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Alex Miller's Utopian Vision of a Bi-Cultural Australian Identity in his Novel *Journey to the Stone Country*¹

The concern of this paper is to present an important contribution to the current discussion of Australian identity made by the acclaimed Australian writer Alex Miller in his novel *Journey to the Stone Country* (2002). I am going to proceed in the following order: First I would like to acquaint you with Miller and his novel. This will then lead me to the focus of this paper which lies with Miller's utopian vision of a bi-cultural Australian identity. He develops this vision as a possible remedy to Australia's identity crises and presents it parallel to his protagonists' journey. I will first present the utopian model and then proceed to Miller's careful attempt to apply it to his protagonists' lives. Using the novel as a 'fictional laboratory'², the author not only conceptualizes a model of a new Australian identity, but he also translates it into a concrete context by letting his protagonists examine it. In the conclusion of this paper, I would like to emphasise the relevance of Miller's literary achievement for present-day Australian society.

Alex Miller was born in London in 1936 and emigrated to Australia as a young man in 1953. His emigration was mainly motivated by the wish to start a new life as an itinerant stockman. In the central highlands of Queensland his droving work brought him into close contact with the Murris, the Aboriginal people of this region. In their company, Miller was introduced to a stockman's life in the outdoors and indigenous knowledge of the land. This unusual insight into Aboriginal culture later

¹ The content of this paper, if not marked otherwise, is based solely on my exam thesis *The Quest for White and Black Australian Identity in Alex Miller's Novel Journey to the Stone Country*.

² I owe this term to Professor Norbert H. Platz, who further elaborates (2009) on the functions of *Journey to the Stone Country* as a 'fictional laboratory'.

enabled him to draw a realistic picture of the concerns of indigenous Australians in his work. Miller's move to Melbourne after his stockman years and his profession as a full-time writer did not disrupt his connection with the Queensland landscape and its original inhabitants. Upon a visit to Townsville in the 1990s, the author made the acquaintance of a white woman and her Aboriginal partner who took Miller on a journey to a sacred site, the stone country. Later, Miller chose these two people as models for his two protagonists in his novel *Journey to the Stone Country*. Furthermore, he adopted the landscape of coastal and central Queensland for his setting, letting his protagonists follow the same route to the stone country he took with his friends (cf. ABC 2004). Such a link between fiction and reality lends Miller's work an unusually high degree of authenticity and emphasises its relevance to the current discussion of Australian identity.

Alex Miller was introduced to the violence of Australia's colonial past soon after his emigration from England (cf. Miller 2008). As a white Australian, he intimately knows the feelings of guilt, displacement and the yearning for reconciliation which have pervaded Australian society for the past 30 or 40 years. The need to overcome the burden of the colonial past and to shape a united Australian nation is deeply felt in all quarters of society and seemed to experience a welcome relief with Kevin Rudd's official *Apology* in 2008. However, although the Rudd government implemented a programme called *Close the Gap* soon afterwards, which is aimed at overcoming the great difference "in life expectancy, educational achievement and economic opportunity" (Rudd 2008) between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians, Aboriginal people still remain on the fringe of society. The Australian Human Rights Commission reports that Aborigines still constitute the most disadvantaged and deprived group within the Australian society (cf. AHRC 2008). Certainly reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians can only be successfully effected if the Aboriginal people are fully integrated into Australian society, enjoying the same rights and duties as the rest of the nation, yet preserving their own identity as a people rich in tradition and culture.

Journey to the Stone Country recounts the story of Annabelle Beck and Bo Rennie who chance upon each other in the central highlands of Queensland and set out on a journey into their past. Gradually, they step back into the landscape that is deeply entwined with their family history and their own biography. Annabelle, the daughter of a white colonial family of landowners, left the country of her childhood at a young age, thus symbolizing non-indigenous Australia in its estrangement from the land. Bo, on the other hand, is the descendant of a white landowner and an Aboriginal woman who has handed down her indigenous knowledge of the land and the ancestors to her family. Thus Bo strongly identifies with his indigenous heritage and possesses important cultural knowledge. Unlike Annabelle, Bo has never relinquished his ties to his homeland. He has, however, endured decades of displacement following the forceful removal of his family from their farm. Upon encountering Annabelle, he feels the time for a return to his "heartland" has finally come. Taking these two characters as representatives of white and black Australia, one can conclude that both groups have to meet on the common ground of having to face uncertainties concerning their identity and ancestral ties. It is most significant that Miller depicts Annabelle's and Bo's quest as being inseparably linked. Only with Annabelle's arrival does Bo feel ready to return to his ancestral land; and it is only under his guidance that Annabelle finally manages to return to her homeland. Thus the author emphasises the importance of a collective Australian identity formation involving both cultures.

However, the protagonists' path is strewn with obstacles, the largest being the revelations of an old Aboriginal woman who unsettles Bo's and Annabelle's relationship by telling them of a massacre committed by Annabelle's grandfather against Bo's ancestral tribe. Nevertheless, Bo and Annabelle seemingly manage to overcome these obstacles by following the teachings of love and forgiveness of Bo's grandmother, Grandma Rennie. It is through this indigenous character that Miller evolves his utopian vision of a bi-cultural Australian identity.

Grandma Rennie's life and teachings are gradually recounted throughout the novel by her grandson Bo, for she is already deceased

at the time of the narrative. Her position in the novel is soon revealed as central as she proves to both sides that a life of reconciliation, equality, and love is possible, if the historical wrongs can be forgiven. Grandma's unusual ability to unite black and white seems to evolve from her own history. As the last child to be born in the sacred stone country she is raised in the traditional ways of her people outside the influence of the white colonisers. She is initiated, given a secret name and introduced to a deeper level of traditional knowledge through ritual. However, her untroubled childhood does not last long for she becomes one of the witnesses of a massacre committed by Annabelle's grandfather Louis Beck and his friend George Bigge. Grandma is forced to witness the violent deaths of her closest relatives and friends from a hiding place. She is traumatised a second time when, at the age of eight, she is separated from her parents and taken to a cattle station where she is put to work by the Bigge family. After she is first employed as a common servant, Grandma is later promoted to the position of companion for the two daughters of the family. Thus she becomes part of the white family and is allowed to live in equality with the Bigge girls and to be educated in the same accomplishments as they are. At the time of the narrative, the discovery of an old photograph offers material proof of her equal standing within white society:

Assured and at ease, the black woman gazed steadily [...] out of the stilled moment of past time, her hands folded in her lap, a necklace of beads or pearls at her throat. Her posture upright and formal, her pale gown narrowly waisted, her bosom buttoned firmly within the bodice of the dress, her dark hair parted severely down the centre. Her gaze was self-possessed and calm, as if she were in the most familiar surroundings among these white people and knew herself to be at home. She looked out of the photograph from her own world, an authority in her gaze [...]. (303)

The photograph is the only glimpse Annabelle and the reader can catch of Grandma apart from Bo's accounts of her. It shows a woman whose Aboriginality is outwardly only discernible by her black skin – and even this Annabelle does not recognise at first sight: "At first Annabelle thought this young woman was sitting in the shade of the verandah coping. Then she realized she was not in the shade but was black."

(303) In this instance, even the colour of skin seems to be an uncertain indicator of cultural affiliations in Miller's novel. As the author himself has remarked in an interview: "It's not a black and white thing. It's not that black and white. You know, we find out. It transpires, it occurs, we discover." (ABC 2004) Avoiding distinct categorisation based on ethnicity, Miller argues that skin colour does not constitute cultural identity. His characters are not simply distinguishable by the colour of their skin; rather, they are revealed to be part of either - or both - groups by their actions, attitudes, traditions, and their overall perception of the world. Grandma Rennie's blackness has become nearly invisible as she seems to have been completely immersed in the white world. However, though her attire and bearing clearly associate her with white Australian culture, she has been able to preserve her indigenous identity. Before her elevation to equal status in the Bigge family, she set out on a secret journey to the stone grounds to perform rituals putting a curse on George Bigge in revenge for the massacre. Clearly, Grandma's capacity for forgiveness and intercultural love gradually grows during the years she spends with the Bigges. Though forced to live with one of the murderers of her own people, she nevertheless learns to accept the whites as fellow human beings. Her position as one of the family is presented as the cornerstone of her ability to choose love and respect over hatred and revenge.

Grandma's position within white society is further strengthened and secured by her marriage to Iain Ban Rennie, a white landowner. The relationship is based on a deep love, uniting them in a perfect fusion of black and white culture. While holding on to their core cultures, they both adapt to the other's lifestyle and beliefs. The couple do not see any difference between blacks and whites but treat everybody with equal respect and friendliness. "She always told us, what's good for one is good for everyone. And she'd share out the good things accordingly with whoever come along." (112) After his death, Grandma buries her white husband in the sacred ground of the stone country and performs indigenous rituals at his grave. In spite of the law preventing indigenous landownership at the time, she inherits Verbena Station from Iain and manages it with the help of her son.

Her open-mindedness and authority earn her the respect of the whole community, who treat her like any other landowner and welcome her into the social community of the nearby town.

It is of great significance that Grandma Rennie actively decides to pass on to her progeny only those views and values which will enhance intercultural harmony. Therefore, her experience of the massacre is not revealed to Bo or his siblings. Instead, she takes care to bequeath her knowledge of the land and indigenous culture to the younger generation, including white children, in the hope that the traditions will not be lost. As Bo recalls: "The way my Grandma seen it, brothers and sisters don't kill each other. And that's the way she lived." (360)

By creating Grandma Rennie, Miller has developed a utopian vision of a bi-cultural Australian identity in that he presents a character who has succeeded in uniting her Aboriginal heritage with the dominant culture of white settler society. Grandma is by no means the product of assimilation or cultural suppression. On the contrary, she retains her indigenous identity unblemished throughout life. Though the target of colonial cruelty, Grandma is also given the rare chance to become a respected member of the white community. This twist in Grandma's biography lays the foundation for her ability to unite her own culture with that of the invaders. Her marriage to a white landowner who possesses the same open-mindedness and adaptability is the epitome of her bi-cultural identity. Without obstruction, Grandma can pursue her indigenous heritage as well as life in the white community. Miller presents this ability of blending one's core culture with that of another people as one solution to intercultural conflict.

On a closer reading of Miller's novel, however, the impression is created that the viability of his vision can be questioned. The account of Grandma's life ends with her sister's betrayal and the consequent loss of Verbena Station. In the end, Grandma, whose life has been characterised by love and respect for everybody, falls victim to her sister's machinations and the Australian law. Asking a solicitor for help, she learns that, as an Aborigine, she had never been legally entitled to hold property or to marry Iain Rennie in the first place. In a

moment of need the marginality of Grandma's position within white society becomes apparent. Cornered by her sister and a corrupt solicitor, she does not experience any support or help from the community. All of a sudden, it seems questionable whether the respect and friendship she experienced from her neighbours were genuine, or whether, as Bo puts it,

[...] people must have decided Grandma Rennie's time was up and that she'd had a pretty good run for an old Jangga woman from the Suttor country. (256).

Annabelle's memory of her family's reaction to the Rennies' lifestyle on Verbena offers further proof that Grandma was never completely accepted as an equal by the white community:

She was remembering her father telling them around the dinner table of the fights at Verbena and the strays along the creek. They had laughed to think of such a place and thought it peculiar and different. (262)

Having developed his bi-cultural ideal, Miller carefully tests its feasibility by applying it to the rather more realistic context of his protagonists, Bo and Annabelle. While Bo is familiar with his family history, Annabelle has to struggle with revelations about Australian history and her own ancestors. After her sensibilities towards white colonial wrongs have been awakened, she realizes how precarious the relationship between blacks and whites still is:

Maybe they all hate us, she thought. Deep down. For what we've stolen from them. For what we've done to them. It was the first time she had considered such a possibility and she was a little shocked by the implications of it. To be hated, after all. It was unthinkable. (94)

While Bo was familiarized with white culture by Grandma Rennie, Annabelle does not have the advantage of a bi-cultural upbringing. On their journey she is gradually acquainted with Bo's Aboriginal perception of the land and of life in general. It is interesting to note that Miller presents Bo as the connector of the white woman with her past and identity. His indigenous wisdom coupled with Grandma Rennie's teachings pave the way for Annabelle to face her family's colonial past and to develop a new feeling of home and belonging. Thus, Miller reverts the historical notion that white Australian culture dominates Aboriginal culture (cf. Platz 284). Annabelle's open-mindedness and adaptability enable her to understand and value Bo's

culture and thereby to re-define herself. Gradually she learns to understand Bo's mindset and her own culture-based perception of the world. However, the cultural difference between them repeatedly puts Bo's and Annabelle's relationship to the test after they have become lovers. After an argument about the historical significance of an old homestead, Annabelle ponders the impact of their cultural difference:

Were their pasts too similar and yet too different for them to understand each other? [...] She thought of Thomas Carlyle boasting of reading a volume of Gibbon a day for six days when he was a young man. Such scraps of knowledge would be utterly foreign to Bo's mind. [...] What might there be, she wondered, in Bo's mind that would be just as foreign to her [...]? (178-180)

Annabelle's and Bo's attempt to establish a successful relationship permeates the whole novel. As a remedy to intercultural conflict Miller resorts to his utopia and offers his characters recovery through the example of Grandma Rennie. Following her lead, Bo and Annabelle even manage to overcome the shock of learning about the massacre committed by Annabelle's grandfather. It is this active choice of black and white to unite and to find a common ground upon which a new future can be built which Miller presents as the foundation for bi-cultural identity. By acknowledging and accepting the differences between the two cultures, both his protagonists establish inter-cultural identities which contain characteristics of both worlds. However, Miller's novel closes with an open end which leaves the reader in doubt whether Bo and Annabelle might succeed in establishing a new life together. Having offered a potential solution to Australia's identity crisis by developing his concept of a bi-cultural identity, Miller refrains from drawing a picture of its likely success or failure. Like the citizens in present-day Australia, his characters have only just started to redefine their existence and sense of belonging. Seeing that the chasm gaping between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians is still considerable, Miller's imaginative attempt to find a future-oriented solution to the Australian identity problem deserves attention. His remarkable vision of a bi-cultural identity offers valuable clues as to how Australians, without cultural loss on either side, might find out and define who they are.

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