

## Exploring Indigenous Identity in Suburbia: Melissa Lucashenko's *Steam Pigs*

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Melissa Lucashenko's post-Mabo<sup>1</sup> debut novel *Steam Pigs* (1997) addresses Indigenous identity and suburbia from the perspective of an Indigenous writer and protagonist. Lucashenko's examination of Indigenous identity within a suburban setting is a unique and innovative combination, since Australian suburban fiction has been dominated by non-Indigenous authors, such as Patrick White, George Johnston, David Malouf, Peter Carey and Steven Carroll, and has largely ignored Indigenous concerns.<sup>2</sup> Following the approach of previous Australian suburban novels, such as Johnston's *My Brother Jack* and Malouf's *Johnno*, *Steam Pigs* is a combination of a bildungsroman and an autobiographical novel.<sup>3</sup> *Steam Pigs* is a confronting, innovative and unique novel that utilizes a working class outer suburban setting to address crucial social issues, including Indigenous identity, belonging, feminism, gender, domestic violence, racism, and alcohol and drug abuse.<sup>4</sup> However, the novel presents suburbia as a destructive site that must be rejected in favour of the life-affirming inner city, serving to perpetuate the anti-suburban tradition in Australian fiction, and calling into question the novel's radical power.<sup>5</sup> There exists a long tradition of anti-suburban sentiment in Australian fiction, and in Australian culture more broadly, which has been dominant since the late nineteenth century (McCann vii). The anti-suburban tradition contends that the suburbs are boring, backward, repressive, conformist, materialistic, sexist, racist, anti-intellectual, ugly and predictable, and thus the suburbs must be rejected, preferably by means of physical escape.<sup>6</sup> Lucashenko's decision to have her protagonist 'escape' from the outer suburbs into an inner urban environment, and the depiction of that movement as both a physical and metaphorical liberation, perpetuates the anti-suburban tradition and dilutes the impact of the novel's innovative and radical aspects. As Ken Gelder and Paul Salzman argue, *Steam Pigs* is simultaneously 'conservative and transgressive' (61). Yet the salvation of Sue, an Indigenous woman, by educated white feminists sends an ambivalent message about the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, suggesting that the solutions to Indigenous problems are to be provided by university-educated non-Indigenous (usually white) persons, thus perpetuating the colonial relationship between non-Indigenous and Indigenous Australians.

As noted above, Indigenous identity is one of the primary issues Lucashenko addresses in *Steam Pigs*, its treatment recalling Stuart Hall's view of identity 'as a "production" which is never complete, always in process' (234). Indeed, Tanya Dalziell's analysis of *Steam Pigs* echoes Hall's position, claiming that the novel refuses 'any ethnographic notion of Aboriginality as a fixed and entirely knowable identity' (144). Like much Indigenous literature, Lucashenko's novel is highly political. In their recent anthology of Australian Aboriginal literature, Anita Heiss and Peter Minter identify 'the nexus between the literary and the political' as a 'persistent' and 'characteristic' element of Aboriginal literature (2). Penny Van Toorn identifies Lucashenko as an Indigenous writer who focuses 'on the complex, politically ambivalent situations that arise when differences of gender, sexuality and class cut across lines of racial and cultural difference' (40). Dalziell further claims that 'Lucashenko deliberately introduces the complexities that the

shifting intersections of class, gender, race, and sexuality across cultural differences can precipitate in postcolonial Australia' (144). The intersections and differences of race, gender, sexuality and class in the novel serve to produce an environment in which Indigenous identity is both contested and in process. In the course of the novel, Sue learns to embrace her Indigenous identity as the narrative progresses with the help of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous friends; however, her Indigenous identity constantly evolves and is difficult to define. As Tomoko Ichitani argues, Sue's identity is 'disrupted and ambivalent' (194). However, while early in the novel Sue considers having 'a bit of Aboriginal blood' as 'largely an irrelevance' (9), by the end of the novel Sue is proud to identify herself as Indigenous.

Sue begins to explore her Indigenous identity after she meets her boyfriend Roger, who has red hair, freckles and fair skin, yet has an Aboriginal father and identifies as Indigenous. Since Roger does not possess outward markers of Aboriginality, Sue initially thinks he is white. When Sue asks Roger if he has 'black blood,' he replies, "'Where I come from we just say we're all Aboriginal, eh? None of that half-caste, quarter-caste bullshit. Like, I've got Scots and Irish too, I won't deny that, but my heart's with the blackfellas. Waka Waka I am'" (20-21). Although she accepts Roger's claims, Sue knows it will take her some effort to accept him as Indigenous, since she associates indigeneity with skin colour (21). In a sign of her ambivalence towards her own identity, Sue at one point thinks that together she and Roger 'might add up to a real Aboriginal' (21). However, what it means to be Aboriginal is often contested in the novel. Commenting on this issue in a more general sense, the Indigenous author and critic Anita Heiss argues that ever since the European invasion of Australia in 1788, 'the concept of Aboriginality' has continually been constructed by the colonizers and definitions of Aboriginality have been imposed on Indigenous people 'who have been forced to live by legislation created around it, to answer to variations of it, while at the same time trying to explain to our "other," that is, non-Aboriginal Australians, what it actually "means to be Aboriginal" from *our* perspectives' (41, original emphasis).<sup>7</sup> Ali Gumillya Baker and Gus Worby point out that Indigenous people have often had to prove their identity to white society and argue that having to do so is an indignity (26). According to Heiss, the very notion of Aboriginality 'is certainly a difficult thing to grasp for contemporary Australians; indeed, sometimes even for Aboriginal people themselves, especially those who have been denied access to family, culture, and community' (41-42). She argues moreover that Aboriginal writers use literature as a means of defining themselves, as well as 'a tool to defend' their right to their identity (Heiss 41). *Steam Pigs* is typical of this approach, setting out Sue's struggle to define and embrace her Indigenous identity precisely because she was denied knowledge of it while growing up. Her development is closely associated with her relationship with Roger.

Roger, an 'abusive, working-class Aboriginal man' (Van Toorn 40), is an Aboriginal Studies student at Griffith University and teaches Sue about Indigenous history and culture (43, 52). Sue reflects that she 'had no clue' about her Indigenous identity 'until talking to Roger woke her up' (54). Although Roger serves as a model and mentor for Sue, and instigates her exploration of her Indigenous identity, he is far from an ideal mentor, and he is certainly not a desirable role model for Indigenous men, especially when one considers his violent behaviour, misogyny, homophobia and drug abuse. By midway through the novel, Sue thinks of herself primarily as Indigenous, and comes to embrace her Aboriginality to such an extent that she wishes her skin were darker. While looking at a *Dolly* magazine, Sue resents 'the dark skin of the beautiful Maori girl' and thinks 'poorfella me, black inside but looking like a wog all me life. Unreal innit, years ago when

Annette [her mother] was a girl all she got for being a bit dark was abuse and running away from the welfare with her babies, and now of course it's trendy, (so long as you're not "too" dark that is) and here's me with me pale skin' (127). Sue claims she does not have an "identity crisis," but tells her white friends Kerry and Rachel that she was raised white and was deeply hurt when other Murries 'reminded her she had a family of coconuts' (145). Later, flying to Townsville to visit her family, Sue observes Palm Island from the aircraft window and wonders 'whether she'd ever know her true family story, ever know why her mother wouldn't talk about growing up, and which was her tribe' (149). While she embarks on a quest to embrace her Indigenous identity and to learn where she belongs, her mother does not even view herself as Indigenous, a view Sue attributes to the shame caused by her mother '[having been] brought up like a whitefella ... they'd brainwashed the old people so well that it wasn't a matter of denying their Aboriginality, more a matter of them really thinking they *were* white' (original emphasis) (166).

Along with Roger, Kerry also plays an important role in Sue's developing Indigenous identity, especially after she returns to suburbia from Townsville. Unlike Roger, Kerry is depicted by Lucashenko as a worthy role model for Sue. Ironically, Sue now embraces her Indigenous identity and becomes independent by emulating a white, educated feminist, rather than an Indigenous man. The path to a safer, more fulfilling and independent life for a young Indigenous woman is presented as being provided by members of the dominant white culture, rather than solely through a closer understanding of Indigenous culture. Kerry's efforts echo the actions of white colonial government attempts to define Aboriginality, since she teaches Sue to accept her Indigenous identity and enables her development. While Kerry's actions are similar to those of colonial governments, she does not *impose* an Aboriginal identity on Sue and the kind of Indigenous identity she encourages Sue to embrace is one that is likely a product of dialogue with Indigenous people, rather than a European construction. After Sue is accepted into Griffith and decides to major in Aboriginal studies (191), Kerry warns her that the other Murries will disapprove if she speaks out and appears to project strength, since it 'challenges their own way of thinking' (190). When Sue moves into her West End flat near the end of the novel, she learns that Bianca, the owner, an 'ordinary old British Aussie,' has discussed Murri issues with Kerry for years and was eager to do a good deed for an Indigenous woman (220). Sue is annoyed, but thinks, 'yeah, okay [...]. I'll be your huddled masses if it makes you feel better. Just don't think we're even [...] rent on a continent don't come cheap' (220). Sue is quick to interpret Bianca's desire to help an Indigenous woman as a means to expiate guilt and atone for white wrongdoing, yet she does not acknowledge or even seem to realize that Kerry and Rachel's actions could be interpreted in the same manner. Although Sue comes to live in West End through the intervention and assistance of three white women, highlighting her dependence on non-Indigenous people, Sue's relocation is also empowering as it enables her to more fully explore and embrace her Indigenous identity. Soon after her move, Sue reads a collection of stories by an unnamed Indigenous author and contemplates issues of land ownership and belonging. Lucashenko includes five pages of a piece entitled 'Anyday Story,' which is written from the point of view of an Indigenous narrator from Brisbane. The narrator claims, '*in the white places of Australia,*' such as Brisbane, '*the Europeans walk arrogantly, and exhibit none of the fear they bring to Alice Springs or Kakadu. They drive to work up Brunswick Street, or take the train home to Yeerongpilly without pausing to think*' (229).<sup>8</sup> Lucashenko presents Indigenous literature and history as a cure for Sue's nightmares, a positive substitute for alcohol or marijuana, and the knowledge that will allow her to fully embrace and understand her Indigenous identity.

Lucashenko herself addresses Indigenous identity in her essay 'A Lighter Shade of Pale: Being Aboriginal in 2002,' in which she argues that 'there's more than one way to be a blackfella' and insists that skin colour is unimportant: 'it's about what's under the skin. Your heart, and your mind. Your spirit' (1). Nevertheless, to a great extent skin colour affects the manner in which Indigenous characters in *Steam Pigs* are treated and perceive themselves. As Heiss notes, 'The issue of skin color is a common one within the Aboriginal community, exemplified in the argument "am I black enough for you?" or having to justify skin color as a degree of Aboriginality' (52). The novel contains numerous instances of racism, most of them inextricably linked to skin colour. Late in the novel, Sue walks through Brisbane's Fortitude Valley and observes a group of Murries loitering on some steps, and wonders 'which of them would die next, would it be another "accident" in the park, a drunken brawl that got "out of hand" ... another suspicious death in custody' (243). Remembering the lack of opportunity in *Eagleby*, Sue thinks, 'And now I'm a million miles away from all that ... living in luxury in my flat that the government's paying for, and half me life spent listening to people at uni talk about blackfella's problems or poor people's problems like they know what the fuck they're on about' (243). Although Sue questions the right of white middle-class people she encounters at university to discuss Indigenous and working-class issues, she does not question the right of Kerry and Rachel to discuss the same issues, even though they are white middle-class women. Sue could be accused of being inconsistent on this count; alternatively, she may be granting Kerry and Rachel the right to speak on Indigenous and working-class issues based on their residence in Beenleigh, and, especially, Kerry's job as a social worker, which has provided them with knowledge of (and relationships with) Indigenous and working-class people.<sup>9</sup> Ichitani argues that Lucashenko uses the relationship between Sue and Kerry to search 'for the possibility of an alliance between Indigenous and non-Indigenous women in the Australian feminist movement' (197). However, the alliance within the novel between Sue and the non-Indigenous women is not an alliance of equals, since the white women hold the power in the relationship. Thanks to being 'saved' by Kerry and Rachel, Sue occupies a liminal space in society somewhere between the Indigenous people Lucashenko depicts begging on the streets in the Valley and the privileged whites who are Sue's peers at university.

In addition to encouraging Sue to explore and embrace her Indigenous identity, Kerry often gives Sue advice about the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, positioning herself as a sage advisor. While counselling Sue regarding what to expect at university, for example, Kerry claims that whites will dismiss Sue as 'just angry, or politically naïve, or a thousand other things, before they'll admit that Murries can be as smart and capable as them. The racism's engrained into us Sue, and it takes constant weeding-out' (190). By using the first person plural 'us,' Kerry acknowledges that she too is part of a racist group. On a different occasion, Sue remembers that not far from her flat the notorious Boggo Road jail is 'full of black women and poor women and addicted women and women who snapped from being bashed one time too many' (243). While reflecting angrily on a debate at university over a case in which an Indigenous woman was released from jail after serving six years of a life sentence, Sue wonders how she refrained 'from slamming this white bitch's teeth down her throat' and thinks how easy it is for outsiders to argue that being released after serving just six years of a life sentence is a miscarriage of justice: 'Try living it from inside those white walls of time. Try being black and being in jail when you walk out the gate, born jailed, live jailed, die jailed' (243-44). As Indigenous scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson notes, Indigenous people 'continue to be the most socio-economically impoverished group in Australian society' ('I Still Call' 25). Unlike Kerry,

the 'white bitch' at university does not exhibit any acknowledgment of white guilt or complicity. Through the depiction of several different white characters, Lucashenko reveals a variety of white identities and positions regarding the treatment of Indigenous Australians, acknowledging that 'white Australia' is not a homogenous culture.

Although Lucashenko presents the treatment of Indigenous Australians by non-Indigenous Australians in a rather negative manner, she also candidly addresses problems within the Indigenous community, such as domestic violence, child abuse, alcohol and drug abuse, and racism against whites and other groups. As Gelder and Salzman note, Lucashenko 'refuses to present a benign image of Aboriginal family and community life' (60). Indeed, the Indigenous characters reveal their racism on numerous occasions. During a brawl in a pub car park, Roger calls Carlos a "wog," and when Sue fights the woman Roger has been flirting with, she calls her a "fucken ugly old white slut" (83). Thus, although both Roger and Sue are victims of racism, they are also racist themselves. Sue's racism is demonstrated during the Townsville section of the novel, when she refers to her brother's girlfriend as a "dirty white slut" (175), and once again after she moves to West End, where she thinks of her flat-mate Melinda as 'a stiff whitey' (223). Sue adopts an Indigenous identity that causes her to perceive most whites as antagonists and as responsible for the contemporary conditions of the Indigenous community, while simultaneously accepting Kerry and Rachel as role models, advisors and friends. While Sue is clearly racist towards some whites, she does not exhibit such attitudes towards Kerry and Rachel, which may be further evidence of the fact that she is in the *process* of developing an Indigenous identity and working toward a subjectivity in which there is no place for racism.

Sue's process of developing an Indigenous identity also involves working through various notions of belonging. Throughout *Steam Pigs*, Sue struggles with issues of belonging in several forms: namely, belonging in her family, belonging in working class suburbia, belonging to the Indigenous community, and belonging to Indigenous land. Near the beginning of the novel, Sue admits she belongs in Eagleby, but later rejects outer suburbia and adopts inner-Brisbane as home. Margaret Henderson argues that Sue's escape from outer suburbia into the inner city resembles 'a classic bourgeois trajectory of self-improvement' and 'the feminist quest for personal liberation away from the deserts of the outer-suburbs' (78). However, Henderson suggests that the narrative is complicated by 'Sue's growing awareness of her Aboriginal identity and its specific history of space,' since she simultaneously occupies Yuggera country and the Brisbane of the white feminists and yuppies (78). Walking through the inner suburbs of Brisbane, Sue remembers 'Anyday Story' and sees the city 'through different, more confident eyes,' realizing 'for the first time' that she can claim it 'as her own, [as] a part of her life and her psyche' (239-40). Sue remembers that the land Brisbane occupies is Murri land, 'whatever they'd done to it or put on it. It was Yuggera country...and that meant she had a connection to work from. No matter what monied artefacts they put on the surface, her belonging roots reached deep into the soil, anchoring her like an old river gum' (240). Gelder and Salzman argue that Sue's evolving Indigenous identity is itself 'a form of belonging' that is manifested as 'a land claim on the city itself, as if it is both her destination and her traditional home' (60). Sue's efforts to establish belonging in Yuggera country, which has been invaded, stolen and developed by the dominant non-Indigenous society, reflect what Baker and Worby identify as the contemporary, post-Mabo struggles in Australian society 'over land and its meanings and values' (19). However, since Sue grew up in Townsville and does not know exactly which country her Indigenous ancestors belonged to, her claim to belong in Yuggera country is questionable. By

Sue's logic, any Indigenous person can belong to any land that was occupied before 1788 by Indigenous people. However, the reality is much more complicated, since each Indigenous group, such as the Waka Waka or Bundjalung, had their own country, and members of other Indigenous groups did not belong to that country. Yuggera country is not Sue's 'traditional home,' to use Gelder and Salzman's phrase. Sue chooses to adopt Yuggera country as her country since she needs a place to which she can anchor herself as part of her ongoing development of her Indigenous identity.

Writing as a critic, Lucashenko addresses colonialism and Indigenous land ownership in an essay entitled 'Black on Black', arguing that labelling Australia 'post-colonial' is 'the biggest crock of shit I've been asked to swallow in a long time,' since two years before the publication of her article, and six years after the Mabo decision, the Queensland government 'used its legislative powers to put 12 percent of the state off-limits to native title claims ... is that post-colonialism? Cos, if it is, it feels a lot like colonialism to the Indigenous owners' (115). Likewise, Graham Huggan argues that even though Australia is 'postcolonial with respect to its former British colonizers, it remains very much colonial or, perhaps more accurately, *neo*-colonial in its treatment of its own indigenous [sic] peoples' (27). Moreton-Robinson describes Australia as a 'postcolonizing society' and notes that she uses the verb 'postcolonizing' 'to signify the active, the current and the continuing nature of the colonising relationship that positions us [Indigenous Australians] as belonging but not belonging' ('I Still Call' 38). Moreton-Robinson acknowledges the complexity of attempting to define Australia as colonial, postcolonial, neo-colonial or postcolonizing, noting that 'There may well be spaces in Australia that could be described as postcolonial but these are not spaces inhabited by Indigenous people' ('I Still Call' 30). Clearly, whether Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples can legitimately lay claim to belong to a particular space or place is an issue hotly contested by both groups.

In *Steam Pigs*, Lucashenko explicitly depicts suburbia as co-occupying Indigenous land; she is the first Australian novelist to do so and thus her novel is radical on that count alone.<sup>10</sup> During a scene in which Roger drives into the Brisbane CBD from Beenleigh, past the suburbs of Springwood, Rochedale, Eight Mile Plains, and Mt. Gravatt, the narrator notes that the entire region is Yuggera country (111-112).<sup>11</sup> Lucashenko does not depict suburbia as having replaced Yuggera country, but as existing on top of it, as an overlay, so that the true history and identity of the land exists underneath, visible only to those who possess Indigenous knowledge. Lucashenko has thought deeply about the relationship between suburbia and Indigenous ownership and belonging. In her essay 'Gender, Genre and Geography,' Lucashenko claims that 'the vast majority' of Australians 'are still struggling with the concept of the land of the quarter-acre block and the great Australian dream' (50). She argues that Indigenous people who 'know the land and sea' allow it to 'enter into' them and possess 'the potential to experience healing and wholeness'; moreover, they 'don't need to know about quarter acre blocks because geography doesn't come in that, it comes in whacking great slabs and plateaus and beaches. It comes in valleys and ranges' ('Gender' 50). Here, Lucashenko argues that suburbia divides Indigenous land into fragments, making it difficult for people to appreciate the scale of the natural environment and to forge strong connections with it. Moreover, she rejects the suburban quarter-acre block as an artificial division and unsatisfactory locale.<sup>12</sup>

Throughout *Steam Pigs*, Lucashenko depicts the working-class suburb of Eagleby in an overwhelmingly negative manner with regard to the physical environment, the residents'

lifestyles, and the suburb's relationship to the city, the bush, and other suburbs. Lucashenko's Eagleby is flat, hot, ugly, boring and isolated. The suburb's residents engage in a range of destructive behaviours, including substance abuse, domestic violence, sexual abuse, child abuse, racism, assault and theft. Moreover, Henderson argues that Lucashenko 'positions class as critical and unavoidable in her suburban geography' (79). Not only are the social problems depicted in the novel presented as working-class issues, as Henderson notes, but Lucashenko also places Eagleby in opposition to Brisbane's middle and upper-class suburbs, which she depicts as being superior in terms of social, economic and aesthetic conditions. Eagleby is one of approximately thirty suburbs comprising Logan City, a local government area located on the southern edge of Brisbane. *Steam Pigs* contains numerous criticisms and negative depictions of Logan City and the individual suburbs it contains. Consciously or not, Lucashenko repeats the criticisms of suburbia contained in the novels by non-Indigenous authors that established and perpetuated the anti-suburban tradition in Australian fiction.<sup>13</sup> Eagleby is described as 'that death of outer suburbia' in which passive unthinking suburbanites 'slumped and sweated it out in their pokey rooms ... melded into limpid living rooms, tranced by the flicker of screens' (5). Domestic entertainment in Lucashenko's outer suburb largely consists of watching television, binge drinking, and taking drugs. This is a life without hope or progress and from the first chapter of the novel, Lucashenko positions outer suburbia as a destructive locale that must be escaped. Sue's developing awareness of her Indigenous identity and subsequent embrace of it evolves in parallel with her realization that she must escape suburbia. Lucashenko depicts the embrace of Indigenous identity and the rejection of suburbia as intertwined processes, both encouraged and enabled by educated white feminists.

In *Steam Pigs* violence is an ever-present component of life in the working-class suburb. The violence is prevalent in both the domestic and public spheres.<sup>14</sup> The children of the suburb are frequently the victims of violence, often endured as punishment.<sup>15</sup> Penny Van Toorn notes that Lucashenko's novel raises questions 'about domestic violence ... within the Aboriginal community' (40), particularly male-on-female domestic violence. However, the violence that Van Toorn identifies is not confined to the Aboriginal community; the entire suburb of Eagleby is depicted as violent. Thus, for Lucashenko, violence is not just an Indigenous problem, but also a suburban and working class problem.<sup>16</sup> Henderson argues that the houses in Eagleby rarely contain 'a sense of comfort,' since the domestic spaces are part of 'an environment that may suddenly erupt into violence' (75-76). Lucashenko addresses domestic violence mainly through Roger's abuse of Sue. In the aftermath of one of the many beatings Sue is subjected to by Roger, Sue visits Kerry, who insists that she repeat the mantra, 'It's not my fault' (141, 143). When Sue attempts to defend Roger, Kerry declares, "'I don't care if it's Roger or fucking Adolf Hitler who done that to you, it's not *your* fault, okay? No woman ever deserves to be bashed, ever. No excuses'" (145, original emphasis). Later in the novel, after Roger beats Sue severely before raping her, Sue turns to Kerry and Rachel for refuge and declares that she will not return to Roger: 'It was true. She *had* had enough. And she remembered, for the first time since Kerry'd said it weeks ago, about how many women got killed, not just bashed, but killed, in domestic violence. Once a week in Queensland, and a black homicide rate ten times that of whites' (200, original emphasis). The didactic tone of the passage is quite typical of the novel, in which Lucashenko repeatedly provides social criticism and advocates change, presumably directing her message to an audience containing both Indigenous and non-Indigenous readers.

Sue's saviour, Kerry, lives in an old Queenslander in Beenleigh (63) which serves to set her apart from the other residents of Brisbane's southern suburbs, most of whom live in small brick houses or flats. Kerry's big white wooden house exudes 'an inviting feel ... that the local brick boxes can never attain' (67). Inside, Kerry's walls 'are adorned with posters ... from around the world. The pictures are full of women, lots of them black women – talking, laughing, marching, working' (68). While showing Sue around the house, Kerry points out 'artefacts from the Northern Territory, painted birds from Ramingining, [and] clothes from the Tiwi islands [...] Kerry's been in enough Eagleby homes to know that tiny fishbowls with miserable orange inmates, posters of Elvis, and pride-of-place family photos are as great a gesture towards aesthetics as Sue's likely to have seen' (68). The interior decorations emphasize the difference between middle-class and working-class domestic spaces and the absence of foreign and high cultures from the lives of the suburban working classes. Kerry's Queenslander shows Sue an alternative lifestyle that she may be able to attain if she can transcend her class. In her essay, 'Not Quite White in the Head,' Lucashenko describes the Queenslander, especially in its contemporary manifestation as a signifier of middle class affluence, as representative of a 'lifestyle [that] is meant to convey a mood of summer indolence, perhaps by the pool but certainly taking in a verandah and an open plan weekend in which cold drinks and friends replace the claustrophobia and TV of the brick bungalow' ('Not Quite' 29). Similarly, David Malouf, in *12 Edmondstone Street*, presents the Queenslander house in positive and nostalgic terms as a cultured middle-class sanctuary. In *Steam Pigs*, the Queenslander serves as an example of a superior alternative to the typical suburban existence in Eagleby, not merely in terms of architecture, interior decoration and class, but also in a more literal sense. Kerry and Rachel are university-educated lesbian feminists and the house serves as a physical manifestation of their identity, often in very literal ways: no men are allowed to enter the house, which has been declared 'women's space.' It is by emulating Kerry and Rachel's lifestyle that Sue escapes the restrictions of her working class suburb. As Van Toorn argues, Sue must choose between an abusive Aboriginal man and the 'asylum' offered by 'white, university-educated, feminist friends' (40).<sup>17</sup>

Sue's first exposure to the inner-urban environment and the potential for escape from her outer suburban existence occurs when Kerry and Rachel arrange a surprise eighteenth-birthday-party for her in Brisbane's West End (134). Sue arrives at the café before Kerry and Rachel, and is met by their friend Louise (133). Sue and Louise discuss Eagleby, which Sue admits is far from the city centre and is plagued by unemployment and domestic violence. However, Sue becomes tired of 'hearing about Logan City's faults' and thinks 'what about the bush being close? and we're only twenty minutes from the surf?' (134).<sup>18</sup> Sue has acknowledged Logan City's faults before, and even claimed to hate the suburbs, but dislikes discussing the suburbs' problems with a cosmopolitan inner-urban resident, since she interprets Louise's criticisms of Eagleby as a middle-class critique of a working-class suburb. However, after Sue moves to West End, she undergoes a cultural transformation and becomes more like Louise and less suburban. Sue writes letters to her incarcerated brother telling him that she often goes to movies and libraries, and describes West End as being full of 'ethnics' and Murries (221). After a couple of months, Sue is transformed, and amazed that six months previously she had not been able to immediately recognize that Kerry and Rachel are lesbians (235). Sue's newfound ability to decipher cultural and sexual signifiers serves as evidence of her increasing cosmopolitanism. Living in the inner suburb exposes Sue to a diverse range of ethnic and cultural groups, makes her aware of sexual diversity, and provides her with easy access to cultural experiences (such as libraries, galleries, museums and theatres) which were not available in Eagleby.

Henderson argues that Sue's embrace of her Indigenous identity and exposure to 'feminist politics and alternative ways of living' eventually culminate 'in her rejection of the white masculinist values of Eagleby and its destructive culture,' choosing instead 'the more plural and feminised habitat of West End' (77). Thus, the inner-urban West End is depicted as morally, culturally and intellectually superior to working-class outer suburbia. However, while Henderson is correct in arguing that Sue rejects 'white masculinist values,' it must be noted that Sue embraces white feminist values, even while embracing and exploring her Indigenous identity, thus substituting one set of white values for another. When Rachel and Kerry visit Sue, they jokingly refer to her as a 'city girl' and discuss her new life, which is the polar opposite of her outer suburban life. Kerry mockingly refers to the residents of West End as "The liberal elite" and "Champagne socialists," to which Sue replies, "whatever ya call it, it's like another fucking planet [...]. I can't work out why youse live down in Yobsville" (236). Rachel admits that some of the residents of the southern working class suburbs are "pretty neanderthal," but argues that "there's *something* down there" and there are "people in Logan City that are *alive*, not just existing" (237, original emphasis).<sup>19</sup> Sue is intrigued by Rachel's somewhat positive view of Logan City, since she had 'spent the last couple of months congratulating herself on her narrow escape [...] and had successfully persuaded herself she didn't miss a thing about "Slumsville"' (237). Sue claims she hated Eagleby when she lived there, but admits she sometimes contemplates moving back (238). However, she does not express such sentiments on any other occasion, and when the novel concludes, she resides happily in West End, her suburban life far behind her. Living in West End not only provides Sue with safety and freedom and allows her a more cosmopolitan selfhood; it also precipitates a physical and psychological transformation. She now wears 'long army pants, a dark blue T-shirt and genuine second-hand Doc Martens' and fastens 'a necklace of tiny Murri beads around her neck' (238-39), proudly advertising her Indigenous identity. Sue transforms from a working-class outer suburban teen unsure of her identity into a cosmopolitan inner-urban Indigenous woman who feels that she blends in with her white feminist friends (239). On one of the final pages of the novel, Kerry half-ironically declares, "So Sue ... you've done it! Thrown off the shackles of patriarchy! Vindicated your race and sex! Well done" (241).

In *Talkin' Up to the White Woman: Indigenous Women and Feminism*, Moreton-Robinson declares that 'Indigenous women are the bearers of subjugated knowledges and [...] their] ethics, behaviours and values repudiate the moral and intellectual hegemony of white domination and oppression' (xxiii). Moreton-Robinson's description of the role and behaviour of Indigenous women cannot be used to accurately describe Lucashenko's Indigenous female protagonist. While Sue may perhaps be said to bear 'subjugated knowledges,' which she comes to understand more deeply as the novel unfolds, she certainly does not 'repudiate the moral and intellectual hegemony of white domination and oppression.' Rather, Sue becomes the protégée of two white feminists, largely embraces and adopts their worldview, and becomes intellectually assimilated into the dominant white culture by attending university and gaining a Western education. Thus, rather than being a symbol of resistance and of the power of Indigenous women, Sue may be seen to represent conformity and assimilation.<sup>20</sup> Moreton-Robinson points out that from the perspective of Indigenous women, 'all white feminists benefit from colonization...are overwhelmingly represented and disproportionately predominant, have the key roles, and constitute the norm, the ordinary and the standard of womanhood in Australia' (*Talkin'* xxv). Thus, for Moreton-Robinson, white feminists such as Kerry and Rachel are equated with

colonization, occupy a position of power that serves to exclude Indigenous women from 'key roles,' and signify the standard for Australian womanhood. For Sue, the white feminists Kerry and Rachel are not representatives or symbols of colonization and oppression; rather, they are role models whom she emulates. Sue perhaps lacks the necessary political awareness and historical perspective to realize that the relationship she has with Kerry and Rachel mimics the colonial relationship between the colonizers and the colonized, in which the colonizers 'civilize' the Indigenous peoples. The fact that Sue is 'saved' and enlightened by liberal, educated urban whites, rather than by her fellow Indigenous Australians, sends a disconcerting message about the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Ultimately, *Steam Pigs* suggests that the solutions for Indigenous social problems are to be provided by university-educated whites, a relationship that perpetuates the colonialist relationship between non-Indigenous and Indigenous Australians;<sup>21</sup> this aspect of the novel, combined with Lucashenko's perpetuation of the anti-suburban tradition, drastically reduces the power of the innovative and radical aspects of the novel, such as Lucashenko's exploration of Indigenous identity and frank depiction of problems within the Indigenous community.

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#### ENDNOTES

I would like to thank Frances Devlin-Glass, Tony Simoes da Silva and the anonymous referees for their helpful comments and suggestions on previous versions of this article.

<sup>1</sup> In 1992 the High Court of Australia accepted Eddie Koiki Mabo's 'claim of uninterrupted ownership of his people's traditional land at Mer Island,' recognizing Aboriginal rights to land and 'thus finally admitting the falsehood of the assumption that Australia was *terra nullius* in 1788' (Heiss and Minter 6). The Mabo decision is a watershed moment in Australian history, especially with regard to the Indigenous peoples' long struggle for native title, and thus the terms post-Mabo and pre-Mabo are now commonly used in discussion of Indigenous literature.

<sup>2</sup> The Indigenous character Alf Dubbo in Patrick White's *Riders in the Chariot* is a notable exception. Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet* deals with the issue of Indigenous dispossession and the stolen generations in an indirect manner.

<sup>3</sup> Like her protagonist Sue Wilson, Lucashenko lived in the southernmost suburbs of Brisbane, worked as a barmaid and delivery driver, practiced karate, and attended Griffith University. Lucashenko was born in 1967 in Brisbane; she is of European and Indigenous Yugambeh and Bundjalung descent. Lucashenko grew up in Brisbane's southernmost suburbs and received an Honours degree in Public Policy from Griffith University. Lucashenko undertook doctoral studies at Griffith on the work experiences of Indigenous women, but abandoned them in order to pursue writing full-time. *Steam Pigs* won the Dobbie Award for women's fiction and was shortlisted for the New South Wales Premier's Literary Awards and the Commonwealth Writers Prize ('Lucashenko').

<sup>4</sup> Henderson's work is one of only two journal articles published to date that contain a detailed analysis of *Steam Pigs*; the other is Carole Ferrier's 'White Blindfolds and Black Armbands: The Uses of Whiteness Theory for Reading Australian Cultural Production.' Curiously, *Steam Pigs* has been almost totally ignored by literary critics, despite the accolades it received.

<sup>5</sup> To date, very few authors have rejected the anti-suburban tradition. For detailed discussions of the anti-suburban tradition, see Rowse (1978), Gilbert (1989), Gerster (1990), Powell (1993), Kinnane (1998), McCann (1998), and O'Reilly (2006, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> The anti-suburban tradition usually fails to delineate between different kinds of suburbs, depicting them all negatively, failing to acknowledge that there are many different kinds of suburb, such as inner, outer, working-class, middle-class, homogenous, multicultural, established, newly developed, low-density, high-density, etc. The term "suburbia" is usually used to describe all of the suburbs as a whole, erasing difference, and often carries negative connotations. In this paper, I wish to emphasize that the primary setting of the novel, Eagleby, is both an outer and a working class suburb, and thus it is doubly marginalized. The inner suburb of West End is privileged and depicted positively, partially because of its proximity to the city centre, which is seen as the hub and height of culture.

<sup>7</sup> Baker and Worby also note that 'Aboriginality' is a construct (23), and, citing Marcia Langton, that 'Aboriginality' has more than seventy legal definitions (25). In her essay 'Many Prisons,' Lucashenko argues that mainstream Australian society 'does not understand Aboriginal people. White people and most non-Aboriginal people of colour in Australia have almost no idea what it is to be Aboriginal' (140).

<sup>8</sup> Lucashenko presents the text of 'Anyday Story' in italicized font.

<sup>9</sup> While only a small percentage of the working-class characters in *Steam Pigs* are Indigenous, all of the Indigenous characters are working-class. Lucashenko does not depict any middle-class Indigenous characters.

<sup>10</sup> In *Cloudstreet*, Winton depicts suburbia as haunted by the Indigenous people whose land the suburbs have been constructed upon. However, unlike Lucashenko, Winton addresses the issue in a very subtle and indirect manner.

<sup>11</sup> As I child, I lived in Rochedale South and attended school in Springwood. Although I had Indigenous neighbors and classmates, I had no verbal interaction with them and was never made aware that I lived in Yuggera country. I was not even aware of the fact that I lived on stolen land, which I think was pretty typical for a white Australian child during the early 1980s.

<sup>12</sup> Lucashenko has herself rejected suburbia by moving from Brisbane to a small town in northern New South Wales.

<sup>13</sup> Here I am thinking of novels such as Johnston's *My Brother Jack*, Malouf's *Johnno* and Winton's *Cloudstreet*.

<sup>14</sup> While most of the violence is perpetrated by males, the females are sometimes violent too. For example, Sue takes karate lessons in order to be able to defend herself, and engages in a fight with another woman outside a pub (83).

<sup>15</sup> The use of physical violence as a means of punishing children forms the central conflict of another contemporary novel set in suburbia, Christos Tsiolkas' *The Slap*.

<sup>16</sup> For more on suburban violence, see Maiden (1988) and O'Reilly (2006, 2008).

<sup>17</sup> Ichtiani argues that Kerry's feminism 'is not a particular feminism for Indigenous women in an Indigenous community but rather a broader type of feminism that liberates everyone from multiple kinds of oppression, including racism and sexism' (196).

<sup>18</sup> This is one of the extremely rare occasions in the novel when Lucashenko's narrator or any of the characters acknowledge that Eagleby has positive attributes.

<sup>19</sup> Rachel's sentiments about working class vitality echo those expressed by Louis Esson in 'Our Institutions,' the companion essay to his 1912 play *The Time is Not Yet Ripe*. However, unlike Rachel, Esson attacks suburbia and celebrates the working-class slums.

<sup>20</sup> I certainly do not wish to suggest that attending university will necessarily mean that Indigenous students will be intellectually assimilated into the dominant non-Indigenous culture, nor that all Indigenous university students and academics represent conformity and assimilation; however, I contend that in Lucashenko's novel Sue becomes intellectually assimilated and that this constitutes a process of conformity and assimilation.

<sup>21</sup> This relationship between non-Indigenous and Indigenous Australians puts non-Indigenous people in a difficult position, to say the least. Acts such as educating, advising, protecting and 'civilizing' Indigenous people performed by non-Indigenous people mimic colonial practices and expose non-Indigenous Australians to charges of neo-colonialism; however, non-Indigenous people surely cannot be expected to cease interacting with Indigenous Australians in spheres such as education, politics, law enforcement and health.

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