

## Reciprocal bonds?

### *Re-thinking orality and literacy in critical perspectives on Indigenous Australian life-writing*

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Since the 1980s, anthropologists have responded (with varying degrees of enthusiasm and reluctance) to the challenges mounted both by members of indigenous societies who are in a position to critique and contest the 'ethnographic authority' of earlier anthropological representations of their cultures, and by revisionist scholarship that has sought to transform the conceptual and methodological grounds by which ethnographic strategies of representation objectify the subjects of their inquiries. Writing of the challenge to ethnography of new ways of remaking social analysis, Renato Rosaldo argues, "If ethnography once imagined it could describe discrete cultures, it now contends with boundaries that crisscross over a field at once fluid and saturated with power."<sup>1</sup>

This cross-over of boundaries relates to genres as well as to cultures and subjectivities, and I document at length in *Entangled Subjects*, the monograph in progress from which this essay is drawn, the relevance of understanding how the legacies of ethnographic surveillance and spectacle continue to haunt the contemporary conceptualisation of a number of cross-culturally produced Indigenous life-writing works. Here, however, I want to draw attention to the fact that Rosaldo's observation about boundary crossings is a salutary reminder of the need to remain alert to how those boundaries traverse *intra-* as well as *inter-*subjective fields of culture and power, because both Indigenous and non-Indigenous textual collaborators are always already constituted as dialogic, not monologic, subjects. In the absence of an acknowledgment of the intra-subjective dimension of multiple cultural locations and crossings, we are less able to understand the complexities of how anthropology and autobiography, ethnography and life writing, intersect, 'cross over,' dissolve and re-form as genre-driven categories of organising culture and representation for both individual subjects and specific texts in Indigenous and cross-cultural contexts.

In the case of collaborative relations in Indigenous text-making, this also requires a reading of the ways in which such collaborators may themselves be multiply co-inscribed as subjects by various cultural locations, and may in turn seek to create multiple or intersecting cultural and textual inscriptions as a result. Put another way, it would be a serious analytical error to assume that all Indigenous authors consistently occupy the 'speaking' rather than the 'writing' position in life-

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writing texts, that all Indigenous authors privilege the oral over the written in managing their own preferences about textual representation, or that all non-Indigenous collaborators are concerned to suppress their own oral presence in the text in favour of written self-representation. To do so would be to reproduce rather than interrogate the crude binarisms on which long-held distinctions between 'orality' and 'literacy' have been based in the constructing of Western and Indigenous socio-cultural frontiers, and to misread the ways in which these texts both reflect but also resist their haunting by ethnographic and literary modes of textual organisation.

Yet such binarisms continue to hold sway in a range of contemporary critical considerations of cross-cultural collaborative life-writing and textuality. I want to focus particularly here on the work of the feminist-postcolonial critic Anne Brewster, author of a still-influential study of Indigenous Australian women's life-writing published in the 1990s. Drawing on the work of earlier critical commentary on cross-cultural collaborative writing and on orality and literacy, including that of American scholars such as Walter Ong, Mark Sanders and Carole Boyce Davies, Brewster investigates collaborative relations in the sphere of cross-cultural text-making specifically in the contemporary Australian context. However, while she shares some common ground with those who argue that the social relations in which such texts are embedded are crucial for an understanding of their politics of representation, her analysis is more accommodating of a model in which talk/text relations are conceptualised as a mode of developmental transition from the oral to the literate, rather than one that locates these as matrices of 'mix' or 'continuum'. Brewster argues (as, in different contexts, do Sanders and Boyce Davies) that despite the erasure of the dialogic 'interview' process from which many Aboriginal women's life-writing texts originate in order to fulfill the laws of genre as these apply to autobiography, "traces of the oral genesis of the text remain."<sup>2</sup> Orality is linked inextricably for Brewster with sociality<sup>3</sup> as she emphasises the reciprocity of storytelling, in which the "ability to exchange experiences" between narrator and listener makes the telling of stories "an essentially social act" drawn from the world of "living speech," producing a "communal bond between teller and listener."<sup>4</sup> The social relations of collaborative text-making can be reconstituted, however, only by returning to an analysis of these relations, and Brewster is silent (as are other critics) on how we might gain access to this knowledge if we have only texts (rather than people) to consult that have not reproduced or otherwise commented upon or represented their dialogic conditions of production within the text as an artefact.

This becomes particularly problematic when Brewster argues that "as performative acts — drawing upon a repertoire to meet the social requirements and conditions of the occasion — these texts are above all contingent and local."<sup>5</sup> Brewster

is rightly concerned to assert that these texts are “contingent and local” as a way of resisting the trap of “decontextualis[ing] and dehistoricis[ing] the text...in the name of the institutional discourse of literary criticism.”<sup>6</sup> Yet she conflates the difference between the socially situated production of narrative as a performative act designed “to meet the social requirements and conditions of the occasion” of its telling with the process of the narrative’s subsequent textual re-production in written form. While many of these texts are undoubtedly both contingent and local at the level of their narrative making, addressing specific audiences at specific times and places, they are not necessarily so as end-products once they have been structured and edited for publication (though they are no less ‘social’ for this; as Alison Ravenscroft observes, “People [in Western book cultures] who have never met or spoken face-to-face are brought into relationship through the printed word”<sup>7</sup>).

As Carole Boyce Davies suggests, there are different texts (and textualities) at work in collaborative life-writing relations because the genre frequently consists of at least two different ‘occasions’ — the occasion of ‘telling’ and the occasion of textualising and publishing that ‘telling’ in written form.<sup>8</sup> To conflate these is to lose an essential understanding that the social relations of text-making are not limited to the ‘oral’ narrative or dialogic stages of their development, but persist throughout the transformation of the text into a cultural artefact — though perhaps not always with the ‘communal bond’ discerned by Brewster remaining intact throughout the entire process. It is also to once again assume a chain of signification in which the ‘local’ is aligned with ‘orality,’ which in turn is aligned with ‘Aboriginality,’ while the ‘world at large’ is implicitly reserved for writing, whiteness and the West, as the following passage suggests:

Reviewers and critics of these texts often mistakenly refer to them as having been ‘written’ by the Aboriginal narrator. It is, of course, a fact that several Aboriginal women have written their autobiographies, albeit with non-Aboriginal editorial intervention... But the majority have been transcribed either wholly or in part from oral narratives... Even Sally Morgan’s *My Place* is partly a transcription of taped conversations with her family.<sup>9</sup>

On the subject of editing, this seems a peculiar observation to restrict solely to the category of Aboriginal women writers who have composed their own autobiographies in written form; what writer of autobiography (or other genres), Aboriginal, female or otherwise, has not been subject to “editorial intervention” in their manuscripts in the form of structural and copy-editing practices routinely engaged in by publishers? As Gillian Whitlock notes, “The idea of the single authoritative life...written in splendid isolation and eloquence by the autobiographer him/herself...is, of course, almost always an illusion. Most Western literary

(and other) autobiographies are the products of extensive editorial work."<sup>10</sup> If the point is to signal that Aboriginal editors are thin on the ground, this is a valid observation, but if so, it remains obscure in Brewster's account here.

In relation to writing and whiteness, the suspicion that Brewster has excluded many Aboriginal authors from the categories of writing and authorship seems confirmed when she refers, a few pages later, to the fact that:

A substantial proportion of Aboriginal women's autobiographical narratives and life stories have been narrated orally by an Aboriginal 'author' who may in fact be literate; they have then been recorded, transcribed and edited either by an Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal 'interviewer.'<sup>11</sup>

What understanding of collaboration across race, culture and language differences obtains in an analysis that is concerned to maintain such strict divisions between 'talk' and 'text'? And what are we meant to make of the contradiction between Brewster's stated — and undoubtedly genuine — desire to highlight the agency of Indigenous Australian women in the creation and publication of their own life-stories, when this agency is vigorously asserted in relation to 'social acts' of verbal narrative exchange but drops out of sight in relation to the textual production of these narratives, regardless of the specific writing skills and interests that individual authors may bring to the collaborative project?

The answer, I want to suggest, lies in part with Brewster's commitment to the idea that orality exists in an obdurately transitional relationship to literacy.

On page 57 Brewster writes, "As a genre, Aboriginal autobiographical narratives in general have mapped *the transition in contemporary Aboriginal culture from an oral to a literate society*"; on the same page, she refers to Aboriginal women's "knowledge [as] in *transition from an oral to a written form*"; on page 60, she notes, "The recording of [Aboriginal women's cultural knowledges, memories and histories] in print and its publication as autobiographical narratives therefore *mark the transition from an oral to a literate culture*"; on page 61 she observes, "*In the transition from orality to literature, story becomes history, at least in the sense that Aboriginal historians construct it*"; close by she remarks on the ways in which Aboriginal people are compelled to "*translate traditional knowledge from an oral into a literate form*" (61) and points to the fact that "*in these translations — from oral to literate culture, from black to white community, and from the private to the public sphere — the storyteller's narrative is transformed and reconstructed according to the mode of production*" (62) [emphasis added in all quotes above].

This iteration of the idea that orality yields transitionally but definitively to literacy is directly aligned to the conceptualisation of orality and literacy as developmental categories advanced by Jack Goody and Walter Ong,<sup>12</sup> and it paves the

way for Brewster's central, twin claims regarding collaborative Aboriginal women's life-writing: first, that the entire genre maps the "transition in contemporary Aboriginal culture from an oral to a literate society"; and second, the importance of recognising that 'traces' of orality nevertheless remain in these works, a residue signaling that "these Aboriginal narratives...imply a network of oral narrative stretching across several generations...which affirms the continuity of past and present."<sup>13</sup>

In regard to the first claim, I would respond that the genre maps a good deal, but it cannot speak to the transition from orality to literacy even within the framework of a developmental/transitional model, precisely because Brewster herself is so keen to demonstrate that these Aboriginal women exercise agency in and command over the 'oral' but not the 'literate' side of the collaborative textual transaction. Given this, where, exactly, is the 'transition to literacy' to be found in these texts when, in Brewster's version, literacy appears to lie so squarely on the non-Aboriginal side of the textual frontier? The life-writing genre does address the relatively recent transition from private to public circulation of certain kinds of stories, knowledges, histories and representations (a point also made by Brewster), and the parallel interest of Aboriginal authors and non-Aboriginal editors and collaborators in bringing such material to wider audiences than previously. In other words, the genre may be said to map an increased interest by Aboriginal authors — regardless of their own relationship to formal literacy skills — in the cultural and institutional *uses* of text and literacy to broaden the preservation and consumption of Aboriginal life narratives in the public sphere — but this is not quite the same thing.

With regard to the second claim, the trans-generational "network of oral narrative" is represented by Brewster as a formation that has an autonomous cultural and historical life in contexts specific to Aboriginal people, families and communities. This is of course true, and I agree with her that it is important to continue to reaffirm that the shifting and complex repertoire of narrative modes in which Aboriginal people choose to represent themselves, their past and their present has not been subsumed or assimilated by white discourses of remembering, telling or preserving knowledge. The problem lies not with the claim for a mode of Aboriginal discourse independent of non-Aboriginal cultural ways of knowing and remembering, but with the claim that this exists only as a *remnant* (what Brewster calls a 'trace') in texts governed by literacy-based norms and strategies of representation. It is precisely the construction of oral modes of narrative as 'remnant' that permits the exclusion of Aboriginal authors from categories of both 'authorship' and 'writing' as these are conceived of in Western literacy-based terms; far from leading to an interrogation of what Boyce Davies perceptively calls our

'scriptocentric expectations,' such constructions merely reconfirm the primacy of 'script' over 'speech' and relegate the Aboriginal author to a marginal position once the dialogic pre-textual conditions of narration and storytelling as a 'social act' have been fulfilled. That Brewster's analysis subscribes, however unwittingly with respect to the implications of this, to the stark division between 'talk' and 'text' along a racially inflected divide is demonstrated by the following remark:

Nor should we forget that the print narrative transcribed from Aboriginal oral histories and stories is the product of a collaborative and intersubjective process in which white technologies transform the oral text.<sup>14</sup>

Collaborative and intersubjective it may be — but it is notable that while 'technologies' are here coded racially, the 'oral text' is not, so taken-for-granted is the affinity between the 'oral' and the 'non-white.' Nor does it account for the ways in which — as Boyce Davies, Stephen Muecke and Elizabeth Tonkin, amongst others,<sup>15</sup> have shown — non-Western technologies of orality also transform the written text, unsettling, expanding and reorienting its parameters of representation and meaning.

The picture that emerges from Brewster's overview is that while the Aboriginal women life-story authors she focuses on may not be 'totally passive,' they are nevertheless construed as peripheral — whether through a cultural allegiance to orality, the machinations of editors and publishers, or what Brewster terms a "disinclin[ation] to take on the task of writing a whole book themselves"<sup>16</sup> — in relation to the decisions and choices about written representation made by non-Aboriginal collaborators or editors. Yet it is hard to see how this argument can be sustained in relation, for example, to Sally Morgan's *My Place* (1987),<sup>17</sup> Rita and Jackie Huggins's collaborative work on *Auntie Rita* (1994),<sup>18</sup> or the works of Ruby Langford Ginibi.<sup>19</sup> Brewster is right to call for the need to "attend to the specifics of the subjectivities and texts at hand"<sup>20</sup> in examining the intersubjective terrains and tensions of cross-cultural collaborative textual relations. Yet her reliance on a transitional model of the relationship between orality and literacy, and the over-generalised assumptions she makes about the relative absence of skills or interests in literacy on the part of Aboriginal women who work in this genre, combine to forestall a more nuanced and complex reading of how specific and different Aboriginal women, speaking and writing across a broad continuum of relationships with, uses of and perspectives on *both* 'orality' *and* 'literacy,' have tactically negotiated these categories within and beyond the collaborative scenarios in which they are encountered and managed.

In the approaches taken by literary scholars to the directions signaled and the dilemmas posed by collaborative author/editor relations in the contemporary cross-

cultural life-writing field, each stresses, to varying degrees, the importance of the social grounds of articulation and production that inform the making of collaboratively staged life-writing texts. Each also problematises to some extent the power relations either explicit or implied in such collaborations with respect to issues of race, gender and agency. Oral narratives, and the subjects that produce them, are variously seen either as subaltern formations that struggle to assert themselves against the will-to-literacy of Western literary genres, or as manifest acts of cultural and political resistance that complicate and unsettle the assumptions about textuality and literacy routinely made in Western cultures of the written word. A number of these critical readings attend to the gaps, silences and disjuncts that speak to the disruption by oral modes of literacy-based norms and practices, and all focus on the capacity of life-writing as genre to transform the terms of engagement by which textual acts of representing both 'self' and 'other' are negotiated and realised.

The representation of the relationship between talk and text in these perspectives varies considerably, however. They either locate orality in an agonistic relationship to literacy (Sanders), characterise it as a surviving 'trace' or remnant of pre-literate, pre-colonial cultural networks (Brewster), or deploy it as a resistance and subversion to 'scriptographic expectations' (Boyce Davies). Brewster and Sanders both understand the relationship between orality and literacy to be largely diachronic, relying on Ong's theorisations for their suppositions regarding the yielding of orality to literacy-based modes of expression, and the corresponding displacement or relegation of orality to the margins even within more elastic, expansive economies of textuality such as life-narrative. As a result, literacy continues to be a fixed and normative standard for textual authority, and orality (and Indigeneity along with it) is constructed as a departure or deviance from that norm, whether for historical, political, cultural or commercial reasons. Boyce Davies, on the other hand, sees the relationship between orality and literacy as synchronic, variable and mutually constitutive, a marker of cultural and historical difference that must be constantly re-negotiated rather than assumed, and much more 'blurred' and indistinct than the divide sanctioned by the transitional paradigm of Brewster or the agonistic model of Sanders.

One of the common links amongst all these understandings, despite the differences and nuances I have summarised above, is that they are generated by critics whose own subjectivities are structured (as mine are) by profound investments in literacy-based modes of thought and expression. What does the landscape look like when we turn to the perspectives of Indigenous writers and theorists for whom 'orality' is neither a residual trace element nor a peripheral mode of expression in a literacy-dominated universe, but is central to the constitution of both subjectivities and communities of meaning, knowledge and practice?

***Reading the word, reading the world: orality, literacy and the vernacular text***

As Dipesh Chakrabarty points out of the writing of history, both “Aboriginal and Indian traditions... need to know what history, the master code, is. But we do not simply master the master’s code; we change it, hybridise it, breath plurality and diversity into it. ...So what does ‘Aboriginal history’ do to our ideas of what history is?”<sup>21</sup> Many of the collaborative Indigenous Australian life-writing texts I examine in *Entangled Subjects* pose the same question about Western paradigms of literacy and textuality: In what ways do Indigenous writers not “simply master the master’s code,” but “change it, hybridise it, breath plurality and diversity into it?”

The response of some texts and some critics is that ‘Aboriginal writing’ does not fundamentally change our ideas about ‘what writing is’ because the ‘authentic’ cultural praxis of Indigenous Australian culture is grounded in orality, not literacy. Other texts and other critics challenge this view, and attempt to re-orient definitions of both ‘Aboriginal’ and ‘writing’ in the process by rattling the underlying epistemological and discursive frames, corridors and relations of power that govern the ascribed meanings and values of these categories within dominant and minority cultural formations.

They mount this challenge in part by providing instances of what I call (drawing on Grant Farred) the vernacular text. In his rich and theoretically vertiginous *What’s My Name? Black Vernacular Intellectuals*, Farred defines ‘vernacularity’ as a mode of language that,

though it emerges from below...is considerably more than a language of subalternity. ...In colonial and postcolonial societies, vernacular speech belongs to the colonial or the ghettoised communities of the metropolis. The vernacular is counterposed to (and less valued than) the formal — or ‘proper’ — speech of the colonisers or the metropolitanised discourse of the dominant society. [Yet] vernacularity [also] has a contradictory function in that it is at once...the form of speech that distinguishes black self-representation from its white counterpart, and an ironic conjoining.<sup>22</sup>

Farred’s claim that ‘vernacularity’ cannot be “reduced to...a series of speech patterns indigenous to country or district...[and] is not a marker of national or regional identity” is undermined somewhat by the highly specific national/regional locations in which he sites the ‘black’ in ‘black vernacular’ (namely, the West Indies, Great Britain and the USA). Other aspects of his discussion are incommensurate with the articulations of Indigenous Australians in diverse re-



gional and metropolitan contexts about the link between regional and community-based identities and vernacular modes of expression.

Nevertheless, his definition of 'vernacularity' as a mode of discourse which positions 'black' ways of speaking and writing as simultaneously disjunctive and conjunctive in relation to the dominant white culture resonates strongly in relation to the way in which texts such as Rita Huggins and Jackie Huggins's *Auntie Rita* and the Willowra community's *Warlpiri Women's Voices: Our Lives, Our History* (1995)<sup>23</sup> stage themselves as vernacular texts in Farred's general terms. They do so by counterposing and admingling metropolitan and/or regional, bi- and multi-lingual Indigenous community speechways with the 'proper' Standard English of the conventionally written majority text, refusing to translate the former into the latter but reserving and enacting the right to operate within and across both formations. Neither text retreats into the position of other collaborative life-writing texts by insisting that writing and textuality have no or little real purchase within contemporary Indigenous cultural contexts; each fuses and counterbalances the spoken and the written without ever conceding (and why should it?) that the presence of an Indigenous vernacular grounded in 'talk' compromises the cultural or political status of the text as both instance of and intervention in majority cultural templates of writing and print culture.

In the case of Huggins and Huggins in particular, *Auntie Rita* vernacularises the text because it embeds a variety of Indigenous vernacular defined in part by talk *through* its modes of written representation, rather than in uncomplicated denial of or resistance to these. As Jane Gallop once famously said of infidelity in relation to patriarchy,<sup>24</sup> this strategy hollows the majority text from within, minoritising and unsettling both Standard English and conventional writing and reading practices in the process. Huggins and Huggins achieve this by inhabiting both writing and speaking positions from within the text that do not allow us to formulate the kinds of oppositions between talk and text, speech and writing, that support the maintenance of an agonistically conceived frontier. The Indigenous vernacular text, like Stephen Muecke's itinerant text, is a discursive formation at once resistant and collusive, playful and threatening, that refuses to be pinned down; it tenants an interstitial zone between the polarities of 'black orality' and 'white writing.'

Such works are examples of texts that demonstrate how collaboratively authored and edited Indigenous life-writing, when it is produced on terms in which Indigenous authors have substantive agency and authority in relation to both text-as-social-relations and text-as-cultural artefact can, through the admixture of both standardised and vernacular articulations across majority and minority languages and identities, construct Indigenous relationships to talk and text that are 'both/

and' rather than 'either/or.' Most importantly, they insist that we confront varieties of Indigenous vernacular *as a mode of writing*, and not simply as a mode of 'speech,' 'orality' or 'talk' transcribed in putatively pristine condition onto the page. In so insisting, each in its own way offers one kind of answer to my re-working of Chakrabarty's question — "So what does 'Aboriginal writing' do to our ideas of what writing is?" And, like all answers, each contains another question unmasked in the moment of its response: "So what does 'Aboriginal writing' do to our ideas of what 'Aboriginal' is?"

The 1990s in particular produced a number of collaborative scenarios that disrupted or undermined, rather than consolidated, the 'communal bond' that Brewster perceived at the decade's midpoint between Aboriginal women authors and their non-Aboriginal collaborators. Huggins in particular experienced a series of highs and lows in relation to her own later encounters with both cross- and intra-cultural collaboration when she and her mother wrote Rita Huggins's life story, *Auntie Rita*, and in 1994 she published a set of 'cultural protocols' for the white editors and collaborators of Indigenous authors that laid out guidelines for conduct, approach and method in this sphere.<sup>25</sup>

Mudrooroo, whose 1990 *Writing from the Fringe* was followed by an updated version in 1997 titled *The Indigenous Literature of Australia—Milli Milli Wangka*,<sup>26</sup> has consistently taken an explicitly critical and cautionary stance on the issue of cross-cultural collaboration in the field of Indigenous life-writing. His concerns are similar to those articulated by Jackie Huggins and Isabel Tarrago at the beginning of the 1990s<sup>27</sup> with respect to how Aboriginal authors — as both generators of orally composed narrative and as literacy-based writers — must constantly negotiate a political and cultural minefield of censorship, sanitisation, interference, misinterpretation and lack of sensitivity on the part of white publishers, editors and readers. Mudrooroo's critical perspective is animated centrally by his political commitment to an essentialised construction of orality, which he sees as the *sine qua non* of what in *The Indigenous Literature of Australia* he terms 'Indigenality.' While I offer a sustained critique elsewhere of his position on the relationship between orality, identity and Aboriginality, I think Mudrooroo's account of collaborative relations in this field nevertheless offers valuable insights through his consideration of the social and ideological relations governing the staging of particular texts in the genre, for which his comparison of how two orally narrated versions of a West Kimberley story (of the eagle Djaringalong) based on two very different editorial approaches have fared serves as an instructive example.<sup>28</sup>

In contrast to Brewster, who locates Indigenous women's agency primarily at the level of their role in the pre-textual settings of collaborative dialogue and exchange, Mudrooroo comments on the ways in which Indigenous agency needs to be vested and made manifest in all aspects and stages of collaborative textual

production, not just at the level of 'telling stories.' His readings of Margaret Somerville's relationship with Patsy Cohen in the making of *Ingelba and the Five Black Matriarchs*<sup>29</sup> as a "problem of collaboration, rather than simple editing,"<sup>30</sup> in which Somerville prevails in her desire to enshrine Cohen's 'orality' in the text against Cohen's own wishes, and of the substantial editorial cuts and re-writing that took place over the second of Ruby Langford Ginibi's second autobiographically-based work, *My Bundjalung People*,<sup>31</sup> suggest how easy it has been for mainstream editors, publishers and readers to demand not only conformity to prevailing ideologies of genre and textuality (as in the case of Langford Ginibi), but also to those of representational experimentation and risk (as in the case of Cohen) in the service of the white but not the Aboriginal collaborator's agendas. Mudrooroo, Huggins and Langford Ginibi are also wary, for reasons amply borne out by the history of collaborative and editorial relations in this sphere, of the way in which Aboriginal voices may be not only silenced or standardised but also appropriated by white collaborators in a representational matrix that amounts to 'ethnographic ventriloquism.'<sup>32</sup>

A defining issue that emerges for each of the Indigenous/Black Australian critical perspectives I have examined on collaborative and editing relationships between Aboriginal authors and non-Aboriginal editors is that of the cultural norms and paradigms which dictate how texts are transformed in the journey from text-as-social-relations to text-as-cultural-artefact. Accounts of interference, intervention, insensitivity, imposition, ignorance, indifference, misinterpretation, misunderstanding and misappropriation recur in the recollection by many Indigenous authors of their experiences with white editors and collaborators when working on manuscripts, despite some of the positive accounts that have also emerged in recent critical surveys of Indigenous editing and publishing, such as Anita Heiss's *Dhuuluu Yala*.<sup>33</sup> At the negative end of the spectrum, these cross-cultural engagements are perceived as failures because the 'crossing' of cultures has taken place in only one direction, not two. Such one-way traffic occurs when Aboriginal people are asked or expected to forgo their own interests, desires, orientations and integrity in order to meet the expectations and demands of cultural brokers in the world of 'literature,' 'texts' and 'writing,' and when there is a corresponding unwillingness to take risks — cultural, commercial, personal — in order to transform the status and authority of such dominant formations. It is also a reminder that the mere structure or presence of 'reciprocity' as a feature of collaborative relationships needs to be more thoroughly scrutinised with respect to its dynamics and effects than has been the case in critical commentary to date.

Such scrutiny might draw, for example, on the anthropologist Marshall Sahlins's typology of reciprocity, in which he identifies a range of forms that run along a continuum of reciprocal exchange and expectation. At what Sahlins calls the

'solidary extreme' of this continuum there is 'generalised reciprocity,' which occurs amongst those "with, or wishing to express, the closest social relations." There is "no return stipulated and no definite obligation, indeed the return may never actually be fulfilled."<sup>34</sup> As Joy Hendry notes in her introductory review of Sahlins's theorisation, the return may occur a long way into the future, or may never occur, but "failure to reciprocate does not necessarily stop the giving."<sup>35</sup> Beyond "generalised reciprocity" lies "balanced reciprocity," "where goods of equal worth pass immediately between two parties, with no time lag and no moral implications." Hendry comments that whereas

generalised reciprocities are characterised by a material flow sustained by social relations [e.g., in families], balanced exchange is where *social relations hinge on the material flow*. The type of exchange will be akin to trade, *but may also include treaties and alliances*.<sup>36</sup>

Finally, there is 'negative' reciprocity, which Sahlins terms the "unsocial extreme" of the continuum. Negative reciprocity involves

the attempt to get something for nothing with impunity, the several forms of appropriation, transactions opened and conducted toward net utilitarian advantage...Negative reciprocity is the most impersonal form of exchange... Approaching the transaction with an eye singular to the main chance, the aim of the opening party or of both parties is the unearned increment...negative reciprocity ranges through various degrees of cunning, guile, stealth and violence to the finesse of a well-conducted horse-raid...the flow may be one-way once more [as in generalised reciprocity], reciprocation contingent upon mustering countervailing pressure or guile.<sup>37</sup>

Whereas the model of collaborative relations based on trust, empathy and equality proposed by Huggins and Tarrago moves in the direction of 'balanced reciprocity,' the structure of relations between Indigenous authors and collaborators/editors is also peppered with instances of 'negative reciprocity' on one or both sides of these transactions, as critical studies of the publishing history of David Unaipon, Ruby Langford Ginibi, Jackie Huggins and Patsy Cohen, for example, have made clear.

In many ways, the struggles that arise over textual agency and integrity — and over the relationship of 'talk' and 'text' — between authors and editors in cross-cultural collaborative text mirror larger national issues about how the spaces and resources we call 'Australian' (and 'Indigenous') can or should be negotiated as shared territories of co-existence without reproducing the entanglements of colonial relations of domination and subordination. The issue of how stories, and the

texts that represent them, mutate or transform during the journey towards publication is not the only issue at stake; it is the issue of who manages and controls these changes, who can lay claim to the cultural histories that authorise and sanction them, whose terms dictate such transformations, whose interests they serve, whose desires they allow to speak, whose subjectivities and agency they affirm, undo or complicate. Mudrooroo speaks scathingly of the 'reconciliatory text' at one point, which he thinks constitutes a virtual betrayal of Indigenous autonomy and authenticity because it inevitably compromises these in order to gain acceptance by a mainstream readership.<sup>38</sup> If 'reconciliation' simply means the insertion of white subjectivities — authoritative, yearning or otherwise — into Aboriginal life-narratives as a way of connoting 'togetherness' and 'shared understandings,' then I think this is a valid point. But it is also possible to see a truly 'reconciled' text as one that represents certain forms of negotiation and struggle over territory — land, language, and text alike — as a process still in the making, unfinished and open-ended, as well as one that makes transparent the terms, conditions, needs and histories of that struggle, rather than repressing these in the name of an idealised 'communal bond' or the desideratum of a critically uninterrogated 'reciprocity.'

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Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Renato Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis*, (Beacon Press: Boston, 1989), 45.
- <sup>2</sup> Anne Brewster, *Literary Formations: Post-colonialism, Nationalism, Globalism*, (Carlton Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 1995), 52.
- <sup>3</sup> Brewster re-confirms this link at a later stage in her discussion, when she remarks, "In recognising the orality of these texts, we take into account their sociality, that is, their contractual nature and the political commitment of the Aboriginal women narrators," Brewster, 64.
- <sup>4</sup> Brewster, 53.
- <sup>5</sup> Brewster, 54.
- <sup>6</sup> Brewster, 54.
- <sup>7</sup> Alison Ravenscroft, 'Strange and sanguine relations: Aboriginal writing and Western book culture,' *Meridian* 16.2, October 1997, 261.
- <sup>8</sup> Carole Boyce Davies, 'Collaboration and the ordering imperative' in Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, eds., *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 3-19.
- <sup>9</sup> Brewster, 53.
- <sup>10</sup> Gillian Whitlock, *The Intimate Empire: Reading Women's Autobiography*, (London and New York: Cassell, 2000), 160.
- <sup>11</sup> Brewster, 7.
- <sup>12</sup> See Jack Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977) and *The Interface between the Written and the Oral*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987; Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, (London: Methuen, London, 1982).
- <sup>13</sup> Brewster, 63-64.
- <sup>14</sup> Brewster, 62.
- <sup>15</sup> In addition to Boyce Davies op. cit., I am thinking here of both Stephen Muecke's *Textual Spaces: Aboriginality and Cultural Studies*, (Kensington, NSW: NSW University Press, 1992) and Elizabeth Tonkin's *Narrating Our Pasts: The Social Construction of Oral History*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1992.
- <sup>16</sup> Brewster, 61.
- <sup>17</sup> Sally Morgan, *My Place*, (Fremantle, WA: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1987).
- <sup>18</sup> Rita Huggins and Jackie Huggins, *Auntie Rita*, (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1994).
- <sup>19</sup> For a brief review of this history, see Anita Heiss, *Dhuuluu Yala—To Talk Straight: Publishing Indigenous Literature*, (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2003), 75-76; for a more extended analysis, see Janine Little, "That's Dr. Ginibi to you: hard lessons in the history and publication of Ruby Langford Ginibi." *Southerly* 58.2, Winter 1998, 31-47.
- <sup>20</sup> Brewster, 66.
- <sup>21</sup> Chakrabarty, Dipesh, 'Reconciliation and its historiography: some preliminary thoughts,' paper presented at the 'Subaltern, Multicultural and Indigenous Histories' Transforming Cultures Winter School, University of Technology, Sydney, 2000.
- <sup>22</sup> Grant Farred, *What's My Name? Black Vernacular Intellectuals*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 15, 19.
- <sup>23</sup> Petronella Vaarzon-Morel et al., *Warlpiri karnia karnia-kurlangu yimi/Warlpiri Women's Voices: Our Lives, Our History*, (Alice Springs: IAD Press, 1995).
- <sup>24</sup> Gallop, Jane, *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: The Daughter's Seduction*, (London: Macmillan, 1982).
- <sup>25</sup> Jackie Huggins, 'Respect vs. political correctness,' *Australian Author* 26.3, 1994, 12.
- <sup>26</sup> Mudrooroo, *The Indigenous Literature of Australia - Milki Milli Wangka*, (Melbourne: Hyland House, 1997).

- <sup>27</sup> 'Questions of collaboration: an interview with Jackie Huggins and Isabel Tarrago,' interviewed by Carole Ferrer, *Hecate* 16.1-2, 1990, 140-147.
- <sup>28</sup> Mudrooroo, 137-139.
- <sup>29</sup> Patsy Cohen and Margaret Somerville, *Ingelba and the Five Black Matriarchs*, (North Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1990).
- <sup>30</sup> Cohen and Somerville, 187.
- <sup>31</sup> Ruby Langford Ginibi, *My Bundjalung People*, (St Lucia, Qld.: University of Queensland Press, 1994).
- <sup>32</sup> The phrase was first used by Patrick Wolfe in 'Reluctant invaders,' *Meanjin* 51.2, 1992, 333-338. See also Huggins, Jackie and Kay Saunders, 'Defying the ethnographic ventriloquists: race, gender and the legacies of colonialism,' *Lilith: A Feminist History Journal* 8, Summer 1993, 60-69, and Wolfe, Patrick, 'Should the subaltern dream? "Australian Aborigines" and the problem of ethnographic ventriloquism' in Humphreys, S., ed, *Cultures of Scholarship*, (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 1997), 57-96.
- <sup>33</sup> See chapter 5, 'Editing Indigenous literature,' in Heiss, *Dhulhuu-Yala*, 66-82, in which both critical and positive accounts of Indigenous author-editor relations are canvassed.
- <sup>34</sup> Hendry, Joy, *An Introduction to Social Anthropology: Other People's Worlds*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), 56-57.
- <sup>35</sup> Hendry, 57.
- <sup>36</sup> Hendry, emphasis added.
- <sup>37</sup> Sahlins cited in Hendry, 58.
- <sup>38</sup> Mudrooroo, 184.