Ethics of Representation and Self-Reflexivity:
Nicolas Rothwell's Narrative Essays

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Australian literature has been preoccupied, perhaps even obsessed, with representations of place and space. What started as a nationalising enterprise, an attempt to artificially cement place-making by substituting landscape for unknown space (Bennett 21), slowly gave rise to texts that interrogate settler colonial culture through spatial contestations. Yet, as Laurie Clancy argued in 1993, literary forms have proven resistant to decolonisation: 'in the last two decades the self-conscious preoccupation with landscape among Australian fiction writers has become . . . debilitating and even self-destructive' (49). The 1988 Bicentenary could be seen as a turning point in Australian history and culture. The array of festivities around the event may be interpreted as an orchestration of reified forms of settler-belonging to counter a rising intellectual opposition to a monolithic conceptualisation of history, art and culture; a last-ditch political effort from centric forms of power to re-assert traditional forms of belonging in the settler imaginary. But the Bicentenary also coincided with non-Indigenous Australian writers beginning to inscribe unbelonging at the heart of their fictions and non-fictions.[1] Spatial crises, non-belonging and unbelonging are, increasingly, features of contemporary Australian literature, as demonstrated in the works of Michele de Kretser, Richard Flanagan, Ross Gibson, Christos Tsiolkas or Tim Winton (Cordier, 'Intimate Immensities'). Non-Indigenous authors who grapple with settler identity in the twenty-first century are also in search of ethical literary forms that reflect a necessary erosion of settler dominance, privilege or class.

The Australian literary canon has been undergoing profound transformations. Since 2000, Kim Scott, Alexis Wright, Melissa Lucashenko and Tara June Winch have taken the Miles Franklin Literary Awards by storm. Their works have significantly reshaped Australia's literary landscape, reterritorialising Australian space by re-inscribing Indigenous culture and language in the land. As Indigenous author and academic Jeanine Leane argues, contemporary Indigenous writers are engaged in a process of 'writing Country back to nation' (15), effecting an 'Indigenous transformation of Australian literary landscapes' (Osborne and Whitlock 5). To avoid writing themselves into irrelevance, non-Indigenous authors are starting to produce works that are more polyphonous, taking into account the voices of Indigenous thinkers and scientists who are gradually breaking down Eurocentric hegemonies. Alternative histories and Indigenous relationships to *Country* are slowly being acknowledged by settler culture.[2] To take one example, the fire management undertaken by traditional owners, advocated by Marcia Langton more than two decades ago in *Burning Issues: Emerging Environmental Issues for Indigenous Peoples in Northern Australia* (1998), and more recently relayed by Bruce Pascoe in his widely-acclaimed *Dark Emu: Black Seeds: Agriculture or Accident?* (2014), is increasingly accepted across Australia. In the current climate of ecological crisis, unitary conceptualisations of knowledge inherited from the Enlightenment are increasingly under challenge, together with growing impetus to start 'Indigenizing the Anthropocene', as Zoe Todd argues in a First Nations Canadian context (241–54).

Enlightenment theories of social and economic progress shaped settler colonial modes of perception and representation; they also provided a rationale for the domination of Indigenous populations (Dixon, *The Course of Empire*). The Enlightenment and its relentless march towards modernity coupled with an emphasis on classical history gave little pause for self-re-assessment or the study of Indigenous cultures *on their own terms*. Yet, much seems to indicate that European or Western thought has reached an impasse. Its legacy is also one of global warning, degraded ecologies and economic crises. Mistrust of long-established institutions, the rise of populism and the corresponding undermining of democracy are signs that 'High European culture' needs to be challenged. It seems unlikely that the solutions will come from the culture that produced these crises. The sense of emergency present in the works of Indigenous scholars like Aileen Moreton-Robinson or Irene Watson is balanced by the possibility of hope: 'The future of the natural world, along with First peoples, could be secured by the state engaging in a process of de-colonisation' (Watson 518). Without overstating the role of literature in such vast undertakings, it is worth analysing how contemporary literary authors seek to reform settler culture by accommodating Aboriginal worldviews through a decentring of western epistemologies and a re-centring of First Nations knowledge (Watson 508–20).

With a classical education, Nicolas Rothwell works both from within 'High European culture' (he was a classical scholar at Magdalen College, Oxford, before he became a foreign correspondent) and from without, to transform non-Indigenous Australians' modes of perception and representation to foster more ethical spatial relations and intercultural exchanges. These have the potential to give rise to new synergies and decolonise settler culture. In Rothwell's works Enlightenment philosophy, aesthetics and literary models (reason, the sublime, the novel, to name a few) are actively questioned, and it is often Indigenous culture that is seen in terms of 'High Culture,' while European thought is reframed against deep time and dwarfed by millennia of Indigenous knowledge. To reform Australian fiction, authors like Winton, Flanagan, Tsiolkas or de Kretser feature settler Australians who gradually learn to adopt less settled forms of existence, but movement is still experienced reluctantly, as an imposition. For Rothwell, the country has seen enough literary and legal fictions that had catastrophic consequences for native populations and the environment. He therefore advocates for a break from the novelistic tradition. Trying to encapsulate Rothwell's hybrid literary object, Silke Hesse coined an appealing phrase in a lengthy review of *Belomor*. She argues that he created 'a new genre': the narrative essay. I argue that Rothwell's distinctive adaptation of the narrative essay culminates in a rhizomic form of writing that accommodates self-reflexivity, polyphony and the reduplicative— aesthetic choices that magnify spatial and textual instability to invite reflection on the ethics of representation. In his narratives, movement and the instabilities of place are embraced as opportunities for a renegotiated identity.

Nicolas Rothwell is a professional journalist who led a cosmopolitan existence, spending many years as foreign correspondent in the Middle East and Eastern Europe before becoming northern correspondent for the *Australian*. Though Rothwell's books are advertised, sold and distributed as non-fiction, I argue that his narratives adopt a hybrid form that straddles fiction and non-fiction. Apart from his first book, *Heaven and Earth* (1999), a novel which he considers a false start, Rothwell's literary production falls into two categories.[3] *Wings of the Kite-Hawk* (2003), *The Red Highway* (2009), *Belomor* (2013) and *Quicksilver* (2016) are composed of semi-independent fragments. Thematically coherent, the pieces are unified by a distinctive narratorial voice. *Wings of the Kite-Hawk* and *The Red Highway* read almost like novels; but as the author refines his literary experimentations with the fragment, his

publications edge closer to independent essays. For Rothwell, irresolution, polyphony and fragmentary literary forms need to become a staple of Australian literature. His self-reflexive prose dramatises the progress and relapses of a first-person narrator in search of meaning in landscapes that prompt profound re-examination and reformation of the settler colonial present.

Rothwell's books feature real-and-imagined characters caught between fiction and non-fiction, the lies in the land and the lie of the land. His narratives create a form of generic disorientation that has a political, social and epistemological purpose. Rothwell roams the debris of western civilisation in the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin wall, 9/11, and, in the context of the post-Bicentenary and post-Mabo Australian turn to Aboriginal questions, his narratives seek appropriate avenues for reinvention. With biting narrative irony Rothwell wonders how Australian writers can reflect on (and speak to) issues that play out on global, national and local scales. In this essay, I read Rothwell's narrative essays as both a symptom of and an answer to these rapidly changing times and contested spaces.

As in much of Australian fiction, the outback, in Rothwell's oeuvre, is a site of both crisis and partial resolution; but unlike colonial narratives that are steeped in assertions of belonging, Rothwell's protagonists embrace less settled forms of existence predicated on *non-belonging*.[4] There, his protagonists are confronted with degraded landscapes and Indigenous populations under considerable strain. At times, one is under the impression that Rothwell's work espouses an aporetic literature of ruins (Dixon, 'Ground Zero' 177–88), an aesthetic choice that could prove complicit in rehearsing colonial tropes (Stoler 7). In *The Burning Library: Our Greatest Novelists Lost and Found* (2012), Geordie Williamson advocates an alternative canon to propose a fresh direction for Australian literature. Rothwell draws from and contributes to other literary traditions. Kay Schaffer suggests that the future of Australian literature lies with experimental authors like Mark McKenna, Stephen Muecke, Katrina Schlunke, Margaret Somerville and Martin Thomas, who are at work developing 'decolonizing texts of reconciliation' (150). Similarly, Lisa Slater praises hybrid texts which represent 'the-subject-in-crisis' on an impossible quest for belonging—narratives that aim to 'generate a postcolonial writing practice that makes room for heterogeneous and multiple stories of belonging' (150, 152). Rothwell's narratives activate such paradigm shifts.

Rothwell's narrative essays decolonise place, space and literary forms to articulate ethical models of non-belonging. He also proposes alternatives to anthropocentric representations of nature, the novel, the sublime and rectilinear representation. In what follows, I begin by analysing the narrative function of the outback in *Wings of the Kite-Hawk* and *The Red Highway*, in order to highlight how Rothwell's characters typically suffer from an existential crisis which is, in essence, a settler crisis of (non)belonging. The origin of their crises lies in colonial modes of perception and representation, which nourished disappointment and myths of absence and resulted in spatial relations that were merely exploitative. In these texts, Rothwell subverts the image of the outback as 'metaphysical void,' and it becomes instead a site for metaphysical recovery (Haynes 185). Rothwell offers a transformative sublime aesthetics that I analyse as an expression of Bill Ashcroft's 'horizontal sublime' (141–51) and Christopher Hitt's 'ecological sublime' (603-23). The second part of my essay investigates Rothwell's ethics of representation, comparing its characteristically self-reflexive prose, narrative instability and narrative regression to that of Anglo-German author W. G. Sebald, who uses similar techniques in his evocation of a ruined Europe. While the two authors adopt similar vehicles to convey their reflections, Rothwell sides with renewal rather than the

eschatological. Rothwell may present man's propensity for a 'Natural History of Destruction,' but he is also intent on identifying the mechanisms at work in building the future.

Deconstructing the Explorers' Journals: Seeing Past the Colonial

Most of Rothwell's books share a similar opening: an unsettled narrator scours Australia's interior following a tenuous trail, often that of an explorer or an artist in search of inspiration. Constantly on the move, he seems set on a quest whose object eludes him. The prelude to *Wings of the Kite-Hawk* surveys the journals of the explorer Ludwig Leichhardt; the narrative *per se* then begins. The protagonist drives through the interior, but seems unable to understand or relate to his surroundings: 'My head was full of confused, conflicting thoughts . . . Full of self-reproach, I hurtled on, as if through blank terrain, seeing nothing' (*Wings* 19). The image evokes the explorer progressing through *terra nullius*. Equipped with the wrong reading grids, like his literary forebears, he merely registers absence and cannot accede to any degree of self-enlightenment.

Instead of a narrative arc that would see the protagonist's journey completed, or his crisis resolved, as in Bruce Chatwin's *The Songlines* (1987) or Robyn Davidson's *Tracks* (1980), Rothwell's texts speak to the paradox that lies at the centre of much of settler Australia's imagined space: despite an over-representation of remote Australia in cultural works,[5] these regions are 'mapped but not known' (to evoke Eaden and Mares's book). In colonial novels, the outback stood as the dramatic backdrop for heroic conquests to nourish fantasies of settlement. When the Australian interior resisted endeavours to subdue space, it became a 'diminishing paradise' and a privileged location for the Gothic (Gibson 1). More recently, with *terra nullius* legally overturned, a *bien-pensant* cultural fringe has engaged in narratives that questioned settler legitimacy. Yet, because of historical erasure and a lack of geographical intimacy with these regions, the outback, for non-Indigenous Australians, very much remains a mythical space, 'a projection of metropolitan fantasy' (Stadler et al. 82). Initially incapable of devising ethical ways of seeing and representing, the narrator of *Wings of the Kite-Hawk* almost succumbs to historical (perpetrator) trauma, but he experiences an epiphany when he learns to deconstruct Australia's earliest literary representations.

Colonial journals of inland exploration have exerted a considerable influence on Australian literature and cultural imaginings of the land. However fascinating, most of these early accounts testify to a blindness to surroundings that served the colonial project in justifying appropriation of land and resources. A product of the settler colonial present, Rothwell's protagonists are ailing as a result of the colonial curse cast upon the land and Indigenous populations: 'I felt almost like some colonial explorer who carries in his bloodstream a fatal bacillus, an infection so virulent it will destroy all that he sees' (*Wings* 67). Central to Rothwell's literary project is the reminder that spatial representations influence spatial practices. Far from what could initially be conceived as an exercise in filiation to enshrine his writing into some kind of pantheon, Rothwell's books assess a deterministic heritage which needs to be transcended. His protagonists gradually learn to diverge from ways of seeing and writing that served the colonial enterprise.

In *Wings of the Kite-hawk*, Australia's immense space helps crystallise the narrator's crisis. The resistance encountered by colonial and contemporary Australians is not so much a result of the land's topography or lack of food and water, but the failure of the European imagination. Looking for clues that would bring a form of resolution, the narrator sees his own crisis mirrored in Charles Sturt's journals. The explorer sought to lose himself in the

desert as a way to cross 'the kingdom of death,' survive the experience and be given a form of revelation (*Wings* 142). His quest was therefore metaphysical; he hoped for a sublime moment that would see him 'return with golden words on his lips' (*Wings* 142). Sturt returned not with golden words, but with a curse. In his journals, he presents the desert as a foe intent on defeating the progress of civilisation and science. The stubborn resistance of Australian space to European logic and scientific probings is a staple of Australia's earliest journals and literary texts (Carter, *Living in a New Country* 12). Their authors were also defeated spiritually. The sublime moment they chased never came. In *Journeys to the Interior*, Rothwell revisits Charles Sturt's journals. Confronted with the parallel dunes of the Simpson Desert, Sturt laments:

> Ascending one of the sand ridges I saw a numberless succession of these terrific objects rising above each other . . . Their summits and about ten feet down each side were perfectly bare, and the hue of vegetation and of barrenness were as strongly marked as the limits of perpetual snow on the sides of the Andes . . . The scene was awfully fearful: a kind of dread came over me as I gazed upon it. It looked like the entrance into Hell. (Sturt, in *Journeys* 41–42)

Sturt remains at the level of fear and terror because he cannot refrain from far-fetched comparisons. Likening the rolling dunes of desert sand to fields of snow in the Andes is unlikely to lead to a transformational revelation or a deeper understanding of the space he traverses. In Rothwell's oeuvre, European ways of seeing are presented as an impasse. A change of lens is needed; the distance between the fantasised object and the physical landforms must be bridged. The closing pages of *Wings of the Kite-Hawk* introduce a character who completes the narrator's enlightenment: 'I was interested in the explorers myself once . . . When I first came out here, I used to live and breathe them and their journals. These days, I've changed my mind. They just don't seem to suit the country' (*Wings* 322). He who sought a point of convergence realises that what is needed is a point of divergence.

But despite this realisation, the protagonist is often about to repeat colonial tropes:

> I spent the next days on the road alone, in an attempt to leach away the more disquieting memories of my Middle Eastern sojourn . . . After some days in that landscape of sandstone bluffs and salt lakes, trying to align my thoughts with the country and its chords and echoes, I retraced my steps . . . it was mid-evening . . . Morning came. I woke in my hotel room. (*Red Highway*, 100–101)

Many elements of the classical sublime are present in this passage: a character in crisis, solitude, a headlong journey, the wilderness, the search for elevation, the day's end—but nothing comes of it. This is an anticlimactic piece of writing that reads as a contemporary translation of Sturt's journals. Sticking to known roads, travelling at speed, he registers little of the landscape, and perpetuates the myth of a land void of Indigenous presence. Rothwell denies the narrator any form of relief because the way he sees, moves and thinks rehearses the magisterial eye/I of the explorer (Ryan 4).

Towards an Ethical Sublime: From a Silent, Horizontal Sublime to an Ecological Sublime

Rothwell cannot allow his characters to attain enlightenment through a grand, vertical sublime experience, for very good reasons. Instead of leading to a rapprochement between man and nature, the use of Edmund Burke or Immanuel Kant's sublime in literary works often results,

William Cronon suggests, in reinforcing the separation between the human and non-human realms (69–89). The moment of humility that follows awe and terror is short-lived. The Kantian third stage of the sublime sees the triumph of reason over nature, and culminates in the individual's self-apotheosis, validating the subject's dominion over the non-human environment.[6] The sublime, in the context of settler societies, is problematic in other ways because the recipient of the sublime transformation is likely to have this experience in Indigenous space.

Does this mean we must abandon sublime aesthetics altogether? After identifying the dangers inherent in the sublime, Christopher Hitt argues that it is not '*fundamentally* or *intrinsically* maleficent' (605). He advocates an 'ecological sublime' which could either stop at the second phase of the Kantian sublime, where awe would keep the subject in a state of humility before the natural realm, or a transformation of the third phase of the sublime. Such a sublime, Hitt suggests, could be articulated in a form of transcendence which would see the subject acknowledge the failure of language instead of the triumph of logos and reason. Rothwell explores both these propositions. The reader does not witness a subject who transcends nature through reason, but the subject's transcendence of reason itself.[7] Another marked difference is that the narrator is in search of horizontality, which constitutes an attempt to establish a dialogical relationship with nature, where the non-human realm is experienced not as an inaccessible 'other,' but is encountered on an intimate and empathic level.

On the verge of suicide, Rothwell's melancholy protagonist in *Wings of the Kite-Hawk* lies down at the lowest possible point in the desert and experiences the first phase of the Romantic sublime:

> I drove over this narrow causeway, through the stagnant pools that marked its lowest point . . . The stillness of the bush, pure and uncaring, descended . . . Slowly, with a sense of sentimental reverence growing inside me, I made my way down the Lynd [river] . . . In the shade of some flowering grevilleas and ancient paperbarks I lay down on the thick sand. (*Wings* 59)

This scene provides the setting for the sublime moment to occur. It is in marked contrast to the Romantic sublime, which comes with jagged mountains, avalanches, and a chill in the air. Here it is desertscape, sun and heat beating upon the flattest surface; the sublime moment will occur lying down at the 'lowest point.' Experiencing the sublime in a horizontal landscape is not new in Australian literature. Bill Ashcroft argues that in Australia, following a logic of antipodean inversion, the experience of the sublime is not triggered by vertiginous mountains, but by the horizontal surface of the outback where 'the excess of space' inspires terror and the sublime moment ('The Horizonal Sublime' 141–51). Ashcroft traces the origins of the horizonal sublime to the journals of the explorers of the 1830s and 1840s, as well as the painters of the 1840s. The horizonal sublime slowly gained currency, and by the twentieth century became a staple feature of Australian art and literature with Russell Drysdale, Sidney Nolan and Patrick White among its best-known representatives (Ashcroft, 'Horizonal Sublime' 141–51).[8]

Rothwell challenges his protagonist to relinquish his cultural expectations by calling up the kite-hawk as an agent of the sublime. Lying on his back, the narrator experiences the second phase of the sublime. He is seized by fear and terror: 'My heart was pounding; sweat dropped from my eyebrows; I was dazzled by the sunshine, dazed by the heat . . . I understood the

danger' (*Wings* 60–61). But unlike the explorers, who despaired at their failure to experience a vertical, transcendental revelation, the protagonist surrenders to his surroundings. His horizontal position paradoxically offers a vantage point that enables him to pay attention to intricate details such as 'dragonflies, with shimmering wings' or the patterns in the cries of the kite-hawk (*Wings* 59). The sublime moment does not occur through the triumph of reason, but the abandonment of reason. Instead, the protagonist embraces intuition and reliance on the senses. He forms the impression that the kite-hawk holds the answer to his fate: 'Three calls, and he would throw himself down; four, and he would live' (*Wings* 60). One last time his reason tries to dissuade him:

> Judgement being passed on me. But whose—and why? Why now, so deep in the stream of life; why here, out in the backblocks? How ridiculous the whole thing was, how arbitrary . . . I listened, in the sudden silence, full of regret. And so, I whispered, this, now, is the end of my journey. I closed my eyes. I leaned into the bright abyss, and then above me, a fourth time . . . the kite-hawk cried. (*Wings* 61)

The humbled protagonist regains his composure after a relinquishing of ego. He does not experience the third stage of the Kantian sublime and remains on a par with nature. Rothwell's protagonist does not perceive or utilise nature as a background against which to measure himself in order to resolve an essentially spatial existential crisis; nor is nature there to be conquered. Rothwell decentres the human protagonist to initiate a series of recalibrations that take into account non-human subjectivities. He also invites cultural rapprochement by foregrounding a form of spatialised individuation (Langton 27–28).[9] By inverting the power relationships that are present in the sublime of Burke, Kant or Longinus, Rothwell develops an emplaced, topocentric sublime that is derived not from a godly apparition or through the agency of large predators such as panthers or tigers, as in Burke's sublime, but from native birds like kite-hawks or budgerigars, which are perceived as the spirit of the place.

A subtle author, Rothwell does not deliver his sublime aesthetics all at once. The reader witnesses a staged formulation of an ethical sublime. Another aspect of literary style that Rothwell aims to reform is the verbal profusion associated with Romantic sublimity (Mishra 23). Aware of how words are used to dispossess and appropriate, he offers a minimalistic sublime aesthetics that stems from and returns to a meaningful silence. In another scene involving native raptors, the narrator recounts a life-changing moment which completes his transformative experience with the kite-hawks. Again, he is walking in a dry riverbed and feels the compulsion to lie down. The desert silence around him is not vacuous, but the 'kind of silence I associate with battlefields, the silence of places that have seen things' (*Wings* 168–69). In other words, he registers Indigenous presence and the colonial violence latent in the landscape. Silence, the result of colonial erasures, becomes a source of terror which leaves the narrator motionless and speechless. It is the sound of a humbling collective conscience that he hears. The revelation he will experience is that he cannot appropriate a space that has 'seen things' to resolve his crisis. The narrator will leave the scene. Rothwell cannot offer resolution to his non-Indigenous characters when Indigenous Australians continue to be affected by intergenerational trauma.

The protagonist nevertheless gradually becomes more intimate with the outback. The desert is no longer the explorers' prison, tomb, or hell, but a place in which one could be remade. The opportunity for self-reformation is revisited in a final passage which deploys the last element

of the protagonist's sublime transformations. At Eyre Creek, early in the morning, he emerges from his swag, which he refers to as 'my canvas cocoon' (*Wings* 195). A transformation is announced. Floating midway in a river, the narrator is caught between two seemingly infinite planes: the horizontal surface of the water and the verticality of the immense sky. Once more, his crisis is kept in check by the agency of birds:

> hundreds, thousands of them, budgerigars, swooping, darting near the water's surface. They split in two, they joined together, they danced in my direction—all this in a space of seconds as they hovered, coiling, close above me, their rush of wings came circling, scattering, like a breeze, a murmur—and at that moment, as they swept beyond me, a green wing-tip, in summons, grazed my cheek. (*Wings* 195)

Here, Rothwell's prose is not overly ornamented, unlike the Romantic sublime, where an excess of words tends to make up for the impossibility of precisely articulating the experience. His sentences are breathless, incomplete, with hardly an adjective or adverb to be found; verbs abound, emphasising movement—an intimation for the narrator to abandon self-contemplation and the impasse reached because of previous modes of perception and representation. Instead of the triumph of logos and reason, the reader witnesses the breakdown of language in front of the abundance of space and wildlife. Rothwell's use of the dash is reminiscent of Francophone Caribbean poet Édouard Glissant, who resorts to this device to attract the reader's attention to the processes of writing and meaning-making in a colonised space, where language is eminently political. Glissant does not advocate an Indigenous identity that would be defined as a counter-identity (an anti-settler position), but a positive *Poetics of Relation* (1997) that rejects transcendence and embraces immanence. Central to Glissant's poetics, the dash interrupts the syntax of a sentence, opening a space for dynamic interaction. I read the dash in his poetry as both a signifier of the rupture of this Indigenous/non-Indigenous relation, and of the will to reconnect. Likewise, Rothwell's linguistic deterritorialisation invites reflection on any hierarchical relations: from the sentence to the State.

Rothwell develops a minimalistic horizonal sublime which embraces the '"collapse" of the "linguistic apparatus"' (Hitt 616). Where his aesthetics differs from the Romantic sublime further still, is that it is silence itself (registered as absence) that triggers the sublime moment—not the roar of the tiger, a tempest or gushing waterfalls. The extract above also signals the sacred nature of Rothwell's sublime. The scene comprises many elements that are reminiscent of a baptism: an immersion in water, sheer light, the visitation of birds. The individual undergoes a personal transformation, but it does not go hand in hand with a triumphant elevation of the subject over nature. It is, rather, a humble sublime where the narrator lowers himself and seeks to relate to a nature that remains awesome and partly inaccessible.

Ecological catastrophes provide new objects of terror for the sublime experience (Hitt 616). In Rothwell's *The Red Highway*, one finds expressions of a full-blown ecological sublime which interrogates degraded landscapes that were produced as a consequence of settler colonialism. Travelling the Canning Stock Route, the protagonist and his friend, kangaroo shooter Charlie Firns, reach Georgia Bore. Near the wreck of a car and rusting fuel drums, among the rubbish left by backpackers and grey nomads, a dingo rummages for food. The narrator is moved by this tableau, where life hangs on miraculously. For Firns, the devastation caused by imported species and western farming practices is 'the true, authentic, modern face of hell' (*Red*

Highway, 241). Without any warning, he shoots the dingo. The indignant protagonist demands an explanation.

In the desert's silence, with death and existential terror as a backdrop, the transformative revelation comes as a lesson in degraded ecologies: the Stock Route destroyed the desert's equilibrium and the dingo had been feeding off human excrement buried by eco-friendly tourists. This vast geography which had defeated the settlers' assaults has been transformed to such an extent that Firns declares it conquered: 'There is no nowhere now' (*Red Highway*, 243). The sacred heart of Australia has been defiled; what was 'nowhere' has turned into 'NowHere.'[10] The ineluctability of this proposal strongly resonates with Dipesh Chakrabarty's thesis that, if we have indeed entered the Anthropocene and accept that all of nature has been irremediably transformed, we can no longer speak of cultural continuity or the possibility of establishing ethical relationships with the non-human environment (Chakrabarty 197–222). What is needed is the relocation of these arguments in the wider framework of a more-than-human, or even post-human order, as recently suggested by Ian Baucom (123–42). This is what Rothwell's works contemplate.

The ecological sublime shocks narrator and reader into acknowledging that the Anthropocene is upon us. But *The Red Highway* does not mean to conclude with Charlie Firns's nihilistic statement. His comments are meant as a summons, the need for the narrator to accept the dissolution of self into space. This is a quality of the ecological sublime Brigid Rooney notes in Andrew McGahan's *Wonders of a Godless World*, where the 'relinquishment of self and acceptance of difference enable another kind of transcendence: the transcendence of ego' (72). Rothwell grants this possibility to those who learn to become intimate with Australia's immensities while at the same time electing to remain at a distance from wilderness and Indigenous space. The fact that Rothwell's narrator is unable to completely reconcile himself with his surroundings and remains in a state of dynamic unsettlement is not problematic; on the contrary, it precludes the politics of place associated with settlement. And if the representations are ethical, there is a chance that future *relations* may also be ethical.

Systems of representation that acknowledge the active principles of the past in shaping the present and the future could productively help reform settler society by changing the way the observer perceives place and space. The western observer enters a place filled with confidence, classifying perceived elements according to scientific, moral and aesthetic criteria. A place is thought of as beautiful or ugly, fertile or barren. Vertical, hierarchical relationships underlie such perceptions and influence the way the individual relates to place, determining subsequent spatial practices. Instead of perceiving rigid barriers between past, present and future, the Indigenous person envisages the elements which constitute place as processes, relationally (Rose 28). As First Nations Canadian scholars Vanessa Watts and Zoe Todd argue, much could be gained from adopting a principle of 'Indigenous Place-Thought' (Watts 20–34) that could 'Indigenize the non-Indigenous intellectual contexts that currently shape public intellectual discourse' (Todd 243). This decentring of the individual, also the focus of Rothwell's narrative experimentation, could go a long way towards disrupting anthropocentric paradigms.[11]

The end of *Wings of the Kite-Hawk* motions towards this new era. In a symbolic act, at the location where Ernest Giles was first defeated by the outback and turned back, the narrator leaves 'European prehistory' and farewells the sites where the explorers lost their ways; he abandons the European name and tastes the name in language, 'Minna Minna' (*Wings* 317). By inverting colonial categorisations inherited from 'the age of discovery' (Indigenous

prehistory / settler history) Rothwell challenges the culture he writes from in terms that are sympathetic to the kind of decolonisation advocated by Indigenous scholars like Irene Watson (517). Upon invitation, the protagonist is ushered into a new culture but his impatient questions are, to say the least, clumsy. When he asks bluntly, 'And where are all those special places?' he is immediately rebuked: 'Why? You like dreams or something?' (*Wings* 326). Knowledge of this kind is not for him to receive. His host accepts being his guide for the journey to come but, to be ethical, the relationship must be reciprocal: 'you can't go self; I can take you. You have to be careful. Say your name to the country, to the rock-holes, so they know you—who you are' (*Wings* 326). This is a basis for establishing intimacy with immensity; an interpersonal relationship where the individual looks after the place, and in return, may be looked after by *Country*. Had the explorers sought to establish contact with Indigenous Australians instead of plunging into the continent with the customary European arrogance, instead of losing themselves in the outback both physically and metaphysically, they could have gained access to a whole world in return. This is the new perspective gained by the narrator after engaging with a living Indigenous culture, rather than the introspective journeys of European explorers struggling to escape colonial world views.

Aesthetics of the Fragment at the Service of Ethical Representations: Nicolas Rothwell's Self-reflexive Narrative Essays

The ultimate goal for authors who work on spatial representations is to forge a way of writing based on the land forms they explore: a geopoetics. In *Quicksilver*, Rothwell identifies the authors he believes to be at the forefront of a writing style that attempts to capture Australia's physical geography: 'I see a special tradition without match elsewhere, a tradition of works made in the likeness of the landscape, work attentive to the country, its look, its feel, its reticence' (*Quicksilver* 147). Prominent among these writers are Geoffrey Blainey, Tim Flannery, Bill Gammage, Germaine Greer, Tom Griffiths, Darrell Lewis, Elliott Lovegood, Mark McKenna, Cecil Madigan, John Mulvaney, Les Murray, Francis Ratcliffe, Eric Rolls, George Seddon, Theodor Strehlow and E. L. Grant Watson. It is surprising, and regrettable, that in his search for an alternative canon Rothwell includes very few female or Indigenous voices. The exemplars he mentions do not form a literary movement; Rothwell uses more flexible terms: 'A school has formed . . . I said a school, but perhaps that's not quite right. It's more like a camp, a gathering of clear, collaborating voices' (*Quicksilver* 147–48). One may ask what are Rothwell's literary contributions to this camp?

Much like Theodor Strehlow, whose writing reflects the 'different metres of the ground,' there is an organic quality to Rothwell's works (Carter, *Lie of the Land* 114). He develops a home-grown symbology, using native animals as agents of the sublime; but this is not the extent of Rothwell's geopoetics. He uses the motif of the parallel dunes across Australia's central deserts as metaphors for the difficulty of escaping the reiteration of the past. The shifting sands of the interior also stand for the spatial instabilities that undermine a settler culture in crisis. In Rothwell's hands, the gibber plains become the physical manifestation of cultures that lie in ruin (both western and Indigenous), echoes of a shattered world which inspire a poetics of the fragment. Across his oeuvre, narrators strive to collect shards of these cultures that have to potential to cut and illuminate, inviting reader participation in meaning-making.

The protagonist seeks life's enduring traces in an apocalyptic landscape where only fragments of Indigenous culture and Australia's native fauna and flora remain. It is fitting that these reflections are written as fragments. Rothwell's fragmentary style shares much in common

with W. G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* (1995), in which the author offers 'a disintegrating landscape . . . an end-time world, falling apart, a post-economic world of ravaged nature' (Darby 275). Like Sebald, Rothwell represents a pulverised world and the evidence of historical catastrophe, but the dominant image is of a world reforming via the gravitational pull of Australia's vast interior, Australia's margins achieving the status of centre. For Rothwell, meaning is still possible and the narrator's walk is not so much through a disintegrating landscape, but a reforming one. The accent is on future possibilities and postcolonial transformations.

Nevertheless, an evolution in Rothwell's writing should be noted: *Wings of the Kite-Hawk* and *The Red Highway* are fragmentary, but the overall narrative arc remains obvious. Frequent narratorial interventions clearly connect the semi-independent stories—sometimes perhaps too conspicuously. As an exponent of the fragment, the author subsequently perfects his narrative technique. In *Belomor* and *Quicksilver*, the elements that imply connections between each fragment are minimised. The narrator of *Quicksilver* prepares his reader and provides didactic clues suggesting how the fragments could be read:

> I would like to proceed from this beginning indirectly, in a mazy, elliptical fashion, by means of an answering set of stories . . . It is not my aim to draw them to some fierce and willed conclusion, so much as to let them stand side by side, and send shafts of implication between their various narratives. (*Quicksilver* 59–60)

Rothwell grows more and more wary of causal links. Cartesian logic and reason may have contributed to Europe's development, but they also provided justifications for colonisation, two world wars, the Shoah and the Gulag (all invoked repeatedly in his oeuvre). By extension, they are also responsible for the settler crisis of non-belonging that affects his characters. He therefore prefers to let his fragments float side by side. They are connected thematically, more than by plot or narrative. A juxtaposition, rather than an orchestration of fragments, allows the complexity and paradoxes of Australia's heterotopic space to be represented more effectively.

Developing a geopoetics that stays close to the lie of the land and whose constitutive elements are borrowed from native wildlife and landforms seems an inspired pursuit, but, as the Jindyworobak experience has shown, it can easily result in cultural misappropriation and serve a romanticising 'land-producing literature' (Stadler et al. 5). In fact, in a scathing review of *The Red Highway*, Peter Cochrane writes: 'it is clear from the outset that Rothwell's quest is romantic, almost Wordsworthian: a search for intangibles such as sweetness, beauty and grace, and for what he calls "the truth of things," in the far reaches of the far north.' Much of the criticism of Rothwell's books stems from the mistake of identifying the narrator with the author. I believe that much can be gained from differentiating the two. A close study of *The Red Highway* demonstrates how Rothwell resorts to dramatising his narrator who is being rebuked when he relapses into gothic or romantic conceptualisations of the bush, or even worse, essentialising *Country*. The reader witnesses what I would call a regressive progress which interrogates the ethics of representation.

The Red Highway opens with an ambivalent portrait of Czech artist Karel Kupka to prime the reader's attention. Despite the best intentions, Kupka rehearses the trope of the outsider who projects fantasies of renewal onto a distant land. In search of mankind's new beginnings after the disasters of World War Two and the communist takeover of his country, he turned his attention to Australia because its native population was literally Aboriginal: a 'people whose

living conditions and way of life most closely approach those of the first man' (*Red Highway* 5). The language used by the narrator alerts the reader to how neo-romanticism easily gives way to essentialising pursuits:

> At this point in Kupka's progress, near the end of his first, triumphant collecting season, it seems a simple thing to imagine the thoughts and plans, and hopes that enticed him on, that led him to believe there was a role for him in northern Australia . . . He told himself that he was searching for the origins of art . . . Such was his overarching idea, but it was also a compulsion: what was original, and pure, and untainted by the mark of Western culture could have redemptive force—could allow him to gaze beyond the world he knew. (*Red Highway* 10)

Kupka is represented as an artist who was genuinely interested in Aboriginal culture, but words and phrases like 'triumphant,' 'led himself to believe,' and 'He told himself' signal possible ulterior motives. The narrator's *élan* must give pause for critical reflection. The danger of essentialisation is present in the terms 'original,' 'pure' and 'untainted.' The outsider who considered himself a true friend to the Indigenous artists he met was probably guilty of trespass as he collected redemptive trophies for a western world in crisis.

Rothwell is well aware of the western propensity for probing the realms of Indigenous land, art and beliefs. His sentences contain both the poison of colonisation, and its antidote. The author frequently interrupts his narrative to invite scrutiny of the construction of his representational project, which gives his work a kind of meta-*non*-fictional quality. Rothwell defuses the conceptual ground before proposing an alternative way of thinking and writing. The choice of the long sentence allows him to elucidate his aesthetic choices and opens a window presenting the writer navigating an ethical minefield:

> I went back to my home in Darwin, and started trying to forge my thoughts into a continuous narrative, a smooth stream of words—but soon I fell into composing in fragments; I would write nothing more than stray snatches of story; and it was not just that I was failing in my tasks . . . No: the fragment, the symbol-laden fragment, rather than the flowing sequence, was the necessary form for what I had to say: what I meant was in fragments, and dust; it was best told in fragments—fragments were all that I could manage, and even they seemed too controlled, too much a bid to reimpose order on a flux. (*Journeys* 296–97)

In this self-portrait, the writer carefully chooses his words, pauses mid-sentence, catches himself, reformulates. The writing process is meant to appear laboured, not effortless. Rothwell first invokes the literary tradition he comes from, and then distinguishes himself from it. The writer is standing at a cusp, writing 'the new way' as he deterritorialises the old. Adopting a prose which teeters on the verge of self-dissolution points to the fact that despite conceptual advances, ontological progress is short lived. I interpret the narrator's slow, and somewhat regressive progress as a symptom of the pervasive nature of settler colonialism and the active structures that underpin its ideology. Rothwell stages an ideological contest. His narrator is made to swing, pendulum-like, between the extremes of romanticism and realism, topophobia and topophilia. The protagonist is in turn challenged, mocked or illuminated through a series of re-adjustments, until he accepts the idea that it is pointless to affix a given image to the outback or Indigenous Australians. Cultures and ecologies evolve and transform.

Rothwell is aware that the material he works with is not simply historical: it is a live matter. He experiments with dynamic literary forms that blur the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction, offering a commentary on Australia's supposedly postmodern and postcolonial nature. Silke Hesse's analysis of *Belomor* as 'a new genre' within the tradition of the narrative essay is particularly judicious. It is a literary form that holds together the paradoxes of settler society. Settler colonial structures of power rely on fictions to ensure settlement and appease the settler. Rothwell does not wish to fictionalise Australia any further: 'I have a persisting sense that the novel sits uneasily in the Australian context, in the Australian landscape' (*Journeys* 301). Yet his books remain narratives. The sum of stories grouped in his books composes a story of Australia and its representations. A recipient of a collective memory, the narrator becomes a crossroads, a node through which many trajectories pass. The node is, of course, a zone of intensity in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's spatial philosophy—a privileged site for reinvention and a disrupter of the established order.

Rhizomic writing is inherently political. Imperialist structures of power may have historically been hierarchical and tree-like, but as Bill Ashcroft argues, imperialism now mainly operates 'rhizomically, producing its effects by a complex, diffracted, discontinuous layering rather than necessarily by acts of brute force' (*Post-Colonial Transformation* 50). Rothwell's writing is rhizomic, with a narrator who resurfaces in different stages of his evolution, book after book. His hybrid narrative essays and his ethics/aesthetics of the fragment seek to undermine imperial structures in all their forms (tree or rhizome) by spreading a *counter-rhizome*: a denunciation of legal fictions, a deconstruction of spatio-temporal paradigms, a new literary genre.

Far from replicating the divisive, binary tactics of imperialism, Rothwell multiplies points of view; but he manages to draw together Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples (not simply in an Australian context, but across several continents), as well as the human and non-human realms. Yet no single voice dominates the narrative; his books are truly polyphonous, which does not mean that all voices have the same weight. The Rothwellian protagonist is reminded that complexity must be embraced if he is to understand settler society and the subtle nature of an environment like the outback: 'One can think two things at once, you know—consistency's a much over-praised virtue' (*Wings* 280).

The juxtaposition of contradictory points of view can be interpreted as a sign of what Edward Said called contrapuntal reading (Said 93). The most memorable voices that populate Rothwell's works represent marginal views expressed by Indigenous Australians or writers and thinkers who are not considered canonical. For Rothwell, the answers to the ravages of colonialism must be found outside the majority tradition. He therefore defers to established and emerging Indigenous intellectuals, writers and artists to further decolonise mainstream settler culture, especially in works like *Another Country* (2007) and *Journeys to the Interior* (2010). But Rothwell goes further than proposing a contrapuntal reading of Australia's literary and historic heritage, *his writing* is contrapuntal—in the sense that his prose is self-corrective, and that his narrators keep readjusting their thinking. Rothwell's seemingly antithetical aesthetics acts as a reminder that the structures of colonialism have the uncanny ability to persist.

Like the narrator of *Wings of the Kite-Hawk* or *The Red Highway*, Rothwell stands on the threshold of two worlds, opening a door to remind the reader that another Australia, *Another Country*, exists and that much could be gained by acknowledging its reality and its priority. He presents a multiplicity of voices from the widest possible backgrounds (political, social,

cultural, scientific, ecological, spiritual) to circle the issues faced by an Australia that some deem postcolonial. The answers cannot be simple. In this mined terrain, like the foreign correspondent in war-torn countries he used to be, Rothwell advances gingerly, poised between the Indigenous and the non-Indigenous, the human and the non-human, the local, the national and the transnational—his sentences taut, often of the verge of self-annihilation.

Conclusion: Towards Ethical Spatial Practices

Much of mainstream Australia's engagement with Indigenous space and culture has been in the wake of anthropology or missionary interest. The renewal of interest in Indigenous societies and cultures during and after the Aboriginal Turn of the 1980s corresponded to a flurry of anthropological fieldwork that nourished a misplaced belief in the wider population that 'As the first peoples of the land, they could understand the country in ways that later waves of peoples could not, and so they could help settler Australians to know this place and thus feel at home in it' (Attwood 24). Rothwell's works are steeped in Indigenous Australia but the author is critical of a tenacious propensity to document and anthropologise. Instead, he proposes spatial practices that invoke cultural convergence and 'relationships of co-dependency' (*Journeys* 163). Rothwell even envisages a mainstream Australia transformed through 'a soft kind of reverse assimilation' (*Journeys* 212). These progressive formulations are perhaps not inconsistent with the kind of 'ethical relationality' and 'Indigenous métissage' advocated by Indigenous scholars like First Nations Canadian Dwayne Donald.[12]

Two versions of reverse assimilation are evident in Rothwell's work: a geographic one, where the landscape transforms the individual immersed in *Country*, and a cultural reverse assimilation, where non-Indigenous Australians may be slowly transformed through contact with Indigenous Australians. It must be noted that Rothwell does not embrace Germaine Greer's problematic proposition of an Aboriginal republic where Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians would embrace their Aboriginality. As Indigenous writer and historian Tony Birch argues, this would constitute 'a shallow appropriation of indigenous culture and identity' that would likely see empirical hegemonies re-invigorated (85). Rothwell accompanies his proposals with ample warnings against the commodification of Indigenous culture, the ethical problems underlying the representation of sacred sites or totemic symbols (Geoff Bardon, the founder of the Papunya art movement which saw the rise of dot-painting, is scrutinised in *Belomor*). Like Emily Apter, Rothwell subscribes to the idea of the untranslatability of some cultural constructs. Protagonists and readers get fleeting glimpses of a universe they have no right fully to comprehend. His prose is strategically elliptical. Where writers like Bruce Chatwin or Robyn Davidson were guilty of what Robert Clarke calls 'celebrity colonialism' (9), and crossed outback Australia in confident straight lines, appropriating Indigenous culture, Rothwell pauses at each step, meanders and returns to the same places, unpeeling the successive layers of history. Before taking a step that will inevitably reterritorialise Australian space, he ponders his sentences as well as his footfall, reluctant to 'reimpose order on a flux' (*Journeys* 297).

Rothwell does not favour a systematic approach or a foolproof aesthetics. Far from being dogmatic or prescriptive, he prefers to express possibilities—flexible forms of thinking and writing. His fragmentary mode is a rhizomic form of writing which helps overthrow 'the myth of centrality fundamental to imperialism'; this also allows Rothwell to 'accommodate the various subject positions an individual may occupy within colonial discourse' (Ashcroft, *Post-Colonial Transformation* 51). The author probes the margins for models capable of accounting for the heterotopic complexity of settler society and the social and political

realities it faces. He invites his readers to locate the traces of previous occupation, to make them realise that the land is not empty, but full of signs. Contemporary Australians do not face a wilderness. Aboriginal culture is everywhere, if we learn to look. Rothwell's deterritorialisation and self-reflection engage with a nation-wide dynamic, intellectual and sensory process of re/discovery which involves the acceptance of unsettlement and non-belonging.

The particular position of the non-Indigenous writer in settler societies has been efficiently encapsulated by Canadian poet Dennis Lee: 'if you are Canadian, home is a place that is not home to you'; the task of the writer is, therefore, not to articulate belonging or place but placelessness and non-belonging, 'to find words for our space-lessness' (Lee 163). Therein lies Rothwell's literary project. His non-Indigenous protagonists do not have a physical claim to place. Rather, they carry an emotional attachment to place, which travels with them, without putting an indelible stamp on wilderness or a sacred place. His narrators are continually on the move: the traveller never arrives; the quest for meaning never ends; resolution always is a step away. On the other hand, Rothwell's oeuvre celebrates Indigenous Australians' ability to resist colonial impositions. Rothwell's is a literature of resilience which invigorates both cultures. In times of resurgent, inherently divisive nationalisms, when governments shy away from practical or even symbolic engagement with Indigenous communities, literary works like Rothwell's—which focus on cultural difference, relationships of co-dependency, and advocate a reverse assimilation—are not only timely but necessary.

NOTES

[1] In the 1980s, historians like Henry Reynolds and Bain Attwood opened a constructive era of revisionism that confronted frontier history. The Mabo and Wik judgements of the 1990s led Attwood to consider this time period as 'The Aboriginal Turn.' During the same period, literary authors were reflecting on the erosion of settler Australians' sense of place. Experimental literary works like *The Road to Botany Bay: An Exploration of Landscape and History* (Carter, 1987) or *Reading the Country: Introduction to Nomadology* (Benterrack, Muecke, Roe 1984) were instrumental in challenging the supposed stabilities of place. One could argue that Peter Carey's early short stories engaged in similar questioning. It must also be noted that Tim Winton, despite appearances, engaged very early in his literary career with spatial contestations, most notably in *In the Winter Dark*, a novel published the same year as the Bicentenary (Cordier, 'Tim Winton's *In the Winter Dark* and the Settler Condition', 58–72).

[2] Throughout this essay, I use the term '*Country*' to refer to the particular attachment Indigenous Australians have formed with the land (a physical, spiritual, legal, ecological and economic set of relations). The common noun 'country' is otherwise used to refer to Australia as a nation state.

[3] Rothwell writes of *Heaven and Earth* as 'a European-accented novel of ideas' that 'reflected European beliefs about the novel as the supreme vehicle for conveying internal experience' (*Journeys to the Interior* 21).

[4] On this particular trope, see Chapter 3, 'Getting Lost with Nikki Gemmell,' in Emily Potter's *Writing Belonging at the Millennium: Notes from the Field on Settler-Colonial Place* (2019).

[5] For an overview of the location of cultural representations in Australian literature and cinema, see *Cultural Atlas of Australia*, developed by Jane Stadler, Peta Mitchell and Stephen Carleton. http://www.australian-cultural-atlas.info/CAA/index.php

[6] Thomas Weiskel identifies three phases of the sublime: a pre-sublime stage where 'the mind is in a determinate relation to the object,' followed by a stage where the individual feels overpowered by nature (experiencing awe, fear or terror); and finally, a 'reactive phase' where the subject re-asserts their dominance over nature (23–24).

[7] In *Alex Miller: The Ruin of Time* (2014), Robert Dixon provides an analysis of Alex Miller's *The Tivington Nott* in these terms (*Alex Miller* 12).

[8] For a compelling analysis of the horizonal sublime in Australian fiction, in the context of an earthed sacred, see Bill Ashcroft, Frances Devlin-Glass and Lyn McCredden's *Intimate Horizons: The Post-Colonial Sacred in Australian Literature*.

[9] Marcia Langton explains: 'Aboriginal beliefs about the place of humans in the natural world construct a different concept of personal identity from that which is conventionally understood in Western thought. The Aboriginal person—as a socialised cultural being—is conceived of, not merely as a body enclosing a singular conscious being, but rather, as spatialized by virtue of totemic affiliations' (27–28). I analyse Rothwell's experimentations with totemic identities in my doctoral thesis, 'Intimate Immensities: The Poetics of Space in Contemporary Australian Literature' (118–19).

[10] This playful coinage has inspired a study of modernity and non-linear spatial representations entitled 'NowHere: An Introduction to Space, Time and Modernity' (Friedland and Boden 1–60).

[11] Human geographer Juanita Sundberg demonstrates how the adoption of 'the pluriverse' as a decolonial tool could transform posthumanist scholarship and geographies. See Juanita Sundberg, 'Decolonising Posthumanist Geographies.'

[12] For an extensive discussion on these concepts in a First Nations context, see Zoe Todd's 'Indigenizing the Anthropocene' in *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environment and Epistemology*.

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