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'The Dark Side of the Moon': Aboriginal Poetry

Abstract
Aboriginal achievement Is like the dark side of the moon, For it is there But so little known. (Ernie Dingo)
Before turning to our subject I must make a preliminary point. It is the point made by Kevin Gilbert in his introduction to his anthology of Aboriginal poetry, Inside Black Australia:

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Before turning to our subject I must make a preliminary point. It is the point made by Kevin Gilbert in his introduction to his anthology of Aboriginal poetry, *Inside Black Australia*:

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 reflecting established constraints.

All poetry has to do with the play of language. But, as John Frow points out, the objects, conditions and relations of this play, of the structures of its discourse and the conditions of enunciation and reception are also part of the operations of social power and at the moment, for a whole set of reasons, psychological as well as political and economic, these operations are particularly uneasy. If identity politics can never be entirely innocent, at the moment in Australia they are particularly complicated, not merely at the public but at the personal level. As a leading figure in the land rights debate, the former director of the National Farmers' Federation, Rick Farley, observes, there seems to be 'something in the psyche' which bedevils relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians.

In her poem 'The Dark Ones' Judith Wright explores this anxiety, meditating on a group of Aboriginal fringe dwellers come to town on pension day:

On the other side of the road
the dark ones stand.
Something leaks in our blood
like the ooze from a wound.

This anxiety as she wrote earlier, is 'the mortal wound' which 'the blacks had known how to deal in return for their own dispossession ... the deep and festering consciousness of guilt' for the violent occupation of the
country, officially unacknowledged but privately deeply troubling.

The night ghosts of a land  
only by day possessed  
Come haunting into the mind  
like a shadow cast.

Day has another side.  
Night has its time to live,  
a depth that rhymes our pride  
with its alternative.  

This anxiety, intensified by current debates over Aboriginal land rights, the rise of Pauline Hanson and, on the Aboriginal side, increasing militancy, means that the non-Aboriginal critic must tread warily when discussing Aboriginal writing. This is not to sacrifice aesthetics to politics but to suggest that aesthetics should also honour ethical concerns since, pace the more extreme post-modernist position, any text arises out of a world inhabited by human beings and remains a part of it: language is a primary cultural and therefore historical and political fact.

For a non-Aboriginal critic to discuss Aboriginal poetry is therefore not a simple matter since it takes us to the frontier between cultures, a frontier, moreover, which, as we have said, is fraught with anxieties on one side and pain and growing anger on the other. Significantly, Aboriginal critics seem more aware of these complexities than most non-Aboriginal ones. Thus, noting that over the last two decades Aboriginal writing has received a remarkable amount of attention and scrutiny from the wider community, Kevin Gilbert points out that this attention has often included cultural misunderstanding, even insensitivity, and has often been Orientalist in its approach:

Many, especially those exercising a critical overview and expecting something different, more exotic perhaps, from a people whose tradition, have not come to terms with this often raw, certainly rugged, and definitely truthful subjective material drawn from the creative impulse.

The hegemonic assumptions of such criticism are apparent in Andrew Taylor’s review of the second volume of poems by Kath Walker (who later took her Aboriginal name, Oodgeroo Noonuccal).

She is no poet, and her name is not poetry in any true sense. It hasn’t that serious commitment to formal rightness, that concern for making speech time under all circumstances, which distinguishes Buckley and Wright at their best. [Her book] belongs more rightly to that field of social protest in which Miss Walker’s statements are most relevant and moving.

Walker is blamed for not measuring up to standards set by contemporary Australian poets belonging to the non-Aboriginal mainstream. By these standards what was they called poetry of ‘propaganda and protest’, was
'forbidden territory'. From an Aboriginal point of view, however, this was not so much a literary as a political position: according to Mudrooroo Narogin, for instance, Taylor's was the 'voice of Anglo-Celtic dominance'.

Far from being aesthetic, Mudrooroo sees this criticism as essentially political. Walker's poetry was not acceptable because she was refusing to stay in her place. She was extending the Aboriginal struggle for equal rights and justice into the arena of literature, knocking on the doors of the Anglo-Celtic literary establishment with verse often as simple as a fist.

This controversy occurred in the late 1960s and critics like Andrew Taylor would now take a very different position. In any case, even then some critics, notably Judith Wright, recognized the power of Walker's poetry — as the general public did: her books ran through numerous editions. Today, of course, Aboriginal writing, like dance, music and the visual arts are fashionable. But fashion can be and sometimes is a form of exploitation and many Aboriginal people continue to suspect this interest, particularly when it is detached from their political struggles. This essay therefore will attempt to make the connection, not from any desire to be polemical but because Aboriginal writing is making clear that hegemonic notions of Australian literature, like hegemonic notions of the meaning of the word 'Australian' generally are not intellectually or ethically sustainable, however much they may appeal to popular emotion.

Mudrooroo contends that critics like Taylor refused to recognize Walker as a 'poet' because of their belief, unconscious perhaps, that 'the place of an Indigenous writer ... was on the fringe'. Today, however, definitions of 'fringe' and 'centre' are becoming increasingly contentious as Australians discover that we all live on a frontier, or better a series of frontiers, in a shifting, dangerous but also creative space in which different cultures, European and non-European, post-colonial, colonial and pre-colonial, encounter one another. This essay is written within this space.

In doing so I will take Judith Wright's response as my model. When Jacaranda Press sent her the manuscript of Walker's first collection, We Are Going, Wright recognized that it was different, politically charged and provocative, making a 'galvanizing set of demands on its readers'. But where other critics dismissed lines like this as 'mere propaganda'

You dishearten, not defend us.
Circumscribe, who should befriend us.
Give us choice, not cold coercion,
Status, not discrimination,
Human rights, not segregation,

she believed it was genuine poetry and represented a 'new voice' and a significant one. In contrast with most poetry of the time which she found 'largely boring and cliché-ridden' and in which 'ideas were few; fire and urgency were nearly non-existent'. With their 'merciless accusation, their
notes of mourning and challenge', their clarity and incisive quality these poems in her view were functional as poetry should be, breaking open what she saw as the prevailing 'tight-lipped narrowness of response'.¹⁶ For her 'poetry had little value if it didn't work in sparking response; this manuscript was working, as far as I was concerned. It was felt along the blood ... [and was thus a] contribution to Australian poetry in its own right'.¹⁷

This may seem naive to those used to the sophistications of contemporary theory. But it is the position I also wish to take – the self which felt the poems 'along the blood' was open to difference. As Wright realized, the reason why many critics are sceptical about the worth of Aboriginal poetry are political, their resistance to the other:

[The] ... sharply pointed comment [of Walker's poems] could hurt and startle readers who had never encountered such criticism before ... Such readers reacted with bitter resentment, sometimes translating that resentment into critical dismissal.¹⁸

Still today much Aboriginal poetry challenges the genteel tradition within which much criticism still exists. As Walker herself realized, the reason her poems were rejected by many was because they were 'somewhat angry and bitter; as though even atrocities were never to be mentioned by nice people'.¹⁹ Where the accepted view was, often still is, that 'poetry makes nothing happen', she and most other Aboriginal poets insist that it does and should.

The first point to be made about Aboriginal poetry, therefore, is that it is 'committed' poetry. As Kevin Gilbert notes: 'Rarely has Aboriginal poetry much to do with [mere] aesthetics or pleasure or ... pastoral views. [In it] there is another reality.'²⁰ This is the reality, the situation of Aboriginal people, displaced and dispossessed, struggling to hold on to an ancient and complex culture, a people colonized within their own country.

The most significant of these poets whose concerns are directly political are Kath Walker, Jack Davis (also an important playwright), Kevin Gilbert, Colin Johnson (the name under which he wrote initially, but which he changed later to Mudrooroo Narogin), Maureen Watson and Bobbi Sykes. But there are very many others represented in the anthologies, from traditional communities (many of these write first in their own language) and from fringe-dwellers and urban Aboriginal people.

What is notable here is not just the number of people writing poetry, and poetry of some power, but also that it is essentially communal and has little to do with mere 'self-expression' – traditional Aboriginal culture was communal, not individualistic. In this tradition which still exists for most Aboriginal people, even those in the cities, all living things and the earth itself are part of this community. Many poems still express this sense of reality. For them the objects of the external world and even human acts and events are not valuable in and for themselves but to the extent to which they reveal the sacred reality, the life of the universe itself, expressed in the stories, songs, dances and paintings of the Dreaming, the beginning of time.
from which all existence derives, and with which human existence should be in tune.

Some of these traditional songs are still current in remote parts of the country where the culture has not been so badly damaged. Some have been translated into English, in Strehlow’s great collection, for example. Parts of others, like the Wonguri-Mandijigai people’s Song Cycle Of The Moon Bone, the Dulngulg Song Cycle of the Mudbara people, poems celebrating the fertility and power of nature and designed to give it increase, have appeared in Les Murray’s Anthology of Australian Poetry. But since their purposes are essentially sacred and associated with ceremonies which belong only to initiates, some to men and some to women, they should not concern us here.

The exception is perhaps Mudrooroo Narogin’s Dalwura, a long poem based on the traditional form of the manikay which draws on Aboriginal imagery but also makes use of Indian, Thai and even Caribbean myths to tell the story of Dalwura, the black bittern, who flies from the west coast of Australia to India where he spends some time and then to Scotland and England, returning at peace at last with the spirits after an encounter with the sacred prostitutes in Thailand. This story in fact parallels that of Mudrooroo himself, so that Dalwura is an example of the Aboriginal ability to adapt culture to present needs – though whether all traditional people would approve of it is another matter.

More typical are the poems written by people removed from their traditional lands but which still continue the traditional functions of poetry, attempting to establish harmony between its creatures and outward shape and inner spirit of the land, keeping alive what Kevin Gilbert calls the ‘creative continuum’ reflected in these lines, for example:

At night as I sit by my campfire
the Great Serpent Spirit a star
I sing songs of love to the Presence within
as it plays with the sparks on my fire.

What others may see as a mere ‘sing song’, a ‘yackaing by the Blacks’, or as ‘mere doggerel’ may in fact, as Gilbert says, express a deeply spiritual experience.

Many, if not most, Aboriginal poems therefore are written for as well as from their own community and thus continue the traditional task of poetry, which is to keep community alive. In ‘The First Born’, for instance, Jack Davis takes up the poet’s responsibility not only to keep alive the voice of the people but also the voice of the land whose life they have always shared and cared for.

Where are my first-born, said the brown land, sighing;
They came out of my womb long, long ago.
They were formed of my dust – why, why are they crying
And the light of their being barely aglow?
I strain my ears for the sound of their laughter,  
Where are the laws and legends I gave?..26

Community, as we have said, is crucial, as Bruce McGuinness and Dennis Walker insist in their essay on ‘The Politics of Aboriginal Literature’. ‘If we are going to survive, we are going to have to do it as a community, we are going to have to do it as a nation and not as individuals.’27 But ‘nation’ here is not an abstract term. Eva Johnson, for instance, reminds us of this when she says that she writes ‘about some of the special people whom I love, people who are important to us’. It is the fact that many of them are ‘victims of an inhumane environment’28 which gives these poems their political quality, not the desire to be polemical.

The energy and urgency of much Aboriginal poetry comes from the realization that, since in Maureen Watson’s words, ‘black reflections aren’t in white mirrors’, they are in danger of becoming invisible and are thus threatened with loss of identity:

Aboriginal people might as well be in a foreign country ... Everywhere around us are the reflections of a foreign race; a foreign people and they are making us foreigners in our own country.29

This crisis of identity compounded by the problems of being a woman in a patriarchal society empowers poems like Eva Johnson’s ‘Right To Be’:

Don’t stereotype an image of what you want me to be  
I’m a woman and I’m Black and I need to be free.  
I’ll give back your sense of values you bestowed upon me  
And regain my pride, my culture, and true identity.30

But Aboriginal men are equally threatened. Kevin Gilbert puts it vividly:

Today a young Aboriginal bloke, he’s in between. He’s lost. He don’t know which way to turn. Yet when he gets [back to his own country] ... he will know that there’s some superior part ... where the dingo cries out in the dark.31

Poetry is perhaps one of the most powerful ways of taking Aboriginal people out into that sacred darkness. Sometimes this means rehearsing the grim story of the last two hundred years, writing the sorrowful experience of Aboriginal people back into the history which has largely ignored it. Thus Jack Davis’ ‘Aboriginal History’ is dedicated ‘to the Others’, that is, to non-Aboriginal Australians, and designed to attack our complacencies:

You once smiled a friendly smile,  
Said we were kin to one another.

But the poem insists on the other side of the story, speaking in the name of the dead –
You murdered me with rope, with gun,
Then massacre my enclave,
You buried me deep on McLarty's run
Flung into a common grave –

and concludes with the challenge:

Now you primly say, you're justified
And sing of a nation's glory,
But I think of a people crucified –
The real Australian story.32

This kind of poetry speaks the voice of the defeated into the culture of the winners. But it is also true to their tradition in the way in which in its ending it sets past and present in the context of myth – even if in this case it is the Christian myth of the resurrection – and appeals from history to the world of sacred belief. But it also dramatizes the situation of the Aboriginal writer as a 'Janus type figure with one face turned to the past and the other to the future while still existing in a post-modern multicultural Australia in which he or she must fight for cultural space.'33

Many poems celebrate this fight – in this sense continuing the tradition of the 'brag'. Thus Kath Walker in 'Assimilation – No!'

Change and compel, slash us into shape
But not our roots deep in the soil of old.
We are different in hearts and minds
In a different body. Do not ask of us
To be deserters, to disown our mother.34

- the mother, of course, being the land itself, the source of their strength, grieving but still sustaining her children and thus, as Davis' 'The First Born' makes clear, the ultimate source of their hope.

Many poems, therefore, particularly those of traditional people who still live in their own country and use their own language, let the land speak through them. Its creatures speak, too, as in Irene James Napurrurla's 'The Water', written originally in her own language which echoes the rhythms of the water:

Water running past the rocks, small rocks and big rocks,
Birds talking in the trees and animals walking – goanna emu and many other animals.

- Clouds gathering big wind blowing, throwing trees and grass, so far away.35

Even when writing about non-native animals, as in 'The Horse', also written, originally 'in language', there is still the traditional feeling for the interdependence of all life:
Poor horse, sick with sores,
Chasing it without feeling sorry for it.
Day by day, it just goes on,
Poor horse, it makes me feel sad.\textsuperscript{36}

Other poems express anxiety at the influence of Western culture. Jennie Hargreaves Narripijinpa's 'Child Leave The Tape Recorder', written in language, is both a plea and a command in the name of traditional culture:

\begin{verbatim}
Leave the White man's things
Music, grog, cigarettes, video
and those other things as well!

Come to the ceremonies
Come hunting and dancing,
Come, so that you can know your own culture.\textsuperscript{37}
\end{verbatim}

At the same time many Aboriginal people are also using Western technology for their own ends and in their own ways. Many Aboriginal bands like Warumpi, from traditional country, have been successful not only nationally but inter-nationally, adapting Country and Western music to sing their concerns and their culture into popular consciousness and some traditional people, the Tjapukai from Far North Queensland, for example, recorded their songs in their own language for sale throughout the country and the world.\textsuperscript{38}

Poetry continues its traditional function in this way, celebrating and empowering community. Even an urban poet like Bobbi Sykes, for example, highly educated in Western culture – she holds a doctorate from Harvard – can write a poem whose beginning the Spirit at the beginning of a new year upon the sufferings of her people.

\begin{verbatim}
Dear Spirit,
Here we are - at the end of a long year of struggle
Against foes of old - oppression, hunger, pain, - And we stand again at the
threshold of a New Year.\textsuperscript{39}
\end{verbatim}

Nevertheless it is important not to under-estimate the profound difficulties which face Aboriginal writers in general and poets in particular. In the first place the fact that traditional culture was oral and has no written literature means that the task of transposing traditional feeling is fraught with difficulty. So, too, with the fact that in their culture poetry belongs to everyone, not just the few with the education and taste for it. This means that non-Aboriginal readers often have difficulty with the rhetoric qualities of Aboriginal poetry, with its emphasis on rhyme, for instance, and with its apparent lack of formal and linguistic complexity.

But there is a more profound problem. The English language was an essential tool in the policy of assumption, the attempt to destroy Aboriginal culture. On the reserves and missions Aboriginal people were forbidden to speak their own language and obliged to speak English. Writing in English
Aboriginal poets can therefore feel themselves accomplices to the attempt to destroy their culture, writing as they do in the language of the conquerors – this anxiety is evident in the move by many, most notably Kath Walker and Colin Johnson, to reject the names given them by white society and claim their tribal names, Oodgeroo Noonuccal and Mudrooroo Narogin, later simply Mudrooroo.  

A poem by Eva Johnson ‘Remember’ expresses the anguish of this separation from her own language and its connection with the land and its life – significantly, the poem is called ‘A Letter To My Mother’:

> Around fire, night time sitting
> With kin – sharing food
> cooked in hot ashes
> Children laughing
> Mother singing
> baby on breast
> Women telling stories, sharing, giving
> Songs, spirit names, teaching
> IN LANGUAGE.

She hopes to return to traditional ways:

> One day your dancing, your dreaming, your song
> Will take me your Spirit back where I belong
> My Mother, the earth, the land – I demand
> Protection from aliens who rule, who command
> For they do not know where their dreaming began.

But for many this is no longer possible. A number of poets, notably Lionel Fogarty, Graeme Dixon, Mudrooroo and Robert Walker, look to a solution within English. Accepting that if they are to speak to Aboriginal people generally and to speak to non-Aboriginal Australians they must write in English, they are working to put their own Aboriginal mark on and find their own distinctive voice within it.

This is not entirely remarkable, of course. Other colonized peoples face a similar problem, and Mudrooroo has drawn on the Rastafarian language developed in the West Indies in poems like ‘Song Seven’ in *The Song Circle of Jacky*, dedicated incidentally to Bob Marley, a Rastafarian singer, and in any case, as Mudrooroo points out, any significant poet must struggle with language to turn it to the ends of his own vision. But Aboriginal poets also face the problem that the Aboriginal English they want to claim is the language of people many of whom have, in Mudrooroo’s words, been reduced to the level of a ‘lumpen-proletariat’ and whose language often reflects their impoverishment.

Nevertheless, as we have seen, by and large, the power of the situation they express often makes up for this. So, too, does the counterpoint effect of setting this language against the expectations of the mainstream. One example is Mudrooroo’s choice of Jacky for the voice which speaks in *The
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Song Circle of Jacky: 'Jacky Jacky' is the name given to the racist stereotype of the Aborigine as dirty, drunken and ignorant.

Graeme Dixon and Robert Walker are perhaps less self-conscious in their use of Aboriginal experience, perhaps because it is the language of their own lives – Mudrooroo has spent most of his time in recent years as an academic. The simple authenticity of these lines from Dixon’s ‘Country Girl’, for instance, gives them a peculiar power, a sense of powerful feeling straining against the poverty of the language:

A mob of skinny
Cousins and mates
playing chasey
through the trees ...
... Dark brown wrinkled
Greyhaired oldies
spinning ancient yarns
under shady gums.46

Robert Walker’s ‘Okay Let’s Be Honest’ has a similar power, intensified by the fact that not long afterwards he met his death in prison:

Okay, let’s be honest:
I ain’t no saint,
but then again,
I wasn’t born in heaven.
Okay, Okay!
So let’s be honest;
I’ve been in and out
since the age of eleven.47

But of all Aboriginal poets it is perhaps Lionel Fogarty who has made the most sustained and consistent attempt to reject the language imposed on him and his people, perhaps because, growing up on the infamous Cherbourg Reserve in Queensland, he grew up in the thick of the struggle. There, as Kevin Gilbert described it in his introduction to Fogarty’s poems, education consisted of counting your money, not reading too well past the ‘Don’t Trespass’ and ‘Keep Off’ signs level, and not being taught to write ‘too well’ in case the pupil learned to write history, or, more alarmingly, make written complaint of the abuse of human rights by the authorities.48

Fogarty’s way of defying this education has not been to storm the citadel of mainstream education but to make his own language, displacing and distorting accepted grammar and syntax, as Mudrooroo writes admiringly, ‘in an effort to create new meaning ... [and] to shift white meaning to black meaning’ which most non-Aboriginal readers find almost incomprehensible since, according to Mudrooroo, it reflects an ‘underlying structure of Aboriginality’,49 not only in its language but also in the
experience which generates it.

Mudrooroo's extended discussion of one of Fogarty's poems 'Free Our Dreams', which there is no space to refer at length, makes this clear. One example will have to suffice, the gloss on the lines

So come on down 
and freehold us.

As Mudrooroo reminds us, freehold is a white legal term and as such a key term in the Aboriginal struggle for land. Fogarty uses it, however, to assert the Aboriginal sense of land as part of the very life of the people who belong to rather than own it. Thus 'to free the people means to free the land'.

It is time to conclude. The argument has been that for Aboriginal people poetry has always been an essential part of their culture and that it remains so today, preserving the traditions of the past and speaking in the name of those who died and were defeated in the struggles of the last two centuries, claiming their rights, their dignity and their culture in the present and speaking in their own voice. The significance for Aboriginal Australians is obvious. But what of the rest of us? The usual answer is that it is politically significant and I would certainly not deny this. But it could also be argued that Aboriginal poetry has a wider significance also, reminding us of the importance of the language of poetry as language which does not merely reflect but also creates reality, bringing into play experiences beyond the scope of mere rationality, a language of promise as well as of description. This is language which displaces the centrality of reason on which our present culture relies to the extent that it is the language of experience rather than of abstraction from it, of face-to-face encounter with other human beings and the world, experienced not so much part of objective reality but part of our own subjectivity. In this way ethics becomes primary.

In turn this means attributing a new importance to literature in general and poetry in particular. By and large Western culture has become a closed and self-referential system, a text without context. But Aboriginal writing challenges this system, insisting on texts fraught with context and a context of an adversarial kind which demands a different kind of reading. This reading is open, generating new meanings. Where most texts within our culture tend to abstract from experience, belong, to use Levinas' word, to 'the said', Aboriginal poetry call us to a living interpretive struggle with it, which involves us in an encounter which suffers for and with 'the saying'. It resounds or echoes outside of time and place as we know them in a way that destabilizes the secure position we take up in 'the said', our conceptual truths, knowledge and values.

If this is so, Aboriginal poetry may matter a great deal to an Australian culture and society wrestling with questions of identity.
NOTES

2. ibid., p. xviii.
12. ibid., p. 40.
13. ibid.
15. ibid.
16. ibid., p. 168.
17. ibid., p. 167.
18. ibid., p. 169.
19. ibid., p. 173.
25. ibid.
26. ibid., p. 54.
32. Gilbert, p. 58.
33. Writing From The Fringe, p. 24.
34. Gilbert, p. 95.
35. ibid., p. 16.
36. ibid., p. 18.
37. ibid., p. 22.
38. David Hudson Presents Gudju Gudju, a tape recording produced by Indigenous Australia, PO Box 38, Balmain, NSW 2041.
40. Mudrooroo, p. 136. Ironically, Mudrooroo's claim to call himself Aboriginal has recently been contested by some Aboriginal groups who have found that his father was in fact Afro-American.
41. Gilbert, p. 32.
42. Gilbert, p. 25.
45. ibid.
47. Gilbert, p. 132.
48. ibid., p. 150.
50. ibid., p. 54.
52. ibid., p. 514.