



MACQUARIE PEN  
ANTHOLOGY of  
ABORIGINAL  
LITERATURE  
Edited by Anita Heiss and Peter Minter

From the Teaching Guide for the *Macquarie PEN Anthology of Aboriginal Literature* at [www.macquariepenanthology.com.au](http://www.macquariepenanthology.com.au)

## Voids, Voices, and Story Without End

Jennifer A. Martiniello

Imagine if tomorrow the veil of language fell away from us. We would not be able to think, understand or communicate. Consciousness would be wiped clean. Words are the unnoticed treasure houses of discovery and meaning. Wittgenstein said: 'The limits of my language mean the limits of my world'. Without language the world would fade away from us. Words keep things present. Language has a secret life, an undercurrent murmuring away, audible in rhymes and rhythms, ambiguities and assonances. The most certifiable uses of language are hostile to this undercurrent. The poetic use of language honours these possibilities, keeps them alive and sometimes reanimates...

—John O'Donoghue, *Secret Echoes*, 1998.

Voids and voices also have lives, under currents, histories, stories. My Aboriginal heritage is full of them. The voices of my people were, and remain, the primary vehicle of oral tradition, of the transmission of knowledge, history, genealogy, Dreaming and Law, and therefore, of life, being and identity. The voices of colonisation have constructed the great voids of silence – in our generations, our sacred places, our languages. And in the consciousness of contemporary Australia, whose multiple languages spoken today number some 282, of which 170 are Indigenous Australian languages. But we have, in the continuity between our oral traditions and contemporary languages, in the poetic languages of song, ceremony, ancestry and story, a secret life, an undercurrent. Voices from an underworld whose possibilities and obligations are to give back life, to re-animate, to become again the law-givers, the peace makers, the contemporary voices of our great Creator Spirits in the vast, ever-present continuum of the Dreaming.

In this essay I could tell you about all these things - how we have only about 250 of our languages and around 700 of our dialects left, how we have lost two thirds of them since invasion. I could show you my T-shirt from the Central Land Council, from the 'dead centre' that deaf colonial government reports referred to as 'empty'. I could point out the words on the front *The land is always alive*. I could turn it around and show you the same

Excerpt from:

Jennifer Martiniello, 'Void, Voices and Stories Without End' in *Southerly – Stories Without End*, Vol. 62. No. 2, 2002, p. 91-93.

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words inscribed in 14 Central Desert languages on the back – 14 testimonies of how the land is always alive, and how it will never die. How our treasure houses will never be empty.

I could tell you about growing up in a voided space. What it is like as a child to be an echo, a resonance of something unnamed in the silence. I could tell you about my grandmother's and my father's first three languages, Alyerntarrpe, Pertame, Arrernte, and about my own eliminative reduction to one, English. My father's fourth language, and the supreme evidence of colonial obsession with an abstracted literacy that could not read the forms and expressions of our multiple literacies. I could show you the void of 200 blank white pages of history unmarked with the black ink of our lives, or tell you about how the lapse of meaning between languages in translation is the chasm that opens up in the same occupied territory, such as January 26<sup>th</sup>, Survival Day.

But I'm not-not whitefella-way, anyway. Instead I'm going to tell you Story, which, in the rhymes and rhythms of more than one black-fella-way, means I am going to tell you about all of them. And I am not going to speak to your ears, because the intellect is greedy for its squatter's rights, it separates and builds fences across indivisible country. Instead I am going to answer a challenge from an Irish writer via email who asked me to 'write about this story-telling business, and come to Ireland, to Dublin and tell it with your spirit to our spirit, so that we can truly understand, so that the spaces that construct our differences can be rendered null and void'. I have since lost contact with her, and I never did get to Ireland. Such is the catalytic, to meditate between crucibles. To make manifest story without end.

You ask me what I know about this story-telling business, but all I can tell you is about is this kid on the cart asleep. His youngest sister is with him to keep him awake at this pre-dawn hour, half his day already worked. He's delivering bread from the bakery at the Chinese Gardens down by Hookey's Waterhole. After school it'll be the fruit and veg.

He slouches, drives, dozes under the brim of his hat, this one camel-hide workday, school day, from the Afghan camp further down the creek. His Sunday hat is felted, taut, from the white-fella store in town. A privilege earned by his father's usefulness to others, others with power. Like his and his brothers' and sisters' some days presence at the one-room schoolhouse on the outskirts of town. They like margins of colour, border countries, slotted between the white columns of a learning page. Squeezed by the loops of a language scrawled ink wise into blotches that spread across margins like a tidal erasure, invading comprehension, vision.

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*English is the language of power, his father says, we speak only that in this house.* His father is a man of insight and intention motivated by experience...of deep and abiding vision. His mind an inevitable journey beyond his escape from the stormy mid-chop of another century, another continent, to land somewhere at the top end of another and the long walk south. The skinny kid behind the reins is still sleeping, soon to wake. Language to him and his sister is not their father's, nor even mostly their mother's three Central Desert languages. It is a sea of currents, each one with its own swell and syntax, direction, salt to bite the tongue, plankton to nourish. A self-sustaining ecology of thought, word and image stirred about now and then by the vividness of their father's own pictographic tongue in moments of frustration and anger. The old man a bony stick close to skeletal, stirring up a sluggish waterhole.

Yet this kid on the cart, asleep and alive, the youngest son, is the one who will continue his father's journey. From the top end of a red gibber ocean to walk south, to another place to cultivate where he will, in turn, replant his roots in new country, go on telling, being the story. Seed and grow an ecology, plants, trees, place that will grow him and go on growing him...

And how do I know all this? Because I am one of them-I am his story, and his father's story, and many others besides; as I am my own, and my children's and my grandchildren's. This is Dreaming. It is Tjukurrpa.

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