Deakin University

Robin Freeman

Black and white: in search of an 'apt' response to Indigenous writing

Abstract
'The good editor,' suggests Thomas McCormack in his Fiction Editor, the Novel and the Novelist*, 'reads, and ... responds aptly' to the writer's work, 'where "aptly" means "as the ideal appropriate reader would".' McCormack develops an argument that encompasses the dual ideas of sensibility and craft as essential characteristics of the fiction editor. But at an historical juncture that has seen increasing interest in the publication of Indigenous writing, and when Indigenous writers themselves may envisage a multiplicity of readers (writing, for instance, for family and community, and to educate a wider white audience), who is the 'ideal appropriate reader' for the literary works of the current generation of Australian Indigenous writers? And what should the work of this 'good editor' be when engaging with the text of an Indigenous writer? This paper examines such questions using the work of Margaret McDonell and Jennifer Jones, among others, to explore ways in which non-Indigenous editors may apply aspects of McCormack's 'apt response' to the editing of Indigenous texts.*
Keywords: cross-cultural editing; Indigenous writing and publishing; editorial education.

Introduction

In his review of the *Macquarie PEN Anthology of Australian Literature* (Jose 2009) published in *The Australian Book Review* in September 2009, Peter Craven writes:

> The sheer quantity of Aboriginal writing included in this volume – much of it devoid of literary quality or even literary ambition – is an egregious mistake. It diminishes the importance of Aboriginal culture and obscures the work of serious black writers, such as Alexis Wright, who now constitute a tiny fraction of the total. (Craven 2009: 8)

Sophie Cunningham, editor of *Meanjin*, engages with several of Craven's points in her response published in Crikey.com a few days later. She refutes his definition of literary output and suggests that Bennelong's letter, originally written in 1796 and included in the PEN anthology, was not, as suggested by Craven, 'devoid of literary quality or even literary ambition'. Rather, Cunningham (2009) finds the letter's 'compressed use of language and

grammar, the rhythm of those words, an extraordinary and complex range of emotion, as well as a sketch of a way of life being stripped away to be replaced with – handkerchiefs and shoes' to be literary indeed.

The withering blast from influential literary critic, reviewer and editor Craven, [1] and Cunningham's spirited defence of the anthology's range of Indigenous writing, foreground the problematic nature of Indigenous writing within the mainstream publishing industry in Australia. In particular, this episode draws attention to the problems experienced by white editors who take up the challenge of editing Indigenous texts.

This article briefly scopes the establishment and growth of the Australian Indigenous publishing industry under the influence of a number of factors during the 1980s and 1990s: the increasing popularity of memoir and biography as literary forms, an imperative for the inclusion of Indigenous studies in educational curricula, a growing popular focus on reconciliation, and the agitation by Indigenous writers themselves for control over the form and means of telling their own stories. It also acknowledges the need, given the dearth of Indigenous editors currently working in Australian publishing (see Heiss 2003, 2007; Freeman 2009), for a cross-cultural education and a sensitive approach to the editing of Indigenous writing by white editors.

Editors perform a number of functions in the book publishing industry. Often termed 'publishers' or 'commissioning editors' at the acquisition stage, editors may acquire titles through a process of active commissioning of particular writers or works, or through a selection of materials presented by agents or that arrive unsolicited at the offices of the publishing house. During the publication process, editors provide a supportive and educative buffer between the publishing company and the writer, and they edit the text, often shaping content, structure and language. Thus editors work within an ambiguous space, balancing their loyalty between the author and her manuscript, and the publisher and its budgetary and marketing requirements.

While this article focuses particularly on the text editing function of the editorial role, selection is nonetheless an important part of an editor's job. In the Australian industry the line between the role of the commissioning and the structural editor is often blurred, endowing editors with the power to influence not only what is published but also the final form of the publication and its content, as will be amplified below using the work of Margaret McDonell and Jennifer Jones.

It is important then that editors reflect on their position of power over writers in general, and in particular over Indigenous writers, as well as their own practice, and the training of the next generation - both black and white - towards an 'apt' response to Indigenous writing.

An Indigenous publishing industry

Editors of the *Macquarie Pen Anthology of Aboriginal Literature*, Anita Heiss and Peter Minter, chart the course of Australian Indigenous writing in English, demonstrating that from the late 18th century Indigenous peoples adopted the new written form of communication as 'a necessity within the broader struggle to survive colonisation' (Heiss & Minter 2008: 2; see also van Toorn 2006). This was a literature of engagement in the push for social and political advancement. Facility with the written English language was a necessary tool put to persuasive use for survival and, according to Heiss and Minter, to 'demonstrate one of the persistent and now characteristic elements of

Aboriginal literature – the nexus between the literary and the political' (2008: 2). This was a literature of activism. Heiss and Minter write:

> The Aboriginal literature of the first decades of the twentieth century is characterised by a concerned and unmistakably public struggle against the overtly assimilationist legislative regimes endured by Aboriginal people. Between Federation and the 1960s, as had occurred in the nineteenth century, Aboriginal authorship appeared in letters and petitions to authorities – but now also in the political manifestos and pronouncements of Aboriginal activist organisations that had begun to coordinate resistance to government control. (2008: 3)

Anthologists of *Paperbark: a collection of Black Australian writings*, Jack Davis, Stephen Muecke, Mudrooroo Narogin and Adam Shoemaker, nominate David Unaipon as the 'first Aboriginal "writer", in the European romantic sense of an individual expressing his or her own ideas' (1990: 4). Unaipon's manuscript 'Legendary Tales of the Australian Aborigines' was published as *Native Legends* in 1929. This work is credited with being the first Indigenous publication 'produced by a metropolitan publisher for a white, middle-class readership in Australia and England' and it provided a precedent for publications by Indigenous writers who were to follow (Heiss & Minter 2008: 4). Unaipon's work, however, was appropriated by anthropologist William Ramsay Smith in his *Myths and Legends of the Australian Aborigines*, and published in 1930 by London publisher George Harrap (Davis et al. 1990: 4). According to Heiss and Minter (2008: 19), the original publisher Angus and Robertson sold the international rights to Uniapon's stories without his permission. Smith's title has been reprinted regularly by a variety of publishers until as recently as 2003. Uniapon's manuscript was edited by Stephen Muecke and Adam Shoemaker in 2001 and was published with appropriate acknowledgement of the original author by Melbourne University Press. Smith's act of appropriation is but the first recorded of other literary collaborations that have seen Indigenous people dispossessed, along with their land, culture and language, of their legitimate ownership and control over the publication of their stories.

Given such circumstances, it is hardly surprising that a call for the establishment of specialised Indigenous presses found expression in the first conference of Aboriginal writers held in Perth in 1983. At this gathering Indigenous writers demanded 'community control' over the means of production of their own writing, because as Aboriginal activist and writer Bruce McGuinness asserted, the writing 'ceases to be Aboriginal when it is interfered with, when it is tampered with by non-Aboriginal people' (McGuinness & Walker 1985: 44).

Specialist presses (Aboriginal Studies Press in 1964, and IAD Press in 1972) had originally been established to publish books about, rather than books for or by, Indigenous people. More recently, both publishers have broadened their range, especially in the areas of Indigenous life writing and children's titles. Both publishers maintain a specialist focus: on academic writing (Aboriginal Studies Press) and Indigenous language publishing (IAD).

Magabala Books was established in 1987 by the Kimberley Law and Culture Centre expressly to publish Indigenous writing by and for Indigenous readers. With a focus on the preservation of community and individual stories their charter echoed McGuinness and Walker's demand, while falling somewhat short of the full creative, editorial and production control that was originally envisaged. When Magabala published its first title *Mayi: some bush fruits of*

Dampierland in 1987 there was considerable optimism about the organisation's future as an Indigenous publisher. Publishing Manager Rachael Christensen confirmed in 2007 that the market for the books is largely 'white middleclass Australians', though their books are also purchased by many Indigenous people as well (Christensen 2007). To cater to this market, Chief Executive Susie Haslehurst seeks to fulfil 'an unmet demand for tourist books about country, history and natural sciences, told from an Aboriginal point of view' (Laurie 2008).

Despite the maintenance of Magabala's presence in the book trade, and a sincere commitment to training and mentoring editors and other publishing staff by Magabala, IAD and Aboriginal Studies Press, the ideal of an Indigenous industry sector remains largely unfulfilled. The reasons for this are complex, and undoubtedly linked with historical problems faced by the wider Indigenous community, compounded by the isolation of these publishers with the attendant problems of attracting, accommodating and retaining staff (see Freeman 2009). Currently there are no Indigenous people heading up publishing companies in Australia, though all three specialist publishers continue to employ and train Indigenous employees across the range of skills required to run a successful publishing house.

Indigenous publishing is also undertaken by smaller mainstream presses such as University of Queensland Press with their 'Black Writing' series and support for the David Uniapon award for an unpublished manuscript by an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, and Fremantle Arts Centre Press which produces a specialist Indigenous writing list.[2]

A growing niche for Indigenous writing

Sally Morgan's *My Place* was published in 1987 by Fremantle Arts Centre Press, selling 25,000 copies in the year of release. *Wandering Girl* by Glenyse Ward was published in the same year by Magabala Books and sold 20,000 copies (Muecke 2005: 109). Stephen Muecke links the publication of these titles (especially Morgan's *My Place*) with the publication in 1981 of (non-Indigenous writer) AB Facey's autobiographical *A Fortunate Life* (2005: 112). 'What I would argue', he writes:

> is that the appearance of an Aboriginal literature over the past two decades is not only in response to historical conditions of repression and struggle but is also a consequence of the publishing industry being in a state of readiness, even eagerness, to publish work by Aboriginal writers. (Muecke 2005: 113)

Using Muecke's assertions Sonja Kurtzer argues that it is only writers 'with particular kinds of stories to tell, who are able to express their stories in particular kinds of ways' who find their writings acceptable to the majority white community and thus to mainstream publishers (Kurtzer 2003: 181). Indigenous writers, she states, work within a dichotomy of constraints that inhibit their ability to 'speak on their own behalf, with their own stories and their own histories'. Simultaneously they are constrained by 'the desires of the hegemonic "white culture",' as well as the 'Indigenous community and its desire to have Aboriginality "authentically" represented to the hegemonic culture' (Kurtzer 2003: 181).[3]

Changes too, to the Australian education systems, which encouraged the development of a national collaborative curriculum during the late 1980s,

expanded the niche market for Indigenous stories. Often an education market was developed for titles originally envisaged as trade sales; Sally Morgan's *My Place* serves as a high profile example. Such market broadening may alter the way in which editors are required to envisage the 'ideal readership' for a particular publication.

In 1989, at the instigation of the Australian Education Council, a curriculum development statement and a curriculum profile were written for eight key learning areas in Australian schools, including Studies of Society and Environment (SOSE). During this process, in key learning areas 'consultants were appointed with responsibility for ensuring that gender equity and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives were reflected in the documents' (Curriculum Corporation 1994: iii). Although these documents were to be accepted only at the discretion of each state or territory, they led to a progressive embedding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies into both the SOSE and wider curriculum throughout Australia. This then provided a focus for publishing about, and a more general interest in, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and has possibly influenced the flow of Indigenous texts to both mainstream and specialist publishers.

A further constraint for Indigenous writers interacting with mainstream Australian publishing is the notion of readership. While the Indigenous writer frequently writes with a specific audience in mind, this may not be the primary readership the publisher is seeking. As is commonly the case, Rita Huggins wrote for 'my children and their children and other members of my family' as well as 'those whites who want to know what the story looks like from the Aboriginal side' (Huggins & Huggins 1994: 1).[4] Oodgeroo, however, intended to 'shape the minds of the younger generation' with her autobiographical *Stradbroke Dreamtime* (Jones 2009: 48). As demonstrated below, her intentions were thwarted by insensitive cross-cultural editing of her manuscript. Tensions too are created for the editor and writer when there exist different perceptions about readership for a particular text between writer and publisher. Jennie Bell, for example, was asked by a white editor to explain in more detail the machinations of the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in her biographical *Talking about Celia*. Her publisher evidently perceived the text as educational and her writing for a 'student readership'. Bell responded, 'I thought there's been so many books written about that stuff and this is not what this is about. This is one woman's story' (in Heiss 2003: 73).

Despite the difficulties experienced by writers and editors negotiating the problematic territory that straddles the realisation of the author's intentions and the publisher's commercial agenda, with support from the Australian publishing industry and specifically from specialised Indigenous and small publishers, Indigenous writers have established a niche within the Australian book market. It is a small niche, initially created by the poetry of Kath Walker (later Oodgeroo) during the 1960s. Indigenous women's life writers, including Sally Morgan, Glenys Ward, Margaret Tucker and Ruby Langford Ginibi, expanded this niche during the 1980s. Kim Scott and Alexis Wright began producing award-winning fiction in the late 1990s and the trend has continued into the new millennium. Indigenous writing is positioned to reach a wider readership, which posits the growing need for editors with an apt sensibility to Indigenous writing.

In search of the 'good' editor – on sensibility and craft

In *The Fiction Editor, the Novel and the Novelist* (1988), when Thomas McCormack suggests that the appropriate editor for a text must respond 'aptly', and that this apt response depends on 'sensibility', he is writing specifically about editing fiction. 'Sensibility' as used by McCormack is 'mental susceptibility or responsiveness; quickness and acuteness of apprehension or feeling' (Delbridge et al. 2003: 1717). McCormack's thesis, it is argued, applies equally to life writing, memoir and biography, where authors use fictional techniques to recreate a 'story' from their experience, research and memory.

This article seeks to move the context within which Indigenous writing has been discussed in academic circles over the past decade, that of cross-cultural collaborative women's life writing (see, for example, Brewster 1995; Jacklin 2004; McDonell 2004; Jones 2009), to encompass broader literary forms. It suggests that certain approaches of the fiction editor - the time allowed for manuscript development and author consultation, for instance - might model an apt response to the editing of Indigenous writing more generally.

'The right editor,' McCormack hypothesises, ' … is not right because he has some sort of absolutely good taste, a special insight into literary Platonic forms … It doesn't take "good taste" to respond to Faulkner. It simply takes a sensibility that responds to Faulkner' (1988: 7). The right editor for a particular piece of writing, then, should demonstrate an 'acuteness of apprehension or feeling' towards the text and in their dealings with its writer. In amplification of the term 'sensibility', McCormack suggests that the ideal editor must have an ability to respond to both macro and micro levels of the text: the plot and its resolution as well as the writer's linguistic choices (1988: 10-11). For the purpose he nominates a series of diagnostic tools, suggesting an analogy with a course in musical analysis and appreciation:

> 'Notice the oboe counterpoint here; isolate in your ear just the flute; see what he's doing with it?' It won't teach you how to compose ingeniously, but you will compose better; and you will listen better, and that's what an editor is before all else: a listener. (1988: 161)

Although his book is directed towards the professional market, McCormack is disappointingly negative about the transference of these skills: 'In an adult', he asserts, 'the lack of apt sensibility is incurable. It cannot be taught' (1988: 12).

The point here is not to suggest that McCormack has experience with either Indigenous peoples or the editing of Indigenous texts. He addresses an educated readership that is effectively a monoculture, with a presumed shared valuing of the American literary canon of the previous 50 years. Rather, it is his establishment of some fundamental ideas about sensibility, diagnosis and craft as they pertain to the editing process that is explored here in an attempt to suggest a useful approach for the cross-cultural editor.

While it may be true that we cannot *teach* a particular sensibility to aspiring editors, it is possible that an 'acuteness of apprehension or feeling' towards particular texts may be *acquired*. Specifically, this article's interest is in the acquisition of sensibility to Indigenous writing, which may be achieved as part of the editor's cross-cultural education (see McDonell 2004). This requires an editor to decentre her Eurocentric world-view, acknowledging Edward Said's notion of 'positional superiority,' which posits the westerner/coloniser as always superior to the Orient/colonised (in Tuhiwai Smith 1999: 58). Within the publication process, as the white editor collaborates with the Indigenous writer, she must reflect not only upon the position of power endowed by her status as an editor, but also her responsibility to prevent the perpetuation of a

system in which Indigenous knowledge is 'discovered, extracted, appropriated and distributed' to a western readership in ways that devalue and fragment both Indigenous culture and the voices of its custodians (Tuhiwai Smith 1999: 58).

An editor unaware of the privileged position conferred by her own 'whiteness' risks influencing the text in ways that disempower the Indigenous writer. Such unconscious influences may lead, among others things, to racial stereotyping, the misappropriation of the 'voice' of the author or, by insensitive cutting of the text, to censorship (see Jones 2009). This position is affirmed by Margaret McDonell in her thesis 'The Invisible Hand: Cross-cultural Influence on Editorial Practice', when she recommends that:

> A non-Indigenous editor needs to find a place, a subject position, that recognises entrenched racism and actively works against it. She needs to educate herself so that her need to learn does not become a burden to the writer and an encumbrance to the collaborative process. (McDonell 2004: 25)

From her subject position of 'ideal reader' McDonell is aware that effective collaboration with Indigenous writers is impossible unless the editor has 'an awareness of and respect for Indigenous culture' (2004: 21).[5] She acknowledges the inherent tension between the probability, even desirability, of exerting influence over the writer's storytelling. Yet this tension must be negotiated during the process of establishing a working relationship with the author, which allows the editor to 'provide feedback and clarify with the writer her intentions for a particular piece of writing' (2004: 66). This must be achieved with the identity of the 'imagined readership' always firmly in mind. What is considered appropriate for a white readership may be quite different when imagining reception by an Indigenous readership (2004: 21). The interests of the publisher to maximise the readership of any particular title may come into conflict with an Indigenous writer who imagines herself writing both for family and community, as well as a white reader receptive to cross-cultural education. Herein is highlighted a secondary tension, echoing Kurtzer's warning of the exclusion from the mainstream of 'particular kinds of stories … [told in] particular kinds of ways' (Kurtzer 2003: 181).

For McCormack, the ideal reader of a particular text reveals a sensibility that allows the detection of an 'undesirable effect' within the narrative and enables the reader to trace this to a 'generic fault in the narrative' (1988: 101). A 'private reader', McCormack suggests, reads and responds to a text with boredom, frustration, engagement or elation, perhaps. A professional reader, an editor, must be able to identify the causes for their responses and to make suggestions for improvement when required. 'What's needed is an analysis that is canny, informed, fundamental, sensible, technical, systematic, and thorough. What's needed is craft … that part of former art that is now so well understood it has been anatomized and codified, and therefore it can be taught and systematically applied' (McCormack 1988: 19).

In *Editing Fact and Fiction*, Leslie T Sharpe and Irene Gunther focus on the nexus between sensibility and craft, confirming that:

> [sensibility] develops with a growing knowledge of the craft of editing, through constant reading, and, of course, through the experience of dealing with many kinds of authors and many types of books. In addition, the principles … [of] tact, flexibility, confidence, respect for the author and responsibility to the book – all play a role in developing the editor's sensibility. (Sharpe & Gunther 1994: 130)

The specifics of both McCormack's and Sharpe and Gunter's ideas around the acquisition of sensibility through an osmotic process of wide reading and the practice of craft are particularly useful, it is suggested, in considering the editing of Indigenous writers by non-Indigenous editors, regardless of the genre.[6]

A snapshot of education and professional practice – on craft

Although editors working in the Australian publishing industry and conducting industry training within post-secondary educational institutions are currently well served by local and overseas texts dealing with the craft of editing in general, fewer titles deal with the editing of fiction in depth.[7] Most contain only short sections on fiction editing in texts largely devoted to the knowledge and skills of the copyeditor. Even fewer provide information on the editing of Indigenous writing in a manner accessible to the student editor. The two main Australian resources for the trainee editor, *The Australian Editing Handbook* and *The Editors' Companion*, provide limited information and advice on the subject of editing Indigenous texts. Generally (though with legitimate reason: the market for texts on the subject of editing Indigenous writing is small), advice highlights technical and practical needs; for example, an exploration of issues of copyright pertaining to the relationships between an Indigenous community and the telling of individual stories.

The Australian Editing Handbook by editors Elizabeth Flann and Beryl Hill, originally published in 1994 and revised in 2004, provides advice about the use of preferred terminology when referring to the Indigenous peoples of Australia and New Zealand. Of particular merit is perhaps the reminder that the editor is questioning whether a story works, not whether they like the particular story. In *The Editor's Companion*, also published in 2004, Janet Mackenzie includes a slightly longer section on Indigenous writing under the heading 'The Ethics of Editing'. This section warns non-Indigenous editors that 'Indigenous writing often confounds mainstream expectations: for instance, it may not fit neatly into a literary genre and its authorship and copyright may be communal' (2004: 35). Non-Indigenous editors are further warned of the 'complex maze of negotiations' they must be prepared to enter into when editing Indigenous texts, as well as the need for an increased self-awareness of their own preconceptions and prejudices. Mackenzie also alerts the editor to the uses and functions of Aboriginal English and the changing views on the spelling of Aboriginal and Maori words (2004: 35-36).

Within an institutional context, craft is taught because it can be 'anatomised and codified' (McCormack 1988: 19) and the acquisition of sensibility defies the limits of a course bounded by the time constraints of semesters and the conferring of diplomas and degrees. 'In our view,' write Sharpe and Gunther, the best way for editors to learn about writing is from writers themselves. Editors need to listen to writers talk – about their work, about themselves, and about the creative process' (1994: 143). Sensibility, as suggested above, is acquired as a matter of deliberate and concerted desire and experiential learning, and a junior editor or editorial assistant is lucky if they are offered the kind of traineeship lamented as missing by both McCormack and Sharpe and Gunther, and which McDonell suggests should open to challenge an editor's 'motives and her decisions … [prepare her] to learn and, in learning, to make mistakes' (2004: 92). Nevertheless, it is sensibility that is required, and a specific sensibility towards Indigenous writing and its themes and content, if the non-Indigenous editor is to successfully support the Indigenous writer towards publication.

White edits Black: the editing of *Stradbroke Dreamtime*

In *Black Writers, White Editors: episodes of collaboration and compromise in Australian publishing history,* Jennifer Jones provides a number of case studies of the editing of Indigenous writers by white editors. 'When white people act as textual midwives for Aboriginal women writers, what happens to the baby?' she asks (2009: v). In her first case study entitled 'Editing Oodgeroo: transforming *Stradbroke Dreamtime* from strident political prose into harmless entertainment', Jones examines the collaborative relationship between Oodgeroo and her editor Barbara Ker Wilson for publisher Angus & Robertson. Although it seems unlikely that the feisty Oodgeroo would be pressured into textual changes with which she did not agree, Jones demonstrates using comparative extracts from the manuscript and the published edition that the changes appear to have significantly altered the text. She writes:

> The changes to *Stradbroke Dreamtime* [published in 1972] were substantial in quantity, with over 3,700 changes to the manuscript. This is a lot of changes to a book that was less than 120 pages long in the first edition. Furthermore, nearly 2,700 of these alterations had a direct impact upon the character of the narrative. During the editing process the manuscript was stripped of its colloquial language, removing any hint of the distinctive Aboriginal voice of the characters. Aboriginal perspectives on land, spirituality and contemporary Aboriginal culture were removed. Some positive depictions of an Aboriginal worldview were replaced by racist representations of Aboriginal people. Any overt criticism of white people or depiction of their racist attitudes were deleted. (2009: 6)

The collaboration with Oodgeroo was Ker Wilson's first with an Indigenous writer, although she had been an editor of some 14 years' experience in the United Kingdom - largely in children's publishing - prior to taking up her position with Angus & Robertson in 1965 (Nevile 2009: 73). Furthermore, Ker Wilson's stated attitude towards her authors was influenced by her own experiences as a published writer, and by an early experience of publication in which she felt betrayed by a student editor. 'Jane Austen', she has recounted in an interview, 'referred to her first published work as "my own darling child" and an editor should never mistreat a writer's child' (cited Nevile 2009: 69) and later: 'As a writer I have sometimes received, largely from American editors, the impression that they seemed to think it was their book' (2009: 76). Here speaks a writer who knows what it is to suffer at the hands of editors.

On Oodgeroo's manuscript, Ker Wilson worked only in pencil, a common practice in fiction editing intended to emphasise the editor's respect for the writer's text. Ker Wilson has described the relationship between writer and editor as 'diffident, we were both diffident' (Jones 2009: 50). Despite Ker Wilson's experience as a writer and editor, and her best intentions as a collaborative partner, Oodgeroo was not happy with the published version of her text (Jones 2009: 44-7). In her book, Jones explores a number of reasons for the confluence of events that saw Oodgeroo's apparent acquiescence to the significant number of editorial changes, which included personal, financial and health issues. In Jones's opinion, 'Oodgeroo's *Stradbroke Dreamtime* was written at a personal low point in her life, making her text uncharacteristically vulnerable to editorial amendment' (2009: 207).

Demonstrably then, Ker Wilson was not the 'good editor' for Oodgeroo's work at this time. Although she seems to have evinced Sharpe and Gunther's principles of 'tact, flexibility' […] 'respect for the author, and responsibility to the book' (1994: 130), perhaps it is in that 'diffidence' whereby she failed to engage 'confidently' with the author's text that editors can begin to understand the problems here and to reflect upon appropriate degrees of sensibility towards the texts of Indigenous writers?

Peter Craven's credentials as a critic, reviewer and editor may arguably be beyond reproach when the English and Australian literary canons are under review, but in his critique of the *Macquarie Pen Anthology of Australian Literature* he states that the anthology contains an excess of Aboriginal writing, much of which (as mentioned above) 'has no literary value'. Craven continues:

> If someone were to publish this amount of African American writing in a comparable anthology of American literature, they would be laughed to scorn, though blacks constitute a much higher percentage of the US population and their objective literary achievement is considerably higher. (Craven 2009: 8)

This article will not argue the accuracy of this statement, though Sophie Cunningham has done so in her response to the original review (Cunningham 2009). Attention is drawn to this example in the context of McCormack's 'apt response' to particular writing and writers. Craven's failure to distinguish the important historical differences in terms of their colonial subjugation between Afro-American and Australian Indigenous writers suggests a sensibility that is unresponsive to particular kinds of Indigenous writing. His comparison might more accurately have been made with Native Americans, though undoubtedly this would not serve the purpose of his argument. As editors we must remain aware of our own inherent capacity for unconscious racism.

The invisibility of whiteness

Margaret McDonell argues that an evidence-based approach, as taken by Jones in her research of cross-cultural writer–editor collaborations, may be inconclusive when used as a singular tool to speculate about changes made to the manuscript. 'Such an examination cannot fully demonstrate the constant negotiation that takes place through the editing process,' she observes (2004: 9). McDonell's approach foregrounds a number of issues, including that of 'self definition' as an essential component of identity formation in Indigenous women's life writing, asserting (from Aileen Moreton-Robinson, bell hooks and Toni Morrison) its importance in 'removing the Indigenous life writer from a position of subjectification, and showing the extent of her participation in and interaction with the dominant culture' (2004: 10). Drawing from the work of Rosamund Dalziell (1999: 127-28), McDonell alerts her readers to the difficulties associated with feelings of 'shame' that must be confronted by black writers when working with 'sympathetic' white collaborators. The corollary of this, she suggests, is the shame experienced by the white editor when contemplating her complicity in the 'invisibility of whiteness' which 'infects the editor, her practice, the publishing house, the reception of the book, the society at large' (2004: 40). Editors are forced to engage pragmatically with real world situations, and thus the cultural and political milieu within which Indigenous texts are produced. Currently in Australia, McDonell suggests, 'editors, along with the rest of the population, are complicit in the entrenched racism that is part of the fabric of the nation' (2004: 27).

Additionally, based on Stephen Muecke's discussion of temporary and positional custodianship of Aboriginal stories (2005: 38), McDonell raises issues relevant to western notions of copyright, calling for clarification of differences in the editor's understandings of 'authorship' and 'custodianship' in relation to Indigenous texts (2004: 11). McDonell also highlights the difficult relationship between 'orality' and literacy (from Walter J Ong) and its relevance to the 'good' editor working with Indigenous texts. 'A literate person', Ong writes, 'cannot fully recover a sense of what the word is to purely oral people' (2002: 12), meaning that at times an editor finds herself working with a manuscript that is the 'equivalent to translation from one language to another' (McDonell 2004: 85).

McDonell argues that 'the cross-cultural context influences editorial process dramatically' and 'must be recognised and accommodated if more effective collaborative relationships are to develop' between cross-cultural collaborators (2004: 6). It is necessary, to provide 'cultural as well as editorial training … to prepare effective editors of Indigenous writing' (McDonell 2004: 6). McDonell's issues-based approach includes the acceptance of a series of protocols based on the work of the Australia Council and the Australian Society of Authors, which enshrine a moral imperative for respect for Indigenous culture in a 'society where whiteness bestows privilege' (2004: 91).[8] Additionally McDonell suggests that marginalia – preliminary and end matter (prefaces glossaries, foot and endnotes) may reveal the usually invisible presence of an editor in the text, thus:

> subvert[ing] and deconstruct[ing] notions of authorship and unmask[ing] both editor and the collaborative process … [Marginalia] can privilege or authorise a text or its author; they may explain matters that are considered unclear, put the writing into a political, geographical, temporal or social context, or attempt to give the writing or author some authority or credibility. (2004: 42)

Though the use of marginalia, McDonnell suggests, is not without problems: if situated at the beginning of the work, too much prominence may be given to the white editor; if placed at the end, the editor may appear to command the 'last word' (2004: 32).

Michelle Grossman too warns against the problematic overuse of marginalia, suggesting that such 'textual apparatus' is 'heavily artifactual, so that some modes of Aboriginal life writing appear to be dominated by the same techniques of "visualism" that have informed the discursive strategies of cultural anthropology' (Grossman 2001: 157). They draw too much attention to the 'craft of text-making, and to the centralizing role of the editor in that process' (2001: 157). Rather than being 'read', texts are 'surveyed', and 'surveillance', Grossman argues, is 'a key feature in the management of the textual economy of Aboriginal writing' (2001: 157).

Despite these difficulties and apparent contradictions, white editors are undertaking the journey of crosscultural education, and their efforts are being met with positive responses from the writers they edit. Alison Ravenscroft, editor of Rita and Jackie Huggins's *Auntie Rita,* has written of her experience of editing the manuscript.[9] While undertaking the task, she read critical theorists and black writers, among them the fiction of Alexis Wright and Kim Scott. She travelled to Queensland and met the mother–daughter team, staying with them for two weeks, and in Jackie Huggins words 'she sat down and started to edit and talk to Mum' (in Heiss: 2003: 78). The scene Ravenscroft

mentions in the following quotation is a description by Rita Huggins of her meeting with her future husband at a segregated dance:

> I [Ravenscroft] wasn't able to step into this [black] scene until certain pressures were brought to bear on my whiteness and its viewing position, and reading critical theories of whiteness together with Indigenous-signed lifestory and fiction were among these pressures, calling me into another position … Reading their various and differing work has shifted my white viewing perspective so that I am not standing always, necessarily, and only in the position of the spectator of 'black' others. Instead, I am also touched, moved, jostled onto a scene in which I can no longer settle so comfortably for the ideal of whiteness and its necessary counterpart a blind blackness which whiteness makes but says it has found. (Ravenscroft 2007)

Sensibility is, I suggest, apparent in Alison Ravenscroft's approach and her reality of being 'touched, moved, jostled' by Rita Huggin's story (Ravenscroft 2007). Penny van Toorn's experience of editing Ruby Langford Ginibi's *Haunted by the past* in 1990, in which she, like Ravenscroft, was incorporated into Langford Ginibi's family network, made her acutely aware that one of her roles as 'editorial assistant' was to bring the perspective of 'surrogate stranger' to her reading of the text (van Toorn 2006: 221). This too demonstrates a sensibility to the text and intent of her author.

Conclusion

This paper contends that Australian publishers require the assistance of trained and culturally sensitive editors in order to publish books by Indigenous writers in a niche but expanding market. Given the current lack of an appropriate pool of Indigenous editors, many editors working on Indigenous titles will perforce be white, perhaps leaving their university-educated comfort zone to work with Indigenous writers for the first time. Some of their authors will themselves share elements of this background: a university education, for instance. Others may be members of a remote community whose stories have been recorded and transcribed by a third party.

A number of factors can assist white editors to become the 'good editor' for Indigenous texts. The first, of course, is the desire to begin to understand and to accept a tendency towards unconscious racism, as well as the need to engage with the cross-cultural education, assisted by the use of protocols suggested by Margaret McDonell. The acquisition of the sensibility for Indigenous writing, which includes a journey of reading, reflection and the practice of craft, is an essential component of the required training. The attitude and techniques of the fiction editor provide a useful model for the necessary attitude and skills to which the prospective editor of Indigenous writing may aspire. Through the practice of editing fiction, an editor may become 'captivated by the voice of a novel' (Sale 1993: 269).

Sensibility is displayed in the intimacy developed between writer and editor during the process: Faith Sale (vice president and executive editor of GP Putnam's Sons, New York, for some 15 years at the time) describes editing a writer she admires as 'a form of an act of love' (1993: 268), and the logical outcome of being 'hooked … unshakably committed for the long haul, regardless of obstacles. But,' Sale continues:

> I can't fake it: my devotion to fiction is borne more out of instinct than intellect, based more on emotional response than calculated judgement. The moment of connection is the moment I become a book's (or an author's) advocate – its nurturer, defender, supporter, mouthpiece, bodyguard. (1993: 269)

Fiction editing is a time-consuming process, and ideally incorporates an exchange of ideas which, Sale suggests, 'in the best case [will make] sublime what had been merely adequate, when an author is led to reimagine or create anew, rather than just make repairs' (1993: 270). Such a process, reminiscent of McDonell's 'shared vision for the imagined reader that is inclusive of a range of possible readers' (2004: 65), shares the characteristic of working towards a collective goal irrespective of the time taken to achieve the full potential of the manuscript. Such editing (less happily undertaken by mainstream multinational publishers with a focus on strict deadlines and financial returns), shares characteristics with the editing of Indigenous texts. Sale, as did Ker Wilson, annotates the manuscript in pencil, writing comments and questions in the margin, but never without personal contact or a telephone conversation. She doesn't, she states, 'prescribe revision, [she] simply locate[s] troubles and, if invited, participate[s] in finding cures' (1993: 271).

Convincing the Indigenous writer that the process is one of true collaboration, in which the editor reflects to the writer the feelings engendered by her text and assists her to participate fully and ably in the editorial process, requires more than a statement of goodwill and positive intent, as has been demonstrated by Jennifer Jones (2009). The ideal though is reflected in McDonell's editorial model of 'women sitting and yarning' together: a domestic, less formal situation than the professional model many editors and writers commonly work with, and is suggestive of face-to-face contact (2004: 33).

The dichotomy embodied in the purpose of publication for many writers also needs to be addressed by the industry. Otherwise, there is a risk that increasingly writing that suits only a mainstream white audience will compete for space in the lists of even specialist Indigenous publishers.

Notes

1. Peter Craven, journalist and literary critic, was the founding editor (with Michael Heyward) of literary journal *Scripsi* published from Melbourne University between 1981 and 1994. He is a former editor of *The Quarterly Essay,* and for several years *The Best Australian Stories* and *The Best Australian Essays*, published by Black Inc. Craven is and has been a frequent contributor to the literary pages of newspapers and journals both in Australia and abroad. return to text

2. For more information about the diversity of Australian Indigenous publishing see, for example 'Indigenous book publishing' by Anita Heiss in Carter & Galligan (2007), and Michelle Grossman's introduction to *Blacklines: contemporary critical writing by Indigenous Australians*. return to text

3. See also Huggins 2003; Hughes 1998; Muecke 2005. return to text

4. Penny van Toorn suggests that this dichotomy of stated readership was the result of differences in intent between the mother–daughter writing team: 'While Rita Huggins' authorial practices were grounded in a paradigm of face-to-face communication with family and friends, those of her daughter Jackie Huggins were shaped by a print-based sense of the reader as a white stranger' (2006: 220). return to text

5. McDonell suggests that an experienced editor brings a 'critical eye and ear … to bear on the manuscript'. Nevertheless, 'what an editor may lack in terms of experiences she may make up for in cultural knowledge; if there is a gap between cultural and other knowledges, the writer's intention may not be well served' (2004: 19). return to text

6. Essentially, editorial work on a manuscript falls into two broad categories: structural editing and copy or line editing. The first is not easy to teach or to codify. This work includes wholehearted support for the writer and his/her manuscript while working collaboratively with a writer's conceptualisation towards a reader's engagement and within the publisher's budget and schedule. The editor brings to this work her education and wider reading, her experience with other projects, her reading about the work of editing and her study of 'how writers write' (Sharpe & Gunther 1994: 142). See also Faith Sale (1993: 268-71). return to text

7. Most famous is the collected letters of Maxwell Perkins in *Editor to author, the letters of Maxwell E Perkins* edited by John Hall Wheelock (1991 [1950]). Faith Sale's 'Editing Fiction as an Act of Love' (1993) is a useful text, as is Sharpe & Gunther (1994). On Indigenous editing, Jennifer Jones' recently published *Black Writers White Editors* (2009) is also useful when considering sensibility and craft. return to text

8. See *Writing: protocols for producing Indigenous Australian writing* (2nd ed), Australia Council for the Arts, published in 2007 at http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/research/aboriginal_and_torres_strait_islander_arts; 'Writing about Indigenous Australia' (Terri Janke) and 'Australian Copyright vs Indigenous Intellectual and Cultural Property' (Anita Heiss), Australian Society of Authors at http://www.asauthors.org/scripts/cgiip.exe/WService=ASP0016/ccms.r?PageId=10200 (accessed 10 February 2010) return to text

9. *Auntie Rita* (published by Aboriginal Studies Press in 1994) is often cited as an example of successful collaborative Indigenous women's life writing due to the form and style of the collaboration between an Indigenous mother and daughter, and their stated satisfaction with the crosscultural editorial process involving Alison Ravenscroft. See van Toorn 2006: 291-220; Grossman 2005; McDonell 2004: 33; Huggins 1994: 3-4. return to text

List of works cited

Brewster, Anne 1995 *Literary formations: post-colonialism, nationalism, globalism*, Carlton South: Melbourne University Press return to text

Carter, David and Anne Galligan (eds) 2007 *Making books: contemporary Australian publishing*, St Lucia: University of Queensland Press return to text

Christensen, Rachael 2007 interview with the author, 5 November return to text

Craven, Peter 2009 'Obscuring the heritage: regrettable omissions in the new national anthology', *Australian book review* 314, September: 7-8 return to text

Cunningham, Sophie 2009 'The black and white of the Australian literary canon', Crikey.com, http://www.crikey.com.au/2009/09/04/the-black-and-white-of-the-australian-literary-canon (accessed 4 September 2009) return to text

Curriculum Corporation 1994 *Studies of society and environment – a curriculum profile for Australian schools: a joint project of the States, Territories and the Commonwealth of Australia initiated by the Australian Education Council*, Carlton: Curriculum Corporation return to text

Dalziell, Rosamund 1999 *Shameful autobiographies: shame in contemporary Australian autobiographies and culture*, Carlton South: Melbourne University Press return to text

Davis, Jack, Stephen Muecke, Mudrooroo Narogin and Adam Shoemaker (eds) 1990 *Paperbark: a collection of Black Australian writings* (Black Australian Writers Series), St Lucia: University of Queensland Press return to text

Delbridge, A et al. (eds) 2003 *Macquarie Dictionary* (rev. 3rd ed), North Ryde: Macquarie Library return to text

Flann Elizabeth and Beryl Hill 2004, *The Australian editing handbook* (2nd ed), Milton: John Wiley & Sons Australia return to text

Freeman, Robin 2009, '"We must become gatekeepers": editing Indigenous writing', *New writing: the international journal for the practice and theory of creative writing* 6.2, July: 133-49 return to text

Grossman, Michelle 2005 'Xen(ography) and the art of representing otherwise: Australian Indigenous life-writing and the vernacular text', *Postcolonial studies* 8.3: 227-301 return to text

Grossman, Michelle 2001 'Bad Aboriginal writing: editing, Aboriginality, textuality', *Meanjin* 3: 152-65 return to text

Heiss, Anita & Peter Minter (eds) 2008 *Macquarie PEN Anthology of Aboriginal Literature*, Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin return to text

Heiss, Anita 2007, 'Indigenous book publishing' in David Carter & Anne Galligan (eds), *Making books: contemporary Australian publishing*, St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 255-67 return to text

Heiss, Anita 2003 *Dhuuluu-Yala (to talk straight): publishing Indigenous literature*, Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press return to text

Huggins, Jackie 2003 'Always was always will be', in Michelle Grossman (ed), *Blacklines: contemporary critical writing by indigenous Australians,* Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 60-65 return to text

Huggins, Rita & Jackie Huggins 1994 *Auntie Rita*, Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press return to text

Hughes, Mary Ann 1998 'An issue of authenticity: editing texts by Aboriginal writers', *Southerly* 58.2: 48-58 return to text

Jacklin, Michael 2004 'Cross talk: collaborative Indigenous life writing in Australia and Canada', PhD Thesis, Deakin University return to text

Jones, Jennifer 2009 *Black writers white editors: episodes of collaboration and compromise in Australian publishing history*, North Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing return to text

Jose, Nicholas (ed) 2009 *Macquarie PEN Anthology of Australian Literature*, Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin return to text

Kurtzer, Sonia 2003 'Wandering girl: who defines "authenticity" in Aboriginal literature?' in Michele Grossman (ed) *Blacklines: contemporary critical writing by Indigenous Australians*, Carlton:Melbourne University Press, 181-188 return to text

Laurie, Victoria 2008 'Indigenous publishers give voice to previously unheard stories', *The Australian*, 30 December at http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/arts/stories-bloom-in-the-bush/story-e6frg8n6-1111118431095 (accessed 28 January 2010) return to text

McCormack, Thomas 1988 *The fiction editor, the novel and the novelist.* New York: St Martin's Press return to text

McDonell, Margaret 2004 'The invisible hand: cross-cultural influence on editorial practice', MPhil Thesis, University of Queensland return to text

McGuinness, B and D Walker 1985 'The politics of Aboriginal literature', in J Davis and B Hodge (eds), *Aboriginal writing today: papers from the first national conference of Aboriginal writers held in Perth, Western Australia, in 1983*, Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 43-54 return to text

Mackenzie, Janet 2004 *The editor's companion*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press return to text

Muecke, Stephen 2005 'Literature and politics: the representative hypothesis', *Textual spaces: Aboriginality and cultural studies* (2nd ed), Perth: API Network, 103-20 return to text

Nevile, Sharon 2009 ‘Janette Whelan & Barbara Ker Wilson in conversation with Sharon Nevile’, in Kerry Biram, Diane Brown, Jenny Craig & Wendy Owen (eds), *Editors in conversation 2*, Carlton South: The Society of Editors (Victoria) Incorporated, 65-93 return to text

Ong, Walter J 2002 *Orality and literacy: the technologizing of the word* (3rd ed), New York: Routledge return to text

Ravenscroft, Alison 2007 ‘Who is the white subject? Reading, writing, whiteness’, *Australian Humanities Review* 42, August-September, http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org (accessed 10 December 2009) return to text

Sale, Faith 1993 ‘Editing fiction as an act of love’, in Gerald Gross (ed), *Editors on editing: what writers need to know about what editors do* (3rd ed), New York: Grove Press, 267-79 return to text

Sharpe, Leslie T & Irene Gunther 1994 *Editing fact and fiction: a concise guide to book editing*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press return to text

Tuhiwai Smith, Linda 1999 *Decolonizing methodologies: research and indigenous peoples,* London & New York: Zed Books and Dunedin: University of Otago Press return to text

van Toorn, Penny 2006 *Writing never arrives naked: early Aboriginal cultures of writing in Australia*, Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press return to text

Wheelock, John Hall 1991 [1950] *Editor to Author: the letters of Maxwell E Perkins*, Atlanta: Cherokee Publishing Company return to text

Robin Freeman teaches creative writing in the School of Communication and Creative Arts at Deakin University in Melbourne. Prior to commencing her academic career, she worked in the Australian book publishing industry for 15 years as both publisher and editor of trade, educational and academic titles. She is currently undertaking PhD studies into the ethical editing and publication of indigenous writing in postcolonial societies.

TEXT
Vol 14 No 2 October 2010
http://www.textjournal.com.au
Editors: Nigel Krauth & Jen Webb
Text@griffith.edu.au