

Navigating Through Time in Bulmurn, A Swan River Nyoongar
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It's the Dreamtime that's calling in the wind,
in the trees; it's calling our people to listen.
For our ancestors' sake we must do what it takes,
to keep all our children together and free.
Walter G. Eatts, 'Ancestors in the Wind'

Richard Wilkes' multifaceted novel, *Bulmurn, a Swan River Nyoongar*, is an intriguing treatment of Nyoongar myths and Law, spanning thousands of years as it traces the creation of cultures (even worlds) in continuing conflict. Set in the early 1800s, it depicts a significant period in the life of Bulmurn, a traditional spiritual healer of the Darbalyung Nyoongar people, following his movements across an area stretching from Murin Morda to Walyalup and Wadjemup (Watson 214-224).[1] The novel works to transpose Nyoongar oral traditions into the written word in English, making them more accessible to contemporary Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal readers, and giving hope for race relations in a future born, at least partly, of the darkness and desperation of the past. One of Wilkes' major aims is to reinforce the contemporary value of Nyoongar traditions and the Law, while yet acknowledging that change is inevitable and the sort of cultural purity fiercely defended by Bulmurn is no longer possible. Against a background of miscegenation and racial objectification, Wilkes invokes a wealth of traditional songs, stories and corroborees. In so doing he directly addresses the sort of colonial misrepresentation of Aboriginal myths and oral tradition perpetuated, for example, in the work of early twentieth-century novelist and so-called anthropologist EL Grant Watson, whose short story 'Out There' will be discussed later in this paper. Wilkes does this by establishing an opposition between the history and law of the invaders, or the wadjbullas, and the myths and Law of his own people. This opposition brings into sharp relief the enduring power of the Dreamtime [2] and ancestral spirits in maintaining a sense of self and place among the Darbalyung Nyoongars, transcending the restrictions of space and time as elucidated by Paul Carter – and the restrictions of the written word so earnestly propagated by the wadjbulla community. Ronald Wright suggests that myths are 'an arrangement of the past, whether real or imagined, in patterns that resonate with a culture's deepest values and aspirations. Myths are so fraught with meaning that we live and die by them. They are the maps by which cultures navigate through time' (Wright qtd in Wilson 4). If this is so, then myth is at the centre of this text.

The novel is concerned with the way history and myth, and law and Law, operate in different cultural contexts. Wilkes, who is a Nyoongar elder himself, takes as his starting point what Paul Carter describes as the 'self-reinforcing illusions' (9) constituting imperial history and contrasts them with his own people's response to invasion and colonisation, as passed down to him by other Nyoongar elders. In this way, the text functions as resistance literature. Such literature, as Barbara Harlow has suggested, 'calls attention to itself' as a political and politicised activity' (Harlow qtd in Helms 8). In the opening chapters Wilkes accredits the wadjbullas with the limiting notion of history as a

chronological record or simplified narrative of past events, and he evokes the myth of terra nullius as an example of what Carter describes as 'Nature's painted curtain... drawn aside to reveal heroic [Englishmen] at [their] epic labour on the stage of history' (9). It rests uneasily beside the two Nyoongar versions of initial contact with the wadjbullas as recounted by Wilkes. In the first, the curious Mooro people are justified in their suspicion that the pale beings are 'bad spirits of jenark, jimbar and bulyut all rolled up in one' when they suffer the 'magic' of the wadjbullas' guns (Wilkes, Bulmurn 25). In the second version, they are frightened away when the strangers shoot at a flock of black swans, each of which is believed to carry one of the Mooro spirits from the spirit world of their Dreamtime people. The violence wreaked upon the land and its original inhabitants by the wadjbullas is the subtext in both of these stories, and it is mirrored throughout the novel in the awkward names with which the strangers attempt to possess the land. The same language used to document with supposed historical accuracy the events of invasion and colonisation is forced upon a land it simply cannot accommodate. In the opening pages this linguistic battle leads Bulmurn momentarily to despair that 'Now no more do my people, the black people, own the river area. The wadjbulla, he got it all' (28). One effective way that this statement is subsequently challenged involves Wilkes' use of Nyoongar words; for example, the Swan River will always be the Derbal Yerigan, Perth is Goomap, and Mount Eliza or King's Park is in fact Kartigarrup. He seeks to combat despair and provide contemporary Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal readers with a sense of the dignity and perseverance of his people. To this end, the writer convincingly represents the temporal and spatial battles between the wadjbullas and various Aboriginal groups on which the novel is based. Bulmurn is central to this process and the narrative traces his progression from mobarn man (magic man) to legend.

The invaders, unlike the Nyoongars, exist within the strict confines of a specific historical epoch. Temporally and spatially they are as isolated from their own ancestors and prospective descendants as from their British contemporaries. They call themselves, as Bulmurn observes, pioneers and explorers, although they are 'discovering' land already inhabited for tens of thousands of years. At the risk of stereotyping them, they are represented by a farmer and his workers, who commit rape and murder during a drunken spree and also by Senior Constable George Clamp and his troopers, whose task it is later in the novel to capture Bulmurn for avenging the rape and murder of his sister and brother-in-law. The Nyoongars, however, are surrounded (and protected, as the novel's conclusion shows) by living myths, which enable them to interpret and articulate truths passed from generation to generation. The Bulmurn figure functions in this way. As Richard Wilkes has said:

Stories like Bulmurn's are the kind of stories, Dreamtime stories, that are told about Aboriginal people in the early days... We had characters that were in amongst the ranks of the Nyoongar people and had these mystical powers and were able to use them in the way I describe in Bulmurn. So, Bulmurn is a real person... those characters were real, even in my time. (Those Who Remain 183)

Yet Wilkes is careful not to make this assertion in the novel itself, which initially functions according to the economy of wadjbulla history. Rather he lets his protagonist

slowly reveal himself to the sceptical reader, whether Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal. Prior to this revelation reference is repeatedly made to what the Nyoongars in the novel think he can do and the powers that Bulmurn is said to possess; we are told that 'such was Bulmurn's power, he was fast becoming a living legend amongst his people. They feared him and were in awe at what they thought he could do' (Bulmurn 16). He is said to be able to change form: into wardang, the crow; minga, the black ant; and balga, a grass tree found in the Swan River area. Interestingly, early in the novel a simple explanation is offered for the first of these: that in fact Bulmurn has trained a black crow to warn him of an enemy's approach – a piece of information which adds the strength of surprise to his powers as revealed during the hunt for him and ultimately, at the novel's end. He is known, even to the tragi-comic black trackers, as a man who inspires 'caution and respect', one who is 'a healer... an elder and a teacher of all ages... a very strong leader, a decision-maker in matters of culture, lifestyle and... tribal law' (130-31). Bulmurn, the Mobarn Boylla Gudjuk, is the possessor of medical knowledge and magical powers. As a figure spanning his people's past, present and future, he is perhaps also Wilkes' response to what has been called the 'uncontrollable, chaotic, unattainable, and ultimately evil' world (JanMohamed 83); the colonised world peopled with demonic dark figures, as seen in colonial poet Charles Harpur's 'The Creek of the Four Graves'. As the narrative proceeds, Bulmurn, who could at times be seen in this way, becomes more real, while also increasing his status as a mythical figure. This seemingly paradoxical process highlights the complexities of the relationship between Western discourse, 'reality' and myth in this novel.

Wilkes describes pre-colonial Nyoongar life in evidently idyllic terms. Clearly he seeks to educate a general (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) readership, taking knowledge usually passed orally between generations, and adapting it to the medium of the written word, while simultaneously seeking to manipulate Western literary conventions in accordance with the demands of an oral literature. This is an ambitious project. Contrary to the expectations of many of his readers, for example, his protagonist describes and explains in considerable detail various aspects of traditional tribal life: the correct intermarriage between skin groupings, various ailments among the tribe and Bulmurn's treatment of them, details of attire, weaponry and hunting procedures, to name but a few.[3] This approach, which reflects the utilitarian nature of much oral literature, challenges the expectations of the reader educated into a written tradition, causing the pace and rhythm of the narrative to appear to falter. Then we are given to understand its significance, as it is in an attempt to defend and champion this lifestyle that Bulmurn, in his capacity as medicine man, deliberately mistreats an increasing number of fair-skinned children 'to keep our bloodlines the same as before, with our kinship intact, so that we can safeguard our traditions' (Wilkes, Bulmurn 41). Through such questionably noble actions he promotes a pre-colonial cultural purity that he realises in the course of the narrative cannot fully be recovered. However, the opinions, prejudices and actions of his protagonist enable Wilkes to investigate in greater detail the survival and preservation of Nyoongar traditions. This will, he believes, give as much hope to his own community in the present as Bulmurn's escape gives to the prisoners on Wadjemup (Rottnest Island) in the novel. As Bulmurn remarks to Weejup, another tribal elder: 'I'm a great believer in our young people learning everything they can about our ways to pass onto their children

so our Law is passed down. Learning makes our people strong...' (14). This is precisely the role adopted by Wilkes as novelist.

In contrast with English law, Nyoongar Law transcends time and place. It is intricately bound up with tribal myths and is the axis about which the novel rotates, deployed by Wilkes as a means of measuring the distance between the wadjbullas and the Nyoongars. For instance, Bulmurn's trial by the Council of Elders is also a trial by the spirits of the Dreamtime, the profound significance of which is reinforced by the fact that he is effectively found not guilty by these spirits, although he is deemed guilty under British law even before his trial. As he undergoes the trial of spears Bulmurn is seen to be a noble warrior opposed by ten of the tribe's other warriors, in a trial which allows the offender to retain honour and dignity. He faces each spear 'coming at him just like a snake, writhing its head from side to side. The barbs of the spear [seem] like the fangs of a snake, sticking out the front, trying to bite into [his] body, trying to put its poison into him to destroy him' (45). Bulmurn, however, survives. So too he survives the 'poison' of the wadjulla trial, which reveals more about colonial law and ignorance than about any of the warrior prisoners dispensed by it to the gaol of Wadjemup. Here is a law based on contempt for both human life and cultural difference, a law which sanctions torture and murder. Of many instances one of the most graphic witnessed by Bulmurn is the hanging of Wandabidar, a warrior, for upholding his Law:

[He] stood calm, tall and dignified. He presented himself to his executioners, a magnificent picture of primitive and uncultured manhood. Each Aborigine recognised his bravery: to them he wasn't primitive nor did he come from an uncultured race. To them he was a very noble and cultured leader. (194)

Significantly, Wandabidar and Bulmurn's eyes meet and Bulmurn responds 'not with sympathy or curiosity but with respect for the man, for what he stood for' (193). Here, as elsewhere in the novel, the contrast between English law and Nyoongar Law, English vision and Nyoongar vision, is a means of mapping and exposing the fundamental assumptions of the dominant discourse, shifting the narrative viewpoint from a Eurocentric one to one which is Nyoongar-centred.

Among his captors and their community Bulmurn is variously 'the Aboriginal witch doctor', 'scum, nothing but a murderous savage' (176), or alternatively 'almost human' (177) when he is dressed in English clothing for the trial. It is perhaps this last tag which provides the greatest insight into Wilkes' representation of race relations. Here the representation of Aboriginal prisoners is based on what Leonard Cassuto calls 'the unique and specific tension of the grotesque', where the grotesque signifies an image which is ambivalent and possesses a 'peculiar disruptive power... that intrudes upon the desired order of the world.' (Cassuto 8). In the eyes of the wadjbullas in the novel, this is precisely what Bulmurn is. In the reader's eyes, however, he is much more than the victim of racial objectification. His captors' treatment of him strengthens the widely held opinion among the Nyoongar elders that 'the white man's law is no law' (Wilkes, Bulmurn 209). Essentially, then, he is doubly disruptive, as Wilkes uses him to redirect

the reader's gaze so that the coloniser rather than Bulmurn is seen to intrude upon the desired order of the world.

The novel traces events arising from Bulmurn's positioning at the junction between Nyoongar Law and British law, as a consequence of which he is regarded by the invaders as neither human nor thing, but somewhere in between. He is both a Law man, ensuring that those who break his Law are punished, as well as an 'almost human' fugitive from wadjabulla justice. At the trial he is decried as a 'nigger, killer, black bastard, murderer' (181), while yet appearing 'a forlorn figure of a man', badly injured and in chains. From the reader's vantage point this ambivalence is heightened, as Bulmurn is also seen to be a tender husband, fearless warrior and respected physician, who appears to have broken his own Law in order to uphold precious personal convictions. Wilkes carefully positions the reader such that his description of Bulmurn's capture, trial and incarceration under wadjabulla law becomes a powerful statement on the nature of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relations both then and now. In other words, Bulmurn's greatest power as a protagonist is his ability to disrupt the order of the settlers' new world by refusing its categories. This power is startlingly well illustrated when one contrasts the trial and courtroom scene to Bulmurn's corroboree with the Dreamtime spirits in the sacred cave. The latter takes place early in the novel, as he prepares to avenge the deaths of his brother-in-law and sister, Binyung and Munyee. Through ritual he achieves solidarity with the spirits, increases his magical powers and more clearly defines his masculine identity. Somewhat similar to the Jesus figure of Christian mythology, in communion with the spirits he prepares and strengthens himself for the coming ordeal.

Bulmurn's 'discovery' of the cave some years earlier while hunting bikuta, the red rock kangaroo, is now seen as an important event in the emerging pattern of his life. Crawling and then walking through the cave, he was on that occasion led by a light into a large chamber, a sanctuary containing 'ancient paintings... drawn by the old ones many, many seasons ago in the Dreamtime... very old and very much of Bulmurn's tradition' (58). In this cave, he discovered the graves of many mobarn men, who had also been led to the sacred site by bikuta. On that occasion he was 'compelled' towards a painted figure which suddenly emitted a beam of light 'blinding him... engulf[ing] him, covering his body' (59). At that moment he realised that he was chosen by the old ones, who were now giving him their special powers, and the scene is set for his lone corroboree later. Bulmurn is determined to give his people 'a new life energy', an aim clearly shared by Wilkes himself in the writing of the novel.

Although it is positioned early in the narrative, Bulmurn's corroboree in the cave is arguably its pivotal point. Subsequently, the author emphasises the significant role of dance and movement in his protagonist's access to and participation in the all-important realm of myth. From the moment he enters the sacred cave after being informed of the murders, Bulmurn is embraced by the Dreamtime spirits and drawn into a state of heightened awareness. Physical and spiritual dimensions merge and he is transfigured. As he paints his body with red, white and yellow ochre, it assumes 'mystical qualities... tak[ing] on longer and longer proportions' and creating 'illusions of several bodies united into the one human frame, Bulmurn' (77). He is in harmony with the Dreamtime

spirits and his environment. So when mar, the wind, 'rush[es] across his body... with the chill of death' and causes the trees to 'quiver and shake' and 'howl', he is not afraid, as he knows that the spirits of his Dreamtime people [have] come to speak with him, to watch and encourage him as he prepare[s] to right the Law and take revenge for his people upon the evil white men...' (77).

The lone corroboree begins slowly, with Bulmurn dancing 'like a brolga bird' and chanting. Gradually, he becomes aware of the rhythm of dancing sticks, the clapping together of boomerangs and a low-pitched singing, although he is physically alone in the cave. It is as if the invisible voice and instruments are 'summoning up an intensity of energy from within his very soul' (78). Suddenly, the rhythm of the narrative increases to match that of Bulmurn's experience. He sees 'the spiritual face' of mar, the wind, and his dancing becomes frenzied, in keeping with the louder, faster music and singing:

Mar the wind screamed around [him] in the dim, flickering fire, creating an effect like a halo which engulfed his shimmering, sweating ebony body, outlining his body painting which grew fluorescent lines of power right through his body... Bulmurn shouted, then he jumped high into the air throwing his arms outwards. His painted body seemed to spread in all directions in the flickering firelight (79-80).

Finally, he collapses into a trance. He is inspired and strengthened by the knowledge that the spirits support his mission, as babbangwin the lightning and mulga the thunder and mar the wind '[deliver] the approval of the Dreamtime spirits for Bulmurn to act, to right the Law for their people...' (80).

We learn that shortly after this event a violent storm occurs; a fitting precursor to the violence wreaked upon the farmer and his workers by Bulmurn, then upon Bulmurn by Clamp and his troopers and other English authorities. A pattern begins to emerge whereby human violence and the violence of nature are seen to be closely related to each other and encompassed by the realm of myth. With the help of the Dreamtime spirits Bulmurn, as a mobarn man, merges with nature, confounding the wadjbullas as he refuses to be categorised yet again. The threat of difference remains, and he appears to the wadjbullas as one of the demonic figures of their literature. Bulmurn shrewdly cultivates this fear.

His corroboree for the Dreamtime spirits, in accordance with Nyoongar Law, may be seen as a response to the plethora of imperial accounts in which Aboriginal dance has been encoded as 'the expression of savage or exotic ♦otherness♦ within a discourse which represents blacks as objects to be looked at, rather than as self-constituting subjects' (Cassuto 17).⁴ To the unsuspecting reader, Bulmurn's corroboree is unnerving. Empowered by the Dreamtime spirits, he is in control and will not be objectified or relegated to the savage or exotic other. We observe him in a moment of transfiguration, which effectively determines not only his own fate but that of a number of wadjbullas and Aboriginal people in the novel. This point deserves some elucidation, which is perhaps best achieved by briefly contrasting Wilkes' representation of the corroboree, Nyoongar myth and Law, with representations of Aboriginal culture by English novelist

and self-proclaimed anthropologist E.L. Grant Watson. Watson's numerous quasi-scientific representations of Aboriginal culture and traditions were influenced by Alfred Radcliffe-Brown and Daisy Bates, with whom he travelled through Aboriginal Australia. They may be regarded as typical of nineteenth and early twentieth century literary and anthropological approaches – the sort that Wilkes is reacting so strongly against in Bulmurn.

In his fiction and non-fiction Watson frequently describes corroborees performed by demonic rather than human dancers. Possibly as a consequence of his fascination, he removes corroborees to 'the realm of the fantastic, the fictional, the infernal' and '[reserves] the notion of *real* dance for the dominant culture by marginalising its variants' (Gilbert 136). The short story, 'Out There' (1913), for example, tells of an Anglo-Australian male, Jefferies, alone in the Kimberley region, who is tempted by the 'bestial... but attractive' Aboriginal women to 'go native.' (Watson 214). Watson reveals his fascination for indigenous Australian myth and Law, but always returns to the comfort of the known in the form of English history and culture. Even when finally Jefferies renounces civilisation, adopting the ways and beliefs of his Aboriginal companions, the narrator suggests paradoxically that it is because he is Western and therefore superior that he is able to do so. This is exemplified by Jefferies' response to a corroboree, as his consciousness remains in control as he sits among 'slender spears', listening to the 'long-drawn nasal chants' (217). He sees the dancers, 'each with tufts of emu feathers on hips and shoulders, their red and white head-dresses swaying to and fro in the glare of the forked flame', as 'spirits of the earth, sprung from it and worked on wires...', placing them in his own system of value in an attempt to control them (217).

These are obviously figures of European literary fantasy in the tradition of Blake, Coleridge and Yeats, indicative of Watson's romantic and imperial nostalgia for the 'primitive' and his unconscious need to objectify the savage or exotic 'other' under his own gaze – the gaze of the coloniser. So, as 'a silent spectator', Jefferies is seized by

... a feeling... that all this [had] happened before... that he [had] lived many lives, and in each life at such supreme moments [had] lost all individual desires and fears and [had] reached towards some supreme God who [lived] in the bush and in the heart of these friendly savages (217).

Like Watson himself in his later autobiographical writing, he thinks this is 'the most real experience' that he has ever had.⁵ Empathising with the 'savages', he believes he understands something of the sacred significance of the 'supreme moment' and of the dancers' God. However, while he acknowledges the moment as a sort of initiation, through which, like the dancers, he is able to assume his mode of being in its entirety, he remains secure in his sense of imperial superiority. As we have already seen, this sort of anglocentric arrogance is vehemently opposed by Wilkes in his treatment of Bulmurn's corroboree.

In 'Out There' it is implicit that, once Jefferies has been admitted as a full tribal member, he has achieved a sort of understanding of the Aborigines or mastery over them. The

mystery of the landscape is redefined such that he ‘understands’ and is empowered by it. The bush is no longer foreign; psychically as well as physically he is at its centre. If we accept Said’s view of Orientalism as a created body of theory and practice, which is ‘never far from... the idea of Europe... [and] of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures’ (Orientalism 7), this story can be seen as the work of an Orientalist, and Watson’s representation of Aboriginal culture can be seen as articulating an attitude of racial superiority. As an Englishman, he believed that he was capable of identifying with all aspects of Aboriginal culture. Wilkes, however, challenges this belief, which was widely held at the time his novel is set. His concern with land and its cultural significance is not, then, surprising, as he attempts to refute the notion of history which ‘reduces space to a stage [and] that pays attention to events unfolding in time alone.’ (Carter 11). As seen from Bulmurn’s corroboree in the sacred cave, as well as his shape-changing in the final stages of his pursuit by the trackers and troopers, he has an intimate relationship with (and knowledge of) his environment. He is, after all, both legend and man, empowered by the sacred secrets of ‘the old ones’ and the Dreamtime spirits, secrets incomprehensible to individuals raised outside the circle of such knowledge.

Richard Wilkes’ *Bulmurn* is an important attempt by a Nyoongar elder to regain the right to represent Nyoongar traditions and culture. It is an attempt to bring to the written word a powerful oral tradition of songs, stories and dance, making them more accessible for contemporary Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal readers alike. The protagonist, Bulmurn, hungers after a cultural purity that those around him realise is vanishing, slowly disintegrating under the weight of English discourses of history and superiority exemplified by the writing of E.L. Grant Watson. *Bulmurn* is the means by which Wilkes forcefully exposes colonialist ignorance and an imperial vision of history, contrasting them with the esoteric timelessness of his ancestors’ existence. In the novel he exists at the point of intersection between Western discourses and the omnipresent Nyoongar myths and Law. Although the writer runs the risk of stereotyping his wadjbullu characters and idealising pre-colonial Nyoongar life, he attempts to address such problems as racial objectification and the ramifications of the growing number of ‘half-caste’ children, and intertwines contemporary concerns with the old ways and knowledges. Consequently, Nyoongar society and culture is seen to be strengthened, and Wilkes arouses in his readership a sense of hope and confidence, as well as an awareness of the continuing significance of Indigenous traditions, myths and Law. Walter Eatts, another Nyoongar elder, also imagines a productive future issuing from the turmoil of the past and the present:

Then the wind in the trees can peacefully subside,
and become quiet and calm across the sky.
When the wind finally drops to a gentle
breeze, we know that our ancestors are at peace
with the land, and the safety of our children
is won. (85)

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Notes

- 1 The colonisers' names are the Darling Ranges, Fremantle and Rottnest Island respectively.
- 2 'Dreamtime' is Wilkes' preferred terminology. It should be noted, however, that 'Dreaming' is now more commonly used, as this suggests an on-going significance and relevance.
- 3 Another striking example of this is found in Doris Nugi Garimara's *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*.
- 4 Cassuto distinguishes what he calls the 'mutation' of the other from Homi Bhabha's concept of 'hybridity'. Unlike Bhabha, he argues that the objectified human being is neither human nor thing. In other words, 'it' is inbetween.
- 5 Elsewhere in his work Watson described his own experience of a corroboree in the same terms that he used to evoke Jefferies' experience in 'Out There' and that of several other protagonists in later novels.

Dr Angeline O'Neill has published in the areas of Australian literature, Indigenous literature and Comparative literature and has co-edited an anthology of Australian Aboriginal writing, *Those Who Remain Will Always Remember*. She teaches courses in Comparative Indigenous Literature, Australian Literature and World Literatures at The University of Notre Dame, Australia.