound. ‘[L]anguage again does the work of a skin, or attempts to do the work of a skin, seeking both to patch and to heal the memory of that trauma’ (71). The process, though, Scott argues is one marked throughout by anxiety and volatility. There is no certain outcome, and in cases where perpetrators and victims are brought into contact, or where the language of one impinges upon the other, ‘words can do the opposite of repair holes in the skin. Rather than provide closure, they can act as a disruptive force’ (72).

Healing, Johnson says, should not take place in a courtroom (360). In the trials that follow from sexual assault charges pressed against Leon by Karen and then by Yvonne, and by their cousin Darlene, the Johnson family’s pain, conflict and injury are on public display. Wiebe, who is present at the trials, provides much of the narration, incorporating trial transcripts with his own accounts, including the dialogue that follows his meeting Yvonne’s mother, Cecilia. ‘Most documented accounts of exchanges between family members where memories were contested show how angry the sequences were’ (75), Scott writes, in a discussion of the volatility of language surrounding trauma. Wiebe’s account of the events of the trials certainly makes the reader aware of this anger, not an insubstantial amount of which is directed from Cecilia to him, Wiebe, ‘the enemy’ (348). Outside the court, Wiebe records her as saying, ‘You write anything about our family […] you’ll answer to me’ (349). Wiebe says nothing at this point, but later that day he tells her, ‘Yvonne’s life story is her own. No one, not even you, can forbid her to tell it the way she remembers and knows it to be’ (349). The remarks rephrase
the exchange that took place between Yvonne and Wiebe at the beginning of the book, and cited earlier in this essay, when Wiebe said to her, ‘no story is ever yours alone’, and Yvonne replied, ‘Maybe not only mine, but it is mine’ (24). This is at the crux of the anxieties that exist both within the pages of Stolen Life and outside of them. No one’s story is ever one’s alone. Every story is a matter both of ‘what I have done, and what was done to me’. Wiebe signals the importance of this from the opening sentence of his ‘Prefatory Note’ to Stolen Life:

This book is based on what Yvonne Johnson holds to be her own truths about the life she has lived. However, since there is never only one way to tell a story, other persons involved in this one may well have experienced and remembered differently the events and actions here portrayed. (xi)

Wiebe’s opening statement indicates the unavoidability of multiple perspectives, conflicting recall, and relative truths. ‘What I have done, what was done to me’, however, signals more than this. It points towards the overlay of testimony and confession, or perhaps towards their conflation.

The distinction between testimony and confession is a seemingly straightforward matter. Testimony comprises a set of statements given by a witness to events. It is offered as evidence, as proof or substantiation that something has occurred. On the one hand, it necessarily implies, as Andrea Frisch points out, ‘first hand experiential knowledge’ (36). Frisch cites Derrida’s claim to this effect:

In essence, a testimony is always autobiographical: it tells, in the first person, the shareable and unshareable secret of what happened to me, to me, to me alone, the absolute secret of what I was in a position to live, see, hear, touch, sense, feel. (38)

On the other hand, testimony also implies an event that has made necessary the testimony: someone or something that has acted or impinged upon that subject’s being and perceptions. ‘Witness testimony’s object’, Susannah Radstone writes, ‘is always an event or an other that is external to the witness’ (169). In contradistinction, confession while also necessarily involving ‘first hand experiential knowledge’, turns upon not ‘what happened to me’, but rather, ‘what I have done’. As Radstone explains, ‘in confession it is the self that is scrutinised — the self that is the subject and object of confession’ (169). In its religious context, confession is a statement of transgression; in the judicial sense, it is an admission of wrong-doing or of guilt. In both cases, however, the objective of confession is redemption, a restoration of self or person to a spiritual or social order.

Johnson has written, as cited earlier in this essay, that she feels her testimony of sexual abuse to be redemptive. Wiebe knows that for Johnson’s story to completely achieve this redemptive end, she must also confess, in her own words, what happened in the basement of her house in Wetaskiwin on the night that Leonard Skwarok was killed. Johnson had made no formal statement to this effect since her arrest. She had not given evidence at her trial. Unlike the other three people involved in the killing, Johnson would in no way explain what she had
done that night. In the years following, she talked and wrote of the events up to the hour of the killing, but would not go further. Wiebe tells us that he wanted her to provide more:

I wanted to hear Yvonne’s personal account of what went on. Especially, I wanted to hear, from her, what she knew she had done. And in her written comments on the trial, in her letters, in our conversations, she did explain things — but never in sequence; never as one connected story. For several years she could not find it within herself to do that. (279)

Finally, in 1996, at the Okima Ohci Healing Lodge, following a ceremonial sweat, under the guidance of First Nations Elders, and in the presence of one of these Elders, Johnson narrates what she did. She begins:

I do this in a ceremonial way, and it is covered under the medicine, and I believe the spirits are here to help me. My sole purpose in doing this is to give it to the Creator, to give it to the spirits in the hope to get some sort of understanding, to put some sort of closure to all of it. (396)

For the next several hours she speaks to the Creator, to the Elder present, but also to a tape-recorder, explaining what she did and how she contributed to the killing of Leonard Skwarok. Later, she will give this tape to Wiebe, who will transcribe it, and select excerpts to be incorporated into the penultimate chapter of their book.8

The redemptive or transformational characteristic of confession in literature establishes a quality of ‘becomingness’ (Radstone 171), and this is a critically important feature in the final two chapters of Stolen Life. Johnson’s confession has only become possible through her engagement with First Nations spirituality, a process of becoming that has been traced throughout the course of the narrative but which culminates in her receiving her spiritual name and in her recovered memories of Cree ceremonies that her grandmother had performed on her as a child.

A crucial point in this process of becoming occurs when Johnson is held at North Battleford jail to await her court appearance to give evidence at Leon’s trial for sexual assault. Battleford is near the Red Pheasant Reserve, where Johnson’s mother and her branch of the Bear family have lived for four generations. In the small cell where Johnson is held, she reads the names of her relatives;

Their names are everywhere, scratched, cut deep into the bunks, the yellow walls. Relatives I recognize from storytelling, or a chance meeting, family friends whom I may have met once on Red Pheasant. […] I’ve never lived much on the rez, so I’m not well known there. And for years, when my family told a story about a person, I wouldn’t know them, but I always thought that some day I would get to know my relations. But sitting here I realize I never will know all my relations. This is a loss I suffer in prison, a loss which can’t be healed. (368)

The phrasing here is significant. Non-Indigenous readers might recognise the expression ‘all my relations’ from the title of an anthology of First Nations
writing, edited by Thomas King, but might not recognise its implications. ‘All my relations’ is a spiritual utterance, acknowledging a speaker’s relatedness, not just to family, or clan, or even nation, but to all peoples and all living beings that share this existence. It is a powerful utterance, one that is not made lightly. Johnson expresses regret that in her life she has not had sustained connections with family, and that in prison she is cut off from family, even as she reads their names cut into the walls of her cell. Yet already in P4W in Kingston she had begun to connect with ‘all her relations’ when she joined and then became chairperson for the Native Sisterhood, an organisation of First Nations imprisoned women. This is an organisation that had negotiated with the Correctional Service of Canada to allow Elders to visit First Nations women prisoners, arranged for a sweat lodge to be built in P4W, and for ceremonies to be performed.

Over the years of Johnson’s writing with Wiebe, her connections and involvement with First Nations spiritual tradition grow. It is during a sweat ceremony at P4W that an Elder triggers childhood memories that will prove crucial in her recovered narrative when he bestows on her the same spiritual name she had been given by her grandmother Flora Baptiste Bear. As he says her name, she writes later in her journal,

I hear the Cree words again. Not from him; it is the voice of my grandmother Flora Bear who speaks my spirit name to me. As I remember she did so often when I was a child:

Muskeke Muskwa Iskwew.

Without knowing that name again I could never try to help myself, or help my family. My spirit name, given me by the Spirit World People, now I have a place. Where I can stand to speak.

Medicine Bear Woman. (331–32)

Hearing her spiritual name again brings back memories of Cree ceremony that her grandmother had performed on her as a child. She begins to remember a visit to the Red Pheasant reserve where her grandmother led her through Cree ceremonies that would protect her and help her to forget the pain inflicted upon her by others. In the final chapter of her book, Johnson recounts these ceremonies: a shaking tent ceremony to perform release from bondage and suffering, a symbolic flaying with bear claws to induce purification, and a ceremony in which Johnson received from her grandmother her spiritual name, Muskeke Muskwa Iskwew: Medicine Bear Woman. These narratives of healing are recovered over the course of more than four years as Johnson writes in her journals, receives counselling from Elders who visit her in prison, and works with Wiebe to retrace her past. Importantly, the Cree traditions that help her rebuild her life narrative also gave her the strength to speak directly of what she has done, as she says at the beginning of her taped narrative of what happened in the basement: ‘it’s time for me to be as a medicine bear woman and to deal with these things’ (396).
For most readers, this process of Yvonne Johnson becoming Medicine Bear Woman is a powerful close to the journey through testimony and confession. I need to return, however, to those readers for whom the confession, especially, produces severe disruption rather than an understanding of the redemptive turn it is meant to invoke: I refer once more to the family of Leonard Skwarok and in this regard Scott’s discussion of trauma and language is again insightful. Scott ends her article by referring to Gitta Sereny’s book *Cries Unheard*, published in Great Britain the same year that *Stolen Life* was published in Canada. The book tells the story of Mary Bell, who, thirty years before in 1968, as an eleven year old, killed two younger boys. The author, Sereny, at that time was an investigative journalist and wrote a book about the trial. In 1996 she began to work with Bell on the story of her life, which involved sexual abuse by friends of her mother before the killings and extensive sexual abuse in the secure facilities to which she was sent after being convicted. Scott cites interviews with mothers of the murdered children, and comments on their intense distress upon learning of the book. Scott sees this as an example of a book, in one particular context, acting ‘as a toxic object’ (81), something so dangerous to the families of the deceased children that it threatened the very stability of their memories of their loved ones (81). This extreme case does bear resemblance to the reactions of the Chaboyer family who in their Victim Impact Statements write of the pain and trauma they experienced at having to relive their grief when the *Stolen Life* was published nine years after Skwarok’s killing.

There is no question that *Stolen Life* is powerful; also without question, to some the book poses a threat to their own narratives and memories, and this brings my discussion back to the image of the spirit bundle. When I spoke to Yvonne Johnson at the Edmonton Institute for Women, she drew my attention to the design of the book: the way in which her narrative is surrounded, covered and, in effect, protected by protocols. The book opens with a prayer:

O Creator of all, I pray you, look at me, for I am weak and pitiful.

I pray,

help me to make amends to all those I have harmed;
grant them love and peace, so that they may understand I am sorry;
help me share my shame and pain, so that others will do the same, and so awaken to themselves and to all peoples of the world.

Hai hai

It is signed (in typescript) Yvonne Johnson, and accompanied by a small image of a bear, a sign of the bear spirit that guides her. Another prayer closes the book, again accompanied by the image of the bear. Johnson, in interview, explains that the prayers are important in Cree ceremony, marking the beginning and end of a protected space. The cover of the book performs a similar function.
of protection. She describes the cover of *Stolen Life* as representing the coverings that wrap and protect the medicines inside a spirit bundle. She describes how the inclusion of her spiritual colours and their display in the four directions seal the book. She explains that the use of the photographs — of herself as a young girl in the centre of the front cover, and of Big Bear on the back cover — signify the importance of the generations: of heritage and lineage, but also of responsibility and duty of care to all ones relations. [Front and back covers reproduced on pp. 50 & 53 of this issue] Although she does not explicitly refer to the tradition of seven generations, Cree readers can make this connection. Johnson’s use of pronouns in the interview indicates that the choice of photographs was not hers (‘On the front they have me as a child. On the back they have my great-great-grandfather’) but she does claim that she was consulted, and that the choices are appropriate to the way she understands the book as a spirit bundle, a ceremonial object passed down through generations, a bundle that holds power within its covers.10

Narratives of trauma, like the powers within a spirit bundle, are volatile. Johnson emphasises the need to protect that which lies within the bundle: stories which are hers, but not hers alone; stories of what she has done, and of what was done to her. Wrapping a medicine bundle serves to protect the contents. The ceremonies and covering, too, may serve to contain the power; to hold it in so that others are not exposed without care to its medicine. I know, of course, that in significant ways a book cannot be a bundle. Its public circulation conflicts with the possibilities suggested above. Anyone can open a book, at any time, with or without ceremony; but in thinking of *Stolen Life*, and the life narratives it relates, and relates to, treating it as spirit bundle may be a proper form of respect for the power it holds. To open a bundle is to be willing to hold another’s story in one’s hands, and to hold another’s story is to open oneself to its power.

NOTES

1 *Stolen Life: Journey of a Cree Woman* was first published by A.A. Knopf Canada in 1998. The 1999 edition published by Vintage incorporates all of the design features requested by Yvonne Johnson. All references in this essay are based on the 1999 edition.

2 It is with respect that I begin to write about this book. Five years ago I had the opportunity to meet with both Yvonne Johnson and Rudy Wiebe. Although many aspects of this present article are not directly related to our conversations then but have resulted from my reading and writing since, the crucial assertion that *Stolen Life* be approached as a spirit bundle comes directly from Yvonne Johnson, and her view was supported by Rudy Wiebe in our interview the following day. While my article here focuses less on concerns of collaboration than issues of representing trauma through testimony and confession, I remain indebted to the co-authors. I thank them for patiently answering my questions regarding their collaboration, their intentions and aspirations, and their reflections on the book they produced together.

If, for this article, I have chosen not to dwell on the dynamics of collaborative writing — in this case a collaboration inflected by gender as well as race — it is not
because the issue is secondary. Instead, I wish to indicate here how critical reading
can also be collaborative. I would not have fully understood the book as spirit bundle
without having spoken to Yvonne Johnson and my reading is, I hope, an attempt to
apply her metaphor to issues as significant as the book’s collaborative construction.

I also thank the participants of the Lifewriting seminar series, held by the Identity
and Cultural Transformations research group at the University of Wollongong for their
productive responses to an earlier draft of this paper.

3 Manina Jones closes her discussion of *Stolen Life* and collaboration in postcolonial
writing with reference to Bill C220. In addition to Wiebe and Johnson’s statements
to the Senate Committee, Jones paraphrases Wendy Lill’s observation that ‘given the
disproportionate number of Indigenous people and other racial minorities who currently
populate Canadian prisons, this legislation […] might well have racist implications’ (219).

4 I refer here to the article by Davis Sheremata in the *Alberta Report*, Bert Archer’s
review in *Now* magazine, and Susanna Egan’s essay in *Canadian Literature*. Archer’s
review raises the issue of the negative representations of Skwarok, or the failure of
other reviews to mention his name.

5 A brief notice on the Upfront Entertainment website, viewed on 10 January, 2007
said that ‘Stolen Life’, a project in development, will be ‘a searing dramatic feature
based on Rudy Wiebe and Yvonne Johnson’s award-winning book about Yvonne’s gut-
wrenching journey as a Cree woman’ (‘Dramatic Programming’).

6 It is important to understand the severity of Johnson’s speech impairment throughout
her childhood, and her gaining the ability to speak with clarity only after extensive
surgery during her teenage years. Johnson explains: ‘My basic problem was the way I
was born; in the centre of my face, where my nose, top lip, gums, and roof of my mouth
should have been, there was only folded tissue that left a gap in my upper mouth.
Even my teeth and inner-mouth bones were affected by this severe deformity’ (29).
Johnson comments repeatedly through the early chapters of her book on the extent of
her inability to communicate: ‘Until Perry came along in 1966, I was the youngest, and
unable to talk. In a way my eyes became my voice. I cried to make someone understand
with my tears’ (34). Although she had operations when she was a child, her impairment
was not corrected fully until she was a teenager. When she was sixteen, Johnson came
before the courts in Butte Montana, charged with ‘driving a car without the owner’s
consent’ (130). The owner had died of hypothermia after Johnson and another man
had abandoned him on a country road at night during a snowstorm. The judge, unable
to hear Johnson as she attempted to speak to the court, realised the severity of her
impairment and, as part of Johnson’s sentence, ordered she receive plastic surgery and
dental work. Johnson comments: ‘And the radical surgery worked, the doctor knew
how to do it all, exactly…. Judge Olson ordered the dentists and that incredible doctor
at State expense to work on me all that time; no one but a rock star or a millionaire
could have afforded it. The surgeon was so proud of me and his architecture, six
hundred and seventy-six stitches! At last, I could speak’ (133). Included in the final
pages of the book is an excerpt from a letter from Johnson to Wiebe in which Johnson
writes: ‘A bear always has a fold in her upper lip. My grandma, I, my eldest child, have
the gift and the legacy of the bear so strong, we have the Bear’s Lip’ (436). In claiming
her cleft palate as ‘the legacy of the bear’, Johnson establishes cohesion between her
childhood inability to speak and her claim now to speak and to identify as Medicine
Bear Woman, as will be discussed later in this essay.

7 All references in this essay to interviews with Wiebe and Johnson refer to the interviews
which follow in this issue of *Kunapipi*. 
Deena Rymhs claims that this confession is ‘a pivotal moment for the narrative since it is not collaborative’ (98). I agree that it is pivotal, a point which is essential to my argument as well. I take issue, however, with the claim that it is not collaborative. The confessional narrative is, in effect, the culmination of the long process of collaboration, not only with Wiebe, but with the First Nations Elders who have facilitated Johnson’s engagement with Cree spirituality, and one of whom witnesses her spoken confession. These key pages are deeply collaborative in the sense that Johnson was unable to reach this point — the ability to provide the details of the violence that led to Skwarok’s death — without the long process of collaboration and the assistance of others.

This passage on the names scratched onto the prison wall, and the significance of the phrase, ‘all my relations’ is discussed in detail in Claire Omhovère’s ‘The Authorisation of Story in Rudy Wiebe and Yvonne Johnson’s Stolen Life: The Journey of a Cree Woman,’ International Journal of Canadian Studies/Revue internationale d’études canadiennes.

Yvonne Johnson in our interview commented on the new cover of the paperback, which does not include her spiritual colours.

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Yvonne Johnson, great-great granddaughter of Plains Cree chief, Big Bear, is the co-author, with Canadian writer Rudy Wiebe, of *Stolen Life: Journey of a Cree Woman* (1998). Their book tells of how Johnson came to be the only First Nations woman in Canada serving a ‘life twenty-five’ sentence for first degree murder. It also narrates Johnson’s experiences of repeated sexual abuse, inflicted on her by family members and strangers, beginning when she was two years old. As Johnson had been born with a cleft palate, she was unable to communicate to others her suffering and so the abuse continued for years.

Rudy Wiebe’s interest in and engagement with the narratives surrounding Big Bear have been integral to much of his writing life. In 1973, he won the Governor-General’s Award for fiction for his novel, *The Temptations of Bear*, although, as Wiebe reminds us in the following interview, Big Bear’s legacy was already there in his first novel, *Peace Shall Destroy Many*. In 1992, when he received a letter from Johnson from the Prison for Women in Kingston Ontario saying she was a descendant of Big Bear and that she wished to clear his name, recover his medicine bundle and find her lost family, Wiebe responded immediately. They arranged a meeting and from this their collaboration began. Yvonne Johnson’s life narrative, Wiebe was convinced, was a story that desperately needed to be told. As he says in the interview, it is crucial that a wide readership be given the chance to understand how and why these events have happened: what she has done and what was done to her.

The experiences of Yvonne Johnson and her family, as told in *Stolen Life*, are those that Big Bear feared his people would face: with European-Canadian expansion across the prairies the Cree were dispossessed of their land and their food, forced to give up cultural practices and, in residential schools, to renounce their language and spiritual beliefs. The Johnson family story — her mother is Cree and her father was an American of Norwegian heritage — includes the residential schooling of her mother; the racial taunts and prejudice experienced by Yvonne and her siblings; the death in police custody of an older brother; Yvonne’s alcohol dependency and abuse; and the prolonged sexual abuse to which she was subjected. For Yvonne Johnson, events were to culminate in a night of excessive drinking when she and three others tied, beat, sexually assaulted with a stool leg, and strangled with telephone cord Leonard Skwarok, a man they barely knew but suspected, without any evidence, to be a sexual abuser and, for Johnson especially, a threat to her own young children. For her role in Skwarok’s death, Johnson was found guilty of first-degree murder and sentenced to life imprisonment with
no eligibility for parole for at least twenty-five years, the most severe sentence possible in the Canadian criminal justice system.

*Stolen Life* was one of the first books I read for my PhD research into collaborative Indigenous life writing in Canada and Australia. I found it a confronting, brutal, and painful reading experience. The experiences that Johnson narrates — the abuse inflicted upon her, and the violence that she participated in — are horrible to conceive. Yet I recognised that the publication of Johnson’s story was a significant event in Canadian literature, in First Nations writing, and in collaborative life writing. *Stolen Life* won the Edmonton Book Prize; the Saskatchewan Book Award; the Writers’ Guild of Alberta Award for non-fiction; and the $10,000 Viacom Canada Writers’ Trust Non-Fiction Award. It was also a finalist for the Governor-General’s Award for non-fiction. In terms of collaborative life writing, the book raises issues of Indigenous narrative and authorship; voice and subjectivity; narrative strategies and editorial control; and relationships of power and vulnerability. It was a book that demanded serious critical consideration and engagement.

In 2002, I was fortunate to receive a travel grant from the Association of Canadian Studies in Australia and New Zealand, and a study grant from Deakin University, that allowed me to travel across Canada to interview Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants in collaborative life writing. Prior to departure, I spent some months establishing contact with writers and, in some cases, with family members of writers. Contacting Wiebe was straightforward; however, reaching Johnson was more difficult. My initial letter to Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge (the correctional facility where Johnson was held after her transfer from the Prison for Women in Kingston, as narrated in *Stolen Life*) was returned, marked ‘No longer at this institution.’ I then learned from Wiebe that Johnson had been again transferred, this time to the Edmonton Institute for Women and so I wrote to her there. I received no written reply, but a few weeks before my departure from Australia a woman phoned telling me that she had spoken with Yvonne and that she agreed to be interviewed. With that verbal assurance, I made arrangements to visit the women’s prison in Edmonton.

I met with Yvonne Johnson at the Edmonton Institute for Women on the 8th of August, 2002. The next day I interviewed Rudy Wiebe at his home. The following are edited versions of our tape-recorded interviews.

**MJ:** Let’s begin with how the book really began. You were at Kingston and you saw on the bookshelf a copy of *The Temptations of Big Bear*.

**YJ:** Well, it’s not the first time I’d seen a copy of *The Temptations of Big Bear*. Not many people have written about Big Bear. The first time I saw it I was seventeen or eighteen. I lived in Uranium City, Saskatchewan. I saw it and I didn’t want to touch it, because being part of the AIM movement back
in the ’70s, we were trying to fight against the exploitation of Natives and Native culture by non-Native people. Like coming up with Pochahontas and things like that that wasn’t real but was Hollywood. So I saw it and I thought, no, this wasn’t written by a Native person. In the ’70s we didn’t have too many Native writers at all. So when I hit Kingston I felt like everything that I was was being questioned at the time — my Nativeness, being of the Cree Nation, being a descendant of Big Bear, which was proven when I got my treaty status. That’s how I got re-instated as an Indian under the Indian Act in Canada. I shouldn’t have to explain any of this but a lot of times Native people say, ‘Explain yourself. Tell me who your family is. Tell me who your ancestry is’. A lot of that was through persecution of the government, that descendants of Big Bear were considered outlaws. So after Big Bear’s death, we went into hiding. That’s why I said that people were sent to the four winds. We didn’t have a Reserve. So we lost our Band and wound up going into other people’s Bands. So our whole family and bloodline got all mixed up and confused. A lot went to Montana so I didn’t know. I was trying to find out who Yvonne Johnson was. I was searching for who Yvonne Johnson was, in all degrees: psychological, emotional, physical. Who am I? Where am I from? What am I for? I’m just here in prison, sentenced almost to death — a life imprisonment with no possible parole for twenty-five years. You start questioning who you are, the reality of your existence and why you’re supposed to be.

Family communication broke down because I was shipped to the only federal prison in Canada for women, which is like over a 1,000 miles away from my people, who couldn’t sometimes afford to drive from the Reserve to town which was thirty, forty miles. So, I was isolated and shunned from my family. I had to have something within myself as a human being to carry on, and I thought: identity, culture, base, find out who I am. I had no way of doing that. When I came out of the office, I saw that book, *The Temptations of Big Bear* on the shelves and just out of total defiance, and being the only book that there was, I thought, okay, I’ll read this whiteman’s book. You know, I’ll see what he’s got to say. When I read it, it was the first time ever that anybody wrote about Native people giving them a fair shake, the closest thing to a fair shake in history, or writing things. I knew nothing about compiling a book. I knew nothing… I didn’t even realise that this is fiction. *Big Bear* is fiction. When I read it, he had times, dates, places and events. I didn’t realise at that time that he most likely, and I’m just speaking out of turn here, he most likely went to the archives, pulled up this data out of the archives, and then that’s where it became fiction because then he wrote his own depiction about it. I appreciated the way he wrote about Native people because we are proud, we are spiritual. We do have dignity. I liked the way that he portrayed my ancestry, and I kind of
laughed thinking how stubborn I was for not reading this book back in the ’70s. I looked at the book and I still remember the picture that was on the book. Rudy kind of looked like an old hippie, eh, and I thought, I could get along with this guy! So I was hanging out at the library and I was reading Carl Jung. I got talking to the librarian there and I started reading a book, *Who’s Who*, and I says, ‘How would you get a hold of an author who wrote a book?’ And she says, ‘Who are you trying to get a hold of?’ And I says, ‘I don’t know, this guy if he’s still alive or whatever’, I says, ‘I’d like to get a hold of this Rudy Wiebe’. So, she went to a book that she had in her office and she goes, ‘Try writing to this publisher, or whoever published the book’. So, I did and I felt so shunned as a human being that when I wrote him, I think that’s where the spirit came through.

There’s more to this collaboration between me and Rudy than the collaboration itself. To me, it was a meant-to-be, because of who Rudy was, and how he portrayed and understood Big Bear, who I was as a descendant of Big Bear, that I could see it as a spiritual thing, more than anything else. That’s just the kind of person I am. I try to deal with people on a spirit level, not on a conscious business level, because I figure if we deal with each other on a spirit level, how can you disrespect that? That’s the way that I see it. All the rest is unimportant if you have that value base, to be respectful of individual spirits, in that we’re all spirits of the Creator, and nothing happens for nothing. Because can you tell me, in your lifetime, how someone like me and Rudy would even connect, much less get along, much less help each other? So it had to have been is the way that I see it, the way that I want to see it. That’s the trust that I have there, knowing that there’s spirits and ancestries that are before me, that are looking after me, and that this somehow has to be a must-be. So I wrote a letter and I thought, ‘Well, I’m going to scare him off. If I don’t scare him off that says a lot’.

So I wrote the letter and I explained who I was. I explained that I was in prison because so many people are in denial to even admit that they are in prison. I had nothing to hide. As they say when they read you your rights, ‘You have nothing to gain. You have nothing to lose’. That’s the way it is. So, I wrote him and I also wrote Hugh Dempsey. He wrote a book on big bear. Hugh Dempsey never wrote me back. He never got in contact with me at all in any way, shape or form. I think some of that had to do with … he was married to a descendant of Big Bear and those descendants of Big Bear that are State-side and the ones that are in Canada, that chain got broken with Big Bear and it hasn’t ever been mended. So they are kind of segregated by this border which shouldn’t be but which seems to happen in my family. So Hugh Dempsey didn’t write me back or anything. I didn’t expect Rudy to write me back. Like, who would write me? Who would?
I wouldn’t want to write someone in prison and I used to have penpals. You’re a forgot person when you’re in prison. I saw them duck out on me as soon as I got my sentence. Everybody ducked out on me. My family had to look at me almost as being dead because I wasn’t going to be part of their life for that twenty-five years. It’s just the human reaction, for lack of being able to do anything else, and you have to come to a conscious realisation of that while you’re in prison or it’s going to kill you. You just got to let it go too; but I try not to let it all go or otherwise I’d be totally institutionalised and never worth being let out. So I have to hold onto a little something, but reality hits home hard, really hard. So I wrote this letter and I waited and waited and waited. I didn’t hear nothing. I forgot about it.

I tried to write a family genealogy on the wall. I had a big piece of paper on the wall and at the top, according to Rudy’s book, I put Black Powder. According to that, then I put Big Bear, then I realised, ‘Well, who’s after that?’ There was a big hole in my family tree; and I asked, ‘How am I going to fill this? How am I going to figure this out?’ Indian Affairs have a census and they wouldn’t even tell me who my family was. Yet they’ll give me my treaty card, saying that because of birthright I am an Indian, but they won’t tell me how that is. So I tried to ask my mother and that was a big thing. But my Mom since then has told me that Big Bear had a son and that son wound up having a baby with the daughter of the Hudson Bay Company Store Operator, at that Frog Lake massacre. So he had my grandfather, John Bear. Then John Bear married into my grandmother’s reserve, which was Baptiste. When I wrote Rudy, I thought he was going to send his records and files. That’s what I wanted. I tried to write one archive in Toronto and they sent me a picture of another chief that wasn’t even my grandfather. So I didn’t trust them, and this was a Native organisation, sending me a picture of Poundmaker. So, I thought, ‘he did this research, he did this book, he’s got all that information’. All I want to do is to find out who my ancestry is, essentially. I guess I never wrote precisely. I did write about trying to bring my family ancestry together. First, he wrote me back. That surprised me. When I read the letter, he said, ‘I don’t think I can get you to understand how much Big Bear has meant to me in my life’. Big Bear was, I think, the first book that Rudy had written to get himself educated and it won the Governor General’s award. That created a lot of jealousy, a whiteman writing about Native people in such a way that he actually went against the odds, or the norms; and to me that meant a lot, that he as a human being would do that and that people would be spiteful and jealous of that fact. So that spoke to me a lot about his character as a human being too. That just nobody wrote about Big Bear. According to the government he was dead and should stay that way. Rudy
never let him completely disappear in records and archives though, like a
dead ghost. He told me that he was born and raised on the Forks, where my
great-grandfather was born, in the Mennonite community. Nobody ever
spoke about the Native community, but he did. Even today, I assume, the
Mennonite community tells him, ‘Write about Mennonites. Don’t write
about Indians no more’. But he still is in there. He too has a lot of gain
from that, as the businessman and the professional person that he is. I don’t
want to believe that there is any hocus-pocus happening there. I refuse to
believe that, because I believe in the ultimate trust in him. Then it’s not for
me to say. Like I said, it’s a spiritual thing and that’s where I leave it at the
best of times. I didn’t write the book for any form of prestige, any form of
literature, any placement, nothing like that.

MJ: Okay, well maybe you could talk about why you did write the book then.

YJ: It was like a last will and testament. It was my final statement before I
committed suicide. That was my goal. People claim that I wrote it to profit
off crime. Baloney! Do you think that I would have shamed myself to
such a degree, that I would have been so honest? Maybe other people
who supposedly assuming write for profit after their crime, glamorise it
and are in denial and they lie. Nowhere in here have I tried to covercoat
anything. That was part of having the death wish. I’m not going to beat
around the bush. What lies on the spirit of Yvonne Johnson is what I’m
going to get off. When I commit suicide, that is like my last confession.
I don’t feel like I’m your Charles Manson, or I’m your Homolka or your
Bernardo, and a lot of it had to go back to my case. A lot of it had to do
with circumstances throughout history that were done to the Native people.
Even Rudy himself said that they imprisoned Big Bear and they let him
out long enough to die. They served their purpose. They used their system
to kill my ancestry. Who cares about the real, real truth or the reality when
it comes to a system? Native people didn’t hold court of laws that way. In
Native way it was a bigger capital punishment to lie than anything else. It’s
like I said about friendship. It’s the same thing about lies. If you are called
up in front of the elders, if you are caught in a lie once, they just write you
right off. You go and you explain what happened. You explain your mind,
your body, your spirit for what it is. Then explain what happened. They
say, ‘Either kill me or you help me’. But the whiteman’s system ain’t set
up like that. I was no first degree killer. I did not do what they said I did.
Yet I knew what I did was bad enough; but that’s something that I have to
wear. What would my existence be in this world if I let history, or if I let
prison record, or if I let court documentation, that somebody can pull out
and write their own book about? I thought no. I’ve seen dead body after
dead body being carried out of that prison and everybody’s saying, ‘Why,
why, why, why, why?’ Inquiries into these women’s deaths. The cover up of systematic abuse done to the Native culture, through the system itself. Culture clashes. I wanted to have the last say if I was going to take my own life. I wanted the world to know even the confusion. Because in my mind … it’s not confused in my mind. It’s confused when I try to portray it to the world that accepts their own reality and their own system. They say, ‘We’re normal, you’re not’. What is normal? What’s classified as normal? That’s why I was very, very truthful because I thought if I die and I stand before the Creator, at least I can say that I’ve tried. I thought when I die I want it printed on my headstone… if someone stands over me trying to snivel around and weenie around and cry because I’m dead, and has the audacity to say, ‘why?’ I says I’ll have it printed on my headstone, ‘Read the book, stupid’.

MJ: It was then that you began writing the journals, the diaries.

YJ: No, I was writing those when I was thinking about killing myself.

MJ: Yeah, that’s what I mean, when you say that it’s your last will and testament, that’s what you’re talking about.

YJ: Yeah, I had no intention of writing a book before I met Rudy, but I did have the intention of having it written down. So I had this already going. That’s why I say it’s a spiritual thing. This is my quest. This is my way of giving some form of understanding back to the world. I speak for Big Bear. I try to. I speak for every silent abused woman, for everybody that has suffered what I have suffered, that has the inability because of shame or because of society’s retardation, and that’s what I call it, retardation. I’m not the retarded one. It’s just that they don’t accept me. They have not accepted my family. We’re hard to kill. So, I wrote a book. I was given an opportunity and a chance to do that. It was like the Creator said, ‘All right, you’re going to kill yourself. What’s your life for?’ Then I thought I can’t live through all of that pain and all of that suffering just to be carted out on a stretcher and put six feet in the hole. Where everything that I am is a lot of what I was created into. Yet my spirit is good. I may not appreciate a lot of the acts that I did throughout life, nor do I appreciate the acts that were done to me. That’s why I told my brother in a court of law, ‘I love you. That’s undeniable. You’re my brother. You’re my blood. But I don’t have to love what you did’.

MJ: Could you now talk about how your writing in those journals and, as you said it was a last will and testament, moved, after your contact with Rudy, towards life writing and the book?
Yvonne Johnson: Well, he responded to my letter with excitement, knowing and having contract with a direct descendant of Big Bear who was actually in the same position as Big Bear was himself, because he was in Stony [Mountain Penitentiary], and I was in Kingston. It’s hereditary, I guess, what’s happened to the Native people. In the letter he was saying stuff like he just kind of had the inner need to come and see me, my being a descendant of Big Bear and Big Bear being such a person in the forefront to his life. I take it as his liking for the Native people, and curiosity, because I don’t know how many of Big Bear’s descendants he has actually interacted with in the past. I like to see friendship based on curiosity … and he came out and visited me … he came out and saw me and in friendship I offered him the four sacred medicines, tobacco, sage, cedar, sweetgrass. I didn’t know where anything was going at all. So I burnt the medicines and I left it to the spirit world. I pretty well said, ‘Well I can’t do anything, you guys got to help me now’, sort of thing. So he came, he visited me. We were talking and visiting, just talking about things. At that time I was already writing, already determined, deep down in myself, to actually get my understanding out too, though our meeting wasn’t specifically for that. Then the more we talked, he was writing for a magazine and he was saying something about doing an article around my conviction. I told him, ‘That’s not good enough. That won’t work’. I says, ‘If you’re going to do it, it would have to be in a book form’. He pretty well went away and thought about it. Somewhere along the line, before our afternoon meeting, I took some of the diaries that I’d already been working on and he was just amazed by that, I guess, and I told him, ‘You can take it’. Part of the reason was, somewhere along the line, I don’t know exactly where it took technical form, but I guess we always had a kind of unspoken agreement that it would happen and that we’d play it by ear, and if I did not make it through, Rudy was to finish it for me, based on my journals. But like your contract says, I could pull out anytime I wanted. That opportunity was always given to me by Rudy. By the same token I’d always phone him as a friend and as a confidant. So when things got hard, when I had nobody to talk to … and sometimes I kind of got revenge. In the back of my mind I’d say, ‘Okay, go ahead. Do your damage to me and I’ll get back to you. I’ll write it in the book. So do your damage. I’m still going to have my last say. You may think that you control everything, but you’re not going to control my life story’. I guess I became more defiant in the possibility that I kind of had this leverage, that I got a strength in knowing that I was going to be heard, that I was going to be understood. At the same time I wrote the diaries, and he would say, ‘Try to put it in book form’. So I would go back to my first memories and I would start writing and send it off to him. Unfortunately a lot of my life has been focused around the damage of sexual assaults and racism and
prejudice and what it does to a child’s mind — trying to develop when all the odds of reality are against you — and not only being a survivor, but being Native, and government and prejudice and people burning crosses outside our home. At the time they were having civil rights marches down in Louisiana and it was all on TV and Vietnam and being in Montana, Custer’s last stand was less than 120 years before, so people were telling me that I’d killed their grandparents, and ahh….

So it was my way … like I didn’t know Rudy would be able to dissect my writing the way he did, but that’s where his professionalism comes in and that’s where this thing that you call collaboration came together. I don’t believe we came together to write a book. I think we came together to collaborate to tell my life story and everything that went with it in the way that I saw it. I don’t think there is any other book written of its kind, where a Native person would divulge so much truth. So that’s how that occurred. It was never signed sealed and delivered until it was signed sealed and delivered, in my mind, because he gave me that opportunity, but there was a certain stage in mandatory things that there was no backing out, in terms of contracts. When you sign contracts with publishers it gets all professional and you get deadlines. That’s when it was taken out of Rudy’s hands, and Rudy, I want to believe, has been protecting me along that way as much as possible. That’s what friends do. I take that with his understanding as a human being to try to bridge between his world and my world, and his knowledge, and that’s where we’re total opposites of each other. That’s why they say in relationships that you find someone who is like you. I say in relationships you find someone who is not like you because then you can actually have more things valid and in common and life is never dull because you’re always trying to understand rather than improvise. I think that is what occurred between Rudy and me. He had it in his spirit. He didn’t have embedded racism or prejudice or hatred. That I can see a mile away. It’s by the way someone looks at you and what they give off in their spirit. I’ve never seen that with Rudy. Just one time I kind of got short with him was when he was trying to lead me because I was shy. I was pulling back, and all he was attempting to do was to try to help me come out of where I was to meet him halfway in his world I suppose. I think that was the only time I got short with him is that I turned around and I told him, ‘Well that’s awful white thinking of you’. I hurt his feelings pretty bad because I didn’t realise because of all of the trauma that I was going through in making it — and knowing that people once again were going to judge me.

People once again, are they going to understand? You know if people want to live in the reality of existence around them, they’ve got to be able to accept the truth of somebody else’s understanding before change can occur; but I’ve never had that experience. I knew it in my mind, but in
life experiences there was not a single act done in my life that I could use as a teaching tool to develop that in myself until I met Rudy. And he’s a teacher amongst teachers. I’ve been told that he goes world over, teaching literature and writing and he’s hard on his students. And he expects what he expects from them. With me, I’ve been in his class now for ten years and he’s been very patient with me. And he’s been very kind and he’s been very understanding in giving and taking and life situations and nurturing and expanding. I’ve asked him, ‘Rudy, would you ever write a book with anybody else?’ and he says, ‘No way’. He says, ‘Once you were done with me, there’s no more left’. I challenged and brought out things in his life that he’d never seen or understood, but knew kind of what existed. That’s where my life experience impacted on him, through my writing, like he didn’t sit and say, ‘Tell me your story and I’ll write it’. No, he says, ‘You write it and I’ll help you’. The book is all my writing until it gets to the courts and the trials. And that’s where I pulled back because I didn’t have an inkling and that’s where his expertise came in, being able to line up the legal ramifications of the documentations, being able to question things where I couldn’t because I was already found guilty. I was already shamed. I was already subhuman. They couldn’t do that to him. And I do that to myself. No judge is going to be any harder on me than I am on myself. No jury, no inmate, nobody. I know what I’ve done, and more so, the Creator knows, but the Creator also knows that I believe those who have the harder lives have the better teachings, the better understandings if you are willing to persevere, get in there and see the truth. Not somebody else’s understanding, but be able to take the understanding of society and the world but still hold your own in there, to care yourself on because, bottom line: everybody that’s judging me, they’re going to be quick to judge, they ain’t going to be as quick to help. So, Rudy didn’t go out of his way to so called collaborate with me. I didn’t go out of my way to collaborate with him. It was just something that had to be, something that was beyond him and beyond me. Together we are quite the team in the collaboration. You’ll probably never ever get a book like that because of the personalism and individuality that went into it, the acceptance and the willing to understand. That’s why I wrote my diary from events in my lifetime to events that were occurring to let him know how it is that I felt, how it is that I thought, how it is that I viewed the world, past experiences that I had. For as many diaries as I’ve written, if they were all word for word condensed, I’d have a little encyclopaedia of six or seven books, but it was just excerpts taken out of it that compiled this, which is one of the largest books published in Canada, 444 pages. That’s pretty well how that happened. I want to believe that it was total humanness for a story that needed to be said. We faced a lot of challenges. Laws, they were trying to pass laws to ban people like me from writing.
MJ: I read about that, about making any kind of a profit from narrating the events of a crime [Bill C-220 regarding profit from authorship respecting a crime].

YJ: They called it the Son of Sam bill. The media called it profiting off of your crime, in other words, glorifying your crime, revictimising your victims, and getting paid for it. My book is my life story. Unfortunately, part of my offence became and is part of my life. When you make a book, that’s what you’ve got to do. You’ve got to take highlights, or events that have changed you or altered you, or your life existence and around it. Like in order for me to cope, to understand my offence, I had to relive all of that. Like, how many times have I sat and thought that if whiteman’s court was like Indian’s court, it would be so much better. In whiteman’s court they don’t want to hear nothing. They only want to subject, create, build. Everybody is bad and evil and should be locked up and put away. You are not looked at as a human being. You are looked at as a sub-human being where you wear the sins of not only your offence, but you also wear the sins of others and are subject to everybody who sits in the jury and to the law itself. An all white jury, too. That’s not my world. That’s not my understanding. That’s not the way my people did things. If it was to happen in Native country, I would be taken up in front of the chief who has consultation with his women and his children and who becomes a spokesperson for the people. I would also be taken up in front of the medicine people, in front of the elders, the leaders who have to guide religiously, in order to ensure the safety of the people for generations. If this occurred, they would have come in and said, ‘What have you done? We’re not going to kill you. We’re not going to beat you. We’ll deal with that afterwards. What’s right important right now is what happened. Why did it occur?’ Something that I realised was very hard was even dealing with my offence because I didn’t deal with it. People don’t realise that locking someone in prison and putting them in a cage doesn’t help them deal with anything. It just toughens them up. It makes them more angry because they are not understood and if they are not understood, then they cannot rectify. They cannot change. In writing a book I’m able to do that. I’m able to rectify. I’m able to change. The government didn’t like it because not only did I tell them what had consisted of my life, but also I told them what had consisted of my parents, and my parents’ parents, and the reality, because you are your ancestry. I had to go back and try to make all of that better by writing this, and if they had taken me into a court of law and said, ‘Yvonne, we want to know what happened’, I think even back then I would have been stupefied, not because I was a hardened convict or anything. It was because I felt like my whole life was never understood. Right down to my very spirit. I felt inadequate as a human being. I couldn’t hold my face up without feeling
judgment, and I was like that when I was in third and fourth grade. But you can’t live in a world and keep hiding from it. You have no choice. If I was now taken in and they said, ‘Yvonne, what is it that occurred? What happened?’ then I would tell them like what I told in the book. Then they would say, ‘But why did you do that?’ and I would have had to say, back then, ‘I don’t know. Maybe I’m crazy’, because I didn’t understand. Now I can understand patterns of abuse, hereditary abuse, hereditary neglect. Systematic abuse, systematic racial discrimination in government policies, from housing to education, to everything. How do you expect people to survive and live like that? That’s why you have such a high population of Native people in prison, or home-based people the world over, like in Australia it’s probably the Aborigines that are the big ones because they are the expendable people, they are the conquered; but you can’t conquer what you never warred against in the first place. You just came in with like sheets over your head and brought in your government and your laws. You caged us, you imprisoned us — and that does something, like you are born with a rage. You are born seeing tears in your parents’ eyes. What do you do? How do you handle that? Then you combine that with alcoholism and drugs, as an escape. More so drugs now, needle dope, heavy-duty stuff. It used to be alcohol when I was a kid, now it’s worse. Now AIDS is killing us off left, right and centre.

**MJ:** These patterns that you’re talking about are systemic racism, systemic dispossession, did you become more aware of these patterns through reflecting on your life as you wrote your story?

**YJ:** Yeah, because I was always too busy hiding. I’d fight when I had to fight. I’ve spent a lifetime hiding when I wasn’t fighting, and it got easier to do when you drink. It’s like I’m a Doctor Jeckyll, Mr. Hyde, and a lot of times it was why I drank — to become that other person. I had no voice.

**MJ:** Could I ask you now about reading Jung because lots of the comments in the book come from your reading of Jung and I think probably the writing in your journal was somehow informed by reading Jung as well.

**YJ:** I had my diary here, and I had Jung’s *Memories, Dreams and Reflections* here. They were very, very connected. Again, I can’t explain that. He spoke to me. He had a lot of big fancy, whiteman words, what Native people call ‘high words’, unnecessary words that you can simplistically say just by actually pointing, or using hand signals or things like that. I’d like to think of Jung as a very ingenious man for his time. What I learned in my own spiritual walk was also guided by him. Through him I learned to accept myself. I would have loved to have just kicked back and interacted with him like I did with Rudy. Great minds debate, not proclaim rightness. I
knew he would understand. He spent a lot of time with original-based people of the land, and with Native people of this continent. I could see in his writing our ceremonies. I can see in his writing our fasting, our beliefs in the tranquillity of mind, body and spirit. Bringing down the senses of a human body for food and for water, making a spiritual and psychological commitment to open yourself up to the realities of the world they call dream state, Native people call visions. He talked a lot about dreams. He talked a lot about dogma. Now I’m an adult I’ve got to go back and look at my situation and understand it. Nobody can do that for me. I have to do it. But with reading Jung and seeing his acceptance and his understanding, I was able to come out of it. I utilised that to even write of the horrific things that happened in my life, if this makes any sense. If I have to relive all of it, that might be too much for me, but what little has been released back to me, I was able to deal with through Jung. Because I was in prison, I didn’t have anybody else, and when I went to talk to a psychologist, I actually blew their minds away. The elders tell me that I’ve had a hard life and that I’ll continue to have a hard life and maybe I’m just fulfilling preordained destiny, fate. That’s why I go through it kind of blindly because everything just seems to happen on its own. The Creator has now chosen to give me voice when I’ve never had voice before. My voice is powerful, to hear me talk, but how many times — like in the Bible it talks about that guy who was out in the desert screaming forever and a day. That’s what I felt like. I felt like that man that was out in the desert screaming forever and a day and nobody listened. Was that John? They finally beheaded him or something. I saw it in a movie. He was supposed to be close to Jesus but they said he was nuts because he was always out yelling in the hills. John the Prophet. I’m not equating myself to him, but I feel that I’ve been in that position.

MJ:  

No one hearing you.

YJ:  

Yeah, and being called nuts and crazy.... Writing is a healing journey as long as your self-empowerment is not taken from you, or your identity. I believe in collaborative writing, but I also believe that because you have more knowledge in the publishing world doesn’t make you any smarter than someone who doesn’t. If you’re entrusted with someone else’s naïveness then that is actually a great gift that you should cherish. You have the ability to help, not become part of the problem.

MJ:  

Okay, that leads into something else that I wanted to ask you. Before you talked about writing the book and working through all this experience as a survivor and I wanted to ask if you have any comments on how the book can help or guide others.
YJ: That was part of the reason. Sometimes I wonder why I’m still alive, and I think about it when things get hard, but... You’ve asked something really close to my heart and a lot of times I’ve got to be still and if I start shooting off I just lose it. Rudy has told me, ‘Your story needs to be told’. And I would say, ‘Who wants to hear about another drunken Indian who committed murder?’ and he goes, ‘You’re explaining a part of society that exists that has never been explained before but has always been judged. Now it is your time to voice that opinion and have trust that through this mass media, beyond the people who chose to be around you, there is a bigger world out there and there is a bigger understanding’. I thought how many times people play self-righteous and then they have to hide behind that. I can’t claim self-righteousness; but I can claim the knowledge that I got through dealing with certain aspects of my life that other people don’t chose to deal with at all, and that is something that I will carry with my spirit when I stand before the Creator, that I’m okay with the Creator, that I’m okay with the spirit world. As long as I harm nobody here in anything that I do or say, or that I don’t harm my body that the Creator gave me. I have disclosed about my abuse because I know I am not the only one who suffered. I know that every woman that I drank with and went to parties with on the street, nine times out of ten have suffered that. I can see my pain in my people’s eyes. What I found was that after my book came out I had more people writing me from non-Native communities explaining about the traumatic cause and effect of sexual abuse and the trauma in their life. When I did get the odd letter from a Native person, it was horrific, horrific in comparison. I don’t believe that... some people if you were to slap them that would traumatised them maybe to the point that I got traumatised when they were shoving that chain-saw in and out of my face. Maybe now a slap on the face to me may not seem as severe, but abuse is abuse and none is greater or lesser than the other. Abuse is abuse and it shouldn’t be accepted at any level. I can see, through my own abuse and how it has impacted on my spirit, that I can see hurt in other human beings. It was like that in my book when I looked into the mirror and I saw the pain in that child’s eyes even though I didn’t realise it was my own reflection. So seeing my own pain and feeling that through eye contact, that touched my spirit, and I now have the ability to look at other people and see their hurt that they can’t hide. They can’t hide it through body language. Why do people walk the way they walk? Why do they talk the way they talk? How did they learn that? It goes from simply things like do you drag your feet when you walk, do you pick them up, do you consciously think or are you just going through life, all of these dynamics. So I say deal with it. How I disclosed my abuse was, ‘I will take the responsibility that is on me’. When I drink and when I was on skid row, I put myself in a bad
situation, not knowing no better, or for whatever reason I chose to make that stupid choice, I can make that choice. But I never made the choice of them drugging me, raping me, impregnating me. So I will take mine and I will give to them what is theirs for their abuse. Once you do that it is a little easier to carry. I also know that part of the reason why I never disclosed was that it was too close to everybody else, and you think it’s so sinful. You wear the sins and the shame of your attackers. When they do that to you they leave the essence of their evil onto you. Especially children are very spiritually susceptible to things, never mind what it does to the mind or the body. What it does to the inside, the spirit, the disturbance that goes on there that affects the mind and the body. They always say it’s so horrible and so shameful I’m not going to tell anybody. I asked for it. I wanted it. Whatever reasons you have in your mind. And I thought I can’t tell them these horrible things. They’re going to judge me. But I got to the point where I says, ‘I’m already judged. I’m in prison, I’m doing life 25 and I’m thinking about killing myself, so what have I got to lose’. Even though at that time I didn’t know what there was to gain, I just thought there was nothing to lose. I thought of all the abusers that have ever abused me and went on with life and went on with the silence. That’s why I chose to go against my brother, to stop him from doing it to my sisters. Even though that court of law never found him guilty, that jury never found him guilty, that wasn’t the point. The point was that I had to look at him and tell him ‘No more’, and that empowering gave empowerment to my sisters. That’s where it all begins, to disclose, to get rid of it. I may have had a suicide mission, but I don’t now … and I have no regrets for divulging my messed up life. They talk about an inner child. I was forever an inner child. Now I’m at an advantage because I’m a grown woman with a lifetime that now can go back to that inner child and tell that inner child, ‘I’ll speak on your behalf. I know what it is that you feel. I know what it is that you suffer from. Let me tell your story’. That’s like your spirit and everything that’s stuffed down inside you. You have to deal with that and bring it to the forefront. Natives call it spirit-walking in one’s own self and it’s not an easy thing to do but it’s a very powerful thing to do. If there is revenge on your abusers, it’s to live life well and full, and you owe it to yourself. If it takes a book of this magnitude to shake the world, then do it. Become a world shaker because that’s the life that was given to you. It’s the life that you’ve got to deal with, but you can leave it here. When you stand before the Creator you can say, ‘I’ve tried, and you know that I’ve tried’. I know that the Creator is not going to persecute me. At least I can look at him with straight eyes and say, ‘I’ve tried. I don’t know what it was I was down there for. I was winging it alone — but for winging it alone, I think I did pretty good’.
MJ: Earlier we talked about the appearance of the book, the book as a physical object. I think it’s really important to talk about. You referred to the physical book as a sacred bundle.

YJ: You see in Native way you have what they call a bundle. And it’s all in your understanding what your bundle is. Usually it’s a square cloth and you put your medicines and sacred items inside. And it’s like dressing it, putting it to sleep, putting it to bed, making sure dust and dirt don’t get in, and putting a spiritual protection over it, which would be this outer coating of the bundle, the wrap that goes around the sacred things. Okay, this book is a sacred bundle. I am sacred. You are sacred. All spirits of the Creator are sacred. What goes in between the front and back cover of this book is my life, which is sacred in the eyes of the Creator. I was scared of what people were going to do with what I wrote in here because other people see it as this and that. I see it as a bundle. I see the outside as being the coating of that bundle. My spiritual colours are red and green. On the back of the coating it’s got the red and it’s got forms of green in the blue in the sky. And it’s on the front cover at the side. So I look at that as being part of that covering. Okay, there’s four directions, north, south, east and west that come into this creation and this world. This is a little creation and a world unto itself. So I put the colours of the four directions on the cover of the book and they are the Cree sacred colours. And I put it in the four directions. That’s why you’ve got it top and bottom, side to side because it covers the four directions. It seals the integrity of my spirit and my life-force that is in this book called my autobiography. If you look towards the inside, there is a little picture of a bear, and to me that’s my spirit keeper. And it’s also where the prayer is. See, non-Native people, they write all this other stuff. They write the notes and Contents and stuff like that. Me, any ceremony you begin with a prayer. Any ceremony you end with a prayer. My life has been one big long ceremony. Same as everybody else’s. When I put it in a book form I tried to treat it as a bundle. And that’s why it’s got the little bear at my opening prayer. It’s got the little bear at the closing prayer, because everything in between is that bundle. On the front they have me as a child. On the back they have my great-grandfather so that speaks of generations past, of generations now, and I try to speak to bring change for generations in the future. This is a legacy that I leave my children. Whiteman may put it in archives. Whiteman may use it differently than I do. Rudy covers that end and I just do what I got to do. I just leave it to the Creator because I’m a vocal person. Rudy is the writer, I’m the thinker. Rudy enabled me to write the way I do because he said that many people go to school for a lifetime to learn how to write what comes to me natural. Because I’m able to speak orally and I write as I speak. Maybe people might find that hard to read if their mind is trained to think
RUDY WIEBE
AND
YVONNE JOHNSON

THE JOURNEY OF A CREE WOMAN

"The most powerful book I've ever read.... Insightful, poetic, gripping."

The Hamilton Spectator

(Front cover of Stolen Life. Reproduced with permission of Vintage, Canada.)
as a very educated person. You forget to think as a human being. There’s supposed to be a pattern of thought. Just because you can think, that’s a gift. It doesn’t mean you have to have a subjugated thought pattern. That’s where Jung was good. He was able to bring out those thought patterns and line it up like that. But I saw the truth behind it. So that’s what that is all about, the cover of that.

**MJ:** And you had direct input into those choices?

**YJ:** This one, yeah, but they’ve got another cover now and they took the colours off because in the book writing world I guess you’ve got to please this well trained … you know they sit back and they think they know how people think and they advertise and they’ve got to get them like fish on a hook. So that’s when they said that the cover was too cluttered. Life is never too cluttered. If it wasn’t cluttered we wouldn’t have anything — but they wanted to make more room to put in what people had to say about it, as a promotion gimmick. But life changes, seasons change, and so do covers of books, it grows and matures, and now there are awards that the book has actually won, as far as I know, it was nominated for the Governor-General’s award. The minute there was a write up in the newspaper that says first time convicted killer wins highest honour in the country, I knew then and there that they had pushed it as far as they could push it for the content of what this book is politically, historically. Rudy’s a historic writer. Rudy helped me use my right, to have freedom of speech, even if I can’t feel free in other ways concerning my life, it’s a human right. It’s because all my fears, all the reasons why I should be dead are now all the reasons why I now need to be alive, and why everyone should have the ability to do what Rudy and I did. It can be done. We are total respecters of each other. It does become an elite controlled thing but it should be opened up to everybody and anybody. We shouldn’t propagandise each other. After this book got published I had somebody writing me saying that the only reason this got published was because I was an Indian — he was whiteman. Then, he says, ‘I want you to work with me on my book’. His was this hocus-pocus Hollywood, non-Native person writing about a Native person. So that doesn’t speak volumes on my relationship with Rudy. I was highly insulted that somebody would even think that that is what transpired. But that goes to show; I wouldn’t do that. I wouldn’t sell my people out. I never would have interacted with Rudy if I thought it was a sellout in any way shape or form, but Rudy is an elite person himself, too. I’m not giving consent that everybody should write together because they can. They should write together because they want to and they respect each other. The end result is to make the world a better place, and not for one to feed off the pain and suffering of the other.
MJ: You say that this experience of co-authoring, of collaborating, can be empowering when it’s a respectful process and that more people should have this opportunity. In the numbers of First Nation stories that are being published, and Aboriginal life writing in Australia as well, something that is being talked about to promote or ensure this respect is the notion of cultural protocols. The collaboration should be guided by the protocols of the community from which the narrator comes. The narrator’s cultural basis, cultural values, cultural strengths should be the guiding principles of the collaboration.

YJ: When you are going to collaborate on history that is factual, truthful and knowledgeable, you don’t go there and assume and write what it is you want. You go there and you ask and you listen, and you keep asking, and don’t be shy to admit to your own humility and say — and Rudy said this a lot of times — ‘I’m just a whiteman. You’ve got to tell me this’, which was pretty cool of him, but it was more of a willingness on his part to share everything that he was. I have great, great respect for that. Verbal contracts and verbal understandings with Native people, with the original people, is the way that it should be. We have to start recognising the handshake. Native people have always had the handshake and they’ve always abided by that, but they used to shake like this and that becomes a very personal promise. So I think it should be the people that decide because in your own naïveness you may change or alter something. It’s not because you are hateful or spiteful. It’s just because you don’t know, any more than I know about your system that I find unjust. I’m a twentieth-century Indian and I still feel the same thing my ancestors must have felt and I have pity on them. It must have been pretty scary seeing the first whiteman, but in all reality, the Native people were given teachings saying that they were going to come. The yellow people were going to come, the white people were going to come and the black people were going to come. But the black people were brought as slaves; so were the Chinese — and the whiteman came with a bad attitude!
Interview with Yvonne Johnson

“So rich… I couldn’t put it down. The central miracle of the book is in the relationship between Wiebe, a distinguished novelist, and Johnson, a woman whose spirit and creativity belie the unimaginably grim events of her life. They find each other in the underworld of Johnson’s life story, and emerge with a book that is an act of redemption.” Ann-Marie MacDonald, author of Fall on Your Knees

“Stolen Life is a gift of understanding… A compelling story infused with hope and spirituality.” Financial Post

This is a chronicle of justice and injustice, the true story of the events that put Yvonne Johnson behind bars for life at the age of twenty-seven. Above all, it is the unforgettable story of a Native woman who has broken a lifetime of silence to share the understandings that sustain her. Written with the compassion that is the hallmark of Rudy Wiebe’s work, and informed by Yvonne Johnson’s own intelligence and poetic eloquence, this award-winning book unites one of Canada’s foremost writers and the great-great-granddaughter of Chief Big Bear in a collaboration that speaks to us all.

“A triumph… Here are two friends who prove to one another that individuals can reach across a nation’s mistakes, and offer forgiveness… An amazing collaboration.” Edmonton Journal

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Front jacket photograph: Chris Harvey/Tony Stone Images

Inset photograph of Yvonne Johnson at the age of five courtesy of Yvonne Johnson

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(Back cover of Stolen Life. Reproduced with permission of Vintage, Canada.)
Interview with Rudy Wiebe
(Recorded August 9, 2002 at Edmonton, Alberta.)

MJ: I’m going to begin my questions by asking you about that first letter that Yvonne Johnson wrote introducing herself. In the parts you quote in the beginning of the Stolen Life she asks for help researching her family’s past and her ancestry. In that first letter there is no mention at all about writing her life story. So that’s what I’d like to ask. How did that initial request for help tracing her ancestry change to the writing of her own life story?

RW: Well of course I had a great deal of information about Big Bear [Yvonne’s ancestor]. Actually there is another man who has a lot more, Hugh Dempsey, who wrote the biography of Big Bear, ten years later or something like that, in the early ’80s. He told me he had never read my book, The Temptations of Big Bear, because he didn’t want to be influenced by it. It’s one of those what I find kind of goofy statements because I would think you’d want to be influenced by everything. He’s still pretending, you know, the historian still pretends that it’s possible to be objective about these sorts of things. And then he goes ahead and interviews the family. And that’s really objective, right? It’s as personal as you can get! Anyway, there was no way you could get Yvonne to the sources, her being in prison. There was no way you could get her to the sources. So I think I answered her something in that line; and we simply started talking about it, corresponding back and forth about that. But you see, nothing just happens… I wrote her a letter and she responded to it … she felt herself guided to me and I was immediately hooked when she mentioned Big Bear. Here she is, exactly what Big Bear was afraid of in signing the treaty in his major encounter with the Whites. What was going to happen to his people, now that they were being overrun like this? And here is the most horrible example … but I still didn’t know, I didn’t have a clue what she was in for. I wrote her a letter quickly saying ‘I better write to you fast because you might be out of Kingston before this letter gets to you’. A very stupid thing to say, but she didn’t indicate what she was in prison for. So, the first idea after we talked back and forth several times was that I would write an article about her. She then sent me a record … the first writing of her memory of … the first horrible memory of her first rape, when she was a baby, when she was a child, two years old or something … going into the whole surround of this, a thirty-, thirty-two page statement that she made to the police. When I saw that and when I heard what she was in for, I thought that if she was
willing I would write an article for *Saturday Night* magazine. They agreed that this would be a great idea, and they actually financed my first trip — they said they would pay expenses and all that stuff to go and see Yvonne in prison.

MJ: *To go to Kingston?*

RW: In Kingston, yeah. So, it began not as a book idea at all, but as an article possibly for a magazine, to show how a life that is in a sense destroyed right from the beginning eventually ends up like this, in prison. I didn’t have a clue yet how at that time, because they were still appealing the ruling, whether that sentence would be upheld in all its … as it was of course shortly after. So it simply began that way.

MJ: *Yvonne also talked about that, about the proposal for the article and her response was that an article was not big enough, that you couldn’t say it all in an article.*

RW: No, I know.

MJ: *But she also did say that in those early stages there was no intention of a book. She was writing her diaries, her journals, simply to get her story down, to make sure her story wasn’t lost.*

RW: Yes, she had begun writing her diaries, the first diaries that I have — and I don’t know, I think they are the first ones though — she had really begun writing in ’91 when she first went to Kingston. Then she wrote to me in November ’92, and I simply encouraged her. I said, ‘write it all down, keep writing’. She said things like, ‘my language isn’t very good and I don’t know how to spell’. I said, ‘That doesn’t matter. Don’t worry about that. Write it down the way it sounds to you’. So she did that and her spelling became much better as she went along because she worked at it too. As you know the first thing for people who are not very skilled at writing, they’re worried … the teacher thing, you know … they’ve been told in school, ‘you can’t write. You can’t write because you can’t spell’; or ‘you haven’t got the proper grammar’, or something. Of course this is not important in terms of this kind of writing at all because you could easily figure it out. Her speaking skills are tremendous and I said, ‘Just write it as you talk. Don’t worry about the sentence structure’, and she did that basically.

MJ: *Did you ever feel that she was writing for you, that you were her reader?*

RW: I think at a certain point that is true because, for example, I sent her things. Things that her father, for example, had given me when I went to visit him. I sent her pictures and I sent her maps and things like that; and these were clearly stimulants to her memory. She drew the maps over into her notebooks and so could track her memory; especially, say, some
of her hospital experiences: where something happened; where an assault happened; and where she ended up in the hospital. Or that arrest, where she appeared before the judge and so on. These things that I sent her helped her recall. Because you know you’re sitting in a cell and you have absolutely nothing except your memory — if you dare to think about it — but with something visual in front of you, especially a picture or something like that, it changes quite a lot. So I think then her writing, in that sense, was not so much directed at me as being aided by some of the things I was able to send her from her own background which were not available to her in prison. That’s one of the problems of writing in prison where you have nothing and that’s why she’s writing, generally, to people … or she tried to write to people asking for information but nothing much came of it.

MJ:  *I realised yesterday when I visited her, how cut off, how isolated you are in prison.*

RW:  Have you been in a prison before?

MJ:  *I’ve never been in prison.*

RW:  You’ve never visited anyone in prison? It’s a shocking experience, no matter what — and Kingston was especially a cruncher for me. These buildings look a little more humane but they’re not really. They’re just inhumane in other ways because people are captives. The whole point of the system is to make a captive of that person, to punish them….

MJ:  *Yvonne’s journal writing continued for a number of years, accumulating seventeen volumes. Journal writing by nature is not structured. It’s not chronological. It follows threads of memory and points of trauma. I suppose your task then was to help transfer that journal writing to a more accessible narrative.*

RW:  My basic problem with writing this book was the structural one. There is the structure of chronology, of course, which is the basic one; but a chronology of a life doesn’t give you a book, a comprehensible book, right? The concept of book became very important for me as I tried to work this out because I realised that a life is not a book — a book in the sense that it starts somewhere with the reader’s total ignorance of the situation and explains what happened so you can get to the point where the most difficult or the most dramatic or the most life changing thing happens, and then does something with that. I’m thinking very much in terms of a reader when I’m structuring a book, and chronology just won’t do it because in a life story, this happens and then this happens and then this happens. There’s no necessary connection. It’s just something that happens to you. An accident, whatever, they happen. So the problem
with making a book of this was that Yvonne, I think, at first thought that it would be quite simple, you know, she’d just write it out … and there were a couple of places in her journals where it was as if she herself was writing her book. But I said that the first important thing was just for her memories to come. When we discussed this … and when we’d meet this is how she would talk — she would go from one memory to the other … by association…. It was only afterwards that you could figure out the chronology of her life … ‘When did this happen?’ … she’d be talking about something when she was eighteen or nineteen in Winnipeg when we’d just been talking about something that happened to her when she was seven in Butte, for example. You can’t do this to a reader. Well, you can do it to a listener, but a listener just hears a little bit of it and it’s a kind of a complete story and it makes sense; but you can’t do it to a reader. So it has to be worked out. So this was the matter of the journals, which stayed a long time on one incident or stayed around one incident, but then moved off into some other place as the memory flows. You don’t want to stop that because that’s where the strength of it is but that’s not a book. So then my job was to go through the journals and first of all construct a kind of chronology about what happened to Yvonne. If there is something precise to hang onto — like there was a grade, a teacher — it was that teacher, then you know, okay, that was grade seven. But there were a couple of problems that Yvonne and I never did figure out, never did solve, and she still thinks that somewhere in there, there is a year's slippage somewhere, especially in her teens just after she ended school. She ran away from home and a number of things happened. We never got that quite straight, but in terms of the book perhaps it’s not that important because between her leaving Butte and wandering around the United States and ending up in Winnipeg, there is a whole series of things that are very difficult to pinpoint. It was really a difficult matter, first of all, to establish the chronology, and then out of that life chronology to make a book which read in a way that’s moving towards the crucial incident in her life, which is of course the death of that man in her basement in her own house, and then make a structure that is intriguing to a reader. That was the big difficulty, and one that I struggled with for years. At a certain time I thought, ‘it can’t be done. I can’t do this. Life is too short’.

MJ: Well, could I ask you, was it ever a possibility that the book could be constructed solely from Yvonne’s journals?

RW: Well, I don’t know how you could have done it, in the sense that it would have been just a series of journals. It wouldn’t have been a book — it wouldn’t have been a book in the sense that it was structured and framed. No one will publish stream-of-thinking journals. It would have been too
confusing. She would have had to order them herself in some way. What she wrote in her journals was not something that could be published because of the way journal writing is. It’s repetitious. It goes back and forth. It’s non-time related. It’s all kinds of things. A journal is not something you necessarily want to make public. A journal is something you do for yourself, first of all. At a certain time a journal writer becomes a writer who knows that this is going to be published and writes accordingly. This is much franker, more open, and completely unguarded and forthright.

MJ: *So in your task of organising this material and making it into a narrative that would carry the reader to that crucial moment, the incident of the death....*

RW: There’s more than organisation, right? There’s an enormous amount of selection. You select things; and many of the chapters that I wrote, that we worked out and agreed upon, when the editor read them, he said, ‘we could cut this out. It repeats what we already know so you don’t have to say it again. The reader has got it’. So all those notebooks, and all those conversations, and all those tapes — it’s not only organisation but also an enormous amount of selection — what moment you are going to choose, or what small story you are going to choose to represent that entire era of her life? These are the things that are particularly difficult for someone, if they are writing about their own life, to choose because it’s probably more simple for an objective person to do that. Then there’s the further objectivity of an editor. As a matter of fact we ended up with two editors, a further editor who read the book strictly as kind of a technical, structural thing, who never met Yvonne at all, and simply picked up little details — legal details, or gave impressions like, ‘this is too sentimental,’ or ‘you’ve said this before, it’s overwrought’. So there was a series of objectivities going on before the book arrived at the present point.

MJ: *As well as organisation and selection, your input into the book is substantial in terms of the framing narrative that you write describing your meetings with Yvonne, describing the other meetings with family members....*

RW: Your question is why is it in there? Well, it’s in there for two reasons. Partly because I’m a writer and I am discovering the story, and in that sense I’m a kind of surrogate reader. I am discovering the story somehow as the reader discovers the story. So in that sense it’s not only a biography or autobiography of Yvonne. It is her life story, but there is a big chunk of me in there — me describing to you how I, as one person, discovered the story, because I think the story just blurted out or just told in its raw form as, say, Yvonne’s long statement about what happened to her in her childhood, for example, is not the best way for the reader to encounter this story.
MJ: *Why not?*

RW: Because certain stories are too drastic for people to be blurted into. They’d be sort of like a disaster, a road accident … sitting in our living room with a book in our hand … you need to be introduced to them somehow … not just to be dropped into it, in first person. I thought: that’s not the way to tell this story in order for it to be told effectively, for it to impact on us the way that kind of pain should, truly, deeply, because at an accident we’re just horrified. We shudder and run away from it. We block it out. We drive past it. We don’t need this. Of course when life does it to us we have to experience it in such a way that we can’t get rid of it for the rest of our lives. So my part, I felt, was to write how I discovered this story and explain exactly why I was in it in the first place; and as I mentioned in the book several times, there was a stage when I felt I shouldn’t be in it. I shouldn’t be doing this at all. Somebody else should do it; but I was encouraged very much by different Native women that I talked to — ‘Perhaps at this time you are the only person because Yvonne trusts you. And being the kind of writer that you are, perhaps you’re the only person that can do this’. I think out of this did come a different kind of book than one usually reads. It was partly because I got profoundly emotionally involved in the story myself and I wanted to be in there to show you how the emotion works in another party, in a party that in effect knows nothing. I’m just as much a stranger to it as you are as a reader, but I’m a reader with a certain kind of training who can help put this into a kind of a context.

MJ: *Well my next question would be that, having made the decision that this would be the best way to do the book, why is there not more of yourself in the book? Can I begin by asking again about that first letter? Yvonne asks, ‘Who are you? How do you know so much? And what was the force behind you? And why did you choose to write about Big Bear?’ She asks these questions in that first letter but you don’t answer in the book.*

RW: Well I think I probably answered her in our conversations, as much as was needed.

MJ: *I’m sure you did, but I’m asking why that didn’t become part of the book.*

RW: Well, for one thing, I don’t think it needs to become part of the book because it’s already there in *Big Bear*, to a certain extent, and in all the stories I’ve written since, especially … just at the time, and this was the amazing thing, just at the time when I was working on this, there was the whole matter of the TV mini-series of *The Temptations of Big Bear* — have you seen it?

MJ: *I haven’t, no.*
Michael Jacklin

RW: Well, it was just in the process of getting made at that time. This began in 1982 or '81. A Montreal company first started working with me on it. I was working on the script all through the '80s and then by the '90s there was an Edmonton company here working on it and then eventually it ended up with Gil Cardinal, the director, and the CBC working on it. In fact when we launched Stolen Life, they were shooting Big Bear in the Qu’Appelle Valley, just north of Regina. So there was a kind of coming together of the whole thing, of this work with this amazing man who I have been involved with all my writing life. Big Bear is in Peace Shall Destroy Many. One of the Cree descendants of him is in that novel. So he’s been a presence in my entire writing life. I don’t think a novelist who has spent his entire life being influenced clearly in various ways by this historical character who comes out of your own life and from the place where you are born, and who reflects not only that world, but also the spiritual world to which you yourself are very powerfully connected — well I don’t necessarily try to explicate that in everything I write. There may be some of the essays in Rivers of Stone … actually there is an essay in there about my experience of going to visit Big Bear’s power bundle which is in New York in the American Museum of Natural History. I did that when I was working on The Temptations of Big Bear; and you see that’s another thing. The last time I was in New York they wouldn’t show it to me. They are bureaucratic now. You have to make appointments through the right people. Anyway, that’s another story; but that’s the kind of thing I couldn’t take Yvonne to see. That’s exactly what she was asking but it’s the kind of thing you couldn’t take Yvonne to see because she’s in prison. They’re not letting go of it, right? Actually that’s another whole story about the bundle, but those are the kinds of things that drive this story, that make this story really part of me. Right behind you, look behind you there. See that? That’s Big Bear. Joe Fafard, do you know him as an artist? [Wiebe indicates a ceramic sculpture]

MJ: I don’t.

RW: He’s a prairie ceramicist. He’s a wonderful man. This is an early Joe Fafard, actually. That’s Big Bear just after he’d been captured … been taken prisoner. He surrendered himself to the RCMP. There’s a picture of him sitting like that and six Mounties standing all around him, in Prince Albert, July 1885. So Joe wanted to do a statue of Big Bear and I gave him a number of pictures and he chose that one. I’ve had that since 1977 or something like that. Anyway …

MJ: Well, since you mentioned the power bundle maybe I’ll mention this: when I talked to Yvonne yesterday, she talked about the book being a sacred bundle. Do you want to offer any comment on that?
Interview with Rudy Wiebe

RW: Is that the way she sees it now?

MJ: Yes.

RW: What do you think she meant by that? Did she explain?

MJ: She said that every spirit is sacred. A life is sacred. And she said that this book was the story of her life and she wanted it to be a ceremony and so opened it with a prayer and closed it with a prayer. She wanted the cover to represent the cloth which encloses the sacred bundle.

RW: Yes, and she wanted her primary colours on there.

MJ: Yes, red and green.

RW: ... and blue and white. On the first edition the colours were only on the bottom of the cover. She wanted them on all four sides.

MJ: So was she satisfied with the cover?

RW: She said, ‘It has to be in a circle’. The first edition doesn’t have it. It doesn’t have the circular thing, which is so important to her. Then on the paperback they fixed that up. So, I think that’s a wonderful way for her to look at it. The book has gone all over the world and has been translated into a number of languages now. It’s coming out in German this fall and she’s had all kinds of readers respond ... did she tell you that?

MJ: Yes she did. She’s had letters from all over world.

RW: Hundreds of people, all over the world. It’s created problems for her too, in the sense that she’s become a very public person. It’s part of what she says in here, in this prayer, of having the courage to show her shame to everyone, what she has done, the people she has hurt. That is superb courage for someone to do that and to show that publicly and this is one of the things that make it very difficult for her family. I don’t know if she talked about that at all.

MJ: No. She did say that she was becoming reconciled with her mother.

RW: Well this is one of the things that, you know, out of families you don’t talk about what happens in the family — especially if you’re a racial minority and you’re a visual racial group and seen as that: you don’t talk out of the family to give more ammunition to those who are racist and despise you. That’s one reason why you don’t see books like this around very often. There is that kind of shame; but she feels that it’s important and she has the courage to show the guilt and the shame and also at the same time it shows what has been done to her.
The only way to break the cycles of abuse is through speaking — making the circumstances of abuse known and able to be talked about and that’s what the book does. All right, I’m going to ask about you again. In a sense the book is similar to the Latin American genre of testimonio, where someone without the skills to see their life story get into print entirely through their own writing, finds the assistance of someone who becomes their advocate. In the book, one of your roles is an advocate for Yvonne’s case. So I’m going to ask, when did you realise that this was happening?

Well, the point I want to make on that matter is the first sentence in the prefatory note. ‘This book is based on what Yvonne Johnson holds to be her own truths about the life she has lived’. I was not going to do a critical life and examine her ideas and opinions and memories and then try to be objective about them and say, ‘this is what really happened’. For one thing, I don’t believe such a thing is possible anyway. As a novelist — someone who spends his life writing novels — I’m very much aware of the kinds of structural fiction that historians put into things in order to make sense of them … and the kinds of things that people say to me all the time: ‘I don’t read novels. I just want to read true stories’. God save me! If I feel particularly vicious at the time I’ll say something savage about that but the whole idea — it’s simply a continuum. But to pretend that there is any sort of God-like objectivity there, or truth. It’s a wonderful question. Pilate asked Jesus, ‘What is truth?’ I could explain endlessly. Five people experience the same thing at the same time, but they have diametrically opposed opinions about what happened, even when the evidence is there. Okay, evidence like someone had his arm cut off. I mean that’s a fact. You can see it. Everybody can see it — but how it happened…. My ultimate example in creative writing classes is always the Kennedy assassination. Even the Justice of the Supreme Court and all the highest level people issued a report which nobody believes any more. So this is very carefully stated here: ‘This book is based on what Yvonne Johnson holds to be her own truths about the life she has lived’. However, there is never only one way to tell a story. So I believe this explicitly and profoundly. All my writing life has only verified that most human experience is the same way. So when her sister for example — and I won’t tell you which one — talked to me for three hours and tore me apart for this book, and said, ‘That’s not true, and that’s not true, and that’s not true’, I had nothing to say. She felt that this book was a vicious lie. Of course there were things in there that she had experienced too, and which she agreed, ‘Yes’, and in fact she told me things that if I had known would have made the book even more horrifying than it already is, but I didn’t know them or I hadn’t been told them. Yvonne either hadn’t told them to me or felt they were part of someone else’s story in the family. So this is where you end up. I would
never emphasise that this is true in any objective sense, but it is as clear and as precise as Yvonne feels and remembers it and that’s good enough for me. That’s all I was trying to help her with — and to put it in the frame of my own experience of discovery, but in many places I disappear completely, especially toward the end — it’s not important any more that I’m there.

**MJ:** I do have to ask you about this — one of the issues is authorship: who is given first position? Yvonne’s comment was that there was never any question in her mind that your name should be first. She wanted to show her respect and her honour for your involvement. Did you have any question about that?

**RW:** Well, it’s difficult, but you have to design the book somehow, and clearly, we are partners. Her name is just as large as mine. Partly, for the publisher it was a marketing thing. They wanted my name first because I’m a very widely-known author. This is partly what it’s all about. Yvonne has been very good about that. Some people have objected to this. I don’t know how to resolve that. As I say, I don’t think she could have written a book that would be publishable. So in that sense, you might say I’m the book maker, but it’s clearly her story. There is nothing of me in here, except the first chapter introduces us in such a way that you know who we both are in relation to each other.

**MJ:** That’s what I was asking about before, that there is very little of your subjectivity.

**RW:** Except in the first chapter, and a few other places, like chapter 2 and 3, or 13. So it’s obviously not my story. But it is my book, in the sense that I structured and made it in a way in which she couldn’t have, but it’s her story. We’re partners here and, as she probably told you, everything is split. Everything is shared fifty/fifty. Unless she does something specifically herself now, and I have nothing to do with it, but it’s shared fifty/fifty. There have been a few people that have remarked about that in newspapers.

**MJ:** Yes, it’s a common criticism.

**RW:** So what is done with this, in the usual case?

**MJ:** There is no usual case. The circumstances leading to any one collaboration are unique. There may be some patterns but I can’t yet say that this is the way it’s usually done; and authorship is very problematic because of readers’ expectations. Autobiography is written by the narrator and collaborative autobiography just doesn’t follow that pattern. It’s not a biography. It’s not someone writing someone else’s life story in the third person. It’s first
person narrative but told through the joint efforts of the two or more people involved and our preconceptions are foiled in many ways by this, one of them being the jacket, the authors. Some of the collaborative books don’t have an author acknowledged on the jacket. It’s ‘the story of … ’ and then the name but no author, and you’ll look inside on the imprint page and it will say edited by so-and-so. But there is no usual pattern to this. It’s often left for readers to struggle with.

RW: Actually, one of the translated books has Yvonne Johnson’s name first. I think it was the Danish book — but I had nothing to do with that. That was the decision of the publisher. Well, it makes sense because I’m not well known as a writer in Denmark.

MJ: So there is nothing to gain by putting your name first.

RW: Certainly there was nothing in marketing terms to be gained, and that’s perfectly fine.

MJ: In some of Yvonne’s comments yesterday, and she laughed when she said this, she said there were things that she was telling you and you said, ‘I don’t know. I’m only a white guy. How do I know all this?’ So I want to ask whether your work with Yvonne has influenced or changed or altered or transformed your perceptions, your understandings of First Nations experience?

RW: Well … I’ve always operated on the basis, and this is one of the reasons I could tell or could try to write a novel about Big Bear, that all human beings are human beings. The society we live in and the race and our people give us particular ways of living and ways of understanding the world; but every human being understands every human being in fundamental ways. We are not different species. We are a language species. We talk to each other. We live with each other. We care for each other. We love each other. There has to be a caring situation going on, or people don’t survive. I mean a child simply won’t live if it is not cared for. So we are profoundly the same in all the important ways that a species is the same. At the same time some of our experiences are very different; our experience of life is very different. I can see that just by going down to the Greyhound Bus depot, right, and I see people arrive there and the way security people behave. For me, with the gray beard and the white skin and obviously a well-to-do, middle-class person, they will never talk to me about loitering. But they see someone who has just arrived straight from the north … these are things that you can recognise in a minute, but which you have never experienced yourself, unless you go to some other country and I’ve had that experience happen to me too … and for women too … For me working with Yvonne was a tremendous initiation. It was an introduction, not only an introduction,
but a deep experience of being a different kind of person, both in race and especially also in terms of being a woman and what she experiences and the way a woman is instantly identified as, ‘Oh an Indian woman. Here’s someone you could buy if you wanted her’, that kind of attitude. The kinds of experiences that she told me, and herself telling them to me directly, this was an experience that I’d never had before. In that sense it was a wonderful experience for a writer, to be offered that. That was the great gift that she gave me, in terms of this book, and that’s one of the major reasons why at a certain point when we were all ready to quit it seemed to be too great a gift not to continue with it.

The other thing that was important — I mean this should be told too in this kind of collaboration —this kind of collaboration is completely impossible to bring to fruition unless you have a publisher who really understands this. A publisher like Louise Dennys at Knopf Canada was absolutely crucial to this because she wanted a book like this. At a certain point when both Yvonne and I were trying to figure out how this could be written — and we thought for a while that maybe we should write it as a novel, you know, change all the names — it was Louis Dennys who, at one point when basically we were at the ends of our ropes, came out here and she and I went to the Healing Lodge together and she met Yvonne for the first time — she’d talked to her on the phone but she’d never met her — she came out here and we spent some days at the Healing Lodge and she was a really crucial part of why this happened. Then also the costs of the legal vetting: we had to get a couple of legal opinions on the manuscript. The best legal mind in Canada who is a personal friend of Louis’ and I know him too, Clayton Ruby, read this book. So without a publisher like that, really committed to the whole idea of telling this story and telling it in a way that would be effective as a book, and then publicising it really well and doing a great job in designing it and promoting it — that is really a crucial part of what happened in a book like this.

MJ: In that last exchange you’ve mentioned a couple of times about the gift that Yvonne was giving you. One of the issues that I’m looking at is the idea of reciprocity, of exchange in collaboration. When a life story is told it is a gift and that gift brings with it in some cases obligations or the responsibility of the listener to give something back. So, what were your obligations in receiving this gift?

RW: Well my obligation, and we’ve already talked about this in one sense, was to tell this story in such a way that it is understandable to a basically white, middle-class audience, the kind of person who is going to buy this book — and that ties in with what I said before. In fact it happened to me on the cross-country tour. At one radio station a man, of course a white man, said,
‘We’ve heard these stories before. We’ve heard thousands of these stories before’. I said, ‘Yes, you’ve heard thousands of bits and pieces. You see thousands of items every year in the newspaper. When have you ever read a story that really goes into the details of where this story started, who this person was and how it happened like this?’ He said he’d never read a book like that. No, he never had. So this is one of the reasons why it’s important for me as a well known white writer to put some effort into this, to show this story, so that people will read it and not say, ‘Oh this is another two paragraphs in a newspaper. This is another thirty second TV thing about a Native person sent to jail for some horrible crime. Some kind of horrible crime has happened and a Native person is involved in it’. No. That story is all too common. Everybody knows it, certainly in Canada or Australia. It’s horrifying. You see the stories all the time. ‘Another Native suicide’, right? You never know the story behind this. You never know. And Yvonne having the incredible courage to actually tell this story, beginning with what happened to her as a two-year old in her own home. That’s where this nightmare starts and this whole thing culminates in a kind of way when she’s starting to get an almost normal life. It’s not quite normal, but it’s relatively normal what she’s living in Wetaskiwin. She’s got a husband who works hard and she’s got a family to care for, and it’s then that her nightmares start — that’s when it starts coming up out of that horrible magma of her subconscious memory. That’s why she said — ‘this murder was horrible and it happened’ — but she said, ‘If I hadn’t been in jail for that I would have come to jail for something else’. She couldn’t handle it, and her husband is the kind of man that Yvonne could care for and he helped her a lot but was not one to help her solve her problems…. It’s her entire life that she has to relive. So this is part of the reason why this story, if she has the courage to tell it, should be told in such a way that we can grasp it, and the response that she has had over the years to it has been quite fabulous.

MJ: Can I follow through with the question about reciprocity? You’re talking in terms of mainstream Canada.

RW: Well, the society in Canada that controls the way our world is.

MJ: I’d also like to ask in what way you see the book, given Yvonne’s ancestry, giving back to the Cree Nation?

RW: Her emphasis on Cree spirituality is a very important thing; but you know, Native people are not automatically good people. They’ve got the same range within them as everybody. The thing that she gives back, in a certain way, beyond that spirituality, is this kind of mirror to the way Native society in Canada has become. You can’t go on blaming forever,
blaming white people for this, blaming white people for everything. There is a certain kind of human responsibility that every human being has, and you can’t say forever, ‘We’ve been wrecked by Residential schools and alcohol and it’s all the White Man’s fault’. There are plenty of examples of Native people who are not wrecked by that, who rise above it and go beyond that, but there are so many who say, ‘The White Man is all at fault. Give us more money’. The Hobbema Reserve just outside of Wetaskiwin is a good example. They have unbelievable amounts of money. Money just makes it worse if you don’t handle it right. Money doesn’t cure anybody of anything. So that is another thing that the book gives back to the Cree people. This is the way particularly Cree women suffer in the whole scheme of things, of the social structure. The men get beat up somewhere and then come home and beat up their women and abuse their children. Then the women beat the children and the children beat the dog, or something like that. There’s this horrible sequence of abuse that goes from top to bottom and Cree men can be as bad as anything a white man can do to you if you are a Cree woman. And that’s what the book gives back, I think, in spades. A person is not all good and all bad either. This is one of the things that I ran into with Yvonne’s mother. She would never talk to me. I said, ‘Look, Yvonne wants to tell her story and she’s telling it to me and if you talk to me, maybe this would help in getting the story told better’. Her father was wonderfully helpful to me, her father who abused her! But he’s an old guy now and visiting him was one of the major experiences of helping this book come into existence because of all the help he gave me, not only in the way he talked but in the things he gave me: school records, photographs, maps, newspaper articles, things like that. I dug up some from the Butte Standard, but he had clipped them out. He had kept them. He kept everything! That house! That was a house! That was an experience! He’s still alive. [Yvonne Johnson’s father passed away in 2004] If Cecilia had been as helpful as Yvonne’s father, then we could have got a better image of Yvonne’s Native experience. But she wouldn’t do anything. She just told me off.

MJ: Well, in the book in those interactions with family, you come across as the enemy.

RW: Well I’m basically that still. That hasn’t changed much. The book probably only confirmed their worst fears. Well, they know the story better than anybody. So if Yvonne is going to be honest about what her memories are, they know it’s going to be a tough story. There are some beautiful things in the family there too, but there are some very tough things. Is that generally the case, that the collaborator is the enemy, as far as the other part of the family is concerned?
MJ: No, not always. Actually, of all of the books I’m looking at, yours is the worst case scenario for that positioning because of the nature of the story.

RW: The other stories that you’re looking at … they’re not so … they don’t deal with this kind of issue?

MJ: They don’t deal with sexual abuse within the family, no.

RW: Or crime, or whatever?

MJ: You’ve said that this is the first book of its kind in Canada to go into the circumstances in such depth, the hows and the whys of the crime and the abuse.

RW: Is there something similar in Australia?

MJ: To my knowledge, no. There are newspaper stories and investigative journalism which looks at these issues in Aboriginal communities, but there is no book length autobiography or life story which deals with this.

RW: That’s interesting to know. I know of none, in the sense of a Native woman who has had the courage to talk like this. That’s quite amazing. It’s a pretty unique story Yvonne has told; but you see it’s not a unique story. You know, when I was in Winnipeg on the book tour, a Native woman who is a columnist for the Winnipeg Free Press came to talk to me. She wasn’t going to write the story because she couldn’t write that story — it was too close to her own life. She had a colleague come and we talked together, the three of us, and then he went off and wrote the story. Then she stayed behind and told me that in Winnipeg every single Native woman that she knew had a story of some kind of vicious abuse in her life. If it wasn’t happening now with her husband, it had happened in her past, either from acquaintances, or on the Reserve, in her family with her uncles, her cousins, her brothers, her father, whoever. This is horrible. Every Native woman she knew, and she must have known hundreds. She said there was a line of abuse, often sexual abuse, certainly psychological and physical abuse, in every single Native woman’s life, and that was why she couldn’t write about Yvonne’s story. You see this book is not in any sense … the experience is not in any sense unique. It’s just the fact that Yvonne has had the courage to do it that is unique. There’re hundreds of articles and TV documentaries on it but they are quick. Things are just said. They can’t be just said. You have to go through and experience them.

* * * * *
Subsequent to my interviews with Yvonne Johnson and Rudy Wiebe, Johnson applied for consideration under the ‘Faint Hope’ clause, section 7.456 of the Criminal Code of Canada. Under this clause, a convicted prisoner may ask a judge to review her or his case to allow for an application to a jury to have the parole ineligibility period reduced. In 2005, Yvonne Johnson’s ‘Faint Hope’ hearing was successful and, subsequently, she was granted the right to apply for parole. Her application, however, was denied. In 2006, she was granted a series of ‘Unescorted Temporary Passes’ which have allowed her to visit her children. To date, she continues to serve her life sentence at the Edmonton Institute for Women.
Caryl Phillips’ *Cambridge* and the (Re)Construction of Racial Identity

In his study of the revisiting of the form of the slave narrative by African-American authors in the 1970s and 1980s, Ashraf Rushdy argues that the primary motives for this literary disinterment were political. In the aftermath of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements of the 1960s, these writers ‘wished to return to the literary form in which African American subjects had first expressed their political subjectivity in order to mark the moment of a newly emergent black political subject’ (7). A parallel movement can be seen at work in the black British writer Caryl Phillips’s fourth novel, *Cambridge* (1991). However, the political subject suggested by this novel is certainly not the unified and autonomous agent implied by Rushdy. The questioning of political identities based around static conceptions of race, gender, and class throughout the 1980s in Britain engendered a situation in which recognition of complexity and the dissolution of conceptions of fixed, essential identities seemed vital. The ‘proliferation of new sites of social antagonism’ based around the politics of identity and disputes around race, gender, sexuality, ecology, ethnic nationalism, and other ‘single-issue’ political articulations, required a fresh understanding of conflict and the subject positions created by unequal social relations (Hall and Jacques 17). In *Cambridge*, the complexities of history are dwelt upon and the totalising claims issued by the supposedly unitary monoliths of race, gender, or class are disturbed. The stories of Emily Cartwright, the plantation owner’s daughter who travels to inspect her father’s holdings on an unnamed Caribbean island, and of Cambridge, the African whose two periods of suffering as a slave are punctuated by a period as a free man in England, are each closely based on original nineteenth-century sources. Through occupying the forms that have been inherited from the past, Phillips is able to reconstruct the ideologies inherent in these modes of writing. However, in his decision to present these accounts together, placing the voice of the well-off white English woman alongside the voice of the male black slave, Phillips demands that tensions between moments of harmony and discord unsettle the easy categorisations that were made at that time and resonate into the present day. By re-enunciating past understandings of social distinction and conflict, the obscured yet sustaining principles of today’s complex political fashionings may be disclosed. Writing in the context of British anti-racist politics, Alastair Bonnett stresses the need for whiteness to be deconstructed and interrogated for the sake of the continuing utility of the anti-racist project. He laments that with
the era of the ‘ethnic assertiveness’ of the late 1980s and early 1990s, it was only the essential black subject that was made the subject of critique, while the envisioning of whiteness as essential and unitary in meaning continued unabated (123). *Cambridge*, as an intervention stemming from precisely this moment of race relations in Britain, participates within the work of critical re-assessment of identity politics by staging one of the formative textual moments of the idea of whiteness. The success of this political act is crucially dependent upon the particular stylistic choices made by Phillips, and particularly upon the mode of his manipulations of the archival texts. In reconstructing the particular boundaries of racial identity that can be found within these remnants of a colonial era, Phillips is able to draw our attention to the very fact of their construction. The contemporary reader is asked to question their own assumptions about the constituents of a racial self.

Evelyn O’Callaghan’s 1993 reading of *Cambridge* looks to identify the accounts from which the novel is constructed. O’Callaghan identifies many of Emily’s words in the novel as a pastiche of travel writings by authors including Matthew ‘Monk’ Lewis, Lady Nugent and Mrs Carmichael:

I do not refer simply to the narrative’s conventional form and use of nineteenth-century ‘polite’ English, but to specific incidents, phrases, even whole passages in the novel which are deliberately ‘lifted’ from the source documents. (36)

She also notes that Cambridge’s narrative is heavily reliant on Olaudah Equiano’s autobiography (38–39); Phillips has ransacked the archive in order to seize fragments of these sources and assemble them within his novel. O’Callaghan argues that this helps to establish the ‘authenticity’ of Phillips’s fiction but also that ‘the deliberate, even ostentatious, borrowing from and echoing of source material … focuses attention on the connection between the fictional and historical narratives’ (39). However, despite establishing this ‘connection’, O’Callaghan proceeds seemingly to confuse aspects of the ‘fictional’ and ‘historical’ in her reading of Phillips’s novel. She recognises that the forms of the travel journal and slave narrative are often inflected with a degree of ‘self-conscious artificiality’ as the authors struggle with the burden of being both subject and object of their tale, but goes on nonetheless to identify these ambiguities and evasions as no more than strategies through which Phillips ‘lulls us into a sense of familiarity only to jolt us out of it’ (43). It is not the case, as O’Callaghan seems to claim, that Phillips writes contradictions such as Emily’s shifting evaluations of both planters and slaves so that ‘the text’s apparent familiarity … is subtly destabilised by strategies [that] shock the reader into awareness of incongruities and discordance below the conventional surface’ (45). One can easily find this ‘discordance’ on ‘the conventional surface’ without any need to excavate below.

In Matthew Lewis’ *Journal of a West India Proprietor, 1815–1817*, the most heavily utilised of Phillips’s sources, the reader can easily locate moments where the categorisations of the slaves employed by the author seem subject to
slippage. Sometimes Lewis is able to paper over these gaps with the use of his self-deprecating humour (in which he, of course, nevertheless remains master). Occasionally, however, he seems to remain unaware of the absurdity of his account — such as where, following a digression on how content the ‘negroes’ are with their position, he laments their unfortunate habit of wishing to poison their masters (126). Phillips does not need to insert such instances of ambiguity into the colonial sources from which he liberally borrows in order to demonstrate their instability; the ambiguity is already there.

It is significant that the two principal accounts in Cambridge (those of Emily and of Cambridge) are inspired by ‘privileged texts’ that already exist in contradiction with one another. There is no need for the author to undercut a definitive account, for it is doubtful that such an account exists. To raise the ontological question of whether such an account could exist is irrelevant; Phillips is interested in the epistemological characteristics of the texts he investigates. His awareness of the already-existing complexity of the historical archive motivates an exploratory heuristic, not a call for refutation. Rather than denying the veracity of the accounts he addresses, he shepherds them into an encounter that may enable more profound readings.

The prologue that guides the reader into Emily’s narrative ends with two short paragraphs: ‘England. / The truth’ (4). In leaving the metropolitan centre, Emily abandons the structures of certainty that have so far shaped her experience. However, the resonance of ‘truth’ persists throughout her journals. She wishes explicitly to create a record of her ‘observations, for good or ill’ (7) and to approach the experiences that await her with what she believes to be an open mind. The lists and regulations with which she subsequently fills much of her journal are reminiscent of the ‘scientific’ form of the categorising list integral to the travel narratives of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Pratt 15–37). In clinging to these systems to organise data, Emily believes she can achieve a true knowledge of her Caribbean stay that is initiated by ‘breaking the last remaining link with a past that I understood’ (22). Bénédicte Ledent argues that ‘one senses [Cambridge] is slightly more trustworthy than Emily for his story operates on a narrative rather than merely descriptive mode’ (94); within the terms set out in the novel, however, the reader is given no reason to accept his ‘facts’ over those given by Emily. Indeed, Cambridge’s wish to portray ‘the truth as it is understood by David Henderson (known as Cambridge)’ (167) rests on exactly the same empirical understanding of knowledge claims that informs Emily’s scientific approach. His statement of intention can be usefully contrasted with that given in one of the source texts, Equiano’s Narrative, in which the author explicitly indicates the pedagogical purpose of his text in hoping that it ‘promotes the interests of humanity’ (1). Neither of Phillips’s narrators declares such vested interest but instead cling to a notion of wishing to present the facts as they have experienced them. The unspoken assumption here is that such ‘disinterested’
reportage is the pathway to truth; in fact, it allows Phillips firmly to delineate the then-current discursive boundaries of ‘the true’.

Paul Sharrad describes the fact that Cambridge is in some ways ‘silenced’ within the novel as a ‘technical problem’ that Phillips is required to overcome in order to ‘make present the absences of history’ (206). On the contrary I would suggest that it is precisely these silences within both Emily’s and Cambridge’s narratives that Phillips wishes to concentrate upon. In the novel, Phillips is keen to take the forms inherited from the past and push them to the limits of what can be said within their registers. The silences that then open up, the apertures that disturb the creation of meaning within these diegetic accounts, provide much of the force of Cambridge. Alaisdair Pettinger has suggested that the classic slave narratives present lacunae that demand revisiting by the contemporary imaginative writer (xviii). These lacunae are revisited by Phillips in Cambridge, although he does not do so with the intention to repair or reconstruct but rather with a wish to explore the absences, to mount an investigation of the discursive circumstances that led to their appearance and persistence across history.

However, Phillips’ novel should not simply be understood as an anthology of the source documents. He selectively builds his fiction from a variety of sources and his novel contains many incidents and rhetorical strategies that are absent from any of them. It is an act of creative re-writing far more than one of plagiarism. Phillips’ text speaks to its late-twentieth-century context through exactly these means. While the words we read may be often taken directly from the past, the organising consciousness that brings them together (and, indeed, the ideological milieu in which they are received by the reader) is wholly contemporary. Phillips does not aim so much to rewrite history as to restage it; under his manipulation, particular events and relationships can be emphasised. The effect is to focus our attention on precisely those places where the racial discourses of colonial slavery strained for hegemony. Recognising the difficulty involved in constructing and sustaining the tropes of whiteness at this crucial time in the formation of racial knowledge, the reader is asked to reconsider how their own understanding of whiteness is sustained.

Many of Cambridge’s valuable perspectives on nineteenth-century thought and of the historical construction of whiteness are achieved by carefully engineering the circumstances of the accounts Phillips presents, and by far his most significant manipulation is his use of gender. As noted above, the most frequently utilised of the source narratives is Matthew Lewis’ Journal. Many of the descriptions of landscape, people, and situations in Cambridge are taken from its pages, often with very little alteration. However, the plot of the novel is dependent on Emily’s identity as a woman. Her femininity dictates much of what happens to her and determines the ways in which she reacts. This impacts forcefully on the manner in which Lewis’s writing can be utilised.
It is precisely because of Emily’s marginality that the lacunae that reveal the precariousness of the prevailing discourse come to light. She exists simultaneously as white mistress and as sidelined female and the difficulties of maintaining this position become increasingly evident. Her total reliance on Brown to quell the disturbance among the slaves who ostensibly belong to her is an example of this:

As soon as [the house-servants] think me out of earshot they renew their animal chatter as though I am in some way responsible for this disagreeable situation. They obviously assume that I am prejudiced on the side of the young overseer in this irksome dispute, but in this they are mistaken. I am merely waiting for Arnold to dispense his justice, being confident that whatever decision he reaches will most likely be the correct one.

(119–20)

Emily fails to recognise the ‘responsibility’ that her class and race bring about, reasoning (perhaps correctly) that the powerlessness dictated by her gender overrules these apparent privileges.

In refiguring the events of Lewis’s *Journal* to make them a part of Emily’s experience, Phillips is forced to stretch the bounds of historical plausibility. O’Callaghan identifies additional sources behind Emily’s account such as Lady Nugent and Mrs Carmichael, but fails to point out the gap between the almost entirely domestic events chronicled in these records, and the more active part played by Emily. Lady Nugent’s recorded contact with the ‘poor blackies’, for example, seems principally to consist of very occasionally teaching them prayers (Nugent 53). In Claudia Brandenstein’s words, ‘Lady Nugent is restricted in what she can do, where she can go, and how she can see and experience her journey … a more limited repertoire of activities is available to her’ (47). In contrast, Emily’s experiences and descriptions of plantation life seem remarkably close to the events. To allow her location at the heart of affairs, Phillips has to manipulate her narrative in several ways: she is unmarried, and therefore independent of the restraining hand of a husband; her father is the absentee landlord, allowing her a greater say in events on the estate (although this is less as a deputy or heir, and more as a spy or intermediary); and the death of Isabella before they even reach the island means that she is denied the buffers to which a woman of her class would be accustomed — she is forced to communicate directly with the slaves and, specifically, with her new maid, Stella.

Through these fictional adaptations, Phillips is able to create a female character whose narrative tests the very limits of what may be said in the discourse available to her. She is relocated at the edge of slave-owning-class white femininity. The absence of the traditional supports of the privileged white woman have left her especially open to the contradictions that exist on the fringes of ideology. Emily’s relationships to her servants particularly put the boundaries of race and class under interrogation. Isabella and Stella (it is unlikely that the similarity between their names is accidental) are crucial in determining Emily’s sense of herself. The
reliance Emily places on Isabella at the beginning of *Cambridge* suggests a bond of psychological dependency: ‘there is nobody who knows more of the sorrows and joys of my heart than dear Isabella’ (11). Isabella’s death leaves a gap in Emily’s life and the only available replacement, Stella, seems ill-suited to the task of filling it. Emily is torn between the need for female company and a confidant, and the inescapable fact of Stella’s blackness. The difficulty Emily faces in trying to incorporate Stella discursively into her journal as simultaneously slave object and female subject is apparent when the housekeeper shifts from being a valuable piece of property — ‘a fine breeder’ (36) — to a carrier of feminine mystique — ‘this dusky maiden’ (37) — within the space of a couple of paragraphs. The restrictive and exclusive codes of plantation society ultimately render it impossible for Emily to accept Stella as a replacement for Isabella within the terms of her journal. The fact of race is, ultimately, non-negotiable in Emily’s world: ‘Stella is but a sad black imitation’ (129). It is only in the extra-diegetic epilogue that Emily and Stella are allowed reconciliation and to begin to search for something that they might share (178). Within the historically and ideologically determined form of the journal, such an ending is impossible.

Emily’s attempt to reproduce the values of her society, both through her actions and, crucially, through the textual record she creates, is always performed through reference to her gender. She explicitly links the discourses of class, race and gender in her criticism of West Indian society:

In this West Indian sphere there is amongst the white people too little attention paid to differences of class. A white skin would appear passport enough to a life of privilege, without due regard to the grade of individuals within the range of that standing. … The other men, perhaps because I am a woman, have shown little courtesy in affording the attentions proper to my rank. … This is barely tolerable amongst the whites, but when I find the blacks hereabouts behaving in the same manner I cannot abide it. (72)

Emily makes it clear that whiteness must consist of more than just skin colour and that, despite it being exactly whiteness which supposedly sets the slave owners above the enslaved, it requires a conscious moral effort to ensure that ‘white’ is to remain the privileged signifier in the plantation environment. She is also clear about her role as a white woman in ensuring that these rules of conduct are followed. The white woman becomes the epitome of whiteness while, tautologically, it is the very fact of this whiteness that allows her the space in which her femininity can first be constituted.

It is Emily’s tragedy that her stay in the Caribbean brings the tripartite supports of her identity — whiteness, femininity, and class privilege — crashing down. She expresses an awareness of this impending collapse in her increasingly panic-stricken considerations of her father: ‘Does he have no conception of what would claim us all in the tropics were we to slip an inch below the surface of respectability?’ (127). Of course, Emily herself slips from her position of respectability through her affair with Brown and commences the slide to her
eventual destitution. Ryan Trimm draws attention to how Emily constructs this movement ‘not as a loss but as a result of development and progression’ (237) while Abigail Ward suggests that she ‘both fears and desires such a conclusion’ (125). Phillips’s intricate portrayal of Emily’s decline reveals the complexity of imperial constructions of otherness.

The catalyst for Emily’s eventual demise is her sexuality. Richard Dyer has succinctly identified the bind to which white women are subject within racialised discourse: ‘To ensure the survival of the race, they have to have sex — but having sex, and sexual desire, are not very white: the means of reproducing whiteness are not themselves pure white’ (Dyer 26). Emily seems able to reproduce whiteness ideologically; it is the physical reproduction that seems thwarted. The fruit of her union with Brown is a stillborn child, a ‘little foreigner’ (183). The buffers that protect the sacred spaces of white femininity in England, the ‘backboards, corsets and stays’ that she so despisces (4), are missing from her colonial experience and she soon becomes undone in their absence. The return of her repressed sexuality on the island initiates the dissolution of the security of racialised and gendered positions.

As the situation on the plantation worsens, Emily experiences a significant moment in which she seems to understand the conditions of her whiteness. She is at the peak of her affair with Brown (although his passion seems to be subsiding) and is also being courted by the plantation doctor, Mr McDonald. Having teased McDonald’s infatuation and deliberately provoked his jealousy, ‘I retired to my chamber and looked into my mirror. Perhaps the affections of all these men turn in due course to some brown-faced beauty’ (122–23). It is possible to read these lines as a realisation of Brown’s fading desire but, considering the situation from which she has just come, another interpretation seems likely. Given that she is at this moment the object of desire of at least two men, the ‘brown-faced beauty’ may well be her. She recognises that her recent adoption of the role of sexualised female has come at a price: that of her unblemished whiteness. Emily’s stay on the island enacts a translation that not only severs her attachment to Britain but also similarly curtails her attachment to whiteness. Her acceptance of sexual desire, and increasing identification with Stella (and even Christiania) causes a disintegration of the persona based on fixed and interlocking senses of race and gender. That such thoughts enter Emily’s consciousness while she contemplates her reflection indicate the seeds of this awareness in her imagination, although the codes and limitations of her writing forbid a more explicit recognition.

Emily’s journal does not reach a resolution; indeed, given the ideologically-determined form of her writing, such an ending would be impossible. Subject to the relations extant on the plantation, Emily’s carefully-preserved sense of self collapses. The form of the colonial travel journal can no longer support her as it too relies on these knowledges and Emily becomes no longer the subject or the object of her discursive construction. She falls through the gaps in that text
and can only be restored in the third-person epilogue. The instabilities of the colonial order that were elided by the construction of the ideal of white femininity at one remove from the realities of plantation society now come to the forefront as the vision of the white woman crumbles through its own contradictions. The unified subject of the travel narrative is deferred and Emily’s precarious position eventually falters beneath the contradictions her text could no longer contain.

Significantly, the account of events provided by Phillips’s eponymous slave does not function to fill in all of the absences and omissions of Emily’s testimony. Trapped within the logic of the source documents as much as Emily, he is unable to transcend the ideological strictures of the forms through which he articulates. The material brutality of the slave system ensures his death and it is the white woman who is given the chance to inhabit a new voice. The catharsis of Emily’s fall from privilege sows the seeds of an original perspective on the plantation dynamic.

For Gail Low, ‘realisation of her complicit relation to the institutions of slavery is a necessary step in [Emily’s] uneasy path to maturity’ although this can only be achieved ‘at a great price’ (127). Part of this progress would appear to be the seemingly regressive step of having to abandon her position as subject of her own narrative. However, Phillips demonstrates that the ideological constraints inherent in the form of the narrative she was creating ultimately inhibited her expression of herself as a free agent. Emily’s inability to complete her story in these terms can paradoxically be read as a triumph of her selfhood over the restraints upon her person imposed by her society. Referring to the epilogue of Cambridge, Graham Swift observes that the ‘sense of a language that can talk about certain things suddenly bursting through Emily’s own language in which she can’t, is very volcanic’ (Phillips & Swift 100). This final section, in which Phillips adopts the voice of a third-person narrator, is crucial to the novel. While the novel to this point has carefully reproduced the language contained in the historical documents that Phillips echoes, the epilogue shows him distancing himself from his sources, and searching for an original way to write about the scenes he stages.

Paul Sharrad argues that there is an ‘unspoken but eloquent problematic at the heart of Cambridge’s cool detachment’, namely, ‘how the modern post-colonial writer can speak objectively and with commitment about the hegemonic forces that shape his/her own life, language and literary production’ (215). This problematic comes to the fore when Phillips is required to create a literary voice with which to end his novel. A striking feature of the epilogue is how little information is actually given. Not only is it relatively brief, but it also takes place entirely within one location (the semi-derelict Hawthorn Cottage) and over a short period of time (shortly after Emily’s ill-fated labour). The earlier part of the novel saw Emily reaching a state of possible self-awareness that could not be expressed within the terms available to her. Phillips is now required to elucidate this awareness. He does so tentatively and with careful consideration of the fragility of the moment.
McDonald instructs Emily, ‘Please keep still and stop talking. Stop talking’ (178). Yet to stop talking and let the story rest is always to impose an arbitrary ending. Having reached this point, Emily is unable to stop. Unlike the record of her journal, which functioned to render the chaos of the real world into strict textual formations, Emily’s new state of consciousness resists any final meanings. In notable opposition to the chronology of a journal, events in the epilogue are presented out of sequence and sometimes more than once. Through this fracturing of time, Phillips’s protagonist is denied the chance to attach any single meaning to this new life she shares with Stella at Hawthorn Cottage. That her thoughts and impressions are now subject to constant revision can be seen in the novel’s repetition of the moment between McDonald’s statements ‘Strange fish’ and ‘I do hope my driver hasn’t made off without me’ (179–81). At the first time of relation, the silence of this moment is ‘peaceful’ and seems to fit with an image of Emily as numbed by her experience and unable to relate emotionally to what she has gone through but Phillips does not leave this interpretation unchallenged. The second account of this moment admits to the ‘unpleasant thoughts [that] broke into Emily’s bruised mind’ and reveals that the sought-after peace remains a state desired rather than achieved. Phillips seems unwilling to assign a final meaning to Emily’s fate. If the collapse of the discourses that previously had sustained her is seen as producing any positive effect, it is in how she is freed to act to some degree as an independent agent in forming her impressions of the world.

Phillips has argued that the writer’s ‘first responsibility is to locate the truth and to deal with the truth, particularly as it relates specifically to the characters’ (Davison 96). It is the pursuit of these subjective truths that motivates his wish to remain so faithful to the narratives upon which he draws in this novel. The anti-racist imperatives to ‘rewrite’ history, or to recuperate and make central the ‘other’, subaltern texts are seemingly rejected in the novel and Phillips instead dramatises the limits of what could be said within the iniquitous racial logics of that time. Rather than accepting any simplified idea of the politically and ideologically unified subject, in the past as much as in the present day, he is concerned to identify out how the discursive constructions of identity (and, especially, literary constructions) present monolithic versions of people who, outside the text, are necessarily infinitely more complex. The epilogue to Cambridge shows Phillips attempting to find a way of writing that refuses such closure and resists the imposition of fixed social and political identities. In doing so, however, what comes across most strongly is the fragility and transience of a voice that speaks outside of such supports.

NOTES

1 Phillips at least once plays upon his ventriloquism of Lewis’s male voice through his female character. The processing of sugar syrup (see Lewis 1929: 79–81) is fully described before Emily admits her knowledge is second hand: ‘However, Mr Brown’s
Caryl Phillips’ Cambridge

explanation was so thorough that not only do I feel confident that I might explain the mysteries of this process to any stranger, but I am persuaded that I must myself have observed it in action!’ (83). This moment might be read as the author’s admission of his historical sleight of hand.

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Black and White Family Album: A Personal View of My Parents’ Work in Papua New Guinea 1949–75

The Papuan poet, John Kasaipwalova, once said, ‘I have left my footprints on your shore. The tide will come and wash them away, but the memories we share will linger on’.¹ Think of how many Australians left their footprints on the shores and mountains of Papua New Guinea. Personal memories and historical events have been recorded, whether on film, like *First Contact*, the documentary about the Leahy brothers’ explorations in the New Guinea Highlands, or as stories collected in oral history series such as Tim Bowden’s ABC Radio broadcast series *Taim Bilong Masta*. Personal accounts have been written by individuals in every genre of literature, or simply treasured in family collections of photographs, artefacts and memorabilia.²

For my parents, Percy and Renata Cochrane, the physical traces of their lives in Papua New Guinea have been neatly assembled into an archive: the Cochrane PNG Collection held at the University of Wollongong, and an oral history recording my father made with Hazel de Berg as part of the National Library of Australia’s collection on expatriate experiences before the country’s independence; but memories spill over organised frameworks such as archives and photographic collections into personal relationships and shared moments, and the urge to write them up. This essay is a tribute to my parents and their remarkable life’s journey.³ Between 1949 and 1968, this journey took both of them on extensive and separate travels throughout Papua New Guinea. My father, Percy, retired in 1968 and the family moved ‘down south’ to Sydney. He never went back to Papua New Guinea, but my mother returned several times until the country’s Independence in September, 1975, as she received several major commissions to work on documentary films or lead articles.

Renata and Percy Cochrane were ‘expats’ in Papua New Guinea⁴; they never intended to be settlers. Like so many of their generation they made a long-term commitment to live and work in Papua New Guinea in the last decades of its status as a colonial territory under Australian administration. In their case the commitment lasted twenty years; it was wholehearted and dedicated to advancing the development of Papua New Guinea. Inevitably, this experience changed their lives, coloured their perceptions and shaped their attitudes. In their own writings Percy and Renata related encounters, friendships and discoveries made with all
kinds of Papua New Guineans and expatriats, including patrol officers and chiefs, missionaries and mavericks, writers and radio broadcasters, village women and housewives. My mother frankly admitted that all these encounters and discoveries were part of her own self-discovery. As my parents became progressively more absorbed into life in Papua, their empathy with the indigenous people increased, as did their interest in Europeans from all walks of life who found themselves equally challenged by the environment and the difficult intellectual and moral terrain they found themselves inhabiting. In the 1950s–60s my parents were among concerned people who endeavoured to structure a society more appropriate to the emerging country’s modernity.

Why did I leave this story sitting in university archives and the family’s store of memorabilia in the camphor-wood chest for so long? What gave me the urge to start unpacking it? The typescripts have faded and papers have yellowed with age. In post-colonial Australia, distanced from its involvement with Papua New Guinea, stories of the colonial era may be an embarrassment, full of people with the wrong attitudes. ‘Balls’, my father would say, ‘if it’s a good story, just get on with it’.

Percy Cochrane arrived in Port Moresby with the title of Senior Broadcasts Officer in 1949; by the time he retired in 1968 the role of radio had developed exponentially. Administration broadcasts had grown from the daily ‘Native People’s Session’ programmed by Percy and his section in the Department of Education, to six radio stations broadcasting in English, Tok Pisin and vernacular languages, at Rabaul, Wewak, Kerema, Daru, Goroka and Mt Hagen. These stesin bilong yumi (our radio stations) were operated by the Administration’s Department of Information and Extension Services (DIES), where Percy was Head of Division and, finally, Acting Director.

Percy’s great passions were music and writing. For him, these were the two great forms of communication. He dedicated his professional life to bringing communication through radio to people, finding it the perfect medium to cross cultural and linguistic barriers, to inform people and contribute to their education and enjoyment. He used his skills as a writer to develop various types of radio programs and teach others how to do the same.

He made extensive recordings of indigenous music on ‘radio patrols’ throughout Papua and New Guinea, and found that broadcasting this music was most effective with people who had only recently experienced close-up contact. Radio was reassuring because it played familiar music back to indigenous audiences, as well as providing information in local languages about many of the perplexing new things that were happening from day to day. He wrote that:
The use of traditional music, prefaced by a spoken introduction explaining the origin of the song, and giving reasons why it is sung, where and by whom, has become an outstanding feature of Administration broadcasting…. It has been found that the broadcasting of this type of music can have a significant effect on breaking through ethnic barriers; in building mutual understanding among dissident tribal groups and in developing district and even national unity. Its function in preserving the culture of the people themselves is fully appreciated by the village elders….

The programmation of traditional and locally recorded music has necessitated a policy of continuous field tape-recording which has, in turn, resulted in the building up of several very comprehensive libraries of tape recordings. (P. Cochrane 1966 1)

In the 1950s the ‘Native people’s Session’ was played to air on the ABC by arrangement with the Territory Administration. As well as Education, other government departments demanded air-time for broadcasting important messages about Health, Agriculture and Fisheries, Local Government, Law, and so on. The audience was continually expanding, as were their requirements for news, information and entertainment. Criticising the ABC, Percy said that Admin broadcasting personnel are all trained to perform simultaneously the functions of at least three ABC personnel, that is: translate, touch-type, operate the turn-table, control the console, mix in-line to program from a battery of three tape recorders, control output levels, accept news relays, time signals from the communications receiver and remote control of the transmitters.

By the late 1950s, after protracted negotiations with the ABC, it had become evident that the Australian broadcaster did not consider that its brief included the needs of the Territory Administration, nor the indigenous people of Papua New Guinea their primary audience. By 1960, the ABC was still not prepared to establish regional stations in Papua New Guinea: ‘the regional stations envisaged are not within the orbit of the ABC’, stated its Chairman, Sir Talbot Duckmanton. After further negotiations, it became apparent that, in Duckmanton’s view, ‘It was not the role of the ABC to operate an instrument of communication for the purposes of the Administration…. This is a task quite different from the role of the ABC’ (qtd in P. Cochrane 1965 1).

In complete contrast to ABC stations, Administration Broadcasting Stations were designed to speak not only to the literate and semi-literate sections of the community, but to the vast majority of the population who lived in villages. Percy argued that although the listening habit was not established in village communities, radio was the most readily accepted new form of communication because news and information had always been transmitted orally.

The old Department of Education Broadcasts Section was assimilated into the new Department of Information and Extensions services, which also had a Publications Unit and a Film Unit. Broadcasts had a fully equipped studio at Ela Beach, in downtown Port Moresby, where new announcers gained experience and confidence in all aspects of recording, presenting and operating equipment. News
and other programs were put together here to be dispersed to all the stations, where local content would be added.

During this establishment period in the early 1960s, Heads of Department and Station Managers were expatriates, usually Australian, but they relied considerably on the core of professionally trained Papua New Guinea staff. Several of the original broadcasts team had completed the Senior Officer’s Course for PNG public servants and were appointed to higher positions. As the radio network spread it needed new staff, who had to have a good level of literacy and speak two or three languages. They were recruited as far as possible from the broadcasting radius of the station. The future Prime Minister, Michael Somare, became one of the multi-skilled staff at Radio Wewak, and commented on his career there in his biography, Sana.

Undertaking the political education of Papua New Guineans towards the formation of their own modern society was a huge task, but one that could not be ignored or put off. Radio broadcast was an oral service that spoke local languages and listened to the people’s voice. It became one of the most important channels of communication because of its suitability for Papua New Guinea’s conditions. The Papua New Guinean historian, John Waiko, credits the role of radio stesin bilong yumi with the rapid spread of Tok Pisin as Papua New Guinea’s main lingua franca. In his view, for all Papua New Guineans to be able to communicate in one language was a significant unifying factor, essential to the task of nation-building (Waiko 1993 205).

The Administration stations had clear concepts and policies set for their broadcasting service, including the following which were set out in one of Percy’s reports:

i. The total programme is conceived for the indigenous people, no concessions being made to the European audience (though in fact this is quite large).

ii. Programmes are conceived primarily at the level at which the greatest amount of assistance can be given to the greatest number of people. Very clearly this is the great mass of village people.

iii. In this context it is clear that the ‘village’ people of different Districts will be at different stages of development. Because of their strongly developed ‘local’ characteristics individual Administration stations adapt themselves to the immediate needs and the level of comprehension of the people being served.

The overall aims of Administration broadcasts were said in February 1962 to include —

Promotion of a national consciousness;

a Breaking down of ethnic tribal and racial prejudices;

b Development of political, economic and social awareness in relation to both the Territory and other parts of the world;

c Developing greater understanding of other cultures. (qtd in P. Cochrane 1966 1)
In 1965 Percy was arguing for the establishment of a new station to reach remote tribes along the Papua New Guinea/Indonesian border, where there were ‘delicate issues’ such as the movement of tribal people across the border (Waiko 205). Radio stations at Goroka, serving the peoples of the Eastern Highlands, and at Mt Hagen, serving Western Highlands and Enga-speaking people of the Southern Highlands, had proved to have a successful level of acceptance by people who had not much contact with Europeans. In another report, Percy wrote that:

In these communities:

- The listening habit is almost completely un-established;
- the linguistic situation is complex and the comprehension of idiomatic English very small….. A linguistic policy closely related to the people’s degree of comprehension is essential;
- modern and popular music is largely unappreciated. The entertainment components (one of the main elements in encouraging listening) must be related to the interests of the people being served and will be drawn primarily from local and traditional sources;
- the introduction of new thought concepts (including the gaining of ‘acceptance’ through the understanding of government policies) must be carefully staged to relate what is known and to understand what is not known;
- the need to forestall possible foreign inspired attempts to gain the mind of the people is urgent;
- physical communication in any of the new areas is extremely difficult and broadcast enables the Administration to maintain a consistent ‘presence’.

(P. Cochrane 1965 2)

How the Administration stations achieved a high level of penetration and acceptance throughout PNG was the result of some quite remarkable strategies they developed in broadcasting techniques and programs. The positive results were assisted by the boon of cheap transistor radios, which made broadcasts widely accessible. News was regarded as the spearhead of the Administration’s three-pronged service — news, extension material (information provided by education, health, welfare, police and other services and ‘localised’ by each station), and music. The stations developed their own independent news coverage, both from their own areas but also to link into Territory-wide news broadcasts. ‘Village news’ was important to all Administration stations. Because each item incorporated the name of the person who was the source of the news at least three times, the relationship between the station and the villagers quickly became personal. This was added to by personalised service calls, responses to individual’s enquiries to Doctors, Infant and Maternal Welfare nurses, Local Councils, Land Titles Commission and Cooperatives. Even illiterate people from remote villages could be represented on the radio by making requests, usually forwarded to the station on their behalf by field workers, missionaries and local teachers.
Music was the great attraction, sometimes taking up 70% of air-time. The stations found it effective to represent every section of the community with locally recorded *sing-sings* (traditional ceremonies), church and school choirs, string bands, and recordings made on field visits to villages. In a report on broadcasting in the Territory Percy commented that:

This specific and determined effort to ensure communication with and penetration of remote areas is obviously one of the greatest efforts being made by the Administration to secure acceptance of the new concepts that the great mass of people must assimilate before they move forward. And, conversely, from the great mass of people, it is the only method they have of beginning to understand what is taking place around them. (P. Cochrane 1965:3)

Among the cross-currents of thought and expression, investigation and imagination, swirling around them in their life and work in Papua New Guinea, Renata and Percy were particularly drawn by several streams: their own need for self-expression; advancing literacy in Papua New Guinea and encouraging creative writing; sharing experiences with like-minded literary people, and communicating what Papua New Guinea had come to mean to them.

Their interest in the potential of Papua New Guinean writers started in 1950, when the Cochranes had only been in Port Moresby for a short time. As Percy was forming a team of announcers, interpreters and reporters for the Broadcasts section, he was on the lookout for anyone who had the potential for this kind of work. From the first time he met Avaia Pinongo, who wrote under the name of Allan Natachee, Percy recognised that he had a talent for writing that was out of the ordinary.

Percy sent Natachee out on assignments, and was quite astonished when he came back with poems, like one about Port Moresby’s first fun fair. Percy thought he would be better employed writing down the legends of his people, the Mekeo, ‘While working for me he wrote *The Spiritual and Legendary History of the Mekeo People*, a collection of poems in English handwritten into ledgers and a voluminous set of the songs of his people in translation’. The greatest honour bestowed on Allan Natachee came from the Philippines — a poet laureate’s crown — and a citation recognising him as ‘Distinguished Poet of Papua’. He wore the wreath of silver leaves for many years but, as Renata writes, ‘Unfortunately, in his own country, Allan had little enough recognition apart from the publication of some of his poems in the Papua New Guinea *Journal of the Public Service* and one of his poems in the *South Pacific Post*. This last poem was specially written on the occasion of the first Common Roll elections early in 1964’.

In the early 1960s, as the Literacy Board established itself and the Publications Unit of D.I.E.S was still preoccupied with pragmatic ‘how to’ booklets, Oxford University Press (OUP) decided to take an interest in publishing Papua New Guinea stories to supplement its English language and literacy course. OUP’s penetration of the developing literacy market was worldwide and Frank Eyre, who
was in charge of OUP’s Melbourne branch, was keen to develop a language and literacy course oriented to Papua New Guinea and other Pacific Islands countries. As well as the student’s workbooks, the OUP literacy courses needed ‘readers’, stories suitable for the staged levels of literacy and preferably with interesting to read local content. On visits to Papua New Guinea through the 1960s to pursue this goal, Frank Eyre became a close family friend of the Cochranes and a frequent correspondent.

Although the reporters, interpreters and presenters on the staff of the Broadcasts and Publications sections continuously wrote news stories and compiled programs, which included their own versions of legends and oral histories, most expats did not consider the possibilities of this nascent literature. Frank Eyre offered an opportunity for those interested to come forward and write one of the ‘Stories of My People’ series, which would be published by OUP and distributed as part of their English courses. Paulius Matane and Mackenzie Jovopa took up OUP’s offer. OUP later published Matane’s autobiography, *My Childhood in New Guinea*. Frank commented on the progress of all these projects in a letter to Renata dated 16 Aug (no year, estimate 1966):

> We have another ‘Stories of our People’ printed and due to be published next month. ‘Kum Tumun of Minj’ by Paulius Matane. Our first indigenous author, Mackenzie Jovopa’s book [that you asked about] came up, with reports, at the same conference and we accepted it. I can’t write to him until I get back to the office but you can tell him if you like. It will have to be pretty drastically edited, as the style and construction are far too involved … but the blunt fact is that if it isn’t reduced to accepted vocabulary and sentence construction the Education Department will not buy it — and we presume the author would like some royalties!

My mother, Renata, started her writing career in Papua New Guinea as a freelance journalist for print and broadcast media. Like my father, her work led to many levels of engagement with Papua New Guineans, and frequent travels throughout the country. Renata’s stories were concerned with family life in Papua, women and their achievements and the work of Catholic Missions. From 1960–1963 she wrote a weekly feature column, ‘What Do You Think?’, for the *Post Courier*, canvassing a diversity of issues. She became Publications Officer for the Department of Information and Extension Services. She had to travel extensively throughout the country, undertaking the production of short films and publications for local distribution, some of the most outstanding on women’s issues. One of her main challenges was to develop poster books, story books and short films, which explained government activities such as elections, to a largely non-literate population. As well as radio
scripts and articles, Renata wrote two full-length book manuscripts based on her life and experiences in Papua New Guinea, but these were not published.

Throughout the 1960s she developed further skills as a freelance journalist in both print and broadcast media.

Under Administration regulations it was prohibited for the wives of public servants to be employed, especially for someone like Renata whose husband held a senior post in the Department that was responsible for government publications and broadcasting; but in a freelance capacity she could submit contributions to government publications such as *The PNG Villager*, a newspaper for indigenous readers. As New Guinea was a Trust Territory of the United Nations, agencies like UNESCO operated there and needed someone to write simple booklets on health and nutrition for Papua New Guinean women.

In 1959 the editor of the *Post Courier*, Papua New Guinea’s daily newspaper, approached Renata to write a weekly column for women — possibly with the idea that she would keep up some kind of chatty cooking and clubs column. She was keen to accept the offer, but had different ideas about the content. On 1st May, 1959, she began her regular contribution under the banner, ‘What do you think?’, and mused about it in her first column.

For some years I wrote a tropical cookery column for ‘The Post’. Now I have been asked to write a different sort of column expressing the things that interest women.

‘What do women think about?’ said the Editor, ‘I don’t know’.

Taking a daily average, and without poking into the private recesses of the mind, what do women think about?

Marriage, birth and death, when these are imminent.

Wives and mothers undoubtedly devote most of their thoughts to their families and the ever-recurring small problems of day-to day living … those new shoes for the children … I must get my husband to go and see the doctor … what on earth am I going to have for dinner tonight (or, if she is thoroughly well organised — next week) … I haven’t got a thing to wear to that party tomorrow.

For the career woman, work and the people she works with take up a good deal of thought space. Then there are the neighbours … .social obligations … voluntary work … and, of course, the houseboy.

Do women think about religion? I believe many of them do. Politics and current affairs? While listening to the news and reading the paper — unless they affect us personally, like income tax.

The fine arts? Spasmodically. Sport? When we or our families take an active part in it. Fashion and how-do-I-look? Subconsciously, all the time, and very rightly, too.

What do you think?

May I say now, at the beginning, that I should be very happy to share this space with you, to put forward your views if they are of interest to women in general. I feel this is the only way I can get in touch with those of you living in other parts of the Territory. But everything will have to be in capsule form as you can judge by the length of this column. (R. Cochrane 1959 np)
Over the next several years, ‘What do you think?’ became much more than the housewives’ champion, although Renata rapidly gained renown as a fearless consumer watchdog, attacking excessive prices and poor business practices that women expected, and received, answers from the authorities.

Sometimes she wrote advice to ‘cadet wives’, who arrived in the Territory, starry-eyed, on the arms of their new husbands, without a clue about the life-style to which they would rapidly have to adapt. Her correspondents alerted her to women who were quiet achievers, both Papua New Guineans and expatriates, and she would unhesitatingly follow these stories up (R. Cochrane 1959 np). Renata was a great admirer of the older generation of pioneers, women who had lived in some corner of Papua New Guinea since the turn of the century, or before, who had lived through an extraordinary range of experience. Ma Lumley, respected doyenne of the Trobriand Islands, told Renata her secret for surviving precarious situations: ‘My grandmother brought me up to do one good turn a day, even if it was only for the cat. Everyone knows I’ll never refuse help and that’s why they all call me Ma’. Nor did she neglect Papuan and New Guinean women, and men, individual leaders and people who were leading the way towards a different future. She wrote feature articles on native women graduating as nurses, becoming nuns, leading women’s groups, and on those who were ‘firsts’, like Alice Wedega, the first woman elected to the Legislative Assembly (R. Cochrane 1960 np).

It is clear from her considerable body of writings on mission activities that Renata was inspired by the spiritual and material benefits brought to indigenous people by what she called ‘the Pilgrim Church’. She was a constant and strong advocate of the work performed by Christian missions in Papua New Guinea, which she saw as bringing progress and enlightenment to the people. She also admired the character and persistence of individual missionaries, enjoyed their sense of humour and counted many among her friends. Renata did not write for publication about her personal faith in the Christian God and the Catholic religion; but without her own firm beliefs and attitudes, she would not have been motivated to investigate and write so much about the activities and influence of missionaries in Papua New Guinea.

Undoubtedly, missions welcomed the coverage she gave them in both the secular and Christian press, locally and overseas. Her initial contact with Bishop Sorin led to a lasting relationship with the S.V.D. Catholic mission on Yule Island and its stations on the Papuan coast and hinterland. She found intellectual and spiritual comfort in their company as well as curiosity about their aims and achievements. Often with kids in tow, she travelled by small plane, on coastal vessels, on horseback and mule train, building up her network of contacts in the Papuan hinterland. So we set out on our adventures, often just mother and children, while Dad was off on his ‘radio patrols’.
After ten years in Papua, Renata felt both welcomed and rejected by the country. The ambivalent sentiments she expressed at this time stayed with her the rest of her life.

Each time I returned to Papua it was with a little fear in my heart … the fear of facing up to myself again, of being brought face to face with my own insufficiency, of measuring and sifting the values that I had once taken for granted. Papua is pitiless when she shows you the black face of strange cultures hidden deep in swamps and rainforests and the remotest mountain ranges. When you have tasted and smelt the rancid smoke-filled fug of flimsy leaf-and-sapling dwellings in the high cold valleys; when you have tried to touch the comforting skin of human relations — as you know them — and have found nothing there that you recognise, you are lost. The edifice within you, carelessly accepted as your right, as the bequest of three thousand years of civilisation, comes crashing down. You knew, of course, that customs and cultures would be different in those long-hidden valleys and the villages strung out along the razorbacks. But you were not prepared to lose sight of human relationships that had seemed to you wholly instinctive; that you had supposed to be broadly the same the whole world over. Could pigs be more important than people? Could women still be considered ‘something-nothing’? Could family life survive when the men lived in the men’s house and the women shared a roof with the pigs? When you found the conditions were like this in the high mountains of the Goilala and the Kunimaipa, you were bewildered, stunned, crushed. You had then, painfully, in the light of your new knowledge, to rebuild your private castle, the dwelling place of your ideas….

Papua could fascinate or repel — or both. That was the impact Papua had on me, and on many of the people who tried to see her as she really was. 10

Percy died in 1981. A short while after his death my mother asked my help to put the manuscripts, documents and photographs that they had accumulated over nearly twenty years in Papua New Guinea into some kind of order. Listing piles of boxes in the garage at their house at Killara contained the output of their life’s work — here were the records of years of energy and vitality — looking, seeing, listening, reporting, recording — she thought they must be useful to someone.

We devised a system of categories for archiving: sets of colour slides recording particular events were numbered and named; then hundreds of black and white photographs taken by my parents or collected from other sources to serve some news item or story — we identified these as far as possible. As well as the photographs there were reel-to-reel tapes of Papua New Guinean music and radio programs, newspaper articles, radio and film scripts, small commissioned publications written for the Department of Information and Extension Services, UNESCO and Oxford University Press. There was a separate substantial collection of all the photographs, articles and other documents related to Renata’s writings on missions. We decided to keep the photo files separate. Some of the District Files rapidly became replete, especially the Districts of Papua Central, Gulf, Sepik and Milne Bay, that my mother and father had so often visited and written about. Radio scripts made a logical category. So did ethnographic music recordings with their accompanying texts and articles. Mum’s weekly newspaper
column ‘What Do You Think?’ was cut out of the Post Courier newspapers and pasted into journals.

Over several sorting sessions we unpacked her own manuscripts, her books-to-be; for her, these unpublished manuscripts were the core of her life’s work. She set them apart. There was sadness in my mother’s eyes and a catch in her voice. None of her book manuscripts were published. She showed me letters from her London literary agent. They said they had tried and tried again to interest publishers, but her stories didn’t fit into any genre and they didn’t know where to place them on their lists. Perhaps she would like to try again, change her style, write it as a novel? Their excuses continued: there isn’t much interest in Papua New Guinea in the UK; its too far away and unknown; maybe she could set the stories in Africa. I remembered the hours she spent drafting, editing and rewriting, in every house we lived in. The results were all here, laid out on neatly typed double spaced quarto, pages and pages in triplicate: My Dear Neighbours stories of early days in Papua; Laurabada, the book about some of the impressive people she encountered in Papua New Guinea, and Kula, the manuscript she wrote when she travelled to Italy after Percy’s death, the one that told more intimately about their lives together and the vagaries of her family history.

Eventually the tide will turn and people will want to read what my parents’ and others of their generations wrote in their attempts to understand the world they lived in.

NOTES

1 Addressing a seminar at the Festival of Pacific Arts, Cook Islands, 1992.
2 First contact and Taim bilong Masta are phrases frequently used in relation to Papua New Guinea. First Contact is a widely known documentary film (Connolly and Anderson dirs. 1987) about the Leahy brothers’ encounter with Highlanders in the 1930s. Taim Bilong Masta is also the title of a radio program compiled by Tim Bowden based on oral histories of people living in PNG during the colonial era.
3 This essay is an extract from the manuscript of an unpublished monograph, Inheritance, completed as the Creative Work for the MPhil (creative Writing) awarded by the University of Queensland in 2005.
4 The colloquial term ‘expat’ was used for expatriate public servants working for the Territory administration (mostly Australians) and more generally for all Europeans living and working in Papua New Guinea.
5 Information on the life of Allan Natachee and his writing is drawn from undated typescripts by Percy and Renata Cochrane in the CPNGC. There is extensive file on Allan Natachee; hand written poems and prose by Natachee, printed versions of his work, articles and commentaries by Percy and Renata Cochrane and related correspondence.
6 Gavin Souter used one of Natachee’s poems on the flyleaf of his book, New Guinea: The Last Frontier, 1963. Commentary on Natachee’s poetry and/or his poems were published in the following: Oceania, 22.2, 1951; Journal of the Public Service, 4:3, 1962; West Australian, 23 January, 1965. In his commentaries on PNG writers, Ulli

7 Andrew Peacock, who was Minister for Territories in 1972 in the McMahon Government, frankly admitted that, ‘In the 1960s, I had felt that despite the bricks and mortar that the British left, the French were, interestingly enough, better colonists. I changed my mind in the 1970s when as Foreign Minister I had to handle certain other issues in the Pacific. But in the 60s I held the view that the French were classically non-racist. And I felt that British rule placed all sorts of other impediments in the way of territories emerging into independence — even though their institutional framework was better. The French cultural element was better’ (Peacock 1995, 1–8).


9 ‘The Pilgrim Church’ was the title she gave to a commissioned series of lead articles for *The Catholic Weekly* in 1967. Section 10: Catholic Mission Manuscripts, CPNGC.

10 Extract from ‘The Awakening’, undated typescript ms in CPNGC.

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Family album: Christmas 1949 in Port Moresby.

Renata and daughters visiting Catholic Mission at Kerema.
Percy Cochrane making live recording at Kuminibus Village, Sepik District. (CPNGC collection slide.)

Percy Cochrane on radio patrol. (CPNGC colour slide.)
Publicity for radio stations.
(Brochure in CPNGC collection.)

Adult education class using OUP readers.
(CPNGC collection.)
Mission Building

Hanuabada
She died in my arms. There was no time to give her anything on the bare mountainside. It was too late. I was empty-handed. Yet while I cradled her heavy body she was both my daughter and one of the lost children groping between two worlds. The daughter of man.

More abused than cherished she had been in her short life, owning only scraps of learning as full of holes as her one blanket. She had reached out once for a little layer of sophistication — so little that it rubbed off like the sooty black coating of her skin when I massaged her body as the warmth drained from it.

Philomena came from Kerau village in the Goilala Sub-District of Papua. At 8000 feet the mountains and valleys were often shrouded in mist and rain. Between sunset and sunrise it was a bone-chilling place. Only during the midday sunshine did the people begin to thaw out properly. It was no wonder they felt the cold. They had no clothes. The traditional covering for men and women was a broad leaf held in place by a fibre belt.

I felt the cold too, in spite of my clothes. After the evening meal I would settle in the warmest corner of the timber convent, in the angle between the wood stove and the wall of the kitchen. There the Little Sisters, who had given up their parlour for our use, spent the last hour of their busy day.
Sister Teresina, the calm mixed-race Superior, and Sister Maggy, the young teacher from Mekeo on the coastal plain, took out their crochet. Sister Anieto — I puzzled over her name until I realised it was the nearest the Goilala tongue could get to ‘Agnes’ — rested her hands on the scrubbed kitchen table where she made bread and rolled pastry and peeled vegetables every day of the week. When all the pots and pans had been cleared off the stove, Sister Gabrielle, the one Frenchwoman among the Papuans, boiled up her syringes for the next day’s work in the dispensary. Sister Aurelia, who suffered from rheumatism in her ankles, sat on a stool with an ancient grey shawl wrapped around her bare feet. Tough, old and tiny, she could — when roused — terrorise the wildest Goilala warrior. She had been at Kerau for many years and the people loved her dearly. Although they called all the Sisters ‘Mame’ (mother), she was their mother in a special sense. She knew their language intimately and understood the complex relationships between the clans. The people said that when Mame Aurelia died they would bury her at Kerau and she could be sure that her bones would be well cared for. At first I did not understand the deep implications of that statement. But I was beginning to learn something about these mountain people from the little Sisters. As Papuans they understood the Goilalas better than any European. I did not have the impression that their replies were what they thought I wanted to hear.

‘I saw a woman wearing a tangle of bones around her neck. Would they be human bones?’

Sister Teresina nodded.

‘That was probably Kemava you saw, from Kerau village. She is a widow. Those are her husband’s bones.’

‘Mon dieu! How long has she been wearing them?’

‘I think he died about six months ago. They made a little enclosure in the village and left his body there until they were nearly clean. Then the relatives took the remains down to the creek and washed them and gave the bones to the widow.’

‘All of them?’

‘Well, Kemava was lucky. Some of the other women helped her by taking a few bones here and there, out of sympathy. But often now they don’t wear all the bones. The fashion is beginning to die out.’

‘Further inland, in the Lunimaipa, the widows still wear all the husband’s bones,’ said Sister Gabrielle. ‘My sister is still there. The widow even carries the dead man’s skull in a special little net bag around her neck. And she wears a special sign of mourning — rows and rows of necklaces made from dried seeds.’

‘For how long?’

‘About a year. Just the same as here. Then there’s a feast and the mourning is finished.’

‘Soon after I came here,’ said Sister Anieto, ‘I went to Sene village. The men were building a little round fence in the middle of the village. I saw them carry
some bones inside. They built a roof over the enclosure. The pigs were walking in and having a good look. The chief came and sat down beside me. “What are you looking at so hard, Mame?” he said.

“I am looking to see what you are building in front of your house.”

“That is a shelter for the bones of my brother. His widow has already worn them for a year. Now the mourning is finished and it is time to make a feast for him. But we cannot attend to it just yet. We are making gardens and the women are planting taro. When that is finished, I shall gather the people together and make a speech about my brother. Then we will kill a pig and have a feast. Afterwards we will destroy this shelter and we will kick all the bones of my brother into the bush. It is the end.”

‘Have you noticed that a lot of the women have the top joint of some of their fingers missing?’ asked Sister Teresina.

I nodded.

‘That’s another sign of mourning. As soon as a brother dies, or a child, or someone close to them, the women will take a bush knife and chop off one finger. They break the end of a gourd and hold one cut finger over it to catch the drops of blood. Then they walk to the front of the house where the dead person is and say, “See what I have done for you. See how my blood is running into the gourd”. And when they have done that, they can have a piece of the pig that is killed for the feast.’

‘One day,’ Mame Aurelia added, ‘a woman came here. She carry little net bag around her neck. She open the bag, show me top of one finger. She say, “Mame, I have just cut off the top of my finger”. I say “Why?” She say “My husband beat me. I forget his food. Mame, will you mend my finger?”’

‘Mame Aurelia, do you remember the time Philomena cut off her finger?’ asked Sister Anieto.

‘That time her mother ran away?’

‘Who is Philomena?’ I asked. ‘Tell me about her.’

‘She is a girl from Keru village, up there,’ said Sister Teresina, nodding towards the slope of the mountain. ‘She must be seventeen or eighteen now. She was one of the first children to be baptised here. The father and mother brought her to the church because the Babe (priest) had told them about heaven and they wanted their little girl to be happy there. When the Babe asked if they wanted to be baptised they said, “Later, perhaps”. Just now it was too hard for them to change. It was soon after that the mother ran away.’

‘It was then that Philomena cut off her finger,’ said Sister Teresina. ‘The old grandfather — he’s dead now came and told the Sisters that the girl was sick in the village. He went to see Pere Andre and asked him to send to Taipini for policemen to fetch Philomena’s father.’

‘Philo’s father, he come back all the same. He find Philo sick, wife run away. He go after her, he come to brother’s village. He find his wife. He try to pull her

‘And Philomena?’

‘She came to school here. Later on both the parents became Christians. When we took in nine or ten older girls to help us, they asked if Philomena could come. She was a bright girl in school and very willing. So we said yes.’

‘How did she get on?’

Sister Maggy giggled.

‘We had a hard time trying to get her to wash — and all the other girls. But we made them some new clothes — the first they ever had. And they thought that was wonderful.’

‘They were learning quite well,’ said Sister Teresina. ‘And they all seemed happy. One day, without warning, they all ran away. They left their clothes here in the convent and went to a dance. And they never came back.’

* * * * *

I thought about Philomena a great deal. Knowing something concrete about her origin and background, her parents and their quarrels, her unhappy childhood, I could reach out towards her. I could begin to feel her as a three-dimensional human being; guess the joys and wonders, the disillusionments and betrayals that beset her. Now I began to understand how essential was fire and warmth and how relatively unimportant a sooty, smoke-grimed skin; how a child might wait all day for mother to come home from the food garden and welcome the bowed figure with joy spiked by hunger. And she suffered acutely, too, from things other than cold and an empty stomach. Dear God, how lonely and desperate a child she must have been to cut off her finger when her mother ran away.

It was only a week after Philomena had taken a strong hold on my thoughts that her father, Wavivi, came down from Kerau village and asked the Sisters to visit Philomena. She had been sick for several days, he said.

It was one o’clock when three of us began to limb the steep track to the village. Sister Gabrielle carried an assortment of medicines — salts, quinine, aspirin, iodine and a small bottle of eucalyptus oil. Mame Aurelia followed with a billy of tea.

‘What’s the matter with Philomena?’ I asked Sister Gabrielle.

‘She came to the dispensary about a fortnight ago and asked for medicine, opening medicine. We haven’t got any castor oil right now, so I gave her paraffin. Then a few days ago her father came and said that Philo was still sick. I gave him Epsom salts for her.’

‘That’s right,’ said Mame Aurelia, ‘her father, Wavivi, he come down and say, “Philo sick. She vomit all the time.” The Sisters tell him to put her in a hammock and bring her down here if she can’t walk. He say, “Yes all right.” But he do
nothing. Wavivi come again Monday. He tell me Philo not very well. I say “Why you not bring her down?” He say “We wait.” I say, “Mame Anieto, here, she sick too. And we do big washing today. If Philo very sick, we come. If not very sick, we come tomorrow.” He say, “All right! We wait.” But when we finish washing, I say to Sister Gabrielle, “I think we go see Philo today.”

‘I wish we knew what was the matter with her,’ said Sister Gabrielle. ‘We met her about a month ago in one of the villages. She was going to a dance. She said her head was bad and she had a stomach ache. She wanted tea. I gave her aspirin and told her to come to the dispensary. But she didn’t come. Tiens, Mame Aurelia, we forgot the salt.’

‘No,’ said the old Sister. ‘I have a little parcel salt in my pocket.’

‘The old people in the village are always glad to see us,’ said Sister Gabrielle.

‘And they always expect a little salt.’

We skirted the rough paling fence of a newly planted garden, taking care not to injure the tender new shoots of sweet potato. There was a fence to climb and more gardens to cross before we reached the village. I turned to give Mame Aurelia a hand, but she grinned and waved me on. She hopped nimbly over the stile, gripping the rough timber with her bare wrinkled toes.

A man smoking a bamboo pipe came out of the first house in the village. The home dried tobacco was loosely rolled and pushed into a small hole drilled into the flank of the bamboo. The man’s short, woolly hair was braided in forty or fifty tiny plaits. Each plait was bound from end to end with green strips of bark so that it stood out stiff and straight from the scalp. The man said he would walk with us to Wavivi’s house. We passed a small fence enclosing a rough shelter.

‘Is that a pig’s house?’ Sister Gabrielle asked.

‘Yes,’ said the villager. That’s where Umi’s house burned down last week.’

‘Well,’ said Sister Gabrielle to me, ‘they’re getting on. That’s one pig at least that won’t sleep with the women.’

Mame Aurelia touched my arm.

‘That’s where they keep sweet potatoes for planting. Up there in the roof of that little house with no walls.’

We scrambled through the tiny doorway of Wavivi’s house. Just inside the door a big young woman was lying on the earth and ashes of the floor. She was huddled under the tattered filthy wreck of a blanket. It was Philomena.

‘O, mais alors!’ said Sister Gabrielle. ‘She is cold, cold, all over her body. Mame Aurelia, tell her father to make a big fire. And ask him where she is sick.’

She knelt beside Philo, feeling her body. The girl pointed to her stomach and groaned.

‘Wavivi say her stomach very hard, hurt all the time. Sunday she vomit.’

‘And today? Has she been vomiting today?’

‘He say, no.’

‘Ask him about the murra-murra, the salts. Did they do her any good?’
‘He say, no.’

Philomena’s mother, Maria, came in. The deep furrows dug from nose to chin, the empty, sagging breasts made her look old, older than her husband. She did not move closer to her daughter but stood near the door taking loudly and rapidly to the Sisters.

‘All right.’ Sister Gabrielle silenced her at last. ‘Now help move Philo near the fire. And tell the little boy to bring plenty of wood.’

Maria spoke to her young son. He remained curled up near the fire chewing sugar-cane. He took no notice. Maria kicked him. He got up and went out. Maria pushed her daughter into a sitting position and Sister Gabrielle and I shook out the two old copra sacks she was lying on and moved them to the fire in the middle of the hut. I picked up the net bag she was using as a pillow. The girl dragged herself over to the fire and collapsed on the sacks, moaning. We covered her with the tattered blanket.

Wavivi fetched two notched sticks and a pole and slung Mame Aurelia’s billy of tea over the smouldering fire. The small boy came in with an armful of wood. There was no chimney. The smoke filtered out through the cracks between the pandanus-leaf thatch of walls and roof. Mame Aurelia took the billy can off the fire and looked around for a cup. Maria picked up an old tin can, black inside and out and proffered it. Then she changed her mind, poured a little water from a gourd into the tin can and rinsed it out.

‘Come, Philo,’ said Sister Gabrielle. ‘Take this aspirin and drink some tea.’

Philomena hoisted herself onto her elbow. She gulped a little tea, moaned again and hugged her arms over her swollen stomach. She swallowed the aspirin, then huddled again under the blanket her eyes rolling.

‘I don’t know what to do for her,’ said Sister Gabrielle.

‘I’d better go and fetch Pere André. He has so much experience with these people. I don’t know what’s wrong with her.’

I stayed with Mame Aurelia. Philomena never stopped moaning. I put my hand on her short, dry, frizzy hair, grey with ashes and massaged the back of her neck.

Philomena called out to her mother and Maria passed the gourd to her. She tried to drink but the water slopped onto the ground. I held her head and she drank a little, then her head slumped back on the floor.

‘Mame Aurelia,’ she moaned, ‘Oh, Mame Aurelia.’

The old Sister took her hands.

‘Poor Philo,’ she said. ‘Poor Philo. Babe is coming. Wait a little. Babe is coming.’

Philo was quiet. Her father talked for a long time. I asked what he had said.

‘He said his wife has a sister who went far away to a country called New Guinea. She is married there. She say it is a good country. When a man die, the women do not take his bones any more and wear them. They bury the dead man
and go to pray for him. I say to Wavivi — this is good. Why people here not do the same?’

Philomena groaned. Maria picked up a bunch of large wilted leaves off the floor. She selected one and rubbed her daughter’s swollen stomach with it. An old, wrinkled, grey-haired woman, naked like the rest, scrambled through the door.

‘Eh, sinebada,’ she crowed. She took my hand, foraged inside her small net bag and offered me a handful of Cape gooseberries. She squatted in the corner of the hut where a second fire still smouldered and poked in the ashes looking for a sweet potato.

Philomena’s body heaved convulsively. She rose to her knees then slumped over her crouching mother.

‘Poor Philo,’ Mame Aurelia crooned. ‘Babe come soon.’

‘Is she married?’ I asked.

‘No. But she leave her mother one time. For a long time she go walkabout.’

Philomena clutched her mother. Again Maria took a wilted leaf and rubbed her daughter’s body. The girl lifted herself to her knees and threw herself on the ground near the door, just where we had found her. A moment later, Père André arrived.

‘Eh, Philo?’ he asked. ‘Comment ça va?’

He knelt beside her and felt her body.

‘Eh,’ he said, ‘but you are cold, Philo.’

He asked her parents question after question. How long had she been sick? Where was the pain? Was it always in the same place? What about the Sister’s medicine? No good? Had she been able to pass water? How long ago had she stopped vomiting?

‘Well,’ he said at last, ‘I think the best thing we can do is take her to the station. I’m pretty sure it’s uraemia, stoppage of the kidneys. First we’ll surround her with hot water bottles to get her warm. Then we’ll have to clear the kidneys.’

Père André hoisted Philomena to her feet. Reluctantly, Wavivi put his daughter’s arm around his neck. Umi was waiting outside. He stooped in the entrance and lifted the girl’s knees. The three men lifted her dead weight through the tiny doorway and carried her into the open space in the middle of the village.

‘Now,’ said Père André, ‘go and get a hammock, and come back quickly.’

They put Philomena on her tattered blanket. She slumped over onto her side.

‘Poor Philo,’ said Père André. ‘She started well. She lived with the Little Sisters for about a year, you know, with several other girls. Then she asked to go to a dance. She didn’t come back. There was a patrol going through the district. The police took her. How could you expect a girl like that to resist temptation? A blanket, a new dress, plenty of food. She followed the police to Karuama and they made her into a harlot.’
‘She was just growing into womanhood then. A fine, big girl. It was two years ago. She would have been about seventeen. Finally she ran away from the police and came home. She went down to Taipini to sell European potatoes and came back full of malaria. The Sisters gave her medicine but like the rest of the village people she couldn’t be bothered coming back for regular doses.’

The men came back with a greasy net hammock. They laid it on the ground and lifted the groaning sick girl onto it. Without warning, her head slumped to the right, her stomach heaved. From her mouth and nose flowed a thick, slimy, green stream, pumped out by each convulsive movement of her body. The men stepped away hastily. The girl had stopped moaning now. We could only see the dirty yellow-whites of her eyes through half-closed lids. A yard or two down the mountainside stood Maria, sniffling, tears running down her cheeks. Père André held the girl’s hand. Still the green slimy flood pumped out as if there was no end to it and with it Philomena spewed out a worm eight inches long. With the next convulsions came smaller worms. The girl drew in her breath sharply and worms and slime were drawn back into her mouth. There was a faint bubbling of slime between her clenched teeth.

‘Quickly,’ said Père André.

He reached for the net bag that held his purple stole and the holy oils for the last Sacrament.

‘Come, my daughter, say the act of contrition with me.’

He held her head with one hand and her right hand with the other. Philomena made no movement as the father prayed in her name, in her language. Then he absolved her and quickly took out the small bottle of holy oils.

‘Give me something to wipe her mouth.’

Sister Gabrielle handed him a scrap of cotton wool. He wiped away the green slime, then anointed her forehead and mouth. He laid his hand on her left temple.

‘She looks dead but I can feel a faint pulse. Sister Gabrielle, you had better go down to the dispensary and bring an injection of camphorated oil. That will help stimulate her heart. I don’t think we can move her as she is.’

We moved Philomena off the hammock and wrapped her again in the blanket. The slime of her vomit had soaked into the bare dry earth and I saw that its bright green had been caused by chewed up leaves.

‘What are those leaves she has been eating?’ I asked. Père André asked Maria.

‘She says she gave Philo nothing, that it is sorcery. Can you hear Wavivi? He is up there at the top of the village, shouting already that someone has brought about Philomena’s death by sorcery.’

Maria unwrapped a small parcel of khaki cloth. Inside were all the tiny plaits she had cut off Philomena’s head when the girl became sick. Maria laid them on
the ground at her daughter’s feet. She seemed to have lost interest. She drifted away.

‘Well,’ said Père André, ‘we must try to get her warm. Will you take some of this oil and rub her chest.’

I rubbed oil on my hands and massaged the inert body, over the ribs and between the breasts. In a moment my hands were black. As I worked over the dark skin, layers of soot and dirt rubbed off. Underneath, Philomena’s skin was lighter by several degrees. Mame Aurelia chafed her feet.

Four or five women had gathered around to watch. They began their ceremonial wailing. Père André turned on them.

‘Can’t you wait until the girl is dead?’

They scattered, giggling, the ceremonial tears still running down their cheeks.

‘You can stop now,’ Père André said to me. ‘See if you can find the pulse in her wrist.’

‘It’s very faint.’

‘Well, cover her up now.’

There were so many holes in the blanket. I laid my raincoat over it. Père André took a little oil and rubbed the girl’s neck.

‘Why has Philo’s mother gone away?’ I asked. ‘The girl isn’t dead yet.’

‘Oh,’ said Père André, ‘she is much more concerned now with fixing the blame for Philo’s death on someone than worrying about whether her daughter will live or not. In this country, it’s not possible to die a natural death. Someone must be blamed.’

Sister Gabrielle came up the hill, panting. She filled a syringe with camphorated oil. The girl made no movement when the needle pierced her arm. We all agreed that her pulse was still faintly beating.

‘Now,’ said Père André, ‘there is the question of transport. How do we get her down?’

‘A camp stretcher would be best,’ said Sister Gabrielle.

‘Yes. Well, I’ll go down and leave the three of you. One of the schoolboys can bring the stretcher, then some men can carry her down.’

There was nothing more we could do. I put one arm under Philo’s head and rubbed her cold right hand. Her pulse was a mere flutter. She lay there, one of a thousand; victim of a crumbling tribal structure; of colonialism. She had been caught, without knowing it, in the assault of technology, the invasion of a money economy upon the age-old life pattern of her people. She knew too little, or too much, for her own good.

A group of naked men and women gathered on the bare mountain side. Fog began swirling towards us. The men lit a fire of dry pandanus leaves and huddled beside it, smoking. The women chattered and giggled. We sat there a long time.

‘I think Philo is dead,’ Sister Gabrielle said. ‘Can you feel her pulse?’
I shook my head.
‘Look at her mouth. It’s beginning to turn white.’
A boy came up the path carrying a stretcher.
‘It’s no good taking her down if she is dead already,’ said Sister Gabrielle.
‘No,’ said Mame Aurelia. Let us pray. Then we go.’
We knelt beside Philomena and prayed for her, silently. The people stopped talking. We collected the bottles of medicine, the father’s net bag. Ashamedly, I took my raincoat off the girl’s body. Sister Gabrielle asked the men if they would bring the stretcher. None of them moved. She picked it up herself. We left the girl’s stiff body with her feet pointing down the mountainside.
As we reached the convent, Père André met us.
‘So she died? Eh, Philomena. Poor Philo! We had such hopes for you. I must go up now and see her parents. They will be full of talk about sorcery. At least they must prepare a Christian grave for her. Mame Aurelia, tell the Sisters to be ready for the burial in the morning. Tomorrow Wavivi will kill two or three pigs for Philomena’s sake. Then she will be forgotten.’
A little later there was a commotion outside the convent. The man with his hair in stiff plaits was talking excitedly to Père André. He handed him a broken arrow,
‘He says they are fighting in the village. It’s quite usual when someone dies. He says the parents are blaming two young men who have been following Philo about and calling her to go away with them. The parents are saying they caused her death by sorcery because she refused. Well, I must go. Do you hear them, up there in the village? They sing a death-song for Philomena.’
Embracing the Alien Inside: Bessie Head and the Divided Self

1 external and internal dividedness

‘Identity’ bores me, I am simply not interested in defending identity as a kind of — how shall I put it … essential, as a kind of necessary thing…. (Said 2002 3). That, plucked from the middle of a 1997 interview, is the voice of Edward Said, taking up the idea he expressed in Culture and Imperialism that instead of insisting too strongly on our ethnic or cultural (or whatever) identities we should be more concerned with ‘knowing about others’ (Said 1993 362). In a similarly sceptical vein, the following discussion of the issue of personal identity in Bessie Head’s writing aims to test the validity of the concept and the explanatory force of alternative concepts. To this purpose I wish to inquire into two rather mundane ideas that, taken in conjunction, may point to a better understanding of this major twentieth-century African writer whose work and person are as puzzling as they are fascinating.

My starting point is with Bessie Head’s often expressed insight that the only way to understand and possibly master her personal crises, her ‘manifold disorders’ (1990 8), was to relate them to the crisis of being a black/coloured woman in Southern Africa, and to the crisis of the continent in the aftermath of colonialism. Born in 1937 as the daughter of a white mother and a black father, Bessie was what apartheid ideology classed as racially mixed or coloured. While around 1900 coloureds in Natal had had the same legal status as whites, including the right to vote, their status was gradually eroded, till in the ’30s and ’40s the racist distinctions of the post-1948 order were firmly established. In ‘A gentle people’, an essay written for The New African in 1963, Head considers the situation of the ‘Cape Coloureds’, celebrating their ‘gentle and unaggressive personality’ (1990 10) but criticising them for their political lethargy. Two decades later, in ‘Notes from a quiet backwater’, published in Drum in 1982, Head confirms her involvement in the world out there even as she stylises herself in the role of a recluse:

I need a quiet backwater and a sense of living as though I am barely alive on the earth, treading a small, careful pathway through life.

All my work is scaled down to this personality need, with the universe itself seen through the eyes of small, individual life dramas. (1990 77)

Safe in her backwater she can observe the ‘howling inferno’ (1990 77) that is played out on the African stage. This biographico-political thesis (Olaussen
is at the same time a poetics of fiction. On the pathway of her life (hardly ever a carefully trodden one), Bessie Head moved anything but steadily from self-rejection to self-acceptance, and developed an understanding of identity in which originally prevailing ideas of wholeness were replaced by a highly contemporary concept of dividedness and self-creation. This second thesis is about the psychology and philosophy of self-perception. Both theses have to do with the representation and understanding of the conflictual relationship between self and other, and for Bessie Head this involves finding ways of recognising and accepting (in a cline of embrace and rejection) her own divided identity, as well as recognising and accepting (as above) those forces outside that sustain or threaten but most certainly shape this identity.

In view of Head’s well-documented tendency to become suspicious and distrustful of the very people most intent on befriending and helping her it seems safe to say that it is probably not a fear of rejection of strangers and outsiders that lies at the bottom of her personal (and creative) problem. Her experience is tainted not with xenophobia but with the fear and distrust of those who are close to her — her friends, her neighbours, her own self even — and more generally the oppressive traditions of an Africa she yet felt to be hers. This paradoxical condition could be termed philophobia, a fear leading to alienation, and in the reigning culture of selfishness that Christopher Lasch once dubbed the ‘culture of narcissism’ (Lasch passim) it is not nearly as unusual as one might think.

The topic of identity will be discussed with reference to a selection of writings by Head, making use of more or less explicit statements by her narrators and characters rather than interpreting the complex ambiguity of her narrative strategies and structures. I will refer in some detail to a model of the self which has served well in social counselling and which I have found particularly helpful in studying and teaching autobiographical writing.

What does it mean to speak of ‘the alien inside’? The everyday notion of the alien is of someone or something coming in from outside: the alien is the immigrant, the foreigner, the stranger, the person whose natural habitat and features are not the same as mine, and whose difference poses a threat. In the case of Bessie Head, the writer herself is the alien, and she has learned to experience herself as such. She is born apparently white but soon classified as coloured into a society which hysterically rejects miscegenation; she is rejected by her mother’s family and again rejected by her first foster-parents. Through the legacy of alleged insanity inherited from her mother she is also an alien in self-respecting ‘normal’ society; she is an alien in South Africa before she leaves the country, and when she arrives in Botswana, she finds herself an alien again. Over ten years after moving to Botswana she will still write, ‘I have never had a country’ (1990 28). As one of her first person narrators puts it, ‘I figure that I’m some of the mess Africa’s in today’ (1989 33) The ‘messiness’ is caused by being an insider and an outsider at the same time. Being a woman does not in itself make her an outsider, but her
conscious recognition of what it is to be a woman in Southern Africa and having to bear the burdens of illegitimacy and insanity and unwantedness, all add up to a sense of what Head ruefully called ‘wearing borrowed clothes’ (1989 141, 143). This multiple alienation in the external world is not directly my topic, however. Rather, it serves as a backdrop to the internal alienation which she experienced when external factors became projected onto her inner self and took effect there; an alienation which she repeatedly gives expression to in her different kinds of writing. In an early text, ‘Let me tell a story now …’ (first published in 1962), she relates how fragile her sense of self can become under the pressure of pushy, intrusive people who ‘can bust your ego to bits’ so that she feels herself becoming easy prey to the many enemies lying in wait for her (1989 16). This vulnerability of the self finds an analogue in the way Head sees other people, namely as ‘complete mysteries’ and fragments of whom she can only make sense by hastily ‘piecing [them] together’ (1989 16.).

Such an identity is not experienced as an assured and reliable state, either in oneself or in others. The divided self poses problems of practical living, of knowledge and of representation.

In everyday life such fragmentation may be troubling and even dangerous, as Head’s life story amply confirms, but it leads her to the insight that there is a dividedness of the self which is beneficial and necessary. ‘A person must have two minds,’ Head says in one of Head’s notes on ‘Village People’ (1989 55), and the figure called ‘Snowball’ gives her the opportunity to explain that in some people ‘contradictory ideas could live in chaotic happiness’ (1989 30). Contradiction is ‘the other name of truth’ (1989 30). This applies first to external contradiction, as when the protagonist of the story called ‘Property’ speaks out against the elders of his clan, and second it can be a sign of internal harmony, of being that rare kind of person in whom ‘word and deed agree’ (1989 70). Superficial harmony, as in the escapist paintings of Gladys Mgudlandlu, is a dangerous thing, for it tempts one away from facing what Head calls ‘the permanent madness of reality’ (1990 17). A more honest response would be to to declare one’s own psychic torment. In the climactic phase of Maru, when the outsider, Margaret, breaks through to the realisation of her creative gifts, Head offers a highly suggestive antithetical phrase describing three of the paintings she has produced: ‘A [single] theme ran through them. There was a pulsating glow of yellow light dominating pitch black objects’ (1971 102). Here is a true reconciliation of opposites, the creation of something meaningful and whole out of the debris of a tormented body and soul. Contradiction can also be a sign of social health, as in the story ‘Kgotla,’ when the negotiation of conflicting arguments leads to the formal reinstatement of peace in the village, though the final point of this story is that the real solution is brought about by an outsider figure, the ‘Sindebele woman’, and that ‘the finest things often come from far-off places ...’ (1977 68). On the other hand, Snowball’s ‘chaotic happiness’ can easily turn into something that Head repeatedly refers to as the storm centre, ‘the dead calm centre of a storm that rages over the whole of
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Southern Africa’ (1989 37), or the storm in the ‘normally calm centre’ of a man’s body, ‘just near the heart’ (1989 27).

The repetition of the storm metaphor here and elsewhere confirms that Head sees the external — the condition of Africa — and the internal — the state of individual minds — as mirror images of each other. Writing about conflicts of the soul and of the mind may be traced to her life experiences, but above all it deserves recognition as a consciously developed strategy for writing about the ills of Africa and its people. To that extent, it is an analytical activity but it should be stressed that there is also a strong strain of creative prophecy in her work, a visionary habit of drafting utopias, for which the analysis of existing conditions is a necessary preparatory step.

2 SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS AND SELF-CREATION

The following discussion of self-consciousness and self-creation refers to arguments developed in Jonathan Glover’s I: The Philosophy and Psychology of Personal Identity. His book is about ‘the ways people think of themselves’ and ‘about how far we create ourselves’ (Glover 1988 13). In trying to work out answers to the question ‘What is a person?’ Glover uses ideas developed by Derek Parfit (1984) according to which personal identity is less important than survival, or continuing relation, and in which survival turns out to be partial rather than total (Glover 1988 102). In Parfit’s words,

What we value, in ourselves and others, is not the continued existence of the same particular brains and bodies. What we value are the various relations between ourselves and others, whom and what we love, our ambitions, achievements, commitments, emotions, memories, and several other psychological features. (284)

It is these forms of relatedness that ensure our continued existence or survival as persons, not any aspect of our being. Now if it is true that survival takes precedence over identity, do I have good cause to worry about losing my old self? Such a question is clearly important for an analysis of autobiographical writing, and of any kind of fiction in which the writer makes creative use of his or her own life experience. In Head’s writing, the oscillation between reportage and fiction is a characteristic constructive and stylistic feature, that is evident in her book Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind (1981) and her final novel, A Bewitched Crossroad: An African Saga (1984), as well as her other works. This merging of genres has some bearing on the question of how the unity of the self fares when it encounters and interacts with other selves, inside or outside of one’s own self.

Glover expounds his ideas about what it means to ‘be a person’ on the basis of three claims. The first is that ‘our natural belief that a person has an indivisible unity is mistaken’ (Glover 1988 14). This claim has an important corollary: ‘Understanding how to divide consciousness also suggests how we may be able to develop ways for people to share consciousness’ (14). Bearing in mind what is known about Head’s perceptions of herself and others, this could mean that
in learning to understand her own dividedness, and that of her continent, and in
learning to write about this growth of self-understanding, she develops a way
for others to share her consciousness. In particular, it could mean that she is
learning to communicate a sense of wholeness in the making that is necessary for
herself as well as for Africa, a desire for wholeness reconciled with the historical
experience of fragmentation.

Glover’s second claim confirms this line of thinking: ‘being a person requires self-consciousness’ (1988 14) and having self-consciousness presupposes perceiving oneself as having a degree of unity. Note that unity is not an absolute, but a matter of degree, so that the five-year-old I once was and my present self, separated by fading and by reconstitution, are not entirely the same. Clearly, Bessie Head’s writing is a form of expressing her consciousness of such a changing self and, as I have shown, her introspection leads her to discover both indications of unity, and elements that disrupt or threaten to disrupt this unity. However, while the philosopher can calmly accept the co-occurrence of unity and dividedness as being characteristic of any person, the long-suffering writer, under the pressure of conventional attitudes to personal identity, has reason to be worried by existential experiences of instability and disintegration. Head writes: ‘There’s nothing neat and tidy about me, like a nice social revolution. With me goes a mad, passionate, insane, screaming world of ten thousand devils and the man or God who lifts the lid off this suppressed world does so at his peril’ (1990 47). On the other hand (and in the same text) she can discover in her fractured unity a quality which she memorably defines as ‘That which is double-edged, That which is made of fire, That which is eternally alive’ (1990 46, 49). The double-edged thing is ‘Truth’, with a capital T, the contrary of ‘slushy emotions’ which only parade as truth, and in the last resort it is a feminised god.6

The third claim on which Glover’s analysis rests is that ‘our natural beliefs about what our own unity consists in are mistaken’ (Glover 1988 14). I take this to mean that even seemingly disruptive constituents like mad passions and screaming insanity do not really detract from unity of self. Up until the time she became aware of her mental deterioration, Head, like most of us, held naive assumptions about the nature of the self as something unified, stable and inheritable which were reinforced by people like the missionary who warned her that ‘If you’re not careful you’ll get insane like your mother’ (1990 4). It is not surprising that she adopted this outside view of herself as dangerously divided and possibly on the way to madness. As she began to project her self-analysis onto the alter egos whose voices may be heard in her letters and autobiographical writings, and then in a still more objectified form onto the fictional characters of her novels and tales, she gradually learned to leave the conventional beliefs behind her and to adopt the more complex positions described. In ‘Some Notes on Novel Writing’ she explains how she needs to ‘concentrate directly on people’ who are visible and external rather than on ‘some hidden, unknown God or devil’ (1990 63), invisible
and possibly internal, in order to be able to express her deeply experienced truths. In so doing she learns to understand herself, to bring ‘the problem of evil closer to my own life’, as she puts it (1990 63). In other words, by externalising and distancing her insights in narrative she can bring them back to bear directly on herself, but now without putting herself so immediately at risk.

Glover’s concept of the necessarily divided self leads him to a second level of analysis on which the consequences of such a self-perception are explored. The main consequence is what he calls ‘our active interest in what marks us off from other people’ or ‘self-creation’ (Glover 1988 16), an idea familiarised as self-fashioning by New Historicist critics, but actually deriving from Nietzsche and developed in the 1920s by phenomenological thinkers and especially sociologists of understanding such as Max Weber and Alfred Schütz. Glover proposes three claims for our consideration. According to the first claim, ‘the distinctiveness of a particular person is not something just given, but is something we partly create in the course of our lives’ (Glover 1988 17). Note the quasi-novelistic elements of process and of composition in this definition of created distinctiveness. In Maru, after young Margaret is taken up by her missionary foster-mother in order to be shaped for her future task of educating the Masarwa, she experiences a vacuum of non-identity in which ‘unlike other children, she was never able to say “I am this or that, my parents are this or that”’ (15). Before she can at last become ‘conscious of herself as a person’ (15) she must learn to speak back and reject the pejorative categories of ‘Bushman, mixed breed, half breed, low breed or bastard’ (16) thrust upon her by others. It is through contradiction-as-education that she acquires a composite, novel identity:

Her mind and heart were composed of a little bit of everything she had absorbed from Margaret Cadmore. It was hardly African or anything but something new and universal, a type of personality that would be unable to fit into a definition of something as narrow as tribe or race or nation. (20)

Margaret moves forward into more active phases of self-fashioning, first with the help of Dikeledi, and then self-reflexively, through recourse to her ‘own inner resources’ (1971 94). In each phase, she strives to reassert her identity (in powerful defiance of those who deny the Masarwa teacher any right to a fully formed and self-determined identity) and to redefine it (rebuking those who seek to check or curtail her growth). An instance of this redefinition occurs after the incident of the two goats, ‘the Queen of Sheba and the Windscreen-wiper’, when Margaret, looking downhill across the village, recognises that she ‘belongs’, or in Parfit’s term, is ‘related’:

She stood where she was, empty-handed, but something down there belonged to her in a way that triumphed over all barriers. Maybe it was not even love as people usually think of it. Maybe it was everything else; necessity, recognition, courage, friendship and strength. (99)
This catalogue of ‘something’ as ‘everything else’ is remarkably similar in content and structure to the forms of relatedness listed by Parfit, which emphasise incompleteness and process as against essence and stasis.\(^9\) One might note that Glover too replaces the static term identity by ‘distinctiveness’, that is, an essentialist term by a structuralist one. In doing this he implies that wholeness of self is a false model and an inappropriate ideal, a view that is supported by what he says elsewhere about the way a person edits, abridges and expands his/her own history in order to produce a coherent narrative (Glover 1988 149–52). This coherently narrated self depends decisively on the values that we express to ourselves and to others in communicating who we are.

Values are a central element of Glover’s second claim for self-creation, which holds that we ‘partly creat[e] ourselves in the light of our own values’ (1988 17). This means that self-creation is not haphazard but goal-directed by the values that we believe we hold, and believe we are seen to hold by others. In her story ‘The Collector of Treasures’ (1977), Bessie Head contrasts two types of men: one type that ‘could be broadly damned as evil’ (91), the other having ‘the power to create himself anew’ by learning and practising the virtue that Head calls ‘tenderness’ (93). It is such value-forging powers, as well as the positive and negative values that we identify in other people and ourselves and by which we identify them and ourselves, that are central to any biographical and autobiographical text, and more generally the essence of all fictional genres — the novel is nothing if not a discourse of value. The project of partial self-creation according to values occurs in the course of introspection (which includes reading), or of conversation with others (which includes listening),\(^{10}\) but if it remained mental and verbal and were not carried over into our actions, we would soon recognise it to be vacuous, and it would collapse. This is demonstrated in Maru, where Margaret’s ongoing reconstruction of self is externalised in her painting, as the beauty she sees becomes the beauty she makes: ‘There was a part of her mind that had saturated itself with things of such startling beauty and they pressed, in determined panorama, to take on living form’ (101). Margaret experiences this ecstasy of creation as ‘total collapse and breakdown’ and ‘torture’ (101, 102), from which she returns weary but strong to ‘her quiet, insignificant way’ (101), stronger than ever before in the knowledge that her creativity has made her ‘a millionaire’ (102). Similarly, in ‘The Collector of Treasures’, it is the recognition of Dikeledi Mokopi’s skills in knitting, sewing and weaving that leads to a revaluation powerful enough to absolve her of her guilt: “You are a gifted person”, her fellow-prisoner Kebonye remarks, and Dikeledi confirms: “All my friends say so … it was with these hands that I fed and reared my children” (90). These women’s skills in art and crafts and nurturing, shared in communal work and talk, are values through which they recreate their selves and resist the loss of identity previously inflicted on them.

Values not only have a guiding function in self-creation — self-creation itself is a value. That is the gist of Glover’s third claim, when he insists that ‘our
partial creation of ourselves is central to what we are like’ (Glover 1988 18). By this he means that self-shaping is something that we value highly in itself, that it is retrospectively a valuable thing for us to have shaped ourselves, however imperfect the result may be. This attitude towards self-creation is important beyond the self for the contribution it makes to the establishment and dissemination of value(s) in society: it contributes towards a society which is self-creative and capable of development on the basis of values made explicit, tested, revised and taught. This is fully in accord with the way Head almost inextricably links her autobiographical reflections with the gradual narrative shaping of identities in her books, and with the overall theme of building a better world for men and women to live in.

3 self-related activities

For the study of (auto)biographical texts of all kinds (including projections of a writer’s self into fictional characters) it is useful to distinguish between a number of self-related activities: self-perception, self-creation, rejection of self and self-acceptance. These can occur in sequence, in any order, or can be simultaneous or overlapping; but you cannot have one of them without the others. As we scrutinise ourselves, we will accept some elements and reject or wish to modify others, and in this we are influenced by other people’s responses to us, responses which form a ‘continuous corrective feedback‘ (Glover 1988 176). For each self-category there can also be one deriving from or referring to the other. For example, Head links self-creation, literary creativity and self-esteem very clearly in her 1975 ‘Preface’ to the story ‘Witchcraft’, when she speaks of the ‘ideal life’ she ‘forcefully created’ for herself in Serowe, at last enabling her to ‘dream dreams a little ahead’ and create ‘new worlds out of nothing’ (1990 28). In A Question of Power, just as Elizabeth sees and judges herself, so she is seen and judged from the outside by Dan and Sello, and further she is rejected or accepted by the people around her and is to some extent created, or shaped, or constructed by others. Her autonomy is neither total nor final, since it is subject to the limitations and definitions exercised upon her by others. For example, when her headmistress reveals the truth about her mother, Elizabeth does not understand what she is being told, and the narrator explains, with retrospective emphasis, that ‘She had always thought of herself as […]’ (16). This statement indicates that what one is (or is seen by others to be), and what one believes oneself to be, are unlikely to coincide. When self-perception and the view from outside diverge so dramatically, an existential crisis is bound to ensue, at least in a culture that does not accept such divergence. In an institution like the mission school the outside view, with its authoritarian claims to official truth and educational experience, will take precedence and condemn Elizabeth’s (or Head’s) private view as false or even wicked. It is this formative early experience of Head’s that leads me to conjecture that for her the most threatening ‘other’ was decreed to be inside herself, inside her shameful family history. Too weak to reject the account given
by her headmistress, Elizabeth has no alternative but to turn against herself. The result is self-doubt and self-hatred and the painstaking examination of the conflict of good and evil impulses inside her. Later, in the course of her adult experience as a journalist, wife and teacher in South Africa and Botswana, she grew to learn that her identity and self-confidence were threatened just as much by forces located outside her, in the anonymous or individual representatives of the ideologies of apartheid and masculinity and acquisition which tore individuals apart and also fractured families, communities and nations. What the relation between the two threats might be was yet another matter.

Illustrations of these activities of the self are to be found in many of Head’s texts, such as ‘The Village Saint’ (1977 13–18). As Jonathan Glover explains, ‘consciously shaping our own characteristics is self-creation’ (Glover 1988 131). In this story we are told how Mma Mompati systematically constructs her identity as a ‘saint’ by behaving ‘just like any English lady, with polished etiquette and the professional smile of the highborn who don’t really give a damn about people or anything’ (14). This kind of self-creation is identified by the narrator as being the erection of a façade, behind which the wise can recognise ‘the real person’ (13). The shift in the first paragraph from ‘People were never fooled by façades’ to ‘She had a long reign of twenty-six years, and a fool-proof façade’ shows how ironical Head’s use of the metaphor is — people may be fooled by façades, but no façade is fool-proof for ever. The point of the story is that Mma Mompati is not the only person to have such a carefully constructed double identity — her very similar son (Mompati meaning ‘little travelling companion’) and her seemingly dissimilar daughter-in-law, Mary Pule, outdo her. Mary not only sees through the ‘little game’ that Mma Mompati has been playing for so long but she herself plays ‘a hard game’ (17) against it. By revealing the truth to the villagers about Mma Mompati, Mary topples her from the throne of saintly first lady and then ascends the pinnacle from where she can govern Mompati, who will continue to impose his cheap morality upon the villagers, who will continue to be fooled by his façade.

Glover suggests that self-creation may have a socio-biological dimension, in that it accompanies the process of leaving one’s parental family and of possibly preparing to live with a partner, an idea illustrated in ‘The Village Saint’. In a similar way, the themes of marital crisis and breakdown, and the whole troubled topic of sexuality, which are both prominent in Head’s vita as well as her work, are associated with phases of self-rejection alternating with self-recreation. This was the case when she left Harold Head and South Africa (Eilersen 62) and carried her disillusionment and unhappiness with her to Botswana where ‘the real Southern African dialogues took place’ (1990 55), outer and inner dialogues which redefined her conception of what it meant to be a woman. The association of departure and self-refashioning is repeated in further situations, as when a person’s social environment is upset (Head’s sense of losing one friend after another, [Eilersen
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60]), when she changes jobs (Head gives up journalism for teaching, [Eilersen 62,
70ff.]), alters her political alignment or religious persuasion (Head dabbles with
Hinduism, [Eilersen 33–35]) and, most visibly, leaves her country of birth and goes
into exile (Head’s one-way exit permit in 1969, [Eilersen 62ff.]). There is clearly
a pattern in which personal crisis and departure are linked with a reassessment of
identity and gender role; but is this always a process of increasing happiness and
self-determination, an experience of success in taking charge of one’s own life
(Glover 1988 129ff.)? Probably not, and in the case of Head there are at least two
reasons why. For one, the periods of calm between the crises and the moves are
too short, and each new phase of self-creation contains the frustrating memory
of an earlier phase which did not culminate in success. Second, Head is always
aware of her legacy of mental illness, a burden she can never shake off. Third,
each move to another place, into a new job or project, means having to come to
terms with new people, new demands, new obstacles, as was most noticeably the
case when she arrived in Serowe (Eilersen 66).

In A Question of Power, before the narrator begins her narrative proper, she
draws her readers into a complex meditation on identity. She distinguishes between
identity as a man, as an African, and as a member of mankind, in that ascending
order. A man’s place in his local society and his place within humanity as a whole
are at issue, but reflections on place, which is momentarily static, presuppose an
account of how his self has become what it is for the moment, that is, something
dynamic. Actually, the movement from one place to another, whether individual
or in the form of group migration, is a frequent topic and always connected with
the issue of changing identity. This ‘soul evolution,’ as Head also calls it, is seen
to be dependent on a man’s relation to society, the arena in which he can shape
himself. In the case of Sello, the hero figure, he can learn to rid himself of ‘his
own personal poisons — pride and arrogance and egoism of the soul’ (Head 1974
11). Dan, on the other, hand is a man who is unable to develop and who flaunts his
vices in the face of his victim, which he typically and drastically does by ‘flaying
his powerful penis in the air and saying: ‘Look, I’m going to show you how I
sleep with B ...’ (1974 13). This contrasting view of the two men’s selves and
development is compared with the self-perception attempted by Elizabeth, the
female ‘pivot’ between Sello and Dan, and characterised as an ‘examination of
inner hells [...] meant to end all hells forever’ (1974 12). The problem is that while
the two men are at liberty to explore and express their inner selves, and to do this
in very different ways, the pivotal woman figure is subjugated by the masculine
‘mechanics of power’ (1974 13), which breaking the metaphor of balance scales
and pivot means that ‘both men flung unpleasant details at her in sustained ferocity’
while she ‘had no time to examine her own hell’ (1974 12). The question, and it is
part of the question of power, is how the female figure can ever hope to fight free
of such domination. For she cannot afford to suffer in passive silence: in a ‘Letter
from South Africa’ Head considers ‘the dangerous state of mind of being wrapped
up in your own troubles and miseries. You cannot think. You cannot live. It’s just yourself all the time’ (1990 14). Such self-absorption, she recognises, may seem to enhance the self but actually weakens it: ‘Yes, maybe I am going to pieces because I was never the type to rush around doing things. I just sat around talking all the time [...]’ (1990, 14). With hindsight we can see how Head’s talking was a prelude to her writing, and that it is in the writing that she begins to ‘do things’ like examining her self and her relation to others from an outside perspective.

4 SUMMARY: SELF ACCEPTANCE AND INCLUSION

This essay suggests that Bessie Head’s writing amounts to a considered refutation of two cherished but mistaken beliefs about the self. The first of these is the notion that a unity of the mind is conceivable and desirable, and without it a person would not exist, and the second is the notion that what might be thought of as evil, dangerous, despicable, alien or just different can be overcome by excluding it from a person’s self-understanding and self-definition. Both Glover and Head suggest, on the contrary, that a self-analysis leading to self-condemnation and the exclusion of some parts of the self from the perception of who one is must in the long run be destructive. For Bessie Head, writing fiction offered some strategies for ridding herself of undesirable qualities, for example in the invention of villains like Dan (in *A Question of Power*) or Chief Matenge (in *When Rain Clouds Gather*). Ultimately more interesting as strategies for containing personal dividedness are the single figures and dual or quadruple constellations demonstrated in *Maru* and in *A Question of Power*, which reconcile contradictory features and finally constitute entities of greater truth to lived experience and greater explanatory power than any singular hero or villain. Exclusion is overcome in favour of inclusion, which can take many forms, of which one of the most important is the capacity to embrace the other in a tenderness or compassion transcending mere love, in which ‘[t]he depths of human feeling and tenderness are never explored’ (Head 1989 52).

I have also tried to show that Bessie Head’s ideas on these subjects are very close to the systematic arguments of a professional philosopher, without there being any direct link between the two. I have not been arguing that Head is a philosopher, but I do think that in her tortured life and in the tortuous processes of writing she achieved remarkably consistent and highly original way of exploring and representing truths about what it means to be a person.

NOTES

1 The main source of biographical data is Gillian Stead Eilersen’s magnificent *Bessie Head — Thunder Behind Her Ears: Her Life and Writing*, where the concept of colour is discussed in connection with the circumstances of Bessie’s birth on pp. 8–11. A concise account of the development of race classification in South Africa up to the 1940s is given by Nigel Worden in *The Making of Modern South Africa: Conquest, Segregation and Apartheid*, pp. 74–106.
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2 The jigsaw metaphor recurs in the opening paragraph of A Question of Power, 11.


5 On the concept of wholeness as a process, see David Bohm, Wholeness and the Implicate Order, Ch. 3, pp. 48–64.

6 Head relates the idea of ‘That which is double-edged’ to memories of the woman from America whom she glorifies as ‘my “Nigra” Goddess’, whereas ‘there’s something wrong with God, expressed as masculine’ (1990 46).


8 See Martin Brasser on Husserl, Buber, Rosenzweig and especially Edith Stein (137–51); and for an introductory account of the construction of personal identity in a social context see Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, The Social Construction of Reality, especially Part III, pp. 194–204.

9 The use of catalogue, proforms (‘something’, ‘everything’ ‘nothing’, anything’) and the hyponymic ‘all’ is an extraordinary combination of adjunctive structures that signals how important this passage is for the assertion of an identity in the course of being reconstructed. On the theory of adjunctivity see Gohrbandt, Textanlässe, Lesetätigkeiten.

10 See Martin Buber’s philosophy of genuine dialogue in I and Thou.

11 On the construction of self and being human as ‘the composing of meaning’ see Robert Kegan, The Evolving Self. Dennis W. Petrie’s Ultimately Fiction: Design in Modern American Literary Biography elaborates a closely related concept of ‘design’.

12 Divergent perception from within, without and ‘nowhere’ is a central topic in Thomas Nagel, The View from Nowhere, which also contains an illuminating discussion of Parfit’s ideas on identity.

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ANNE HOWELL

The Rhizomatic Art of Kurt Brereton

The wisdom of the plants: even when they have roots, there is always an outside where they form a rhizome with something else — with the wind, an animal, human beings.... Follow the plants: you start by delimiting a first line consisting of circles of convergence around successive singularities; then you see whether inside that line new circles of convergence establish themselves, with new points located outside the limits and in other directions.

(Deleuze & Guatarri 11)

Artist and academic Kurt Brereton’s creative output grows like a rhizomatic ginger plant. He will stage a show of animations one moment, a performance the next, followed by an exhibition of paintings alongside a sculpture display. Branching off at another angle he produces a bi-lingual graphics and text book on Hyper-Taiwan. His art may seem to be chaotic in format, yet it has a consistent thread or logic running throughout. It speaks of disappearances as much as presences. It does so, not in the way Warhol did, with his silkscreen multiples referring to the disappearing original, nor as the Post-object Conceptualists did, drawing attention to the vanishing art object. Brereton’s art speaks of the disappearance of place — as it brings together time and space in a variety of specific cultural sites.

In his various productions, the Australian coastal-dweller Brereton conjures up beautiful beaches, wetlands, mangroves and escarpments. He shows them facing the stresses and strains of our current environmental crisis. Global warming, late-stage capitalist greed (our desire outweighing our respect for our surrounds), or an indifference to local ecologies all come under scrutiny. Brereton’s focus is on his own lived experiences in his own backyard.

Brereton’s art-making practice does not stop at the aesthetic representation of natural life forms (from the estuarine littoral zone), it is also about the way people make rhizomatic connections and interact with their surroundings. This creative methodology takes as its model the rhizome — an underground horizontal stem, often thickened and tuber-shaped, possessing buds or nodes. Brereton grew up on a sleepy beach on the far north coast of New South Wales amongst a host of various rhizomatic life forms be it forests of mangroves, stands of pandanus palms or armies of soldier crabs. He likes to say that he didn’t know what a tap root was until he hit Sydney to go to art school in the mid 1970s. His exhibition career began in the early 1980s, when the Sydney art world was gripped by an influx of international philosophies, among them the post-structural ideas of Gilles Deleuze
and Félix Guattari. Brereton was instantly attracted to their writings, particularly *A Thousand Plateaus* and *Anti-Oedipus*, and he saw that their theoretical notion of performing ‘rhizomatic’ machines matched the way he was already operating artistically.

Deleuze and Guattari had brought the notion of the rhizome to the fore in order to question hierarchical information systems, and propose a revolution based on this non-linear form of growth and political action. This had struck such a strong chord in Brereton who, as a political anarchist and atheist, was forced to forge his own path through the various fundamentalists orders. When Deleuze and Guattari spoke of the rhizome as a model for a new way of operating, they referred to it in ‘organic’ terms: a swarm of bees, rats, ants, weeds — are rhizomes with multiplicities and performances. An image map is also a rhizome in that a ‘map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification’ (Deleuze & Guatarri 1987 12).

Brereton argues that by operating laterally (map-like) across a range of analogue and digital media, he is defying the usual conventions of orthodox art practice that prefer an artist to focus on one clearly marked linear line of endeavour — in a tap root fashion. Brereton performs not only across media and job descriptions, his rhizomatic approach decrees that within one so called ‘work’ (or better, ‘growth’) there might be two or three different media components at play. In a single growth or ‘event’ then, one might expect to find things made by hand, alongside that which is digitally-produced. He might then use wood and metal side by side with spray paint or packaging cardboard from a rubbish bin. These fragments are his attempt to mirror the second and third degree nature of his daily life. ‘We live nowadays on a variety of different “plateaux” or planes at any given time — all of which are connected by a mass of roots, leads, cables and lines across time and space.’

In a bid to avoid giving a false sense of heterogeneity, he also uses stamps. For instance, he makes a stamp from a linocut, dumb object or paper stencil and places it within a bigger painted image, thus breaking up the whole and puncturing the frame. ‘Stamps for me are mobile signs,’ he says,

> they are images that relate as mementos; or memory-images; they are a kind of alphabet that I add to constantly. I have hundreds of them … anything can become as a stamp, even an idea. I like the printing and stamping process, it gives you a direct immediate graphic aspect. It instantly registers as a sign … it is analogical, iconic — yet second-degree in its abstractness.

Brereton’s aim is to avoid providing a one-sided didactic view of the world. ‘Everybody has their own perspective, there are an infinite number of realities … I am railing against vertical narrow thinking that tends towards monotheistic, universal and binary equations that always threaten to hammer us into simplistic outcomes.’
While Brereton has operated for over thirty years with the notion of a rhizomatic art practice upper-most in his mind, it wasn’t until his *Rhizomorphosis: the Morphology of Mangrove* touring exhibition (2001–02) that he overtly showcased the principle in a solo exhibition context. While this exhibition engaged with the metaphor of the mangroves — its plant life, its geography and fauna — Brereton’s vision is certainly not limited by the Australian shores. Quite the contrary, while he may draw on themes of, say, the Illawarra region where he lives today, his bigger strategic picture has been a global one.

Brereton has been a regular visitor to Taiwan, Korea, Thailand and Japan for more than a decade now and is currently an Adjunct Professor at University of Technology, Sydney and University of the Sunshine Coast where he supervises international postgraduate creative arts students, mostly from Asia. Brereton sees this academic life, primarily in multi-disciplinary creative arts field, as a significant part of his overall social and cultural contribution. His connection to other cultures has a long and strong history, including teaching at Tranby Aboriginal College in Glebe during the mid-1980s and gaining his doctorate on the invention of the famous tourist site of Ayers Rock (as opposed to Uluru) as an advertising icon. In 1989 Brereton took academic leave and lived in Thailand and Indonesia for a year conducting research into the politics of tourist imagery.

Brereton’s artworks, which can each be considered as ‘bulb sections’ in his overall practice, can be read in any order — there is no beginning or end, only interruptions.

‘Rhizophora (against straight line thinking)’, acrylic and coffee on paper, 230 cm x 190 cm, 2004.
Eternal Monuments for a Short Time

They [time-images] reach the absolute, as instances of pure contemplation, and immediately bring about the identity of the mental and the physical, the real and the imaginary, the subject and the object, the world and the I. (Deleuze 16)

Brereton’s recent animations, *Mt Keira-Time* and *Edgewood Estate-Time*, were produced for a series of exhibitions across Taiwan during 2006. In Australia the videos were shown during 2007 at De Havilland Gallery in Wollongong, and at Flinders University Museum Gallery in Adelaide. Installed as a wall plus screen/monitor set up, the audio-visual ‘machine’ performs as a loop without beginning or end, so as to provide — as Brereton puts it — lots of ‘middle activity’. The weather comes and goes and so does the passing of housing estates, bushfires and traces of human habitation. In time-lapse motion Brereton dances across a blank page/canvas, a landscape bereft of any signs (taints) of human life, then up springs a house, then another, until the viewer recognises the signs of those standardised, new shiny “little boxes” homes that comprise modern housing estates. Then just when the landscape is about to be engulfed by dozens of slick houses, a little flame springs up, growing into a fully-fledged bush fire that wipes out the lot. The style of the animation is snappy, up-beat, like an hysterical music video clip. Yet, along with the amusing Benny-Hill-style antics comes a message of ecological foreboding.

These tightly meshed message bundles are created from a combination of digital and traditional techniques. Brereton uses photographs to record thousands of actions (drawing gestures) that are then digitally altered to boost colours and sharpen reliefs and then animated in the computer to make a video-performance come to life. ‘I find that I am focused on overlapping images and blurring boundaries’, observes Brereton. ‘For me the music term “sampling” is useful: an art event, or sound event both construct networks of creativity out of many fragments or elements. This is an art practice or methodology based on the concept of the “remix”’. A “remix” involves shaping second-degree polyphonic registers — it’s about making multiple rhythms mixdown together, synchronised, cut, pasted, and collaged. We might start with one sound, image or gesture and end up transformed into something else altogether. This is the cartoon way consumer culture operates too. Images, events, slogans, ideas are fed into one end of the capitalist machine and a shiny new product is shrink-wrapped at the other end.

Brereton’s early career as an actor and performance artist has directly and indirectly carried over into his paintings and animations. The role of the body is crucial to the aesthetics of every analogue art production and Brereton feels that in an increasingly digital world the role of the body is taking on new sacrificial meaning. Rather than try to hide the clumsiness or rawness of the hand Brereton seeks to make his body an active and obvious player in his ‘analogue shoots’.
Art Realty

In his new role as a cashed-up and powerful buyer, Fraser says he is excited by the possibility that paintings not seen in public for years will be offered for sale. It’s like the real estate market, in buoyant times really good things come on to the market and realise their true value.

(Mark Fraser, The Australian, June 25, 2007)

In 2002 Brereton staged the *Art Realty* exhibition at the Sir Hermann Black Gallery, University of Sydney, in which he took a critical swipe at the commodification principle and its confluence between the art market and the Real Estate market. A series of painted landscapes were overlaid with real estate’s apportioning of property via a system of grids. The grids, created a number of ‘lots’ within each ‘parcel’, and each of these was up for sale — just as our natural world is sectioned off into property parcels for ownership’s sake. Along with the visual lots, came a set of ironic rules and conditions for playing the *Art Realty* ‘game’, for instance: ‘Conditions of sale — All lots are numbered and signed by the artist and come with a site map and certificate. Information on adjoining lots may be supplied if the owner-neighbours are all in agreement’. In *Art Realty*, each ‘lot’ was granted a number, so that, to acknowledge the art parcels were going to be broken up for sale was unavoidable.

In *Art Realty*, Brereton was also alluding to the commercial practices governing the art market. It was a two-in-one dig at the consumerist impulse that breaks things up into saleable components across a range of commercial markets. Ironically, while the sales hype in *Art Realty* was all ‘go, go, go’, the viewer/prospective buyer found themselves staring into a panel of non-descript marks, each art lot appearing like a mere fragment of some tree-and-leaf-jigsaw puzzle, nothing more. Just like the actual property or art market, Brereton posed the question: am I about to be ripped off? As he told me recently, often the most commercially successful paintings are those that strategically say nothing and resemble a piece of retro patterned fabric.

The subject matter of *Art Realty* also concerns loss — while it looks square on at (misguided) cultural valuations of our natural environment and cultural production. Brereton makes the point that the more valuable a painting lot becomes the more it physically disappears yet multiplies as second degree image, as advertising, packaging or logo. Ultimately, this exhibition raises awareness of the warped state of affairs in which the natural world can now be directly exchanged for carbon credit points. ‘Fine art aesthetic systems of rarefaction and speculation also build up cultural credits,’ Brereton remarks.

‘Lots of Bushfire’, oil on canvas, 90 cm x 120 cm, 2002.
Dream Homes

‘This land is not unsung land. It is of ancient and sacred significance. It is our history as much as any other’s history ... Sandon Point to us means Ngurumbaan: The Past, The Present, The Future’. (Reuben Brown, Chairperson of the Korewal (La Perouse) Elouera (Illawarra) Jerrunganugh (Shoalhaven) Aboriginal Elders Corporation)

Property ID: 2006401929
The Ocean View Release
Build your dream home in one of the Illawarra’s most prestigious locations. This 746sqm block is one of very few left and will not last! Your dream can soon become a reality.

(Real Estate Advertisement)

*Dream Homes* confronts the rapid rise of the luxury housing estate at Sandon Point just behind Brereton’s studio. This development has galvanised the local community for the last seven years. In its earlier stages the proposed development was criticised by Aborigines and non-Indigenous opponents alike for threatening the environment as well as Aboriginal and European heritage. A cokeworks was found on site, and a number of endangered species were discovered living in its wetlands. However, the biggest outcry came when the 5000-year-old remains of an Aboriginal elder was uncovered in nearby sand dunes. Local Aboriginal elders dubbed him the Kuradji Man or Clever Man and the site was deemed sacred. Despite several contestations in the Land and Environment Court, the development went ahead and now the once pristine location has been transformed into a waterfront housing estate.

A notable painting is *Dream Home No 5*, oil on plywood, in which a white hard edged ‘dream home’ is superimposed over a coloured pastel drawing of the Kuradji Embassy. Ghostlike (the dream home is rendered as a white line side elevation drawing of the building), it sits hovering as if on the surface of the solid embassy building and surrounds. Brereton’s ‘dream homes’ are more about visions than hard matter and offer less of a dream, in the utopian sense, and more of a dystopian threat. The solid context or background is the Aboriginal Embassy protesting and holding out against the Stockland housing corporation and local government orders. The dream of the Embassy is to reclaim Koori sacred land. Brereton highlights the tensions between the two competing value systems and visions — by rendering the dream homes as ‘concrete bunkers’ as opposed to the ‘corrugated iron shack tactics’ of the Kooris.
In witnessing both the past and present within the one frame, Brereton has brought multiple histories of the development simultaneously into play, and by breaking down the linear sense of time Brereton destabilises the notion of progress. Even while being inspired by the micro-world of Sandon Point politics, these paintings draw attention to the way late-stage capitalist rapaciousness for standardised energy-sapping homes inspire similar ‘ideal home’ choices all over the world. Fragile ecosystems are sold off to make way for prime location supersized housing estates. The group of paintings titled Searise 2030, (including Bulli Point 2030) that were recently exhibited at De Havilland Gallery, Wollongong, offer a direct engagement with the impact of global warming on the Illawarra coast. Famous beach-front views have been overdrawn with (and erased by) linear outline profiles of the BHP steel works. This ghost-like technique is similar to that applied in his Dream Home series. Imaginary views have been constructed of what the local iconic tourist beaches might look like in 2030 under five metres of seawater.

‘Bulli Point 2030’, oil on plywood, 50 cm x 23 cm, 2007.
‘Dream Home No 5’, oil on plywood, 56 cm x 48 cm, 2007.

‘Searise (Bulli) 2030’, oil and coal on plywood, 150 cm x 64 cm, 2007.
Escarpment Series

Brereton creates a shallow depth in which the real shifts in the surface signs of our prior evaluations, politicised visions and estimations. Or it may be that the signifying level is foremost with the other reality riding, moving underneath, like a base pattern carrying a melody of ornamental motifs.

(Ken Bolton 2005 2)

A large-scale painting of a native beehive in a gum tree, sculptures resembling mutant hybrid plants and a pristine escarpment invaded by modular houses: Brereton’s fascination with the disappearance of the ‘natural world’ is nowhere more evident than in his recurrent focus on the life-cycle (of ever diminishing returns) within the Illawarra escarpment. The life forms that exist on the escarpment behind his Bulli home, many of which are rhizomatic, have fuelled several series of high intensity projects.

The multi-media Messiaen at Mt Keira exhibition (2001) concerning the escarpment rainforest was first exhibited at the University of Technology, Sydney. Part of this project was a sound piece, Lyrebird Mixdown, produced for the ABC Radio National Earclips archive (available on the web) and was showcased at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 2002 as part of the Meeting Messiaen program. Brereton also held an exhibition along this theme — titled simply, Escarpment — jointly with Ken Orchard, at Hazelhurst Regional Art Gallery in 2005 and at Flinders University Museum Gallery in June 2007.

In the large scale Bulli Escarpment Estate, the viewer is presented with what looks like a typical lookout view of the escarpment framed by Norfolk Pines. On closer inspection it may be observed that everything in the image has been produced by thousands of overlapping hand-coloured linocut stamps of houses. As Ken Bolton points out in his catalogue essay, ‘Brereton’s Illawarra is felt up close as an almost fluid medium in which human life is suspended. This landscape teems ungovernably. The history of time depicted is not that of geographic time but of rapid, more recent despoliation. Brereton’s Illawarra is kinetic with crowded life’.

Another series entitled Tagging The Escarpment, brings together a multiple perspectives and media treatments then erases the integrity of discrete forms (the notion of a pristine environment) by spray painting silver graffii tags across the face of the paintings. The calligraphic fluidity of the tag overwrites and underscores the fragility of the ecology. The suggestion here is that it is no longer possible to see such views in a seamless homogenous fashion. The escarpment rainforest is not some infinite boundless resource or even a Romantic sublime immensity. Instead the viewer witnesses a fading pathological slide image of
browning foliage, burnt trees and dried out creek beds. Yet Brereton’s images and personal visions are still full of life, colour and suggestion. There is a sense of defiance and triumph of the ultimate indifference of nature.

Brereton says: ‘I’ve been lucky enough to spend many hours taking the time to immerse myself in the subtle aesthetic differences of gestures, colours and material nuances such as when walking through the rainforest itself’. These works provide an insight into the experiences of one who has spent many long hours studying the forest variations both as a natural science student and artist.

‘Mutant Palms at Sandon Point’, linocuts on inkjet photo, 62 cm x 220 cm, 2007.

‘Tagging the Escarpment No 2’, linocut, pastel, spray enamel, 72 cm x 228 cm, 2005.
‘Native Beehive Cycle’, linocut stamps, charcoal on paper, 150 cm x 300 cm, 2005.

‘Bulli Escarpment Estate’, linocut stamps acrylic on paper, 150 cm x 320 cm, 2005.

‘Bulli Escarpment Estate’, (detail) linocut stamps acrylic on paper, 150 cm x 320 cm, 2005.
Mangroves

Ghostly white figures of mangrove trees, finger roots and eye socket holes stand prop-like on an estuarine stage. Here imagination follows matter. All life is interconnected, hyper-adaptive and flexible. Temporal and spatial references must be renegotiated. Stillness and patience force an attentive silence and a breathing that is long, slow and deep — in tune with the pulse of the river. The reward is a gradual introduction to the mangroves as a sympathetic organism — a body with much more going on beneath the surface expanses of dumb mud, reflective pools and unruly trees.

(Rhizomorphosis: the Morphology of Mangroves — Artist Statement)

In Jean Cocteau’s 1930 film, The Blood of a Poet, Orpheus dives into the underworld through a doorway that is, in effect, a watery mirror. Orpheus’s (and the artist’s) fall opens up a world of insights that lie outside the restrictions of spoken/linear language. Brereton, who has been walking with the mangroves thematically since 1975 (as a child he showed his first ceramics and sculptures in the family-run art gallery on the far north coast of New South Wales), reminds us that few people venture into the Orphic domain of the mangroves. Brereton observes that, ‘Mangroves demand a quantum leap of entrance, of being inside. And once you have left the familiar solid shore, you must give yourself up to the laws of mud, strange sounds and mirrored waters.’ In the exhibition Rhizomorphosis: the Morphology of Mangroves, mounted at the University of the Sunshine Coast Gallery, in Queensland and at Project Contemporary Artspace, Wollongong in 2004, Brereton draws attention to things existing silently underfoot.

At this time Brereton began calling his art pieces ‘image maps’— a phrase that relates both to their conceptual post-structural underpinnings and the process of their making. A map is something coded, a metaphor and an analogue that stands in place for something else and is a guide that helps us negotiate difficult terrains. Brereton constructs images conscious of the two main ways we tend to read images — by scanning them for tell tale signs, (Barthes’s punctums), and also as a whole, that is via their overall gestalt effect (studium). Brereton presents the mangroves, therefore, as a mapping system — one that enables the foreigner to be guided through unknown terrain; and remarks that,

‘Art can serve as a map guiding us through strange new ways of seeing reality — a reality that is a kind of underworld in an Orphic sense. I love the way great art can carry you into an underworld of ideas, associations and emotions and safely return you to the social, yet somehow leave you changed for the travelling….’
Kurt Brereton

‘Mangrove Nursery No 1’, tree root, copper wire, fimo, acrylic, 100 cm x 40 cm, 2004.

‘Mangrove Rhizomap No 1’ (summer), linocuts, acrylic, gum tape on watercolour paper, 250 cm x 120 cm, 2004.
The notion of mapping also relates to the way these pieces are made with a number of media acting in collaboration and across time. They are assemblages of old drawings, fragments of abandoned paintings, linocut prints and new inscriptions. By performing on paper the images can be rolled up or folded in the same way as tourist maps. Every exhibition is a new installation made up of tidal offerings. His fragmentary, recycled approach is typical of his general approach to art: often engaging with beach flotsam and jetsam; old postcards, photos, his own images or texts. Steering away from the monolithic, he over-paints canvases and cuts up paintings to use in new ones. Brereton’s comment to me that ‘life is organic so we all end up as black mud to support the next forest of organisms’ supports an Orphic view of being a part of country.

For Brereton being creative means living in a fluid state that raises possibilities, questions, doubts and solutions. Yet he does not envisage an aesthetic or creative solution as a fixed outcome. In line with the nature of how mangroves are formed via a system of reclaiming land by accumulating sediment through one’s roots, Brereton has built up a body of ‘image maps’, assemblages and sound pieces using the mangrove effect. Art can act like aerial roots attracting and positioning new ideas and ways of seeing, so creating island nurseries of meta-critical thought and in turn new shoots.

NOTES
1 All quotations from Kurt Brereton are taken from unpublished interviews conducted by the writer between May and June 2007.

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Riley’s Handbook: ‘Exegesis to His Cryptic Utterance’

On her departure in 1920, the novelist Jane Mander described New Zealand as ‘a positively exciting country’ (Belich 335). On her return in 1932, she lamented ‘the barren wastes of Victorian philistinism’, the ‘brain-numbing, stimulus-stifling, soul-searing silence’ (335) of colonial provincialism. Ironically, her grievances were expressed in a year that witnessed the birth of the vibrant literary journals *Tomorrow* and *Phoenix*; journals that would soon establish their reputation as pre-eminent voices of contention to a cultural landscape described by Frank Sargeson as ‘The Grey Death, puritanism, wowserism gone most startlingly putrescent’ (quoted in King 255). First published in 1935, Sargeson was New Zealand’s architect of literary decolonisation and principal exponent of realist short fiction. For Sargeson, literary expression was a process of catharsis and rebellion, and over the subsequent years, expatriation, suicide, anti-nationalism, political internationalism, and authorship were the disparate responses of the talented local artist. Indeed, Jane Mander’s literal expatriation can be compared to Janet Frame’s escape to the mind, Robin Hyde’s to the grave, Rex Fairburn’s to a sub-culture of masculine literati, and Frank Sargeson’s to his retreat on Auckland’s North Shore. Sargeson’s literary response refuses to document exclusively the negations of a stagnant culture, but rather locates the beauty and affirmation of moments of transformation. Despite the diversity of responses, all of the prominent colonial writers recognised mainstream New Zealand society of the 1930s and ’40s as a ‘sterile, materialist and dreary … wasteland’ (Belich 335).

Duggan’s narratives were collected in three volumes, *Immanuel’s Land* (1956), *Summer in the Gravel Pit* (1965) and *O’Leary’s Orchard and Other Stories* (1970), and by the publication of his first collection literary visions of New Zealand provincialism had not perceptibly changed. Considering the cultural milieu of the decade, this is perhaps not surprising; the Waterfront dispute of 1951, which led to the disestablishment of the union and censorship of apparently dissident material, proved that in the context of the Korean War and a continuing Anglo-American political deference, Sidney Holland’s National government was not averse to practices that sustained cultural sterility. The impact of James K. Baxter’s consequential call for free expression of opinion, ‘Recent Trends in New Zealand Poetry’ (1951), was diminutive outside of literary culture. Bureaucratic despotism prevailed; the Customs Department censored Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* and Dan Davin’s *For the Rest of Our Lives*, while New Zealanders’ first
sight of Marlon Brando in *The Wild One* occurred in 1977, twenty-three years after its release. It was only as a consequence of the liberalising Indecent Publications Tribunal that the 1967 film adaptation of Joyce’s *Ulysses* was screened to gender segregated adult audiences.

It was in this climate that Maurice Duggan’s writing developed, and his publishing career, which spanned 1945–1974, also spanned much of the ‘Provincial’ and beginning of ‘Post-provincial’ periods. For the purposes of this discussion, the terms ‘Provincial’ and ‘Post-provincial’ refer to the multitude of cultural transitions that occurred in New Zealand and their representation as themes/tropes in literature. The ‘Provincial’ period is often marked by significations such as Puritanism, nationalism and the ‘Man Alone’, as discussed famously in Bill Pearson’s *Fretful Sleepers* (1974), and usually in the mode of realism. By contrast, ‘Post-provincial’ literature often focuses on the ‘new’ generation of New Zealanders who, by the 1960s, began to move away from such imperatives and instead explored new concerns through increasingly divergent styles (rather than simply realism). Thus, when contextualizing Duggan in the history of New Zealand short fiction, it is important to state that his narratives are anomalous in both their affirmation of and resistance to ‘Provincial’ fictional practice. Consequently, even though Duggan’s work has elicited a limited critical response, the responses are diverse. Many see his mode as extending the provincial, secular realist story exemplified by Frank Sargeson, who remained a close friend and mentor until Duggan’s death in 1974. In opposition to this view stand critics who identify his prose as firmly developing the Katherine Mansfield tradition of symbolic, experimental impressionism: ‘Reviewers noted that the stories seemed to focus on moments of experience in a way that New Zealand literature, with its largely social concerns, had seldom done since Mansfield’ (Richards 216). Both assessments invite re-evaluation, especially in the context of the critical neglect of Duggan’s work. The first paragraph of Terry Sturm’s 1971 article, ‘The Short Stories of Maurice Duggan’, unwittingly predicted the response of critics for the remainder of the century and beyond:

> It is surprising, in view of Maurice Duggan’s reputation as one of New Zealand’s major short story writers, that so little has in fact been written on his work. Apart from reviews of individual collections, commentary has been wholly confined to short discussions in general surveys of the New Zealand short story. (Sturm 50)

It is even more remarkable that, with the exception of a few articles in over thirty years, Sturm’s appraisal remains accurate. Even the most extensive study of Duggan’s work, Ian Richards’ *To Bed at Noon: The Life and Art of Maurice Duggan*, is limited. Although the author acknowledges Duggan’s status and makes an important concession:

> His stories are also among the most complex in New Zealand literature, and a detailed analysis of each would require another book altogether. As a result, I have limited
myself to including comment on stories only insofar as the work throws some light on the development of Duggan’s thinking, or on his developing strengths as a writer (Richards 3), in declaring this in the introduction of his biography, Richards confirms that despite the importance of Duggan’s prose, the critical attention to his work has barely developed since Terry Sturm’s article, and that his biography cannot, understandably, fill the void.

Maurice Duggan’s early narratives and the more established ‘Lenihan cycle’ in *Immanuel’s Land* (1956) and *Summer in the Gravel Pit* (1965) testify to the difficulties in attempting to locate Duggan in either the realist or impressionist tradition. This is, perhaps, why his writing has received so little critical attention; it is stylistically anomalous in the genre of short fiction. Yet, there are important intersections that can be made between Duggan’s non-‘Provincial’ mode and ‘Provincial’ subject, and in doing so, it is possible to locate his writing in the history of New Zealand short fiction. To achieve this, it is necessary to examine ‘Riley’s Handbook’, Duggan’s most brilliant and complex narrative that explores the process of self-destruction and self-identification. Simply put, the narrative describes one man’s psychologically detrimental exploration of who he is, what he searching for, and how he can achieve contentment in a society he fails to comprehend. The narrative concerns Fowler, an artist who flees the community, changes his name to Riley and presents the reader with a bleak vision of his current state of existence, isolated both geographically and metaphorically from humanity. Like the early narrative, ‘That Long, Long Road’, it is almost entirely absent of plot, taking the form of a sustained tirade against both the absurdity of provincial life. While the often anthologised and established provincial parody ‘Along Rideout Road that Summer’ is often cited as Duggan’s finest story, and sometimes the finest in the history of New Zealand literature, ‘Riley’s Handbook’ has suffered from comparative disregard, despite its intelligent intensification of the ‘Man Alone’ motif that is the subject of parody in his earlier ‘Along Rideout Road that Summer’. Although unfortunate, this neglect is to some degree understandable, for ‘Riley’s Handbook’ is a vast multi-textured narrative, far too long for any anthology, and the eclecticism of its style would prove incongruous in any anthology in a country where realism is not merely the most dominant, but also the most critically acclaimed mode. Richards astutely comments that ‘Although many of his themes and subjects are similar to those of other New Zealand writers, his attitudes towards them are difficult to relate without distortion to any particular pattern in New Zealand fiction. His scepticism about “certainties” or “final truths” is much more uncompromising than, for example, Frank Sargeson’s’ (Richards 52). ‘Riley’s Handbook’ is the ultimate distortion of the social pattern (the mode of fiction as practiced by Duggan’s fellow ‘Provincial’ exponents): the ‘Man Alone’ is explored but not defined, and the narrative poses multiple problems for the critic attempting to find a place for
it. This arguably explains why critics have emphasised, and even attacked, its linguistic exuberance, rather than its subject: as the content of a text is difficult to locate within the local fictional paradigm, then critics have found it expedient to focus on locating its style in the local fictional paradigm. C.K. Stead recalls the critical response, ‘I remember, when “Riley’s Handbook” first appeared in Landfall, hearing it cheerfully dismissed, by people who ought to have known better and who were clearly not going to persist with it, as verbose, pointless, unreadable.’ The position Stead espouses, is one that also identifies linguistic exuberance as the story’s claim on literary value, but observes,

that if, one hundred years from now, there should be a continuing interest in our own literary history (and of course that is something which could be lost entirely) most of the literary work which grabs immediate attention will either be forgotten, or will be looked back upon as quaint relics of a long-lost age. “Riley’s Handbook”, on the other hand, will still read like living language. (Stead 127)

I would suggest that ‘Riley’s Handbook’ is not merely a unique stylistic achievement, but is rather a proclamation of Duggan’s complete formation as an artist. Indeed, prior to its publication in 1961, he discussed his literary obstacles with his friend, the poet and historian Keith Sinclair: ‘I am engaged in the dreary and very chastening business of wondering what in Christ it’s all about. I’m bored stiff with Duggan’s style and Duggan’s attitudes and Duggan’s little puppets ... I still want for my subject — what a confession for a writer aged thirty-seven. Not the detail, for that is there, but the theme, the frame, the informing obsession’ (quoted in Richards 261). Duggan was still suffering from the problems identified by Dan Davin in 1951: ‘He shares with me the Irish curse of rhetoric and the problem of writing about a background which is Irish Catholic which James Joyce has exhausted’ (quoted in Richards 151). Richards observes that ‘The idea of being a Joycean writer-in-exile may have had its momentary appeal, but it did not have the emotional influence that Duggan found New Zealand exerted on his thinking’ (Richards 106). Duggan needed to consolidate his personal experience, literary influences, and awareness of the New Zealand subject, in order to fulfil his enormous potential. It is in this way that ‘Riley’s Handbook’ represents his fullest achievement; it is a solipsistic exploration of self and identity, inspired by a combination of personal experience and literary influence. As a Burns Fellow at Otago University, Duggan temporarily relocated to Dunedin on the South Island, where he stayed at the Captain Cook pub. In a letter to Sargeson, he described the Cook’s patrons as ‘the awful spectacle of the New Zealander enjoying himself. Without strong drink that would be an unendurable sight. … The place is crammed to bursting with crazy humanity; it might be called Beckett’s Reach’ (Richards 254). ‘Beckett’s Reach’ becomes Tunny’s Reach in ‘Riley’s Handbook’, and by comparing the ordinary New Zealander to Beckett’s incompetsents, Duggan was commencing the process of consolidating life and art for the first time.
It is not difficult to locate the intersection of Duggan, Riley and Beckett’s fictional creations. Like Joyce’s refusal to accord with Stephen Dedalus’ notorious doctrine that ‘The artist, like the God of creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible’ (Joyce 132), Riley’s self-portrait can be interpreted as revealing Duggan’s pre-eminent concerns and life history:

In the matter of disguise let me admit that I considered playing the part of a paralytic in a wheelchair. I had the talent for that part, I imagine; but the problem of earning enough money to support myself, except through the manufacture of felt toys and paper flowers, decided me against it. Better to continue to stumble about. Why the disguise at all? I had a small reputation, nothing either grand or accurate, as a painter. Abstract, of course; what else can it be if it’s art at all? (Duggan 1961 56)

At the age of nineteen Duggan developed osteomyelitis, and soon after his left leg was amputated at the knee. It was a source of physical pain and emotional trauma for the remainder of his life, and as a consequence of this disability he spent much of his time employed in factories producing small merchandise: the role Riley resists. Indeed, it is interesting that Riley considers and rejects all of the physical and vocational conditions that Duggan was forced to experience; it suggests that Riley represents an alternative self liberated from these afflictions. Duggan certainly admired his fictional creation, and was heard referring to himself as Riley in the company of Fleur Adcock (Richards 78); Riley is, essentially, the metaphorical mediator between Duggan and Beckett. It is perhaps not surprising that Duggan related to and admired Beckett’s work, since over the course of his life he developed the multiple afflictions of Beckett’s characters; alcoholism, immobility, and a misanthropic anti-faith in the essentially flawed nature of humanity. Duggan might even be recognised in Riley’s evocation of his Heideggerian ‘factual’ situation illustrated through his ill health: ‘Head naked and eyes protuberant, from smoke or booze or lack of sleep, some trembling of the hands, Huntingdon’s chorea if my mother had a thigh in it, and the neck thick ...

... Remainder equally undistinguished except for the heavy breathing; something shot to ribbons somewhere. The lung, one or both I never enquired’ (Duggan 1961 65). Duggan invested his suffering in Riley, who is by extension strikingly similar to Beckett’s Malone: the latter even inhabits a room in a house whose location he does not know. Malone has no recollection of his arrival in the room, and in ‘Riley’s Handbook’ the reader has no awareness of how Riley arrived at Tunny’s Reach. It is also interesting that Molloy embarks upon a desultory quest for his mother, and ‘Riley’s Handbook’ has been described as ‘a fictionalised lament for mother-love both withheld from a child and repudiated by it’ (Richards 23). Mary Duggan died of heart failure when Maurice was only seven, which again reveals the tripartite correlations that can be made between Duggan, Beckett and Riley; connections that are not exclusively isolated to superficial details. Indeed, ‘Riley’s Handbook’ appropriates the formal aesthetics of ‘Malone Dies’, and
a juxtaposition of the final paragraphs of both narratives, which delineate the deaths of Riley and Malone, is arresting:

Lemuel is in charge, he raises his hatchet on which the blood will never dry, but not to hit anyone, he will not hit anyone, he will not hit anyone any more, he will not touch anyone any more, either with it or with it or with it or with or or with it or with his hammer or with his stick or with his fist or in in dream I mean never he will never or with his pencil or with his stick or or light light I mean never there he will never never anything there any more. (Beckett 289)

Duggan inverts the composition of Malone’s death; Lemuel’s disintegration accords with the gradual attrition of the self, whilst Riley’s death accords with the fictional resurrection of deceased family members:

All still now at last and steady as maNan thunders down long corridors towards me in sweet airs in light as lovely as jade to stand looming to tower and reach down a cool and blessing hand. MaNan? Pegeen? Riley from there looking up at last. Am I too late? It’s someone speaking above the roar. Whose voice? Possible only to guess. In the roaring blood under the jade shadow. A gentle quiet man? (Duggan 1961 63)

The passage suggests that Beckett’s influence was profound; as death arrives both narratives become fragmented, ambiguous and structurally limitless.

It is clear that ‘Riley’s Handbook’ includes congruencies with both Duggan’s life and Beckett’s oeuvre, yet it is crucial to probe the narrative’s subject. Richards states that the narrative concentrates ‘less emphasis on philosophy and more on psychology’ (274). This is highly debatable; the narrative is, I believe, densely philosophical, exploring the self in a manner that accords with Cartesian investigations, and thus extending the ‘Man Alone’ enquiry and positing the provincial New Zealand subject at the centre of humanity. Even though there is no evidence that Duggan was interested in Cartesian ontology, he was, as we have seen, intensely interested in the work of Beckett, and it is very difficult to understand and, to a lesser extent, enjoy Beckett, if one is not interested in Cartesian ontology or, more simply, investigations of the self: these considerations are not merely dimension or themes in Beckett’s work, but govern the entire Beckettian modus operandi. Duggan’s interest in Beckettian explorations of the self might account for Patrick Evans’ claim that the narrative is ‘obscure, “difficult” and opaque’ (229), and his concession that, ‘This quality, and the great demands it places on Duggan’s readers, are of more importance to this discussion than are any remarks on its “meaning”’ (229). In ‘Along Rideout Road that Summer’, the protagonist Buster complains that the object of his affections, Fanny, offers no interpretation
of her father’s thoughts, no ‘Exegesis to his cryptic utterance’ (Duggan 1956 57). Similarly, despite Evans’ predominantly local focus in ‘Maurice Duggan and the Provincial Dilemma’ (1982), his essay does demonstrate that the inaccessibility of the narrative has led critics to de-centre its content and accentuate its linguistic turbulence. Yet, the text deserves a focused analysis of its content. Riley realises that in exploring the self he must ‘move, therefore, further into this morass, this indecency, this exposure and recognition, this process of discovery on a voyage without hope’ (Duggan 1970 61). His seclusion in Tunny’s Reach, a marginalised settlement of dysfunctional characters on the edge of sanity and civilisation (both metaphorically and geographically), represents a withdrawal that coerces a confrontation with the self that corresponds with the mind/body disconnections of Descartes and later Cartesian ontology. The classic Cartesian cogito that establishes the mind as the only location of the self is a doctrine that fascinates Riley:

Who is the who who would change? Me? Bright lunacy, reflective lunacy, a simple sailing skyward moony matter. The choice is somewhat too absurd. I want no part of it. Who would be then the who who is inescapably Riley? What is the large freedom they propose other than the things I am in flight from? He is not Riley; doubtless that’s how they put it to themselves; doubtless that’s the grisly bit of thought they’ve been chewing on all this while. Then who am I? It’s not, I realize, to be answered by a purely negative description of the things I am not. (Duggan 1961 71)

The passage embodies Heidegger’s thesis that Dasein possesses an understanding of its own being, that knowledge is the ‘presence’ of a thing to consciousness, thus what is present to Riley’s consciousness is, essentially, not Riley. In Sartrean terms, things cannot be present to être-en-soi, objects in themselves, only present to être-pour-soi, nothingness; Riley’s consciousness is opposed to, yet cannot be defined in relation to, être-en-soi. His recognition that être-pour-soi negates être-en-soi, which connects the narrative to the early ‘That Long, Long Road’, throws into disarray R.A. Copland’s criticism that Duggan is a realist writer whose work fails to demonstrate ‘a modelling up from the imagination’, (Copland 78) and also Bill Pearson’s that ‘his vision is static’ (quoted in Richards 217). Even if Duggan had failed to consummate this realisation in his early writing, then ‘Riley’s Handbook’ reveals how far his writing had developed by the late ‘Provincial’ period (1934-1964) the external world is imaginatively distorted and energised through Riley’s incessant internal examinations and external criticisms. His aporias are rhetorical impasses, spaces of radical indeterminacy where distinctions collapse and arguments defeat themselves by espousing their diametrical opposites. His attacks on much of humanity and the benchmarks of civilisation, marriage, women and specifically religion, expose that, (given the absence of God) Riley converts the reticently optimistic philosophy of Descartes into a fundamentally pessimistic view of the world. For Riley, there is no longer any confirmation of the reality of the external world; nothing to anchor the self in any secure relation to its surroundings: ‘Father Royle, dollman in his armozeen
Joel Gwynne

smock, dream pedlar in his driving gloves, the parish zephyr, holy purveyor of toy concepts and sugarcoated reassurances for ingrown adults afraid of their dark and their humanity’ (Duggan 1970 73). Riley’s vision of existence is secular; if the idea of God did not exist, then no one could feel the painfulness of its absurdity, and if the idea that life has meaning did not exist, then the meaningless of life could hurt no one. Thus, Riley’s atheism extends to multiple anti-humanisms of Kierkegaardian proportions; his perspective accords with Kierkegaard’s in the attestation that any individual who commits himself to thinking about human existence is involved in a comic and pathetic quest:

Existence itself, the act of existing, is a striving, and is both comic and pathetic in the same degree. It is pathetic because the striving is infinite; that is, it is directed towards the infinite, being an actualization of infinitude, a transformation which involves the highest pathos. It is comic, because such striving involves self-contradiction.

(Kierkegaard 84)

In a harangue that appears to latently employ ideas central to Freud’s ‘Civilization and its Discontents’, Riley attributes the role of humanising innate male aggression to women, perceiving it as a self-sacrificing, civilising role that is ultimately futile and absurd:

To damp out the fire, to domesticate the beast, to wash away the rank odours and stifle the bestial tortured cries, that is her plan. And it would be Myra’s plan, too, if the hope were let burgeon there. To dress out the untamed, the raging and prophetic beast, as husband, father, citizen, responsible adult (ha) and peck it away to the office. For what? For what you see about you; the towering, stinking absurdity. Pfuh! As if ninetynine percent of all human activity weren’t the most insane waste of time.

(Duggan 1961 74)

Once again, the intersection of Riley and Duggan is conspicuous; the latter conceded his pessimism in conversation with Rev. Bob Walsh, an alcoholism counsellor at Auckland’s Oakley Hospital:

Basically I have for a long time seen most of human life and endeavour as absurd... Being what’s known as sober in these terms isn’t comfortable — but who said it was to be? The uneasy realisation for the alcoholic when he has dried out is that he is waking to the ruin he has made and that there isn’t going to be any prize, any reward, just for keeping off the sauce, just for ceasing to pursue unsustainable because unearned euphoria. (qtd in Richards 381)

It is this intense pessimism, and to a certain extent misanthropy, that connects Duggan with Schopenhauer, a Cartesian for whom to exist was to suffer:

Then, instead of the restless pressure and effort; instead of the constant transition from desire to apprehension and from joy to sorrow; instead of the never satisfied and never-dying hope that constitutes the life-dream of the man who wills, we see that peace that is higher than all reason, that ocean-like calmness of the spirit, that deep tranquility, that unshakeable confidence and serenity, whose mere reflection in the countenance ... is a complete and certain gospel. Only knowledge remains; the will has vanished.

(Janaway 92)
In conjunction with Schopenhauer, Riley shares with Kierkegaard the belief that the only course of action for the suffering individual is to deny the ‘will to live’; the will is, ultimately, the most distressing facet of existence. Indeed, it is the will that Riley identifies as the fundamental force of humanity, and that any self-examination invariably situates the will as the source of sustaining and reconstructing the self: ‘I do know that the common prescription recommending change neglects to describe processes or to outline methods or to describe that paradise that is to follow on the hot heel of the event. The same old hell: the will’ (Duggan 1961 86). Once again Riley exemplifies the paradoxically pessimistic humanism of Cartesian philosophy; like Sartre, he attests to the encumbrance and responsibility of freedom, and like Kierkegaard, identifies this value-conferring freedom as the source of Angst. It is another example of the intersections between ‘Riley’s Handbook’, and even Duggan, and the Cartesian ontology of Descartes, Sartre, Heidegger, Kierkegaard and Schopenhauer: each is developed from the idea that the self and world are disconnected, each places emphasis on the mind’s ability to form the world, and each places the development of the self at the centre of the human condition. ‘Riley’s Handbook’ proposes greater questions than any other ‘Provincial’ narrative, extending the local subject to universal proportions in its consideration of what it is to be human and what we, as humans, can offer to humanity.

In her discussion of the protagonist of A.P. Gaskell’s ‘All Part of the Game’, Lydia Wevers states: ‘His transition into an adult environment, in which those who don’t succeed or conform are ignored or rejected, functions as a critique of that environment in a way that it is typical of the male realist tradition’ (Wevers 231). Without actually discussing ‘Riley’s Handbook’, Wevers’ recapitulation conveys the disparity between a narrative like ‘Riley’s Handbook’ and the male realist tradition; Riley supports self-determination, which largely explains why humanity, and in particular the determinisms that exert their influence on all of us, frustrates him. Yet, Wevers proceeds to identify a component of the male, secular realist tradition that corresponds with ‘Riley’s Handbook’: ‘In the stories of A.P. Gaskell, the typical New Zealand male likes football and beer, finds relationships with women difficult’ (Wevers 230). Despite the universal philosophical enquiry of ‘Riley’s Handbook’ regarding what drives us as human beings, it is vital to determine the narrative’s locality. This can be achieved by examining patterns of ideological investment that accord with the frequently latent and often manifest misogyny of male-authored provincial fiction. Certainly, if we retreat from the late-Cartesian territory of identifying values as products of action, and instead acknowledge values as inscriptions of culture, it is important to realise that whilst Sturm evaluates Duggan’s connection with the ‘Man Alone’ thematic, he fails to acknowledge that this trend in ‘Provincial’ fiction is, at worst misogynistic, and at best dismissive of female experience:
For Duggan the whole issue of ‘Man Alone’ is complicated by difficult moral ambiguities. His rootless characters are usually intelligent, extremely self-conscious, and sensitive (in the sense that they have a hyper-active inner life), with an often obsessive awareness of the moral and social hypocrisies which they reject. On the other hand Duggan has a keen sense of the illusions which such apparent freedom can foster: the habit of cutting loose, ‘taking it lightly’ (as he describes it in ‘Voyage’) can easily become a habit of moral irresponsibility, a deliberate refusal to commit oneself to any relationships or principles, and their consequences. (Sturm 57)

Riley reinforces the ‘Man Alone’ motif, specifically the ‘cutting loose’ to which Sturm refers. Wevers observes that, in order to escape from entrapment ‘the process of transition typically provides the narrative structure of Duggan’s fictions’ (Wevers 234). Riley’s narrative begins with his escape into the territory of a new, independent if dislocated life: ‘Nor am I the first to find that I am wanting not only in a sense of direction but also in a sense of their being anywhere to go’ (Duggan 1961 87). He commences the narrative as the classic ‘Man Alone’ figure: ‘I have deprived the community of very little; very little considering the depth of my contempt for the community’ (78). It is not clear what Riley is initially fleeing from, as upon meeting him he appears to exist in a chasm of Existentialist temporality; he is a formless and ambiguous figure, unable to reconcile the hiatus between past and present. The only information the narrative provides is that he needs to change his name, and once again he relates this to escape from a small-town environment: ‘Even a change of name, in so small and stinking a country, if I may say it, is cover too thin to afford much protection’ (78). Yet, it becomes clear that Riley’s predicament is not singularly parochial, but also embedded in his relations with women. This firmly locates ‘Riley’s Handbook’ in its contemporary ideological landscape, even if it is stylistically irreconcilable with any other New Zealand writer. Indeed, Sargeson’s ‘The Hole That Jack Dug’ and Maurice Shadbolt’s ‘The Woman’s Story’ are merely two examples of provincial fictions where women are invariably culpable in inhibiting male freedom and destroying male aspirations that extend beyond domestic territory. Sturm states that ‘Most obsessive of all, however, is Riley’s disgust with sex and procreation... he has a Manichean disgust for all merely physical processes because they reveal, more than anything else, the imprisonment of man in time’ (69). Sturm’s view of the narrative is loosely Cartesian, and whilst it is possible to compare Riley to Beckett’s representation of the body as merely an unwanted and repellent vessel for the mind, I believe that Riley is not actually disgusted by the physical process of sex, but rather disgusted by his female sexual partners. His misogyny is both sexual and ideological, the latter discernible in his discussion of his deserted wife Leah:

I know the cast of her thinking. If she only persists, without trying to bully me; if she only reminds without recrimination; if she only continues, without faltering, to express her deadly calm intention, her unnatural resolve to forget and forgive; if she can only get me to understand; if through patience and perseverance and sympathy she can only
get em to see the uselessness, the futility, of my rage, all, she is sure, will then be well. She expects to succeed. I know her; I know her passion for understanding, her belief that to know is to master. To understand! What hours we have spent, in the past, in trying to understand the incomprehensible, the inconsequential and the inexplicable. How many million words have we spent on the subject of what is now Riley? What a rage is induced in me in the face of this calm and unwavering belief in the power of reason; reason at the service, let us be plain, of the conservative, female, suburban and domestic compromise. (Duggan 1961 98)

Riley’s view is biologically essentialist: ‘It is for them that the hunter is induced to hand up the blazoned shield, the long spear, his balls and his inheritance. It is for them that he dandles upon his knee the babypowdered and diapered symbol of the defeat of his moment of wild and impermissible hope’ (89) Riley’s scarce consideration of the sacrifices many women perform for motherhood exposes the patriarchal sexist male/female dichotomy in New Zealand short fiction; women writers have responded passionately to ‘Man Alone’ fictions through the ‘Post-provincial’ development of the ‘suburban neurosis’ story. Riley’s essentialism attributes female masochism and self-sacrifice for man as a collective, to a female desire for annihilation. This value is central to patriarchal ideology, and Riley’s essentialism supports Freud’s equally sexist conviction that the masochism of the female psyche is organic: ‘The suppression of women’s aggressiveness which is prescribed for them constitutionally and imposed on them socially favours the development of powerful masochistic impulses which succeed in binding erotically the destructive trends which have been diverted inwards’ (Freud 56).

Riley is convinced that his new life of quiet isolation would not fulfil Leah’s latent demands: ‘She would rather, I know, that I shouted, argued, and raved; that’s at least the known, the familiar pre-Riley. She would rather I struck her. And once or twice I have been close to that — the back of my hand on her talking mouth. But no; one touch, one blow or one caress, and even that has in my madness crossed my mind, for she is a woman, one move and I am done, undone’ (82). After leaving Leah and fleeing to Tunny’s Reach, Riley discloses his sexual misogyny in his relations with Myra: ‘Myra is no catch; but we serve a purpose for each other’ (80). It never becomes clear what purpose Riley serves for Myra; it is certainly not emotional. He conveys a disconcerting interest in speculating on the quantity of Myra’s sexual partners: ‘I am to believe that my suggestion that she might be going with two men, or six, at one time is distasteful to her. A highprincipled whore if you like’ (84). This is connected with an impassive view of her childhood sexual abuse: ‘Who with Myra was first, after her father on bathnights taking dexterous liberties, a Woking man, I have yet to hear to tell’ (86). The abuse is merely documented, and given a significance equivalent to her father’s birth place. Nor is Myra satisfied in her sexual relations with Riley: ‘Myra has reached her point of protest at last. She is not prepared to continue the stark routine. A little decoration, a few frills, a word even now and again of tenderness, the confession of a need; it doesn’t cost anything. Her words not
mine. In short she pines for the usual fucking wrapping, the common deceits of the common and ancient game’ (87). It is not clear whether Riley classifies marriage as the central component of bourgeois, provincial suburbia, and thus sublimes his feelings into a homogenised view of women. However, his attitude is palpable when summarising his relations with all women:

I can at this stage surely say, without boasting, that I have never understood how it was with women or what they saw in me or why it was that in the face of a moral, emotional and financial bankruptcy, all clearly stated by me from the very first, they were so reluctant to leave and so difficult finally to be rid of, even when told their place was taken. (78)

It is due to this level of patriarchal sexological discourse within the ‘Provincial’ tradition that the feminist movement was so fierce in New Zealand. In discussing the 1984 assault on playwright Mervyn Thompson, Kai Jensen recognises that ‘Thompson had stepped on to a stage that several generations of male writers had constructed for him’ (Jensen 3). In The Sexual Wilderness (1985), Sue Kedgley identified the culpability of the ‘Provincial’ period as the source of contemporary discord between feminist women and literary men, and A.R.D. Fairburn provides an extreme example of ‘Provincial’ misogyny in ‘The Woman Problem’. The author declares that ‘women have little notion of abstract justice’ (quoted in Jensen 80), ‘are incapable of attaching importance to principles of any kind’ (80) and ‘can act “immorally” with much greater ease of conscience than a man’ (80). It is important to realise that Fairburn’s essay is a personal vision that fails to encompass the perspective of all of his prominent contemporaries; for Fairburn, homosexuals were guilty of multiple transgressions, including a domination of New Zealand literary circles, and propagation of the romantic ‘heresy’ of male and female equality. Yet, in the framework of Fairburn’s identification of the masochism of women, through declaring their gratification in marital submission, it is possible to position Riley as the epitome of local virulent, creative and aggressive masculinity. Yet, despite this concurrency between Duggan and his contemporaries, it is very difficult to perceive him as representative of fellow male Provincial authors, not merely because of his stylistic eclecticism, but also in conceptual terms: none of his contemporaries explored the internal world of the self with such a degree of complexity, self-reflexivity and inaccessibility.

NOTES

1 Even Michael Morrissey’s anthology The New Fiction (1985), which aimed to centralise non-realism, excluded ‘Riley’s Handbook’.

2 In Heideggerian understanding, a ‘factual situation’ is simply the negative quality of the situation, colloquially put, ‘the way it is’. 
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Kamila Shamsie was born in Karachi, Pakistan, in 1973. Educated at Hamilton College (BA) and the University of Massachusetts (MFA), Shamsie published her first novel, In the City by the Sea, in 1998. She has since published three more novels: Salt and Saffron (2000), Kartography (2002), and Broken Verses (2005). Pieces of Shamsie’s short fiction have appeared in numerous anthologies, including Leaving Home: Towards a New Millenium (2001) and And the World Changed: Contemporary Stories by Pakistani Women (2005). In Britain, Shamsie’s In the City by the Sea and Kartography have both been short-listed for the John Llewelyn Rhys/Mail on Sunday prize, and she has also been recognised by the Orange Prize for Fiction as one of the ‘21 writers for the 21st century’. In Pakistan, In the City by the Sea also won the Prime Minister’s Award for Literature in 1999, and Shamsie was recognised with the Patras Bokhari Award for Literature in English in 2004.

In addition to this creative work, Shamsie regularly contributes to journalistic and scholarly venues, such as The New York Times, New Statesman, Times Literary Supplement, Index on Censorship, and The Annual of Urdu Studies. She has also served on the English faculty at Hamilton College (Clinton, NY, USA), where she teaches courses in creative writing. Currently, Shamsie divides her time between London and Karachi.

In the interview that follows, Shamsie speaks to the similarities between history and fiction, especially about how Pakistan’s past — from Partition to the intranational ethnic conflicts in Karachi of the 1990s — influences her novels. Another noteworthy avenue of discussion within the interview is Shamsie’s articulation of the function of aesthetics. Merging the novel as a genre with what she views as the inherently political nature of ideas, Shamsie contends that aesthetics are about precision in representation through the use of metaphor rather than about constructing a realm outside of or above politics.

This interview began as a phone conversation in February 2006 and was completed via e-mail.
**Interview with Kamila Shamsie**

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**CC:** * Do novels matter at this point in time? What are your thoughts on the role of storytelling, the role of fiction in a time when it’s so clear that history is written by the people with the most power?*

**KS:** I suppose that was always true of history, so I don’t think that is what has changed so much. Actually, you could say that now, because we have so many forms of communication, so many outlets, that in some ways that balance has shifted slightly away from the people with power. You do have more voices coming out. The problem with the novel, specifically, is your readership. Particularly in a place like Pakistan, where you have very low literacy rates. When you’ve written a novel in English, then your readership is even smaller. You can’t really make grand claims about what role your novel — or anyone’s novel — might have in the nation’s consciousness. That doesn’t mean that I’m giving up on it. I think there’s always been a place for alternative forms of narrative, and they don’t have a huge and immediate impact — occasionally they do, but that’s very rare. But they stick around and there’s a sort of ripple effect. People can go back to them. Everything you read sort of adds up to create the sum total of who you are. That’s not to be underestimated.

**CC:** *What was it that made you decide to pursue writing in English if you were aware of readership limitations in Pakistan?*

**KS:** It’s the only language I know well enough to write in. I didn’t have a choice. Also, I write because I love the English language. To me, even if tomorrow I went out and became fluent in something else, my desire to write is so tied up with that particular language that I can’t really see a separation.

**CC:** *You just used the phrase, ‘alternative forms of narrative’. I would be inclined to view history as a form of narrative myself. I don’t know that everyone would agree with us. What brings you to this way of thinking of history as narrative?*

**KS:** When you grow up under a military dictator with a lot of censorship, how else are you going to think about it? We used to open the morning newspaper and see how ‘official histories’ are being written, but you know they’re fiction. It’s also interesting when you grow up so close to Partition. I remember, at a very early age — because half my family is in India — thinking how easily I might have been Indian rather than Pakistani. If I were, I know I would view things very differently. I was aware, even as a young child, that there is no such thing as the fixed truth of what happened.
CC: How did it come to pass that your family split? It sounds very similar to the family in Salt and Saffron.

KS: It’s extremely similar, though not so dramatic. My family is still speaking to each other. There was no silence across the border. Both my parents’ parents had siblings who stayed in India and siblings who came to Pakistan. They have different reasons: some going with the Muslim League, others sticking with Congress. Some of it had to do with economic considerations: some people wanting to stay with their land, others thinking they had a better economic future in Pakistan. There were all kinds of reasons for that happening.

CC: Is it accurate to say that your family is muhajir?1

KS: Yes.

CC: So there’s an obvious connection to Kartography. Can you explain some of those tensions that arose in the 1980s in Karachi?

KS: At Partition, Karachi went — overnight — from being a city of 100,000 to a city of one million. Now it’s a city of about 15 million. When that initial influx happened, it was all muhajirs from across the border. Because they came from parts of India where education levels were higher, the muhajirs came into Karachi as the most educated group. Obviously, that’s going to lead to tensions; there are always tensions between migrant communities and existing communities. When there are such huge migrations, virtually overnight, it’s going to be made worse by unbalanced education levels. Especially when the smaller and newer group has the advantage. That creates even more problems. There was a quota system set up in the province of Sindh, which I’m not going to go into too much, but by the 1980s the muhajirs in Karachi felt that the quota system there, which didn’t exist in any other province, was hugely acting against them.2 If you were from rural parts, if you could prove such connections, it was much easier to get university admission and civil service jobs and all kinds of things. The muhajirs politicised; there was a political group — the MQM — formed. It became a strong political party in Karachi, and it was a loggerheads with the central government, Benazir Bhutto’s government, over all kinds of things. A lot of violence erupted from that. That started in the ’80s and really reached a crescendo in the mid-’90s, when the latter half of Kartography is set.

CC: When one looks at the muhajirs and the tensions in Karachi, it seems that historian Ayesha Jalal’s views are accurate. She contends that Partition effectively enabled the mapping of a non-territorially defined ideology of Muslim nationhood onto a territorially defined geographic region.
KS: It also has to be said that the non-territorially defined people come believing that the culture they come from is superior. The muhajirs came largely from parts of India with a very strong sense of their cultural heritage — Delhi, Lucknow, and so on. They came with the attitude that we’re here to be Pakistani, but we’re not here to be integrated into the ethnic life of the province we find ourselves in. Just because we live in Sindh, doesn’t mean we’re Sindhi.

CC: The muhajirs wanted to raise identity above a provincial level?

KS: They were very snobbish. They simply believed and continue to — and I say this coming from a family of this sort — that they were culturally superior. They did look down on the others, and they did have a sense that their way was better than the way of those who lived in the area. That was part of the tension. There was no question of integrating or amalgamating. Of course, the snobbery works both ways. I have sat in rooms listening to Punjabi friends of mine making horribly disparaging comments about muhajirs.

CC: These are the sorts of ingrained tensions that, in Kartography, both Raheen and Karim are dealing with. Where would you put Karim? As a boy, he seems sensitive to this snobbery and privilege but, toward the end, he wants to embrace that superiority so that he and Raheen, as a couple, don’t have to face all these difficulties. Raheen seems to be on a separate track.

KS: The dividing factor in Pakistan, more than anything else, is class ... and also the snobbery of class. Raheen and Karim both belong to the upper middle class — the elite who, regardless of their ethnicity, are able to live in a certain bubble and not deal too much with anything else that’s going on. Karim is a lot more sensitive than Raheen, particularly as a child, to everything that’s going on. Then he moves away to England, and it’s that odd sense of dislocation where you want to be passionately involved with something that you’re not actually actively a part of. In his case, Karim writes all these letters to Raheen in which he gets upset over how she’s not engaged enough with the place, but he never goes home to Pakistan. Raheen then thinks that it’s easy enough for him to talk about, but she lives there. Karim just stays away and rants at her. I think that when Karim wants to slip away from the world he has grown up in simply so that he does not have to deal with the problems of ethnicity, privilege, and so forth, it’s not really Karim’s true self. It’s a moment of pure exhaustion. He doesn’t want to deal with it; he just wants Raheen in his life. By the end, Karim comes back: if we need to figure anything out, it’s how are we going to exist in this class/nation context. Otherwise, it’s not worth it.
CC: *If class is such a dividing force in the nation, as you’ve just described Karim and Raheen’s love relationship, it suggests that there’s no protective cover around one’s personal life. Is there a divide — perhaps a permeable one — between one’s personal and public positions?*

KS: In a way, yes. Both Karim and Raheen have to figure out a way to negotiate a personal self through all these issues of the public sphere; but you can’t simply ignore the public sphere. All these issues of class and ethnicity and history and ethnic divide aren’t just a part of the nation’s history, but they’ve also become a part of your family’s history. They become part of your daily life and how you interact with those around you. So, you have to take all that on board.

CC: *In Kartography, there is also the story of Maheen and Bangladesh. How are these class and ethnicity issues tied to this other storyline?*

KS: That storyline deals more with the ethnic problems. Maheen and Zafar both belong to the same social class. They mingle quite freely regardless of ethnic grouping. However, there comes a point in history when suddenly ethnicity exerts a kind of primary pull. You can’t get away from it. You can’t get away from the fact that Maheen is Bengali and that Zafar isn’t. That leads to the rift between them. Zafar, much like Raheen, his daughter, later, is happy just to say, ‘Let’s ignore it. It doesn’t really matter’. Of course, it comes in because of the public sphere pressing against you, making demands on you.

CC: *You used the word ‘dislocation’ when you were talking about Karim’s departure from Karachi. I’m interested in this notion of ‘dislocation’, because, in several of your books:, there is always this movement away. There’s a return, too. How does this movement function in your fiction?*

KS: Different purposes. With Karim, it’s very much about that sense of dislocation. He actually migrates, whereas the others — Aliya in *Salt and Saffron*, Raheen in *Kartography*, for instance — go away for university but come back to Pakistan. They’re only away eight months of the year. Going away serves different purposes. When I started *Salt and Saffron*, I saw Aliya on an airplane. What is significant in that beginning when Aliya is in England is the people she meets there, rather than the place itself. There’s irony in the fact that it’s in England where Aliya can meet her Indian relatives, because they would never meet in Karachi. The ‘going away’ is used there to get Aliya to meet her relatives and to get her to meet a boy whom she would never meet in Karachi.

   It is a sociological fact; I never thought, ‘will these characters go away or not?’ It was just clear from their backgrounds that they would. If they didn’t, then their not going away would become this big thing that would
need to be dealt with. I didn’t particularly want that to be part of the story. So, now they’ve gone away; let’s do something with that. For Aliya, it’s being in England and meeting these relatives; but I didn’t want her to be studying in England, because then she would meet them over a prolonged period of time. I wanted there to be just a short visit, and she meets Khaleel and her Indian relatives, and then she leaves again.

In *Kartography*, with Raheen, I wanted there to be a going away that in some way could have moved her closer to Karim and then didn’t. But finally there’s a way for her to experience being away from home … and to miss home. Perhaps that should have brought Raheen and Karim closer together, but it doesn’t — yet. I did want to have it be a way for her to have a stronger sense of Karachi as this place that she misses and loves, particularly because she’s away when all the violence is going on. I think it strengthens her sense of being tied to the place. As she’s in this university world, where everything is sort of bucolic and idyllic around her, she’s away from this other world in which things are completely falling apart. She knows that this second world really is her world. Being away at university serves that function, to make her feel more strongly that she needs to go back.

**CC:** *From this quote, it sounds much like Sara Suleri’s realisation in *Meatless Days* that she ‘became historical, a creature gravely ready to admit that significance did not sit upon someone else’s table like a magazine to which one could or could not subscribe’ (127). Why does dislocation work in this way? Is it maturity? Responsibility?*

**KS:** I think it’s a few things. One is the issue of maturity. For Raheen, it’s between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two. When you’re at university, it’s the first time really you’re being asked to interrogate ideas. It’s the early ’90s, everyone’s talking about identity politics in American universities. If you grow up in one place your entire life, you never actually question the place or your relationship to it. You’re simply in it; and then you leave and go away into the questioning environment of the university. You’re missing that place in ways you weren’t expecting to, so the place becomes very much the centre of how you’re framing your past. When you’re at university in America, there’s lots of questions that will be asked there. You have to find a way to make them relevant to your own experience. At that point, the strongest experience you’re having right then is not being home. The relationship between you and the place itself becomes one that you start thinking about.

**CC:** *In *Salt and Saffron*, when Aliya is in London meeting her relatives and Khaleel, she starts using the vocabulary of postcolonial discourse. When you talk about being away from home and about interrogating these ideas*
at school, does the predominance of postcolonial studies assist in this? How does it not turn into a kind of nostalgia? An exclusivist, rigidified identity, that questing back for roots?

**KS:** I think one effect of the characters’ considering their connection to place would be to make you question postcolonial studies, which seems like a hankering back to 1947 and even pre-, when you feel that the problems of your nation are so far past that already. To be entirely frank, when I was in university going to postcolonial classes, I would think, ‘why are we talking about this stuff?’ It’s so not relevant. It might have been relevant to my parents’ lives, but we’re a completely different generation now. Our vexed relationship with subaltern positions or with the English is just not an issue. That makes you feel, on one hand, impatient with postcolonial discourse. On the other hand, at its best, it asks you to question the relationship of nations to each other, the relationships of different communities to a nation, of the individual to the nation, to the community. Yet, I am not sure how much of it Aliya takes on board. She’s very flippant about it. Aliya has this great mechanism of being able to be very witty and bright in a way that often allows her not to think deeply about it. If you were to ask her a question in a classroom, she would have a very quick response but it wouldn’t be a deep response.

**CC:** All three of your women protagonists — Aliya, Aasmani, and Raheen — have that witty veneer. Though we, as readers, can see that all three of them have a deeper awareness of what’s going on.

**KS:** It’s the strongest in Aliya; Raheen isn’t quite as witty. She’s funny with Karim, but she doesn’t have Aliya’s wit. So, Raheen is less able to charm her way through the world. With Aasmani, it’s much more brittle. You can see the hurt much easier because there’s so much she’s trying to cover up. They all use their intelligence as a defense mechanism in a way that also works against them.

**CC:** At a lecture here at the University of North Carolina Wilmington, Sara Suleri-Goodyear talked about generations. The first generation after Partition had the responsibility to establish what it meant to be a writer of Pakistan or of India. That’s the older generation. What is the responsibility of this younger generation of writers of/from Pakistan?

**KS:** The ‘younger generation’ certainly goes along with the topic of alternate forms of history that we talked about. Writers like myself, Mohsin Hamid, and Uzma Aslam Khan, who are all born within three or four years of each other — Sorayya Khan is just a few years older, but I’ll put her in there as well — I think it’s a question of, okay, we’ve got the nation, now what? There are so many areas of silence specifically in English language
literature in Pakistan. Urdu language literature is another matter. There’s so much that hasn’t been written about in English, whether it’s the ’71 war, the nuclear tests, or what happened in Karachi in the ’90s, the Baluchistan stuff which no one has touched yet. Maybe in some ways by looking at them we’re looking at the nation as it now exists and what’s going on in it. I think it’s still a question of nation because Pakistan is still such a young country. I don’t think any of those initial problems are over; maybe more is getting added to them.

CC: Earlier you talked about how issues of class, ethnicity, and history are tied up in the public sphere of the nation to the extent that they inexorably affect personal lives, as Raheen’s and Karim’s struggles demonstrate. Is your characterisation of the second generation of writers as still concerned with the problems of the nation also contending that these young writers are changing the novel as a genre — by which I mean: are these young writers somehow rendering the private aspects of novel-reading more public?

KS: If there’s an absence of the separation between the private and public, as we were talking about earlier, the novel must reflect that. The novel is essentially an individualist, private act — but even private acts don’t exist in isolation. So, you read as a private individual in a certain public sphere.

CC: What sorts of ways can novelistic conventions be altered so that readers have to acknowledge that they’re engaging in the public sphere?

KS: I don’t think I’m saying anything radical of the novel. If you’re in a political context, everything becomes political. The novel itself does not necessarily have to alter its form for that politicisation to happen. When the novel is really working, it is a way of using narrative to explore ideas — whether they’re about love, nation, whatever it is. The novel explores ideas. You can’t separate ideas from politics. To say that the novel is ever un-political is a false notion to begin with.

CC: In your most recent three novels, you draw attention to the act of storytelling. In Broken Verses, this self-consciousness is accomplished through Ed’s impersonation of the Poet. Can you talk about drawing attention to story-telling and the voice of the story-teller?

KS: History and story are things that you can come at from different angles. The idea of there being a lot of different narratives going on at any given time in any given place is something that I was very interested in thinking about in Broken Verses. You can have one narrative about feminism in Pakistan saying it failed, or you can have another saying, here is this
incredible force that you now have to continue on with. Within Aasmani’s
generation there’s a responsibility to recognise the powerful narrative that
you can continue on from. With Ed’s impersonation, I wanted to talk about
the different narratives and how convincing one can be. You realise that
there’s actually another way of looking at something entirely. Perhaps a
certain version of things was fed to you to create a certain specific reaction,
to make you believe something that was never true to begin with.

CC: *How can we, as readers of your books — specifically — and as humans
bombarded by narratives all the time, know when we can settle on
something? Or is it always contingent?*

KS: You settle on the versions that seem truest to you. Near the end of *Broken
Verses*, Aasmani says something like, ‘This is the story I’m making up for
myself; it’s the one I’m willing to live with’. I don’t think that means it’s
not to be trusted. There are many stories that are co-existing. Some of them
are entirely false, and you have to see the falseness in them. Even among
the true stories, there are different ways of looking at them. The way you
look at them says a lot about who you are, what you believe, and what
you’re willing to stand up for. The books we read also shape our ideas of
the world and what we believe of it.

CC: *Is Aasmani’s relationship with her mother meant to demonstrate that
feminism in Pakistan has failed?*

KS: No. I meant that the perceived failure of feminism in Pakistan was one
narrative. Aasmani’s failure, at the beginning of the book, grows out of
her anger, her resentment, her feelings of abandonment. So, one of the
things she does is to say that her mother’s feminism was for nothing. By
the end of the book, when she’s watching the video Shahnaz sends her,
her mother’s saying, ‘What really matters is what the next generation —
Aasmani’s generation — thinks of us because history is a rolling process.
The seeds of what we have sown now may not bear fruit for many years’. What Aasmani then realises is that what counted most was that initial
incredible stand they took and that you can’t expect them to have done
everything, to have fixed the world. You can’t sit back and say, ‘Well,
they didn’t fix the world, so why bother’. Instead, you have to say, ‘I’m
the child of that. They did what they could. Now I have to pick it up and
move forward’. That’s the position that I think Aasmani is inching toward
at the end. I didn’t want Aasmani to have the grand epiphany and suddenly
become the great reformer.

CC: *Considering *Broken Verses*’ ending ... you were just saying that the
previous generation took a stand and embarked upon this battle or this
conflict, how does the younger generation carry that forward? Is it always
Interview with Kamila Shamsie

KS: It’s always going to be the old situation of patriarchy, of course, though its manifestations may change. With Aasmani, it hasn’t; the laws her mother was fighting against are still on the books. Some of those situations have stayed the same, but the world in many ways has moved forward. One of the things that Aasmani’s generation has available to it that her mother’s didn’t is a much freer media. This is one of the only suggestions I have of Aasmani moving forward: her saying, ‘Let’s use the media in some way’. That is one way you have a different battleground, so that you don’t have ten thousand women marching on the capital. Suddenly you’ve got the internet, the television, the radio; you’ve got all these other channels of reaching people; and then you have to then sit back and say: ‘How can we use this? These are tools that we didn’t have before. And we need to figure out what to do with them’.

CC: At the beginning of this conversation, you confessed your admiration of the English language. Clearly this is tied to an aesthetic sense. Your piece on Agha Shahid Ali includes this wonderful line about pondering every word. You recall that you were skeptical; you didn’t think it was possible that you would become that interested in language. At the same time, I hear you talking about your characters and your stories as real, as other human beings. Where does the aesthetic realm exist for you in your work, and how does it connect to what we will call ‘reality’?

KS: Aesthetics is the form I use to convey notions of reality. Here’s an idea, now let’s find an aesthetic form to translate that into; or let’s see how I can discuss these things using language in the best way I know how to use it. Aesthetics isn’t just about prettiness, of course. Ultimately, it’s about being able to take whatever your medium is — whether it’s clay or language or your own body, if you’re a dancer — and deploying it with utter precision. Convey what it is you want to convey in a way that will strike other people.

CC: I was just reading Speaking Havoc, which is an analysis of literary and cinematic trauma in South Asia. The author talks about the idea of aestheticising trauma and how that runs the risk of turning the trauma into a spectacle rather than turning it into an event with ethical implications.

KS: I think the word ‘aesthetics’ tends to be used in a variety of ways. The way I’ve tried to define — it’s not about, ‘Oh, look, isn’t this pretty’ — it is about precision. I’ve been reading W.G. Sebald’s A Natural History of Destruction where he talks about the failure of German writers to adequately deal with the firebombing of German cities. He says that when
they do try to write about it, they fail because they turn to aesthetics; their
treatment sort of makes it prettified. I wondered how he wanted them to
deal with it. Then, I read in a later part of the book a passage where Sebald
approvingly quotes a passage which talks about destruction through
powerful metaphor. For me, the use of metaphor is very much part of
aesthetics. These distinctions we make to characterise aesthetics vary a
lot. I think we need to avoid any way of making things pretty just to make
them pretty even if the thing we are describing isn’t pretty at all. Aesthetics
has to be about affects. So you want your sentences to produce a certain
effect. Aesthetics is the way you figure out the best way to do that.

CC: I appreciate that articulation and your use of the word ‘precision’. That
word and your emphasis on affect recognises how any sort of representation
is going to mediate what it’s trying to represent. This aesthetic mediation,
though, isn’t meant to detach what’s being represented from its contexts
and its consequences. Which brings me to the phrase you used in your
‘Migrate or Die’ piece published in Index on Censorship: ‘in a world
of consequences’. Am I getting a glimpse of some unified way that you
interact with the world through your writing? Precision — affect —
consequences.

KS: I think it’s a sense of what I want to be doing. How well I’m doing is another
matter. On the one hand, a novel is an artefact, a work of art but, on the
other hand, it’s a work of art that is placed within a world of consequences.
I do have both these things in mind when I’m working on them. Hopefully,
they shouldn’t work against each other, but should inform each other in
some way.

CC: What is the next project you’re working on?

KS: The next project is a novel which spans sixty years. It starts with the
bombing of Nagasaki. I’ve decided to move out of Pakistan for a bit.

CC: How do you approach this? Are you doing tonnes and tonnes of
research?

KS: Tonnes. It’s a novel that moves around. It starts in Nagasaki then moves
to Delhi, Karachi, then moves to Turkey. It goes all over the place. While
I was working on the Nagasaki portion, for every sentence I wanted to
write, I found myself on the internet for hours checking various facts and
details and going to the reference books I have. There is a different kind
of work that goes into this section even though it’s only about forty-five
pages. Quite possibly it required more work than the next two hundred
pages will.

CC: Is it a nuclear thread that connects all of these places?
KS: I started thinking it would be a nuclear thread, but it seems to want to be a migrant thread. One of the things that I’ve been looking at is this idea of, as people move from one place to another, what is their relationship to the place they move to and to the place they leave behind? Also, what is the relationship of the people already existing in a place to the newcomers? It looks at the latter half of the twentieth-century through a series of migrations and movements.

CC: Tell me what you mean when you say that you thought it would be a nuclear thread but it wants to be about migration. How does your narrative get away from you?

KS: It always does. Every time. The novel shapes itself. That’s why I talk about my characters as though they’re real: they end up doing things which can be very vexing but fabulous. To start with, I had the question of how could there be, in Nagasaki, a second bomb. How there could be a first bomb, I don’t know — but how do you defend a second bomb? This has been in my head since I was about eighteen. So I thought, let’s start a novel there. As soon as I put characters into that place, they wanted to go and do their own thing. There’s a character who will migrate to Nagasaki and another who will migrate away from it. Very quickly I realised that was the thread I would follow.

CC: Mentioning Nagasaki and the reality of two bombs makes me wonder how people who have perpetrated barbaric acts can carry on into the future in good faith. How do we Americans carry on? I also think about Musharraf in 2002 acknowledging what happened between the Pakistanis and Bangladeshis in 1971. What do you think about the victors carrying on and remaining human?

KS: One thing we need to recognise is that they do and they are. The fact that Truman could drop one bomb and then a second bomb doesn’t mean he didn’t madly love his wife, for instance; but frankly, that doesn’t mean a thing to the people of Nagasaki or Hiroshima, and why should it? I think one of the ways people carry on after their own barbaric acts is that it’s so easy to justify so much. You say things like, ‘they were hard decisions that had to be made’. That’s language being used at its worst, when it’s being used simply to justify, to ease a conscience. It’s very effective. You really can convince yourself and many people around you of pretty much anything.

NOTES
1 ‘Muhajir’ literally means ‘migrant’. In post-Partition Pakistan it is the term used to refer to those people who journeyed across the new border from India to Pakistan.
Unlike other Pakistanis who may have regional and linguistic loyalties within Pakistan’s borders due to their pre-Partition ties to places, muhajirs may be more readily identified as Pakistanis invested in the Muslim League’s ideological concept of Pakistan as a nation for Muslims.

This quota system was established to benefit the native Sindhis, who faced competition from the newly-arrived muhajirs, a generally better educated and trained, not to mention wealthier, segment of the population.

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The End of Jewish Jerusalem

I have no idea how my father met Eshkol, but there has never been more than a handful of Israelis living in Ottawa. Eshkol’s television sales and repair shop had an oblong white sign with large navy blue lettering hanging outside, the kind you see on cheap motels: Open Seven Days a Week. My brother, Our-Stan, and I hung out there on Sundays and sometimes after school. This allowed my mother to shop uninhibited without the bother of two kids tagging along. She couldn’t leave us at home with my father because he disliked days off. They were something to be avoided like running out of gas or milk. So, we were dropped off at Eshkol’s and tried to stay out of the way while my father worked. ‘Whatever you do, don’t bother Eshkol,’ Abba warned us every week. ‘Without him you wouldn’t have food in your stomachs,’ he added.

‘Life is avoda, work,’ he’d insist when my mother would ask him to take a break. ‘I don’t know who told you Canadians that life was about happiness.’

I never knew my father was Yemenite until I was already in university. My mother had told me he was Israeli and he was not a talker. I knew he was as strong as the desert heat and just as relentless. The clang of barbells hitting a floor or clashing together still make me think of him; his powerful inhalations and robust exhalations could tilt you off balance if you weren’t careful and stood too close. To watch my father doing his daily work-outs was to fill your being with a potent mixture of admiration and fear. Admiration that the human body could be capable of such physical strength; there were dozens of framed photographs on the basement walls of my father on his back with his hairy, dark brown arms and legs in the air balancing all six of us kids on his four limbs and smiling with ease into the camera. Then there was the fear, the shattering sounds of impact: fist meeting plaster, plaster giving way to muscle. It’s a good thing his own father apprenticed him to a carpenter — it made it a breeze for him to fix the holes his flying fists or his muscular heels put through the walls. It made it cheaper, too.

My eyes often lingered on my friends’ fathers. I would see them at pick-up or drop-off time at my Jewish day school. They wore neckties and suit pants and looked like they were on their way to, or had just come from temperature-controlled rooms. But my father wore the identical pair of plum-blue shorts all year round with wide-strapped brown or black sandals and pink, green or yellow short-sleeved button-downs that he only ever buttoned half way, revealing his massive hairy chest. Either the customers at Eshkol’s didn’t care or didn’t come in often enough to buy or repair a television set to notice. I am convinced that he got those shorts looting makeshift Egyptian army bases when he was a paratrooper in the Sinai War. I even mentioned this to him once.
‘Oh vadai, we take lots from them. Blankets, food, you know, cans? My mother blessed me she was so happy. In Jerusalem it was freezing.’

‘And your shorts?’

‘What these? The blue?’

‘Yes those.’

‘You going to help me match the socks or you going to talk shtuyot? Now you don’t like my shorts?’

In the icy Ottawa winters when the radio was instructing the public to leave each tap running slightly so the water pipes wouldn’t freeze, expand and burst, my father added a winter coat to his wardrobe, one that reached the edges of his shorts. His exposed thighs and calves were covered in black hair curling out of his dark brown skin. His thin neatly-trimmed black moustache sat on his purple lips that hid gleaming white teeth. He had no idea that he looked like a dangerous foreign flasher to the average pale, thin-boned Ottawan.

As a teenager, from October through March I dreaded escorting him into the bank, which he often asked me to do as his spelling was not good enough to fill out withdrawal and deposit slips. I held my breath as he pulled back the heavy glass doors; were people simply going to throw their money at us before they fled or push some red button that would signal the impending arrival of a police car?

‘Abba it’s minus thirty outside. Your legs are naked and you’re wearing a long coat. Please can you put on a pair of pants?’

‘I put boots okay. This make you feel better?’

‘No Abba, a big coat, bare legs and boots? They will think you’re a flasher or a thief or both. Can’t you take Mom to the bank?’

‘What does it mean flasher? Your mother with me in a bank! She only spends money. If she knew what I save she buy more junk for the cupboards. When I was a kid I do whatever my father told me and I don’t tell him what to wear, so don’t get too smart.’

I pictured my father then as a twelve-year-old boy in Israel’s first year of life: 1948. He was late for school again. He had spent too much time in the provisional control room on his roof, inhaling the sights and sounds of the emerging Israeli air force. There are pilots practically within arm’s reach speaking in low tones as they boil water for their first cup of coffee. A few of them are sleeping in makeshift tents or single worn-out sleeping bags, but most have already scraped the last spoonfuls of dysa, a hot breakfast cereal, out of their bowls and are preparing for another day of war.

‘Assaf, get the leftovers while they are still hot. Assaf!’ his mother calls to him in Arabic. She does not speak Temani like his father, only Hebrew and Arabic.

Assaf scatters the rest of the yellow grains to the five rust-coloured chickens they keep in their front yard, and begins to climb the wooden ladder the soldiers have attached to the back wall of their stone house: these are the stairs to the airport headquarters.
‘Hello boy,’ says the first soldier he sees as he steps onto the black, freshly tarred roof. ‘It’s Assaf, right?’

The boy smiles. He cannot understand the soldier’s question. A Jewish soldier, who speaks Hebrew in a strange accent, tells him there are men here from unimaginable places like Canada and Austria and many are not Jewish. They are all volunteers, eager to help the new Jewish state.

‘This must be very exciting for you Assaf, eh? Imagine the roof of your house is full of soldiers, your field an airport, a boy’s dream, eh?’

The twelve-year-old smile re-emerges, but his mouth does not move.

‘Well, here’s your breakfast. Take it while it’s hot. You’re lucky we always get more than enough. Beats your rations, eh? Maybe in the afternoon there will be some candy for you and your little brother.’

I see him pat Assaf’s head and return to the heap of maps and papers that cover a turned-over crate that doubles as a table. The boy steals another minute to watch him as he picks up his walkie-talkie and begins to speak. Soon the pilot is deep in conversation with another soldier. They are marking up the maps in different colours: black lines that close off parts, red lines even they can’t cross, blue circles of open spaces.

Six soldiers have their heads stuck inside small airplane engines in the recently flattened field behind Assaf’s home. He can hear them tinkering with the metal parts, the occasional curse in Arabic, Hebrew or English erupts from their mouths as they struggle with something heavy or something that won’t come loose.

Every few minutes their heads pop up like rabbits emerging from their hiding places, and they sip steaming cups of muddy Turkish coffee and take long drags on their cigarettes as they pause. There is the constant whine of airplanes overhead, the occasional sound of a shell bursting in the close-by centre of Jerusalem. On the ground, the chickens are fighting, squawking loudly for the last seeds on the hard soil in the front garden. Strange languages reach his ears and he watches the accompanying vivid hand gestures the men use in order to make themselves understood.

‘Assaf! Your little brother is hungry.’

His mother’s voice penetrates his thoughts. He becomes conscious of the hot pot of dysa in his hands. He stirs the cereal with the wooden spoon his mother gave him before he climbed the ladder, and turns in the direction of his kitchen at the same time.

‘Ima, I’m coming.’

In an instant he is inside his own kitchen and his mother is spooning out the dysa into small white hard bowls.

‘So nice of the soldiers to give us their leftovers. What else do they have up there, Assaf? I see many supplies coming and going. Is there anything else today?’
'I didn’t have a chance to ask, but yesterday the blonde one said they would share everything with us, maybe candy later. I will check again after school Ima,’ he answers her gently and then leans over to kiss her, pleased that she allows him this show of affection; normally she shies away from even a quick hug.

* * * * *

When I was eight, wars and daring soldiers were the stuff of television shows and movies I disliked watching. I had a lot of time to watch television at Eshkol’s where my father worked. He was the new manager of the large television store. There you could bring in every kind of television that had ever existed, practically obsolete black-and-whites; gleaming polished new ones that still smelled like Styrofoam from the delivery boxes; portable ones as small as lunch-pails. You could have your television repaired, trade it in, or sell it. Eshkol’s shop was in a commercial area of town called Glenn Hill. It was one long line of fast-food restaurants: McDonald’s, Dairy Queen, Wendy’s, Burger King. In between there were independently owned shops that sold shoes, household objects, clothing and there also was Eshkol’s TV Repairs and Sales.

Eshkol was his surname but no one seemed to know his first name. He had bald-in-the-front hair of a burnt-orange colour. His high, white creased forehead and his thick brown glasses dominated his face and he had no other distinguishing facial features, no beard or moustache. A black leather motorcycle jacket was his only distinctive article of clothing. I can’t tell you if he was tall or short, fat or thin, but he was probably none of those things or my mother would have mentioned it to me often enough that I would remember. She has a habit of referring to people by weight and height that is out of fashion.

‘Which one? You mean the daughter? Oh, she was always big, even as a girl. What can you do? The guy who came to fix the windows? God he was tall. People say Jews aren’t tall, but my own brother was six-foot-four. But who remembers? He’s been gone so long. What a waste.’

Next door to Eshkol’s was a children’s hair dressing salon. There were Sesame Street drawings on the walls. Big Bird smiling down at Ernie and Burt, Cookie Monster with a plate full of crumbs, his blue furry cheeks bulging. A large paved parking lot encircled both shops and Eshkol’s cherry-red motorcycle was always parked outside the front glass door of his own store. Eshkol’s door had a bell attached to it which announced each entry. Inside the shop it was large and spacious, and humming with the muted sounds of TV. You entered into a thinly carpeted showroom full of the latest television sets.

The most prestigious was an Electrolux, but there were many large floor models with chestnut-wood panelling. As you went further in there was the repair area: long, dirty and narrow. Middle-aged Jewish men with names like Syd and Saul were bent over dusty television tubes, twisting around different coloured wiring with miniature screwdrivers.
Calendars depicting plastic smiling women in strapless or low-cut tops and tight jeans or elastic-waist shorts hung on nails jammed into the walls. Backless television sets covered most of the available space except the inches occupied by black saucer-like ashtrays and coffee cups that always had cigarette ash mixed in with the dregs.

The repairmen taught me how to ‘vacuum’ out the thick dust from the maze of wires at the back of a TV, how to put the tubes in the ‘tester’ to see if they still worked or needed replacing. A third section of the shop was partitioned off with glass walls. It was the office for calculating payments and receipts. There were three black telephones on the large desk. The kind with round dials and the phone number of the shop written in blue ink in the centre. There was also an answering machine, a grey filing cabinet, and wastepaper basket.

A wide flight of stained, carpeted stairs led down into the basement that I knew was as large as the upstairs. I never went down there because it emanated foreign, off-putting smells. The air changed, thickened, as you lowered yourself onto the first step, which I sometimes did half seriously, already panic-stricken at my childish daring. My lungs suddenly seemed threatened, in danger of closing, as though there was an invisible wall between the first and second floor.

My father told me that Eshkol was divorced and he lived downstairs. His ex-wife lived in a camping trailer near-by and they were still friends. When my father saw me place my sneakers on the first step, he cautioned me with the tilt of his head and his raised eyebrows not to go downstairs. I had learned at a young age how to read my father’s rippling body language and wide-eyed facial expressions in much the same way as I imagine he had internalized the meaning of his own father’s small movements, his voice.

* * * * *

‘Rivka!’

All three of them jump at Father’s customary bark. Father wears the clothing of his socialist political party, Mapai. Loyal Mapainiks wear khaki from head to toe, Shabbat and weekdays. He always adds his dusty gray hat to this uniform, never a kippah. Assaf thought he had gone to work.

‘Do you know what happened to me today?’ Father growls. ‘I was expecting my promotion. Went in early. That promotion was for me. In my hand.’

Three sets of eyes stare down at the cold stone floor. Even at seven, Adi knows better than to look up. His cereal-covered spoon hangs between his fingers. Now the dysa will be cold.

‘Do you know what they did? The mamzerim! Do you know what they did? They brought in this Russian Jew, some Ashkenazi from Russia. He doesn’t know the first thing. The first thing he does not know. They gave him the position and then they asked me, me who has been working, no, slaving for a decade and a
half for them, an honest to God slave I have been, they asked me to teach him the ropes. Can you believe that?

Father’s black eyes are exploding like the small pieces of shrapnel bursting on Ben Yehuda Street. Sharp and jagged. He is clean-shaven and he has smooth spotless desk-job hands. He glares at his wife. Finally she looks up.

‘Well, that’s your party,’ she spits at him in Arabic. ‘Your party whose behinds, you kiss day and night. What do you think? You’re a token Avraham. You know? One Kurdi, one Parsi, one Moroccai and one Temani. You went up a little, but no more. You’ll never go up more. That’s your party,’ she repeats.

Assaf can see her shoulders tense, and he knows her feet are ready. His own toes twitch inside his shoes.

‘Silence!’ Avraham snarls and lunges for her at the same time.

But she is too fast for him, too prepared. She dives into the next room and quickly hops onto the balcony; her most common escape route. The brothers hear her pounding feet on the stone path that leads to the green iron gate at the end of the garden. Soon she will be cursing her husband with her girlfriend, Mazal, over fresh doughy saluf dipped in hilbeh. Mazal feels sorry for her.

Father returns from the balcony. He is breathing heavily. He is young, healthy and has never smoked, but luckily for his wife he was never a good runner. Tears spill onto the floor and Assaf remembers his little brother, Adi.

‘Don’t worry. I will stay here until Ima gets back. I won’t leave you alone. Come Adi, finish the dysa.’

‘It’s cold now.’

I knew that in the centre of their living room stood a kerosene heater, called a primos. My father told me it had been their only source of heat until they bought an oven, but by then he’d become a soldier. Besides, kerosene was rationed along with all other necessary supplies in Jerusalem.

‘He is not alone. You have school now, no time to heat baby food. Get to work. You’ll be late. What will you be later on, the way you are about studies?’

‘I don’t want to go anyhow. I hate it. Why do you want me to go so much? You just said the Ashkenazim didn’t give you the job you wanted. Why do you push me toward them?’

‘You will learn something there, that’s why. What do the Temanim learn at school? They have nothing. The teachers don’t know much more than the students. Go.’

He said this last word in a tone that made my father understand; if he doesn’t get going his father will simply start barking unstoppably like the wild dog they kept tied outside in the back of the garden to scare the Arabs away. That was before the war, before the Arabs in the near-by villages fled, Abandoning their homes seemingly overnight.
Adi grabs his brother’s arm, but Assaf shakes it off gently and goes. It is finally spring, maybe he can start cleaning up people’s yards and save enough money to buy a bicycle.

‘Hey Assaf! You’re late, too? I will walk with you until my school.’ It was Moshiko, his best friend. He was half skipping half flying down the narrow sidewalk, with a worn-out *siddur* under one arm and a small piece of newspaper stuffed into his front pocket. Inside was flat brown pita stuffed with hard-boiled egg. Assaf notices it and realizes that he has nothing for lunch again. ‘My mother didn’t want to let me go today. She heard too much bombing in the night. It’s quieter now, so I begged her to let me go, otherwise, she’d have me feeding chickens and searching for wild herbs and grasses in the fields all day. I hear on *kibbutzim* they have real fruits and vegetables, maybe we should go there.’

‘*B’emet*? You beg to go to school. I wish I could go to your school. I swear if that teacher twists my ear today I will grow up to burn his house down.’

‘Misken you are. To *gehenom* with those white Jews, worse than the Arabs. Don’t worry. Next year you will be bar mitzvah, after that you can leave that awful place and come with the rest of us to school. Your father won’t be able to control you after thirteen. Besides, we’re going to make money. I’m learning how to fix engines. Motorcycles, cars, anything. I’ll teach you.’

‘You’ll teach me,’ Assaf repeats. ‘*Baseder*, my friend.’

A bomb explodes, but Moshiko and Assaf walked on. It isn’t close enough to stop and look for cover. The ground does not jump beneath their feet. Not yet.

‘Hey? There’s one of our small planes. Do you think they will let me practice on the engines a little? Use their tools?’ Moshiko asks.

‘We can ask them. My house has become the new Jewish border of Jerusalem,’ Assaf answers. He does not try to disguise his pride.

‘Your father, he doesn’t care about the airport?’

‘They promised to pay him after the war. You should have seen how they levelled the field. *Chik chak*. Nothing for them. They share everything with us. Come over later and see.’

They arrive at the corner where Moshiko turns off; for Assaf there is another kilometre and a half to go.

Father does not return home that night. Although it has never happened before, no one glances at the heavy iron gate or mentions his name.

‘Go up to the roof and give some fresh eggs to the soldiers.’

That’s all Mother says the entire evening while she boils wild grass in the week’s water ration. They will use whatever water is left in the pot for the dirty dishes, which they assemble and clean in one bucket and the remaining drops for the toilet.

Assaf does not go up to the roof until Moshiko arrives. A red-headed soldier shows the boys an airplane engine. The cigarette smoke fills the air and coffee
flows on the roof endlessly, like the British soldiers on their Sunday marches under the Occupation.

‘Hey, your eyes are red, ata baseder?’ Chaim asks Assaf. He is one of the soldiers in charge of the airport.

‘It’s just the smoke,’ he answers, half grinning.

‘Here, have a piece of chocolate.’

His hand was warm. Assaf feels him slip a square of chocolate into the pocket of his tight faded jacket. Moshiko’s head was buried in an airplane engine, but Assaf promises himself he will share the rare treat with him later.

As dawn breaks, the chickens wake the boys as usual and Assaf is the first to force himself out of bed and head for the washroom. They are the only ones on the street with an indoor toilet and bath. The rest of the crowded road uses outhouses and the public bathhouse once a week.

Another day passes with no sign of Father. Mother’s face relaxes a little. Maybe he has disappeared like the British patrols and their vicious dogs that never drooled on their polished black boots.

After school, the boys help Mother. They slice hard prickly sabras, the only fruit growing wild in Jerusalem. There is a knock at the iron gate.

‘A policeman came. It’s your father. He’s in the hospital,’ Mother tells them when she returns down the stone path. The only hospital is run by nuns.

‘His leg is broken; shrapnel from a bomb. He was so furious about the promotion when he left here. He probably just galloped off to work like a donkey and thought himself invisible in the centre of town, in the middle of a war.’

Mother could have been discussing the squashed juke she found on the bottom of her shapeless shoe in the morning, or the time Mazal accidentally tore the wedding dress she had preserved all the way from Yemen for her seven daughters. She could never be sentimental about a wedding dress, even one that was not her own.

An explosion erupts in Assaf’s mind and he remembers the bomb that exploded the day before on his way to school.

‘You have to go to the hospital to visit him after school tomorrow,’ she continues quietly.

The sound of the bomb is still in-between the boy’s ears. It had not seemed threateningly close. Sometimes only one landed and then there was time before another one. Time enough to get to a bomb shelter. Sometimes many landed one after the other and there wasn’t much time. The friends had dug their hands deeper into their pockets and suddenly their shoulders were touching, but they kept on walking. Assaf wondered if he should save money for a bicycle, which would lengthen the life of his shoes or if he should buy shoes he could run fast in.

‘Assaf, you must promise me you will go. He still has the paycheck from Mapai in his pocket. If you don’t visit him he won’t give us anything.’
‘I have to go to a school I hate. I have to go to a hospital. I don’t want to see him.’
‘The soldiers won’t be on the roof forever. Who knows how long? There is little need for cleaners during a war maybe.’
She stops there and her hard brown eyes catch his and he cannot look away.
‘Okay, base der Ima.’
Before the sun sets the sky is a rich cloudless blue, the airplanes are still visible. Assaf looks up and spots two. They are flying low and he knows in minutes they will land in the field behind his home, then the weary pilots will climb the ladder up to his roof for some lukewarm water or a cup of hot coffee. The faint purr of the engines overhead comfort him. He is curious about the red-headed soldier; is he one of the pilots in the sky now and what supplies is he carrying today? Powdered eggs and powdered milk or bullets and rifles?

* * * * *

Eshkol’s was something I had forgotten about, like the pilots my father met on his roof as a boy during Israel’s first war. Then one day my mother was exhausted from showing off my new son. We were visiting Ottawa from Israel and she had organised a lavish Shabbat tea. Some of her old friends I remembered and others were strangers. There was one woman who was fond of my baby; she had trouble returning him.

‘You don’t remember her?’ my mother asked me afterwards, as she filled her outstretched palm with the crumbs she was sweeping off the table with her other hand. ‘Well, I guess you wouldn’t.’

Then she laughed girlishly; like we were friends at a sleepover, not mother and daughter. I felt a kind of gaiety surge through her like it made her touch her youth again to think about it. Afterwards, this surprised me as I would have expected something closer to a look of disgust and a shake of the head, as though turning away from a close-up view of road-kill while sitting in the passenger seat.

‘Abba, why did you hang out with these guys? How could you work for someone like Eshkol?’ I asked him after the conversation with my mother. I couldn’t stop thinking about the woman at the tea, holding my baby and cooing.

‘Hang out, shmang out. What does it mean to hang out? Eshkol, he was downstairs, he gave me his shop to run. That’s how I paid the mortgage, the bills, you think your mother could care less about bills? Visa’s calling me, not her. What do I care what drek is downstairs? They were all dopies, dummies, why God makes them I don’t know, but he makes them. Me? I made money with the TVs. It was good money all right. At least he didn’t give me to clean floors like the canadian Jews when I asked them for a job.’

‘He made porno movies down there— of himself and all of his girlfriends, including his Jewish ex-wives. She was his first wife. No children.’ My mother emphasised the word children. ‘He used to take out Jewish girls, get them drunk
and take them down there. Before they knew what was happening he was filming himself with these women. Reels and reels. Think of it, they’re old ladies like her now. Then he’d invite a bunch of guys downstairs; they’d drink and do God knows what and watch. He used to watch himself with these women for hours. Oh, he was something I tell you. He was a real...

She stopped reminiscing and looked into my green and gold flecked eyes. I looked directly back into her identical pair. Perhaps she was waiting for my reaction or maybe she was worried about these revelations, about how they reflected on her.
Ngugi’s Retrospective Gaze: The Shape of History in *A Grain of Wheat*

Ngugi Wa Thiong’o’s engagement with history in *A Grain of Wheat* has been commented upon by critics differently. G.D. Killam (201) and Andrew Gurr (92) view it within the post-colonial frame in which ‘received history is tampered with, rewritten, and realigned from the point of view of the victims of its destructive process’ (Ashcroft et al 34). In their view, Ngugi’s first three novels — *Weep Not, Child*, *The River Between*, and *A Grain of Wheat* — provide his version of Kenya’s history from the 1920s to the time of its independence. Ime Ikiddeh too considers Ngugi a novelist-historian, who focuses on key phases in the history of Kenya covered in the novels, but reads *A Grain of Wheat* mostly as a story of heroism and betrayal, of human relationships in a chosen situation (76–77).

Some critics discuss the novel within the context of the novelist’s traditional use of history. Shatto Gakwandi considers it an example of the ‘fictional recreation of history’, a kind of ‘historical novel’ (109) which fails to deliver because it lacks thematic unity, makes infelicitous use of flashbacks, is deficient in characterisation, does not hold the ‘plot and the political theme’ in a coherent frame, and provides inadequate space for political leaders (118). Charles Nnolim writes that because it contains too many historical dates and characters, it becomes ‘flawed by countless blind spots’ (80). For W.J. Howard the novel reflects Ngugi’s ‘confusion between fiction and history’: ‘where the author is true to himself … his work succeeds very well; where the personally involved historian is not edited or the history is transformed, the writing fails, through either uncertainty or obvious bad judgment’ (119).

While the opinions of Killam and Gurr are too general to merit any comment, Ikkedah’s analysis of the novel hardly evinces any consciousness of the problematic nature of the history-fiction interface. Likewise, Gakwandi overlooks the instability of the historical novel as a genre, the limitations and inhibitions of its character, especially when used in its most familiar Lukacsian sense of a kind of novel that comes to life only in a specific social and ideological setting.

Blaming Ngugi for mixing the factual and the fictional overlooks the very grain of the novel’s being, for as a genre, the novel has constantly been evolving especially by taking the past out of its fixed confines (Bakhtin 16–27). The novelists have imitated, incorporated, and interrogated history right from the time the novel came into its own. Ngugi too does the same in his own distinctive style, for which he deserves appreciation and respect and not unwarranted censure.
To correct the failure of the existing criticism ‘to locate Ngugi’s texts within the contested terrain of Kenya’s historiography’ (2), James Ogude discusses his novels within the current debates on history and fiction, but by stating that ‘ultimately, the explanatory power or even the epistemological usefulness of literature depends on how close it approximates the historical truth which is its ultimate referent’ (3), he sets an erroneous standard for judging Ngugi’s effort. For he implies that there is an ‘historical truth’ out there — firm, solid, fixed, and immutable — and the novel, to be successful, has to conform to it.

Though Ogude makes use of the insights of critics like Hayden White, he ignores White’s proven view on historical reconstructions: that ‘there is no such thing as a single correct original description of anything, on the basis of which an interpretation of that thing can subsequently be brought to bear’ (127). Ogude also disregards the historians’ unease after the breakdown of positivist historiography and their dissatisfaction with ‘documentary reconstruction of a pre-critically conceived past’ and the limitations of ‘conventional historiography’ (LaCapra 139). That is why, instead of judging the novel on the basis of its conformity to the so-called ‘historical truth’, it is better to find what Ngugi does in the novel and judge its validity in terms of the cogency of his reasoning for doing so.

Ngugi’s involvement with history in A Grain of Wheat no doubt springs from his reaction to the coercive nature of imperialistic historiography, but it does not stop here. He makes an historiographic intercession of far-reaching cultural consequences. He takes a definitive position on what constitutes the true history of Kenya, and thus challenges the very basis of a leader-centred nationalist historiography. By looking at Kenyan history through forest fighters, the Mau Mau, and intertwining their activities with the everyday lives of peasants and workers, he is not merely illustrating the close bond between the two but also retrieving it from its fringe status, virtually reclaiming this subaltern history for the mainstream, and establishing his claim of what constitutes true history and how it should be represented. Since he considers freedom from colonial control to be a much more complex activity than is commonly understood, he also deals with the vital issue of a proper historical subject. A proper historical subject implies a person whose thoughts and actions are in tune with the requirements of the situation in which he or she functions; in the colonial setting, for example, a person is expected to work for the liberation of his people and not for realizing his private dreams.

Though Ngugi’s historical design reveals a strong imprint of Karl Marx and Franz Fanon, which has been widely noticed,’ it is also embedded in his deep understanding of the pristine Gikuyu culture of Kenya, so ably represented by Jomo Kenyatta in Facing Mount Kenya. It is this double bind that largely determines the contours of the novel’s narrative, which is realistic to the core. Some of the characters are based on actual historical figures and some are purely invented, but both struggle with their past and make it a basis for living in the
present, thus providing for a blend of private and public histories that is radically different from its more fashionable varieties as, for example, in the novels of Salman Rushdie, who uses fantasy and grotesque to blend the two.

In Ngugi, history becomes the very fabric in which lives are woven in a complex intermingling, and where they are quite often in tension. His implicit view of history and historical change becomes the basis of his judging the private histories of individuals and taking an ethical position on individual efforts and aspirations. The ethical dimension, in fact, is so pervasive in the novel that some critics (such as Govind Sharma, passim) have elaborately analysed its religious texture, but the novel’s secular resonances are equally important. This also lends the novel an extra edge, a fine dimension that is so rare in the African novels of the 1960s about the frontal clash between the individual and the collective.

Ngugi’s involvement with Kenya’s past is the very foundation of his being, for it provides him with the basis of ‘defining himself in the mainstream of his people’s historical drama’ (Ngugi 1971 4). Voicing his repugnance for what he calls the ‘romantic glimmer’ of capitalism, he openly declares his cherished goal to ‘Africanize and socialize our political and economic life’ (Ngugi 1972 12). The crucial point here is that the past can be represented only on the basis of one’s perception and understanding of it. That is why the retrospective gaze is the informing operative principle in the novel; it is also crucial for understanding its true import: ‘I believe that it is only in a socialist context that a look at yesterday can be meaningful in illuminating today and tomorrow’ (Ngugi 1971 8).

A direct consequence of Ngugi’s gaze is that he sees the history of Kenya only through the common people, the peasants, and their brethren, the Mau Mau, whose misrepresentations were known to Ngugi, as can be seen in his response to Fred Majdalany’s book on their activities, in which the Mau Mau emerge ‘as something purely and simply evil, atavistic and something completely unrelated to the mainstream of African nationalism or any decent political sentiments’ (1972 28). In Ngugi’s estimation the Mau Mau are revolutionaries in the true sense of the word, with a clear-cut and well-conceived agenda: ‘to drive out the Europeans, seize the government, and give back to Kenya peasants their stolen lands and property’ (1972 28). This is a part of the dynamic movement of history and its course that Ngugi approves. Though ideological preoccupations often have a dampering effect on fictional art, for they can reduce characters into shadowy stereotypes (Al Marzui 170) and give the narrative a predictable turn, the force and vigour of Ngugi’s passion is so strong that his ideologically steeped view of history does the opposite. It provides the basis for showing characters going through a real wrestle with their selves and experiencing a great deal of agonising suffering, which is one of the major strengths of the novel.

Ngugi’s authorial remark, which functions like an epigraph in the novel, provides the most significant clue to his approach to history. If leaders like ‘Jomo Kenyatta and Waiyaki are unavoidably mentioned as part of the history of our
country’ (1967 vi), it is because they had a role at some time in the past, but now figure in the novel only as part of the background. By the time the struggle had entered its final and decisive phase, they were no longer the leaders that they had started out as. Their attitude towards the struggle, its aims, methods, and more importantly, its ultimate shape, had changed dramatically.

When Kihika, the young rebel who eventually becomes the Mau Mau leader, makes his first major speech in the novel, because Kenyatta does not show up, it is no chance occurrence: it is loaded with significance, for it is a symbolic takeover from old leaders who had compromised their ways and changed the very tenor of the independence struggle, resulting in many tragic happenings in post-independence Kenya. In a painful reference to this in the epigraph, Ngugi draws attention to the efforts of people who staked their lives for the cause, but the rewards were taken by others. One has only to read Ngugi’s account of this phase of the Kenyan struggle for independence in Detained to know the full implications of this tragic betrayal (66–90). The worst and inglorious aspect of this was that these very leaders spread false stories about the Mau Mau and slighted their valorous part in the struggle. Ngugi’s quarrel is not only with the British writers and historians but also with those Kenyans who, because of their ‘mental colonization precipitated by both colonial and neocolonial education’ (Mazrui and Mphande 165), wrote highly unreliable accounts of the Mau Mau and their contribution. So the novel looks at the struggle for independence with peasants as active participants, along with the Mau Mau, who were from among their ranks. One has also to bear in mind that for Ngugi the true process of history at that time was not merely to fight the colonial masters but also to set into motion the processes of decolonisation, which was much more than wresting political control, and which the so-called leaders had neglected.

It is for this very reason that the novel is largely an unravelling of the past of the people of a village who paradigmatically represent all the labourers and peasants of the entire country and their sacrifices and pain during the most important part of the freedom struggle, illuminating in the process the whole range of Ngugi’s interests: his view of historical change, the assumptions underlying it, and a proper historical subject. In short, A Grain of Wheat goes beyond the bounds of traditional historical narrative, and investigates larger questions through the fictional mode.

Perhaps the most interesting feature of the novel is that not only does it begin with Mugo, who has established himself as a leader of repute, but that he also dominates its narrative space. If the intention of the novel, as I have tried to show by analysing the full implications of the epigraph, is to focus on the role of the peasantry and the Mau Mau, why does the text foreground Mugo who, as the narrative eventually reveals, is no more than a discredited hero? If the thrust of the narrative is just to unmask his treachery, then Ngugi’s narrative management is open to censure, for it destroys the very shape of the intended novel.
To overcome this difficulty, James Decker provides a postmodern reading of the novel in which he interprets Mugo’s silence as a metaphor for its stylistic concerns. Because Decker considers Mugo’s silence symptomatic of his lack of communication, a painful consequence of the oppressive colonisation, he writes that ‘Mugo, then, equals the text’ (45). Decker also contends that because his anguish, fears, and anxieties reflect the mental state of all the people of the village, ‘Mugo personifies the village itself’ (55); but this is not wholly true. Equating Mugo with the village goes against the very grain of the text’s texture and structure. Mugo’s silence has far more serious implications, both for himself and the society in which he lives.

There is no denying the fact that Mugo is central to the meaning of the novel, but for other reasons. First, in spite of several laudable qualities, including a tremendous capacity for suffering, he is not a fit historical subject. By concentrating more on his personal advancement than on the needs of his community, he fails to rise to the need of the hour. Second, his agonising wrestle with himself provides the basis for making sense of the efforts of several other characters who weigh preferences in their lives in relation to the turn of events. Finally, the texture of the novel confirms that Ngugi has drawn him as a foil to Kihika, who eventually becomes a Mau Mau.

In the march of events in the village, Ngugi portrays a set of individuals who represent different ideas and dispositions to clarify how their participation in the anti-colonial struggle acquires a meaningful purpose, but some, like Mugo, provide an insight through their own contrasting positions. If the Mau Mau exemplify Ngugi’s confirmed belief in what Fanon calls ‘absolute violence’ as the one and only method for getting liberation, then it also follows that colonial subjects should be willing to cast themselves into a new mould in order to be the torch bearers of the process of decolonisation, which Fanon calls ‘replacing of a certain “species” of men by another “species” of men’ (27). Elaborating on this, Fanon states that ‘it influences individuals and modifies them fundamentally. It transforms spectators crushed with their inessentiality into privileged actors, with the grandiose glare of history’s floodlights upon them’ (28). In fact, this is the only way in which they are transformed from ‘things’ into men and women. The overall frame of the novel testifies that Ngugi sees the struggle for liberation in the wider context of people’s struggle to become worthy of being called a liberated people.

Two significant traits of his personality would have made Mugo an ideal person for fighting the colonial oppressors: his marked streak of violence, and his love for land, a value cherished by all oppressed Kenyans and praised both by Kenyatta and Fanon because, for the members of the tribe, earth is the ‘most sacred thing above all’ (Kenyatta 21), and in purely economic terms, ‘the most essential value’ for providing bread and dignity (Fanon 32). For Mugo this love is self-directed, because he sees it as a source for realising his dream of ‘success and
wealth’, which would force ‘society to recognise him’ (11). The evolving action of the novel illustrates Mugo’s problem: he is too involved with himself and has little regard for the basic beliefs of his organic community.

If the system of education in the Gikuyu community, as Kenyatta tells us, puts great emphasis on ‘a particular act of behaviour in a concrete situation’ (105), then Mugo’s is woefully inadequate, because he represents a psychology that is out-and-out Western. Fanon aptly describes it thus: ‘the colonialist bourgeoisie had hammered into the native’s mind the idea of a society of individuals where each person shuts himself up in his own subjectivity, and whose only wealth is individual thought’ (36). Consistently, and often with unbelievable vehemence, Mugo thinks of himself only as an individual whose dreamed goal is personal advancement, which collides with the needs of his society and the need of the hour. The values he cherishes may be laudable enough in themselves, but wholly inappropriate to the situation because they militate against the beliefs and values of his society where the cultural orientation is of a different kind.

It needs to be stressed here that Ngugi is not invoking any kind of fetishised atavism or nativism: he is only reaffirming that the cultural orientation of Kenya, which has to shape the march of history, has to represent a psychology that is not an imitation of the Western kind which leans towards individual-biased capitalistic order, but one which accommodates the dreams and aspirations of the society. This might look Marxist or Fanonian, but in its essence is one of the basic requirements of social organisation within the Gikuyu community: ‘The selfish or self-regarding man has no name or reputation in the Gikuyu community. An individualist is looked upon with suspicion and is given a nickname of mwebongia, one who works only for himself and is likely to end up as a wizard’ (Kenyatta 119).

Intertwined with the fate of Mugo is the issue of being a leader, of which his foil Kihika is an ideal prototype. Though Ngugi has relegated the old leaders to the background, they help to see the differences between them and the new ones like Kihika. He is loved by the people because ‘he talked no longer in terms of sending letters to the white man as used to be done in the days of Harry’ (18). This is not just a factual statement; embedded in it is an implicit critique of the approach and methods of old leaders, and of their views on how freedom could be achieved. If in the case of individuals, as with Mugo, it meant bending oneself to the needs of the society, for the country as a whole it implied bringing about a systemic change, and not merely a change of guard symbolised by the change of flag. In this respect, Kihika’s comment comes close to Fanon’s distrust of nationalist parties and leaders who do not stress the necessity of an armed struggle because ‘their objective is not the radical overthrowing of the system’ (46) which Ngugi has very much in mind. The leaders, writes Fanon, are ‘violent in their words and reformist in their attitudes. When the nationalist political leaders say something, they make it quite clear that they do not really think it’ (46). That is why, perhaps, in the subsequent revision of the novel, Ngugi substitutes the word
Movement for Party. Movement has not only a strong processional flavour to it but also a vigorous breadth, for it raises the vision of a huge mass of people, and, in this case, the peasantry, who Ngugi considers true revolutionaries. They say it in support of Kihika: ‘what we now want [that is, after seeing what their leaders had led them to] is action, a blow which will tell’ (18). Kihika too admits that ‘Our people have talked for too long’ (101).

Mugo’s wrestle with himself and his eventual acceptance of the wrongs he did, have their counterpoint in the activities and growth of Kihika, the idealised leader who spearheads revolt against all kinds of authority. Events related to these are woven into a larger frame in which there are the British, who articulate their attitude and philosophy towards the natives, and people who took to the British by imitating their ways, either because they succumbed to their brainwashing or because they were convinced that the British would never leave their country. All these details are woven into the narrative not merely to fill the picture and to help appreciate the full implications of the Mau Mau mode of fighting oppression, but also to provide the background against which this response to colonialism has to be understood.

The arrival of Thompson, the British representative in Kenya with a dream and mission are brought into the narrative through his memory recall. Ngugi weaves strands of delicate irony in Thompson’s passionately idealistic formulation of the ultimate goal of his stay in Kenya, for he considers the growth of the British Empire as ‘the development of a great moral idea’ which, even while positing equality among men of all colours and races, is no more than an imaginary construct. After all, the patronising peremptoriness implicit in the apparently high-sounding principle — ‘to administer a people is to administer a soul’ — (64) denies Africans their very right to be. Thompson also considers the Mau Mau evil and a threat to civilisation (65), an assertion that the novel vigorously interrogates.

Kihika’s growth into a Mau Mau illustrates the duplicity in Thompson’s views, for he directly experiences its basis in religious blackmail. The missionaries use the authority of the Bible to denigrate as barbaric both the natives and their cultural practices, such as circumcision. Kihika also understands that the civilising mission of Thompson and his kind did not permit any kind of resistance, for the parties organised for the purpose changed their character after their leaders were released from their prisons. The example of Harry Thuku, who led the struggle for a number of years, proved how the contact of the leaders with the British had turned their glowing fire into one of smouldering ash. Released from prison, Harry had ‘come back a broken man, who promised eternal co-operation with the oppressors, denouncing the Party he had helped to build. What happened yesterday would happen today. The same thing, over and over again, through history’ (122); and people, Kihika realised, could not live with this forever.

Kihika makes the people understand that the British had taken away their land and freedom and turned them into slaves. The slavish mentality could be
destroyed by violent action, as advocated by the Mau Mau: ‘We must kill. Put to sleep the enemies of the black man’s freedom…. If we are weak, we cannot win. I spit at the weakness of our fathers’ (216–17). In spite of being a proponent of violent ways, Kihika spiritualises the mission of liberation by couching it in religious imagery. For binding people together, he invokes the images of prophets like Moses and Christ, and to instil in them a spirit of work and sacrifice, he inspires them by recounting the deeds of charismatic leaders like M.K. Gandhi and Abraham Lincoln. He uses religious symbolism to infuse a spirit of sacrifice in them and so spiritualises the act of defiance. Working for the liberation of the country is to ‘become sacrifices for one another…. Everybody who takes the Oath of Unity to change things in Kenya is a Christ’ (110). Taking the Mau Mau oath is akin to ‘water sprinkled on a man’s head at baptism’ (218) which transforms a person’s character. The Mau Mau credo of action and sacrifice is exalted to the lofty heights of a spiritual mission: ‘That’s what crucifixion means today. Else we deserve to be slaves, cursed to carry water and hew wood for the white man for ever and ever’ (218).

Ngugi is at pains to show that Kihika’s mission and its ideological positioning meets resistance not only from the British but also from self-seekers like Mugo and colonial subjects like Karanja, who uses his influence with the British to oppress his own people. In doing so, he documents what was widely known and has been written about by the leaders, such as J. Kiboi Muriithi and Waruhiu Itote. What Ngugi dramatises through the narrative movement of the novel is the supremacy of Kihika; the inevitable surrender of self-centred people like Mugo; and the marginalisation of undesirable people like Karanja who virtually ends up as an outcast.

I have already discussed the psychological make-up of Mugo, the narrow walls of his dreamed future, and his desire to be cocooned from the strong winds of political change. Through a series of flashbacks into his past, for which Ngugi deserves credit and not criticism, the reader is shown the severity and compelling nature of his choices. When Kihika wins the hearts of his people by his impressive pleading of the cause they have to fight for, Mugo is filled only with revulsion and hatred: ‘Something surged for release in Mugo’s heart, something, in fact, which was an intense vibration of terror and hatred’ (19). Any disturbing buffets from the world outside are highly annoying and irritating to him: ‘Why should Kihika drag me into a struggle and problems I had not created?’ (218).

When Mugo decides to hand Kihika over to the D.O., the reader witness his solipsistic withdrawal, which insulates him even from the call of his conscience. Ngugi’s powerful rendition of what he felt and what he subsequently suffered also shows his superb understanding of the human psyche: ‘For a time he [Mugo] experienced a pure, delicious joy at his own daring, at what he suddenly saw as a great act of moral courage. Indeed for him, at that moment, there was kind of purity in the act; he stood beyond good and evil; he enjoyed the power and authority of his own knowledge…’ (226).
Mugo, however, is no monster; his elation does not last long. Very soon, the ‘shock of discovery was so deep it numbed him. He felt no pain, and saw no blood’ (227) and tuned into a stone. Caught in the atmosphere of arrests and imprisonment, he proves an indefatigable sufferer. Details of his arrest, imprisonment, and his refusal to confess are used by Ngugi to bring into the narrative many actual details of camps where people were detained tortured and even killed, but Mugo survives it all because he feels neither physical nor emotional pain. Other detainees do not know that he is beyond despair and pain, and they ‘saw his resignation to pain in a different light; it gave them courage’ (152). This raises his prestige in the eyes of the public and illustrates one of the ironies of history: that circumstances often throw up people who pass as heroic beings, although they are not. Keeping quiet over his shame, and distancing himself from societal affairs, Mugo lives the life of a recluse. The more he retreats into himself, the more his reputation grows till it touches legendary proportions.

Having withstood pain and suffering in camps, and received praise for his contribution to the freedom struggle, Mugo has another temptation: that of playing the role of a seer and a leader. He rationalises it by claiming that it is possible, and even reasonable, to wipe away a part of his disturbing past: ‘Those buried in the earth should remain in the earth. Things of yesterday should remain with yesterday’ (198). He also thinks that surviving the ravages of imprisonment has made him into a man of destiny. He has messianic delusions, which are highly ironic, especially in the manner in which he aligns his fate with prophets like Moses: ‘I am important. I must not die. To keep myself alive, healthy, strong — to wait for my mission in life — is a duty to myself, to men and women of tomorrow. If Moses had died in the reeds, who would ever have known that he was destined to be a great man?’ (224). Implicit in this is Ngugi’s criticism of the actual political leaders, who thought that surviving their jail terms gave them the license to rule their people.

Fortunately for him, unlike the actual leaders of Kenya, Mugo fails to do so. The visions of his new role are continuously disrupted by the visits of Gikonyo, Mumbi, General R and others, who either involve him in conversation about Kihika and his betrayal or bare their own hearts to him. These visits continuously remind him of his past and virtually force him into making a public confession.

Thus we see that in Mugo, Ngugi creates a character of tragic proportions who suffers like a heroic being, bearing the agony of contending forces in his heart, but he makes it amply clear that people like him do not deserve to be historical subjects in Kenya. That is why even after Mugo makes his confession, there is no sympathy for him, no forgiveness. He has to pay for giving a free rein to his subjectivity, for pursuing dreams that are too private and beyond the pale of public necessity. He is a failure because he could not carry a cross for somebody else.

On a lower plane, and in a simpler way, Gikonyo is like Mugo. He too thinks like him, except that he is less ambitious and not so effectively inured to the world around him. In his keenness to see his ‘Mumbi and take up the thread of
life where he had left it’ (130), he does not hesitate to confess before the prison
officials though he does not betray anybody. Yet when he sees her with a child, he
feels hurt and realises that ‘to live and die alone was the ultimate truth’ (130). He
drowns his despair in work, which enhances his respect in society; but it is only
when he moves out of the narrow confines of his small world that he sees things
differently.

On a lesser scale and at the lower end of the scale is Karanaja, an archetypal
colonial subject, who is not only an agent of his master but also a slave in his
mentality. His understanding is so clouded with fear and his desire to be known
so strong that it is inconceivable to him that ‘the coming of the black rule would
mean, could never mean the end of white power’ (45). Therefore, he chooses to stay
with the whites, imitate their ways, cling to them with despicable obsequiousness,
threaten his own people, and ignore the prophetic words of his mother: ‘Don’t go
against the people. A man who ignores the voice of his own people comes to no
good’ (256).

It is only Kihika and General R who truly represent the kind of people who are
fit historical subjects, and it is no accident that they belong to the Mau Mau, for in
Ngugi’s scheme of things they are the true makers of history. We have already seen
that Kihika’s political ideology is an amalgam of Fanonian principles and Gikuyu
culture. General R’s career, which resembles the career of many actual fighters
who rose to high positions in the Mau Mau ranks, explains why in their kind of
fight violence was essential, and why even some black people had to be killed.
Though they were their ‘own black brothers, [inside] they were white men’ (250).
It is through people like R and Kihika and countless and faceless multitudes who
supported them, whose lives and activities form the main narrative of the novel,
that the true liberation of Kenya came about.

NOTES
1 See, Adrian Roscoe 171–75; Alamin Mazrui and Lupenga Mphande 159–83; and Chidi
Amuta 147–52.

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ABSTRACTS


A ‘Black and White Family Album’ is a story of interaction across cultures. It draws on and interprets rich original source material in my parents’ archive, including biographical material and stories from my parent’s published and unpublished manuscripts. The Cochrane Papua New Collection is held at the Michael Birt Library, University of Wollongong. The material in the archive includes published and unpublished manuscripts, radio and film scripts, newspaper columns, reel-to-reel recordings, photographs, personal documents and ephemera, originated and collected by my parents, Percy and Renata Cochrane.

Detlev Gohrbandt, ‘Embracing the Alien Inside: Bessie Head and the Divided Self’.

In the course of her life and writing, Bessie Head developed a non-conventional understanding of individual and social identity that led her to accept dividedness and conflict as formative constituents of the self. She learned that coming to terms with her ‘bust ego’ was necessary in order to understand and value herself as a developing person and writer in Africa. These ideas about Head are explored on the basis of Jonathan Glover’s dynamic philosophy of identity, in which personal unity is redefined as survival (of a changing self) and relation (between the self and others), and fragmentation is seen as a precondition for self-understanding and truth. Glover’s analysis of the ways in which self-perception leads to narrative acts of autobiographical self-creation proves enlightening for the analogous strategies employed by Head with regard to her own person and her fictional characters, especially with regard to the ethical dimensions of value and action.


This essay reads Caryl Phillips’ 1991 novel, Cambridge, as a comment upon the construction of ideas of racial whiteness, and an attempt to reveal the fragility of such paradigms. The forensic attention to the historical archive, manifest in Phillips’ use of passages taken directly from nineteenth-century accounts, allows for the ideological imperatives that drove the colonial construction of racial identity to be exposed, while his careful manipulation of the historical texts within the form of his fiction reveals the fault lines inherent in such discourse. This reconstruction of a seminal moment in the history of whiteness reveals Phillips’ investment in the late-twentieth-century project to deconstruct racial essentialism. The essay concludes by examining the epilogue of the novel and suggests that Phillips presents the beginnings of a voice that might speak outside of racialising limitations, though this articulation necessarily remains transient and tentative.
Joel Gwynne, ““Riley’s Handbook”: “Exegesis to His Cryptic Utterance””.

This essay interrogates Maurice Duggan’s most complex yet critically neglected work ‘Riley’s Handbook’, and focuses on contextualizing the piece within the cultural, and to a certain extent ideological, landscape of the period. It considers Duggan’s appropriation of Beckett and Cartesian ontology, influences external to the artistic climate in which he wrote, yet also considers the text in relation to regional thematics in order to establish both the locality and universality of ‘Riley’s Handbook’.

Anne Howell, ‘The Rhizomatic Art of Kurt Brereton’.

The art of Kurt Brereton engages with the concept of rhizomatics. Across a range of visual and new media art forms, Brereton applies the notion of the rhizomatic machine first put forward by the philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari to explore aesthetically a range of ecological and environmental issues. Using the idea of the ‘image machine’, Brereton’s art challenges conventional ideas of what an ‘art work’ is as a discrete or singular object. Instead, Brereton’s images grow in non-linear directions like mangrove forests, swarms of bees or internet webs.

Michael Jacklin, ““What I Have Done, What Was Done to Me”: Confession and Testimony in Stolen Life: Journey of a Cree Woman”.

_Stolen Life: Journey of a Cree Woman_ by Rudy Wiebe and Yvonne Johnson is a book that is permeated by trauma. The collaboratively written text is an account of Johnson’s life-long experiences of sexual abuse which culminated in her participation, with three others, in the killing of man they suspect of being a sexual abuser and a threat to Johnson’s own young children. _Stolen Life_ is confronting: it shocks in its descriptions of the abuse Johnson has suffered; it also shocks in its accounts of the crime she committed. Testimony and confession appear troublingly proximate in this text, and the claims each makes upon us provoke conflicted responses. This essay acknowledges that trauma is involved in both, and offers a reading that is guided by Johnson’s assertion that her book should be understood as a spirit bundle, a Cree power object needing to be handled with caution, care and respect.
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CARA CILANO is an assistant professor in the Department of English at the University of North Carolina Wilmington, USA, where she teaches courses in postcolonial theory and literature. Her work has appeared in *The Journal of Commonwealth and Postcolonial Studies*, *The Contemporary Pacific*, and in the collection *Beyond the Borders: American Literature and Post-Colonial Theory*. She has recently co-edited, with Elizabeth DeLoughrey, a special cluster of essays for *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment* on eco-criticism and postcolonialism, and she is completing a manuscript on historical contrition in Hawai‘i and Pakistan.

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Michael Jacklin gained his PhD from Deakin University (Melbourne, Australia) in 2005. His research focuses on life writing, collaborative writing, and Indigenous literature. In 2007 he became an Associate Research Fellow at the University of Wollongong. He has published in Australian Canadian Studies, Life Writing, New Literatures Review, Antipodes, and The Australian Journal of Anthropology.

Pamela Mordecai immigrated to Canada in 1994. However, her birthplace, Jamaica, continues to be the focus of her poems and stories, which often ‘take serious ting make joke’. Mordecai’s thirty plus books include: Culture and Customs of Jamaica (2000, with husband, Martin Mordecai), Rohan Goes to Big School (2000) and The Costume Party (2000) for children, Certifiable (2001) and The True Blue of Islands (2005), collections of poetry, and Pink Icing: Stories (2006). An anthologist with a strong interest in the writing of Caribbean women, she has edited groundbreaking anthologies including Jamaica Woman (1980, 1985 with Mervyn Morris) and Her True-True Name (1989 with Betty Wilson). Pamela lives in Toronto.

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