

Stories to Live In Discursive Regimes and Indigenous Canadian and Australian Historiography¹

One "fictions" history starting from a political reality that renders it true, one "fictions" a politics that doesn't as yet exist starting from an historical truth. (Foucault Michel Foucault 74-75)

I
"Indigenous history" was for many years a contradiction in terms, because Westerners defined "history" precisely in terms of what Indigenous cultures lacked. Whether describing a body of significant events and universal causal principles, or a set of epistemological conventions and scientific textual practices, "history" was delimited by Western thinkers in a manner that ensured it could never, by definition, be made or used politically by tribal peoples.

Yet no matter where the boundaries of "history proper" are drawn, every culture has its own characteristic ways of remembering, its own distinct array of social memory practices, formal and informal. In the period since Canada and Australia were first colonised by Europeans, traditional Indigenous modes of preserving and transmitting knowledge of the past were either destroyed outright as populations were decimated by frontier violence and disease, or were severely disrupted by government and church policies. These policies involved driving Native peoples away from their traditional homelands, breaking up their families, prohibiting their languages and ceremonies, and deauthorising their traditional story forms.

Although allegedly doomed to extinction, First Nations and Aboriginal peoples survived. Although disqualified as historians, they did not forget. Memories were preserved and transmitted orally inside Indigenous communities, largely out of earshot of white academics and the wider non-Indigenous community. Behind the biases and silences of white history, Indigenous social memory persisted, some practices continuing virtually unchanged to the present day, others adapting and transforming often in

response to pressures imposed by the dominant culture. Although history is written by the winners, social memory cannot ever be completely eradicated (short of committing genocide) because memories remain lodged in people's minds and encoded in their everyday speech- and life-practices.

At present, four sites of Indigenous historiographic production are particularly significant. First, traditional Indigenous communities continue to practice oral modes of transmission, and certain of their oral narratives have been reproduced and disseminated to wider audiences in printed texts, on film, TV and radio, on the internet, and on multimedia CDs.² Second, Indigenous people's accounts of the past are produced and transmitted throughout the literary, visual and performing arts, in the form of poems, short stories, novels, biographies, autobiographies, paintings, sculptures, films, photographic exhibitions, plays, dances, and songs. Some of these histories have reached enormous national and global audiences. They have played a crucial role in forming Indigenous imagined communities and in raising non-Indigenous levels of historical and political awareness.³ Third, academically trained Indigenous historians produce work that appropriates the power of the discipline of history for Indigenous purposes. Indigenous historians also observe and/or contest disciplinary norms and protocols from positions outside the academy.⁴ Fourth, in legal-governmental settings such as land claim hearings and official government inquiries, Indigenous people's historical testimonies are included in the official records. From there they pass into public circulation through the mass media as news and current affairs, and occasionally through commercial publications.⁵

Indigenous Canadian and Australian voices have now well and truly broken into history. However, a serious political problem remains to be addressed: although Indigenous people are retelling the past, the means of reproducing their enunciations, disseminating them, and ascribing historical authority to them—all the processes necessary to making social memory public and politically effective—these processes remain largely in the hands of non-Indigenous individuals and institutions. Other than those produced by, about, and for the most isolated traditional communities, Indigenous histories remain for the most part tactical in de Certeau's sense of being produced, transmitted, and evaluated in cultural territories predominantly under someone else's control.⁶

How is that control asserted? Indigenous historiography is governed by four discursive regimes, or sets of regulative mechanisms, that determine

who can say what to whom, under what circumstances, and in what manner. Three of these four regimes are largely non-Indigenous controlled. The four regimes are:

- (1) Indigenous cultural tradition—in which Indigenous people assert their own cultural values by producing, transmitting, and utilising their own stories in traditional or semi-traditional ways for their own purposes;
- (2) the market—through which the cultural values and financial power of White audiences are exercised;
- (3) the discipline of history—through which scientific norms and standards of scholarly research and writing are enforced; and
- (4) legal-governmental mechanisms—where the rules of evidence and the terms of reference in land claim hearings and official inquiries effectively elicit some kinds of histories and suppress others. Other regulative devices within this regime include copyright, defamation, and heritage legislation, and government policies pertaining to arts funding, the media, research funding, and school education.

These regulative mechanisms shape Indigenous histories at the four sites of production previously described, as well as at the manifold points of textual transmission and consumption. They set limits on the field of objects of study, determine who can be the agents of knowledge (who can produce it, have access to it, and transmit it), and decide how that knowledge must be represented, organised, authorised and interpreted.

Most texts exist in a space of overlap between two or more regimes. Non-Indigenous mediators and collaborators often play a vital role in the process of negotiating between conflicting regimes.⁷ Texts also have the potential to move from one discursive regime to another in the course of being transformed from one medium to another. They can also shift between different regimes depending on whether we view them at the moment of production, transmission, or consumption.

In the remainder of this paper I will focus on three case studies which illustrate some of the issues that arise when Indigenous authors and artists enter into dialogue with the discipline, and when traditional Indigenous oral regimes meet alien communications technologies and market pressures to commodify and aestheticise Indigenous cultural products.

Before moving to the case studies, however, it is essential to emphasise from the outset that the working of these regimes does not make histories

produced by Aboriginal singers, storytellers, painters, or film makers any less “true” than, say, those produced according to traditional academic protocols. All cultures have their own characteristic canons of truth. All histories are generated, transmitted, authorised, and empowered (or disempowered) by regulative mechanisms specific to their time and place. No historical representation—Indigenous or otherwise—is produced in free space outside any system of cultural, financial or political regulation.⁸

II

It is perhaps not coincidental that the West’s institutionalisation of scientific historical research and citational methods took place at a time when rapid and aggressive imperial expansion necessitated a devaluation of traditional Indigenous knowledge-forms and cultural practices. Western scientific history—defined as objective, properly documented, chronologically ordered knowledge of the past—denied the possibility of traditional Indigenous oral accounts being classified as histories, or of being accorded the authority and political instrumentality of “history proper.” The Eurocentric discipline of history pushed non-Western and other unscientific forms of historical representation out of history’s official realm of the true. The protocols of Western academic historiography activated “the rules of a discursive ‘policing’” (Foucault “The Order of Discourse” 61) which banished traditional Indigenous historical discourses to “the space of a wild exteriority” (61) where their historical statements would not be recognised as such. Indigenous accounts of the past thus became part of a “whole teratology of knowledge” (60) that was pushed back beyond the margins of history as defined by the West.

Since the 1960s, however, the discipline of history has undergone some profound changes, and is now internally fissured along political and theoretical axes. Intra- and inter-disciplinary dialogues have made for high levels of political and cultural self-consciousness in some quarters of the profession. The question of what counts as history has been reopened. This is a political issue as well as a theoretical one. Historical knowledge is an immensely powerful political resource, and the breadth and variety of what counts as historical knowledge in a society at any given time reflects and reproduces the distribution of power and privilege in that society. Some historians argue that the term “history” should remain firmly anchored to its European origins. They claim “the idea of history is a western concept,

developed over time in European culture,” and that it is therefore assimilationist to pull Indigenous peoples onto centre stage in history, or to categorise non-Western understandings of the past as historical.⁹

Opponents of this view see the term “history” as somewhat more elastic. Maintaining that “history is culturally ordered, differently so in different societies” (Sahlins vii),¹⁰ they argue that it is narrowly Eurocentric to deny historical status to non-Western ways of constituting, representing and understanding the past. In their view, the experiences of all the world’s peoples should be included in the field of objects open to historical inquiry; likewise, culturally diverse ways in which human beings know the past should all be regarded as varieties of historical awareness. The word “history” has a history of its own; to essentialise the word is to freeze it in time and space, denying its historicity and its amenability to cultural diversification.

The poem, “Our Story Not History,” by Ron Hamilton (Ki-ke-in) from the West coast of Vancouver Island, contributes to this debate by de-essentialising the concept of history, exploring the semantic limits of the word, and surveying a range of Indigenous relations with history as action and as discourse:

We are walking up the road
That leads to history.
Some are being led peacefully
Others are driven from within.

Some are dragged kicking and screaming.
Pulled forcefully
Down the road that leads
Away from their history.

A very few are changing history.
Redefining the meaning of history.
Making history responsible
To those caught in its sticky web.

Sadly some are prisoners of history,
Their very lives defined,
And their futures determined,
By a history compiled by their enemies.

Some are being made by history
Some are “making” history.*

(Ron Hamilton [Ki-ke-in] 87)

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In this poem, as I read it, the meaning of the term “history” is unfixed; “history” slides strategically from one meaning to another. The poem’s title, “Our Story Not History,” makes an initial clear distinction between First Nations oral narrative traditions and Western historical discourses. At this point in the poem, the two traditions are strictly foreign to each other: First Nations oral traditions are not assimilable into Western historiography.

In the first and second stanzas of the poem “history” is a Western imperial vortex of action and discourse into which First Nations peoples are being inexorably pulled, like it or not. Yet paradoxically, Native people are moving both *to* and *from* “history.” In line 2, “history” refers to Western history, and Indigenous peoples are walking *towards* it; in line 8, “history’s” meaning has expanded to incorporate an Indigenous life-world, a place Native people are being pulled *away* from. The end of stanza 2 refers to traditional Indigenous ways of being and knowing as “their [own] history,” a move which implicitly annexes such ways to the domain of “history’s” referents.

In stanza 3, “history” shifts again; the text enacts the semantic change it describes. “History” is now explicitly susceptible to redefinition and appropriation for First Nations purposes. Yet at the end of stanza 3 and in stanza 4, “history” is again a white story that has the power to imprison and destroy Indigenous people. It is a “sticky web” woven by the enemy. In stanza 4, the text alludes to “history” as a real-life story within which government policies and laws are framed and enforced. As such “history” is capable literally of imprisoning Native people, and of governing their lives on a day-to-day basis.

In the final two lines of the poem, Ron Hamilton presents two opposing orientations to “history”: Native people can either be history’s victims or they can grasp it and remake it as their own. In the poem’s last line the semantic limits of “history” have been stretched even further than in line 8, to include all the ways in which Native people may know and textualise the past. The suggestion is that instead of being colonised by and assimilated into Western “history,” Native people are breaking into “history,” invading it, changing it, and appropriating “history’s” power while demanding recognition of culturally different canons of truth. “History,” once foreign, and still a tool of the enemy, can be redefined and put to work by Native people in the service of their own objectives.

“Our Story Not History” enters into dialogue with the discipline, but as a poem the text situates itself outside the protocols of the discipline as traditionally practised in Western societies.¹¹ Yet the poem is not free from other

mechanisms of regulation. By writing a poetic interrogation of “history,” has Ron Hamilton jumped out of the frying pan of the discipline only to land in the fire of a different white-dominated discursive regime—a publishing market that enforces Western high-cultural criteria of artistic excellence?

Ron Hamilton clearly recognises the potential disjunction between Western literary values and Indigenous modes of writing “not necessarily recognisable as prose or poetry” (“I invite” 91). Yet his response to that disjunction appears contradictory. On the one hand he asserts, “I don’t want to have to launder my thoughts and bleach my words ‘white’ in order to have them published.” On the other hand he maintains, “I invite honest criticism, and look forward to improving and learning from it” (“I invite” 91). The questions that arise for me here are: Is “*honest* criticism” culturally unbiased? And by what standards would poetic improvement be measured?

Despite this apparent contradiction, I would argue that “Our Story Not History” succeeds in jumping out of the disciplinary fry-pan *without* landing in the fire of the literary publishing market. The site and occasion of the poem’s publication are crucial. The poem was not published in a *literary* journal nor with a commercial literary publisher, where white financial power and cultural preferences would have shaped editorial values. Instead Ron Hamilton spoke from a space relatively free of white mechanisms of constraint. But it was a space only momentarily available—a special issue of the multidisciplinary journal *BC Studies*, entitled “In Celebration of Our Survival: The First Nations of British Columbia,” guest-edited by two distinguished members of British Columbia’s Indigenous community, Doreen Jensen and Cheryl Brooks.

Without casting aspersions on anyone involved with editing and managing *BC Studies*, I would suggest that even this space may not have been absolutely free of indirect constraints. It would be interesting to know precisely how the journal’s regular editorial team were involved in the work of the guest editors, and to ascertain whether the editorial process was shaped at all by a sense of accountability to the organisations that financially assisted the volume’s publication—the Leon and Thea Koerner Foundation, the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia, and the Hamber Foundation. It is even possible that, in spite of the best intentions of everyone involved in editorial decision-making, special issues of academic journals can sometimes function as a mechanism of containment, like little reserves specially granted in the dominant culture’s textual space.

That said, I would reiterate that in a forum such as the special “First Nations of British Columbia” issue of *BC Studies*, Indigenous historiography is much less subject to regulation by white market forces and cultural values than is the case when it is disseminated through commercial publishing outlets or in journals edited by ethnocentric non-Indigenous scholars.

III

The extent of this difference can be seen by comparing Daisy Sewid-Smith’s historical essay, “In Time Immemorial,” written for the special issue of *BC Studies*, with an Aboriginal autobiography, *Wandjuk Marika: Life Story*, published commercially as a glossy, lavishly illustrated, large-format book by the University of Queensland Press in 1995.

Daisy Sewid-Smith’s text was composed as a written historical essay, while Wandjuk Marika’s story was told orally to a non-Indigenous woman, Jennifer Isaacs, who recorded, transcribed, and edited the narratives. Yet the two histories have many elements in common, and many elements which can be read as evidence of the continuing regulative influence of their authors’ respective traditional cultures. They both offer accounts of sacred events that took place in mythic time, and that resulted in the formation of the land, the social order of the clans and tribal groups, and certain of their customs. Both use written and oral sources—“My grandmother told me...”; “My father told me...”—the oral sometimes supplementing or correcting the written, and the written cited usually to corroborate the oral. Both histories use features of the landscape in the way professional historians use documents, to certify the truth of their narratives. And each text uses a special orthography to capture the distinct sounds of Indigenous language words.

In many ways, *Wandjuk Marika* appears more tightly regulated by traditional Aboriginal cultural standards of propriety than Daisy Sewid-Smith’s essay. In traditional Aboriginal Australian cultures, information flows are restricted by differences of age, initiation level, gender, kinship connections, and affiliations to country. Only certain people can speak about events that occurred in certain places or to certain people; only certain people are permitted to hear those stories. Violations of the dividing lines between secret and public domains of knowledge are met with severe punishments. Many communities also have mortuary restrictions against naming and displaying images of the deceased, and against reproducing their songs, stories,

clothing, or other possessions. So in traditional Aboriginal oral discursive regimes, information movements across time and space are highly restricted. In addition, representational codes are relatively fixed. Wandjuk Marika tells a story of how, one day, after years of painting in the traditional black, white and ochre, he happened to make green by mixing two colours together. His father told him that green was outside the Law, so he never painted with green again.

Wandjuk Marika was an elder of the Rirratjinu people, one of the communities of north-east Arnhem Land who collectively call themselves the Yolngu. He was an artist, musician, dancer, political activist, and Chairman of the Aboriginal Arts Board. He was also a senior ceremonial leader and traditional custodian of the sacred site of Yalanbara, a beach in north-eastern Arnhem Land where the creation ancestor, Djankawu, first came to land. From both his mother's side and his father's, Wandjuk Marika was uniquely placed within the Yolngu kinship system network so as to have access to the most secret and sacred knowledge. He also traced his descent back in a direct line back to the creation ancestor, Djankawu. The book presents these facts not only because they are intrinsically interesting, but because, according to Aboriginal Law, they are Wandjuk Marika's credentials to speak, paint, sing and ritually reenact the sacred history of his traditional country.

The interesting thing about Wandjuk Marika's *Life Story*—the text and the design of the book—is the way it negotiates between the conflicting requirements of two discursive regimes: traditional Yolngu culture and the white-dominated book market.¹² The timing of the book's publication was determined by Yolngu cultural tradition. Wandjuk Marika died in 1987, and in conformity with Yolngu mortuary restrictions, his name, words, and images could not be spoken or shown, until the family gave permission, eight years after Wandjuk Marika's death. We are also told that other recently deceased members of his family cannot be named, and that since uninitiated children may read the book, the secret, sacred version of the Dreaming stories won't be told. Nor can secret aspects of ceremony be described or photographed. The traditional Yolngu regulative system is clearly operating here.

The oral feel of Wandjuk's narratives is preserved as far as possible on the printed page. Grammatical errors are not corrected, and sections of his stories are laid out on the page in short, left-justified lines that look like poetry. (The publication details name Rodney Hall, a senior member of the White

Australian literary establishment, as the “consulting poet.”) This poetic layout is now a well-established marker of “authentic Indigenous orality.”¹³

There is also a note, positioned prominently above the book’s publication details, informing readers that

The Literature Centres in Yolngu have developed their own phonetic script which reproduces the languages of north-east Arnhem Land more accurately than can be achieved with the English alphabet. This is the first book to utilise this typography for general readership.

Five special symbols are listed, which, while serving to guide pronunciation, do not interfere in the least with the text’s readability by the “general readership.” Like Wandjuk’s grammar and the poetic page layout, the orthography works to authenticate, and perhaps even exoticise the text, without alienating mainstream readers from it. This readability is in marked contrast to Daisy Sewid-Smith’s special orthography—forty-eight symbols from the International Phonetic Alphabet—which looks very foreign on the page, and proves disorienting for that majority of the general readership who cannot translate the symbols into sounds. Daisy Sewid-Smith does not need to accommodate the tastes of a general readership, whereas the publishers of Wandjuk Marika’s *Life Story* can’t afford to alienate the mainstream market.

In times gone by, Aboriginal texts would often begin with a preface by some well-known white author, whose job it was to assure the (white) audience that the Aboriginal writer was worth reading. These days, the points of entry into Aboriginal-authored texts are more elaborately organised. Jennifer Isaacs’ Preface, which introduces Wandjuk Marika and explains why his life story is significant, is itself preceded by a Foreword written by Wandjuk Marika’s son, Mawalan, explaining how Jennifer Isaacs has been adopted into the family, and how she is a most appropriate person to be editing the book. We are told that Wandjuk Marika invited Jennifer Isaacs to help him with his life story; as a result, this is not a case of an intrusive researcher going uninvited into a traditional Aboriginal community to seek out exotic life stories to market to the world at large. Explicit mention is made at a number of points in the text that the book was produced with the cooperation and endorsement of Wandjuk Marika’s family, who advised Jennifer Isaacs on matters relating to the transcription of the audio tapes and the selection of photographic images.¹⁴

There is no cause to doubt any of this. It is worth remembering, however, that Jennifer Isaacs has made a career out of adding commercial value to

Aboriginal knowledge, cultural products and practices. She has published numerous large, glossy, expensively produced, coffee-table books about Aboriginal art, music, food, and culture. Some are published internationally; in Australia they are distributed through major bookstore chains and through retailing centres catering to the tourist market—airports, souvenir shops, art galleries, and craft stores. Clearly, Jennifer Isaacs is an experienced negotiator between the life-world of Wandjuk Marika's family, with its traditional Yolngu regulative systems, and the white-dominated discursive regime of the market. This is not to say that Jennifer Isaacs is some kind of traitor. She too is caught in a complex web of commercial influences and cultural constraints. It may be that while Jennifer Isaacs holds herself scrupulously accountable to Wandjuk Marika's family and the Yolngu community, her publishers are using her mediating skills as a marketable commodity. Her name is part of the packaging of Wandjuk Marika's story; it is a design element employed to attract the general readership.

Mawalan Marika's Foreword stresses that his father's life story is not only for his family, and not only for Aboriginal people, but for all people. I would suggest that it *has* to be for all people—it is an expensive publication. Retailing at \$34.95 it would probably be out of the financial reach of many Aboriginal people. The necessary appeal to as large an audience as possible is apparent in the self-positioning of the text in a number of genre categories familiar to a mainstream readership. The front cover flap tells us that the text is an autobiography, a "major literary work [that] reveals the beauty and integrity of Aboriginal English in the oral narrative. . . ." The paintings are described as "religious documents," and we are told that Wandjuk Marika's story "reveals the Yolngu (Aboriginal) side of history."

At times, Wandjuk Marika speaks as the voice of the land: he says, "Many are the stories I could tell you—*already there in the land*" (22). As he relates the sacred histories of the land, the accompanying photographs of the beach and rock formations at Yalanbara show readers the physical landscape which Wandjuk Marika himself is reading. The photographs document the land-as-document; they provide visual proof of the truth of his story. By allowing us to read the landscape as if it were a historical document, the book observes the rules of verification that operate in the Yolngu discursive regime.

This regime overlaps, however, with the regime of the market at the moment when the place-name "Yalanbara" is followed in brackets by the words "Sunrise Beach." The sunrise is significant in the traditional creation

story because Djankawu followed the beams of sun over the ocean to the beach. But still, “Sunrise Beach” is jarring because it articulates the book’s orientation towards the white Australian and international tourist markets. The beautiful colour photographs of pristine white sand, clear turquoise waters, voluptuous tropical cloud formations, and spectacular sunsets position the text inside a discourse of eco-tourism. The front cover flap tells us that “The full colour photographs, which . . . reveal the power and mystery of Yalanbara’s sacred sites, will be enthralling to the general reader as well as students.” (No mention of Wandjuk Marika’s family here, nor of the strict secrecy of many Aboriginal sacred sites.) Similarly, the book participates in a discourse of cultural tourism, with images of grinning, dark-skinned children, woven baskets, colourful ceremonies, and perhaps most intriguing of all, Wandjuk Marika’s traditional paintings.¹⁵

So here we have a book that attempts to respect the prohibitions and requirements of the traditional Yolngu discursive regime in terms of its language, text-layout, orthography, mortuary restrictions, and the ways in which it authorises Wandjuk Marika and Jennifer Isaacs. Yet it is also designed to seduce an affluent mainstream national and international readership, which makes it subject to constraints and requirements imposed by the publishing market. The question that arises here is whether, at least in mainstream contexts of reading, the book *obeys* the Yolngu rules of signification in such a way as to *display* those rules too conspicuously as yet another exotic, consumable, Indigenous cultural commodity—a feature of the book that makes it worth buying. Can Wandjuk Marika’s *Life Story* work inside the Yolngu rules, while at the same time objectifying them as a commodity available for White consumption?

Some Indigenous texts have been able to enter the arena of historical debate through the back door, heavily disguised as marketable cultural commodities, so as not to place themselves wholly under the jurisdiction of the discipline. But tricking history in this way is a risky business: if the disguise works too well, the trick backfires. At the moment of reading these texts can be transformed into what they pretend to be—decorative coffee table books that offer momentary light entertainment, quaint myths, fictions, or native artifacts. The potential political force of such histories can easily be deflected or dissipated by the very conditions under which they are disseminated and made meaningful. The contingencies of the reading context can annex them to depoliticised zones such as the aesthetic, the mythic, the romantically exotic, or the playfully postmodern.

IV

Perhaps the challenge for Indigenous authors seeking to rewrite history is to trick the market and the discipline at the same time. Cherokee author Thomas King does precisely this in his children's book, *A Coyote Columbus Story*. Published in 1992, the book took advantage of the wide public interest in Columbus stimulated by the celebrations marking the five hundredth anniversary of his "discovery" of the Americas.¹⁶ As well as picking his moment, King exploited the full potential of his genre. He turned the tables on those custodians of "history proper" who dismissed Native oral histories as childish fairytales by rewriting the Columbus story as a crazy tale for children (and of course adults).

King's version of the story begins some time before Columbus's arrival, with Coyote's creation of the world. She creates beavers, moose, and turtles to play ball with her but they prefer to do other things. She creates human beings to play ball with her. They agree, and become Coyote's good friends. But Coyote keeps changing the rules so she can win every time; the human beings get fed up and refuse to play. Coyote becomes bored, and "doesn't watch what she is making up out of her head." Voilà: "three ships and some people in funny looking clothes carrying flags and boxes of junk." The arrival of Christopher Columbus means "big trouble." Columbus doesn't want to play ball with Coyote either. He's too busy looking for gold and other "stuff they can sell." The newcomers have bad manners, and "act as if they've got no relations." Columbus "grabs a big bunch of men and women and children and locks them up in his ships." "Hey," says Coyote when she sees what's happening, "Where are my friends?" Columbus takes them back to Spain to sell "to rich people like baseball players and dentists and babysitters and parents."¹⁷ Realising she's made a big mistake in creating Columbus, Coyote tries to undo her creation but instead Jacques Cartier appears. Beavers, moose, turtles, and human beings escape on the first train to Penticton.¹⁸ The story ends with Coyote trying to talk Jacques Cartier into playing ball.

According to standards traditional to the discipline of History, King's *Coyote Columbus Story* is spectacularly wrong. But this is a children's book: "errors" are committed ostentatiously, obviously to create laughter, but also to serve strategic purposes. The reference to Penticton, and the illustrations of the landscape by William Kent Monkman situate the story thousands of miles away from the sites where Columbus's records indicate he landed. You

have to know the “proper” story to get the jokes. Yet this geographical “error” is on one level not a joke: as far as the Indigenous peoples of the Americas were concerned there were thousands of Columbuses. In King’s retelling of the story, the name “Columbus” ceases to signify a particular individual, and instead refers metonymically to the European presence all over the Americas.¹⁹

As well as getting the setting “wrong,” King’s *Coyote Columbus Story* is also full of flagrant anachronisms. When Coyote created the world, she created modern Western technologies alongside the rainbows, flowers, clouds, and rivers. In the foreground of the book’s first picture, a turtle wearing earrings and covered in sunblock watches a commercial for prune-juice on a TV plugged into a tree. The effect of mixing the past and present is to close the gap between 1492 and 1992. This move invites children to imagine what it would be like if a stranger like Columbus suddenly arrived on their own doorstep today. It also emphasises that the process of invasion continues.

King also unmakes the distance between 1492 and the present by telling the story in both the past and the present tenses. Orthodox historical narratives are written entirely in the past perfect tense, the effect being to draw a sharp line between past and present, as though the historical events in question were entirely finished, complete, and closed. Yet for many Indigenous people of the Americas and elsewhere, the past is not invariably a distant place in time. As a source of cultural traditions to be maintained, it is sometimes painfully far away; as a source of injustices to be overcome it is often too close for comfort. In Aboriginal poet Oodgeroo Noonuccal’s words: “Let no one say the past is dead / The past is all around us and within” (99).

Native peoples were once thought to be themselves a historical anachronism, relics of a time left behind long ago by Europeans. This “denial of coevalness” had far-reaching political implications (Fabian 29-31). Forming a basis for evolutionary hierarchies of cultural and biological development, its ideological effect was to legitimise European domination over Indigenous peoples. In *A Coyote Columbus Story*, Native people—“the human beings”—are pictured as both modern and traditional at the same time. They are neither primitive nor assimilated; neither just like whites nor entirely different. They were present in the past, and many of the old ways are practised in the present.

Thomas King enacts the continuity of First Nations traditions in a number of ways. By suggesting that Columbus is Coyote’s creation he assimilates

a White American culture hero into traditional Indigenous cosmology. King also preserves the flavour of Indigenous oral storytelling in this and other stories. Children's literature, which is often read aloud, is an ideal vehicle for preserving and popularising oral narrative modes. King's tone in *A Coyote Columbus Story* is casual and conversational. Readers (and those listening to the story as it is read aloud) are addressed directly as "you."

At the point of reception, some discursive regimes regulate the dialogic process of making texts meaningful by standardising the rules, rituals, and contexts of interpretation. In the market regime, however, texts are scattered into various contexts, where random contingencies can shape the ways readers assign meaning to the text. A story produced as history may look like something rather different in the eye of the beholder. Having tricked the discipline of history by utilising the freedoms of children's literature, can Thomas King also trick the market by overcoming its power to dehistoricise and depoliticise his narrative?

With his illustrator William Kent Monkman, King conjures readers imaginatively out of their diverse actual contexts by providing two texts rather than one—a verbal text and a visual text. By framing and reinforcing one another, the visual and verbal texts insulate the story from a certain amount of random contextual interference. *A Coyote Columbus Story* positions its geographically and culturally scattered readership as though they were physically together in a shared spatial context of telling. The illustrations are crucial to this process: they standardise the context of reading by physically framing the text uniformly for all readers. When King refers to "those beavers," and "those human beings," every reader can look at an identical set of images on the page, in the same way as a group of people listening to an oral storyteller might direct their eyes to something to which the speaker points in their immediate vicinity.²⁰ King's words and Monkman's illustrations draw the book's scattered readers together centripetally into something resembling a united community of listeners. The many different actual readers addressed by the pronoun "you" congregate into an imaginative community around the storyteller. From that perspective, as Columbus takes members of what is now our community away, the culture hero looks like a rather nasty piece of work.

Younger children would read this book (or have it read to them aloud) before, or around the same time as, they encounter the Columbus story at school. Educational policies in general, and school history curricula in par-

ticular, are among the regulative mechanisms making up what I have called the legal-governmental discursive regime.²¹ Until recently, school curricula in both Canada and Australia offered only whitewashed heroic-romantic versions of European discovery, exploration and “settlement.” In these stories, Indigenous people were either omitted altogether, or cast as treacherous villains, helpless victims, or faithful helpers to whites. Today, Indigenous historical perspectives are being incorporated into school curricula, sometimes in ways that cause new problems in the process of solving old ones. Thomas King’s *Coyote Columbus Story* may well make a difference to the way children hear their history teacher, or read their history text books, or receive the Columbus stories that circulate as popular white mythology. Non-Indigenous adults who read this story to their children may find some of their old certainties disrupted. They may even re-imagine Columbus’s arrival through the fresh eyes of their children, and share in childhood’s passionate, unerring abhorrence of injustice.

Western scholars and philosophers once disqualified Indigenous peoples as both actors and knowers of history. They believed that without the technologies of writing and a sense of linear chronological time, Indigenous peoples had no understanding of historical cause and effect, and no objective means of distinguishing “history proper” from “mere myth and legend.”²² Thomas King overturns these Western epistemological and narrative hierarchies. By retelling the Columbus story in a humorous children’s book, he is able to make “liabilities” work as assets. Children’s literature is a crack in the edifice of Western historical discourse. It is a genre that offers Thomas King a range of rhetorical opportunities that would not otherwise be available. King is able to trick all three white dominated regulative systems—the academic discipline, the market, and the legal-governmental (school educational) system. In *A Coyote Columbus Story*, King’s chosen genre allows him at once to defy the protocols of academic research and writing, to use pictures which seduce the market and frame and control verbal meaning, and to counter the ideological and political biases disseminated for so long to children through the school system.

V

At the end of the twentieth century, the field of historical enunciation in Canada and Australia is at one level more open, democratic, and diverse than at any time in the past. The media, the arts, and the school system are

bringing Indigenous histories out of the local communities, the archives, and the academy, and are disseminating them in mainstream public domains. In the world arena, Indigenous peoples of Canada and Australia are speaking out at international human rights forums, and seeking moral redress and financial compensation under international laws and agreements. No longer is history enunciated only by those who think of themselves as the winners. Indigenous histories ask the winners to acknowledge and ameliorate the human cost of their victories. Consequently, “settler” societies in “new world” nations such as Canada and Australia are now struggling under the weight of their own burdens of history, as Europeans did a hundred years ago.²³

While Indigenous groups and their supporters may celebrate the growing public awareness of Indigenous history, there are powerful forces on the political right, and in rural, forestry, and mining industry groups, who would like to consign Indigenous perspectives to oblivion. In Australia, hostility towards Aboriginal histories has come from the highest levels of government. The Prime Minister, John Howard, and his Aboriginal Affairs Minister, John Herron, have refused repeatedly since the release of the “Stolen Generations” report in April 1997 to apologise for the suffering caused by past government policies of removing Aboriginal children from their families. (In response to the Canadian government’s official apology, they alleged the Australian situation was different.) John Howard has also publicly castigated Aboriginal leaders for exposing Australia to international opprobrium by their speaking of the stolen generations at overseas conferences and human rights forums. He has dismissed as un-Australian “the black armband version of history,” by which he means those versions of history which foreground the killing, rape, and exploitation of Aboriginal people by Whites. On many occasions since the Liberal-National Government came into power in March 1996, Howard and Herron have publicly urged the Aboriginal community to put the past behind them and move into the future.

The future holds a special allure for those who want to shrug off an embarrassing past. As Canada and Australia sail inexorably towards the coast of the new millennium, the future comes into view as though it were a new place in time, a *tabula rasa* where history can begin afresh, and where nations can reinvent themselves in ways calculated to serve the interests of the powerful. The new millennium allows “new worlds” grown old to draw

a line across history's account book and pretend they have left the bad old days of racial oppression far behind. Yet in far too many respects the bad old days are still with us. As the white-dominated republican movement pushes to cut Australia's ties to Britain by the year 2000, Aboriginal deaths in prisons and police cells continue to increase in every state, and Aboriginal land rights are being eroded by the Howard Government's proposed amendments to the 1993 Native Title Bill.²⁴

So while the gains already made by Indigenous historians in Canada and Australia are to be celebrated, the continued operation of oppressive forces should not be underestimated. Indigenous histories are indeed proliferating in Canada and Australia, but it would be erroneous to imagine that either nation now has a nice, permanent smorgasbord of equally authoritative and accessible histories. In historical actuality, people rank different histories into hierarchies. In the process of formulating policies and arriving at legal judgements, governments and courts give precedence to certain versions of history over others. White people's private attitudes and behaviours towards Indigenous peoples also take shape inside some versions of history rather than others. The static, monoplanar, smorgasbord model of historiographic diversity is inaccurate in so far as it pictures Indigenous histories as static objects rather than as dynamic political forces that are generated, disseminated, utilized, or subdued in specific contexts of social struggle.

It is one thing to get Indigenous histories into print, or onto canvas, film, or radio. That is a major achievement. But it is quite another thing to turn these histories into effective instruments for change. The crucial questions are: What power will accrue to which histories, and by what mechanisms? What kinds of work will these histories do in the world? Whose interests will they serve? These are questions that have to do not only with the content of Indigenous histories, but also with the historicity of the texts themselves as they move within and between different discursive regimes. It is crucial to understand what happened and is happening to Indigenous peoples. But it is also necessary to identify the specific institutional mechanisms through which Indigenous histories come into being, are disseminated, and put to work (or not) as a historical force in their own right.

NOTES

- 1 This paper comes out of research in progress. I would greatly appreciate any feedback readers might care to offer, especially from Native Canadian and Aboriginal historians. My postal address is: Department of English, University of Sydney, NSW 2006, Australia. E-mail: penny.van.toorn@english.usyd.edu.au
- 2 Printed texts, audio tapes, and films made by non-Indigenous anthropologists account for a large portion of the Indigenous oral narratives that have been transformed into Western media. See, for example, Robinson and Bird Rose (1991).
- 3 Australian examples include Yothu Yindi and Morgan.
- 4 For example, in Australia, see HREOC and Bird; in Canada, see Adams and Miller.
- 5 In Australia, *Bringing Them Home*, the official report of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children From Their Families was widely publicised in news and current in the mass media. The 700-page Report became a best-seller, retailing to the public at \$60 per copy from government bookstores. In March 1998 Random House published a selection of Aboriginal testimonies from the report, *The Stolen Children: Their Stories*, edited by Carmel Bird, a writer and university lecturer in creative writing.
- 6 De Certeau quotes von Bulow to distinguish between tactical and strategic practices: in warfare, "strategy is the science of military movements outside of the enemy's vision; tactics, within it" (212 n.14). Indigenous histories produced within non-Indigenous institutions are tactical in that they "must play on and with a terrain imposed . . . and organised by the law of a foreign power" (37).
- 7 I worked in this capacity with Bundjalung author Ruby Langford Ginibi on her son's biography, *Haunted By the Past* (1998). In this paper, as in my teaching, research, and editorial work on Aboriginal literature and historiography, I cannot pretend to be outside the systems of control and regulation I am attempting to describe.
- 8 For example, market forces have shaped the ways in which non-Indigenous histories of Canada and Australia were written. Before local scholarly publishing became financially viable, historians often wrote in the colonial adventure romance genre partly in order to appeal to the largest possible British audience. See Macintyre (71-90); Francis (158-67), and Trigger (19-44).
- 9 See Munz; Coltheart.
- 10 I am appropriating Sahlins's formulation to present an argument somewhat different from Sahlins's own.
- 11 The academy gives the discipline an institutional base of operations, but is not identical with it. Traditional disciplinary protocols can be observed or contested from positions inside or outside the academy.
- 12 The book also unobtrusively observes the conventions of citation and acknowledgment required by copyright legislation and disciplinary protocol.
- 13 See, for example, Roe; Benterrak, Muecke, and Roe; and Robinson.
- 14 Copyright on the text and paintings belongs to Wandjuk Marika's family; copyright on the editorial arrangement and notes belongs to Jennifer Isaacs.
- 15 Cultural tourism is the main source of income for many Aboriginal communities in northern and central Australia. Paintings, and cultural artifacts such as didgeridoos, boomerangs, clap-sticks, and woven baskets are sold locally to tourists or shipped to dealers in the regional centres, the major capital cities, and overseas.

- 16 This seizing of a special moment officially designated for other purposes is characteristic of tactical manoeuvres. De Certeau notes that “a tactic depends on time—it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized ‘on the wing.’ Whatever it wins it does keep. It must constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into ‘opportunities.’ The weak must continually turn to their own ends forces alien to them” (de Certeau xix). In Australia, Aboriginal protesters took tactical advantage of world media coverage of the Bicentenary of British “settlement” in 1988 to proclaim on placards and T-shirts that “White Australia has a Black History.” In front of the world media on Australia Day, 1988, at the harbourside launch by Prime Minister Bob Hawke of the officially commissioned *Penguin Bicentennial History of Australia*, an Aboriginal protester seized the volume and threw it into Sydney Harbour.
- 17 In 1495, during his second voyage, Columbus shipped a large number of Native people to Spain, intending to sell them as slaves. Queen Isabella objected, however, and ordered Columbus to return them to their homeland.
- 18 Penticton is a major centre of First Nations literary activity. It is the home of Native-controlled literary institutions such as Theytus Books, the En’owkin International School of Writing, the En’owkin Centre, and *Gatherings: The En’owkin Journal of First North American Peoples*.
- 19 The same kind of metonymic references to Captain Cook are found in Aboriginal Australian accounts of early white contact, even in regions far distant from the routes recorded in Cook’s logbooks and journals. See Bird Rose; Healy 42–72.
- 20 Thomas King’s oral style echoes aspects of the speech of Okanagan storyteller Harry Robinson.
- 21 In most states of Australia, school curricula are a state responsibility, and are therefore highly standardised across all public schools in each state.
- 22 For example, Walter Murdoch’s *The Making of Australia: An Introductory History*, a text written for Australian schoolchildren, informed readers that “there is good reason why we should not stretch the term [history] to make it include the history of the dark-skinned wandering tribes . . . for they have nothing that can be called a history. They have dim legends, and queer fairy tales, and deep-rooted customs which have come down from long, long ago; but they have no history, as we use the word. Change and progress are the stuff of which history is made: these blacks knew no change and made no progress . . .” (ix-x).
- 23 See White.
- 24 The Native Title Bill, passed by the Keating Labour Government in 1993, encoded in law the High Court of Australia’s findings in the Mabo case (1992). In the course of their ten-year court battle, Eddie Mabo and his co-claimants from Mer Island in the Torres Strait lodged historical evidence that eventually caused the High Court to overthrow the legal fiction that Australia was *terra nullius* (a land belonging to no one) at the time it was first settled without treaty by the British. In the face of manifest evidence to the contrary, the *terra nullius* myth had been upheld for 204 years. The 1993 Native Title Bill gave Aboriginal communities the right (subject to certain conditions and to their meeting strict eligibility criteria) to claim crown land that had never been sold into freehold. Mining and pastoral leases were a grey area in the 1993 Bill; however, in *The Wik* case of 1997, the High Court found that pastoral leases did not automatically extinguish native title, and that the two could coexist (with the pastoralists’ interests prevailing over the Aborigines’ if they conflicted). The Howard Government’s proposed amendments to the

1993 Bill extinguish native title on pastoral leases and remove Aboriginal rights to negotiate with mining companies on mining leases. The proposed amendments also introduce stringent new conditions and eligibility criteria that make it far more difficult for Aboriginal people to claim any land at all.

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