

The Literary Transformation of Memory Across Generations

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Artistic and cultural representations of space, place, memory, and belonging are some of the fundamental aspects of fictional narratives. This paper focuses on how the tropics evolve as a place of belonging in Terri Janke's *Butterfly song* through literary transformation of generational memories of personal and family experiences combined with historical fact. The notion of the tropics as 'different' is examined through complex relationships between the place where the protagonist, Tarena Shaw, lives in Sydney; the place that she calls home, Cairns; and the place of her ancestors, Thursday Island in the Torres Straits. Layers of memory unfold through family stories revisited in the context of contemporary cultural life to ensure the return of a pearl brooch lost for nearly forty years. Components of culture, a love story, a connection of things to ancestors and people, and the history of the Torres Straits and Cairns are the foci of Janke's novel. These features demonstrate how multiple perspectives of place and memory can enrich the literary imagination and in turn, enlighten Australian readers to the historical past and present life of tropical North Queensland.

This paper demonstrates how the concepts of space and place are filtered through generations of memory which serve as a storehouse for motivation of the literary imagination of Terri Janke, a Torres Strait Islander, in her novel *Butterfly song* (2005). In this novel, the tropics evolve as a place of belonging for the protagonist Tarena Shaw, a Torres Strait Islander, and through the process of literary creation are regenerated for the writer. Literary transformation of memories and personal experiences centre Janke's characters, despite living outside the Torres Straits, within a family whose cultural and spatial belonging is firmly rooted on Thursday Island. Within the context of this story, family and memory are inextricably linked through a pearl brooch made in the 1940s.

Although the novel is fiction, a pearl brooch does exist, but is in fact a leaf and not the butterfly shape in the story. Its ancestral connection to Janke's cultural belonging forms the root of the narrative. In an article entitled *Writing about family*, Janke (2007) explains how a connection of things to ancestors and people sustains cultural belonging:

When the book was launched...my mother came...[and] gave me the brooch, the one my grandfather carved, and told me that this was for me to keep – it was something to which I had shown a connection and therefore should have. I love this brooch, I draw from the strength of it when I feel sad or worried and I will treasure it always. It will be something I will keep safe and pass on to my children. (55)

The link between this ancestral connection and place is aptly described by Janke (2005) in an evocative passage at the end of the novel:

They say that each generation draws from the spiritual strength of those who came before. We might not know them in this physical space, but their lessons are timeless. Their wisdom compounds. Our mentors are our mothers, our fathers. Our families, our ancestors. The people we love. The people who gave us breath. Our places, our

lands, our waters. Our homes, our ways. Our stories and songs. The things we all long to dream about. (292)

Generations of family memories laced with cultural and historical fact form an integral part of the literary expression that develops a relational belonging to this tropical space and place for the protagonist Tarena. I argue that through this process, Janke also regenerates her personal sense of cultural belonging. In her writing reflection, Janke (2007) advises:

While some events and literary sequences in my novel are not based on fact, much of the story is autobiographical and includes characters based on family members or events drawn from family experiences...They understood that the book was fiction, and that I was drawing on the stories to create my story, my version of the family's story. (52)

While the main plot of the novel, the court case and return of the butterfly brooch, was fictional, it was the vehicle through which Janke (2007) gave expression to "emotional connection to the past, to my mother, and to my grandparents" (53). Watkin Lui (2012) argues that "Mainlander's culture and identity have not been lost or displaced across generations. Instead, their Islander identity has been re-interpreted to reflect their mainlander diasporic experience" (142). Reading the novel in conjunction with Janke's writing reflections supports this notion and exposes how the transformation of generations of family memories through the literary imagination regenerates a strong sense of place and belonging which informs Torres Strait Islander identity and overrides notions of cultural dislocation.

Janke (2007) states that "The idea for the story started in 1997 when I travelled with my Mother and my Uncle Tony to Thursday Island in the Torres Strait for the tombstone opening...This was an extended family event...the first time I had been to the Torres Strait" (53). This ceremony is an important event in Torres Strait Island culture. Leah Lui (1996) explains the cultural significance of the ceremony which:

involves the public unveiling of the engraved tombstone which is blessed by a priest. The unveiling is followed by feasting and traditional dancing to celebrate the occasion. Its observance is symbolic of many things; the acknowledgement of a final resting place for the spirit of the deceased; the end of the period of mourning; the fulfilment of obligation and the reinforcement of Island custom through the reunion of kin. The performance of the ceremony continues today on the Islands and the mainland.

Janke's visit was the catalyst for literary expression of this cultural ceremony and gives readers an insight into how this Torres Strait ceremony unites Islanders through the sharing of stories, music and dance to rejuvenate Islander identity. Accordingly, the novel begins with a request for the protagonist Tarena Shaw to accompany her mother to a tombstone unveiling on Thursday Island. Tarena is a young Torres Strait Islander woman afflicted with self-doubt, confusion and loss of identity while studying law in Sydney away from family. She questions the futility of her chosen direction while trying to comprehend the complexity of laws which do not adequately protect Indigenous people from the discrimination and racism faced on a daily basis. With her final exam looming she refuses her mother's request, but is coerced into going after being told the tickets have already been purchased.

This novel is ultimately about reclaiming possession, both in a material and a spiritual sense. In a material sense within the narrative, it is reclaiming a pearl brooch in the shape of a butterfly which was carved for Tarena's grandmother, Francesca, by her grandfather, Kit, from a rare pearl shell which he acquired while diving in the Torres Straits. At a much deeper level within the narrative, the story is a spiritual journey through the character Tarena to trace family memories to reclaim and regenerate her cultural identity and connection to place and space. For the author, the novel serves as a vehicle for the process of literary transformation of memories across generations to express and honour a cultural identity rooted in the Torres Straits. As Janke (2007) states: "I wanted to write about going to law school but also I wanted to talk about my cultural background...Most of the novel is a work of fiction but as most writers do, I have drawn from my own personal experience to craft the story, the characters and some of the events" (52-53).

Within the narrative, family stories and layers of memory unfold in contemporary cultural life to highlight impacts of the social and historical past on individuals and communities. The complexity of family relationships and the human need for belonging are intertwined throughout the narrative within the context of place to centre the protagonist Tarena as she traverses a difficult stage in life's journey. Greer's (2007) supposition that "Roots and identity are imagined to be co-extensive" is exemplified in Janke's choice to contextualise place and belonging in the Torres Straits from an ancestral perspective through Tarena's grandparents (ix).

The novel reaches across generations of memory of events from the past, using the literary discourse to raise social issues and highlight how the past continues to impact *in* the present. The story exposes how the negative literary representation of "Coonardoo" in the early 20th century novel of the same name impacts negatively in the daily lives of Indigenous women in the 21st century. Tarena's lecturer draws unwanted attention to her:

Tarena, you're an Aborigine, what can you tell us about the cultural practices of Coonardoo?' ...I want to tell him that I'm actually Torres Strait Islander *and* Aboriginal, but I'm too frightened. I've read the book and didn't understand it. I'm not like that. Does that mean I'm not a real blackfella? I feel stupid. I am silent.
(Janke, 2005 74)

This short exchange exposes the notion and expectation that all Aboriginal people 'know everything' about Aboriginal culture, and demonstrates Tarena's self-doubt and identity confusion. Shortly after this incident, Tarena is verbally abused at a hotel: "Abo...I thought we extincted you mob around this area" (Janke, 2005 77-8). This event is almost enough to push her to walk away from her studies. But, soon after, another incident changed her mind. It began when she stated that she was Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander in response to a question about what country she came from; an answer received negatively. When Tarena questioned the negativity, her girlfriend explained to the questioner that "she used to study law. She loves to argue", which was followed by a sneering remark: "Dropped out, did you? Was it too hard?" (Janke, 2005 81). This triggers unpleasant childhood memories for Tarena and that night she dreams she is:

Back in the second grade with Sister Bernadette. She is standing above me. She is taking my pet rock from me. I found it in the playground and have been holding it all morning. She is asking me to put out my and. 'You're a savage little girl', she is saying. The kids in the class are laughing and the classroom spins. (Janke, 2005 82)

In the morning Tarena repeats to herself over and over “I’m not giving up, I’m not giving up” (Janke, 2005 82).

The author’s inclusion of the ongoing discrimination against Indigenous Australians in consequence of negative literary representation is a valid trope in Indigenous literature; one supported and expounded by fellow writer Larissa Behrendt (2005) who confirms the social relevance:

The ways in which stories in popular culture portray Aboriginal women - the stereotypes that are generated about us - can find their way into legal analysis in a way that sees those stereotypes reinforced and our rights unprotected. It is not just overtly racist literature that provides these examples; they can be just as prevalent in accounts that purport to be sympathetic to Indigenous women. One example is Katherine Susannah Prichard’s novel *Coonardoo*. When I was in high school in the 1980s, one of the names I was called was ‘Coonardoo’. It was the title of a book taught to some of the English classes (not mine) and I never worried too much about the label because, as a black woman, there are worse names that you can be called. It was only when I went to study at Harvard and took to borrowing Australian novels from the undergraduate library to lessen my homesickness that I finally picked up a copy of this namesake book. I was horrified when I realised the implications of being called ‘Coonardoo’, of the images and messages that were being placed upon me with the name. (247)

This is a story about white sorrow, not black empowerment...[which] fails to contextualise for the reader the impact of colonisation on the ability, or lack thereof, of Aboriginal women to say ‘yes’ and ‘no’. It reinforces the view that only debased men engage in sexual contact with Aboriginal women. For Indigenous women, violence, and especially sexual violence, have been a legacy of Colonisation. (249)

Janke’s use of literature to raise issues that impact on the current lives of Indigenous people on the one hand, and to rejuvenate attachment to the Torres Straits through the plot of the story on the other, exemplifies “the ways that Islanders negotiate and contest the contemporary Mainlander experience through the creation of systems of re-presentation, cultural expression and relatedness between individuals and the collective” (Watkin Lui, 2012 141).

In the opening paragraphs of the novel, Janke (2005) hints at the depth and uniqueness of the individual and collective cultural and spiritual identity that unfolds:

They say if you live on an island for too long, you merge with it. Your bones become the sands, your blood the ocean. Your flesh is the fertile ground. Your heart becomes the stories, dances, songs. The island is part of your make up. The earth. The trees. The reef. The fish. The music. The people. The sun, moon and stars surround you. You are only part of the integral world called life. You and those who follow you will always be a part of it. They say that when you leave, the sounds of the waves stay with you. The smell of the sea is a constant, never-ending reminder. The island calls you, and your children, and their children. It will beg you to dream it, and know it, forever. No matter where you or your children travel, the island is home. (3)

Tarena’s grandfather and grandmother, Kit and Francesca, were born on the Island, but left after they were married. Lily (Tarena’s mother) and Tally (her uncle) were born in Cairns

and never lived on Thursday Island, but Lily clings onto the family connection to the Island as a part of her cultural identity and sense of belonging fulfilling the prophesied 'call' of the Island. This connection across generations awakens a sense of belonging in Tarena who is drawn into 'circles within circles' on her first sight of the Island from the air:

I see an island, small, in the shape of a stingray. The dark circles of the outer reef surround the blue lightness of the inner reef. Through spidery clouds I see another group of islands and imagine I am watching a time-lapse film depicting the evolution of its beaches, trees and coral reefs. Perhaps this is the place where the first sea creatures dragged their sleek bodies onto soft white sands. Where they twisted their spongy heads and shook the salt from their fins, which turned into wings with feathers more colourful than coral. I can see them flying about, and the motion causes circles like the ones below. I am drawn into these circles within circles, rippling and blending into the green blueness of the Pacific. (Janke, 2005 13)

When Tarena arrives, although it is her first visit, she thinks: "it feels familiar because I've heard so much about the place. TI, they call it. It's in the words of that old song my mother sings at parties. 'TI, my beautiful home'" (Janke 2005, 4). Janke's (2007) personal description of her first journey to Thursday Island in *Writing about Family* is no less convincing in its illustration of a sense of connectedness:

It was a magical experience and I felt an instant connectedness. I thought what this place would have looked like in the days of my grandparents. It made me think of the times when the harbour would have been filled with pearling lugers. I knew my grandfathers worked on the boats, and that my grandmothers grew up in the convent school. I had heard so many stories from my mother and my family. Even though I had never been there before, the place felt familiar, even nostalgic to me, but I was also in awe of the place. (54)

As a child, Tarena questioned why her grandparents left Thursday Island, but Lily always evaded the question claiming she was either too young when she was told to be able to remember or she was never told. Her romanticised perception of what life was like for her grandparents on Thursday Island adds to the allure of the place and inspires images of an idyllic life for the Island residents in this tropical space before war broke out in the Pacific: "I imagine my grandfather diving in the open sea for pearls, or playing the guitar under a frangipani tree. I can see my grandmother, Francesca, walking down the street on her way to church. I dream what life might have been like for them" (Janke, 2005 4).

The author cleverly brings the three generations of Tarena's family together to reclaim both the brooch and Tarena's cultural identity. Surprised by her mother's insistence that she attend a tombstone unveiling on the Island, Tarena soon understands the reason. Her mother Lily, and her Uncle Tally, have seen a photo in the newspaper of a butterfly brooch which they insist is the one their father carved for their mother who kept it with her always. It disappeared when she died in hospital when they were just children (Janke, 2005 233-5). The brooch is to be auctioned, but its estimated value of \$15000 makes buy-back impossible. Lily and Tally believe the brooch belongs to their family and they want Tarena, now she has finished her law studies, to get it back.

The day that Lily saw the brooch in the paper was the same day that Kit's old guitar mysteriously fell off her wall and she is convinced it is a 'calling' from her father because he

is really angry about the sale of the brooch and wants them to do something about it (Janke, 2005 17). This spiritual connection of things to ancestors and people is reflected in the last sentence of the novel: “It’s a cycle, a cultural circle, and when the time comes, my dear great-great-grandchildren, you will remember my story, you will draw from my strength, and you will know I’ll always be there with you” (Janke, 2005 292). This is a powerful affirmation of belief/faith, both for the fictional mother Lily and for Janke’s real mother. Lily demonstrates this through her belief that Kit has sent a sign and that the tombstone unveiling will offer an opportunity for Tarena to gather stories that can prove their family connection to, and ownership of, the butterfly brooch (Janke, 2005 6). Janke’s mother demonstrates this by giving her daughter the brooch that her father carved for her mother after the novel was published (Janke, 2007 55).

Re-presentation of the Torres Straits through Janke’s fictional narrative through generations of memory gives readers the opportunity to witness the literary gaps and silences that belie the economic and strategic importance of this tropical space. Janke’s literary depiction of earlier generations provides glimpses of an industry upon which the Torres Straits once based its economy. In the 1890s when pearl shell was used to make buttons, cutlery, hair combs, jewellery items as well as art objects and inlay for furniture, the Torres Strait supplied over half the world demand (Evans, 1972 106). The pearling industry was a major economic force for over one hundred years in northern Australia and for business interests in the southern capitals from the 1850s onwards (Aust. Gv., 2007). Unfortunately, as Janke’s story reveals, alongside the development of the industry, there were stories of forced and indentured labour, danger and death at the hands of rogue traders and bad weather.

The historic importance of this tropical space during WWII is woven into the story as background to the lives of characters and exposes the vulnerability of the Torres Strait which lay in the path of any invasion from the north. Seekee (n.d.) informs that “The prospect of Japan entering the war alarmed planners, who knew that there were far too few troops available to defend against a Japanese advance...Japan's entry into the Second World War changed everything.” The Torres Strait Light Infantry Battalion was formed in 1943 to provide additional protection to the path of invasion open from the North. The Battalion of approximately 700 members, the majority of whom were Indigenous Torres Strait Islanders, shared knowledge of the local reefs and waters which proved invaluable to the defence of Australia, and their knowledge of the local marine life provided food for the thousands of troops in the area (Seekee, nd). This local history is seamlessly woven through Janke’s (2005) literary imaginings to meld Islander memories of the Japanese attacks on Horn Island into her story:

‘Did you know they bombed Horn Island during the war? Uncle Ron says.

‘Who bombed it?’ I [Tarena] ask.

‘The Japanese, It was where the Australians had a runway for planes in and out of the Pacific.’

‘Did you see the bombs?’

‘We could see the fires and hear the noise from here. It was proper frightening.’ (36)

The frangipani tree also represents a symbolic link between generations of family stories. For the young woman Francesca, this tree evokes childhood memories of her grandfather when he comes in “smelling of the sea. ‘The green sea, it’s in my bones’ he used to say, ‘like that old turtle. I might travel far but my heart always stays’...[she recalls that] The old ways were important to her grandfather. When he was alive, he used to tell her stories of pearling all

around the seas, going far away in the luggers. But he always came back here” (Janke, 2005 40-1). It is under this same frangipani tree while she is chasing butterflies, that Francesca first encounters Kit, called the guitar man, who becomes her husband. He composes a song about a butterfly and she falls in love; the next day as she passes the tree she notices a guitar carved on its trunk. This song is passed through generations and becomes a key feature in establishing the provenance of the butterfly brooch.

In the next generation, Lily shares her story about a frangipani tree with her daughter Tarena when she is a young girl. Lily describes a strong tree with white and yellow flowers under which a girl sits looking out over the cliff, towards the open sea. She plays with the fallen leaves and is surrounded by the scent of crushed petals. The legend has it that “This was her favourite place in the world. She could spend hours under the shade of that tree, playing with the butterflies” (Janke, 2005 31). The story tells how she grows up to become a beautiful woman and one day a young man sails by and sees her, sits with her, sings her songs and plays his guitar and they fall in love and arrange to meet in secret when the man’s boat comes to the island. The woman knew that her father would not let them marry. But she loved the man so much she agreed to run away from the island and go away with him when he next returned. Alas, she waited night and day for so long for him to come back that one day as the tree grew bigger, “it grew into her flesh, piercing her heart, absorbing her every breath into its trunk, branches, flowers and petals” (Janke, 2005 31).

While Lily’s story begins as the love story between Kit and Francesca, by altering the ending to ensure Francesca never leaves the Island, the storyteller (as does the writer) intertwines the tree into the family story, forever connecting them to the Island. Lily insists that the frangipani woman is beautiful, but “no one really notices her. She’s waiting to make her mark”. Tarena immediately relates this mark to her skin condition and goes to sleep dreaming of a large frangipani tree with eczema (Janke, 2005 32). Through this connection, the tree becomes part of Tarena’s story also. She remembers:

When I was a girl I would peel the flowers, petal by petal...When they fell to the ground I would lie on them, wrap them around me...put them in a bowl next to me when I slept...one morning a branch had snapped...and white sap flowed from the grey limbs. ‘The tree is crying,’ I told my mother. ... ‘You know that story you told me about the woman who turned into a frangipani tree waiting for her boyfriend? This tree is like that. It can keep going and grow another tree from part of its own branch.’ (Janke 2005, 195-6)

When she is in Cairns for the court case, Tarena visits their old house and through an open window “can smell the frangipani flowers...That large tree looming over the fence is such an old friend...I almost sing the words to the tree: ‘Can I take you with me?’ ” (Janke, 2005 182-3). Memories of the frangipani tree have transgressed from the individual to become part of a collective family story.

An important cultural and social aspect of Janke’s novel is the restrictions Islanders suffered in relation to the Protection Act. The fear of having children ‘removed’ is firmly seated in the memory of Indigenous people across generations. It is witnessed in Francesca’s fear of the monthly visits from ‘the funny little man’ (the Government Inspector) after Kit’s death, knowing that his report could mean the Government would take her children away. The accompanying heartache is revived in the story of her friend Mara who tells Francesca: “They said I couldn’t keep him, that he’d be better off with the white grandparents” (Janke, 2005 215). Such stories are reminiscent of the real life stories of the Stolen Generations (Nannup

1992, Pilkington 1996, Ward 1987). This is a familiar trope in Indigenous fiction and the literary expression of this fear and distrust as part of family memory across generations should encourage serious reader contemplation of the ongoing impact of the racist policies of the 20th century which saw children removed from their families. Larissa Behrendt's *Home* (2004) proclaims the *enduring* pain of such policies:

Now her most precious daughter...had been swept away into the harshness of that other world...The pain of loss and its bitterness gnawed at her, devouring her. It would prove to be terminal...The sound of her pain filled the country. It filled the soil. It filled the trees. It filled the grasses and the empty river beds. It hung in the air for all time. (43)

Despite what anyone can know of the past either through stories or family memory, neither writers nor readers can walk in the footsteps of those who have gone before. Indigenous literature, such as Janke's *Butterfly song* is a step in the right direction to challenge outdated perceptions and negativity. However, one must be ever mindful, as Larissa Behrendt (2002) points out in "Unfinished Journey", that the ground swell of support for the 1967 Referendum rendered little structural change for Aboriginal people as a result of that collective sympathy, and suggests that "the agenda for structural change should be more ambitious to ensure that the achievements of that moment leave a longer, more positive legacy" (24-7). Terri Janke has managed to transform stories and memories of events across generations, from her grandparents, through her parents, to herself, to create a positive legacy by "drawing on the stories [of her family] to create my story, my version of the family's story" (2007 53). This is a story of survival steeped in her cultural background as a Torres Strait Islander.

Throughout Tarena's journey, the reader meets various characters from the 1940s through to the 1990s. Some stories are funny, some are sad, but most distinctly relate to the tropical north. Janke's (2005) description of Tarena's attempts to sleep in the northern heat on Thursday Island, rolling from side to side "listening to the frogs...imagining them dancing in the rain" is part of the lived experience of Far North Queenslanders (33). The vision of an Islander woman, Auntie Sugar, chasing a goat through the sugarcane in her floral dress, and the goat clip-clopping "along the road, like a scarlet woman in high-heels" as she chased him home would not raise too many local eyebrows (Janke, 2005 239). But probably the most vivid and typically tropical literary image that Janke (2005) enlivens is that of mango juice dripping from children's elbows with stringy bits caught in front teeth (205).

Within this novel, like many family stories, there is tragedy and heartache, love and loss, and while some memories build an illusion of tropical paradise as they unfold in the novel, others belie the notion of perfect harmony. But there is joy and renewal as the protagonist Tarena, like Janke herself, stands secure, centred and confident in the Sydney Law Courts knowing who she is, where she comes from, and where she belongs. Janke's literary transformation of family memories across generations found expression as the nuances of life for her Torres Strait Islander characters to demonstrate how multiple perspectives of place and memory can enrich the literary imagination and the literary discourse. In turn, it enlightens readers to life, past and present, in tropical North Queensland.

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