Regenerative Voices:

Narrative Strategies and Textual Authority

in Three Post-colonial Novels

and

The Wheel Pin

A thesis in 2 volumes

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Abstract

The Exegesis

This thesis investigates narrative strategies in three novels featuring the fragmented stories and multiple perspectives of individuals and families who have suffered dislocating effects of colonialism such as dispossession, migration or violence. Since a project of these novels is to deconstruct the machinery and ongoing effects of colonial power, representations of authority, including narrative voice, may be problematic. Traditional modes of narration, whether authorial or personal, tend to mimic existing power constructs and thus reinforce hegemonic master narratives. Alternative strategies are therefore necessary to authorise narration in fiction that is self-reflexively post-colonial.

This study demonstrates how three specific narrative strategies shape textual authority in three novels: *Butterfly Song* (2005) by Terri Janke, *Bloom* (2003) by Kelly Ana Morey, and *Sorry* (2007) by Gail Jones. Various forms of what I have called *nonunitary narration* (following the use by feminist theorists of the term *nonunitary subjectivity*) may be seen as attempts to solve the dilemma of *authorial* versus *personal* narration. *Textuality*, as envisaged by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Indira Karamcheti, is concerned with the representation of cultural identity and the reclamation of imaginative geographies and histories. *Assemblage*, a term borrowed from the visual arts, is the construction of a text around retrieved objects, embedded texts, and memory fragments that link disparate narratives or times.

Textual analysis of the selected novels is underpinned by critical perspectives from the disciplines of feminist narratology and post-colonial studies. The study concludes with reflection on the process of developing narrative strategies for my novel, *The Wheel Pin*.

The Novel

After twenty years, Cat returns to her hometown to attend her grandmother's funeral. When she discovers an intriguing letter from a long-lost relative, Jack, she sets off to find out what happened to him, encountering apocryphal tales of a Bronze Age artefact, the crumbled ruins of an outback mission and an enigmatic stranger, Dingo. Picking up Jack's trail in the Gulf country of northern Australia, Cat meets Merran, an Aboriginal counsellor seeking her own history. Cat discovers the lost wheel pin in

a local museum, takes it and accompanies Merran to a riverside camp where Jack once lived. They journey to an island where they learn the ending of Jack's story and are reunited with friends and family.

  The Wheel Pin endeavours to put into practice the theory developed in the exegesis by employing narrative voices with diverse authorities to tell one family's post-colonial history: their journeys, conflicts, stories and the missing pieces of the past. *Nonunitary narration* allows a range of voices to be heard and stories from various times and places to take their places in a larger narrative; *textualising* formerly obscured white cultural values, remote settings and forgotten histories invites readers to reflect on their assumptions, while the *assemblage* of embedded texts, objects and fragmented memories links past and present and validates disparate narratives. My aim is to establish a polyphonic textual authority that embraces ambiguity, alternative interpretations, cultural differences and the possibility of change to create a hybrid space of hope.

Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Michele McCrea

Acknowledgments

Introduction: A Polyphonic Heterotopia

> This is, I trust, no narcissistic elaboration, it is a wish to narrativise matters which seem to me intrinsic to all writing practices: the negotiation of lost histories, the power of idealisation and the wish, even if unconscious, to embrace or to incorporate the body of an other.[1]
>
> —Gail Jones

How do I relate to the 'Other'? How, in particular, do I, as a non-Indigenous person, deal with Indigenous 'others' when the uncomfortable realisation dawns that it is perhaps I, the descendant of colonisers and missionaries, the agents of dislocation, who am 'other'? I use the term *dislocation* here to mean the many kinds of disruption experienced by people in the wake of colonial invasion.[2]

This exegesis and novel explore the possibilities of representing the dislocations of post-colonial experience from a number of perspectives. *Post-colonial* is a controversial term, refuted by some Australian Aboriginal writers because of the possible erroneous implication that the actions and effects of colonisation have ended, and by others because they see it as irrelevant to Aboriginal culture and writing.[3] I use the term to mean the time after the principal events of colonisation when, although some of the overt institutions and practices of colonialism have been replaced, its attitude and influence linger.[4] In this study, critical perspectives from feminist theory and post-colonial studies coexist with narrative strategies gleaned from many sources: visual arts, social sciences, literary theory, and narratology. My chosen works of fiction, published in the past decade, are informed by the realities of post-colonial life over several generations. They represent dislocations ranging from the violence, dispossession, and destruction of lives and families suffered by Indigenous peoples, to the disruption and alienation endured by immigrants and their descendants. The novels depict attempts at regeneration: the rebuilding of lives and identities, the reclamation of land and culture, and the reconciliation of family and cultural differences. Such attempts may be unsuccessful or painful, yet they demonstrate resilience, resourcefulness, and

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[1] Gail Jones, 'A Dreaming, a Sauntering: Re-Imagining Critical Paradigms', *JASAL* 5 (2006), pp. 12–13.

[2] See Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, eds. *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts.* 2nd edn, *Routledge Key Guides* (London: Routledge, 2007) pp. 65–66. Also see Chapter One of this study for a discussion of this term.

[3] For details, see Anita Heiss, *Dhuulu-Yala: To Talk Straight: Publishing Indigenous Literature* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2003), pp. 43–46.

[4] For a discussion of this and related terms, see Ashcroft, et al. (2007) pp. 168–178.

creativity. These qualities are evident also in the innovative narrative strategies of these novels, which represent experiences and understandings that cannot be adequately textualised by traditional means.

Research Question

What narrative strategies establish textual authority in post-colonial novels featuring the fragmented stories and multiple perspectives of women experiencing dislocation, texts in which the question of 'authority' is necessarily problematic? This study demonstrates how narrative strategies described as *nonunitary narration*, *textuality* and *assemblage* assert textual authority in three post-colonial novels by women writers, and relates these findings to the writing of my novel *The Wheel Pin*.

Choices about narration influence not only literary structure and perspective, but also textual authority, or the ways in which a fictional narrative convinces readers and draws them into its world. How does narrative mode confer authority on a text? Is the narrative voice that appears conflicted, fragmented, or ambivalent less convincing than that which appears confident, coherent, and unified? Or is it merely different? I argue here that, in a post-colonial context, deliberate fragmentation does not diminish textual authority, but may, when handled skilfully, lend a different and more appropriate kind of authority to fictional texts.

The works selected for study may be characterised as 'female quest' novels.[5] However, women's quests in a post-colonial era can be neither heroic nor singular. Any search for identity, purpose, and belonging must, if it is to be successful in a post-colonial world, include the needs, voices, and quests of cultural others. Such a quest is therefore complex; it may seem at the beginning to have no clear goal, or the goal may change along the way.

Three narrative strategies are significant for my project because they respond to the post-feminist, post-colonial problem of textual authority. Various forms of what I have termed *nonunitary narration* (following the use by Leslie Bloom of the term *nonunitary subjectivity*[6]) may be seen as attempts to solve the dilemma of *authorial* versus *personal* narration.[7] *Textuality*, as envisaged by Gayatri Spivak[8] and

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[5] See my discussion of Rachel Blau Du Plessis's work on female quest narratives in Chapter One.
[6] Leslie Rebecca Bloom, *Under the Sign of Hope: Feminist Methodology and Narrative Interpretation*. ed. by Deborah P. Britzman and Janet L. Miller, *Suny Series, Identities in the Classroom* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998).
[7] These terms, used by Susan Lanser, are discussed in Chapter Two, and fully explained in her book *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992).

Indira Karamcheti[9], is concerned with the representation of cultural identity and the reclamation of imaginative geographies and histories. *Assemblage*, a term I have appropriated from the visual arts, constructs a narrative text around secondary embedded texts, iconic objects, and/or memory fragments that function as links between different perspectives and/or time frames.

[8] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Criticism, Feminism and the Institution' (interview with Elizabeth Grosz) in *The Post-colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, ed. by Sarah Harasym (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 1.

[9] Indira Karamcheti, 'The Geographics of Marginality: Place and Textuality in Simone Schwarz-Bart and Anita Desai' in *Reconfigured Spheres: Feminist Explorations of Literary Space*, ed. by Margaret R. Higonnet and Joan Templeton (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), pp. 127-131.

Rationale

A fledgling postgraduate at a conference held by the Association for the Study of Australian Literature (ASAL) in Adelaide in July 2005, I watched and listened, spellbound, as Gail Jones spoke. I did not understand everything she said, but I sensed that she spoke of matters close to my heart and necessary to my thinking. Since that day I have deepened my acquaintance with the ideas she floated, like luminous balloons, as her paper was subsequently published.[10] Jones proposes a critical paradigm based on the affirmation of difference, the honouring of fragments, and the possibility of dreaming as a way to re-imagine communities (14). She sees Australia as 'a heterotopia, a system of multiple sites that are richly particular and distinctive.'[11] Jones suggests that here, in this space of cultural contradictions and disparate yet co-existing realities there is a need to embrace not only the diversities of the present but the ghosts of the past and the demands of the future, by 'construct[ing] an ethics of consubstantiating difference', a way of living peaceably with our different histories, cultures, and perspectives (21). The task before us, she argues, is not to attempt to reconstitute the past, nor even to reconcile differences, but rather to use the fragments we have—our partial understandings of history and of others—with awareness, intelligence, and imagination, and from these to assemble a new kind of community.

My novel *The Wheel Pin* has arisen from stories and overheard snatches of conversation, glimpses of insight revealed while travelling and working in strange territories, and a persistent desire to project myself into alternate realities through dreaming, writing, and making art. It is an attempt to construct a kind of literary heterotopia. The project of this exegesis is to unearth strategies for doing this by critically analysing contemporary novels set in former colonies that deal with issues of dislocation and cross-cultural relationships. Each of these novels is narrated in part by a female protagonist who attempts, in collaboration with others, to discover the missing parts of a story or stories connected with her family. In studying these texts

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[10] Gail Jones, 'A Dreaming, a Sauntering: Re-Imagining Critical Paradigms', *JASAL,* 5 (2006), pp. 11–24. Further references are given after quotations in the text.
[11] Jones, (2006), p. 14. The term *heterotopia* originates with Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', *Diacritics* 16 (1986), pp. 22–27.

that reach across cultures and histories I have learned ways to tell a story that reveals its diverse origins, its gaps and complexities.

While this exegesis is based on the analysis of narrative strategies in literary fiction, it draws on a range of theories and practices which have contributed to my understanding of the context in which I write. Feminist critical analysis and narratology have given me tools for textual analysis, while post-colonial studies and research by Indigenous women have assisted my understanding of cultural contexts. In addition, my professional training in counselling and psychotherapy has provided valuable insights.

Choosing the Primary Texts

The novels chosen for textual analysis provide models and points of comparison for my own creative work. Each is by a contemporary woman writer and was published within the past decade, takes place over several time periods and in diverse geographical settings, and has a plot that revolves around an absence—a mystery, a secret, or a forgotten event. Each is narrated by a woman protagonist whose quest returns her in some way to a place of origin, and consists of several stories or perspectives woven together in a complex narrative structure. Finally, each explores issues of trans-generational trauma, forcible dislocation, or migration and represents cross-cultural relationships.

Looking for an Indigenous perspective, I researched novels by Aboriginal writers, including Alexis Wright's *Plains of Promise* (1997), Vivienne Cleven's *Her Sister's Eye* (2002), and Larissa Behrendt's *Home* (2004).[12] I chose Terri Janke's *Butterfly Song* (2005) because of its complex narrative structure and use of alternating narrative voices, as well as its exploration of racism, dispossession, and dislocation from the standpoint of a contemporary Indigenous Australian woman.[13]

My maternal grandmother is the model for my character Freya, whose resilient philosophy is shaped as much by the cultural contexts of her early life in remote mission outposts as by her strict religious upbringing. Kelly Ana Morey's *Bloom* (2003) is set in the Taranaki region on the west coast of New Zealand's North Island, where my grandmother spent her childhood, and where I spent three weeks on

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[12] Alexis Wright, *Plains of Promise* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1997).
  Vivienne Cleven, *Her Sister's Eye* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2002).
  Larissa Behrendt, *Home* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2004).
[13] Terri Janke, *Butterfly Song* (Camberwell: Penguin, 2005).

a research field trip.[14] Although the New Zealand section of my novel has been cut, the connection remains important, and is one of the reasons I chose *Bloom*, a looping, lyrical meditation on presence and absence, memory and forgetting.

I read a number of novels from a non-Indigenous Australian perspective, including Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* (2006). [15] For textual analysis, I chose Gail Jones's *Sorry* (2007), a complex and nuanced exploration of cross-cultural relationships and dislocations in contemporary Australia.[16]

Three Post-colonial Novels

Coming home to ancestral country marks the beginning, rather than the end, of quests for the young female protagonist-narrators in first novels by Terri Janke and Kelly Ana Morey. The telling and retelling of family stories weaves together personal memories and cultural histories, creating a space for discovery and new, empowering narratives. Events that have been forgotten, distorted or erased by official histories are scrutinised, discussed, and reanimated, strengthening family relationships and building resilience. Gail Jones's fourth novel, *Sorry*, follows Perdita's journey from childhood to adulthood, from trauma to recovery, and from forgetting to remembrance and responsibility. For Perdita, hope resides in the connections made through reading, the power of imagination, and the rhythms of Shakespeare's iambic pentameters. Each of these novels is characterised by specific ways of representing cultural identity, settings, and histories; by disjunctions in the narrative voice; and by elements that link the different kinds of narrative.

Methodology

This study draws on aspects of theory and practice in feminist and post-colonial studies, narratology, and psychotherapy to analyse narrative strategies in three novels with themes of cultural dislocation and regeneration, and to relate these findings to my novel *The Wheel Pin*. For each text, I consider narrative strategies of particular relevance to fiction concerned with cultural diversity, dislocation and the regeneration of culture and community in a post-colonial context. These are *nonunitary narration*, pertaining to narrative voice; *textuality*, or the representation

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[14] Kelly Ana Morey, *Bloom* (Auckland: Penguin, 2003).

[15] Kate Grenville, *The Secret River* (Melbourne: Text, 2006).

[16] Gail Jones, *Sorry* (North Sydney: Vintage, 2007).

of cultural identities and imaginative geographies and histories; and *assemblage*, the structural linkage of the text around significant objects and memories.

Three Narrative Strategies

Nonunitary narration refers to disjunctions in narrative voice arising from multiple perspectives, whether of one or several agents (narrators or narrator-protagonists). The term I use derives from the work of Leslie Bloom on women's self-representation[17] and Susan Lanser on women writers and narrative voice.[18] These are discussed in Chapter Two.

Gayatri Spivak's notion of *textuality* or *textualisation*,[19] further developed by Indira Karamcheti,[20] refers to the making or remaking into story and/or text of events and places that were previously uninscribed or inscribed by colonisers whose texts, (such as maps, histories, scholarly works, and literature) based on their own imaginative histories and geographies, usurp the power to represent the land from its prior owners, just as colonisers usurp the land itself.

Assemblage is the arrangement of embedded objects or fragments in a new context in such a way that they simultaneously bear evidence of their origins and resonate with one another in the new context to provoke questions and generate new meanings. It is a narrative strategy akin to the visual arts practice of placing (often unlikely) images or objects together so that their juxtapositions and the spaces between them form the meaning of the work as much as the objects themselves.[21] The narrative strategies of *textuality* and *assemblage* are discussed in Chapter One.

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[17] Leslie Rebecca Bloom, *Under the Sign of Hope: Feminist Methodology and Narrative Interpretation*. ed. by Deborah P. Britzman and Janet L. Miller, *Suny Series, Identities in the Classroom* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998).

[18] Susan Sniader Lanser, *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992).

[19] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Criticism, Feminism and the Institution' (interview with Elizabeth Grosz) in *The Post-colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, ed. by Sarah Harasym (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 1.

[20] Indira Karamcheti, 'The Geographics of Marginality: Place and Textuality in Simone Schwarz-Bart and Anita Desai' in *Reconfigured Spheres: Feminist Explorations of Literary Space*, ed. by Margaret R. Higonnet and Joan Templeton (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), pp. 127-131.

[21] See Anna Dezeuze, 'Assemblage, Bricolage, and the Practice of Everyday Life', *Art Journal, 67* (2008), 31-38 (8); Julia Kelly, 'The Anthropology of Assemblage', *Art Journal, 67* (2008), 24-30 (7); and John Phillips, 'Agencement/Assemblage', *Theory, Culture & Society* (2006), 108.

Scope and Limitations

Since the brevity of this study prohibits in-depth investigation, the complexity of the cultural and literary context of my work can only be summarised here. Theoretical concepts and analytical tools are chosen from feminist narratology and post-colonial thinking for relevance and usefulness with the aim of contextualising the creative work in terms of narrative strategies and textual authority. The choice of three primary texts for analysis represents a compromise between a detailed analysis of one text and a broader survey of contemporary post-colonial novels, but has nevertheless effectively sharpened my understanding of the subject. Foundational concepts for my theoretical work are outlined here and may be studied comprehensively in the original texts to which the reader is directed via footnotes.

Most of my novel research is excluded, including archival research in Australia and New Zealand on colonisation, nineteenth-century missions and cross-cultural relationships; the transcription and editing of historical family documents and the unpublished stories of my grandmother, Elfrieda Foster; and research on subjects ranging from agricultural accidents to Bronze Age archaeology.

Contribution to Scholarship

This work, informed by scholarly and creative research, integrates practical and theoretical knowledges from diverse fields to develop tools for identifying narrative strategies that support 'an ethics of consubstantiating difference'[22] in relation to post-colonial fiction. It synthesises the work of significant theorists in order to demonstrate that authority in the post-colonial fiction studied here arises from unique strategies of narrative voice that represent the fragmentation, complexity and mutability caused by various kinds of dislocation for descendants of both colonising and colonised peoples.

Outline of Chapters

Chapters One and Two provide the theoretical groundwork for the textual analysis undertaken in subsequent chapters. *Chapter One: Critical and Cultural Contexts* examines alternative narrative strategies formulated by feminist researchers Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Leslie Bloom; outlines Michael White's Narrative Approach to

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[22] Gail Jones, 'A Dreaming, a Sauntering: Re-Imagining Critical Paradigms', *JASAL,* 5 (2006), p. 21.

therapy; summarises concepts from Post-colonial Studies to provide a cultural context for the literary texts under discussion; and outlines the narrative strategies of *textuality* and *assemblage*.

Chapter Two: Narrative Voice and Textual Authority examines Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the polyphonic novel; condenses the work of Mieke Bal and Susan Lanser, feminist narratologists who devised tools for analysing narrative texts in terms of narrators, focalizers and textual authority; and puts forward the narrative strategy of *nonunitary narration*.

The influence of these narrative strategies on textual authority in three novels is explored in the following chapters: Terri Janke's *Butterfly Song* (2005) in Chapter Three, Kelly Ana Morey's *Bloom* (2004) in Chapter Four, and Gail Jones's *Sorry* (2007) in Chapter Five. The nature of *nonunitary narration* in each text is revealed through analysis of their narrative structures using tools developed by Bal and Lanser. Each novel is then considered in terms of how it *textualises* cultural identity and imaginative geographies and histories. Finally, each narrative is shown as a structural *assemblage* of significant elements that link the fictive present and the fictive past.

Chapter Six traces the development of narrative strategies in my novel, *The Wheel Pin*.