# Geotrauma in Melissa Lucashenko's *Too Much Lip*

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**Abstract:**
The award-winning novel *Too Much Lip* (2018) by Bundjalung author Melissa Lucashenko is a complex work of contemporary fiction which operates at the intersection of trauma and place. Narrated with great insight not only into the persisting problems afflicting Aboriginal people but also into their culture and ontology, the novel depicts the suffering of the human characters as inseparable from the suffering of Country. As such, this depiction befits the theoretical framework of geotrauma developed by Rachel Pain, which centres on "the relational clasping of place with the experience and impacts of trauma" (3). In this essay, Pain's approach will be complemented by the theory of Indigenous realism and neighbouring terms to analyse three important supernatural scenes in the novel. The essay will show how the scenes in question help the land to articulate its own hardships and how these hardships are reflected onto the protagonist and her family. Thus, the supernatural scenes expose the workings of slow violence (Nixon) deep-rooted in 21st-century society and challenge the dominant Western principle of anthropocentrism. It will therefore be argued that the key to healing the intergenerational trauma suffered by the human characters in *Too Much Lip* lies in freeing their traditional land from Western exploitative practices.

**Keywords:** Melissa Lucashenko; *Too Much Lip*; geotrauma; slow violence; Indigenous realism; magical realism.

## 1. Introduction

The winner of the 2019 Miles Franklin Award, Melissa Lucashenko's *Too Much Lip* is an uncompromising story of violence, suffering and dispossession whose serious tone sits alongside plenty of humour. Published in 2018 to an overwhelmingly positive reception, the novel was recognised by critics as "a triumph, brimming with love and wit" (Pung), "a performance of truth told slant … ; thrumming with life" (Webb), and "a worthy addition to the work of such original and passionate writers as Kim Scott and Alexis Wright" (Sullivan). Moreover, having reached British and American audiences in 2020, *Too Much Lip* proved extremely popular with readers outside Australia. However, despite the novel's critical and popular acclaim and Lucashenko's successful literary output, which has attracted many commentators and scholars, the number of academic papers dealing with *Too Much Lip* remains relatively modest.

In an attempt to fill this gap, this essay analyses *Too Much Lip* as a layered work of fiction where an often gritty realism is interspersed with naturalised supernatural elements, that is, elements which represent a departure from the otherwise mimetic text but are interwoven into it in a matter-of-fact manner. Serious but also playful, openly defiant as well as ironic, the novel accords great importance to the land and its experience, wherein the challenges and trauma of the characters inhabiting this space are intricately linked to the trauma inflicted on that very space. By doing so,

the novel challenges the dominant Western principle of anthropocentrism.

By focusing on this interrelationship between human and non-human experience, the essay will propose a reading of the trauma in *Too Much Lip* through the lens of Rachel Pain's concept of geotrauma, that is, "the relational clasping of place with the experience and impacts of trauma" (3) in order to argue that the trauma of the self and the place in the novel are inseparable. The analysis will also draw on the well-known concepts of collective and intergenerational trauma, as well as Rob Nixon's influential theory of slow violence. Starting with the analysis of three important supernatural scenes, which will be examined within the theoretical framework of Indigenous realism and neighbouring terms, the essay will discuss how this aspect of the novel helps the land to articulate its own hardships, and how this is in turn reflected onto the protagonist and her family. Significantly, the central notion in the novel is Country: as will be shown, *Too Much Lip* is narrated with great insight not only into Aboriginal history and trauma but also into traditional culture and ontology, which are based on Country as "a place that gives and receives life," that "is lived in and lived with" (Rose, 7). Thus, it will be argued that, in *Too Much Lip*, the key to healing the trauma suffered by the human characters lies in freeing their traditional land from Western exploitative practices and replacing them with Aboriginal practices of care and respect for Country.

## 2. Voicing Country and its Reality

Even though *Too Much Lip* has been broadly classified as a dark comedy (Wyld) or a black comedy (Sullivan), humour is just one of the novel's many facets; in fact, most reviewers refrain from categorising the novel according to genre or mode, opting for a more descriptive approach instead.[1] This is a telling comment on the hybridity of Lucashenko's narrative, which defies easy categorisation and lends itself to different interpretations, as is the case with many contemporary Indigenous novels. *Too Much Lip* is a story about a family, how it falls apart and comes back together, about the legacy of colonial oppression, about fighting back, and ultimately about love, told in a mode which incorporates elements of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures and realities. The narrative follows Kerry Salter, a witty, daring Bundjalung woman, who often finds herself on the wrong side of the law, as she returns home to the small town of Durrongo to see her terminally ill grandfather before he passes away. Since her relationship with her family is very strained, she initially does not intend to stay long, but that changes when the Salters learn that the town mayor Jim Buckley is planning to build a prison on their ancestral Country. As the family comes together in order to fight back, they are confronted by their own problems, unhealthy relationships and dark secrets from the past.

While it is true that the story is predominantly mimetic, the novel attributes a special place to the three scenes that the non-Indigenous reader would label as supernatural, which draw attention to non-human experience through the voices of animals as well as ghosts of deceased ancestors. These scenes take place at three crucial points of the narrative. The first occurs at the beginning and

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[1] For example, Amy Vuleta states that *Too Much Lip* is a "postmodern Indigenous Australian novel." Arguably, the postmodern label is in itself a testimony to the novel's hybridity, seeing that the postmodern, evoking concepts as diverse and complex as "irony, disruption, difference, discontinuity, playfulness, parody, hyper-reality and simulation" (Malpas, 7), sets out to challenge "clear and concise [processes] of identification and definition" (4).

includes the protagonist Kerry Salter and three crows; the second happens halfway through the narrative, in one of the novel's decisive moments, and includes Kerry and the ghost of her late great-grandfather; the last, at the end of the novel, concerns the Salter family and a shark. In these scenes human and animal characters understand each other's language—languages, in fact, since their Aboriginal English is sprinkled with occasional phrases in the language of the Bundjalung people—and, even though talking animals are a clear instance of the supernatural, in neither scene are the human characters surprised to hear the animals speak. Kerry's dialogue with the ghost of her great-grandfather functions in a similar way: they communicate in a combination of English and Bundjalung, and even though his appearance is sudden and unexplained, Kerry readily accepts it and follows his instructions. Significantly, Lucashenko does not provide a glossary of the Bundjalung words as she does in her previous novel, *Mullumbimby* (2013), which serves as a clear signal to the reader that these words are no longer part of the peritext. Through this decision, and the seamless inclusion of the supernatural into the story, Lucashenko introduces traditional Indigenous culture into the narrative. In fact, the three scenes in question are indicative of "an Indigenous reality" (Potter, 255), whose defining features include "multi-vocality, and cross-temporal presences, as well as multi-special representation" (255), all of which are exemplified by the animal and spectral characters. The notion of Indigenous reality also brings to mind the similar concept of maban reality which Mudrooroo formulated in the 1990s to explain the Aboriginal worldview. As Mudrooroo writes, "[m]aban reality might be characterised by a firm grounding in the reality of the earth or country, together with an acceptance of the supernatural as part of everyday reality" (97). This multifaceted reality that Potter and Mudrooroo describe found its mode of expression in what may be termed Indigenous realism. Interpreting *Too Much Lip* through the lens of Indigenous realism effectively means that, from the perspective of Aboriginal readers, the three supernatural scenes in the novel constitute reflections of everyday reality rather than extraordinary occurrences. The term has been used by Lucashenko herself, who, in an interview about the novel, refers to Indigenous realism as "just one way of seeing the world that I have access to" (2020a). One of the purposes of her incorporation of the Aboriginal worldview and reality into the novel is therefore to broaden the cultural horizons and challenge the preconceptions of those who do not have access to that way of seeing the world: her non-Indigenous readers.

Unsurprisingly, the vast majority of Lucashenko's readers, and readers of Aboriginal fiction in general, are precisely non-Indigenous. As Gomeroi writer and researcher Alison Whittaker points out, "our white audiences … are majorities in both literary industry and buying power" (Whittaker). This causes discomfort among Aboriginal writers, described by Nyungar author Kim Scott as the "'postcolonial angst' of those who, displaced linguistically if not geographically, write in the colonizer's tongue, for an audience of which their own people are a tiny minority and thus for an audience that is effectively 'the conquerors of one's people'" (3-4). This audience may find the novel's supernatural scenes challenging, since they do not correspond to the Western mode of realism, as the rest of the novel does, but are nevertheless seamlessly integrated into the story. Given their worldview, cultural background and the literary conventions arising from that background, Lucashenko's non-Indigenous readers will most likely turn to the theoretical framework of magical realism to make sense of the three scenes since, unlike Lucashenko, they do not have access to the way of seeing the world which these scenes arise from. In other words, their access to what Lucashenko terms Indigenous realism is via magical realism because they do not share the same cultural code with the author. Magical realism is a well-known genre which,

according to Wendy B. Faris, "combines realism and the fantastic in such a way that magical elements grow organically out of the reality portrayed" (163). In fact, one of the genre's characteristic narrative procedures is precisely "the naturalization of the unreal," as Tommaso Scarano terms it (17), an interpretative tool which can help the non-Indigenous reader to explain the matter-of-fact representation of talking animals and ghosts in Lucashenko's novel.[2]

From the perspective of the readers who share the same cultural code with Lucashenko, this kind of reading may seem limited if not quaint since they will interpret the novel as simply realistic. In fact, the author herself uses "magical realism" only as an alternative term for "Indigenous realism" when talking about her novel (2020a). Waanyi author Alexis Wright concurs with this choice of words when talking about her 2006 novel *Carpentaria*: "Some people call the book magic realism but really in a way, it's an Aboriginal realism which carries all sorts of things" (qtd. in Ravenscroft, 220). Hence, it seems that Indigenous or Aboriginal realism is a term used by Indigenous authors to discuss the representation of reality in their novelistic works, while magical realism can help non-Indigenous readers to detect the ways in which Aboriginal and Western cultures, worldviews and realities converge in such works. Indeed, as Faris argues, magical realist texts make the reader experience "the closeness or near-merging of two realms, two worlds" (172), they "open the door to other worlds, respond to a desire for narrative freedom from realism, and from a univocal narrative stance" (180). By introducing supernatural elements into the novel, Lucashenko arguably brings together Aboriginal and Western realms, which intertwine but can never be reduced one to the other, and represents a plurality of realities and voices rather than establishing universal ones. Hence, by approaching this plurality through the prism of magical realism, non-Indigenous readers can not only question their own worldview, but also become aware of and gain some insight into Indigenous realities. This process of challenging one's own culture and of recognising and learning about another necessarily involves contrasting the two cultures' conceptualisations of humans' relationship with the non-human: thus, the rigid Western binary of human versus nature is set against the all-encompassing Aboriginal concept of Country. This juxtaposition, as will be shown, is vital for the discussion of the land's and the family's trauma.

As already indicated by the discussion of Indigenous reality and realism, Aboriginal people see their culture and the world they inhabit as grounded in the land, which they conceptualise as 'Country'. For Lucashenko's Indigenous readers, just as for the author herself, this concept warrants no explanation, for their imaginings of Country seem "so simple" to them that there is "little point in talking of them" (Lucashenko 2005, 9). In contrast, the non-Indigenous reader lacks that specific understanding and is bound to find Country completely incompatible with their notion of the land or the environment. Much more than just a place, Country is described by anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose as "a living entity with a yesterday, today and tomorrow, with a consciousness, and a will toward life," one which "knows, hears, smells, takes notice, takes care, is sorry or happy" (7). Likewise, as Alexis Wright argues, "Country can be stirred up, … it has the power to destroy,

[2] The use of the magical realist framework to analyse Aboriginal literature has been deemed inappropriate by some Aboriginal scholars, such as Wiradjuri scholar and poet Jeanine Leane, who lists it among the "limiting labels" (9) of colonial frameworks. More generally, Goorie and Koori scholar and poet Evelyn Araluen questions the applicability of literary theory and poetics to Indigenous literature, claiming that they occupy "a contentious place within global discourses and practices of decolonisation" (2017).

renew, or remain constant" (12). According to Jane Gleeson-White, Country also "contains Aboriginal knowledge systems" (29), the wisdom that, as Alexis Wright writes, is "essentially about keeping our interconnected and interrelated world strong" (12). As such, it has no equivalent in Western culture, where the land is believed to have no agency, knowledge or consciousness of its own. And as Rose also indicates, "Country is multi-dimensional" (8), which means that it consists of animals, plants, earth, waters and other non-human entities as well as of people, both living and dead. In the words of Palyku illustrator and writer Ambelin Kwaymullina, "[r]ock, tree, river, hill, animal, human – all were formed of the same substance by the Ancestors who continue to live in land, water, sky" (12). This means that, in effect, the talking animals and ghosts of ancestors in *Too Much Lip* form part of the Salters' multidimensional Country, just like the human characters do, and are as important to its survival as them.

What also needs to be noted as an additional layer of Country's complexity, and what Lucashenko's novel clearly enacts, is the fact that it has not only a spatial dimension, but also a temporal one. This essentially means that Country is marked by a distinctive merging of past, present and future into what W. E. H. Stanner has termed "everywhen" (58), a concept specific to Aboriginal culture which is completely at odds with Western linear temporality. The Ngarinyin, Worrorra and Wunambal groups of the Kimberley people, for instance, explain their way of conceptualising time through the term "Yorro Yorro," which refers to a period "from the Beginning to the present and onwards," or, in other words, "[a]s long as we are standing up with everything in Creation; as it was in the Beginning and will be for as long as nature regenerates itself. Ongoing creation, perpetual renewal of nature in all its forms" (Mowaljarlai and Malnic, 214). As can be seen, in Aboriginal ontology, Country "exists both in and through time" (8), as Rose succinctly puts it. Consequently, Aboriginal ancestors are never simply relegated to the past because they become one with the land upon death, living on as part of their Country. This also signals another crucial aspect of Country: it plays a vital role in the self-perception and identity formation of Aboriginal people, who see the land they inhabit principally as a source of belonging and culture. As Kwaymullina puts it, "Country is family, culture, identity. Country is self" (12). After all, "[t]o know the country is to know the story of how it came into being, and that story also carries the knowledge of how the human owners of that country came into being" (Rose, 36). This relationship is also at the heart of the important Aboriginal concept known as the Conception Dreaming, which is defined by the Warlpiri dictionary as an individual's "life-force or spirit which is localised in some natural formation and which may determine the spiritual nature of a person from conception and the relation of that person to the life-force" (qtd. in Nicholls 2014). As can be seen, Lucashenko's non-Indigenous readers will experience another aspect of the magical realist vision, that is, they will "question their received ideas about time, space, and identity" (Faris, 173), as Country cancels the boundaries between these three categories, and brings time, space and identity together in a way not congenial to Western culture. This confluence is vital for the understanding of the interrelation of human and non-human suffering in the novel.

Clearly, then, the novel's Indigenous realist or magical realist scenes function as a powerful expression of ecological concerns, since they stem from a specific conceptualisation of the environment, its dimensionality, agency and its nexus with humans inhabiting it, as well as the adverse consequences of its suppression. As such, these scenes help the reader to conceptualise the Salters' Country as a conscious, suffering agent, which is vital for understanding the complex

trauma that Lucashenko's novel revolves around. It is also significant that the supernatural dialogues with animals frame this largely mimetic novel, announcing the problem in the first chapter and marking its resolution in the penultimate one. In this way, they allow the non-human world and its predicament to get established as a central issue, equal rather than inferior to the human characters and their experience. This is in line with Timothy Clark's argument about the animal's gaze. Writing about the role of animals as non-human agents in literature, Clark argues that, "[a]s the inhabitant of undeniably real worlds, alien to us and not fully comprehensible, the animal's gaze into the human realm may seem profoundly to shake it, refusing it the illusion of totality or if self-evidence in its modes of coherence" (191). In *Too Much Lip*, the main role of the animals' voices is precisely to shake the human sense of totality and ensure that the negative experiences of the non-human part of Salters' traditional Country are paid as much attention to as the family's problems.

**3. From Country to Real Estate**

The prominence of the land and its suffering in the novel makes it fertile ground for analysis within the theoretical framework of geotrauma developed by Rachel Pain, which describes "multiscalar, intersecting and mutual relations between trauma and place" (3). As Pain argues, "trauma exists in psychic and worldly realms simultaneously" (3), and "[n]ature is seen not simply as the object of human violence but, as exterior ecological relations already constitute the human realm, violence is reflected back onto humanity" (3). This perception of geotrauma as inherently twofold ties in with Reza Negarestani's theory about nested traumas, that is, about the inherent relation between, on the one hand, psychic trauma and, on the other, organic, terrestrial and even cosmic trauma: "Since there is no single or isolated psychic trauma (all traumas are nested), there is no psychic trauma without an organic trauma and no organic trauma without a terrestrial trauma that in turn is deepened into open cosmic vistas." Geotrauma, then, can be perceived as a complex trauma suffered by humans and the environment alike, an amalgam which makes the traumatic experiences of the human and the non-human indistinguishable. This is precisely why this theory befits Indigenous trauma narratives such as *Too Much Lip*, where the suffering of the ancestral Country soon proves to be inseparable from the suffering of the human characters. In other words, suffering of Country means suffering of the people who inhabit it.

The reader becomes acutely aware of the hardships of the land already in the first chapter, through the complaints of the three crows—waark in Bundjalung—that Kerry encounters on her return to her home town. She is drawn to them as they rip apart and devour a dead snake. As soon as she approaches, the birds start to mock her: "'Can't talk lingo! Can't even find its way home! Turned right at the Cal River when it shoulda kept going straight. It's as moogle as you look'" (Lucashenko 2020b, 9). Clearly, the crows recognise that Kerry has become alienated from her family, her Country and her culture, so much so that she can no longer speak the language of her people, or orientate herself in her home town. Significantly, the problem of language is represented as the clearest signal of this broken connection. In fact, one of the crows, whose beak has got stuck in the snake skull, refuses Kerry's offer of help unless she addresses it in Bundjalung:

> "I'll help you if you fly up here," she offered, tapping her handlebar. The other crows instantly began to shriek in alarm.
> The snake-crow tilted its mutant head at her.

> "Gulganelehla Bundjalung." *Speak Bundjalung.* A test of good character.
> "Bundjalung ngaoi yugam baugal," she said. *My Bundjalung is crap.* The bird hesitated.
> "It's a trap, a trap, a trap!" the other crows screeched. (Lucashenko 2020b, 10)

As Kerry fails the language test, the crows fly away, making it clear to her that she cannot take care of her Country properly. The outlook for the unfortunate crow is therefore bleak—as the novel suggests, the snake skull accident is probably going to cost it its life: "Kerry sat for another troubled moment, feeling certain the crow was going to spend several hideous days before starvation claimed it" (Lucashenko 2020b, 10). This is confirmed at the end of the novel, when Kerry finds its carcass. The story of the doomed crow really stays with Kerry, but also with the reader, because it clearly illustrates the plight of the ancestral land. Just as the crow suffers because of the snake's skull, the land suffers at the hands of white Australians who exploit it, and it is as helpless as the crow because its traditional owners, the Salter family, have been unable to look after it properly, and consequently also suffer in various ways. Indeed, by emphasising her poor knowledge of the Bundjalung language, the perceptive crows also hint at Kerry's inner turmoil arising from her estrangement. As the scene shows, her alienation from the land also means alienation from her culture and people, which has led to a very troubled sense of belonging. In this way, Lucashenko establishes tending for Country as central to the novel, illustrating the aforementioned interrelationship between Indigenous peoples and their Country.

As it soon becomes clear, the family's inability to take care of their land is a direct consequence of society's ongoing violence against both Indigenous peoples and the environment. Indeed, in Lucashenko's fictional contemporary Australia, the traditional way of life and practices of land custodianship continue to be systematically destroyed, which serves as a painful comment on some of the country's current problems. In the case of Kerry's family and their ancestral land, such a behaviour culminates in the decision of the city council, led by mayor Jim Buckley, to sell it to a state government-backed consortium for the building of a prison. This can be read as an iteration of the *terra nullius* fallacy,[3] since Buckley considers and treats the Salters' Country as nobody's land and therefore as available for occupation and development, just as the entire continent was considered and treated as nobody's land upon invasion. As Goenpul scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson puts it, "[t]he premise of colonization that Australia belonged to no one informed the relationship between Indigenous people and the nation-state from its very inception, and continues to do so" (13).

Thus, the family's perception and treatment of the land as Country is opposed to Buckley's attempt to make money on it by selling it as real estate. These conflicting views are evident in the scene where Buckley is invited to comment on the family's appeals against the building of the prison, wherein he simply concludes the following: "I hardly think frivolous concerns about so-called sacred land, land that has been used for primary production for well over a century, I might add,

[3] In European international law, *terra nullius* (Latin: "no man's land") denotes territory owned by no one and therefore open to occupation or colonisation. This is how Australia was perceived by the British invaders in 1788, and how it, consequently, became a British colony, in spite of the fact that the land had been inhabited and managed for approximately 65,000 years by the Aboriginal peoples. For more on *terra nullius* and property law in Australia, see Banner, 2005.

can be taken as anything but stirring by professional rent-a-crowds" (Lucashenko 2020b, 203). Buckley has the land fenced off, metaphorically imprisoned even before an actual prison is built on it, which reflects Bill Ashcroft's observation that "the idea of enclosure, or property, has dominated colonizers' views of place" (162). This tendency for demarcation is also visible in the official map of Australia, which is divided into states and territories by straight lines drawn rather arbitrarily, with little consideration for natural geography or the population. As such, it is an illustrative example of how maps "[enforce] a Eurocentric view of spatiality" (Ashcroft, 133). Buckley's fences, then, serve to draw attention to the fact that in Australia, just as in other Western societies, the land is conceptualised as something that can be enclosed, owned and exploited, something with no rights or value in itself.

This dismissive stance reveals anthropocentrism, defined by Timothy Clark as "the view that human beings and their interests are solely of value and always take priority over those of the non-human" (3), to be at the root of the problem of Western environmental violence. Anthropocentrism implies not only that human beings are completely separate and distant from the non-human world but also that they are seen as a superior species and are therefore allowed to (ab)use it as they please. In fact, according to Clark, "[b]eing other than or superior to nature in this sense [perceived as the non-human world] forms a definitive part of many modern conceptions of human identity" (7). Significantly, Jacques Derrida cites nature and culture as one of the oldest binary oppositions in Western societies, claiming it to be "congenital to philosophy" and "even older than Plato" (397). According to Timothy Morton, the cause of this division is the development of what he calls agrilogistics, "a specific logistics of agriculture that arose in the Fertile Crescent and that is still plowing ahead" (42), a logistics which has established "thin rigid boundaries between human and nonhuman worlds and [has reduced] existence to sheer quantity" (43). As he argues, "[t]he nature-culture split we persist in using is the result of a nature-agriculture split (*colo, cultum* pertains to growing crops). This split is a product of agrilogistic subroutines, establishing the necessarily violent and arbitrary difference between itself and what it 'conquers' or delimits" (43). As such, agrilogistics is diametrically different from the land management characteristic of pre-colonial Australia. While Indigenous people certainly "did alter the country in significant ways – most Australians know about the ancient practice of firing the country," they "worked in concert with the natural world, not against it as most humans do today," "consistently and constantly ['value-adding'] to, or [enhancing], nature's creation" (Nicholls 2021). It follows that the geotrauma in Lucashenko's narrative arises precisely from the displacement of Aboriginal land management by agrilogistics, from the land being reduced from Country to real estate, from an active, multi-dimensional, living being to a voiceless, one-dimensional, distant source of profit. As care is replaced by exploitation, the land is bound to suffer, and, as *Too Much Lip* makes it clear, so are the people living on it.

Lucashenko refers to the dichotomy between Country and property by evoking the conflict between the Aboriginal customary law and the Australian state law. The Aboriginal customary law "is land-based," meaning that it "is specifically associated with and applies to particular country" (Rose, 31), and it encompasses the way Aboriginal people live, their rules, their ceremonies, songs and stories (27). However, in Australian society the state law takes priority, and it is through its enforcement that the violence against the land is perpetrated, as it authorises the anthropocentric exploitation of the environment and thus turns harm into a norm. This confirms that there is a

connection between geotrauma and "oppressive power relations" (Pain, 3). In the novel, the Salters face the threat of theft and imminent destruction of their ancestral land precisely because, according to the state law, they do not own it. Paradoxically, they are the ones who are considered to be breaking the law by living on the land, despite the fact that they have been its custodians for generations. Indeed, when Buckley comes to inspect the land, Kerry, who is bathing in the river near her Granny Ava's island, hides so as "not to be discovered trespassing on private land" (Lucashenko 2020b, 37). Effectively, the state law places the Salter family in a state of homelessness, to use Moreton-Robinson's words: in Australian society "[t]he legal regime of the nation-state places Indigenous people in a state of homelessness because our ontological relationship to the land, which is the way we hold title, is incommensurable with its own exclusive claims of sovereignty" (16). By exposing the absurdities and fallacies of the law which is officially recognised and should be abided by, Lucashenko makes her reader aware of the existence of another law to be reckoned with. The following passage illustrates how the white man's law, or, in Aboriginal English, the dugai law—dugai meaning "ghost", as white people "were assumed to be ghosts at first contact" (Lucashenko 2020a)—is challenged by the Salters' law of the land:

> The moon pulls the ocean and the ocean pulls us and everything is always pulling at everything else whether we know it or not, just like Grandad Chinky Joe insisted to the very end. The dugai can flap their jangs as much as they like, Pretty Mary [Kerry's mother] had reported him saying, but us mob got the law of the land, granddaughter, and that's that. We's in everything: the jagun, the trees, the animals, the bulloon. It's all us, and we's it too. And don't ever let the dugai tell ya different. They savages, remember. (133)

Thus, *Too Much Lip* undermines the authority of the state law by setting it against the authority of Aboriginal customary laws, which is clearly shown to be healthier for both the non-human and the human world. The novel demonstrates how "[s]tate law excludes, subordinates, and suppresses Aboriginal sovereignties and laws," and at the same time "relies on narratives of harm in constituting its own authority" (325), as Honni van Rijswijk argues in relation to Alexis Wright's novel *The Swan Book*, another seminal novel that brings Country and geotrauma to the forefront.

Through the family's battle to stop the prison from being built, the novel paradoxically echoes the grim reality of Aboriginal people having to fight for their land within the framework of the white man's law. It is important to note that the land is ultimately saved thanks to the professional expertise and knowledge of the Australian legal system of Kerry's brother, Black Superman, and especially of her estranged sister Donna, who has worked in real estate for years and who therefore manages to outsmart Buckley in his own game, reporting him to the Independent Commission Against Corruption. Moreover, apart from exposing the fact that the Aboriginal customary law is still completely glossed over in Australian courts, the battle against the prison lays bare the racism of the Australian criminal justice system, reflected in Buckley's view that "[t]here's jobs in locking up criminal blacks" (Lucashenko 2020b, 98), by which he attempts to justify the construction of the prison on the Salters' Country. Not only does it evoke Cook's proclamation of 'Australia' as *terra nullius* which would turn New South Wales, that is, the country belonging to numerous Indigenous peoples, into a penal colony with the arrival of the First Fleet, but it also enacts Australia's contemporary situation wherein Aboriginal adults and youth are far more likely to get

incarcerated than non-Aboriginal people. These disproportionately high Indigenous incarceration rates are reflected annually by the Australian Bureau of Statistics,[4] as well as in the Uluru Statement from the Heart, which draws attention to the fact that

> [p]roportionally, we [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples] are the most incarcerated people on the planet. We are not an innately criminal people. … And our youth languish in detention in obscene numbers. They should be our hope for the future. These dimensions of our crisis tell plainly the structural nature of our problem. This is the torment of our powerlessness. ("View the Statement")

As is evident from both the Uluru Statement from the Heart and Lucashenko's novel, the unfounded perception that Indigenous Australians have an inborn tendency to criminality has become institutionalised in Australian society, leading to the consolidation of structural racism. Moreover, in *Too Much Lip* the representative of the Australian law ends up in prison himself for breaking that same law, which constitutes another ironic comment on the corrupt state of Australia's legal system.

## 4. Of Ghosts, Sharks and Settling Old Scores

As the narrative of *Too Much Lip* frequently underscores, the trauma does not only derive from Jim Buckley's exploitative business practices, nor does it only affect the younger generations of the family. Instead, the trauma depicted in the novel is intergenerational, as it "shapes the internal representation of reality of several generations, becoming an unconsciously organizing principle passed on by parents and internalized by their children" (Auerhahn and Laub, 22), and collective, because it shows the reader "not only how individuals respond to mass violence but also how the aftermath of mass violence becomes politically embedded over time" (Lerner, 5). A case in point is the ordeal of Kerry's great-grandmother Ava. As a young woman, pregnant with her daughter, Ava barely manages to escape the armed white troopers chasing her. Led by the station owner, Nunne, who has raped and impregnated her, the troopers shoot her as she is trying to swim the river on her Country to get away from them. Ava nevertheless manages to survive and gives birth to Kerry's grandmother, Ruth. This violent incident has marked the entire family, not only psychologically but also physically, as one woman in each generation of the Salters is born with a scar whose shape corresponds to Granny Ava's bullet wounds. Far from ending during her lifetime, the brutality endured by Granny Ava at the hands of Australia's white settlers clearly continues in various forms. The suffering grows as the pain of the younger generations accumulates with the pain of those who came before them. This ties in with Pain's claim that trauma is "a chronic, ongoing condition often situated in collective histories of violence" (6). Significantly, Ross Gibson uses similar words to describe the collective psyche of Queensland, the state where Lucashenko is from and where *Too Much Lip* is set: "Like most colonies [Queensland] was inaugurated through systematic violence, but atypically its bloody inception is still lodged in recent social memory, in family tales and town litanies that go back just a couple of generations. … In Queensland, colonial

[4] According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, on 30 June 2023 "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners accounted for 33% of all prisoners" ("Prisoners in Australia"). This rate is extremely high in comparison to the size of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population: as indicated by the most recent Australian census, in 2021 they represented only "3.8% of the total Australian population" (2021).

times and contemporary times are coeval" (53). This description is congruent with the Queensland of *Too Much Lip*, a deeply divided place which is evidently still haunted and crippled by its violent history. Of course, the hardships of the Salter Country accompany the hardships of its custodians. The land suffers too when Granny Ava is shot, when she "[bleeds] onto her own dirt" (Lucashenko 2020b, 32): the white settlers' violence against her is reflected in their violence against the land which they intrude upon and whose law they have broken. In fact, the land had been taken over long before the incident. As Pretty Mary explains: "[Granny Ava] run for her life, yeah. But the land was long gorn by then. Use ya brain, girl! Nunne's mob bin here two generations already by 1899. It was all stations and villages" (303). Thus, Lucashenko makes it clear that the trauma does not begin with and is not limited to Buckley's present-day exploitation and the impending construction of the prison, but has been going on since the moment the Salters' Country was colonised. In order to underscore the fact that dispossession is a persistent problem rather than a past event, Moreton-Robinson even suggests that the current condition of Australia should be conceptualised "not as postcolonial but as postcolonizing with the associations of ongoing process, which that implies" (10).

The duration of the trauma is emphasised in two pivotal scenes containing uncanny dialogues: the first between Kerry and the ghost of her great-grandfather, Grandad Chinky Joe, and the second between the entire family and the representative of the shark clan called The Doctor. Kerry's conversation with the ghost of Grandad Chinky Joe marks a turning point in the narrative, as it occurs at the moment when Kerry is robbing the council chambers. She is looking for money to pay the lawyer hired to represent the family in the legal fight over the land, but also wants to retrieve the backpack with $30,000 that Buckley has stolen from her. As she is about to escape with the council's money, Grandad Chinky Joe appears in front of her and leads her to a room where she finds sacred items stolen from their ancestral land a long time ago. In Bundjalung, Grandad Chinky Joe insists that she should take the sacred ancient items back where they belong, and she obeys. Thus, the reader's attention is drawn to a past violation of the ancient law which has had lasting consequences on the family's Country and which has to be addressed if the land is ever to recover. Kerry then understands that she is dealing not with an isolated event limited to the present and the near future, but with a long-lasting, complex geotrauma that has to be addressed at its root. This is confirmed by The Doctor at the end of the novel, when she comes to Granny Ava's island looking for payback, that is, for the blood of white murderers that Granny Ava promised the shark's ancestor in exchange for being allowed to swim to the island safely. As Pretty Mary explains, "by rights she [Granny Ava] should have died. She was shot, and losing blood, but she made it. Bargained her way over to the island when the shark come smelling the blood, see, but there was a catch. She had to promise old wardham something in return for her life: whiteman's meat instead of her own" (Lucashenko 2020b, 312). Because an old law of the land was broken, the Country demands that the humans make reparations and the injustice finally be addressed. As The Doctor reveals, "[her] grandfather died waiting for this debt to be honored" and "[her] mother died waiting" (313); it then becomes evident that the land does not forget, that past injuries have remained deeply inscribed in it. This is in line with the Aboriginal view of the land as an entity with consciousness existing in and through time.

By placing emphasis on the temporality of trauma, Lucashenko addresses the fact that "at many sites of trauma previous or new violences continue into the present" (Pain, 9). Pain sees "the layering of violence and trauma as sedimentation, so that trauma is built and stored as the ground on which we live" (10). In other words, geotrauma is gradual and accumulative rather than instantaneous and explosive in its nature, which arguably makes it harder to notice and address. Indeed, not only is the violence against the land frequently overlooked and downplayed as a consequence of the anthropocentric belief that it is both separate from and less important than violence against humans, but it also passes under the radar because humanity tends to accord more importance and attention to traumas that manifest as spectacular events. This tendency has also marked the history of trauma studies, as detected by Michael Rothberg, who writes that for decades the dominant model of trauma had been the event-based model and calls for its supplementation "with a model that can account for ongoing, everyday forms of traumatizing violence as well" (226). As a phenomenon which certainly challenges the event-based model of trauma, geotrauma brings to mind Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence,[5] which he introduces precisely with environmental degradation in mind. According to Nixon, slow violence is "a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2). As he goes on to argue,

> [v]iolence is customarily conceived as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into instant sensational visibility. We need, I believe, to engage a different kind of violence, a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales. (2)

*Too Much Lip* shows that the framework of Aboriginal temporality, with its central notion of circular time, is ideal for recognising and dealing with this different kind of violence, since it means that anything that happens, any abuse or violation, happens everywhen, affecting past, present and future alike. Significantly, as Rachel Pain indicates, "traumatic time is non-linear" (8) too. In fact, the central Freudian insight into trauma, according to trauma theorist Cathy Caruth, is "that the impact of the traumatic event lies precisely in its belatedness, in its refusal to be simply located, in its insistent appearance outside the boundaries of any single place or time" (9). Therefore, it can be argued that the insidious forces of slow violence are much easier to detect and much more likely to be taken seriously if considered through the prism of non-linear Aboriginal temporality. In fact, due to the nature of Country, that is, to the fact that time is grounded in the land, one can understand

[5] The insidious nature of slow violence may bring to mind the concept of microaggressions, namely "everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership" (Sue, 3). It can also be linked to Johan Galtung's concept of structural violence, which he contrasts with "personal or direct" violence (170) since, in the case of structural violence, "[t]here may not be any person who directly harms another person in the structure. The violence is built into the structure and shows up as unequal power and consequently as unequal life chances" (171). However, these two concepts differ from slow violence mainly in that the theory of slow violence "foregrounds questions of time, movement, and change, however gradual" and calls attention "not simply to questions of agency, but to broader, more complex descriptive categories of violence enacted slowly over time" (Nixon, 11).

better the endless spiral of environmental suffering, the land being slowly poisoned as every harm it experiences remains stored within it like layers of a palimpsest. Lucashenko makes it clear both by introducing non-human characters that attest to the Country's long memory of harm, and by insisting on the presence of the deceased members of the family, who not only come back to right the wrongs done to their land, but are also part of the land itself. After all, Kerry "always understood that Granny Ava hadn't really died. She was the bend in the river. She was the grave lying deep in the forest behind the giant pine. Was the tree itself. She was the presence constantly invoked whenever an example was required of discipline, courage, tenacity, culture" (Lucashenko 2020b, 33). This description demonstrates the inextricable connection between space, time, identity and culture, revealing the "intimacies of place, of voice, of language, of memory, of companionship" (Araluen 2023). By doing so, it makes the reader acutely aware of all that is at stake if the land is not healed, and, by extension, of all that is being lost in the real world through the exploitation not only of Australian land, but of the entire planet.

**5. Country Crying Out for Young Ones to Come Home**

As aforementioned, the land's suffering and the suffering of the people living on it invariably occur together, which complicates the process of healing. Lucashenko makes a point by illustrating the extent and seriousness of the Salters' trauma throughout several generations: apart from Granny Ava's harrowing experience, the reader learns about Kerry's grandfather Pop Owen, who was brutalised by the white settlers and lost an eye in a conflict with the owner of the station where he worked; about Pretty Mary, who had a severe drinking problem and was therefore unable to look after her children for most of their childhood; about Kerry's abusive, frustrated brother Ken and his son Donny, a helpless victim of his father's anger issues, and many other troubled members of the family. It is evident from the narrative that the family is trapped in a vicious circle of intergenerational dysfunctionality, as one person's suffering leads them to hurt other members of the family. One of the most shocking examples is Pop's sexual abuse of Kerry's sister Donna when they were children, which resulted in her attacking him and then leaving home, letting her family think she was dead. Lucashenko's narrator rises to the complexity of the problem, painting all the different nuances rather than presenting the situation as black and white. Indeed, it is clear that this dysfunctionality is a direct consequence of settler-colonial violence, that is, of the loss of culture and the traditional way of life, both of which go hand in hand with the loss of the land. Nevertheless, this is not represented as an excuse for domestic violence, and the Salters, despite being victims, are neither innocent nor flawless themselves. As can be seen, Lucashenko refrains from offering an easy answer, but rather indicates how complex the issue of trauma is. However, she makes two things clear: healing is possible, and it has to start with Country.

Long before the satisfactory resolution of the fight over the land, the novel suggests that the key to dealing with trauma lies in the re-establishment of the family's relationship with Country. This ties in with Rachel Pain's proposition that "[t]he work of rebuilding from trauma often involves re-establishing the material and emotional qualities of place" (11). For example, when the deeply troubled Ken and Donny 'go bush' with Uncle Richard, Pretty Mary's brother and an elder, and participate in a ceremony about love with Uncle Richard's mob, they finally manage to face their problems and start working them out. This proves that care for the land is reciprocated: when Ken and Donny reconnect with their Country, it takes care of them in return, alleviating their suffering. In a way, this can also be perceived at the macro-level of the narrative, as the hard task of fighting

for and saving their Country forces the family to reunite and work together, which leads them to confront their problems, both past and present, and thus helps them to build a healthier relationship not only with the land but also with each other. Therefore, it can be argued that *Too Much Lip* puts emphasis on healing Country and then seeing its custodians heal as a result, rather than focusing on the family and leaving the land to wait in the background for the people to resolve their problems first. To put it simply, Lucashenko's narrative is about healing the land to heal the people.

Just as she stresses the collective nature of trauma, Lucashenko places the emphasis on collective healing, showing how important the community's strength and support are for its traumatised members, how strong, healthy relationships with the community and the non-human world result in individual well-being as well. In this way, the story of the novel reflects Pain's observation that "[n]on-Western and indigenous perspectives involve long traditions of collective healing from trauma" (12). What also comes to the fore in the context of collective healing in Aboriginal culture is the importance of Elders, that is, their role in keeping the community together as well as preserving and transmitting traditional culture. This is in line with the research findings of Busija et al., which prove that the participation of Elders in the governance of their communities has major benefits for the said communities, most notably reversal of cultural erosion and increased community cohesion (514). Jacob Prehn and Douglas Ezzy also discuss the importance of mentorship by community Elders and senior men and evoke specifically the "uncle-nephew program [that] provides a strong framework for other mentoring-type programs to be developed" (160) in order to improve Indigenous health and well-being. An excellent example of this positive influence is the character of Uncle Richard, a figure of authority in the Salter family who is not only able to offer care, stability and understanding to his suffering relatives, but is also wise enough to recognise and address the complex hardships of the land. Thus, at Pop Owen's funeral, he brings up the problem of the younger family members' alienation from the land, telling Kerry and Black Superman, who had both chosen to live in the city rather than on their Country with their family: "This country's crying out for you young ones to come home" (Lucashenko 2020b, 92). However, the reader also learns that Uncle Richard and his mob live rather far away from Kerry's family, and have therefore been absent during most of their crises. In this way, Lucashenko also offers some insights into the adversities of those Aboriginal communities that have no strong Elders to guide them. As Busija et al. indicate, the absence or weakening authority of Elder figures in Aboriginal communities is another very real problem in contemporary Australia: "Increasing assimilation and urbanization of Indigenous peoples, dissolution of traditional ways of life, loss of intergenerational connectedness, and high mortality have all contributed to the eroding role of Elders" (514).

The land's active role in the process of healing is highlighted throughout the novel. In fact, it is the land itself more than anyone else that shows the family how to address the geotrauma properly, acting as a guide to healing. This is visible from the crows' warning, from Grandad Chinky Joe's appearance, but it really becomes eminent in the scene where Black Superman desperately asks the ancestral spirits of their Country to help the family to protect the land—seemingly to no avail. However, at that very moment, somewhere in the Pacific Ocean, "The Doctor had the sudden tug of an idea from nowhere at all. The idea was that she should turn and head upriver again to the distant waters around Ava's Island. Something there required her presence" (Lucashenko 2020b, 261). This supernatural moment may be inconspicuous, but it in fact constitutes Country's response to his plea, The Doctor's visit being its way of instructing the family what to do in order to heal the

land and themselves. Significantly, it is Ken who makes reparations in the name of the entire family, spilling his blood to appease the shark, which he is ready to do owing to the experience and knowledge he acquired when he 'went bush' with Uncle Richard's mob and spent some time in Country. In other words, Country itself has prepared him for the difficult task ahead of him. This shows how involved it is in the process of healing, in how many ways it can help the family to deal with the problem of trauma, only when they make an effort and are willing to listen. It also proves the land to be an entity with a life and will of its own, as posited earlier in the article. However, The Doctor can be read not only as a help, but also as a warning: indeed, the fact that she comes to settle an old score shows that the environment reacts to the violence directed at it, that it can and will fight back. Thus, *Too Much Lip* also responds to the issues of climate change and other environmental problems occurring as a form of the planet's retaliation against centuries of exploitation and destruction.

Finally, even though the novel does end on a positive note, with The Doctor appeased, Buckley behind bars and the family reunited, it is clear that the process of healing has only just begun. Significantly, one of the prominent words in the final sentence is "hope" (Lucashenko 2020b, 320), as the narrator leaves both Kerry and the reader looking forward, rather than offering complete closure. The prospects for the future have improved significantly, but Lucashenko makes a point of showing that, just like trauma, healing is a long and slow process rather than a single event.

**6. Conclusion**

As it explores the complexities of Aboriginal trauma, Melissa Lucashenko's *Too Much Lip* offers valuable insight into a number of social, political and cultural issues, ranging from settler-colonial violence and its contemporary forms to Aboriginal culture, law and way of life. Crucially, the novel never loses focus on the inseparable link between Country and the people living on it, largely owing to the effective use of scenes embedded in the distinctiveness of Indigenous realism, or, alternatively embedded in what non-Indigenous readers may detect as magical realism. The integration of such scenes into the novel results in a polyphonic, plural narrative where representations of different concepts of realities and worldviews intertwine to draw attention to non-human as well as human suffering.

As the essay has argued, the novel's supernatural scenes reveal the potential of Indigenous realist or magical realist narrative procedures for signalling environmental violence, which, as Nixon's theory of slow violence asserts, often remains under the radar. Moreover, as they bring to the fore the agency of the land's non-human inhabitants, these scenes effectively articulate not only the land's hardships but also its active role in the process of healing and fighting back. In this way, *Too Much Lip* challenges the readers' received ideas about the environment, most notably the principle of anthropocentrism and the understanding of land as property. Indeed, looking at the novel through the notion of geotrauma reveals *Too Much Lip* to be fertile ground for research in the rapidly developing field of environmental humanities that reiterate the fact that in order to understand the nature of the human, we first need to understand the nature of the non-human.

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