

**MOBILITY AND RESISTANCE IN YOUNG INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIAN  
WRITING; READING TRAVEL NARRATIVES IN TARA JUNE WINCH'S  
*SWALLOW THE AIR***

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**Abstract**

Considered as writing back to the Empire, postcolonial writing by young indigenous Australian offers different insight and perspective of their identity. One of postcolonial tendencies is re-define their own experience of space and place in contemporary Australia. Mobility and travel become method on experiencing the ancestor's land. Many of Australian indigenous writing is about mobility, both physical and non-physical. This paper aims to elaborate mobility and mode of resistance in Tara June Winch' *Swallow the Air* as young Australian Indigenous writing.

*Swallow the Air* portrays journey of a young half-Indigenous descent across Australia. The journey is an attempt to translate past stories of Indigenous knowledge to the modern-day Australia. Instead of encountering the authentic, she finds out the long-lost landscape, tradition, mythology, and community. The travel narrative depicted in this novel is the contestation between the subjective expectation and objective reality. Lingering between fact and fiction, travel writing is a negotiation between the objective reality and subjective representation. By focusing on writer's representation on the travel narrative, this paper aims to elaborate how mobility becomes mode of resistance.

This research shows that othering occurs not only to the strange geography, people, and culture, but also inner strangeness to the self; a half European-Wiradjuri descent. Her encounters and dialogs to various landscapes and communities searching for home narrates metaphor of survival. The travel narrative accommodates the mobility, which offers a resistance toward fixation of identity—binary opposition between Indigenous and West. Other than spatial othering, *Swallow the Air* shows the tendency of temporal differentiation, comparing the past utopian fantasy with modern-day Australia. Melancholia occurs as the central theme of the journey as the failure to fulfill the utopian expectation—the loss of authentic Indigenous land, people, and culture. The mode of resistance offered in this melancholic travel narrative is the effort of preserving what is left—from the authentic utopian fantasy—Indigenous knowledge, inheritance, and memories, both personal and communal.

**Keywords: Mobility, Travel Writing, Indigenous, Australia, Postcolonial**

**1. INTRODUCTION**

The year of 1837 might be the turning point of Australian Indigenous literature. The date marks Indigenous publication of opinions, articles, and journal which were still limited in

audience and distribution. These publications challenge the stereotype created by the British colonialism that Indigenous people is backward community, illiterate, and primitive. Nowadays, more than two hundred years

after the first arrival of the British Immigrants; and after several generation of *The Stolen Generation*<sup>i</sup> has been born, the effect of colonialism and oppression are still manifested in Indigenous literary works.

Many Indigenous authors published their works as a counter-narrative to the colonialist point of view. Heiss (2003) recorded that until 2002, there are about 78 biography and autobiography written by Indigenous authors. Indigenous writings, especially those by women writers are mostly in form of biography and autobiography, telling stories from their perspectives and reveal the abuse of colonialism. Their writing mostly tells about the memoir of colonial oppression and injustice, which Smith and Watson (as cited in McDonnell, 2007: 85) call as *trauma narrative*. This tendency appears in most of Indigenous' works such as those by Sally Morgan, Doris Pilkington, Melissa Lukaschensko, and many others. Those publications open the Aboriginal version of history to the wider world.

According to Sandra Phillip (cited in Heiss, 2003), the emergence of autobiographic writing in Indigenous communities is a sign for groups that need a definition. Indigenous people

have experienced a lot of oppression and injustice during the colonial period. This kind of writing also tends to appear in oppressed groups such as African Americans. Indigenous autobiography functions as an empowerment, chance to start writing and resisting using English, language which was used to colonize them (Heiss, 35-36). In postcolonial perspective, Holland and Huggan, (1998: 99) argue that autobiography is one of the choices of Indigenous writers as a counter discourse that challenges Western stereotypes. The discourse is used to reclaim their version of history. Indigenous authors try to create a counter discourse by making Indigenous writings one of the canonical works of Australian literature. These works are a basic necessity to challenge the settler's version of history; also become sign that Indigenous communities are considered and have rights in the writing of Australian history.

The turn of the millennium marks the born of new literary group. Along with the support of several institutions<sup>ii</sup> towards Indigenous writing, here comes the wave of young Indigenous Australian writers. While previous generation commonly wrote in form of biographies or autobiographies<sup>iii</sup>, young Indigenous

writings offer new insight and vision toward current condition of Australia (Leane, 2013: 116). One of those is Tara June Winch's *Swallow the Air* which was published on 2006. This novel is not only concerned with the trauma narrative of the past memories, but also conveys different perspective of recent Indigenous generation toward contemporary Australia. Responding to different situation from the previous generation, Winch (as cited in Cornwell, 2008) commented that the Aboriginal generation should be more grateful that they had the opportunity to speak up. She added that if in the past his father's generation was "forced" to erase and forget their identity, now is an opportunity for future generations to celebrate their identity and go 'beyond healing'.

This book tells a story of May Gibson, a half Wiradjuri descent who travels along Australia to find sense of belonging. Born as the descent of The Stolen Generation, May has never fully heard and understand about his ancestor culture and tradition. With the conflict of identity crisis, she travels along the country to search and experience the ancestral authentic land. Her expectation has to be clashed with the objective

reality, the modern Australia. With the lost of tradition, sacred landscape, and knowledge, modern day Australia is totally different compared to her mother's story. The travel narrative is about finding what has been gone and what is now left. The mobility—departure and arriving to home—facilitate the self and spiritual enlightenment.

Mobility is a very important aspect since it becomes essential necessities of human in the age of globalization. However, mobility is still limited to certain group of people. As Lisle (2005: 10) argues that the idea that everybody moves freely in the era of globalization is a fallacy, only those who can afford and face the consequences of journey have the access to mobility. Thompson (2011) states that the limitations to travel are now varied; not only geographical and physical difficulties, but also financial challenge, social class, gender stereotypes, political danger, crime, etc. He adds that woman is more vulnerable to the limitation since they are more vulnerable to the danger of travel. However, recent development in travel has made it is more available to people. Now, anyone can travel, any gender, and any social class. Travel is

not only monopolized by middle to high class society. Even though, there are more challenges and limitations.

Even before the 21<sup>st</sup> century, mobility has become the (post)colonial spirit, along with the technology development of transportation since the previous century. Travel becomes a rite of passage and indication social class. This is what becomes the main theme of *Swallow the Air*, a girl on the road with ‘liminal position of traveler’ and having a life changing experiences before returning home (Thompson, 2011: 16). Cocker (cited in Thompson, 2011:6) states that travel indicates freedom; and travel writing celebrates it. Travel refers to the freedom of mobility, while writing indicates the freedom of speech, also access to publication.

Written by young Australian Indigenous, this postcolonial travelogue offers young generation insight about Australian condition. Thompson (2011: 165) states that post-colonial travel notes written by others (subaltern and hyphenated people) can be a counter-discourse or what Holland and Huggan (1998: 50) call as counter-travel writing. Written by a young Aboriginal and European descent—*Swallow the Air* becomes the negotiation between those

two sides. This study aims to elaborate how travel narratives and the representation—of world, self, and other—reflects the mode of resistance. Also, to explain how utopia and melancholia is used as strategy to cope with the everchanging landscape of Australia. The findings on these studies is hoped to elaborate the position of Indigenous writing—in its various forms—as an effort to negotiate the history writing; and illustrate the position of (literary) text in the production and formation of knowledge, especially on history and politic of Australia.

## 2. METHOD

In this study, there are two types of data needed to answer the research problems; First is the novel *Swallow the Air* by Tara June Winch; Second, the external texts related to the phenomenon of the social, politic, culture, and history relating to Indigenous Australia.

The analysis is done by close reading on the travel narrative as a form of travel writing. This close reading is aimed to identify writer’s representation of world, self, and other. Next discussion will be done by analyzing the representation based on the concept of

utopia, nostalgia, and melancholia. Finally, the external documents are used to elaborate the phenomena occurs in the travel narrative and elaborate their relation on social, political, cultural issue about Indigenous Australian.

### 3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Travel literature covers variety of forms as it consists of various combinations of writing (and medium) ranging from journal, diary, essay, short story; and it collides with various disciplines ranging from history, geography, anthropology, and social sciences (Holland and Huggan, 1998: 8). Due to the diversity of forms and characteristics of travel literature, they suggest that travel writing as a ‘hybrid genre’ that collides across various categories and disciplines.

Briefly, to travel is to make a journey, movement through spaces. Travel writing is an account resulted from the confrontation or negotiation between self and other, in its encounter with the place, society, or different culture. The basic function of travel writing is to report or bring news of strange world to the audience. It means that travel writing is a translation of ‘travel experience’ into ‘travel text’.

One of the most technical highlights in the definition of travel writing is the movement of places. Place becomes the most important element of travel since it functions as locus of home, history, and background (knowledge), also destination, negotiation, challenge, and representation. As Thompson (2011) suggest that one strategy of travel writing is the portrayal of the world. Its main purpose is to report other world and to ‘disseminate information’ about new place.

Previous study that I have conducted on *Swallow the Air* as Australian Indigenous travel writing<sup>iv</sup> found that this novel narrates the inter-sites of resistance, a connection between Indigenous community across Australia which she encounters in the journey. The inter-sites of resistance serve as a network—also feeling of belonging—among communities with shared understanding and knowledge of history, oppression, and feeling of—familial—nationalism. This study discussed portrayal of world, self, and other as the focus; and its relation to social, politic, and history. In this study, I will focus more on utopia, melancholia, and mobility as a mode of resistance, which I only mentioned it a bit. I will also

discuss the position of fictional text as travel writing to elaborate more about the foundation of this fictional travel narrative.

Vassos (2013) on her research entitled *The Importance of Place in the Definition of Aboriginality in Aboriginal Women's Fiction: Tara June Winch's Swallow the Air, Gayle Kennedy's Me, Antman & Fleabag, Vivienne Cleven's Her Sister's Eye, Larissa Behrendt's Home, and Alexis Wright's Carpentaria* finds that journey becomes vital element of Indigenous writing. Journey (nomadic) has become important tradition of Indigenous people. Unlike travel in sense of Imperial conquest, nomadic journey done by Indigenous people is in the mission of finding the self. It becomes both physical and spiritual journey. The main character in *Swallow the Air* conducts the journey to the country to find sense of belonging and her position among the world.

The importance of mobility, also confirmed by Leane (2013) who states that young adult novels portrays journey as rites of passages—separation, liminality, and incorporation. This reflects the writer's articulation of contemporary Australian situation. These phases might be the illustration of

three main focus of Indigenous concern; European settlement and colonialism in Australia, the stolen land, family, and generation, and reconciliation program.

What Vassos (2013) and Leane (2013) has discussed can be considered as the element of life writing. A piece of literary works where writers use to project his life story; autobiography, memoirs, or diary. Thompson (2011:99) argues that travel writing also often appears in the form of life writing; writers could project he autobiographical narrative which writers explore questions of identity and selfhood. In such form as life writing, Thompson (2011: 119) argues that travel writing has its own personal agenda. It can be used as an effort of creating a staged persona of self called as *self-fashioning*. He adds that this subjective sensibility often appears in the more modern writing. Although in the most objective representation, the writer could also imply a self fashioning projection of which highlight the differentiation during the encounters with unfamiliar place or people.

In his/her encounter with the strange place, society, and culture, the traveler tends to create differentiation which Thompson (2011: 132) calls as

othering. In softer sense, othering is one strategy to highlight differences between self and other. In stronger sense, it is the strategies depicts other culture as different and also to inferior to itself. The method of differentiation—in travel writing— mostly done by comparing home and away, self and other. However, Lisle (2006) suggest that it is not only the othering based on space. Contemporary travel writing shows that the travel writer often uses temporal othering, a differentiation based on time; such as the discourse of nostalgia. It is an effort to longing for the ideal condition in the past. Where things were simple, in order; without the presence of modernization. She adds that this temporalization often fails since in this globalized world, all places has been discovered, affected by globalization and modernization. Thus, what the travelers encounter is the disappointment—melancholia—of the lost place, of an ideal and utopic past.

Thompson (2011) states that travel writing can convey three discourses in its othering, colonial discourse, neo-colonial discourse, and postcolonial discourse. Colonial discourse mostly occurs on travel writing in the era of high imperialism, the era

when Great Britain, France, and other European empire expand their territories. At that time, travel writing became the medium to manifest Imperialism agenda. Neo-colonial discourse occurs in the era when equality is supposedly manifested, together with the decolonization. Meanwhile, travel writing could not escape its colonialist legacy since travel writing basically creates the differentiation and giving the right of representation through mobility and the right of representation. Moreover, travel writing is also medium which enables the effort of mapping and packaging the world for easy Western consumption which reassuring the hierarchy and superiority of Empire. Postcolonial travel writing, or those written by subaltern or hyphenated people have less tendency to portray other culture as inferior since they have the feeling of being oppressed. He adds that postcolonial travel writing can become counter-travel writing or even reproduce the (neo)colonial discourse or becomes the apologist for Western (neo)colonization.

Regarding to the othering as method of differentiation, Lisle (2006: 4) propose two kind of tendencies in postcolonial travel writing; First, those

with *colonial vision*, a travel writing which inherit the spirit of superiority over other people, place, and culture. This vision embodies the superiority of writer's moral and cultural value. Thompson (163) mentions this method as a travel narrative which become reproduction of (neo)colonial discourse. Second, *cosmopolitan vision* which becomes the challenge to the previous by portraying the harmonizing effect of globalization. Instead of highlighting differences and showing superiority, this kind of vision underlie differences on its shared understanding, norms, and sensibilities of the global community (Lisle: 4). However, since the travel writing's main business is about differentiation, it somehow still trapped in the logic of Empire. The relation between colonial and cosmopolitan vision is not separable. Both occurs in the same discourse in various ways.

#### **4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

##### **Locating the Text: Fiction and Travel Narrative**

In this paper, I would like to propose a reading on fictional text such as *Swallow the air* as a form of travel writing. This proposal is not without a risk, since the definition of travel writing

itself has not come to a final. What makes me confident in bringing this young adult fiction is that every representation of place, people, and communities are still in linkage with what Thompson (2011:73) mentions as *epistemological decorum*—an effort by the author to make their account reliable. All places and people mentioned in May Gibson's journey across Australia are real place. Even though there is no proof that the writer did conduct the journey; or there is no claim that the writer admits this piece as travel writing, I hold on the notions that in every objective account there could also be subjective portrayal, vice versa. Also, in every fictional story there must be a portion of objective representation. In this sense, Thompson (2011) and Holland and Huggan (1998) agreed that modern and contemporary travel writing has developed and covered various mediums.

Thompson (2011) argues that travel writing can be defined; exclusively as 'travel literature', travel account with autobiographical narrative. It can contain picture, image, map, or illustration as supporting detail in minor portion; inclusively it can be broadly defined as every document connected with travel including the illustration



itself. DeCerteau (via Thompson, 2011) emphasizes that even map can be considered as form of travel writing since map also contains 'text'. Considering every medium contains 'text', travel writing can be richly developed into various forms. In this sense, I would hold on DeCerteau's argument that every literature is travel writing. Every 'text' or 'discourse' of representation of people and places can be considered as a form of travel writing. This argument is supported by Borm (as cited in Thompson, 2011: 24) that includes both fictional and non-fictional text as travel writing. He suggests that fictional travel themed book like Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* provides representation and information as much as non-fictional travel book. Moreover, both fiction or non-fiction provides representation of people and places which can shape our perception of others.

There are many layers, challenges and distortions for the author to make their account reliable. Accuracy and authoritative of a travel writing become a peculiar problem regarding different audience expectation. Thompson (2011) argues that there are several aspects that determine the

reliability and authoritative of travel writing he calls as *epistemological decorum*. In this book, the author uses several strategies to gain reader's trust. First, she uses empiric principle by using first person narration so it emphasizes the position of eyewitness. Second, using the authoritative source to confirm her depiction of the world. Third, the author emphasizes the objective description by providing detailed portrayal of world, people, and places. Fourth, the author uses possible description so it will make sense to the audience, this is called as principle of plausibility. Besides, as a modern travel writing, this novel uses another aspect like uniqueness and aesthetic device to attract reader's attention. For example, in the using of figurative language to emphasize Aboriginal value and point of view which is interesting for the reader.

### **Between Self and Other; Contesting Identities**

Through *breeding out* projects, including the Aboriginal Protection Act and the Mission program, settler's governments are working to erase Indigenous ancestry and its cultural heritage. Mixed descent of European and Aboriginal children was forcibly taken

from their families and placed in *The Mission* to limit the number of Aboriginal descent and to erase their identity and culture, and knowledge. They were placed among the settler's community, and were prohibited from admitting, using names and languages, and finding out about their culture. Moreover, the assimilation efforts in the colonial period taught that being Indigenous was a shame so that the next generation would distance themselves from their ancestor's knowledge.

The impact of identity and cultural erasure creates issues regarding Indigenous identity (Indigeneity). This is also caused by discourses created by Europeans which creates negative stereotypes and discrimination. Huggins (in Heiss, 2003) asserts that representations written by non-Indigenous tend to underestimate and homogenize, even though Indigenous Australia consists of various ethnic groups and diverse cultures. Furthermore, Birch (via Heiss, 2003) states that government intervention in Indigenous lives has restructured the Indigenous category so that it is very difficult to achieve a full understanding of their diverse and multi-layered identities.

May Gibson character, as it is written in the novel is the projection of Indigeneity conflict suffered by The Stolen Generation. She does not feel fully as Indigenous or European descent. In her journey searching for the sense of belonging, she was expecting to encounter the authentic Indigenous culture. Yet, the real condition of the world did not meet her expectation. This raises the negotiation between her expectation and objective reality of the place she is living in. She realizes that pursuing for the authentic is not possible in this global open world. As it is stated by Heiss (2003) that Indigeneity is not based on blood; it is not something given, but earned.

Mentioned as a semi-autobiographical account, this novel accommodates author's desire to create staged persona or as Thompson (2011: 99) mentions as self-fashioning. May character is a self-fashioned version of author's ideal character which reflects her ideological position. Other than creating discourse and positioning herself in between, she admits both identity within her; Indigenous and European descent. The writer offers reader an enlightenment from the negotiation between the traditional

(Aboriginal) and the reality (modern Australia) which give understanding and sense of belonging. She intends to go beyond the conservative separation of identity toward wider, national or even global identity. In the interview with *Antipodes*, she stated that the thought of wider Anglo community that Indigenous people who are traditional and live in the bush is naive (Bryne, 2007). She implied that Aboriginal people have also capacity of becoming modern; they are capable of becoming anything.

The negotiation between both identities creates a space for performativity. It can also be seen in the novel that it speaks about the negotiation of self and identity by both criticizing and also appreciating each culture. She speaks of equality, capability, and also the potential of race, class, and gender. Lisle (2006: 4) mentions this tendency as a cosmopolitan vision, that conveys ‘the problem of global community—of what values might cut through cultural difference and make it possible to develop a global order based on shared understandings, norms, and sensibilities.’

Apart from text, the author also self-fashioned herself through her biography. Compared to other authors

who tend to identify themselves as Indigenous writers, Tara June Winch identifies herself as European and Afghan descent, Wiradjuri. This can be considered as an attempt to emphasize her in-betweenness. According to the Indigeneity criteria stated by the Australia Council of Arts—descent, identification, acceptance—Tara June Winch is an Indigenous member. However, that does not mean he is not of European descent. By claiming herself not only as Indigenous, she was breaking through the rigid boundaries of categorization between Indigenous and European. Although European blood flowed within her, this did not prevent her from becoming Indigenous. Also, even though she has Indigenous blood, this does not prevent him from becoming a realistic modern. *Swallow the Air* highlights that identity is not fixed, yet it is fluid and has dynamic performativity.

By proposing the idea of fluid identity, *Swallow the Air* presents an ethical challenge on the reconciliation based on mutual understanding. This novel carry what Lisle (2006: 4) called as *cosmopolitan vision*; representation with respects to cultural differences and acknowledging shared values. *Swallow the Air* expresses empathy, a process of

understanding differences, equality, and interconnected values between Settler and Indigenous people. Carrying cosmopolitan vision, this novel shows resistance efforts or counter-discourse not by attacking back, but by understanding equality and equity in regard to contemporary condition. Instead of striking back, this novel emphasizes equality between humans; whether Aboriginal, European, or other tribes—such as Charlie, an African native and Mr. Tzulakis. She regards all people from various ethnicities, races, class groups, and gender with the same rights and respect.

At the end of the novel, May arrives at her final destination, her own home and family, she comes back to the periphery. She finally realizes that she belongs to the suburban marginalized community, a peripheral location determined by colonial positioning. This might indicate a surrender to (neo)colonial control over Australia; a realization towards the legacy of Empire. However, the self realization and acknowledgement on May Gibson's character indicates that she is 'celebrating' her identity and belonging. Leane (2013) considers this as the incorporation stage—from rites of

passages—a phase to reconcile the long conflict between settler and Indigenous and go 'beyond healing'.

### **Home and Mobility as Resistance**

Thompson (2011: 173) states that travel—in some era—is seen as a ritual to show the image of masculinity. This assumption creates gender discrimination; Women are considered as weak that they can not overcome the dangers on the way. In addition, women are also considered to be vulnerable to the dangers of physical violence and threats of sexual violence. In the globalization era, mobility becomes essential for many people. Travel, which used to be considered as a ritual to exercise masculinity and becomes gender discrimination, is now more available for everyone. Lisle (2005: 10) criticize this idea by stating that 'the idea of everybody moves freely in a globalized world is a fallacy: only those who can afford to move, or those who are willing to take the risk associated with migration, are able to cross established geopolitical border with ease.' In the era of globalization, the challenge is now becoming new forms of global exclusion, domination and violence. Foster and Mills (via Thompson, 2011:

173) further suggest that gender is only one of variable that create boundaries, but also race, age, class, financial position, education, political ideals, and historical period.

Swallow the Air can be seen as an attempt to break those limitations—not just gender boundaries, but also global challenges. In case of gender, it challenges stereotypes of women as domestic. It also challenges the stereotype of Indigenous as people who cannot afford to travel. May Gibson breaks all of those boundaries by demonstrating what (Thompson, 2011: 50) mentions as hippie mentality or a backpacker mentality. By fundamentally travelling on foot, also without being dependent on budget, May could afford to travelling; going beyond financial, racial, and gender stereotypes.

Based on the discussion above, mobility becomes central element of this novel. It accommodates an alternate position between home and away. It put her in the liminal condition where home is challenged by the desire to encounters the outside of her territory, outside of her knowledge. This position of liminality can be seen on the statement, "*The booze had got a strong hold of her, her and her boyfriend Craig, and the bottle was what*

*the house turned into, not a home any more than she had meant for it to be*" (Winch, 2006: 53). In this statement, May does not feel that the place she lives in can be considered as home. So, she starts wandering around to search her true home; a place told by her mother. This was done to overcome the liminality. However, in the journey she needs to confront her idea of home—as the authentic and traditional landscape—with the contemporary condition of Australia. This novel main narrative is the negotiation between two values; the binary opposition between Indigenous and Western. As it is mentioned above that the journey is not only physical but also spiritual—outward and inward—the mobility is also in May's state of mind, an understanding and knowledge of the world.

By returning to her home with new understanding of herself and the world, this novel implies a closure which can be read in two ways; First, returning to home might be considered as May's surrender to the overwhelming effect of colonialism. With excavator slowly destroying her surroundings—see Chapter Home (Winch, 2006), it seems to confirm that she belongs to her marginalized home, a place mapped by

colonialism. Second, returning home means reuniting with family and community. Familial relationship is a very important role in the contemporary formation and continued survival of Aboriginal community in the face of two centuries of oppression. Instead of refusing patriarchy, women Indigenous uses the family as a *'location which they may confound and at times elude the continued scrutiny and interference of policies designed to survey, manage, and regulate every aspect of Aboriginal lives'* (Brewster via Grossman, 2013: 68). Therefore, returning to home can also be considered as locating resistance in the very foundation of her existence; and by acknowledging her position in the world.

Swallow the Air impliedly directing into Brewster's idea of family as site of resistance. May's adventure is a journey seeking for sense of belonging as concept of home. Here, home can be read as location of resistance. The familial resistance can be seen in the (family) history of May's Grandmother told by her Mum (Winch, 2006: 19). This tendency is also dominant in her representation of places she visited. Responding to the landscape, May tends to refer to family stories or Aboriginal

beliefs. The process of transferring information between generations is emphasized in the chapter Cloud Busting (Winch, 2006: 19-28) which tells of the past conditions of her grandmother's generation in 1967. The familial generation to generation story can be considered as an attempt to preserve the Indigenous history, also to teach the next generation about Indigenous heritage.

Mobility in this travel narrative enables May to access Indigenous knowledge and story in other places. By using the travel narratives, this novel enriches readers with information about condition of Indigenous communities. Like Joyce's story about Redfern and The Block (Winch, 97-105), Issy's story about Lake Cowal (146-148), as well as Graham's story about European abusive politic (Winch, 169-172). The reader is brought up to a journey wandering across Australia to see places, communities, and re-visit histories. Regarding those communities as home, May's search of sense of belonging results the interconnected 'homes'; findings on other Indigenous communities. Travel narrative in this novel accommodates an inter-sites resistance (Furqan, 2016). Thus, it projects the concept of home to a wider

scale; it becomes a symbol of shared community, a nationalism of Indigenous people.

As an Indigenous life writing, this novel also functions as discourse of Indigenous memory. Regarding the idea of Julia Martinez (also Michael Mansell), Brewster, and Upstone as I have mentioned above, in relation of nation and reconciliation, *Swallow the Air* offers a mode as a resistance by including Indigenous knowledge, existence, and community in the Australian nation. This reminds me to Bhaba (1998) statement that home may not be where they want to be, but home might be a *metaphor of survival*, which in this novel is translated into any kind of effort of preserving memory, knowledge, and identity of self and community. In the context of Australian literature, this novel offers a modern Indigenous perspective, a cosmopolitan vision, and ethical challenges, then includes them as mode of resistance that helps shape Australian identity. In context of nation, *Swallow the Air* efforts to facilitate mode of resistance through intimacy between homes and networks, an effort of reconciliation with shared understanding of Australia as nation.

Martinez in '*Problematizing Aboriginal nationalism*' (1997), questions the nationalism of Aboriginal people. She elaborates Aboriginal nationalism based on Benedict Anderson and Anthony Smith's concept of nationalism. She suggests that Aboriginal's nationalism is formed by English as *lingua franca* and the principal of blackness. Aboriginal people did not have the concept of nationalism other those created by the colonizer. Regarding the context of the state, Mansell (cited in Martinez, 1997) states that '*the best way to provide power for Aboriginal self-government is to build that right into the Australian Constitution*'. Martinez commented on Mansell's statement by stating that through familial relationship, Aboriginal people can foster sense of nationalism. Even though perspectives on Aboriginal nationalism and Aboriginal nation varies, Martinez concluded that the notions of Aboriginal nation ensured with strong sense among community could become foundation of Indigenous nationalism.

### **Utopia, Nostalgia, and Melancholia**

McDonnell (2005: 85) argues that Indigenous writers mostly concern

on *trauma narrative*, which focus on trauma and human rights violations in colonial times. Clarke (2016) also argues that the theme utopia and melancholia has always been in Australian Indigenous representation. The colonial abuse, dislocation, identity crisis, and human right violation becomes the traumatic theme haunting for decades, even centuries. The melancholia occurs due to the utopian fantasy of the authentic. In this novel, the utopian is the myth told by May's mother about the past condition and Indigenous tradition. Once the journey starts, the utopian fantasy will be challenged by objective reality, in which melancholia is resulted from the disappointment due to the rapid changes of Australian condition.

This theme also becomes main tendency in *Swallow the Air*. Melancholia results from disappointment—clash between subjective expectation and objective reality she encounters. In her depiction of places, May often compares the geographical conditions in the present and with the past stories she heard from her mother. Her description of landscape and mythical experience is based on the past ideal condition, which was untouched by modernity. This what Lisle

(2006: 209) mentions the discourse of nostalgia, which lies on method of temporalization. This method of othering uses the time sequence, imagining that there are still those—utopian—ideal, untouched, authentic, place outside the Imperial modernization. In this globalized world, all places are already revealed, visited, modernized. The works of travel writer is to create boundaries between Empire and outside. The discourse of nostalgia appears in May's character as the descent of The Stolen Generation, whose connection with place, tradition, culture and Indigenous knowledge has been erased by colonialism.

Lisle (2006: 216) mentions that nostalgia uses the principle of spatiotemporal othering. The writer not only uses spatial differentiation, but also temporal othering to differentiate self and other, home and faraway place, present and past. This differentiation underlies the main theme of her journey. May's journey is the process of experiencing the real world and confirming her utopian fantasy (expectation). She tries to translate myths and stories about the outside world based on real world conditions. May thinks that the present condition is



not better than the stories she heard—the authentic landscape. However, in such globalized and rapid changing world, the traveler's expectations are always different from reality, so melancholia appears as a strategy to cope with the disappointment.

*Mum used to say that these parts are famous for their leeches, or used to be anyway. She said that the old people used to trade them, big juicy fat ones, they'd use for medicine. She said that the people from this part are called the Dtharawahl people, and dtharawahl means valley, a perfect wet breeding ground for leeches. It is their land, Mum would say, so we have to help look after it for them in exchange for our staying here. Be respectful, she'd say.*

*But there were no leeches anymore; they left when Mum left – traded for the bushfire's arrival. (Winch, 2006: 44)*

The ideal world existed only in the past. It was unattainable, untouchable, and unreachable. The impossibility of achieving an ideal world due to the rapid change of Australian landscape once again confirms superiority of Empire (modernization). Melancholia is an expression of disappointment, loss, and longing for the exotic, or the authentic. Clarke (2016: 15) stated that melancholia is the condition of being trapped in colonialism. This supports Jackie Huggin and Sandra Philip idea (cited in Heiss, 2003) that Australia is

rather considered as neo-colonial rather than post-colonial, considering that oppression and discrimination are still overshadowing. This novel portrays how strong influence of colonialism in modern-day Australia—especially the erasure of Indigenous identity, knowledge and rights. It is also portrayed in the novel—see the description of Paradise Parade, Winch (2006: 44); Urban Sydney (93-94); Joyce's story of The Block (100-101); Lake Cowal (136-137)—that all of May's nostalgia and melancholia occurs due to the loss of place, people, and tradition; which is inherited from the abuse of colonialism.

May's journey might be full of disappointment, nostalgia, and melancholia. The theme of the journey itself is not about exploring new places and people, but about finding new understanding in self about the contemporary condition. Furqan (2016: 153) states that the mission on May's journey is pilgrimage, visiting ancient Indigenous sites and viewing the world based on its mythology—see the description of Bila Snake (Winch, 2006: 157); Lake Cowal (146-147); May and Johnny imagining home in the past (119-129). The very purpose of pilgrimage is achieving self-enlightenment by

experiencing the sacred sites. In this novel, self-enlightenment comes in form of understanding of history, community, and changes. At the end of the novel, May comes back home with new understanding, seeing the world with different eyes. The encounters with landscape, people, and communities has enriched her understanding of her sense of belonging and her position as young generation of Indigenous.

The closure of this journey is an ethical challenge to Australia's reconciliation. May's return to her home implies her understanding of contemporary condition of Australia. She challenges all Australians to participate in the reconciliation mission. Clarke (2016: 24) states that such postcolonial writing which concern of writing memories, is 'deeply invested in addressing the past'. The necessity of recalling all of those memories is the mission of shaping the history of Australian—including all races. He adds that this method could be considered as reparative writing and reading, and strategy to represent history, memory, and legacy of colonial conflict. In this case, the utopian fantasy of Indigenous landscape, culture, and knowledge is precious to preserve. The effort of

writing the (travel) narrative as a part of Australian literature, also in position to negotiate and enrich Australian history, is an attempt to recover the nation from reluctant amnesia (Clarke: 24). This effort is like gathering the scattered leaves of history, falling from the same tree, Australian nation.

The mobility, as a mode of resistance, locates homes of the Indigenous community as inter-sites of resistance (Furqan: 2016). Considering the melancholic theme of Australian Indigenous writing, *Swallow the Air* offers is a kind of melancholic resistance—or, I should say recovering from resistance, to go beyond healing. In such globalized and mixed world with the wide openness of space and access, the authentic is located only in the utopian vision. However, the authentic is not what this mainly talks about. It was about acceptance, negotiation, and realization of the long gone authentic. Not by ignoring it, but by acknowledging and preserving what is left from it. As Martinez (1997: 144) has argued that the best way to gain political power for Indigenous is to include its—familial and communal nationalism—into Australian constitution. Home—in this case, May's returning to home—might

be the colonial fixation, positioning, and practice of surveillance of the residence, but it also facilitates as the site of resistance by providing intimacy between the family member Upstone (2009: 119). The mode of resistance is directing to go beyond the authentic, beyond utopia—to the struggle of preserving identity, memories, knowledge, and inheritance of Indigenous. Rather than projecting the utopian authentic, it offers us of the understanding of fluid identities and challenges us to preserve memory—both personal and communal—as a part of history of the nation.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The discussion on *Swallow the Air* as a postcolonial travel narrative by young Indigenous offers an understanding on how contemporary Indigenous writing—including fiction—can also be regarded as a form of travel writing. After all, travel writing is a hybrid genre covering wide range of theme and medium. With this such inclusive definition, one important thing to underline is its main business in creation discourse of othering; differentiation between self and other, home and away.

Nostalgia and melancholia become the main theme of the travel narrative. By comparing the past stories of Indigenous land with the objective present reality of Australia, nostalgia occurs as a method of spatial and temporal differentiation. The overall travel narrative is about confirming the utopian fantasy of traditional Indigenous land, beliefs, tradition, and knowledge. From the encounters, melancholia occurs as expected utopian fantasy could not be confirmed with the objective reality; the everchanging Australian landscape and the loss of traditional setting. Melancholia occurs as result of the negotiation between the long-lost tradition and culture. However, it also gives self-realization, an understanding of self and the position in contemporary Australia. Mobility in the travel narrative accommodates a mode of resistance by creating a network among Indigenous communities across Australia. Thus, the network of communities serves as network of 'homes' as a site of resistance. It creates an inter familial relationship; an Indigenous feeling of nationalism with the same mission; to preserve Indigenous inheritance and knowledge. Home is not seen as a physical place, but as any kind of effort

of preserving personal and communal memory and history to be included in the discourse of Australian history.

This novel offers a young Indigenous insight toward contemporary condition of Australia. By demonstrating cosmopolitan vision, it is trying to escape the melancholic tendency by offering to go beyond binary opposition—Indigenous or settler. It also suggests the reconciliation between past conflict by going beyond healing, beyond authentic; a method of survival by preserving the remains of Indigenous knowledge.

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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>i</sup> The Stolen Generation refers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait people who were forcibly taken from their families as children under Australian government policy from 1800 to 1970. Korff, *A guide to Australia's Stolen Generations*.

<sup>ii</sup> David Unaipon Award which was initiated by University of Queensland since 1980 has flourished many Indigenous authors.

<https://www.uqp.com.au/pages/about-us>

<sup>iii</sup> McDonnell (2005: 85) argues that Aboriginal writers mostly writes about trauma narrative, which focuses on trauma and human rights violations in colonial times.

<sup>iv</sup> Furqan (2016). *Swallow the Air Sebagai Catatan Perjalanan Indigenous Australia*.