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Healing, Catharsis and Reconciliation: Water as Metaphor in *Ghost River*

Abstract I: Questo articolo esplora la possibilità di catarsi interculturale attraverso la letteratura, le connessioni metaforiche e le rappresentazioni del luogo ne *Il fiume fantasma* di Tony Birch (2015). L'acqua, la pioggia ed essenzialmente il fiume, simboleggiano la costruzione di una nazione e la riconciliazione di relazioni razziali tra indigeni e non indigeni. La teoria della catarsi aristotelica è dunque decostruita e ricostruita sulla base delle filosofie indigene e il dialogo interculturale per esplorare le idee relative alla costruzione di relazioni come viaggio spirituale collegato alle direzioni testuali del paesaggio.

Abstract II: This article explores the possibility of intercultural catharsis through literature, metaphorical connections and representations of place in Tony Birch's *Ghost River* (2015). Water, rain and essentially the river, symbolise the building of a nation and the repair of Indigenous and non-Indigenous race relations. Aristotle's theory of catharsis is deconstructed and built upon using Indigenous philosophies and intercultural dialogue to explore ideas about relationship building as a spiritual journey connected to the textual directions of the landscape.

But I believe, nevertheless, that it is possible to reinvent the world since, by and large, it is evident that its shape reflects our notions of reality and value, the way we weave together the various strands of existence.

(Brady 2006: 103)

A flood of metaphors enliven Australian Indigenous literature and characterise it as first peoples' writing – its unique distinctions are captured in the visceral depictions of country, home and land which do more than simply describe place but provoke social and political consciousness. Indigenous writing, in its many forms, pushes against the currents of colonialism and engages with intercultural dialogue through creative penmanship that includes literary metaphors capturing the spiritual connection Indigenous people have with land and their deeply cultural understandings of place. These understandings are often portrayed by metaphors belonging to Australia's natural landscape – they are used with artistic purpose and, they too have power. Water, air and various elements of Australia's landscape inform more obvious and literal meanings of texts, yet serve as metaphorical

signifying systems in Indigenous writing – working perhaps intentionally (and unintentionally) to articulate more than a text's setting – speaking to Western discourses and ideas of belonging to country from Indigenous viewpoints. These authors are continually shaping and hydrating literary tradition in distinctively 'Indigenous' ways, approaching writing or storytelling from always within their own imaginations, always pushing against the current to prove that colonial ways of reading and writing are not given but are metamorphic, shifting, changing and, at the same time, inviting readers on a sacred journey of transformation whether they identify as Indigenous or not. Readers come to a text from extensively diverse backgrounds, many of whom may argue that the literature of Australia's first people does not solely belong to them, and stories, tropes and messages speak also to readers who are non-indigenous and open to textual understandings about who *they* are, how to belong to nation and the possibilities of where to set forth as people(s) of many backgrounds seeking to understand home.

This essay will argue that reading and writing can offer non-Indigenous readers an opportunity for catharsis, as it is understood to be a spiritual journey, changing the ways in which readers imagine Indigenous others, understand nationhood(s), and explore inter-cultural relations as meaningful for reconciliation rather than symbolic to the perpetuation of neo-colonialism. This essay will analyse the ways in which Australian Indigenous author Tony Birch uses the river as a metaphor to represent healing, renewal and transformation in his most recent novel *Ghost River* (2015). In his text Indigenous and non-Indigenous characters navigate friendships in a place which is being deliberately fenced-off and destroyed, reflecting Australia's relational politics and the possibilities of reconstructing 'home' alongside a politics of reconciliation. Water and rain, as written in *Ghost River*, symbolise the constant and fluid nature of nation building, social renewal and relational repair.

Western conceptualisations of the land typically include scientific representation or associations with geography, topography, climate, terrain, towns, sites and the 'bush', whereas Australian Indigenous writers inform representations of place as more than a setting or backdrop for a plot to unfold – the role of land, including water has its own literary functions and creative powers within a text that can narrate stories, influence characters and ultimately move readers' perspectives of belonging to place and, who they are, alongside others. The focus of water in Indigenous writing should not to be confused with reducing Indigenous literary representations with only the landscape – there is a long history of seeing Indigenous people as part of the landscape in order to make them 'othered' and reduce their humanity. On the contrary, water is commonly represented in Indigenous writing as metaphors for connecting with and belonging to place, for example in *Watershed* (2005) female Indigenous author Fabien Bayet-Charlton, likens the link between her Indigenous people and the river to that of a mother and child: "The sucking and pushing of the womb, through the cervix and vagina, is, to a baby, like the surging swimming heartbeat of a river. It is the river, my soft safe mother. It is the rivers the Murray Cods swim on forever" (Bayet-Charlton 2005: 3). This text is a stark reminder of the poor state of the Murray Darling Basin and that the River is a place in need of protection like a mother protects her own child. Similarly Oodgeroo Noonuccal's first prose work *Stradbroke Dreamtime* is described by CA Cranston

as a collection that names the island that gave birth to the Dreamtime stories: the emphasis therefore is on stories *from* place, rather than *about* place (Cranston 2007: 247).

Another Indigenous author who includes water as metaphor is Bruce Pascoe in the short story *Tired Sailor*. In his story non-Indigenous female character Em is burdened by the crime of her great-grandfather Craypot, who drowned an Aboriginal child by tying him to the bottom of a craypot for bait. Pascoe writes of the boy kicking and screaming in the net as he is lowered into the water, then juxtaposes this image from the colonial past with an image belonging to that of a postcolonial future. Em imagines she is making love with a man who returns from the sea: “waiting in certainty for him who would come with the hands shaped to the geography of her own undiscovered land” (Pascoe 2000: 114). Em’s place within Australia is not inherited from her ancestors but informed by hope for a different future where renewed relations constitute the social and political geography of place. In this short story water is a metaphor for the dynamics of relational repair – as it is continually reconstructed rather than passively bequeathed from one generation to the next – dependent on polemical frameworks created from her own experiences and not those belonging to settlers of the past. The future is therefore yet to be realised, belonging to those who choose to imagine it.

In *How a continent created a nation* Libby Robin’s explores Leopold’s essay ‘Think like a mountain’ to see how non-human actors like mountains and deserts inform history and Australian national identity (Robins 2007: 2). While rivers are not discussed in great detail in Robin’s work, her ideas about land having agency in building culture, point to alternate perspectives from the ground up. She begs the question how constructions of land have created the ‘Australian nature’. If interpretations of the land have created a culture of isolation then these interpretations can be recreated to allow nature, or in this case a river, to interpret new ways of being in place with others. If polemical prose suggests reconciliation can be written as a spiritual journey, rivers as metaphors allow for textual experiences with new opportunities perhaps even forcing political debate in particular directions. Water may be a metaphor for that pitcher of hope, forgiveness and renewal, a textual passage for catharsis and the possibilities for redirecting the mind’s eye through the practice of reading.

In *Poetics* and later *Rhetoric* Aristotle showed how the practice of writers was utilised through various means of persuasion including, the evocation of emotions as well as style and argument in the construction of speeches. He argued that poetry could have a positive emotional effect on an audience which he termed *Katharsis*, describing the value of moral purification or “the final cause” (Leitch *et al.* 2001: 88). Modern literary critics however use Aristotle’s theory of *Katharsis* to support the significance of literature as affective theory with the ability to shape historical and political discourse and explore discursive ideas about nation, how logical and reasonable persuasion operates in a range of texts, not only political speeches. Former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s apology to the stolen generations does however, make for an interesting example of textual catharsis, as his speech was based on historical and political facts placed alongside emotional persuasions, inviting an entire nation to acknowledge Australia’s ‘Black’ history and seek metaphorical forgiveness through this speech act. While speeches are beyond the scope of this article, in vein of Aristotle’s theory of catharsis, we can explore the ways in which water as metaphor

acts as emotional persuasion of “the final cause” or social purification as it is represented in longer texts. Although Aristotle belongs to the school of classical philosophy and it seems commonplace to start, it is argued that intercultural philosophies and the discussion of Indigenous ideology should inform the worlds from which we read Indigenous writing. An inclusive approach to philosophy works to decentralise Western representations of the other, refusing to examine “culture as human enterprise” (Mall 1998: 15) while formally recognising the complex and evolving knowledge systems of Indigenous people in the academy, philosophy and politics. A completely Aristotelian reading of water as metaphor for catharsis is in danger of embarking on a Western gaze of the other through text, rather than engaging in intercultural dialogue about the complex nature of race relations and realising how to change the mind’s eye of non-Indigenous readers.

Since ancient times Indigenous people have participated and contributed to their own systems and laws – many of these social and legal systems already bound to philosophical and spiritual ways of seeing oneself in relation to others and how to ‘be-long’ to place. Indigenous writer Bruce Pascoe argues in *Dark Emu Black Seeds: agriculture or accident* that:

Colonial Australia sought to forget the advanced nature of the Aboriginal society and economy, and this amnesia was entrenched when settlers who arrived after the depopulation of whole districts found no structure more substantial than a windbreak and no population that was not humiliated, debased and diseased (Pascoe 2014: 17-18).

Thus Indigenous people do not require advanced teachings about the art of storytelling – their ways of understanding and articulating culture have for long been represented in sophisticated iterations of stories such as rhythmic and lyrical forms of song-circles, intricate paintings and, poetry and plays represented in the embodiment of music, song and dance to communicate intergenerational knowledge, beliefs and principles for cultural survival. Perhaps it is the power of these stories which have allowed for the continuing survival of Australia’s first people once “humiliated, debased and diseased” to keep their cultures strong and continue expressing who they are in unique ways. Literature has become somewhat a platform for the expression of Indigenous peoples’ stories and, modern-day texts are capturing ancient teachings and philosophies for all readers wanting to learn more about themselves and learn more about the intersection of whiteness and Aboriginality on a sacred journey towards healing and catharsis.

Indigenous writing gives way to new languages which inform the belonging rather than the unbelonging of place which colonial writing and European languages have attempted to articulate. For example, the French term, *a joure* captures a sense of being both home and away (Dixon 2009: 15), while the German term *unheimlich* meaning ‘un-homelike’ describes the unusual experiences to be had in familiar places or what Freud translated in English to mean, ‘uncanny’ experiences of place (Gelder & Jacobs 1998: 26). Yet there are Indigenous terms that represent the unique experiences for peoples both belonging and un-belonging to Australia. Margaret Kemarre Turner is an Indigenous woman from Central Australia who has published a number of non-fiction texts on Indigenous culture. In *Iwenhe Tyerrtye – What it Means to be an Aboriginal Person* (2010) she argues that race relations have

come to reflect a reconciliation between the social and political constructs of cultural identities and that “two cultures *can* hold each other”. She describes, for example how non-Indigenous people working on *Arrente* country are referred as *Penangke* – a term which renders “a different feeling for people when you learn, like you’re really close’ ... ‘*ikirrentye*’ and that this ‘feeling brings you into the system somehow, even non-Aboriginal people, joining them together with us in *anpernirrentye*” (Kemarre Turner 2010: 220). Bhabha’s notion of hybridity is similar and refers to the historical and cultural necessity for any postcolonial society to produce revolutionary cultural change through the principle of “political negotiation” (Bhabha 1949: 2388). However, Kemarre Turner’s concept of “holding each other” as two cultures extends this principle to point to the possibilities for relationship rather than a hybrid existence obligated to negotiate from separate yet sometimes similar cultural positions.

Being open to the effects of Indigenous writing also means acknowledging that there is still a lot about Indigenous writing which may and may not ever be understood. What cannot be seen by (white) ‘eyes’ or one’s own languages and epistemologies can instead welcome you and ‘I’ to read more openly, more deeply, more reflectively, and change the face of postcolonial politics as they appear textually – as Joan Copjec’s argues: “semiotics, and not optics, is the science that enlightens us for the structure of the visual domain” (Ravenscroft 2012: 1). Writing by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous authors (about interracial characters), creates textual opportunities for catharsis – to know and understand the other and oneself – an offering of intercultural dialogue – or in a postcolonial context, possibly a moment for healing, discursive/symbolic/ideological renewal and for the reconciliation of ideas about nation to transform in the mind’s eye of a reader. There must be new ways for white readers to ‘see’ Indigenous subjects and their writing – perhaps as sovereignty unto itself, where aesthetic practices are not read to be assimilated or colonised but appreciated for being radically different (Ravenscroft 2012: 2).

Ghost River is Tony Birch’s third novel and like *Blood* (2011) it is narrated from the perspective of children to reacquaint us with the deeper meaning of simple things. The earlier and most ordinary experiences of human existence can, as children, over-awe and frighten us but it is these experiences that impassion our beliefs about who we are and what we stand for as adults. Sonny and Ren are the main characters of this recent text and as the story progresses, so too do their experiences of the River, punctuating their changing perceptions of who they are and possibilities for coming of age. The novel starts when Sonny moves into the same street as Ren and, although they are in the same class together at school, Sonny looks at Ren with his “demented eye” and does not “invite friendship” (Birch 2015: 7). From the onset, the politics of their friendship are not based on the commonalities of belonging to the same age, race, gender or economic status but on reciprocity – what each offers the other ideologically while finding their identity outside of school. For example, Sonny earns Ren’s respect when he defends him against *Milton the Monster*, a bigger and more powerful boy in the playground who targets Ren because he is vulnerable. Readers learn that according to Sonny, “Milton’s a bully and he got what he should’ve” (Birch 2015: 9). From this point, in the text, social justice becomes a developing trope pointing to the foundations of both equity and respect in the politics of a friendship that advocates difference and continual maturation.

The River implies a third aspect to the boys' friendship with its metaphorical presence it influences the boys' relationship throughout the text and appears more than a backdrop for which the plot unfolds. Readers are for example introduced to the River at the same time as they are introduced to the boys: as it runs "through the suburbs and inner city" from the hills (Birch 2015: 6)¹. At first we sense the River may hold an antagonist's position with its introductory description as polluted and a haven for human and animal waste – it is the colour of "strong black tea", it is dangerous, and stinks; it is where gang members dump dead bodies, and people, mostly women, commit suicide in an effort to find "peace and salvation" (6-7). The River's textual powers grow alongside the main characters self-awareness as the boys discover a secret spot located further down the River hidden away by trees; it is a safer, more pristine and welcoming place because it has not been contaminated with waste or built up with human development. It is here the boys bond with the River and ultimately each other, but uncannily it is the camp of several homeless Indigenous men or as Birch calls them, "river men" (13). This secluded part of the River plays an important role as metaphor and synecdoche because it is here the boys learn about racial, political and economic power structures and, by doing so, they each locate a more awakened and purified version of themselves. As such metaphorical imagery transcribes:

Ren dipped his hand in the water and scooped out a bug. It swam in circles in the small pool of water cupped in his hand. He was about to slam his hands together and squash the bug, but changed his mind and dipped his hand into the water a second time and watched as the bug swam away. He stood up, dived, turned under the water and swam across the river backstroke, catching the sun on his chest (59).

Initially, the river men are uncomfortable with the boy's intrusion to their camp, and rightfully so, as Sonny approaches them with a metal pipe lifted to his shoulders (like a gun) and takes "aim at the men" (14). Collective memory translates this scene to a historical time of Australia's European invasion carried out by war and force. In true fashion of history repeating itself, the river men put up their hands to surrender, yet this time it is in jest and they invite the boys in to introduce themselves. Perhaps this welcoming of 'others' was possible in historical times too and Europeans and first peoples may have had the chance to pervade violence through a willingness to understand each other? As research suggests, on first seeing white people, Indigenous people believed they were "ghosts" returning to country – an idea colonialists may have felt "comforting" as it denotes they were not an enemy but "could be accepted as kin" (Cowlshaw 1999: 9). This view may be in danger of being appropriated to justify Australia as Terra Nullius and belonging to no one worthy enough of fighting for its original ownership. As Indigenous writer and historian Pascoe laments, Australia's mainstream historical discourse reads as "national myopia" because it fails to include the ways in which Indigenous people fought for their land and this separates us "from our soul and soil" (Pascoe 2007: 255).

Viewpoints are critical for interpreting a text like *Ghost River* and Birch creates new ex-

¹ Tony Birch (2015). All quotations are from this edition.

periences for his main characters (as children who own their future) as this allows them to *see* the River differently and belong to it alongside the river men in a different way to their forebears. For example, one of the river men is bewildered by Sonny's demented eye: "That eye you have there, I believe it may be a true wonder ... we have someone special visiting this morning. How'd you earn such an eyeball as that, son?" Asks Tex (15). The men are not so much talking in riddles as withholding cultural information about how they should relate to the boys. Sonny's "demented" eye orients us to Ravenscroft's theories about visibility and knowledge: as she reminds us that the postcolonial 'eye' is intrinsically linked to 'T' in intercultural dialogue about race. Assumedly, it is the innocent and less provincialised minds of these boys which allow them to 'see' the river men in ways which are not based on racialised anxieties about the black male other, allowing them to become open to the men's stories and their strong connection with the River. It is ultimately through these stories that the boys' ideological understanding of the River shifts. For example, the River is at first feared for its dead trees lurking at the bottom – known as "preachers" because they could grab you from the bottom and never let you back up, leaving "a preacher" to stand at your funeral over an empty coffin" (33). Contrary to these earlier fears, the boys come to learn through the river men's stories that "the river took such good care of the men" and that the River "was their *mother*" (21).

When one of the river men, Doc, suddenly passes away, the boys are left to fully grasp the powerful connection the men have with the River as they witness them sending Doc into the River as a ceremony in lieu of a "pauper's funeral". Tex assures "if all goes right for old Doc, the ghost river, she'll care for him" (108). Big Tiny steps forward to say a few words; "You was an arsehole sometimes, Old Doc. But at the same time you was one of us" (107). His words capture the true nature of relationships as always intersecting between enemies and friends – not always loving, not always oppositional, but some of the time understanding each other when on common ground.

Just as the river men acquired their own various nicknames (Tex, Doc, Big Tiny) the meaning of Birch's titled work *Ghost River* is revealed through a traditional story the river men share of how she got her name. The metaphorical meaning of the River is necessarily clearer if the story is quoted in full:

This is a story from the other time when this river she did not end where she is today. There weren't no boats for travel back then. And there weren't no bay at the end of the river. The land was full and the river was a giant. Then one time more water come and stayed. Years and years of rain. The land filled up and there was the bay that come, drowning the old river. But she's still there, under this one. The old ghost river. This is her and when a body dies on the river, it goes on down, down to the ghost river. Waiting. If the spirit of the dead one is true, the ghost river, she holds the body to her heart (108).

This traditional story speaks of a time in history when Australia was colonised (perhaps by ghosts). It also rings true of a present time when cultures have become hybrid or represented as palimpsestic over time. The River symbolises how water works as a textual

metaphor to renew the ways in which one can belong to place in a postcolonial context – with hope for reconciliation – with possibilities that “two cultures *can* hold each other” – as the boys’ relationship with the river men portrays this two-way relationship building.

By the end of this chapter Sonny and Ren have learned of the River’s power and readers become aware of its textual prowess. The plot changes on cue with the rain, indicating maturation and change: “walking home from their excursions upriver Ren would feel a little different. He couldn’t make sense of it. He knew it was a feeling he craved, but one in danger of slipping away from him” (113). Winter begins, and with it so too does the challenge to stop a road being built through the river men’s camp and destroying the special place they share with them. Ren and Sonny become advocates for social justice on this mission to save the River and the dignity of the river men who will otherwise become displaced and eventually die as “paupers” who are disconnected from people and place. Most uncannily, it is this group of alcoholic and homeless men who are the benefactors for healing and the ‘for-givers’ of hope because they let the boys into their world and share a new way of living together: *Alakenhe athewe* or as Kemarre Turner translates: “working together as real champions for language; for culture; for Land, and for relationship” (Kemarre 2010: 221).

Tony Birch’s *Ghost River* is a reminder that colonisation has changed Australia’s landscape forever, but it is this very landscape that invites us on a spiritual journey of cultural renewal and purified perspectives of ‘seeing’ and feeling about home with others and, at home with ourselves: “As his skin dried he noticed specks of dirt, fine as baby powder, covering his body. From that day on, the boys carried the river home with them” (34). The River as metaphor flows towards an approaching reality which drowns out the colonial discourses of Australia’s past, offering transformation of the textual space as opportunity for cultural healing, catharsis and changing race relations. Stories should not be ignored for their effect on broader relationships because it is stories which evoke feelings and thoughts about radical possibilities for the future. This essay has argued that Aristotle’s philosophy on the principles of evocation or catharsis remains important in the literary analysis of modern-day Indigenous texts. Building on his classical theories however, requires the wisdom of Indigenous philosophies to contribute to intercultural dialogue, particularly on Australian literature and its decolonisation. There are some aspects of Indigenous culture and spirituality which cannot or should not ever be seen by readers, but metaphors, like that of water is an essential life-source; translucent or accessible enough for anyone wanting to make sense of their own emotional worlds, and how they wish to nurture concepts of belonging. Tony Birch has successfully used water as a symbol for cultural healing, and showed his readers that transformation or cultural renewal is dependent on stories about Indigenous and non-Indigenous characters whose lives intersect because there is nothing else left but the land and water at their feet – a cyclical realisation of the first time Indigenous people came into contact with their invaders and there was nothing else that stood between them. *Ghost River* emblematises the sheer difficulty of reconciliation and that a process of changing national consciousness or collective ‘catharsis’ is not for the faint hearted, it needs protecting, fighting for, and continual championing: *Alakenhe athewe*.

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