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Perpetuating White Australia: Aboriginal self-representation, white editing and preferred stereotypes

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Foundational Aboriginal women writers who published in the 1970s often collaborated with white people in order to bring their publishing projects to fruition. These white people were drawn from political, religious and social interest groups; communities of commitment to which the Aboriginal women belonged.1 As fellow travellers, they shared similar values and willingly acted as facilitators for the publishing project. Aboriginal women faced considerable barriers to their authorial aspirations in this era, including a disinterested general public with a predilection to forget Aboriginal issues,2 few established Indigenous writers to act as mentors3 and often a meagre formal education.4 While alignment with a community of commitment provided tangible benefits, it also required pragmatic compromise. Some of these compromises were textual, reflected in editorial changes that aligned the narrative with the world view of the collaborating party. These changes were often to the

4 Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *Talkin’ up to the white woman: Aboriginal women and feminism* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2000).
detriment of Aboriginal cultural priorities.\(^5\) As Gillian Whitlock comments, the textual construction of the autobiographic self, negotiated between editor, author and implied reader, is ‘not a place where the desire to speak is liberated unconditionally, but rather a site of multiple constraints and negotiations of meaning.’\(^6\)

For Ella Simon, a Biripi woman from NSW who published her life story *Through my eyes* in 1978, these constraints and negotiations centred on the transformation of her life narrative from an oral to written text.\(^7\) Based upon the re-transcription of Ella Simon’s original oral recordings, this chapter examines the white collaborator’s engagement with the oral narrative. I argue that the style of emendations and omissions reflect the white collaborator’s capacity to accommodate otherness. Although government policy regarding Aboriginal people had moved from assimilation to self-determination when *Through my eyes* was published, public thinking did not necessarily align with official rhetoric. Ella Simon’s preferred self-representation was still substantially suppressed during the preparation of her book. The textual suppression of her Indigenous perspective demonstrates the collaborator’s prioritisation of the needs of a still-robust ideology of ‘white Australia’.

Here ‘whiteness’ is taken to be a discursive regime in which white and Indigenous Australian subjects are produced.\(^8\) White subjectivity and white privilege is predicated upon the denial of Indigenous sovereignty and ongoing Indigenous dispossession.\(^9\) White privilege also extends to


the discursive construction of Aboriginality. As Marcia Langton famously posited, the white Australian majority base their understanding of Aboriginality upon racist stereotypes and mythologies, the ‘stories told by former colonists’, not upon relationships with actual people.\textsuperscript{10} Because these stories are based upon stereotypes and mythologies, the way white Australians think about Aboriginal people does not necessarily keep pace with official government policy, but may instead be rooted in the past.\textsuperscript{11} For example, between 1909 and 1940, NSW government policy advocated the ‘protection’ of Aboriginal people on segregated reserves,\textsuperscript{12} ‘smooth[ing] the dying pillow’ on the mistaken assumption that ‘the Aborigines were dying out’.\textsuperscript{13} The projected outcomes of ‘protection’ policy co-operated with the goals of the official White Australia policy, preventing non-whites from entering Australia while non-whites already here conveniently expired.\textsuperscript{14} The exposure of the racially-motivated atrocities of the Second World War influenced the adaptation of overtly eugenicist policies, and biological absorption shifted to cultural assimilation.\textsuperscript{15} The NSW state government formally adopted a policy of assimilation in 1951. This policy required Aboriginal people to ‘live as white Australians do’,\textsuperscript{16} revealing a continued commitment to cultural

\textsuperscript{10} Marcia Langton, \textit{Well, I heard it on the radio and I saw it on the television: An essay for the Australian Film Commission on the politics and aesthetics of filmmaking by and about Aboriginal people and things} (North Sydney: Australian Film Commission, 1993), 33.
\textsuperscript{15} Rowse, ‘Introduction’, 178
homogeneity underpinning the ‘white Australia’ policy. It was not until 1973 that the NSW government finally repealed all elements of the 1909 *Aborigines Protection Act* and following the Whitlam Labor government, adopted a policy of Aboriginal self-determination. Yet texts like Ella Simon’s *Through my eyes*, which carry a history of cross-cultural collaboration, provide an account of the social construction of Aboriginality that suggest the rhetoric of self-determination and cultural plurality was far from a functioning reality.

Ella Simon recorded her oral narrative between May and December 1973, in the founding moments of self-determination; a policy which ‘ostensibly gave Aboriginal people some voice and options’ in deciding the direction of their own future. Her life story *Through my eyes* was launched five years later, in 1978. Thus the collaborative construction of the narrative between 1973 and 1978 (the transcription, editing and publication processes) offers insight into the negotiations between Aboriginal self-presentation and the stories white Australians expected and accepted about Aboriginality.

Ella Simon was born in 1902 near Taree on the mid-north coast of NSW. She was raised on Purfleet Aboriginal Station by her Aboriginal maternal grandparents. When she gained an exemption from the provisions of the *Aborigines Protection Act* in 1957 she was described as a ‘light caste Aborigine’ and deemed suitable for assimilation into the white community. Ella Simon became the first Aboriginal Justice of the Peace and was a member of several Christian and women’s community organisations, including the Country Women’s Association and Quota.

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20 Simon, *Through my eyes*.
21 Ibid.
She was a matriarch of high standing in her Indigenous community when she decided to record her life story. Ella Simon’s social links in the white community provided physical resources and support that enabled her to record her narrative.22 One white friend drawn from this network, Anne Ruprecht, facilitated the transcription, editing and publication of *Through my eyes*.23

Ella Simon’s oral recordings consist of five audiotapes that were retained by Ruprecht. In 2008 I had the tapes digitised and then I re-transcribed them. The overall quality of the recording was poor due to the limited microphone sensitivity of the cassette player and Simon’s health conditions. The poor quality of the recording undoubtedly impacted upon the original transcription in 1974. Ruprecht used a small grant from the Australia Council to fund the transcription. Budget restrictions prompted her to engage typists who would accept token remuneration. These were ‘friends or daughters of friends who needed a part time job and were typists’.24 Ruprecht was the only one in her circle who had any significant contact with Aboriginal people.25 The typist’s decisions were thus unlikely to have been informed by Aboriginal cultural knowledge. Ruprecht recalls several examples where these typists ‘doubt[ed] the truth’ of Simon’s recollections and felt authorised to change ‘whole sections’ of the transcript.26 Upon discovering the most obvious errors, Ruprecht had to ‘change back’ these sections of the transcript.27 During this process she and Simon decided that the oral voice didn’t ‘read properly’, so the text was rendered into Standard English:

> When it is spoken into a tape, it’s not quite the same when it’s transcribed.
> There were two schools of thought about this ... one school of thought was

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22 Including blank tapes, a tape recorder, and assistance with funding applications from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) Arts Board of the Australia Council.
24 Ibid.
26 Ibid. 181 and 182.
27 Ibid. 182.
that the way she spoke was poetic, and to leave it as that. But when I showed her that, she said, ‘this doesn't read properly, this doesn't read properly at all’. So then I started to re-write quite a bit of it, just in the language that she wanted, which was just straightforward English.28

The standardisation of Ella Simon’s Indigenous storytelling style reflects the historical denigration of oral culture as illiterate, incorrect and therefore deficient.29 Other foundational Aboriginal authors, embarrassed by the rendering of their Aboriginal English into writing, also supported its standardisation.30 The standardisation of the narrative also reveals the prioritisation of the requirements of the printed form and the comfort of a projected white readership ill-equipped to hear Aboriginal voices. As Ong argues, reading a text involves ‘converting it to sound, aloud or in the imagination’.31 Widespread unfamiliarity with Indigenous Australian culture meant that few mainstream readers would have been able to hear, let alone value, the oral features as they read. This prioritisation of sight over hearing32 can also be understood as a mask or double mimesis that covers the narrative33 and presents a socially acceptable biographic face to the audience.

28 Ruprecht.
31 Ong, 8.
32 Close examination of this inversion of Derridian logocentrism is beyond the scope of this article. The Derridian position (oral primacy and writing an inadequate derivation) is Eurocentric, ignoring the role of writing as a tool of domination in colonised societies (see Adam). The denial of literacy maintained Indigenous subordination. Contemporary examples include the privileging of written accounts over local oral knowledge in native title disputes. See Gillian Cowlishaw, ‘On getting it wrong: collateral damage in the history wars’, Australian Historical Studies 127 (2006): 194.
Once standardised, Ann Ruprecht took the manuscript to the Australia Council, where those concerned assessed the manuscript to be too detailed and still too colloquial: ‘When all of this was put together, the Australia Council said, “There is too much detail in this” and they handed it over to somebody, some writer, to edit it.’  

The contracted editor reportedly adopted a high level, academic register and slashed the number of stories told. One casualty of this revision was the removal of multiple narrations. In oral discourse the orator reiterates important points through repetition or ‘copia.’ Ella Simon’s oral narrative is copious because different versions of the same story are told for different purposes. With repetitions now removed, the manuscript was much shorter, but used highly sophisticated language. Anne recalls the shock of reading the edited manuscript:

I had to ... start all over again. They went to a different extreme. It was too much of a literary style ... in the opening pages it talked about how ‘she opined’ and ... other trendy words. And when Ella saw these she said ‘I don't know what these words mean!’ and I said to her, ‘I don't either!’ So, we started off again.

To achieve the desired register Anne Ruprecht re-wrote the manuscript again. With her health now rapidly failing, Ella Simon accepted the multiple changes to her narrative as the price of publication:

She was just pleased to get the book finished and back into a form that was more like what she would have written, and to get it out, because she kept saying to me that she didn’t think the book would come out before she died. So she was anxious for it to come out and as long as the main thread of the story was there, she was happy.

Thus the published version of Through my eyes preserves ‘the main thread’ of Ella Simon’s experiences, but not as seen through Ella Simon’s

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34 Ruprecht.
35 Ong, 39.
36 Ruprecht.
37 Ibid.
eyes alone. The process of transcription, editorial emendation and re-writing ensured that the manuscript also reflected the collaborators’ vision of Aboriginality. Recalling some of the changes made by the typist, Anne Ruprecht argued that:

If a project such as this has been subjected to so much of the ‘we know better than you’ attitude, we have to be very careful with what is recorded and reported—that is if it is really the truth we are seeking and not just confirmation of our own prejudices.38

In her role as facilitator Anne Ruprecht contested the corrections imposed by the typist, hoping that her own efforts helped to ‘set the record straight ... about Aboriginal history and culture’.39 However, as the cultural and textual construction of Aboriginality is derived primarily from ‘inherited, imagined representations’,40 not the self-presentation of actual Aboriginal people, ‘confirmation of our own prejudices’ is the most likely outcome.

My comparison of the oral narrative with the published text revealed a total of 228 significant differences. The oral manuscript included 159 narrations focusing upon traditional knowledge, oral history, Indigenous perspectives on current affairs, and cross-racial relations; these were excluded from the published text. There were also 69 instances where narrations were included, but were changed to conform to the collaborator’s vision. These included the alteration of Ella Simon’s perspective on cross-racial relations and Indigenous knowledge, and the management of issues deemed offensive to white readers. In the remainder of this chapter I will examine three of these amended narrations, focusing upon the representation of Aboriginality.

38 Simon, *Through my eyes*, 182.
39 Ibid.
40 Langton, *Well I heard it on the radio*. 
Kinship, Aboriginal identity and the ‘half-caste problem’

Parallel sections of the oral manuscript and the published text offer very different understandings of Aboriginal kinship and cultural survival. The example below centres upon the mixed racial descent of Ella Simon’s maternal grandmother, Granny Russell. Miscegenation was a confounding issue for assimilationists because it reflected badly upon white Australians, the purported models of progressivism and racial hygiene. The published text looks for a solution to the problem of miscegenation by highlighting the rejection of so-called half-castes by the ‘full-blood’ tribal people:

My grandmother was half-caste herself. In those days, the old Aboriginal tribes wouldn’t have anything to do with half-caste children … If there was any lightness there, the baby would be killed or left to die … That’s what happened to her. The mother was of the opossum clan of the Biripi tribe. Her father was Irish. Her mother died when she was an infant and the tribe simply abandoned her.41

Biological absorption posited that ‘breeding out the colour’ and eventually subsuming the Aboriginal race would safeguard white Australia. By emphasising the rejection of people of mixed descent by the remnant ‘full-bloods’, white Australians could imagine that these ‘half-castes’ did not retain their Aboriginal culture.42 It was argued that although ‘part-Aborigines’ problematically retained an Aboriginal social identity, their racial and geographic proximity to white people made them amenable to shedding this identity and ‘merg[ing] socially with the general European community’.43 It was believed that they would eventually ‘metamorphose into white Australians’.44

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41 Simon, Through my eyes, 22.
43 Ibid.
The published text has it that Ella’s grandmother was ‘simply abandoned’ when her mother died, but the story is not so simple. In the oral manuscript this narrative of abandonment is contextualised by other layers of specificity. The published text deletes the identity of the white father and his interest in his baby and elides the ongoing negotiation of Indigenous identity over time. By contrast, the manuscript reads:

My grandmother had an Irish father and she was half, she had an Aboriginal mother. She was left under a bush at a place called Burrell Creek. The Aboriginals were travelling with her mother, and they left the baby behind when the mother died … There are two classes of Aboriginal people; the coast tribe and the hillside. These people are very big-boned people, tall—they call them the Winmurra’s. The women are very possessive, they keep their men. It is often stated that they would way-lay a man whom they desired and would just take him along to her camp … The grandmother was this type of woman that came from the bush, but the grandmother’s father was an Irishman. He lived in the Monkerai, his name was McGrill. It was told that the mother would steal the baby away from this place, where he tried to keep it at home.45

According to Ella’s oral narrative, her grandmother held a specific cultural identity into which she was acculturated, regardless of her earlier abandonment or ‘half-caste’ status. She was a revered and powerful Winmurra woman. She is also identified as the daughter of McGrill from Monkerai district, not simply an anonymous ‘Irishman’ as in the published version. This account highlights conflicting dimensions of absorption ideology. Although rural people were anxious to have the embarrassing and apparently culturally-bereft ‘half-castes’ merge and disappear, miscegenation remained a ‘shameful colonial secret that many did not want exposed to public scrutiny’.46 Therefore the identity of Granny Russell’s father is obscured. Similarly, his attempts ‘to keep [her]…

46 Moran, 176.
at home’, indications of love and acknowledgement of paternal responsibility, are also deleted.

Significantly, this is a section that Anne Ruprecht recalls as having been altered by the typist:

A well-meaning typist changed what was on the tape to make it sound ‘correct’. She had typed that Ella’s grandfather had lived ‘in a monastery’ [but] there were no monasteries in those parts. She said, when I found it on the tape, that he’d lived ‘at the Monkerai’, which happens to be a small district south of Gloucester in NSW! If the typist had kept to what the old lady had actually said, it would have taken me less time to work out than her ‘correction’.47

Anne Ruprecht suggests, by implication, that she had repatriated this kinship detail, only to have it removed again by the editor. Such ‘corrections’ to Ella Simon’s manuscript removed evidence of the complex negotiation of Aboriginality in rural Australia, achieving a generalised account of Indigenous history.

**Imposing a non-indigenous perspective on Indigenous knowledge: Charlie and the goanna**

Assimilation rhetoric, in the broad sweep, required Aboriginal people to repudiate their culture in order to be socially and morally uplifted.48 Ella Simon’s attitude towards traditional culture therefore posed a problem to the editor of her narrative, as it did not align with her supposed status as an assimilated ‘light-caste’ woman. In this example gathering bush tucker becomes the focus for textual correction. Ella Simon’s oral narrative provides fond and detailed descriptions of food gathering and

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48 The meaning and application of assimilation was hotly contested in the era. The diversity of opinion is exemplified by prominent advocates such as A.P. Elkin, who believed Aboriginal identity could be maintained and modernised, and Paul Hasluck, who believed individuals had to abandon Aboriginality in order to be assimilated. See Russell McGregor, ‘Wards, words and citizens: A.P. Elkin and Paul Hasluck on assimilation’, *Oceania* 69.4(1999): 243–59.
preparation, and emphasises important knowledge through repetition and shared recollection:

There was an old Aboriginal, Old Big-eye Charlie we called him. He came to our home a lot, and I saw him catch a goanna; just climbing up a tree. He caught it by the tail and he cracked it like a whip, and the goanna broke its neck. Also, a black snake, just getting into its hole as fast as it could, he just grabbed the snake by the tail and the same crack broke the old snakes’ neck. They cooked the animals and often offered us some of the things to eat. There was a sweet yam; the downg and the wombi. They’d bruise them before they’d put them into the ashes, and cover them until they were cooked. That would serve the family, even cold ... There is also the witchetty grubs and the wasps; they used to half cook them and there was a milky substance that came out of them. We used to watch this old lady do this. Then they would eat the young bees in the comb; that is a milky substance too. They would have their little coolamons, half full of honey, and they would dip this honeycomb with the young bees in it, and they would suck at it. They would then have milk and honey! ... They would enjoy this real milk and honey diet.49

Simon concludes the section on traditional diet with a biblical metaphor; that of the Promised Land flowing with milk and honey. This biblical reference reveals the high value she placed upon the quality and taste of bush tucker. The opposite effect, however, is achieved in the parallel version found in the published text. Here the consumption of bush tucker is denigrated:

There was one old Aboriginal we used to call Charlie. I saw him catch a goanna by just climbing up a tree after it and grabbing it by the tail. Then he broke its back by cracking it around his head like a whip. I saw him do the same thing to a black snake. It was sliding into its hole as fast as it could go, when he grabbed it by the tail and cracked its back in the same way. The old people would often cook things like this that they would catch and offer some to us. We didn't often take up the invitations!50

50 Simon, *Through my eyes*, 121.
The turn of phrase, ‘we didn’t often take up the invitations!’ replaces the lengthy description of bush tucker and suggests that Simon and her age-mates spurned the food they were offered. This perspective is not supported by the oral narrative, which dwells at length upon bush tucker practices. Nor is it supported by the Indigenous cultural value of respect for elders. Upon hearing this example, family members argued that Ella wouldn’t contradict the instructions of an elder of Charlie Bugg’s stature.51 Another oral version of this story, a conversation with her cousin Maude, confirms this view:

Ella: I remember Fred’s father, Charlie Bugg, Charlie used to call in. He used to take us out and get animals, let us have a little taste of it. Oh, he’d give us carpet snake, and they cooked it and gave me a little taste of it; gave all the little kids a little taste of it. He’d give you a little tiny bit; just to taste it.

Maude: Taste it, mmm.

Ella: Mmm, he’d give you a taste of anything; witchetty grubs or anything. If you didn’t like it, well.

Maude: You didn’t have to have it if you didn’t like it.52

Maude and Ella concur that trying bush tucker or ‘having a little taste’ was standard protocol, whilst eating more was optional. As Maude says, ‘You didn’t have to have it if you didn’t like it.’ Ella Simon’s concentration upon the collection, preparation and taste of bush tucker in three other lengthy manuscript sections also suggests its importance. The editorial treatment of these manuscript sections reflect non-Indigenous perspectives on bush food as being irksome and strange, and supports assimilation ideology by placing cultural distance between Ella Simon’s generation and their elders.

The other major change is the amalgamation of the two oral versions and the complete deletion of Maude’s voice. As Aileen Moreton-Robinson

52 Simon, Through my eyes: oral narrative, Tape 4A, 18.
argues, Aboriginal women’s autobiographies are relational; they include the views and voices of the group.\textsuperscript{53} Ella Simon attempted to include multiple voices in her foundational life story; before the autobiographical genre, as understood by the collaborators, was capacious enough to accept it. Thus the Indigenised ‘yarning’ approach, with its cues, repetitions and distinctive language was stripped from the narrative, aligning it with the western convention of a single triumphant protagonist.\textsuperscript{54}

\textbf{Minimising potential offence to white readers}

If Aboriginal people of mixed racial descent were divorced from Aboriginal culture and poised to merge into the white community, why was assimilation so difficult to achieve in practice? When this question was posed by scholars in the 1960s,\textsuperscript{55} their answers concentrated upon the personal flaws of those who ‘failed’ to be assimilated, not the flaws of the wider society who failed to receive them.\textsuperscript{56} As Maureen Perkins argues, white culture asserts that a coloured person who passes as white ‘can be unmasked, as not really belonging, by various non-white behaviours’.\textsuperscript{57} Blaming Aboriginal people for their own failure to ‘advance’ was one strategy used to distract attention from the appalling conditions faced by Aboriginal people on segregated reserves and the recalcitrant

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{53} Moreton-Robinson, \textit{Talkin’ up}, 16.
\item \textsuperscript{56} Rowse, ‘The certainties of assimilation’.
\end{itemize}
white majority who resisted Aboriginal assimilation, particularly in rural areas.\textsuperscript{58}

Ella Simon, a frank and forthright person, didn’t hesitate to allocate appropriate blame for Aboriginal disadvantage. The example from the published text below reveals that the collaborators altered potentially offensive narrative sections, in this instance regarding Indigenous education.

Education comes to mind now ... Teachers ringing up because kiddies are away from school and all that. As I said before, these same children have parents who went to school for years without being taught anything. They came out of school after all those years scarcely able to read.

I saw it happen in my own family. They all went to school for about ten years and could scarcely spell their own names! No wonder older people weren’t interested in their children going to school. What did it matter if the kid missed a day or two here or there? What had education to do with attending school? Whether you had an education or not, you still lived the same; you still just got by like everyone else.\textsuperscript{59}

The disinterest of Aboriginal parents is explained by their own poor performance at school, ‘They all went to school for about ten years and could scarcely spell their own names! No wonder older people weren’t interested in their children going to school’. This infers that Indigenous people themselves are responsible for their own social stagnation, ‘Whether you had an education or not, you still lived the same; you still just got by like everyone else’. The manuscript version takes a different view. Ella Simon insists that the failure of Indigenous students reflects the substandard level of education delivered by poorly trained teachers:

They allowed these missionaries to become government teachers without diplomas or anything, you know. They went there and started teaching. I


\textsuperscript{59} Simon, Through my eyes, 162.
knew one woman that came to Purfleet; she was there for 17 years ... She was teaching them children, but them children can't spell their own name. They couldn't read hardly, or write because she wasn't educated. Now they are the parents that you people are dealing with at Purfleet. I tell them, ...

‘These Purfleet people ... they are the ones that had a government teacher for more than 17 years, [she] was a missionary, she wasn't a qualified teacher’. She didn't know what she was teaching ... These people say, 'Why don't they send [their children] to school’ and I said, ‘Because they wasn't educated themselves, and they got on alright’ ... and They say, ‘Why do you know so much? Who taught you?’ I said, ‘Don't you ask me that question, because I might be related to you’ and that shuts them up!60

Ella is emphatic that low levels of interest in education amongst the Purfleet community reflect the failings of the long-standing teacher at Purfleet and the racist government policies that enabled her retention. Unlike the published text, which asserts that educated and uneducated Aboriginal people alike ‘just got by’, the manuscript version acknowledges that people ‘got on alright’ despite the discrimination they faced. Thus the published version focuses on the failure of the Aboriginal people, while the manuscript focuses upon their resilience and survival against the odds. This position has clearly upset white people in the past, because Ella raises the moot objection, ‘They say, “Why do you know so much? Who taught you?”’ to which she responds ‘Don’t you ask me that question, because I might be related to you’. Clearly accustomed to attempted denigration, Ella silences her critics by raising the spectre of her own mixed racial heritage and illegitimacy. She had inside knowledge of the longstanding hypocrisy of white people who attempted to maintain social distance from Aboriginal people in the context of geographic proximity and shared history.

These examples of emendations made to the oral manuscript reveal what the white collaborators saw when they read Ella Simon’s life narrative: a perspective on cultural survival that contradicted socially

60 Simon, Through my eyes: oral narrative, Tape 5b, 9.
preferred stereotypes and opinions that shamed white Australians. In response, Ella Simon’s narrative was changed to more suitably reflect white representations of Aboriginality. The perspective that dominates key aspects of the published version of *Through my eyes* is the perspective of the non-Indigenous collaborators. The imposition of non-Indigenous perspectives on Indigenous knowledge deprives Indigenous readers of important sources of cultural information and perpetuates cross-cultural misunderstanding. Standardising Ella Simon’s Indigenous voice and oral storytelling style into ‘straight forward English’ depletes the cultural integrity of the narrative. Removing the communal oral narration aligns the text with white western autobiographical tradition, which prefers a triumphant, individualistic birth-to-success trajectory. The oral narrative is thickly woven with opinions and responses, recollections of people, places, language and traditions. Unfortunately, the white collaborators transformed this highly detailed oral narrative into a rather threadbare and conformist autobiography.