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**Indigenous Transnational: Pluses and Perils and Tara June Winch**  
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Abstract

In the context of the "transnational turn" in Australian literary studies, I consider the dynamics of writing and reading by and around Aboriginal literature. Positioning of authors, books and readings across, through and beyond nation spaces has particular challenges for Indigenous writers who locate identity on "country", with reception determined largely by a national framing. Informed by work from Lynda Ng, Chadwick Allen and others, the article examines the transnational movements of and around the fiction of Tara June Winch.

Keywords: Tara June Winch, Aboriginal Writing, Transnational Literature

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Since around 2005, the study of Australian literature has undergone a "transnational turn". This can be attributed to several factors: the need to correct the limitations of critical work framed by national/ist structures and concerns, the progressive fine tuning of postcolonial/diaspora theories, the sudden access to large data sets that enabled "big picture" analyses of book history such as Franco Moretti inaugurated, and the influence of Euro-American exponents of World Literature as a pedagogical model. The shift can be succinctly represented by works such as Bill Ashcroft's formulations of "the transnational" (2011, 2017), Katherine Bode's *A World of Fiction: Digital Collections and the Future of Literary History* (2018) and Robert Dixon and Brigid Rooney's edition, *Is Australian Literature a World Literature?* (2013).

In practice, the transnational turn has worked to break open national borders around

Australian literature, showing how both writing and reading was always characterised by movements of books and authors between Australia and overseas—primarily Europe and North America—and how transnational networks also make more complicated the “self-other” oppositions of postcolonial analysis (Carter, Dixon 2007 and 2015; Huggan). There are, however, a number of ways of thinking about the transnational as more than an international network of migration and trade. To follow the dictionary derivations from Latin, the “*trans*” can mean “across”, as in “transcontinental”, “through” as in “transfuse”, or “beyond” as in “transcend”. One common factor in these meanings is the sense of movement and agency: “translate”, “transitive”, “transact”. We shall return to these ideas in due course.

In the context of scholarly discussion, the transnational most commonly carries the sense of international flows (as in transnational crime, or migration studies or analyses of environmental changes). In literary studies, the “transnational turn” may bring into view complicated exchanges hitherto obscured by nation-centred reading—modernist transmissions around London, New York, Paris and the Caribbean or India, for instance (Jay; Kalliney; Hayward and Long; Valdez and Begam). It may also turn our attention to a particular kind of writing that both represents the flows of globalisation as content and as product inhabits in its circuits of making, and reception of those same flows (as with some discussion around Salman Rushdie, or a novel like Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss*). However, “transnational” can also refer to a post-diasporic subjectivity in which the binary of “home/origin” and “exilic” migrant residence is superseded by a shuttling to and fro, physically and/or virtually via the new digital media, such that “home” and “self” become contrapuntal complexities (Hannerz; Levitt; Vertovec). The transnational subject may not move into a totally happy cosmopolitanism, but the melancholia that theorists attach to polarities of diasporic experience (Mishra) mutates into a less troubled network of identifications. A third mode of the transnational is a subtler one relating to the “through” aspect of the Latin root. It is an extension of Homi Bhabha’s “Third Space” processes of negotiation in which social, literary and cultural vectors not only go beyond and across nation spaces but also engage with regions and ethnicities and languages within the nation, thereby disturbing the image of the nation as a smoothly homogeneous geo-social space within clear boundaries (Bhabha, Ashcroft).

With every new theoretical construct aimed at correcting overly narrow and conceptually invalid assumptions, there goes a critique of its new potential exclusions and blind spots. Michael Jacklin, for example, finds that the transnational turn in Australian literary studies tends to overlook what goes on under the older rubric of “multicultural writing” (Jacklin); Chadwick Allen, in North American and international contexts, worries that it obscures Indigenous literatures (Allen 2012, 2012a).<sup>1</sup> My interest on this occasion is akin to Allen’s. In Australian literary studies, how do scholars, writers and readers negotiate the intersections of local and global when it comes to Aboriginal literature? What might be the strategies of creation, dissemination and reception by and around an Aboriginal writer who travels both across Australia and beyond in her life and writing?

Quite rightly, many indigenous writers and critics will insist on specificities of location, language and identity, and the importance of attachment not just to land, but to “country” – to use the Australian term, meaning a particular space in nature that is also homeland and spiritual

anchor co-substantial with self and community (Behrendt, Bird Rose, Mumbler and Morris). The result – with both positive and negative effects – is that discussion of Aboriginal writers and writing tends to concentrate on and be circumscribed by nation frameworks. Some of the implications of this can be seen at the socio-political level. Larger Aboriginal groups label themselves as “nations” to claim respect, thereby challenging the unity of the nation state but also falling into the terms of the state that conflict with Indigenous traditions of law and connection to land. The fracturing of nation space by smaller communities also allows the larger “container” of the nation state to play them off against each other and keep them on the margins. Minority “nation” collectives can strategically unite under pan-Aboriginality to exert more influence on the nation state, but in doing so run the risk of overriding differences of language, “country” and self-definition. What role, then, might the transnational have in such a field?

In her introduction to *Indigenous Transnationalism*, a collection of essays about Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria*, Lynda Ng spells out the incongruities of positioning for the Indigenous writer:

Indigenous peoples worldwide have been forced to emphasize their originary status in order to assert their rights to be on a land that was theirs to begin with. This is both a matter of pride and a form of limitation, for it continues to reinforce the stereotype of Indigenous culture as a peculiar form of anachronism – something that must be preserved as a curiosity, rather than an active and equally valid participant of modern national culture. (Ng 3)

The Aboriginal writer, then, must work across these conflicting positions, finding ways to insist on a place in modernity and the world without surrendering claim on country and identity. Chadwick Allen points out that “indigenous signs and sign systems travel” (Allen 2012, 1), often through and around dominant sign systems. Aboriginal society has always conducted a transnational trade network of axes, shell, ochre and song. There have also been connections with Makassar and New Guinea, and later on whaling ships and colonial voyages. As Ng mentions, David Unaipon’s pioneering *Legendary Tales of the Australian Aborigines* was transnational in the sense of moving beyond his own Ngarrindjeri country to incorporate stories from other “nation” groups around Australia (Ng 8), and the essays she collects show how Alexis Wright speaks to the nation state as an activist (both against national oppression of Aboriginal peoples and against exploitation of the nation and its minorities by multinational mining), while also looking beyond the bounds of the nation continent. Her story has characters moving across the nation and across its shoreline, and her own literary vision incorporates a wide variety of influences from Europe, the Caribbean and Latin America (Wright 2018). Wright herself has lived in the north, the centre and the south of Australia and now travels to literary events overseas, but at the same time, she anchors her identity and her story in the Waanyi country of her birth in northwest Queensland. *Carpentaria*, therefore, enacts a transnationalism that negotiates the conflicted relationship between Indigenous identity rooted in “country” and an international outlook that refuses containment within narrow and prejudicial views of definitive locatedness.

As Gillian Whitlock has shown, the rootedness of authors and stories does not preclude

transnational circulations of their books. Sally Morgan's *My Place*, in particular, has gone into all kinds of editions and languages across the globe regardless of the author's Western Australian home and original publisher (Whitlock). *Carpentaria*, partly because of its particular voice and regional setting, could only find publication with a small, independent press closely identified with the western suburbs of Sydney (not unlike Morgan's publication through a then small regional press south of Perth). Like *My Place*, Wright's novel has begun to move among international publishers and readers, raising questions about the nature of transnational recognition and readings.<sup>2</sup> By moving beyond continental borders, both texts disrupt the national idea of Aboriginal texts being tied to one marginal place, and they disturb cultural space by running across and through it voices and stories not commonly heard.

Many indigenous writers make deliberate use of the transnational to resist being ghettoised by stereotypes or systems of production. Anita Heiss, in Australia, resists narrow definitions of Aboriginality as "tribal" and Aboriginal literature as polemical social realism by writing "chick lit" with protagonists as young professionals living in Paris and New York, and emulating the world of *Sex in the City* (Heiss 2007, 2008, 2010). If Heiss is still published mainly in her own country and discussed mostly in relation to Australian literature, others, like Aboriginal Philip McLaren, find publication and readership in international spaces: the former in France (Anon; Castro-Koshy).<sup>3</sup> On the critical (and political) side, there is a push for strategic alliances across national borders and work in "pan-indigenous" comparative critique, such as we see in Chadwick Allen's *Trans-Indigenous: Methodologies for Global Native Literary Studies*. At the same time, critical practice properly takes to heart the maxim "think globally, act locally", and tends to continue to focus on the immediate (regional, national) problems for and impacts of indigenous writing.

In thinking about the benefits and challenges for an Aboriginal writer who takes on various aspects of the transnational outlined above, I consider the interestingly unusual case of Tara June Winch. Apart from the positioning of her fiction—within texts by the author, and of them by publishers and readers—Winch is distinctive in the range of her travels across Australia and beyond. Unlike other Aboriginal writers, whose works move beyond the nation, but who themselves reside within the nation if not also "on country", Winch has lived outside of both Australia and the English-speaking nations for quite some time. In this regard, she can be seen as a quintessentially transnational figure in all senses of the term outlined. As such, her work illustrates some of the benefits and challenges for the Aboriginal writer in contemporary Australian literary, and World Literature studies.

Winch and her work move through many spaces, disturbing the assumptions and practices of each one. Within Australia, she grew up on the east coast, away from her ancestral lands. At the same time (unlike Sally Morgan), Winch knew her family story, with its strong attachment to Wiradjuri country in New South Wales. As a teenager, she took to the road and moved across the continent, then spent some time in India, where an interest in Buddhism took her to a retreat in Scotland. India also inspired her to read more widely, including the works of Tagore (Creagh; Reines; Sarkar; Winch "Walking").<sup>4</sup> This allowed her to begin thinking seriously of herself as a writer, and Tagore's example helped her forge the poetic imagery and musicality of her prose that won her praise when she eventually published (Smith; On). After returning to

Australia, she completed a university degree and produced a series of linked short stories that won the David Unaipon Award in 2004 for best unpublished manuscript by an Aboriginal writer. The prize included a promise of publication through the University of Queensland Press and *Swallow the Air* appeared in 2006. It was well reviewed and earned her a fellowship that took her to New York in 2008 and then, under the Rolex Mentor and Protégé scheme, she spent time with Nigerian Nobel-winning writer Wole Soyinka. After that she moved to Paris, eventually getting married and settling in France.

International movement does not prevent national fixations on indigeneity, however. As with Sally Morgan, Winch's early success attracted unwelcome disparagement. Morgan was faulted not only for writing in a quest-romance form that white readers could relate to, but for being urban, young, good-looking and pale-skinned enough to be accepted by society at large. Some of this criticism came from people of colour (e.g., Mudrooroo), but also reflected long-engrained white thinking that "real" Aborigines were dark, spoke an Indigenous language and lived according to traditional custom—usually a long way away in the country. As Morgan's book showed, being assimilated through white schooling did not prevent social welfare agencies controlling your life or white folk calling you a "dirty boong". Winch's success with *Swallow the Air* was questioned by at least one reviewer, who declared that Winch had undue editorial help, but also criticised the style as teenage poetic overload—rather suggesting that there was *insufficient* editorial help (Hunt). This mix of envy, suspicion and racist essentialism repeated itself in 2009 when conservative, talk-back radio figure Andrew Bolt accused a number of Aboriginal writers of exploiting an Indigenous connection to gain advantages, even though they were clearly too pale to be "proper" Aborigines (Bolt). Winch was part of a successful court action but withdrew because it became too distressing and she was by then in France (Cain). The case demonstrated the difficult situation of modern Aboriginal Australians in having simultaneously to insist on their connection to country and indigeneity, while resisting attempts to define that identity in stereotypic racist fixity. In any case, overseas recognition of Winch as a writer of promise invalidated suspicions that her writing success was based more on national ethno-politics than literary merit. Residence overseas offered both escape from reductivist attack in the name of white settler humanism and refutation of dominant national preconceptions of Aboriginality.

At the same time, the success of Winch's first book might owe something to the same factors that allowed Morgan's ficto-auto-biography to be corralled within safe national reading spaces. Like *My Place*, *Swallow the Air* was a coming-of-age quest for identity that could be read alongside other such generic tales and fitted into schoolroom study themes like "home" and "belonging", its gritty inclusion of teenage sex and drugs giving it relevance in the eyes of teachers and perhaps also students. Its poetic handling of imagery also gave it a literary and lyric gloss that many found appealing compared to the brute naturalism of some other Aboriginal and minority protest writing. These factors, and perhaps the author's then still young and retiring persona, left the transnational aspects of both writer and work hidden under a blanket of "young adult" reading or displayed as "Aboriginal", generally defined as regional, largely rural, and national.<sup>5</sup> The book appeared through agencies (prize and publisher) known as "specialist" supporters of Aboriginal writing, and it has remained with University of Queensland Press (UQP) through all of its editions, leaving it potentially contained within a literary "native reserve" in the

wider space of national culture.

*Swallow the Air* does lend itself to such a focus in so far as the protagonist draws comfort from her mother's traditional "dreaming" stories and her quest for family takes her back to Wiradjuri country and some of her "mother tongue". However, Winch's debut book pushes back against any essentialist capture of Aboriginality. Unlike *My Place*, which has a relatively stable domestic circle to start from and (regardless of its different voices and silences) has a clear trajectory to discovering a definite history and identity, *Swallow the Air* is a discontinuous narrative of movement—structurally, and in the physical and emotional trajectories of the protagonist. Family is unstable at the start: one father dead, another disappeared, mother about to die. May Gibson is driven to leave her aunty and stepbrother in quest for her father. As suppressed memory of domestic violence is revived, that quest is aborted. When May travels to her mother's country, the lake at the centre of her belonging has disappeared under a polluting gold mine, and when she gets to "country" (the title of the section in which she meets another Gibson) she finds a relative who has so assimilated into white ways that he questions whether her mother's traditional stories are at all genuine and refuses to salvage any family history. At the end of the book, May does arrive "back home", but her seaside childhood is not the Wiradjuri country of her roots and her aunty's home is about to be bulldozed.

*Swallow the Air* does rest on a claim on selfhood as belonging to country, family and language group, and its ending suggests an assertion of belonging to a nation-wide community of Indigenous Australians. At the same time, the "across" and "through" movements of the narrative in nation space suggest a transnational consciousness behind the writing that prevents any easy romance of stable unitary identity. In this book it is not a post-diasporic transnational subjectivity, but rather a restless agon imposed by the ongoing effects of colonial/racial/male violence. Spatially, the personal narrative about "country" is extended across Redfern and the Northern Territory, thereby becoming a trans (intra) national story, and figures like the Greek car-wash owner and May's African co-worker point to the trans (inter) national world beyond Australia that the author has come back from, and which permeates and pluralises the modern nation. The complex working of the transnational here places pressure on any ethno-minority pigeonholing on the part of readers: it both engages a pre-colonial originary authenticity of "country" and enacts a "fallen" postcolonial modernity experienced as an untidy and unending dynamic of provisional selves and communities constructed across a range of sites: local, diasporic, exilic, national and international. Aboriginality pervades all of these spaces yet none of them provides a singular, definitive anchor. All of the spaces together work to prevent national or international reduction of the story to some simplistic notion of localised indigeneity.

Nonetheless, the whole point of the book is to express an affect of Aboriginal experience as displaced and marginalised within the nation. Clearly it and its author irritated conservative white readers like Bolt, rejecting it as too Aboriginal (too anti-nation) and not Aboriginal enough (too displaced from country to be considered authentic). Celebratory reception of *Swallow the Air* might also have had negative effects: might have kept the writer identified as regional (a Wollongong girl) or ethno-national (promising young Aboriginal Australian). How might a writer then continue to assert an Indigenous identity while breaking free of such nation-based reception? The New York writer's grant and recognition by a transnational corporation offered

escape from narrow identity politics and national cultural agendas. At the same time, sojourns overseas removed the writer from her immediate audience and put her “on the road” again, potentially moving Winch towards a transnational subjectivity that could erode foundational attachments to “country”. Pluses and perils are entangled. In the novel, May learns from her troubled mother to walk away whenever trauma threatens; the older author relates walking to Buddhist meditational practice as much as to personal restlessness and genealogical displacements (Winch “Walking”). Like Alexis Wright, she also engages in “mental walking”: Winch lists Camus and Soyinka, Kundera, Yeats and Carol Anne Duffy amongst her library (Wilding), and so positions herself as a transnational writer.

It is into this context that *After the Carnage*, Winch’s second book, appears. It carries the sense of the writer being encouraged to develop her craft by breaking free of autobiographical material, varying the point of view and the settings (stories are located in Australia, France, Pakistan, China, Turkey, the United States (US), and there is an international cast of characters). Many of the stories in this collection deal in the situations of contemporary life everywhere, with families and their tensions as a central theme. A gay couple isolate themselves by moving out of town and bicker over minding the neighbour’s cat. One lets it out at night and it is run over. Jules is left thinking of the mysterious thin line between life and death: clearly an analogy to the relationship of the two men. The tales are mostly straightforward narration relying on their successfully controlled pace and voice and can be appreciated as such, with no invitation to evaluate social issues.

Reviewers frequently find “The Proust Running Group of Paris” to be the most impressive story of the collection, and it does successfully convey the strange and fragile pleasures of a serendipitous community in a global metropolis. “Failure to Thrive” also impresses for having a clear sense of the politics of global flows and postcolonial histories. An ambitious West African gets an unpaid internship at the United Nations (UN), hoping to parlay it into a job with Goldman Sachs. He lives with a Brazilian in a Manhattan bedsit, Facebooks his brother in Germany, escapes arrest by humiliating himself, and encounters the “holier-than-thou” attitudes of UN staffers towards global South nations. We can intuit his slow decline into waiting tables in some ethnic restaurant as an “overstayer” or his disillusioned return home to his mother’s failing business. Equally, “The Last Class” depicts a language class for refugee immigrants in France, both stories being transnational tales in that they engage with dynamics of race relations beyond national borders under globalisation.

This internationally located collection opens interesting questions about transnational readership. In “Baby Island”, an international agent for an Australian university, Australian-Chinese, Ming, finds herself at yet another trade fair, this time in Guangzhou. In her hotel, she contemplates her life: teenage pregnancy, mid-life lesbian relationship, sense of vacancy. She escapes onto the street and walks into a hallucinatory restaurant/bar/toyshop populated with white couples with babies. Ming thinks of taking a new identity and living in Shanghai, asks to hold one baby and then runs off with it into an unknown future. From an international position, it could be read as a writer’s experiment with magic realism and the implicit suggestion that the babies are Chinese infants tacitly critiques “first world” adoption of “third world” babies. Australian readers would be as likely to see an allegorical satire directed at

the nation's universities and their trade in fee-paying Chinese students. Either reading regimes focused on the identity of the author might also detect allegorical reference to white Australia's forcible removal of children from Aboriginal families.

Winch plays down Aboriginal content throughout *After the Carnage*, but it is there at times. In "The Wager", the narrator's mother mentions the "Gubba-ment", a clear use of Aboriginal English that points to difficulties of representing underprivilege and domestic violence without confirming stereotypes. These would be apparent to Australian readers, but less so to others. The story that spans readerships more successfully, but which also contains references to Australian race relations is "It's too difficult to explain". A mixed-race boy is fostered out and earns a reputation as a sprinter. We meet him after his career has peaked, washed up in a rented room, and follow his career in flashbacks. As with the wounded, then dead cat already mentioned, the thinnest of margins (for Vincent, point zero-five seconds) separates success and failure, but gradually we come to see (though his relationship with a white would-be concert pianist) that the other inexpressible dividing lines are skin colour, class and the unstable family past that keeps him on the run, until he can come to terms with himself at the point of being stripped bare of aspirations. Mike Griffiths' reading of this story centres on its questioning of whether art can be separated from the artist and the suggestion that white ("settler") emphasis on cultural product works to efface non-white being and an uncomfortable history that its presence reminds the nation of. Griffiths' reading can be extended to show how Winch's refusal to specify Vincent's ethnicity simultaneously prevents the work being read narrowly as Aboriginal protest (enabling a transnational, "anonymous" circulation). The story also demonstrates the inextricability of person and product, retaining authorial agency, and provokes readers to examine how they read meaning (and value) into stories from biographical details of writers as well as illustrating how society "processes" Black artists (and athletes like Kathy Freeman and Adam Goodes).

What is interesting about the collection is the surrounding negotiation of transnational vectors in the career of an indigenous writer. The global literary network of awards and writers' centres leads to Winch, unusually among Aboriginal writers, becoming an expatriate living outside of the Anglosphere. However, her book was again published by the UQP, so although the international story settings and content might disturb national and Indigenous sites of reading, the book circulated principally within a national context, and from the publisher associated with a special line in Aboriginal writing. *After the Carnage* has "Award-winning author of *Swallow the Air*" on its cover and inside two pages of encomia for that book from Australian periodicals. One intuits a national frame of reception within which the transnational work will sit uneasily. Within that frame contradictory responses might pertain: disappointment that Winch seems to have sidelined her Aboriginal identity, or approval that she has developed a wider repertoire of material (suggested in Gretchen Shirm's review, entitled, "Tara June Winch shows new sophistication in *After the Carnage*"). Both reactions would be differently inflected depending on whether readers were Indigenous or not. In the literary marketplace, the transnational author might rise to new prominence by entering an approved space of international writing or lose her market edge by not insisting on an "exotic" minority identity and subject matter.

Reviews so far pay little attention to the author's racial background and tend to favour the international reach of her stories (as, to use Kerry Goldsworthy's review title, "Well-travelled

Tales"). Themes that get attention are precarity (Kossew), memory (Varrenti) and the collision of cultures, along with "disaffection and inequality on a global scale" (Barnes). The collection has been generally well received but without the enthusiasm that attended Winch's first book. Despite the collection's international focus, only one story ("It's too Difficult to Explain") appeared overseas – in the American journal *McSweeney's*. Within the national space it "sold only in the hundreds" (Cain).

One wonders how reception of the new breadth of material has been affected by the transnationalising of Australian literary discussion and the growth of a particular kind of globalised anglophone writing. Nam Le had been applauded in Australia for his international range of material and variety of styles in *The Boat* (2008). His book had the kudos of coming out of a leading American writing school and being published simultaneously in Australia and the US, where the book was included in the *New York Times Book Review* list of 100 notable titles for 2008. It was Le's first book, and so was mostly free of preconceptions of content and style, and it went on to find publication in Canada and Britain and in twelve translations across Europe and Asia. Any expectations were tied to the author's ethnicity, and Le's reviewers commonly noted how he recognised and refuted expectations of Vietnamese migrant writing in the opening line of the title story—"This story does not begin on a boat"—and then cleverly integrated two generations of migrant experience. His position as part of a widespread Asian diaspora internationally and a significant component of younger generation multicultural writing in Australia allows him more room to move successfully through transnational literary circuits than what is available to the Aboriginal writer.<sup>6</sup> The "migrant" writer may express a diasporic longing for roots but is defined by international movement and a certain shape-changing of identity. By contrast, the Aboriginal writer is usually more closely associated with one place within one nation and an identity (albeit internally varied) constructed as singular in opposition to the nation. *After the Carnage* was always going to be linked to an author originally hailed as the *Wunderkind* of a new generation of Aboriginal writers. Something not immediately identifiable as "Aboriginal" from an Indigenous writer who had been absent from Australia for ten years in places not central to Australian attention was not likely to provoke immediate success.<sup>7</sup> In addition, Le's book had generated acceptance of a certain kind of "writing school" internationalism that made similar subsequent work seem less exciting.

It is interesting, then, that Winch's next work, *The Yield*, despite being written for the most part in France, positions itself as definitively Aboriginal within a clear Australian setting. It is a book about "country". In fact, it begins:

I was born on *Ngurambang* – can you hear it? – *Ngu-ram-bang*. If you say it right it hits the back of your mouth and you should taste the blood in your words. Every person around should learn the word for *country* in the old language, the first language – because that is the way to all time, to time travel! You can go all the way back. (1)

However, possibly thanks to *After the Carnage* demonstrating the versatility of its writer, this latest work is not linked with the Aboriginal literature side of UQP but came out with Hamish Hamilton (coincidentally Nam Le's Australian publisher). Hamish Hamilton was by this time

amalgamated with Penguin, now itself part of the Random House global conglomerate, and that transnational network provides Winch with her only international book publication, *The Yield* entering the US market through HarperVia. A French version is planned as well (Edwards).

*The Yield* looks like the kind of novel audiences, Australian and foreign, would happily receive as “proper” Aboriginal writing: its story line is anchored on return to country, recovery of family ties, and its anti-colonial protest is lightened with moments suggesting hope for reconciliation, with a happy ending in which the protagonists look like gaining the right through the laws of the nation state to protect their land. Reviewer Mike Allison refers to it as a “big-hearted hopeful book” (Allison). It fundamentally conforms to the social realism of a long line of Australian novels and to the protest mode that has been usually expected of Aboriginal writing.<sup>8</sup> However, it also interweaves three distinct voices spanning four generations in a manner that could be celebrated as interestingly experimental, with occasional echoes of Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria* (Stella). It is a book that promises to do well, but again, could do so as approved minority art within the national cultural space or it could be consumed by overseas readers in a globalised market criticised by Graham Huggan [2001] as trading in the “postcolonial exotic”.

At the same time, Winch’s latest fiction works with enough destabilising transnational elements to resist both national and international co-option. Old Albert Gondiwindi, for example, inhabits both the “church time” of his displaced white upbringing and the “deep time” of his ancestral culture, and he regains access to the language of that culture by learning to read and write in English (1–3). His wife, the matriarch of the Gondiwindi clan, is a city girl who came to town on the anti-segregation Freedom Ride of 1965 (281). She extends the struggle of one region onto a national scale and confirms the pan-Aboriginal ideal of family in the same way that allegorical techniques (naming the district “Massacre Plains” and a road “Broken Highway”, a mission turned farm property “Prosperous”) turn the story of one family in one corner of the Wiradguri nation into a transAustralian tale of race relations history. Daughter August’s experiences take all of that onto a trans (inter) national scale as well, as she consumes British and American stories from the mobile library as a child (62), then visits Hadrian’s Wall when she is in England. The world beyond the nation then penetrates through antipodean nation space: August sees the importance given to museum artefacts and this enables her to utilise the information she gains about her own family’s heritage kept in a Sydney museum (247).

Although it has its origins in the research Winch carried out to write her first book, *The Yield* is not simply an updating of that teenage quest for identity and home. It sat with her and troubled her through years of being too poor in Paris to take time to write (Kembrey) and so is infused with a personal grief of loss and separation that endows the family history of her characters with emotional authority. Like *Swallow the Air*, *The Yield* works with trauma and the combined pain and purposefulness of recovering memory (Takolander). As Lisa Hill elaborates in her review, it continues to explore lives lived amid what is missing: self-confidence, home, language, family members, land, documents, artefacts, history, environmental health (Hill) and, moving on from the uncertain end of Winch’s first book, this one begins to provide some hope of returns. August Gondiwindi is able to reconnect with her grandfather’s spirit and her more immediate relations, his papers are recovered, mysteries are solved, but there are still things

missing and ongoing tensions within the community and across the nation.

The book is not a seamless unity: three characters vie for our attention in quite different textual modes: August's quest to obtain land rights and reconnect with family as a "straight" narrative; letters from a nineteenth-century missionary; word lists and glosses on them compiled by a dead grandfather. *The Yield* picks up on the few words of Wiradjuri that May Gibson encounters in her search for origins in *Swallow the Air* and expands them into a dictionary of the language based on one compiled by Uncle Stan Grant senior and linguist John Rudder.<sup>9</sup> Arguably, this novel defending country and mother-tongue required its author to live at a distance in order to see both the disparate elements in the text and a way to bring them together. If it enacts the transnation as a space of creative utopian hope, it also shows how the elements of transnational across, through and beyond do not add up seamlessly to a tidy sum that can be slipped into any comfortably homogenous nation narrative. *The Yield* presents a fundamental challenge to monologic language and form in its notes towards a dictionary, which break narrative flow and disturb the smooth dominance of English. They still contain elements of Albert's biography that support a central plot line but their reversal of the English alphabet and their resulting twenty-five pages of words at the end disrupt the novel form as a whole.

Russell West-Pavlov makes a case for considering Aboriginal writing such as Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* as part of world literature: "the extension of story tracks beyond the contour of the continent" (West-Pavlov 24) and suggests that literary worldliness is characterised by an "experimental temperament". We might wonder whether that has the outcome of catering to global publishing producing an acceptable literary mode of transnational indigeneity, as per Timothy Brennan's view of Rushdie's fiction or Graham Huggan's "postcolonial exotic" (West-Pavlov 25). One point of interest in Winch's *The Yield* is how she exercises an "experimental temperament" in bringing together different textual modes, voices, languages and times without adopting any internationally approved "magic realism".<sup>10</sup> Her novel maintains the movement and agency of the transnational in deploying both inter and intra-national perspectives that run social-realist protest traditions, historical tragedy and the quest romance in unsettling counterpoint.

Winch began the novel by imagining an expatriate figure not unlike herself, though imbued with more diasporic suffering. August Gondiwindi returns to western New South Wales after 10 fruitless years in London to a home that is (like the aunty's house at the end of *Swallow the Air*) under threat of destruction. As an outsider, Winch (and August) can see the dust as well as the imposed degradation of rural life and can acknowledge the dirty secrets of the Gondiwindi family (the abuse that sparks the death of sister Jedda, whose disappearance drives August to flee overseas). Writing from outside the ethno-national space allows Winch a mischievous moment when she has Albert, the respected Aboriginal elder, tell of going as a tourist to Uluru and meeting some "proper blackfellas" (34). The writer/character as transnational can appreciate the historical complexities of intranational relationships that characters caught up in the binaries of black and white in a small town don't always have the luxury of seeing. Winch wrestles with the paradox that the missionary who worked to destroy Indigenous culture also strove to protect Aborigines against the violence of the settler frontier; that his efforts were unsuccessful partly

because as a German immigrant he too fell victim to Anglo-prejudice. The plot turns on the fact that the station-owning family that had stripped people of their artefacts and exploited their labour had nonetheless kept the Gondiwindis in a house on country and had preserved those artefacts by sending them to a museum, thereby validating a land rights claim a century later. Winch can ironically disrupt regional space, not just by inserting the threat to occupation and environment by a mining company, but by bringing in urban “greenies” whose protests against the mine include Aboriginal techniques of firing the land. She also complicates Indigenous spaces by showing that it is a member of August’s family who, to keep shameful family secrets from being uncovered, actively hides the material that will make a land rights claim possible. Her foregrounding of language both represents a pan-Aboriginal (transAustralian) claim to the importance of culture and land and fractures pan-Aboriginal (national) space: Wiradjuri is not Yolngu is not the Nyoongah that Kim Scott works to revive, and the slow, environmentally threatened Murrumbidgee river is not the tropical expanse of Alexis Wright’s river country in *Carpentaria*. Nonetheless, in its transnational take on a struggle centred on family and country, one of *The Yield*’s central messages is surely a national one – that the white reader engaging seriously with *any* Aboriginal language would be a mark of restorative respect.

Thinking in terms of De Certeau’s tactics and strategies, and Spivak’s strategic essentialism, there is a particular challenge for the indigenous writer who finds herself in a transnational situation. She can certainly deploy aspects of it as liberating her from narrow national or ethnic confines. But in the long game, any move to a comfortable transnational cosmopolitanism must keep as an essential component the indigeneity of her person and the regional/national affirmation of country in her work. To some extent, this is a problematic familiar from older discussions of the Australian expatriate writer, but for the Aboriginal writer the dynamic has a particular intensity. We can see Tara June Winch, for example, living in France, and collecting funding from Queensland to support literacy projects for girls in Pakistan and Turkey, while also becoming an ambassador for the Australia Council Indigenous Literacy Project (Sparrow; AustLit). Transnational feminism intersects with intra-national indigeneity in the kind of demandingly difficult representational politics and intersectionality that Spivak analyses.

In the Australian context, Aboriginal being inheres in matters of identity and location “on country” and inevitably in some manner of protest against (ongoing) colonialist discriminations within the nation state. However, indigenous writing can also tap into advantages to be found in comparative and transnational spaces, keeping in mind the dangers of politically eviscerating global commodification. In the regional space of “country”, any effects will be important to “home” consumers, but of limited impact if circulating more widely unless larger spaces of relevance (as with care for the environment) can be engaged. In the nation space, Aboriginal literary output is a minority (and, in Deleuze and Guattari’s usage, “minor”) production, with individual works achieving occasional national prominence, boosted when they attract international attention. As part of a global network of comparative studies such as Jodi Byrd envisages in *Transit of Empire*, indigenous writings can both achieve a collective “critical mass” and do complex but useful work of disturbance. Each production can highlight specificities in the other indigenous spaces it aligns with, can use international recognition to call into question national structures that marginalise it into subnational enclaves, and collectively, transnational circulation of indigenous

texts, as Chadwick Allen outlines, can challenge easy “world literature” formations. The fiction and biography of Tara June Winch provide a fascinating illustration of this complex trans/national dynamic.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In Australia, the term “Indigenous”, when referring to first peoples, is usually capitalised, according to the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) guidelines: <https://aiatsis.gov.au/australias-first-peoples>
- <sup>2</sup> See the AustLit database for publication details: <https://www-austlit-edu-au>
- <sup>3</sup> It is interesting to note that despite her reach into international settings, Heiss has not found overseas publication, except for her young adult “testimonio” book, *Who Am I? The Diary of Mary Talence, Sydney 1937*, translated into Spanish, French, Farsi and Chinese. McLaren, like Winch, began his writing career with the University of Queensland Press. His major “hit” was *Scream Black Murder* (1995), first appearing with HarperCollins Australia, but going into two French editions and one American one.
- <sup>4</sup> Tagore gets a mention in *The Yield* (83). Winch’s travels are an interesting link with Mudrooroo’s. He also credits reading Tagore as part of his literary formation: see his autobiography, *Tripping With Jenny*.
- <sup>5</sup> The reception of the book as young adult fiction is indicated by the inclusion of reviews in periodicals titled *Fiction Focus: New Titles for Teenagers* and *Viewpoint: On Books for Young Adults* (White, Blyton). Melissa Lucashenko, writing for school audiences, aligns the books of Morgan and Winch with work for national consumption as “universal”, May rejecting victimhood to overcome multiple losses in a quest for somewhere to belong and familial love. Nonetheless, the essay keeps returning (necessarily) to the book’s engagement with Aboriginal experience.
- <sup>6</sup> Two sample commentaries are Wenche Ommundsen’s “‘This story does not begin on a boat’: What is Australian about Asian-Australian Writing?” *Continuum* vol. 25, no.4, 2011, pp. 503–13 and Brigitta Olubas’s “Literature, Literary Ethics and the Global Contexts of Australian Literature: Teaching Nam Le’s *The Boat*” in *Teaching Australian and New Zealand Literature*, edited by Nicholas Birns, Moore and Sarah Shieff, New York: MLA, 2016, pp. 190–98. See the AustLit database for details of Le’s publications.
- <sup>7</sup> See Winch’s comment in Edwards. Elly Varrenti’s review begins, “It’s been a long time between drinks for Winch”.
- <sup>8</sup> Mudrooroo criticised this fictive mode as too dominating, limiting the range of Aboriginal literary expression (Mudrooroo 1990).
- <sup>9</sup> Ellen van Neerven describes *The Yield* as “a deft novel of slow-moving water” that challenges the reader with its three distinct voices but rewards patience and centres on “decolonising the throat and the tongue” (Van Neerven). That process involves some painful muscular exercise, and the book may take some time to find the appreciation it deserves. A few readers at least have been willing to exercise their eyes and ears: *The Yield* won the New South Wales Premier’s Literary Award and more recently the national Miles Franklin award for fiction.
- <sup>10</sup> The appropriateness for indigenous literatures of the “magic realism” label and the term “fantasy” are much debated. I note Daniel Heath Justice’s objections but would argue that his substitute descriptor, “wonder works”, still fails to break free from Western associations (of medieval unreality, for instance). “Paranormal” might be an alternative descriptor. See the discussion in *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, 141–56.

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