Translating Australian Trauma Narratives

Western and Indigenous Conceptualisations of Trauma for an Italian Readership

Alessia Carbonaro
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Overview

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Western conceptualisations of trauma

- Trauma is “a **disruptive experience** that disarticulates the self and creates holes in existence”, as well as the **belated response** to such an overwhelming event (LaCapra 2001, 41; Caruth 1996).

- **Inaccessible** to conscious recall and understanding according to pre-existing frameworks (Caruth 1996).

- **Paradox of classical trauma theory**: trauma defies representation, and yet it gives rise to (literary) narratives seeking to make sense of it (Whitehead 2004; Luckhurst 2013).

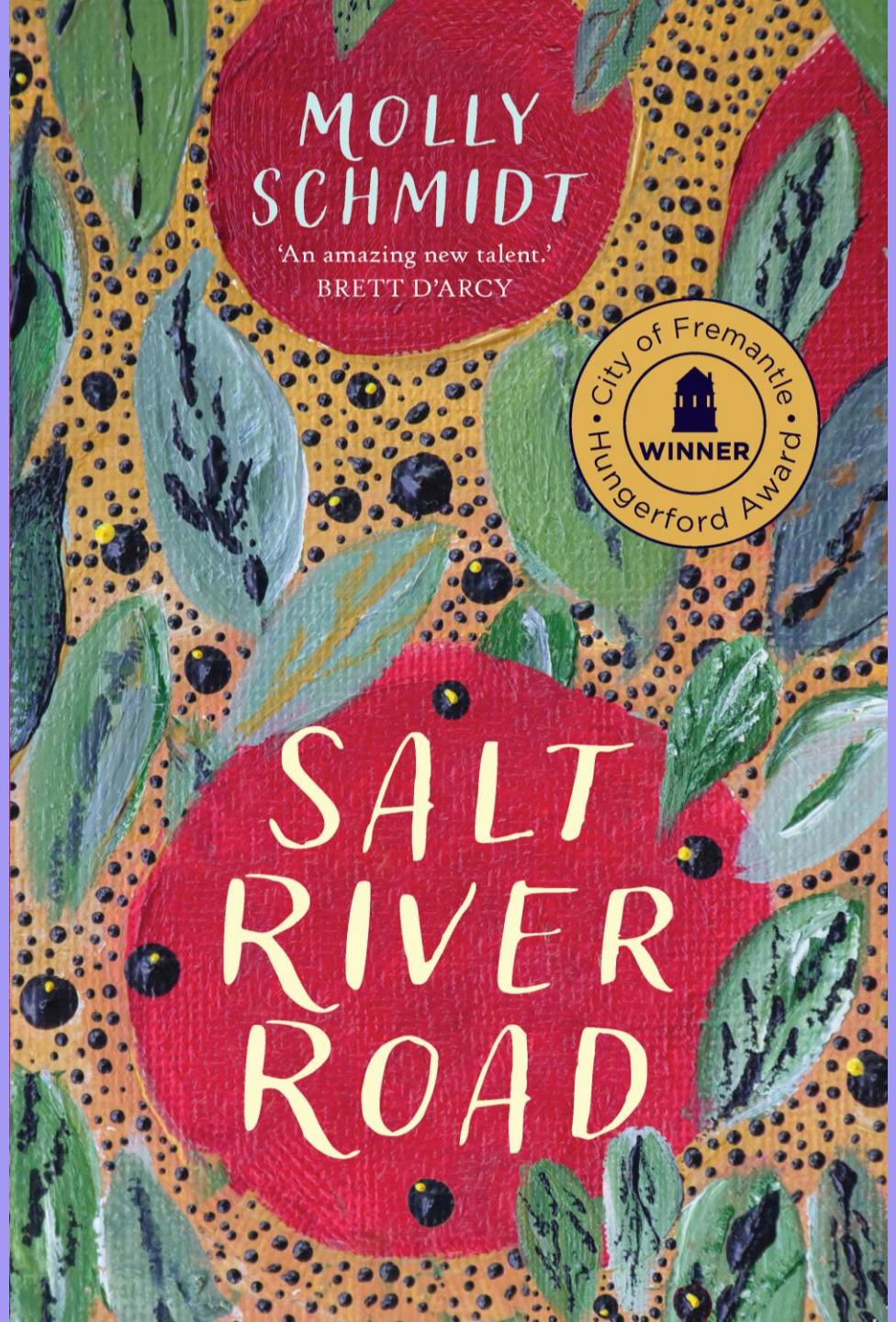
- Typical features of **trauma fiction**: fragmentary narration, silences, repetitions, and splitting of the narrative voice (Pederson 2018; Sütterlin 2023).

Towards an inclusive understanding of trauma

- Reactions to trauma are **culture-specific** (Eaglestone 2023; Deane-Cox 2024).
- Criticism towards the **Eurocentric focus** of classical trauma theory.
- Turn to Indigenous ways of experiencing and representing trauma: e.g. **narrative and non-narrative forms**, such as storytelling, painting, dancing, etc (Visser 2018; Di Blasio 2024).
- Evident challenges in translating not only trauma in its Western meaning, but also Indigenous articulations of trauma.

Why *Salt River Road*?

- **Molly Schmidt**'s literary debut
- Published in Australia in **October 2023** by Fremantle Press
- Two interwoven narratives:
    1. Coming-of-age novel about **grief** and **family**: the story of the Tetley kids losing their mother, Elena, to cancer
    2. Novel about **small-town racism**, **healing** and **Reconciliation**: the Tetleys cross paths (again) with Noongar elders Patsy and Herbert



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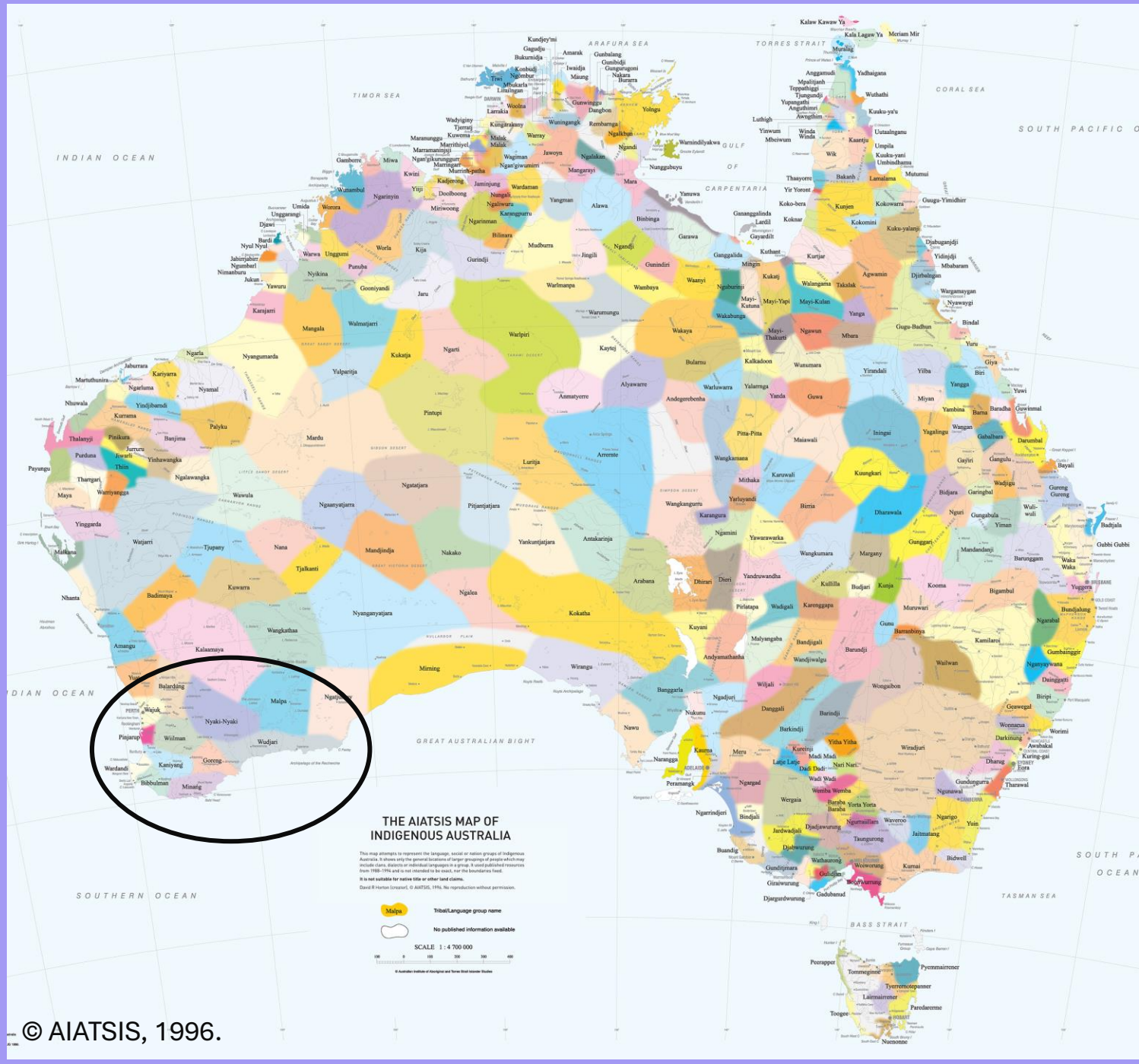
Why *Salt River Road*?

Western and Indigenous conceptualisations of trauma coexist:

- At an epistemological level, in the characters' **differing reactions** to Elena's death
- At a linguistic level, through the **hybridization** of English with Noongar, the local Indigenous language



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Translation challenges

Western and Indigenous epistemologies

‘i’m sorry, i’m sorry,’ my brother says
imsorryimsorryimsorry
i have never loved
or hated him
more.
(Schmidt 2023: 213)

«scusami, scusami» dice mio fratello
scusamiscusamiscusami
non l’ho mai amato
o odiato
di più.

Translation challenges

Western and Indigenous epistemologies

I follow her as she walks straight into the bush. We reach a clearing and Patsy snaps a sprig from a branch. She closes her eyes, takes a deep breath. Softly slaps the branch across her chest, her back, lifts her legs and circles the branch around them, then round each of her arms. It's as if she's washing herself with the branch.[...]
'Cleansing' she says. 'Before going bush.'
(Schmidt 2023: 186)

La seguo mentre si addentra nel bush. Raggiungiamo una radura e Patsy stacca un ramoscello da un ramo. Chiude gli occhi, fa un respiro profondo. Col ramoscello si colpisce delicatamente il petto, la schiena, solleva le gambe e vi muove attorno il ramoscello, poi attorno alle braccia. È come se si stesse lavando con il ramoscello. [...]
«Ci purifichiamo» dice. «Prima di andare nel bush».

Translation challenges

Hybrid language

Title of the prologue: Ngank

Your daughter is holding a thumb to the sky.
‘Nganka,’ she says. ‘Ngank. Ngank.’
Thumb.
Sun.
Mum.
(Schmidt 2023: 271)

Tua figlia tiene il pollice alzato verso il Cielo.
«Nganka» dice. «Ngank. Ngank».
Pollice.
Sole.
Mamma.

Translation challenges

Hybrid language

Gravel dust, up the side of the car. Aunty pulls over, stops next to a couch honeypot shrub. Could never remember the botanical name for that one. Patsy still isn't talking, so I ask her.
She pauses. Thinks. 'Bullgalla.'
'That's the botanical name?'
'The Noongar name, bub. The real name. Old name.' She opens the door, climbs out.
'Come on.'
(Schmidt 2023: 185)

Polvere sul lato dell'auto. Aunty accosta, si ferma accanto a un arbusto conosciuto come *couch honeypot*. Non me ne ricordo mai il nome botanico. Patsy ancora non parla, quindi glielo chiedo.
Fa una pausa. Pensa. «Bullgalla».
«È quello il nome botanico?».
«Il nome Noongar, tesoro. Il nome vero. Il nome antico». Apre la portiera, scende.
«Andiamo».



Final remarks

- Example of **collaborative efforts** towards Reconciliation
- Importance of **appreciating differences** in translation → BUT awareness of the risk of exoticizing such representations of Indigenous cultures
- Trauma's supposed unspeakability does not equate untranslatability

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Thank you for listening!

alessia.carbonaro@warwick.ac.uk

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