Curtin University

Daniel Juckes

Walking, talking, looking: the Calibre Essay and remembering persuasively in Australia

Abstract:

The Calibre Essay Prize has been awarded annually since 2007 by the *Australian Book Review*. In this paper I argue that a number of the Calibre essays represent a discontinuous, but vital, conversation concerning the interaction between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. I use the work of Ross Gibson to interpret some of the commended and winning essays. I suggest that the essay form is suited to negotiating difficulties that persist in contemporary Australia as a result of colonial incursion, and argue that the Calibre essays under examination offer possible mechanisms for reconciliation. The form and method of the essay, as well as the finished work itself, help writer and reader to engage with others, with silences, and with the past through concentration of focus, conversation and reciprocity, and the particular flâneur-like qualities of essay writing. I argue that the Calibre essays are examples of what Gibson calls persuasive remembering (2015b: 29).

Biographical note:

Daniel Juckes is a PhD candidate at Curtin University, Western Australia. His research interests include nostalgia studies, Thing Theory, and autobiography. His writing has been published in *Australian Book Review* and *Westerly*: New Creative. Contact: daniel.juckes@postgrad.curtin.edu.au

Keywords:

Calibre Prize – Ross Gibson – Essay – Reconciliation – Flâneur

1. Introduction

In this paper, I argue that the essay form is well suited to addressing and telling the Australian past. I use the body of essays awarded the Calibre Prize to make my case, and I frame my argument using Ross Gibson's theories and prose (which focus, broadly, on ways to represent the past in Australia). I see links between Gibson's interpretation of the flâneur and how the essay might be considered a kind of literary saunter through (or alongside) a subject. And while it is true that the contemporary essay is more diverse and complex than any single word might suggest, I think it is probable that, by utilising the genre's flâneur-like qualities (a characteristic, I will argue, of some Calibre essays), an essayist can write a past which is detailed and focused, representative, conversational, and which allows for what Gibson calls persuasive remembering (2015b: 29). This form of remembering is important in a country still working towards reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. By expanding on the idea of the essay-as-walk, I will suggest that the Calibre essays provide examples of some of the genre's possibility (even if they also represent some of the genre's constraints); essays allow the past to be explored slowly, at walking pace; they give the writer (and reader) the opportunity to examine a subject closely, and to engage with issues (and people) they might not usually encounter. Through their very form essays have the potential to change how Australian history is perceived. In their status as recipients of a prestigious prize, the Calibre essays have a role to play in national conversations regarding the past.

The Calibre Prize was first awarded in 2007, and is presented by the *Australian Book Review*. The ambit of the prize is broad – the only real stipulation of the competition being that an entry be written in English – and, because it is still young, only sixteen essays make up the winning, runner-up, and commended entries. These are both good and practical reasons for a critical assessment, along with the prize's reputation as one of the premier essay-writing competitions in the country. In this paper, I explore a selection of essays from the Calibre subset that I argue represent the texture of the cohort. My focus – on essays which examine the repercussions of the past and the continuing implications of colonialism – is to describe a method of writing which prioritises a certain way of looking at Australia. Of the sixteen Calibre essays, published between 2007 and 2016 (the last prize awarded at the time of writing), nine were written by men and seven were written by women. Five were broadly about the relationship between what I will self-consciously call white and black Australia[1]; two were more directly concerned with the past, three if you include Sophie Cunningham's 'Staying with the Trouble', which braids recollection and history to the act of walking in New York City. There are two essays about climate change and one about violence (all three of which take on the state of Australia and consider race relations); there is an essay on body image; one on writing; one on motherhood; another on the life and death of two mothers; and one on copyright in the digital age. Of course, most of the essays exceed this kind of simple synopsis, and not all of them are applicable to the task of this paper. My critical assessment will, by necessity, be confined to the essays of David Hansen, Michael Winkler, Martin Thomas, and Moira McKinnon. My argument will be coloured by interpretations of the past from other Calibre essayists, such as Cunningham.

The editor of *ABR*, Peter Rose, spoke to me about the prize he inaugurated and judges. He praised the polyphony of voice in the Calibre winners, and lingered on ways that the essays, as a group, tend towards the political; he said, of his own preferences: 'Sometimes you want a bit more urgency, sometimes you want a bit more provocation. Sometimes what you want in an essay is outrage' (pers. comm. 4 August 2016).

There is, indeed, a strain of indignation running through the essays, impelled by what Michael Winkler – in his 2016-winning essay 'The Great Red Whale' – describes as ontological disturbance produced by colonial incursion. In Winkler's writing, and in other Calibre essays, there is anger at the circumstances of the present, and rumination on how white Australia might best deal with those circumstances. He evokes his own sense of dislocation within Australia, and addresses damage done by colonisation. In their very form the Calibre essays exemplify a way to address those circumstances. Ross Gibson speaks of the tension a sense of past and place can engender in 'an aftermath-culture like Australia' (2015b: 144). It's an observation that I think is resonant to the work the Calibre essays most often seem to do. Gibson's work, on ways to construct the Australian past and present, is pertinent to my focus here, which is to excavate a set of Calibre essays which have a historiographical impulse. I will argue that the essay form itself is well positioned to confront the history-induced fractures which are a recurrent theme in contemporary Australia.

2. Walking

In the first section of this paper I'd like to expand on the notion of the essay-as-walk, and consider reasons why such an approach might be suited to dealing with the Australian past. Essays are a way of wandering, tiptoed and tentative, into imagined territory; Gibson, writing of the 'grounded flâneur', whose journeys are cognitive not physical, describes the way the mind works in this roving state: 'You can free associate like a montagist, a poet, a dreamer … [T]he flâneur … meanders into zones where … crucial insights often come associatively and through *peripheral* vision' (2016: 100-101). It's this type of thinking which Sherman Young says benefits 'the need to seek strangeness, identify difference, [and] engage with the other' (2016: 82). A way of writing which means to engage with the other is different to more traditional methods of telling the past because it breathes life into the historical subject. Gibson is almost literal on this idea: 'The way the past breathed is rarely noted explicitly in the evidentiary systems that historians customarily go to' (1996: 2). The literary stroll becomes a way of narrativising history through the detailing of a journey, one which can present our lives 'visible anew in brief flickers of revelation' (Ibid.: 1).

In her 2015 Calibre-winning essay, 'Staying with the Trouble', Sophie Cunningham muses on the power of walking:

> We walk to get to one place from another, but in doing so we insist that what lies between our point of departure and our destination is important. We create connection. We pay attention to detail, and these details plant us firmly in the day, in the present. They bond us to place, to people. Walking opens our hearts. Thoughts stop swirling in tight circles. (2015)

For Cunningham, the essay is a kind of performance of thinking, feeling, being; it gives writer and reader the opportunity to slow down, focus in, and forge connections. In this way, she suggests, cognitive walking can create literal connection, bonding a person to place. This cohesion is vital in Australia, which is post-colonial, ruptured, and characterised by the ontological disturbance I mentioned in the introduction.[2] To keep turning the metaphor, making it more literal, this need to be bonded to place chimes with an idea of Gibson's from *Changescapes* (a book of essays interested in different ways of representing complexity). He suggests that: 'An examination of Australian experience must focus principally on the ways we understand *place*, on the ways one is meant, eventually, to feel *grounded*, when one defines oneself, privately or publically, as Australian' (2015a: 216).

As Cunningham meanders through the history-soaked (and history-obscuring) streets of New York, she muses that 'there is meaning in the space between' (2015). David Mowaljarlai, whose ideas recur in Gibson's writing, understood that space too. He said: 'To go back in time, you walk. It gives you respect for what happened when everything was created. It gives you a quietness of mind – and direction' (1993: 68). The essayist's way of moving through a subject is perhaps one reason why it is a genre suited to encounters with the darkest and most hidden aspects of the Australian past, and perhaps why that past occurs and reoccurs through the Calibre essays. It might also be a way of thinking and writing more appropriate for a place where oral history is still a vital method of history making for much of the Indigenous population. Essaying is more reflexive and conversational, and less constricted in what it can say about the past, than traditional historiography bound by source material.

If the essay as a form is one of connection and associations, how does the actual way-of-writing – prose – affect how the past is experienced? In *Memoryscopes* – a collection of essays exploring modes of remembrance and the dynamism of the past, the companion volume to *Changescapes* – Ross Gibson argues that to 'imagine across gaps and quandaries … heighten[s] our awareness of the prevalence of implicit historical forces' (2015b: 145). It's Gibson's argument that this type of imagining results in a more palpable history, felt when 'the past seems to flow through the present toward the future' (Ibid.: 134). Imagining across gaps can be a mechanism for addressing some of the rifts produced by colonial encroachment. And, even though Gibson champions multi-media approaches to writing and representing the past, it might also be that essayistic prose is an effective way to plumb history's nooks and crannies.

In Roland Barthes' *Michelet* (about the French historian Jules Michelet), prose is praised for its smoothness. What Barthes calls 'the great Micheletist theme' is 'that of a seamless world' (1987: 27); he says that 'the real stake of historical labour' is not to 'rediscover a Pointillist order of details' but to find again 'the vast unctuosity of the past' (Ibid.: 81). Through a combination of narrative and tableau a version of the past that is (in Michelet's words) 'the most *human*' (Ibid.: 39) can be achieved at the same time as complexity, darkness, and lacunae are acknowledged. I interpret narrative and tableau as a way of expressing the essayist's pleasure at zooming in on persons, moments, events, details, and then out again to consider that brief and focused event in context. Gibson suggests that 'emphatically adjusting the shot-scale' places 'a tiny, albeit *clearly significant*, incident in a larger, virtually boundless environment … The

human presence in an environment is repeatedly "put in its place"' (1992: 149-150). This telescopic characteristic of prose can, again almost literally, help settle people in place in Australia.

Barthes' description of Michelet's prose style evokes an essayistic attitude to history writing, one embracing the inconclusive:

> the narrative is always conducted toward a display, an epiphany, and the *tableau* is never closed, its goal is an anxiety … [N]o chapter of Michelet is ever really conclusive, but no line of facts is ever without its tropism. Everything is linked together, not by virtue of rhetorical plan, but by [a] kind of existential *tempo*. (1987: 22)

This existential tempo is linked to the way Michelet goes '*walking*' through the past, in an attempt to force a path through oppressive landscape. But it is also a way to skim, flirt with, and push at what is unknown or lost. The essay is a genre designed to describe elision; prose is a form which necessitates elision. The way an essayist moves from narrative to tableau, from tableau to tableau through narrative, is key to the way I interpret the Calibre essays under investigation: the technique allows for a sidelong interrogation of the past, an approach which asks questions and allows the gaps skimmed over to be glimpsed off the edge of the page. Cunningham's essay does not contain within it all that she saw or thought or felt the day of the walk she describes, but the path she strings through her subject evokes the journey. One telling observation, which perhaps hints towards the essay's fitness for describing the Australian experience, is that, 'The undertow of history exerts its subtle force on city walks but is more constant in older landscapes' (2015). In a land as vast and old as Australia the subtle force of the past weighs heavy: all of what was can never hope to be expressed. But, by examining gaps and spaces, and by stringing a narrative path around events of the past, some of that force might be assuaged. Tony Birch, for The Wheeler Centre website, constructs a short eulogistic essay built around a walk along the Yarra River, and suggests that the space between is a space which can yield revelation: remembering how it felt to jump from a bridge into the river, he says: 'If you have never jumped, let me share a secret with you. In the space between your feet leaving the safety of the railing and hitting the water, there is a moment of genuine flight – everything stops, except your imagination' (2014).

The flâneur-like qualities of the essay – the way it helps the past to live, and its balance of narrative and tableau – help the reader and writer imagine across psychic and literal gaps. In the interplay of focus, free association, and peripheral imaginings – all part, I think, of what Rose called an essay's 'novelistic' qualities during our conversation – is the potential of vivid pasts, which help address historical silences. In a book edited by Gibson, *Exchanges: Cross-Cultural Encounters in Australia and the Pacific*, which sprung from a 1995 conference at the Museum of Sydney, the historian Greg Dening writes toward those silences, which are

> Not likely to be an emptiness. They are more likely to be in Paul Valéry's words, 'the active presence of absent things'. Finding absent things requires a special sort of history-writing. Richard Rorty has suggested that they are more likely to be found in imagination than by inquiry. Imagination is rather unnerving to most historians. But it need not be. Imagination is not necessarily fantasy. Imagination is restoring to the past

> all the possibilities of its future. Imagination is hearing the whispers behind the shouts. (1996: 172)

In the next two sections I explore how those whispers might be amplified.

3. Looking

Working through a subject at the speed of a walk allows closer attention to be given to the people, places, and events that make up what is being examined. This close attention plays a role in the way the essayist is able to engage with the other. In this section of the paper I present examples of how the narrow and detailed focus made possible by the essay form allows less-clichéd depictions of black Australians to be presented on the national stage. At this point it's worth acknowledging that, while the Calibre Prize is prestigious, it is a literary competition and is thus limited in scope and exposure: there is a very real chance that the vast majority of Australians have never heard of the prize. It's also pertinent to point out the lack of Indigenous authorship (to the best of my knowledge) among the sixteen Calibre essays. This is a problem – the lack of diverse voices is a problem across the literary landscape the world over – but it is not my focus here. I simply point out that the crop of Calibre essays evokes a contortion: they are written into the very middle of educated, upper-middle-class Australia, while often being aimed past the edges of that closed-in world. Certain Calibre essays are attempts to convince white Australia of better ways to relate to black Australia; this is the most obvious politicisation of the Calibre essays taken as a group, and pointed at by Rose during the interview – he called the essays strongly and openly political, suggesting they were intended to play a role in national debate (even if that role is curtailed by small readerships or a lack of more diverse voices). That said, the essay might be a particular mode for working through both colonial guilt and ideas of or hopes for reconciliation. The prize confers status, is visible as an arbiter of taste, and so has a role in shaping a canon of essay-making in this country (and, if the essays find their mark, in shaping more than just the essayscape). Essayists like David Hansen, Moira McKinnon, Martin Thomas and Winkler encourage close attention, listening, respect, and conversation. These values are built into Hansen's essay 'Death Dance' (2007), which argues for a more reciprocal and respectful attitude to black Australia by white Australia (2007). The work of Hansen (2007; 2010), McKinnon (2011), Thomas (2013) and Winkler (2016) are all examples of essays which practice what they preach, but for brevity I will only draw from Hansen's work in this section, concentrating on his way of looking at both Indigenous Australians and the Australian past.

Gibson's *26 Views of the Starburst World* explores the way the world changed for colonists and colonised at the birth of white Australia. It is an engagement with the notebooks of William Dawes, a polymath marine who came to Australia with the First Fleet. His writings attempt to interpret the language of the Eora people and give an intimate impression of his relationship with his interlocutors. Initially, for Dawes and the invading party, the simple act of looking was unmistakably violent, colonial:

> "to see" is the all-important verb around which the whole land-grabbing enterprise seems to hang – all the pasture-seeking treks, all the spying, surveying and boundary-making, all the astronomy, all the trigonometry, all the horizon-scanning and desirous

> gazing. Colonialism depends so much on seeing. At least, [Dawes] probably thought this when he started: we are here to become the masters of all we can see. (2012: 38)

But, somewhere along the line, the act of looking (for Dawes) became something different. When he looked closely, and – importantly – when he looked reflexively, what he saw began to surprise him:

> In these first pages of Notebook A, therefore, we see Dawes really, seriously *looking*. … And we see him looking again. … Then we see him reflecting. … In this opening sequence, we see his thoughts run together, then pause, go back on themselves, retract from themselves, and then take a fresh run at cohesion, but only momentarily. So we begin to understand how *he* begins to understand that the process must always be ready to start again. We see Dawes trying to make sure here, trying to start as he intends to continue: immersed but also reflective in narrative. And because the reflection promptly brings him some understanding about how every meaning seems to shift with every new and ever-altering context, we see him stride into doubt, and into a mode of thinking that will be almost always provisional. We see him step away from his old scientific convictions, his old nominalist solidness, as he starts to understand some of the prevailing contingencies. (2012: 44)

This reflective way of looking, with thoughts running backwards and forwards and 'immersed … in narrative' is, I think, analogous to the way the essay can take the writer and reader closer to the past. It's then that some of the 'prevailing contingencies' of the Australian continent can be considered. One of the Calibre essays which I think best exemplifies this way of looking is 'Death Dance', by David Hansen. This was a commended entry in the first year the prize was awarded, coming second behind Elizabeth Holdsworth. In Hansen's essay themes of indigeneity and history are vivid and centre-stage; the essay opens with the author contemplating a painting of Bungaree, an Eora man who lived through the beginnings of colonial Australia. In the painting, on show at an exhibition of 'National Treasures from Australia's Great Libraries', Bungaree stares past a mixed space of artefacts and mementoes, 'His lifted hat and benevolent expression … at once courteous and condescending; regal, in fact' (2007). Hansen then describes his personal interaction with the portrait:

> I am standing in front of him, but I am distanced. The painting is glazed, low-lit, hung on a wall on the far side of quite a deep display case. If I stand up straight he is in focus, but too far away for me to see the details. As I incline my torso forward to examine the picture more closely, we exchange bodily gestures of courtesy: I bow and he raises his hat. But in this exchange I lose clarity. The edges blur. I have to reach for my spectacles. (Ibid.)

This is an almost literal evocation of the kind of looking required of white Australians, who should reach for spectacles (if necessary) to correct historical astigmatism. The way Hansen brings Bungaree into focus, through careful attention, is the literary equivalent of turning up the focus on a microscope. He spends a good deal of time talking the reader through different iterations of Bungaree, considering how he has been known both within his lifetime and in history books. Hansen slowly but surely breaks apart the notion that Bungaree might fit within a wall of historiographical stereotypes, from 'Ned Kelly's helmet [to] Sir Donald Bradman's cricket bat' (Ibid.). And he closes

the essay with a wave of rhetorical questions designed to crosshatch and complicate who Bungaree was:

> I step back from the glass case. Who is this man who salutes me from the wall of the State Library of Victoria, Melbourne, in 2006, and from the rough streets of The Rocks, Sydney, in 1826? Is it Bungaree of the Carigal clan of the Kuringgai tribe, from Broken Bay – West Head country? Is it indeed Bungaree, husband of Matora, father of Young Bungaree and Long Dick and Sophie and stepfather of Gaouenren; also husband of Rose and father of John Bungaree; also great-great-great-great-great-grandfather of Warren Whitfeld, presently of Woy Woy? Or is it rather Bungaree, ambassador of Governor Lachlan Macquarie, dressed in Macquarie's discarded general's uniform and cocked hat, decorated with Macquarie's medallion and standing in front of the Sydney Cove fort that bears Macquarie's name? Or possibly even Bungaree, the proxy for Governor Sir Thomas Brisbane, painted by Augustus Earle, the artist of Brisbane's official portrait, bowing the Brisbane bow, while behind him in the harbour is HMS *Warspite*, the Royal Navy frigate commanded by Brisbane's first cousin? Which is the real Bungaree? Or is he lost completely, the very type of postcolonial theory's mottled, creolised, unsubstantial, subaltern mimic man? (Ibid.)

The essay form allows this type of cross-hatching to occur, and can cause both the reader and writer to see the past as a more complex place, populated by complex people – even if no conclusions are necessarily drawn. Here I think Hansen is showing both respect to, and allowing a degree of reciprocity from, Bungaree. There's no way for Bungaree to write his own past, but, by presenting such a detailed and complex vision of the man, Hansen is trying to write a different sort of colonial narrative.

Three years after 'Death Dance', Hansen won the Calibre Prize (in 2010) with an essay called 'Seeing Truganini'. He used a similar technique to demonstrate the myth that Tasmanian Indigenous people were wiped out, and to show the importance of continuing the conversation around the best ways for white and black Australia to interact. Hansen sees the act of not speaking as one of condescension: he wants to use his position to engage in conversation with black Australians, and to discuss the crimes of the past with as wide an audience as he can get. Because of this I regard essays like 'Seeing Truganini' as attempted conversations, aimed at encouraging reciprocity, despite the fact that his words are couched in the context of a white voice speaking to a mostly white audience. 'Death Dance' and 'Seeing Truganini' are, at the very least, acts of close observation. They are arguments for plain expression when talking about the past: 'Fashionable academic casuistry actually blurs historical reality and, when there is difficulty or conflict, leaves you no solid place to stand' (Hansen 2010). Hansen believes that (and here I am deliberately, provocatively twisting his figure of speech) talking plainly about the past gives a person solid footing; lets one stand in place. Acknowledgement of a fractured past, of a complex past, seems to offer the same thing: a firmer place on which to stand.

Hansen shared the 2010 award with Lorna Hallahan, who wrote an essay called 'On Being Odd'. Her essay about 'counting deformity as one of our graces' feels part of a drive to acknowledge other aspects of Australian culture; she suggests that 'suffering is apparent if you take the time to look into the eyes of the other or to feel their breath

upon your cheek' (2010). There is a sublime promise to the acknowledgement staring brings: essay competitions like the Calibre Prize – because of the form they promote, and because of the reach they offer – can help white Australia feel a little more keenly the presence of the past from the perspective of the colonised, or the marginalised.

4. Conversation

Michael Winkler, the Calibre prize's most recent winner at the time of writing, gives a window onto our troublesome, fractured past, which affects sense-of-place in the present. Winkler is a white Australian male; he displays a felt response to the Australian landscape that is a realisation of his own position of power in relation to black Australians; it is also an unease at the fact that the place in which he lives can never be his own. His essay is called 'The Great Red Whale', and compares Uluru to Melville's Moby Dick. But, as Winkler points out, Uluru isn't called Uluru:

> I call the rock The Rock. Or nothing. The other day I asked one of the most senior traditional owners what she calls it. She said "puli" – Pitjantjatjara for a rock or a hill. That is, any rock or hill. I said whitefellas like me think we are doing the right thing by calling it Uluru, and I was careful to pronounce it correctly, stress on the first syllable, tongue towards hard palate for the retroflex 'r'. She didn't say anything, just laughed. (2016)

In 'The Great Red Whale', Winkler describes the 'ontologically disturbed' connection so many white Australians have to the country in which they live. He evokes his own sense of dislocation within Australia, and addresses damage done by colonisation. The technique here is dialogic; Winkler uses italics to set apart a contradictory argumentative voice, the author, presumably, arguing with himself: he grumbles that, '*Perhaps the only topic more clichéd than traversing Australia's interior is traversing the interior of your own diseased mind*' (Ibid.). This is an example of a writer engaging with the kind of questions which can emerge through the essay form, when imagined gaps are plumbed and silences are strolled past. If Winkler's questioning is compared to Barthes' analysis of Michelet's prose, it's possible to see the kind of epiphany and anxiety which is the result of an essayist's mode-of-examination: Winkler's italics demonstrate the tropism of the essayist wandering. They are also an example of a writer using the essay form to examine and interrogate his own consciousness: Winkler asks himself questions and enters into conversation with himself, writing to find out what he thinks. This musing on his own place in Australia is possible because of the form in which he writes; his essay is an attempt to proffer a kind of solution to the oddness of living in a colonised space: '*What a wild idea*,' says Winkler's alternate persona, '*that a member of the dominant group should submit to assimilation*' (Ibid.).

Of course, an essay should be more than just a conversation with oneself. It is a conversation between the writer and the reader, a conversation between the writer and another. The Calibre essays are replete with those 'novelistic' qualities Rose identified, and the use of dialogue is just one example of those qualities.

Paul Carter, writing in *Exchanges* (ed. Gibson 1996), suggests that the snatches of Eora language William Dawes managed to record do more to 'arrest the process of silencing

the other' than more traditional dictionary-making methods, which represent a colonisation of language (1996: 76). Hooked to trade and conquest, dictionaries themselves were 'entrepots of a discursive power' (Ibid.). But, for Carter,

> A distinguishing feature of Dawe's auditory environment is its intimacy … Dawes reports at least two words signifying "to breathe", "to swallow", "to yawn", "to sneeze", "to blow the nose" … [I]t is a feature of Dawes's notebooks that, however they may appear to gloss a language, they in fact constitute a commentary on the protocols and dynamics associated with instituting dialogue itself. (Ibid.: 72-73)

The Dawes notebooks, then, are a dialogue which engages with the other, and offer a method for doing so: through the capturing of close up exchanges; through an implied, irresistible encouragement to the imagination. In 'The Great Red Whale', Winkler adopts a similar method, one which is implicit in writing the kind of essays which the Calibre Prize demarcates. By recording interactions and by playing with the untranslatable edges of language exchange, a dynamic and fluid existence (on the page) is made possible. Here is one example from 'The Great Red Whale':

> I remember one of my early interactions with the locals. I had been talking, in a misfiring, onesided way, to a group of kids. The oldest lad waved his hand at me and shouted "Ara, Puulanya!" The other boys screamed with laughter; fluency in Pitjantjatjara is not required to translate children's malicious glee. "Ara" is roughly "Piss off", a term habitually hurled at dogs. My friend, who speaks the language superbly, said "Puulanya" maps into English via "puula", which means fat and is derived from the word "ball".
>
> It didn't hurt my feelings. It just reinforced that I don't really belong here and never will. (2016)

The essay, a form which indulges in a more fluid aesthetic than (for example) traditional academic history, has the potential to communicate what Carter calls 'Sounds [which] are signs of place' (1996: 80). By evincing the intimacy of conversation between writer and reader, or between writer and subject, a version of the Australian experience can be articulated – a version which considers the experience others have of the same place.

Moira McKinnon's 'Who Killed Matilda' (winner in 2011) utilises dialogue, and shows why dialogue – conversation – should be utilised in the essay form. Her essay is a similar sort of urgent, political argument to Winkler's: it is, mostly, about the relationship McKinnon, a doctor specialising in population health and infectious disease, has with a patient called Matilda, who she treated early on in her career, in the remote Kimberley town of Halls Creek. Matilda is an enigma to McKinnon: she is equal parts healer and hopeless case (smuggling booze and taking McKinnon's car keys, but also enacting the kind of traditional knowledge which demonstrates her unique position as custodian of her country. In the essay, Matilda asks McKinnon for a favour: 'Little fella, Cody, he has big cough, like poor fella. I rock 'im like this, and I give 'im water. You gotta take me get 'em leaf from dat tree. *Lawuny* tree' (2011). When McKinnon sees Cody she urges Matilda to let her take him to hospital, but Matilda refuses, and there is a compromise: the tree first, then the hospital. When they reach the tree Matilda lights a fire and smashes a termite mound. She heats the *lawuny* leaves and holds them, smouldering, under Cody's nose. Then Matilda lays him in the leaves and covers him

in a paste made from dirt from the mound. McKinnon is looking on, incredulous: 'I watched his breathing, the draggling at the corner of his mouth. The mud dried and cracked. His hand curled in a tremor around a bunch of leaves and softened again. His breathing eased' (Ibid.). In the car, heading back, the writer asks: 'Why didn't you just let me take him to hospital?' In McKinnon's words:

> The child sat on her lap banging a small branch against the dashboard of the car.
>
> "Too much white fella stuff, the rain not come."
>
> "So, is the rain coming?"
>
> "Everything messed up."
>
> "Messed up?"
>
> "Yeah, them ants ain't making their lines in the ground, them birds mak'em home in dem other bird nest they ain't coming, 'em plums ain't coming right." (Ibid.)

I argue that the dialogue is a way of engaging with Matilda on the page. Of course, there are problems of representation: Matilda does not write her own story. But Matilda's voice, in conversation with McKinnon's, acts to de-other her for McKinnon's intended audience: the judging panel, and readers of *ABR*. The subtext of 'Who Killed Matilda' pokes holes in the ways white Australia is run, from its rigid grammar and syntax, to its public policy. For McKinnon, the essay is one of epiphany after epiphany. By grappling with the skerricks she can sense of Matilda's worldview, McKinnon comes to the conclusion that the ways in which white Australia works may not be best-suited to black Australia. It's only through conversation and journey – perhaps the slow drive through the bush to the *lawuny* tree – that McKinnon reaches this conclusion. In this way McKinnon captures something of the disjuncture between policy and reality, and the gulf between that policy and the polyglot nature of lived experience for Australians who are not white. I think that the essay as a mode for imagining the other is key to this shifted mindset, and – without wanting to overstep – more suited to such purposes in the kind of place Gibson considers Australia to be. In the conversation between McKinnon and Matilda, and the conversation between McKinnon and reader, the possible epiphanies of the form can be observed. It would be remiss if I did not point out that McKinnon's essay finishes with another kind of epiphany, one which captures the anxiety she feels at being an interloper in Matilda's country, not even close to accessing Matilda's cosmology and grieving for the state of things:

> I am on a road where the police found Matilda. The soil is powdery red, deep to my ankles, and rises in small puffs as if I am stamping blood from the earth. I am thinking of her and I am thinking of where we are going in this world. The tears roll down my cheek and for a brief moment the ground is spotted with moisture, but then my tears are covered in dust and dried by the sun. (Ibid.)

5. Remembering Persuasively

Elizabeth Holdsworth, the inaugural winner of the Calibre Prize, says in her essay 'An die Nachgeborenen: For those who come after', that she writes to have 'a specific conversation with the past … [to] try to make some sort of landing' (2007). This is an attempt to engage in the type of remembering Gibson thinks aids the process of sense-making, of place making: remembering is 'an attempt to sense cohesion, cogency, and

vitality in the model of the past you are making' (2015b: 29). That attempt at making sense has important consequences, because, 'When you remember persuasively in a space where decay or disappearance has occurred, you are working to make that space a place' (Ibid.). In this sense the act of remembering (persuasively) becomes something like an act of reconciliation. I believe that the essay form has a cogency which can be linked to the process of place-making, and, thus, reconciliation.

'"Because it's your country": Bringing Back the Bones to West Arnhem Land' by Martin Thomas (2013 winner), is an essay impelled by bones – stolen bones – which make for inconvenient realities. Thomas's essay describes his role in making a documentary about the returning of human bones to West Arnhem Land, and of his investigations into the High culture of the Bininj people. He follows the bones as they journey home – smoked with all due ceremony – from Washington, D.C. His essay acknowledges the agency of the past, and he addresses issues of national silence, national shame, and national memory. Here he reflects on how the past produces the present:

> What I have come to realise … is that the dead never become objects or object-like … In west Arnhem Land, the precise relationship between spirit and bones is never easily expressed, perhaps because of the limits of my questioning or understanding, because of the linguistic differences, or because there is a range of beliefs about such matters … Spirits have agency. (2013)

Thomas is another white Australian trying to make sense of black Australia, trying to show both the complexity of, and tragedy which befell, Indigenous Australians. His essay is an example of repeated subjects in the Calibre essays: how white Australia should talk to black Australia, how it should write about black Australians, and how it might best deal with the repercussions of the past. The focus on black Australia in the Calibre essays discussed is an example of current power structures, and still a kind-of colonisation. But that focus in this form allows the essayists and their readers an acknowledgement of personal distress and a more complex, interesting, human picture of Indigenous Australia sometimes lacking in the national conversation.

While the ontological disturbance white Australians sense might never fully dissipate, by treating Indigenous Australians with more respect and by ceding privileges earned through invasion, Australian space might feel more like place. And then, according to Gibson, 'You might know something not only in the bones but in the blood. Such a state of knowing *entirely*, such a state of embodied, holistic knowledge: it is worth yearning for, worth working for' (2015b: 29-30).

The essays I have discussed advocate and demonstrate ways in which we might know more about the place in which we live. Perhaps they do even more than that: they advocate and demonstrate ways in which we might *feel* the place more. Through wandering, heightened focus, emphasising and conversing with the other, and the persuasive qualities of prose, the examined essays show methods for addressing the failing relationship between white and black Australia. The essay form itself is a way of mediating between white and black Australia.

The form of the Calibre essay – novelistic and provocative (Rose, pers. comm. 4 August 2016), as well as discursive and wandering – has become an example of what Gibson

calls 'the efficacy of yarning' (1992: 157). Speaking of the Outback specifically, but of Australia in general, Gibson suggests that 'This is an environment which requires a penetrating percipience, an ability to see and think past the obvious' (Ibid.: 154). The very mode of essay writing requires an ability in the writer to saunter past the obvious, to take in more of the world than 'straight lines [which] lead into mirage' (Ibid.: 145). It's Gibson's argument that what he calls 'yarning' is an attempt to 'take … lessons from the text of the country' (Ibid.: 152). I argue that the yarning made possible by the essay form – as exemplified in the Calibre essays – is well suited to the kind of persuasive remembering that is necessary in Australia.

Endnotes

1. For the sake of brevity I will refer mostly towards Indigenous Australia as 'black' and non-Indigenous Australia as 'white'.

2. Because this paper is focused on the Calibre essays it will concentrate on the ontological disturbance of white Australians. This pales in significance to the psychological impact the colonial-Australian past has had on many black Australians, definable as something like Glenn Albrecht's neologism 'solastalgia'. Solastalgia is, according to Albrecht et. al,

> The pain experienced when there is recognition that the place where one resides and that one loves is under immediate assault (physical desolation). It is manifest in an attack on one's sense of place, in the erosion of the sense of belonging (identity) to a particular place and a feeling of distress (psychological desolation) about its transformation. It is an intense desire for the place where one is a resident to be maintained in a state that continues to give comfort or solace. (2007: 45)

Solastalgia can be felt in the words of David Mowaljarlai, an Indigenous Lawman from the Kimberley. In collaboration with Jutta Malnic he left behind an astonishing collection of Dreaming stories and interpretations in *Yorro Yorro*, and touched on the reasons why those stories had to be left in such a non-traditional form (the written word): 'When the old men die, all this knowledge will be dead-gone. The stories we told all the missionaries and anthropologists are all locked up, maybe thrown out at times. The next generation will never know how to put the culture together again' (1993: 198). Crosshatch his words with Melissa Lucashenko's: in her essay 'Not Quite White in the Head' she talks about the exile an Indigenous person might feel when separated from country, of how the atmosphere of a place changes when it has become unknown:

> To live outside one's country is to be constantly in peril, spiritually, emotionally and physically. Exile is a peculiar form of illness, and of blindness … Known indigenous country is healing, nurture, sanctuary, responsibility and safety. Unknown country is frightening, inhabited by dangerous spirits, liable to violent defence by its true people. (2003/4: 12)

Works cited

Albrecht, Glenn and Gina Sartore et. al 2007 'Solastalgia: the distress caused by environmental change', *Australasian psychiatry* (February): 41-55. DOI: 10.1080/10398560701701288 (accessed 16 October 2016)

Barthes, R trans. R Howard 1987 *Michelet*, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, Oxford

Birch, Tony 2014 'Remembering Steven: a Yarra River walk', *The Wheeler centre*: http://www.wheelercentre.com/notes/d24525a88a72 (accessed 24 October 2016)

Carter, P 'Repetitions at night: mimicry, noise and context' in R Gibson (ed) *Exchanges: cross-cultural encounters in Australia and the Pacific*, Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, Sydney: 59-88

Cunningham, Sophie 2015 'Staying with the trouble' *Australian book review*, 371 (May): https://www.australianbookreview.com.au/abronline/currentissue/154may2015no371/25002015calibreprizewinnerstayingwiththetrouble (accessed 23 June 2016)

Dening, G 'Voices from the beach' in R Gibson (ed.) *Exchanges: cross-cultural encounters in Australia and the Pacific*, Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, Sydney: 163-184

Gibson, Ross 1992 *South of the west: post-colonialism and the narrative construction of Australia*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington

— 1996a *The Bond Store tales*, Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, Sydney

— Ed. 1996b *Exchanges: cross-cultural encounters in Australia and the Pacific*, Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, Sydney

— 2012 *26 views of the starburst world*. Crawley, UWA Publishing, Western Australia

— 2015a *Changescapes: complexity, mutability, aesthetics*, UWA Publishing, Western Australia

— 2015b *Memoryscopes: remnants, forensics, aesthetics*, UWA Publishing, Western Australia

— 2016 'Riding with the mobile oneiric combinator', *Westerly: walking with the flâneur* Special Issue 1 (May): 100-104 https://westerlymag.com.au/issues/uwa-day-of-ideas-2015/ (accessed May 12 2016)

Hansen, David 2007 'Death dance', *Australian book review* 290 (April): https://www.australianbookreview.com.au/commentary/calibreessays/137april2007no290/23752007calibreprizecommendeddeathdance (accessed 23 June 2016)

— 2010 'Seeing Truganini', *Australian book review* 321 (May): https://www.australianbookreview.com.au/abronline/archive/2010/136may2010no321/23732010calibreprizewinnerseeingtruganini (accessed 23 June 2016)

Holdsworth, Elizabeth 2007 'An die Nachgeborenen: for those who come after', *Australian book review* 288 (February): https://www.australianbookreview.com.au/component/k2/131february2007no288/2369andienachgeborenenforthosewhocomeafter (accessed 23 June 2016)

Lucashenko, Melissa 2003/4 'Not quite white in the head', *Griffith review* 2 (Summer): http://search.informit.com.au.dbgw.lis.curtin.edu.au/documentSummary;dn=449627524855510;res=IELLCC (accessed 5 October 2016)

McKinnon, Moira 2011 'Who killed Matilda?', *Australian book review* 333 (July-August) https://www.australianbookreview.com.au/abronline/56julyaugust2011/448whokilledmatilda (accessed 23 June 2016)

Mowaljarlai, D and J Malnic 1993 *Yorro yorro: everything standing up alive: spirit of the Kimberley*, Magabala Books, Broome

Thomas, Martin 2013 '"Because it's your country": bringing back the bones to West Arnhem Land', *Australian book review* 350 (April): https://www.australianbookreview.com.au/component/k2/98april2013no350/1400 (accessed 23 June 2016)

Winkler, Michael 2016 'The great red whale', *Australian book review* 382 (June-July): https://www.australianbookreview.com.au/abronline/currentissue/183junejuly2016no382/33522016calibreessayprizewinnerthegreatredwhale (accessed 23 June 2016)

Young, Sherman 2016 'Flaneur 2.0', *Westerly: walking with the flâneur* Special Issue 1 (19 May): https://westerlymag.com.au/issues/uwa-day-of-ideas-2015/ (accessed 12 May 2016)