

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Anita Heiss: *Am I Black Enough for You?* (Random House: Sydney, 2012)

Anita Heiss' *Am I Black Enough for You?* is a compelling and deeply affective memoir on community, family, alliances and the complexities of identity. This work contributes to Heiss's prolific oeuvre as a proud Wiradjuri woman, writer, educator, public speaker and literary critic. Heiss is the author of historical fiction, non-fiction, social commentary, poetry and travel pieces and the creator of an innovative genre of commercial women's fiction named 'Koori chick-lit', or 'choc-lit', featuring urban Aboriginal women.

The thought-provoking title of the memoir, *Am I Black Enough for You?*, reflects its preoccupation with identity. Posing the question, Heiss invites readers to reflect, consider and reconsider stereotypical and received notions about Aboriginal identity. The memoir begins with an act of self-defining, attesting to its importance and necessity, as Heiss embraces her diverse selves, firmly rooted in her identity as a Wiradjuri woman: 'I am an urban, beachside Blackfella, a concrete Koori with Westfield Dreaming, and I apologise to no one' (1). Throughout her introductory chapter, Heiss challenges stereotypical notions of Aboriginal identity, asserting her connection to her land and community. Analysing terms such as 'Aborigines', Heiss reveals the problematic constructedness of such terminology connected to the history of invasion and dispossession, emphasising once again the importance of self-expression and self-representation.

Following the introduction, Heiss references her much-publicised suit against conservative columnist Andrew Bolt and his article which targeted Heiss and several others, claiming they have chosen their 'Aboriginal identity' for personal and professional gain. Along with eight other plaintiffs, Heiss took Bolt to court for breaching the Racial Discrimination Act and won the case. She reflects on Bolt's discriminatory and inaccurate assumptions and challenges prescriptive notions about Aboriginal identity emerging from colonialist imagination. Winning the case against Bolt, Heiss significantly contributes to countering problematic representations of Indigenous people in the media and encourages dialogue on equality and accountability.

Political engagement is a recurring thematic thread in this memoir, written in an accessible, engaging and occasionally humorous style. Heiss's writing is confident and dialogic, as she invites her diverse readers to either examine their own assumptions and prejudices or recognise a part of themselves in her experiences. However, one of the most compelling aspects of this memoir is Heiss's sense of accountability as she uses her platform as a writer to empower her readers, address issues in her community, challenge racist assumptions and encourage relentless self-representation. Admitting her own privileges, she works to empower and motivate her readers across cultures. As she writes, 'That's what it means to be Aboriginal to me: to be active, to be political' (146).

Heiss's love for family, community and friends forms the core of the memoir. In the first few chapters, she details her childhood, growing up in the eastern suburbs of Sydney, Matraville as the child of a Wiradjuri mother and an Austrian father. She experiences racist assumptions and the complexities of inhabiting different cultures from an early age. In particularly moving passages, Heiss details her affectionate relationship with her parents, their loving marriage and her siblings. She views her parents' marriage as an example of overcoming differences and obstacles or real love which 'knows no boundaries, least of all race' (25). Heiss also details her parents' story, recounting the way her parents met and

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started a family. In a chapter entitled 'Being Elsie's daughter', Heiss expresses her admiration for her mother, including a moving poem, 'Ode to My Mother'. She tells her father's story in the next chapter, 'Joe-the-Carpenter', describing his Austrian background and family. In particular, Heiss insightfully relates how her father, as a white migrant from Austria with a life-long accent and her mother, a Wiradjuri woman, were both at times excluded from the notion of 'Australianess'.

Dedicated to social and political change, Heiss details her experiences as an educator working to promote Indigenous literacy and highlight the value of education as a necessary prerequisite for challenging racism and strengthening Indigenous communities across Australia. Criticising historical erasure and national amnesia in her discussion of education and the curriculum, Heiss argues that the history of massacres, invasion and the Stolen Generations should be included under 'Australian history' and taught as part of the national Australian history curriculum (101). Her engagement with reclaiming histories is reflected in her historical novel on the Stolen Generations, *Who Am I? The Diary of Mary Talence, Sydney, 1937* (2001), which she discusses in a chapter aptly named 'Writing Us Into Australian History'. Affirming her role as a politically engaged writer, Heiss relates that she wrote the book 'to give voice to those who are without one' (194).

Apart from historical fiction, poetry and social commentary, Heiss also writes urban Aboriginal women into the Australian literary canon with her 'Koori chick-lit'. The memoir reveals Heiss's motivation for writing commercial women's fiction in novels such as *Not Meeting Mr Right, Avoiding Mr Right, Manhattan Dreaming* and *Paris Dreaming*, explored in a chapter tellingly named: 'On Being Koori Bradshaw'. Inventing a new genre featuring urban Aboriginal women, Heiss invests her protagonists with energising qualities; they are 'urban, educated, articulate, career-minded women' (215) with dreams, aspirations and dilemmas. Most importantly, they are explicitly politicised, multifaceted and compelling characters who challenge one-dimensional, tokenistic literary representations and affirm, in Heiss' words, 'the common bonds we all share' (225).

The memoir also relates Heiss's experiences as an academic and a writer engaging with academic audiences and researchers. Heiss's decision to do a doctorate in Aboriginal literature reflects the necessity for re-centering academic discourse dominated by elitism and whiteness. As she writes: 'I wanted students and researchers to be reading the voices of Blackfellas talking about our own writing, not the voices of white academics who'd written about Black authors after doing desktop analyses of what other white academics have written about Black authors' (107). Heiss's critique of whiteness and entitlement is particularly highlighted in passages describing encounters with white academics claiming to be 'Aboriginalists', or experts on Aboriginal issues, as well as researchers who appropriate oral testimonies and photographs for career purposes and self-promotion without the communities' permission. Challenging white hegemonic discourses, Heiss underscores the 'decades of appropriation and exploitation of Aboriginal cultural material in the arts' (140) and calls for more accountability.

Heiss decides to leave academia after a conference in Fiji, where she was invited to speak at the Pacific Epistemologies Conference. At the conference, she contemplates the alienating nature of academic language used to define and discuss Indigenous people. Pointing out academics' lack of practical engagement, or 'academics talking purely to other academics' (131), Heiss's criticism highlights the need for making academic knowledge more accessible, inclusive and politically engaged. She contrasts western societies' view of

education as a consumer product founded on competition, individual gain and rights to Aboriginal values of cooperation, community and accountability (142). Taking this discrepancy into account, Heiss emphasises the importance of gaining education for Indigenous people as means of self-defining, political strategising and reclaiming rights.

Another important thread in the memoir stems from Heiss's travels, as she situates her discussion in international contexts. As a well-travelled writer and public speaker, attending conferences and book tours as well as conducting overseas research for her books, Heiss engages with international perceptions on Indigenous Australians and identifies stereotypes acquired through Hollywood and Tourism Australia campaigns. Most importantly, Heiss emphasises the value of transnational alliances between Indigenous people, facing similar challenges in resisting appropriation, exploitation and erasure of their culture. In particular, she acknowledges the influence of African American politics and culture on Aboriginal Australians and describes her admiration for Oprah Winfrey as an influential and persistent figure.

Acutely aware of the prevailing effects of colonialism, Heiss uses her writing to challenge racism, empower communities and reclaim the right for self-definition. This well-written, accessible and deeply intimate memoir is a compelling read which will be of interest to diverse readers, particularly students and educators across disciplines and contexts. Positing self-representation as a basic right for all, the memoir reflects the author's perseverance, dedication and most importantly, inspiring optimism.

Maja Milatovic