

Speaking Back to the Center: Decolonizing the 'Great Australian Silence' in Contemporary Life-Writings

Dr.S.ARMSTRONG

*Professor and Head, Department of English
University of Madras, Chennai, Tamil Nadu*

The Great Australian Silence was not a surprise, however, but a purposeful structural aspect of the settler-colonial arrangement. In his 1968 Boyer Lectures, W.E.H. Stanner represented a "view from a window," one that deliberately left out the foundational violence of the Australian state.

For decades, the "Center"- defined as Anglo-European literary and political hegemony- mapped the borders of Australian identity. Contrast that to modern life-writing and, in this respect, works like Kim Scott's *Benang* and Anita Heiss's *Am I Black Enough for You?* —is a kind of literary counter-insurgency. These texts speak to omissions, but also interrogate and destabilize the linguistic and structural frameworks of the "Center."

There is a primacy to modern life-writing in the deconstruction of the architecture of silence. Unlike the narrative of the past (so many of whose stories have been written in, and through, colonial archives), including memoirs, autobiographies and testimonies, life-writing foregrounds the "sovereignty of the personal." When Indigenous authors like Kim Scott, Anita Heiss or Alexis Wright work, they are not merely adding to the existing narratives, but they are actually "talking back" to the Center in ways that upset its structures. This is a radical reclamation of agency where Indigenous presence is an established and present reality which demands reintertwining the national narrative from all angles.

Decolonizing the silence involves more than just "Filling in the Gaps." It requires us to confront head-on the "White imagination" that has structured the Australian story. Through life-writing, authors bypass the gatekeepers of the colonial archive and instead are drawing from oral histories, "Country" and even memory of their family in the past – sources the Center has regularly dismissed as untrustworthy and/or "unscientific." In the process, they reveal that "Great Australian Silence" is a thin front.

This paper examines how modern narratives serve as literary counter-mapping. Though colonial architecture was

conceived to close in and exclude in detail, such life-writings function as structural breaks that force the Center to recognize voices it has sought to silence for more than two centuries.

The terrain of contemporary Australian life-writing and critical theory shows that the "Silence" itself is in decay through four thematic breaks: the critique of white possession, the ecological imperative, the re-location of Australia within Asia, and the pushback from the legal sector to defend its constitutional voice.

Goenpul scholar Moreton-Robinson lays the groundwork for theoretical work that will lead to the decolonization of the Australian narrative. She suggests that the "Center" carries forth to maintain its dominant influence via the "White Possessive" – a structural logic wherein the settler-state defines itself on the basis of ownership over Indigenous lands and bodies. In life-story, the concept of ownership usually takes the form of a state attempt to collect Indigenous stories into the "multicultural" success narrative, so as to avoid discomfort with the unresolved question of sovereignty. Moreton-Robinson maintains that Indigenous sovereignty was never ceded; therefore, all life-writing that "speaks back" asserts the previous superiority over the land, rather than attempting to gain permission to exist in Australian history. This reframing frames the "Silence" as the state's refusal to recognize a competing authority, not as a mere absence of sound. Stanner's idea of silence connects to history: this is what Alexis Wright wants to discuss concerning the silence of the future and specifically the environmental silence of the Anthropocene. In *The Swan Book*, Wright uses "biographical fiction" to subvert the Western Center's division between "Self" and "Nature."

Wright, by depicting a future Australia laid waste by climate change and ongoing Indigenous displacement, asserts that decolonizing the mind is indistinguishable from decolonizing the Earth. Here the "Silence" means the fact that the settler-state is unable to 'hear' the Country.

Wright's storytelling, thick, circular and epic, becomes a kind of literary sovereignty in itself, the antithesis of the linear, not-much-logic that life-writing has traditionally been the practice of in the West, that the survival of the land cannot occur outside of the survival of the narratives that have kept it alive for thousands of years.

The "Center" has long defined Australia as an isolated British outpost, an "island" castle. Shankari Chandran's work pushes back on this narrative by positioning Australia's role in the Indian Ocean and Asia. Through a focus on the experiences of Sri Lankan migrants at a Sydney nursing home, Chandran reveals how settler-colonial racism intersects with the trauma of peoples fleeing other colonial histories. This development expands the definition of "Speaking Back," turning the binary of Black and White into a multi-vocal challenge to the ongoing legacies of the "White Australia" policy. Chandran probes if the "Silence" also serves to repress these intersecting traumas, hinting that Australia's own story is intimately entwined with the geopolitics of its neighbouring land.

The most recent real-world attempt to break the "Great Australian Silence" occurred in the political world via the Voice to Parliament referendum. This debate is a state of nationwide life-writing, an effort to incorporate Indigenous recognition into the Center's core documents. Literature produced over this time, from the Uluru Statement from the Heart to companion essays, highlights a tension of much greater consequence: What kind of colonial constitution will actually "hear" an Indigenous voice? But the rejection of the referendum by the vast majority of the Australian electorate in 2023 has perhaps brought back the "Architecture of Silence." For researchers, this era is an important case study of how a democratic process employed by the Center reproduces the exclusions Stanner recognized half a century ago.

The shift from anthropological look to individual life-writings is a seismic shift in Australian literary practice. Historically, Indigenous peoples were always portrayed as "objects of study" through a Darwinian trope of the "dying race"—a narrative convenience which allowed colonial expansion by implying that "Aboriginality was a relic of the past." Early ethnographic texts and settler fiction acted like taxidermy, preserving a "primitive" other and denying them agency in contemporary life. The rise of life-writing marks a significant shift from earlier texts where observation was

limited to certain clinical aspects. Authors focus on memoir, testimony, and family history, moving from subjects of investigation to writers of their own individual lives. This genre is an important site of decolonization because it bypasses the "official" colonial archive (Stanner describes it as resulting from omissions) and instead highlights the "sovereignty of the personal."

Life-writing can be a means of reclaiming body, family, and spirit from the institutional control of the state. At the heart of this movement is the theoretical model that drives "The Empire Writes Back." In an Australian context, writers use the two strategies of abrogation alongside appropriation. Abrogation is to deny the aesthetic and grammatical "correctness" of Standard English that has long acted as an arbiter of the Center. Appropriation then takes the colonizer's language, filling it with Indigenous syntax, Kriol, and traditional tongue. By adapting English to speak to an Indigenous worldview, these writers deconstruct the "Great Australian Silence" not by whispering in the Center's ear, but by reconstituting the very language of conversation.

The "Center" has historically used Standard English to assimilate—a linguistic border patrol that excluded Indigenous epistemologies. In decolonized life-writing, on the other hand, authors engage in what Ashcroft calls abrogation, denying "the 'correctness' of the colonial tongue." By writing Noongar, Wiradjuri, or Yolngu Matha terms directly into English prose — often without the "safety net" of a glossary or italics — writers like Kim Scott in Benang create a friction that puts the settler-reader on an uneven path of non-fluency. So, while the colonizer wrote, its own words — its own syntax — were written, but here a hybridity is an act of appropriation that captures what a colonized person would say and translates it into a weighty Indigenous worldview.

This linguistic "talking back" ensures that the story cannot be assimilated or "owned" by the colonial center, but rather that the story remains a territory of its own, where Indigenous language stakes its continued existence in the face of erasure. Western biography is historically enmeshed in a linear teleological "progress" narrative — a chronology of birth and death; "primitivism" and "civilization." Decolonization of this framework involves applying Circular Temporality. For Alexis Wright and Tara June Winch, time is not a straight line, but a series of

concentric ripples in which the past, present, and future coexist. This type of so-called 'deep time' alludes to the concept of Country as the perpetual 'living thing'. By upending the linear timeline, these life-writings refuse to allow the colonial myth that Indigenous history ended on the frontier. Instead, they cast the Dreaming as a modern, pulsing reality, not a remote mythos.

This temporal shift interrupts the settler-state's project to "reconcile" the past by burying it, claiming the past is a constant, audible presence in the present. Western biographical conventions are founded on the theory of the "Great Man"—the individual, autonomous hero. In their turn, Indigenous life-writing decolonizes this by emphasizing Collaborative Authorship and collective memory. Works such as *Aunty Rita* (Rita and Jackie Huggins) or Benang's family-driven narratives have shown the "I" in Indigenous life-writing is almost always a "We." Often, the narrative voice is an amalgam of Elders' voices—testimonies, fragments from the archive, and "blood memory." This approach challenges the Center's focus on individualism: it insists that people are born and live through the ties of kinship in addition to being members of their clan. By recording the "stolen" threads of family history, these texts reconstruct a social fabric that the Great Australian Silence tried to shred.

Through this lens, writing turns into a communal ceremony of "bringing the people back together," effectively canceling out the project of fragmentation the colonial state carried out. Decolonizing the "Great Australian Silence" entails decoupling Indigenous "authenticity," which only occurs when located in a distant, "traditional" past, from the colonial binary. In the settler-colonial Center, the urban Indigenous person is often a site of intense anxiety given that their presence—modern, professional, and vocal—upends the myth of the "disappearing savage." Anita Heiss's memoir, *Am I Black Enough for You?* (2012), is at the heart of its efforts to 'speak back' to these silences in the present by insisting on a "Sophisticated Blackness." Heiss's story is a story woven into the foundation of a historic legal battle against columnist Andrew Bolt, who in 2009 asked why light-skinned Indigenous people might claim to be Aboriginal.

This was a contemporary form of the "Great Australian Silence," an initiative by a leading media figure to repress or trivialize Indigenous identity and render urban

Aboriginality invisible or fraudulent. By specifying she was a litigant in *Eatock v Bolt* (2011) — in which the Federal Court held Bolt had contravened the Racial Discrimination Act — Heiss takes the decolonial battle from the frontier to court. She exposes how the "Center" uses media platforms to preserve a "color-coded" hierarchy of Indigeneity. In doing so, her life-writing serves as a legal and cultural monument, confirming — and in doing so, suggesting that identity is not a matter of skin pigment or lack of location but genealogy, community acceptance, and history embodied and lived experience instead.

Decolonizing the national narrative Heiss navigates the space of academia, literature, and urban cosmopolitanism — with a strong base in her Wiradjuri identity. She deliberately employs the term "Sophisticated Blackness" to break the stereotype that Aboriginal life is in no way predisposed to success in modern life. Her life-writing speaks in a dual-literacy: She knows the protocols of the university as well as the oral traditions of her relatives. By chronicling her life as a city-dwelling, chocolate-loving, high-heel-wearing intellectual, she is refusing to be "silenced" into a tight, essentialized box. To say that is an act of extreme sovereignty of the self. Which implies the "Center" doesn't hold the power to dictate what an Aboriginal person should look like or how they should live. Heiss's memoir also succeeds in moving the "Great Australian Silence" from a place of silence of a past to now, calling on the nation to acknowledge the existence of the millions of Indigenous stories in Australia's suburbs and cities.

Decolonizing the "Great Australian Silence" is not an act performed on behalf of the writer alone; it requires reader transformation of the ethical stance of the reader. In the past, the settler-colonial "Center" has treated Indigenous texts as ethnographic objects — objects to be "studied," "interpreted" or "mapped" through a Western academic lens. To truly "speak back" to this center, contemporary life-writings such as Kim Scott's, Anita Heiss's and Alexis Wright's require a new protocol of engagement: one that swaps out the settler's desire to classify with an ethical impulse to attend to the work of active listening. To re-center the narrative for the non-Indigenous reader is to endorse "uncomfortable truths."

Decolonial life-writing frequently intentionally resists being an "educational resource" for the settler in need.

Rather, what these texts do often relies on what scholars refer to as strategic opacity — language or cultural references, or “inside” knowledge that eludes outside engagement. This creates a necessary “discomfort” that resonates with the historical silencing of Indigenous voices. Because they refuse to offer a “universal” (read: Western) entry, the author makes the reader occupy a location of non-authority. No longer the reader is the one weighing the truth of a story’s “accuracy” or “value,” they are a guest to a sovereign intellectual sphere. Shifting from “interpreting” to “listening” is the first step in challenging the colonial ego; it requires the Center to confront parts of the Australian story that the Center does not or cannot own. Through this lens, the writing acts as a manifestation of Sovereignty of the Page.

When an Indigenous author writes about their life they are performing a certain cognitive and cultural self-determination that circumvents the legislative and constitutional silences of the state. ‘White Possessive’ logic, as Moreton-Robinson articulates it, is temporarily suspended, and the page becomes yet another battlefield. This sovereignty does not require recognition from the Center; it represents a manifestation of an inescapable reality. The reader’s ethics must thus be seen in that the book is more than a “story”, an act of political and spiritual presence. By interacting with such life-writings, the reader enters into a ‘treaty of the mind’ wherein it is at last the great Australian silence, which is no longer disturbed by the sounds of settler discourse but at its deep sovereign vibration of Indigenous truth. The “Great Australian Silence” was never a natural event, but a curated void, a form of structuring so as to sustain a settler-colonial system of power. As discussed in this research, the tearing down of this silence is not just a passive phenomenon; it’s an active, combative project of literary and intellectual reclamation.

Today, people like Kim Scott, Anita Heiss and Alexis Wright have taken us one step beyond a “politics of apology” that serves only as a soothing balm to the settler-conscience and towards a “politics of presence” that has dominated national discourse. Indeed, it is this presence which proclaims that Indigenous sovereignty is not a mere cultural artifact upon which to revise the past but something alive and alive, calling for a complete reset of the Australian identity. By “speaking back” to the Center, these

writers have inverted the traditional hierarchy of the Australian canon. The “margins” — once consigned to anthropological studies’ footnote — have become of far more depth and intellectual rigor as the loci of literary truth. The combination of linguistic hybridity, circular temporality, and collaborative authorship has subjected the “Center” to its own deficiencies. The Anglo-European narrative, formerly known as the “universal” narrative of Australia, is now shown to be a tailored, localized and often exclusionary viewpoint. The monopoly on national “story” has been broken; the polyphonic chorus of voices refuses to be silenced because the “view from the window.”

The move forward for Australian life-writing and for the country-wide identity lies in the move from recognition to realization. As the 2023 Voice to Parliament debate shows, the legal and political infrastructure of the Center is still resistant to substantial change. But the literary sphere is still running ahead of the political. Decolonizing the silence in the future will require a commitment to Radical Listening—an ethical engagement based on the realization that for the settler-state and its citizens, it is not only to “hear” Indigenous stories, but also to allow those stories to reshape the foundations of the legal, environmental, and social nation in ways that change Indigenous identity. And further still, the “way forward” needs to involve the points at which the Anthropocene meets global decolonization. As exposed through Wright and Chandran, the Australian story becomes no longer a one-man islander; it is part and parcel with an ongoing world-wide struggle in the face of the logic of White Possessiveness that precludes cultural and ecological survival.

Future scholarship needs to continue to consider how life-writing might act as climatological and geopolitical sovereignty, a claim that the care offered to “Country” is inextricably tied to the care offered to the story. But the silence is not only being broken; it is a sophisticated, sovereign resonance. The structure of the settler-state may endure, but its walls are now scarred with the indelible verities of those it sought to shut out. But to move past the silence is to recognize that Australia is not a completed project, but a continuous dialogue — a conversation in which the First Voice is ultimately and forever the loudest.

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