

Desiring Authenticity: Perspectives on the Non-indigenous Performance of Aboriginality

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The indigene is a semiotic pawn on a chess board under the control of the white signmaker. And yet the individual signmaker, the individual player, the individual writer, can move these pawns only within certain prescribed areas (Goldie 172)

Terrie Goldie in his article, "The Representation of the Indigene", has documented Australia's age long, continuing and generally uneasy relationship of the indigenous and non-indigenous representation of Aboriginality. Using the chessboard analogy Goldie implies the underlying politics of every form of representations whether essentialist or universalist. In this regard, he later confirms that there can be only two possibilities. One possibility he puts forward is the white culture incorporating the "Other", and the second is the complete negation of the "Other" (Goldie 174). Therefore, the main aim of this paper is to consider these competing viewpoints and their underlying politics with reference to Patrick Brantlinger's article "Notes on the postmodernity of fake (?) Aboriginal literature" (2011) published in the *Postcolonial Studies* journal.

Brantlinger belongs to the first category of school of thought as mentioned in Goldie's essay. The writer indirectly advocates for an indigenous cultural appropriation while discussing the issue of authenticity. There is a gradual step by step unravelling of the complexity of the concept. Beginning with the rampant materiality and commodification of the postmodern culture, the essay slowly develops into larger issues of authenticity, identity and performance. It introduces the reader to new perspectives and issues regarding the concept of authenticity and compels the reader to think in a different way. The arguments produced in this essay are well framed and substantiated with a wide range of secondary critical materials.

Brantlinger begins his essay by advocating a Marxian way of understanding literary production, where materiality as a result of social practices, becomes a strong determining factor in the reception of literary productions. He therefore values Marxist materiality as the key factor in understanding how consciousness, identity, language, politics and meaning are socially constructed and practiced. Brantlinger's project underlies this materiality while examining the Australian Aboriginal literature and explores the relevance of postmodernity in challenging such socially constructed materiality. He raises a poignant question, "In all postmodern cultures, commodification reigns supreme, and how can any commodity, even if it is original and one-of-a-kind, be Aboriginal?" (Brantlinger 355), which he tries to answer by investigating the concept of authenticity in multifarious dimensions. For this, the writer examines an extensive range of literary hoaxes, tries to locate the historical shift in the literary narrative throughout the time and attempts to trace the different meanings of authenticity, which I will discuss later in my paper.

The crisis of representation and the notion of fragmentation which are characteristic to the postmodern condition provide strong ground of support for Brantlinger's assertion of the impossibility of authenticity. The whole chaos set in motion by the numerous literary hoaxes in Australian literature throughout the time, is perceived by the writer as an inevitable outcome of the postmodernity. Therefore, for Brantlinger to be inauthentic in this postmodern milieu is natural and so the term "fake" in his title is evidently free from the pejorative connotations. Accordingly he declares, ". . . what I am calling 'fake' Aboriginal writing might be viewed as authentically postmodern although not authentically aboriginal" (Brantlinger 356). The writer having justified the socio-political relation between postmodernity and the rise of literary hoaxes, then takes up the issue of authenticity and tries to define it at different levels.

Brantlinger borrows Elizabeth A Povinelli's phrase "indigenous popontology"¹ (Brantlinger 356) to discuss the commodification of "primitivism" where he critically analyses the capitalist cultural interest invested by the Australian Tourism department in Aboriginal sites like Uluru and Kakadu. He even takes up few "New Age" (Brantlinger 356) bestseller novels and examines them in the same critical line of investigation to see how they propounds the capitalist cultural economy. Here we find the writer attempts to delineate the usual exocitization framework where the non-indigenous "nostalgic aspirations for Aboriginality" (Brantlinger 356) gets commodified, which according to him must be seen as symptomatic of the larger postmodern state of late capitalism.

It is again interesting to see how Brantlinger deliberately constructs a disjuncture in his method of analysis by turning to the concept of performance. Using performance as a method of analysis, the writer explores various literary hoaxes by tracing the authors' participation in the general pursuit for legitimacy. Here the writer provides literary examples of non-Aboriginal authors attempt to legitimize their works by incorporating Aboriginal values, experiences and cultural ethos. For example, he looks at the poetry of the Jindyworobaks, novels like Katherine Prichard's *Coonardoo* and Xavier Herbert's *Capricornia*. As a matter of fact, Brantlinger engages in a serious critical inquisition of Mudrooroo's literary case study. He disapproves the whole enterprise of fraudulence ascribed to Mudrooroo's literary career by trying to look beyond the veil of deception and fake. This he succeeds in by underlying the significance of the cultural authenticity seen in Mudrooroo's literary works, the "authentic" (Brantlinger 357) portrayal of Aboriginal experiences of oppression and pain. It is significant at this point to note how Brantlinger shares similar critical line of thoughts on performance with Philip Auslander. Auslander in his book *Liveness* identifies the "ideological concept" (Auslander 70) behind authenticity as performative. Therefore he says that performers can "achieve and maintain their effect of authenticity by continuously citing the norms of authenticity" (Auslander 72). We see how Brantlinger tries to challenge the meaning of authenticity by

¹ Povinelli's term "popontology" stands for "popularized ontotheological novels and films" (Povinelli 514). In her article she studies the marketing and commodification of indigenous spirituality.

displacing the racial and biological implications to cultural grounds. But, while such an assertion from the writer's part indeed carry some weight, it still seems doubtful to see how such assertions successfully vindicate his arguments to replace the established definitions of authenticity. He indeed recognizes the problem when he says, "Needless to say, this is not the "authentic" Aboriginal experience' demanded by the officialdom adjudicating land rights, by New Age spiritual tourists, or even by many Aborigines" (Brantlinger 357). Again, Margery Fee in her article, "Who Can Write As Other?" proposes another dimension to the definition of authenticity when she says, "...the ideal of 'authenticity' has been proven to be, like so many others, relative and context-bound" (Fee 171). Brantlinger confronts such difficulties while elucidating on his proposal of cultural authenticity as the determining factor of legitimising the literary works. Despite such problems Brantlinger tries to identify the multiple possibilities to appropriate indigenous culture and reinforces the relative significance of such an appropriation. He borrows Maureen Clark's viewpoints regarding the cultural authenticity of Mudrooroo's portrayal of Aboriginality. In his article "Mudrooroo: Crafty Impostor or Rebel with a Cause", Clark explains Mudrooroo's childhood experiences sharing the same Aboriginal dilemmas and complexity, which in turn provided him the opportunity to represent Aboriginality in an appealing manner.

The elevation of authenticity from racial to culture then raises certain amount of social suspicions which Brantlinger addresses very effectively in his essay, thereby compelling the readers to seriously engage with the issue. He discloses a palpable tension of "neocolonial racism" (Brantlinger 357) which results as a process of essentialising Aboriginal experiences and which ultimately becomes a mode of "discursive oppressions" (Brantlinger 358). It is interesting how he looks at the different perspectives propounded by the critics on this matter of social suspicion. For instance, Brantlinger draws on Gareth Griffiths discussion of the suspicion arising from the writers' insistence of a "nonhybridized authenticity" (Brantlinger 358). Another important critic Brantlinger discusses in this regard is Adam Shoemaker and his examination of the literary case study of Mudrooroo, which the latter aptly describes as "The curse of authenticity" (Brantlinger 358). Consequently, Brantlinger declares that "race today should be a factor of no consequence whatsoever in judging the quality of anyone's writing, so that, in assessing the literary qualities of *Wildcat Falling* or his other writings, Mudrooroo's genetic make-up should be irrelevant" (Brantlinger 358). This assertion from the part of the writer reflects his interest to correct misrepresentations and the power to mobilize a new way of looking at authenticity.

Brantlinger also examines Sretan Bozic's literary issue which revolves round the author's assumed Aboriginal identity. Bozic, a Serbian immigrant, wrote under the pseudonym 'B. Wongar' and the success of his novels is mainly benefited from his false Aboriginal identity. Bozic's literary fraudulence gives Brantlinger the possibility to raise questions like, "...can a white person 'go native' thoroughly enough to become Aboriginal?" (Brantlinger 358). The writer tries to answer this by seeing it as the "obverse of the assimilationist policy" (Brantlinger 358). In addition,

Brantlinger demonstrates how Bozic's faking of his Serbian descent and not his portrayal of Aboriginal characters and culture, deemed his fiction as hoaxes. His study of the literary hoaxes at this juncture, paves way for his critical examination of the historical fiction and the question of authenticity. In doing so we find the writer closely engaging in an inclusive study rather than attempting to brush off other literary narratives. While talking about the factual truths as the defining factor of the cultural authenticity, he does not sideline the issue of historical fiction which is also marked by the factual truths. Brantlinger notes how the historical fiction is always perceived as something inauthentic although it is factually accurate. This, he says, is mainly because they are temporally and spatially detached and are therefore not based on immediate experience of the authors.

As a part of his analytical methodology, Brantlinger does a study of the literary hoaxes in US. He takes up texts about the Native American culture and the supposedly authentic authors which later turn out to be labelled as the examples of literary fraudulence. He cites a few of them, Carlos Casteneda's *The Teaching of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge* (1968), Forrest Carter's *The Education of Little Tree* (1976) and illustrates how such hoaxes are universal and not only specific to Australian context. In doing so he critically confronts Simon Caterson's demeaning of Australia as the "hoax nation" (Brantlinger 359). Moreover, he tries to locate such literary hoaxes within the relatively new national history of Australia, and sees how the "literary hoaxes exacerbate Australia's 'cultural cringe' and its 'obsession with the issue of legitimacy'" (Brantlinger 359).

Another significant strategy employed by the author in his methodology is that he traces the evolutionary literary history of the hoaxes in Australia. Brantlinger writes,

Hoaxes in Australian literary history begin with the texts attributed to transported pickpocket George Barrington, the first person to receive a pardon in New South Wales. *According to the Australian Dictionary of Biography*, 'countless works were published over his name. He wrote none of them...' (Brantlinger 360).

The writer also illustrates numerous other literary hoaxes, Elisa Fraser's case (1836); the Ern Malley's issue (1944), the literary controversy of David Unaipon's *Native Legends* and Helen Demidenko scandal (1995) are some of them. In this context, Brantlinger draws on Peter Carey's argument that "genealogy of fraudulence" (Brantlinger 360), a phrase used by Graham Huggan, in his book *Australian Literature: Postcolonialism, Racism, Transnationalism* coexisted with the historical development of Australian literature itself. Here we find how the writer tries to extend his initial argument about cultural authenticity by linking it with the socio-political history of Australia. Subsequently, he elaborates it by interconnecting the "genealogy of fraudulence", underlying the literary hoaxes, with the "genocidal theft" marked by the stolen generation of the 1960s (Brantlinger 359). By examining the "genealogical information" (Brantlinger 361) of various indigenous and non-indigenous authors, and their social interactions, Brantlinger says that "There is never any secure basis of authenticity in notions of racial purity" which validates his initial proposal

for the cultural definition of authenticity (Brantlinger 361). The question of instability of identity is further discussed in the book *Who's Who? Mapping Hoaxes and Imposture in Australian Literary History*, where writers Maggie Nolan and Carrie Dawson problematise the very notion of fixed identity. They write,

All three critics— Ashcroft, Dawson, and Brittan— consider the colonial context, and more specifically the vexed cultural and political relationship between England and Australia, to be crucial to an understanding of the ways in which the instability of particular identities could be thematised by writers... (Nolan and Dawson 10)

Thus, Nolan and Dawson trace the cause of such “instability” back to the colonial enterprise and its aftermath.

Brantlinger, after asserting the necessity of defining authenticity in terms of cultural grounds, he analyses the diverse notions of authenticity circulated in the contemporary intellectual debates. This analytical strategy employed by the writer in his study, helps the reader to understand, not only his take on authenticity but also the different perspectives propounded by various critics and writers. For instance he quotes Anna Johnston and Alan Lawson's viewpoints, where they attempt to see authenticity in an altogether different plain. They declare that,

The typical settler narrative... has a doubled goal. It is concerned to act out the suppression or effacement of the indigene; it is also concerned to perform the concomitant indigenization of the settler. In becoming more like the indigene whom he mimics, the settler becomes less like the atavistic inhabitant of the cultural homeland whom he is also reduced to mimicking. The text is thus marked by counterfeiting of both emergence and origination. (Brantlinger 362)

Johnston's and Lawson's argument reflects Brantlinger's initial assertion that “...to be neither fully Aboriginal nor fully white is to be caught between two impossibilities...” (Brantlinger 362). Drawing on the ideas of critics like Terrie Goldie, Walter J Ong and Jacques Derrida, the writer takes a significant critical shift in his assertion of the inherent inauthenticity of the Aboriginal literatures. He analyses the concept of authenticity in the dichotomy framework of orality and written/ print medium. Brantlinger explores the inherent difficulties surrounding these issues and shows how the debates are framed within these parameters. Subsequently, he writes,

Writing is here defined as the condition of *social inauthenticity*². One upshot is that all written, literary renderings of Aboriginality, even the most strictly autobiographical accounts, fail to be authentic in these terms. However, another is that the concept of authenticity has here exceeded any useful, meaningful limits (Brantlinger 363).

Prominent within these critical explorations has been a strong reconfiguring of conceptions of authenticity and identity.

² The phrase “social inauthenticity” is used by Derrida in his *Of Grammatology*.

Brantlinger as a part of his analytical strategy critically examines the first anthologies and certain historical works to trace the beginning of Aboriginal literature. Accordingly, he finds the two contradictory claims which are often made side by side throughout the time. One tries to limit the beginning of Aboriginal literature to the modern period of written and printed forms. He cites, for instance, Mudrooroo's *Writing from the Fringe* (1990) that tries to see "the strong beginnings of Aboriginal literature in the sixties and seventies" (Brantlinger 364). Contrary to this is the second claim which perceives Aboriginal literature as "not a new development" (Brantlinger 364) but believes that they existed in the oral traditions throughout the centuries. The editors of *Paperbark: A Collection of Black Australian Writings* (1990) belongs to this category. While also recognizing the conflict underlying the birth of Aboriginal literature, Brantlinger offers his critical view that such exclusive contradictory claims depends on the ambivalence surrounding what is perceived as literature. So when he says, ". . . the answer depends on how 'literature' and the 'oral traditions' of the Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders are defined" Brantlinger does not take a specific stand on this matter. It is interesting here to note that the writer discusses the contradictory claims by referring to the books published in the same year.

Brantlinger critically examines other historical texts like Svent Lindqvist's *Terra Nullius*, *Strehlow's Songs of Central Australia* and Paul Carter's *The Road to Botany Bay* to discuss the contradictions in the study of "Aboriginal narrative heritage" (Brantlinger 365). He also takes into account the critical viewpoints made by critics, Daniele Klapporth and Hodge and Mishra for instance, while discussing the inherent problems in the process of transmission of traditional Aboriginal narratives to English. The former talks about how the Aboriginal stories get "transformed and distorted" during the process of transmission, while Hodge and Mishra focus on the "weak or improbable" Aboriginality created by the white authors (Brantlinger 366). Brantlinger quotes Hodge and Mishra's comment on Thomas Keneally's *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*:

The title refers to a 'chant', recalling the ancient singers of tales, Homer, the Irish bards, or the mediaeval singers of epic tales like the *Nibelungenlied* or the *Song of Roland*. The Aboriginal tradition contains songs too, but not of this militaristic genre, and in any case Jimmie does not really know how to sing in the Aboriginal way, in Keneally's story (Brantlinger 366).

It is striking to see how this quote from *Dark Side of the Dream: Australian Literature and the Postcolonial Mind* effectively critiques the "weak" and "improbable" (Brantlinger 366) Aboriginal reflections and appropriations made by the white authors in their works.

Examining the critical debates and the evidences presented in his study of literary hoaxes, Brantlinger concludes that "In both racial and literary terms, the stress on authenticity is misleading, especially when it is considered that any translation of an oral source into a printed text is in some sense and to some degree already inauthentic" (Brantlinger 366). Here he once again substantiates his point by drawing on Renny van Toorn's

critical position on the “destructive powers of literacy” (Brantlinger 366) in Aboriginal literary history.

As already mentioned, he derives the conclusion of his essay by supplementing his initial arguments with a large range of critical enquiries. It is interesting to look at Brantlinger’s reflection on the issue of impossible authenticity, he says, “It is instead similar to Carey’s *My Life as a Fake*: both achieve a certain ironic authenticity by acknowledging the impossibility of ever achieving the nonironic authenticity claimed by hoaxes” (Brantlinger 363). His initial argument that race cannot be perceived as a determining factor for claiming authenticity gets again validated, towards the end of his essay, by the diverse critical perspectives propounded by writers like Terrie Goldie and Elizabeth Povinelli³. He concludes his essay by reflecting on the relationship between hoaxes and postmodernity, he says, “Hoaxes fit the various diagnoses and definitions of the postmodern condition as inauthentic— that is, the condition of a globalized, capitalist culture consisting only of copies, mass-mediated and commodified images or simulacra” (Brantlinger 368). This justification from the writer’s position compels the reader to reflect upon his whole project which is indeed located in the larger critical project of the politics of performance and the question of identity.

While engaging with the issue of authenticity, certain questions seemed to be very problematic. For instance, who profits from authenticity? In whose interest the claim of authenticity of specific cultures and historical past are made? Such questions are left unaddressed by the writer. Even for this matter the cultural membership is an annoying factor regarding this debate, which the writer skilfully evades in his discussions. At this point C.K. Stead’s two important questions concerning the cultural membership comes into my mind. “First, how do we determine minority group membership? Second, can majority group members speak as minority members . . .” (Fee 169). Brantlinger does not address these questions in his discussions.

When Brantlinger advocates for cultural authenticity throughout his essay by representing Aboriginal cultural ethos and experiences in a more appealing manner, he indirectly propagates a cultural appropriation. This is quite problematic since appropriation destroys cultural autonomy and what is even more problematic is the writer’s complete negation of such an issue. Following this line of thought, Philip Morrissey’s article “Stalking Aboriginal culture: the Wanda Koolmatrie affair” brings into light the ethicality and legality lurking behind such cultural appropriation processes. Morrissey delineates the “Draft United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples” PART III Article 12 which says:

Indigenous peoples have the right to practise and revitalize their cultural traditions and customs. This includes the right to maintain,

³ Terrie Goldie in his article “On Not Being Australian: Mudrooroo and Demidenko” discusses the “impossible necessity” of the white settlers to become indigenous. While the critic Povinelli describes the “impossibility” of the present Aborigines to sustain and practice their traditional customs and laws as “exactly as their ancestors maintained and practised” (Brantlinger 367) due to colonization.

protect and develop the past, present and future manifestations of their cultures, such as archaeological and historical sites, artifacts, designs, ceremonies, technologies and visual and performing arts and literature, as well as the right to the restitution of cultural, intellectual, religious and spiritual property taken without their free and informed consent or in violation of their laws, traditions and customs (Morrissey 305).

It is significant to see how Margery Fee notes Terry Threadgold's illustration of ideology in her article, "ideology' is 'not out there', imposed as it were from above, but rather, is part of the significant itself" (Fee 171). Similarly, Brantlinger's complete negation of such legal and ethical issues related to cultural appropriation in his essay evidently portrays his political project behind his study. It is this political ideology that Maggie Nolan and Carrie Dawson identify in their work. They write,

. . . discussion of hoaxes, frauds, and identity crises in Australian literature is not intended to collapse the various events into the manifestation of a single phenomenon. They have different causes and different contexts, and each of them can be thought about from a range of perspectives . . . the ways they played out have much to tell us about the management of anxiety surrounding cultural and racial identity (Nolan and Dawson 13).

It is indeed true that Brantlinger had a certain political project behind his study and in the pursuit of that project he wilfully ignores other valuable insights regarding this issue. Nevertheless, as Linda M. Park-Fuller in the article, "Performing absence: The staged personal narrative as testimony", quotes the critic Alcott, "To whom one is accountable is a political/ epistemological choice. . ." (Park-Fuller 28). A significant part of this article critically validates the essentiality of cultural appropriation of the indigenous by defining the concept of authenticity in cultural terms and also advocates the diverse enabling possibilities opened by it. However, this position has itself been come under attack throughout the centuries. While at one side it advocates for indigenization⁴, it wholly dismisses the enabling forces of essentialism and cultural autonomy. As Terrie Goldie states, "The necessities of indigenization can compel the players to participate but they cannot liberate the pawn"⁵ (Goldie 175).

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⁴ It should be noted that the term "indigenization" is not used by Brantlinger in his article. As a matter of fact, I am using it as a synonym for "cultural appropriation".

⁵ Terrie Goldie's analogy of the chessboard in the article "The Representation of the Indigene".

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