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Restoring the Aboriginal Voice: Language and Identity in *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how Thomas Keneally's *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* engages with the restoration of Aboriginal voice and identity within the context of Australian colonial discourse. Specifically, the novel addresses the historical silencing of Aboriginal people and highlights the tension between imposed European language and enduring Aboriginal oral traditions. The central objective of this study is to explore how linguistic hybridity—particularly Aboriginal English and ceremonial chanting—functions as a tool of identity assertion and resistance against colonial authority. Employing close textual analysis informed by postcolonial theory, the paper draws on Said's concept of colonial discourse, Bhabha's notion of hybridity, and Ashcroft's idea of linguistic resistance. This analysis demonstrates how Aboriginal English, with its hybridised grammar and vocabulary, alongside chants rooted in kinship and cultural memory, operate subversively within the English novel form. Furthermore, the study situates Keneally's novel alongside Indigenous-authored works such as Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* and Kim Scott's *Benang: From the Heart*. This comparative perspective underscores both the contributions and the limits of settler-authored attempts to "restore" Aboriginal voice, contrasting them with Indigenous narrative sovereignty that reconstitutes English from within Aboriginal epistemologies. The findings conclude that while Keneally's novel functions as a counter-narrative that unsettles colonial silencing, its mediation through settler authorship leaves it marked by ambivalence. Ultimately, the enduring reclamation of Aboriginal voice and identity in literature is most powerfully enacted in Indigenous-authored narratives, which reshape language, memory, and representation on their own terms.

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Highlights:

- Aboriginal voice restoration (it examines how The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith restores Aboriginal voice and identity within Australian colonial discourse).
- Linguistic hybridity (it demonstrates how linguistic hybridity functions as a means of survival, identity assertion).
- Counter-narrative discourse (it argues that the novel operates as a counter-narrative, asserting Aboriginal agency and reframing dominant historical accounts).

Keywords: Identity; Aboriginal English; Aboriginal Chanting; Linguistic Hybridity; Colonial Discourse; Counter-Narrative

1. Introduction

In recent decades, postcolonial literary studies have increasingly centred on examining voice, identity, and historical revisionism in settler-colonial contexts of Australia. Scholars such as Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (2011)[1] have explored the role of language in negotiating power and resistance within colonial and postcolonial narratives. Within this discourse, the representation of Aboriginal identity by non-Aboriginal authors remains a contested issue, particularly in literary works that attempt to critique colonial violence through fictionalised accounts of Aboriginal lives[2,3]. Although these narratives may be well-intentioned, they frequently risk reproducing the structures of colonial control and marginalisation they seek to challenge.

Thomas Keneally's *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* is significant in the discourse above. First published in 1972, the novel fictionalises the life of Jimmie Governor, an Aboriginal man who, in 1900, committed a series of murders that made him a figure of both notoriety and symbolic significance. Through the characterisation of the protagonist Jimmie Blacksmith—a half-caste Aborigine torn between white settler society's values and his Aboriginal heritage—Keneally addresses themes of colonial violence, racial hybridity, cultural conflict, and Aboriginal resistance. Notably, the narrative incorporates Aboriginal English and chanting, signalling an attempt to embed Aboriginal forms of expression and disrupt Standard English's dominance as the sole literary medium.

This study examines how *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmi*th challenges and reinforces colonial discourse through its deployment of linguistic hybridity and narrative form. Analysing the novel's utilisation of Aboriginal English and chanting demonstrates that Keneally simultaneously indicates Aboriginal resistance and subjectivity while reaffirming the authority of white settler authorship. The analysis draws on theoretical frameworks from postcolonial scholarship—including Said's (1978) critique of colonial discourse[4], Bhabha's (1994) concepts of hybridity and mimicry[5], and Ashcroft's (2001) emphasis on linguistic appropriation as resistance—to explore the dual function of language as both an instrument of oppression and a medium of resistance in colonial and literary contexts[6]. In re-examining Keneally's novel over fifty years after its publication, this study also considers its contemporary relevance: the novel's engagement with voice and identity offers insights into ongoing debates about Indigenous representation and the reclamation of Aboriginal voice in Australia's literary and political discourse.

2. Literature Review

Scholarly responses to *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* have remained divided between its merit as a critique of colonial violence and its constraints as a settler-authored narrative. Literary critics such as Tiffin (1978) and Healy (1978) have commended Keneally for addressing Australia's systemic racism against Aboriginal people through fiction[7,8], while other scholars—notably Frow (1982)—have questioned the novel's narrative authority. Frow contends that the novel's realist form ultimately reinforces white settlers' control over the Aborigines, observing that the chants Keneally includes are "false chants"—ceremonial references detached from their original contexts and repurposed through the lens of white authorship. This limitation, he suggests, restricts the novel's capacity to restore an authentic Aboriginal voice[9].

Similarly, Lattas (1992) examines the mythologisation of Aboriginal identity in Australian culture, including in works like Keneally's, where Aboriginal agency is filtered

through white narrative conventions[10]. These critiques emphasise the tension between representation and appropriation, particularly when non-Aboriginal authors, such as Keneally, adopt Aboriginal perspectives in their fiction to reconstruct Aboriginal experiences. This concern resonates in postcolonial debates on voice and narrative power—key themes in the works of theorists such as Said (1978), Bhabha (1994), and Ashcroft (2001). Moreover, recent scholarship continues to interrogate these issues. Indigenous scholarship offers a critical lens: Nakata (2007) conceptualizes the meeting of Western and Indigenous knowledge systems as a "cultural interface"—a contested space of differing epistemologies and power relations[11]. Recognizing this cultural interface grounds the analysis in an Indigenous perspective, acknowledging the long history of distorted representations of Aboriginal people in colonial narratives. Roberts (2023), for instance, situates *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* within a broader context of settler narratives to critique its cultural appropriation of Aboriginal voice[12], highlighting the ongoing ethical implications of a white author speaking for Aboriginal subjects.

At the same time, postcolonial theory provides a framework to analyse how literary texts, even when shaped by colonial forms, can challenge dominant colonial ideologies/hegemony. Bhabha's (1994) concept of mimicry and hybridity proves particularly relevant for understanding the novel's use of Aboriginal English, which functions as both a product of and a resistance to colonial assimilation[5]. Ashcroft et al. (2011) further argue that using vernacular or hybrid forms of English in postcolonial literature can be a mode of cultural resistance[1].

Despite the critical engagement with Keneally's fiction, limited studies have focused on its linguistic strategies—particularly the intersection of Aboriginal English and tribal chant—as resistance and identity formation/assertion tools. While most discussions have addressed race, history, and morality in thematic terms, insufficient attention has been directed toward how the text's language choices function at the formal level to contest colonial narrative.

This study addresses that gap by examining how Keneally's narrative voice incorporates Aboriginal linguistic forms not only to portray cultural hybridity but also to signal Aboriginal modes of expression. Drawing on Frow's (1982) and Bhabha's (1994) critiques of genre and voice, the following analysis explores how language—despite its limitations—serves as a contested site of memory, power, and postcolonial negotiation[5,9].

3. Theoretical Framework

Figure 1 reveals that this research employs a postcolonial literary analysis to examine how *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* utilises Aboriginal English and chant as resistance and identity assertion mechanisms. The framework integrates close textual analysis with theoretical perspectives from Said's (1978) critique of colonial discourse, Bhabha's (1994) concepts of hybridity and mimicry, and Ashcroft's (2001) emphasis on linguistic appropriation as resistance. These theoretical lenses enable an interrogation of how language in the novel operates within—and challenges—colonial structures of meaning.

The analysis examines key passages where Aboriginal English and traditional chanting are prominent, exploring how these linguistic practices intersect with the novel's themes of identity, appropriation, and voice. Particular emphasis is placed on the narrative framing of these elements, and whether their presence marks a disruption or re-inscription of colonial authority.

This study integrates postcolonial theory and textual analysis to examine how Keneally's novel restores and amplifies Aboriginal voice and identity by challenging dominant colonial discourse through language and cultural expression. The analysis of the novel's incorporation of Aboriginal English and traditional chanting demonstrates literature's capacity to reclaim marginalised voices. Furthermore, it advances broader discussions on postcolonial literary resistance and the ethical issue of non-Aboriginal authors representing Aboriginal narratives. This analysis aims to enhance understanding of language's dual role as a tool of oppression and resistance in postcolonial Australian literature.

Keneally's *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* employs Aboriginal English and tribal chanting as strategies to challenge colonial hegemony. Through a hybrid sociolect that blends settler vocabulary with Aboriginal rhythms and the lexicon of Mungindi (one of the Aboriginal tribal languages), the novel tends to affirm Aboriginal identity while destabilising colonial narrative norms. This linguistic resistance functions as both a mirror and weapon—reflecting the frag-

mentation of racialised existence while asserting a sort of defiant presence against the historical erasure of the Aborigines. Concurrently, fragmented tribal chants evoke ancestral memory and cosmology of the Aborigines, establishing a narrative form of decolonisation within Western narrative structures. Both Aboriginal English and chant function as Aboriginal forms of cultural resilience, compelling readers to confront colonialism's epistemic violence. Together, they exemplify what Ashcroft et al. (2011) describe as the "subversion of the coloniser's language into a tool of resistance"[1] and what Frow (1982) identifies as critiques of "Western realism's inadequacy"[9].

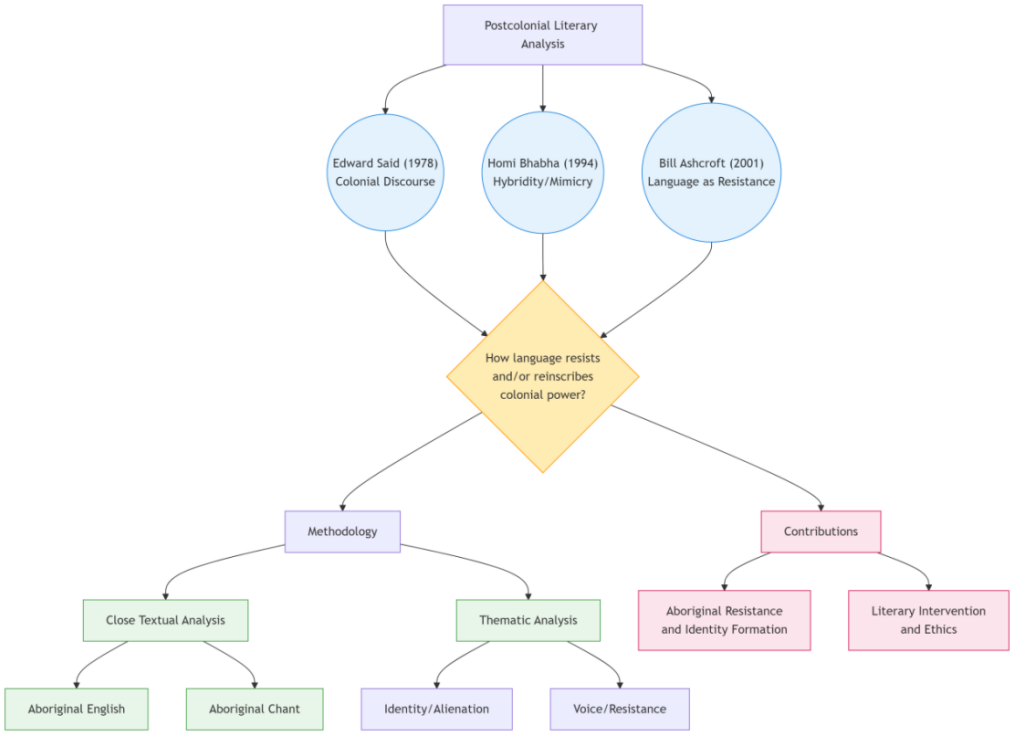

Figure 1. Theoretical Framework.

4. Discussion

Keneally's *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* employs Aboriginal English and tribal chanting as deliberate strategies to contest colonial hegemony. Through a hybrid sociolect that blends settler vocabulary with Aboriginal rhythms and elements of Mungindi (an Aboriginal tribal language), the novel affirms Aboriginal identity while destabilising colonial narrative norms.This linguistic resistance functions simultaneously as a mirror and a weapon—reflecting the fragmentation of racialised existence while asserting a defiant presence against the historical erasure of Aboriginal peoples. Fragmented tribal chants, interwoven into the narrative, evoke ancestral memory and Aboriginal cosmology, creating a textual form of decolonisation within the confines of Western narrative structures. Aboriginal English and chant operate as modes of cultural resilience, compelling readers to confront colonialism's epistemic violence.

4.1. Aboriginal English as Resistance and Identity Assertion

The novel's use of Aboriginal English is not merely a stylistic device but a manifestation of cultural resilience. Keneally renders Jimmie Blacksmith's voice hybridised, combining settler vocabulary with rhythms, intonation, and structures drawn from Aboriginal oral traditions. This linguistic hybridity challenges the hierarchy embedded in colonial narration, asserting Aboriginal identity within a textual space historically dominated by the coloniser's language.

Homi Bhabha's (1994) concept of mimicry is particularly relevant here. Mimicry describes the ambivalence in colonial encounters, where the colonised subject is produced as "almost the same, but not quite"[5]. By partially adopting

the coloniser's language, the colonised both imitates and subverts colonial authority—posing a "menace" to its legitimacy[13]. In *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, Jimmie's speech reflects this dynamic: raised under white settler values, he attempts to integrate into settler society by adopting its language and behavioural codes. However, his linguistic assimilation is incomplete, and in that incompleteness lies its subversive potential. The hybrid quality of his speech destabilises colonial authority, revealing the ambivalence and fragility of its control.

Bhabha's concept of hybridity further illuminates Jimmie's linguistic position. Hybridity refers to creating new transcultural forms within contact zones produced by colonisation. Linguistic hybridity arises when elements of the coloniser's language merge with Aboriginal oral traditions, producing a distinct sociolect that resists total assimilation. Keneally's deployment of Aboriginal English exemplifies this hybridity: while shaped by colonial contact, it remains anchored in Aboriginal oral culture, resisting subsumption into standard English. As Ashcroft et al. (2011) note, post-colonial literature often reclaims authority by transforming the coloniser's language into a vehicle of resistance[1]. Within a neo-colonial literary framework dominated by white authorship, Jimmie's hybrid dialect asserts the historically silenced voice of Aboriginal people and disrupts settler expectations.

This kind of Aboriginal English is marked by features that differentiate it from standard forms: non-verbal and semi-verbal markers, repetition, culturally specific terminology, interrogatives, verbal punctuation, and mythological allusions. These features embed Aboriginal worldviews in the text, producing what has been described as "white form, black content"[14] —formal structures associated with Western literature, but infused with Aboriginal themes, style, and dialogue. In *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, this stylistic fusion reflects Jimmie's fractured identity and a declaration of cultural belonging. The result is a discourse that challenges colonial linguistic dominance while affirming an enduring Aboriginal presence.

Aboriginal English in the novel also incorporates words from Mungindi, a traditional Aboriginal language, which serve as markers of identity and deliberately exclude non-Aboriginal participants. Linguistically, this creates a space where Aboriginal characters can articulate their worldview and resist erasure. The following exchanges illustrate this dynamic:

> "Hey, yer paley bastard!" he (Wongee Tom) murmured.
> "Hey, Wongee Tom".
> "Yair, that's who. How's that old sow Dulcie goin'?"
> "Dulcie's good. Wilf's drunk.Dottie's good, Mort's bloody good. Are you good?
> "Yair, not workin' much". He chuckled at his joke. They could get very superior, these travelled blacks who had seen the larger towns.
> "Are there other Emu-Wren here?" Jimmie asked in Mungindi.
> "Emu-Wren?" Wongee Tom mocked. "Bullshit." But he gave in to the old language.
> "Hardly a black man to offer me a roll of his wife. No Emu-Wren. The crayfish here are good. Nice red meat."
> "You got a job?"Jimmie asked. In English, in Mungindi, there was no word for 'job'.
> "I catch'em possums. Sell'em skin. Thrippence a skin. Not much. Wish I had a gun. Whitefeller don't like Wongee hangin' round homestead catchin' possums.
> "Long time since yer skinned yer last possum," Jimmie Blacksmith teased him.
> "Like hell, yer paley bastard!" Then Wongee Tom gave in and laughed out his admissions.
> "Don' know when last one was. Possum meat scrawny, full of bones. Wongee instead, pinch bacon"[13].

In this excerpt, as illustrated in **Table 1**, it is a conversation between two Aborigines: Wongee Tom and Jimmie when they met in the town. If viewed from a grammatical perspective, readers may notice the distinctive grammatical inconsistencies of this conversation, which reveal the underlying structure of Aboriginality. The dialogue pictures with grammar and discourse are not the objective reality readers perceive or conceive around, but the mirroring of reality, which is, in fact, the effect that assimilation has had on the Aborigines. Unlike the convention of standard English in the white system, this dialogue between two Aboriginal people is supposed to be written in distorted grammar.

Table 1. Aboriginal English as Resistance.

Standard English	Aboriginal English	Linguistic Hybridity	Linguistic Features
Hey, Wongee Tom		Hey, yer paley bastard! Like hell, yer paley bastard!	Grammatical inconsistency
	Are there other Emu-Wren here? Emu-Wren? No Emu-Wren.	Emu-Wren: Mungindi words in their tribal language	The use of Mungindi language (Cultural code-switching for identification)
Dulcie's good. Wilf's drunk. Dottie's good, Mort's bloody good. Are you good?	Hardly a black man to offer me a roll of his wife. No Emu-Wren.		Aboriginal syntactical rhythm
Bullshit.		How's that old sow Dulcie goin'?	Grammatical inconsistency (Nonstandard contractions)
The crayfish here are good. Nice red meat.		Don' know when last one was. Possum meat scrawny, full of bones. Wongee instead, pinch bacon.	Omitted auxiliaries Aboriginal syntactical rhythm
"You got a job?"	In Mungindi, there was no word for 'job'.	Yair, not workin' much.	Rejection of colonial paradigms
	I catch'em possums. Sell'em skin. Thrippence a skin. Not much. Wish I had a gun. Whitefeller don't like Wongee hangin' round homestead catchin' possums.	Long time since yer skinned yer last possum.	Omitted auxiliaries Aboriginal syntactical rhythm

Language in this discourse must be based on Aboriginal culture, which may lead to a language centred on one theme, "Aboriginality, conveying a specific Aboriginal feature and confirming a kind of Aboriginal subjectivity"[15] to some extent. Linguistically, an occasional word of Mungindi, such as Emu-Wren (the unique totem for their Aboriginal tribe), explicitly excludes the people spoken to from that tainted identity imposed by the white employers. The name of the novel itself signifies that the Aborigines' true strength has always been that through anti-using the whites' language, through using Aboriginal English, they, the Aborigines, can become the master of their discourse and articulate their voice to define themselves positively instead of being defined with a racial stigma by the dominated white narrative.

Specifically, Keneally's use of Aboriginal English in the novel reflects a conscious engagement with linguistic hybridity. Far from being "incorrect," this "English" is richly coded with semi-verbal markers, repetitions, and idiomatic expressions that encode Aboriginal worldviews.

Another example further demonstrates this linguistic hybridity:

> "I catch'em possums. Sell'em skin. Thrippence a skin. Not much…
> You bugger off, Blackie! Thrippence a skin, that's all."
> "Like hell, yer paley bastard"[13]!

These dialogues, marked by nonstandard grammar and occasional Mungindi insertions, construct a linguistic space grounded in Aboriginal experience. The grammatical deviations are not errors but acts of resistance—a political assertion outside the coloniser's linguistic terms. Through Aboriginal English, characters reclaim agency, resist assimilation, and assert self-definition. Even the novel's title becomes symbolic: through chanting and speech, Aboriginal characters articulate their identity rather than being defined by the racialised frameworks of colonial discourse.

4.2. The Function of Chant: Ancestral Memory and Cultural Reclamation

Aboriginal chant is "a sacred rhythmic voice that connects people to ancestral wisdom"[16], Country (Country, capitalised to signify its sacred meaning, is a foundational concept with profound spiritual, cultural, and ecological dimensions), and the Dreaming (Dreaming is the sacred, timeless dimension where ancestral beings created the world, established law (Lore), and continue to inhabit Country while preserving vital knowledge and spiritual power through generations). It is not a song, but a vibrational law—voice as a bridge between the human and ancestral realms. Traditional Aboriginal chanting in the novel appears at moments of emotional or spiritual significance, often linked to Jimmie's inner conflict or memory of his tribal heritage. These

chants, though fragmentary, evoke a cultural framework that predates and survives colonisation. By "integrating chant into the narrative"[17], Keneally gestures toward an alternative mode of storytelling rooted in Aboriginal oral tradition, contrasting with European literary forms. Beyond everyday speech, these chant fragments emerge during psychological rupture or ancestral recollection, reflecting Jimmie's efforts to reconnect with his ancestral heritage and invoke cultural practices that precede colonial influence.

Chant is a spiritual manifestation of identity that resists assimilation into white narrative frameworks. Its fragmentary nature signals both cultural resilience and trauma, representing the persistence of Aboriginal knowledge and traditions despite mission education, forced assimilation, and colonial suppression. As Frow (1982) observes, these "false chants", mediated through the perspective of a white author, gesture toward Aboriginal spirituality without fully capturing ceremonial authenticity[9]. Nevertheless, their presence disrupts conventional narrative expectations and highlights the limitations of Western realism in representing Aboriginal epistemology.

Moreover, Aboriginal chants are central to tribal life, providing "a form of self-expression"[18] that allows characters to occupy the narrative centre and assert agency. They enable a portrayal of Aboriginal history and identity in positive terms, countering stereotypical images imposed by colonial discourse. Repetition of fragments from Aboriginal stories and songs imbues the dialogue with dignity and cultural meaning, fostering recognition of Aboriginal reality and identity, while challenging white Australian readers linguistically and intellectually.

The term "chant" in the novel's title signals a dual function: cultural memory and ceremonial practice. In Aboriginal cultures, chanting is more than rhythmic speech or song—it is an oral archive, a means of transmitting ancestral law, kinship ties, and spiritual connection to Country (a foundational concept with profound spiritual, cultural, and ecological dimensions). Traditionally, chants often form part of corroborees (ceremonial gatherings), initiation rites, or welcome rituals, where they serve both to honour the living and reaffirm their ancestors' presence. These performances are not merely artistic expressions but acts of cultural continuity, sustaining the Dreaming (the sacred, timeless dimension where ancestral beings created the world, established law (Lore), and continue to inhabit Country) narratives that underpin Aboriginal identity.

In this novel, this practice is evoked when the Aboriginal Mort reunites with his brother Jimmie, greeting him through a Mungindi chant of kinship and joy:

> Breed of Emu-Wren, see your breed coming
> Shouting the day's joy as you
> Shout the day's welcome.
> I sing my welcomes to you
> As I take you by the shoulders
> And my hands clap
> Recognising eyes, and beards
> Jutted with smiling[13].

The "Emu-Wren" reference invokes a totemic identity—a spiritual emblem connecting individuals to specific animals, plants, or natural phenomena, linking them to a shared lineage and territory. The clapping of hands and the recognition through eyes and beards suggest a physical greeting and the ceremonial acknowledgement of tribal kinship. By embedding such a chant in the narrative, Keneally "aligns Jimmie's story with Aboriginal cultural forms that resist erasure of tribal culture"[19], situating personal reunion within the broader framework of communal belonging and ancestral presence in Aboriginal traditions.

Chanting also structures narrative experience through the lens of ancestral patterns. In Aboriginal culture, such chants are not simply poetic devices but are embedded within the broader songline tradition—oral maps of Country and history that link physical journeys with spiritual pathways traced by the ancestors during the Dreaming. These chants often encode collective memory, recounting past battles, hunts, and journeys while invoking the presence of spiritual beings connected to specific places and totems. In this way, chanting becomes both a performance of identity and a reaffirmation of Aboriginal tribal traditions, carrying the weight of tribal history into the present moment.

Tabidgi, Jimmie's maternal uncle, performs a raiding song while accompanying Jimmie to the Newbys' homestead:

> Men vault rivers,
> Fear in their eyes.
> Women surrender.
> At dawn we are beyond your hill.

At midday we stalk you on tip-toe from a distance.
At dusk we are at your throat,
Closer than child to pap[13].

In Aboriginal oral tradition, such raiding songs are stylised recountings of martial skill and cunning. They are often built around formulaic structures—repetitive rhythms, parallel imagery, and vivid sensory cues—that both memorialise ancestral deeds and prepare the mind for the task ahead. Mort similarly adapts raiding chants to frame Jimmie's acts of justice, employing these structures to invest their actions with an epic resonance. This transforms the events from isolated acts of vengeance into culturally meaningful narratives that speak to both the living and the dead[13].

After the massacre of the Newbys (their white employers), Tabidgi wards off spirits with another chant:

Ghosts started by my hand,
Spirits fleeing back to their totem fathers,
My barbs deep in their bodies,
Come not near me,
Here in the night I reign,
Bullawi the great lizard,
Whose scream shakes the hills apart[13].

Here, the invocation of "totem fathers" reflects a core aspect of Aboriginal cosmology. Every person is linked to a totem—often an animal, plant, or natural phenomenon—that defines spiritual lineage and responsibilities. Naming "Bullawi the great lizard" not only asserts Tabidgi's spiritual authority but also draws on the protective power of an ancestral being associated with strength and territorial dominance. In Aboriginal belief, such chants can serve an apotropaic function: warding off harmful spirits, restoring spiritual balance, and protecting the living from the restless dead. By embedding these ceremonial functions into the novel's structure, Keneally reproduces "the formulaic structure of traditional raiding chants"[20], which employ repetition, parallel imagery, and heightened sensory detail. These features work as oral mnemonics, transmitting tactical knowledge while invoking the authority of past warriors. He also gives voice to cultural practices that maintain continuity between past and present, ensuring that acts of resistance are anchored in a living tradition rather than reduced to a mere rebellion against the white-dominated world.

In this novel, Jimmie chants sparingly, limiting it to moments of ceremonial or personal significance—most notably his initiation rites and later key life events. In Aboriginal cultural contexts, initiation (manhood ceremonies) is one of the most sacred rites of passage, marking the transition from youth to adulthood and full integration into the social, spiritual, and legal responsibilities of the tribe. Such occasions are traditionally accompanied by chants, dances, and storytelling that link the initiate to the Dreaming—the timeless creation period in which ancestral beings shaped the world and established law (Lore). The chants are not mere personal expressions but communal affirmations of belonging, sanctioned by elders and embedded in the unbroken chain of oral tradition.

Following his initiation, Jimmie expresses joy and identity through a chant that draws on natural imagery and totemic associations:

Dash surprise from your eyes, my mother,
As crested parrots are dashed from the white branches of dawn.
On your brow, put pride as proud as Dubra the berry tree.
Out of the chrysalis and out of the lizard's mouth your son comes man[13].

Here, the "crested parrots" and "Dubra the berry tree" are not decorative metaphors but culturally resonant symbols. Parrots, often associated with dawn, suggest renewal and vitality; the berry tree signifies abundance and strength. Emerging "out of the lizard's mouth" echoes a totemic rebirth—linking the young man to an ancestral being, a common motif in Aboriginal initiation songs.

He later recounts an ancient raid through chant:

In the sting of our manhood,
Mungara's daughters being few
As hills beyond Marooka, river snake-scant hills,
Mungara's daughters scant,
Over Marooka we went singing,
Stalking Widgarra men with strokes of war-clubs,
Taking to us all the shrilling pee-wit women, daughters to Mungara,
Wives unto the men of Emu-Wren[13].

This chant narrates a historical raid dating back to the English Civil War—an ironic juxtaposition that bridges Aboriginal oral memory with a European historical marker. In Aboriginal tradition, such war chants memorialise intertribal conflicts and alliances, preserving them as part of the community's living history. The "Emu-Wren" reference is totemic, signifying tribal identity and binding the act to ancestral law. By embedding these oral structures within the English-language novel, Keneally allows Aboriginal perspectives to claim space in the colonial historical record, producing a hybridised form of storytelling.

From this point, Jimmie essentially ceases to chant directly. When he uses his tribal language, Mungindi later—such as to manipulate Mort or to justify the killings of his white employers—these utterances function as "false chants," stripped of ceremonial authenticity. In Aboriginal culture, chants are bound by strict protocols: they are owned by particular individuals or tribes, and their performance outside of sanctioned contexts can be seen as dangerous or spiritually improper. Jimmie's distortions—like his pre-justification for Mrs. Healy's murder—She is a devil woman and put magic on your kinsman so that he writhed and shivered to the edge of death. She has bewitched her husband. She is the fang of the coiled adder[13]. However, this is a false chant, an abuse of symbolic language. It illustrates the fragmentation of Jimmie's Aboriginal voice under colonial pressure, as he deploys symbolic language for strategic rather than sacred ends.

Even at sacred tribal sites, Jimmie remains hesitant: "Jimmie sang nothing and was afraid"[13]. This fear reflects the alienation from ceremonial authority that can occur when one has been raised within mission schooling and Christian moral codes rather than immersed in one's tribal traditions. The novel internalises this tension between authentic Aboriginal discourse—rooted in spiritual and communal legitimacy—and the degrading or ironic language imposed by colonial structures.

In contrast, Dulcie's farewell chant elevates Jimmie to a mythic status:

> Tall is my son going away.
> The mountains will feel his feet,
> And his hair catches in the stars[13].

Dulcie's chant about her son Jimmie grants him mythic status, yet this epic mode is undercut by his inability to inhabit that identity within the white world. In addition, Keneally juxtaposes this poetic Aboriginal language with the degrading influence of colonisation on Jimmie. Despite occasional chanting, Jimmie loses touch with the oral tradition of his tribe. His final "chants" become "distorted imitations of the epic war in the Aboriginal ancestral legend"[21], used to justify violence during his revenge on his white employers, revealing the tragic disintegration of his Aboriginal identity under colonial pressure.

However, even in Jimmie, there is a residual blackness, a beyond which Keneally attempts to cope with through a religious discourse. Mort and Jimmie are "raiders and outdarers and adjures but also pilgrims, bears of onus, seekers for justification, desirers of exorcism"[13], and this is not, as it is suggested here, simply a question of the residue of H.J. Nevillie's Christianity. The whole adventure-story structure is mediated through images of tribal warfare and of the pollution caused by women's blood in Aboriginal belief. This leads to an attempted restoration of epic categories as a hinted-at transcendence. It leads to a mythicisation of Jimmie. While reading the bulletin cartoon, "he (Jimmie) saw the remote potential of becoming a figure of myth[13]: his prospective destiny merges with the retrospective destiny imposed by the novelist who needs the myth to redeem Jimmie.

The structure of linguistic control is duplicated thematically within the novel, above all through the fact that the Aborigines are defined as those who are deprived of language. There is a sort of ironic parody of the violence of linguistic command in the newspaper accounts of Tabidgi's trial, with their editorial interventions and especially the use of the cruelly pedantic 'sic' (sick).

> "Mr. Newby wouldn't give us food, so we went to argue with Mrs. Newby. We never expected for a second we'd kill them. Jimmie was a good worker and I ain't afraid of dying because I earned hanging with what I done [sic]. I have never done nothing [sic] like this before. You would think it would take up a good while to make up your mind to kill someone and then to kill them. I'm just an ignorant [sic] black man but take my word for it, it only takes a second"[13].

After reading this article, Jimmie abandons his idea of writing a testamentary letter because he imagined the press

reducing his love's importance to something inane and comic, much as they had done in their mocking use of "[sic]"[13] when describing Jackie Smoulders. Jimmie interprets "sic" as a term of mockery, reinforcing his growing disillusionment with white world. His development as a "mission black" represents a history of internalizing white values; however, he eventually realizes that "he had very light right that spouted blunt percept"[13]. It is for this reason that he shoots his white employer, Mrs. Healy, in the throat—an act that symbolically silences her power to mock him and his family.

This violent imagery resonates with the epic mode of Aboriginal chant, in which human actions are magnified through cosmic and environmental symbolism. Nevertheless, this elevated sense of identity is soon eroded within the white-dominated world. Jimmie's later "chants" distort ancestral forms into tools of vengeance against his white employers, rather than serving as instruments of cultural authenticity.

Moreover, the novel introduces an important character, McCreadie, a white hostage who paradoxically functions as a linguistic controller and narrative mouthpiece. He embodies the perspective of the liberal intellectual—argually serving as a stand-in for part of Keneally's own authorial voice. McCreadie is highly idealized, presented as the first white person who offers Jimmie and Mort "room to speak in their true selves"[22]. He acts as a medium for conveying moral generalizations about the oppression and destruction of Aboriginal people.

At the same time, the novel underscores the ambivalence of his role. Although he is their hostage, McCreadie quickly comes to dominate Jimmie and Mort linguistically and psychologically: "it was clear that the teacher would emasculate and sunder them, and he intended it"[13]. Yet, his inadequacy as a liberal is partially redeemed through his involvement in rebuilding an Aboriginal sacred site—an act of symbolic reparation that suggests the possibility of reversing the historical damage of colonization.

Nevertheless, Keneally's project remains constrained by its cultural limitations. The "false chants" reflect white interpretations of Aboriginal culture, McCreadie's linguistic dominance undermines his liberal pretensions, and Jimmie's eventual silence ("sang nothing and was afraid") highlights a residual Aboriginal identity that European categories can not contain. The novel's ambivalence—seen in its juxtaposition of Mungindi poetics with pidgin English—mirrors Australia's unresolved cultural conflict, where anti-language tactics persist as "audible traces" of what colonialism ultimately failed to erase.

As illustrated in **Table 2**, the novel employs Aboriginal English, inserts Mungindi language, and incorporates Aboriginal chants to encode identity, resist assimilation, affirm kinship, connect characters to ancestral memory, and elevate narrative events to ceremonial significance. These strategies collectively reveal tensions around cultural authenticity while asserting Aboriginal agency and embedding Aboriginal frameworks that challenge colonial discourse.

Table 2. Linguistic Hybridity and Narrative Voice in the Novel.

Textual Element	Example (Text)	Function/Cultural Significance	Narrative Role
Aboriginal English	"I catch'em possums. Sell'em skin. Thrippence a skin. Not much…You bugger off, Blackie!" (p. 10)	Linguistic hybridity encodes the Aboriginal worldview; resists assimilation	Creates a space for Aboriginal agency; subverts colonial linguistic hierarchy
Insertion of Mungindi (Aboriginal language)	"Are there other Emu-Wren here?" (p. 10)	Identity marker; excludes non-Aboriginal participants; affirms tribal belonging.	Maintains Aboriginal cultural specificity within dialogue
Initial ceremonial chant	"Breed of Emu-Wren, see your breed coming… Recognising eyes, and beards jutted with smiling." (p. 28)	Connects present actions to ancestral memory; affirms kinship	Establishes cultural and spiritual continuity; highlights Aboriginal oral tradition
Epic raid chant	"Men vault rivers, Fear in their eyes…At dusk we are at your throat…" (p. 83)	Frames acts of justice/raiding in tribal tradition; invokes ancestral cosmology.	Elevates narrative events to epic and ceremonial significance
False/strategic chant	"She is a devil woman and put magic on your kinsman…" (p. 99)	Manipulates symbolic language; approximates ceremonial chant for survival	Demonstrates tension between authentic Aboriginal culture and colonial oppression
Epic maternal chant	"Tall is my son going away. The mountains will feel his feet, And his hair catches in the stars." (p. 3)	Mythicises Jimmie; assigns epic status within Aboriginal cosmology	Highlights contrast between Aboriginal identity and white world constraints

Therefore, the combined use of Aboriginal English and chanting demonstrates how Keneally foregrounds Aboriginal voices within a colonial narrative space. Aboriginal English facilitates resistance through linguistic hybridity, while chanting reconnects characters to ancestral memory and tribal cosmology. Together, these strategies function as intertwined mechanisms of identity reclamation, enabling Aboriginal perspectives to reframe and resist colonial discourse.

In summary, Aboriginal English and chanting operate as dual modes of linguistic resistance, destabilizing colonial hierarchies through hybrid sociolects and cultural revival. Jimmie's "imperfect" speech—characterized by grammatical inconsistencies, blended vocabularies, and Aboriginal rhythmic patterns—serves as both a reflection of cultural fragmentation and a weapon against erasure. It allows Aboriginal characters to "become masters of their discourse"[18] outside stigmatized white narratives. Similarly, the chants—which often adopt "white form" with "black content"—reclaim cultural memory through ancestral ties to land and cosmology, creating decolonial ruptures within the assimilationist policies of white settlers.

4.3. Beyond Hybridity: Indigenous Counter-Narratives

While Thomas Keneally's T*he Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1972) demonstrates how Aboriginal English and ceremonial chants can disrupt colonial discourse, it also reveals the limitations of settler-authored representation. Keneally's narrative creates what Homi Bhabha calls a "third space" of hybridity, where Aboriginal orality intersects with European literary form, yet this space is always mediated through a non-Indigenous authorial voice. As cultural critic John Frow warns, such mediation risks re-colonising Aboriginal experience by filtering it through settler frameworks of authorship.

In contrast, by the turn of the twenty-first century, Indigenous authors like Alexis Wright (Waanyi) and Kim Scott (Noongar) began reclaiming narrative authority, embedding Aboriginal epistemologies on their own terms. Wright's novel *Carpentaria* (2006) exemplifies an Indigenous approach to narrative voice through cyclical, Country-centered storytelling that resists linear European temporality. By blending Waanyi language, colloquial Aboriginal English, and an Elder-like omniscient voice, *Carpentaria* enacts what Bill Ashcroft terms "linguistic resistance"— not by simply appropriating English, but by reshaping it within an Indigenous worldview. The novel's shifting registers speak differently to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal readers, firmly rooting the story in an Indigenous epistemology and forcing non-Indigenous readers to adapt to its worldview rather than the other way around. Ancestral spirits, kinship bonds, Dreaming stories, and connections to Country are presented not as exotic backdrops but as integral, living components of the narrative reality. In this way, Wright's work asserts that language and storytelling style itself can be an act of sovereignty, proclaiming Aboriginal identity on its own terms[23].

Kim Scott's *Benang: From the Heart* (1999) offers another illuminating counter-narrative, centering the voice of an Aboriginal protagonist, Harley, who pieces together his family's history after generations of assimilation policies designed to "breed out" Aboriginal identity. Rather than employ a linear or single-voiced narrative, *Benang* is deliberately fragmented and polyphonic. Harley reconstructs his disrupted genealogy by weaving archival documents, letters, bureaucratic records, and ancestral stories — a process that draws the reader into actively reconstructing the story alongside him. This "shifty, snaking" narrative form subverts Western realist conventions – the very "white way of thinking"[24] that traditionally frames historical novels. Noongar words, humour, and cadence permeate the text, ensuring that the storytelling voice emerges from Indigenous experience rather than through settler mediation. Through irony and first-person intimacy, Scott's novel critiques colonial history from within Aboriginal consciousness. Notably, where Jimmie Blacksmith's story ends in tragic silencing under colonial law, Harley's journey in *Benang* ends with a surreal image of uplift—literally floating above land and sea—symbolizing an ongoing, self-determined process of healing and identity reclamation.

Together, Wright and Scott demonstrate that Indigenous authors bring a fundamentally different approach to portraying Aboriginal voice—one of narrative sovereignty embedded from within. This stands in sharp contrast to the ambivalent position of Keneally's novel. Yet it is precisely Keneally's ambivalence that makes *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* significant for critical analysis today. As a canonical settler-authored text, it exposes both the possibilities of linguistic hybridity in unsettling colonial discourse and the inherent limitations of a ventriloquized Abo-

riginal voice. Read alongside Indigenous-authored works, Keneally's novel sharpens our understanding of the politics of authorship and voice, underscoring why the true restoration of Aboriginal identity in literature must ultimately be led by Indigenous writers themselves.

Ultimately, this comparative lens not only clarifies the evolution and enduring ambivalence of *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* but also lays the groundwork for a broader conclusion on how hybridity, resistance, and narrative sovereignty intersect in postcolonial debates about Aboriginal voice and identity.

5. Conclusions

This study has demonstrated how Keneally's *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* engages with Aboriginal English and ceremonial chanting as sites of hybridity and resistance. Drawing on Said's colonial discourse, Bhabha's hybridity, and Ashcroft's linguistic resistance, the analysis has shown that Keneally uses hybridised grammar, vocabulary, and chant to disrupt the authority of colonial discourse. Language in the novel emerges not simply as a medium of communication but as a contested space where Aboriginal identity is asserted, survival is symbolically enacted, and dominant historical narratives are unsettled.

Yet, when placed alongside Indigenous-authored texts such as Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* and Kim Scott's *Benang*, Keneally's novel reveals its limits. Wright embeds Aboriginal epistemologies, oral storytelling, and Dreaming cosmologies directly into her prose, producing a narrative where language itself becomes sovereignty. Scott, through his fragmented, polyphonic narrative, reconstructs silenced histories and re-centres Aboriginal voices from within Noongar tradition. These works highlight how Indigenous authorship asserts narrative authority on its own terms, contrasting with the mediated and ambivalent position of Keneally's text. In this light, *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith "*remains valuable as a canonical intervention"[25], but its hybridity also underscores the inherent constraints of settler-authored attempts to "restore" Aboriginal voice.

Re-examining Keneally's 1972 novel in the present also provides a valuable historical perspective. In an era when Indigenous voices are increasingly central in literature and public life—for instance, in debates around an Indigenous "Voice to Parliament"[22]—the novel illuminates the transition from a time when Aboriginal voice was ventriloquised by white writers to today's flourishing of Indigenous storytelling. Taken together, these findings affirm both how groundbreaking and how limited Keneally's intervention was. *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* remains significant as a counter-narrative that unsettles colonial silencing, but the enduring restoration of Aboriginal voice in literature has ultimately been—and continues to be—achieved most powerfully by Aboriginal authors themselves.

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Conceptualization, P.L.; methodology, P.L.; validation, P.L., N.A.S. and F.H.; formal analysis, P.L.; investigation, P.L.; resources, P.L.; writing—original draft preparation, P.L.; writing—review and editing, P.L., N.A.S. and F.H.; supervision, N.A.S. and F.H.; project administration, N.A.S. and F.H. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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