

## Reading Mabo in Peter Goldsworthy's *Three Dog Night*

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**Abstract:** This essay offers an analysis and interpretation of Peter Goldsworthy's *Three Dog Night* (2003) as post-Mabo fiction. In doing so its broader aim is to expand the definition of post-Mabo fiction and to argue that no single historical event in recent decades has transformed the Australian literary imaginary more than the High Court's Mabo decision of 1992. I concede that Goldsworthy's text does not directly thematise the Mabo decision or native title. But in the portrayal of characters' everyday conversations, their discussions about art, history and the land, the text engages with post-Mabo discourses, that is to say, with the recognition of indigenous people's *presence* in the land, in history, and in political and social affairs, as opposed to their *absence*. Scholars in various fields of study—history, law, geography, film—have acknowledged the broad influence of Mabo in cultural production; literary scholars have too, though less so by way of close readings of specific texts. The examination of *Three Dog Night*, offered here, suggests Mabo's impact on fiction writing is more widespread and more sustained than generally considered.

**Keywords:** Peter Goldsworthy; *Three Dog Night*; Mabo; post-Mabo fiction; indigenous characters; Warlpiri; desert

Australian culture has been substantially transformed by the Mabo decision of 1992. This is not to argue that the introduction of native title into Australian law has delivered land rights justice to indigenous Australians or that the discourse of *terra nullius* is a thing of the past. The High Court in Mabo refused to recognise indigenous sovereignty, and since the passing of the Native Title Act in 1993, native title provisions have been progressively watered down by parliaments and by the High Court itself. Nevertheless, more than any other event in Australia's legal, political and cultural history, the Mabo decision has challenged previous ways of thinking about land, identity, settler belonging, and history. For Larissa Behrendt, Mabo was "an important legal, symbolic and *psychological* turning point" (my italics, 1), because it shook the foundations of the majority "white" population's belief in the legitimate settlement of the continent by the British. It confronted non-Aboriginal Australians with a new narrative of nationhood: no, the country was not an empty land, settled peacefully by Europeans from 1788; rather, the land, already occupied, was taken from its original inhabitants. Aboriginal people were dispossessed, often violently so, from their lands. For Felicity Collins and Therese Davis, the Mabo decision reminded "white" Australians that "belonging ..., being at home in Australia ..., having a sense of identity ... was achieved at the cost of dispossession of Indigenous people from their land, language and culture after 40 000 years of continuous possession" (112). Ken Gelder and Jane M. Jacobs speak of a "radical shift from absence to profound significance," since the Mabo decision, in the acknowledgment of an Aboriginal presence on the land (16). Along similar lines, Ali Gumillya Baker and Gus Worby argue that since Mabo:

Indigenous narratives of place, prior and continuing ownership of land, and the cultural connections of peoples to land are more frequently heard in mainstream debate. The language of colonization is interrogated by an increasing number of

Aboriginal (and non-Aboriginal) knowledge holders, writers, artists, performers as well as historians. (22)

Indeed, Mabo changed Australian literature, according to Nicholas Birns, as “Indigenous issues ... surged to the forefront in an unprecedented way” (14). However, the Mabo decision’s significant and transformative impact on Australian *fiction writing* has been underestimated and underrepresented. What also needs to be acknowledged is that fiction writing itself has been instrumental, since 1992, in re-shaping and re-configuring imaginings and understandings of land and space, settlement and belonging, race and relationships, and nation and history to *create* post-Mabo discourse in Australia. In this essay, I address myself to the examination of a single novel that has escaped scholarly attention as a post-Mabo text, Peter Goldsworthy’s *Three Dog Night* (2003). At first glance, this is a story about a triad of Adelaide doctors on a quest to find peace in death in the desert. Mabo is not a thematic element of the novel at all. However, the impact of the Mabo decision on Australian fiction is to be found not only in novels that specifically thematise Mabo or native title, such as Dorothy Hewett’s *Neap Tide*, Alex Miller’s *Journey to the Stone Country* or Andrew McGahan’s *The White Earth*, all of which have been examined as post-Mabo fiction by Kieran Dolin. David Malouf’s *Remembering Babylon* and Kate Grenville’s *The Secret River* have also been scrutinised as post-Mabo texts (see Otto; West-Pavlov; Jones; Weaver-Hightower). However, an examination of novels like *Three Dog Night*, in which Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relations are *not* the primary focus, reveals the broader, more sustained impact Mabo has had on fiction writing, because when such novels *do* reference key motifs in settler-Australian fiction, such as land, identity, nationhood and history, they inevitably engage with Mabo’s cultural legacy: the recognition of indigenous people’s presence in the land, in history, and in political and social affairs, as opposed to their absence.

Such an invocation of “post-Mabo” requires a more expansive definition, one that moves beyond the more common usage of post-Mabo as a mere temporal marker (fiction produced after 1992) or as referring only to “texts that explicitly engage with white Australian responses to native title” (Dolin 4). I therefore propose the following: post-Mabo fiction is narrative prose, principally written by non-Aboriginal authors since the Mabo decision, that acknowledges or thematises, in whole or in part, prior and continuous indigenous occupation and possession of the land; it is fiction that seeks to counter the myth of *terra nullius*, and that seeks to critically scrutinise colonialism in Australia and the often-violent dispossession of indigenous peoples from their lands. In this context, I would like to examine a number of conversations and incidents in *Three Dog Night* to show how indigenous ownership of the country, the denial of *terra nullius*, and an assertion of the strength of Aboriginal cultures find their way into a contemporary Australian story that mostly deals with desire, dying, doctors and the desert.

### **Original Inhabitants**

*Three Dog Night* is a story narrated by the protagonist, Martin Blackman, a psychiatrist who has been working in England for ten years, but who returns home to Adelaide with his English psychiatrist (and medical doctor) wife, Lucy. Martin introduces Lucy to his old school and university friend, Felix, a surgeon. Felix has pursued an altogether different medical career. He went into the desert to work in an Aboriginal community but has now returned to Adelaide’s outskirts after contracting hepatitis C. His liver is disintegrating; he does not have long to live. For Martin, Felix has become cynical and obnoxious, and, what’s more, his long-time mate is now trying to charm Lucy into accompanying him back into the desert to die. Lucy feels too much sympathy for Felix’s condition to refuse him help. Most of

the second half of the novel is set in the desert, with Martin in pursuit of his wife and his manipulative, dying friend.

In the opening scene of the novel Martin and Lucy are driving through the Adelaide Hills on their way to visit Felix. It is a beautiful sunny Sunday morning. Martin has told Lucy, who is seeing the rolling green hills for the first time, that Germans settled the area. He is pointing out the flora and fauna when Lucy asks:

“What happened to the original inhabitants, Marty?”

“The Germans?”

“The Aborigines. I’ve read things ...”

“Then you already know. Died of the pox, mostly. Herded into missions. The usual sad stories. But it was a long time ago.”

I speak lightly, trying not to spoil the mood of the morning, but a shadow crosses her face and for a few minutes her thoughts are elsewhere. (Goldsworthy 6-7)

This conversation positions this novel, from its beginning, as a post-Mabo narrative. The dialogue reveals an acknowledgement by one of the main characters that Aboriginal people inhabited the land before the arrival of Europeans. Such representations of everyday banter in which middle-class urban characters consider Aborigines as Australia’s original inhabitants are generally not found in fiction writing prior to the Mabo decision. The conversation between Martin and Lucy is worthy of closer scrutiny because, although short, it sets two competing discourses on Aboriginal history, as read and considered in post-Mabo times, on a collision course with each other.

Lucy has clearly informed herself about the dispossession of Aboriginal people but what she has read on this subject is different to Martin’s reading of history. The ellipsis in the text (“I’ve read things ...”) hints at the unspeakable, the not-quite-yet utterable aspects of a colonial past that are starting to find their way into utterance, or near-utterance, in Anglo-Australian conversation. At the same time, Lucy’s hesitation or reluctance to give voice to what she has read allows Martin the opportunity to override her with his own assessments. His statement, “Then you already know,” is an attempt to divert Lucy from her line of discourse and inculcate her, as an English person who has only just arrived in Australia to live, into a line of thinking about the past shared by many politically conservative Australians. In four short sentences, Goldsworthy then positions his narrator as someone who still clings to more self-comforting assessments of the colonial past. Martin’s curt statements serve to obviate “white” culpability for Aboriginal dispossession by, firstly, downplaying the direct intervention of the colonist (“Died of the pox, mostly”); by emphasising the apparent necessity of white protectionism in the process (“Herded into missions”); by positioning such actions as common and worthy of pity (“The usual sad stories”); and, finally, by relegating these acts to a distant past, beyond the reproach of current generations (“But it was a long time ago”). These are four tropes of a history of white apologetics for the impact of British colonialism on Aboriginal peoples.

Martin knows, too, as evidenced by his effort to “speak lightly” about such a subject, that his statement might be taken as an insensitive dismissal of Aboriginal history; he does not want to ruin the “mood of the morning” but he fails. The haunting, hidden aspects of Australia’s past have emerged to spoil a perfectly fine day for this couple. The “shadow” that crosses Lucy’s face is the spectre of a troubling past, the “dark side of the Australian dream” (Hodge

and Mishra xvii), that continues to unsettle settler Australians. This is the first breakdown in communication and understanding between Martin and Lucy, and it foreshadows major breakdowns that are to emerge between them later in the narrative.

### **A Warlpiri Painting**

During the visit to Felix in the Adelaide Hills, Lucy learns about his medical work in a desert community. A little while after at a gathering to celebrate Lucy's birthday in Adelaide, Felix gives her a canvas painting by an Aboriginal artist. It is titled *Ngatijirri Jukurrpa*, which Felix translates as "Budgerigar Dreaming" from the language of the Warlpiri, the desert people Felix lived with (67). Lucy thinks it's beautiful, wants to know about it. Felix, who has been initiated into the Warlpiri community, is able and willing to answer her questions, to a degree. Martin, on the other hand, is not especially impressed. Through the varied receptions of this painting by the three main characters and others at Lucy's party, we witness a range of possible non-indigenous, middle-class attitudes to Aboriginal culture in post-Mabo times. In other words, Goldsworthy uses ekphrasis, the "literary representation of visual art" (Heffernan 297), to reveal post-Mabo tensions in contemporary Australian society.

The literary depiction of the painting begins after Lucy eases the rolled canvas out of a tube and spreads it across a kitchen bench. Felix, Lucy and Martin are all able to look at it. Martin's internalised thoughts as a viewer (and as narrator) come first: "An Aboriginal dot painting, thick daubs of acrylic paint in the usual desert colours: ochre-red, rust-brown, burnt umber, off-white" (Goldsworthy 67). Martin immediately allocates the artwork to what for him is a particular classifiable genre ("Aboriginal dot painting"); he considers the type of paint used and its application (not brushstrokes but "thick daubs"); and he ponders the colours. For him, every colour is qualified; none are identified in their wholeness. And these colours are described as "usual," nothing special. The painting falls within his range of (limited) expectations.

Martin then observes Lucy inspecting the painting: "She studies the spread canvas and its geometric patterns, half bevelled cuneiform, half exotic paw-print, its white margins smudged by thumbprints" (67). We must keep in mind that Martin, as the narrator, cannot really know what Lucy is studying; the text reveals what he *thinks* she is studying. What we read, then, is more of Martin's view of the painting. He considers its geometry, its seemingly disparate shapes. Again, these are all qualified, only ever "half" of anything. And he reads the thumbprints in the white margins of the canvas as smudges, suggesting he perhaps sees the painting as irreparably marked or disfigured. It is significant that this particular painting is unframed and that Martin is depicted as noticing its lack of a frame. Richard Brock reminds us that a frame around a painting, though not the work itself, "is indissociable from it; presents it in a certain manner, in a certain light; and draws attention to the relationship between the work and its setting" (103). A frame helps to construct meaning. But the lack of a formal frame around the painting depicted in Goldsworthy's text serves to reduce the capacity of those looking at it, particularly Martin, to construct meaning around or make sense of the painting. In general, for Martin, it is as if the painting doesn't quite measure up, is not properly put together, with its daubs and smudges and half-doneness. Or it remains for him only half describable, indecipherable. Martin has already shown himself to be an unreliable reader of Aboriginal history and we see, in this first ekphrastic moment, that all of his worldliness and learnedness deserts him when it comes to interpreting this piece of art. Aboriginal culture is either lacking, uninteresting or unfathomable for Martin.

In fact, Lucy is not interested in shapes or smudges, as Martin had assumed, but in the painting's story. "Tell me about it," she demands of Felix (67). His reply is evasive: "There's not much to tell. It's just a painting" (67). It's not clear here, initially, whether Felix does not know much about the painting, whether he wants to play down its significance or its value, or whether he is reluctant to impose his own non-Aboriginal interpretation on the work. After a while though, Felix relents. He taps his finger on a small painted circle and proceeds to explain:

"Warlpiri iconography is pretty simple. This might be a person, an animal, a place. In this case it's a hole in the ground – a waterhole. The place where the Dreaming budgie comes out."

"Budgies live in the desert?"

"Budgies belong in the desert. Ngatijirri, in desert Latin." (67-68)

This explanation suggests that Felix is an able interpreter of the work and is more than familiar with Warlpiri culture. In this ekphrasitic moment he provides both Lucy, within the story, and the reader, beyond the narrative, with seemingly helpful guidelines for non-Aboriginal readings of Aboriginal art. Felix fixes the budgie not only as living in but as belonging in place. Further, he gives the bird its Warlpiri name, thus fixing it in location within the culture of the Warlpiri, and the Warlpiri language is elevated in status, equated to the language of the learned elite in Western society, Latin. However, this "Latin" is not a dead language, it is alive and indigenous to this place in the desert. Martin has been listening and watching too. His thoughts are revealed before Felix continues to interpret:

Nothing on that canvas of squiggles resembles a bird of any kind. Felix points to a bent-stick figure. "This little bird is Japaljarri skin. My mob. He travels all over the place. Has all the usual adventures, usual trials" .... Another tap of his finger. "He goes back into the ground here. Ngarlpa." (68)

Martin continues to find the painting incomprehensible. The artwork is now thought of dismissively as "that canvas;" its shapes have become mere "squiggles." Lucy then asks Felix about Ngarlpa:

"It's a real place?"

"Of course. The Dreaming places are always real. Ngarlpa is a waterhole."

...

"You've been there?"

"No-one's been there for fifty years ... Blackfeller or white. No-one's even sure it's still there!" (68)

This discussion about the meaning of places signified in the painting further reveals Felix's apparently extensive knowledge of the Warlpiri. Here, Goldsworthy's text also serves to inform contemporary readers about important aspects of *The Dreaming*, such as the fact that places in Dreaming stories are real. In this sense it functions as a post-Mabo text in emphasising the link between Aboriginal stories about the land, as revealed in paintings and in *The Dreaming*, and real places in the landscape that have survived *terra nullius* and are still cared for by Aboriginal people. The painting is also important to the plot, as the waterhole depicted in it is the place Felix gets Lucy and Martin to accompany him to on his quest into the desert. (They journey to Ngarlpa under the stewardship of two Aboriginal

elders, one of whom is the artist who first gave the work to Felix as payment for medical help.)

### **A Warlpiri Painting, Commercialised**

Later at Lucy's birthday party, *Ngatijirri Jukurrpa* is examined and admired by other guests. The ensuing conversation is worth examining for its reflection of a further range of views about Aboriginal culture:

Stella, a weekend painter herself, gasps as she reads the artist's name, printed in thick felt-tip in a child's large hand on a back corner of the canvas.

"Doctor Jerry Jungarrayi? My birthday's in three weeks, Felix. Please take note."

"You know his paintings?" Lucy asks.

"That isn't a painting, darling. It's your superannuation."

...

"He's a medical doctor?" someone else is asking.

"A witch doctor," Frank suggests.

"I love those desert colours," Jill says. "But what's it mean? Is it a map?"

Felix is still saying nothing. Stella fills the vacuum. "I imagine it's a kind of quest story. A journey. Like many of the Dreamings."

"Looks like a board game," Frank says. He kneels and lifts another corner of the canvas and reads the inscription on the back. "*Ngatijirri Jukurrpa*. What's that in Swahili, Bwana? Do not pass go? Do not collect \$200?" (74-75)

In his study on the aesthetics of ekphrasis, Stephen Cheeke argues that artistic objects are often introduced into a text "to be read and deciphered by characters within the narrative, as well as readers of the work as a whole; to be understood or half-understood, sometimes even to be misunderstood" (20). The discussion in the passage above reveals multiple half-understandings about the artwork in question, and thus a range of misunderstandings and even racist attitudes towards Aboriginal culture. Stella responds not to the painted image but to information gained from insignia on the back of the canvas, suggesting her interest lies not in aesthetics or story but in the status and potential market value of the work. She recognises the name of the painter as a famous artist. The painting then becomes objectified as Lucy's "superannuation." This simulates what the art curator Hetti Perkins calls the "commodification and objectification of Aboriginal art" (97), which results from the "increasing consumption of 'things Aboriginal'" in recent decades (98). In contrast to Stella, Jill admires the colours but is more interested in the supposed utility of the painting ("Is it a map?"). In response, as Felix remains silent, Stella purports to speak as an expert on Aboriginal art. Her broad, generalised interpretation, without any reference to the specific painting, serves to reduce *Ngatijirri Jukurrpa* to speak for all Aboriginal desert art (as in, "They all look the same, don't they?"). Felix's silence throughout this discussion, his refusal to act as interpreter in front of a larger crowd, suggests a refusal to participate in the belittling of the artwork (its reduction to commercial commodity, cartographic utility, exemplar for all desert art), a refusal to take part in the derision of the artist and the culture of the Warlpiri that he has been initiated into.

Frank's outright racism dominates the scene. Earlier in the novel, he has been introduced as "Life-of-the-party Frank," a former school mate of Martin and Felix, and now the "State President of the College of Surgeons" (72). He represents the elite of Adelaide society. For Frank, *Doctor Jerry Jungarrayi* cannot be configured as a colleague, as a potential member of

his elite professional grouping; he must be a “witch doctor” because he is Aboriginal. And the painting is dismissed as a “board game,” a play thing, not worthy of serious consideration as art. He too inspects the back of the canvas and reads the name of the painting out loud. Instead of referencing the words “Ngatijirri Jukurrpa” as derivative of an Aboriginal language he does not understand, he exoticises the words beyond Australia as Swahili (i.e., as East African). Whereas earlier Felix sought to elevate the status of the Warlpiri language to something like learned Latin, Frank seeks to deny indigenous language in Australia, and thus to affirm, within the framework of the novel, the lingering presence of the discourse of *terra nullius* in bourgeois Australian society. For Frank, the painting is derisively equated to a game of mumbo-jumbo monopoly.

Renate Brosch argues that ekphrasis “is always an opportunity to comment on the ideology of representation, the hierarchy between word and image and by implication on the power relations between the figures represented in the two different sign systems” (260-61). We do not learn anything about the visual image of the painting in the above scene. Instead, we learn a lot about the ideology of representation of Aboriginal art by non-Aboriginal Australians, and the hierarchy of power relations, in particular, between non-Aboriginal word and Aboriginal image. Goldsworthy thus uses *Ngatijirri Jukurrpa* to portray a range of responses to Aboriginal culture in post-Mabo times. Ekphrasis becomes a tool for exposing informed readings, ill-informed mis-readings and racist anti-readings of Aboriginal culture. More broadly, the painting scenes index a variety of non-indigenous attitudes to Aboriginal people, art, politics and place that continue to be articulated and negotiated in response to what Nicholas Birns and Rebecca McNeer refer to as the “seismic shift” Mabo has caused in “Australians’ sense of what their nation and its relationship to Indigenous peoples is and has historically been” (9).

### **Bedford, the Driver**

When the narrative moves to central Australia, Martin is picked up from Alice Springs airport by Bedford Driver, an Aboriginal man, to be driven hundreds of kilometres north to meet Felix and Lucy. At the start of their journey, Martin offers to drive the car for this old, slow-moving man but Bedford refuses the offer. This is Bedford’s country; he is in charge of the vehicle and takes charge of the conversation as they head north. Martin has begun his own quest but he is no longer in control of his destiny; he must relinquish control to Bedford, who tells Martin stories about the country they drive through. The text thus portrays a non-Aboriginal character who must defer to an Aboriginal character’s learned knowledge of the land.

The land is viewed differently by the two characters as they drive along. Bedford explains to Martin that it has rained recently:

“... Big rains from the north, from my country, Warumungu country .... Ngapa we call him. Ngapa Jukurrpa. Rain Dreaming. He come straight through there, my place, all the way from the Gulf country. He finish up back that way.” (216)

The land is personified in Bedford’s description. It is full of names and stories, and he states plainly that this is his “country,” his “place.” A little later, Martin tries to take his mind off the slow progress they are making by “immersing [himself] in the landscape” (217), but he doesn’t take in much: “The plain now horizon to horizon, the highway running arrow-straight between red-dust shoulders as wide and smooth as the road itself .... Repetitive scrub and small anthills offer little to catch the eye” (217). It is not country that “speaks” to Martin; it is

monotonous and unreadable. It reflects a stereotyped, non-Aboriginal reading of the desert, which, as Roslynn Haynes puts it, appears to offer nothing but “the overwhelming monotony of interminable parallel dunes, spinifex and mulga scrub” (25).

Crucially, in this post-Mabo text, Bedford is not only portrayed as being familiar with the natural history of the land but also with its colonial history. They pass a turn-off with a signpost labelled “CONISTON,” and Bedford asks Martin if he knows the place. “Should I?,” replies Martin (217). This is a wonderfully evocative question-as-answer coming from a highly intelligent, well-educated non-Aboriginal Australian, who knows his Latin and ancient Greek history well, but who remains ignorant of the history of the colonisation of Australia. Goldsworthy’s text has Martin pose a question of seeming innocence that might well have been posed, too, by many intelligent, liberal-minded Australians had they been asked about Coniston. Martin, who could be read as a metonym for middle-class Australia, may know of various massacre sites across Australia, but should he know about Coniston? The text resonates with the suggestion that, yes, in post-Mabo Australia, Martin should probably know that Coniston is a place associated with massacre. Or, alternatively, we might argue that Martin suspects he should know something about Coniston. In any case, Bedford proceeds to enlighten Martin (whom he calls “Mardin”) with a story about Coniston:

“A whitefeller borrowed a blackfeller’s woman over that way. Long time back. Before army time, you know?”

“Before the war?”

“Yuwayi [Yes]. That whitefeller borrow two women, that Napurrula and her niece. Over that way, Coniston Station. Near the place we call Yurrkuru ...”

...

“That’s okay. The whitefeller pay for those women. He give the husband, that Japanangka, and his cousin Japaljarri tucker. Hatchets. Bacca .... But the wives don’t come back. The two blackfellers think about it. You borrow woman, Mardin, but not too long. Borrow too long, big trouble eh? They spear that whitefeller. Blackfeller way, Mardin. Payback. He keep those woman too long.”

...

“True story, Mardin. My daddy was a little boy.” (217-18)

First, it must be stated that this story is important for the development of the plot, as Martin himself feels slighted by Felix having “borrowed” his wife Lucy, as he sees it, for his end-of-life odyssey. A slightly paranoid Martin even wonders whether Bedford thinks he is planning to spear Felix when he meets him (218). Second, the form and flow of Bedford’s story is interesting for its attempt to replicate Aboriginal modes of oral storytelling (keeping in mind that this is a non-indigenous author’s representation of Aboriginal oral storytelling). Stephen Muecke says there is “a kind of rhythmic alternation, an oscillation in oral narrative” between speech and silence, between narrator and listener, between “then” and “now” (77). We see this kind of oscillation at work in Bedford’s story in a number of ways. First, it alternates between past and present tense, though it is told mostly in the present tense thereby giving the story currency. Second, important details of the story are repeated, doubled back on. Third, the listener is integrated into the narrative, especially through question prompts. Muecke points out that: “Someone listening to Aboriginal stories is positioned ... as a participant who must respond actively during the telling of the story.... The listener is thus linked, personally ... back to the actual event” (71). Finally, the assurance of veracity is established with its closure as a “True story,” and via the naming of a witness to the events who is known to the storyteller: Bedford’s father was around at the time. The attempt to incorporate oral



storytelling structure serves to privilege the importance of Aboriginal oral stories in contemporary historiography. However, what I would principally like to examine in Bedford's narrative is its subject matter. Importantly, Bedford references the *foreground* story to what is known as the Coniston Massacre, the last known mass killing of Aboriginal people (and one of the least known) on the colonial frontier (Lewis et al. 30).

In August 1928, a "white" dingo trapper, Fred Brooks, was found murdered on Coniston station, around 250 kilometres north-west of Alice Springs. Instead of seeking out the suspected killer, known to Aboriginal witnesses as Japanangka, non-Aboriginal vigilantes and the police, led by Constable William Murray, launched punitive raids on the Warlpiri. Thirty-one people were killed, according to a federal government Board of Inquiry set up to investigate the raids, though it is more likely that between 70 and 100 Warlpiri were killed (Doyle 146). The Board of Inquiry exonerated Murray and all others involved in the killings. What many accounts fail to mention is *why* Brooks was killed by Japanangka or other Aboriginal people in the first place. Theresa Napurrula Ross, whose father was an eyewitness to the Coniston killings, says that Japanangka killed the dingo trapper "because Brooks stole his wife" (Ross n.pag.). This is the most commonly cited motive for the killing of Brooks, which became the trigger for the indiscriminate killings that followed. Crucially, in Goldsworthy's fictional re-telling of the massacre story, through Bedford, Japanangka's reported motive for the attack on Brooks is also provided first.

Martin is subsequently involved in extending the narrative: "What happened then?", he asks Bedford (219).

"Big trouble, Mardin. This policeman name of Murray went all over the country killing people.... That way. He kill a big mob of blackfellers. But them two men who did the spearing, the Japanangka and his cousin, they run away. Live to old age. In the spinifex country. That way." And he chuckles[.] (Goldsworthy 219)

Bedford recounts the reprisals against Aboriginal people for Japanangka's actions, names Murray as the principal actor involved in the killings, and suggests a kind of triumph in the end for the protagonists in their managing to avoid police capture. The story is an important intervention in the Bedford-drives-Martin-north narrative, for it draws attention to signposts (CONISTON is on a signpost [217], in capitalised letters) in the landscape that speak of a recent history of colonial conquest that is not yet acknowledged or even known about among the conquerors. Bedford returns to the Coniston story later on to explain that many Warlpiri people ran hundreds of kilometres north through the desert to escape vigilante killers (280). Some Warlpiri were able to live in relative safety with the Gurindji people at Wave Hill "[till] Murray stop killing them blackfellers down south" (281).

It is worth noting that *Three Dog Night* was published in the year of the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Coniston Massacre. The Central Land Council (CLC), the body that officially represents Aboriginal land holders in central Australia, organised special ceremonies and events to commemorate the killings of 1928. As the CLC puts it:

The story of the Coniston killings is well known to many Central Australian Aboriginal people. It has been told and re-told to generations of Aboriginal children by their parents and grandparents but most Australians are still unaware that such a brutal event happened in our recent past. (*Making Peace* 2)

Bill Wilson and Justin O'Brien emphasise Coniston's "status" as "arguably the best documented and one of the bloodiest of all frontier conflicts in Australian history" (75). Yet for Wilson and O'Brien, the affair makes a mockery of the claim "that Australia's settlement was fairly guided by the British rule of law," given what amounted to a "whitewash" of mass murder by the Commonwealth Board of Inquiry (76). "Coniston gives the lie that the British rule of law, even where it applied, offered security and justice to Aboriginal people" (Wilson and O'Brien 76).

Goldsworthy draws particular attention to the Coniston massacre, in an anniversary year, in his work of fiction. His text serves to highlight the relative temporal proximity of frontier violence in Australia, given that stories of the massacre reside in the memories of many Warlpiri people still living in central Australia. In the novel, the Coniston story is told and reiterated by Aboriginal characters (by Bedford and, later, by Doctor Jerry, who is said to have fled the killing raids [280-81]), not by the narrator, Martin, and not by the non-Aboriginal interpreter of Warlpiri stories, Felix.

### **Doctor Jerry's Singing**

On the journey north with Martin, Bedford stops in a community to pick up Doctor Jerry Jungarrayi, the painter of *Ngatijirri Jukurrpa* and Felix's adopted "father." He knows the desert country they will head into together. They hit the road again, and Martin reports: "New seating arrangements in the Toyota: Bedford and Doctor Jerry in the front, me relegated to the back" (225). In this way, power relations are established among the three men in the enclosed space of the car. Martin must once again defer to Aboriginal control during the journey. Towards dusk, Bedford pulls over to the side of the road when he notices a flock of budgerigars nearby. He wakes the older man from a slumber, and explains to Martin why they are stopping:

"That little green bird make that old man happy. He own that little green bird, Mardin. His animal. His Dreaming, you know?"

No signs of happiness in the old man's face, but his lips are moving slightly, and when Bedford cuts the engine I realize he is singing, a soft chant that is barely audible beneath the excited twittering of the descending birds. (227)

This is a representation (albeit by a non-indigenous author) of an intimate moment of Aboriginal connection to country. Doctor Jerry is portrayed as "singing up this country," as Bedford puts it, a little later on (280). He is singing to (or with or about) his "Dreaming," his totem in this specific instance. Deborah Bird Rose explains that totemic relationships in Australia are three-way relationships between people, species and country (28). The relationship invariably requires "that people take responsibilities for their relationship with [a particular] species, and learn that their own well-being is inextricably linked with the well-being of their totemic species" (28). The well-being of people and their species "is linked to the well-being of [the] land" (Rose 28). In other words, Doctor Jerry's singing should not only be understood as something that makes him "happy," as the text overtly states, it should also be understood in terms of the fulfilment of responsibility. A sense of responsibility Doctor Jerry has for his Dreaming is represented, I would suggest, in the lack of manifest happiness that Martin sees on the old man's face, the apparent seriousness and formality with which he engages in "soft chant that is barely audible." Such moments of quiet pleasure and formality involving Doctor Jerry (and, later, Bedford) "singing the country" are depicted at various points in Goldsworthy's novel hereafter (277-78, 280, 284, 294, 311). The *Ngatijirri Jukurrpa*, which was earlier just a painting with "thick daubs" and "squiggles" for Martin, a

representation of things he did not understand on a piece of canvas in the urban environment of Adelaide, is now coming to life with real people in a living landscape.

### **To the Sinkhole**

After meeting up with Lucy and Felix in the (fictional) town of One Shoe Creek, the triad of Martin, Lucy and Felix sets off in the car, with Bedford and Doctor Jerry, bound for Ngarlpa, the waterhole or sinkhole in the desert. Felix's condition is deteriorating quickly. He needs the medical attention and help of both Lucy and Martin if he is to make it to his final resting place. While the final part of the novel deals mostly with narrator-Martin's frustration, jealousy and anger at having to look on as his wife Lucy comforts the dying Felix, the text establishes very clearly that the Aboriginal men are not followers of or mere assistants to a non-Aboriginal man's dying wish. Rather, the two Aboriginal men are leading this odyssey into the desert. As the text has made clear thus far, Ngarlpa is a special place for Doctor Jerry Jungarrayi. He was born there and grew up there, and is keen to return to visit this place for the first time in 60 years (232-33). Bedford is also duty-bound to visit Ngarlpa: "My mother's country," he tells Martin. "My job to keep an eye on it.... But I never bin there" (262). In other words, this is not a quest textualised as a Voss-like search for "white" meaning in the desert, with Aboriginal guides imagined as footrests. The Aboriginal men are portrayed as taking part in this journey on their own terms, for their own reasons. The seating arrangements in the car are, once again, a sign of who is in charge. Martin-as-narrator notes: "The old men sit in the front seats, Lucy is sandwiched between Felix and me on the back bench. Second-class, whitefeller-class" (259). Further, during the journey, Martin is ordered by Bedford to gather wood for the campfire and do the cooking (260). He thus takes on a role of subservience to the Aboriginal men. This is the position (and status) that Martin and the triad as a whole will have to accept on this ultimate journey.

After days of driving through sand and scrub, the group arrives at Ngarlpa, the sinkhole. But rotting carcasses in the water have turned it into a stink-hole. A kangaroo and other smaller animals have come here to drink, fallen in, and have not been able to climb out due to steep banks around the hole. Martin considers the breadth of their journey: "We have travelled as far from the high paradise of the Adelaide Hills as it is possible to travel. To the mouth of hell?" (296-97). He wonders whether the place of the budgerigar might actually be "a doorway to hell ... Avernus, the birdless place?" (307), given there are no budgies around, only the smell of death. Martin's allusion here to Virgil's *Aeneid* is one of many references he makes throughout the narrative to Roman and Greek mythology. In his educated Western mindset so much of what he sees and experiences is reduced to Latin epic. On the one hand, it is patronising. It indicates the narrator's imposition of a European way of seeing the world on the Australian landscape. It becomes the only way Martin can translate the incomprehensible into meaning for himself, and it is colonialist in tradition. On the other hand, we know of Martin's unreliability as a narrator, and we are not required to consider the world as he does. I suggest we are invited to see Martin's reading of the landscape as indulgent, yes, but also as bestowing significance on Aboriginal readings of the land, as offering tribute to those readings, given his elevation of all that *he* encounters to epic poetry. Martin listens to Bedford's stories about the land, hears Doctor Jerry's sustained "singing up" the country, realises that these old men, whose country it is, see great forces at work, see meaning in small detail, are able to read the land according to a pre-existing poesy and law. Martin does not have access to their view of the world and therefore provides the reader with limited access, but Aboriginal stories and songs about the land can be configured, through Martin's parallel reading of ancient Western stories in the land, as revealing the existence of a civilisation of

high culture on the Australian continent. It is a high culture known and practiced by indigenous Australians.

As if to prove Martin's reading of Ngarlpa-as-Avernus wrong, at the moment of Felix's death, as the first rays of sunlight illuminate the sky and land, there is a sudden visitation of birds. Doctor Jerry has been singing "long flowing lines" of poetry to the "percussive *clap-clap* of Bedford's sticks" (311). The two men have positioned themselves on the other side of the sinkhole from Martin, Lucy and Felix. Suddenly, Martin hears the old men shout out in excitement, and he sees a "dense, fast-moving cloud" of what he first suspects are insects "wheeling and banking above the plain, silhouetted against the whitening sky" (319). But it is a flock of birds, "a flying carpet of luminous greens and yellows" (320). Ngatijirri – the budgerigars – have arrived "by the hundreds of thousands, perhaps by the million" (320). And Martin sees that "[out] of the mouth of Avernus, the birdless place ..., the little green birds are now rising" (321). They rise and fall continuously to drink from the water. This is not Avernus; it is a place of life for desert birds.

By the time the sun is up the budgerigars have gone. A crow squawks. The old men begin mourning for Felix. Each takes a stone and strikes at his forehead, drawing blood. "But almost as soon as they have begun," Martin observes, "they stop. These are old men, after all. Desert men, pragmatic men, thrifty with all resources, including grief" (322). After the joyful and uplifting visitation of the budgies, Martin is brought back down to earth by the pragmatism of the old men. Felix's wish was for his body to be left perched in a tree-bier rather than be buried in the earth, and so Martin sets off to help Bedford. "We build that Japaljarri [Felix] a proper bird-nest, eh?" says a grinning Bedford, as they set to work with hatchets in the scrub. At this moment of manual labour, Martin's narration of the desert odyssey comes to an end. In a final paragraph, all of his epic exultations to the learned heights of myth and poetry desert him as he concentrates on the corporeal, on observing a man, Bedford, at home in his land:

*Homo sanguinea*. Cheerful man. Lizard fat in his belly, the yellow fat of the morning sun basting his head and shoulders. Working away with his hatchet, working up a sweat, on a morning to die for. (323)

This passage cannot be read as a description of Aboriginal experience; it is Goldsworthy's reading of Aboriginal experience as fabricated through the views of his non-indigenous narrator. However, the image that we (as readers) are left with here is of desert inhabited by a man of good cheer, with food in his stomach, the sun on his body, sweat on his brow, at work building someone a final resting place: Bedford Driver, a contemporary indigenous Australian, is at home in this place.

### **Post-Mabo Quest**

Alison Bartlett has noted the emergence of a different kind of quest figure in what she calls contemporary "desert narratives" (119). She points out that "Australian deserts have traditionally been narrated as sites of discovery, exploration, penetration and mapping, and have featured also as physical landscapes for dramas of the Australian psyche" (119). The legal and cultural fiction of *terra nullius* enabled the creation of such narratives, says Bartlett, as well as "a particularly masculinized tradition of writing" (119). But she argues that due to shifts in cultural and feminist theory and in black-white relations, the dominant tropes of desert narratives are "no longer sustainable" (119). She suggests that "new ways of writing relations with the desert" have emerged (119). Bartlett, whose article was published in 2001,

identifies Nikki Gemmell's 1998 novel *Cleave*, as well as Eva Sallis' *Hiam* (1998) and Kim Mahood's *Craft for a Dry Lake* (2000), as narratives which attempt to rework "patriarchal and colonial legacies with the land and its indigenous people" (Bartlett 121).

With the benefit of a little more hindsight, I would call these texts *post-Mabo* quest narratives. We might add Jo Dutton's *On the Edge of Red* (1998), Pat Jacobs' *Going Inland* (1998), Robert Drewe's *Grace* (2005) and, of course, Goldsworthy's *Three Dog Night* to this list, because all of these narratives acknowledge prior and continuing Aboriginal ownership of the land in stories involving a protagonist's journey into a desert or "outback" region. In such post-Mabo quest narratives, Aboriginal characters are not the main characters but they are integrated into the story and often intervene in the main plot. These characters appear not as figures of subservience to "white" whim but as traditional owners of the land or as knowledge holders in country they belong to. In these narratives, non-Aboriginal wanderers are cast as *visitors* to already-known places, not discoverers of an Australian void.

The particular analysis and interpretation undertaken here of *Three Dog Night*, and its subsequent sub-categorisation as post-Mabo quest narrative, suggests that many more novels written since the Mabo decision of 1992 might now be read as post-Mabo fiction. The discursive interventions of Mabo, across a range of Australian literary production of the last quarter of a century, remain open to further investigation.

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