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Maarten Renes interviews Janie Conway-Herron

Wandering beneath the grace of clouds: An interview with Janie Conway-Herron

Abstract: The following is an edited version of an interview with the writer-scholar-musician Janie Conway-Herron which took place in the beginning of March 2013. It formed part of a Master's seminar on Australian identity/-ies taught at the University of Barcelona in which Janie Conway-Herron's first novel, Beneath the Grace of Clouds *(Cockatoo Books 2010) was addressed. The interview explores the links between her creative writing, her sense of belonging and place in Australia and her involvement in the alternative protest movements of the 1960s and beyond, especially her engagement with the Indigenous cause through Rock Against Racism. It aims to flesh out the politics behind her creative agenda, which she formulates as follows on the first pages of* Beneath the Grace of Clouds*.*

> *I am a collector. I collect lost stories; the ones that people forget or the ones that people know but don't tell. You can find them if you look hard enough in the right places. I look for different stories and hold them up to myself like a mirror, searching for the elusive threads that might slip away before I have time to catch them. Holding them tightly in a grid of sentences that give vent to a particular jewel of a moment that shines across the centuries, I give meaning and shape to my own life. (Conway-Herron 2010: 7)*

Keywords: fictional (auto)biography, belonging, Australianness

Maarten Renes (M): I see your novel as an experiment with life writing. Would you agree?

Janie Conway-Herron (J): Yes, it is an experiment with life writing and an experiment with fact and fiction. The whole project experiments with the idea that you can write fiction based on historical fact, and tries to complicate what life-writing is by playing with the idea of the eye-witness account and how that sits with new genres such as fictional autobiography. While this is a contradiction in terms, it points to the way I can write from facts and accounts in history and write a fictional-imaginative story as well; one is meant to complement the other. There is life writing in the novel but some of the supposed memoir accounts have been more heavily fictionalised than the history.

M: I take your point, and you make me think of the way Kim Scott writes about his own life, which is semi-autobiographical, as much fiction as it is

connected to his own self.

J: I took a lead from Helen Garner, who often writes fiction based on her own life story, like *The Spare Room* (2008), where she writes about looking after somebody who is dying. She's taken all these things that are clearly from her own life and changed them around but the protagonist's name is still Helen. It is fictionalised but it reads as a memoir.

M: You're writing on this edge between fiction and reality. Fiction is a great medium to look at reality from different angles, don't you think?

J: It can also question whose truth it is anyway. I'm playing around with the whole postmodern questioning of what history is and what truth is. It is life writing but with a difference.

M: It's also a very Australian way of writing, as in the History Wars where there are claims on historic truth from different sides of the political divide, with the paradox of benign settlement or invasion at its core.

J: The truth about Australian history has never been told, if there can be such a thing as the truth about any history. Certainly, there has been so much covered up in the history taught at school, where Captain Cook discovered Australia, which is so untrue on so many levels. Besides Indigenous people, there were people up north, the Macassans from Sulawesi, who traded with the Aboriginal people400 years before Cook. I grew up with an untrue history, and as soon as I realised this, Iwanted to show it in my writing.

> Twenty years [after the 1967 referendum] I attended a lecture given by Aboriginal activist and scholar, Marcia Langton. She gave the two hundred or more students crowded into a hot and airless lecture theatre her version of the landing of the First Fleet in 1788. It was a story the majority of us were familiar with and it had happened less than a kilometre from where we were all gathered. As her version of the story unfolded, the events as I had understood them began to twist and warp. (Conway-Herron 2010: 10)

J: This project was a visceral thing for me, because I actually came as an undergraduate to university with experience of, and close relationships with Indigenous people in a number of ways. I tried to work out straight from the beginning ways to use that knowledge in my own work. It wasn't just something I did at the end of my degree; it was something I'd been doing all the way through.

The Rock Against Racism sections in my novel are actually there to show how I came to that knowledge through Indigenous people themselves. I think I was actually very privileged to have that opportunity.

M: It is interesting to read your novel in that light, because it shows a shifting identity. For some time you thought there was an Indigenous link in your family, and your Indigenous friends pointed out to you that you should investigate that. You haven't put this take on your identity in the foreground or vaunted it in your novel. From a simple position of commitment you investigated all that material. I was wondering to what extent your life has been determined by the fact you thought for some time you might be of Aboriginal descent.

> I grew up feeling white. My whiteness was something I took for granted. I was the eldest daughter; together with my two

> brothers and my mother and father we were, to all appearances, a white protestant family. As a young girl I never questioned this, but over the years my sense of myself changed. I was over thirty years old before I knowingly came into contact with Indigenous people in Australia and these meetings influenced me, in turn, to look at where I have come from. (Conway-Herron 2010: 9)

J: It actually determined things in quite a good way. I think when many non-Indigenous Australians first find out about the Indigenous history of Australia and realise they weren't told about so many things, some react by not wanting to know any more while others ask themselves what this means about them being Australian. It's difficult to articulate because there's a fair amount of guilt when you realise that you call Australia home, and that Indigenous people have suffered as a result of that. It makes for a dichotomous relationship with who you are as an Australian. I've tried to articulate that moment in the novel on that train journey when my I-persona says 'My grandmother is Aboriginal'. That train journey actually happened; I remember asking myself whether it meant that I had more right to call myself Australian. I was trying to articulate that without coming up with an answer, just describe a feeling you can have.

> My search for my dad's mother's background began in earnest in 1981, almost a decade after she died and a year after I had moved to Sydney from Melbourne... The search was driven by a sense of guilt as I began to understand the consequences of the history of my family's migration to Australia. The way the comforts of my own life that I had so easily taken for granted were so deeply intertwined with the dispossession and fragmentation of the lives of many of the Aboriginal people I had met. (Conway-Herron 2010: 49)

M: I think what you're saying is very palpable in your novel, because 'Janie' seems to navigate very smoothly through her positions of being or not being an Aboriginal person; she's right between those and seems able to function well in both environments. I know this holds true for your own life as well.

J: Well, a lot of Indigenous people were certain I did have Indigenous blood, and at that time many people who thought themselves non-Indigenous were finding out they had an Indigenous background. Sally Morgan's *My Place* (1987) was a real groundbreaker in that it showed this possibility to other people, and raised this question regarding their ancestry. In my case it was this grandmother that I didn't really know, who seemed French until, all of a sudden, this hidden history came out. I was trying to articulate my own sense of that. I was halfway through writing the book when I found out my grandmother was not Indigenous so then I incorporated her possible Romani background into the narrative.

M: I think you handle it in a very skilful way. What fascinates me is that your particular history bears resemblance to what happened to the Aborigines in Australia: you've got Jewish and Gypsy descent, populations that have suffered genocidal oppression as well.

> I have learnt that there are many parallels between Aboriginal and Romani cultures, particularly in terms of economic deprivations and racial discrimination. There are also some significant differences in the way these cultures have evolved in terms of their relationship to the land. Indigenous Australian cultures derive much of their identity and sense of belonging

> through a notion of a homeland and a sense of knowing the landscape of their ancestors' places while Romani cultures have remained coherent without the same notion of homeland, although many Roma have remained in settled villages for hundreds of years. There are also parallels between Indigenous Australian sensitivities about people's claims to an Indigenous heritage and Romani cultures that are also protective of boundaries. I began to meet people who had grown up within the Romani community who knew the history of the culture, even spoke a dialect of Romanes. Around them I felt like some kind of boundary rider, riding the edges of all these different cultures looking for a belonging place; a comfortable place between being and longing where I could simply exist. (Conway-Herron 2010: 189)

J: I've also got Scottish descent. The Scots were amongst the people that took the land from Indigenous people, which I'm investigating in my writing as well. Because I have family going back to the invasion of Australia I only have to pick this or that ancestor and tell their story and I'm telling the history of migration to Australia in some way or another. Showing this forms part of the autobiographical nature of my writing.

M: I'm also interested in how you take gender into account. You describe the lives of three women, one Indigenous, two non-Indigenous: what was your point in doing so?

J: I've always been interested in women's issues and the difference when you tell the story from a woman's perspective. So I had an Indigenous perspective and interest at heart and a woman's perspective rather than the masculinist one, which is the mainstream idea of Australian history. I'd been reading copious background stories about it. Robert Hughes' *The Fatal Shore* (1988),Mollie Dixson's *The Real Matilda* (1994) and a lot of feminist histories indicate that the very night when the First Fleet landed was a terrible time for the women in particular, because the marines were fed rum and subsequently there were rapes. So here we are celebrating Australia Day in a way that is supposed to be very triumphant, but I think for many there at the time this was not the case. On Norfolk Island, where my ancestor Elizabeth was also sent, the same thing happened. Robert Hughes writes about the way the women were bought and sold there and I used that account to recreate Elizabeth's early days.

> Later, in a mockery of matchmaking, Elizabeth and the other women are lined up like cattle and paraded in front of an enthusiastic audience of men. Feet scuffing in the dry earth they are forced to run in circles on the hard earth floor of a disused storehouse that has become a saleyard for human flesh. Elizabeth looks at the dry earth between her dancing feet waiting for that inevitable tap. When it comes she looks up into the grinning face of Dick Widdicombe as he offers her a swig from a flagon of rum. 'What a prize you'd be for an old man' … the minute she is inside his tiny hut he pushes her to the floor. (Conway-Herron 2010: 145)

M: I think you make an important point there in showing this overlap between racial and gender struggle, especially in a society like Australia built on this male idea of mateship. Is masculinity still a big issue in Australia?

J: The mainstream framework of Australian society is still very masculinist. Throughout the world things have changed a lot for women but this idea of

mateship still predominates in Australian culture. In my world I don't have to deal with it too much but in lots of other environments women do. The backbone of Australian society is very masculine; certainly the historical stories are, and I chose to write about women to try to counteract that although it was very difficult. There was so little material, so few primary sources to be found, but they do exist and there's increasingly more coming out. In my PhD, which this novel comes from, my original task was to use primary sources and to recreate a fictional story out of those, just to imagine the lines between them and the stories buried there. I had this scene where Booron goes up the river and takes off her dress as the last place that I was able to find records of her was an account of her being seen going upriver in a canoe, which in today's geographic terms would be towards Parramatta. Then, when I got my comments back after examination, the historian Heather Goodall said, 'Why don't you write something about the Darug Wars?' So afterwards, since it wasn't a change I had to do for my PhD, I actually extended the imaginary material for the novel beyond the primary sources and imagined Booron into those wars.

M: That's the beauty of fiction, isn't it, that you can invent, re-invent and re-imagine these events and make them plausible. If history is to be believed, that is: history is always an interpretation, a selection of facts.

J: Before I went to university, I had no idea there'd been a 40-year guerrilla war undergone by Indigenous people just out of Parramatta, which is part of Sydney these days. When I found out about that and coming from the background that I have, my imagination ran wild. I wrote that scene at the pool where the woman spirit grabs the man when he dives in. It's actually based on a story I was told and I've been to that pool in Darug country, where men aren't supposed to go.

M: The first episode of the documentary series *First Australians*, produced by SBS, is about these places and events described in your novel, so that ties in neatly.

J: I was inspired by an equally groundbreaking series of the 1970s and 1980s – *Women of the Sun*. But *First Australians* directed by Rachel Perkins also covers exactly that period and area. All the Aboriginal people dying of what seems to be smallpox is historic fact, which I use for the scene in my novel when Arabanoo is standing on the boat seeing all the bodies. Captain Hunter's diaries describe that almost exactly as I wrote it.

> Captain Hunter takes Arabanoo to visit the coves where his people have been. Arabanoo stands at the edge of the water and looks around at the bodies lying in the hollows of rock or the shelter of the caves. The picture of desecration and misery cuts to the very core of his being... Not a living man, woman or child is in sight and it looks as if in their hurry to leave these places of death his people have left the dead to bury the dead. Whatever has caused them to do this is too horrible to contemplate. As they row silently from cove to cove the dreadful picture repeats itself again and again until Arabanoo can't stand the torturous visions any longer. (Conway-Herron 2010: 107)

M: That brings me back to Booron, because at the end of the novel you write this sense of loss and impending death for her. What made you decide to do that?

J: Interestingly, if I get a chance to re-release the novel I'm going to add something I've discovered since I wrote it: Booron had disappeared from the primary record, but since I did my original research for my PhD, more information has been uncovered. I would now add as a postscript that Booron actually ended up as Bennelong's third "wife" and that Bennelong, Booron and Nanbaree are buried at Kissing Point on what became known as James Squire's land. I only guessed that this had been the case when I wrote the novel but that is where they actually ended up. I went there with my youngest granddaughter and my son. If you were to take away the houses, it would look exactly like the scene at the beginning of *Beneath the Grace of Clouds*, which was an uncanny experience of extraordinary proportions for me.

What I was implying in that last scene was that she was so much at peace back in her home country that she was ready to die – not that she was dying. But I also wrote that she had had to leave her daughter behind because she couldn't make it *with* her. Now *that is* fiction in that I haven't got any factual records to back that up. If there's anything I feel I may have done wrong there in Aboriginal terms, it is in imagining that story because it might not have happened: that she left that child or even had a child. That's where the fictional uncertainty lies. What I was doing in writing that was to leave a space for another story that I know about in a future novel that follows on from this one. It's about the home on the Parramatta River where all the Indigenous kids were sent in the very early days of white settlement. The story continues; that's the thing to remember. When you write an historical fiction what you do is write back to the present, which is why I actually had the three stories and added the present-day story in. I wanted to show how in the present we are affected by these stories of the past. I wanted to explore that big question about my life here in Australia being contingent upon Indigenous lives. That was a big part of what I wanted to do in my project.

> Every day that I live and breathe the fresh air of Eora country, I do so because of Booron. Without her, the spirit of my own country is missing and the narratives pale with absence. The stories of Booron's meeting with my ancestor Elizabeth is [sic] part of a history that gives resonance to my own sense of belonging. (Conway-Herron 2010: 11)

M: I think you state that very clearly in your novel. Talking about these connections between the past and the present, and how we interpret the past from the present, would you say there is a 'last-Tasmanian', Trugannini-like ring to Booron?

J: Yes, there is, although I didn't base Booron's story on the story of Trugannini at all and I don't agree with the concept of the last Tasmanian either. If you look at recent historical interpretations around Trugannini they show her as a translator, a person-in-between. Booron went with Reverend Johnson and actually was a translator along with Bennelong. They were the in-between people that helped negotiate language and so on, and so was Trugannini. Some people say that she enabled George Augustus Robinson [the first Tasmanian Missioner-Protector of the Aborigines] to round the Aborigines up and place them out there on various islands. But for me she was a cultural ambassador, so indeed, there is a lot of similarity between those two Aboriginal women.

> The next afternoon I watched as bus after bus arrived at the concert stage at the Davies Park Oval and Aboriginal people from all over the country streamed into the sports grounds. One bus of particularly fair-skinned people caught my attention.

> ‘Where are they from?’ I asked Leon. ‘Tasmania,’ he answered. ‘There are actually two buses. They came across on the ferry and then drove all the way up here.’
> ‘But I thought they’d all been wiped out?’
> ‘Well, think again, those guys are the living proof of the Tasmanian’s survival. Even if they are fair-skinned, they’ve been living and breathing culture all their lives’. (Conway-Herron 2010: 176)

M: Wouldn’t you agree that Trugannini forms part of the History Wars and how they are fought out? Her status remains controversial and it shows how fiction plays its part for Australians in establishing the truth about their own past.

J: You know how Elizabeth Hayward, my convict ancestor who comes out on the First Fleet and provides a central protagonist for *Beneath the Grace of Clouds*, goes to Tasmania at the very end of the novel. Her son, George, who is a little boy on the ship in my novel, ended up as part of the Black Wars, the Black Line, that attempted to wipe out the Indigenous people in Tasmania. You see what I’m saying? I’m in Australia because of those things. And he is my grandmother’s great grandfather. So there are definitely parallels, and this history, where they attempt to wipe out Indigenous people in one way or another, gets repeated again and again over time. This genocide is what everybody in Australia needs to come to terms with. That’s a very hard thing to do and the book is my attempt to settle my own feelings about it. I don’t think there is any reconciliation particularly; I’m just trying to bring those stories to life rather than cover them up.

> Elizabeth Hayward had eventually sailed to Tasmania where she had finally settled. Her family and their descendants went on to become stalwart members of society in the town of Evandale, where my grandmother Osla was born one hundred and fifty years later. Although most family members acknowledged our convict forebears, the story had been elevated by the inclusion of Lieutenant David Collins and Nancy Yeates as ancestors. In one swift change of the historian’s pen, our ancestors had become respectable founders of Australia and the story of Elizabeth Hayward had been covered up. But a few astute family members over the generations had had their doubts and left easy trails for me to follow. (Conway-Herron 2010: 199)

M: I was wondering how you felt about the idea of giving voice to an Indigenous person in your novel.

J: It’s controversial and I know it is. Part of the protocol is that you get permission from Indigenous people, so I gave it to Indigenous people to read. Whether that makes it OK [I don’t know] because they weren’t necessarily from the Wallamatagul or Eora people; Ruby Langford Ginibi [Bundjalung] said it was wonderful and that I should publish it like this. However, Kate Grenville, the author of *The Secret River* (2005), said she couldn’t write in the voice of the Indigenous person so she didn’t. Many saw that as the right way of doing things but, for me, *The Secret River* is lacking a certain voice and agency on the part of the Indigenous people. I don’t think that is wrong, it’s just different. I really felt the lack of the view coming from Indigenous people in that book because there’s so much Australian history starting with the ships coming in, viewing the land and taking possession of the land. I wanted to have a view where Booron sits on the cliffs and watches the ships coming in. I could

have chosen a fictitious person but all other characters were from history so I looked for that person in the sources and lo and behold, I found her.

M: It makes sense that there should be such a person, and I find it intriguing and fascinating that Booron should end up with Bennelong, who was so important in the mediation of Indigenous and non-Indigenous culture.

> Slowly Bennelong's intentions become clear to Booron. Now that he has impressed the officers and marines with his ability to transform himself into one of their own kind, they must take notice of him. He motions for Captain Tench to sit with him. Then he tells the Englishman that his people have been recently robbed of their spears, fishgigs and other hunting implements and requests that they are given back. In return, he promises to return the knife the governor lost when he was speared. (Conway-Herron 2010: 131)

J: Historian and author Keith Vincent Smith has done a lot of work on that era and the Indigenous people that were there, and has written extensively about Bennelong. It's because of him and others that this period has come to life historically. When I started writing this novel I only had primary sources in the State Library, I had no Internet sources and I had to make it all up and guess things a lot of the time. I wasn't a historian either, I was a creative writer, but I loved doing that research, I was in my element. Now it's so much easier to get to the information that I really needed at the time. I'm just so thankful that I guessed it right. Yet, I wish that I had known that Booron had ended up with Bennelong when I wrote the novel. When I re-release the book I'll put that postscript in. I have the contemporary narrative and the historical narrative, and it will work if I add it as part of the contemporary narrative.

M: I addressed Booron's role in the novel because I was wondering how these three stories came together, whether they balance out. I've always found this sense of impending loss a bit of a problem there.

> She is home, she tells herself and these straggling remnants of the Eora are her people. Whatever happens now, she is in Wallamatagul country… Gradually the grace of the clouds moves over her and with it comes serenity. She will be ready now whenever the spirits come to her and will accept the gift of death gratefully when they lift her soul upward to where the ancestors are waiting to welcome her. (Conway-Herron 2010: 209)

J: There is also a sense of achievement. She'd promised herself that she would come back home before she dies and she does. They were starving Indigenous people out of that land and making it really hard for them to live anywhere, but, Booron does it, she makes it home to the place where she can die freely!

I was hoping that my book would cause more controversy than it has, and that there would be more discussion about these issues. In the meantime there's been Richard Flanagan's *Wanting* (2008) with the story of Mathinna that's based on historical fact. That might have been very controversial but nobody said, 'You shouldn't have done that!' He doesn't do it very well, in my mind, but you do see the world through Machine's eyes a little bit, but they are still colonised eyes. The colonised gaze; you don't get away from that for a moment.

M: This brings me back to Kate Grenville's *The Secret River*. The way she doesn't give voice to Indigenous people is problematic in the sense of it being a

form of denial, don't you think?

J: Well yes. I grew up with textbooks in which Indigenous people were always on the side of the page with a spear in their hands and standing on one foot. And I feel that in Kate Grenville's *Secret River* they are relegated to the same status. They never speak, you only ever see them and that's problematic for me. You can see what she's trying to do and I totally understand it, but at the same time, and in spite of the quality of her writing, I feel that the text is lacking. My project revolves around the notion that there was a community here before the white man came to Australia, and people did see the white men coming in as much as the British came in and saw the country then claimed it as their own.

M: Your novel picks up very well on the two communities interacting and feeling each other out at first contact.

J: In Indigenous culture you're not meant to represent people from particular cultures if you're not part of that culture yourself; I understand how that is but I also find that a difficult situation to be in. I chose to go out on a limb that way. I do understand where that sensitivity comes from and I think it is warranted, but it has got this sense of stopping everything. Some non-Indigenous people have had experiences with Indigenous people and this has been happening since first contact, a subject also taken up by Kim Scott and Eleanor Dark as well as many others.

M: I'd like to know a little bit more about your own self-perception as an Australian. Do you consider yourself in the centre or on the margins of the mainstream?

J: I see myself like Booron when she translated between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in that time. We're both moving in between cultures. The way I've led my life and the things I've done and the way I've written is a marginal way of looking at Australia. But I also see that writing from the margins allows you to see things better than when you're writing from the centre. That's what I would like to be seen as representing, this moving backwards and forwards from centre to margin.

M: Michel Foucault claimed that you can understand society by looking at its margins, and looking from the margins into the centre, which is what you do in your novel.

J: When I'm working with students I get them to do this exercise where they have to imagine they're sitting by a pool and the pool is part of a still lake. A stone drops into the pool, the ripples go out in circles from where the stone has dropped, and they are asked to imagine themselves where the circles break up at the edges of the pool. And I find this works as a visualisation and helps the students understand how when you are in that still place at the centre, you don't always see things the same way as you might see from the margins where things aren't quite so comfortable.

M: This reminds me of Alison Ravenscroft's *The Postcolonial Eye* (2012), which discusses the blindness contained in normative whiteness as not being able to appreciate cultural difference.

J: When I became aware of whiteness it made me aware of my own blindness, and part of this project is to make myself look, and understand my own privileged position at the same time as wanting other people to see that as well. You have to be right there at the edges and not be afraid to look. It's so easy just to march through life being in this nice, still place, it's less comfortable to be out at sea when the ocean's rough.

M: This has resonances with Sally Morgan making a place for herself in the Indigenous community. When her novel came out it was controversial because she wrote herself into Indigeneity. Her commitment to the community came later, when she was able to do all sorts of things for them after the publication. How about your own commitment there, as through Rock Against Racism?

J: *My Place* came out after I'd been engaged in Rock Against Racism for some time. Due to Rock Against Racism and the Deaths in Custody commission, awareness of Indigenous issues was building exponentially. Many people started thinking they might be from an Indigenous background and then tried to find out if they were. That was problematic too because people that had identified as Indigenous all along had suffered the prejudices of that identification, and those who were claiming to be Indigenous now too were coming in to organisations with their non-Indigenous ways and trying to change things. I saw and understood that. Now I think it was wrong to judge Sally Morgan's work in that light. I think she wrote about a realisation that was similar for a lot of people at that time. Because of the Stolen Generation, people had been whipped away from their homes, adopted out and never told they were Indigenous. That happened to thousands of people, and in a time span of only two generations. Sally's grandmother said she was Indian. Anything was better than being Aboriginal in those days when identifying meant you could have your children taken away from you.

M: What did your involvement in Rock Against Racism mean for your own sense of identity?

J: Rock Against Racism was really important in that sense but it really started a little before that, from the early seventies and before when I was working as a musician and already very involved in left politics. I was asked to organise some gigs for two Aboriginal bands that came from Adelaide, called Us Mob and No Fixed Address, which a friend of mine, Graham Isaac, producer of [the popular Indigenous musical] *Brand Nue Dae*, was involved with. I developed a very close relationship with the guys in those bands and then moved from Melbourne to Sydney, where Rock Against Racism was happening. Having my own band I became involved with Rock Against Racism too, which highlighted and showcased Aboriginal bands and Indigenous artists of all kinds. There were a lot of people involved that were active in Aboriginal Land Rights, Deaths in Custody and the Stolen Generation. The knowledge and the stories around these issues prompted me to find out more about myself, and Aboriginal people encouraged me to do so.

I had an idea of my grandmother being part of the Stolen Generation that really provided the impetus for the book. What underpins the project is my need to describe feelings that I think are shared by lots of Australians. I also had a feeling that if this was so, I wanted it to be confirmed. A lot of my family were going, right from the beginning: 'This isn't true, this can't be possible,' but I knew it was and I hope that my book joins a chorus of voices writing about this. It's not unique. It's just one of many similar writings about colonial history and Australian identity.

M: Your political engagement took place through hippie culture and its music and this led you to playing music with your first husband, and Rock Against Racism, amongst other things. Could you tell us about your present partner and long-time friend, Peter, using those connections?

J: Pete wouldn't really call himself a hippie, but we were both involved in alternative living from a very early age, and that came out of what happened with Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War. That is something that helped

define my politicisation and Peter's too. I had many friends being called up, and the first song I wrote had some crazy chorus, like, 'He was twenty then and he couldn't even vote.' It wasn't very good but I was only seventeen and my older friends were being called up.

Peter was called up too. He told his family that he would go into the army but what he'd do after he went in was his business, and he actually went AWOL. He was on the run for many years and there were quite a lot of men like that. When [the leftist PM] Gough Whitlam came in, he declared an amnesty and offered money in compensation too. Peter is not the kind of a person to want compensation but he was literally a stateless citizen in Australia for about five years. At the first demonstrations that I went on, there were a hundred thousand people on the streets of Melbourne. I remember being absolutely terrified and there being mounted police everywhere; we were thinking terrible things could happen but I had to go anyhow. It meant a lot to me.

M: Of course the Vietnam protest was international and tied in to the freedom thinking and freedom movements of the late sixties.

J: And also looked at how capital and the war industry go together to create something which is still happening. We stopped the Vietnam War, but we didn't stop war per se. We were naïve in thinking that we *could* stop war systematically.

M: You criticise the system but form part of it as well. You profit from it too. The gullibility stems from the fact that you can't see your participation or don't experience it as such.

J: I was talking to somebody about this recently who said, 'Well, we were all middle-class and we didn't understand. We had a good life, so we couldn't imagine what could happen; it was a failure of imagination.'

M: Speaking of the power of imagination, you live in the Northern Rivers, NSW, an area of Australia well-known for being alternative: the 'hippie' town Nimbin, the Woodstock-like Aquarius festival, the intentional communities. How has this influenced your sense of identity? Has it helped you express your ideas?

J: When my son was very small, I sang with his father in a band called Myriad. We were known for singing about peace, love and that kind of thing. A group called The White Company travelled around and performed at all the campuses advertising the Aquarius Festival, which was organised by people from the National Union of Students and was to be held on land just out of Nimbin. We were invited to be on that tour. We didn't go because I had a young son and it was just too difficult to be on the road but my brothers went with a band called The Captain Matchbox Whoopee Band. The festival itself was organised as a gathering of people with no agenda, no kind of programme of who was going to perform next; it was a very open, non-hierarchical experiment.

In May this year [2013] it's the 40th anniversary of Aquarius, which set up a flavour for alternative living in this area in particular and attracted a lot of people. Nimbin is a big part of that. It is also an area that has endured a lot tension due to the easy access to marihuana, which is grown here. There's the hemp industry and the alternative living aspect of it and the other side of it that centres on a drug culture and its legalisation. Outsiders, those who didn't fit in to so-called normal society were encouraged to go to Nimbin, so there's this cultural mix. People are generally very poor so it has a very different feel to other country towns in Australia.

M: The intentional communities involve quite a few people who are very well informed, and quite a few of them work for Southern Cross University. Perhaps you could say something about that connection with these alternative communities.

J: They do live there, yes, there are quite a few intentional communities around the area; Tuntable Falls is probably the better-known one. Years ago, for 200 dollars you could get a share in that community, and that entitled you to some land and the permission to build a house on it. It's all run communally and people have built houses of all different kinds there. Now some of the original people who live there are getting older and younger people are coming through who are involved in alternative living and different aspects of alternative culture, which in itself is important. Some of those people are also working at Southern Cross University.

It's another part of the history of Australia where there has been a genuine attempt amongst the people within the community to acknowledge and to involve Indigenous culture in the infrastructure of the community too: to be part of what Patrick Dodson describes as a dialogue with Indigenous people. That's also what my work is about and my ideas began to take shape through things like the peace movements and an alternative cultural impetus where we began to question mainstream ideas of history, identity and culture. My work today began with ideas that had their fermentation way back then.

> If we are to enact Patrick Dodson's notion of a national framework that involves a just relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians then we need a dialogue that involves listening to Indigenous people. Like that night at Kurnell Point when the tables were turned and Aboriginal people performed rituals to vanquish the spirits trapped by the violence of Australia's past, we need to understand the past inequities of white Australia's black history and incorporate Indigenous knowledges, spirituality and ceremonial practice into our national infrastructure as well as acknowledging the influence of their cultural practices on the Australian psyche. (Conway-Herron 2011: 110)

This interview is dedicated to the late Dr Pam Dahl-Helm Johnston and Dr Ruby Langford-Ginibi.

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