

# Long Paddock

TRACY RYAN

*"The living hyphen": France and Australia in two novels by Marion May Campbell*

From the outset, Marion May Campbell's importance as a novelist has been acknowledged in Australia, even by those who felt, like Cassandra Pybus back in 1986, that they had to "battle" their way into Campbell's writing "in order to wrest meaning from it" (Pybus 1986, 60). Confessing that she "did not enjoy" Campbell's first novel, *Lines of Flight*, Pybus nonetheless labelled it a "tour de force" whose language was "dazzling, complex and dense". The difficulty for Pybus was specifically located in what the novel "owe[d] to France": "I can't help but wonder if proper appreciation is dependent on one's familiarity with French theorists", as well as the way in which the book's plot was "deliberately overwhelmed ... by the sheer torrent of language and ideas" (61). There is also a muted suggestion, in Pybus's review, of resistance to the use of the French language in the English-language novel.

It is true that *Lines of Flight* was something unusual in its time and place, issuing from a small Western Australian publisher (Fremantle Arts Centre Press, now Fremantle Press) in 1985, and it is simple enough to explain its difference by pointing to the author's studies in French language and literature, as well as graduate education in France, with a strong influence from French poetry and film in particular. Some reviewers disliked or resisted the book's innovations; many others welcomed the novel for its wit and knowing self-referentiality, its "linguistic eroticism [that] lightens the density of its language" (Liddelow 1986, 290).

But Campbell's writing is acknowledged as "risky" even by critics who greatly admire it, such as Susan Midalia (1999, 116) who has nonetheless called *Lines of Flight* "one of the most important works of experimental fiction to have appeared in Australia". Midalia is noting this in a review of Campbell's third novel (she has published four to date), *Prowler*, which appeared in 1999 from the same press in Western Australia. As Midalia points out, the first novel and the third have much common ground. Both are set between Australia and France (specifically around Marseille), both concern artistic Australian women who spend time working in France. Each of these women bears a child fathered by a man met in France, and in both cases the male-female relationship ends in domestic violence as well as a return to Australia. Midalia acknowledges that this leaves the later novel "open to the charge that it is simply re-working old material" but then asserts "there are... important thematic and political differences between the two novels. Indeed, *Prowler* might be read as a bold attempt to confront some of the evasions and elisions of *Lines of Flight*" (117).

This paper, then, will examine the ways in which Campbell's first and third novels negotiate their connection as Australian works with France and French literature. As a title emblematic of this, I have chosen a term from the earlier novel, *Lines of Flight*, used

to refer to the baby Rachel, who has one French parent and one Australian – her mother, who is relating the tale, calls her “the living hyphen” (Campbell 1985, 163). The baby plays only a late and minor part in *Lines of Flight*, largely in terms of a responsibility that must be worked around for the woman-artist, her mother, but is symbolic too of the link, sometimes tenuous and sometimes unbreakable, between the two places, France and Australia, and their two representatives, Sébastien and Rita. A hyphen is also decidedly a feature of language and of writing, wherein the link between the two literatures is evoked. Finally, the designation “living hyphen” recalls too the troubled and contested notion of “hyphenated identity”, which is connected to issues of immigrant status and identity raised in the later novel, *Prowler*.

Where the earlier book could present the Australian Rita mentally critiquing the privileged academic Raymond in France as one of “you colonizers” as he recites lines from Valéry at the sight of the Mediterranean:

oh, honeyed voice of *France Culture*, modulating your harmonic variations, stringing out the prestigious jewels of your Port-Royal grammar, your imperfect subjunctives wearing almost visibly that coquettish circumflex, this is the real artillery of you colonizers, this is the way you would have annihilated the voice of *Algérie Libérée*... (Campbell 1985, 181)

By contrast, the equally culpable status of the white Australian colonizer is highlighted in the later book, *Prowler*, when the character Asif, of Arab immigrant background, challenges the Australian woman Tom-Tom who has come to Marseille to do experimental theatre on the theme of exile:

So, you, how come you're not an invader yourself? So radical, Banksiasister. How come you say you gave them back *your* land then? ... *Our land!* I bet you've been travelling on the surplus you stole (Campbell 1999, 107).

Later, Asif says, “Why in the hell, I asked, was this woman who calls herself the Banksia, looking for a cause here when she had one stinking cause back in her own country?” (127). Asif, it should be noted, despite or maybe because of his confrontational tone, will marry and have a child with Tom-Tom, moving for a while to Australia, allowing for more extensive consideration of the status of this second instance of a “hyphenating” child, Karim. The perplexing alternation between deepest intimacy and baffled distance in the mother-child relationship here certainly reiterates the earlier idea of one’s child as “otherness encountered”. Eventually Karim will go to live in France with his father, who notes, in a deft stroke of defamiliarisation for the Australian reader, reinterpreting the myth of the easygoing, laid-back “Aussie”:

I don't think Australia did much for my son... He's out pruning the vines, putting some callouses on those soft hands of his... He is not very used to work or commitment. Well, I understand it doesn't crop up much in their vocabulary down there (344).

Tom-Tom's situation as the white Australian wife of Asif and mother to Karim in Australia is fraught, by her own admission, with evasions and possible complicity with the wrongs of that environment. Looking back on the relationship long after, she asks:

When I called the cops to the house [*after suffering domestic violence*] and they said of Asif: Ah fuck, not another wog; why did I choose not to believe my ears? When I told Karim to walk straight, to ignore them when they told him to go back to his own country, whose side was I on? (350)

Many such instances of moral self-scrutiny could be cited – *Prowler* indeed leaves no stone of possible collusion or complacency unturned, no space for the self-congratulatory liberal mentality of the supposedly non-racist Australian.

Midalia summarises this shift in emphasis between the two novels as follows:

While *Lines of Flight* merely hints at the racism of white Australia, *Prowler* brings the issue unmistakably home; the thematic, structural and political prominence it gives to white Australian racism is a significant departure in Campbell's fiction (Midalia 1999, 118).

*Lines of Flight* did touch on Australian racism as background detail (such as when Rita notes a bus-stop near her Sydney home bearing the words "ASIANS OUT" [164]), but on the whole the book was much more concerned with the politics surrounding the identity and situation of the woman artist. By contrast, as I have suggested, *Prowler* is overtly concerned with issues of alterity and exclusion, inviting us to consider the situation of the post-colonial immigrant "Other" in France alongside that of the indigenous dispossessed as well as the immigrant in Australia, as morally pressing political matters facing each country.

It is at this point that Midalia, while admiring *Prowler*, balks at the aesthetic outcome of the stance taken by this later novel, suggesting that though its political commitment is laudable, it "doesn't always make for the best writing"; that "[a]t times the critique of racism is heavy-handed, tending to assertion rather than imaginative realisation" (118) This complaint seems to me simply not justifiable from the text of the novel – an issue to which I do not intend to devote much time here, except to say that perhaps *Prowler's* critique of Australian racism seems to leap out so strongly at the reader because it is indeed intended to confront the reader, in much the way that the character Asif confronts Tom-Tom – we hear it loudly because it is our own name being called.

Both novels, then, are concerned with what the first calls, again referring to that hyphen-baby Rachel, "otherness encountered" (Campbell 1985, 200). In *Lines of Flight*, the exploration of this encounter is heavily mediated through literary and other artistic figures – the novel famously begins by referencing Eluard, as Rita, the Australian student-painter in France, contemplates how to do aesthetic justice to an orange that sits on a desk; then too, imagery in her paintings is shown as being in dialogue with Mallarmé, particularly his *Hérodiade*, and especially in Rita's *Self-Portrait with Pomegranate* (46). Later we see this Mallarméan figure again explicitly evoked when Rita and Sébastien make love for the first time in a scene-fragment that is both serious and comic at once:

... her own hands make their stuttering way to his shoulders, redescend his neck, bring his face down toward the fluctuating dappled light on her breasts, again she is *Hérodiade*, and that head sacrificing intellect to her

body, breasts swell, nipples harden with the analogy, is this pornography she vaguely worries, this need for other imagery? but still...

*Et ma tête surgie*

*Solitaire vigie*

*Dans les vols triomphaux*

*De cette faux*

*Comme rupture franche*

*Plutôt refoule ou tranche*

*Les anciens désaccords*

*Avec le corps*

her lips murmur the Mallarmé in a tranced monotone that could be taken for the caressive nothings of love enumerating the splendours that lurch and roll before her eyes. (194)

We might guess that this poetically-mediated detachment doesn't augur well for the relationship that is just beginning between these two, and indeed, in a further comic deflation typical of erotic scenes in Campbell's writings, the passage continues:

*Hein? Tu disais chérie?* he whispers, You were saying, darling?

She closes her eyes and gives in a feline purr: *Que tu es beau.*

*Et que tu es belle, Rita, et que t'as un p'tit sexe adorable!* He nuzzles her neck. Irritation jars her for a brief moment. *What an adorable little sex you have,* worse than *Little Red Riding Hood*, how could anyone say that, but then, perhaps she's just reacting to the French language. (194)

The effect of bathos in the juxtaposition of the Mallarmé and the echo of a fairytale catchphrase does not, however, obscure the quasi-castration threat implied in both intertexts, deployed reversibly – is Rita only Hérodiade or also Jean-Baptiste? is it also her own head that sacrifices intellect to her body? is she Red Riding Hood or the wolf? – a threat then shrugged off with a distancing, tongue-in-cheek excuse: “perhaps she's just reacting to the French language”.

Many such examples of structuring the encounter with the other through literature can be found in *Lines of Flight* – the novel even frequently likens specific characters to real-life figures out of French literary history, such as Rimbaud, or Baudelaire's mother. Though Rita has recently given up her studies to concentrate on her painting, she is still very much in a student or academic milieu, so the “cultured” allusions, from literature or the visual arts, come naturally within the fictive setting; and though this whole sphere is questioned and challenged through the troubling character of Raymond, an academic who picks up and moulds younger people and is a controlling third in the relationship between Rita and Sébastien, it is not until the later novel, *Prowler*, that the writer's fullest attack on theorising and abstraction will emerge.

Unlike *Lines of Flight*, which has one main protagonist in Rita, *Prowler* splits its female viewpoint across two main female characters, Lou Barb and Tom-Tom. Lou Barb

is an academic, friend and former lover of Tom-Tom's, and is writing and compiling a work drawing on Tom-Tom's own writings, after the latter's death, so that we get narrations embedded within narrations – the permutations on point of view here are complex and sophisticated. For example, we may be given an account of something that happened to Tom-Tom, told by Lou through Tom-Tom's imagined point of view. The two women had known each other a long time, but where Tom-Tom chose what she perhaps saw as a more radical and resistant path in life (though the novel makes a problem of this), Lou took the apparently safe, middle-class and stable route, so that the two states are frequently compared in their narrations. Across the course of the novel, Lou's disenchantment with her "safe" choice, which she comes to see as a sell-out of ethical and political principles, leads her to hand in her resignation from the Institute where she works, referring to academia as a "commerce of abstraction... knocking concepts about" (Campbell 1999, 337). At the point where we are given Tom-Tom's last thoughts before her narrative closes, she thinks of Lou and addresses her thus, internally:

A little *bricolage*, eh Lou! They used that word at the Institute ahead of *tinkering*, you said, because of the French cachet. What if they put a tax on those imports, I said, that'd bring in some money, eh, all those boutique words, marking up ordinary old things. Now I think racism's the same, France, or Australia. Nothing is lost really in translation (371).

As critic Carolyn Bliss observes of *Prowler*, the debates about literary theory and politics that informed Campbell's earlier writings are still pertinent, but with a more urgent sense of critique:

Those concerns remain very much in evidence here, where allusions to and brief discussions of feminism, Marxism, poststructuralism, postcolonialism and cultural theory pepper the text. But Campbell also maintains her insistence that theory divorced from practice is sterile. Worse yet, it can be used to exploit the very real obscenities it seeks to redress (Bliss 2000, 577).

Though *Prowler* does occasionally make overt reference to French literary texts – for example describing Tom-Tom and Asif as being "like joyous children who'd strayed from some carnival out of the *Grand Meaulnes*" (253), such reference is less frequent, less pervasive than in the earlier work. This is writing that is determined to confront its own limits, that perhaps sees "reworking old material" not as a negative to be warded off but as the very project of the writer at any time – whether that is one's own same old material, or the material found in other works of literature. Where *Lines of Flight* might well take Mallarmé, Eluard, Valéry, indeed any part of the whole terrain of French culture and theory as its intertextual material, *Prowler* may be said to take on all that at one remove, by assuming the earlier novel *Lines of Flight* as a site of investigation.

Even at the level of setting, we are talking the same and not the same, as a comparison of some excerpts will establish. Both novels, as I have said, are set at least partly in Marseille, and contain descriptive passages of that city that are, at first reading, strikingly similar in stylistic approach, yet reveal a shift in how the place is to be envisaged and constructed. The first extract in question, from the first novel, begins: "Marseille: the postcard ripples..." (Campbell 1985, 209); in the later book, when Tom-Tom visits the really poverty-stricken areas of the city, she tells us, "Postcard Marseille dead, buried" (Campbell 1999, 202). While it's true that the two novels may be read

entirely separately without any loss of reference, it's also true that reading them alongside each other augments and amplifies each novel in turn, and this does not seem an accidental effect.

Here are the relevant passages – from *Lines of Flight*:

Marseille: the postcard ripples and the raucous port wakes up untidily, its gutters awash with yesterday's refuse. Obscenity does easy commerce with seduction as the fish and vegetable sellers shout their wares across the marketplace. Marseille contrives its labyrinth of gestures and glances, every emission from windows and doors reads and is read by pimps, spying concierges, cops and brothel manageresses, its stench and perfumes in easy dialogue. The city snorts and honks, flaunts bad taste like the carnival counterpart of continence. Marseille incontinent, indiscriminate in its centripetal drive, is bombed out mediaeval, baroque, flamboyant rococo, sober neo-classical, nineteenth century vulgar, twentieth-century functionalist, the ancient sinuous streets of the Arab quarter release their spillage on to the Haussmannesque grand perspectives, rationalized boulevards with uniform façades, engulfing fishing villages, sprouting high-rise apartment blocks, giving way to the luxury swoop of the Corniche, threading the pink marble cliffs of the *callanques*, flattening out into the main drag along the sea-front cafés, pausing for an exclamation mark with the vulgar giant copy of Michelangelo's David... (209)

And from *Prowler*:

This is Marseille then and these are the St Charles steps where Simone de Beauvoir once stood, with her head still in Paris, and this is the city rising with its untouched futures and the huge weight of its past, murderous brigands and traders and disseminators of plague, its resistance fighters and its collaborators, its Armenians and Greeks and Jews and Romanies and Madagascans and Malians and Ethiopians and Tunisians and Moroccans and Algerians and Pieds Noirs and Corsicans and its turbaned traders of carved artefacts and its sippers of mint and orange-blossom scented teas and downers of Pastis and Côtes de Provence and its overstatements in voice and colour and passion and corruption and violence. This is something to hang on to, never forget: this kind of pause, night washing down the city's gutters and a timorous awakening of colour in everything, the icy wind waking the full curve of eyeball to extreme sensitivity... Could dance Marseille even now before I have moved my body through its spaces, plying my particular trade with it, do it just on the ride from Marignane to this, with the limestone vertebrae vaulting into the *calanques* as the bus hurtled us along, the jade water ruffled by the mistral, and now with the city pouring its cries and colour onto the pavements, it's like my repatterning has begun.

No such thing as a stranger here: from the Phoenician beginnings, this town has been built and fuelled by strangers, exile is its domicile... There's garish dressing with heavy eye make-up, concerted elegance, somehow on the edge of what Parisians would call bad taste because here it's marked as display; there's an excess in the attention it calls to the cut... There's excess even in the adornment of the street kids... (80-82)

Where Marseille is piled up for us in both extracts with the same kind of cumulative clauses and long sentences, in what amounts almost to companion prose poems, a closer look distinguishes the two views. The first is presented in a chronology of its various stages of architecture; it is sexualised and characterised as vulgar without any immediate indication of by whose standards this might be so (although elsewhere in the novel there is certainly an implied contrast with Paris, to which Rita's erstwhile close female friend Laurence has moved).

The second Marseille is explicitly opposed to Paris – “what Parisians would call bad taste” (Campbell 1999, 82) – it is less purely chronological than sociological, specifically peopled; there is a stronger sense in its depiction of the heterogeneity of those people that implies a challenge to the homogenising tendencies of terms like “the French”, of all our efforts to construct national identities and erase the multiple hyphens – as a snobbish character says elsewhere in the novel, “Marseille is not France, if you know what I mean” (347). Indeed we see that Tom-Tom too *is* Marseille even while arriving as “other” there – “it's like my repatterning has begun” (81). “No such thing as a stranger here”, she tells us – “...this town has been built and fuelled by strangers, exile is its domicile” (81). The interface here is not hard and smooth but entirely permeable, as Tom-Tom of the hyphenated name arrives to add the implied “Australian”, also permeable and internally heterogeneous, to that long list of those who have made up “Marseille”.

The metaphoric hyphen-child born in each case to parents of differing background is only the concrete embodiment of a general truth about the implication of self in other and other in self, which is not the same as a fusing or incorporation. Marion Campbell has written elsewhere, in an article called “Evil, Time, Redemption”: “Evil is a failure to recognise the sacredness of alterity, that the other also is a subject, not an object to be incorporated into a cannibalistic, infantile self” (Campbell 2000, 37). The hyphen acknowledges separation and connection at the same time, recalling the words spoken by *Prowler's* Lou Barb when she finally resigns from her compromised position at the Institute: “But we must cease calling authentic our acts of severance. Why can't we make our truth the other way, in reaching out, in joining?” (374).

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