'The Millennial Generation Reading the Past through Literature'

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Introduction

Kate:

Thanks everyone for joining us on this wintery Saturday afternoon and welcome to the session. We would like to begin by acknowledging the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation as traditional custodians of the land on which we gather today and pay our respects to their elders, past, present and future.

We would also like to acknowledge all those Queenslanders who lived through the Joh Bjelke-Petersen era, an era of incredible suppression and police control, especially for Aboriginal people. In our discussion today, we attempt to understand this era as an historical moment without the lived experience of those who were there.

What draws us together for this session is Philip Morrissey, who most of you will know from previous *Past Matters*. In one way or another we are all Philip's students, and through his teaching we have been introduced to a way of reading our past, present and future through writing. Philip has exposed us to diverse texts which have enabled us to confront, question and consider the complexities of Settler/Aboriginal relations in the past, present and future, enriching our knowledge of history, place and identity.

As students of literature we obviously have a real belief in literature and its potential to challenge and to expose. Being introduced to Aboriginal writing in particular through Philip's courses has been a revelation, I think, for many of us on this panel. We really see a value in studying these novels and grappling with the insights, challenges and truths they present. Today in this session we want to offer some new readings and reflections on Sam Watson's text, *The Kadaitcha Sung* – in doing so we hope to reinvigorate interest in the novel, which is currently out of print. But we also aim to use the novel to reconsider the context of Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen's government and the 'police state' that was Queensland between 1968-1987.

Philip set us this task when he came to us and said: 'This is a novel that needs to be read and spoken about at the Past Matters Festival, and you are the people to do that.' It was an interesting challenge for a group of young people with very little knowledge of the text, the era and Queensland more generally.

And so we were given a novel, some poetry and a few contextual references and told to go forth and read. The background material included the Queensland centenary publication *Triumph in the Tropics*, the *Couldn't Be Fairer* documentary by Mick Miller and Dennis O'Rourke and the Four Corners exposé *Moonlight State*.¹ And over some very enjoyable sessions with wine, Tim Tams and peppermint tea, we

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¹ Triumph in the Tropics: An Historical Sketch of Queensland, compiled and edited by Raphael Cilento and Clem Lack for the Historical Committee of the Centenary Celebrations Council of Queensland (Brisbane: Smith and Paterson, 1959); Couldn't Be Fairer, documentary directed by Dennis O'Rourke, written my Mick Miller, 1984; The Moonlight State, ABC documentary reported by Chris Masters, produced by Peter Manning, broadcast 11 May 1987.

explored and debated this novel, and today we would like to share some of our reflections.

Lionel Fogarty, 'Condemn King Peanut Picking Joh'.

Kate: To set the scene, we will read Lionel Fogarty's poem, 'Condemn King

Peanut Picking Joh'. Fogarty is an Aboriginal poet, born on Wakka

Wakka land in Cherbourg, whose radical poetics and perspective as a

Murri activist are significant within a consideration of the political

context of The Kadaitcha Sung.

Kate: We chose that poem obviously for its anger, its energy, its pace, its tone

- because as five young Victorians, we'd struggled to come to terms with

Queensland under Premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen, particularly the

oppression, subjugation and suppression of Aboriginal people. When we

came across Lionel Fogarty's poem we thought, well, that's captured the

energy and the anger that we need to understand in relation to the novel.

And so we want to start by talking about that poem, about anger and

resistance and using poetry in that way. I just want to ask each of the

panellists here to talk to your responses to that poem.

James: I certainly found this to be a challenging poem, both in terms of form and

content. Even in the context of Australian poetry, Fogarty's style here

stands apart.

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Jon:

I think it's challenging because most of us have studied poetry as part of our honour's year, and we've studied the classics and a lot of Australian poetry, and we are very used to looking for, you know, certain kinds of rhyme schemes, cadences, stanzas of a certain length. And this poem doesn't really subscribe to any of those conventions. So initially that was challenging, but also I think we have less experience reading poetry that is so charged and inflamed: the way the language is structured by just such a strong emotion as anger. So for me reading the poem was like being hit over the head by a sledgehammer and coming to grips with pain and anger that I have certainly never experienced in my life.

John:

It reminds me Allen Ginsburg's poem *Howl* and the section with Moloch. It's the same kind of incarnation of a repressive system in one body – Joh Bjelke-Petersen in this case.

Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen, Premier of Queensland, 1968-1987

Kate:

Can I ask what we actually knew of Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen prior to this session?

Finn:

I only encountered Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen somewhat peripherally in my studies at high school. I was aware of him but I didn't quite understand the extent of the pain and violence that his party brought to Queensland. I think this poem is successful in depicting Bjelke-Petersen not just as a person capable of inflicting pain, but also as a personification of the anger of that time which definitely comes through very strongly in *The*

Kadaitcha Sung. There's not really a reference to Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen in this book, but he's definitely there.

James:

I knew the name and that was about it.

Jon:

I knew the name and I knew that there was a long period in Queensland that was painful and literally a police state. But I wasn't aware of the ins and outs and how much he actually instigated that system. That's about all.

John:

Shamefully, I had never heard the name. My Dad used to say that Queensland is a bit funny, meant lovingly of course. It was an area of ignorance for me.

Kate:

It's the same for me – ignorance is the appropriate term, I knew nothing of the Bjelke-Petersen government. Which seems astounding now considering the length of his term in office and the devastating impacts of his power. To be honest I knew very little of Queensland more generally, it always seemed to sit just outside the limits of my consciousness.

John:

Looking back it was so surreal, it was like this bizarre dystopian period in Australian history which I had never heard of. I'm not sure why I hadn't heard of it, why I never showed enough curiosity about Queensland's history.

Sam Watson and The Kadaitcha Sung

Kate:

So from the energy and fire of Fogarty's poem we will turn to *The Kadaitcha Sung*, and we'll start with a brief biography of Sam Watson and a summary of the novel.

John:

Sam Watson was born in Brisbane in 1952. His grandfather was one of the first Aboriginals to free himself from the Aboriginal Protection Act of the time. Throughout the 70's Watson was a leading figure in the Queensland movement for Aboriginal liberation and empowerment. He also worked for such vital programs as the Brisbane Aboriginal Legal Service, and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit of the University of Queensland. Between 2004 and 2010 he ran as a candidate for the Socialist Alliance in Federal and State elections. He wrote *The Kadaitcha Sung* over a period of four days in 1990; it is his only book and sadly it is out of print.

The Kadaitcha Sung begins in myth with God creating the world. One God, Biamee, makes his camp in Australia, the south land. At the request of the tribes, Biamee conceals Australia from the rest of the world through a veil of mists and calls for a clan of sorcerers, the Kadaitcha, to guard Australia after his ascension to heaven. The chief of the Kadaitcha, Kobbina, has two sons, Koobara and Booka; a dispute over succession causes Booka to kill his father, and to prevent Biamee from returning to the world he steals a sacred stone from his shrine in Uluru. In the resulting war between Koobara and Booka the mist

concealing Australia gets blown away, leading to European invasion and settlement and the massacre of the tribes. Koobara manages to imprison his brother within the limits of Brisbane but is then killed in a trap set by Booka.

The novel then shifts to the present day as the protagonist, Tommy Gubba, the son of Koobara and a white woman, is inducted as a Kadaitcha. He is told that with the assistance of the kookaburra spirit, Ningi, and an imp, Jonjurrie, he must kill Booka and restore the sacred stone which will allow Biamee to return to the land. He travels to Brisbane, remaining hidden from Booka who has assumed the identity of a white man, Booka Roth, and established himself in command of the Native Mounted Police. Tommy travels around Brisbane taking revenge on Booka's servants and seducing a young Aboriginal woman, Jelda. Finally he defeats Booka and reclaims Biamee's sacred stone, but before restoring it to Uluru he forces Biamee to lift a curse on Jelda's tribe. In punishment for his arrogance, Biamee arranges for Tommy to be tried by a white court and hanged for the murder of a policeman. The novel concludes with the revelation that Jelda is pregnant.

I hope that made sense – as you can tell it's a fantastical novel. What my summary didn't convey is Watson's fine sense of the everyday. Much of the book is taken up with drinking, conversation and conflicts with police: it is through these details that Watson creates a real sense of Aboriginal experience in Brisbane in the 70's and 80's.

Finn:

The pace of John's description really fits reading this book because you *are* just running on this journey with these spirit figures and with Tommy and with Booka.

John:

It kind of reads like a comic book, you know, it is just one fight after another!

A Novel of Excess

Kate:

Within the novel you are constantly moving from one space to another and it is incredibly violent and incredibly explicit. And yet you move so quickly through those moments that you have very little time to actually have a sense of the trauma or the experience of those moments.

James:

Yes, certainly in my own reading experiences I'd never come across anything like *The Kadaitcha Sung*. So when I started trying to decipher what Philip thought of it, because he was teaching me at the time – well, I'd been reading Kim Scott, I'd been reading Tony Birch, so I wasn't really prepared for this sort of prose. From the introductory passage, the italicised section that narrates colonisation in terms of Aboriginal mythology, I was expecting a very grand scale, huge, fantastical novel. And then we see reality – drinking, fighting, conversation – collide with this magical realm; it was a little bit – I don't want to categorise it as this – magic realist. So I'd never read a work like this in the Australian or even in the Indigenous canon. And I think the big thing for me from reading this was that it actually normalised Indigenous spirituality and

obscured some of the western logics that were applied by the Queensland government. And it really emphasised the absurdity of the situation and the energy at the time and the hatred and the violence that was felt. But that didn't occur to me until I'd done the extra readings. So it is my second time through the novel when I read it this week, and I really felt it much more.

Jon:

I would certainly say that it's quite a challenging read in a number of ways. Kate mentioned the fact that some of the scenes are quite explicit, and to read any novel with content like this initially can be very shocking. She's also correct in saying that it's completely original, I'd never seen that content or that kind of imagery presented in that way. Because the narrative can be a little bit confusing I would call it picaresque in the sense that it follows one central character for essentially the whole novel as he undergoes a series of adventures. My initial problem with reading the novel was that the more surprising and upsetting parts of the book fly by so quickly that you almost don't have time to register them, and on first reading there can almost seem to be an absence of empathy, or an absence of contemplation of some of the terrible things that take place. So I would say that the first reading was challenging!

James:

Can I ask the things that you might want to elaborate on, the things that upset you or that you found confronting in the novel?

Jon:

Without being too explicit, there were some very violent scenes of rape.

Finn:

I think what I found particularly challenging when I first read it is that it begins with a quest that is put to Tommy, the protagonist. So you expect him to reach some kind of tangible outcome, but what happens is completely outside that goal. There's a lot of drinking, there's a lot of procrastination and there's a lot of getting sidetracked. It was hard to reconcile the book's self-positioning as a quest with what occurs throughout and with its ending. Which, not to give anything away, is very sudden and perhaps not entirely fulfilling.

John:

I read it overseas and I was looking forward to it. I had read the blurb before and it sounds like an awesome idea, these two Aboriginal warlords going to war and that's the reason for colonisation. I thought it was a fascinating concept, I was gripped by it, it was a real pageturner for me. But I was also quite surprised by what the book contained. Obviously there was the very violent, explicit scene which Jon mentioned, but the whole book was informed by powerful hatred for the society and the system, and it can be quite exhausting in a constrained period of time reading a diatribe against this particular society. I don't mean it as a criticism at all, because I think it was a genuine reaction to what Sam Watson experienced, but it is a very angry book in many ways, very militant.

Kate:

On my first reading, there was just this immediate sense of excess, it's an incredibly fast-paced novel. And for me as a non-Indigenous reader it was an absolutely destabilising novel, which I'm going to claim is one of its strongest assets. There is no easy position in this narrative, no position from which you can claim moral superiority. You enter chaos and there is no hero, there is no goodness, there is no kind of purity. Everyone is complicit in this novel. Even the Gods are unpredictable and the quest outlined in the beginning shifts and becomes unpredictable too.

Jon:

For a novel which seems to have a very strong distinction between good and evil, it turns out very amoral and nihilistic, I felt. A lot of people are violent to each other for different reasons, mostly personal, and then it just kind of reaches its end, violently.

Kate:

Yes, so I had to start reading the novel and then stop and then go hang on, this isn't what I expected. How do I ground myself? Position myself? It was both challenging and freeing. Let's hear the first four pages of the novel to give a sense of the overarching myth with which it begins.

(pages 1-4 were then read by the panel)

James:

I thought there were some really fascinating Biblical parallels with Australia referred to as Biamee's garden. In the Bible evil was expelled from the Garden of Eden but the Garden remains. It is admitted at the end of this book that colonisation can't be undone, so in *The Kadaitcha*

Sung evil came into the garden but is there forever. It's an interesting comparison. I think also in both cases you have a natural sympathy for the rebel. In this case, Booka is a more interesting and charismatic character than Tommy or his brother, who is not even in a character at all. You kind of want Booka to win even though you know he is the bad guy; because of his kind of individualism you have to admire him as well.

Jon:

I certainly think that Kate's point about it being unstable and destabilising was one of the first things that I felt. And the way that those first few chapters positioned this character Booka, this evil character, as being the cause of white settlement – I actually felt that was really problematic and I am curious to hear what you all thought about it. The difficulty there to my mind, as a white reader, is that if you read it that way, the narrative removes the responsibility of white settlers for their own actions. That was my first reaction.

Unsettling the Idea of Good and Evil

Finn:

I had a similar response in that I was like, yeah, wow, this is doing something I've never actually read before. Initially I wondered what does it mean for an Aboriginal political novel, a resistance novel, to be writing *that* into its first few pages. But then as you get further into the novel and further into Booka and further into the complexities of this story, I began to see it as quite an empowering move by the writer. It is an incredibly powerful way of unsettling the common understandings or

readings of colonisation, and even unsettling the idea of good and evil and the binaries of white and black as well.

Kate:

I do think yes, it does upset these binaries and dichotomies that we think of in relation to the Settler/Aboriginal position. The opening is very problematic and I think you have an expectation that some tangible outcome will ultimately be achieved. And it's not. But I am interested in the fact, and I'm not sure whether you guys think it is a failure or a virtue of this text, that Watson makes these very political kind of statements which are then either instantly compromised or not sustained. And I wonder whether this is a result of the book being written so quickly in four days; or whether these narrative inconsistencies are intentional as a means to reinforce the instability of this particular political time. Because certainly one of the things that frustrated me - not that I wanted Booka to ever dictate to me or to tell me what to think - was that I couldn't grasp on to any kind of really consistent meaning in this book.

James:

Actually I would agree with that. One of my major problems with the text was that I wasn't able to find anchor in any kind of moral ground. But I think by the time you get to the end of the novel it's obvious that it's destabilising and therefore the nature of the narrative is going to be fluid and aggressive and challenging. And I do agree that the way it is written reflects the fact that it was done in four days. We read an interview with Sam Watson from 1995, five years after the novel was published, and he said that his purpose was to put the novel into white

people's living rooms and point the finger and say this is how violent things are and this is who is responsible.² I also think there are some really lucid clear moments – and you want them to last longer and they don't last long enough. But then again, at least they are there.

Finn:

I like the point that you made there about the moral centring – you could almost watch us trying to find out the centre ...

James:

... naively moving around the book?

Kate:

I don't think it *is* naive though, I think that when you pick up a book you do have certain expectations as a reader. You expect that it's a considered treatise, I mean it's somebody's significant labour, you don't just write a book and get it published. So I suppose you are trying to reach your own individual reading while keeping in mind the author's intention as well. You never completely push the author aside. I don't think it is naïve to feel thrown around by Sam Watson, to feel unsettled by the narrative.

John:

As much as I agree with you that the opening passage destabilises the way we might think a novel would normally start, or the way that these mythologies are normally inscribed in text, I think that for me the beginning chapter and the end of the book have a certainty and a unifying position. There is a vision of good and there is a vision of evil

² Elizabeth Dean, 'An Interview with Sam Watson, June 1995', http://walleahpress.com.au/int-watson.html

and never the twain shall meet. And I think the whole rest of the book is a critique of that. In the rest of the book those ideas are completely confounded and, you know, the very next page almost, that kind of mythology is brought to bear on real contemporary Queensland in the 70's and 80's. And there is tension in the way they interact with each other.

James:

I think it is interesting how the authorial mode changes between that opening section and the rest of the book. That opening section is carefully putting on this epic style and the rest of it is very urgent: sentences run into each other, there is a lot of profanity, people order drinks and then one sentence later they order more drinks after speaking just one word to each other.

Energy and Lethargy

Finn:

The book is written in four days but it actually takes place in four days as well and no one sleeps and no one eats. There is a lot of drinking and a lot of sex, there is a lot of violence and no-one actually gets any rest.

James:

But then there's also so much procrastination, it's like this conflation of manic energy and lethargy. They are kind of sitting around drinking, talking about the same things, just trying to pickup one another, it's bizarre in that way. I think it's expressing a mood where perhaps the author had a lot of energy and urgent desire to do something but then little idea about how to go about doing it. Because Tommy is always

being told to wait, wait for the right sign, wait until Booka makes his mistake.

Jon:

I mean, to give a good illustration of how polarising the novel's prose is, we have made various comparisons between the introduction and the Bible or *Lord of the Rings*, these big fantasies, and then there are these passages of laconic conversation and drinking – there was a little bit of *Wake in Fright* or something like that. Those two streams collide and it is very hard to reconcile that.

Kate:

Another thing I found destabilising was the relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous characters in the book. I knew that Sam Watson was a political activist in Brisbane at that time, and thought that he would have a political imperative to write Aboriginal resistance, Aboriginal solidarity and perhaps even Aboriginal revolution. Yet there is no real sense of this in the novel — instead all the characters are capable of perpetuating violence, and even victims of violence become perpetrators of violence. And so I would like the panel to reflect on the impact of that for your reading, and also in the context of Indigenous studies.

Finn:

I suppose there's a point of comparison with the Fogarty poem that we read before. There's not much of a sense of optimism, but there *is* a direction in that poetry, perhaps an excitement or some kind of mobilising force. Whereas Watson's book is definitely an indictment of a system but it's certainly not mobilising. Though perhaps you could

argue that such explicit condemnation of that era could be mobilising, I don't know.

John:

I don't want to distil the thesis of the novel to one or two ideas, but there are several passages that you could isolate which make a really powerful case against the status quo in Queensland at that time. There are several passages of articulate and beautifully torrential rage that are similar to the Fogarty poem, but worded differently. And those are the parts of the novel that I reacted most strongly to because that's where I could really feel Sam Watson the activist speaking through the book and trying to move people's hearts and get them off the couch.

Finn:

That's true, but it's always countered almost instantly with something that completely compromises it. You can get so invested in it and then something will happen that just completely wipes that off the board. So I don't know whether you are supposed to hold on to those moments of lucidity or take them as a general critique of having a sustained position on something.

An Aboriginal Politics?

James:

I think it is intriguing that Tommy often expresses his wish to drive every white person in Australia into the sea. Only at one point in the novel does he stop to reflect that his own mother is white, which puts him in a very ambiguous position. And I think that confusion is a deliberate thing. I think Sam Watson is trying to wonder what should be

the objectives of this kind of Aboriginal movement. Is it really meant to try and undo colonisation? Or is it meant to achieve power within certain Settler structures or create new structures? It is very uncertain, and I think he was giving voice to that uncertainty when he wrote the book. Which is why it doesn't really provide any kind of specific program or any kind of rhetorical purpose.

In the following scene, the character Booka dramatises the role and position of those Aboriginals who rise in the hierarchy of white society.

Pages 231-234 were read

James:

It's important to establish that Booka still regards himself as black and he states at one point that he hates being in a position where he has to look up at any white man. But at the same time he presents himself as white, literally, so he is an Aboriginal who can camouflage the fact of his Aboriginality and I think it is hard not to read this as a commentary by Watson on those Aboriginals who did deny or turn against their parentage in order to advance in white society, or to protect themselves. But then at the same time, if you read the scene literally, it is an Aboriginal tricking and forcing his way into parliament.

John:

He's the sort of character who despised where he comes from despite his family or local region, he puts himself before anything else. And that was the most complex area for me because Booka was probably the most

sophisticated character and you get a little bit of an idea about the inner workings of his mind. I am still going through the process of trying to figure out who Booka Roth is, and interestingly enough, I've discovered that there was a Chief Protector of Aborigines in Queensland named Walter Roth – so Watson is taking history there and incorporating it into his novel.

James:

Yes, I think it's telling that Watson made the arch villain of his novel an Aboriginal rather than a white person, since this is a novel about race and colonisation. Perhaps he is trying to blur the lines between black and white; I think the complexity he is suggesting here is that from the moment of colonisation there was an element of Aboriginal complicity in what occurred. And if Aboriginal people continue to be oppressed, if that's still a fact, then there has to be a degree of complicity still. And I think that's a difficult thing to say, but yes, I think he drew it quite explicitly.

Kate:

Yes, a difficult thing to say and a difficult thing to read and come to terms with as young people trying to read the past, as the task was set for us. I'm now going to move to the concluding extract – and I just want to ask the panellists to reflect on whether they found it a fulfilling conclusion or not. So this extract depicts Tommy, who is really meant to be the hero of the book and yet we've all decided that none of us liked him very much and he wasn't much of a hero in our eyes. So he's gone back to Fingal, to the mission and to the reserve where his family, his

mob, is living. He has gone back to gain strength and he is reflecting on the children who live in this mission.

pages 261-262 were read

Kate:

I think this is an exemplary passage. The novel poses very complex questions for Australia, really, and for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. But it then moves on very quickly, back to the quest and the fantasy, because in many ways the questions posed are ones that Sam Watson, I believe, feels unable to answer at this moment. And perhaps it is the chaos of the novel that allows us, as readers, to register the intensity of the violence, the layers of complicity and the webs of corruption. Entering the chaos of the novel we are confounded and confronted by it all and faced with the realisation that it is actually going to take a lot, lot longer to sit with and to respond to the implications of this novel and what it means for our history, and ourselves. No simple narrative. No simple answer.

John:

This is actually quite a humorous passage if you really go into the nitty gritty of it. You know, there's the hugest matters brought up there, you know, what do we do now in this situation? And then it's kind of cut off with two words, 'never mind'. But of course, yes, you should mind, and I think that Sam Watson's working on a very difficult plane and I think you're right, it does feel as though he's still in the process of working it

out himself. And indeed so are we as readers, I think maybe that speaks to its strength as a novel.

Jon:

I agree with you, and I think the novel itself is a time capsule and a record of a history that we've all acknowledged we didn't know very much about. You know, it actually does remind us of history, it achieves that for us.

James:

I think it's odd for a novelist writing in English to say it's a bad thing to be too fluent in English. It's a humorous paradox that conveys a certain conflict that perhaps Sam Watson felt, as author, writing in a kind of foreign language while trying to express this very personal issue.

Finn:

Yes, and I suppose it's also the fact that Tommy reverts to fulfilling a quest which is simply bestowed on him. Even though he has a kind of burgeoning consciousness of these other issues it's almost as though he finds it easier to relate himself to a task that he knows in the end will kill him. So in that respect I think that this is one of the most important passages in the book.

Kate:

I was just reminded as well of listening to the incredible session this morning with Alexis Wright. Alexis talked about having a sense of obligation and responsibility to ask the questions of our time and to write the human condition in a way that will hopefully promote conversation or make people think in new and different ways. And so I want to think

about the question of responsibility we have as readers of these novels. We have been given an incredible gift, writing doesn't just happen, writers spend a lot of time grappling, obviously, with these questions and with words. I think as readers we also have an obligation to take up the questions posed and to talk about them. And that's what we've done over the last few weeks, we've really had to try to come to terms with this very unique and complex novel and it's actually sparked some incredible conversations about ethics and history and complicity. To read this is a pleasure but also a responsibility.

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