

MARK GALLIFORD

voicing a (virtual)
**postcolonial
ethnography**

FRANK GURRMANAMANA, LES HIATT AND
KIM MCKENZIE WITH BETTY NGURRABAN-
GURRABA, BETTY MEEHAN AND RHYS JONES

*People of the Rivermouth: The Joborr Texts of
Frank Gurrmanamana*

National Museum of Australia and
Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 2002

ISBN 1-876944-08-0

RRP \$135.00 (pb with CD-ROM)

The concept of postcolonialism, and an Australian postcolonial literature specifically, is fraught with problems. The least of these is the reality of this country not yet being fully free from its British colonial inheritance, let alone from ongoing internal colonialism. Even so, postcolonialism is still a useful term to define a body of (particularly Indigenous) literature produced over the last thirty years. Keeping the irony in mind, Australia's virtual postcolonial literature has been gaining increasing prominence, providing fertile ground for the political promise that one day may be realised as a state of actual Australian postcoloniality of sorts. In the meantime, the postcolonial movement desired and reinforced by the literature continues to gather momentum. *People of the Rivermouth*, a recent addition to the Australian anthropological corpus, initiates what looks like a promising future for postcolonial ethnographies; yet it too has some problems. While the book claims that it is 'arguably the most comprehensive work ever produced on a single Australian Aboriginal group', in effect presenting itself as an ethnography of the highest order, the main component of the work—the Joborr texts—are, I believe, somewhat more aligned to what Eric Michaels once described as 'para-ethnography':¹ a story that transcends itself into a kind of incidental ethnography.

At first glance, *People of the Rivermouth* is a beautifully presented book. The cover aerial shot of the meandering Blyth River in northern Arnhem Land, home to the Anbarra of whom Frank Gurrmanamana is still a respected elder, merging into a photo of a wet-season camp

immediately grabs the reader's attention. The (very small) advertisement of a CD-ROM inside and the broad-sweeping claim of comprehensiveness on the back cover further garners interest in what promises to be a 'must have' for academics, students, armchair anthropologists and others interested in all things cultural. Not only this, the professional credentials of the people involved in this project almost guarantee the book's importance. And then you notice the price! At this point, many of us (especially students) simply replace the book on the shelf and walk away disappointed. One could argue that the price is justified by the significance of the material, but the cost—necessitated, in part, by the high-quality production values—is a major drawback and could have been managed differently. Despite the book's many attractions, which include the presentation of interesting and valuable ethnographic knowledge, this is not the only disappointment.

The book itself consists of the transcripts of the Joborr texts as told by Frank Gurrmanamana and recorded by Les Hiatt in Maningrida in 1960. 'Joborr' encompasses the traditional codes and etiquette of moral behaviour expected of an Anbarra, and Gurrmanamana explains this using hypothetical examples of the everyday dramas and personal interactions that an Anbarra man, in particular, would encounter. Sections of the book follow the general life cycle: from birth to boyhood, initiation, marriage and other relationships, men's business and death. Each section contains a relational diagram of the actors involved, a brief synopsis of the event, notes that at times superfluously further explain the event, followed by

the texts in Gidjingarli with their standard English translation. Along these lines, then, the book attempts to follow the path laid down by the classic ethnographies that isolate and dissect each 'section' of cultural behaviours and mores. The CD-ROM component provides much greater detail on the ethnographic, anthropological, historical and regional aspects of the Anbarra in general, and includes the complete transcripts found inside the book. It also contains information on many related anthropological topics and one can spend considerable time pursuing links to specific areas of interest.

The defining moment for the beginnings of an Indigenous postcolonial literature was the emergence of an Aboriginal 'voice'. Here the CD-ROM of *People of the Rivermouth* opens up innovative and vital ground for ethnographies, allowing for the continuing importance of Aboriginal voices to now be actually heard. Leaving aside the works of David Unaipon, this 'voice' became present in some personalised form in early anthropological literature such as W. Lloyd Warner's *A Black Civilisation*.² In this instance, Warner's friend and informant, Mahkarolla, was given the respect and equality due to him as an individual and not merely as some detached object of study, and one can sense the presence of Mahkarolla throughout the book as Warner's cultural guide. The structuralist emphasis on the importance of language began in the 1970s and 1980s to replace the authoritative functionalist approach that fundamentally posited a differentiation between anthropological experts and 'their' others. Works such as *This Is What Happened* introduced Aboriginal

narratives in their original language, literally translated along with their expressive readings.³ Other works presented only the English rendition of stories, as they were essentially being retold to a mainly non-Aboriginal English-speaking audience.⁴ Bill McGregor, in his co-authored book with Jack Bohemia, explains that the problem of using Aboriginal stories unabridged in language, together with their translations, is simply one of economy. Speaking on this collaborative work, McGregor notes, 'For one thing, it would have been a large book, amounting to well over 500 pages. A work such as this would run the risk of being marginalized as exotic, and its cost would be prohibitive.'⁵

People of the Rivermouth, with its translations of Gidjingarli into English replicated in both book and CD-ROM, suffers in this regard. One major concern relates to the book's structuralist approach, which tends to place language in a synchronic moment of 'traditional' cultural purity, much the same as functionalism did for explaining cultural life-ways as enclosed systems. The book thus starts to feel like something of a relic, a static cultural artefact underwritten by an ethos of ethnological 'purity' or authenticity. This basically reinstates an otherising process instead of exploring its active and dynamic collaboration both in the work's production and in the wider cultural influences that were, and had been, impacting on the Anbarra for some time. While the forewords to the book eagerly describe the project as a collaboration, and the introduction by Kim McKenzie sheds light on its production and on certain intercultural influences the Anbarra experienced,

there is only one moment within the texts themselves in which Frank Gurrmanamana acknowledges interactions that were no doubt having some effect:

Genggarda to Ngaypa:
Yinda barra n-boy?
Where are you going?

Ngaypa to Genggarda:
Yi-gaba barra nu-boy. Balanda a-jawaja-nga apula.

I'm going over that way. The white man is ready for me to go with him. (95)

This criticism concerning the visibility of the work's collaborative aspects is an important one in understanding how the text is trying to position itself, given the forty-year lapse between the collection of data and its publication. It was not until the emergence of the so-called post-structural approach about twenty years ago that the Aboriginal 'voice' found more positive acknowledgment and representation. Transcripts such as those initiated by Stephen Muecke (his transcription of Paddy Roe's Aboriginal English in particular) brought to life the anthropological tradition of language translations.⁶ By offering all the extra-linguistic signs within the text, such as pauses, laughter, mistakes of comprehension, specific uses of language, lengthening of words and inclusion of the translator's own vulnerable voice, the reader receives not only a more faithful copy of what was spoken to an English-speaking collaborator (and subsequent audience) and how, but more important both the Aboriginal and academic orators are provided with a more honest

intercultural context. These self-reflexive collaborations help the reader to be aware of the open and mutually inclusive cultural processes that were going on at the time, and avoid the exclusivity of presenting a 'real' and 'pure' detached culture.

Concerning *People of the Rivermouth*, it is problematic how this set of texts, recorded in 1960 in the days of almost unquestioned anthropological method and authority, is now presented within postmodern theoretical understandings of reflexivity. What happens in this case, strangely enough, is the almost complete erasure of the anthropologist. Les Hiatt was there in the tent taking down Frank Gurrmanamana's information, but he is nowhere in the book (although we do see his face and hear his voice in the CD-ROM's introduction). In attempting to update the work, the collaborators seem to have privileged reflexivity to the point of their own invisibility, somewhat missing the point. While the transcripts of Frank Gurrmanamana's voice rightly own the space in the book—a measure of the book's postcolonial status—the book itself remains essentially a museum piece of 'otherness' because of this self-erasure. Perhaps some would see this as the intrinsic value of the book, being a record of previously traditional cultural life-ways; however it does feel like a return to the more orthodox and objectifying ethnography. *People of the Rivermouth* definitely (or defiantly?) sets itself up as an authoritative and exhaustive ethnographic study, but in doing so gives itself an unfortunate air of academic elitism.

Another issue should also be raised here: can the Joborr texts be regarded as providing an

extensive ethnography? Certainly the texts provide significant insights into the operations and priorities of a culture as detailed by one individual within that culture, in a sense delivering a kind of 'auto-ethnography'. Of some interest is how these texts would differ if described from a woman's perspective, for instance. But not only this, in terms of the traditional notion of emic-etic ethnography—of cultures studied from the 'outside within'—can the subject themselves be objective enough for a truly comprehensive coverage of their own culture? What are the omissions in such a case? How may one's own preoccupations colour the final descriptions? Of course, these types of questions have also been applied to the more academically orthodox ethnographies that once propounded the highly desired modernist value of an unbiased objectivity.⁷ If, however, we now accept the postmodern 'tenet' of reflexivity in considering the impossibility of a comprehensively objective study in the first instance, then at least we can enjoy the book for what it is, and not for what it claims to be: that is, a fascinating collection of one individual's hypothetically described cultural behaviours, rather than 'the most comprehensive work ever produced on a single Australian Aboriginal group'.

While these criticisms apply to the work in general, I would not want them to override the overall value of this project. The level of intimate detail that Frank Gurrmanamana divulges captivates the reader (I won't bother here with arguments of cultural voyeurism), and the ethnographic possibilities inherent in the CD-ROM format provide immense interest. This

format is the overall work's primary strength as it allows the viewer to enjoy certain visual and aural aspects of Anbarra culture, with immediate links to related materials on the disk, including film footage, photographs and ample referencing. This is not to say that the book is superfluous or unimportant but simply that the CD-ROM outshines the written texts, which remain fossilised on the page. I believe the Joborr texts have been much more successfully incorporated onto the CD-ROM; here the user has the opportunity to hear the language spoken and can access a glossary giving any Gidjingarli word its immediate meaning with a click of the mouse. Instead of the unnecessary and expensive replication in print form, the book may have been more useful as a handbook or guide to the CD-ROM and the project in general, thereby revealing a little more of the anthropologists involved and allowing for a much greater reduction in price. As it is, the overall work appears too divided: at once celebrating the intertextual immediacy and connective potentials of new media, while, almost stubbornly, delivering an ethnographic parchment that privileges the texts into a kind of archaic sacredness. In fact, the differences between the actual book and the CD-ROM seem to unintentionally represent the tension that exists between the exclusive (otherising) colonialist method of the traditional ethnography and the more inclusive postcolonial approach: in short, the frustrating 'divide' between the modern and the postmodern that many students struggle with.⁸

The recording and transcription of Aboriginal languages has been an extremely important

activity since colonisation began and one that has since helped some Indigenous people to revitalise their cultural knowledges and lifestyles. Yet, for all the value of this recording, the information often remains basically academic and of little interest to the wider public. At such a price, *People of the Rivermouth* will undoubtedly find its way onto the library shelves of museums and universities, but in doing so short-changes the high quality and wide-ranging value and interest of its CD-ROM, which will fail to attract the broad readership it deserves.

The CD-ROM serves not only as an extremely interesting and interactive means through which to enjoy information on Aboriginal cultures but is also an exciting sign of things to come with future ethnographies. If Joborr is somewhat sadly waning in communities, as Betty Ngurrabangurraba points out, (xviii) one can well imagine Anbarra kids playing around with a CD-ROM and picking up Joborr with a lot more enthusiasm than otherwise diligently sitting still and reading the book. This format would be an invaluable asset for higher levels of learning and for local community and school libraries. Given wide access, the words of Frank Gurrmanamana would then perhaps achieve what they set out to do—to teach others about the Anbarra's perspectives on life.

MARK GALLIFORD works occasionally for the Unaiapon School, University of South Australia. He is applying for a doctorate placement to further his research into the notion of cultural

becomings, especially in relation to Indigenous tourism and its (potentially postcolonial) effects.
<mgalliford@hotmail.com>

-
1. Eric Michaels, 'Para-ethnography' in *Bad Aboriginal Art: Tradition, Media, and Technological Horizons*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1994, pp. 165–175.
 2. W. Lloyd Warner, *A Black Civilisation: A Study of an Australian Tribe*, Harper Torchbooks, New York, 1958 [1937].
 3. Luise Hercus and Peter Sutton (eds), *This is What Happened: Historical Narratives by Aborigines*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, 1986.
 4. For example, see the works of Bruce Shaw.
 5. Jack Bohemia and Bill McGregor, *Nyibayarri: Kimberley Tracker*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1995.
 6. See, for example, Krim Benterrak, Stephen Muecke and Paddy Roe, *Reading the Country: Introduction to Nomadology*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, South Fremantle, 1996 [1984].
 7. For an useful overview of these issues, see Eric Michaels, 'If "All Anthropologists are Liars ..."', (Review of Fred Myers's *Pintupi Country, Pintupi Self*), in *Bad Aboriginal Art: Tradition, Media, and Technological Horizons*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1994, pp. 127–140.
 8. Or, perhaps for this very reason, the work stands as an interesting moment in such an epistemological shift.