**Other Fronts**

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Michele Grossman et al.
BLACKLINES: CONTEMPORARY CRITICAL WRITING
BY INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIANS
MUP, $34.95pb, 258pp, 0 522 85069 3

While ‘history wars’ rage, some of the subjects of the wars have quietly slipped a significant book into the market. Has the book received significant attention? Don’t be silly. For a start, it is not couched in the winners-versus-losers terminology of the history wars. It is a difficult book to pin down, certainly not susceptible to quick newspaper coverage or, heaven forfend, television grabs. This reader could imagine at least some of the contributors to *Blacklines* mounting a convincing case that the current debate is a diversion from far more fundamental questions of representation of Australia’s indigenous peoples in history, anthropology and various media.

Most of the essays in this volume have appeared before, and a few are quite well known. Having them in a ‘permanent’ collection means they are accessible, but, more importantly, they can argue with each other. There is a certain amount of unravelling to do, as they were written over more than a decade, and, while the issues have not changed a great deal, if at all, over that period, the day-to-day skirmishes have. These include the controversy over Mudrooroo’s (Colin Johnson’s) Aboriginality and the debate over the article by Diane Bell and Topsy Napurrula Nelson, ‘Speaking about Rape is Everyone’s Business’.

Aileen Moreton-Robinson takes up the second point in an argument that is fundamental to the idea of this collection: not so much the right to speak but, as Jackie Huggins puts it, having the knowledge to speak. Though Moreton-Robinson is arguing within a feminist context, her arguments apply across the board. While many of the contributors, such as Marcia Langton, give generous acknowledgment to non-indigenous cultural critics, and none seems to be arguing for a kind of separatism of critical debate, the theoretical ground should rightly be firmly in indigenous hands. Compare this with the history wars, where most of the antagonists are not indigenous.

Few white writers should or could tackle the kind of issues raised by Ian Anderson and Philip Morrissey in their essays. Morrissey, in ‘Aboriginality and Corporatism’, continues the discussion of some issues raised in Anderson’s preceding piece, ‘Black Bits, White Bits’, about ‘degrees’ of Aboriginality and how they are used in debate and analysis. Morrissey begins by contesting Mudrooroo’s hardline positions on Aboriginality and writing. Morrissey shows that these are a means of policing inclusion and exclusion, and moves on to outline how indigenous issues became ‘corporatised’ under the Hawke and Keating governments, an issue only now being played out in the dramas surrounding the future of ATSIC. Morrissey and Anderson are tackling delicate issues here and do so with finesse and a grace sometimes lacking in arguments in these areas.

The present Australian government has been divisive in all sorts of ways, but not least in attempting to drive a wedge between ‘traditional’ and ‘non-traditional’ Aboriginal people. This division is played out in the discussions about art in *Blacklines* by writers such as the late Lin Onus, Hetti Perkins, Margo Neale and Marcia Langton. Much that is now taken for granted (non-traditional art, the presence of indigenous cura-
tors in major galleries) has been hard-won. The fact that ‘traditional’ artists have embraced innovative techniques and technologies has blurred the neat categories which some have tried to impose on the evolving cultures. Particularly interesting is Langton’s introduction to Part Two, and its discussion of authenticity as a concept. The idea of being able neatly to distinguish between traditional and non-traditional has been blown out of the water.

It is impossible even to give a passing reference to all of the essays and themes in the collection, but particularly striking is Tony Birch’s account of the attempted renaming of the Grampians as the Gariwerds. This was part of an ongoing push to market the park area as a kind of Victorian Kakadu, so an indigenous name might have seemed appropriate even to those who cared nothing for indigenous heritage. Not so. Birch’s essay, “Nothing has Changed”: The Making and Unmaking of Koori Culture, shows how the most appalling racism came to the surface and the argument almost became bloody. This is very recent history!

Similarly, the arguments of Fabienne Bayet-Charlton have a very contemporary relevance. She looks at the connections between environmental and indigenous issues. She asks, among other things, whether the push for wilderness values is just an updated version of terra nullius and looks at some of the pitfalls of ecotourism.

The area in which I have closest knowledge and expertise is books. Sonja Kurtzer looks at the successful book by Glenyse Ward, Wandering Girl. Earlier in the collection, Jackie Huggins gives a critique of the phenomenally successful My Place, by Sally Morgan. Issues to do with representation, marketing and acceptability resonate throughout this book on writing and other artforms, including craft, painting, film and video.

The issue of the acceptability of indigenous autobiographies is certainly a significant one. The less challenging a story is to a contemporary audience, the more likely it is to gain wide acceptance. However, I suspect that the dilemma has less to do with the hegemony of white culture and more to do with the commercial exigencies of popular culture generally. The straightforward, stripped-back narrative of Wandering Girl was more commercially successful than its more complex sequel, Unna Ya Fullas. An examination of sales histories of indigenous books in this country would almost certainly show that the more ‘authentic’ the book, the lower the sales, with a few exceptions. Whether this is a political issue or the result of a desire for straightforward narrative is debatable.

But it is a problem of Mr Micawber dimensions for publishers, especially the indigenous presses, which must, to some extent, choose between a ready market and survival through sales, and a more adventurous publishing policy that favours the challenging and ‘authentic’ voices. Similarly invidious issues occur for indigenous art centres, where the choice made is between promoting ‘stars’, who might eventually fetch big prices (collectors love ‘names’, especially dead ones, whose output is therefore limited), and promoting the community of artists — to some extent, depressing prices.

Fortunately, the operations of the Australia Council and others (in the case of this book, Victoria University) have tempered the rule of the ‘marketplace’ and allowed different views and genres to be heard. Some would argue that this is a distortion of the marketplace and that different views should be buried or confined to ‘alternative’ media like graffiti walls, a good venue for slogans but not critical writing. This book demonstrates the value of good, thoughtful criticism by indigenous scholars. Mercifully, it is relatively free of jargon and daunting terminology. It needs careful reading, but that reading is amply rewarded.