THE TRANSLATION CHARACTER OF *STRADBROKE DREAMTIME* BY OODGEROO NOONUCCAL

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ABSTRACT: This article delves into Oodgeroo Noonuccal's short story collection *Stradbroke Dreamtime* (1972) from a translation perspective. A national best-seller and a well-known classic of Australian children's literature, Noonuccal's narrative includes 27 illustrated stories, half of which are autobiographical, and half drawn from the author's knowledge of Indigenous spiritual cultures and oral traditions. Specifically, the exploration focuses on the inter-epistemic translational processes within Oodgeroo's work, including the transformation of performative and visual narratives into written form, the translation of Indigenous knowledge into children's literature, and the transmission of her life experiences and cultural background to individuals of diverse descent, thus raising awareness of Aboriginal epistemologies within a multicultural readership. The twofold objective is to suggest new methodologies applicable to the examination of Indigenous translation and underscore the significance of translation as a heuristic paradigm for the study of Indigenous cultures.
KEYWORDS: (Inter-) Epistemic Translation, Indigenous Australian Literature, Children's Literature, Aboriginal Narrative, Translationality

1. Translational Processes in Aboriginal Writing

In 1964, Oodgeroo of the Noonuccal tribe (1920-1994, formerly known as Kath Walker) gained renown as the first published Aboriginal poet in Australia with her debut collection, *We Are Going*. Beyond her literary achievements, Oodgeroo was a prominent socio-political activist, advocating for treaties concerning Indigenous human and land rights. Additionally, she devoted the final two decades of her life to teaching, specifically focusing on children's education on North Stradbroke Island, her birthplace off the Queensland coast (Hatherell, 2012, p. 4). Her extensive connections with Indigenous communities stretched across Australia and beyond, to Aotearoa New Zealand, Malaysia, Fiji, China, India, Russia, Nigeria, and the USA. Oodgeroo's global travels involved representing Indigenous interests, delivering lectures, and participating in international gatherings. Today, her literary contributions — which reconstruct the memory of an ancient Indigenous past, intricately weaving it with official Australian history and hegemonic narratives — are recognised for their groundbreaking impact in bringing Indigenous narratives to broader attention.

In 1972, at the apex of her fame as a poet and activist, and still known by her Anglophone name Kath Walker (she would change her name in 1988, as a sign of protest against Australia's bicentenary celebrations and as a symbol of pride in an Aboriginal

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heritage), Oodgeroo published her first narrative book, *Stradbroke Dreamtime*. This autobiographical work includes 27 stories for children, written in English, presenting two aspects of her life: the first part includes episodes from her childhood spent on Minjerribah (North Stradbroke Island), while the second part collects Creation stories from Stradbroke Island and the Tamborine Mountains, and stories based on the author's knowledge of her people and the land.[1] Oodgeroo crafted the book between 1969 and 1972 upon returning from the "concrete jungle" of Brisbane to Minjerribah, before establishing the Noonuccal-Nughie Education and Cultural Centre to promote the study and firsthand experience of First Nations culture (Hatherell, 2012, pp. 3-4). Until her death in 1993, Oodgeroo would live there in a caravan, with thousands of children and teens regularly visiting and camping nearby.

Since its first publication in 1972, *Stradbroke Dreamtime* has achieved widespread popularity, selling thousands of copies across its five editions and earning recognition as a national best-seller. In 1994, the work was honoured with the Australian Children's Book Council Book of the Year Award. Notably, besides its success in English, *Stradbroke Dreamtime* holds the distinction of being the first piece of Indigenous Australian literature to be translated into another European language. Over the years, it has been translated into Polish, Japanese, German, and partially into Italian (Walker, 1977, 1981; Oodgeroo Noonuccal, 1998a, 1998b; Petrilli, 2017; Zanoletti, 2012, 2017).

It may therefore come as a surprise that, in spite of these notable achievements, *Stradbroke Dreamtime* has received limited scholarly interest thus far. Considering that it was not until the publication of this book that the Creation stories of Southeastern Queensland came to be written from a First Nations perspective (McKay, 2007, p. 94), and despite increased interest sparked by Noonuccal's centenary celebrations (Sharma, 2020; Pal, 2020, 2021; Zanoletti, 2021, 2023; Swan, 2022; Ryan, 2023; Wright, 2023), academic contributions on *Stradbroke Dreamtime* remain scarce, with only a few notable mentions (Petrilli, 1995, 2017; Jones, 2003, 2004, 2009; Zanoletti, 2017, 2024b; Kwapisz Williams, 2018; Pal, 2021). Among them, particularly noteworthy is Jennifer Jones' research documenting the revisions and rewritings done by the editor to put Oodgeroo's manuscript into publishable form, a form which was domesticated to suit Anglophone norms. Jones' study reconstructs the collective process that gave rise to the final work, including the dynamics of standardisation of the text during the process of editorial revision.[2] Equally inspiring is Susan Petrilli's contribution (2017), approaching *Stradbroke Dreamtime* from a semiotic point of view and emphasising its inherently translational nature. What appears

[1] Aboriginal peoples scattered across the continent have always been divided into hundreds of linguistic groups, each with its own territory, history, language and culture. However, they share a common oral tradition involving the stories of the Dreamtime or Creation (these are referred to by different names in their various languages), which provided a code of life that was and still is the basis of their existence.

[2] In an email message dated February 2024, Jones states that at the time she would have liked to publish a version of *Stradbroke Dreamtime* that restores the original text, but the combination of willing publisher / Oodgeroo's family support did not arise. Kwapisz Williams (2018, p. 34) inaccurately reports that in 2006 the book was reissued by Vulgar Press in a version edited by Jones which "restores this important Aboriginal text and offers it to a new generation".

to be a limitation is that, despite the shared emphasis on Oodgeroo's cross-cultural awareness and communication, Noonuccal's commentators (mostly literary scholars or historians, rather than translation scholars) have yet to fully grasp the translational character of her endeavour—meaning by 'translation' not a purely linguistic transcoding, but a process of interpretation and reperformance aimed at creating new relationships, new meanings, new knowledge (Petrilli, 2003; Marais, 2019, pp. 122-123; Bennett, 2023).

This paper seeks to address this gap in the literature by examining Oodgeroo's narrative work through the lens of (inter-) epistemic translation. Drawing on prior research, archival investigations, and personal involvement with the author's estate and community (Zanoletti, 2012, 2017, 2021, 2023, 2024a, 2024b), as well as applying a number of relevant theorisations from the field of translation studies (Robinson, 2017; Marais, 2019; Petrilli and Zanoletti, 2023; Bennett, 2024a, 2024b) and beyond (Santos, 2016, 2018) I aim to tackle two fundamental questions: first, what constitutes the translational dimension of Oodgeroo's work?, and second, in a broader context, how can a translational perspective, grounded in an understanding of translation as a phenomenon inherent to all semiotic transactions, provide deeper insights into creativity across various domains? To this end, whilst elsewhere I have focused on the intralingual and interlingual character of Oodgeroo's translation work (Zanoletti, 2024a), in this contribution I want to shift the attention to processes that go beyond the mere verbal sphere. Particular reference will be made to two interrelated but distinct phenomena: *interepistemic translation*, i.e., translation between different paradigms of knowledge (see Robinson, this issue), and *epistemic translation*, i.e., the construction of knowledge (or discourses) from primary perception (see Marais, this issue). Applying this distinction, I shall investigate Noonuccal's act of translating Indigenous knowledges and stories into children's literature, turning performative and visual narratives into writing, and bringing the heritage of the Aboriginal peoples to the attention of a globalised community of readers.

Ultimately, what I aim to argue is that these underlying translation processes show *Stradbroke Dreamtime* to be far more multilayered than it seems at first glance. Unearthing these dynamics also highlights the complexities behind the construction of knowledge more generally, contributing to expand the object of translation studies beyond the standard realm of professional translation of written texts (Tymoczko, 2006; Marais and Feinauer, 2017, pp. 2-3; Meylaerts and Marais, 2023, pp. 1-2; Bennett, 2024b, p. 11-12).

Such a perspective is shaped by my cultural background as a female white Italian translation researcher who lived in Australia for a period and has since returned to Italy. This perspective, I am aware, differs from Oodgeroo's viewpoint and from the "periperformativity" of her audience at the time *Stradbroke Dreamtime* was initially published (Robinson, 2017, p. x). As a non-Indigenous observer, I subjectively interpret her work, understanding it in the light of translation theories encountered in my academic journey and in relation to my personal values, experiences, and semioethical stance (Petrilli, 2015).

The discussion that follows is structured in three sections. The first section recalls some of the most pertinent conceptualisations of (inter-) epistemic translation that form the theoretical background to my analysis, and briefly reports on the methods and desired outcomes of my study. The second section examines (inter-) epistemic translation in *Stradbroke Dreamtime*, providing examples. The conclusions highlight how the unpacking of these processes encourages engagement with new ways of thinking around translation, contributing to conceptualising the translational dimension of culture and society globally (Marais, 2019, 2022).

2. Conceptualising (Inter-) Epistemic Translation

The starting point of my analysis of Oodgeroo's literary work is that translation is more than a transfer of textual features from one language to another (Jakobson, 1959; Robinson, 2017, p. viii), but instead a phenomenon intrinsic to all communication and meaning-making processes. Accordingly, translation between languages is seen as a specific case of translation across sign systems (Petrilli, 2003a, p. 41; Marais, 2019; Petrilli and Ji, 2023).

Such view is shared by several scholars, although the classifications proposed vary considerably (Petrilli, 2003; Sütiste, 2021; Torop, 2023; Petrilli and Zanoletti, 2023, pp. 342-345). Recent contributions to the debate include Kobus Marais's radical argument (2019, p. 57) that all forms of translation are intersemiotic insofar as they occur among semiotic systems in addition to within the same semiotic system. Rather than Roman Jakobson's tripartite distinction between intralingual, interlingual, and intersemiotic translation, where the latter is defined as an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems (Jakobson, 1959), Marais proposes the categories of intra-systemic, inter-systemic, and extra-systemic translation, irrespective of what those systems are, and replaces such expressions as 'source text' and 'target text' with 'incipient sign system' and 'subsequent sign system'.

In recent years, reflection on translation has been further enriched by Douglas Robinson's introduction of 'interepistemic translation', a notion particularly suitable to explain the inherently translative character of *Stradbroke Dreamtime*. Among the scholars who have ventured to rethink Jakobson's tripartite distinction, Robinson (2017, p. 200) designates interepistemic translation as passage from one incipient Epistemic System (ES) to a subsequent one, like when one author "reframes the narratives in one written genre (or semiotic world), popular or 'narrative' neuroscience, as a narrative in a different written genre (or semiotic world), the novel". Other examples include educational and popularisation mechanisms (i.e., compilations, students' notes, magazine articles, TV documentaries, picturebooks, etc.), as well as the reworking of specialist knowledge into literature and art (Bennett, 2023, pp. 444 and 448). As Robinson suggests, this phenomenon can also manifest itself as a process of transfer and transmission ('translationality') that reworks previous knowledge in accordance with new cultural and ideological configurations, involving adaptation and transformation (Robinson, 2017, p. 22; also Bennett, 2023, pp. 443 and 448-450; 2024a, p. 10) as well as when transferring

information between two different epistemic regimes such as Indigenous knowledges and Western epistemes.

In *Stradbroke Dreamtime*, as we shall see, *interepistemic* translation occurs between the Creation, or 'Dreamtime', stories belonging to the Indigenous Australian societies and Western-style literary codification, while *epistemic* translation is in action as the meaning-making mechanism through which new discourses are constructed (Marais, this issue; Bennett, 2024a, p. 10). Through translation, Oodgeroo contributed to counter the monopoly exercised by Western Science on what was considered to be 'knowledge', through which the Indigenous knowledges of the Global South are sidelined and deprived of intellectual authority (Bennett, 2023, pp. 444-445; 2024b, p. 2; Santos, 2016, pp. 212-236).

Robinson (2017, p. 201) explains interepistemic translation with a flowchart, where Epistemic Systems (ESs)—systems that attempt to construct a coherent reading of reality—are connected by vectors within a multidirectional whole. The line diagram displays how the interaction between different systems invariably brings about transformation and change. This interpretative network composes a dynamic framework, informed by continuous interactions and collaborations that make the construction of knowledge endlessly unstable, provisional, and dialogic. Drawing on Robinson's model, the new flowchart proposed (Fig. 1) attempts to diagram the (inter)epistemic dynamics concerning *Stradbroke Dreamtime*.

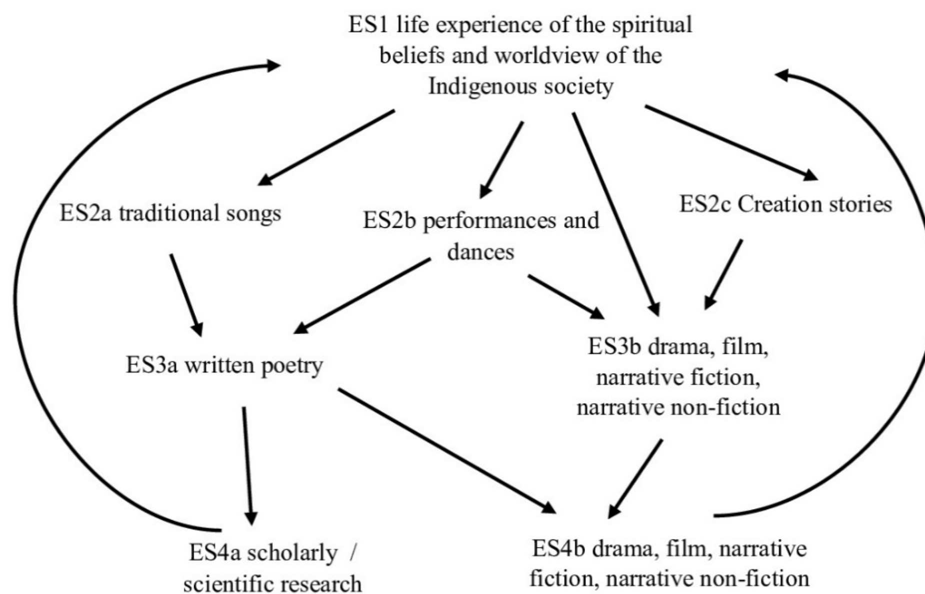


Figure 1. Flowchart of (inter)epistemic translation in *Stradbroke Dreamtime*

As visible in the flowchart, the various translational processes involved in the production of *Stradbroke Dreamtime*, even before conventional interlingual translation is contemplated, make it an object for translation research. In the chart, *ES1 to ES2c to ES3b* would be the translational trajectory followed by Oodgeroo in creating *Stradbroke*

Dreamtime. Also implied in that line diagram is what Jakobson defines as 'interlingual translation'. We can see it twice: in the trajectory *ES2c to ES3b* (resemiotising Creation stories from Aboriginal Australian languages and dialects into English); and *ES3b to ES4b* (translations of *Stradbroke Dreamtime* into other natural languages) (see Petrilli, 2017, p. 65; Bandia, 1993, p. 56).[3]

It is important to note that interepistemic translation is not only a device for sharing the world with those who do not share our knowledge or experience, but it also raises awareness of the fact that no single form of knowledge is complete in itself but exists in a complementary relationship to others (Santos, 2016, p. 221-224). And while imperial epistemologies have represented the Indigenous Other as primitive, impressionable, incapable of self-representation, this kind of interepistemic translation can be used as an exercise in existential self-reflectivity, a struggle against the great powers of consumerism and colonialism, and a claim of pre-consumerist, precolonial memory which works toward the ecologies of knowledge necessary to achieve cognitive justice (Santos, 2016, pp. 188-211; Bennett, 2023, p. 454).

From this viewpoint, *Stradbroke Dreamtime* can also be viewed as part of a strategy of cultural resistance against 'epistemicide' (Santos, 2016; Price, 2023), understood as the systematic eradication by western science of the Indigenous knowledges belonging to *Terra Australis* (southern land). With this work, Noonuccal decontextualises and recodes several 'Dreamtime' stories, placing them in contact with external influences within a global cultural system. And while the first wave of post-colonial literature discussed the problem of whether or not to write in the colonizers' language (Vidal Claramonte, 2012, p. 272; also Shoemaker, 2004, pp. 182-183), the hegemony of the English language in the globalised world as a form of "linguistic imperialism" (Bennett, 2024b, p. 2) is pushed to the extreme by Oodgeroo, who acts as a mediator.

Throughout the book, for instance, Noonuccal employs the word 'Dreamtime', the translation of the Aranda/Arrernte word '*Alcheringa*' superimposed by the English invaders (Oodgeroo, 1990, p. 8). In *Stradbroke Dreamtime* the word serves as a calque, i.e., a translation technique by which Indigenous concepts, sayings, and idiomatic expressions that are absent from the culture of the subsequent sign system are translated almost literally into European languages (Bandia, 1993, pp. 64-67).[4] In *Stradbroke Dreamtime*

[3] As denounces Oodgeroo (1990, p. 5; see also Gnecchi Ruscone, 1999, p. 183), "originally, there were 350 entirely separate Aboriginal languages and 750 dialects; the tribes of Australia had a rich and diverse culture […] The Aboriginal legends were recorded by many of the invaders, who saw it as a way of making money." Between the late 1940s and the early 1950s what Adam Shoemaker (2004, pp. 86-87) refers to as "traditional Aboriginal literature not written by Aborigines" came into vogue, due to the efforts of white anthropologists who sought out traditional Aboriginal myths during their field work. In such cases, the English translation of the recording, carried out on the basis of a simplified phonetic transcription, reflected the anthropologist's preconceptions and interpretation of the incipient sign system.

[4] This translation is far from unproblematic. Not only does the word 'Dreamtime' deviate from the Aboriginal idiom but it is also an artificial paraphrase introduced by white scholars; however, it still aims to convey the mystic and spiritual character of the incipient sign system and, due to its widespread popularity, is easily understandable by a non-Aboriginal audience. See Zanoletti, 2024b.

calques, translations, toponyms, names and expressions in the Aboriginal languages and references to Indigenous cultures all contribute to create a blending of Indigenous and western discourses resulting in a *code métissé*, where diverse perspectives do not relate in a merely additive manner but rather mesh in transformative ways, generating new meanings (Bennett, 2024b, p. 14). Such a process manifests itself as an adaptational and ultrasemiotic sign-shifting work (Gottlieb, 2018, pp. 51-52), which contributes to Oodgeroo's transmission of knowledge, experiences and values, and to the expansion of her communication network.

3. The Translation Character of *Stradbroke Dreamtime*

Drawing together the conceptualisations illustrated above, let us now analyse three aspects of *Stradbroke Dreamtime* that are revelatory of its translational character: autobiographical writing, diamesic resemiotisation, and imagetextual synergy. The approach that I employ for conducting the analysis is grounded in a practical limitation: it has proved impossible to identify and retrieve the sources (e.g. oral and bibliographic sources, recordings, testimonies, iconographic and visual materials) used by Oodgeroo to write *Stradbroke Dreamtime* and therefore to compare them with the published book. This comparison would have enabled the retracing of the (inter-) epistemic translation processes involved in Noonuccal's writing. Unfortunately, the folder held in the Fryer Library of the University of Queensland containing material on *Stradbroke Dreamtime* does not shed any new light on the origins of the stories. The material consists of a few pieces of original artwork and a marked-up typed manuscript of the work. Comparing the manuscript to the published work, no substantial changes from draft to publication emerge. The draft of the introduction, in particular, provides no information excluded from the published version.[5] Therefore, I have shifted the attention from the comparison between incipient sign system(s) and subsequent sign system to a thorough analysis of Oodgeroo's work, mainly based on the identification of intertextual references and various forms of appropriation and reframing, such as the selection of contents and the addition of new semiotic material, including textual and paratextual elements (Bennett, 2024a, p. 9).

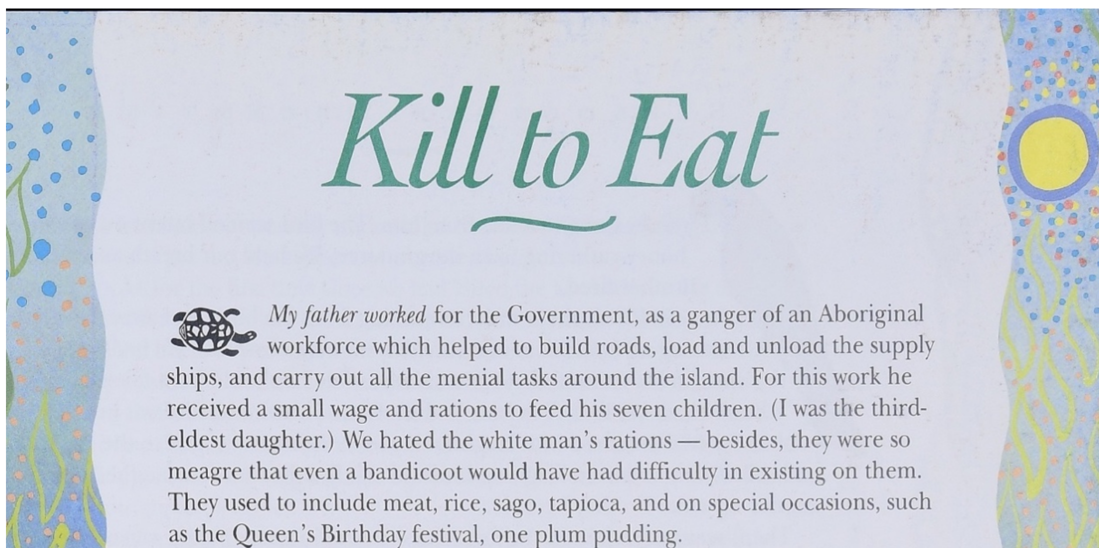
In my investigation, the expressions 'incipient sign system' and 'subsequent sign system' are employed throughout, to emphasize the time-based, intersemiotic, and intersystemic nature of all translative processes. Moreover, to highlight the multimodal character endemic to any instance of expression and communication, all case studies are provided as Figures, even when the signifying code employed by Oodgeroo is apparently monomedial, as in the case of a printed text. For the sake of uniformity, all the examples

[5] E-mail correspondence with Jeff Rickertt, Fryer Library, February 2024. This information contrasts with Jennifer Jones' comparison between the manuscript and the final version of the book. In her published research, however, Jones does not explore the link between Oodgeroo's sources and her creative work.

analysed have been taken from the 1999 edition of *Stradbroke Dreamtime*, illustrated by the Bundjalung artist Bronwyn Bancroft.[6]

3.1 Autobiographical Writing

The first part of *Stradbroke Dreamtime*, entitled "Stories from Stradbroke", includes 13 stories inspired by the author's childhood (Walker, 1972, p. 10). With these stories, from a semiotic viewpoint Oodgeroo translates her life experiences into narratives, in close relationship with the places, the people and even the words with which they are born (Petrilli, 2017, p. 65). Written as a grownup, these excursus are imbued with the political, pedagogical, and literary awareness of the adult Kath. However, the point of view is always that of a child, and stories sound amusing and light-hearted. The protagonists are the little Kath, her parents and siblings, the island, and its natural beauties. In this scenario, the ethical and ecological codes of conduct that regulate Noonuccal society emerge. Family and social dynamics, daily activities, the relationship with surrounding nature and the creatures living on the island enrich these stories with charm, freshness, and appeal. As the incipit of one of those stories, titled "Kill to Eat" (Figs. 2 and 3) suggests, many experiences that Oodgeroo describes are common to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children, and any reader can easily identify with the protagonist.



Kill to Eat

My father worked for the Government, as a ganger of an Aboriginal workforce which helped to build roads, load and unload the supply ships, and carry out all the menial tasks around the island. For this work he received a small wage and rations to feed his seven children. (I was the third-eldest daughter.) We hated the white man's rations — besides, they were so meagre that even a bandicoot would have had difficulty in existing on them. They used to include meat, rice, sago, tapioca, and on special occasions, such as the Queen's Birthday festival, one plum pudding.

Figure 2. Oodgeroo N. (1999). *Stradbroke Dreamtime*, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, p. 9 (detail).

[6] Bronwyn Bancroft's work is held by the National Gallery of Australia, the Art Gallery of New South Wales, and the Art Gallery of Western Australia. She has illustrated more than 20 children's books, including the 1994 and 1999 editions of *Stradbroke Dreamtime*. The similarities and the differences between the different editions of Noonuccal's book, with a particular focus on the paratextual elements and the relationship between the words and the images, will be further explored in an ad hoc study.

Kill to Eat

My father worked for the Government, as a ganger of an Aboriginal workforce which helped to build roads, load and unload the supply ships, and carry out all the menial tasks around the island. For this work he received a small wage and rations to feed his seven children. (I was the third-eldest daughter.) We hated the white man's rations — besides, they were so meagre that even a bandicoot would have had difficulty in existing on them. They used to include meat, rice, sago, tapioca, and on special occasions, such as the Queen's Birthday festival, one plum pudding.

Of course, we never depended upon the rations to keep ourselves alive. Dad taught us how to catch our food Aboriginal-style, using discarded materials from the white man's rubbish dumps. We each had our own sling-shots to bring down the blueys and greenies — the parrots and lorikeets that haunted the flowering gums. And he showed us how to make bandicoot traps: a wooden box, a bit of wire, a lever on top and a piece of burnt toast were all that was needed. Bandicoots cannot resist burnt toast. We would set our traps at dusk, and always next day there was a trapped bandicoot to take proudly home for Mother to roast. Dad also showed us how to flatten a square piece of tin and sharpen it. This was very valuable for slicing through the shallow waters; many a mullet met its doom from the accurate aim of one of my brothers wielding the sharpened tin. Dad made long iron crab hooks, too, and we each had a hand fishing-line of our own.

One rule he told us we must strictly obey. When we went hunting, we must understand that our weapons were to be used only for the gathering of food. We must never use them for the sake of killing. This is in fact one of the strictest laws of the Aborigine, and no excuse is accepted for abusing it.

One day we five older children, two boys and three girls, decided to follow the noise of the blueys and greenies screeching from the flowering gums. We armed ourselves with our sling-shots and made our way towards the trees.

My sisters and I always shot at our quarry from the ground. The boys would climb onto the branches of the gum-trees, stand quite still, and pick out the choicest and healthiest birds in the flock. My elder brother was by far the best shot of all of us. He was always boasting about it, too. But never in front of our mother and father, because he would have been punished for his vanity. He only boasted in front of us, knowing that we wouldn't complain about him to our parents.

The boys ordered us to take up our positions under the trees as quietly as possible. 'Don't make so much noise!' they told us. In spite of the disgust we felt for our boastful brother, we always let him start the shooting. He was a dead shot, and we all knew it. Now we watched as he drew a bead on the large

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Figure 3. Oodgeroo N. (1999). *Stradbroke Dreamtime*, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, pp. 9-10.

"Kill to Eat" revolves on one central theme: the code of rules regulating the Noonuccal community on Minjerribah. The story teaches that, according to the Aboriginal law, killing for the sake of killing is forbidden. Kath's parents transmitted this rule to their daughter, and obeying the law is not just important, but vital for the preservation of the natural environment.

The first lines of the story reveal the tone and the setting of the story. It is a simple narrative, suitable for children from 9 years of age. The language is apparently plain, with easy vocabulary and syntax, and a few references to the real world. We learn soon that two cultures shaped Oodgeroo's daily life: white Australia and Aboriginal Australia. Her father "worked for the Government", and "for this work he received a small wage and rations to feed his seven children". Soon after the father, the narrating self appears on the scene, although in brackets: "(I was the third-eldest daughter)." In the next sentence, the individual self gives way to the collective dimension of a "we" opposing the white world: "we hated the white man's rations". The paragraph concludes with two poignant references: a simile derived from Australian wildlife associates Kath's cravings to those of a marsupial ("even a bandicoot would have had difficulty in existing on them"), followed by a straightforward allusion to colonial Australia ("Queen's Birthday Festival"). The co-existence of Indigenous elements and Anglo-European elements is accentuated by a food list made of autochthonous products ("meat, rice, sago, tapioca") and a British recipe ("one plum pudding").

"Kill to Eat" is a good example of an autobiographical story (all "Stories from Stradbroke" are based on Oodgeroo's memories of her childhood on the island) grounded

on the transformation of Noonuccal's life experience into first-person narrative. This epistemic process has entailed turning information acquired, stored, retained and, years later, retrieved by Oodgeroo, into words, thus interpreting nonverbal signs by means of signs of verbal sign systems.

Moreover, intersemiosis is evident in the combination of verbal signs and visual signs informing Oodgeroo's picturebook. In "Kill to Eat", Brownyn Bancroft's illustration features a stylised portrait of five figures holding a sling at the bottom, while at the top of the page are images of two typical Australian birds: on the right, the kookaburra and, on the left, a colourful parrot of the species *Alisterus Scapularis*. The colours, circles and lines that make up the design refer interpictorially to the vibrant style of Aboriginal dot paintings. The story is an iconotext formed by words, images, and effects, playing on the interaction between different sign systems. The visuals support the verbal narrative, paralleling or expanding on what is said in words. On an intersemiotic level, it is also worth mentioning the importance of the auditory dimension. "Kill to Eat" is based on memorial and oral sources translated into writing and, like most children's stories, is designed to be read aloud by adults. Therefore, "sentence length and rhythm, repetitions and parallelisms, the presence of rhymes, alliterations, or other forms of sound patterning, and of course punctuation (which indicates to the aloud-reader when to pause or stop or take a breath) […] even the visual appearance of the letters on the page will affect the way that the text may be read" (Bennett, 2021, pp. 1-2). Let us consider, for instance, the expression "(I was the third-eldest daughter)": how would an adult *perform* those parentheses?

Oodgeroo's translation work, however, plays out not only on the intermedial level, but also on the epistemological level. Epistemic translation has turned her stories from experiential, embodied, and emotional knowledge to its literary codification as children's literature (in Fig. 1, *ES1 to ES3b*). Not only has the author turned a specific episode from her own childhood into a written story, but she has also recoded some oral Aboriginal knowledge into a literary form. For instance, the Aboriginal rule according to which "our weapons were to be used only for the gathering of food. We must never use them for the sake of killing" is a central element in the story. The process of popularisation involves aspects related to the Noonuccal culture and the natural environment of North Stradbroke Island, where all stories are set.

In "Kill to Eat", Oodgeroo makes her life experience accessible to Indigenous and Non-Indigenous children, thus transmitting her own perspective and values to children and teenagers of all descent and extraction. To this aim, as observed, she employs plain English, the language of the invaders, as the lingua franca understandable by a global community of readers (Santos, 2016, p. 232). And if today Aboriginal cultures are often idealised as being opposed to Western culture, due to their archaic nature and their almost symbiotic relationship with nature, in Oodgeroo's story the point of view expressed is that of a child like any other, who lives with her family in a social context that, in many respects, resembles that of other children of her age. This "similarity" defeats the primitivist stereotype of authentic 'aboriginality', which portrays the Indigenous person as detached

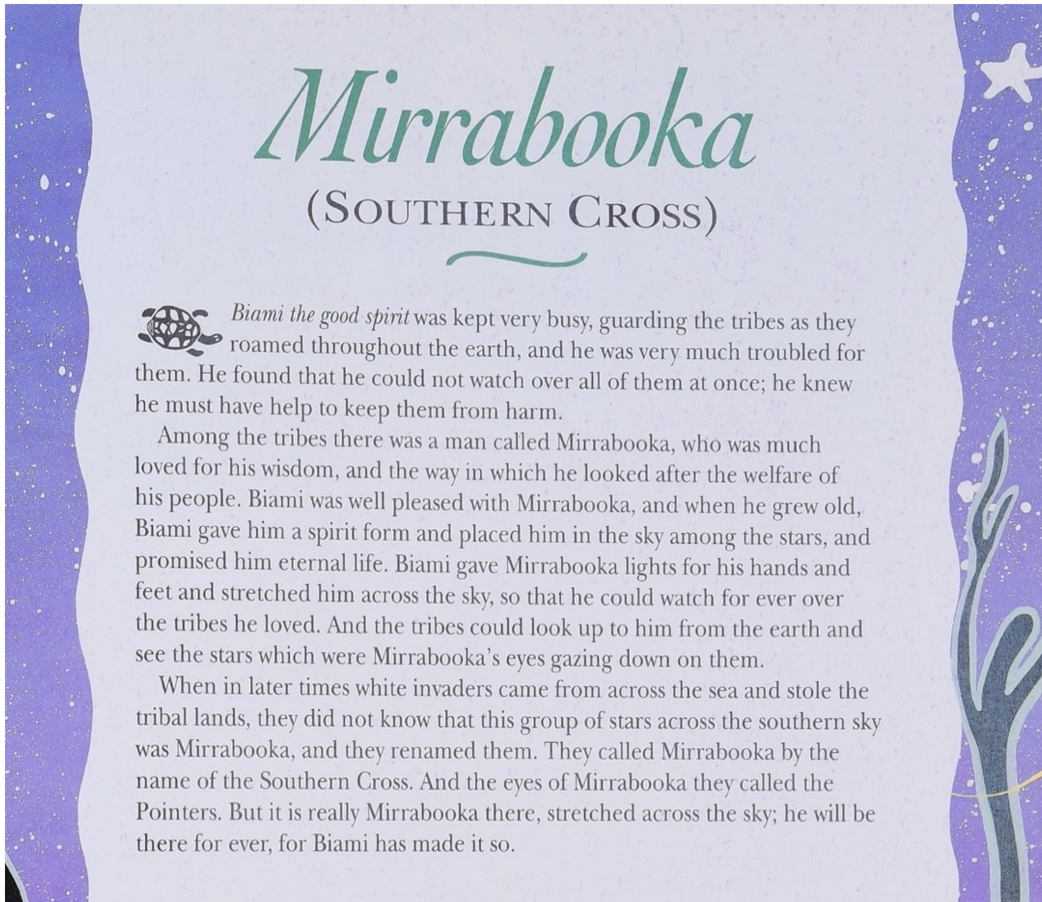
from society and from other cultures (Gnecchi Ruscone, 1999, p. 188). Unveiling her own biography, thus, Noonuccal plays the role of intercultural mediator, searching for contact zones and developing new forms of cultural understanding and intercommunication useful in favouring dialogue.

3.2 Diamesic Resemiotisation

The second part of *Stradbroke Dreamtime*, titled “Stories from the Old and New Dreamtime”, contains Creation stories belonging to the Aboriginal peoples. It includes 14 Dreaming stories and tales based on the author’s knowledge of her people and the land. The English terms ‘Dreamtime’ and ‘Dreaming’ refer to a time-place where ancestral beings travelled the earth, singing and creating its topographical features; then they settled, shaping the territory, and tracing their ‘songlines’. In Oodgeroo’s “Stories from the Old and the New Dreamtime”, the author reshapes this spiritual background into a new narrative physiognomy, translating and transmitting in English knowledge of profound semiotic complexity, made of stories transmitted orally, also conveyed through drawings, music, and dance.

If one had to describe Noonuccal’s operation of translation and transmission with one word, reference could be made to the concept of ‘oraliture’, that is, the various genres of oral literature such as short stories, legends, proverbs, rhymes, and songs that present oral storytelling to us in the form of writing. With ‘oraliture’, orality is translated into written genres either in the form of transcription or of more or less complex literary expression (Petrilli and Ponzio, 2001, p. 99). Determined to take the narrative back and to create a work of authenticity to honour her people and land, Oodgeroo (1990, p. 8) based her own work on previous recordings of Dreaming stories as well as on personal research and memories of stories “told mostly at night around camp fires”. This transformation of oral knowledge into written narrative can be classified as a form of diamesic resemiotisation involving the passage from one linguistic modality to another, i.e., from oral to written language (Petrilli, 2003, pp. 19-20; Gottlieb, 2018, pp. 49-51; Petrilli and Zanoletti, 2023, p. 345).

A clear example of ‘oraliture’ is Oodgeroo’s story titled “Mirrabooka (Southern Cross)”, included in the second part of *Stradbroke Dreamtime* (Figs. 4 and 5).



Mirrabooka

(SOUTHERN CROSS)

Biami the good spirit was kept very busy, guarding the tribes as they roamed throughout the earth, and he was very much troubled for them. He found that he could not watch over all of them at once; he knew he must have help to keep them from harm.

Among the tribes there was a man called Mirrabooka, who was much loved for his wisdom, and the way in which he looked after the welfare of his people. Biami was well pleased with Mirrabooka, and when he grew old, Biami gave him a spirit form and placed him in the sky among the stars, and promised him eternal life. Biami gave Mirrabooka lights for his hands and feet and stretched him across the sky, so that he could watch for ever over the tribes he loved. And the tribes could look up to him from the earth and see the stars which were Mirrabooka's eyes gazing down on them.

When in later times white invaders came from across the sea and stole the tribal lands, they did not know that this group of stars across the southern sky was Mirrabooka, and they renamed them. They called Mirrabooka by the name of the Southern Cross. And the eyes of Mirrabooka they called the Pointers. But it is really Mirrabooka there, stretched across the sky; he will be there for ever, for Biami has made it so.

Figure 4. Oodgeroo N. (1999) *Stradbroke Dreamtime*, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, p. 67 (detail)

Mirrabooka
(SOUTHERN CROSS)
67

Figure 5. Oodgeroo N. (1999) *Stradbroke Dreamtime*, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, pp. 66-67

"Mirrabooka (Southern Cross)" is one of the many Aboriginal stories about the constellation in the southern hemisphere also known as *Crux Australis*, regularly used for navigation down through the ages by both European navigators and the Aboriginal peoples. Australian Aboriginals were probably some of the first human beings to name the celestial objects in the night sky: many of the star groups which we call constellations were divided and named by the Aboriginal populations thousands of centuries before ancient Egyptians or early Greek astronomers observed and named them (Bhathal, 2006, pp. 5-27).

The first part of "Mirrabooka (Southern Cross)" narrates how the Southern Cross came into being. In Noonuccal's story, Biami, the creator spirit in the sky, was busy keeping an eye on the Aboriginal people, but found he could not watch them all the time and "knew he must have help to keep them from harm".[7] Therefore he chose a man named Mirrabooka, who was not only loved by everyone, but also looked after the welfare of his tribe. "Biami", writes Oodgeroo, gave Mirrabooka "a spirit form and placed him in the sky among the stars, and promised him eternal life" and "lights for his hands and feet", and stretched him across the sky, so that he "could watch for ever" over his beloved tribes. The tribes could gaze upward from the Earth, and behold the stars, which represented Mirrabooka's eyes watching over them.

The second part of the story calls the white man ("white invaders") into question and accounts for the name Southern Cross, relating it to the colonisers' unawareness. In fact, the Southern Cross was first observed by Europeans only in the 16th century (Bhatal, 2006, p. 5.27). On the contrary, as Oodgeroo states peremptorily, "it is really Mirrabooka there, stretched across the sky; he will be there for ever, for Biami has made it so". With this conclusion, Noonuccal links the past and the present, emphasizing that Aboriginal cultures possess a level of sophistication and knowledge surpassing common stereotypes.

In "Mirrabooka (Southern Cross)" translation takes place as a shift of signs from verbal to verbal. Assuming that Oodgeroo based her text on a pre-existing story passed down orally to her, such an intra-systemic passage has been activated in the diamesic transition from oral verbal signs to written verbal signs, "from an orally-based language-culture into a Western language-culture" (Bandia, 1993, p. 56; also Petrilli and Ponzio, 2001, pp. 98-109; Petrilli, 2017, p. 64). Or else, the author might have inferred the story from sources written either in an Australian language or dialect or in English, resemiotising the narrative into a format suitable to her audience. Epistemic dynamics also animate the relationship between the words and images in the story (Fig. 5), involving a transition between semiotic systems (Bennett, 2021, p. 3). Like "Kill to Eat", also Mirrabooka's story of is accompanied by a drawing that mimics, completes, and expands Oodgeroo's writing, accentuating the bare poetic nature of her text.

On an epistemic level, Oodgeroo's diamesic semiotisation activated in "Mirrabooka (Southern Cross)" implies both the translation of expert knowledge, such as astronomy, into a form that is accessible to a less specialised public (in Fig. 1, *ES2b to ES3b*, or *ES2c to*

[7] In the spirituality of south-eastern Australia, Biami is the creator deity and sky father.

ES3b) and the transformation of a Dreaming story into children's literature. Oodgeroo fits the Creation stories of her people to the needs of any child or teenager. In fact, the heterolingual title "Mirrabooka (Southern Cross") accounts for both the Aboriginal epistemology and the Western epistemology linked to the constellation.

Oodgeroo's "Mirrabooka (Southern Cross"), like all "Stories from the Old and New Dreamtime", preserves elements of pre-colonial memory and transmits them to a wide, potentially global audience. While employing a very simple and direct language, suitable for children, Noonuccal effectively conveys a message of profound semiotic complexity. Repetitions of the proper names "Biami" and "Mirrabooka" add emphasis. Paratactical syntaxis facilitates comprehension. With a fairy-tale style, Oodgeroo translates a corpus of knowledge, handed down orally from generation to generation, into literature written in English, mediating the encounter between the Western world and the teachings and wisdom of her people.

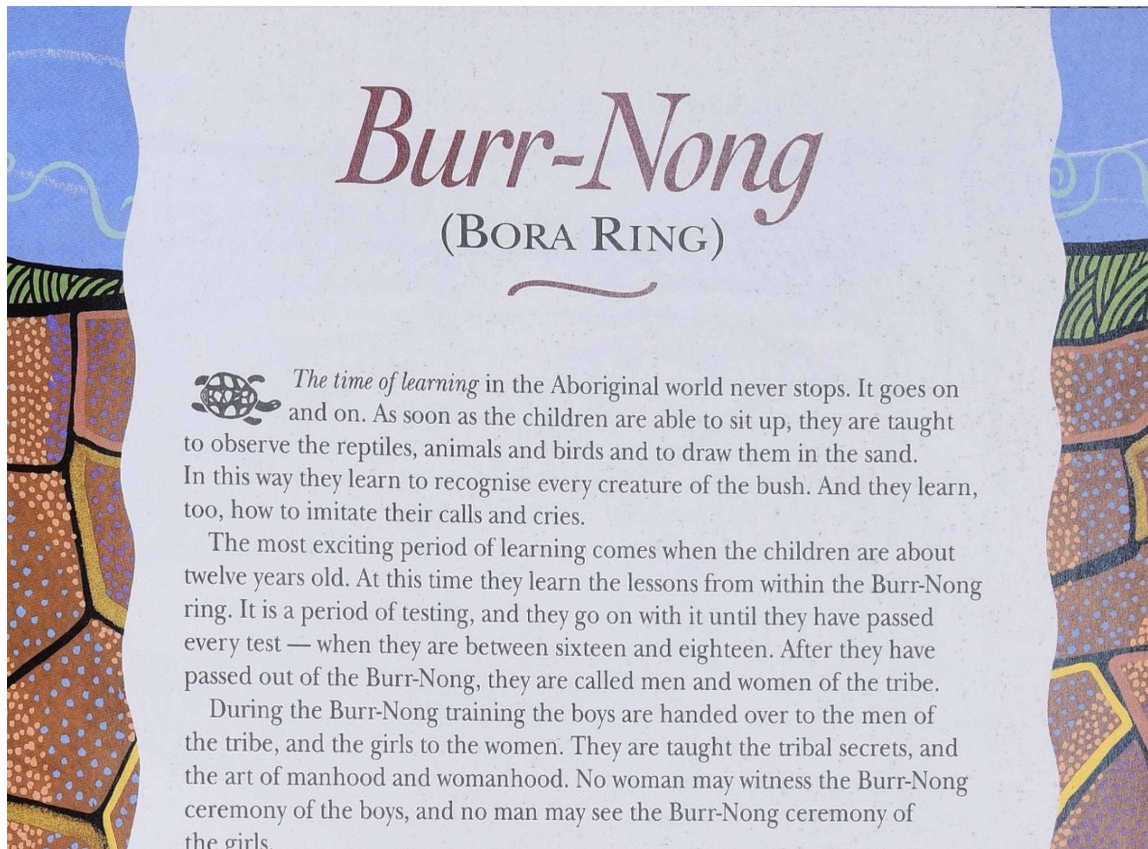
3.3 Imagetextual Synergy

Stradbroke Dreamtime is a picturebook designed for children. As observed previously, analysing the stories "Kill to Eat" and "Mirrabooka (Southern Cross)", illustrations translate the content of Oodgeroo's texts inter-systemically, transposing them in nonverbal signs. This occurs in all the different editions of the book: Dennis Schapel illustrated the first, while the 1982 edition features Lorraine Hannay's drawings, and the 1990s reissues contain Bancroft's illustrations (Walker, 1972; 1982; Oodgeroo, 1993; 1994; 1999). In all cases, the scenes of daily life, portraits, landscapes, and symbols portrayed in the drawings mediate the meaning of Noonuccal's texts, exerting an immediate sensorial impact on readers (Zanoletti, 2023, p. 245). When asked to explain her method, Bancroft revealed: "So, often, I'll read the text, maybe 50 times. Like, I've read it, read it, read it, and it becomes a part of me. So, when I'm doing the visual, you know, storytelling, it's so easy, 'cause I've actually kind of swallowed up the words and they're in my brain and it's very instinctive".[8] According to Bancroft's description, the creative process presupposes an internalisation of the text; afterward, it is possible to recreate the stories visually in an intuitive way.

Transforming Noonuccal's textual stories into pictures is an intersemiotic phenomenon. This process, carried out by different illustrators in the different editions of *Stradbroke Dreamtime*, entails interpreting verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems. Looking closely, for example, at the story titled "Burr-Nong (Bora Ring)", contained in the second part of the book (Figs. 6 and 7), one can spot several common elements in the text and design, as well as a few significant differences. Announced by the dual title "Burr-Nong (Bora Ring)", referring to a world vision which is very different to the Western vision (Vidal Claramonte, 2012, p. 273), Oodgeroo's story describes the training of Aboriginal young people, culminating, between the ages of 12 and 18, with a series of

[8] Available at: https://www.abc.net.au/education/interviews-with-australian-10-authors-ch-2-draw-with-bronwyn-ba/13581746 (Accessed: 15 May 2024)

"Burr-Nong ring" trials.[9] Although initiation rules differ from Aboriginal culture to culture, typically bora ground comprised a larger circle and a smaller ring around. The former was a more public space while the latter was sacred and restricted to participants who were either the instructing elders or the initiants. As Noonuccal explains, "during the Burr-Nong training the boys are handed over to the men, and the girls to the women. They are taught the tribal secrets, and the art of manhood and womanhood."



Burr-Nong
(Bora Ring)

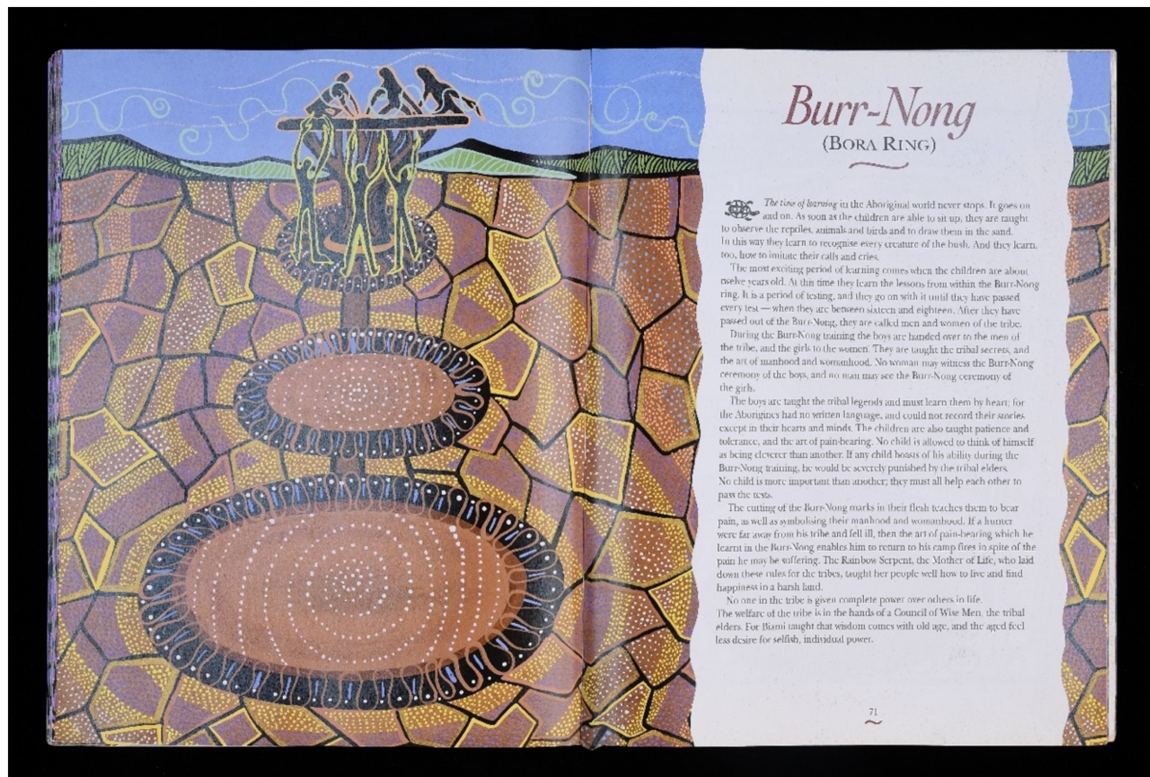
The time of learning in the Aboriginal world never stops. It goes on and on. As soon as the children are able to sit up, they are taught to observe the reptiles, animals and birds and to draw them in the sand. In this way they learn to recognise every creature of the bush. And they learn, too, how to imitate their calls and cries.

The most exciting period of learning comes when the children are about twelve years old. At this time they learn the lessons from within the Burr-Nong ring. It is a period of testing, and they go on with it until they have passed every test — when they are between sixteen and eighteen. After they have passed out of the Burr-Nong, they are called men and women of the tribe.

During the Burr-Nong training the boys are handed over to the men of the tribe, and the girls to the women. They are taught the tribal secrets, and the art of manhood and womanhood. No woman may witness the Burr-Nong ceremony of the boys, and no man may see the Burr-Nong ceremony of the girls.

Figure 6. Oodgeroo, N. (1999) *Stradbroke Dreamtime*, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, p. 71 (detail)

[9] The same theme is at the heart of Oodgeroo's poem titled "Bora" and Judith Wright's poem "Bora Ring".



Burr-Nong
(Bora Ring)

The time of learning in the Aboriginal world never stops. It goes on and on. As soon as the children are able to sit up, they are taught to observe the reptiles, animals and birds and to draw them in the sand. In this way they learn to recognise every creature of the bush. And they learn, too, how to imitate their calls and cries.

The most exciting period of learning comes when the children are about twelve years old. At this time they learn the lessons from within the Burr-Nong ring. It is a period of testing, and they go on with it until they have passed every test — when they are between sixteen and eighteen. After they have passed out of the Burr-Nong, they are called men and women of the tribe.

During the Burr-Nong training the boys are handed over to the men of the tribe, and the girls to the women. They are taught the tribal secrets, and the art of manhood and womanhood. No woman may witness the Burr-Nong ceremony of the boys, and no man may see the Burr-Nong ceremony of the girls.

The boys are taught the tribal legends and must learn them by heart; for the Aborigines had no written language, and could not record their stories except in their hearts and minds. The children are also taught patience and tolerance, and the art of pain-bearing. No child is allowed to think of himself as being cleverer than another. If any child boasts of his ability during the Burr-Nong training, he would be severely punished by the tribal elders. No child is more important than another; they must all help each other to pass the tests.

The cutting of the Burr-Nong marks in their flesh teaches them to bear pain, as well as symbolising their manhood and womanhood. If a hunter were far away from his tribe and fell ill, then the art of pain-bearing which he learnt in the Burr-Nong enables him to return to his camp fires in spite of the pain he may be suffering. The Rainbow Serpent, the Mother of Life, who laid down these rules for the tribes, taught her people well how to live and find happiness in a harsh land.

No one in the tribe is given complete power over others in life. The welfare of the tribe is in the hands of a Council of Wise Men, the tribal elders. For Biami taught that wisdom comes with old age, and the aged feel less desire for selfish, individual power.

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Figure 7. Oodgeroo, N. (1999) *Stradbroke Dreamtime*, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, pp. 70-71

While Oodgeroo’s text dwells on the description of the bora ring, its meaning, functioning and values (“it is a period of testing, and they go on with it until they have passed every test”; “no child is more important than another”), the drawing emphasises the physical context of the trials, completing the information provided by the writer. The illustration depicts two Burr-Nong, one larger and one smaller, and next to them, a third bora with a large tree and six human figures: three males, and three females. The landscape is drawn in a stylised form: we see clods of earth and, in the distance, low green hills and a windswept sky.

The process of turning the spiritual beliefs and worldview of the Indigenous society into an illustrated story targeted to children is also a form of translation from one incipient Epistemic System (ES) to a subsequent one (in Fig. 1, the trajectory *ES1 to ES3b*): it is a process transforming knowledges from Southern cultures into forms that are meaningful in the North (Bennett, 2024b, p. 13). In “Burr-Nong (Bora Ring)”, for instance, Oodgeroo reframes the Aboriginal knowledge as a narrative in a different semiotic world, recoding concepts and information into a children story. She reworks knowledge of the ancients in accordance with new cultural and ideological configurations, adapting and transforming (Robinson, 2017, p. 22). Such movement is a process of popularisation of specialist contents and meanings related to the Indigenous culture and worldview in terms not only of reverbalisation, but also visual recoding.

And whilst for millennia, the Indigenous peoples of Australia have experienced their stories in terms of action/performance, in contrast with the Western view that sees stories as texts (Gnecchi Ruscone, 1999, p. 182), illustrations in “Burr-Nong (Bora Ring)” should be

also viewed as part of a translation strategy crucial to the full representation of meaning, as they intersemiotically evoke the pictorial and performative aspects inherent in the Aboriginal storytelling. From this viewpoint, images can be seen as a performative device encouraging interaction, facilitating comprehension, and expanding the audience on a global scale, supporting Oodgeroo in her mission to bring the knowledge of her people to the attention of the West.

4. Conclusions

As this analysis shows, *Stradbroke Dreamtime* is imbued with translation. The memorial dimension of Oodgeroo's "Stories from Stradbroke", the transformation of oral, performed, and written sources into her "Stories from the Old and New Dreamtime", and the interactions between verbal and non-verbal elements, all these are translational aspects. Autobiographical writing, diamesic resemiotisation, and imagetextual synergy co-operate in giving shape to a literary work that provides children and adults of any background a sense of Oodgeroo's own experience and values. With *Stradbroke Dreamtime*, while playing the role of a negotiator between two worlds, the author taught Australians about their cultural heritage, and at the same time made these teachings accessible to all English-speaking readers, in an intergenerational and inclusive way.

Underlying this analysis is a notion of translation stretching beyond that of interlingual transposition—although it also considers this phenomenon—towards a broader, semiotic conceptualisation that involves (inter-) epistemic aspects. Translation is viewed here as a process of creating and disseminating knowledge – as a dynamic cluster concept with the potential to explain how things change through the modelling of the new upon the old, and as a central metaphor for any situation where we try to relate meaningfully to difference and alterity (Robinson, 2017, p. x; Bennett, 2023, pp. 444 and 456; Santos, 2016, p. 215). From this perspective, the twofold aim of this study has been to contribute not only to unveiling the translational character of *Stradbroke Dreamtime* as a key feature of Noonuccal's work, but also to challenging the perimeter of inquiry of Translation Studies, opening it up to new conceptions that embrace all forms of communication far beyond the merely literary and linguistic. Translation is poised to become, as forecasts Bennett (2024a, p. 11), an important operative tool in a new transdisciplinary research paradigm and, as advocated in this study, a powerful lens to interpret Indigenous cultures in new and fruitful ways.

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