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***Six groundings for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander story in the Australian creative writing classroom: Part 1****Abstract*

*'All Australian children deserve to know the country that they share through the stories that Aboriginal people can tell them', write Gladys Idjirrimoonra Milroy and Jill Milroy (2008: 42). If country and story, place and voice are intertwined, it is vital that we make space in Australian creative writing classrooms for the reading and writing of Australian Indigenous story. What principles and questions can allow us to begin? We propose six groundings for this work:*

- *Indigenous story is literary history, literary history is creative power.*
- *We do culture together: culture becomes in collaboration, conscious or unconscious.*
- *There is no such thing as Indigenous story, and yet it can be performed and known.*
- *Country speaks, to our conceptions of voice and point of view.*
- *History and memory are written in the land and on the body in bodies of practice.*
- *Story transmits narrative responsibility. Narrative responsibility requires fierce listening.*

*This two-part paper will discuss each of these groundings as orienting and motivating principles for work we do as teachers of introductory creative writing units at the University of Canberra.*

*Keywords: Indigenous story, creative writing pedagogy, Indigenous knowledge*

In their essay on Aboriginal Dreaming and narrative ecology, 'Different Ways of Knowing: Trees Are Our Families Too,' Gladys Idjirrimoonra Milroy and Jill Milroy write that 'All Australian children deserve to know the country that they share through the stories that Aboriginal people can tell them' (Milroy & Milroy 2008: 42). Their position is founded on the understanding that country and story, place and voice are intertwined. If this is so, and much in the history and criticism of literature would agree that it is, we must make space in the Australian creative classroom for the reading and writing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander story.

How do we begin this work? The authors of this paper have been collaborating over the last two years on this question, and we would like to offer six 'groundings' that have emerged. We use the word to mean principles that compel us to do this work, and that orient us as we do it. This is, therefore, a kind of manifesto; it is also an overview of some of our beginning points and early efforts in a body of pedagogical practice and research which we expect to develop further in future years.

For the purposes of readability, this paper will appear in two parts over two issues of *TEXT*. This first part defines Australian Indigenous story as literary history, discusses the underpinnings of our work as cultural collaboration in the context of that history, and describes our engagement, in collaboration with students, with the question of what an Indigenous story might be. The second part, which will appear in *TEXT*'s next issue, develops the implications of a pedagogy which considers language and place to be inextricably linked. It considers the presence of country as manifest in understandings of literary voice and point of view, brings disciplinary boundaries into conversation with the history and memory of the land, before discussing story as the transmission of narrative responsibility.

The experiential basis for these papers is a period from 2015 to 2017 in which the authors have collaborated on ways to engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content, epistemology and practice in the design and delivery of two large first-year creative writing units taught at the University of Canberra (UC). These units, Introduction to Creative Writing (around 260 students) and Writing Short Narratives (around 160 students), draw enrolments from across the University's faculties, with one-quarter to one-sixth coming from within the Faculty of Arts and Design's Bachelor of Writing. We don't track the cultural identification of students in these units, but UC's current enrolment data suggests that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students comprise around 2% of total enrolments. The two units discussed here are served by teaching teams that include one to five lecturers and three to five tutors each semester. As unit convenor (Jen Crawford) and adjunct tutor/teaching fellow (Paul Collis) we have worked to design and

adapt the unit topics, materials, readings and delivery methods of these units in order to begin to explore the intersection of Indigenous story and creative writing pedagogy.

An important first consideration as we open this discussion is that the word ‘story’ as it is typically used in the creative writing classroom is not synonymous with the word as it is used in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural discourse. In creative writing pedagogy a ‘story’ is usually an individual narrative written in prose. In Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander discourse, the traces of translation from different languages, usage variations across Aboriginal Englishes and contextual nuance feed into broad and variable usage for the term; to summarise, ‘story’ can refer to all knowledge and cultural making, or any part of that whole. It includes, but is not limited to, what the *Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia* (noting the apparent paradox in the term) describes as ‘oral literature’, containing ‘information on how to live in the world as an intricately connected entity’ (Horton 1994: 827). Milroy and Milroy’s essay refers to ‘stories given to us from the Dreaming. Stories tell us about the spirit of the world, and they come from trees, animal, rocks, rivers, the moon, stars and country itself’ (2008: 22). Astronomer and anthropologist Dr Duane Hamacher makes the point that stories in oral traditions have functions beyond the realm of the aesthetic and the imaginative, noting that they ‘also contain all of the information that’s been passed down over tens of thousands of years, which includes information about the natural world’ (cited in Harrigan 2017); thus story encompasses scientific thought. Alexis Wright’s *Meanjin* essay, ‘What Happens When You Tell Somebody Else’s Story’, uses the word to describe ‘national narratives’ (Wright 2016: 60) about Aboriginal people that are controlled by others, manifesting in public discourse in everything from individual anecdotes ‘about’ Aboriginal people to journalism, policy and law affecting their lives. Wright contrasts these narratives with Aboriginal people’s own stories – experiences, ‘cultural laws, ideas and beliefs’ that may be either subsumed by the dominant culture or held private (2016: 76).

In our work we use the broadest frame of reference for the term. We expect that the material that appears in the creative writing class may manifest any aspect of knowledge or cultural making, and we expect that poetry, script, oral story and other forms of language art can be usefully considered within the circle of this discussion. These works don’t need to fit conventional definitions of narrative, prose or even writing in order to forward the education in these areas and others that occurs and is possible in creative writing as a discipline.

## **1 Indigenous story is literary history, literary history is creative power.**

The idea that one can know place, and know one’s own place, through the stories that are told about it is a familiar proposition for scholars and teachers of literature and creative writing. Much literary criticism and indeed literary history is interested in how we might understand sites (geographical and cultural) through the works that are written in and about them. Indeed, the very ideas of national literatures, regional literatures and comparative literatures manifest the literary academy’s acceptance of the symbiosis of voice and place. The same acceptance operates in creative writing as a pedagogical discipline, where we often encourage our students to know and use the specifics of their own physical and cultural environments to help them write their stories (as implied in the dictum ‘write what you know’ [1]). In creative writing we often also expect our students to orient themselves in literary history as well (see for example, Hetherington 2010), to know where their work and their voice is sited in relation to various conceptions of tradition and the contemporary.

Yet we can acknowledge that most of those who teach creative writing in Australian tertiary institutions are more comfortable tracing the lines of literary inheritance in the Western canon than with helping students to know themselves in relation to the traditions of Indigenous story – traditions that have emerged from up to 80,000 years of continuous relationship to this country’s landscape. This body of story, which Marcus Wollombi Waters describes as ‘the oldest living intellectual property left in the world’ (Waters 2012: III) represents an extraordinarily long intimacy between place and narration – between *this* place and narration – and yet it remains quite separate from the work many writing teachers do with the writers, including young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers, who will continue to narrate Australia into the future.

For those without knowledge, authority or experience it may be a daunting prospect to begin to approach the teaching of Indigenous story. But the value, from a certain perspective, is self-evident.

One potential of this work is that it can help attend to what many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, experience in the Australian mainstream as a wounding invisibility and/or misrepresentation. Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers have described the connections between material disadvantage in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lives, and alienation from self-authorship. Melissa Lucashenko writes that ‘Most information that white Australians hold about us is from non-Aboriginal sources. Most of this information is grossly misleading and much of it is prejudiced’ (Lucashenko 2009: 7). In the words of Alexis Wright, ‘All the statistics are linked to the national narrative, to story-making, to the way that stories are told, to keep the status quo in place’ (Wright 2016: 60). Mick Dodson specifies this link as affecting educational outcomes in particular:

There is a dynamic interaction between perception and performance. The way we are seen by others and the way we internalise that view has the ability to affect material

outcomes. The negative effects of this vicious cycle are most clearly observed in the field of education. (Dodson 2010)

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university students, this can manifest as alienation and academic disengagement as higher social burdens are compounded by teaching approaches and materials that don't recognise or respond adequately to difference.

As writing teachers, we may ask to what degree we perpetuate these wounds in our classrooms through unconscious reproductions of a storyscape which excludes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people or which wrests self-authorship away from them. It is difficult to make comprehensive assessments of how much this occurs in the Australian creative writing classroom, but there are indications that the issue is, at least, underexplored. The *Teaching Austlit* database, which tracks the teaching of Australian literature, identifies 20 of 291 Australian texts taught in creative writing courses as falling within the scope of the 'BlackWords' project [2]. At roughly 7%, this is proportionally a considerably smaller share of literature than is identified as taught in Australian literary studies (17%), English literary studies (15%) and film studies (16%) (AustLit 2002- ).

A survey of *TEXT* Journal and the conference proceedings of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs also suggests that the representational problems that Lucashenko and Wright identify in the culture at large are at work in the disciplinary discourse. This survey turns up at least a dozen papers on the poetics and politics of non-Indigenous writers writing Indigenous characters and on Indigenous land. These are often nuanced, thoughtful and dialogically informed, but they are not matched in number by pieces which address the experience of writing as an Indigenous person, studying writing as an Indigenous person, approaches to reading or teaching Indigenous writing, or approaches to reading and teaching Indigenous students – of which, in these fora, only a small handful collectively seem to have been published.

And yet if we are concerned with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation, surely we are also concerned with the opportunities and conditions in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers might represent themselves. As teachers, these opportunities and conditions are not entirely out of our hands; nor is it obvious that the status quo in our pedagogy provides what's necessary without consideration or intervention.

Addressing this issue so that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander story has a clear place in our writing classes goes to the heart of the psycho-social work that can be performed by the literary arts. Lawrence Perry writes of the centrality of story for Aboriginal people:

Our Dreaming and creation stories are integral to our traditional culture and our history, but there are many other Aboriginal stories of cultural knowledge that are just as important. These stories are becoming more frequently written, and many more will be told about what our history and survival as Aboriginal peoples was like under a European colonial regime. (Perry 2014: 7)

The telling of these stories reveals not only the trauma but also the joys that official discourse generally conceals. It not only subverts the hegemonic narratives of colonialism, but also engages a deep healing process. For healing to take place, there must be remembering, not a forgetting, of the Indigenous past. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to tell our own stories is an important part of the healing process because, as thinkers from Sigmund Freud to Michael White have shown, 'one of the principle factors in the intergenerational transmission of trauma is the incapacity on the part of the survivors to remember, to mourn and to symbolize the trauma' (Connolly 2011: 610). If left unexpressed, trauma will not simply go away. Things that are hidden still exist. We are now seeing an increase in the telling of those stories by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Especially in the case of the Stolen Generation, long silences have been broken. By telling our stories we enunciate our subjectivities and support each other.

Perry notes that storytelling is a performative act which enunciates the subjectivity of the narrator by calling upon the roots of his/her heritage. From these roots emerge not only the content of stories, but also the manner and situations of their telling. The telling itself creates communities, as communities go about the work of tending the wholeness and continuity of story itself.

From this perspective tertiary study in creative writing, in which the verbal arts are valued as forms of knowledge and practice, might seem like a natural place to land for both undergraduate and postgraduate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who seek to work in continuity with these aspects of their heritage and their own sense of community. For teachers, there is the opportunity in the creative writing class to meet such students with enough cultural competency that creative writing becomes an anchor point – a link to community – within those students' experience of tertiary study.

For non-Indigenous students, working with Indigenous story and pedagogy makes room for the particularities of their own stories, which also invariably both fail and exceed hegemonic norms. For students who are very immersed in the dominant culture, this work can take them to the edges of their own cultural paradigm, allowing them to reflect beyond it and look back, perhaps for the first time, perceiving its shapes in new ways.

When pedagogical conditions allow, the value of such engagement occurs not just as creative stimulus, but as training for all students in skills and knowledge that are foundational for writers: skills in listening, in mobility of perspective, in research ethics, and in a literary and cultural history that encompasses much more of the Australian inheritance than would otherwise be available. It offers a tangible experience of the principle that Gladys and Jill Milroy convey, and that Rhoda Roberts recently articulated in similar terms: that engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture is of benefit to all Australians. 'There is no Aboriginal disadvantage,' writes Roberts, 'our culture is our advantage. Actually, it's an advantage that all Australians share and can become our shared strength' (Roberts 2016).

## 2 We do culture together: culture becomes in collaboration, conscious or unconscious.

In creative classrooms we are actively engaged in making culture through collaborative performance. We consider that we are either collaborating on making silence and invisibility for certain kinds of stories and ways of thinking about story, or we are collaborating on dialogue. As Paulo Freire contends in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*: 'Cultural action either serves domination (consciously or unconsciously) or it serves ... liberation' (Freire 1972: 146).

We also take it that the creative classroom is a microcosm of what happens elsewhere in society, where Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures create one other. These cultures do not exist in isolation or in any pure form, but are responsive and performative in relation to one another. This is not to suggest that the coercion and violence of continuing colonisation has been invited, but that individuals swept up in larger social currents affect and create themselves and one another as they respond to the possibilities of those currents. Jeanine Leane, for example, describes her experience of reading Katherine Prichard's *Coonardoo*: 'I could see the way that whiteness defined itself through blackness and by what it is not – the black woman is simple and promiscuous and by comparison the white woman is rational and modest' (Leane 2013). Projection is a key operation on one side of this coercive collaboration; the other may be compelled to respond with reactive exaggerations of traits that defy or relent to the projection, or simply with the energetic expenditure required to defend against them.

The psychoanalyst RD Laing describes the phenomenon of projective identification thus: 'The one person does not use the other merely as a hook to hang projections on. He/she strives to find in the other, or to induce the other to become, the very embodiment of projection' (Laing 1961: 111). Perhaps this is how, despite the temporal facts of Australian history, we find ourselves in a situation where many white Australians, who are separated from the alienation of settler experience by a small few generations, can simply think of themselves as 'Australian', while consciously or unconsciously identifying Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians as outsiders.

Yet cross-cultural collaboration has generative as well as destructive dimensions, and is not simply dispensed with for those who create and pass on creative works. What are the conditions of an ethical collaboration? When, if ever, can a creator cross cultural boundaries to draw on or depict material from another culture? Rather than answer these complex questions prescriptively, we invite students to think, talk and write through them actively in relation to their own practices and a range of inputs. In one lecture-dialogue, Paul reads a passage from his novel *Dancing Home* (Collis 2017) in which three 'dark figures' huddle and then scuffle under a gum tree in a park, prompting the protagonist Blackie to remember the witches of *Macbeth*. The scene brings together Blackie's sense of prescient foreboding with his grief at seeing Blackfullas cast as fringe-dwellers, and foregrounds the layered cultural inheritances of the work. We use the reading to open questions of intertextuality and cultural exchange. A pressing concern for some students is whether white writers are 'allowed' to depict and/or write in the perspectives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander characters. We respond not with one answer to fit all, but with detailed work over the semester on issues of narrative responsibility and the ethics of research. We also attend to the emotional freight of the reading within the broader historical context. The accompanying tutorial exercise is for students to write about a time when they felt like an outsider, sensorily recreating, owning and voicing that experience, and implicitly connecting with the experience of the character Blackie and the Blackfullas he sees under the tree. Of all our class exercises, this is the one that students seem to find hardest to share – one that provokes both intensive writing and silence on the invitation to read aloud. Options such as sharing in pairs and through their writing journals (or not at all) take the pressure off. But once the first brave few read theirs to the group, reluctance and individuated shame begin to dissipate in an atmosphere of collaborative listening.

Thus story becomes a community practice, helping us to experience and announce ourselves as individually and collectively conscious. Writing offers experiences of being other than what one is; this can allow disowned aspects of self to return, and can generate new possibilities entirely. The experience gives power; the power to speak of yourself rather than be as you are spoken, and to connect to the community of others as an active participant rather than a numbed or unconscious object.

This kind of active, conscious collaboration is essential at several levels of our pedagogy. As teachers, our dialogue allows us to become aware of our received dynamics and their effects, and to work out new possibilities together. Without this dialogue, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander story too easily becomes an artefact, spectacle or embodied 'other' to be catalogued, marvelled at or judged. Indeed, our work began

with Jen inviting Paul to give a guest lecture, and Paul raising precisely these concerns: too often Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academics are placed in this role, facing student biases from an isolated position and disappearing once the topic has been ticked off. Collaborative praxis instead means engaging with story and creating story as a living entity in which the dynamics of the present are in continuity with the past: in the words of Oodgeroo Noonuccal, 'the past is all about us and within' (Noonuccal 1970). And so we integrate story as practice through our conversations with each other and our students, present to those continuities, responsive to them. From the beginning we have taken it as given that we are not free, as individuals, of our acculturations. We expect ruptures and dissonance to emerge at times as these interact, and they are a vital part of our dialogue.

### 3 There is no such thing as Indigenous story, and yet it can be performed and known.

Even leaving aside the question of non-Indigenous writers taking up Indigenous material in their work (to be discussed in Part 2 of this article), the question of what makes an Indigenous story Indigenous is not straightforward. It may be that there is no adequate answer to this question, just as there is no fully adequate answer to the question of what makes an Indigenous person Indigenous. What is the blood or DNA of a story – is this defined by the blood or DNA of its author? Must we confirm that relationship, and if so, how? Must the story 'self-identify' to be Indigenous, proving itself by foregrounding certain subjects, or by displaying certain language traits? Must it be accepted by a community? Which community, and how large must that community be? There is a certain haranguing quality to these questions; one senses that any validation they generate for one story will quickly turn into invalidation for another [3].

In the realm of story, demands for credentials are dissolved by the impossibility of verifying essence through any particular quality. Considerations of identity can be reconfigured within the plurality of language and story. This is historically appropriate as well as ontologically truthful. At the point of contact with the British First Fleet in 1788, there were approximately 250 distinct language groups in Australia, with many more dialectical varieties (Walsh 1991). Each language group had individual laws and culture and they each identified with specific lands and waterways. Each language group had attachment to particular country which they knew to be theirs specifically.

While sacred attachment to country was common among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, individual language groups enjoyed specific individual difference to one another. With this being so, Australia's Indigenous peoples do not regard ourselves as 'one people'. Our languages and cultural practices and laws belong to individual language groups; therefore there is no definitive, quintessential Indigenous story. Rather, there are many stories that belong and become in that space, and that ought to be recognised.

These include the many possibilities of contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stories – those of loss and interruption, as well as continuity and regeneration. In the classroom, therefore, when we approach Indigenous story as a pedagogical subject, we don't seek out a version of story from before or beyond the damage to knowledge and breaks in knowledge that colonialism has wrought. To do so would suggest that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture ended with the First Fleet, cutting adrift the voices of contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians and their own work in story.

In valuing that work, we also refuse the demand that any one story alone bear the responsibility of being representative. In *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, Deleuze and Guattari argue that it is not possible for the works of a minor literature to avoid taking on a collective value: the 'cramped space' of a minor literature 'forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics'. Literature 'finds itself positively charged with the role and function of collective, and even revolutionary, enunciation.' This is no less the case for writers who exist on or beyond the fringes of a minority community: 'this situation,' they contend, 'allows the writer all the more the possibility to express another possible community and to forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility' (Deleuze & Guattari 1986: 17).

This supercharging of the individual enunciation makes it all the more important that we connect to multiplicity, difference and plasticity within a given 'type' of minor literature, challenging singular, static conceptions of the collective. This is as important for student writers, who are often conscious of community responsibilities, as it is for student readers and for us as teachers. In our classrooms we use works by multiple Australian Indigenous writers and storytellers – including singer-songwriter Dougie Young, Jill and Gladys Idjirrimoonra Milroy, Kim Scott and Tony Birch – within a palette of materials from a broad range of international cultures. Each work offers a different set of possibilities, a different impression of how the intricacies and intimacies of genre, form and language can express and create communal and individual consciousness and sensibility, from Dougie Young's pointed larrikinism to the Milroys' resonant layering of dream image and cultural critique.

Those we have so far been able to integrate barely scratch the surface of what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander literature has to offer, but we attempt to integrate them in a way that opens Indigenous story as a field of historical depth and situated individual expression. In a lecture-dialogue on 'Voice and Memory', we play a song from Dougie Young's 1965 EP *The Land Where the Crow Flies Backwards* ('They Say It's a Crime': 'People in this town, they just run me down,/they gave me a real bad name. / They say I drink and fight, well that's quite all right / 'cause the other boys do the same...') (Young 2012). Paul offers

historical context for the song, describing the incursions of the NSW Aborigines Protection Act and its amendments, which gave the state the power to

move Aboriginal people out of towns; set up managers, local committees and local guardians (police) for the reserves; control reserves; prevent liquor being sold to Aboriginals; and to stop whites from associating with Aboriginals or entering the reserves... The 1915 amendments gave [the Board] the power to remove any child at any time and for any reason. (National Museum Australia, nd)

Confronting this history shifts the boundaries of the song, which for students then becomes more transparently about a shared Australian history, rather than about Dougie Young alone or about Aboriginal history as though distinct from Australian history. Another layer is added when Paul tells a story from his own experience with Dougie Young – a story of Dougie’s arrival in Paul’s home town, of his welcome into Paul’s extended family, and of Dougie’s journeys from one home to another. Later, in tutorials, we will explore this story’s themes of migrancy, home and exile, its use of journey as narrative structure, and the roles of the storyteller and listener as witness. In the lecture another layer again is added when Paul introduces a film clip (Coffey 2013): the trailer of Essie Coffey’s *My Survival as an Aboriginal* (1978), in which Essie speaks about the experience of forced displacement into the Aboriginal camps, and delivers a version of Dougie’s ‘They Say It’s a Crime’ which then morphs into her own hymn to Country and to Black sovereignty and pride. There is much to discover in these layers. In response to student reactions we may go on to explore the particular characteristics of oral literature, the proximity of story and song, mnemonic features, the relative values and effects of fixity and responsiveness in the transmission of cultural heritage, the intimacy and particularity of the speaker-audience relationship in spoken-story contexts, and/or their own relationships to these particular stories. We ask students to enter the story exchange by thinking about their own narrative heritage, and by asking family members for a story which they can then bring to share orally with the class. In this way, story becomes a living entity which we participate in together.

It will be clear by now that bringing Australian Indigenous story into the scope of our creative writing pedagogy has not been a simple matter of making inclusions of content. We are interested in individual stories, but also in the epistemologies from which they emerge. We continue to investigate how our pedagogy might be changed by this encounter, and how we might make our pedagogy open to such change. In the second part of this article we will look at some of the pronounced ‘rubbing points’ between Indigenous story and conventional creative writing pedagogy that we have grappled with, including perspectives on voice and point of view, disciplinary boundaries and questions of narrative responsibility.

## Notes

[1] US novelist and creative writing academic Eileen Pollack summarises this case:

Since writing programs are designed for young writers, most of whom scorn the farms, ghettos, and suburbs from which they sprang in favor of the worlds they have seen in movies and on TV, writing teachers often need to urge their students to set their stories on farms in rural Wisconsin or in neighborhoods in inner-city Detroit or upscale developments in River Oaks or Shaker Heights rather than in Middle Earth or Hollywood. (Pollack 2007: 547-548) return to text

[2] The BlackWords project identifies literature ‘by and about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers and literary and storytelling cultures’ within the *AustLit* database. Statistics calculated here are from data generated using the ‘category’ and ‘project’ (‘blackwords’) fields of the Teaching *AustLit* dataset. return to text

[3] Anita Heiss gives a comprehensive introduction to discussion around definitions at ‘What is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Literature’, from Chapter 3 of *Dhuuluu-Yala=To Talk Straight: Publishing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Literature* (Heiss 2007). return to text

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