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Practices of Proximity: Intersubjective Relations in the Australian Literary Contact Zone.

Abstract I: Drawing on recent Australian studies of "intersubjectivity" and "whiteness", this article offers insights into the ongoing debate on Indigenous/non-Indigenous literary collaborations. Through the combination of these theories, the Australian literary contact zone is unveiled as a space where writers, readers, editors and critics are always intersubjectively, although often not reciprocally, influenced. Hence, this article hopes to offer a terrain for discussing issues of sovereignty, difference and subject positioning.

Abstract II: Rifacendosi a recenti studi australiani sull' "intersoggettività" e la "bianchitudine", il saggio offre una lettura del dibattito contemporaneo sulle collaborazioni letterarie indigene/non-indigene. Attraverso la combinazioni di tali approcci critici, la zona di contatto letterario australiana si rivela come uno spazio in cui scrittori, lettori, redattori e critici si influenzano secondo una relazione intersoggettiva spesso non reciproca. Quindi, questo articolo si propone di fornire uno spazio per discutere i problematici concetti di sovranità, differenza e posizionamento del soggetto.

Several studies have emphasised that the recent self-reflective turn of many non-Indigenous editors and critics can be regarded as a first sign of "listening" after years of "deafness" or as a "pre-condition of reconciliation" (Brewster 2003, 2005; Jones 2003; Olubas and Greenwell 1999). However, there is also an ongoing and insistent call for visible speaking positions in the recent work of Indigenous Australian writers such as Anita Heiss, Lisa Bellear and Romaine Moreton. This invitation, far from signifying an encompassing pattern of "deafness", might entail an ongoing refusal to grant analytic value to the textual "sovereignty" of Indigenous authors. However, the neo/colonial social

forgetfulness and cultural amnesia about Indigenous/non-Indigenous contact and co-habitation, with its long history of representation of Indigenous Australian oral cultures as distant in both time and space, is interrupted by Indigenous Australian writing which creates zones of contact in the improvisational and specific dimensions of speaking and reading (Pratt 1992: 7). Thus, the Australian literary contact zone is unveiled as a place where the colonial subject is ontologically and epistemologically constituted in correlation with Indigenous peoples. As this article hopes to demonstrate, writers, readers, editors and critics are always intersubjectively, although often not reciprocally, related.

In the Australian literary contact zone, editing, collaboration and criticism have often, but not always, been shaped by "intersubjectivity"(1). As Marcia Langton has suggested, "intersubjectivity" shapes the experience of both Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people who engage "in any intercultural dialogue, whether in actual lived experience or through a mediated experience such as a white person watching a program about Aboriginal people or reading a book" (Langton1993:118). However, intersubjectivity is not inherently a problem, it becomes a cause of conflict when the most positive form of intersubjectivity, called by the feminist theorist Jessica Benjamin "mutual recognition" (Benjamin 1994: 231-251), is denied. In Indigenous/non-Indigenous relations, power relations are often but not always made effective by the absence of reciprocity in the mutual recognition of intersubjectivity. A particular challenge for many Indigenous writers has been "how to manage their own textual agency so that this is not reduced either to mere "presence" or marshalled as evidence" by non-Indigenous authors/editors (Grossman 2004: 59). Editorial strategies have diminished or denied the role of Indigenous authors, who have been written out of the work altogether or have been the referent of a stark demarcation between the role of the editor as creator of the written text as opposed to the Indigenous author's contribution as storyteller (Grossman 2004: 59). A particularly poignant example of exploitation is the case of David Unaipon, whose manuscript and typescript "Legendary Tales of the Australian Aborigines" was published in 1930 by the anthropologist William Ramsay Smith with the title *Myths & Legends of the Australian Aboriginals* without any credit or reference to Unaipon. Another example is the heavily edited, unauthorized publication of Kevin Gilbert's *End of Dreamtime* by Island Press in 1971, which was later published by University of Queensland Press as *People ARE Legends* (1978). Unaipon's and Gilbert's experiences are recognisable at an immediate level as acts of editorial abuse but, as Anita Heiss notes, the recourse to sympathetic mainstream publishers and Indigenous Australian publishers such as Fremantle Arts Centre Press and Magabala Books often involves heavy editing processes (Heiss 2003: 51-65). Although some texts have managed to escape this treatment, publishing a manuscript or the transcription of an oral recording has often involved a re-arrangement of form and content "by a friendly white man or woman who naturally knows how things should be written" (Mudrooroo 1997:

47). For Indigenous Australian writers, writing, editing, printing and distributing their work often implies an intersubjective negotiation with non-Indigenous definitions of Indigenous genres and codes of expression, which are employed as norms by editors. As Mary Ann Hughes notes in a study on the relation of authenticity and editing, mainstream editors and critics tend to evaluate the work of Indigenous writers primarily in terms of their own definition of Indigenous "authentic" modes of expression (Hughes 1998: 48). Hence, Indigenous Australian writers have often been made aware of the dialectic nature of non-Indigenous editorial collaborations for the most common relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians is not between actual people, but between non-Indigenous Australians and the symbols created by their predecessors.

The call for a reflection on editorial relations was first voiced in the 1970s when, in their pivotal speech "The Politics of Aboriginal Literature", Bruce McGuinness and Denis Walker clearly identified the interference and influence of "white" editors (McGuinness, Walker 1985: 44-45). Following the liberation principles of the 1970s' Black social movement, McGuinness and Walker claimed that if Indigenous people do not control the funding, the content, the publishing, and the ultimate presentation of a written text, it cannot be considered Indigenous. However, the suggestion made by McGuinness and Walker and by many other critics of Indigenous Australian literature that non-Indigenous editing and publishing result in an inauthentic or flawed text implies a refusal not only of the intercultural praxis of writing and publishing but also of the supplementary rapport with the reader. Writing exists always in a "supplementary" rapport to the reader because, the reader, critic and interpreter always supplies ulterior elements to the literary text and writers are greatly influenced by the readership's response to their work (Ingarden 1973; Barthes 1975). In this light, publishing houses perform a "complementary" function as they generally regulate acceptance of all manuscripts according to what the readership expects. Hence, the refusal of any contact with an intercultural audience/readership and with the editorial system would result in giving up the possibility of writing in a supplementary relation with the reader *tout court*, for Indigenous Australian readers are only a small percentage of the Australian and International marketplace (Heiss 2003: 16). Conversely, as mentioned above, the issue of authenticity is raised by non-Indigenous scholars and critics only in relation to collaborations between Indigenous Australian writers and non-Indigenous editors. While it is unquestioned that all writers collaborate with editors and are chosen by editors according to mainstream readership and criticism, in the case of Indigenous Australian writers it is often used by critics and readers to dismiss the significance of the author and to put in question the "authenticity" of her/his work (Hughes 1998: 49). As a consequence, many Indigenous writers present their work as though answering an ever present question about the authenticity of their writing. In this way, non-Indigenous

editors, critics and readers not only relate to Indigenous writers through a non-reciprocal intersubjective relation but exert an intersubjective and intercultural influence on their work (Hughes 1998: 48). In the words of Jack Davis,

> "You've got to remember, too, that Aboriginal writers are not like non-Aboriginal writers, inasmuch as they've got the political scene to contend with. And they've got their own thoughts to put down on paper, regardless of what's political, in terms of writing something which they want to sell. So it's sort of like splitting their mind". (Davis, 1982: 116)

Davis's reflection on the writing/reading process as a splitting of the mind is relatable to Frantz Fanon's suggestion that black people endure a schizophrenic condition because they internalise the image of the white other as the self ([1952]1967). If we extend Fanon's argument to writing, as an act that is always interrelated with the reading act, Indigenous Australian writing may be considered as a process influenced by the internalisation of "white" expectations. Due to the process of internalisation in which the writer finds himself/herself by identifying with the "white" reader, the writer's self is disassociated. This schizophrenic rapport with the readership may result in an auto-censorship of the writer, who internalises what "white" publishers require and produces an acceptable script.

The erasure of deviant elements and the internalisation of "white" parameters of judgement are only a part of an "ideological" use of complementary relations, where the combination of speaking positions produces a colourless light of objectivity. As a consequence, the recent work of some scholars and writers has sought to render visible the subject position "white" by showing how certain forms of privilege operate in the asymmetrical visibility and definition of speaking positions (Durie 2003; Huggins 1991, 1993; Huggins e Tarrago 1990; Moreton-Robinson 2000, 2003, 2004). As noted above, the textual production of the "white" editor or collaborator is usually "invisible, unmarked and uninterrogated" while the message of her/his informant "tends to be objectified within the text" (Moreton-Robinson [1999] 2003: 67). Employing the "scientific" and "objective" third person narrative, editors and collaborators attempt to render themselves "distanced" and deny their relation with Indigenous writers. Even though they have often proclaimed a spirit of consultative writing, by employing the third person narrative and embracing the rhetoric of objective scientificity, critics and editors posit themselves as non-participants in the mutual collaboration of writing and editing, which implies the reciprocity of a "you" and an "I". As Muecke notes, the use of the third person and the first and second person serve to locate the "subject in different positions in relation to the text" and the use of a third person narrative has, "The overall effect for the text to become authoritative and the reader unquestioning" (Muecke 1983: 72-73). Consequently, if, as Emile Benveniste notes, "one will see that there is no other objective testimony to the identity of the subject except that which he himself

thus gives about himself" (Benveniste 1971: 225), the "white" academic, editor and critic may succeed in rendering her/himself invisible from the object of enquiry. However, it is impossible for any reader, critic, interpreter, transcriber or editor to avoid her/his involvement in the utterance. Non-Indigenous collaborators, critics and editors are always intersubjectively related to the utterance of the writer and have only succeeded in rendering themselves "invisible". If editorial, collaborative and interpretative relations are analysed in light of a mutual relationship of complementarity, Indigenous/non-Indigenous rapports in this field always "exist" but are often "unmarked". The denial of this inextricable relationship and the charge of "inauthenticity" described above are part of a discourse of "detachment" used to define and control. Consequently, some critics have recently questioned the "invisibility" of editorial collaboration, which may result in reading a narrative that presents the writer's "I" instead of the writer-editor's "We" (Heiss 2002, 2003; Huggins 1991, 1993; Moreton-Robinson 2000; Muecke 1983; Somerville 1990, 1999; Somerville and Perkins 2003; (de) Ishtar 2004; McDonnell 2004; Probyn 2002; Probyn and Somerville 2004; Grossman 2001, 2004).

Instead, in 1983, the non-Indigenous scholar Muecke and the Nyigina elder Paddy Roe inaugurated a new mode of Indigenous/non-Indigenous recording and editing by making their presence "visible" in the narrative process. Editing the stories of the Nyigina people, recorded by Paddy Roe on tape, Muecke attempted to transcribe the stories as closely as possible. However, as Muecke openly admitted, *Gularabulu: Stories from the West Kimberley* (1983) was a work of "Aboriginal-White encounter" (Muecke 1983: iv). As he explains in the "Introduction",

> "As a white person, I represented for Paddy Roe a kind of generalized representative of white Australia. Accordingly I came to influence the texts to the extent that Paddy Roe addresses the 'White Reader' at some points; he constructs scenes and characters in ways that show that he is aware of European representations of scenes and characters. The texts are thus a message for a white audience, even if only at certain points. And as a listener I had a further role than that of transmitting this message". (Muecke 1983: v)

Acknowledging that the performance of the narratives depended in part on his listener response, Muecke didn't erase or "edit out" neither his presence nor those of other people present at the story-telling sessions. For instance, in "Mirdinan", a *trustori* about a *maban*'s (2) capture by the police and his escape, Muecke is involved and addressed as an active listener. Moreover, Paddy Roe concludes the story by reiterating that it is not a secret/sacred story but a public story and thus implies the presence of Muecke in the selection of this *trustory*:

"all right they took-im right up —
must be hangin' place there too eh in Fremantle big
place is it?
(Stephen: Yeah)
yeah well tha's right —

so they took-im there —
all right —
they gave-im last supper —
ooh feed anyway —
tucker you know —
after that they put-im on ah —
I dunno what —
mighta been some sort of flatform? —
they put the rope round his neck —
they out-im on that one —
it's ready —
[.....................................]
I, I dunno how they do that but
(Stephen: Yeah, goes down)
there's something, yeah -
right! Go! finish - he fly out he's eaglehawk (Laugh)
(Stephen: Good One!) (Laugh)
(Aside to Nangan) eaglehawk iyena - ginyargu -
(Nangan: Em) -
waragan you know, eaglehawk (Soft) he fly away -
(Softer) he was a eaglehawk then
[...............................…..]
He was a clever man -
this fella -
oh everybody know this story you know".
(Muecke 1983: 11-12)

In a later work (1983), Muecke and Roe collaborated with the non-Indigenous painter Krim Benterrak. The aim of this new collaboration was to perform a reading of Roe's country through Muecke's writing, Roe's oral knowledge and Benterrak's paintings. This choice seems at first to imply an "essential" relegation of each participant to a specific medium. Arguably, Roe's oral contribution is part of a discourse of assimilation by the non-Indigenous transcriber, Muecke, and, therefore, he is the only one who, due to a mediated intervention, cannot speak. The text formation draws attention to the relation between technologies and discursive strategies of subject formation (Foucault 1988). As Muecke notes, "rather than being cumulative or encyclopaedic, knowledges come into play in

specific encounters, often between institutions, they work in specific sites and govern the plausibility of the statements produced there so that what is said can count as being 'the truth' for a certain time" (Muecke 1984: 195). Intercultural and intertextual works are often conditioned by régimes of truth. However, by indicating openly the process of production and translation, Muecke, Roe and Benterrak reveal the potential of mutual recognitions of difference inherent in intercultural collaborations. As Muecke explains, the implicit theory of communication of the book depends on "relational difference" rather than on oppositionality (ibid:18). The diverse readings offered by the tree "sources of author-ity" (ibid: 20) are part of the contingent distribution of knowledges of this collaboration, but are also shaped by their constitutive intertextual relation. As Muecke relates, the employment of different technologies, different practices, and ways of living is not aimed at "representing" "a whole people" (ibid: 20), but since bodies of knowledge don't arise spontaneously in people's heads these three authors master differently these technologies. However, they are employed in a reciprocal acknowledgement of difference. This active performance and acknowledgement of the relativity of epistemological approaches renders visible the mutual "foreigness" of each author and the intersubjective "hidden undercurrent of dialogue between artists and cultures" that have been problematically polarized by centre-periphery models (Grossman 2003: 12). Revealing the process of production line is functional to the recognition of a mutual collaborative practice. By recognising that "where one person's story ends the other one takes off" (Muecke 1983: 27), Benterrak, Muecke and Roe admit the interrelation and co-existence of their knowledges in a common space of enunciation. However, as Goldie demonstrates, the attraction to orality which permeates Muecke's text "most clearly shows how its attraction to Other is linked to a desire for an alienation from self, an alienation which is impossible to fulfil" (Goldie 1989: 113). According to Goldie, texts with a positive bias towards Indigenous peoples tend to seek some version of a natural path. In this text, Roe's voice and the voice of nature are often melded. Regardless of Muecke's care, "when the text pretends to be oral it falls into the metaphysics of orality, into the tendency for the white text to claim the "natural" presence of voice and the subversion of what the oralist text would itself deem the artificial absence that is writing" (ibid: 113-114). This is certain for enunciation is unavoidably related to a differential access to speaking and writing positions. As Langton theorises, a "reciprocal" relation is the imperative at stake in the struggle against those non-Indigenous subjects who have failed "to allow Aboriginal people to articulate their own models of what they perceive 'Europeans' to be" (Langton 1993: 37). The consequent step to enable actual dialogue would entail that the "individuals test and adapt imagined models of each other to find satisfactory forms of mutual comprehension" (ibid: 81). Hence, the necessity of a shift of the relation between the editor and writer from different to reciprocally different.

The misconception of Indigenous Australian writers as employers of an essential, "past" oral mode of expression, which conditions their treatment as mere "presence" or "evidence" by non-Indigenous authors/editors (Grossman 2004: 59), emerges as a consequence of the denial by non-Indigenous editors, collaborators and critics of their investment in the representation of writing as a non-Indigenous possession. The non-Indigenous editor, collaborator or critic has for a long time been represented as the possessor of the appropriate way of editing, writing and critiquing, while Indigenous writing has been charged of being unauthentic. Spoken and written narratives have been the referents of the discrimination between Colonial self and Indigenous other. However, I believe that the ongoing heated and prolific debate of the last two decades, which has variously been termed as "the personal turn", the study of "whiteness" or the "poetics of failure", is prompted in Australia by the larger circulation since the 1970s of Indigenous Australian writing, which through a process of "reflection" has started to render visible the unmarked voices of authority inherent in the objective and scientific façade of editing and academic analysis. The incipient critical and academic move towards the acknowledgement of the problematic positions of non-Indigenous people who seek to read, interpret and collaborate with Indigenous writers is promising. Unfortunately, it often rests on an ongoing self-reflex/ctive stasis and many problems remain unresolved. However, it is in the absence of closure and in an ongoing questioning of past, present and future relations that the benefit of a self-reflective turn might reside.

NOTES:

1. The term "intersubjectivity" derives from the founder of phenomenological sociology, Alfred Schutz, who insisted that individuals recognize the world as "intersubjective" – that is, shared with people like themselves with whom they share a 'reciprocity of perspectives'. For the purposes of this article, it is important to note that theorizations of intersubjectivity such as Schutz's lack any extended consideration of power and intercultural relations. See Jessica Benjamin, 'The Shadow of the Other (Subject): Intersubjectivity and Feminist Theory', *Constellations*, 1:2, 1994, pp 231-251. See also E. Ann Kaplan's re-elaboration of Benjamin's theory of "intersubjectivity" in *Looking for the Other: Feminism, Film and the Imperial Gaze*, Routledge, New York, 1997.
2. In the "Introduction", Muecke explains that Paddy Roe distinguishes between three types of story: *trustory* (true stories), *bugaregara* (stories from the dreaming) and *devil stori* (stories about devils, spirits etc). Another very important distinction is between stories which are secret and those which are public. Moreover, he explains that a *maban* is a doctor. These are men or women who are well-trained in Aboriginal law and have special perceptive skills or fighting skills.

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