

1 Introduction

In 2007, Australia's Racial Discrimination Act was suspended in the Northern Territory to allow for the implementation of the Intervention: policy that included deployment of military personnel to Aboriginal towns and communities, withholding of welfare payments, prohibitions of customary law in bail, and sentencing and bans on pornography and alcohol, amongst others (Scott and Heiss, 2015).¹ This was an extraordinary measure. The establishment of the Act in 1975 had sought to partly redress and protect ethnic and cultural groups from the discrimination previously enshrined in Australian policy. It was more than a statement of good intentions, and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, subjected to greater legal discrimination than any other minority group in Australian history, it contributed directly to the advancement of Indigenous rights with the eventual establishment of native title in the Mabo case of 1992.² Despite the advances and language of the reconciliation movement, the Intervention represented both the re-emergence and the endurance of racist Australian policy.

It was against this context that Wiradjuri academic and poet, Anita Heiss, published the first of her four-part chick lit series: *Not Meeting Mr Right*. The purple cover of the 2007 publication features an image of a woman with flaming red hair, dressed in a little black dress, sitting

¹ Dependent on context, this manuscript uses the language Aboriginal and Indigenous. Indigenous refers to both Aboriginal Australians and Torres Strait Islander people.

² Lieutenant James Cook declared Australia as property of the British Empire at Possession Island in the Torres Strait in 1700. This claim to ownership was based on the legal fiction of *Terra nullius* (land belonging to no one), which declared that the land was uninhabited and, thus, viable for occupation. Two hundred years later Eddie Koiki Mabo challenged this legal ruling, thereby affirming in the eyes of the law that Australia was always Aboriginal country. The transformative potential of the ruling was later significantly restricted by amendments that identified numerous grounds for the extinguishment of the native title. Despite this, the Mabo ruling remains significant as a partial acknowledgement of some of the injustices of the past.

coyly as abstract representations of men fall from a conveyor belt below her red stilettos. Similar imagery was to adorn the covers of the subsequent three novels: *Avoiding Mr Right* (2008), *Manhattan Dreaming* (2010) and *Paris Dreaming* (2011). For each, these paratextual elements, including their promotional blurbs, belie the novels' political intensity.

Academic and industry understandings of the genre present the pursuit of a career, love and shopping as uniformly constitutive of chick lit. That is, through first-person narration, an urban-based woman heavily invested in consumer culture 'comes of age' or 'consciousness' through episodes of dating (Yardley, 2006: 4). Each of Heiss's texts certainly adheres to this generic description, featuring a different Aboriginal female protagonist in pursuit of love, career and general fun. In *Not Meeting Mr Right*, Alice Aigner – Head of History at a Sydney Catholic girls' school – undertakes an exhaustive search for Mr Right, determined to be wed by her thirtieth birthday. In *Avoiding Mr Right*, Peta Tully – Department Manager of Media, Sports, Arts, Refugees and Indigenous Affairs – relocates from Sydney to Melbourne to pursue her career aspiration of one day becoming Minister of Cultural Affairs. Along the way she escapes a stifling relationship and finds love with an unconventional character – a policeman! In *Manhattan Dreaming*, Lauren – an up-and-coming curator at the National Aboriginal Gallery of Canberra – undertakes a fellowship at the National Museum of American Indians in New York City in flight from an unhealthy relationship with a Canberra-based footballer. And, in *Paris Dreaming*, Lauren's colleague Libby, the programme manager at the National Aboriginal Gallery, undertakes a fellowship at Musée du Quai Branly in Paris. Although declared to be on a 'man fast' (2) and a 'realist' not a 'romantic' (12), Libby ultimately finds love with Jake Ross, First Secretary to the Australian Ambassador.

As much as these novels are about dating, shopping, career and international travel they also feature fiercely and unapologetically political themes and content. In *Not Meeting Mr Right* this entails constructions of Aboriginality and a complication of Australian history. In *Avoiding Mr Right* there is a focus on Aboriginal deaths in custody and the institutionalization and exploitation of Aboriginality as a field within academia. *Manhattan Dreaming* and *Paris Dreaming* both foreground the role of art

by Aboriginal artists in maintaining and celebrating culture as well as deconstructing reductive and stereotypical understandings of Aboriginality. In the same year that both images and accounts of Aboriginal community dysfunction dominated the mediascape, courtesy of the Intervention, Heiss was presenting an alternative – a representation of Aboriginality that was successful, urban, career-driven and middle-class. The juxtaposition of event and publication is not necessarily causal, but it is significant. Despite sixteen years of formal commitment to reconciliation, settler Australian conceptions of Aboriginality remained dominated by deficit discourse,³ ‘a mode of thinking . . . that frames Aboriginal identity in a narrative of negativity, deficiency and disempowerment’ (Fforde et al., 2013: 162).

For the purposes of this book, the significance of Heiss’s novels lies not singularly in the presentation of a counter stereotypical representation of Aboriginality, but also in the strategy, intent, presentation and marketing of these texts in the genre of chick lit. Heiss is arguably the first Aboriginal Australian author of popular fiction. This classification has implications not only for the internal logics of the novels but also for their readership. As argued by Ken Gelder in his seminal study *Popular Fiction: The Logics and Practices of a Literary Field* (2004), ‘a writer produces popular fiction because he or she intends (or, would prefer) to reach a large number of readers’ (22). For decades, Aboriginal authors have been writing narratives that defy stereotypical representations of Aboriginality. Although her protagonists are fictional, Heiss draws on a tradition of Aboriginal female

³ The process of reconciliation in Australia formally began with the establishment of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation in 1991. Guided by the vision of ‘a united Australia which respects this land of ours; values the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage; and provides justice and equity for all,’ the Council established a ten-year time frame to advance the national process of reconciliation. Very basically, reconciliation is an ongoing process that encourages the ‘coming together’ of Australians based on mutual understanding, recognition and respect. In 2001 Reconciliation Australia, an independent not-for-profit organization, was established to continue the council’s work. Their vision for reconciliation is based on five inter-related dimensions: race relations; equality and equity; unity; institutional integrity; and historical acceptance (‘Reconciliation Action Plan’).

authors who write in the confessional mode. In her memoir, *Am I Black Enough For You?*, Heiss reflects on this writing process, noting that ‘my expression of identity is translated onto the page as the story unfolds’ (2012: 219). What is significant about Heiss, however, is that she is strategically electing to write into the genre of chick lit, thereby taking an overtly political message – a message that defies dominant deficit understandings of Aboriginality – to a mainstream audience.

Previously, Heiss had published in diverse formats such as children’s literature (*Who Am I? The Diary of Mary Talence*, 2001), poetry (*Token Koori*, 1998) and satire, exemplified in the collection *Sacred Cows* (1996). Her PhD dissertation, later published by Aboriginal Studies Press as *Dhuuluu-Yala: To Talk Straight-Publishing Indigenous Literature* (2003) is an exploration of the Australian publishing industry as it relates to Indigenous authors. In this landmark study she clearly identifies systemic difficulties facing Indigenous authors publishing fiction works focused on Indigenous issues, ideas and themes, in particular the mistaken notion that there is a circumscribed readership for Indigenous authored texts. In her memoir (2012), she describes her desire and decision to write chick lit novels as strategic and measured:

my strategy in choosing to write commercial women’s fiction is to reach audiences that weren’t previously engaging with Aboriginal Australia in any format, either personally, professionally or subconsciously. And it is that non-Indigenous female market that is key to my audience. Let’s face it, there are not enough Blackfellas to sustain any publishing venture, least of all an entire genre. With this in mind I made a conscious decision to move into the area of commercial women’s fiction, releasing four books in the genre of chick lit. (215)

Reinforcing her strategic approach to genre, Heiss’s own authorial persona adds another important dimension to the significance and reach of these novels. She inhabits a multitude of positions in the Australian literary field, thereby appealing to a broad and differentiated audience. Heiss has moved

between the academic and literary fields at different points in her career and has resisted or remained largely ambivalent about qualification of a singular professional category.

Her personal website, Anitaheiss.com, describes her as ‘an author, poet, satirist and social commentator’, and as a ‘creative disruptor’ (2018). In an article published in the *Sun Herald* in 2008, Catherine Keenan wrote of her conversation with Heiss, ‘the only question that really seems to stump her is when I ask what her job is. Usually, she says she’s a writer, which is true, but doesn’t quite cover it.’ Indeed, Heiss is also an academic – now Professor of Communications at the University of Queensland – and an activist, a public intellectual and an Ambassador for Indigenous Literacy, amongst other roles. In her memoir Heiss demurs, ‘I don’t even consider myself an academic, even though I’ve jumped through all the hoops’ (2012: 109), but her academic institutional affiliations and PhD in literature bolster her authority as a public advocate and intellectual on Indigenous affairs. Ultimately, she is an individual who is able to leverage the discursive power of one space – and translate this into another. Her chick lit novels can be interpreted as both an extension and departure from her academic material and imply a diverse readership; including those who are committed genre readers and those who are drawn to her work as an academic and public intellectual. Primarily, this breadth of appeal and focus constitutes the focus of this book: it is about chick lit, representations of Aboriginality and the Australian reader. In particular, it is about genre as strategic practice for an author who inhabits a multitude of authorial positions in the Australian literary field and as an interpretative frame for her diverse and differentiated readership.

1.1 A Tradition Challenged: Non-White Chick Lit

This book aligns with the theoretical aims of Erin Hurt’s excellent edited collection *Theorising Ethnicity and Nationality in the Chick Lit Genre* (2018a). Hurt notes that ‘while scholars have addressed the attraction chick lit held, and holds, for readers, this genre remained undertheorized in key ways, especially with regard to ethnicity and nationality’ (2018a: 7). Hurt’s collection is a careful interrogation of what constitutes ‘cultural citizenship’ in chick lit novels from across the globe; Australia, Saudi Arabia, America

and East and Southern Asia. It is an exciting intervention into a previously whitewashed genealogy of the genre that begins with Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996). Cumulatively it demonstrates how a white-centric framework *can* lead to productive, but often incomplete, readings of non-white articulations of the genre: 'whiteness implicitly becomes the norm when chick lit scholarship treats ethnicity and race as a focus rather than a framework, thus implying that race and ethnicity are secondary or optional elements when analysing chick lit' (10).

In opposition to Yardley's more generalized definition of the genre, Hurt extends the scholarship of Pamela Butler and Jigna Desai (2008) to identify a transnational unity in these narratives that is defined by the ascendancy of neo-liberalism. In effect, they are neo-liberal fairy tales. As argued in her article, 'Cultural Citizenship and Agency in the Genre of Chica Lit and Sofia Quintero's Feminist Intervention' (2017): '[these novels] represent individual action as capable of solving systemic problems . . . that do not accommodate inequality on a social and cultural level' (15). This claim, in Hurt's opinion, extends to other forms of ethnic chick lit (2018a: 6). Ultimately, her appraisal of the genre is not entirely pessimistic: 'the goal here is not to discredit or dismiss the genre as a purveyor of these fantasies – since these fantasies are generated by neoliberalism as a protection mechanism to hide real systems of oppression – but rather to understand why protagonists and readers desire these fantasies and continue to feel attached to them' (7). By decentring a theoretical focus on post-feminism for neo-liberal feminisms, transnationalism and intersectionalism, many of the essays in the collection affirm the novels' significance through attention to their internal politics.

This Element represents both an extension and a departure from Hurt's approach. My analysis attends more closely to the reader, as well as the author's own understanding and navigation of genre. Ultimately, this is a localized study that is grounded in the politics of the Australian context and does not seamlessly map onto transnational readings of chick lit. Indeed it is my contention that while scholars must remain mindful of industry definitions, terms such as ethnic chick lit (and subgenre classifications: chica lit, sistah lit, etc.) only reify these narratives as deviations or subversions of their white – and implicitly normative – counterparts. This Element

proposes a distinct approach to chick lit, genre and popular fiction. I argue that straight ideological or textual analysis, that is, a reading of the politics of Heiss's novels, would be insufficient to adequately capture and underscore the significance of these works. In opposition to this approach, I propose a sociological model of literary analysis that holistically accommodates the nexus of gender, race, author, text and reader. Heike Mißler employs a comparable approach in *The Cultural Politics of Chick Lit: Postfeminism and Representation* (2016), especially in her attempt to privilege the voice of readers of chick lit. Through analysis of chick lit blogs and online fan communities, Mißler asks 'how they make sense of their genre' (3). Her study is an ambitious and global survey of the political significance of the genre. My own study is more localized: both geographically and in focussing attention on genre as strategic practice.

Methodologically, this approach is loosely inspired by Bourdieu's sociology of literature (1993, 1996) and supplemented by critical scholarship on genre, critical race theory, Australian Indigenous studies, postcolonial literary theory, reading studies and an extended interview with the author. In his three-tiered analysis of *A Sentimental Education* Bourdieu undertakes a reading of the internal logics of the novel, a consideration of the literary field, and finally, an analysis of the author's habitus. For my own analysis of Heiss's literature I re-interpret this approach to focus on three key areas aligned with my own definitions: the author; the page; and the reader. I follow Bourdieu's line in asserting that an ideological reading of the text, or any kind of purely internal interpretation, does not suffice. I agree, too, with his suggestion that 'it can only be an unjustifiable abstraction to seek the source of the understanding of cultural productions in these productions themselves, taken in isolation and divorced from the conditions of their production and utilization' (Bourdieu, 1988: xvii). Therefore, any analysis of a literary text must take into account factors in its production and reception. As expressed by Johnson (1993) in his summary of the *Field of Cultural Production*, 'to be fully understood, literary works must be reinserted in the system of social relations which sustains them. This does not imply a rejection of aesthetic or formal properties, but rather an analysis based on their position in relation to the universe of possibilities of which they are a part' (11). In so doing, I avoid essentialist understandings of the

text and push against a universal or ahistorical conception of literature. My Element, thus, engages with the complex network of social relations that make the existence of the text possible (Johnson, 1993: 10).

In accordance with Heiss's desire to 'reach audiences that weren't previously engaging with Aboriginal Australia in any format' (2012: 215), I pursue the questions: What power does Heiss's chick lit bear for producing personal transformation in the reader? Just who is reading her novels, and to what effect? I am interested in how this question plays out with reference to available discourses and understandings of Aboriginality, Australian history, racial identity and belonging within the Australian context. I conduct thematic discursive analysis of book reviews collected from Goodreads.com and further inform this analysis with surveys then conducted with Goodreads reviewers to move beyond an abstract consideration of these questions.

Heiss positions her literature, both academic and popular, as a pedagogical tool. In an interview conducted with the author she explains, 'I want [settler audiences] to learn things, but I want all my books to teach in some way' (2017). However, her approach is more evocative of the language of reconciliation, with an emphasis on understanding, assistance and discussion, than it is bluntly didactic: 'I'm trying to create something that has a lasting life and will be used in classrooms to generate conversations and help people understand their role in society' (Heiss, 2017). Although I am interested in the idea of the education of the reader (Mathew, 2016b), I supplement this with a focus on the concept of the cultural interface, first developed by Martin Nakata but integrated into Australian literary studies by Anne Brewster (2015) as a productive site of cross-racial and cultural negotiation (Nakata, 2007). Through my analysis of Goodreads reviews of Heiss's novels I adapt this approach for online communities and extend contemporary scholarship in reading studies that considers book clubs as democratic sites of discussion. This Element, then, presents a sustained complication of academic understandings of chick lit, genre and of popular fiction. Drawing on the work of Hans Robert Jauss and Elizabeth Benziger (1970) and John Frow (2006), I propose an understanding of genre as a regulative frame. Genre, as a 'fuzzy' and 'historically contingent' organizational practice (Frow, 2006: 80), is something imputed by the reader to the text that operates to contextualize

and delimit its interpretation. While I do not seek to advance a new definition of genre in this Element, I do put forward an understanding of genre as a framing device as inspired by Frow's analysis.

This is not to suggest, however, that different genres do not possess constitutive thematic and rhetorical elements. There are a number of different academic and industry definitions of chick lit. In this Element, I take up Ann Steiner's (2008) definition of the genre: 'good chick lit novels are defined as fun, witty, easy and light reads dealing with real issues. Readers have to be able to sympathise with the main character; identification is, of course, the foundation of the genre' (par. 33). Steiner's definition of the genre is sufficiently porous to facilitate a reading of Heiss's literature that can account for both the author and reader's subjective experience.

1.2 Aboriginal Popular Fiction

In the year directly following the publication of Heiss's first chick lit novel, Australia's cultural and political landscape shifted markedly. Eleven years of conservative liberal rule ended with the ascendancy of a Labor government. Newly appointed Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's leadership began optimistically with a declaration that the government's first orders of business would include the acknowledgement of truth contained in the *Bringing Them Home Report* (1997) and the delivery of a formal apology to members of the Stolen Generations.⁴ The report, commissioned under the leadership of Labor Prime Minister Paul Keating (1991–6), but inherited by a Coalition administration, exposed the reality of the forced removal of Indigenous children from their families throughout the twentieth century. On 13 February 2008 Rudd issued a formal apology to the Stolen Generations. He not only offered his condolences for the actions of past governments, but also expedited an intervention in national storytelling and narratives (Butler, 2013: 3). Rudd's apology represented a turning point in public history and issued a direct challenge to those Australians who had denied the truth of Indigenous testimony.

⁴ The Stolen Generations are the Indigenous children who were forcibly removed from their families by the Australian government. This assimilationist policy endured throughout the twentieth century.

For some, this acknowledgement marked the loosening of the stagnated debate of the Australian History Wars: public debate driven by academics, public intellectuals and the mainstream press that contested the extent to which colonization had impacted, and continued to impact on Australia's Indigenous peoples. What eventuated was a seeming moment of cultural cognitive dissonance, a space opened up for greater reception of Indigenous testimony and narratives. At the same time, mainstream media representations and policy articulation of Indigenous deficiency continued to proliferate and circulate. The *Closing the Gap* policy (implemented April 2007), successor to the Reconciliation movement, now can be read retroactively as further compounding deficit understandings of Aboriginality (Fforde et al., 2013: 166).

Heiss's novels reflect the tensions and dissonance inherent in this moment. In *Paris Dreaming* (2011), for example, protagonist Libby outlines the significance of the Apology for the increased status of Aboriginal art: 'it was as if Rudd had endorsed a greater interest in Aboriginal art and culture' (49), but the novel also highlights the Apology's role in fostering a level of unintentional political apathy among settler Australians. Reflecting on poor attendance at the Sorry Day Memorial Walk, Libby's mother surmises, 'I reckon since the Apology, the pressure's off people to march so much, like it's all over now and they don't have to remember' (97).

Since concluding her four-part chick lit series Heiss has gone on to produce other popular fiction novels. These include *Tiddas* (2014) and the historical romance *Barbed Wire and Cherry Blossoms* (2016). The earlier chick lit novels, however, were arguably significant in demonstrating the viability of mainstream Aboriginal literature and other cultural forms. Heiss's novels navigate the incommensurability of the pervasive political situation: a growing desire for narratives of Aboriginal resilience and survivance are confounded by media portrayals and government policies that continue to reinforce deficiency. In the years following the publication of her chick lit novels there has been a surge in numbers of Aboriginal authors writing, publishing and producing in fields of popular fiction and other mainstream cultural forms: Ambelin Kyawmullina's *The Tribe Series* (Young Adult 2012–15); Claire Coleman's *Terra Nullius* (Science Fiction/Speculative Fiction 2017); Nicole Watson's *The Boundary* (Crime 2011); as