Cultural Explorations of Time and Space: Indigenous Australian Artists-in Residence, Conventional Narratives and Children's Text Creation

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Introduction

This paper details a project, funded by the University of Ballarat in Victoria, which addresses a local problem of schools' lack of acknowledgement of their being positioned on traditional owners' land. In addressing this issue, I am using two texts, M*y Place* (Wheatley and Rawlins 1987) and *Who am I? The Diary of Mary Talence* (Heiss 2004) to engage the participants in discussions to make visible what has been invisible; that is, the issue of traditional Indigenous Australian ownership of the land on which the school is placed. Taking up notions of deconstruction from poststructuralist theory, I have looked to these texts as ways of disrupting the taken-for-granted occupation of public space, that is, I examine the language used to position the readers and 'yield up the ideologies that inform them' (Bradford 2001, p.9). I will then ask participants to use these understandings to look at their own situation in relation to the space their school occupies. What is examined in this project is the current state of affairs, where the land occupied by schools is owned by the state, and, notionally at least, by the school community of various stakeholders with no sense even of an Indigenous Australian perspective on ways in which relationships with the land may go well beyond concepts of ownership. The project referred to in this paper has not concluded, so I do not report here on any changes that may have occurred. Rather, I report on how I envisage the texts are to be used to make visible issues of land ownership and how and why these particular texts can contribute to this endeavour. The problem of acknowledgement of traditional land ownership has become evident in relation to schools in the region as part of an unexpected outcome of a photographic survey of the entrances to around 120 primary schools used by my own undergraduate students for the conduct of their teaching practice. The survey indicates that only four of these schools in some way publicly acknowledge traditional and current Indigenous Australian presence in the schools' histories, or the schools' occupying traditional owners' land. This suggests that every Indigenous Australian child who enters any of the remaining 116 schools photographically surveyed does not have formal, sustained acknowledgement of their school being built on traditional owners' land or in some way connected to a history that spans more than that of European settlement of the region. Even though every school in Australia is built on traditional owners' land, Indigenous Australian children who do not see this acknowledged are not overtly welcomed as part of their traditional landowner heritage as far as these schools are concerned, and thus are covertly excluded from traditions and heritages to which they might otherwise lay claim.

In a similar vein, the historical understandings of European and other migrant children are diminished while this aspect of their history is not addressed. This understanding has led me to a question that Foucault himself has used to guide his own thinking: 'How do things happen?' (Foucault 1980b, p.50). How indeed did this situation with schools happen? Perhaps, even more to the point, how can this be made visible so that it does not keep happening? To address these questions, I have looked to discourses as a focus for the project.

Discourses

Discourses are not just verbal or written texts, but social practices that constitute and are constituting of a social self and a social reality (Foucault 1974). Discourses constrain the possibilities of thought, keeping the unthinkable at bay so that certain discourses are privileged over others by virtue of their privileged application. The concept of discourses opens up concepts of marginalised and dominant or privileged discourses, and the network of conditions that maintain their position within fields of knowledge. Marginalisation can be understood as being a result of particular constructions of subjectivities through discursive practices which make invisible certain subjects and subject positions and what is more, they normalise that invisibility. Normalisation can be understood as a process within power relations that constructs that which is being marginalised and that which is being privileged as being beyond question, as part of being a natural state of affairs (see also Barron and Zeegers 2006).

The project makes visible a number of normalising processes related to those who are constructed as marginal—in this case, Indigenous Australians and their backgrounded positioning in Australian history. At the conclusion of the project, the children will generate texts that express their understandings of Indigenous Australian ownership

of land. This will be undertaken under the guidance and supervision of Indigenous artists-in-residence at the school. A durable and permanent artefact to be positioned at the school entrance will acknowledge the school's occupying traditional owners' land and being part of a longer tradition than that of European presence in the region. The current lack of acknowledgement of the schools' occupation of traditional owners' land is made possible in part by the acceptance of the sorts of exclusionary devices of print-based texts engaged by children in their classrooms, texts which operate as mechanisms of normalisation.

Making visible the taken-for-granted

To make visible the links between taken-for-granted exclusionary devices within discourses of Eurocentric views of Australian history, this project will use the selected texts for exploration by the children involved. *My Place* (Wheatley & Rawlins 1987) will be a touchstone text. A touchstone text is one by which others may be assessed when set against it (Abrams 2005, p. 211). Thus, it envisaged that this book will help to establish the quality or otherwise of other texts that we will introduce or which will be created as part of the project. More specifically, this touchstone text is the one upon which to base strategies for helping the children to access discourses of culture and history. Juxtaposed with this is *Who am I? The diary of Mary Talence* (Heiss 2004). It is through this text that I will guide children in the identification of gaps and silences in discourses of Australian history. Such guided reading enables the children to read *My Place* as a site of silences—silences of discourses of marginalisation and normalisation—as it is the silences of a discourse that may be explored for things that are not said as exclusionary devices that serve to background things within discourses. In this project, analyses of privileging and marginalising discourses are based on the principle that *everything* is never said, pointing up the deficiencies of the statements themselves in that aspect (Zeegers 2005).

That which is never said, however, is as indicative of backgrounding within discourses as that which is said is foregrounded. Explorations of silences will enable the children to study them 'at the limits that separate them from what is not said' (Foucault 1974, pp.118-119). What exists

in the silences, then, is to be examined as well. Foucault (1974) does emphasise the point that it is not a matter of 'rediscovering the unsaid' as it were, but a matter of 'discover[ing] what special place [a particular discourse] occupies and how it's isolated in the general dispersion of statements' (p.119). This process is part of a distribution of discourses, of things said and things concealed, in relation to multiple discursive elements (Foucault 1980a, p.100). In exploring silences, we can enable children to come to an understanding as to:

> *Who is speaking, who is accorded the right to do so, who is qualified to do so, from where comes the presumption that what he says is true. What is the status of the individuals who—alone—have the right, sanctioned by law or tradition...to proffer such a discourse?*
> (Foucault 1974, p.50)

The texts

What follows is my account of what *My Place* offers and then a short section which shows how auxiliary texts may be used to guide these deeper understandings. The scope of Wheatley and Rawlins' work is remarkable in its ability to canvass a number of factual developments in a non-fiction form, presenting a plausible Eurocentric account of just what might have happened in the particular place that is their focus in this work. Starting from the present, the narrative moves backwards, presenting what are in effect historically dated snapshots of people, their activities, cultures and various other symbolic and cultural markers to a time before the major intrusion of a new and different European-based culture in 1788. Even so, the final snapshot does not admit to that new Euroculture having been felt in 1788, adding a touch of irony to the idyllic picture that is so suggestively depicted in the crowded illustration of Barangaroo and her family, in her place.

The whole work is book-ended by symbols of Australian Indigenousness, with the Indigenous Australian flag displayed in the front window of the first dwelling that we encounter in the book, and the tree with the colours and the sun itself depicted in landscape form in the final snapshot. Having in such ways established the potential for tensions to be resolved, the book works in language

features as cultural markers. In the opening scene, the child introduces herself, 'My name's Laura and this is my place'. The young girl in the final two scenes introduces herself saying, 'My name's Barangaroo. I belong to this place'. The use of the possessives in these two sentences is different, reinforcing a crucial aspect of cultural diversity and cultural identity. It underscores different attitudes to place and one's position in relation to the land that the particular space occupies. It is reminiscent of the song *This land is mine* (Hannan, Carmody & Kelly 2001) where a white farmer refuses to have a black tracker on his land, even to have him find his lost child. The father sings, 'This land is mine'. The reprise by the tracker is as telling as the Wheatley-Rawlins' phrasing, 'This land owns me'. In similar vein, in this case in *My Place,* the tensions are subtly but forcefully presented to the reader, foregrounding the Indigenous Australian perspective. This is so, however, only for the first and final snapshots, in all the others, cultural, social and commercial activities occur outside of this frame. The possibilities for the playing out of the tensions suggested by the use of this difference in phrasing are neglected.

For the rest of Australian history between these two dates in *My Place*, there is no reference whatsoever to any Indigenous Australian presence or influence. There are no Indigenous Australian goldminers, or members of fighting forces during wars, or marrying or having and raising their children in family groups, or doing anything else that people might do. The cultural diversity emphasised in the book does not extend to Indigenous Australians in the representations of a world of colonisation, gold rushes, industrialisation, economic downturns, war, the 1950s and subsequent waves of European migration. It is only at the very end of all such movements that Indigenous Australians find a place as the family of the first episode appears in an urban context. How did they get there? What were their forebears doing while all of this was happening in Australian history? What happened to the implied line of children from Barangaroo's mob? The answers to these and any other questions along these lines are embedded in the silences that effectively background and therefore marginalise this group of Australians.

As the decades are examined, the single place is represented through the eyes of a child of the decade, so that it becomes 'My place' for a number and variety of people, and the intensity of the relationship of each child is emphasized by the personal and possessive forms of the pronoun 'me', it is always 'my' or 'mine'—always with the exception of Barangaroo, for whom the place is the possessor rather than the other way round. There is also the voice of Laura. Initially it seems that this is one of the many children in the narrative, but at the end, it appears that it is actually a Laura/Barangaroo voice. It is a voice that presents a snapshot of Australian Indigenousness that spans the eras of European occupation of that place, but the very absence of an Indigenous Australian presence within every other stanza marginalises Australian Indigeneity in the narrative of history that Australian children encounter in this text. It is the European children (with a sidelong glance of acknowledgment of a Chinese child on the 1850's goldfields) whose voices dominate. The apparently multiple voices created in this text maintains a conversation between what Johnston refers to as 'the art of its words and the art of its pictures' (2001, p. 403), not only focusing the reader on the picture book itself, but constructing opportunities for an examination of the wider world and its historical trajectories. The opportunities are not taken up, however. In this book, it is a reading experience that invites reader interaction that goes beyond the text and its pictures, certainly; but I argue this is only insofar as the silences of the text are to be explored, and able to be explored, by knowledgeable readers able to fill the gaps from their own knowledge of the world. Without this sort of knowledge it will simply not happen, and there is not enough to be gleaned from other Eurocentric texts to enable it to happen.

The construction of eurocentric identities is more than textual. It is also embedded in the illustrations of *My Place*. Johnston (2001) ascribes a 'third space' in children's literature to picture books (p.400). She sees this as unique, part of the 'deep structure' of picture books, citing Pullman in describing them as 'the greatest story-telling device of the twentieth century' (1989, p.404). *My Place* is one such book, exploring on multiple levels the possibilities of history, of identity, of culture, and of a child's place

in such a complex and dynamic representation of what it may mean to be an Australian child in a multicultural Australia. It maintains a relentlessly positive perspective on multiculturalism, on culture, and on personal identity within a complicated set of structures, languages, activities and familial relationships. It does so within a predictable structure that varies its point of view with each episode, adding a feature of its own that eschews pagination and relies on eras for identification of the children that people each stanza. It could have made a major contribution to explorations of Australian Indigenousness in its narrative of Australian history, but it did not pursue its potential. It opted for silences in its story as to issues of dispossession, of systematic oppression, of policies of smoothing the dying pillow, of racist policy that underlies the establishment of various church and state missions, of inferior educational provision, and of stolen generations' children.

Unique transaction

Saxby (1998) writes of children's literature written between 1841-1941 as being 'offered to children'. Such 'offerings', both past and present, invariably construct discourses about Eurocentric knowledge that is privileged in Australian primary schools. The reader-text relationship is one that Rosenblatt (1976) describes as a 'unique transaction', in that, '[a] novel or a poem or a play remains merely ink spots on paper until a reader transforms them into a set of meaningful symbols' (p. 25) that touch the emotions and stimulate the imagination. The themes explored in *My Place* encompass discourses of marginalisation, and a normalisation of that marginalisation of Indigenous Australianness in a discursive formation of Australianness itself. It is discursive practice; it is discourses in operation. Discursive practice is, as Foucault (1974) defines it, 'a body of anonymous historical rules, always determined in the time and space that have defined a given period, and for a given social, economic, geographical, or linguistic area, the conditions of operation of the enunciative function' (p.117). The enunciative function here is to marginalise one, and to privilege the other, within Australian schooling.

The implied reader

Iser's (1974) work provides the concept of the 'implied reader' to consider. The (ideal) implied reader does not just take up a passive position in relation to what is being read. This reader actively engages with the text to make meaning from it, and that meaning may not at all be what the author intended. The reader is fundamental to the text, for it is the reader who makes meaning from it. That is not to say that the author of a text does not guide the reader towards the intended meaning, but it is the reader who takes the path or not, fills in gaps in the text, actively visualises the scenes and situations, and essentially enters a dialogue with the text as it is read. The reader accepts or rejects subject positions and this in itself indicates just how the unwritten parts of the text, or what exists in what is not said, is also negotiated by the reader. Traditional representations of Indigenous Australian characters in text engaged by readers, then, construct the characters in particular ways within discourses of possession and dispossession, privileging the European perspectives on Australian history. A good example of this is Bradford's (2001) description of her New Zealand childhood impressions of Australian Indigenous peoples as passive subjects, perhaps even willing collaborators, in their dispossession and marginalisation in the face of European encroachments on their lands. The child readers of *My Place* take up such discourses of privileging of those views of history without ever interrogating the text in the light of such discursive formations.

What we read, according to Iser (1974) is more than the text; it is a whole world of reader experience brought to the text so that it only takes life when it is realised in the mind of the reader. It is a concept consistent with that of knowledge as occurring when information or data is filtered through a learner's own experience and applied as a meaningful thing to that experience, so that it is internalised and becomes the learner's own. It is a very private thing. And it must ever be so. Once it is articulated, it becomes information again. It is then up to whoever encounters it to internalise it and turn it into their own private knowledge (Pennell 1999). The ideal implied reader of *My Place* thus has the opportunity to take up an aesthetic position, certainly, for it is a beautiful book.

That reader may at the same time take up an efferential position suggested by Rosenblatt (1976), so that the meaning s/he makes points up a cultural position regarding what history declares it to mean to be an Indigenous

Australian in this country. Further, that reader may fill in the narrative gaps as part of their meaning-making exercise. But gap-filling as part of a meaning-making exercise in reading is not the same as exploring the silences of discourses, especially discourses that privilege certain things before others. The discourses' silences are more than gaps in reader understanding and knowledge. Explorations of the silences are required to analyse the discourses that in this case background Indigenous Australian history within powerful discourses of Euroculture. It is at this point that the Indigenous Australian artists take up roles integral to the project—as authorities that may speak of the Indigenous Australian history—as they offer the children a perspective that provides a means of access to other discourses of history.

Thus, the project proceeds on the one hand of the basis of texts becoming alive when they enter the reader's mind; that a vibrant and dynamic transaction occurs between the reader and the text that makes the whole experience for the reader so enjoyable. On the other, it proceeds on the understanding that readers cannot do this effectively when the possibilities for engagement are limited by texts that in their silences in relation to what it is possible to think close off opportunities for full engagement. It is through the juxtapositioning of *My Place* and *Who am I? The Diary of Mary Talence* that it can be understood that *My Place* is closing such opportunities.

The silences in *Who am I? The Diary of Mary Talence* are silences for the character, Mary, not for the reader. Nobody really ever tells the stolen child, Mary, why she is at the mission instead of with her family, or just what is not being said in the Australian history she is being taught at school. Heiss's writing subtly renders the lies told Mary by teachers as ones designed to teach her how to hate herself. This print-based text is one that the children may scrutinise with some appreciation of the power of discourses to create subjectivities. Heiss offers them with honesty and a concern for more than just a plausible account of what might have happened in the case of a stolen generation's child. It is a telling example of one narrative's explorations of one feature of Australian history that exists largely in the silences of discourses of indigenous Australian history.

Children reading this book will be struck not just by those lies told to Mary, but that she really believed them in a way that only a child *can* believe the lies that adults are disposed to tell them. The gap-filling in which the child reader engages is an element of quite a different discursive formation from *My Place* in that the gaps loom large as silences that children will have opportunities to explore with teachers equipped with the knowledge and the disposition to do so as part of a productive engagement with children's literature. Heiss's book is one that treats child readers with respect, and treats history with some regard for its possibilities as an exploration of what really did, or might have, happened. Other texts that offer possibilities in this vein are *When I was Little, Like you* (Malbunka 2003), *Land of the Dingo People* (Trezise 1997), and *Papunya School Book of Country and History* (Anangu staff and students at Papunya School 2001). This last example is especially significant as it explores Indigenous Australian people actively involved in significant historical moments in Australia as featured players, not as passive onlookers to and recipients of a history being created around them. Perhaps more significantly, it is a highly successful example of the sort of durable and public artefact that children themselves have created out of their own developing knowledge of texts that portray Australian history.

Transformative possibilities

The necessarily affective dimensions of critical reading experiences are the very dimensions that carry within them transformative possibilities. There is the potential for print and non print texts to be developed with, and engaged by, children; to acknowledge children's sensibilities in their responses to texts; and to extend the scope of child readers by developing those intensely personal understandings of what they encounter (see also Zeegers & Smith 2005). With this, of course, comes the potential that explorations of their rich cultural heritage promises. The project treats all of these as the group of elements that constitute the whole of its own particular discursive formation. The project works on the principle that there are some things that are not said, for a discursive practice is of and by its nature selective in what is actually said, by whom it is said, and with what authority it is said. With the authority granted by virtue of the reference group, the Indigenous Australian

artists, and the Indigenous Australian parents and children who are part of the school community, the project enables both Indigenous Australian and non Indigenous Australian children to engage with non print-based texts derived from a cultural tradition that is different from the Eurocultural tradition. Songs, music, dance and stories performed and presented by professional Indigenous Australian provide other texts to explore, and other perspectives to engage with. The project aims to enable children to examine just what is possible and what is impossible to think (see for example Foucault, 1973). Thus, children will be given the opportunity to re-examine texts such as *My Place* in the light of new text encounters.

What is perhaps more significant, is that the children will have the opportunity to create their own texts in the light of their developing cultural understandings. They will create non print-based texts that will represent a history of their school that goes beyond the arrival of Europeans in their part of the world. They will place these at the entry to their school—durable artefacts that tell the story of that larger and wider history, and they will formally pass on their new knowledge to the children in the grades that come after them. They will do this in consultation with Indigenous Australian artists who will work with them to develop authentic engagement with the Indigenous Australian history of their own place, their own school. In the process, they will be creating a discursive formation that foregrounds elements of their own understandings of just how things happen.

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