

***Uby's Underdogs:*
A Transformative Vision of Australian Community**

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In *Black Words White Page* (2004), his seminal study of Aboriginal cultural production in Australia, Adam Shoemaker notes that 'when Oodgeroo Noonuccal's first collection of poetry appeared in print in 1964, a new phase of cultural communication began in Australia' (2004, p. 5). The 'new phase' to which Shoemaker refers pertains to the many plays, collections of poetry and novels by Aboriginal authors published between 1964 and 1988 and directed to Australian and international audiences. Flying under the radar of scholarly attention, Aboriginal authors and artists also produced significant numbers of children's books during this time, including Wilf Reeves and Olga Miller's *The Legends of Moonie Jarl*, published by Jacaranda Press in 1964 (see O'Connor 2007), Oodgeroo Noonuccal's *Stradbroke Dreamtime* (1972), and the picture books of Dick Roughsey and many other Aboriginal authors and artists (see Bradford 2001, pp. 159-90).

Texts produced for children and young people are rarely visible to literary scholars, since their circuits of production and reception operate outside those of general literary texts. For

instance, Shoemaker does not include children's texts among the Aboriginal poetry, plays and fiction he discusses, although his observations about Aboriginal textuality are also true of texts for the young: 'the power and impressiveness of Aboriginal writing stems from the authors' intimate knowledge of their subjects, their strong belief in what they are accomplishing through literature, and their socio-political involvement and awareness' (2004, p. 122). Children's texts occupy a key position in Aboriginal cultural production, since they are informed by the knowledge, belief and political engagement to which Shoemaker refers, directed toward children and young people, the adults of tomorrow. These texts address a double audience of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children (see Bradford 2001, p. 167).

Discourses of race in Australia have historically distinguished themselves from those of ethnicity, in what Peta Stephenson refers to as the 'partitioning of "the Indigene" and "the immigrant" in dominant Australian ideologies and policies' (2003, p. 57). This discursive divide is destabilised in the texts we discuss: Brenton E McKenna's graphic novels *Ubby's Underdogs: The Legend of the Phoenix Dragon* (2011) and *Ubby's Underdogs: Heroes Beginnings* (2013), the first and second volumes of a trilogy set in Broome after the Second World War and featuring the adventures of a young Aboriginal girl Ubby and her gang, the Underdogs: Fin from Ireland, Sel, a Malay boy, Gabe, a Maori boy from New Zealand, and the Chinese girl Sai Fong.¹

The 'Ubby's Underdogs' books are the first graphic novels published by Magabala Books, representing an innovation which maintains the inventiveness characteristic of Magabala's picture books.² The trilogy's treatment of the Underdogs' exploits in multicultural Broome foregrounds the encounter between Aboriginal and Chinese cultural traditions. By drawing on

a blend of cultural signifiers, the novels display the carnivalesque qualities described by Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World* (1984). In McKenna's novels carnivalesque scenes, polyglot voices and intercultural dialogues give rise to a transformative vision of a community which resists monologic authoritarianism. Like graphic novels more generally, the Underdogs novels rely on visual, verbal and cultural stereotypes to enable rapid identification of characters of various ethnicities. They transform such stereotypical and exoticised figures through modes of representation and narrative which privilege the 'culture of folk carnival humour' (Bakhtin 1984, p. 4) to present negotiations between and across cultures in the setting of post-war Broome.

Setting the scene

McKenna's graphic novels afford a visual manifestation of the social hierarchies and racialised separations which characterise the heterotopic space of Broome, at once located in the real world of 1940s Australia but also comprising a 'second world and a second life outside officialdom' (Bakhtin 1984, p. 6) where hierarchies of race, class and power are destabilised. The social mix represented in the trilogy mirrors the interracial relations forged when the pearling industry attracted Asian indentured labourers, including Chinese, Japanese, Malays and other immigrants, to work under European pearling masters (see Choo 1994; Stephenson 2003). Many of the Asian labourers developed close relations with the local Aboriginal population, partly because both groups occupied the lower or bottom rungs of Broome's stratified society. The polarising opposition between Aboriginal/Asian alliances and European settlers was a corollary of racial discrimination and oppression which shaped hierarchies of power in Broome during the first half of the twentieth century. As the pearling industry boomed and Asian businessmen employed Aboriginal labourers, alliances between

Asian immigrants and Aboriginal groups threatened the socio-political dominance and economic interests of white pearlers in this region (see Yu 1999). Interrelations and marriages between Asian men and Aboriginal women inevitably led to an increase in the 'coloured' population. Legislation introduced at state (Western Australia) and federal levels enforced 'a regime of interference and fear' (Yu 1999, p. 59) which restricted contact between these two groups. Such Aboriginal/Asian alliances do not imply a unified group which occupied a common social-economic status in this contact zone. In the real-world setting of Broome interactions between Aboriginal people and ethnic minority groups, especially Asian/Chinese immigrants, were seldom documented in the historical record, and the voices of their shared experiences were often suppressed and muted (see Yu 1999; Stephenson 2005).

McKenna's focus on relationships between Aboriginal and multi-ethnic characters and narratives in the novels dismantles the bifurcation of 'White-Aboriginal' and 'Anglo-Ethnic' discourses in Australian historiography, foregrounding the cultural negotiations of the mixed-race group of Underdogs and its locatedness in the broader networks of Broome society (see Hage 1988, p. 24). The books signal histories of disharmony in Broome which surface in continuing struggles against British dominance. Delomarr, Ubby's father and a former leader of the Aboriginal groups, is said to have been murdered 'during the last Broome riots' (McKenna V1, p. vii); and in *Heroes Beginnings* Maryanne, Ubby's mother, tells her daughter about how she once helped an Italian girl, Sylvania Neocrat, who was bullied and abused by the British master pearler Donappleton and who has now become the owner of 'the only pearling company still resisting Donappleton's grip on the Industry' (McKenna V2, p. 5). Such interpolated stories about racialised violence and resistance complicate the trilogy's narratives by providing insights into historical relations between and across cultural and ethnic groups. They create a world of depth and complexity where the triangulation of white,

ethnic and Aboriginal cultures is nuanced by signifiers of class, economic and social power, and gender.³ For instance, Ubby is the undisputed leader of the Underdogs as Delomarr's daughter, and she forestalls Scotty Donappleton's attempt to claim Sai Fong as a member of the Pearl Juniors, even though Sai Fong's uncle Yupman Poe is employed by Scotty's powerful father. Similarly, Fin (one of the Underdogs) is white and was at one time a member of the Pearl Juniors. However, his economic disadvantage as an Irish boy, and his dislike of the English, align him with Ubby and her gang. The allegiances and identities of protagonists are represented as fluid, generated by interpersonal relations as well as by heritage and history.

Carnavalesque relations in 'Ubby's Underdogs'

Children's literature scholars have long recognised the value of Bakhtinian theory in offering constructs for understanding texts for children and young adults (see McCallum 1999; Nikolajeva 2010; Stephens 1992; Allan 2012). Reading McKenna's 'Ubby' books through a Bakhtinian lens draws attention to how the parodic and carnivalesque operate in both the content and form of these graphic novels to convey a transformative vision of community. The 'carnival spirit' (Bakhtin 1984, p. 10) of the trilogy manifests in its irreverent and ribald humour, the Underdogs' strategies of evading surveillance and control, and the heteroglossia of Broome's cacophony of voices. Events play out in the public spaces, the streets and alleys of Broome, which correspond to the town square envisaged by Bakhtin, where 'a special form of free and familiar contact reigned among people who were usually divided by the barriers of caste, property, profession, and age' (1984, p. 10). The Underdogs' contests with their rivals, the Pearl Juniors, position readers to take pleasure in plot outcomes which

undermine hegemonies based on race, ethnicity, gender, economics, and politics, often through humorous antics and satirical effects.

One such carnivalesque episode occurs after a confrontation between the Underdogs and the Pearl Juniors. Incensed by Scotty's insults, Uby challenges the Pearls to a game of Gruff, a socially-sanctioned outlet for gang conflict, refereed by an Aboriginal leader and played on the 'Gruff battlefield' (McKenna V1, p. 39) where the Broome gangs gather: Chinese, Aboriginal, Japanese, Malay and European. The game is played in accordance with a complex set of rules outlined at the end of *The Legend of the Phoenix Dragon* and affords a temporary liberation from everyday life, involving Bakhtin's formulation of the carnivalesque, as the 'suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions' (Bakhtin 1984, p. 10. After a phase during which the Pearl Juniors are set to win the game, Sai Fong recovers from a vicious attack by Scotty and displays her preternatural martial arts abilities before tricking the Pearl Junior player Pegleg into kicking an own goal which delivers the win to the Underdogs. The high seriousness with which the game is treated is then itself rendered comical as the Pearl Juniors are obliged to perform a 'backdoor singing session' in which the losers must 'pull their pants down and run on the spot till they fart' (McKenna V1, p. 67), to the uninhibited hilarity of the assembled gangs.



Figure 1. Excerpt from *Ubby's Underdogs: The Legend of the Phoenix Dragon*, p. 69. With permission, Magabala Books.

This page focuses on the faces of the onlookers and the hunched bodies of the Pearl Juniors, cringing as they are pelted with seeds from the gubinge plant, a fruit which acts as a laxative. The faces shown in the fourth panel of the page, where gang members come together to celebrate the victory of the Underdogs, emphasise the cultural and racial diversity of the community and position readers to applaud the defeat of the Pearl Juniors; at top left of this

panel three members of the European gang, the Thracians, glower in disapproval, their sour expressions offset by the laughing faces of the other gang members.

The carnivalesque episode of the game of Gruff foregrounds the trilogy's communitarian and democratic orientation, depicting the triumph of the lowly over the powerful: the Underdogs over the Pearl Juniors, who metonymically represent the dominance of the British in Broome society. In the bottom three panels, Ubbly stands tall, to the admiring glances of those around her; well-wishers congratulate Gabe and Sel; and in the panel at lower right Quick, Sel's older brother and the leader of the Basilong gang, praises Sai Fong. Even in this depiction of a notable win, the narrative refuses to take victory too seriously; Ubbly sketches a bow to the applauding gangs and says, 'Thank you, thank you, you mob too kind,' to which Fin responds, 'That's right, we here all week' (McKenna V1, p. 65). These wry and self-deprecating comments remind readers of the Underdogs' lowly position in the hierarchies of the Broome gangs, and undermine the seriousness with which the contest is approached.

Another carnivalesque moment disrupts discourses of officialdom personified by Sergeant Macintyre, an ex-British army officer and head of the Broome's police. Shortly after Sai Fong meets the Underdogs she notices that they engage in a spitting ritual, which Fin explains to Sai Fong as follows: 'It's something you do when you mention the British. My dad does it all the time' (McKenna V1, p. 33). Sai Fong assumes that spitting is a normal practice in Broome and when she is introduced to Sergeant Macintyre she accordingly spits into his palm. Yupman Poe is obliged to cover for his niece's transgression, assuring the bewildered McIntyre that it is 'a Chinese gesture from our province for formal introductions' (McKenna V1, p. 73). This humorous depiction of cross-cultural confusion alerts readers to

hierarchies which assume the superiority of British culture. Sai Fong's 'unsuccessful' cultural translation generates carnivalesque laughter which exemplifies what Bakhtin terms 'the material bodily lower stratum' (1984, p. 82); her action of spitting disrupts the social formality of the scene, constituting a comic spectacle in which the authority represented by the Sergeant is satirised and ridiculed. In the meantime Ubby and her gang are transformed into the audience of carnival, amused and exempt from coercion or punishment. Bakhtin argues that carnivalesque laughter 'existed and developed outside the official sphere of high ideology and literature, but precisely because of its unofficial existence, it was marked by exceptional radicalism, freedom, and ruthlessness' (1984, p. 71). The puzzled expression of the Sergeant in this scene suggests that the unofficial and subversive nature of laughter transmits a fugitive social critique which cannot be officially traced or punished. The Underdogs' laughter demonstrates its positive potential, albeit temporarily, in disrupting and reconstituting the rules of the dominant culture.

Polyglot voices and the carnivalesque in 'Ubby's Underdogs'

Although Bakhtin's contribution to literary theory is usually considered in relation to the novel, it has great value as a means of reading the graphic novel. This form is ideally suited to the racial hybridity addressed in the 'Ubby's Underdogs' narratives, since the graphic novel is itself a hybrid mode of communication which combines linguistic and visual symbols, calling on readers to actively construct meaning by interpreting images and words arranged in panels and whole-page (or double-page) spreads (see Sly 2014). The variations of design common in graphic novels, together with components such as captions, speech and thought balloons, insets and symbols, create a sense of fluctuating rhythms, evident in the 'Ubby's Underdogs' books through sequences where the adventure narrative gives way to

flashbacks, interpolated narratives, and moments focusing on the relationships between characters.

Utilising a fusion of verbal and visual codes, McKenna orchestrates a polyglot world where ‘speech and gesture [is] frank and free’ (Bakhtin 1984, p. 10) and interrelationships are liberated from expected norms. As a new medium which developed on the boundaries of art and literature, graphic novels are relatively unfettered by conventional artistic or literary norms; moreover, they originate from comics, a popular form which has always been open to countercultural approaches. Thus they can provide a valuable forum for marginal, different and distinctive voices. The codes and conventions used in comics and graphic narrative interweave visual and verbal cues into a hybrid form described by Charles Hatfield, in which ‘word and image approach each other: words can be visually inflected, reading as pictures, while pictures can become as abstract and symbolic as words’ (2005, p. 36). In this way graphic novels can operate as a site of heteroglossia embracing a variety of speech genres and a polyphonic interactivity between word and picture. In their introduction to the 2006 themed issue on graphic narrative in *Modern Fiction Studies*, Hillary L. Chute and Marianne DeKoven observe that this interactivity ‘offers graphic narrative a representational mode capable of addressing complex political and historical issues with an explicit, formal degree of self-awareness’ (2005, p. 769). A closer examination of visual and verbal elements in the ‘Ubby’s Underdogs’ books will help us to explain how these narratives both address complex issues and also draw readers’ attention to the representational strategies they deploy.

Linguistic utterances are indicative of a speaker’s role, race, and social status, yet in the ‘Ubby’s Underdogs’ stories readers encounter negotiations between characters in

circumstances where ‘purely human relations’ (Bakhtin 1984, p. 10) tend to transcend socio-cultural differences. Readers perceive cameos of selected moments as the scenes shift in time and space. Verbal interchanges occur within caption boxes, speech and thought balloons, or as onomatopoeic symbols interacting with the visual track’s display of facial expressions and bodily gestures. In this way the various components of the narrative, with their illusion of movement and aurality, position readers to engage in active and creative processes of meaning-making.

From the outset McKenna engages his readers as an audience. In the opening pages of both books, he presents a cast of characters. This *dramatis personae* delivers character sketches which lead readers into the narrative, where they are positioned to engage actively with the text by envisaging the movement and *hearing* the dialogue and other intradiegetic sounds within the storyworld. As Robert E Petersen argues, through a combination of written and visual clues, the comic format invites a reader to ‘experience the sound of an action or place ... and give an animating force to the actions’ (2009, p. 164). In the ‘Ubby’s Underdogs’ books, a combination of authorial voice, narrative voice, and the ‘actorial’ voices of the characters encompass a reader in the polyphonic township of Broome in the late 1940s.

The Legend of the Phoenix Dragon opens with a description of Broome as: ‘a dusty little pearling town where the people are as rugged and rough as the red-dirt country that surrounds them ... home to its Indigenous people as well as a host of recent arrivals’ (McKenna V1, p. iv). The ethnic mix and ‘roughness’ of the characters is evident in the verbal descriptions and visual character sketches which follow. McKenna’s visuals are dominated by strong characterisation conveyed through distinctive figures, gestures and expressions. While the

artwork is stylistically unique, the depiction of prominent eyes and mouths, exaggerated facial expressions, and overplayed physical actions is reminiscent of Japanese manga illustration. Overall, the narrative format, with its multiplicity of styles including prose, the list of characters, verbal and visual panels in the mode of comics, and techniques adopted from both Western comics and manga creates a multifaceted text which reflects the multiculturalism of the community it depicts.

Initially, the voice of the external narrator guides readers through settings and offers information about characters, but soon the ballooned direct speech of the characters becomes more prominent. Their verbal interchanges, although delivered in standard speech/thought balloons, convey diverse voices proceeding from the transcultural storyworld. Comments such as Ubby's 'Look you mob. I gonna get 'em' (McKenna V1, p. 15) and Gabe's lisping, 'I'll get 'em one of thiesthe dayth' (McKenna V1, p. 16) simulate the utterances of idiosyncratic voices. Graphic novel theorists including Aczel, Ivanič & Camps and Petersen argue that through linguistic and other resources, writers can prompt a reader to *ventriloquate* the voices of the characters. In this sense, graphic novels do more than merely encode voices in lexical form. Through their combination of lexical and iconic codes they embody voices within the visual images of the speakers and the *balloonics* which encase the words. In the examples above, the dialogue attributed to Ubby and Gabe is imbued with *persona* and *aurality*.

As a mode of communication, the graphic novel has the capacity to evoke an *illusion of aurality*. McKenna's simulation of voice, accent, dialect and other oral nuances embodied by the visual representations of the characters and their dialogue enable a reader to *hear* the

different voices emitting from the storyworld. As Don Ihde suggests, ‘even voiceless reading can subtly reestablish its secret liaison with the adherence of the spoken word ... [and] the phenomenon of “hearing”’ (2007, p. 152). By situating verbal language within a visual context, graphic novels readily activate a reader’s inner voice enabling her/him to *hear* the voices of the characters with their different registers and dialects, and allowing for the recognition of a plurality of voices as well as the more subtle variations of tone and intent. These dialects, like stage voices, are often stereotypical constructions which render the impression of different speech modes. On the topic of creating dialects in children’s books, Anastasia Stamou notes, writers ‘concentrate on a few salient linguistic features to suggest a specific way of talking’ (2012, p. 314). Through modifications to written English, McKenna creates a multicultural storyworld which has both visibility and an apparent *audibility*.

Representations of race and ethnicity rely on a synaesthetic combination of illustrations of characters and their visually inflected verbal interchanges. Physical difference is communicated through caricatures of nationality and ethnicity, as is evidenced early in *The Legend of the Phoenix Dragon* where the Broome gangs are introduced. Characters’ facial features, complexion and attire distinguish the Chinese, Aboriginal, Japanese, Malay and British groups from one another. Presenting vocal differences can be more complex, requiring an author to write in non-standard language which, rather than actually replicating speech dialect, captures difference. The linguist Mark Balhorn explains that ‘dialect rendering situates the character or narrator in some social, economic, or ethnic opposition to standard English’ (1998, p. 51) and thus the effective depiction of dialect in writing involves the use of unusual and non-standard syntax and morphology.

Some linguists, including Balhorn (1998), Dennis Preston (1985), Alexandra Jaffe and Shana Walton (2000), argue that respellings used to communicate dialect denigrate speakers; Preston argues that such depictions make the speaker seem ‘boorish, uneducated, gangsterish, and so on, and ... that nearly ALL respellings share this defamation of character’ (1985, p. 328). However, we argue that this effect is not invariable. In the ‘Ubby’s Underdogs’ narratives McKenna employs such verbal devices as a means of defamiliarising linguistic expectations and creating a rich, multifaceted, polyglot storyworld which extends readers’ understanding and appreciation of difference. The tendency to perceive non-standard orthographies as “indices of low socioeconomic status” (Jaffe and Walton 2000, p. 561) owes its stigmatisation to the context in which it is presented, and to socially conditioned expectations of readers. As Bakhtin suggests, social interaction involves many competing dialects and idiolects, which he describes as ‘the rivulets and droplets of social heteroglossia’ (Bakhtin 1981, p. 263), and through the inclusion of these ‘rivulets and droplets’ the ‘Ubby’s Underdogs’ books divert the normative flow of standard English. By positioning readers to engage in an empathetic relationship with the Underdogs and their allies, McKenna’s different voices operate more to demystify prejudice associated with dialects than to reinforce it. Some of McKenna’s characters, including Ubby, Gabe, Fin, Safa and Stryper exhibit idiosyncratic dialects; but their non-standard voices convey the texture, vibrancy and heteroglossia of the Broome township.

Most characters in the ‘Ubby’s Underdogs’ books communicate in standard colloquial English, but there are nuances which distinguish certain characters. For instance some speak the language with more formality. The Chinese characters, Yupman Poe and Sai Fong, speak English with a precision which suggest their exacting training in English as a second language. When introducing himself to Clancy Bankler, Mr Donappleton’s assistant, Poe

says, ‘Thank you for meeting us. You can see we are...how you say, fresh off the boat. But I shall get to work once we have settled into our quarters’ (McKenna V1, p. 19). Poe’s self-conscious use of the expression ‘fresh off the boat’ is communicated through the pause created by an ellipsis and the phrase ‘how you say’, which acknowledges his uncertainty about the way he is using the colloquialism. In addition to this, Poe’s formal ‘I shall’ rather than the contraction ‘I’ll’ points to his penchant for speaking English correctly. Bankler, on the other hand, speaks in a formal register which suggests a sycophantic style of address conveyed by exaggerated praise: ‘Mr Donappleton...is overwhelmed to have a man of your skill working for him. It is not every day that we get to work with a financial wizard’ (McKenna V1, p. 19).

While English is the prime mode of verbal communication in the ‘Underdogs’ books, it is also used as a foil against which to project alternative voices. Preston explains that a range of respellings can simulate different modes of orality (1985). *Allegro speech*, or the elision of words such as “watcha” for ‘what do you’, occurs at times in Ubby’s utterances. These lexical constructions, along with occasional Aboriginal terms such as ‘mob’, ‘blackfella’, and ‘uncle in the broad sense of kinship, and instances of altered syntax, convey Ubby’s tough, street-wise nature and her Aboriginality. *Dialect spelling* attempts to capture features of nonstandard pronunciation and is evident in the construction of Safa’s dialect: ‘Arh dat be all right. And oos might dis be?’ (McKenna V1, p. 100)ⁱ and ‘Ere’s sumpem that migh help’ (McKenna V2, p. 14). From information provided in the *dramatis personae* and elsewhere in the narrative, it becomes clear that Safa is Afro-Caribbean, a kind-hearted, ukulele-playing vagabond whom the Underdogs treat with respect and friendship. Safa’s pet, the chess-playing baboon, Medinga, has been stolen and the Underdogs are committed to retrieving him. Gabe’s pronounced lisp is encoded through the use of *eye-dialect*, or phonetic spelling.

In the characterisation of both Safa and Gabe, McKenna's orthographic choices create *stage voices* which distinguish their idiolects from those of other characters.

Early in *Heroes Beginnings*, there occurs an interchange involving Fin, Gabe and Safa [Figure 2] which demonstrates how the iconic and lexical codes operate simultaneously to convey the characters' interactions as well as highlighting their dialectal variation. On this page, and the three which follow, non-standard English predominates, affirming the interplay of different voices, notably Gabe's lisp and Safa's Afro-Caribbean dialect. The kindly Safa offers Gabe some of his potion to help with an injury sustained in an earlier skirmish. Wide-eyed with concern Safa says, 'Ere's sumpem dat migh help with that big graze Gabe got dere' and warns him 'But ya mite wanna 'old ya nose closed' (McKenna V2, p. 14). In the construction of Safa's accent the use of dialect spelling including 'ere's', 'sumpem', 'dat', "'old'; eye-dialect such as 'mite'; and allegro speech words like 'wonna', intersect to create an impression of Safa's unique orality. Catching a whiff of the foul smelling potion, Gabe, covering his mouth and nose exclaims, 'Oooh, dithguthing. What ith that thtuff? It thmelth putrid! (McKenna V2, p. 14). Far from accentuating Gabe's lowly status as a Maori boy with a lisp, this representation of his speech celebrates his energetic individuality.



Figure 2. Extract from *Ubby's Underdogs: Heroes Beginnings*, p. 14. With permission, Magabala Books.

Characters in the *Underdogs* books are clearly defined by their visual appearance. Even in crowd scenes, each spectator is a clearly identifiable individual within the multitude. For example, during the pursuit of Medinga in *Heroes Beginnings* peripheral characters are individualised through facial expressions and bodily gestures (McKenna V2, pp. 100-105). Characterisation is accorded far greater prominence than background setting in these narratives and cultural difference is made explicit, with voice often functioning as a prominent feature of individuality within the assembly of multicultural characters. While working in the comic medium, McKenna does

not fall into the trap of simplistic caricature and negative stereotyping which as Derek Royal argues, 'dehumanizes by means of reductive iconography' (2007, p. 68). On the contrary, each character is individualised in a manner which recognises and values difference.

Through this interplay of voices and activity, McKenna creates a storyworld which evades hierarchies of class, culture and ethnicity, a 'world of topsy-turvy, of heteroglot exuberance, ... where all is mixed, hybrid, ritually degraded and defiled' (Stallybrass and White, 1986, p. 8). In the 'topsy-turvy' world of 'Ubby's Underdogs', the youthful idealism of individuals from mixed racial and ethnic backgrounds challenges the status quo and demonstrates the value of transcultural respect and cooperation. Power relations are negotiated through the visual construction of the carnivalesque and its power to disrupt the power of the rich and privileged.

Intercultural and cross-cultural transformations in 'Ubby's Underdogs'

McKenna's graphic novels centre on the interplay of racial and ethnic engagements, notably the encounters of Chinese and Aboriginal cultures and legendary figures. The books constitute a counter-narrative, drawing attention to the limitations of discursive binaries which categorise Aboriginal people in terms of race and subsume ethnic immigrants under the banner of the multicultural in relation to Anglo-Australian settlers (see Stephenson, 'New Cultural Scripts' 2003; Curthoys 2000; Brewster 1995). The prologue to *The Legend of the Phoenix Dragon* depicts violent riots in ancient China when the vicious force of the Hede attempts to rule over the country. The Phoenix Dragon protects the mountain village from annihilation but is badly injured. He travels to the south, looking for a cure from the

Sandpaper Dragon in Australia. The name of the Phoenix Dragon combines two auspicious imaginary creatures in ancient Chinese legends—the feminine symbol ‘Phoenix’ and the masculine ‘Dragon’. The creative combination of Chinese cultural elements forms a dialogical relationship with the ancient Aboriginal culture, signified by the giant goanna known as the Sandpaper Dragon who lives in the Australian desert. In a symbolic sense, the cross-cultural encounter of these two legendary figures implies a historical relationship between Chinese and Aboriginal Australians, which foreshadows the Aboriginal/Asian alliances in contemporary Broome society as depicted later in the books. By foregrounding the contact between two ancient cultures and peoples, the books depart from the distinction between race and ethnicity which has dominated discussions of cross-cultural and inter-racial relations in Australia.

The graphic treatment of this encounter underscores the negotiation of power differences between these two cultural entities. As shown in the panels of Figure 3, the Phoenix Dragon comes from a war-torn homeland, and the Sandpaper Dragon is positioned as the host, passing the flame (*druga*) on to endow him with life and power. As the Phoenix Dragon is grateful to the Sandpaper Dragon for healing and wisdom found in ‘a land of vast desert’ (McKenna V1, p. 8), their relationship enacts a power dynamic which insists on the primacy of Indigeneity in the Australian context. As much as the book recognises the intercultural contact between these two groups, it implicitly re-affirms the fact that ethnic migrants are the beneficiaries of what the land of Australia offers, a land formerly owned and occupied by Aboriginal people. Noticeably, the ritual of power transmission (*druga*) shown in the second left panel is enabled through a semi-comedic episode in which an Aboriginal warrior woman carries the *druga* flame in her mouth and kisses the Phoenix Dragon.



Figure 3. Extract from *Ubby's Underdogs: The Legend of the Phoenix Dragon*, p. 10. With permission from Magabala Books.

At this point, the tense, solemn druga ritual is mediated through a corporeal experience of intimacy. The two faint exclamation marks in the adjacent panel indicate the bewilderment of the young Phoenix Dragon and give rise to a moment which blends comedy with high

emotion. The implications of sexuality and rebirth in this sequence address what Bakhtin calls ‘the material bodily principle’ (1984, p. 18), which is central to the carnivalesque folk humour of the trilogy. The bodily intimacy of the dragon and the warrior woman transforms the seriousness and sacredness of their cross-cultural ritual into an act of sensuous frivolity. The comical implications of this page technically realise a shift from a high register to a low one, which is consistent with the entertaining ambience of the trilogy. But this erotic degradation, in the Bakhtinian sense, is positive and regenerative, as it suggests that the Phoenix Dragon is rejuvenated and regains life and power. Meanwhile, the prominent role of the warrior woman as she mediates between the dragons ascribes power to Aboriginal femininity, rather than locating female figures at the margins.

The legend of the Phoenix Dragon traverses tempo-spatial and cultural divisions, anticipating the intercultural transformation visible in relations between Sai Fong and Ubbly’s Underdogs. Against the backdrop of this cultural pluralism, McKenna manages to play with stereotypical images through exaggeration and excess. The portrayal of Chinese immigrants in Broome, notably Sai Fong and her uncle Yupman Poe, enables an exploration of neglected voices in its treatment of intercultural and cross-cultural engagement. The novels’ syncretic cluster of stereotypical representations of Chinese culture and characters is not unproblematic. Nevertheless, this deployment of stereotypes is used effectively in the novels to readily identify characters from certain ethnic backgrounds, to interrogate racialised binary discourses, and to produce a transformative vision of marginalised cultures in the Broome communities.

The portrayal of Sai Fong does not shrink from the stereotypes of Chinese femininity which are prevalent in popular culture; rather, a hybrid mix of stereotypical images is intensified to achieve a hyperbolic and comical effect. From the outset of the story, Sai Fong is presented as vulnerable: she suffers from an unidentified illness and is subservient to her uncle Yupman's paternalistic order. These negative attributes conform to racialised western tropes of Asian women who are framed as weak, sentimental and subordinate (see Jiwani 2006, p. 166). Nevertheless, the transformation of Sai Fong is achieved through intercultural engagements. She disobeys Yupman by associating with the Underdogs and when she confronts the Pearl Juniors in the game of Gruff, Sai Fong demonstrates her versatility in Chinese martial arts, her loyalty to Ubby's gang, and her desire for justice against racial prejudice.

In this respect, the characterisation of Sai Fong pays homage to the images of Chinese warrior women prevalent in popular culture: for instance, Hua Mulan in the Walt Disney animation *Mulan* (1998), who is filial, pious and brave on the battlefield; and Jen from the Hollywood blockbuster *Crouching Tiger and Hidden Dragon* (2000), an ostensibly fragile woman who is exceptionally talented in martial arts. The attributes of warrior women as invincible, mysterious and exotic are combined in the characterisation of Sai Fong. She is attributed with a mysterious identity as a dragon summoner and with the supernatural powers of casting fire, communicating with animals, and detoxifying snake poison to save Ubby's life. Although Sai Fong is kidnapped toward the end of *The Legend of the Phoenix Dragon* and is absent throughout *Heroes Beginnings*, the searches undertaken by the various factions render her powerfully present within the narrative. Projected as a 'non-human' or 'superhuman' figure, Sai Fong's mystical presence suggests a division of worlds, mediating between the real and the alien, the familiar and the exotic. In a sense, the characterisation of

Sai Fong is constructed by what Jiwani refers to as ‘a hodgepodge of differences pastiched together’ (2006, p. 162), so that she can be seen as a hybridised combination of Chinese female characters in western popular culture.

The excess of stereotypical elements is an integral aspect of graphic novels, enabling readers to quickly identify characters’ ethnicities and comprehend meanings beyond visual representations. This strategy also accentuates racial differences in the novels’ depictions of multicultural Broome, using signifiers of ethnicity to produce a counter-narrative which contests racial ideologies and norms. This effect is evident in the episode in which Sai Fong invites the Underdogs to see a film at Sun Pictures, an outdoor theatre in real-life Broome. As Yu comments, Sun Pictures enforced racially discriminating seating arrangements referred to as ‘Blacks in the back’ (1999, p. 60), in which Aboriginal people were required to sit on the benches at the back and Asians in the front while white Europeans occupied the best seats in the middle of the theatre. Before the Underdogs see the film, Sai Fong dresses Ubby in traditional Chinese costume – a top with a stand-up collar and a bun with a hairpin. The depiction of Ubby dressed like a Chinese girl is not merely for fun, but implies a temporary, strategic shift of identity, though in a playful and deceptive manner, when Ubby enters a place where Aboriginal people suffered discrimination. In this sense, what might appear to be the tokenistic signifier of the Chinese costume constitutes evidence of the cross-cultural alliance between Ubby and Sai Fong, as well as a ploy to bypass racial segregation.

Further allusions to Western stereotypes of Chinese people and culture are evident in the identities the novels attribute to Chinese adult figures: sorcerers/wizards, gangsters, street thugs, refugees, criminals, pearl labourers, and shop owners. The characterisation of Yupman

Poe is informed by just such stereotypical perceptions. He is a fugitive from Shanghai, having being framed as the murderer of the Black Guard General (the protector of China). He brings Sai Fong to Australia in search of a magic cure for her illness. Upon his arrival, Yupman is soon engaged to work for Donappleton. His role as ‘a financial wizard’ (McKenna V1, p. 19) fits western assumptions that Chinese men are exceptionally shrewd and financially astute. In *The Legend of the Phoenix Dragon* it is implied that Yupman employs shady schemes to enable the reckless expansion of Donappleton’s business. Donappleton says: ‘Mr Poe knows how to reduce my taxes. Poe may not know it yet but I shall use every one of his financial talents to build my empire’ (McKenna V1, p. 96). Yupman’s talents cannot serve a noble purpose because his choices are limited by his lower social status as a Chinese immigrant in Australian settler society. The characterization of Yupman exposes the complex triangulation of Chinese migrants, Anglo-Australians, and Aboriginal people in colonial history, in which, as Stephenson observes, Chinese ethnic groups were ‘exploited by and marginalised from the wider Anglo-Australian citizenry’ (2003, p. 62), while implicated in the colonial enterprise which caused the dispossession of Aboriginal people. In this sense, Stephenson argues, the Chinese were ‘not only victims of colonisation, they were also agents of it’ (2003, p. 62). Nevertheless, this does not imply that Chinese migrants possessed the same resources and power as white Europeans; rather, their role as perpetrators of colonisation was due largely to the pressure they experienced as they sought to make a living in a strange land. Yupman Poe’s uneasy complicity with Donappleton reflects the interracial contact which remains part of Broome society in the novels’ setting and exposes the imbalance of power which shapes relations between these characters.

Despite the ambiguous positioning of Chinese migrants in relation to the dominance of Anglo-Australian settlers, the Chinese often formed a dynamic alliance with local Aboriginal

people as well as other ethnic groups, which sometimes involved a shared sense of being excluded and oppressed by white society. The novels' treatment of such interracial engagements foregrounds characters' empathy and their sense of a common humanity. For instance, in a scene where Ubby and Yupman Poe are pursued by ex-military thugs, they seek refuge at Ubby's home. Here Ubby's mother Maryanne drives the thugs away with a broom, then turns her attention to Ubby: 'So where the woop woop have you been? Had me worried sick' (McKenna V2, p. 140) Maryanne next questions Ubby about Yupman's identity: 'And who is this old mongrel staring at me?' (McKenna V2, p. 140). But when she understands that Yupman is 'that old fella who lost your little girl' (McKenna V2, p. 141), she invites him into her home and provides him with tea and accommodation. This entertaining exchange displays both Maryanne's volatility and also her ready sympathy for Yupman, constructing an Aboriginal feminine characterised by endurance, humour and loyalty. The fact of Yupman's Chinese ancestry is of no consequence in comparison to what he has in common with Maryanne as the guardian of a wilful young girl. This scene portrays the multifaceted and diverse engagements between Chinese and Aboriginal groups in the Broome community.

The first two books of McKenna's trilogy are highly innovative in their blend of graphic novel and manga strategies and their approach to intercultural negotiations. They adopt the comic format and create captivating narratives which affirm racial and ethnic difference. Foregrounding the identity-formation of two young girls, Ubby and Sai Fong, the interwoven stories of these novels celebrate female agency and cultural exchange in a setting marked by histories of racial discrimination and resistance. By drawing on a blend of cultural signifiers to envision hybrid identities, the novels refuse binaries which segregate Aboriginal from migrant discourses. The books are particularly audacious in the way they intermingle

Aboriginal and Chinese legendary figures and beliefs through the framing narrative of the meeting of the Phoenix Dragon of China and the Sandpaper Dragon of the Australian desert.

As we have argued throughout, the trilogy addresses serious and weighty concerns – intercultural relations, colonialism, race-based discrimination – through a carnivalesque orientation which enables satire, humour and comical excess. The powerful are mocked and the marginalised achieve success in a narrative which celebrates demotic humour and linguistic diversity. Readers are positioned to align with Ubby and the Underdogs and to engage with their relationships and adventures. In this way the narrative advocates the values of openness, generosity and courage which characterise the Underdogs. But even as the Underdogs perform heroic deeds, the energetic polyphony of McKenna's verbal and visual storytelling complicates the notion of heroism. Nobody is immune from the carnivalesque laughter to which Bakhtin refers, which is always ambivalent: 'it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives. Such is the laughter of carnival' (Bakhtin 1984, pp. 11-12). In the 'Ubby's Underdogs' narratives, parody, irreverence and carnivalesque laughter interrogate the social order of a community, revealing the critical power of strategies such as celebration and deprecation. The heroic triumph anticipated by Ubby and the Underdogs offers readers a perspective of Australia which departs from the dominant tropes of Australian historiography by foregrounding relations between Indigenous and immigrant populations. In this sense, the oppositional discourse of McKenna's graphic novels works not only to re-envision post-war Broome, but also to project a vision of intercultural transformation onto contemporary Australia.

Notes

1. The final instalment of the 'Ubbys Underdogs' trilogy is currently under development. Throughout this essay we refer to the first two titles of the trilogy by their sub-titles, *The Legend of the Phoenix Dragon* and *Heroes Beginnings*. Unlike *Heroes Beginnings*, *The Legend of the Phoenix Dragon* does not have numbered pages. In our citations of *The Legend of the Phoenix Dragon* we have counted the pages treating the right hand splash page entitled *Prologue* as page one. We cite the pages prior to this page by numbering from the title page as i-x. *The Legend of the Phoenix Dragon* is designated as Volume 1 (V1) and *Heroes Beginnings* as Volume 2 (V2).

2. See, for instance, ground-breaking Magabala picture books such as Daisy Utemorra and Pat Torres' *Do Not Go Around the Edges* (1990) and Gracie Greene, Joe Tramacchi and Lucille Gill's *Tjarany Roughtail* (1992).

3. See Peta Stephenson, *The Outsiders Within: Telling Australia's Indigenous-Asian Story* (2007) for a thorough account of the complexities of these triangular relationships.

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