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Black Poetics

Anita Heiss explores the relationship of Aboriginal poetry with the Aboriginal political voice

Make us mates, not poor relations,
Citizens, not serfs on stations.
Must we native old Australians
In our own land rank as aliens
Banish bans and conquer caste,
Then we'll win our own at last.

Kath Walker¹

POETRY is currently the strongest and largest body of published writing by Indigenous authors in Australia. Kath Walker, who was later known by her Aboriginal name Oodgeroo Noonuccal, was born on Stradbroke Island and is recognised as one of Australia's greatest Indigenous poets, writers and activists. When her poetry collection *We Are Going* was first published in 1964 it began a new phase in communication and relations between black and white Australia. It met with great sympathy and understanding on the part of the white community, running through seven editions and selling 500 copies on one day alone, which is remarkable for any book of poetry in Australia at any time before or since.

Oodgeroo's work was provocative and emotional and sought justice for Aboriginal people. Her 'Aboriginal Charter of Rights', quoted above, is perhaps one of her best-known poems, and was prepared and presented at the fifth Annual General Meeting of the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Straight Islanders, held in Adelaide in 1962. After returning from Adelaide conference, however, Walker found that her residence had been broken into and her clothing destroyed, evidence that some whites did not appreciate her political voice.

¹ Kath Walker, 'Aboriginal Charter of Rights', in *We Are Going* (Brisbane, 1964), p. 12.

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I believe poetry attracts Indigenous writers because it provides a political platform for Indigenous writers in lieu of or in addition to those offered by the more conventional channels for their voice in national political organisations or government infrastructures. I also suggest, that poetry, as opposed to prose, may be attractive to emerging writers, who often *believe* there are fewer restrictions on style and technique when writing poetry and who feels less threatened by at least attempting to pen their thoughts poetry. This feeling of literary inadequacy is largely born of their being part of a society with incredibly low literacy rates and often being raised in homes without books to encourage reading. These facts continue to have an impact on aspiring Indigenous writers who have important political statements to make, and seek to do so through the arts.

Much of what Aboriginal poets continue to write in the twenty-first century can be regarded as political because of the issues they raise, such as the politics of Aboriginal identity, the enduring impacts of policies of protection and separation on individuals and communities, the consequences of colonisation including dispossession of land, the high rates of Aboriginal incarceration and black deaths in custody, and the recent grassroots Reconciliation movement.

Josie Douglas and Marg Bowman, editors from the Institute of Aboriginal Development Press in Alice Springs, believe that when Aboriginal writing first began to emerge during the 1960s, poetry was the most popular genre because:

Aboriginal people were writing in a time of great political change and activism, land rights and the right to vote were all part of this era. Poetry at this time carried the voice of protest and was used as a political tool. Aboriginal poetry today still carries a political message. Even those themes that might normally be considered apolitical can't escape the political nature of Aboriginal people's experiences. Black poetry is a commentary on black lives, showing the diversity and range of the Aboriginal experience.²

The diversity and range of the Aboriginal experience are demonstrated by Aboriginal authors' assertion of Aboriginal identity through poetry. This has increasingly become a political issue, particularly for non-Aboriginal Australian as the demonstration of Aboriginal strength and pride in identity challenges non-Aboriginal Australians to redefine themselves and their own connection to country, the place they call home. Defining Aboriginality by nation and place is only one way of demonstrating such pride and identity, and in her first collection of poetry, *Black Woman Black Life* (1996), Kerry Reed-Gilbert declares her identity in 'Wiradjuri Woman' as she writes: 'I'm a Wiradjuri Woman/Born of this land.'

The real impact Aboriginal identity has on the production of writing, and how the politics of identity is expressed through the poetic form, emerges on reading Aboriginal poets, some of whom write in reaction to continued definitions of

² Josie Douglas and Marg Bowman, 'New Publisher for Black Poetry', *Five Bells*, vol 4, no. 6 (July 1997) p. 9.

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Aboriginality by white academics and anthropologists. Some of the strongest pieces are by Lisa Bellear and Tony Birch. Bellear is a Goernpil poet and performer. Her poem 'White Man's Approval' from her first collection, *Dreaming in Urban Areas* (1996), talks of the black man's fitting into the white structure in order to attain approval in that society, while providing the stereotype of what's 'not Aboriginal'.

Following from that theme and in response to white academic Bain Attwood's lengthy comments on Sally Morgan's work, and his suggestion that she forged her Aboriginal identity through the writing of *My Place*, writer and historian Tony Birch from the University of Melbourne wrote the poem 'Half Caste':

You see me
half Black
half white
but never whole

a corpse
torn apart
to toy with
my body-
an 'intellectual's'
commodity

you 'make' me
arranging
rearranging
my history
and identity
I turn to see

Myself
I am decapitated
Limbless
My body-
Re-assembled
In gubbah discourse³

The issue of Aboriginal identity arose only with naming the original people 'Aborigines' at the point of invasion. Clearly, there weren't any Aborigines before invasion, there were only peoples defined by nations, clans, skin groups, language groups and moieties. Our identities as 'Aborigines' were therefore given to us by the colonisers.

³ Tony Birch, "half Caste", *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 25, no. 100 (April 1993), p. 458.

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