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RE-READING REPRESENTATIONS of INDIGENALITY in AUSTRALIAN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE: a HISTORY

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Abstract

Australian children's literature has a history of excluding Indigenous child readers and positioning non-Indigenous readers as the subject. Rather than portray such literature, particularly before the 1950s, as simply racist or stereotypical, I argue that it is important for teachers, of all students, to help readers understand how nationalist or white Australian myths were constructed on Indigenous land and knowledges.

Introduction

Nineteenth-century Australian children's literature has often been criticised as simply "racist" and only representing Indigenous peoples as "savages" (Foster, Finnis & Nimon, 1995; Goodwin, 1986; McVitty, 1981). This kind of argument implements an unofficial censorship that absolves readers, in the twenty-first century, of the responsibility of reading and re-evaluating such literature. To dismiss from critical analysis representations of Indigenality in Australian colonialist literature as paternalistic attempts to determine what should not be read and remembered (the term "Indigenality" is used in this paper to refer to the construction of an Indigenous person in Australia, as defined by Mudrooroo (1995)). It formulates a policy of "protection", which reinforces other kinds of paternalism on behalf of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. It also ignores an awareness of Indigenous peoples and knowledges that such literature can contain. Popular readings reveal stereotyped notions of Indigenality, but by questioning ideological assumptions, alternative notions of Indigenality are revealed. Questioning ideological assumptions in narratives, particularly in children's literature and particularly representations of Indigenous peoples, should be a practice that all teachers encourage. It is important that alternative perspectives and differing interpretations exist within any classroom context. This paper shows how popularly accepted representations and interpretations of Indigenality in Australian children's literature can be dismantled to expose other purposes.

Children's literature, in general, is understood to be purposive. Representations of Indigenality that may arise from an author's ethnocentrism need to be analysed not simply as examples of "racism" but instead in terms of what ideas they signify and what thematic or didactic purposes of the text they serve. By evaluating stereotypes and tropes used to represent Indigenality, I focus on how children's literature provided a medium for the dominant society to articulate its ideologies, such as nationalism, and to justify its policies, such as invasion and dispossession. I also examine how representations of Indigenality implicitly, if not explicitly, "amplify the voices of

the disenfranchised ... expose the guilty political unconscious of the text ... deepen and widen the faultlines in its legitimation of the status quo" (Ryan, 1996, p. xv). By examining children's literature written by non-Indigenous authors at the turn of the twentieth-century, this paper argues that white Australia needed the image of the Aborigines and it is that need that often subverts non-Indigenous claims to "power".

Positioning Australian children's literature and representations of the Indigenous "other"

The intended reader of Australian children's literature has changed from the English child, to the white Australian child, to the multicultural child. These shifts stem from changes in mainstream Australian society. Late twentieth century Australian children's literature's representation of Australian society as inclusive uses representations of Indigenality that are similar to the "othering" and "racialisation" of early twentieth century children's books. When representations of Indigenality are included in a children's book to impart information about Indigenous cultures to the child reader, even with the intent to teach tolerance and respect, Indigenous cultures are transformed into objects of study for an intended reader that is implied to be non-Indigenous. As Bradford (2001, p. 25) states, "[white] child readers are positioned to receive as givens these doctrines of Aboriginal inferiority". While the representation of Indigenous peoples may have altered from the "traditional tribal blackfella" to an "urban, English-speaking Koori", the intent to define an "other" for mainstream child readers, to teach them to recognise difference and diversity from themselves, has remained. Children's literature emphasising the difference of and need to know "other" peoples ignores the need for "white mainstream" readers to question their own social and cultural construction of identity. It also ignores the synthesis of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples and knowledges, continuing to build information on cultural essentialisms of black and white.

Representations of Indigenous technology and practices in nineteenth century Australian children's literature indicates cognisance that Indigenality resists reduction to a mere signifier of "whiteness". Australian children's literature employed Indigenality purposively; it was part of the larger project of explaining non-Indigenous childhood and other cultural discourses, including nationalism. Simply categorising representations of Indigenality as positive or negative, authentic or inauthentic, does not analyse the dynamics of such representations and their multiple and conflicting readings. Reinterpreting stereotypical portrayals of Indigenous peoples by non-Indigenous peoples can reveal the implicit non-Indigenous awareness of invasion, dispossession and Indigenous existence. I do not question that representations of Indigenous peoples were often formulaic, prejudiced, offensive and generic. Simply labelling them as such, however, disempowers and ignores Indigenous resistance and survival during invasion, genocide and segregation times.

Early Australian literature: Setting a precedent

Fascination for and with Indigenous cultures existed in early Australian children's literature – as it does in more contemporary children's books. References to Indigenous peoples often included details of the "savages" customs and beliefs. By questioning the author's ideological assumptions, for example that Indigenous peoples were undeveloped and barbaric, the white perspective of Indigenous peoples as a power to be overcome surfaces. ***Bush luck: An Australian story*** (1908) by W. H. Timperley, for example, begins with a commonplace image of Australia and its Aboriginal people and finishes with the familiar nationalist sentiment of a hard-working, strong non-Indigenous race developing the land. The reader is informed that "people who live out there [in the bush] have often literally to go through fire and water, at the risk of their lives, besides which, there are savages and snakes and thirst and plenty of other risks to run" (1908, p. 22). Such stereotypes of the "native" reveal non-Indigenous awareness that people were fighting for their land and resisting a "peaceful settlement". Timperley also includes non-Indigenous characters' "revelations" or perceptions about the abilities of the "natives". The narrative offers an account of the character Black George, who speaks English perfectly and reads and writes better than "the labouring class of whites" which would suggest that Black George as well as coming from a strong and resilient people also has the capability to understand and use another culture's language and practices. Hugh, Timperley's hero, meets a "variety" of "natives" described as fine-looking, mangy, wild and friendly. His encounter with a couple, he calls Jack Crow and Polly, is amicable. Hugh's view of his "friends" is paternalistic, but it is Jack Crow and his partner that give Hugh food and water. Once "reconciled to each other" they were "friends ever after" (1908, p. 227). Contemporary expectations of reconciliation are often reminiscent of such representations from the early twentieth century: paternalistic non-Indigenous attempts to understand and tolerate the "other" reveals an inability to "assimilate" or exclude Indigenous peoples completely.

Stereotypical images of Indigenous Australian peoples and cultures in Australian children's literature

Australian children's literature often acknowledges, either implicitly or explicitly, Indigenous alliance with

the land and Indigenous knowledge while trying to inform the non-Indigenous child reader about "their place" in the country. In one of the stories in Hezekiah Butterworth's *Zigzag journeys in Australia, or, a visit to the ocean world* (1891) the stereotypical savage image is included but is built on the prowess of the Aboriginal character. Mary, a non-Indigenous character, learns about kookaburras, kangaroos and natives. She is shown an exhibition of Aborigines throwing boomerangs and spears:

> The boomerang used was about half an inch thick and two feet long, its edges being rounded. It had a bulged side and a convert edge. The native who used it first was a finely shaped boy. He stepped apart from his comrades, and sent the boomerang into the air with an odd but expert motion. The weapon began to ascend the air and whirl and circle, and at last it turned and came directly back to the thrower, and fell at his feet. The boomerang is the ancient instrument of hunting, and was in use among the aborigines. The native throws it so that it will return to any spot they designate (Butterworth, 1891, pp. 250-251).

The Aborigine is represented by Butterworth, and many others, as a curiosity in much the same way as the kookaburra or kangaroo. Yet, rather than relying solely on one image of the Aborigine as barbaric, another image involving skills and intelligence is revealed. The "ancient" instrument created and used by the Aborigines reveals awareness on behalf of the non-Indigenous characters of a culture that has a long history in this country with an associated body of knowledge: something that the non-Indigenous Australians did not have. Such descriptions stemmed from the colonisers' "ethnographic imagination" (Carr, 1996), the authority to detect and depict the particular and the authentic but was also "highly emotionally charged" (Carr, 1996, p.17) and encumbered with other beliefs of imperial discourse. These ethnographic texts, that include representations about the skills of "aborigines" directed at the non-Indigenous child reader – the future cultural keepers (Collins-Gearing, 2003) of Indigenous information – expose a non-Indigenous dependence on Indigenous knowledges.

In Gordon Stables' *Wild adventures in wild places* (189-), the English protagonist Frank and his companion not only enjoy a "pleasant" evening with an Aboriginal family but also discover the Aborigines' ability with weapons:

> Very expert are the New Hollanders with the use of the few weapons they carry. They can hurl their spears with terrible effect for a hundred yards or more ... The boomerang is apparently a magical instrument. Its actions, when thrown by the hand of a native, are marvellous; the thing does his bidding as if it were one of the fabled genii under control of a magician (Stables, 189-, pp. 182-183).

Stables' representation of Indigenous peoples can be read as patronising and "racialising" but it also reveals the non-Indigenous fascination with Indigenous knowledge and ability, knowledge and ability that the non-Aboriginal Australian does not possess or even understand as it is aligned with "magic", the unknown. It is the Indigenous characters who are experts in this acknowledged field of knowledge. Arthur Ferres reinforces this interpretation with his representation of Indigenality in *His first kangaroo: An Australian story for boys* (1900). Ferres details the construction and use of many Aboriginal tools, such as the boomerang. The detail with which many non-Indigenous authors described Aboriginal instruments reveals the Western admiration of the black man's technology. After his description of a boomerang, Ferres' narrator states: "It was astonishing to see the ease, dexterity and accuracy with which the young men of the tribe used this simple-looking article" (1900, p. 234). Ferres' protganist Archie, doesn't think it would be difficult to throw the boomerang, so he and the other non-Indigenous characters give it a try. They fail dismally. The narrative positions Aborigines as savages while acknowledging Indigenous ability and vigour.

Representing history, colonisation and invasion

Awareness, whether conscious or unconscious, is presented in these non-Indigenous representations of Indigenality of the effects of invasion on Indigenous peoples and their lands. Butterworth, in *Zigzag journeys in Australia* (1891) includes a chapter about the "last Tasmanian":

> When, in 1803, the English began to colonize Tasmania, the native population consisted of about four thousand men, women and children. They were a harmless, kindly race ... The English treated them with brutality. They fired upon them with bloody and deadly results, on the very first day that the two races met. This was done, not only without provocation, but while the poor barbarians were striving to show their desire to be friends with their destined exterminators. It was but one of a thousand instances that might be mentioned of the wicked conduct of the "superior races" towards their weaker brethren ... Intensely savage was the treatment the natural savages received from the savages of civilisation. Wars like those now raging in New Zealand took place. In peace and in war alike, the Tasmanians

> faded away, as our Red Men have faded away, only more swiftly ... As if to complete the power of this work, there was a quarrel over the last Tasmanians remains; and his head was cut off and stolen, to be sent to the London College of Surgeons; and his feet and hands, for the benefit of the Tasmanian Royal Society! He was treated exactly as if he had been an executed traitor under the old law. His was a strange fate – to be the last of his race, and to have his head kept in the greatest of the cities of Christendom, fifteen thousand miles from the place of his birth (1891, pp. 237-238).

This late nineteenth century view of Australia's history of colonisation would, no doubt, still cause controversy today – for a number of reasons. The suggestion that the last Aborigine in Tasmania was killed over a century ago would incite debate from both Indigenous Tasmanians and non-Indigenous historians. Some of the latter would argue that cultural genocide never occurred during colonisation. Butterworth's contact narrative opposes the "natural" savage to the "civilised" savage: hinting at the irony of one race/culture professing itself to be more civilised when behaving unjustly in not only one, but two, justice systems: breaking their own laws as well of those they are imposing their laws on. Ferres' narrative also highlights the irony of the so-called "civilised" race when his narrative describes how "the white man's civilisers – rum and tobacco" have diminished the Indigenous peoples (1900, p. 229).

G. E. Sargent problematises the effects of the colonisers' invasion of the Aborigines' land and the colonisers' expectations of Indigenous people in *Frank Layton: An Australian story* (1917). The story outlines the wrongs the colonisers have committed against Indigenous Australians while explaining established arguments about why the land needed to be settled. The underlying belief that colonisation benefits Indigenous peoples, struggles with the overt message that emphasises the destructive effects contact has had. Sargent uses a British character and a non-Indigenous Australian character to voice opposing opinions about colonisation:

> I knew something of the spiteful, unprovoked ways of what you call the natives of the country; and yet when I come to think of it not so unprovoked either: for, in the first place, we take away their grounds and drive them further back; and, in the second place, they had not been used to much kindness in return for the land we have taken. Wherever white men and what we call civilisation have gone – such civilisation, too! Mostly gunpowder and rum to begin with, at any rate – it has been pretty much might against right, I think. But, this is a problem I am not going to try to solve: there's room enough, no doubt, for all, and a hundred times more room than is likely to be filled up for many generations, and so it seems rather unfair to say that a few black savages should hold land for ever, and do nothing with it, when millions of people that do know how to use it want room in the world to turn themselves. However, there are all sorts among the black natives (1917, pp. 64-65).

The narrative increases awareness of the problematic association between black and white by trying to contain acknowledgement of a problem to be solved, or any hint of a dissenting nationalist voice. That the colonisers came and took Indigenous land is simply stated as a fact and an explanation as to why Indigenous people might not be welcoming to the white men. That the coloniser is trying to justify this act with the view that land should be used and the Indigenous people aren't "using" it exposes the need for justification in the first place.

The depiction of the Aborigine in *Australian tales of peril and adventure in town and bush*, by "an Officer of the Victorian Police" (Anon., 1893), explains that the colonists' dominance relied on "the general cowardice and harmlessness of these half-naked sons of the soil" (1893, p. 51). The narrator reveals the falsity of representations of the heroism of settlers:

> While the colonists were weak in numbers and the blacks were numerous, the former took care to keep on good terms with their sable brethren, and overlooked the numerous acts of petty thieving which daily took place. At length, however, as they grew more numerous, and learnt that the native was a poor, timid, easily scared creature, they assumed the high hand and without training or teaching, the black was expected to understand and conform to the white man's code of morals (1893, p. 207).

There could be no suggestion of the white man understanding and conforming to the black man's code of morals, but the narrative presents the white man's code of morals in such a way as to be circumspect – they were deceitful, sly and brutal. The patronising view of the narrative about Indigenous peoples serves to highlight the ignorance of the colonisers that they expected so much from a supposedly "poor, timid, easily scared" people.

Shaping an Australian identity, manipulating Indigenality

The image of the Aborigine could either help or hinder nationalistic purposes. Totally excluding any references to Indigenous peoples helped to establish an identity that non-Indigenous Australia hoped to create. This identity depended on the non-existence of Indigenous

peoples as in John Shaw's *Captain Stormalong: the bushranger* (1898) and E. Stredder's *Archie's find: A story of Australian life* (1900). The stories focus on making or praising white Australia, with complete exclusion of anything Indigenous. The purpose is to define future generations of non-Indigenous Australians as a strong, moral race that have a relationship with the landscape. Stredder writes,

> Archie's father reclaimed the forest, and planned and built and planted, he told his wife he was making a farming home that would last for generations. He had purchased a large tract of land, which he began to clear and cultivate by degrees. When it was all brought under the plough and spade, he knew that it would make his children's children men of wealth and position in the district (1900, pp. 32-33).

Thus, the Western legal concept of terra nullius is reinforced with the creation of a white Australian, agrarian, peaceful, wealthy race on uninhabited land. The text exposes how land, used as financial wealth and gain in non-Indigenous cultures, has been appropriated. Archie's father has obviously "purchased" the property from a non-Indigenous source. Excluding any references to "savages" or Indigenous peoples intentionally tries to establish the idea of a clear, uncultivated basis from which to build (white) Australian society. Including any mention of previous occupiers of the land would shatter both the legal concept of terra nullius and the nationalistic creation of Australia while revealing the resistance of Indigenous peoples. The need to completely ignore any references to Indigenous peoples reveals their problematic presence for the colonisers.

In contrast to the overt exclusion of Indigenous references, was the notion that Aborigines had been tamed. D. Lawson Johnstone writes in *In the land of the golden plume: A tale of adventure* (1894), "It is now several years since the natives around Hamilton Gap, North Queensland, made the last attempt to frighten their white supplanters" (1894, p. 7). Even in girls' stories such as *Trefoil: The story of a girl's society* (1900) by M. P. MacDonald, it is emphasised that the Aborigines are no longer as threatening as they were in the 1840s: "Bush-fires and bush-rangers, and blacks. Squatters had lively times fifty years ago" (1900, p. 165). Suggesting that Aborigines have been subdued and are no longer dangerous or savage stressed the nationalist image of Australia as cultivated and settled while implicitly revealing the fictitiousness of concepts and beliefs based on terra nullius. Indigenous presence had to be overcome before the white man could assert his own.

Including allusions to Indigenous peoples also brought with it confirmation of white Australian nationalism. As Goldie (1989) has theorised, the "indigene" became a useful commodity for non-Indigenous people. Goldie uses a structuralist analysis to argue that a non-Indigenous process of "indigenisation" controls images of the "indigene" in Australian literature. The "indigenising" of white Australians and non-Indigenous Australian readers excluded Indigenous peoples from the subject position of readers, yet was dependent on their presence in the first place. Befriending, conquering, or accommodating Indigenous peoples somehow, affirmed the image of Australia and white Australians, in much the same way that the unique flora and fauna was used. Mrs F. Hughes' narrative *My childhood in Australia: A story for my children* (1892), presents Indigenous peoples as being part of, and even important to, experiencing Australian life – the "natives" teach the white children how to throw boomerangs, what certain bush foods taste like, and other experiences of bush life – a purpose for including Indigenality that continued to appear in twentieth century Australian children's texts as well. Such recognition of Indigenous knowledges, although explicitly used to enhance the idea of "Australia" as a country, implicitly exposes Indigenous value and import. For the white child reader's entertainment, Hughes (1892) offers anecdotes about the natives' ignorance of civilised ways – from refusing to wear clothes, to thinking that falling potatoes were devils. The focus of the narrative rarely moves away from exploits of the Aborigines, for example, when Hughes writes, "We learnt more from watching them than from being taught" (Hughes, 1892, p. 48). Hughes adheres to non-Indigenous ideas of a "natural" state which allows a connection between the child and the "native" – the white children experience an idyllic childhood (in Australia) mostly due to their association with Aborigines. In such representations, an Indigenous presence is a powerful signifier of what it means to be Australian.

In Mary F. Nixon-Roulet's children's story *Our little Australian cousin* (1908) a non-Indigenous child character befriends an Indigenous child character. The narrative also attempts to represent an Indigenous character's perception. In her preface she writes:

> Australia, though a continent, is part of the Empire of Great Britain. A few years ago it was a wild country, where no white people lived, filled with Blacks, who were man-eating savages. These are fast-dying out, but in this story you will learn something about them, and of the lives of your Australian cousins (Nixon-Roulet, 1908, p. 1).

In her address to the British child reader, the author is revealing both the prior occupation of the land by Indigenous peoples, the benefit to white

people in learning about Indigenous people and the connection between knowing Australia and knowing its first peoples. Nixon-Roulet's protagonists, Fergus and Jean, are 12 and eight years old respectively and are eager to meet some of the "natives" – as they "like black people" after meeting a black nursing mother back home in the States (1908, p. 30). After becoming closely acquainted with an Aboriginal boy, the condescension of Jean and the narrator is replaced by approbation. Kadok, the Aboriginal boy, reveals to the reader what he thinks and feels when he leads Jean through the bush to safety: "'Black people very much like white people ... Some black face white heart, some black all way through. Some white face, very black heart' and the boy shook his head" (1908, p.106). Nixon-Roulet's reliance on the Western connotations of black as "bad" and white as "good" is apparent. She does, however, attach a notion of "human values" to her representation, rather than repeating a stereotype of the "other" savage:

> Much was passing in the black boy's mind. He knew too well the need for haste. The trip was dangerous for him as well as for his little white friend; he understood the danger and she did not. She felt only the danger of the forest, reptiles, hunger, cold and thirst. But Kadok had to fear both Blacks and Whites. Should the two fugitives run into unfriendly Blacks, they would be captured, and if the little girl was not killed by them she would be taken far inland, where as yet white people did not rule, and all hope of restoring her to her people would be at an end. On the other hand, were they to fall in with any of the mounted police or squatters, Kadok knew that his story would never be believed, and that he would be punished for stealing a white child. All this he knew, that Jean could not understand, but he felt that he must make her see the need for hurrying if possible (Nixon-Roulet, 1908, pp. 83-84).

The relationship that develops between the white girl and the black boy depends on the Aboriginal boy's knowledge, protection and generosity. Jean, the white child, does what Kadok says, eats what he gives her, and allows him to protect her. The idea of a friendship between a black child and a white child has appeared throughout Australian children's literature; however, Nixon-Roulet presented her characters and themes at a time when children's fiction rarely used the perspective of an Indigenous protagonist and rarely advocated a friendship between a white female and a black male. The story ends with an illustration of a fair, white child leading a black boy on a white pony (Kadok has sore feet, so Jean makes him ride her horse) and being found by Jean's father. Ultimately, the benevolence of the non-Indigenous characters and their power concludes the narrative: the white family offer Kadok a home for the rest of his life. The narrative, however, revolved around non-Indigenous dependence on Indigenous peoples.

Conclusion

Australian children's literature of the nineteenth and early twentieth century did construct stereotypes of Indigenous peoples as savage. As well as these representations, though, and from the existence of such representations, non-Indigenous awareness of, and fascination with, Indigenous peoples is apparent. The inclusion or exclusion of Indigenous references was used to build white nationalism and create an image of what it meant to be Australian. The non-Indigenous need to either exclude Indigenous peoples or to appropriate them as part of the image exposes not only the myths white nationalism was created upon but the inherent sovereignty of the original occupiers. Australian children's literature has a tradition of excluding Indigenous child readers, yet by facilitating open discussion of ideological assumptions that a text contains, teachers and readers can dismantle popular representations and interpretations to expose alternative ones and promote inclusivity for all readers.

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