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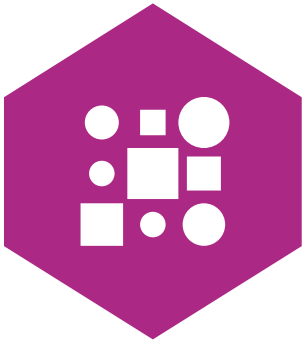
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Cross-cultural Editing and Critique Confronting White Estrangement from Indigenous Texts

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Cross-cultural Editing and Critique: Confronting White Estrangement from Indigenous Texts

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Abstract: While it is evident that the work of the book editor and the literary critic are different, they share important synergies around the publication of the literary text. An editor's role is one of critical friend to the manuscript and its writer during the processes of publication. Commensurate with this are budgetary, scheduling and marketing concerns owed to the publisher. The critic's job is to interpret, to contextualize, and to critique the published text within both public sphere and university. The critic's responsibility is to current and following generations of writers, editors, and readers, as well as to the market for literature. As Indigenous writing enlarges its niche status within mainstream settler society publishing, the questions of cross-cultural editing and criticism have become increasingly significant discourses within the academy and the industry. Indigenous writers, as indeed do all writers, require competent and conscientious editing in order, as Emma LaRocque has observed, to advance their skills. Their books too, require perceptive critique in order to improve publishing standards and to sustain and increase markets for Indigenous works. This paper considers the symbiotic role of cross-cultural editors and critics in the development of the publication of Indigenous authors in Australia and Canada, seeking to elucidate changes since the late 20th century when critics and writers like Judith Wright, Stephen Muecke, Penny van Toorn and Emma LaRocque began to critique the nature of the dominant white society's relationship with Indigenous texts.

Keywords: Cross-cultural Editing, Cross-cultural Critique, Indigenous Writing, Indigenous Publication, Aboriginal Writing, Aboriginal Publication

Introduction

Embracing diversity is a process that entails more than mere toleration of the 'other'. It is an intellectual activity, as suggested in Veronica Brady's 'defence of the importance of reading', a matter of creativity derived from 'interrogation':

We need people who can still think and feel for themselves, critically aware not only of the social and cultural forces which shape them but also of the possibilities of difference, and ready to cherish those possibilities (Brady 1994, 41).

For anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose this interrogation 'seeks relationships across otherness without seeking to erase difference' (2004, 21). Rose asserts an ethical obligation toward the work of 'decolonization' by the inheritors of settler societies who have benefited from the processes and proceeds of colonialism. She evokes Emmanuel Levinas's ethics of the face: 'It is the frailty of the one who needs you, who is counting on you', in which the powerful becomes the servant to those in need, to describe her position (from Levinas, in Bernasconi & Wood 1988, 171).

In the preface to *Imagining Justice: the politics of postcolonial forgiveness and reconciliation*, Julie McGonegal questions whether 'redress and reconciliation [are] merely dogmas or illusions sustained by the inheritors of a nation's power and privilege', or whether it is possible that these concepts might become more, a functioning alternative to Edward Said's 'politics of blame' (2009, ix), for instance. McGonegal (2009, 29) looks to a reconciliation in which colonizer and colonized are linked in mutual transformation 'by facilitating "a democratic colloquium between the antagonistic inheritors of the colonial aftermath"' (from Leela Ghandi 1998, x). Efficacious reconciliation must be consensual and entered into without forceful compunction; furthermore, the "work" is not assumed only, or even primarily, by those that have been wronged' (McGonegal 2009, 33). Reconciliation involves a constant commitment by

the inheritors of the settler society to ‘transforming the brutal conditions that are the legacy of colonialism’ (McGonegal 2009, 33).

If we accept as a basic premise the importance of the work of decolonisation: the acknowledgement and preservation of Indigenous history, of Indigenous knowledges and of Indigenous voices, the scholarship of decolonisation is central from both ethical and practical positions.¹ Therefore it is also possible that the publication and distribution of Indigenous writing within settler societies plays an important part towards reconciliation.

For Rose, ‘the unmaking of the regimes of violence that promote the disconnection of moral accountability from time and place’ is a central idea of decolonisation (2004, 214). Rose’s knowledge of the ‘callous indifference to the dispossession, death, and despair [the settlers have] generated for the Indigenous peoples and ecosystems of their “new worlds”’, requires a personal response from the current generation (2004, 5). Rose understands engagement with the process of decolonisation and reconciliation as a way in which to ‘inscribe back into the world a moral presence for ourselves’ (2004, 6). Within this spirit, this paper contends that ethical approaches to the publication of Indigenous writing and its critique ought be canvassed and established.

In response to the changing, complex and permeable national boundaries of the 20th century, Homi Bhabha argues for a reconsideration of definitions of national literature that welcomes inclusive contributions towards the ‘imagined community’ (1998, 937). He challenges traditional English canons to incorporate the voices of Indigenous peoples and of immigrants.

This paper explores ways in which the cross-cultural editing and criticism of Indigenous writing might assert ‘engaged responsiveness in the present’ (Rose 2004, 213) to facilitate individual ethical engagements in publishing. In settler societies where the Indigenous population currently constitutes a very small percentage of the total population (such as Australia and Canada), Indigenous writers often find themselves negotiating the process of publication with non-Indigenous editors, while non-Indigenous critics subject Indigenous works to critical scrutiny and public review. If we accept the importance of Indigenous literature in the decolonisation process, and engagement in the processes of decolonisation and reconciliation as an ethical responsibility for the ‘white’ inheritors of the settler society, then it is important that Indigenous writers and their works are treated accordingly. It matters that such voices are not subjected to continuing invisibility, and Indigenous writers to humiliation or oppression during processes that for the wider community – though not entirely and not always successfully – have been developed to enhance literary standards and the engagement of readers with texts more generally.

Editorial-critical Nexus

During my most cynical moments I believe that the literary canon – that collection of ‘great’ works of literature – is merely a creation of academics looking for teachable works of literature, and publishers looking for the profits that are likely to ensue if their texts are taught in university English classes (Episkenew 2002, 52).

Jo-Ann Episkenew’s suggestion that a national literary canon is created by teachers of literature in collusion with publishers, though couched somewhat facetiously, stresses the significance of text adoptions to the successful publication of particular kinds of works. From the perspective of publishing houses, sales via ‘book listing’, as it is termed in the industry, sustain a readership in what may otherwise be a minor work capable of generating only a small print run, and a shelf life of weeks rather than months in general bookshops. Literary works, typically without mass-market appeal, preserve their place in many publishers’ lists through sales into the education

¹ In this paper I use the term ‘Indigenous’ when discussing Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as well as the First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples of Canada unless in quoted material.

market. They are sold to teachers, to course coordinators and to academics, with the possibility of ensuring that the works remain in print for years: they become part of the established canon.

Critics, perhaps more obviously, influence the 'canonisation' of works of literature. As public intellectuals, through published reviews in literary journals and the review pages of magazines and newspapers, they have both opportunity and ability to sway public perceptions, to contextualize stories and to persuasively encourage the reading and purchase of particular texts. Through their research and academic writing, and the enthusiastic teaching of specific works in English and Literary Studies courses within the academy, critic-academics also influence their students: the next generation of editors and readers.

At times, critical influence functions to exclude writing that does not conform to mainstream perceptions of literature. Indeed, a body of academic work suggests that texts that are non-compliant with a recognizable genre, or seemingly have no useful purpose for the numerical majority will not be funded and published. This 'difference' and its consequences can be particularly relevant to the literary output of Indigenous writers. When minority voices seek influence beyond their own community they cede power to 'the dominant audience' (van Toorn 1990, 102). Furthermore, reduced educational opportunities, which have limited the access of Indigenous students to tertiary study has meant that, more generally, Indigenous readers lack 'what Andre le Fevre calls status conferring power' (van Toorn 1990, 107). When Indigenous writers seek to engage with the broader white community, Sonja Kurtzer explains:

A process of negotiation takes place between the desires of 'white' Australians and those of the Indigenous population: the result is that some authors with particular kinds of stories to tell, who are able to express their stories in particular kinds of ways, find that these stories are readily received by 'white' audiences (Kurtzer 2003, 181).

Stephen Muecke suggests that a confluence of influences including the 'state of readiness, even eagerness' of the publishing industry for Indigenous works ensured their publication. Such influences were unrelated to the intent of the writers themselves (Muecke 2005, 112-113). Thus, 'It is not at present the Aboriginal communities whose canonical values determine what is or is not publishable' (van Toorn 1990, 107).

During the publication process, editors provide a supportive and educative buffer between the publishing company and the writer as they edit the text, often shaping content, structure and language. Thus editors work within an ambiguous space, balancing their loyalty between the author and her manuscript, the needs of particular readers, and the publisher and its budgetary and marketing requirements. Within a commercial publishing context, the book editor performs the role of 'critical friend' to the writer, often commissioning a specific text, supporting the writer through the developmental phase of the manuscript, working through a close reading, making suggestions for changes, and finally line or copyediting the text. The editor's task is to assist a writer to enable her writing to best express her message, and to ensure the final work is best suited to its targeted readership. During this process an editor reflects to the writer the feelings engendered by the text in an 'ideal' reader. When the aims of the writer and publisher do not align, the cross-cultural editor – especially if she is committed to an ethical practice – may find particular difficulty in negotiating the tensions inherent in this work. It can be very difficult to satisfy the needs of all stakeholders in the business of publishing, and especially so when dealing with minority texts in a cross-cultural environment.

White Estrangement from Indigenous Texts

'Culturally Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians inhabit two very different worlds, relating to one another either in terms of stereotypes or of bureaucratic definition and organization', writes Veronica Brady (1994). Typically, in settler societies, Indigenous peoples have been written out of the historical record through physical and cultural domination by its colonisers.

Subjected to deliberate and racist eugenicist policies, they have survived in the non-Indigenous cultural imagination as inferior to white society: the noble savage, innocent, childlike, and a dying race. They have become an item of curiosity. Co-incidentally, Indigenous peoples have inhabited the popular culture through images of primitivism, of savagery, requiring the 'civilizing' influences imparted through a specific education by the white society. Canadian academic Emma LaRocque suggests that a 'civ/sav dichotomy' informs an ideology that has legitimized the power relations entrenched in colonisation, and has 'permeat[ed] colonizer texts' (2010, 37). In thus reinforcing the position of superiority of the settlers and their descendants, such texts have distorted the reality of Indigenous culture, denying realistic role models to Indigenous youth and encouraging the disintegration of Indigenous culture and society (LaRocque 2010).

As LaRocque argues, these historical images of Indigenous people are merely inventions that have allowed the settler society to excuse or to ignore the government policies and behaviours of their forebears. Coming to terms with the actuality of a surviving and empowered culture as demonstrated through a flourishing of Indigenous writing is the real challenge for the Canadian mainstream in the 21st century (LaRocque 2010). It is difficult however (as discussed above) for such writers to reach a broader readership, and especially when, as is often the case, the objectives of the Indigenous writers do not always align constructively with the marketing intentions of the publisher.

There are issues too for non-Indigenous readers with the textual transmission of Indigenous laws and cultural knowledges beyond their authorised boundaries. 'How do we see, or know, or imagine, from a Waanyi point of view if we are not Waanyi?' Alison Ravenscroft asks in 'Dreaming of others: *Carpentaria* and its critics'. She refutes critical readings of Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* as a magical realist text, suggesting that such a reading solves difficulties for the white reader rather than elucidating the text or the writer's intentions. Rather than a form of resistant writing from a dominated culture, magic realism is a construct of Western critical strategy (Ravenscroft 2010, 195). 'When a white reader determines the text's placement in her own genre of magical realism,' Ravenscroft writes, 'what is this but a determination to read her own bewilderment as the other's magic' (2010, 205). In Ravenscroft's opinion, this reading incorporates a 'recuperation of the binary that associates Indigeneity with magic, irrationality, delusion and dream, and whiteness with realism, reality and rationality, and with consciousness, a wakeful state' (2010, 197).

Until recently, Indigenous epistemologies, history and theories of literature have been given scant attention in theoretical discourse. One important way critics and editors begin to engage constructively with the voices of the Indigenous writers and critics is suggested by Veronica Brady:

reading about the shadow side of our history and culture, the experiences of Aboriginal Australians, is a way of recovering this identity, creating a set of shared meanings and values, an objective world we know and relate to together and a shared social world which is wider, more in tune with actuality and therefore more capable of expansion than the one we non-Aboriginal Australians have lived in hitherto, enclosed within the Orientalising fantasies of western colonialism' (Brady 1994, 42).

As Bhabha has argued, 'a critic must attempt to fully realize, and take responsibility for, the unspoken, unrepresented pasts that haunt the historical present' (Bhabha 1998, 941). But this presupposes a growing body of work by such critics and writers.

Australian Critical Approaches

As Indigenous writing became more widely published in Australia during the 1980s, critics were confronted with the complexities of cross-cultural literary criticism within a context and

understanding of difference. (Edward Said's *Orientalism* had appeared in 1978.) While Adam Shoemaker asserted the importance of considering 'aesthetic criterion' as well as the historical, cultural, and sociological determinants upon Indigenous writing (Shoemaker 1989, 6-7), Judith Wright sought to highlight problems with the dominant culture's ability to evaluate and to criticise Indigenous literature. 'Can we apply,' she questioned,

the critical standards we use in evaluating new contributions to our own literature by those who inherit and live within the dominant culture and language, to those who have no such education training and background – and who, moreover, may bitterly and thoroughly reject all the bland assumptions of that culture and feel that language an alien imposition? (Wright 1987, 24).

Wright was concerned that given that Western schooled critics were ill equipped to deal with 'the literatures of protest without embarrassment', they may withdraw from the field, thus effectively silencing the Indigenous voice (1987, 25).

The 1980s saw Indigenous writers coming together to discuss their joint interests, to critique each other's works, and to press for an independent Indigenous publishing industry. They sought to set the critical agenda for their works, alongside a political and sociological agenda for their lives (see Davis & Hodge 1985, Nelson 1988).

During this period Colin Johnson (later Mudrooroo) assumed the role of Indigenous literary auteur, becoming involved in debates around the 'authenticity' of Indigenous writing, and the task of defining specific and identifiable Indigenous forms of writing. Having written the first Australian work of Indigenous fiction, *Wild cat falling* in 1967, Johnson published poetry, fiction and criticism during the 1980s and 1990s. Mudrooroo's criticism has been influential in identifying the critical debates of the 1980s and 1990s. He refuted contemporary critical appraisals of Indigenous poets Oodgeroo Noonuccal and Jack Davis as 'assimilated' due to their use of the ballad form, as a limitation of Western criticism, declaring:

This approach is not only invalid in presupposing that there is an absolute artistic standard which is identical with the Western standard, or that poets are writing verse for aesthetic enjoyment, but it also is an active agent in suppressing any development of Aboriginal arts which live outside this standard (Mudrooroo 1990, 43).

He argued that 'the primary criticism of Aboriginal arts and literature must come from Aborigines', because Western standards of criticism are developed by Westerners for Western audiences (1990, 44).

In 1996, however, Mudrooroo's identity as an Indigenous man was publicly challenged in an article in the *Australian Magazine* (Laurie 1996, 28). Rather than being the son of a Nyoongah woman from Western Australia as had been previously accepted, Laurie asserted that he was in fact the son of an Afro-American father. Following this exposure, Mudrooroo retired from public life and eventually relocated to Nepal. Contemporary critic Adam Shoemaker suggests that had his reputation not been tarnished by the suggestion of fraudulent behavior Mudrooroo's works would still be read in schools and universities (Shoemaker 2011, 2). (See also Clarke 2007, and Oboe 2003 for further discussion.)

It is impossible now to read Australian Indigenous writing without feeling the influence of Mudrooroo's critical and creative writings. He was an important influence in Indigenous literary criticism not only because of his stature as an Indigenous writer and critic. His works dominated a very small field of critical Indigenous writers who were often published in the same journals, and who commented on each other's works.

Penny Van Toorn has suggested that Mudrooroo created an Aboriginal reading position for white readers to occupy, arguing that the changeable and arbitrary nature of the 'signifiers of discursive authority' mean that 'the distribution of value between different kinds of discourse

will always remain in a state of ambiguity, controversy and flux' (1990, 112). Mudrooroo, she suggests, has benefited from this situation by writing texts which 'harness the power of valorizing signs recognized by the dominant audience, in order to impart prestige to the valorizing signs recognized in traditional Aboriginal communities', thus opening up these texts to a broader readership (1990, 112).

Following Mudrooroo's withdrawal from the critical arena, Indigenous participation in literary criticism in Australia was significantly reduced. In part, this may have been a function of the small pool of Indigenous critics operating during the final 20 years of the 20th century. It may also reflect the age of those Indigenous writers engaged in criticism as they came to an end of their working lives. Partly, too, the establishment of independent publishers specializing in the publication of Indigenous works, like Magabala Press in Broome and IAD Press in Alice Springs, may have distracted the activists who had previously seen control of the means of dissemination of their literary output as preeminent (see McGuinness & Walker 1985; Mudrooroo 1997, 48).

A lack of Indigenous critical writings, however, was noted, leading Michelle Grossman, in her introduction to *Blacklines: contemporary critical writing by Indigenous Australians* to lament a lack of critical discourse on Indigenous culture generally. 'Where [...] was the book that made available at least a portion of the theoretically informed and critically focused writing produced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander intellectuals?' she asks (Grossman 2003, 3).

When this anthology of critical writing was published in 2003, its back cover copy attested to the fact that its fifteen contributors covered an extensive area of expertise: 'From museums to Mabo, anthropology to art, feminism to film, land rights to literature'. That so relatively few Indigenous experts must cover such a spectrum suggests that individual Australian Indigenous intellectuals bear a heavy burden of critical thought and commentary. 'Many intellectuals published in this collection,' writes Philip Morrissey:

write on a range of issues; understandably, this is often dictated by political imperatives. For Indigenous intellectuals the intense political context in which their work is situated can threaten to be undermining (2003, 191).

Canadian Critical Approaches

In Canada over the past four decades, Indigenous writers had also been conveying a realistic picture of their lives through poetry, memoir and autobiographical fiction. In parallel with Australian Indigenous poets and writers of the late 20th century, their words were often critiqued dismissively as 'protest literature' and thus removed from the purview of the literary scholars (see Episkew 2002, 53; Lutz 1991, 2). Mainstream as well as a small group of specialized Indigenous publishers had served the publication needs of Canadian Indigenous writers. These writers pursued similar aims to those in Australia: writing for their own people alongside the desire, often a subordinate goal, of educating the wider non-Indigenous community (see for example, Armstrong 1992, 14; Huggins & Huggins 1994, 1; LaRocque 1991).

The critical debate around Indigenous literatures appears to have developed more rapidly in Canada on the cusp of the 21st century, driven by a group of Indigenous academics researching and writing from within Canadian universities. Largely rejecting of what they describe as Eurocentric critical theories: 'Will we teach our students that Native voices and perspectives matter in themselves, or that hybridity, mediation, and reaction are the only way that Indigenous concerns are meaningful?' (Justice 2004a, 9), these writers have sought to construct new theories and methodologies for the critical appraisal of Indigenous texts. They teach courses in English and Native Studies, and have called for an understanding of the traditional and historical context of Indigenous literature and a 'degree of cultural initiation by critics engaged in the teaching of Indigenous literatures' (Ruffo 1993, 163).

Indigenous academics attest to the fact that Indigenous epistemology pre-dates the coming of colonialism, and it is to an epistemology that centres on the land and on story that they look for an explication of Indigenous writing (King 1990; Kovach 2010, 12-14). ‘Story,’ writes Margaret Kovach, ‘is an Indigenous method for sharing experience, and interpretive, subjective understanding is accepted. That which contextualizes life – place, kinship, ceremony, language, purpose – matters greatly in how we come to know’ (Kovach 2010, 176). Emma La Rocque researches similar territory:

Some Native writers [...] argue that theory in Native writing comes not from the construction of the narrative but from the telling of the story itself. I have found that most Native autobiographies are not centrally about personal life events; rather, life events are recounted to make sense of what was a colonial experience not understood at the time such events or responses took place (LaRocque 2010, 91).

LaRocque asserts the importance of the inclusion of Indigenous writing within a culture of critical and editorial appraisal (1990, xxiv). It is the method and means of this appraisal currently embedded within a Western epistemology that she challenges (2010). Although Canadian Indigenous academics often see themselves as operating within an academy at times hostile and challenging to their ideas, they choose to remain within a system they perceive as ultimately beneficial to their aims (Justice 2004b, 112; Kovach 2010; LaRocque 2010). They have decided to use, to adapt and to change its tools to negotiate their own reality and that of their students.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to establish that ethical approaches to cross-cultural editing and criticism are important works towards decolonisation and reconciliation. Such approaches, because they include individual responsibility for engagement with Indigenous texts and their dissemination, become a work of moral accountability by cross-cultural editors and critics as the majority inheritors of the settler state (Rose 2004).

Yet, as Emma LaRocque has also argued, there is no universal template for looking at Indigenous writing; Indigenous culture is living not dead, diverse not homogeneous (2010). Problematic too for the work of the critic elucidating Indigenous texts is the generative nature of academic discourse. ‘Critical works,’ writes Jo-Ann Episkenew, ‘beget more critical works’ with an unfortunate consequence that the literary work itself may become a merely exemplary material (2002, 54).

This research compares and contrasts the settler societies of Australia and Canada within a caveat that acknowledges the problems associated with essentialising either individual writers, their cultures or societies. It acknowledges that while there are similarities in the colonisation of these nation states, and in the effects of this colonisation upon its inheritors, there are significant differences as well. Within what might appear as contradictory parameters, it is nevertheless important that stories that promote decolonisation, that offer an empowered future, and that reject victimhood are presented to both Indigenous and wider readerships. ‘Do we only want to study [stories that cause us to] wallow in helplessness and hopelessness? I hope not, because not only are we what we eat, we are also what we think’ (Mihesuah 2004, 101). In a settler society where Indigenous writers have few choices but to engage with cross-cultural editors and even less choice regarding their critics, it is important that such editors and critics ‘find courage to let this literature be unsettling’, engage in education about cultural differences and Indigenous strategies for critique (Eigenbrod 2005, 206). In essence, they must acknowledge the work of, and listen to their Indigenous counterparts. For, as Canadian writer, editor and critic Daniel Heath Justice writes: ‘to be a thoughtful participant in the decolonization of Indigenous peoples is to necessarily enter into an ethical relationship that requires respect, attentiveness, intellectual rigor, and no small amount of moral courage’ (2004a, 9).

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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and cultural influences as well as the reconstruction of space within the country for relatively autonomous forms of economic and cultural enterprise. With varying degrees of openness, it also incorporates aspects of indigenous Chinese cultural thought and practice. Another high-profile member of the Paris-based group is the curator and critic Hou Hanru, who has published a number of texts that seek to align post-colonialist discourse with aspects of traditional Chinese cultural thought and practice. The high-water mark of contemporary art's estrangement from mainstream politics was the essay reprinted here, "Estrangement and Cognition," is one of the earliest statements of some of Suvin's core theses. This version is the author's preferred text as it appeared in *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1979). References to other book chapters have been retained in this reprint, but a new postscript has been added for 2014. We are grateful to Professor Suvin for his permission to reprint and his assistance in preparing this version. Author's note, 1979: The firm Ultimately, the study of cultural identities offers rich understandings for both oneself and others. As the world that we inhabit is becoming increasingly diverse, the study of cultural identities will continue to gain traction within the communication discipline and beyond. Summary and Keywords. Within the discipline of communication, the concept of "cultural identities" has captivated, fascinated, and received sustained attention from scholars of communication and culture over time. Like the concept of "culture," which is varied, complex, and at times contested, the study of cultural identity has been approached from diverse lenses, whether theoretically, methodologically, or ontologically.