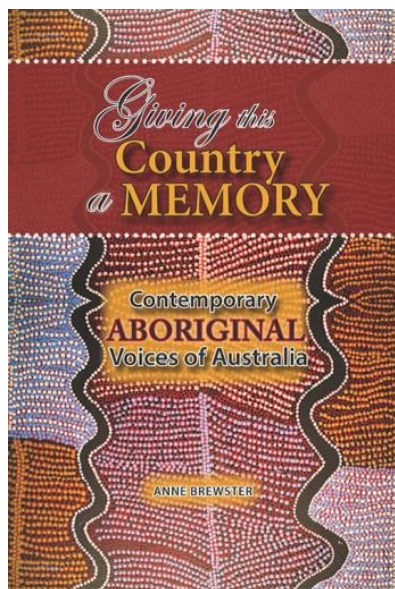


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## Book Review

Anne Brewster, *Giving this Country a Memory: Contemporary Aboriginal Voices of Australia*.  
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Anne Brewster, associate professor at the University of New South Wales and specialist in Australian literature, is renowned for her long-standing research into, and dedication to Indigenous-Australian writing. A prolific writer of journal articles and book chapters on the topic, she also published the specialist study *Aboriginal Women's Autobiography* in 1995 (republished in 2016) and the more general volume on postcolonial studies and Indigeneity *Literary Formations: Postcoloniality, Nationalism, Globalism* in 1996. Her engagement with the Indigenous community has resulted in collaborative works such as the anthology of Indigenous writing *Those Who Remain Will Always Remember*, co-edited with Nyoongar academic and author Rosemary van den Berg and the non-Indigenous academic Angeline O'Neill in 2000; and in 2015 the interview and essay collection *Giving this Country a Memory. Contemporary Aboriginal Voices of Australia*, which is the focus of this review article.

With *Giving this Country a Memory*, Brewster has written and published a respectful, very accessible and timely overview of Indigenous Australian writing which takes to heart anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner's 1967 appeal to break "The Great Australian Silence"—the absence of Indigenous peoples in Australia's mainstream history and nation-making (1968). Much has happened and changed since Stanner launched his dictum ... and yet not: over the past five decades Australia has seen the incorporation of the Indigenous Australians in the census after a landmark nation-wide referendum in 1967; the progressive suppression of discriminatory legislation; the Aboriginal Death in Custody and Bringing Them Home reports; Reconciliation and ATSIC and their demise; the advent and partial dismantling of Native Title; the highly symbolic mainstream Apology for the Stolen Generations; and last but not least—the Northern Territory Emergency Response, perhaps better known as the NT Invasion. Political action and policy have been too ambivalent to grant Indigenous Australia the discursive and material space it deserves in Australian society and identity formation, as

the ongoing Indigenous fight for sovereignty of mind, body, community, culture and Country indicate.

Literature is a key element in national identity formation, and moving from life-writing into full-fledged fiction, it has developed into an important discursive space for Indigenous voices to be heard. Indigenous authors participate in redefining language, rewriting history and retelling stories so as to adjust meaning to Indigenous needs and truths and carve out spaces of independence as well as cross-cultural encounter between the mainstream and the Indigenous populations. As Brewster herself argues, “The emergence of Aboriginal literatures, therefore, brings about a renegotiation of the literary contract—recoding and resignifying subjectivity, aesthetics, canonicity, indigeneity, whiteness and the nation, and transnational connectivities” (xii). Based on the relationship of trust that Brewster, a non-Indigenous scholar, has built up with the Indigenous literary community over the past three decades, *Giving this Country a Memory* contributes to this struggle for sovereignty by giving Aboriginal authors a voice beyond their (docu)fiction and poetry, allowing non-Aboriginal readers to gain insight in, and empathy with their oeuvre through the personal and communal circumstances and experiences that inspire and generate them. Inasmuch the literary work under discussion is an exponent of Aboriginal political, social and cultural memory, Brewster’s collection records and amplifies some of the Indigenous voices that undertake this recalling within the “postsettler multicultural nation” (xvii).

After a theoretical introduction in which Brewster lays down her postcolonial analytical framework, each chapter introduces an Indigenous author, moves on to their interview and rounds off with an analysis of their oeuvre within its specific social, political and cultural setting. Kim Scott is of Wirlomin Nyoongar descent (southern Western Australia coast), a university professor in creative writing and a key figure in contemporary Indigenous writing with considerable media impact, so that his interview strategically opens Brewster’s book. Scott’s take on literature and identity formation is inflected by the intergenerational trauma of racial passing. Scott’s recovery of his Indigenous roots has been a long and arduous project in which his literary activity has played a key role, experimenting with form and content in order to find empowering places of enunciation. His three novels, *True Country* (1993), *Benang* (1999) and *That Deadman Dance* (2010), and one volume of docu-fiction, *Kayang and Me* (2005) reflect an increasing move from an individual “confessional” focus, associated with European culture (Brewster, xiii-xiv), to a communal approach of storytelling, place-making and identity-formation. Romaine Moreton, with Goernpul Jagara (Southern Queensland) and Bundjalung (North New South Wales) roots, is an academic, filmmaker and author of three successful bundles of performance poetry: *The Callused Stick of Wanting* (1995), *post me to the prime minister* (2004), and *Poems from a Homeland* (2012). A powerful and critical exponent of Indigenous protest poetry, she shares Kim Scott’s inclusionary approach towards her audience. Jeanine Leane is of mixed Wiradjuri (southwest New South Wales) and white descent and has reflected on her youth and the impact of eugenics on her family in the bundle of poems *Dark Secrets* (2010) and the short story collection *Purple Threads* (2011). She is also engaged in scholarly activity, having published on cross-cultural pedagogy, and currently preparing a study on white and Aboriginal representations in the Australian literary canon. Melissa Lucashenko has Yugambeh/Bundjalung (southeast Queensland) and Ukrainian roots, but is also connected to Central Australian and Gulf of Carpentaria mobs. She has authored two young-adult novels and three successful novels to date, two of which were award-winning: *Steam Pigs* (1997), *Hard Yards* (1999) and *Mullumbimby* (2013), which “attest to Aboriginal autonomy, diversity, cultural and physical resilience, and self-determination” (Brewster 134). Marie

Munkara was born in Arnhem Land (Northern Territory) of Rembarranga, Tiwi, Macassan and Chinese descent, but raised in Melbourne and so has a very mixed heritage and background. As well as two children's books, she has published two short story collections, *Every Secret Thing* (2009) and *A Most Peculiar Act* (2014), the first of which won two literary awards. Her first collection paints an ironic picture of the civilizing and Christianizing zeal of mission life, loosely inspired by her own family's experiences, and highlights Indigenous humour as a successful strategy of cultural resistance and resilience. Her second collection depicts cross-cultural relations (Aboriginal, white and Asian) in the Northern territory during the Second World War and its concurrent white fear of invasion and defection which affected Aboriginal lives in restrictive ways. Alf Taylor is of Yuat Nyoongar descent but grew up on the Spanish Benedictine Mission of New Norcia, north of Perth, as a member of the Stolen Generations. He has published two poetry collections, *Singer Songwriter* (1992) and *Winds* (1994), the short story collection *Long Time Now* (2001), and finished writing his memoir *God, the Devil and Me*. Taylor's poetry and prose are characterized by their directness, depth of feeling and humorous treatment of characters and situations, in line with Munkara's writing. His piece of life-writing, soon to be published by Magabala Books, tells about the devastating impact of mission life and education on himself as a young kid and the strategies of psychological dissociation he has had to apply to cope with trauma and survive. Doris Pilkington Garimara, who recently passed away, was of Western Desert Mardu descent and published a life-writing trilogy over a period of a decade: *Caprice, A Stockman's Daughter* (1991); *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* (1996), successfully adapted to film format in 2002 by the mainstream-Australian director Philip Noyce; and *Under the Wintamarra Tree* (2002). Her prose is concerned with the impact of the Stolen Generations as an act of genocide and the resistance and resilience of the Aboriginal population to this policy, especially its female members: grandmothers, mothers, aunts and daughters. Brewster's choice to place Pilkington Garimara's chapter at the end of the series of interviews and essays may be seen as a homage to the author and an expression of general respect towards Indigenous-Australian culture. It allows her to wrap up her discussion and point out that reading Garimara—who was “appointed copatron of the Australian Sorry Day's Committee's Journey of Healing in 2002” (Brewster 221)—and other Aboriginal authors by implication, draws non-Indigenous readers into “relations of accountability, reciprocity and obligation” (Brewster 254) they should respond to.

*Giving This Country a Memory. Contemporary Aboriginal Voices of Australia* is a logical development from the earlier anthology *Those Who Remain Will Always Remember* in that its interviews with some representative Indigenous-Australian authors, introduced by short bio notes, form the main body of the text and so confer the main focus of attention to the writers whose work Brewster sets out to discuss in appended short essays. No doubt influenced by the oral tradition in Aboriginal cultures with its emphasis on custodianship of the narratives that bind the community together, Brewster has wisely chosen to give the floor to the writers themselves when it comes to telling their story and providing a personal and communal context for their work. This then serves the reader to tune in to the lived experience behind the literary work under discussion. The short analytical sections are strategically placed after each in-depth interview, and so enable readership to reach a more accurate appreciation of the work's literary qualities and political and social agenda in the dialogic space created with the preceding interview. Brewster's adroit and engaged analysis of the novels, short stories, and poetry—the way these can be contextualized and understood within the mainstream pressures exerted upon the Aboriginal communities and the continuing fight for Indigenous sovereignty—never frames or takes over from, but rather adds on to, the Indigenous author's voice which precedes the analysis. Skilfully guided by Brewster's questions, the

“heterogeneous” group of interviewees (xiv) displays a common range of interests and motivations across the “bodily, spiritual, cultural, historical, gendered, generational, geopolitical, regional, classed, religious, and sexual” contexts (xiii) that inspire them to write across a variety of intermingling genres, but always within an Indigenous and Indigenizing rationale of cultural production. Thus the collection strikes a fine balance between the distancing effect of a scholarly approach and the respect and engagement owed to the Indigenous community because of what Brewster defines as the settler-Australian’s “implicat[ion] in the colonial history of violence” (253). No selection of interviews can be exhaustive and is always contingent upon personal circumstances and availability so, although the absence of the ground-breaking writer of Waanyi descent Alexis Wright feels like a missed opportunity, on the whole Brewster’s well-pitched, necessary and timely initiative stands as an indispensable piece of engaged scholarship from a mainstream speaking position that contributes significantly to what Martin Nakata has called the “cultural interface” (198) between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.<sup>i</sup>

### **Works Cited**

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<sup>i</sup> In *Disciplining the Savages* (2007), the Indigenous scholar Martin Nakata builds towards an Indigenous version of Standpoint Theory and constructs the “Cultural Interface” as a complex and flexible space of intercultural relationships in which Indigenous agency and knowledge are acknowledged and inform theorisation; it problematizes and deconstructs oppositional terms such as agent/patient, white/black, mainstream/margins to give way to more interactive and participative models of Indigenous lived experience vis-à-vis the larger world in which it is embedded.