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'Nhill' and the Aboriginal Language Revival movement: Relational identity, short story titles and 'contracts of homophony'

Abstract
This article takes a practice-led research approach to engage with a current debate in Australian post-colonialism centred on the language issues involved with the Aboriginal Language Revival movement. Using the author's own short story, 'Nhill', as a case study, the article develops Amos Oz's notion of the beginning of a story as a 'contract' that all texts make with their readers. 'Nhill' is a provocative instance of this sort of contract because it is an English-language corruption, and mis-hearing, of the Aboriginal word, 'nyell'. Nhill is also a town on the edge of the Little Desert in the Wimmera region of Western Victoria. The article explores the relationship of this place to the implications of the contract that the title 'Nhill' makes with its readers. By tracking the practice-led shift in the title of the story from, originally, the English-language name 'Little Desert', through to 'Nhill' as a homophonic echo of 'nyell', the article explores the ethical implications of a 'contract of homophony' for the current debate around the Aboriginal Language Revival movement. However, because 'Nhill's' author is a non-indigenous researcher involved in the field of Aboriginal Language Revival, the article's focus on 'homophonic ethics' must itself be situated ethically.
Keywords: Aboriginal Language Revival, ethics, homophony

As a creative writer, I use words to navigate my way through place in my short stories. At the same time, in the temper of practice-led research, I use my frequently lengthy re-drafting process to track those threads and affects of language that hint at new forms of academic and creative knowledge. As Estelle Barrett observes:

> An innovative dimension of this subjective approach to research lies in its capacity to bring into view, particularities that reflect new social and other realities either marginalised or not yet recognised in established social practices and discourses. (Barrett 2007: 4)

Frequently, these 'new social and other realities' are explored further in academic forums, such as an article like this one. Always, they depend upon a literal and/or metaphorical re-writing of the creative piece, re-writings that may seek a way through or around the pitfalls, traps and entanglements that places often place in the way of words. Sometimes, the less smooth the path of words through place, the more creative the artistic practice becomes, in that the resistances of place encourage writerly risk-taking.

A further advantage of the practice-led research approach is that it helps to orientate this article towards an indigenous research methodology suited to the engagement with Aboriginal Language Revival. As Jelena Porsanger notes:

> The Alaskan Yupiaq scholars, George P Charles Kanaqluk and Oscar Kawagley, have shown in their studies that "theoretical", "ready-to-use" methods must be re-considered and re-worked in indigenous research, and that the researcher should not start from a theoretical point. (Porsanger 2004: 110)

This statement applies as readily to practice-led research as to indigenous research methodologies, and in each case suggests a heightened ethical sensitivity to the research materials. In the following pages, I will link this idea of ethical sensitivity to a mode of 'listening'.

In this article, I want to analyse the literal and metaphorical re-writing, over a period of many years, of my short story 'Nhill'. My research focus is language-place relations, building on previous research by numerous indigenous scholars, writers and activists into Aboriginal Language Revival. The aim is twofold: firstly, to present a case study of practice-led research methodology; secondly, to show the value of this approach to a current and significant issue in post-colonial studies. The continuity between these twin aims lies in the notion of what it means to listen to place and to the overt and covert, or homophonic, languages of place (extending to an engagement with the seemingly non-linguistic sounds of place). Put slightly differently, to the extent that linguistic sounds as homophony are non-signifying (lacking a direct signified), they are of a part with the natural, animate and inanimate sounds of place. Sound is an enduring aspect of both language and place, and onomatopoeia is only tangentially relevant here; more relevant is Gilles Deleuze's notion of Nature as a 'plane of musical composition' (Deleuze 1988: 126). From this, I suggest, emerges an ethics of post-colonial linguistics, listening and sound, which taps into the recent debate about the relationship of colonial to indigenous languages explored in, for example, Melissa Lucashenko's novel *Mullumbimby* and in the review of this novel by academic Eve Vincent.

In its provenance as an interpretation by a White academic of an Aboriginal text, Vincent's review of Lucashenko's novel raises the issue of the relationship that people of non-indigenous descent, like me, have to indigenous research material. Quoting Shawn Wilson, Jioanna Carjuzaa and J Kay Fenimore-Smith state that 'if Indigenous ways of knowing have to be narrowed through one particular lens (which it certainly does not), then surely that lens would be relationality' (Carjuzaa & Fenimore-Smith 2010: 8). All post-colonial identities are complex; in Australia, the multi-cultural dimensions of society further complicate the multi-racial dimensions that inform group and individual identities. Further, the landmark recognition of native title made by the High Court of Australia in 1992 in Mabo v Queensland has not lessened the significance to identity issues of the struggles between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples around the occupation and meanings of land and place. In this context, how might non-indigenous researchers relate to indigenous research material? This question is pressing because, as Linda Tuhiwai Smith states in her classic study *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, 'Research in itself is a powerful intervention, even if carried out at a distance, which has traditionally benefited the researcher, and the knowledge base of the dominant group in society' (Smith 2012: 178). Smith continues, 'it is critical that researchers recognize the power dynamic that is embedded in the relationship with their subjects' (Smith 2012: 178). As a non-indigenous researcher from what Smith terms 'the dominant group in

society', the burden is on me to identify and enact an ethical relationality to the indigenous research materials, regardless of the extent to which this article also engages with *non*-indigenous research domains.

Along with other thinkers around this issue, such as Porsanger, and Carjuzaa writing with Fenimore-Smith, Linda Tuhiwai Smith develops what I am calling a 'scale of relationality' for analysing the relationality of non-indigenous researchers to indigenous research material, and to indigenous communities and researchers. At one end of this scale is what Porsanger, quoting Robert K Merton, refers to as '"extreme insiderism"' (Porsanger 2004: 109, note 1). Porsanger writes: 'There are, indeed, some extreme opinions that only indigenous researchers may conduct research on, with and about indigenous peoples' (Porsanger 2004: 109). Similarly, Carjuzaa and Fenimore-Smith note that, 'From what [Xae Alicia] Reyes and others suggest, one might conclude that there is no room for non-Indian researchers to be involved in Indigenous research' (Carjuzaa & Fenimore-Smith 2010: 5). Meanwhile, analogizing from a historically earlier position in feminism to the current state of play in Maori research, Smith countenances 'the idea that only women can carry out feminist research' in order to draw a parallel with Maori research 'as currently framed' (Smith 2012: 189) [1].

However, Smith joins with Porsanger, Carjuzaa and Fenimore-Smith, in rejecting the 'extreme insiderism' position: 'What I want to signal, however, is that feminist scholarship has moved from its early foundations and as a parallel the same possibility exists for Kaupapa Maori research' (Smith 2012: 196, note 11) [2]. Along with Porsanger, Carjuzaa and Fenimore-Smith, Linda Tuhiwai Smith proceeds from this standpoint to outline a range of options for non-indigenous researchers along what I am calling a 'scale of relationality'. At the bottom end of this scale, Smith describes 'the strategy of avoidance, whereby the researcher avoids dealing with the issues or with Maori' (Smith 2012: 179). Seemingly, this is barely different from 'extreme insiderism' in its practical impact. At the top end, she describes 'the strategy of "making space" where research organizations have recognized and attempted to bring more Maori researchers and "voices" into their own organization' (Smith 2012: 179). Porsanger, Carjuzaa and Fenimore-Smith all reference Linda Tuhiwai Smith in their advocacy for an approach that would, reversely, make space for *non*-indigenous researchers in indigenous research space. For this reason, I will work only with Smith in the following comments.

Smith outlines four stages or positions on the scale of relationality. In some ways, I am positioned at the top end –for a non-indigenous researcher engaging with indigenous research materials –as my home institution (Deakin University) supports an Institute of Koorie Education. In other ways, I am lower down the scale. Stage 2 provides for 'the strategy of "personal development", whereby the researchers prepare themselves by learning Maori language, attending *hui* and becoming more knowledgeable about Maori concerns' (Smith 2012: 179). Over the course of the development of this article, I have had the opportunity to reflect at length on the extent and nature of my relationality to the indigenous research material that I am engaging with. Smith's stage 2 provides the opportunity to unpack the research methodology that informs this article in the service of relationality:

Firstly, as will be described and analyzed in more detail in what follows, Aboriginal Language Revival is clearly a current and significant 'concern' for indigenous people across Australia. Relatedly, I have been involved with workshops for learning Aboriginal language as both participant and organizer. Not to put it lightly, I am concerned with this concern of Aboriginal people.

Secondly, but this time picking up on and extending the notion of 'personal development', this article itself is a significant moment in my personal reflection on my relationality to the indigenous research material that I am engaging with. In this way, my work is a heuristic learning experience in post-colonial identity.

Thirdly, through the approach of practice-led research, my work enables me to revisit the notion of indigenous concerns in that my short story, 'Nhill', is the result of time spent 'in country' around the town of Nhill, in the Little Desert, and in the Wimmera region of Western Victoria generally. To a degree, this brings my work into alignment with indigenous concerns through the focus on *place* as the wellspring of research knowledge. This is not work that could have been done in the library. Furthermore, again as a practice-led researcher, my experiments with and at the limits of the English language have fertilised my engagement with indigenous concerns in that (as will be discussed further below) they have landed me on the ambiguous, post-colonial relations of the word 'Nhill' and the Aboriginal word 'nyell' in the writing of my English-language short story entitled 'Nhill'. 'Nhill' is both a limit case of English (as the proper name for the town of that name derived from the Aboriginal word 'nyell') and a limit case of my short story to the extent that a title occupies the margins of the text that it signifies. Again, as previously mentioned, my practice-led research methodology helps to align my work with an indigenous frame of reference in the way –on the model of indigenous research approaches –it deliberately eschews what Porsanger calls '"theoretical", "ready-to-use" methods' in favour of more of a 'bottom up' approach (Porsanger 2004: 110). At the same time, my choice of the first-person singular point of view in this article and, more directly, my use of the first-person plural point of view in the short story 'Nhill', helps me achieve at least some measure of traction with indigenous concerns. As Carjuzaa and Fenimore-Smith observe:

> the institutional expectations of researchers to distance themselves from the participants and community of study as evidenced in the accepted use of the third person in research writing ... is in stark contrast to the first-person accounts preferred by many Indigenous scholars. (Carjuzaa & Fenimore-Smith 2010: 3)

Supporting this idea, Carjuzaa and Fenimore-Smith quote approvingly Shawn Wilson's proposition that:

> situating himself as a storyteller instead of researcher/academic scholar allows him to present information in a more culturally appropriate way by modelling "Indigenous ways of being, knowing, and doing". (Carjuzaa & Fenimore-Smith 2010: 3)

The practice at the heart of my practice-led research is a story told in the first-person plural. It is not a matter of co-opting the 'voice of the other', rather of using the mode of address of the other to replace the fantasy of objective, academic 'third person' knowledge with the opportunity (through the use of first-person storytelling) to more deeply inhabit my own subjectivity within the circumstances of post-colonialism and in my relationship to the other.

Finally, there is one more aspect to mention of my positioning within stage 2 of Smith's scale of relationality regarding the relationship of non-indigenous researchers like myself to indigenous research material. To an extent, this concluding aspect sums up the three preceding aspects of my relationship to such material, for it relies on the notion of an identity of the researcher shaped around 'listening' as a mode of 'ethical sensitivity'. To listen in this way is to

attend to the revivals of language (as in Aboriginal Language Revival), to reflect on one's self rather than imposing one's self more or less inconsiderately on the world, and to work up knowledge through being receptive to the representations of the other within a comity of the creation, telling and sharing of stories in the first person. This aspect of my positioning is also linked to how my article's theory of 'ethical listening' is a direct expression of my methodology, and to how my theory constantly re-circulates through the space of my methodology. In this way, theory is created from the bottom up, while methodology is kept on its toes. Such a double move is characteristic of the iterative mode of practice-led research. The emphasis in this final aspect of stage 2 is on the ethical possibilities of listening, which marginalizes the potential violences of brazen interpretation.

Having developed a foundation for this paper's approach and methodology through a consideration of how non-indigenous researchers might situate themselves in relationship to indigenous research material, I now want to turn to the question of the relationship of the writer and reader to short story titles.

'What's in a name?' asks William Shakespeare. My interest here, however, is more in the question, What's in a title? Titles appear, at first, to originate, anchor, and locate the stories that we write and read, even as they exist on the literal and metaphorical margins of those stories (not infrequently, the 'same' work is re-published under a different title; more infrequently, a 'different' work is republished under the same title). In *The Story Begins: Essays on Literature*, Amos Oz (2000) discusses, as examples of beginnings, the *opening lines* of numerous novels and short stories. Oddly though, he never raises the possibility that *the very titles* of these works might constitute at least one of their possible beginnings.

Nevertheless, I find Oz's suggestion that 'Any beginning of a story is always a kind of contract between writer and reader' (Oz 2000: 7) a useful way in to thinking about the post-colonial implications of my story entitled 'Nhill'.This is because such a 'contract' is, for Oz, what he labels 'a latent beginning-before-the-beginning' (Oz 2000: 8), or rather, drawing on Edward Said's work in *Beginnings: Intentions and Methods* (Said 1978), 'an act of returning, of going back, and not just a departure point for linear progress' (Oz 2000: 9, footnote). To me, a title is just such a 'contract', which looks two ways in time. In fact, a title is perhaps the most contrary of time stamps, due to its ontological (not to mention literal) affinity with Jacques Derrida's theory of framing, which Derrida expounds through the notion of the *parergon* as the 'additional' or 'supplementary' work to the work of art. Like a title:

> a parergon comes against, beside, and in addition to the *ergon*, the work… but it does not fall to one side, it touches and cooperates within the operation, from a certain outside. Neither simply outside nor simply inside. (Derrida 1987: 54)

A short-story title is thus part of the narrative it anticipates, which presses forward in time, and also antithetical to it, some sort of a restraint on time. Further, to the extent that Said's reference to 'linear progress' implicates the cultural priority given to Darwinian evolution, Henri Bergson's thoughts on evolution and time are relevant here (Oz 2000: 9, footnote). Evolution itself, Bergson notes, 'is not only a movement forward; in many cases we observe a marking-time, and still more often a deviation or turning back' (Bergson 1998: 104). On this logic, any sense of a beginning, any title at all, is riven with such a double aspect of time future and time past.

When I began writing the short story now entitled ‘Nhill’, two decades ago, I gave it the title ‘Little Desert’. But that title never seemed to fit with the text of what I have described elsewhere as ‘a story about the relationship difficulties of a young couple trekking through the Little Desert on the outskirts of Nhill in the Wimmera region of Western Victoria’ (West 2014b: 155). It was only when I changed the name of my story to ‘Nhill’ that the story started to ‘come alive’, and was later published in several books, journals and anthologies. With the benefit of hindsight, I would now characterize this title change (this plucking of a word from ‘inside’ of my story and planting it on the ‘outside’) as an early intimation of a ‘contract’ of heuristic and creative, *post-colonial awareness*. That is, an intimation held ‘in place’ by certain ambiguous relations of history, language and place, and also informed by the notion of looking two ways in time.

Both titles, both ‘Little Desert’ and ‘Nhill’, are the names of a place, but the former is a colonial and English name and the latter, not … or almost not. As I intend to explain, the peculiar status of the title and place name ‘Nhill’ provides my short story ‘Nhill’ with the energies that start to enact a practice-led research engagement with post-coloniality. At least two modes of ‘mis-alignment or dislocation’ induce this, related firstly to the content of my story, and secondly to the language or forms of language in which it is told. Firstly, there is a fracturing between the title and the place (in story terms, the setting) of the story that the title refers to. Strangely, ‘Nhill’ is not about Nhill (the small Wimmera town) so much as about the Little Desert *on the outskirts of Nhill*. My story, that is, is a ‘contract’, though its title, *of not arriving at or of missing a place*. As both a researcher enacting practice-led research, and as a post-colonial creative writer, this encourages me to ask the question, what else is missing?

One answer to this question is: language. Language is missing, and in several senses. This second ‘mis-alignment or dislocation’ will take some time to unpack. Nhill is supposed to have received its name from a corruption of a local Aboriginal word ‘nyell’, which means ‘the abode of spirits’ (Van Der Putte 2004). (On this issue of local Aboriginal inhabitation near Nhill, Libby Robin writes that the ‘Little Desert lies within the country of the Wotjabaluk people’ though ‘before European invasion its harsh, prickly heathlands were sparsely inhabited hunting grounds’ [Robin 1998: 5-6].) Granted, the genealogical study of words is notoriously a mysterious and nebulous business, if only because, as Cher Coad reminds us (drawing on her engagement with Jacques Derrida’s philosophy), ‘meaning generates in time from usages established over time and is, through the endless repetition of difference, always deferred towards further and future meaning’ (Coad 2012: 256). Or in other words, no word is ever identical with itself, which makes the tracing of origins, not a worthless exercise, certainly, but an ultimately impossible exercise. That said, ‘Nhill’, as a word, let alone as a place name or a title to a short story, has an exceptionally ‘deferred’, mis-aligned or dislocated footing in meaning. For here, Derridean ‘différance’ (meaning how meaning is created through difference) spills over (in the mode of a ‘corruption’ of ‘nyell’) from a local Aboriginal language into English. So, just as my short story ‘Nhill’ misses its mark in that the title designates a place other than the place that the story is about, so too the very word ‘Nhill’ misses its mark in that it somehow falls into the gap between two languages (Derrida’s philosophy in combination with post-colonial historical reflection tells us this). To cite Amos Oz once more, the title ‘Nhill’ is a ‘contract’, or a beginning, that in its linguistic or ‘language state’ deconstructs colonial certainties of the naming of place (not to mention of the occupation of place). ‘Nhill’ looks two ways in time because it is always already sited, linguistically, in three times: colonial, pre-colonial, post-colonial. The gap between two languages that ‘Nhill’ reveals might thus

be thought of as the gap of post-colonial relationality, to the extent that this prevails in language.

This brings us to a political moment in post-colonialism, a strategic moment too, related to the circumstances of language in a post-colonial nation like Australia. How might the concern to reconcile the peoples of a place, through the languages spoken by these peoples, be addressed through a textual formulation? Read sympathetically, my short story, in the way that the title 'Nhill' opens a passage to the title lying hidden within it ('Nyell'), might be interpreted as suggesting that a full recovery of 'uncorrupted' Aboriginal language has the potential to help re-establish 'our' relations to place. That is, that the 'same' story told in a different (indigenous) language, and thus inevitably in a different way, might solve the problem of the lack of fit between language and place evident in a story called 'Nhill' that is actually about the Little Desert. Language, that is, might impel a new relationship to place; 'nyell', we recall, means 'the abode of spirits' (Van Der Putte 2004), which already implies some other geography of place to begin with –even perhaps a 'less missable' place. Significantly, such an interpretation of the title 'Nhill' would cohere with the approach of the Executive Officer of the Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages, and Aboriginal scholar, Paul Paton, when he argues for the importance of Aboriginal Language Revival in these terms:

> Language connects to spirit and the land. Languages uphold and reinforce Indigenous world-views held by previous generations. Reviving and maintaining language is core to reviving cultural and spiritual practices. (Paton 2014: 3)

Aboriginal writer Melissa Lucashenko's 2013 novel *Mullumbimby* reinforces Paton's view by including a Glossary of Aboriginal words, and also advice to the reader on where to go if they want 'to learn more [words]' (Lucashenko 2013: 283). Reviewing *Mullumbimby*, Eve Vincent suggests that by 'using phonetic spellings, Aboriginal English and Bundjalung words, Lucashenko breathes life into the language belonging to this place' (Vincent 2013). All the same, the invitation merely 'to learn more [words]', which Lucashenko's glossary note seems to imply by directing the reader to '*A Dictionary of Yugambeh and Related Languages*, or the several dictionaries of Bundjalung', has a *quantitative* character to it that does not necessarily invite a *qualitative* exploration of how words function on a material and affective plane (Lucashenko 2013: 283). (Interestingly though, these 'several dictionaries of Bundjalung', seem to come from a non-indigenous source ['all of which were complied by Dr Margaret Sharpe with the guidance of Aboriginal informants' (Lucashenko 2013: 283)] and therefore this glossary note itself evidences an example of research collaboration between indigenous and non-indigenous researchers.)

Certainly, I do not want to dispute the political and strategic value of the Aboriginal Language Revival approach to Australia's post-colonial context. There is considerable power in an approach that relies on a one-to-one correspondence between language and people. Indeed, to indulge in a harsher self-critique of the politics of my creative writing than the one I have just conducted in the previous paragraph, perhaps I should never have changed the title of my short story from 'Little Desert' in the first place, rather than adopting the option of linking the mainly English-language body of my text to all the 'contractual' (after Amos Oz) problematizations generated by the latest title, 'Nhill'. That is to say, the title 'Little Desert' carries the advantage, relative and compromised though it might be, of not trespassing onto the territory *of Aboriginal language* within an English-language text. In the same

vein, resuscitating the ‘uncorrupted’ Aboriginal name ‘Nyell’ for my title might even have exaggerated the political difficulties that an unsympathetic reader may associate with the title ‘Nhill’, by creating a mis-match between the almost exclusively English-language text of my story and the out-numbered, indigenous word, ‘Nyell’. Staying with the title ‘Nhill’, however, *does* allow for another strategy, which is perhaps not inconsistent with the Language Revival political turn, for just as Jacques Derrida’s notion of ‘différance’ is, as Cher Coad notes, ‘a pun’, because its ‘difference’ from ‘difference’ is only apparent in writing (at least, in French), so too the word ‘Nhill’ (as mis-heard ‘nyell’) carries substantial homophonic heft and impact (Coad 2012: 256). What might we infer from such a ‘contract of homophony’?

When speaking to people about my short story, ‘Nhill’, and mentioning the title before the content, they often ask, Why write a story about ‘nil’, as in ‘zero’, ‘nothing’ or ‘nothingness’? It would appear then that my story, even as it misses its mark in at least a couple of ways (the ‘mis-alignments or dislocations’ described above), *hits the mark of homophony*. Now, one could take the relatively familiar Derridean route here, and play out the consequences of Derrida’s punning to show how writing deconstructs the privileging of speech in the Western philosophical tradition, and further, how writing also undoes any privileging of itself [3]. Still it seems that that particular move, valuable as it might be in other contexts, has already been conducted, in the present case, by the very use of the word ‘Nhill’ as title of my story. ‘Nhill’, in its evocation of an (non-English) Aboriginal word, takes the post-colonial route, as it were, to Derrida’s destination of the lack of self-presence in all constructions of meaning. (Also, I do not want to restrict myself to Derrida’s concern with speech vis-à-vis writing; I have more interest in speech as it opens onto domains such as non-signifying sound.) I thus intend to pursue another approach, which models the practice-led research methodology of using a creative work to attempt a contribution to knowledge within the Humanities and Social Sciences (in this case meaning, to post-colonial studies).

I will also mention at this point that I am aware of, but have chosen to pass over for this article, yet another language-based option that presents itself: that is, the option to embrace and cultivate a sort of ‘third space’ or ‘pidgin’ language, on the model of ‘Nhill’ as midway between English and an Aboriginal tongue. This is partly because I am concerned that the unavoidable simplification of communication in ‘pidgin’ can be seen as detracting from the creativity and artistry that is as essential in day-to-day culture as in artistic practice itself; amongst other things, this makes it less palatable politically. My choice to leave out a discussion of ‘pidgin’ relates more, however, to the observation that the Aboriginal Language Revival debate, as carried out by Aboriginal public intellectuals such as Melissa Lucashenko, Paul Paton and others, does not frame itself strongly in this way. Proposals towards a ‘third space’ language or discourse are fairly sidelined in favour of a notion closer to that of ‘parallel languages’ linked to ‘parallel knowledges.’ In other words, while I would not want to say that the Aboriginal Language Revival debate maintains a strict linguistic binary, it surely avoids significant engagement with any sense of a ‘synthesis’ or ‘third space’ of the Aboriginal and English languages. In this, it avoids both ‘pidgin,’ on the one hand, and linguistic ‘in-between experimentation’ on the other hand. Lucashenko’s *Mullumbimby*, for example, despite its use of what Vincent calls ‘phonetic spellings, Aboriginal English and Bundjalung words’ (Vincent 2013), actually reads as a much less experimental text, in terms of any English-Bundjalung commingling, than this description of Vincent’s might imply. If you look for it, you might notice the syntactical pressure placed on a conventional sort of English language in direct speech lines like ‘“Sorry, sister, no can do”’ (Lucashenko 2013: 152) or ‘“Radical blackfellas at two o’clock. Book em Danno”’ (Lucashenko 2013:

43). Such so-called 'Aboriginal English', however, is less a form of 'hybrid language,' and more like an English merely shot through with often American-flavoured sayings. Thus, while the note to Lucashenko's Glossary reads, 'In this novel, Jo speaks a mixture of Bundjalung and Yugambeh languages, interspersed with a variety of Aboriginal English terms', in fact most of the English Jo speaks is little different from the English-language speech to be found in any number of contemporary Australian novels, authored by Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal writers (Lucashenko 2013: 283). It is almost as if *Mullumbimby* is easier to read for a mono-lingual English-language reader like myself than it perhaps should be! Certainly, it conveys the overall effect of pushing the English and Aboriginal languages into parallel streams.

On this basis, drawing together my proposed strategy with that of Aboriginal Language Revival, I want to address the question, What would a language of homophony amount to? That is, what are the advantages, for (post-colonial) relationality, of picking away at the thread of homophony in 'Nhill'? What would a 'contract of homophony' enable? The most prominent homophony in 'Nhill' is, as mentioned above, 'Nhill' with 'nil'. Quite disturbingly, to my ear, 'nil' (slipping precipitously from homophony into meaning) suggests next: 'terra nullius'. Equally though, 'terra nullius' evokes the word, and poet's name, 'John Shaw Neilson' … which also appears in 'Nhill'. And so on and so forth; the multiplying potential signifieds of 'Nhill's' homophonic signifiers (signifiers without a direct signified –traversing signification 'horizontally' as it were, connotation rather than denotation) take the reader on a journey through all manner of meanings –including the meanings in Aboriginal languages that a unilingual English speaker might hear without understanding. Which is precisely my point: for while the political question of *what is actually said* in a language is, no doubt about it, vital, the question of *how to listen to* language is vital too. Homophony is a prompt to listening, and listening is a prompt to a powerful politics and ethics.

One slightly odd thing about 'Nhill' is that, although it contains characters, even characters that talk to each other a lot, it contains not one word of direct speech. More precisely, the latest and perhaps 'final' version of my story has no direct speech. I now realize that, in my writing about place in 'Nhill', as a writer I was myself the locus (or place, if you like) of a tension between the place I was writing about (and felt I knew quite well on the basis of time spent there) and the conventions of short-story creativity. A relatively early, published version of 'Nhill' ended with its one and only line of direct speech, and just three words at that (West 2006: 137). It was as if I couldn't resist the lure of direct speech for bringing character alive! One kind reviewer of this version, however, wrote that 'Nhill' 'would be perfect but for its last line' (Falconer 2006/2007: 44). Thereafter, I cut all the direct speech out of my story, for all its subsequent re-publications. Initially, this made the story feel unfinished to me (the three concluding words cut were 'I love you') but with time, and as a practice-led researcher and artist, I have come to see that what this excision really did was to 'finish' 'Nhill' as some sort of sustained engagement with a certain aspect of speech (one Delia Falconer, in effect, alerted me to). In other words, my story became less a piece about 'things spoken', than a piece about 'how spoken things might be spoken', and, by extension, about the hearing of these things, whatever they might mean. Relatedly, by cutting all direct speech, I also kept open the possibility that, while 'Nhill' is almost entirely written in English, the language spoken (indirectly, as it were) by the characters is not necessarily English. In its secondary, reporting function, indirect speech thereby shape shifts as an 'invisible interpreter,' availing direct speech of an ambiguity. A path opens up here of *language in general* as distinct from *a language* per se.

To pursue this idea further, I suggest that the absence of direct speech opens a space for an exploration of the materiality of language, as sound and as an element or sensation to be listened to, in relationship to the place of my story (the so-called, in English, Little Desert). In the last parts of this article, I want to focus on these two aspects closely: the relationship of the materiality of language to the materiality of place; and, the notion of language as something that is above all to be listened to, almost as one might listen to music. The 'contract of homophony,' in fact, motivates both these things; homophony draws attention to the materiality of language as sound, which in turn prompts attention to language's material context (here, above all, place) and also to a certain mode of human, sensory engagement: hearing. The absence of 'direct' meaning via 'direct speech' focuses attention on language's material and aural aspects. Ultimately, 'Nhill' is about bodies in a post-colonial place, bearing an orientation to language that sets the question of the actual language any given character might be speaking aside, in favour of an enquiry into language as it relates to place, and to the meanings of place, via what Susan Sontag calls 'the attentive sense [of the ear], humbler, more passive, more immediate … than the eye' (Sontag 1996: 196). Scattered plentifully through 'Nhill', in a way that recalls in fiction what Jioanna Carjuzaa and J. Kay Fenimore-Smith refer to as 'a repositioning of the researcher from interpreter to listener' (Carjuzaa & Fenimore-Smith 2010: 6), are sounds 'for their own sake:'

> Tiny desert mice and prodigious desert rats were in shadowy motion within the scrub, chittering among themselves without regard to size or species. (West 2014a: 149)

> It had been as if the visible landscape –the few trees, the copper-coloured, needle-like grass –was listening to what we said, finding it eventually acceptable, and allowing our utterances to pass back into the quietness unhindered. (West 2014a: 150)

> A single duck's cry carried to our ears with almost no volume at all, the smallest increment imaginable before deafness begins. (West 2014a: 151)

These examples, I suggest, imply that the textuality of 'Nhill' is saturated, to a greater or lesser extent, with a 'contract of homophony'. They draw attention to the materiality of language as sound to be heard, as a dimension of the sounds of place, and as an integral element of place and of the occupation of place (even, after Sontag, of a 'humbler, more passive, more immediate' occupation of place [Sontag 1996: 196]). By hinting at the whole potential flow of meanings that streams through language as homophony, they open up the question of how local or introduced language or languages might generate meanings (in any given place) and the consequences of such meanings. In other words, these extracts from 'Nhill' expose questions around the connection between language and all the sounds that flow through those post-colonial places inhabited by indigenous and non-indigenous human subjects distinguished by the human characteristic of possessing speech and the related capacity to hear it. In this, a 'contract of homophony' is, at the very least, not inconsistent with the Aboriginal Language Revival political turn noticeable in texts like Melissa Lucashenko's *Mullumbimby*.

As mentioned above, to the extent that linguistic sounds as homophony are non-signifying (lacking a direct signified), they are of a part with the natural, animate and inanimate sounds of place. Sound is an enduring aspect of both language and place, and onomatopoeia is only tangentially relevant here; more relevant is Gilles Deleuze's notion of Nature as a 'plane of musical

composition' (Deleuze 1988: 126). In short, the homophonic materiality of sound, as an aspect of language, insists upon the importance of the relationship of language to a place as indexed by the sounds of place. However, for a post-colonial, multi-racial and multi-cultural society like Australia, such a focus on the materiality of sound has the advantage of not restricting political decisions about language to a binary either/or approach. It need not be either an indigenous language *or* English. As discussed previously, the Aboriginal Language Revival debate steers away from the notion of a 'third space' language in favour of the option of 'parallel languages' and by extension 'parallel knowledges'. Consequently, I view a 'contract of homophony' as a bridge between indigenous and non-indigenous languages in the shape of a reminder (a reminder constantly and unavoidably asserted within the sounds of speech) of the unavoidable and valuable connection of language to place as expressed in the materiality of the dyad 'sound-place'. To mis-hear 'nyell' as Nhill, and then to clarify this mis-hearing, is not to divert language down one path or another (either English *or* the Aboriginal language of which 'nyell' forms a part). It is rather to hear the 'English' in the indigenous language, and vice versa, and ultimately to keep faith with the mis-hearing of 'nyell' as a homophonic prompt to the importance of recognizing how we engage with place through our languages. As a short story, 'Nhill' sustains this productive tension thematically in the way its title unsettles the relationship of the story to its setting in the Little Desert. If homophony encourages us to engage with place more ethically, it also encourages us to listen across languages, in a show of good faith to the other. Thus, it preserves a place for the indigenous in the non-indigenous, and vice versa, within all of our listening and speaking bodies.

Following the lead given by Estelle Barrett, my practice-led research approach thereby anticipates, howsoever modestly, 'particularities that reflect new social and other realities either marginalised or not yet recognised in established social practices and discourses' (Barrett 2007: 4). If it weren't for my dissatisfaction with the original title of my story, 'Little Desert', I would not have taken quite the same pathway, constructing a suturing together of theorists (like Amos Oz, Jacques Derrida and Eve Vincent) with moments and aspects of my own creative writing, to quite the same sort of engagement with a post-colonial linguistics centred on language-place relations. In fact though, it is yet another *title* (drawn out of a moment in mid-nineteenth historical discourse) that has been the stuff of another sort of 'contract' (after Amos Oz) in guiding my practice-led research around 'Nhill'. That title is the title of Henry Reynolds' study, *This Whispering in Our Hearts* (1998). This very 'whispering', I have tried to show, is also a 'whispering' inside of all languages, and thus a 'whispering', too, inside all the debates around Aboriginal Language Revival. Methodologically then, the intertextuality of this article, and of my practice-led research, consists partly in the way in which the titles of works can create a 'chain of contracts' serving to flesh out a contribution to knowledge. (Similarly, and as faintly, as place names, titles and contracts, 'Nhill' links to *Mullumbimby*.) The title of Reynolds' book (the materiality of a whisper's quietness, as it were) returns me to 'the smallest increment imaginable before deafness begins' (West 2014a: 151). This is the very edge of homophony, where sounds of language and other sounds, merge into place.

All the same, if there is a conclusion or limit point of homophony at this point in 'Nhill', just 'before deafness begins', then the actual conclusion to my story, a couple of pages on, might be seen as unravelling this conclusion afresh in the new questions it raises:

> That afternoon, turning into our street in the suburb of St Kilda,
> I glimpsed again the brilliant green waters of Port Phillip Bay.

> How could such intensity ever seem so deep to us again? My wife started telling me that everything was going to be fine in a little while and I needed to listen to her with great care. Every word she used sounded as though travelling to me through both water and sand, and from much further away than she really was. (West 2014a: 153)

What is it, here, that requires the protagonist 'to listen … with great care'? The new place names in this paragraph (St Kilda, Port Phillip Bay) seem to fade away, to lose intensity, in favour of the power, or at least the suggested power, of words unsaid – unsaid at least within this story. For what might it mean for words to sound as if 'travelling… through both water and sand,' and from further away than would appear to be their spoken origin? I do not have the space here to go into these questions, or rather into the questions behind these questions, but it would seem, at first glance, that this final paragraph evokes some sort of dissatisfaction, some sort of regret (as it were) with the 'contract of homophony' that has, in my reading of my story, been circulating through 'Nhill' to this point near its ending. There is a strangeness here that is far from unusual in practice-led research, where the research immanent to the practice seems to reach beyond what it is that academic theory can currently say. The question provoked, I would hazard, is how, in the end, one might 'listen' to a story itself so much about listening? What 'whispering' is it that is going on here?

Notes

[1] Smith is writing about this issue in the 2012 edition of her book. return to text

[2] By 'Kaupapa', Smith means what Kathy Irwin calls 'culturally safe' research (Irwin 1994: 27). return to text

[3] See Kevin Hart's 'Jacques Derrida: "The Most Improbable Signature"' (Hart 1992) for a concise summary of Derrida's methodology in this respect. return to text

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