

Book Review: Growing Up Aboriginal in Australia edited by Anita Heiss

*With the edited collection **Growing Up Aboriginal in Australia**, Anita Heiss brings together a range of multivocal, heterogeneous and deeply compelling contributions from 51 Aboriginal writers reflecting on their experiences of growing up in Australia. This is a valuable resource for those wanting to listen to, learn from and better understand the diverse experiences and perspectives of Aboriginal people in Australia, finds Maja Milatovic, and will also prompt many readers to consider their own implication in unequal, imperialist power structures that continue to impact on everyday lives.*

***Growing Up Aboriginal in Australia*. Anita Heiss (ed.). Black Inc. 2018.**

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Growing Up Aboriginal in Australia is a landmark anthology featuring 51 temporally, geographically and culturally diverse contributions from Aboriginal people detailing their experiences of growing up in Australia. The anthology is edited by Dr Anita Heiss, a prominent author of fiction, non-fiction, social commentary and a groundbreaking genre of women's commercial fiction featuring Indigenous protagonists. Heiss is a proud Wiradjuri woman who has previously related her experiences of growing up Aboriginal in Australia in her memoir [Am I Black Enough for You?](#) (2012). As a socially and politically engaged author, editor and educator, Heiss is committed to empowering marginalised communities through art and literacy. Reflecting on the anthology in her editorial 'Introduction', Heiss writes that there were no limitations placed on the content of the contributions, resulting in truly multivocal, heterogeneous and deeply compelling stories which speak for themselves.



Each contributor reveals personal and vastly diverse understandings of their own identity and personal history. Adding layers of intimacy to the affective experience of reading, each narrative is accompanied by a photograph of the author as a child. While the stories reveal the devastating effects of racism and shame brought by colonialism, dehumanisation and attempts to erase Aboriginal cultures and break apart families, Heiss highlights that the 'anthology is not one of victimhood: it is one of strength and resilience, of pride and inspiration, demonstrating the will to survive and the capacity to thrive against the odds' (2). This collection of inspiring narratives shows Aboriginal people authoring their own stories, disrupting hierarchies and actively resisting colonisers' erasure.

The anthology is dedicated to the memory of passionate poet, activist, educator and environmentalist Alice Eather and 'all those who were lost too soon'. Eather's contribution in the anthology, entitled *Yúya Karrabúrra*, features her poem of the same name, followed by a narrative reflecting on the poem's engagement with identity and detailing Eather's childhood and family. *Yúya Karrabúrra* is a deeply moving meditation on Eather's identity and the challenges of navigating multiple worlds. In Eather's words:

I walk between these two worlds / A split life / Split skin / Split tongue / Split kin / Everyday these worlds collide / And I'm living and breathing / This story of black and white (77).

Eather depicts the ways in which she embodies her complex ancestry, highlights the necessity of coming together and, in her words, 'being part of conscious change' (84), and taking action to challenge ongoing oppression and dispossession.



Image Credit: Aboriginal Flag, Sydney ([picsbyclive CC BY 2.0](#))

Apart from the complexities of identity, numerous contributors write on their experiences of racism and the frequent objectification and stereotyping resulting from hegemonic culture's monolithic and reductive notions of Aboriginal identities. For instance, Natalie Cromb's narrative features her memories of childhood happily spent on country with family, followed by high school experiences marked by the sense of being singled out and teased for being Aboriginal before ending with her eighteenth birthday. Here, Cromb remembers someone she considered a friend introducing her through a racist remark (66). The casual way in which this was uttered reveals a broader context: how the insidiousness of racism can permeate even the closest relationships with friends, families or partners.

Describing the experience of racism in her contribution, Ambelin Kwaymullina writes:

It's like standing in the sea and having waves crash over you; it's regular and relentless and you forget what it's like to be able to properly breathe (136).

Kwaymullina's waves metaphor as 'regular and relentless' shows the omnipresence of racism, its daily iterations and its suffocating effects. Many contributors describe in detail the ways in which racism limits them and confines to narrow, damaging constructs. Crucially, Kwaymullina underscores the value of safe spaces where she retreats, places of possibility and reclamation which make her 'horizons expand to infinity' (137).

Most importantly, many of the contributions focus on empowerment, resilience and survival, affirming the politically engaged function of this anthology. Education is highlighted as a crucial element in challenging social hierarchies, establishing spaces of affirmation and leading communities. For instance, prominent sporting figures Adam Goodes and Patrick Johnson underscore the relevance of learning from one's elders, listening and being fearless and ambitious. As Shahni Wellington urges at the end of her narrative revolving around life lessons: 'So don't forget: Put your identity first. Respect and educate. Keep it strong' (261).

Moreover, all the contributors reflect a deep sense of belonging to country and culture. For instance, Frank Szekely's narrative begins with poetic descriptions of places important to him, their natural beauty and the pride he feels when he sees the reactions of people visiting those spaces (226). Ultimately, this anthology contains a range of interconnected themes and issues, with only a fragment of these mentioned in the thematic threads outlined above. The layered wealth of experiences and perspectives represented in this work invites a highly reflexive and thoughtful reading.

Considering the importance of storytelling, Doreen Nelson states in her contribution: 'I believe by recording our stories we leave behind a wealth of knowledge and a rich and important legacy for our future generations' (177). This anthology demonstrates the importance of centering Indigenous Australian Peoples' voices, perspectives, art and scholarship in the ongoing processes of decolonisation in Australia. Challenging hierarchies and cultural erasure, the contributions feature a moving, engaged and diverse range of perspectives on Aboriginal identities. The anthology is accessible to a range of readers and not isolated to one specific group. Therefore, it will be of interest to the international public, activists, artists, scholars and students of Indigenous studies, Australian studies, history, sociology, literature and other interrelated disciplines. Moreover, the anthology is a crucial resource to be included in reading lists in tertiary and secondary schools, in order to change reductive curricula that erase Indigenous Australian perspectives and cultures while privileging white Anglo-Australian views and narratives.

Ultimately, the anthology brings to diverse readers of different backgrounds a valuable resource for listening to, learning and understanding heterogeneous experiences of Aboriginal people in Australia, as well as for reflecting on one's own accountability and implication in unequal, imperialist power structures which privilege certain groups over others.

Dr Maja Milatovic teaches at ANU College, Canberra, Australia. She holds a PhD in English Literature from the University of Edinburgh (UK) and an MA in Postmodern Fiction from Aberystwyth University (UK). Her current research is located at the intersections of international student education, human rights and decolonising methodologies.

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.