

Beyond Orality: Canada and Australia

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IN CANADA AND Australia it is only recently that the original inhabitants have begun to publish their stories and particularly their versions of history often in the English language. After two centuries or more of white settlement, there are strong new literatures emerging within and against the established “new” literatures of the colonizers. With their long traditions of oral narrative, Indian, Inuit, and Australian Aboriginal people have, with this development, placed themselves in each case, in a complex political relationship with the dominant culture and its discourses. In writing themselves into new existence the previously oral cultures are paradoxically participating in those processes that previously wrote them out of history by neglect, denigration, or simply by the euphemizing “reasonableness” of their civilized, rational discourses — legal, anthropological, religious, and scientific.¹ The authority of these discourses, with their daunting empiricist apparatus of sequential logic, evidence measurement, and experimental repeatability, has been difficult to challenge, not least because of the powerful self-reinforcement assured by the uninterrupted production of printed material in every sphere of knowledge in what amounts to an unbroken narrative of narratives forming the master or super-narrative of the colonial episteme. And so, until recently, the discourses encountered few obstacles to their construction of colonized cultures as either undefined or undeveloped or as threateningly and monstrously other. How does this othering occur and what defences have the new “new” literatures against it in view of their oral traditions and loyalties? Is there a way of rewriting the future as well as the past by twisting the thread of the colonial

super-narrative in the spirit of what Derrida calls, in the context of apartheid, constructing “a memory in advance” (291)? Clearly this is what some of the new narratives are striving for and achieving. The aim of my paper is not to look at particular new versions of history but at new historicisms which can help to explain the political spaces from which the new writing speaks now.

The task of new histories, as many contemporary theorists see it, is not simply to get the story right but to question the enterprise itself, and the authority of the processes of linear narrative by which European history has been constructed. It is to question, that is, the narratibility of the world and in the process to destabilize historical super-narratives. Post-colonial indigenous writing is in a strong position to do this by the very fact that it is not fixed and stable and also by its perpetual and multiple dissembling. By adopting borrowed forms, voices, and postures, it carnivalizes, in the act of writing, all official colonial history-making. It is therefore, by definition, double-voiced since it must partake of the colonizing discourses in the process of literary decolonization. In this, post-colonial histories and post-structuralist criticism cast themselves in similar roles.

Contemporary critics of colonial discourses, notably Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak, point to the complicity of the traditional genres of European writing, particularly narrative realism, in the act of colonization. But the way out may not be so much to find a *better* way to represent the past but to think of history, as Howard Felperin describes it in a recent paper on the new historicisms, in terms of “persisting relation” between past and present. Speaking of *any* history, he argues that

[t]o qualify as a *historical* as distinct from an antiquarian, archeological, or anthropological discourse, the study of past cultures must have present import and consequence. . . . In sum, a genuinely historical discourse inscribes the present as well as the past; it is not only diachronic but dialogic at the very least, if not actually dialectical.²

Writing that springs from an oral cultural tradition is in an ideal position to set up this kind of dialogicity, first, by the fact of its oppositional relation to the dominant histories and, second, because oral histories have always had built into them an understand-

ing that the past is not infinitely repeatable and recoverable "as it was." It is remade in every telling. There is no doubt that orality demands the recognition of the role of the *present* in constructions of the past in a way that European written narratives with their teleological drive, do not. Crucial to this drive is the European collusion between historicism and realism with their common commitment to "true" representation in linear narrative.

There are many ways in which such histories/realisms can be analyzed and questioned. One of the most persistent in the colonial context has been the use of a fiction, Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*. For centuries the play has been used both as a dramatized example of colonial practices and attitudes and also as a metaphor for the structure of colonial relations. In his survey article "This Island's Mine: Caliban and Colonialism," Trevor Griffiths shows how productions of *The Tempest*, particularly in their representation of Caliban, over one and a half centuries "have acted as a barometer of the changing fortunes and particular relevances and resonances, critical, social, political, and theatrical, of [colonial] themes" concerning race and class (180).

Griffiths's examples of Darwinian "missing link" representations of Caliban as ape-like and even quadruped make compelling reading, but while his survey demonstrates the changeableness of interpretation, it also partakes of the will to truth that dialogic historicism tries to avoid. For Griffiths, the play provides access (however minimally) to "real" historical social attitudes. Traditionally, *The Tempest* model has been used to act out the colonial encounter so directly that even as a model it participates in the realism of colonial histories and is complicit with them. In other words, because its structure is so relevant and so close to recorded history with its classist and racist assumptions, the play loses its power as a model and becomes in the hands of each interpreter another version of colonial history which reinforces racist othering in the very act of performing an "enlightened" and "humanist" literary analysis. That is, it works not as a critique so much as an instance of colonial historical representation.

Without wanting to undervalue the role played by *The Tempest* in post-colonial readings of history, I would like to propose a different Shakespearean model, one that can provide a more general

critical structure for the relationship between colonizer and colonized and, more important, one which can form the basis for a critique of processes of historical construction. In a sense, this use of a play within an “official” academic narrative allows a decentring of that narrative. By adopting the *Hamlet* strategy of indirection, I can let the play speak for me. The change of direction proposed here is one that shifts the focus away from *images* of the colonized (that is, from Caliban) to the relations between the *discourses* of colonization and resistance. In other words, it is a shift from hermeneutics to politics. *Hamlet* is particularly useful as a tool for this revision in that it is indisputably a “high” canonical text which would normally be the central subject of analysis rather than an object to be raided for purposes of canonization and decolonization.

Hamlet can be read as an allegory of dialogic history, of histories confronting each other and fighting for their lives. It exposes the self-justifying and self-endowing motives that underlie all official histories and specifically, because of its theme of violent usurpation, it is particularly relevant as an allegory of colonial historical construction. Throughout the play, Hamlet’s obligation is repeatedly defined not so much in terms of physical revenge — “I will speak daggers to her, but use none” (3.2.404), which defines his attitude to Claudius as much as to Gertrude — but in terms of setting the record straight, “set[ting] it right” (1.5.188) with words. Claudius has “popped in between th’election and [Hamlet’s] hopes” (5.2.66). For Hamlet, as for all people who have been robbed of their future, the past needs to be reclaimed but the inescapable problem is that this recovery can only occur within the framework and the language permitted by the new power. Hence Hamlet’s obliqueness, his ironic play with language (“wild and whirling words” [1.5.134]), and hence his absorption with the genres of representation (mirror, theatre, painted picture, trickery, forgery, shadow, and show).

The battle between Claudius and Hamlet is that between reasonable public language and impassioned, private speech or between official history, which cloaks its personal motive in respectability by invoking common sense, balance, and a prudent long-range commitment to the “common” good (the commonwealth),

against the unofficial history of the victim who is sacrificed for that common "good."

Most important, the attributing of the logic of events to *nature* deflects attention from the brutal physical facts of the seizure of power — murder, sexual violation, usurpation — to the vast and immutable patterns of the universe. In this, Claudius's rhetoric (often echoed by Gertrude) is very much like the rhetoric of Darwinism:

Thou knowest 'tis common. All that lives must die,
Passing through nature to eternity. (1.2.72-73)

... as common

As any the most vulgar thing ... (1.2.98-99)

Colonial histories have traditionally been presented in the voice of Claudius — the rational, even-handed, objective tones of his "most painted word" (3.1.53). In the context of Australian Aboriginal and other Aboriginal colonial expressions of grief and mourning for past genocide and continuing murder, Claudius's reaction to Hamlet's grief rings a grotesquely familiar note:

... 'tis a fault to heaven,
A fault against the dead, a fault to nature,
... whose common theme
Is death of fathers, and who still hath cried,
From the first corse till he that died today,
'This must be so.' (1.2.101-06)

While Claudius's word "common" becomes increasingly ironic as does all of his "discourse of reason" with its attempt to hold down implication and control connotation, Hamlet's use of it is even more so. His "Ay, madam, it is common" (1.2.74) breaks the word open, challenging not only Claudius's strategic determinism but all commonality of meaning, as does the whole play.

The Hamlet dilemma springs from the necessity to speak of the death of the father (and the end of rightful inheritance) in words that can pierce the smooth lie of the official discourses of power without risking too soon, before all is said, its own silencing:

... Yet I
... can say nothing (2.2.563-66)

But break my heart, for I must hold my tongue. (1.2.159)

This is the difficult path that alternative new histories of any kind have to negotiate, that of speaking a language which can attack from within the framework of the language of power, the closed discourses that have driven them into silence in the past. The historical horrors of this in the late twentieth century for dispossessed people who have been robbed of their history, their culture, and even their language are unimaginable and unspeakable. But the fiction of dispossession, however historically and culturally removed from "the centre," or perhaps even because of its distance, can help to make the structures of dispossession and silencing more visible and therefore more open to attack. For Hamlet's purposes it is essential that the players perform an old, existing play. It is for survival that strategies of indirection and deflection are adopted. Speaking in other voices, clowning (putting on "an antic disposition" [1.5.172]), acting on other stages, through other texts than one's own, offer powerful alternatives for telling and being heard. In Australia, creative writing has opened up an important political arena, with historical characters such as Mudrooroo Narogin's Doctor Wooreddy playing out in fiction alternative versions of history. As Hamlet says:

The players cannot keep counsel; they'll tell all. (3.2.150-53)

What the play *Hamlet* can bring to contemporary political debates is a dramatization of the ways in which official speech, endowed with power, can claim centrality and authority to determine what is "natural," "universal," and "right." At the same time, it shows how these claims can be challenged by exposing the fictionality of the dominant coercive realist stories and finally all stories. On this, in the modern context, Homi Bhabha writes:

... to remove the possibility of an "unmediated reality..." demands a theoretical self-consciousness of those critical practices which, in claiming to restore the "natural" and "reasonable" meanings of texts, are in fact engaged in strategies of naturalization and cultural assimilation which make our reading unwittingly collusive. (98)

And for the critic of Western colonial writing this can be a tall order since there is such a weight of habit and tradition to overcome. As Achebe says, "in the nature of things, the work of the

Western writer is automatically informed by universality" (Bhabha 123).

By bringing into head-on collision a rhetoric of naturalness and universality to describe an event which by any definition breaks the "natural" span of life, the play *Hamlet* provides a model for the collision of any opposing histories — whether in private speech (Hamlet and Gertrude), in guarded play (Hamlet with Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern), or in the wider political arena (Hamlet and Claudius) where the collision is at its most obvious since Claudius's insistence on the naturalness of the king's death is countered not only by the appearance of the ghost but also by its account of the death as "most unnatural murder" (1.5.25), "most foul, strange, and unnatural" (1.5.28), and the injunction to Hamlet, "If thou hast nature in thee, bear it not" (1.5.81).

Beyond this direct clash of stories, Shakespeare offers a critique of the truth-telling drive in all stories. When Hamlet holds up an image for Gertrude of one husband and then another — "Look here upon this picture, and on this" (3.4.54) — the play makes it impossible to read either portrait as simply true or false and so, after all the dissembling, clowning, and deviousness of the play's action, Hamlet's final passionate plea to Horatio can only be read as sadly ironic:

... Report me and my cause aright. (5.2.333)

Absent thee from felicity awhile. . . .

To tell my story. (5.2.341-43)

For there is not one but many feasible stories to tell, and it is Hamlet himself who has played them out in a drama of self-creating and self-undoing in which what he is changes with every moment and every audience to the point where Guildenstern, in friendly exasperation, says to him,

Good my lord, put your discourse into some frame, and start not so wildly from my affair. (3.2.316-17)

But it is precisely this ability to elude frames that gives Hamlet his discursive advantage and makes him a threat. His shifting frames of reference make ironical and so dislodge all frames. While Shakespeare obviously does not endow Hamlet with the

power to recognize “truth” (his stories are as partial and motivated as any others) he does give him the power to escape (at least for a while) the tyranny of other people’s stories and definitions.

The Hamlet model can be useful, then, in allowing paternalistic, imperialist, and Darwinian discourses to be read in terms of a Claudius rhetoric of suppression and cover-up, with Hamlet’s chameleon elusiveness playing out the razor’s edge paradoxes of subversion from within a narrow political space — “bounded in a nutshell and . . . king of infinite space” (2.2.253-54). By the same strategies, “official” history is redefined as open to infinite interpretation and infinite rethinking:

For there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so.
(2.2.248)

Returning to history, we must remember Walter Benjamin’s dictum that “there is no document of civilization which is not at one and the same time a document of barbarism” (256) because it was made possible through violence and exploitation. With that recognition comes the need constantly to produce new stories, new documents, and new ways of writing that disrupt established continuities of “custom” and “antiquity,” the “ratifiers and props of every word” (4.5.107) and that work towards enforcing forgetting as much as remembering. In the words of the player king,

Most necessary ’tis that we forget
To pay ourselves what to ourselves is debt. (3.2.201-02)

From the moment of the ghost’s early injunction “Remember me,” which echoes throughout the play, Shakespeare presents the question of remembering in the same relative terms as he presents historical construction of any kind. Over and over again, Hamlet exhorts himself to remember and tell his father’s story but he is caught up in the tactics of presentation and concealment, in the politics of mediation, which repeatedly defer disclosure. He is stalled also by the pitfalls of language — “words, words, words” (2.2.193) — and the immense demands of the past — “dizzy th’ arithmetic of memory” (5.2.113). Ophelia’s poignant echo of the much repeated “Remember me!” of the ghost — “Pray you, love,

remember" (4.5.177) — brings into play a further exploration of memory as both an obligation and an impossibility since it is demonstrated that memory can only be a set of changing relationships expressed in motivated language which is itself caught up in the whirl, the "wordy-gurdy" of history.

The lesson of *Hamlet* is not that either remembering or forgetting holds the key to winning back the future but rather that it is only by a *perpetuum mobile* of "rewording" rather than by any dream of retrieval that new histories can have the power to puncture official histories. Here, Gayatri Spivak's notion of reworlding (95-102) can be used with positive force: "'I,' says Hamlet, 'the matter will re-word'" (3.4.144). Obviously there can be no programme for this kind of war of words but it can be waged in readings as well as writings. Most strikingly it is apparent in the highly ironic relationship set up everywhere between the editorial notes (prefaces, introductions, headings, and footnotes) that frame the "indigenous" writing that has been published in recent years in Canada and Australia and the text itself which has in one (mediated) form or another been provided by the "indigenous" writers/speakers of the text. Even the most well-intentioned white commentaries (including this one) are vulnerable to attack by the ironies of their very position — as commentators upon another's discourse. To some extent, it can be said, the same ironies pervade all black writing, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. argues:

Black writing is a process which is so very ironic from the outset: how can the black subject posit a full and sufficient self in language in which blackness is a sign of absence? (12)

The same question can be asked in relation to any colonized discourse. How can anyone escape these ironies in post-colonial writing? The answer seems to lie not in escape but in exploitation. While "attempting to speak the other's language without renouncing their own" (Derrida 294), if people accept the double position as a position of power rather than of dilution, then remembering can be simultaneously an attack on individual false histories and on the discursive practices that construct what Derrida calls "the totality of this present" (298). And this is precisely what post-colonial immigrants and indigenous people are doing and, with

more insidious language barriers to cross, so too are women throughout the Western world. Once again, oral traditions are at an advantage in that memory is their mode and so memory/history is recognized as a changing two-way negotiation between past and present. In Canada and Australia, where recently there has been room to speak, totalities of past and present are beginning to be broken up by new forms of speech and writing and by a foregrounding of the ironies of the black/white literary encounter. A good example of this is the confrontation between cultures that appears (and it is one of many) in Robin Gedalof's *Paper Stays Put: A Collection of Inuit Writing*. At the top of the page, a song by the Inuit poet François Tammaraluk is introduced in bold black print. It says:

Song Composed for the visit of their Excellencies Governor General and Mrs Mitchener to Igloolik,
Mayday 1969
François Tammaraluk

In the old days, songs were frequently composed spontaneously to celebrate the occurrence of some special event. The visit of Queen Elizabeth's representative to an arctic community in 1969 was sufficiently important to revive the tradition. Tammaraluk's song was presented in the Igloolik newspaper, *Midnight Sun*. (48)

Beneath this commentary, the song begins:

Happiness is here
I found the song
Ai-ai-ai

People's happiness
Is not to be forgotten
Ai-ai-ai

So the song wants to go away
So I'll tie it to my throat
Ai-ai-ai

It really wants to go
It wants to go to the future
Ai-ai-ai

It looks as if
It knows the drum,
Ai-ai-ai

This song is not too good
 But it *will be* a good song
 Along with the drum,
 Ai-ai-ai

This song is sometimes mixed up
 With the words
 Ai-ai-ai

The end is coming
 We are running out of words
 Ai-ai-ai (48-49)

What makes this a potent political statement is the refusal, built into the diminishing and self-parodying text, to play the part and pay the expected homage to the crown but instead to choose to take the stage and turn the occasion into a play within a play — with the power to expose and shock.

Many of the works in this volume, and others, express more directly their outrage and horror but always within the framework of the book that has permitted them to speak — the talking book — that has provided them with a controlled and regulated space in which, it is acknowledged, the writers have even been allowed to make grammatical errors — “the grammar is occasionally execrable” (Gedalof 10) — and which can describe “Eskimos,” in a momentary colonizing lapse, as “the most human of men” (Colombo 7). This is not necessarily to blame editors, translators, or publishers for they too are bound by controlling frames, but it is to point out the need for reading practices that can identify the points of resistance which can then be used to announce the presence of at least two conflicting discourses and two political positions in the text.

As an example of the riskiness of speaking too directly, I want to quote several fragments from Colin Johnson’s (Mudrooroo Nargin’s) bicentennial gift poem, “Sunlight Spreadingeagles Perth in Blackness,” which was written in Perth in 1985 but still has no publisher.³ These are juxtaposed with quotations from *Hamlet*, chosen not simply for their similarity of feeling but to set up a dialogue between the two texts. The first Johnson fragment is about the dichotomy between word and action:

What am I
 But Lampoons
 In my words
 The sing along
 Without the unnecessary killing of a single man or woman or child
 to
 allow the birds to shriek out their agony for the reprieved trees (7)

In *Hamlet*, Hamlet says:

Why, what an ass I am . . .
 That I, the son of a dear father murdered . . .
 Must, like a whore, unpack my heart with words (2.2.580-83)

The second Johnson fragment deals with memory:

Am I to forget
 The moaning sick body
 The dripping lips of vomit . . .
 Am I to forget, I want to forget
 Remembering them in my moving years of indecision . . . (8)

Hamlet says:

Must I remember? (1.2.143)
 . . . Remember thee?
 Ay, thou poor ghost, while memory holds a seat
 In this distracted globe (1.5.95-97)

And the last Johnson fragment is about naming and about the lie of white "reasonableness":

Lost in names
 We'll remember 'Boong',
 And 'Nigger' and 'Coon',
 And all the rest of the scum
 You lashed us with:
 Every child cries hating
 Your reasoning reasoned lying
 We'll kill your reason
 With unreason;
 The murdered child,
 His people waiting;
 We'll kill you stone dead. (12)

Finally, a comment about dialogic historicism is appropriate. The justification for using a remote, canonical European text to

illuminate an urgent political situation in the present lies in the belief that histories need to be thrown into relationship with any texts, fictional or "historical," old or new, high or low, in order to prevent them from rigidifying into the formal postures of conventional historicism. This enables even the most hallowed high literature of the dominant culture to be put to use as an agent of political change. How quickly the political intricacies of historical events can be naturalized, routinized by the discourses of power is demonstrated not only by the Claudius rhetoric of *Hamlet* but also by Horatio's words towards the play's ironic end where, over Hamlet's body, he begins to summarize his friend's agonies in the solemn, ritualized, and generalizing tones of official historical narrative:

So shall you hear
 Of carnal, bloody and unnatural acts,
 Of accidental judgements, casual slaughters,
 Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause,
 And, in this upshot, purposes mistook
 . . . All this can I
 Truly Deliver. (5.2.374-80)

NOTES

- ¹ See Kateryna Olijnyk Arthur, "Fiction and the Rewriting of History: A Reading of Colin Johnson," *Westerly* 1 (March 1985), for a discussion of these problems in the Australian context.
- ² From his unpublished paper "'Cultural Politics' Versus 'Cultural Materialism'."
- ³ No publisher has accepted the poem but it has now been printed in full in Kateryna Arthur (Co-ordinator), *Australian Literature External Studies Reader*, Murdoch University, 1990.

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