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Ethnobotany, Migrant Writing and Australian Tropical Rainforest: A Conversation About Story, Plants and Place

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ABSTRACT

Australian tropical rainforests are increasingly recognised as cultural landscapes. Aboriginal peoples maintain strong and complex connections with rainforest. Stories told by migrant and settler-colonial writers often misrepresent or omit Indigenous perspectives and thus facilitate exploitation of traditional knowledge for commercial gain. This has ongoing consequences for Aboriginal peoples due to loss of intellectual property rights and financial benefits. Despite Indigenous writers increasingly producing self-authored literature and criticism, the voices of some identity groups remain under-represented. This article argues for employing conversation as a tool to accelerate the reach of Indigenous voices into Australian literary studies. Through a conversation about Welsh migrant writing in John Naish's *The Cruel Field*, Mbabaram ethnobotanist Gerry Turpin and literary scholar Elizabeth Smyth reposition Naish's representation of rainforest relative to Aboriginal biocultural knowledge. This cross-disciplinary approach demonstrates how oral communication can fruitfully advance literary research when essential comparative stories are held in minds and memories.

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'Our stories are mostly not there; they are located somewhere that is silent and hidden, in memory that is not often visited', writes Gudanji/Wakaja scholar Debra Dank, in her memoir, *We Come with This Place* (Dank 2022, xvi). Uncovering hidden stories and knowledge requires close attention to ethics, protocols and protection of Indigenous peoples' interests. As Wiradjuri poet Jeanine Leane notes in a review of *False Claims of Colonial Thieves* (2018) by Yamaji poet Charmain Papertalk Green and settler poet John Kinsella: 'Such collaborations can only be born of deep mutual respect, a shared sense of place, and a desire to heal Countries that the nation sits shallowly above' (Leane 2020, 3). In the Wet Tropics of Far North Queensland, stories have been told for many thousands of years by Rainforest Aboriginal peoples, yet their voices are under-represented in Australian literature. Rainforest Aboriginal peoples in the Wet Tropics identify through some 20 identity groups of the Eastern Kuku Yalanji, Yirrganydji, Djabugay, Mbabaram, Yidindji,

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Gunggandji, Djirrbalanji, Wanyurr Majay, Ngadjon-ji, Mamu, Djiru, Gulngay, Wabubadda, Warrgamay and Nyawaygi. Since the mid- to late-nineteenth century, outsiders have arrived on these peoples' Countries (traditional lands) – including colonists, migrants, displaced persons, refugees and tourists – and developed their own stories. Throughout this period, the cultural knowledge of Aboriginal peoples was often disrespected yet increasingly drawn into the now dominant settler-colonial culture. Stories, and the knowledge enmeshed in them, have frequently been used without permissions of the traditional knowledge holders. Historian Dane Kennedy notes that globally '[e]xploration, the environment and empire are inextricably intertwined' (D. Kennedy 2013, 100) and that 'explorers and other travellers abroad were a major source of the botanical, geological and other natural specimens' (106) now held in museum collections and used in contemporary research. Simultaneously, scholars have explored the overwhelmingly non-Indigenous written literature of North Queensland.

In Patrick Buckridge and Belinda McKay's edited collection, *By the Book: A Literary History of Queensland* (2007), the voices of Rainforest Aboriginal peoples have been inadvertently neglected due to editorial decisions to exclude oral storytelling and to collate Indigenous writing in a chapter separate from those defined by specific regions. Presumably at the time of publication, this structure helped focus attention on Indigenous authorship throughout Queensland as an important and impactful body of work. However, it also obfuscates the geographical breadth of representation. Because Aboriginal authors were discussed in a separate chapter, they became less prominent in the chapters focused on regions marked on a map in the front matter as follows: South-East, Central, Western and North Queensland. The traditional lands of the Indigenous authors in the 'Bitin' Back' chapter were clearly and appropriately acknowledged by the chapter's author Maggie Nolan; however, the lack of a map of Aboriginal Countries makes identification of gaps in representation laboriously difficult. The writing celebrated by Nolan cannot easily be juxtaposed with the literary histories of other chapters. Indeed, readers who only read the chapters within the four designated Queensland regions will inevitably overlook or underappreciate key Aboriginal voices. That the North Queensland Chapter 'Warm Words' categorises texts under settler-colonial headings of 'exploration narratives', 'pioneering tales', 'travellers' tales', 'castaways', 'autobiographies and family histories', and 'post-war fiction' reinforces a conceptual segregation. In this article, we aim to strengthen the presence of Rainforest Aboriginal peoples in a literary history of North Queensland through a process of contemplative inquiry and conversation.

The literature of North Queensland's rainforest region is predominantly associated with writers who arrived from other places. Well-known authors include New Zealand-born Jean Devanny (1894–1962), West Australian-born Xavier Herbert (1901–1984), Brisbane-born Thea Astley (1925–2004) and Melbourne-born Janet Turner Hospital (1942–). Aboriginal writing has emerged most strongly in picture books, including Roy Banning's *Bulurru Storywater* (Banning, Quinn, and McLeod 1990), illustrated by Frank McLeod; Maisie (Yarrcali) Barlow's *Jirrbal: Rainforest Dreamtime Stories* (Barlow and Anning 2001), illustrated by Michael (Boiyool) Anning, about Jirrbalangan traditional and colonised ways of life; and Trevor Fourmile's *Gurril, Storm Bird* (Fourmile 2023), illustrated by Jingalu, a book that tells the Gimuy Walubara Yidinji story of the rainbow serpent and explains how the call of the storm bird alerts people to the arrival of the wet season. Contributions have also recently been made to non-fiction (Singleton 2024) and poetry (Sarago 2024). As

a repository for First Nations Australian writing, AustLit's BlackWords dataset contains over 28,700 works by more than 7,900 First Nations authors and organisations (2002). However, relatively few records connect with the rainforest lands of the Wet Tropics Bioregion. Rainforest peoples' knowledges are more often employed in other disciplines, such as history, linguistics, anthropology, ethnography and archaeology. For example, historian Timothy Bottoms and linguist Bob Dixon both worked with Jirrbal Elder Ernie Grant (Bottoms and Grant 2008; Dixon 2011). More recently, oral stories or 'geomythologies' have been studied as witness accounts of historic environmental events, such as past volcanic activity on the Atherton Tablelands, in a process of 'merging or interweaving elements of these contrasting [Indigenous and scientific] knowledges' (Franks et al. 2025, 73). In literary studies, we argue, scholars can and should similarly embrace oral storytelling. We seek to do this through a process of conversation, or research yarning (Atkinson, Baird, and Adams 2021; Walker et al. 2014), prompted by Max Brierty and Stephen Muecke's use of dialogue to reposition rationality or 'whitefella magic' relative to Kullilli culture (Brierty and Muecke 2023, 2). Walker et al. describe yarning as a 'conversational process that involves the telling and sharing of stories and information' (2014, 1217). We use the term *conversation* here as a reflection on our two-way exchange. Aside from introducing the research topic and occasional attempts to stay on topic, our conversation developed organically, free of a predetermined structure. For this reason, it differs to the 'conversation method' that Atkinson, Baird, and Adams (2021) defined as an 'interview' (193) with set questions and therefore aligns more closely with definitions of the research yarn.

An advantage of conversation or research yarning over use of legacy textual sources is the ability to explore contemporary issues faced by Rainforest peoples and thus recognise ongoing experiences and culture as dynamic, interconnected and living. However, Yuwaalaraay writer Nardi Simpson notes that 'writing changes this; it complicates things a little ... freezes the words' (Simpson 2021, 276). Written words do not necessarily convey the energy of the moment they were spoken or heard and in the written form represent a past moment in time, irrespective of how recently written. As Simpson notes, by the time voices are written down, the speakers have moved on to other things, developed their thinking in other ways. Nevertheless, writing enables transmission of ideas to more people, and the process of storytelling generates other benefits. In *Decolonising Research: Indigenous Storywork as Methodology* (Archibald et al. 2019), Archibald et al. describe storytelling 'as healing, as methodology, as decolonization, as mobilization, and assertive self-determination' (10). What emerges, they say, is 'a deep intent to transform the lives of our families, our communities, and to heal and unite our experiences through story' (10). In our conversation and this article, we similarly make use of vignettes of story to strengthen the presence of Rainforest Aboriginal peoples in literary and botanical discourse and facilitate cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary understandings necessary for future Intellectual Property (IP) claims by Rainforest Aboriginal peoples. The conversation we present is between the authors: Mbabaram ethnobotanist, Gerry Turpin, and literary scholar Elizabeth Smyth. Gerry is a Mbabaram traditional custodian in North Queensland with familial links to Wadjanbarra Yidinji and Nadjon on the Atherton Tablelands, and Kuku Thaypan on Cape York Peninsula. He leads the Tropical Indigenous

Ethnobotany Centre in the Australian Tropical Herbarium, which is a joint venture of James Cook University, Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO), and the Queensland Government. Gerry has a science degree majoring in botany and a Master of Philosophy (Medical and Molecular Sciences) and is internationally recognised for his work on biocultural knowledge and legal protections for Indigenous traditional knowledge in biodiscovery. He describes ethnobotany as the relationship of people and culture with the study and use of plants (Turpin 2016). Elizabeth Smyth is a writer and literary researcher of English ancestry, who was born in Cairns, North Queensland, and completed a doctorate on the Australian farm novel with attention to human–plant relationships. We began working together after many meetings and discussions – planning the article, personal exchanges to establish relationality (see Atkinson, Baird, and Adams 2021) and joking around – interactions that were fundamental to developing a strong sense of mutual respect and trust.

Trust was developed in many ways, one of which involved Elizabeth's demonstrated respect for Gerry's knowledge as a Mbabaram Elder by, for example, agreement from the beginning that he would be first author. This decision reflects the fact that this article simply would not exist without his knowledge and contribution. As Kennedy et al. have noted: 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be at the forefront of research about them' (M. Kennedy et al. 2022, 19). Throughout the research process, from conception to publication, Gerry carried the decision-making authority and Elizabeth consulted with him openly and often. However, it was important that our use of authorship convention, recognition of authority and approach to the research would not diminish the egalitarian nature of our conversation or yarn. Although Elizabeth introduced the research topic and at times sought to return to the selected passage, neither speaker directed the other on how to respond.

The passage used as a prompt for our conversation was selected by Elizabeth from Welsh migrant writer John Naish's *The Cruel Field* (Naish 1962) due to her hypothesis that Naish's representation of tropical rainforest would differ from the views of Rainforest Aboriginal peoples. The selected passage raised questions, she thought, about botanical knowledge, uses of plants and storytelling due to the protagonist Emery Carol's admitted lack of knowledge or 'wild guesses' when identifying rainforest species, his willingness to ignore laws that restricted harvesting resources in a 'criminal act', and his aptitude for spinning stories to influence others for personal advantage, when his dubious answers 'gained authority' (153). Elizabeth had no preconceived idea of how Gerry would respond. This article was written after the conversation and is based on what emerged.

We began recording our research yarn on Friday 7 March 2025, sitting on Yirrganydji land under a shady tree at the base of the hills on the northern side of James Cook University's Nguma-bada campus, in Gimuy/Cairns. The conversation, which echoes what Nardi Simpson refers to as a 'speak/listen trade' (Simpson 2021, 275), was recorded, transcribed and subsequently lightly edited (both of us editing our own words) to ensure we had communicated clearly for a dialogue that would be read at some later time. We even added words from subsequent conversations, and so what appears as a conversation in one sitting is in fact an amalgamation of multiple conversations. From here we will present a brief background on the writing used as a prompt for our research yarn, followed by the passage from Naish's *The Cruel Field*, and our conversation.

The Cruel Field: A migrant view of rainforest

John Naish (1923–1963) was a Welsh migrant who arrived in Australia in 1950 and worked cutting sugarcane on land cleared of lowland rainforest in North Queensland. He wrote an autobiography, *The Clean Breast* (Naish 1961), about his time in Europe and his early experiences in Australia, some plays and two novels, *The Cruel Field* (Naish 1962) and *That Men Should Fear* (Naish 1963). In recent years, his novels have been read as examples of farming literature (Smyth 2021, 2023), as contributing to North Queensland literature (Taylor and Balanzategui 2024), and for insights into the experiences of mid-twentieth-century sugarcane workers (Balanzategui 2023). The setting of Naish's *The Cruel Field* is 'somewhere between Babinda and Mossman' (Balanzategui 2023, 34), and since lowland rainforest was often cleared to grow sugarcane (Keto and Scott 1994), we envisage the setting as being on the lands of either the Eastern Kuku Yalanji, Yirrganydji, Djabugay or Yidindji peoples.

The Cruel Field tells the fictional story of English migrant canecutter, Emery Carol, and his experiences during the 1951 harvest at Cook's End, Nagonda. The narrative is predominantly set on the farm of Italian migrants, Peter and Tony Leonardi, and explores the social harm associated with sugarcane cultivation in the labour-intensive mid-twentieth century. Neither Italian farmer is successful. Tony is forced off the farm due to a conflict with his brother, and Peter dies in a cane fire. The harvest, therefore, represents a tragic loss despite being completed by gangs of stoic canecutters. Naish's representation of rainforest has been interpreted as 'a spatial zone where the pastoral mode's leisure, ease and retreat dominate' (Smyth 2021, 8). In this article, we read it as revealing a narrow settler-colonial encounter with rainforest plants that has implications for biopiracy, a practice in which individuals or companies use Aboriginal knowledge to identify and collect plants for commercial advantage without adequate consultation or benefit-sharing with traditional owners. Biopiracy has led to significant losses of IP rights for Indigenous Australian peoples (Janke 2021; Turpin et al. 2022) and is an ongoing problem due to its role in reinforcing the financial disadvantage experienced by many Aboriginal people. The following short extract from Naish's novel depicts the protagonist, Emery Carol, taking the married French barmaid, Adèle Bondeau, into the rainforest on Emery's day off from cutting sugarcane.

Extract from the Cruel Field

Emery led the way as the path climbed up the gully cut by Windfall Creek ...

No, she wasn't tired: what was that plant and that tree and that bird? – she was like a child on its first visit to the zoo, and his answers – correct ones, doubtful ones and wild guesses alike – gained authority by her smiling acceptance ...

And she was enraptured by the parakeet, the indignant white cockatoo, the pheasant and the brown dove, the giant trees, and the fact that the lawyer vines could be hauled down, dried and made into furniture.

'How are your washing-lines?' he asked her. 'Rusty? They make the best washing-lines you ever saw'.

'Could I have one?' The same breathless child-like unrefusable excitement.

She watched him heave like a bell-ringer on the thin vine until the great tangled mass of leaf crashed down. He cut off the leaf and root and coiled up her line.

'That was a criminal act', he said. 'This is a reserve' (Naish 1962, 152–53).

Our conversation

Elizabeth: I'll tell you what I know about the author, John Naish. He was from Wales and came out to Australia in 1950, during a big migration programme after World War Two. The deal was that people had to work for two years if they wanted to stay, so he cut sugarcane. I've studied his two novels because they were set in the Wet Tropics and I'm interested in stories, mainly novels, written and set here. I read Naish's novels as examples of farm novels, and for what they told readers about farming. It's good to be able to talk to you about them now, or one of them, because obviously they were written from the perspective of someone who had just arrived from Europe, someone who inevitably had a narrow view of this place.

Gerry: A lot of my old uncles who have passed on, they were canecutters, so obviously they had to survive then and disregard their own culture. Another thing was the shifting to missions and reserves where they were forbidden to practise culture and not speak about it. In a way that was kind of protection as well, but also exploitation. Later they were driving tractors, hauling bins. They had to look after their families. It was about survival.

This book, there's no hidden meaning, the writing is a bit different to other things I've read.

Elizabeth: It's a particular style, realism. A bit of a fashion then to make things as 'real' as possible, but according to the settler-colonial point of view, so important things are missing. But Naish does raise a whole lot of issues, like the social injustices of that time, particularly for Indigenous people, which are plain to see in his writing. Another aspect of his writing is the attitude that his protagonist, Emery, an English migrant, has to the rainforest. In that small passage, Emery was acting like he knew what he was talking about when he took the French woman, Adèle, into the rainforest, but obviously, because he admitted to it, he didn't know the names of all the plants she wanted him to identify.

Gerry: There's still that rainforest on the fringes, so there might have been a bit more around at that time.

Elizabeth: The way Emery was seeing the rainforest is presumably very different to how you would see it. What did he overlook from your perspective?

Gerry: Yeah. Obviously to the Indigenous way of living, cultural living, how they used the rainforest, how they managed it. In some areas, there were pockets that were cut purposely to be able to live in those areas. From there, they lived and moved around in the rainforest. My father, where he grew up with his tribal grandmother, on one of the creeks on the Tablelands. He lived in a gunyah with his grandmother, and she carried him around everywhere on her shoulders, just walked around. Those were the first years of his life. So it made me think he would have seen the rainforest being cut down and some of

my research is in that area. There were some white people saying that they're cutting all this rainforest down and making lives difficult, they were saying at least leave the Koah tree because that seems to be a preferred food source for the Tableland Aboriginals. I found out later what that tree actually was. One of the walnuts. The white people were saying, at least leave these trees so they can still access their food source, because they began to starve and that led to killing of animals and in return started the wars because the farmers retaliated.

Elizabeth: Who was asking to leave those trees?

Gerry: Just a normal person living there.

Elizabeth: Did anyone listen to them?

Gerry: I'm not sure. It was an old newspaper. Sometimes I come across old newspapers where people write in, express their views. A lot of them were sympathetic to what was happening at the time. I'm also part of the Mbabaram, which is over the Dividing Range, and there was that relationship as well between the two tribes: Mbabaram and Wadjanbarra Yidindji. In times of drought, the Mbabaram people were allowed to come over and access the swamp there, as a food source. One of our friends who we've been working with for over ten years now, she's a contact archaeologist, so when she was involved in diggings on the sites, she was looking at what sort of food remains were in there, and she saw the nuts from the rainforest, so that confirmed the story that Aboriginal people went over and got food sources from the rainforest as well.

Elizabeth: Is that tree still growing?

Gerry: Yeah, it's still around. It's one that needs to be processed, so the knowledge is still there but people are not doing it anymore, as you can imagine, with all the new foods that are coming in, like KFC and that. But I was also involved with a neighbouring group in using those old methods of preparation. Probably not that actual one but others. So the methods are still there but nobody's using it.

Elizabeth: Would this tree grow in lowlands rainforest that was often cleared for sugarcane?

Gerry: Yes, I've seen it in the lowlands. Also up top. It's part of the rainforest and commonly used among Rainforest Aboriginals. The other one that we processed was the Black Bean. We used the old methods. That was part of a project with Northern New South Wales mob, Bundjalung.

Elizabeth: That's Melissa Lucashenko's people [winner of the 2019 Miles Franklin Award, Australia's most prestigious prize for literature, for her novel *Too Much Lip*].

Gerry: So they've got a story about the Black Bean, that it could grow there but they weren't allowed to transport it. The main part of the project was about human transportation of plants. You might get a cluster of plants in one area and hundreds of kilometres away you get another cluster of plants, so you look at the Aboriginal stories and their songlines and you get trade routes and find some connections there.

Elizabeth: Coincidentally I've been writing about a Black Bean tree. Obviously from a non-Indigenous perspective. So Naish's story was set back in the 1950s and published in 1962. Things have changed in terms of how Aboriginal knowledge is understood or protected. What has happened that's good in that space and what still has to happen?

Gerry: Going back to my own father. He never talked about his past. We only found out much later. Even where he lived on the creek bank. Later on he started telling us. He would always take us out bush, camping and fishing. And then later on we found out there were special stories about those places, so he was showing us without telling us the special stories about those places.

Elizabeth: How did you find out the special stories?

Gerry: Later on, through him. Something would come to his memory, and he'd say, 'Oh yeah, that rapid up there that's a sacred place'. We never knew that. We'd just go there fishing. Up the Goldsborough, we went up there camping a lot, and some places up there are pretty sacred, certain parts of the river. Then he talked about where there were sacred springs up on the Tableland. Later in life. We always knew. Growing up we were scared of the rainforest because there were spiritual stories attached. One at Rocky Creek it's called the Devil's Pool, so we don't go there, we've never ever been in that. We followed that right up to our adult years. Only probably a few years ago that I got close enough to have a look.

Elizabeth: Is that the place where there's free camping?

Gerry: Yeah, where the war thing is [Rocky Creek War Memorial Park] and that's where the old hospital was. And in there, there's a spring where the water was used for the hospital but that's a sacred site [widely known now]. I only found out about that probably about ten years ago.

Elizabeth: Did you grow up learning language?

Gerry: No, nothing. My mother come out of that Herberton Mission, so you know I can still remember going there to visit family. They weren't allowed to [speak it] and language became a shame thing.

Elizabeth: What a terrible situation.

Gerry: I guess when it all come back it would have been around the 1990s I think, around Native Title. As far as I can remember, that's when protection of knowledge came but more lately in my experience. During the bush tucker industry, a lot of the knowledge created wealth for other people, not the Aboriginal people. I think 2004 was when the Biodiscovery Act was legislated. That's about any research on biological material and started protection in that area on the medicinal side and any financial benefits that come from research.

Elizabeth: Those benefits would take a while to be received by communities, but is it working now?

Gerry: Yeah, in 2016, through Minister [Leeanne] Enoch, it was revisited because it just wasn't enough protection for Aboriginal people and their knowledges, so the expert roundtable, there were quite a few of us in that group and we made recommendations. Then they were accepted and legislated again in 2018 so there was more protection. After that we had the Mbabaram medicinal plants project. We were the first ones to use the updated Act. It was good but then it created some other problems in complying with the Nagoya Protocol, access and benefit sharing. Free prior and informed consent. Our mob needed to understand the jargon so they could make decisions, contract decisions. Not having funds was a problem. JCU [James Cook University] couldn't provide that because they had their own lawyers and it would be a conflict of interest, so Mbabaram had to try to find funds to get legal advice to help with making a decision, and that's a problem because a lot of groups don't have the funds for that. Contracts take a long time, and you have multiple partners. Multi-institutional agreements take time. What funding bodies don't allow you to do is to have the funds for the initial engagement. So you can't use any of those funds to do that. They expect you to have all those relationships already, but as you know, that takes a long time. With First Nations it's a different timeline that you use.

Elizabeth: Definitely easier, for sure, when you have more time.

Gerry: IP protection has improved but a lot of information is already out there. So one of [the] main aims is to go through archival material and get any information we can and put it into a database and give it to the relevant people we're working with. Other people have done that, gone through all the old stuff and produced books. This is how the bush tucker industry started; they looked in these books. Organisations like CSIRO did research on bush tucker.

Elizabeth: I remember seeing those books. [For example, Tim Low's *Bush Tucker: Australia's Wild Food Harvest* (1989) and Jennifer Isaac's *Bush Food: Aboriginal Food and Herbal Medicine* (1987).] I remember seeing Bush Tucker Man [Les Hiddens] on the TV.

Gerry: So people just looked through them and started growing stuff. It's a huge industry. A lot of Aboriginal people didn't know those books were published, so what they thought was a secret was already out there. That's one of the [IP] laws. If it's published, it's open for everyone. It's difficult. Some people are saying that if it's published, you can track it back to the original people and protect their knowledge.

Elizabeth: That's relying on the people who collated that information to have done a good job of recording where they got their information.

Gerry: The people giving the information didn't know it was going to be used to make lots of money. They were just sharing knowledge and being helpful. Nothing you can do about that now, at the moment. Even in research, publishing in a scientific journal, you have to supply the name of the plant they're researching, so you can't keep that a secret. In Western science, people need to be able to verify and check.

Elizabeth: It's a difficult interface. Are there examples in other places in the world where there have been good returns to Indigenous people for medicinal products?

Gerry: No, I don't think so.

Elizabeth: OK, so it's still got to happen.

Gerry: Other parts of the world is where it all started. With Peru and coca leaf.

Elizabeth: I don't know that story.

Gerry: Peruvian people weren't allowed to chew coca leaf, a traditional plant, or grow it commercially as a result of the 1961 United Nations Single Convention for international drug control[(see Gootenberg 2004)]. They applied that Western law to those countries rather than using frameworks grounded in Indigenous Knowledge systems. We're in the same position, trying to protect, but it's hard. The bush tucker industry, for example, is worth about seventy to eighty million [Australian dollars] a year but less than three per cent of Indigenous people are engaged in that industry. They're missing out on the benefits even though it's their knowledge being used. We have a project that's about putting Indigenous people in a place where they can establish a nursery and build from there.

Elizabeth: Looking back at Naish's writing about rainforest, he only mentions government laws ['This is a reserve' (Naish 1963, 153)]. Do you think there are enough Indigenous voices in published literature up here?

Gerry: There are some, even from our mob. I've got a few that I've come across and even bought but never really had the time to read them. There were a couple of people on the Cape, talking about their cultural stuff.

Elizabeth: I remember years ago being up at Hopevale and someone gave me a history written by the missionary there, I think wanting to get my reaction. It was interesting to read but obviously a one-sided perspective.

Gerry: I've read other accounts from white people about our area. One of the things she said was that there were no Mbabaram people left. She knew the last traditional custodian from Watsonville, so I'm assuming she meant the full-blood and not the part Aboriginal, and it's a lot of people's perception these days of not being a real Aboriginal because of having mixed blood.

Elizabeth: I hope that perception has changed.

Gerry: Nah, it's gone worse. Since the referendum.

Elizabeth: Have you read Penny Van Oosterzee's *Cloud Land*? It was a recent history of the Tablelands.

Gerry: I've actually got that book. Did you give it to me?

Elizabeth: No.

Gerry: Someone gave it to me.

Elizabeth: Everyone must want you to sit around reading. Oosterzee took on this incredible project, but it would be good to read stories by the local people for themselves.

She had an example of some specific people, but it would make more sense to read or hear their stories directly from them or their families.

Gerry: When I was a kid, we were told to be careful of white people, not to look the wrong way around them. People didn't have a choice about how they lived, what they did. Now a lot of groups are reconnecting with Country and wanting assistance with recording their knowledge and looking at how to use their own knowledge to manage Country. This is what the custodians want, to record the knowledge, document it, and keep it in a safe place. At our Centre [the Tropical Indigenous Ethnobotany Centre], we use modern technology, but the Elders are still transferring knowledge the traditional way by showing and teaching their family and clan groups. We have a permission form that states that it's not going to be used for commercial purposes, only for scientific purposes. If someone else wanted to study that plant, then we advise them to come back to the traditional owners of that plant and to contact them and engage with them. That's about access and benefit sharing, particularly with genetic samples and resources. My interest is bringing Western science and Indigenous biocultural knowledge together, ensuring that Western science recognises, acknowledges, and accepts biocultural knowledge. I'm inspired now to record my own stories.

Elizabeth: What do you remember about your first time in rainforest, as a child?

Gerry: When I was young, we went into the rainforest for *jumbun* grubs. We used them for fishing. *Jumbun* is a Yidindji word. One of those times, we went into the rainforest and my uncle told us when we were leaving to check [our genitals] for leeches. We had nightmares about that. Like researchers who get leeches in their eye and don't even know about it. The point of this is that learning about Country is not like going to university to complete a course. A custodian's education starts from birth and just continues on.

A continuing conversation

Similarly, this article starts a conversation that will continue on. As Wiradjuri poet Jeanine Leane notes: 'It takes a long time to learn a whole story' (Leane 2019, 126). The conversation in this article models a cross-disciplinary approach to elevating under-represented voices in literary studies. An advantage of using contemplative inquiry and conversation or the research yarn is the ability to draw into literary discourse contemporary issues that are highly important to Aboriginal peoples. For the Rainforest Aboriginal peoples of the Wet Tropics of Queensland, these include the prevention of biopiracy and protecting Indigenous biocultural knowledge. Our conversation illustrates how Aboriginal perspectives and knowledge can be replaced in literature by an English perspective and botanical ignorance, demonstrated in Naish's *The Cruel Field*. This common practice in migrant and settler-colonial fiction effectively erases any conception of Aboriginal victims of biopiracy and thus facilitates a continuing settler-colonial exploitation of Indigenous botanical knowledge. Where Aboriginal writing that counters settler-colonial and migrant representation is scarce, conversation is crucial to gaining insights into contemporary issues of concern to Indigenous peoples and to developing new understandings of Aboriginal cultures

and new interpretations of available literature. Through this article, the perspectives of Rainforest Aboriginal peoples, whose lands are represented in the fictional setting of Naish's *The Cruel Field*, can be considered. Gerry Turpin's voice as a Mbabaram traditional custodian with a three decades-long career in biocultural consultations with other Aboriginal peoples makes a significant and long overdue contribution to readings of North Queensland literature. Through this conversation, Naish's migrant writing – in which the protagonist exhibits a lack of knowledge, willingness to ignore laws and a desire for personal gain when engaging with rainforest Country – becomes obviously counterproductive to the interests of Rainforest Aboriginal peoples and thus highlights the urgent need for strong Indigenous voices to shape the ways in which rainforest is imagined and understood. Additionally, this article has implications for the curation of literature that details Indigenous ethnobotanical knowledge in library and museum collections. Due to the long history of biopiracy, administrators of such materials must maintain or develop policies and processes that support active engagement with the relevant Indigenous knowledge holders to ensure appropriate management of ethnobotanical data.

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