

## Aboriginal Issues

Seminar II

1 December 2010

Aboriginal poetry

Read the following poems and articles:

- Kevin Gilbert: "Introduction." Inside Black Australia: An Anthology of Aboriginal Poetry. Ringwood: Penguin, 1988.
- Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Kath Walker): "We Are Going" (1964)  
"The Past"  
"Municipal Gum"  
"No More Boomerang"  
Jack Davis: "Aboriginal Australia"  
"John Pat"  
"The First Born"  
"Urban Aboriginal"  
Robert Walker: "Solitary Confinement"  
Mudrooroo Narogin (Colin Johnson): "Song Cycle of Jacky"  
"They Give Jacky Rights"  
"Jacky Demonstrates for Land Rights"  
"Jacky Hears the Century Cry"  
Eva Johnson: "Weevilly Porridge"  
"A Letter to My Mother"  
Iris Clayton: "Kidnappers"  
Grandfather Koori: "Never Blood So Red"  
Lionel Fogarty: "Breaking Down the Barriers" and "Guerilla Poetry: Lionel Fogarty's Response to Language Genocide." In Fogarty, Lionel G. New and Selected Poems: Munaljalil, Mutuerjaraera, South Melbourne: Hyland House, 1995.  
"I'm Not Santa"
- Good to know: Adam Shoemaker's book: Black Words White Page can be found on Googlebooks. There is a chapter on Aboriginal verse (179-230).

Wilbert, Kevin, ed. *Inside Black Australia: An Anthology of  
 Aboriginal Poetry: Reprinted & Revising 1978.*

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INTRODUCTION

Over the last two decades the Aboriginal voice has received quite a remarkable amount of attention and scrutiny in the European Australian world of literature. Many, especially those exercising a critical overview and expecting something different, more exotic perhaps, from a people whose traditional expression was an oral tradition, have not come to terms with this often raw, certainly rugged, and definitely truthful subjective material drawn from the creative impulse. There are a number of difficulties in perception and analysis, the most difficult of these is to attempt rationalisation of hundreds of thousands of years of oral tradition against the last twenty years of limited access to white education and education in the alien English tongue.

The successful transformation from oral to written form can be attested by the success of Oodgeroo Noonuccal's (Kath Walker's) writings, Robert Merritt's play, *The Cake Man*, Gerry Bostock's play *Here Comes The Nigger* and the more recent plays of Jack Davis. All of which have won acclaim here and overseas. In 1929 David Unaipon had his *Native Legends* published. This was the first complete work by an Aboriginal. Oodgeroo Noonuccal, with her book of poems *We Are Going*, published in 1964 under her previous name, Kath Walker, became our first poet to be published. Colin Johnson produced the first Aboriginal novel *Wild Cat Falling* in 1965. Jack Davis followed in 1970 with his first published book *The First Born and Other Poems*. In 1973 I completed the first major political work by an Aboriginal *Because A White Man'll Never Do It* and in 1978 *Living Black* the first collection of contemporary Aboriginal oral history from an Aboriginal viewpoint. Altogether 'Aboriginal Writers' as such were very thin on the ground – the merest handful – and, to add to our difficulties, were an unknown market potential.

In the 1980s, with the showing of *Hyllus Maris* and Sonia Berg's *Women of the Sun* on TV, and of other Aboriginal films, has come the realisation in the Aboriginal community that we can write and express our view more forcibly, and more importantly, more truthfully than can whites writing about or making

films about us. The result has been a small avalanche of Aboriginal biographies, plays, political writings and poetry. Many of these writers and poets are fully occupied in producing news magazines and broadsheets within the Aboriginal community, which in turn will ultimately produce a much wider participation in literature within the next decade.

A whole new education 'industry' has arisen in the academic area, where it would appear that every student is doing his or her PhD English thesis on 'Aboriginal Literature'. Some people ask the inevitable questions: What is an Aboriginal poet? How should they be differentiated and why differentiated from any other poet writing in English? Is it necessary to know that they *are* Aboriginal poets provided that the criteria are comparable, i.e. aesthetics, imagery, relationship to traditional forms or drawing on other poetic forms? Aboriginal poetry rattles, flings and bends the chains and rules of verse, sometimes in a remarkable manner. But within each bending one can see the cyclical incantation, the emotional mnemonics, the substance from which Aboriginal poetry is made.

When Europeans see a group of Aboriginals sitting around a camp-fire singing a corroboree song, they say 'corroboree' or 'Blackfellas yaekaaing'. But to *understand* what they are doing introduces a whole new area for examination. For instance, most people know what transcendental meditation is about, or yoga positions, or they understand something of the process when some people kneel down, clasp their hands together and look up into the sky, saying, 'Our Father which are in Heaven'. The Aboriginal way is the creative continuum:

At night as I sit by my camp-fire  
the Great Serpent Spirit a'star  
I sing songs of love to the Presence within  
as It plays with the sparks on my fire.\*

So, that which is seen as a bit of a sing-a-long, a 'yaekaaing' by Blacks, is a deeply sacred and spiritual experience. So much so that, if an uninvited man or woman enters the circle unbidden, they can well court a death sentence, for within that circle the Great Creator Essence is present.

Rarely has Aboriginal poetry much to do with aesthetics or pleasure or the pastoral views, those remarkable views the city person finds in the commonplace torn by bulldozers, overstocking and mining operations. There is another reality, a reality that could find parallels in the experience of the indigenous peoples of South Africa or Bolivia, or of oppressed populations within the national boundaries of one culture, the Jews in Nazi Germany or the Palestinians in Israel. For instance, I was talking to an old man in the desert country, blind from trachoma, one leg lost to leprosy, his hands twisted to a macabre semblance of digitless talons. He sat in the ashes of his camp-fire and, pointing a twig at an equally gnarled and twisted tree, said:

That leaf, the seed, that leaf  
my old old grandfather  
he was a baby  
little fella you know  
a big mob camped  
a big mob  
the horsemen came  
guns guns guns  
pulled stirrup irons from saddles  
bang bang blood  
and slit everywhere  
his mummy buried him  
and 'nother two quick  
under rocks and rocks  
and her blood run through  
the rocks and leaf  
the leaf with seed attached  
stuck to him  
red with seed stuck on  
the leaf the leaf  
with seed stuck on  
the leaf.

In emphasising the leaf, the seed and the rock, the speaker thus assured that I would remember the story thereafter by focussing on the leaf, the rocks, with seed attached to the leaf. In

subsequent reiteration, an emotional visual shorthand would be used with the key symbols, selecting the poetic metaphor.

Many critics of Aboriginal poetry, whether using polite language or digital graffiti, express some difficulty in finding comparisons and parallels. Their solemn enunciation on the aesthetics, the imagery, rhyming and metric patterns, metaphors, lucidity, fluidity, linguism, jingoism, polemicism, chantism, phenomenalism of the Aboriginal voice, is an assurance to us that the debate will long continue. Of course, there will be many who, not wanting to reveal any overt or covert racism, paternalism, condescension, misconception, self-deception or otherwise to the value of the contribution, will dart like a prawn in a barramundi pond to the safety of antecedents. To us it is like seeing a saga of these British Boat People returning to the wreck to salvage a plank and, holding it aloft, try to make comparisons with the indigenous tree and twist it to the semblance of the 'tree back home'.

Aboriginal poets share a universality with all other poets, yet differ somewhat in the traumatic and material experience of other poets, especially those who have wandered through Europe and, for that matter, Australia, starving in ghettos or rejecting established constraints.

Aboriginals have done their starving in miasmas, gunyahs, shanties or under loose sheets of old iron gathered from the white man's rubbish-tip; in below poverty-level ghettos, or in gaols. For instance, a white South African poet's voice is easily identifiable with his English, Dutch or American counterpart, especially when each so lavishly follows the 'new poetry' trends of the other in the 100th monkey imitation style that was so prevalent in Australia during the 70s. Aboriginal poets, on the other hand, can be identified with the freedom poets of the lately decolonised countries and as a new phenomenon upon the Australian scene, demanding a new perception of life around us, a new relation with the sanctity, the spiritual entity and living Presence within the earth and all life forms throughout the universe.

As Aboriginal bark paintings reveal the fundamental elements of the subject, so too does the Aboriginal poet reveal the fundamental subject of the song. The emotional experience is...

a great degree, an extension of the traditional oral language, where the history or song cycle is recorded on bark paintings – symbolic mnemonics which link together the beginning and end of the complex whole – stimulating recall of the intervening detail. In written language we see the poems as emotional mnemonics, which, to fully appreciate their import, one needs to understand a little of the poet, the social and historical context from which is wrought the subjective crystallisation of the voice.

Much of the historical subject of this poetry has been carved indelibly in blood over the past 200 years and before the poets were born. That the psyches still quiver with the shock of these horrendous times can be directly attributed to the continuing brutality, the national lies, the callous indifference to Black human life and the continuing practices of institutionalised racism today.

In an attempt to clarify some of the misconceptions about Aboriginal life and time in this land, I'll draw on some established criteria. The earliest existing record (skeletal remains, carbon dated implements) of the appearance of 'modern man' has been discovered in Australia. Australia has the oldest geological formations in the world and the oldest life forms. Aboriginals inhabited this land before the great ice-age, disproving the theory of the land bridge immigration path, in agreement with the Aboriginal story that we have *always* been here.

Aboriginal culture, based on a predictable and unchanging system of Law, obviated any war for possession of land. Each tribal area is the Sovereign Domain of that tribe born into that tribal area, governed by and governing, the social and spiritual system as set down at the Beginning, the start of time. The Dreaming is the first formation, the beginning of the creative process of mobile life/spirit upon and within the land. It is the days of creation when the Great Essence, the Spiritual Entity and minion spirits formed the Aboriginal version of the 'Garden of Eden' and recorded that creation and the laws abounding upon the turingas. These laws, this Dreaming, still nurtures the spiritual body of the People who still follow 'the Business' the proper way.

When Captain James Cook landed on these shores he was able

