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REVIEW ESSAYS

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Australian Children's Literature and Postcolonialism: A Review Essay

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Abstract

The theme of land and country is resonant in Australian children's literature with Aboriginal subject matter. The textual and visual narratives present counter-discourse strategies to challenge the colonial ideology and dominant valuation of the Australian landscape. This review essay begins by examining the colonial history of seeing Australia as an "empty space", naming, and appropriating the land by erasing Aboriginal presence from the land. Then it explores the conceptual re-investment of Aboriginal connections to country in the representation of Australian landscape, as reflected and re-imagined in fiction and non-fiction for child readers. Thereby, as the essay suggests, a shared and reconciliatory space can at least discursively be negotiated and envisioned.

Key words: Australian Children's Literature; Postcolonial Narratives; Aboriginal Custodianship; Connectedness to Country; Reconciliatory Space

In postcolonial narratives, landscape can be as much cultural and political as it is geographical. It is inextricably linked with notions of place and space, home and habitation, boundaries and transgressions of the boundary between Indigenous communities and a white settler society. Literary representations of the Australian landscape are implicated in territorial disputes between colonizers and colonized, marked by ongoing struggle, negotiation and re-inscription.

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In Australian settler society, the landscape displays a massive evocative power in literary texts. The literary representation of the landscape not only captures its beauty and terror in language, but is also etched into the national consciousness of what constitutes Australia and the Australians. The conceptualization of a united, white Australia, however, often excludes the presence of Aboriginal people, facilitated by what Bernard Smith describes as "mechanisms of forgetfulness" (17). The attempt of decolonization in postcolonial representation of landscape challenges this forgetfulness in the dominant discourse.

There is no doubt about the significance of land for Aboriginal people. Their struggles to reclaim the ancestral land remain unfinished. Referring to the importance of land, or "country" in Aboriginal people's term, Deborah Bird Rose writes:

Country in Aboriginal English is not only a common noun but also a proper noun. People talk about country in the same way that they would talk about a person: they speak to country, sing to country, visit country, worry about country, feel sorry for country, and long for country. [...] Because of this richness, country is home, and peace; nourishment for body, mind, and spirit; heart's ease. (*Nourishing Terrains* 7)

Aboriginal people hold a distinct relationship with their land and country. Rather than conceiving land as a form of property as is dominant in Western thinking of land use, Aboriginal traditional landowners undertake custodianship or guardianship through which they form a reciprocal connectedness with the land. The rights conferred by the land are as important as the obligations derived from the land. Their traditional connections to country, together with related knowledge, performances and rituals, remain an essential component of Aboriginal cultural heritage.

The evocation of Aboriginal traditional land, or "country" as it is often referred to a specific place where Aboriginal groups inherit and live for centuries, echoes with "the country" occupied by settler Australians in a disputable sense. The double resonance of country reveals the ambivalence at the core of Australian literary geography. The Postcolonial narratives in Australian children's



books, in a realistic or imaginative mode, often expose the territorial disputes since European settlement and inform young readers of different cultural values and perspectives in relation to the relationships between people and landscapes. The articulation of Aboriginal relationships to country in this regard not only contests the Eurocentric dominance of space and reflects on the continuing impact of colonization in Australian settler society, but also values Aboriginal living experiences on their traditional land and recognises various modes of connection between contemporary Aboriginal descent and this country. Such re-mapping strategies as conveyed through literary imagination in texts for children are ideologically important to envision a reconciled racial relationship in a shared space.

This essay begins by examining the colonial history of seeing Australia as an “empty space,” naming, and appropriating the land by erasing Aboriginal presence from the land. Then it explores the conceptual re-investment of Aboriginal perspectives of landscape in fictional and non-fictional texts for children, which reflect historical and contemporary territorial disputes and engage in cross-racial dialogues to unsettle the dominant ideology and valuation of the land. Through a transformative representation of Australian landscape, a reconciliatory space can therefore at least discursively be negotiated and envisioned.

I. Mapping the “Empty Space”

The map can be defined as “a representational model, as an historical document, and as a geopolitical claim” (Huggan, “Maps” ii). It bears the marks of social and cultural changes in the spatial dimension. Informed by a Eurocentric perception of spatiality, maps in the history of colonization not only represented a wealth of geographical knowledge, but also signified the power of surveillance over a static, universal space (Ashcroft 129). In Western traditions, sight is often equated with knowledge, wisdom or reason. The visual dominance suggests that if a space can be seen, it can be known and reached by the viewer’s intellectual capacity. Maps foster the viewer’s position in relation to the object that is viewed as exterior (Ashcroft

136). Along with the invention of longitude and latitude in the development of cartography, space was increasingly conceptualized as a grid network; it was located as “a geographical object that can be treated in isolation, as a legal or economic unit” (P. Carter 136). The gradual disengagement of space from place, especially from the localized experience in a specific place, was conceptually important in the process of dispossessing Indigenous people of their land.

During the expansion of British colonies, the act of mapping which invested the space with the rhetoric of naming was a key to realize the dominance by early explorers and settlers. In *The Road to Botany Bay* (1987), Paul Carter traces the tradition of naming in colonial Australia and describes the engagement of the British settlers who were “more than ever obliged to settle the country rhetorically [...] to conjure up the object of [...] [their] desire and, through the act of articulating it, to bring it into being” (137). The metaphorical names, such as those bestowed by James Cook in charting the Australian coast, were not merely descriptive of the geographical features, but “framed and isolated” the images of a vast landscape so that “such features are brought close, made homely, domestic” (P. Carter 31).¹ The process of naming became a conceptual re-inscription of the land, which discursively transformed the unknown landscape to make it conquerable, controllable, and open to settlement.

The colonial practice of naming was premised on the notion of Australia as an essentially “empty space” (Ashcroft 153). The emptiness did not refer to the actual absence of human existence, but designated the lack of evidence of habitation, namely “planting, farming and fencing land [that] established a claim to ownership” in European assumptions (Bradford, “Homely” 177). To see Australia as “desert and uncultivated” provided the legal legitimacy for British sovereignty and the gradual colonial occupation of Australia (Attwood 8). Before the term *terra nullius* (meaning “a land belonging to no one”) entered into Australian legal and demotic discourse,² as Michael Cathcart points out, “it was a state of mind,” fundamental to the British settlement during the colonial period (54). The notion of a land being empty, blank,

vacant, and claimed by no one was widespread in colonial descriptions of this vast continent. Considering the factors that contribute to the formation of empty space, Anthony Giddens recognizes the importance of “those allowing for the representation of space without reference to a privileged locale which forms a distinct vantage-point; and those making possible the substitutability of different spatial units” (19). The development of maps made both of these factors viable and was then conducive to the colonial expropriation of Aboriginal land, since mapping the space facilitated the process of incorporating the land into colonial discourse and enabled the division of spatial units to create the possibility for occupation. The geographical representation thus transformed the living places of local Aboriginal people into imagined space units and allowed conceptually the creation of empty space to go hand in hand with the act of naming.

The notion of empty space in colonial discourse erased the presence of Aboriginal people and underpinned the fantasy of a white nation in a contested territory. As colonization proceeded, repetitive references to Aboriginal people as “the last of the tribe” and a “doomed race” consolidated the stereotype of Aboriginal inferiority and the assumption that Aboriginal people would gradually but inevitably die out. The presence of Aboriginal people in literary texts alluded to their absence in colonial discourse. Rose summarizes the uncanny and paradoxical representation of Aboriginal people:

Taken together, the two ways of representing Indigenous people—imminent absence and mythic presence—represent death and resurrection: the death of the Indigenous people, and their rebirth as a central mythic dimension of settler nationhood and settler identity. (“Year Zero” 25)

The mystical presence of Aboriginality suggested a division between the real and the mythic, the familiar and the alien. Such an embedded colonial ideology of mystifying racial others was coterminous with the invention of empty space that beckoned the coming of European settlers and civilization. The “creation of a vast emptiness” devoid of land ownership and inhabitants further contributed to the pacified frontier in Australian master narratives of the contact history (Rose, “Year Zero” 22).

The fiction of empty space served as a conceptual basis for British settlement and the naming process then enclosed the land within the Western epistemological and legal framework. It should be noted that the colonial discourse of naming still casts its shadow in contemporary Australia. For instance, the non-fiction picture book *Maralinga: the Anangu Story* (2009) offers a glimpse of the history of Maralinga in South Australia, the traditional country of the Anangu people. Maralinga is located in the south of today’s Great Victoria Desert named by the explorer Ernest Giles. Maralinga was a British nuclear testing site with the agreement of the Australian government for ten years between 1953 and 1963. The first of the following excerpts interrogates the Eurocentric naming of the desert in the nineteenth century. The second and the third paragraphs point out that the government authorities imposed the wrongly borrowed name “Maralinga” for Anangu country and perceived it as an “empty” desert for the purpose of nuclear testing:

Ernest Giles, who crossed the desert in 1875, called it the Great Victoria Desert, after a whitefella queen that Anangu had never heard of, in a faraway land they did not know existed. (12)

Politicians and scientists [...] regarded it as desert, open space largely uninhabited. They did not understand its importance to Anangu who had cared for the land for over 40 000 years. They knew nothing of its richness in tradition and law. (36)

In 1953 the site, some 100 kilometres north of Ooldea, was named Maralinga by the whitefellas. This time they took the word from an Aboriginal language of northern Australia. Because Maralinga means thunder, they thought it was appropriate to describe the sound of the explosions they would make over the next ten years. The Anangu word for thunder is *tuuni*. (36, 38)

To name the largest desert in Australia (which stretches across Western Australia and South Australia) after Queen Victoria was to fill this place with the evocation of British imperial supremacy, whereas the lived experiences and living cultures of the traditional landowners were ignored and erased. The irrelevance of the name to the Aboriginal people and the hollow connection between Queen Victoria and the place manifested the separation between the locale and the localized living experience. The imposition of a wrong name, “Maralinga,” from a northern Aboriginal language for the Anangu country

in South Australia accounted for a specific inscription of Eurocentric occupation that treated Anangu country as at once “empty” and “filled” for nuclear testing purposes. The naming of “Maralinga” by an Aboriginal language from another place also revealed the white authority’s failure to acknowledge the place-based nature of Aboriginal languages and cultures. Indeed, it erased the presence of the Anangu people on the land by a gesture of token respect for Aboriginality that at the same time legitimated the use of the land for nuclear testing. While on the map the Anangu place was given a misappropriated and false Aboriginal identity, in reality many Anangu people were displaced and evacuated from their home country.³ In this case, the lasting effect of colonization enabled through Eurocentric discourse seriously damaged, if not entirely severed, the link between Aboriginal landowners and their land.

II. Re-connecting to Country

Since the “First Fleet” of British convicts settled at Port Jackson in 1788, Aboriginal people have never ceased to fight for their land rights. Aboriginal traditional land usually refers to homelands or traditional territories that Aboriginal people of various language groups inherit from their ancestors and that have enabled them to carry on traditional ways of life for centuries. As the earliest inhabitants in Australia, Aboriginal people have developed profound emotional, ritual and spiritual affiliations with country. Such affiliations are embodied in rich forms of Aboriginal cultural and performative expressions, including paintings, dances, song lines, storytelling, and so forth. The “performative epistemic mode” in Aboriginal people’s engagement with the land contrasts with the Western perception of space as static and enclosed (Verran 250). Galarrwuy Yunipingu describes the way in which Aboriginal people interact with the land: “When Aboriginal people get together, we put the land into an action. When I perform, the land is within me. [...] I pretend to be the land, because the land is part of me” (13). In Aboriginal beliefs, the land forms a dynamic, inseparable relationship with the people.

For Aboriginal people, the land is an “ultimate source of knowledge and creativity” (Daes 7). It is an entity or

embodiment fundamental to Indigenous knowledge and cultural life. “The land and Aboriginal culture go hand in hand. You can’t separate them. The land is the giver of life. It is our mother,” as Boori Pryor remarks (6). The personification of the land as part of Aboriginal life and culture accentuates its central importance throughout Indigenous history. In the spiritual and religious sense, the land forms a tangible relationship with Aboriginal Dreaming,⁴ as a home to ancestral spirits and a symbol for the continuation of life. The places that are associated with the Dreaming or certain rituals are regarded as sacred sites, including totemic places, the adjacent objects and geographical features, such as Dreaming tracks, ceremonial venues for men’s or women’s business, initiation places, ancestral pathways, trees, waters, food gathering places, and burials. By worshiping and maintaining the bonds with these sites, Aboriginal people connect to their ancestors and spirituality.

In the protracted struggles to reclaim ancestral land, Aboriginal people have sought to re-establish their traditional bonds with country. For them, this is a process of searching for “routes,” not necessarily “a return to roots” (Hall 209; see also Clifford 477). Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra point out that Aboriginal people in northern and central Australia seek to maintain their traditional life “as close to their traditional territories as is now possible”; whereas for many Aboriginal people residing in the southern cities, “the direct link with a specific piece of country is no longer viable” (92-93). The idea of place-boundedness not only may disunite the people who have settled in a new place and make them feel alienated from the place where they live now, but also would lend power to an essentialist view that urban Aboriginal people are less “authentic.” As Hodge and Mishra stress,

[i]nstead of the confident assumption of identity tied to and established through links to a country, dispossession to some degree is their universal experience. But there is still a continuity between traditional and contemporary forms of cultural expression of this theme amongst Aborigines. [...] Yet each of these distinct strands of Aboriginal art is equally Aboriginal, equally crucial to all Aborigines, since one establishes the Aboriginal base, while the other opens up the transformational freedom that is equally important to all Aborigines, wherever they are placed. (92-93)

This view epitomizes the predicament as well as the resolution for contemporary Aboriginal people to re-establish their bonds with country. Aboriginal people suffered from dispossession and displacement to varying extent during colonial history. But it is necessary to see that the continuity of Aboriginal cultures enables them to maintain the traditional bonds with the land through various cultural expressions. This reconnection is not always directed to their original country, but links to the places that can be identified as “home” again.

The theme of Aboriginal country is evident in the postcolonial narratives of children’s books. But how do they inform young readers of the historical and contemporary tensions between Aboriginal people and white settlers? What kind of strategies and difficulties to re-establish Aboriginal custodianship do they represent? To answer these questions, the following section will consider Kate Constable’s time-travel fiction *Crow Country* (2011), which exemplifies critical issues concerning Aboriginal land interests and seeks to redress past injustice figuratively.

The novel *Crow Country* is set in Dja Dja Wurrung Country, which is located in Boort, a real small town near Bendigo in Victoria. The Crow is the totem of this country and messenger of Aboriginal ancestral spirits. At the beginning of the story, the Crow addresses cultural amnesia in Australian settler society and stresses the importance of maintaining the continuity of Aboriginal culture:

“Who tells Crow’s stories now? Where are the dreams when the dreamers are gone? Where are the stories when no one remembers?” ... “Country remembers,” it croaked softly. “Country remembers. Crow remembers.” (42)

To re-establish the broken connection to country underlines the central theme of this novel. The plot tells the forgotten story of a (fictional) murder that took place in the 1930s, in which the rich pastoralist Mr Mortlock killed the Aboriginal stockman Jimmy Raven, due to an argument over the construction of a dam in Mr Mortlock’s property. Jimmy was an Aboriginal custodian. He objected to this project because the dam would jeopardize the sacred place where Aboriginal people gathered and performed rituals. Jimmy and Mr Mortlock, together with another

white man Clarry, served in the army during World War I and had formed a deep friendship with each other. But after the murder, Clarry helped Mr Mortlock to cover it up. Another thread is formed through the contemporary young characters Sadie (Clarry’s great granddaughter), Lachie (Mr Mortlock’s great grandson) and the Aboriginal boy Walter. The two threads are linked by the protagonist Sadie who, under the guidance of the Crow, stumbles back in time and witnesses the un-resolved crime. She completes the Crow’s mission by revealing the historical injustice and restoring the lost sacred object once held by Jimmy.

By unfolding the tension between building a dam and preserving the sacred site, the novel reflects the conflicting interests of white settlers and Aboriginal traditional landowners in Australian pastoralist history. The Mortlocks’ large-acre property is located near Lake Boort. Geographically this region is part of the Murray-Darling Basin, a major pastoral area in Australia. Historically, due to low rainfall and the irregular flow of rivers in the Murray-Darling Basin, an intensive irrigation system was built to expand agricultural and pastoral development at the turn of the twentieth century (Goodall, “Telling Country” 163). However, the development of the irrigation system met with fierce opposition from Aboriginal traditional landowners, for many reasons: the source of water, such as waterholes, was of cultural significance in Aboriginal knowledge system; the changed watercourses and underground water levels not only severely affected Aboriginal people who lived along the rivers, but also jeopardized their important cultural and ritual sites and threatened the transmission of Aboriginal traditional culture; moreover, compounded by years of overgrazing in this region, the environmental deterioration made it difficult for Aboriginal people to maintain their traditional ways of life (ibid.).

The pastoral landscape has been a powerful evocation of Australian nationhood since the nineteenth century. By the 1920s, the pastoral imagery of flocks of sheep in rural settings had gradually replaced the bush legend, signifying a new Australia in the national historiography (D. Carter 156). In contrast to the wild and unknown bush, the rural or pastoral landscape was believed to be

civilized, pacified and prosperous, which provided “the best evidence of successful settlement” (ibid. 149). The pastoralists sought to celebrate their toil in a pastoral nation. However, conflicts led by the disparate interests between pastoralists and Aboriginal groups have remained ever since European settlement.⁵ The progressive history of pastoral achievements constructed “a racialised, ‘white,’ rural society” that conveniently excluded the presence of Aboriginal people, together with their experience and knowledge accrued in managing the land (Goodall, “Telling Country” 168).⁶

The novel addresses pastoral history through the portrayal of the Mortlocks, who exude the pride of the family’s pastoral legacy on the land that has been “looked after for five generations” (158). Lachie argues with Walter, defending his family’s established relations with the property:

“I was born here,” he said to Walter. “And I’ve lived here all my life, and so had my dad, and his dad, and his dad before him. Who do you reckon this land belongs to? Not to you, mate. There’s none of your people left round here. They’re *gone*.” (158)

Asserting his family’s connections with this place, Lachie’s remark echoes the dominant ideology which denied Aboriginal habitation and forced displacement in history. Moreover, his view insists that only those who originate from *here* are entitled to the land rights, expressing a prevalent idea of place-boundedness which excludes the dispersed Aboriginal descendants (like Walter) from reclaiming their rights to the land.

With a focus on the characterization of Jimmy, the novel demonstrates the efforts of traditional landowners to maintain their contact with country under colonial control in Australian pastoral history. Jimmy is portrayed as an Aboriginal “clever man”—the custodian or deputy of Aboriginal traditional landowners (179). Meanwhile, he is also “a good man, a good worker” for Mr Mortlock (57). Jimmy’s double role does not mean a mitigation of the historical and racial confrontation between traditional landowners and white pastoralists. Rather, it captures the uneven power relation between these two groups during the post-contact history. Jimmy’s job as a worker, on the one hand, reflects the difficulty of Aboriginal people to

continue living in traditional ways after being dispossessed and displaced. On the other, as white settlers gained the dominant control on economic and social fronts, it became a strategic expediency for Aboriginal labourers to work on the property, so that they could support themselves without relying solely on mission charity and seek possible ways to maintain their traditional contact with the land (i.e. hunting and harvesting bush tucker between the mustering seasons).⁷ Referring to the presence of Aboriginal labourers in pastoral history, Heather Goodall writes, “The two groups of landholders coexisted, uneasily and sometimes in open hostility, but with some advantages for both” (“Telling Country” 163). In the novel, this vexed relationship between Aboriginal traditional landowners and white pastoralists is characterized by both conflict and co-existence, which I will return to shortly.

The complexity in the characterization of Jimmy is not only seen from his double role as both the Aboriginal custodian and the stockman on Mr Mortlock’s property, but is also revealed from another detail: when serving in the army during WWI, Jimmy saved Clarry’s life; and Jimmy, Clarry and Mr Mortlock became best mates on the battlefield in France. However, the relatively equal relationship as comrade-in-arms was dissolved into uneven racial dichotomy when they returned to Australia. Jimmy’s devotion in war was faded into oblivion after the war and his name was not able to enter on the war memorial without Clarry’s insistence and Mr Mortlock’s support. This captures the racial discrimination entrenched in Australian mainstream white society. Jimmy’s patriotism in fighting for the country of Australia during the wartime could possibly be connected to his responsibility and loyalty to the same, yet however contested, “country” as an Aboriginal custodian. Nevertheless, racial dominance and split interests in the use of land ultimately render the tragic confrontation between Mr Mortlock and Jimmy inevitable.

As the novel unfolds, Mr Mortlock insists on the plan for building a dam over an Aboriginal sacred site, regardless of Jimmy’s strong objections. Based on the mateship that he built up with Clarry during the wartime, Jimmy

approaches Clarry first and anticipates that Clarry could join him to convince Mr Mortlock to give up the plan. Jimmy explains to Clarry the importance of the sacred site:

“It’s like this, see.” He [Jimmy] was silent for a long moment. Then he said, “Suppose you’re given something to look after. Something precious, something—” He glanced across at Dad [Clarry]. “Something sacred. And suppose you knew that a person was planning to do something that would destroy that sacred thing. What would you do?” (55)

Aware that Aboriginal custodianship bears little resemblance with Western practices, Jimmy makes an effort to translate the Aboriginal sacred site into “something to look after,” “something precious” and “sacred” that Clarry as a white man can possibly grasp. In doing so, Jimmy seeks white alliance to protect Aboriginal land interests while he petitions Mr Mortlock. Different from the violent confrontation or “guerrilla tactics” during the contact history, to seek alliance with and to petition white people for land preservation, as shown in this episode, manifests an alternative approach by Aboriginal traditional landowners to cope with the changed power relations (see Goodall, “New South Wales” 71).

The novel’s climax is the intense argument between Jimmy and Mr Mortlock. Jimmy speaks out about his responsibility to protect the Aboriginal sacred site, when confronting Mr Mortlock.

“I got to speak with Mr Mortlock,” said Jimmy.
“Telling me I’m not *allowed* to dam Cross Creek!” shouted Mr Mortlock. “Bloody cheek! *Mustn’t do this, mustn’t do that!* You’d think it was his own damn land!”
“Not my country. But this is my business.” Jimmy stood tall, unmoving. (88-89)

The tension—to whom this land belongs—underlines the power struggle and negotiation between the two “landholders”: the white property owner and the Aboriginal custodian. Note that Jimmy undertakes the traditional custodianship, but he was not born to this country. As he reveals elsewhere,

“My country is way down south by the sea [...] I don’t reckon I’ll ever see my country again. But I know a special place when I see it. There’s a special place in that valley. I

know it. The people who belong to that place, they’re not here to protect it, so I got to do it.” (91-92)

The colonial dispossession forces Jimmy away from his own country. He is not an Aboriginal descendent from this place, but he is committed to this new country where he lives now, by forming a new kinship relationship and taking care of this country as his “business” (89). Jimmy’s example challenges the dominant assumption of seeing the newly formed connection with another country as “inauthentic” or “fabricated.”

As a matter of fact, Aboriginal custodianship is by and large based on the kinship system. Aboriginal kinship is an extended family network in a traditional community, different from the vertical family tree commonly seen in European genealogy (Goodall, “Telling Country” 181).⁸ Though the situation may vary in different places, the Aboriginal kinship system makes it possible that one is eligible to claim several tracts of land, although a person can only choose to be the custodian in one country (ibid.). Moreover, the kinship system is not necessarily formed through biological relations because one can be the descendent of a particular sacred object or place.⁹ According to Goodall, there are recorded examples that people take up the responsibility to protect Aboriginal interests with the new kin in a new country (“Telling Country” 182). The custodian for a particular country does not necessarily originate from that place, but he needs to acquire sufficient knowledge of the land and go through rigorous ritual procedures to establish the loyalty with that particular country. Only in this way can he be capable and responsible for the rights conferred by the land and the obligations derived from the land. In this sense through the portrayal of Jimmy, an Aboriginal custodian who commits himself to a new country, this novel informs young readers of Aboriginal custodianship and kinship system, which are often misunderstood and denigrated.

Aboriginal connectedness to country is governed by the Law, observed by generations of Aboriginal people. In the novel, the recurring reference to the Law transmits a strong sense of restoring justice for the loss of Aboriginal life and recognizing the interests of traditional landowners. As the

Crow reiterates, “*when the Law is broken, there must be punishment*” (148; italics in orig.). This causality implies that the injustice of Jimmy’s death results in Mr Mortlock’s mysterious suicide, Clarry’s untimely death, and the dried lake where the dam is built. To position the Aboriginal law in the foreground, the novel alludes to the absence of legal justice for traditional landowners. Since the European settlement, native title was gradually extinguished by the Crown and the British law overrode the traditional Aboriginal law.¹⁰ The justice of native title has come a long way within the British-Australian legislative framework. The historic Mabo decision in 1992 and the subsequent Native Title Act 1993 recognized the Aboriginal possession of their traditional land when Australian sovereignty was established.¹¹ The legislation opened up the possibility for traditional Aboriginal landowners to claim back the land that had not been made freehold. In this light, conflicts between pastoral leases and native title once again came into the social and legal spotlight. Indeed, after the Mabo case, a wave of heated debates erupted over the question of whether the grant of pastoral leases could extinguish native title.

There have long been legal disputes about conflicting land interests between pastoralists and Aboriginal traditional claimants. Henry Reynolds traces the historical development of the legal policies and opinions, pointing out that as a matter of fact during the 1830s–1840s senior colonial officials understood the continuance of Indigenous rights to the land.¹² In the second half of the nineteenth century, the colonial governments in Queensland, Western Australia, and South Australia issued legislation that recognised Aboriginal rights of use and occupancy on pastoral leases (Reynolds 128). However, following the intensification of pastoral use of land from the 1840s, the expulsion of Aboriginal inhabitants and the pastoralists’ campaign to call for enhanced security on their properties, the legislation was compromised and Aboriginal land rights on pastoral leases were, in Reynolds’ words, “ignored, unenforced and apparently never tested in the colonial courts” (128). As depicted in *Crow Country*, Jimmy argues that the dam construction is “against the Law, all the Laws,” which may imply that the breach of Aboriginal land rights violates both Aboriginal

law and white men’s law (of certain historical periods). Jimmy’s hidden death may allude to many real tragic incidents that resulted from racial tensions concerning land use, yet which were dismissed, closed, or never brought to court for justice.

In this context, the 1996 Wik People v. State of Queensland case¹³ can be seen as a hard-won success, which rules that native title is not necessarily extinguished by pastoral leases, suggesting that Indigenous rights and interests to the land can co-exist with non-Indigenous proprietary rights on pastoral leases. But Aboriginal independent law making, particularly in relation to land control and management, remains a struggle. While exposing the injustice related to Aboriginal land rights in history, *Crow Country* pins the hope of racial reconciliation on the younger generation. Sadie and Walter reconcile with Lachie at the end. After Lachie knows that Jimmy has been secretly buried in his (the Mortlocks’) family graveyard, he proposes to put up a marker for Jimmy’s grave. He says to Sadie and Walter, “Well, if you want to put up your cross or whatever, I guess you can go ahead. Dad’ll never know. He never comes here” (231). To put up the grave marker for Jimmy is symbolically meaningful, because it not only recognizes a solemn presence of Aboriginal land interests on a pastoral property, but also signifies a re-assertion of Aboriginal bonds with country in a largely white Australia. From Lachie’s words, we also know the attitudinal indifference of his father, who does not care about his own family graveyard, let alone the injustice to Jimmy in the past. The characterization of Lachie’s father represents an entrenched racial ideology that refuses to acknowledge historical wrongs. While acknowledging the difficulty of changing the colonial mindset in Australian mainstream society, the ending of the novel suggests that there is no quick solution to amend history and to create a reconciled future. But the collective action taken by the three teenagers escapes the surveillance of Lachie’s father and signifies a hope of setting up a reconciliatory space for the deceased Jimmy and Mr Mortlock who were both mates and enemies. Their action also becomes a starting point of a deeper understanding and friendship among the three teenagers who represent the hope to build a reconciled future.

By redressing the racial injustice and inculcating young readers with a historical perspective on Aboriginal struggles for land rights, this novel shows the Aboriginal efforts to resist cultural amnesia in the memory of homelands, to re-connect their country with custodial duties and to re-establish the authority of Aboriginal Law that governs the human-land relationship. Indigenous cultural elements represented in the novel's thematization and characterization inform a counter narrative that suggests a re-writing of the colonial geographical discourse and a possibility of racial reconciliation in future generations.

III. A Reconciliatory Space

Mary Louise Pratt's concept of contact zone describes the space of cross-cultural interaction between colonizers and colonized (6). Though the power relations within the contact zone are often highly asymmetrical, Pratt argues that "copresence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices" should not be ignored (7). The convergence of different strands of cultural and ideological thoughts opens up the chance for transculturation in an ethnographical sense and embodies a reconciliatory possibility for different or even conflicting cultural entities. Willie Ermine regards a field that converges disparate systems and forms of engagement between Indigenous people and settler society as an "ethical space" (203). The framework of a contact or ethical space is useful in the sense that it acknowledges the need to accommodate diverse views and beliefs informed by different social and intellectual traditions, without diminishing the diversity or uniqueness of each culture, or sidestepping the fundamental issues of Indigenous and white sovereignty. In doing so, a reconciliatory future may possibly be envisioned. The postcolonial narratives in children's literature re-embed Aboriginal perspectives of land and country within the geographical representation, thereby unsettling the colonial dominance of place and space. To inform young readers of an alternative memory and tradition invested in the Australian landscape, these narratives often suggest a reconciliatory space that accommodates a diversity of connections to the land.

To conclude this essay, I will consider the *Papunya School Book of Country and History* (2001), in which the textual and visual representations seek to conceptualize a space of coexistence and reconciliation despite the difficult times. This informative book tells the Anangu history of dealing with explorers, missionaries and pastoralists since the colonial invasion, and presents "a dialogic interplay of Western and indigenous textual practices" (Bradford, "Different" 204). The episode "Anangu Come to Camp at Alalpi" addresses how the Anangu people moved to camp at Alalpi (near Haasts Bluff) on a Christian mission due to starvation and colonial suppression during the 1940s:

Through all these years, the Anangu continued to be squeezed out of their country by the cattle stations. As well as finding it increasingly hard to get food, they lived in fear of attack by police and pastoralists. Some Anangu felt it might be safer to live together in larger groups, and under the protection of the Mission. (24)

The role of missions in Aboriginal post-contact history was contested. The missions were run by church groups under the charge of missionaries or by managers supported by the government, where the strict rules and routines constrained to varying extent Aboriginal traditional ways of life. For the Anangu, the mission at Alalpi provided a temporary shelter for safety and survival, like "a place of refuge" which at least protected them from the settlers' attack and expulsion (13). Their story of the 1940s shows the way in which the Anangu people sought to navigate their interests in a changed situation.

As different language groups of the Anangu people came to live together on the mission at Alalpi, the mission was gradually turned into a place of coexistence between different Anangu groups, and between Anangu and European missionaries. On the mission many Anangu were baptized, but Christianity did not replace their traditional spiritual beliefs or their longing for homelands. On the same page of the Alalpi story, a hymn to God tells of Kamutu and his family who came to live on the mission. The hymn was composed by Kamutu's grandchildren and written in both *Pintupi* (one of the Anangu languages) and English. The theme of homeland is resonant throughout the hymn and the last two lines repeat, "He [Jesus] will take you home" (24). The hymn to God is intertwined

with the Anangu language (*Pintupi*) and their longing for home. By borrowing the form that was recognized and allowed by the missionaries, the Anangu people enabled themselves to retain the memories of their land without being censored by the mission.

The history of dispossession and exploitation has not destroyed the Anangu people's connections to country. Their long record of struggle shows that it is a tactical strategy of resistance and survival to re-assert their voices within the dominant framework. The illustration at the bottom of the aforementioned page, which accommodates both Aboriginal dot painting and European perspectival tradition in depicting the Alalpi landscape, offers an example to illustrate a reconstructed view of landscape as a shared space for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. The picture consists of two parts: the depiction of Haasts Bluff (outcrop) is situated at the central circle and Aboriginal dot painting fills the rest of the frame. In the middle, the rocky mountain stands against the sky in the distance and the forefront is occupied by red sand and green scrub with a low row of bushland at the foot of the mountain. The scene is characteristic of Western perspectival perception with objects in the front bigger and those at the back smaller. Different from the Western figurative style of painting, however, outside of the circle are depicted two sets of iconographical images in both upper corners, which are characteristic of Central and Western Aboriginal desert art. In Aboriginal desert painting, objects are not depicted to resemble or mimic reality; rather, following a symbolic and abstract style, objects are usually drawn in the shape of traces left on the sand, metonymically representing the real from a vertical top-down point of view (see Nicholls 13-15). In this picture, the horseshoe or U shape signifies a person who sits on the sand with legs crossed or lying apart. The person on the left has a shallow, dish-like coolamon (a vessel to carry water or food), a digging stick, a spear with a sharp end, a stone knife, and a boomerang. On the right a person brings along a long digging stick and a coolamon.¹⁴ The dots in five colours around the icons represent sand and earth from five different places. Collectively, the picture tells that Anangu people of five language groups came to continue their life on the mission at Alalpi. The combined

use of figurative and iconic techniques reflects a creative representation of the landscape. The juxtaposition of different visual perspectives disrupts the Eurocentric authority in viewing space; in doing so, the painting opens up a dialogic space between Aboriginal and Western cultures and suggests a sense of co-existence in a cross-cultural context.

From interrogating the colonial discourse of empty space to re-affirming Aboriginal land rights, from exemplifying the land disputes to suggesting a shared spirit of co-existence, these books for Australian children project a strong motif of Aboriginal land and country. The books examined in this essay manifest Indigenous people's efforts to re-assert their connectedness to country and re-imagine the landscape as a reconciliatory space. They invite young readers to reflect on a series of contested issues and alternative strategies of viewing place and space, and to deepen their understanding of Indigenous cultural and spiritual attachments to country. This cultural enrichment for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal child readers can thus nurture the possibility of reconciliation in future.

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Notes

1. Among the names of one hundred and fifty places given by James Cook, some described geographical or natural features, descriptively or imaginatively; some related to incidents during the voyage; a considerable number of names commemorated crew members and paid homage to British aristocrats, political figures, and naval officers (See P. Carter 2).
2. In an article "*The Law of the Land* or the Law of the Land?: History, Law and Narrative in a Settler Society," Bain Attwood points out that the concept of *terra nullius*, originating from international legal discourse, did not as commonly held come into use in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Australia. Only in recent decades did the term enter public discourse by way of explaining colonial dispossession of Aboriginal Australians. Attwood traces today's development of the term to Aboriginal

- lawyer and activist Paul Coe's 1978 case before the High Court. Coe claimed the British "wrongfully treated the continent now known as Australia as *terra nullius*," the precedent being the case of the Western Sahara at the International Court of Justice in 1975 when the term was used to challenge the legitimacy of the Spanish colonization in 1884 (qtd. in Attwood, 8).
3. During the nuclear tests, as a matter of fact, some Anangu people remained in the affected area due to the lack of prior notice. Some of them lost their lives while others had their health seriously damaged. The nuclear fallout severely contaminated the environment, posing a long-term threat to Anangu who lived on the land. But their struggles for the lost homelands did not cease. The title to Maralinga Tjarutja lands was finally handed over to traditional landowners, in accordance with the Maralinga Tjarutja Land Rights Bill in 1984. See *Maralinga* 39–45, 48–53, and 58–59.
 4. Aboriginal Dreaming is the spiritual and religious state that can be connected to Dreamtime, when ancestral spirits created life and natural features and the Law was established between the land, animals, and different groups of people. Though varying from place to place, the Dreaming is ever lasting from time immemorial to an infinite future.
 5. During the early colonial history, the increase of cattle and sheep damaged the fragile grassland with their hard hooves, depleted severely the underground water and scared away the native animals on which Aboriginal people lived. Lacking sufficient water and bush tucker, Aboriginal people attacked the houses of settlers and occasionally took away the sheep, hoping to drive the newcomers off their country. The white pastoralists sought revenge on Aboriginal people, often resulting in bloodshed and the violent expulsion of Aboriginal people from their homelands.
 6. It is evident that Aboriginal people used fire-stick farming to ensure sufficient wild animals and plants for food. The term "Aboriginal fire-stick farming" was first used by Australian archaeologist Rhys Jones in the 1960s. It rejects the assumption that there was no farming or cultivation before white settlement. By using fire to burn the land in a systemic and controllable way, Aboriginal people managed the land for centuries before the European arrival. This method also gradually changed the Australian landscape from the rainforest to the scrubland or pastures, which the modern grazing industries rely on and benefit from. See also Gammage, *The Biggest Estate on Earth* (2011).
 7. The historical research on the conditions of Aboriginal labourers on south coast pastoral properties from the 1860s to the 1890s shows that in "some areas they [Aboriginal labourers] were working for rations only, in others they were employed for wages, and elsewhere were living by a combination of seasonal employment and traditional subsistence harvesting [...]. Aborigines were 82 per cent self-sufficient due to some combination of these activities" (Goodall, "New South Wales" 74).
 8. For example, in the Kimberley areas where the Kukatja people of the Malarn, Yaka Yaka and Wirrumanu communities live, according to their kinship system, the sisters of one's mother (aunts) who share the same "skin name" can be called "mother," and similarly, the brothers of one's father (uncles) also serve as "father" in terms of social responsibility and etiquette. That's to say, one can have several mothers and fathers, and in this sense the notion of descent is expanded (See Greene, Gill, and Tramacchi 38–43).
 9. For instance, according to Justice Toohey, in the place near Alice Springs "Kirda may call a sacred object 'father' or call a site and the country around it 'father'. Kurdungurlu may say about the same object, site or country, 'That is my mother' or 'my uncle'" (qtd. in G. Pryor 422). See the report delivered by Justice Toohey, Aboriginal Land commissioner, to the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs and to the Administrator of the Northern Territory in June 1980 (excerpted in *Issues in Australian History*, published in 1982).
 10. Native title is the rights and interests that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders have to their ancestral land or waters. It recognizes Indigenous people's traditional connections to the land. According to Australian law, the legal rights to hold, occupy and use the land are called Land Title. Before 1992, all land in Australia belonged to the Crown (the government). The Crown could grant the land to people in two modes: freehold or leasehold. Freehold land is what we commonly regard as ownership. Leasehold is the land belonging to the Crown and the Crown can rent it to individual or groups. There are four types of leasehold according to the different types of land use: pastoral leases, general leases, reserve leases, and leases in perpetuity. In Australia over half of land is held under tenure, among which the pastoral lease constitutes a significant proportion—around 42% of the total landmass. See *Land Fact Sheets* issued by Department of Indigenous Affairs, Western Australia, Bartlett 414 and D. Carter 417.
 11. Refer to *Mabo v Queensland* [No 2] (1992) 175 CLR 1; *Native Title Act 1993*, Act No. 110 of 1993.
 12. Reynolds quotes the comments on the dispatch of Governor Fitzroy to Secretary of State Earl Grey in 11 October 1848, which made clear that "the Imperial government 'did not intend [...] to exclude the natives' from land held under lease" and soon the Colonial Office was informed to secure for Aboriginal people "the right of wandering as heretofore in quest of food' on all lands leased for pastoral purposes" (125–26).
 13. *The Wik Peoples v The State of Queensland & Ors; The Thayorre People v The State of Queensland & Ors* [1996] HCA 40 ('Wik').
 14. The interpretations of these icons refer to Christine Nicholls's *Art, History, Place* (2003). Note that in

Aboriginal dot and circle paintings, the iconographical meanings may vary and one icon could designate different objects in different contexts.

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