1995

Body-Landguage: Linguistic inhabitation of land in the poetry of Judith Wright and Oodgeroo of the tribe Noonuccal

Anne Collett

Follow this and additional works at: https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi

Recommended Citation
Available at:https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol17/iss3/4

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au
Body-Landguage: Linguistic inhabitation of land in the poetry of Judith Wright and Oodgeroo of the tribe Noonuccal

Abstract
This paper was performed at a European Australian Studies Conference in Copenhagen (October 1995) and included the reading of a number of poems (in entirety) that cannot be given word-space here, and quite obviously cannot in print, carry the qualities of that performance, but the ‘word of warning’ issued at the conference stands as a political statement as much now as then. That warning went/goes like this:

This serial is available in Kunapipi: https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol17/iss3/4
Body-Languge: Linguistic inhabitation of land in the poetry of Judith Wright and Oodgeroo of the tribe Noonuccal

This paper was performed at a European Australian Studies Conference in Copenhagen (October 1995) and included the reading of a number of poems (in entirety) that cannot be given word-space here, and quite obviously cannot in print, carry the qualities of that performance, but the 'word of warning' issued at the conference stands as a political statement as much now as then. That warning went/goes like this:

I have always considered poetry to be a performing art – that so much more is realized when printed word is voiced with living intent and significance. So, whenever given the opportunity to speak to a 'real' audience, I always take that opportunity to perform the poems I discuss.

It might be added that the reception given the performance was warm, and that the performance of work discussed invariably brings the audience on-side – tuning their collective 'ear of mind' not only to what you have to say about the work, but also to the voice and the sentiment of the author you would speak about/with/to. Authors are people. This may seem a rather obtuse thing to say, but it is something all too often forgotten by critics and audience alike. Relative to this comment and additional to my warning was/is a prefacial note that is particular to the written tradition of academic criticism, and it is this:

I have chosen to use the poets' first names as opposed to surnames as a double name, after the first instance of naming, is cumbersome and seems to still the flow of prose, and it has always struck me as very 'English public school' and therefore both anti-woman and anti-democratic to use a surname only, as is the usual practice in academic writing. Names do matter, they sign a relationship and a stance towards that which is named (a point with which I am sure Oodgeroo – formerly Kath Walker – would be in agreement). After specific identity has been established in the initial use of a full name, why not refer to that person thereon/in by first name – personal name? It is all too easy to forget when reading printed word that people made this Word, in some cases people even died for this Word – Word is people power.

So to the paper:
Judith Wright was the poet of my childhood, whom I read for the affirmative joy of a poetry that spoke my land - the 'lean, clean hungry country' that was my 'blood's country' too.¹ What I found striking on returning to her writing after some twenty-five years, was the degree to which land was word-sculpted into body; and it is this particular aspect of her word-art that I would like to examine in this paper, in contrast to the almost total absence of what I have termed 'body-language' in the poetry of her 'other' half, her 'shadow-sister', Oodgeroo Noonuccal. In the poem 'Two Dreamtimes' (Alive, 1971)² Judith writes to Oodgeroo:

My shadow-sister, I sing to you
from my place with my righteous kin,
to where you stand with the Koori dead,
'Trust none not even poets'.

The knife's between us. I turn it round,
the handle to your side,
the weapon made from your country's bones.
I have no right to take it.

But both of us dies as our dreamtime dies.

Looking back over her work in interview with Jim Davidson in 1982, Judith Wright remarked upon a growing consciousness that even in her first book, she had been writing, and was still writing on 'the theme of white occupation'.³ 'Nigger's Leap, New England' (Moving Image, 1946) is exemplar of this recurrent theme in her oeuvre that now spans some 50 years: 'The eastward spurs tip backward from the sun/.../Night floods us suddenly as history/that has sunk many islands in its good time.'(pp. 15-16)(The poem was here read in full).

In light of relatively recent post-colonial theory and the articulation of the colonizer's discourse of 'other', one line from 'Nigger's Leap' leaps from the page, in a way it would never have done twenty years ago, 'And there they lie that were ourselves writ strange.' They that were 'ourselves writ strange' are the 'other' Australians, our (I speak here as a white Australian of settler stock) 'other' selves that Judith would give form to. These are the 'shadow' people of her poetry. Shadow is the black of white, the negative of positive, the distortion of proportion, the ephemeral of substance. In terms of Judith's view of Australian history, this shadow of existence, this 'dreamtime' is all that we have left of an indigenous culture that a few generations of men, her generations of men, have all but obliterated. In Platonic terms, the shadow on the cave wall is the only evidence we have of our reality - our belonging.

In 'Nigger's Leap, New England', the cliff over which the aboriginal peoples were hunted to their death is a 'spine of range' whose end point is a 'lipped' 'granite head'. It is as though the land itself screamed with their screams, and moulded itself to their body anguish.

Now cooled by time, the warm living flesh is become sculpted granite, whose silent lip recalls the horror of those silenced voices. The shadow
people are given substance, flesh become earth, bone become rock, in
the word sculpture of Judith’s poetry.

With some hesitation because I am still a little lost in a complexity
that is difficult to de-code, I would suggest that Judith’s poetry
attempts to give substance to shadow, to quicken bone with the blood
of word, not only that the submerged voices and stopped mouths of the
indigenous peoples might tell the ‘other’ side of the story of terra
nullius, but also that she herself might acquire an indigeneity – a
word/land bondage – that would enable her to speak her belonging
without guilt, without a sense of alienation.

On returning to New England in the late 1930s after an absence of
some years, Judith observed, ‘I knew then how closely connected I was
to that landscape. I began to write again and the poems came closer to
what I’d hoped for.’ These were the poems for which she is still best
known, poems like ‘South of My Days’, ‘Bullocky’ and ‘Nigger’s Leap,
New England’; but they were poems that did not write meaning or sing
belonging to the extent that she had hoped, and in the 1960s Judith was
to remark:

It will take four or five hundred years for us to become indigenes, and to write
poetry, unless you are an indigene, is very difficult. I don’t know how anybody
does it.

The landscape lost its character. The aborigines lived with the landscape and
every bit of it had meaning for them. We couldn’t accept any of their meanings.
This is what the Jindyworobaks were trying to get at but they were doing it the
wrong way. They were trying to deny their own meaning and to get back to
the aborigines’ meaning, but you can’t do this. You’ve got to live your own
meaning into it. You have to be yourself and at the same time come to terms
with something that you have robbed of its original meaning. This is an
extremely difficult thing to do."

Language, indigene, land and meaning are here linked in what
amounts to a definition of poetry as linguistic inhabitation.

When Elleke Boehmer writes of Judith’s work as a representation of
the land as ‘humanly viable, its geography made complex by historical
and spiritual associations’, of ‘the work of convicts, the dancing of
Aborigines, the solitary dreams of bullock drivers,’ as ‘enriching
Wright’s Australian earth’, her reading of Judith’s poetic landscape is
too skating. In a poem like ‘Nigger’s Leap, New England’, Judith does
much more than ‘read into dust and rocks the silenced history of
Aborigines pursued to death by whites’. She writes the anguish of
colonizer narrative into the land – she wordsculpts body into land. She
is not merely highlighting a writing that has been erased by the
colonists’ narrative, but is creating a new medium – a new mode of
expression – a new art of telling, not necessarily to make reparation for
the past, but to create a belonging built on the acknowledgement of
aboriginal inheritance and a land/body indivisibility that might also be
ours – given time, maybe even given a poetry that creates links
between land/body and word. It is an art that is painful in its making.
In the poem 'At Cooloola' (*The Two Fires*, 1955) she writes:

The blue crane fishing in Cooloola's twilight
has fished there longer than our centuries.
He is certain heir of lake and evening,
and he will wear their colour till he dies,

but I'm a stranger, come of a conquering people.
I cannot share his calm, who watch his lake,
being unloved by all my eyes delight in,
and made uneasy, for an old murder's sake. (p. 140)

Most commentary on Judith's poetry misses much of the poignancy, the hurt, the anguish of her historicizing, humanizing, the land – she is so acutely aware that although she was born of this land, she is not of this land because she has no claim to indigeneity. Although Les Murray writes, 'If...you sing the country, celebrate the country, then it's your country. These are the titles of ownership.' (1992), and Judith herself declared that 'Poetry ought not to be thought of as a discipline, but as a kind of praise', this singing, this celebration, is not enough. Her poetry sculpted the land into human form – word shapes land, shapes our perceptions of land, ascribes human meaning to rock and hill and tree and river. This is a poetry not of landscape but of landsculpt.

These hills my father's father stripped,
and beggars to the winter wind
they crouch like shoulders naked and whipped -
humble, abandoned, out of mind.

Of their scant creeks I drank once
and ate sour cherries from old trees
found in their gullies fruiting by chance.
Neither fruit nor water gave my mind ease.

I dream of hills bandaged in snow,
their eyelids clenched to keep out fear.
When the last leaf and bird go
let my thoughts stand like trees here.
'Eroded Hills' (*The Gateway*, 1953), (p. 83)

Although I remarked in a previous paper on Judith Wright that 'The land/word scape that informs her work is woman,' I would now ask what woman? I do not think it is the pioneer white woman, as perhaps represented by her grandmother, May, but it would seem more and more that it is black woman – that shadow woman of herself – that other half, the indigene with whom she desires union. The land that is owned, bartered, stripped, whipped and blinded, is woman – her bony slopes wincing under the winter ('South of My Days', p. 20), her eyes clenched to keep out fear, her delicate dry breasts now drooping over ribs of bone ('Eroded Hills', p. 83). She is the ancient earth that roots the tree, that bears and buries the fruit, that bears and buries the fruit –
the overarching night sky that has known a million years: "On her dark breasts we spring like points of light/and set her language on the map of night." ("Naming the Stars" (Five Senses, 1963), p. 206)

When asked for an explanation of her spoken desire to 'speak some quite new dialect' (in the poem 'For MR') Judith said,

I feel very deeply this gulf between us and the Aborigines: the Aborigines are the land, we merely think we own it. The kind of dialect that I was trying to indicate there, would be one which at least came closer to Aboriginal ways of thinking and feeling and looking, because that does seem to me to be a very important thing we’ve got to do, somehow. That’s what I mean when I say they are closer to their reality than we can imagine, because we’ve actually got no reality.9

Remember my opening remarks about Plato and the shadows on the wall? It would appear that colonizer-belonging can only be built on the word union of us and other – ourselves ‘writ strange’ in body-landguage. As I said before, what is often missing from many readings of Judith Wright’s work is a sense of the intensity, the anguish of the poetry that arises from the colonist’s sense of unbelonging, and unrightful habitation. This is not only a question of tone or voice, but something apparent in the very structure of the poetry in which imagistic word-sculpture attempts to create bridges – body-bridges. However, the language link that Judith builds between us and them is not in fact dialogic but imagistic, and therefore static.

Although Oodgeroo’s work bridges indigenous and colonist claims to habitation, there is no sense in which land/body/word ‘possession’, or belonging, is in any doubt, because, as Judith says, the land is hers (that is, Oodgeroo’s). Therefore what is particularly striking in a comparison of the two poetic oeuvres is the almost total absence of land/body imagistic merging in Oodgeroo’s word form. She declares in ‘We Are Going’710:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{We are} & \text{ the wonder tales of Dream Time}, \\
& \text{ the tribal legends told.} \\
\text{We are} & \text{ the past, the hunts and the laughing games}, \\
& \text{ the wandering camp fires.} \\
\text{We are} & \text{ the lightning-bolt over Gaphembah Hill} \\
& \text{ Quick and terrible.} \\
& \text{And the Thunder after him, that loud fellow.} \\
\text{We are} & \text{ the quiet daybreak paling the dark lagoon.} \\
\text{We are} & \text{ the shadow-ghosts creeping back as the camp fires burn low.} \\
\text{We are nature and the past, all the old ways} \\
& \text{ Gone now and scattered.} \\
& \text{The scrubs are gone, the hunting and the laughter.} \\
& \text{The eagle is gone, the emu and the kangaroo are gone from this place.} \\
& \text{The bora ring is gone.} \\
& \text{The corroboree is gone.} \\
& \text{And we are going.} (p. 74, emphasis mine)
\end{align*}
\]

‘We are going’ is a happening – a form of present continuous verb, that
Anne Collett does not only indicate the state of imminent danger of extinction of the aboriginal peoples, but also carries a challenge (when we go, you go to, for we are the land that you would possess and without the land you are nothing) and a sense of forward momentum – we are going somewhere ... One of the things that came to my attention when reading the work of the two poets is the degree to which Judith’s grammar resolved itself in a past tense and Oodgeroo’s in a present tense. After six generations of aboriginal ‘sit-down’ that amounts to a heavy loss of productivity and creativity, Oodgeroo, as word-bearer/bringer for her people cannot afford a loss of momentum. It is publish or perish – sing or die. Judith’s poetry, on the other hand, is ‘silted’, still frozen in a complexity of imagery that also bears a heavy load – but it is a burden of the past, not of the future. In the poem ‘At Cooloola’ (p. 141) she writes of:

Those dark-skinned people who once named Cooloola
knew that no land is lost or won by wars,
for earth is spirit: the invader’s feet will tangle
in nets there and his blood be thinned by fears.

And walking on clean sand among the prints
of bird and animal, I am challenged by a driftwood spear
thrust from the water; and, like my grandfather,
must quiet a heart accused by its own fear.

The word/image ‘silted’ occurs often throughout her work, and for me it signifies a combination of richness and yet of backing-up, a loss of forward momentum, an involution, perhaps even a collapsing into self. In ‘Old House’ (The Gateway, 1953) Judith images her great-great-great grandfather moving through ‘that mindless country’ – a country in which he is lost without signs of belonging – ‘the nameless trees’; but the aboriginal people sing him into the country:

In the camp by the river they made up songs about him,
songs about the waggons, songs about the cattle,
songs about the horses and the children and the woman.
These were a dream, something strayed out of a dream. (p. 83)

They sing him into their dreamtime – their belonging, but for Judith and for her great-great-great grandfather, the doing and the singing is an unreality – a dream that is incomprehensible and impossible to possess: for Judith it represents ‘the past’ whose distance she would bridge with her poetry but the fragments will not make song, they remain silted:

But the sad river, the silted river,
under its dark banks the river flows on,
the wind still blows and the river still flows.
And the great broken tree, the dying pepperina,
clutches in its hands the fragments of song
The poem ends without a stop\textsuperscript{13} – there is hope – but is it enough? The clutching hands of the dying tree image a degree of desperation.

Oodgeroo cannot afford this collapse into self, this silting of past. She is a poet on display, poet of her vanquished people who refuse to go silently. This role of poet in the public arena is something Judith experiments with but does not stay with, perhaps because this oratorical form cannot carry the complexity of her inheritance. Where Oodgeroo can be forthright and outward looking, Judith is always forced back into herself – questioning her responsibility, her liability, her complicity in a night that ‘floods us suddenly as history’.

Their differing poetic structures are not then just a matter of given word traditions, that of the written and the oral, or Western European and Australian aboriginal, in fact, both Judith Wright and Oodgeroo draw to some degree on an oral inheritance of ballad derived from the Scots. In a sense they both sing the land into history, but where Judith must create, must wordsculpt that belonging, Oodgeroo can rely on a word talisman that represents the narrative memories of people in place and time – the ‘songlines’ of a mythical, ancestral, hereditary land/body unity of thousands of years that she ably contemporizes, as in ‘Ballad of the Totems’, (p. 24). (This ballad was read in entirety) A ballad of totem does not sing of past totemic relationships, but of on-going relationships, undiminished by a Western European sense of time:

\begin{quote}
My father was Noonuccal man and kept old tribal way,
His totem was the Carpet Snake, whom none must ever slay;
But mother was of Peewee clan, and loudly she expressed
The daring view that carpet snakes were nothing but a pest.
\end{quote}

‘Mother’ does not express this daring view of carpet snakes because she is a modern woman who rejects ‘old tribal way’ but because she is of the Peewee clan and holds the timeless position held by those of the Peewee clan that carpet snakes are nothing but a pest. The story is timelessly regenerative; and thus, the ‘old tribal way’ is not actually the ‘old’ way, but rather, it is ‘the way’. Oodgeroo’s people are not bone, are not rock, are not history in a past tense – they are living present green-growing, lightning-making, thunder-breaking, shadow-creeping, daybreak-paling, tribal legends not just ‘told’ but telling ... for Oodgeroo is telling – she is paperbark – she is the song. In interview in 1988 Oodgeroo relates how Paster Don Brady “renamed” her:

\begin{quote}
And he said, Kathy, if we had our own way of life, if we could decide our own destiny, the tribal elders would have called you Oodgeroo, because you couldn’t do it without your sister, the paperbark tree. You need the paperbark. Which was quite logical. And so when I went home I wrote the story of Oodgeroo who had lost her tribes and was trying to get back to them, and it’s only lately that the people who’ve read the story have realized that I was writing about myself.\textsuperscript{14}
\end{quote}
In her own retelling of the story/legend/myth of the paperbark-tree Oodgeroo re-situates herself within the continuum of dreamtime—singing/writing herself into story that does not remain fixed in the past but moves with that past into present and future. She begins her retelling of the paperbark story with reference to new and old dreamtimes:

In the new Dreamtime there lived a woman, an Aborigine, who longed for her lost tribe, and for the stories that had belonged to her people; for she could remember only the happenings of her own Dreamtime. But the old Dreamtime had stolen the stories and hidden them. The woman knew that she must search for the old stories—and through them she might find her tribe again.15

Working from a Western European perspective of 'new and old', Oodgeroo sings/writes herself into dreamtime continuum: 'Time had lost his power over her because Biambi has made it so.' (p. 32) Time is no longer perceived as though through the wrong end of a telescope. Temporality cannot be diminished or distanced. Kath Walker’s renaming of herself, Oodgeroo, through story, signifies a possession of self and community in land:

And when next the paperbark-trees filled the air with the scent of the sweet, honey-smelling flowers, they took her into their tribe as one of their own, so that she would never again be without the paperbark she needed for her work. They called her Oodgeroo. (p. 32)

When Oodgeroo says, 'Let no one say the past is dead./The past is all about us and within' ('The Past', p. 94), she is not trapped within or by tribal memories but sings them into living continuous day; for 'a thousand thousand camp fires in the forest' and a thousand thousand stories are in the blood and will be 'writ strange', not on bone but in the song—in living word—on paperbark. When, in the last line of 'Eroded Hills' Judith expresses the wish that her thoughts might 'stand like trees', there is a staticty—a desire for replacement rather than a desire for word that might generate new tree, new leaf and bird. Bird, leaf and tree, like the aboriginal people in Judith’s poetry have turned to stone, but the aboriginal people in Oodgeroo’s word are not stone, are not past. This is the difference between regenerative word as opposed to the word of signification—word of headstone (gravestone) and epitaph. For Oodgeroo word and body are blossoming tree—the living breath—for which there is no need to interpose the mediation of metaphor—the bridge of body-language.

In conclusion I would like to address the questions raised in my initial proposal for this paper—it is always interesting to read what one’s intentions were after having written the paper. Although I intimated in the proposal that Judith Wright and Oodgeroo draw on two very different poetic traditions—one oral and the other written, I am not sure that this is quite what I want to say, or what I have said.

Aboriginal ‘writing’ has no inimical or inherent written tradition (by
‘written’ tradition I mean a ‘word-writing’ tradition rather than a scribal tradition of sign and symbol that does not include word); and I do not believe a mere transcription of orature is sufficient to describe the word-writing process. Quite what that involves would take another paper. However, I would say that the writing of the indigenous Australian peoples cannot and should not be anthropologized or colonized by a terminology that would see it as a mere re-writing of orality or a contemporary translation of a mythical dreamtime. Dreamtime is not a past time but a ‘present continuous’, as Oodgeroo makes plain. What is apparent is that poetic structure – the make-up and mode of the word-vehicle – is largely determined by the writers’ position within ‘history’ and the audience to whom he/she would speak. For Judith, ‘blood’s red thread still binds her fast in history’. For Oodgeroo, ‘history’ must be future – weaving stories into current corroboree. The ‘two dream-times’ as Judith calls them are different from each other but dependent upon each other for their survival. Publishers might shake their heads at poets (‘Two Dreamtimes’), but song is our only means of pulling the fragments together into a continuum of human/land belonging.

NOTES

1. From ‘South of My Days’ (The Moving Image, 1946), p.20. This and all subsequent quotation from Judith Wright’s poems will be from Collected Poems: 1942-1970 (North Ryde: Angus & Robertson, 1971/75) unless noted otherwise. Although I have indicated the original volume of publication, the page numbering refers to the Collected Poems.
3. Interview with Jim Davidson, ‘Judith Wright’ in Meanjin, 41, 2 (1982), p. 325: ‘The further I went into it, even in my first book, the more I became aware I was writing poetry on the theme of the white occupation, and it has become a rather strong one in my life. I don’t know anybody else who was doing this when I began, and now I think I can possibly claim to be rather original.’
10. Quotations of Oodgeroo’s poetry will be taken from My People: A Kath Walker Collection (Brisbane: Jacaranda Press, 1970), unless otherwise noted.
11. An approximation of Irrumula’s words from a paper delivered at the conference.
12. ‘The Cycads’ (Woman to Man, 1949), pp. 41-2; and ‘Old House’ (The Gateway,
13. The lack of punctuational stop at the end of a poem is extremely unusual in Judith's poetry which inclines me to feel a little hesitant. The poem appears without stop in *Collected Poems* but I do not have access to the poem as printed in *The Gateway* to check original punctuation.


16. See 'Corroboree' (p. 20) and 'Bora' that begins 'Stone Age youth...'(p. 34).