

Reviewing Race in the Digital Literary Sphere: A Case Study of Anita Heiss' *Am I Black Enough for You?*

Imogen Mathew

1. Introduction

WITH HEAD TURNED DOWN AND EYES RAISED IN SCEPTICISM, ANITA HEISS ISSUES AN unmistakable challenge from the cover of her 2012 memoir: *Am I Black Enough for You?*. The reader, in turn, is drawn into the ugly cultural and racial politics that characterise life for many Aboriginal Australians. Awarded the 2012 Victorian Premier's Literary Award for Indigenous Writing and nominated for the 2012 Human Rights Award for Literature, Heiss' memoir has its genesis in the 2011 court case *Eatock vs. Bolt*. In a syndicated article entitled 'It's So Hip To Be Black', *Herald Sun* journalist Andrew Bolt accused Heiss, along with several other prominent Aboriginal Australians, of choosing to identify as Aboriginal for financial gain. He was subsequently found guilty of racial discrimination under Section 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act (RDA). Justice Bromberg's application of the RDA would push questions about protections from vilification, freedom of speech, journalistic integrity and the alleged 'right to be a bigot' onto the public agenda from 2011 to 2016.¹

This paper highlights book reviews of *Am I Black Enough?* as a crucial—though hitherto unexplored—juncture in public discussion about the court case. I argue that the book review becomes a key site where the social, political and cultural ramifications of the court case (and the racial politics it brought to the fore) were, and continue to be, debated and contested. While some of these reviews were published in the mainstream media, the highest proportion were recorded on

¹ The initial focus on Aboriginal Australians widened to include many marginalised community groups. The January 2015 *Charlie Hebdo* shootings in Paris, alongside the Abbott government's ultimately unsuccessful bid to repeal the 'Andrew Bolt Law', have kept debate about the RDA alive for several years.

'digital-native' platforms (Murray 322) by 'popular' or 'lay' readers (Guillory; Procter). My approach is grounded in qualitative analysis, despite the critical reflex to associate this type of enquiry with the quantitative. I engage in a close reading of reviews posted on Amazon, Goodreads and personal blogs, asking what the reviewing practices surrounding *Am I Black Enough?* reveal about contemporary race relations in Australia. My emphasis in this paper is on the reviewing platform, not the reviewer's racial identity. This is a tricky methodological crux: omission of racial identifiers does not necessarily constitute evidence of whiteness; nor can race be neatly divined by evaluative stance. This important question deserves deeper exploration than the present enquiry allows: my chief concern is to map the transformations book reviewing practices undergo when they appear on non-traditional platforms by non-professional readers.

The first section of this essay explores how reading and reviewing *Am I Black Enough?* enriches the reader's knowledge of Aboriginal Australian culture and people, often leading to an interrogation of attitudes towards, and beliefs about, Aboriginal Australians. I contrast this warm embrace, prominent on blogs and Goodreads, with the hostile reaction found on Amazon, particularly in the days following *Am I Black Enough?*'s publication in 2012. Amazon reviews are stridently negative in their assessment of the book and use the book reviewing platform to pursue what Benwell, Procter and Robinson would call 'not-reading' practices, namely continued debate about Heiss' role in *Eatock vs. Bolt*. As such, I ask if commentary masquerades as reviews on Amazon.

Mainstream media coverage (encompassing traditional print outlets and digital-native news platforms) provides a foil to popular readings of *Am I Black Enough?*. Heiss was interviewed about the memoir by several news outlets (Elliott; Prior) and from 2012 onwards, *Am I Black Enough?* became something of a cultural reference point, invoked regularly in discussion of Aboriginal identity (Cooper; Dangalaba; Johnson; Overington, 'Not So Black and White'; Overington, 'It's Not About Being Black Enough'; Russell-Cook). Traditional book reviews may differ in their attitude towards *Am I Black Enough?*, from the disapproving (Connor) to the appreciative (Bongiorno; Funnell; Maxwell; Stafford) and the moderately ambivalent (McGirr, 'Black', 'Challenging') but they are alike in their shared critical distance from the text. Personal identity is by no means erased, but the reviewer is positioned as a professional, evaluating an object circulating in the literary marketplace. My analysis of popular reviews, however, emphasises the way *Am I Black Enough?* sits in a far more intimate relationship with the reviewer. Indeed, non-traditional reviews are so distinctive because they record intensely personal reactions to the book, ranging from searching self-reflection to angry repudiation. Tantalising parallels, sitting beyond the scope of this essay, could be drawn between the foregrounding of readerly affect in online amateur reviews and that

found in female book clubs (Long) and among female readers of popular romance (Radway).

Though the autobiographical project that became *Am I Black Enough?* was commissioned prior to the court case, it was published in April 2012, almost seven months after Justice Bromberg's judgement was released. Apart from a brief statement marking the victory, Heiss had been silent in the intervening months, promoting her latest chick lit novel but refusing to be drawn on *Eatock vs. Bolt*. *Am I Black Enough?* thus represents Heiss' sustained and eloquent response to the court case. Five short chapters recounting Heiss' involvement in the trial structure a narrative that combines family history with political manifesto. Heiss is a prominent figure in the Australian public sphere and *Am I Black Enough?* exhaustively catalogues her work as an academic, activist and author. She is best known for her commercial women's fiction, 'choc' lit as she playfully calls it, which blends *Bridget Jones*-style humour and *Sex and the City*-style friendships into the lives of glamorous and assertive Aboriginal women.

Common to Heiss' interventions in the public sphere is the belief that

... self-representation in the public domain is not only desired but also essential for self-respect and dignity in Australian society today. Definitions of Aboriginality from outside the community—sometimes through media commentary—continue to provide the motivation for many authors to pen responses and reactions. ('Blackwords' n.p.)

Am I Black Enough? works to reframe public debate about the court case after the initial wave of press coverage, addressing the question of who gets to define Aboriginal identity and on what terms. If Bolt's articles attempt to hold Aboriginal people to a narrow and outdated logic, premised on the idea that skin colour determines identity, Heiss' act of self-representation emphatically reclaims that territory. Moreover, the digital literary sphere opens up a space for the (not-)reading public to engage with diverging accounts of identity. From a scholarly perspective, these reviews provide an insight into how racial difference is negotiated and the machinations of online book reviewing across multiple platforms.

In setting forth this investigation, I affirm *Am I Black Enough?* as a subject worthy of academic enquiry. This paper presents the first sustained consideration of a memoir (and its reception) whose importance has been hinted at but never directly addressed. It is telling that academic book reviews remain the most fulsome site of scholarly engagement with *Am I Black Enough?* (Milatovic; Quick). When Heiss' memoir does surface in scholarly writing, it is as a single instance: a footnote, a sentence, a paragraph at most (Anthony 19; Birns 118-9; Carey and

Prince 277; Gelber and McNamara 473-4; Mathew, 'Pretty' 9; 'Educating'; Schwartzman 206; Whitlock 197). The memoir and its reception are notably absent from accounts of the social, legal and media repercussions of *Eatock vs. Bolt* (Aggarwal; Griffiths; Maddison; Stone). Additionally, this paper responds to Simone Murray's call for greater engagement with the digital literary sphere (echoed by Daniel Allington and Stephen Pihlaja in 'Reading in the Age of the Internet', a 2016 special issue of *Language and Literature*). Several of the websites and social phenomena comprising the digital literary sphere have been analysed on a case-by-case basis, including Goodreads (Nakamura), e-readers (Barnett; Cameron; Rowberry), Amazon (Allington; Finn; Steiner, 'Private Criticism'), LibraryThing (Pinder), blogs (Steiner, 'Personal Readings'; Nelson) and online reading challenges (Foasberg). By following *Am I Black Enough?* as it is reviewed across the digital literary sphere, this paper emphasises the analytic insights to be gained from using a single text to draw comparison between reviewing platforms.

2. Education, Empathy and Ethical Reflection

For the segment of Heiss' reading public found on Goodreads or blogs, reviewing *Am I Black Enough?* is a tripartite exercise in empathy, education and ethical reflection. These reviewers typically isolate and identify the educational aspects to Heiss' memoir before demonstrating what they have learned through extended ethical reflection. This approach eschews the professional reviewer's assumed objectivity in favour of a more personal relationship with the text. While these reviews lack the imprimatur of an established media masthead, there are compelling reasons to consider Goodreads and blog reviews *as* reviews. Heiss' memoir remains subject to critique and evaluation. The criteria (Accessible? Enjoyable? Enriching?) may vary from those applied by professional reviewers, but this should not exclude Goodreads and blog reviews from the category of book reviews. Rather, it demonstrates the new and often unexpected characteristics book reviews acquire when they are published in the digital literary sphere by non-professional readers.

Studies of cross-cultural and cross-racial reception have consistently shown that reading and talking about books is a site of self-reflexivity and knowledge production. This subset of reception studies concerns the (homogenously white or racially mixed) reception of non-white authored texts in a variety of geographic locations: New Zealand (Keown), America (Davis, 'White Book Clubs', 'Oprah's Book Club'; Burwell) the United Kingdom (Lang, "'Enthralling'", 'Reading'; Procter) and beyond (Procter and Benwell). Yet the reception of Aboriginal-authored texts by Australian readers has received scant attention. Extant research is either set against a European backdrop (Haag, 'Bumping', 'Indigenous'; Čerče; Di Blasio) or investigates the reception of white Australian-authored texts (Clarke and Nolan 'Reading Groups', 'Book Clubs'). To inaugurate a cross-cultural reception studies

framework in an Australian context, this paper marks out the importance of studying reader responses to Aboriginal-Australian authored-texts.

Examining reading practices in white book clubs ('White') and on television ('Oprah's'), Kimberley Chabot Davis counters the prevailing view of cross-racial empathy as inherently colonising and hegemonic. According to her, white reception of African-American-authored texts demonstrates that 'empathetic identifications' can be an effective method of 'galvanizing anti-racist political sensibilities' ('White' 157). In the UK, Anouk Lang explores the 'transformative potential' of cross-cultural reception ("“Enthralling” 137) among readers of Andrea Levy's *Small Island*. She finds that preconceived notions of British colonialism are often 'relativized and destabilized' (129): '[readers are prompted] to interrogate their own perceptions, however briefly' (130). Davis, like Lang, reports that some 'white female [Oprah] fans ... experienced transformative identifications with black subjects and a reflective alienation from white privilege' ('Oprah's' 399). Davis and Lang hint at, but never fully express, the educative possibility of cross-cultural reception. This section makes that possibility explicit.

Pedagogy, education and race are encoded within the narrative of Heiss' memoir. At primary school, she is appraised as "[...] a good counter for an 'abo'" (85). High school is a mercifully 'racist-free safety zone' (90-1); as an undergraduate, the discovery that 'the government considered animals more valuable than [her] mum' provides the impetus for her Honours thesis on the 1967 Referendum (100-1). Her time as a doctoral candidate in Media and Communications (106-14) marks the transition from *educated* to *educator*. She is subsequently 'appointed deputy director of the Warawara Department of Indigenous Studies at [Macquarie University]' (114) and declares 'I don't think *any* Australian student should be graduating from *any* Australian tertiary institution without having done at least one unit on Indigenous Australia' (118; original italics). This extends to primary and secondary schools: 'many Australian students at the age of fifteen still don't know the basics about Aboriginal society or culture' (196). Thus, when Heiss conducts 'what should be a standard author visit', it 'ends up becoming a crash-course in cultural awareness workshop' (197). Heiss also devotes a chapter to explaining the pedagogical subtext to her 'choc' lit (211-25). Education, in other words, forms a recurring theme in *Am I Black Enough?* and is refracted in multiple directions through the prism of Heiss' life. Moreover, the memoir—as a text circulating in the public sphere—aims to educate others about the diversity of Aboriginal identity in twenty-first-century Australia.

Am I Black Enough?'s 2014 entry into the American marketplace was shepherded by the University of Hawai'i Press, a publishing house that 'strives to advance knowledge through the dissemination of scholarship' ('About'). Here, the editorial philosophy and institutional affiliations underpinning *Am I Black Enough?*'s trans-

Pacific debut reinforce its pedagogical overlay.² In Australia, Michelle Carey and Michael Prince applaud the memoir as an ideal learning tool for Murdoch University's Australian Indigenous studies major:

... students are asked to write a review of Anita Heiss' 2012 book *Am I black enough for you?* [sic] This exercise teaches students the critical skills required to undertake a book review, while introducing them to an emerging genre in Indigenous literature, namely 'Choc Lit'—and how it might be juxtaposed against related genres such as 'Chick Lit' and 'Sistah Lit' (Guerrero, 2006). It also engages them in recent debates about Indigenous diversity and freedom of speech (Aggarwal, 2012). (277)

The ease with which Heiss' memoir integrates into the classroom highlights its relevance as an educational aid and the fact that student engagement is evaluated through the genre of the book review is similarly remarkable, suggesting that the act of reviewing magnifies and solidifies insights gained through reading.

The use to which Carey and Prince put *Am I Black Enough?* is not unusual. Many reviewers on blogs and Goodreads comment on the memoir's value as an educational resource, primed for use in the secondary or tertiary classroom.³ Rosamond, in her blog review, hopes that '[Heiss'] book is seen on secondary school reading lists in the near future'. Chris Gordon, writing for the independent bookseller *Readings*, similarly confirms that 'every high school in Australia should be ensuring this book is on its curriculum'. Goodreads reviewers are even more expansive in their comments on *Am I Black Enough?*'s suitability as a teaching aid, with many stating that they plan to use it in their classroom or that they are already: Pam, a 'soon to be high school teacher', felt that *Am I Black Enough?* contained 'some great "teachable moments"'. For Beverley, not only should *Am I Black Enough?* be 'required reading' but 'it certainly will be, at least parts of it, for [her] own students'. Becca doesn't identify as a teacher, she is keen to see *Am I Black Enough?* 'in the Secondary Schools books Curriculum' [capitals in original]. Evidence of its suitability lies close to home: 'I have two teenage boys and I already have one of them reading this book'.

Goodreads users were also the most likely to comment on the educational aspects (and the pedagogical experience) of reading *Am I Black Enough?*. 'Read this. Learn from it'; 'very educational, entertaining and well worth the read'; 'brilliant,

² This is further reinforced by the University of Hawai'i Press' focus on postcolonial and autobiographical writing.

³ All Goodreads, Amazon and blog reviewers have been given pseudonyms but the names of reviewers from mainstream media outlets and online magazines have been retained. Bibliographic details for the latter group can be found in the Works Cited.

educational and challenging'; 'a genuinely fascinating book, from which I learnt a lot'; 'an entertaining read that informs, challenges and, hopefully, opens the reader up to a new way of viewing Aboriginal Australia'; 'a relatable tone that is both appealing and educating'. Others praise the memoir through an enumeration of what they learnt: 'the main lesson I learnt from Anita was...'; 'the book taught me more than I had previously known'; 'I learnt a lot, which is the very reason the author wrote it in the first place—to teach, to share knowledge'.⁴ Ethical reflection is likewise present: 'a thought provoking and often light hearted read'; 'a wonderful text that provokes much thought, challenges prejudices through her words and experiences'; 'forces self reflexivity of the best kind'; '... an easy yet thought provoking read'; 'thoughtful, engaging and humorous this book gives me a perspective I had not contemplated before'. While an emphasis on the thought-provoking aspects of *Am I Black Enough?* account for the majority of ethically reflective responses on Goodreads, some reviewers offer a more personal take. Fay, for one, admits 'I can never work [sic] a mile in the author's shoes, but I have a much greater appreciation of how those shoes feel now'. Caitlin testifies to having been 'moved [by the book] in a place so deep [she has] yet to find the words to describe it'. In these examples, ethical reflection may be prompted by *Am I Black Enough?* but the interior work of such reflection takes place off-stage, outside the book review.

A number of readers are, however, willing to use the book reviewing space to submit to uncomfortable and potentially unflattering moral examination. This often manifests in a dawning awareness of the reviewer's *white* racial identity. Take Susan Righi's Goodreads review: 'heck, I'd gotten sick enough of the racism of my upbringing & the privilege of my (white) life'; '[Heiss] also managed to correct some common (mostly white) misconceptions & offer the beginnings of an education'; 'Heiss made me think it was possible to say that I am white & often quite ignorant—but I'm willing to learn'. Here, education and ethical reflection are laminated together: learning does not happen separately to ethical reflection but they are one and the same thing. Secondly, if the political project underpinning Heiss' literary output coheres with the objective of critical whiteness studies (to 'make [whiteness] visible' (Moreton-Robinson 87)) Righi's repeated references to herself as a white woman suggests that Heiss has done more than simply *educate* people about the diversity of Aboriginal Australian experience: Heiss demonstrates, with withering clarity, that *white* Australians cannot be exempted from racial politics. They sit at its deeply entangled heart.

A similar operation is at play in blog reviews by Jeffrey Winton and Linette Webster. In both cases, reading and then reviewing *Am I Black Enough?* acts as the

⁴ Future research could explore this in relation to long-running debates about the educative value of literature and literary studies more broadly.

impetus for re-visiting behaviour and beliefs about Aboriginal people. Some parts of Winton's review praise the educative elements of Heiss' memoir ('[she] is right on the money about how little we are taught about the history or even presence of Aboriginals in Australia'; 'I want to keep learning. Anita Heiss has just stimulated that desire even more. And there is plenty to learn.'). Other parts credit it as an effective framework for re-evaluating the past:

In reading Anita's book, I found myself feeling embarrassed, even perhaps a little guilty at times. I was never a deliberate racist, a white supremacist piece of garbage, but in reviewing those times as a lot younger and possibly (probably?) stupider, I realise just how I viewed Aboriginals as different and not necessarily in a positive way.

This sensitive and frank disclosure of the reader's lack of knowledge about Aboriginal Australians is echoed by Linette Webster. She begins her review by painting the racial climate of her childhood: '... I was blessed with a few teachers who taught me to respect the ways of the original inhabitants of this wide brown land, but at the same time, Aboriginal jokes were still told ... names such as abo, coon and boong were also in use'. The present, in contrast, has brought partial improvement: '... abo jokes might be relatively easy to stamp out, [but] it is the inadvertent and inherent racism that is much harder to get rid of. The racism that is paved with good intentions.' She then goes on to list some of her own well-intentioned thoughts that could be construed as racist. In all three examples, reviewers welcome the experience of being educated, and the act of reviewing the book is inextricably linked with the act of reviewing the self.

Just as 'theatrical norms of [authorial] performance and conscious self-fashioning increasingly infiltrate the literary sphere' (Murray 328), so too are online book reviews a carefully mediated and cultivated public performance. It seems unproblematic to designate online reviewing, particularly on blogs and Goodreads, as a foundry for the creation of a well-read, considerate and critical literary persona. However, when the memoir under review wears its racial politics on its sleeve as overtly as *Am I Black Enough?*, the performative nature of the review is correspondingly amplified. If, on Amazon, this takes the form of trolling and hyperbolic grandstanding, Goodreads and blog reviewers overwhelmingly present themselves as liberal-minded, sensitive and politically-engaged citizens, eager to learn about Aboriginal people, culture and history. While I have no qualms interpreting these reviews as genuine expressions of learning and ethical reflection, they nonetheless remain performed acts for an imagined, public audience.

The correlation between thematic emphasis on 'education' in Heiss' memoir, amateur reviewing practices, and Goodreads/blog reviews goes deeper still. *Am I*

Black Enough? is not only *about* education, but the *act* of reading it, as previous surveys of cross-cultural reception have shown, can be transformative, destabilising, and most importantly, educative. (For an explanation of how this didactic impulse drives Heiss' fiction, see Mathew, 'Educating'). Viewed from the perspective of online amateur reviewing practices, the ability to identify and reproduce pedagogical aspects of *Am I Black Enough?* becomes a way for non-professional readers to demonstrate their reviewing competency and critical literacy. Genre plays a role here too. The desire to be educated—and reader's concomitant gratitude for Heiss' guidance—sits in stark contrast to the reception of Heiss' 'choc' lit. Readers of *Tiddas* (2014) constitute roughly the same demographic as readers of her memoir and populate the same reviewing spaces. They are markedly less enthused, however, at the prospect of being educated while reading a genre premised on escapist fun. This suggests that the non-fiction genre of the memoir is more likely to be read—and accepted—as an educational text. Or, given that most works by Heiss have a pedagogical overlay, this is likely to be received more positively in her non-fiction than her fiction.

3. Amazon Reviewing Controversy

The desire to educate others forms a frequent refrain in *Am I Black Enough?*: 'I want people to be challenged, to think about their role in the world and how their behaviour impacts on other people, particularly Aboriginal people. I want readers to learn ...' (199). From the evidence presented above, Heiss appears to have been successful. Yet this tells only half the story. At the time of its publication, Heiss' memoir was reviewed extensively on Amazon; these reviews are remarkable for their insistent negativity and their obdurate focus on the court case and Heiss at the expense of reviewing the book itself. Moreover, they occupy the porous boundary between reviewing and commentary; in these reviews, 'not reading' practices and 'non-readers' (Benwell, Procter and Robinson) play a crucial role in generating controversy.

Amazon reviews have been the focus of both mainstream and scholarly analysis. The former frequently parses its coverage using the language of scandal and controversy—and not without reason. The historian Orlando Figes and crime writer R.J. Ellory have both admitted to 'sock puppetry', the practice of using reviews to pseudonymously praise their own writing while panning the work of rivals. Amazon has pursued legal action against web users who offer to review books for a fee and the case study offered by this paper precedes more recent accounts of 'activist' reviews, whereby proponents of a particular cause (such as those who believe that the 2012 Sandy Hook massacre was staged by the American government) use the Amazon book reviewing space to discredit or attack their opponents, invariably flooding the book in question with negative, one-star reviews. The mainstream media generally portray book reviewing

practices on Amazon as one limb of a multi-tentacled, ethically dubious empire: Amazon is equally notorious for its tax evasion, anti-competitive practices and poor treatment of workers. Scholarly accounts, by contrast, are chiefly interested in Amazon as a source of data. This research appears in computer science or business journals and employs a variety of statistical and algorithm-based methodologies to evaluate the utility of reviews, ratings and recommendations. In contrast, this paper contributes to the small body of work that treats Amazon reviews as a qualitative source of analysis for literary studies. Through reference to earlier scholarly treatments of scandals of reception (namely Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*) this paper takes the mainstream media's focus on Amazon book reviewing scandals as a matter of academic concern.

The Amazon reviewing controversy surrounding Heiss' memoir has its origins, much like the court case itself, in the work of Andrew Bolt. Hot on the heels of *Am I Black Enough?*'s release in early April 2012, Bolt published a blog post asking 'Are We Censored Enough for You?'. The text of this particular post has disappeared from the web, but remaining fragments available on *Crikey* or Bolt's Goodreads blog, coupled with media reportage at the time, suggest that its most salient feature was a link to the Amazon website for *Am I Black Enough?*, accompanied by the disclaimer 'I am not trying to incite anyone into attacking Heiss's book' (Bolt qtd. in Sear). Bolt was responding to the closure of the comments section on several Australian-hosted *Am I Black Enough?* webpages after they had received heavy trolling traffic. That *Am I Black Enough?* could still be reviewed on the American Amazon website was designed to demonstrate the limits of 'free speech' in Australia and the comparatively greater civil liberties enjoyed across the Pacific. A few days after Bolt's blog post went live, Saffron Howden, a Fairfax journalist, wrote a pair of articles questioning Bolt's response ('Racist', 'Bolt'). Her work was later subject to a complaint to the Australian Press Council. Bearing this snarled history in mind, I focus on Amazon reviews published on the main US website; the local Australian shopfront opened for business in late 2013, when the lion's share of *Am I Black Enough?* reviews had already been recorded on the American website. Although *Am I Black Enough?* continues to be reviewed on Amazon (.com and .com.au) my analysis centres on reviews from early April 2012.

To borrow Bethan Benwell, James Procter and Gemma Robinson's terminology, the reviewing practices that comprise *Am I Black Enough?* Amazon reviews could productively be viewed through the framework of 'non-readers' and 'not-reading'. Not only do 'non-readers' (as opposed to the more far more commonly encountered category of 'readers') represent an under-theorised but highly

necessary area of reception studies,⁵ but also they tend to emerge in controversies that, perhaps not incidentally, implicate contested religious, racial or ethnic identities. Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988) represents the high-watermark in this regard, followed more recently by the furore that erupted on the publication of Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003) and its adaptation into film. I formulate my investigation into the *Am I Black Enough?* Amazon reviews using the terms provided by Benwell, Procter and Robinson, that 'the values attached to reading, not reading, and the choices between them [are] variously attached to notions of freedom, tolerance and democracy...' (84). Moreover, like Benwell, Procter and Robinson, I treat 'not reading' as a 'fertile and contested site of meaning production that still has much to teach us about the significance of recent book controversies' (84).

As I have shown in the preceding section, book reviews posted on personal blogs and Goodreads tend to produce certain types of discourse about race, where reading about race becomes a site of learning and ethical reflection. While race still forms the basis of the majority of *Am I Black Enough?* Amazon reviews, it is parsed in language filled with derision, scorn and outrage. These reviews hold Heiss up as a 'hypocrite', 'a grotesque hypocrite' and a 'coward'. She asks '... a bold, rhetorical question, smug in her knowledge that the last person to answer it publicly was persecuted by law' and embodies 'Aboriginal tokenism by a token aboriginal [sic] living off the public teat'. Her Aboriginal heritage is so small as to be negligible: Heiss is '[a member] of the professional aboriginal [sic] class', 'predominantly of European descent' and 'obviously white'. Reviewers lament their inability to express their opinions on an Australian website ('I am using this forum as it would be illegal for me to express these views in Australia, such is the curtailment of freedom of speech'; 'I believe freedom of speech still exists in the US; it no longer does in Australia'). The only possible reason anyone may want to purchase Heiss' memoir is to use it as toilet paper ('This balderdash as a paperback has one use. Take it with you on a [sic] Everest climb and use it page by page each whenever the need calls'). Or not: 'I wouldnt [sic] even buy this book to wipe my ??? [sic]'.

The fact that so many of these reviews are written by non-readers who use the Amazon reviewing space to parade their not-reading practices presents an important question: are the *Am I Black Enough?* Amazon reviews actually reviews at all? The answer, as I will show, is both a yes and a no. On one hand, they bear far greater resemblance to commentary than to any traditional conception of a review. This can be indexed in several ways. First, they mirror the online comments section still available in other fora, such as Andrew Bartlett's blog

⁵ For a tongue-in-cheek take on not-reading practices, see Pierre Bayard's *How To Talk About Books You Haven't Read*.

review of *Am I Black Enough?* and an interview with Heiss on the ABC's Radio National. Second, most of the Amazon reviewers have not read *Am I Black Enough?*: while this is implicit in most of the reviews, some staunchly assert their 'not-reading' ('I have not read this book and have no intention of doing so'; 'As a clear caveat up front, please note that I have not read this book, nor do I intend to'; 'i [sic] will not even bother reading the book (and I state that now without any pretence) so i am unable to critique its contents as a body of work'; 'I read the first few pages for free (thanks Amazon) - what a load of self serving [sic] dribble'). Third, most of the reviewers pursue a line of enquiry that has little to do with the book itself, and more to do with Heiss as public figure ('a professional grievance monger'; 'yet another race huckster'), a perceived silencing of civil liberties ('In Australia we don't have the freedom of speech that enables us to answer [her] question') and the waste of taxpayer's money ('using the mis deeds [sic] of the past to feather your own nest in the present on the taxpayers dime is a disgrace').

When Amazon reviewers do discuss the book, this is generally limited to a disputation of the titular question before digressing quickly back to the court case. Those who have read *Am I Black Enough?* are scathing: '[a]fter having read this book, I am surprised it was ever published. In a triumph of the middling with a nod to mediocrity, the book is dull and uninspiring, no great literary work and leaning heavily on the victimhood angle'; 'As for a work of literary merit, I'd place it up there with "Mein Kampf" and "The Little Red Book"'. Fourth, a number of reviewers echo Bolt's frustration at the closure of the *Am I Black Enough?* comments section on several Australian websites. The Amazon reviewing space represents a refuge for those whose desire to continue discussion of the memoir has been curtailed on Australian-hosted websites. In this light, Amazon reviews are perhaps more appropriately characterised as transposed commentary. Finally, the comments section under each Amazon review provides additional space for vigorous interaction with the preceding review. The number of comments sitting under one review can be astronomically high, with some (mostly the few positive *Am I Black Enough?* reviews) registering between 80 and 100 comments. In this sense too, *Am I Black Enough?* Amazon reviews more closely approximate bitter and protracted online flame wars than book reviews.

For all the reasons I incline to read Amazon reviews as comments, there remain some sticking points. An argument could be made, for example, that the Amazon reviews *are* reviews because they appear under a particular rubric designated as a reviewing space. Even if a close reading of the content would suggest otherwise, the fact that they are presented and labelled as reviews deserves credence in a discussion of their relationship to the reviewing genre. Further acknowledgement of the sway 'review' holds as a label or generic marker is demonstrated by my choice in this paper to refer to the Amazon reviews as reviews, in spite of the concerns I raise in the preceding paragraphs. Finally, if a book review is designed

to help readers decide whether a particular book merits their investment of time and money, there should be no doubt that Amazon reviews fulfil this purpose too. Reviewers respect the conventions of the review by giving *Am I Black Enough?* a starred rating (usually one out of five) and they are adamant that this book should not be bought: 'Don't waste your money...'; 'Do not get it'; 'I recommend you DON'T buy this book' [capitals in original]; 'Spend you [sic] money elsewhere on an author more deserving'.

Unlike reviews appearing on other platforms, the *Am I Black Enough?* Amazon reviews cannot be discussed without addressing the charge of racism: were they racist or simply tough and unsparing? For critics of Andrew Bolt, sympathetic to Heiss' writing and her role in the court case, the Amazon reviews are 'predictably nasty' (Bongiorno); these commentators respect Heiss' 'courage' in the face 'hate mail and racist comments' (Windisch), rue their own 'misfortune' at having witnessed the 'racist and derogatory comments' to which Heiss was subject (Foster) and stand in solidarity with her 'after another internet backlash from trolls' (Prior). On the other hand, those supportive of Bolt and disappointed with the outcome of the court case reject any charge of racism. This is a no-brainer for Andrew Bolt: '... none of the reviews I'd seen when I linked [to Amazon] were racist by any sane definition' ('Race' n.p.). Caroline Overington concedes that the reviews 'bristle... with criticism of Heiss' decision to publish her book, some of it moderate, some of it quite cruel' but avoids any discussion of racism ('It's Not About Being Black Enough' n.p.).

The racial politics at work in the *Am I Black Enough?* Amazon reviews cannot be ignored, nor dismissed as simply harsh critique. They rest on the same logic voiced by Bolt in his original newspaper articles, that Heiss' claims to Aboriginal identity are spurious and that her identification as an Aboriginal woman is motivated by financial gain. Heiss is everything Aboriginal people are assumed not to be: fairer-skinned, articulate, financially secure and professionally successful. The public discussion of racial politics on Amazon anticipates the more recent booing that has dogged Sydney Swans footballer Adam Goodes.⁶ Waleed Aly's succinct and devastating summary ('the minute an Indigenous man stands up and is something other than compliant, the backlash is huge... We boo our discomfort')⁷ provides a disturbingly apt framework for reading Amazon reviews of *Am I Black Enough?* as an index of our discomfort when an Aboriginal woman refuses to be complicit in stereotypes perpetuated by people such as Bolt. Of course, many who read and reviewed *Am I Black Enough?* treated this process as an opportunity to learn about Australia's First Peoples and reflect on their own attitudes towards Aboriginal

⁶ Goodes is an Aboriginal man who has denounced racism on and off the sporting field. When he was booed by opposition spectators at Australian Football League matches in 2015, it was justly interpreted by many as racist.

⁷ I thank Monique Rooney for bringing Aly's commentary to my attention.

Australians. At the risk of giving too much weight to those who shout the loudest, the Amazon reviews measure just how deeply contested racial politics and Aboriginal identity remain in contemporary Australian society.

4. Conclusion

The reception of Anita Heiss' *Am I Black Enough for You?* should leave no doubt that racial politics hold tremendous sway over online reviewing practices. If, in some corners of the digital literary sphere, reviewing race is a process of learning and reflection, in others it is a space scorched with anger and indignation. When this terrain is appropriated *en masse* to denounce a book, its author, and the events preceding its publication, the line between commentary and reviews is confusingly blurred. Despite the many differences between the two types of reviews discussed in this paper, what is perhaps most remarkable are the points on which they converge. As Benwell, Procter and Robinson point out, 'reading' and 'not reading' alike are profoundly fertile sites of meaning-making that start with the book but often end up in another place altogether. This paper has shown that the book review, as a genre and as a site of online literary engagement, opens up vistas that far exceed the book itself, travelling inwards towards the self or opening outwards towards the Australian psyche and its constituent parts.

Am I Black Enough for You?, is, admittedly, an extreme example. It sits at the confluence of a unique and unprecedented set of events in Australian literary, legal and political history. It implicates an extraordinary range of actors, from the private reader to the Prime Minister. Its reception brings to light the entangled racial politics of the nation as a whole, encompassing deep reservoirs of goodwill and animosity. Yet the very things that make Heiss' memoir attractive as a case study of racial politics in the digital literary sphere and beyond also mark out its limitations. Its sensational beginnings in Andrew Bolt's articles and subsequent court case, its provocative title and controversies of its reception all give weight to the question of how representative a case study it truly is, and how applicable any findings extracted from it may be. Such doubts are legitimate but misleading. They ignore the influence one book can have in provoking and rekindling a debate about freedom of speech, protection from vilification and an individual's right to identify with their cultural, racial or ethnic origins.

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IMOGEN MATHEW is a doctoral candidate in Australian Literature at the Australian National University, Canberra. Her research spans Aboriginal Australian literature, reception studies, popular fiction, and the sociology of the intellectual. Her work has been published in *Contemporary Women's Writing* and *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature*.

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