

The Poetry of Politics: Australian Aboriginal Verse

Abstract for chapter 8

In this chapter, examples of the entire range of Aboriginal verse are examined in order to illustrate the diversity and talent of contemporary Black Australian poets.

The author considers the political involvement and stance of these writers as well as the particular social conditions in which they live – which is often addressed in their work.

The achievements of Indigenous Australian poets are compared to the writings of White Australian poets – such as Les Murray and Bruce Dawe – who have an apparent understanding of Aboriginal culture. To emphasise the Fourth World dimension and oral predisposition of Australian Aboriginal verse, the writing is contrasted with the poetry of contemporary Canadian Indian writers.

Keywords

‘representative’ school of Aboriginal poetry, cultural identity, First Nations, Jack Davis, Kath Walker, Kevin Gilbert, *My People*, poetry, protest poetry, resistance, verse, *We Are Going*

The Poetry of Politics: Australian Aboriginal Verse

I would rather see Aborigines write a book called *Kargun* than pick up a shotgun.¹

I always believe that the old axiom, 'the pen is mightier than the sword' is really true. And I always like to modernise that phrase by saying, 'the biro is far far better than the gun'²

Black Australian authors are not unified in their aims and approaches to writing. The diversity of Aboriginal literary perspectives is perhaps best illustrated by Black Australian poetry in English. Whether it is published in popular Australian periodicals such as the *Bulletin* or in local and regional Aboriginal community publications like the *North Queensland Message Stick* or the *Kimberley Land Council Newsletter*, poetry has attracted more Black Australian authors than any other mode of creative writing. Whether its orientation is towards Aboriginal health, education, legal matters, or government policy, almost every Aboriginal newspaper or magazine contains poetry on a regular basis. Verse is not only the most popular genre of Aboriginal creative expression in English; it also clearly illustrates the wide spectrum of Black Australian attitudes to the practice of writing and to the social purpose and utility of literature.

Some Aboriginal poets consider themselves to be mouthpieces for their people, expressing grievances and concerns felt collectively by the entire Aboriginal community. Others emphasise this political aspect of verse even further, believing that the act of composing poetry is an inherently political one which is itself an invaluable form of activism. Others view poetry as a means of preserving impressions and appreciations of nature and the beauty of life, and eschew any political involvement. Still others consider that writing verse is an essential

emotional release and a salve for bitter experiences. Finally, some Aboriginal poets hope to become successful individual role models for their people who, through international as well as domestic recognition, can bring the Black Australian situation to the attention of the world.

It is against this complex background that Aboriginal verse must be assessed. It is clear that, despite differing individual aims and aspirations, most Aboriginal poets reject the art for art's sake argument and feel that their work has at least some social utility, whether to reinforce Aboriginal pride in identity, attack government policies, or criticise social ills within the Aboriginal community. Even when Black Australian nature poetry does not have an overt socio-political dimension, as an illustration of the singular Aboriginal poetic appreciation of the Australian landscape it can be politically significant. For example, as Stanner has commented, the Black Australian sense of oneness with the soil – which is the essence of the land rights campaign – is a relationship which requires a poetic understanding:

No English words are good enough to give a sense of the links between an aboriginal group and its homeland. Our word 'home', warm and suggestive though it be, does not match the aboriginal word that may mean 'camp', 'hearth', 'country', 'everlasting home', 'totem place', 'life source', 'spirit centre' and much else all in one. Our word 'land' is too spare and meagre. We can now scarcely use it except with economic overtones unless we happen to be poets.³

Given the range of Aboriginal approaches to writing, any dismissal of Aboriginal poetry as simply propaganda is inaccurate and unfair. Some Black Australian verse is blatantly polemical and impassioned; other examples of Aboriginal poetry are restrained and consciously apolitical. Ranging from overt political commitment to celebrations of nature, there is talented and impressive work from an ever-growing number of capable poets. No matter how obvious or how covert the socio-political dimension of this verse, it all expresses and reinforces a distinctive Black Australian world-view, highlighting pride, dignity and survival in the face of loss. Perhaps most important, in recent years a number of Aboriginal poets have articulated that world-view in verse which has an inherently oral, colloquial and/or phonetic character – a trend which represents a unique Black Australian contribution to Australian literature.

In this chapter, examples of the entire range of Aboriginal verse will be examined in order to illustrate the diversity and talent of contemporary Black Australian poets. I will consider the political involvement and stance of these writers as well as the particular social

conditions in which they live – and which they often address in their work. In order to throw into relief some of the distinctive elements of the Aboriginal authors' approach, their work will be briefly compared with that of selected White Australian poets with an apparent understanding of Aboriginal culture, such as Les Murray and Bruce Dawe. Finally, in order to emphasise the Fourth World dimension and increasingly oral predisposition of Australian Aboriginal verse, I will contrast it with the poetry of contemporary Canadian Indian writers.

Any assessment of current Black Australian verse has to begin with the woman whom her publishers have claimed is the most-purchased Australian poet next to C.J. Dennis: Oodgeroo Noonuccal.⁴ There is no doubt that Noonuccal is the doyenne of Aboriginal writers: her works, both poetry and prose, have been widely translated and are currently used as educational texts as far afield as Germany, Poland, and Japan. She is, along with Jack Davis, MumShirl, Pat O'Shane, Neville Bonner, Margaret Valadian and Charles Perkins, one of the best-known and most respected Aborigines, both in Australia and overseas. It came as no surprise that Noonuccal was chosen to script the Australian Pavilion's major presentation at World Expo 88, a striking holographic version of the Rainbow Serpent legend.

In this sense, her international fame enables her to act as a positive and successful role model for Black Australians and also makes it possible for her to wield a certain amount of political influence. For example, Colin Johnson claims that the Queensland government's last-minute decision to permit one officially illegal black protest march during the 1982 Brisbane Commonwealth Games was a direct result of the fact that it was learned Noonuccal would be one of the demonstrators. He maintains the Bjelke-Petersen government wished to avoid the embarrassment which would attend the arrest of such a prominent Aboriginal Australian.⁵ A further example of her political influence is the fact that her candidacy for a Queensland senate seat in the 1983 federal election was taken seriously, both by other Black Australians and by the national media, as was her decision to withdraw in support of Neville Bonner's campaign.⁶

Noonuccal's direct involvement in Aboriginal affairs has continued since her experience as Queensland state secretary of FCAATSI in the 1960s. It is hardly coincidental that her first volume of poetry, *We Are Going*, was published in 1964, at the height of her political involvement. This is not to say that the poetry merely

presented political slogans in slightly-disguised verse form, but that the heightening of Aboriginal pride, resolve and socio-political involvement which characterised the 1960s helped to provide the impetus for cultural expressions of Aboriginality, as well as for public campaigns on behalf of Black Australians. Throughout Australia, Aboriginal opposition to the official assimilation policy manifested itself in many ways. One of these was in the assertion of Aboriginal individuality, protest and pride which Noonuccal's poetry represents.

What of the verse itself? Some of the initial critical reaction to *We Are Going* was very harsh. The anonymous author of one typical review of Noonuccal's book contended that what she was writing was simply not poetic:

This is bad verse . . . jingles, clichés, laborious rhymes all piled up, plus the incessant, unvarying thud of a single message . . . This may be useful propagandist writing . . . It may well be the most powerful social-protest material so far produced in the struggle for aboriginal advancement . . . But this has nothing to do with poetry. The authentic voice of the song-man [sic] using the English language still remains to be heard.⁷

This reaction is interesting, for the critic suggests rather myopically that protest poetry of the type in *We Are Going* is essentially a contradiction in terms. In short, poetry which was critical of White Australian society was invalidated because it did not conform to a limited conception of the 'permissible' forms of that society's literature. The author's own expectations are revealing, as indicated by the final sentence of the review, which implies that the only 'authentic' and legitimate Aboriginal poet will be one who is able to transform the literature of the black 'song-man' (presumably traditional, male, oral literature in translation) into English verse. This is as inaccurate as the suggestion that the art of Namatjira and his followers was not authentic Aboriginal painting because it was influenced by certain European techniques, which fails to perceive that it was guided by a distinctively Aboriginal sensibility. Is it too much to suggest that this sort of reaction indicated a prevailing belief amongst those involved in Australian literature (a belief espoused by many in the anthropological school during the 1940s and 1950s) that the only true Aboriginal culture was traditional in nature?

Other evaluations of *We Are Going* displayed more enthusiasm. In Jill Hellyer's consideration of the book in *Hemisphere*, she quite correctly praised the strong elements of Noonuccal's verse:

Kath Walker's poetry possesses the very definite merit of coming to life when spoken

aloud . . . Her free verse, too, has great fluidity . . . There is no doubt that Mrs. Walker possesses an innate lyricism. It is her craftsmanship that needs to be worked upon if it is to match the depths of her feeling . . . When Kath Walker learns the difference between wisdom and propaganda she could well become a significant voice in Australian poetry.⁸

It is true that Noonuccal's poetry is uneven, as a result of metre which occasionally jars, and rhyme which is sometimes forced. The point is that these are technical failings which have no bearing on the question of whether or not the poetry is allegedly propagandistic (which is an implicitly pejorative term in the first place). What can be said is that some of Noonuccal's most successful verse has a clear and strong socio-political message:

No more woomera, no more boomerang,
No more playabout, no more the old ways.
Children of nature we were then,
No clocks hurrying crowds to toil.
Now I am civilized and work in the white way,
Now I have dress, now I have shoes:
'Isn't she lucky to have a good job!'
Better when I had only a dillybag.
Better when I had nothing but happiness.⁹

In addition, I contend that, despite the technical weaknesses in much of Noonuccal's rhymed poetry in *We Are Going*, her free verse is often impressive in its directness and poignancy.

This observation is even more true of her second volume of poetry, *The Dawn Is At Hand*, first published in 1966. In such poems as 'Nona' and 'Gifts' the poet displays not only a keen eye for colour and signatures of detail but a subtle and endearing sense of humour which, for the most part, critics have failed to note. Above all, these are simple and direct imaginings of Aboriginal life before the invasion of the Europeans, as in 'Gifts':

'I will bring you love', said the young lover,
'A glad light to dance in your dark eye.
Pendants I will bring of the white bone,
And gay parrot feathers to deck your hair.'

But she only shook her head.

'I will put a child in your arms,' he said,
'Will be a great headman, great rain-maker.
I will make remembered songs about you

That all the tribes in all the wandering camps
Will sing forever.'

But she was not impressed.

'I will bring you the still moonlight on the lagoon,
And steal for you the singing of all the birds;
I will bring the stars of heaven to you,
And put the bright rainbow into your hand.'

'No', she said, 'bring me tree-grubs.'¹⁰

The imagery in 'Nona' is equally effective:

At the happy chattering evening meal
Nona the lithe and lovely,
Liked by all,
Came out of her mother's gunya,
Naked like the rest, and like the rest
Unconscious of her body
As the dingo pup rolling about in play.
All eyes turned, men and women, all
Had smiles for Nona.
And what did the women see? They saw
The white head-band above her forehead,
The gay little feather-tuft in her hair
Fixed with gum, and how she wore it.
They saw the necklet of red berries
And the plaited and painted reed arm-band
Jarri had made her.
And what did the men see? Ah, the men.
They did not see armlet or band
Or the bright little feather-tuft in her hair.
They had no eye for the red berries,
They did not look at these things at all.¹¹

Admittedly, not all of Noonuccal's verse is of this standard. The tone of the 'Verses' which end *The Dawn Is at Hand* is more suited to juvenile nursery rhymes than it is to adult poetry. These vignettes are too obviously an attempt at cleverness:

Man's endless quest is to be happy,
Ever since Cain wet his first nappy;
Yet crime-waves now and A-bomb plans,
And Yanks turned Schickelgruber fans.¹²

It is one thing to say that Oodgeroo Noonuccal's poetry varies quite markedly in atmosphere and accomplishment. It is another to denounce her as merely a 'rhymmer' or a 'versifier', as Leon Cantrell did in his 1967 review of *The Dawn Is At Hand*:

According to my system of pigeon-holes and prejudices she is not a poet. She has absolutely no feeling for words: it's almost as if they use her rather than she use [sic] them, with the result that one can gain no notion of the individual qualities of the person behind the verse.¹³

So, too, Andrew Taylor commented in the *Australian Book Review*:

She is no poet, and her verse is not poetry in any true sense. It hasn't the serious commitment to formal rightness, that concern for making speech true under all circumstances, which distinguishes Buckley and Wright at their best.¹⁴

This denial that Noonuccal is a poet amounts to a disturbingly limited critical position. Hellyer is right to criticise Noonuccal's occasional lapses into an 'attitude of preaching' and her tendency towards 'clumsy inversions' in certain poems.¹⁵ But to claim that none of Noonuccal's work is poetry smacks of a closed-mindedness which she and many of the other Aboriginal poets inveigh against in their verse. Given the markedly derivative character of much twentieth-century Australian poetry, Noonuccal's best work is quite a welcome departure from the 'serious commitment to formal rightness' of which Taylor speaks. In the words of the *Times Literary Supplement's* reviewer of *We Are Going*:

Kath Walker has no need of metaphorical paraphernalia. She has a subject . . . Much of the best poetry here is effective propaganda . . . When so many poets are trying to write who fundamentally have nothing to say (the jottings of casual thoughts never made poetry) *We Are Going* is on the whole a refreshing book.¹⁶

I do not intend to engage in a revisionist appraisal of all the White Australian critics of Aboriginal poetry, but the case of Oodgeroo Noonuccal, as the first published Black Australian poet, is an instructive one. The initial critical reception of her work was hostile partly because it was something new and different on the Australian literary scene, something which did not conform to canons of poetic acceptability as they had been devised by the White Australian intelligentsia. Despite technical flaws, it is verse which is intended to be read out loud and always gains added power when it is delivered in this way. Second, Noonuccal's work has had an undoubted impact, through healthy sales, usage in the classroom and international exposure; such an impact was in fact its *raison d'être*. Most important,

Oodgeroo Noonuccal introduced an Aboriginal perspective into contemporary Australian literature for the first time. She celebrated Aboriginal survival in the face of adversity, lamented prejudice and oppression, and offered an optimistic view of the potential for interracial harmony in the country. She is not the most impressive or the most accomplished Aboriginal poet: others have transformed Australian English into Aboriginal English in more innovative and exciting ways. Despite her early critics, Noonuccal was a pioneer in a new form of Australian poetry, embracing directness, environmental values and an overriding Aboriginal world-view. As Doobov concludes:

Her importance lies in showing the potentialities of the Aboriginal influence rather than in fully exploring it. Yet the importance of what she attempts to achieve should not be underestimated. She has written poetry based on the Aboriginal philosophy that art is not the province of an intellectual elite, abandoning the esoteric fashion which some believe is strangling modern European poetry. She has produced literary works out of a culture which is neither traditional Aboriginal nor European, but an emerging symbiosis of both.¹⁷

Perhaps the most significant aspect of Noonuccal's poetry is the fact that she intended it to be a distillation of the feelings and concerns of all Aboriginal people in Australia. In interview, she has repeatedly emphasised her role as a mouthpiece for the Australian Aboriginal nation: 'I see my books as the voice of the Aboriginal people, not my own personal voice. They dictate what I write'. When asked why she began writing poems rather than short stories or novels, Noonuccal replied:

I felt poetry would be the breakthrough for the Aboriginal people because they were storytellers and song-makers, and I thought poetry would appeal to them more than anything else. It was more of a book of their voices that I was trying to bring out, and I think I succeeded in doing this . . . I'm putting their voices on paper, writing their things. I listen to the Aboriginal people, to their cry for help – it was more or less a cry for help in that first book, *We Are Going*. I didn't consider it my book, it was the people.¹⁸

Noonuccal thus established what might be termed the 'representative' school of Aboriginal poetry, an approach which has attracted other notable Black Australian poets, such as Kevin Gilbert.

There are strong pressures in Australian society which militate against this view of the writing of poetry; inherent difficulties in any attempt to mirror the collective Aboriginal voice. First, Australian society often presumes a unanimous Black Australian position on many

issues, which is seldom the case. The second drawback is that poets in Aboriginal society are not chosen by their peers to pursue their craft, even if there is an emerging trend amongst Black Australian poets to acknowledge community responsibility and control over their work. The persona of the individual author inevitably pervades the writing, and no matter how impervious to the critics an Aboriginal author may claim to be, she or he almost always has personal goals or aims. In a fascinating interview with Cliff Watego, Noonuccal demonstrated – almost unwittingly – the tensions which Aboriginal poets writing in a dominant white society must endure. When asked if she had to accept Western critics' judgements of her works because she was writing in English, Noonuccal answered:

Most critics are wrong anyway in the Western world. So black writers shouldn't worry about it. That should be beneath their dignity or contempt.

However, immediately afterwards she conceded:

The only thing that worries [Aboriginal writers] about critics is whether they're going to get their books sold or whether the critic's gonna squash it.¹⁹

So while attempting to write for and please Aborigines, many Black Australian poets are aware that critical judgements can have an effect upon the impact of their works, at least in terms of book sales. Since the Aboriginal reading public represents only a tiny fraction of the Australian book market, poets – like all Aboriginal writers – are constrained at least in part by the knowledge that they are not entirely free of white expectations if they want their work to be printed, distributed, and read widely. This factor can produce an almost schizophrenic reaction in black authors. As Jack Davis put it:

You've got to remember, too, that Aboriginal writers are not like non-Aboriginal writers, inasmuch as they've got the political scene to contend with. And, they've got their own thoughts to put down on paper, regardless of what's political, in terms of writing something which they want to *sell*. So, it's sort of like splitting their mind. You know, if you haven't got any political hang-ups, I should imagine you can sit down and go ahead and write with your mind fairly free. But, most Aboriginal writers were involved within the Black movement . . . We all started off as political people.²⁰

Davis's comments go to the heart of the matter. While the majority of Black Australian authors wish to retain that political consciousness which they have developed, often through years of involvement in Aboriginal affairs, they do not wish to deny themselves the crucial

opportunity to be heard, both in Australia and internationally. In the words of Cheryl Buchanan, the Aboriginal woman who almost singlehandedly published Lionel Fogarty's first volume of verse, *Kargun*, no publisher wanted to touch such 'heavy political material'²¹ as was contained in his second collection, *Yoogum Yoogum* – until Penguin Books answered her plea to take up the project. Yet books like Fogarty's have expanded the range and achievement of Aboriginal poetry in English. How many other Lionel Fogartys are there in Australia who have never broken into print due to the negative response of many commercially oriented publishers? It is for this reason that one of the priorities of the National Aboriginal and Islander Writers', Oral Literature, and Dramatists' Association (NAIWOLDA) is to establish an independent national Black Australian publishing house.²²

A further aspect of the politics of Aboriginal poetry is excellently illustrated by the case of Oodgeroo Noonuccal. Though not all Aboriginal writers would agree with her, Noonuccal is fervently determined to reach, and be evaluated by, world literary standards:

In one way I think it's a draw-back because we're trying to express ourselves in the Aboriginal way of expression and it doesn't meet with the world standard . . . It should be written not for the Aboriginals but . . . for a *world* audience . . . a universal theme.

She continues:

When I'm written up in the papers or the media or whatever, they always call me an 'Aboriginal poet'; they always tag me with that. And I don't see myself as an 'Aboriginal poet' . . . I see myself as a poet who is proud to be of Aboriginal descent.²³

The internal tension becomes obvious once again. While she is a committed spokesperson for the Aboriginal people and extremely proud of her heritage, Noonuccal also wants to be thought of as a successful individual writer – regardless of race. Above all, black writers like Noonuccal want to be treated and evaluated as Aboriginal human beings. However, as this study has demonstrated, White Australian administrators, politicians, anthropologists and writers have experienced profound difficulties in proceeding from a conception of Black Australians as indigenous symbols to an appreciation of Aborigines as people.

Contemporary Aboriginal poets thus face numerous obstacles above and beyond those which other Australian authors encounter. Those who wish to represent widely-held Black Australian views are often

criticised for attempting to be unauthorised national spokespeople. Some lesser-known Aboriginal poets who write verse to underline their distinctive appreciation of the Australian natural landscape are made to feel vaguely uncomfortable, because their poetry is not obvious social criticism or advocacy. In the same way, those who have achieved renown have often been accused of not being adequately political or radical. Others who have written talented protesting literature have had it dismissed by unsympathetic publishers and critics as solely 'protest' literature, a genre which is largely avoided in the Australian publishing industry. As Bobbi Sykes points out, this dismissal of the merits of Aboriginal creative literature of social comment and analysis is often unjust:

Have you ever heard any white person in the so-called free world calling Alexander Solzhenitsyn a protest writer? The protest literature title that whites try and lay on Black Writers is no more than an attempt to try and negate the value of what Black writers are saying.²⁴

In addition to all of these pressures, Aboriginal poets face one other drawback which confronts the members of many other indigenous minority (and majority) groups writing in the world today. Simply, it is that of dealing with the English language and making it their own. This challenge underlies the writing of poetry throughout many areas of the British Commonwealth. In the words of Professor J.E. Chamberlin:

Certainly many of the best poets, especially Northern Irish, West Indian, and African, write with a profound sense of anxiety about the language they use, which is often much more like a foster parent than a mother tongue to them and is unmistakably associated with a colonial authority (and a corresponding literary inheritance) that is both a curse and a blessing. Purifying the dialect of the tribe has always been one of poetry's central responsibilities; how to do it when you are not sure which tribe you belong to – as a writer and a shaper of reality with the imagination – is another matter and a disconcerting one.²⁵

For Aboriginal writers, who very often have had minimal formal schooling, the challenge is a daunting one. Even though many Black Australian poets do have a positive and proud sense of their own identity, this dilemma of what might be termed the 'imperialism of English' is very real. It is a dilemma to which they have reacted in a variety of ways.

One response is illustrated by the poetry of Jack Davis who, in his first volume of verse, *The First-born and Other Poems*, adopts a conventional European metrical approach to his work. Davis's early

verse is customarily composed in evenly measured end-rhyming lines of four stresses or less; there is very little experimentation with run-on lines, caesura, or internal rhyme. Boston has commented, 'lacking confidence as they enter a field previously monopolised by whites, and handicapped by a limited education, they [the Aboriginal poets] seem to find a measure of security in the short line lyric with its established metrical and structural pattern',²⁶ and this observation is probably most accurate with reference to Davis. Despite the regularity of his poetic form, Davis is, like Noonuccal, not always in complete control of his verse. For example, in 'The Boomerang', the shift in end-stressed syllables is somewhat jarring:

But for me this is not so,
Because I throw and throw.
My eyes are bleary,
I am arm-and-leg weary,
Right to the marrow.²⁷

But there is no denying the sincerity and honesty of Davis's impressions. As is the case with many of the most powerful poems written by Black Australians, a number of Davis's are occasional – composed in the immediate aftermath of socio-political events bearing upon Aborigines. For example, his 'Laverton Incident' was written in the wake of the police shooting of a young Aborigine, Raymond Watson, after a dispute outside the pub in Laverton, Western Australia. The author arrived on the scene soon afterwards and the sight of Watson's blood on the ground remained etched in his mind:²⁸

The two worlds collided
In anger and fear
As it has always been –
Gun against spear.

Aboriginal earth,
Hungry and dry,
Took back the life again,
Wondering why.

Echo the gun-blast
Throughout the land
Before more blood seeps
Into the sand.²⁹

Boston has called Davis the 'gentlest and most contained'³⁰ of the

Aboriginal poets, but the best examples of his earlier work are the most impassioned, such as 'The First-born', 'Prejudice', 'Lost', 'The Drifters' and 'Desolation'. In the last of these, the poet writes:

We are tired of the benches, our beds in the park,
We welcome the sundown that heralds the dark.
White Lady Methylate!
Keep us warm and from crying.
Hold back the hate
And hasten the dying.

*The tribes are all gone,
The spears are all broken:
Once we had bread here,
You gave us stone.*³¹

Like many other Black Australian poets, Davis has made a long and significant contribution to Aboriginal socio-political affairs, through his work for the Aboriginal Advancement Council and his six-and-a-half years as editor of *Identity* magazine.³² Despite Noonuccal's desire for universality, it is actually Davis who, especially in his second collection of verse, *Jagardoo – Poems From Aboriginal Australia*, has more frequently engaged other than specifically Aboriginal poetic themes. For example, over ninety per cent of Noonuccal's poems in *My People* deal with Black Australian themes such as white racism, Aboriginal identity, oppression, dispossession and so on, while less than one-third of Davis's poems in *Jagardoo* can be so classified.

In this volume Davis celebrates the beauties of nature – rivers, birds, trees, the seasons, and the ocean, in addition to whimsical childhood experiences. He also delves into issues such as analysis of the self, convalescence from illness, and the evils of militarism. There are poems dedicated to other Aborigines, such as Oodgeroo Noonuccal and Charles Perkins. *Jagardoo* is stylistically significant too, for Davis often loosens the measured grip on metre which characterised *The First-born*, and experiments with repetition, free verse, parody and variations in pace. These are often successful. Some poems are still marred by archaisms such as 'A-beckoning to me'³³ but his best work displays careful observation and reflection of people and events both in Australia and overseas. For example, in 'Bombay' he neatly encapsulates the irony of cultural relativism and shows that urbanised White and Black Australians are in some ways not as dissimilar as they might think:

The taxi,
honking, weaving, swaying,
took us in our opulence
through the people-teeming streets.

An old man,
thin black,
shook the dust of night
from limbs made gaunt
by caste and Eastern ways.

A pig
sucked the street's grey mud
with slobbering jaws,
growing fat, no doubt,
as men died around him.

While we, wide-eyed,
clicked our tongues
and made decisions
arrived at, by what we saw
through Western eyes.³⁴

The verse of Noonuccal and Davis is marked by its imagistic clarity. But even in their more experimental poetry, even in their overtly political work, they contribute little to Australian poetry which is – structurally or technically – uniquely Aboriginal. Their themes and concerns and world-view are undoubtedly Black Australian, but not their poetic technique.

Kevin Gilbert's poetry is also remarkable for its directness, but it is frequently more caustic than the verse of his predecessors. Gilbert's published poetry shows as much concern for Aboriginal social issues as Noonuccal's, but he brings a greater daring, a greater appreciation of Black Australian colloquial speech patterns and far more bitterness to his work. Part of the bitterness is due to a sense of profound frustration; part, in literary terms, is due to what he views as betrayal. Gilbert saw the manuscript version of his first published collection of verse, *End of Dreamtime*, radically altered by a white editor – without his permission – prior to publication. The episode presents one of the worst cases of European editorial intrusion in the field of Aboriginal literature, and offers an opportunity for textual criticism of Gilbert's corpus of poetry far beyond the scope of this study. One poem can serve as an example of just how important these unauthorised

changes were. In 'People *Are* Legends', the poem which gave its title to Gilbert's 'authorised' 1978 volume of verse, the original manuscript version (composed in the late 1960s while he was still in prison) is as follows:

Kill the legend
Butcher it
With your acute cynicisms
Your paternal superfluities
With your unwise wisdom
Kill the legend
Obliterate it
With your atheism
Your fraternal hypocrisies
With your primal urge of miscegenation
Kill the legend
Devalue it
With your sophistry
Your baseless rhetoric
Your lusting material concepts
Your groundless condescension
Kill it
Vitiate the seed
Crush the root-plant
All this
And more you must needs do
In order
To form a husk of a man
To the level and in your own image
Whiteman.³⁵

The poem was printed exactly in this form in the 1978 volume³⁶ whereas in 1971, the following, significantly condensed, version was published without Gilbert's approval:

Kill the legend
butcher it
with your acute cynicism
your paternalist wisdom

Kill the legend
scrub it out
with your hypocrisy
your malice and mockery

Kill the legend
 rubbish it
 with materialistic rhetoric
 and grasping lust

Go on
 kill it
 crush the seed
 hack at the root
 make me a husk
 make me like you
 whiteman.³⁷

It could be claimed that these are minor revisions since they do not alter the basic intent or meaning of the poem. According to standards of simplicity and effect, it is possible to argue that the edited version is poetically superior. However, this is not the issue: it is one of trust and ethical integrity. The decision to revise Gilbert's work without his sanction implies that the editor of Island Press not only considered Gilbert's writing as it stood to be unfit for publication (an opinion contradicted by the University of Queensland Press seven years later) but that he also felt he had the right to 'improve' it according to his own particular standards. It is no surprise that Gilbert has repeatedly and publicly disowned the version of his poems which appeared in *End of Dreamtime* and, for this reason, that volume will not be discussed any further here in relation to his verse.

Gilbert's poetry has been enthusiastically received in some quarters and viewed with disfavour in others. For example, one critic enthused that *People Are Legends* 'consists of metrical poems that flash and sparkle like polished gemstones'³⁸ while another complained that 'often the language is stiff and mannered, and nowhere more so than in the title poem, whose good deal of truth does not cover up its verbal shallowness, facile twists of bitter wit, self-defeating bluntness, and carelessness of prosody'. In a sense, such a wide range of opinion is to be expected concerning poetry which is so accusatory and disconcertingly direct. As the same reviewer continued, 'The poems are embarrassing, and the more we sympathise, the more disarmed and unhelpful we feel in the face of an angry, bitter tone'.³⁹ Gilbert certainly does not mince his words, as some of his more striking openings attest:

I've had a cunt of a life

I suppose
As a woman.⁴⁰

and:

I'll sell me moot for half a note
And a bottle of wine if you need.⁴¹

and finally:

Then the white man took his bloodied boot
From the neck of the bugged black
Did you expect some gratitude
His smile 'Good on you Jack?'⁴²

Elsewhere, he just as forthrightly takes the (presumably white) reader to task:

But I reckon the worstest shame is yours
You deny us human rights.⁴³

While Gilbert can stir feelings of culpability in sensitive White Australian readers, many would dismiss his stance as anti-white racism. But a careful reading of Gilbert's verse makes it impossible to maintain this view. For he is just as critical of Black Australians who allegedly sell out their people by accepting European accolades or well-paid government employment, or by passive complacency. Some of the author's most trenchant verse is aimed at these supposed betrayers of the Aboriginal movement. For example, the clipped line length and powerful rhyme scheme in 'The "Better Blacks"' is most effective:

Watch for the traitors
Dressed in black
Watch for those jackies
Up you Jack!
Watch for the puppet
Watch for the brute
Living like a whiteman
Grey serge suit

'Tommin' ' for his pay now
'Tommin' ' for his job.
Watch him watch him brothers
Watch his sleek black hide
Selling out our people
While our people die.⁴⁴

There is no clearer example of Gilbert's ability to rankle others than the aftermath of his caustic poem, 'To My Cousin, Evonne Cawley', given pride of place in *The Bulletin Literary Supplement* of September 1980:

I wonder, Evonne, when you're playing
straight sets
And you 'haste' your opponent so well,
Do you ever look back at your
grandmother, black
And catch glimpses of her in her hell?⁴⁵

The publishers of *The Bulletin*, Consolidated Press, were put in an awkward position when the poem they had highlighted in their advertising for this issue prompted Cawley to undertake ultimately successful legal action against them. Not only did this demonstrate Gilbert's ability to raise indignation through his verse; it was also an excellent example of the potential social impact of Aboriginal literature, of the convergence of poetry and political considerations.

Like Noonuccal, Gilbert subscribes to a 'representative' notion of his work:

I've adopted writing as a means of voicing the Aboriginal situation . . . I try to present as truly as possible the Aboriginal situation and the Aboriginal response.

But he is also motivated by didacticism:

There is the need to educate White Australians to the present situation of Aboriginal people . . . I'm presenting it as honestly as possible – it's not a pretty picture.

Gilbert draws much of his conviction from his time behind bars:

I spent fourteen-and-a-half years in prison. I saw human rights contravened every day. Despite the debasing conditions there, it still wasn't as unjust as the system oppressing Aborigines.⁴⁶

Though there is a strong, militant side to Gilbert's often sarcastic poetry, there is another side of which most Australians are not aware. Even in *People Are Legends*, a sense of sardonic humour emerges in such poems as 'Granny Koori', in which Gilbert portrays the symbolic emasculation of Aboriginal men:

Dear Director of Aboriginal Grants
My association needs \$55,000 bucks
To purchase silky black ladies pants
A quota to cover each area, the Territories –
State by state

To conceal from the prying eyes of the world
The Aborigines poor buggered fate.⁴⁷

Gilbert's vibrant humour is often disguised in his poetry, but is particularly evident in his drama – as will be illustrated in the following chapter.

There is a further facet to Gilbert's talent which encompasses most of his unpublished material. He has written a number of very different poems, still only in manuscript form, which celebrate such themes as love and devotion. If one examines an unpublished poem such as 'Extract From a Letter to a Woman Friend', one might not believe it was written by the same man who produced *People Are Legends*:

And I would part the weeping willows
Hold the birch firm in my hand
Gently stroke the living waters
Whispering to the fertile land
Beams of sunshine shot with silver
Thriving brown and vital hue
Resting land aglow with nature
Dreaming of the ever you.⁴⁸

More recently, Gilbert has written a substantial series of whimsical and light poems in the form of nursery rhymes directed at children, but again, these exist only in unpublished form:

Once I met a mad Rosella
He was quite a crazy fella
Who got drunk on nectar-ferment
From a rich old bottle-brush
His wings he flapped and fluttered
While foolishly he muttered
I wish I was an eagle
Or a fine plumed English thrush.⁴⁹

Many of these poems deserve publication; however, the variety of Gilbert's accomplishments have been downplayed both by the media and by publishers, thereby perpetuating his image as solely a 'protest' poet. This is primarily because, in Gilbert's words, 'publishers didn't want my love poetry'.⁵⁰ It seems to be commercially more profitable to publish a militant Aboriginal writer – as long as he or she is not too acerbic – than to print less controversial material. Therefore, Australian publishers have, in a further sense, dictated the public image with which well-known Aboriginal authors have been cloaked – a further motivation for NAIWOLDA's estab-

ishment of an independent Black Australian publishing house.

One wonders whether Les Murray's rather unjust review of *People Are Legends* might have been different if all the dimensions of Gilbert's poetic achievement had been represented in the book. Murray commented, 'Worst of all, he confuses vehemence with poetic intensity. Unlike many radical versifiers, he has things to be vehement about, but poetry will not be forced.'⁵¹ Some of Gilbert's work is awkward in terms of metre and scansion; like all poets, he is not consistently successful. But some of his most fluid verse is that which relies upon an ear for Aboriginal colloquial speech and intonations, as in 'The Gurindji':

Poor fellow
Simple fellow
Sweet fellow
Strong
Sittin' in the desert
Singin' desert song
Cryin' countin' chickens
Chickens made of lan'

Poor fellow
Silly fellow
Sad fellow
Cry
White fellow gibbit lan'
To hide you when you die.⁵²

Other Australian poets have attempted to structure their poetry in the Aboriginal idiom, most importantly, those of the Jindyworobak group. As was noted in Chapter Three, their commitment to the idiom was formal and superficial: they frequently attempted to utilise Aboriginal concepts and phrases in a parodic and ineffectual fashion. Les Murray has been termed 'the last of the Jindyworobaks' by Bruce Clunies-Ross.⁵³ Clunies-Ross is correct to ascribe Jindyworobak sympathies to Murray and, as the poet has explained, there are cogent personal and environmental reasons for this.⁵⁴ Probably more than any other contemporary White Australian poet, Les Murray has been aware of the 'Aboriginal presence'⁵⁵ and has consciously and conscientiously attempted to incorporate it into his work. But (again like many of the original Jindyworobaks) Murray apprehends Black Australians primarily as symbols and representations of Australia's 'greatest autochthonous tradition':⁵⁶ during his childhood, they

were 'partly a people, partly a caste, partly a class'.⁵⁷ His observation of individual Aborigines from his own experience certainly has influenced his verse. However, the treatment of Black Australians in his poetry is – however sympathetic – one of types of human beings rather than of truly individualised characters. For example, in 'The Ballad of Jimmy Governor' the speaker is representative of Aboriginal fugitives, not only from white law, but from European culture. The poem abounds in references to feet, shoes and the earth: the contrast is between barefooted (or free and natural) Aborigines and shod (restricted and destructive) whites. As Jimmy relates:

Today I take that big step
On the bottom rung of the air . . .

Mother, today I'll be dancing
Your way and his way on numb feet.⁵⁸

Murray is intrigued by, and concerned with, White Australian myths about Aborigines and with the mythology of the Black Australians themselves. He appears far less interested in portraying Aborigines as people, or in reflecting their characteristic rural or urban speech patterns. For example, his poem 'Thinking About Aboriginal Land Rights, I Visit the Farm I Will Not Inherit' is a personal evocation of the pain that the dispossession of land can cause:

By sundown it is dense dusk, all the tracks closing in.
I go into the earth near the hay shed for thousands of years.⁵⁹

Here it is implicit that Murray's feeling for the farm which he will be denied is akin to the sense of loss which has afflicted Black Australians confronted with the white encroachment into their continent. He feels very intensely that White Australians view their land as far more than an investment: 'It's bullshit to say that "property" is the concept that whites have for land; I couldn't live in another place from where I've come from'.⁶⁰

While it is true that White Australians have developed a real and heartfelt feeling for their sometimes unlovely land since 1788, Murray's reference to 'thousands of years' pushes the parallel too far. The sense of *belonging* of which he speaks is of a different order of magnitude to the sense of being *owned by* the land, which is the traditional Aboriginal concept, with all the sanctity of religious veneration. Murray draws this parallel because of his belief in the convergence of the White and Black Australian cultures. He claims that

Europeans have absorbed – almost without realising it – a number of Aboriginal concepts, such as the appreciation of periods of seasonal work interspersed with periods of nomadism (as practised by miners, cattlemen, and shearers), the annual summertime holiday ‘walkabout’, and the dislike of ‘hobby farmers’ on the part of both Aborigines and country people. Murray’s position, while intriguing, is simplistic and eurocentric. Despite his sincere interest in Aboriginal culture, he has restricted himself to a quasi-anthropological appreciation of that culture because of his fascination with the traditional Aboriginal world-view. This leads him to an admitted over-emphasis (like the original Jindyworobaks) upon tribes such as the Aranda, an over-reliance upon anthropologists such as Strehlow, and a lack of appreciation of contemporary Aboriginal culture. He does not see that culture as an adaptive, ongoing phenomenon which is just as viable in urban as well as in country areas.

Les Murray’s poetry on Aboriginal themes is therefore one step removed from the ground level of current thought about Aboriginal culture. Unlike many other concerned White Australian authors, Murray does not recognise the concept of a collective European historical ‘conquest-guilt’ which he thinks ‘may be no more than a construct of the political Left’.⁶¹ Other prominent contemporary White Australian poets, such as Bruce Dawe, would not agree. His poem, ‘Nemesis’, is an excellent and effective example of the kind of sentiments which other poets such as Judith Wright have also expressed:

But what is that one slaughter
repeated many times
to us who tread domestic grass
and thrill to ‘foreign’ crimes?
We cannot call the Turrbul back
and guilt’s a slippery thing
if all it feeds is speeches
and songs that poets sing . . .

When the Kalkadoons stopped running
and charged and charged again
they fell as fell their tribesmen
on earlier hill and plain.
And we who wrote their finish
must turn and write a start
if we would turn from running
and face our thundering heart.⁶²

Les Murray and Bruce Dawe are arguably representative of the two major thematic streams of White Australian literature of the past fifty years which has dealt with Aborigines. The former is a member of the school of symbolic usage of the Aboriginal theme, which counts Katharine Susannah Prichard, Xavier Herbert, the Jindyworobaks, and even Patrick White amongst its members. The latter illustrates the stance of the school of concerned conscience (often motivated by guilt) which numbers those such as Judith Wright, Thomas Keneally and Robert Drewe amongst its adherents. The two streams are not mutually exclusive (Herbert, for instance, crosses the boundaries) but this schema makes it possible to contrast the attitudes of White Australian authors more clearly.

If there is any 'school' of Black Australian poetry it is one of social protest. This is not to say that Aboriginal verse is one-dimensional. As Cliff Watego has put it:

With protest poetry, this tradition of protest poetry, they like to say 'Oh, that's just protest poetry, and that's it. We can easily handle that.' That's what critics have a tendency to do . . . But it's not a limiting factor. To emphasise this protest tradition, or what they want to call protest poetry, it's unfair, because it's made up of all different aspects, different viewpoints, as the poets or writers know themselves.⁶³

It is probably best to see Black Australian poetry as stemming from a long tradition of opposition to the established order – but that opposition takes many forms. In his *The Song Circle of Jacky, and Selected Poems*, Colin Johnson illustrates some of those forms while he criticises the dominant Australian culture. His thirty-five poems in the Jacky series often have an undercurrent of satirical bitterness, as in 'Song Twenty-Seven':

A youthman was found hanging in his cell
On Nadoc day when everywhere the Aborigines
Were dancing, everywhere the Aborigines were marching.
'They're just like us', was the quaint refrain,
'They like balls and footy and songs and beer':
They ignored our call for Landrights!

On Nadoc day a youthman strangled in a cell:
Who killed him, who were his murderers?
'Not I,' said the cop, 'I only took him in.'
'Not I,' said the town, 'I never spoke his name,
It's no fault of mine that he had to die
We treat them as we would our own,
There's no racism in our town.'⁶⁴

Johnson's poem assumes great power when seen in the light of the work of the Muirhead Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, established in late 1987. It found that between January 1980 and February 1988, ninety-six young Aboriginal men died in unusual circumstances while incarcerated: the majority were found hanged, over half while they were in police custody.⁶⁵ It is this coalescence of politics and poetry which makes it impossible to divorce the social context from what black poets like Johnson are expressing.

It also makes it impossible not to see Johnson as one of the most talented Aboriginal poets, for he handles such themes with an innovative confidence. His range in *The Song Circle of Jacky* is striking:

Born between straight lines;
 Dying between straight lines;
 Laid to rest between straight lines,
 Buried in rows as straight as supermarket goods:
 Our heaven will be straight lines;
 Our hell will be all curved lines,
 Unable to fit the straightness of our souls.⁶⁶

As in his historical novels, Johnson emphasises that Black Australian history was a proud saga of resistance. The apparently simple rhyme scheme in 'Song Five' underpins a purposely didactic tone:

Ned Kelly was a man,
 Who rode through this land,
 An Irishman, brave and true –
 Then the British hung him high,
 So that his feet danced in the sky –
 And Jacky says they did the same to –
 Yagan, Melville Harry, Broger, Lory Jack,
 Ellemara, Talboy, Merridio, Therramitchie,
 And many, many, too many Jacky Jackies.⁶⁷

The familiarity of Johnson's rhythm insinuates his message in the reader's mind so effectively that the parallel which he establishes would be clear to any Australian secondary school student.

Elsewhere, his experimentation with rhythm is particularly marked. In his usage of the linked song-cycle format, Johnson has consciously reached back for inspiration to the oral poetic traditions of his forebears. In places, he also captures the stylistic wholeness of traditional Aboriginal songs, with their frequent repetition of words and sounds, and their incremental progress of story-line:

He takes young man, he takes old man, makes them shiver in fright and fear;
He takes young man, he takes old man, makes them see his visions;
Makes them shiver in fright and fear, makes them suffer from the storm;
Makes them see their spirit maker, makes them leave him all alone,
While he finds his secret things, sacred objects of his trade:
Whispers to the magic wand, sings softly to the dilly bag,
Murmurs to the emu feathers, lights the fire with a word,
Brings the whirlwind to his feet, glides off to see the world:
Jacky, Jacky, he no fool; Jacky Jacky, he kurdaitcha man!⁶⁸

Thus, Johnson's poetry of protest relies upon structure and style as much as content to make its statement about Aboriginal independence.

Of course, this protest genre is not confined to Australia. It surfaces all over the world, especially amongst indigenous groups who have only relatively recently gained a political and literary voice. The poetry of Canadian Indians is a prime example of the same phenomenon. It is striking that, in both Canada and Australia, indigenous peoples share a strong and vibrant spiritual affinity for one another as oppressed 'first citizens', for their traditions and, above all, for their land. A convenient way to exemplify this affinity is to examine the Canadian Inuit and Indian and Australian Aboriginal position papers on ideology and political rights, tabled at the World Council of Indigenous Peoples' Third General Assembly, held in Canberra in April-May 1981. The Inuit and Indians declared:

We, the indigenous peoples of Canada, know that the Creator put us on this land.

We were given our languages, our culture, and a place on the Earth which provided us with food, water, medicines, shelter.

We were created as free peoples.

We have maintained our freedom. Although in recent times we have made agreements and signed treaties so that major portions of our lands could be shared with others, we have never given up our freedom. We have conserved our languages, our traditions, and we have protected our lands. We have reserved to ourselves the right to govern our own people and our own affairs, and to determine our destiny.

Peoples of the world who have their language, culture, and lands, and who have never surrendered the right to govern themselves, are considered to be nations.

THEREFORE:

We are nations.

We have always been nations.

We have the right to govern ourselves.

We have the right to self-determination.

We have the right to control our lands and our resources.⁶⁹

Though the wording of the National Aboriginal Conference's paper on 'Aboriginal Ideology' is different, the sentiments are very similar:

The land, for us, is a vibrant spiritual landscape. It is peopled in spirit form by the ancestors in the dreaming. The ancestors travelled the country, in adventure which created

the people

the natural features of this land

the code of life

The law has been passed on to us

Through the reverence and the celebration of the sites of the ancestors

Songs and dance

Body, sand and rock painting

Special languages and legends

These are the media of the law to the present day.

And now our social existence is in conflict with white society

But our existence is based on an unrelinquished will

to maintain identity

to maintain our relationship with the land

to reject the interference of the white institutions.

And as we draw on our 'myths' to retain our existence

So must the whites draw on their 'myths' of superiority

to secure power

and rule in our lands.⁷⁰

A comparison of Aboriginal and Indian poetry is particularly rewarding in view of this common ideological stance, and because of the numerous other similarities between Canada and Australia. Literature is playing an increasingly important role in the articulation of both Aboriginal and Indian cultural identity, and poetry as the genre of creative expression perhaps most amenable to previously oral cultures is, for indigenous groups in both countries, the single most popular medium of creative expression in written English. In both countries, most of those indigenous people writing verse are very politicised and active in the field of agitation for their rights. In

the case of Canadian Indian poetry the symbolic, spiritual nature of indigenous existence is extensively explored; in Aboriginal poetry, what defines contemporary 'Aboriginality' – the distinctive Black Australian self-definition – is a common emphasis. The poets of both nations display in their work an overriding sense of loss: the loss of happiness, of traditional laws, of togetherness and of freedom. Hence, the poetry is very often bittersweet and ambivalent.

The atmosphere of evanescence – of witnessing the fading away of the old ways – strikes one of the strongest chords in indigenous poetry, both in Canada and in Australia. Oodgeroo Noonuccal addresses this dilemma of potential identity loss, and emphasises the fragility of the entire human species, in her most famous poem, 'We Are Going', which ends:

The scrubs are gone, the hunting and the laughter.
The eagle is gone, the emu and the kangaroo are gone from this place.
The bora ring is gone.
The corroboree is gone.
And we are going.⁷¹

The lamentation for lost heritage is equally fervent in Canadian Indian poetry. Jim Dumont uses the symbol of the buffalo to represent the extinction of traditional ways:

In my youth
I went south,
In my dreams
I went south.

There
I watched them hunt . . .
I watched them hunt the buffalo.
And in my heart
I hunted with them.

Now they are gone.
The buffalo have left,
Ashamed,
That we had let them die,
Mercilessly,
At the hands of the white hunters.⁷²

In his poem 'The Last Crackle', Gordon Williams illustrates effectively how the rape and destruction of Indians in the past continues in the exploitation of Indians today:

All our men are dead and our young ones
Have no ambition. They took it all away,
Those bearded men, with their strange ways.
'Kneel with us' they said, 'and pray!'
Then they took our land and children.

Now they've taken their beards off and shorn their
Hair, and they smile quick as a rattler's strike:
Before you open your door, a face of stone,
Then before your door is fully open, a smile
Trying to sell an old woman beauty cosmetics.⁷³

This sense of the loss of Indian traditions is a spiritual one as well; the damage done cannot be measured solely in material terms. In this regard, the loss of pride, of autonomy and of a feeling of importance have caused a severe loss of self-respect and confidence which, while not quantifiable, is equally harmful. Indian lecturer, activist, author, film-maker and poet, Duke Redbird, expresses this atmosphere of enervation very effectively in his poem, 'Tobacco Burns':

Tobacco curls when touched by fire
The smoke rises – up –
Blue and grey
A fog that holds medicine
The spirit is strong.
The story is old
The smoke curls
I feel a sound – the sound
Of drums on distant hills
Of buffalo hoofs on frozen ground
A medicine chant wailing by breezes
That have not blown
For many moons; nor suns
That shine no longer on brown children
My eyes seek a vision
For old people told of visions
That were not seen by eyes
But burned in the mind and mouth
Of our men
Who fought battles
But did not win.
My body cries for strong medicine
But my eyes water from whisky
My brain bleeds – my heart sweats
I regret

That tobacco burns
And I am not strong.⁷⁴

In both countries the verse of the indigenous peoples also celebrates those links with the past which are still retained today. The very act of writing much of this poetry is an exercise of celebration and reinforcement of traditional ties. For example, Jim Dumont ends his 'For Joe Mackinaw' with the words:

. . . in my old age
I will go in dreams
And I will find the buffalo again.⁷⁵

Similarly, Oodgeroo Noonuccal underlines the fact that history lives on for many contemporary Aborigines, in her poem, 'The Past':

Let no one say the past is dead.
The past is all about us and within.
Haunted by tribal memories, I know
This little now, this accidental present
Is not the all of me, whose long making
Is so much of the past . . .
a thousand thousand camp fires in the forest
Are in my blood.
Let none tell me the past is wholly gone.
Now is so small a part of time, so small a part
Of all the race years that have moulded me.⁷⁶

In her poem 'Drums of My Father', the Canadian Indian author, Shirley Daniels, makes almost exactly the same point using very similar language:

A hundred thousand years have passed
Yet, I hear the distant beat of my father's drums
I hear his drums throughout the land
His beat I feel within my heart.

The drums shall beat, so my heart shall beat,
And I shall live a hundred thousand years.⁷⁷

If the relationship between the past and present – between historical and current injustice – is one of the major themes in both Indian and Aboriginal verse, another pertains to the future, uncertain as it may be. One of the most potent images of the future is, of course, the child, and indigenous poets in both countries, such as the Black Australian, Maureen Watson, and the Canadian Indian, Eleanor

on your bones
that rattle and wail
that drive me
to find you.⁷⁹

Watson makes it clear that it is impossible for her to protect her son from the racial persecution he will suffer in educational institutions, however much she wishes to. It is noteworthy that her direct, emphatic style is accentuated by her measured metre and regular rhyme-scheme – which has the effect of building the impact to a crescendo at the close of the poem. The Aboriginal poets' desire for a vivid, telling impact means that their verse very frequently incorporates a steady rhyme scheme and rhythm together with the repetition of key words in successive lines. The best-known Aboriginal poets – Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Jack Davis, and Kevin Gilbert – incorporate these techniques in the majority of their poems, and only in the last ten years have Aboriginal poets begun to experiment to a greater extent with blank verse, irregular metre, and phonetic spellings.

On the other hand, as Crowe's 'Shadows' exemplifies, Canadian Indian poets have been more inclined to write unrhymed verse which emphasises word order, positioning, and pauses, rather than repetitive sounds. Indians have also been experimenting with written poetry for a longer period of time and with a significant amount of success. Some of Duke Redbird and Marty Dunn's ventures into the realm of concrete poetry have been very effective, particularly as they have moulded their pictorial verse into graphic illustrations which have meanings for both native and non-native Canadians. In one striking example, attributes of the White and Indian cultures are unified into a prescription for the social evolution of the North American consciousness by the year 2001. These 'male', 'active' (white) and 'female', 'passive' (Indian) characteristics coalesce into a unified circle, which is depicted as shining like the moon over a totem pole.⁸⁰

To cite another example of Indian poetic experimentation, Sarain Stump illustrated his own extended, book-length poem, *There Is My People Sleeping*, so that the graphics become an integral component of the very lyrical text. There is no Aboriginal poet who has yet written a sustained work of either the calibre or the length of Stump's poem, nor is there a Black Australian who has illustrated her or his own publication as meaningfully. A brief, unillustrated excerpt does not adequately convey the total effect of his book, but may give some

indication of its density:

AND THERE IS MY PEOPLE SLEEPING
SINCE A LONG TIME
BUT AREN'T JUST DREAMS
THE OLD CARS WITHOUT ENGINE
PARKING IN FRONT OF THE HOUSE
OR ANGRY WORDS ORDERING PEACE OF MIND
OR WHO STEALS FROM YOU FOR YOUR GOOD
AND DOESN'T WANNA REMEMBER WHAT HE OWES YOU
SOMETIMES I'D LIKE TO FALL ASLEEP TOO,
CLOSE MY EYES ON EVERYTHING
BUT I CAN'T
I CAN'T . . .

I WAS MIXING STARS AND SAND
IN FRONT OF HIM
BUT HE COULDN'T UNDERSTAND
I WAS KEEPING THE LIGHTNING OF
THE THUNDER IN MY PURSE
JUST IN FRONT OF HIM
BUT HE COULDN'T UNDERSTAND
AND I HAD BEEN KILLED A THOUSAND TIMES
RIGHT AT HIS FEET
BUT HE HADN'T UNDERSTOOD⁸¹

The majority of Canadian Indian poets have succeeded in creating extremely visual poetry, in which word positioning on the page, artwork and design are important components. For example, the manner in which the poems of Skyros Bruce are printed on the page contributes importantly to their success:

in
dian

we are north americans
he said
and made me feel
ashamed that i was not wearing
beads at my throat
small proud flowers
growing there
or leather
sarain stump
handsome faced

colour of earth rose
quietly
telling me that i am
indian now
and ending all
the identity fears⁸²

In a similar fashion, Leo Yerxa's 'I Searched' gains its maximum effect from the visual pauses which its layout necessitates:

 i searched
 the places in the
 long narrow streets
 and at times
i even looked between the sheets,
 in the morning
 all i found
 was a head full of hurt,
 a dime on the shelf
 and the devil
 to pay⁸³

Such pauses are also essential to the impact of Wayne Keon's 'Moosonee in August':

the Cree women
are laffing,
& hide their faces
behind a worn blanket
every time a man
raises a camera
in front of them . . .

one woman
speaks to me
in a dialect
i cannot
understand
& I feel stupid
but smile anyway

my face
gets hot
when I walk away
and take the hand

of my blonde
woman⁸⁴

Naturally there are exceptions to this visual trend, such as the work of Gordon Williams. In his poem, 'Justice in Williams Lake', he offers the reader a hard-hitting poetic critique of a judicial system which can permit the acquittal of the rapists and murderers of an Indian woman. In so doing, he uses the techniques of assonance, alliteration, and a jagged, repetitive rhythm, in order to produce a poem which is orally very effective:

the wind blows colder
and the flag snaps angrily
bells of freedom ring
thru an idealistic dominion
publication
prints
splots
of ink
splotted splatted
blotted
plotted
democratic rapists
set free
fined forgiven –
Indian maiden
raped and killed
too young
too dead to smile
her murderers
set free
this is democracy
mute flags indifferent to lamentation
manipulation of justice
in Williams lake.⁸⁵

This is not to imply that Canadian Indian verse is superior to Australian Aboriginal poetry. The point is that, while poets of the two indigenous groups share many thematic concerns – such as the question of identity, and of 'unjust justice' in a white society – they have engaged in stylistic experimentation which has generally taken them in different directions. While the Indian writers have largely written more visual, unrhymed verse, the Aboriginal authors have developed more rhymed and, particularly, more oral poetry, which has a greater impact when read aloud as a result of its increasing

emphasis upon phonetic sounds and the spoken dialect.

Over the past fifteen years, a number of Black Australian poets with very distinctive voices have emerged. One of them is Tutama Tjapangati, a tribal man from the Papunya area of the Northern Territory, who has published only sparingly. His poetry breaks new ground in Australia through its unique phonetic synthesis of Pintupi/Luritja and English – as in this brief poem, which concerns a severe storm which lifted a sheet-iron roof off a dwelling:

Ohhh,
too much/
little bitta cheeky bug/
kapi purlka/ walpa purlka/ ohhh! ebbrywhere!
jitapayin WHOOF! gone. Pinished!
/kapi kapi kapi/ cough'a cough'a cough'a
ohhh, too much.⁸⁶

Another of Tjapangati's poems, 'Aladayi', tells the story of the local school bus:

big one mutukayi
kulaputja katiku
bring em up here

big one
Tjukula, show em a you
my country

Mickini, mighty be we take em
Mayayana, my daught
Nolan, my brother
Kayiyu Kayiyu, Nampitjimp

Ohh, too much!
grab em big one you
ebbrything a tucker
kapi too/puttem a-drum

you right that's 'im
my country, piyu
kala!

[mutukayi – motorcar; kulaputja – schoolbus; katiku – will bring;
Tjukula – a place in the eastern Gibson Desert; Nampitjimp –

shortened version of Nampitjinpa, a skin-name; kapi – water;
piyu – all's well; kola – anyway, what next?⁸⁷

Another semi-tribal man of the same area, Nosepeg Tjupurrula, has recited 'Pangkalangka dreaming', also of this synthetic style:

I'll tell you somethink
 that Pangkalangka gotta kungka parmpa
 he gotta kungka – that's his wife
 big mobba tjtji –
 Pangkalankas son, daughter,
 same like a kungka this ones mob!
 gotta lotta pamily,
 from dreamin,
 all here, no worries!
 Big tall pella him
 go ebbrywhere: Amanturrngu, Kintore,
 Karrinyarra;
 anythinga they take em:
 they gotta boots,
 parttja/trabil underground
 just like a wind him go
 we callem 'walpa'/
 big like a city inside;
 they gotta lid,
 shut em up,
 key em up,
 inside;
 then they go way workin,
 vijiting more Pangkalangka,
 ebbrywhere they go!
 They gotta spear,
 stone knife,
 little tomahawk (notta
 whitepella tomahawk!),
 women gotta coolamon.
 Ohh, too much

That Pangkalangka, him notta nguntji:
 notta bullshit: him true! proper!
 pilkarti! cheeky bugger! really wild! –

sometimes a lover boy they fight!!!⁸⁸

It must be noted that these recitals have all been assembled in written poetic form by a white Literature Production Supervisor working in

the area. Nevertheless, the potential for the writing of such verse by Aborigines as an inherently oral, bilingual and unique form is certainly vast.

There is also a discernible trend in much urban Black Australian poetry towards oral verse which emphasises, above all, the phonetic sounds of words. Oodgeroo Noonuccal discovered this poetic door; Kevin Gilbert began to open it; but it is urban poets like Bobbi Sykes, Aileen Corpus and Lionel Fogarty who are beginning to cross the threshold. One of the best-known and most active Black Australian spokespersons of the 1970s, Bobbi Sykes, has had a considerable influence upon Aboriginal Affairs as well as Black Australian literature. Sykes's more colloquial poetry replicates the Black American idiom, in a dialect similar to that chosen by poets such as LeRoi Jones:

When that man comes home/
I'm going to tell him/
Right/

You – the clinkhead dude/
who is making my life/
A misery –

Playing on my
e/motion/s
'n'

Coming in late/
with/
Your enigmatic smile⁸⁹

There is little doubt that the 'Black Power' and 'Black is Beautiful' movements in the United States have had at least some effect upon the format and the language of Black Australian political protests. Similarly, the Black American vocabulary has also influenced the writings of some Aboriginal poets, such as Gerry Bostock, Lionel Fogarty, and Aileen Corpus. Corpus is one of the most promising of the growing number of Aboriginal people who have published one or several poems in various magazines and newspapers. Her verse, printed in journals such as *Identity* and *Meanjin*, is frequently urban in focus, quite colloquial, and often captures sounds in an onomatopoeic fashion:

bright red spurted out
in warm tiny drops
to my heart-beats,
pht. pht. pht.

fingers tensed unbending
and outstretched
as blood-springs said
tch. tch. tch.
as they drop upon
bright red spots
turning black.
blk. blk. blk.⁹⁰

Corpus has also made some of the most effective use of consonants and phonetic sounds in Aboriginal poetry, as in 'blkfern-jungal', a poem which is clearly indebted to Black American phraseology:

wlk'n down regent street i see
blks hoo display blknez
(i min they sens of blknez)
n they say t'me . . .

'ime gonna lif yoo outta
yor blk hole n sho yoo
how t'wlk n dress n tlk.'

n i sit in th'gutta
of regent street
(outside wair we ol meet)
n i look up n see
arown th' haylo of they hair,
a cosmetic afro ring –
shiny haze
like it blines me man!!

so mu eyes go down t'thair
smart soot ol prest n cleen
n thair hi heel kork shoos
n i turn mu head n look at mu
soiled blknez, n i sez . . .

'ime gonna lif yoo outta
yore blk hole n sho yoo
how t'wlk n dress n tlk'⁹¹

This is one of the most effective examples of the Black Australian trend towards the writing of poetry which has an inbuilt phonetic imperative quite unlike anything White Australian poets have produced. It is noteworthy that this trend is common to both urban and semi-tribal Aboriginal poets (such as Tjapangati) and that it represents the single most significant stylistic contribution of Black Australian verse to Australian literature.

This oral imperative has also affected the work of one of the most important younger Aboriginal poets: Lionel Fogarty. With only minimal education ('half of grade nine'⁹²) Fogarty has had few poetic models to emulate and has instead relied upon an ear finely tuned to the spoken language of the Aboriginal fringe-dwellers. He has also been influenced by slogans, advertising jingles and popular songs, and the amalgam of all these influences is fascinating, if not always successful. In his first volume of verse, *Kargun*, one of Fogarty's weaknesses is an occasional lack of control: the vituperation sometimes spills out as suddenly and as violently as the blow-out of an inner tube:

I get out my best knife
cut the heart out
then stuff it in their mouth
until it went down the gut.
I thought
I must slice off the balls
and shove
in the eyeballs
with blood
spitting out of the nose.⁹³

Fogarty's bitterness is probably justified. Not only was he raised on Cherbourg reserve in Queensland but he was also falsely implicated in a conspiracy trial in the mid-1970s. Nevertheless, the kind of uncontrolled rage which occasionally surfaces in *Kargun* is self-defeating and serves to alienate even the most sympathetic reader.

Elsewhere in his first book, Fogarty is far more effective. For example, his poem, 'You Who May Read My Words' is a successful, self-reflective treatment of the theme of tokenism with reference to Aboriginal literature:

Now!
Everyone wants writings of Aboriginals
Past, Present and Future.
But do they want the REALITY

Or, is it good words
nice words
Patronising
pat on the back.⁹⁴

In the same vein is his 'Mr. Professor', which attacks exploitive white research into Aboriginal culture:

Our guns are alive
that's the reality
alive
like lava
and your intellectual
and academic criticisms
have been your industry
out of our oppression.⁹⁵

The most memorable aspect of the collection is probably its fervent tone of exhortation, with a pronounced Fourth World dimension:

Red power show me you're not lost
Black power row me to meeting you
Yellow power sing me a wing, tall in flight
Brown power make me sounds, aloud
White power, don't take me
Aboriginal power give me power
Now, I'll go – take.⁹⁶

Fogarty's second collection of verse, *Yoogum Yoogum*, was published in 1982. Most of the poems were composed very rapidly and then Penguin Books rushed the typescript into print in a fortnight, so that the volume could be launched during the Brisbane Commonwealth Games. The launching of *Yoogum Yoogum* during Commonwealth Writers' Week provided one of the clearest possible examples of the conjunction of Aboriginal politics and poetry. One of the speakers at the book's launching, the well-known Black Australian activist Gary Foley, underlined the role of such literature as an integral part of the Aboriginal political movement:

You can't divorce what Lionel has written from what is going on in the streets of Brisbane today and tomorrow and the day after. It is part of our struggle; an *important* part of our struggle, as any book that is written – as Kevin Gilbert's . . . – as any book that is written by Aboriginal people . . . We make no apologies for being overtly political; we see more clearly than anyone else in this country what is wrong with this country.⁹⁷

Paradoxically, the urgency of Fogarty's own feelings is both his greatest strength and his most important failing in *Yoogum Yoogum*. The rapid, unrevised pace of his composition has given these poems candour and immediacy but it has also led to confusion and obscurity – sometimes in different parts of the same poem. As Chris Tiffin pointed out in his review of the book:

Yoogum Yoogum is not the work of an unconfident writer, in fact its successes and its faults stem from a confident and courageous experimentalism.⁹⁸

When his thoughts are apparently not focussed, Fogarty's verse can be very frustrating for the non-Aboriginal reader:

Wise oaks crack compass broken
wash mud
sorrow flickering cats
waxed glorious colour butterflyed
harmless caterpillars
just to screen gloved 'pray to Gods'.⁹⁹

What is beyond doubt is that Fogarty is increasingly a poet who writes the spoken Aboriginal word. Colloquial expressions and expletives are accentuated by alliteration in 'Decorative Rasp, Weaved Roots':

Couples contemplating
followed another bunch
of friggen portable rubbish public
jumped up propaganda
fair dinkum mates
think them sick scratched pissed patients
inmates of time.¹⁰⁰

On some occasions the poetry is as vibrant as a sustained exclamation:

Old Billy, young alive, was he denied?
He look around
and he frowns
Also Billy is hairy
Wowie . . . some fella call him
YOWIE.

He black
Smell even
Green eyes crept behind you
and BOO! YOU!¹⁰¹

An emphasis upon oral communication becomes even more apparent in Fogarty's subsequent two volumes of poetry, *Kudjela* (1983) and *Ngutji* (1984). As Cheryl Buchanan writes in her foreword to the latter, Fogarty's own 'experience of oppression and frustration grew into a revolutionary style of writing that no other Aboriginal person has achieved'. She continues, 'Lionel regards himself as "a speaker, not a writer"', and does not like to be categorised as a "poet"¹⁰². Fogarty is, as Colin Johnson has termed him, a 'guerilla poet wielding the language of the invader in an urge to destroy that imposition and recreate a new language freed of restrictions and erupting a multi-meaning of ambiguity'.¹⁰³

The assault on European language includes an attack on contemporary modes of western communication; for example, in 'Ain't No Abo Way of Communication' he writes:

Godfather, do you remember?
 Ring, ring, the phone calls for you
 come grab, it's yubba, for you
 Hello, hello, who's this?
 You know who.
 Look, yubba, me don't like your attitude or your ways

me don't wanta have any to do you no more.
 Well, get fucked. Bang, down it went . . .

Yubba, whoever you are, ring me no more
 But see me, feel one.
 Don't use their phones, be a real murrie¹⁰⁴

The critique of the dominant Australian culture in Fogarty's verse often extends beyond the country's shores:

The people, country, Pine Gap, conceals in arms race
 Victories cannot confirm goals
 Less confrontation political or philosophical
 taking greater strength
 Who's threatening?
 Whites are threatening
 are threatened . . . even tomorrow¹⁰⁵

Fogarty's poetry is difficult to assess, because of its experimental unconventionality. What can be said is that it necessitates being read aloud, it is confident and unique in Australian literature. As Kevin Gilbert has put it, 'Coming from a tradition of oral poetry, having been forced by assimilationist policy of the government to forego

traditional language and to adopt the European tongue, Lionel used the written English like a dervish wields a club.¹⁰⁶ It is true that Fogarty's poetry is often hard for the non-Aboriginal reader to comprehend, but that is precisely the point: it is *meant* to be. Just as Jack Davis's plays challenge the theatre-goer linguistically and make the audience work to understand the dialogue, Fogarty makes no concessions to simplicity. This is just another way in which Aboriginal authors are breaking new ground in Australian literature: it is a form of what the Jamaican poet Louise Bennett has termed 'colonisation in reverse'.¹⁰⁷ It implies that the White Australian reader will be on the outside, purposely externalised from an easy understanding of the text.

In this way, to criticise Fogarty for being obtuse or inaccessible is to adopt a limited critical stance. As Colin Johnson has expressed it:

In modern Aboriginal writing, and by modern Aboriginal writing, I signify writings by such writers as Lionel Fogarty, there has been a shift away from what has been a simple plea, or a writing slanted towards white people and to be used as a tool for understanding. This early writing did not result in a return of understanding, but an outrage of critics directed at such writings as being puerile and essentially not as good as European writing . . .

Aboriginal writing has developed towards a spirituality interested in using and exploring the inner reality of Aboriginality in Australia. Naturally in doing this, there are problems in that there may be no readership for such a writing or that those critics who dismissed Aboriginal writing for accessibility may now dismiss it for obscurity.¹⁰⁸

The underlying principle of Fogarty's 'spoken' writing is undeniably a political one, supporting the Black Australian struggle for thorough-going autonomy. However, as Johnson indicates, he does run a risk in so doing: of making his work so difficult that non-Aborigines refuse to make the effort to comprehend it. The fact that his work is already being studied at the tertiary level indicates that there are those prepared to make that effort; to understand how the Aboriginal political movement finds expression through the creative writing of its authors.

Of course, not all Black Australian writers are comfortable openly associating their poetry with the Aboriginal movement. For example, Mona Tur (who writes under her tribal name of Ngitji Ngitji) states, 'I'm not one for political things', and she adds, 'I get most of my poetry through nature'. Yet even she admits, 'I know politics and life go together to a certain extent' and one of her best poems,

'Uluru', was written immediately after viewing a documentary on 'The Rape of Ayers Rock': 'I was so ropeable after I had watched that film . . . that I sat up half the night writing it'.¹⁰⁹ Tur's sincerity and heartfelt grief is communicated in her lyrical verse:

My heart bleeds, our beloved Rock,
To see you torn apart.
Our dreamtime tells of your forming,
You put forth your beauty at dawning.
As evening comes, your haunting beauty
Mirrors beauty beyond compare.¹¹⁰

In one sense, all Aboriginal poetry is political, in that public statements of Aboriginality or of affinity with nature can be interpreted as support for the ideology of the land rights campaign. Often, though, this is not the stated intention of the author, who may be writing a celebration of the natural world with no ulterior motive. An example is Leila Rankine's lyrical evocation of the Coorong district of South Australia:

Land of my father's people,
Place of my ancestors past,
Never will forget you
For, you are dear to my heart

I've climbed your golden sand dunes,
And walked through your native scrub,
Swam in your sea green waters
Watched the birds, in their evening flight . . .

Oh spirit of the long ago
And guardian of the past
As I stand beside your waters
My soul knows peace at last.¹¹¹

However, even Rankine admits that the attraction of poetry for Aboriginal writers is a more than 'natural' one:

You can do it in poetry form and be very *strong* in your approach without being hassled. It's an art form, which allows you to say a lot – express a lot – without getting into strife with the authorities.¹¹²

Clearly, this is yet another motivation for the convergence of Black Australian politics and poetry.

Ever since Oodgeroo Noonuccal's *We Are Going* was first released in 1964, Aboriginal poets have often reacted in the same immediate

way to socio-political incidents which specifically affected Black Australians. Noonuccal herself wrote 'Acacia Ridge'; Jack Davis composed 'Laverton Incident'; Kevin Gilbert wrote 'Mister Man'; Lionel Fogarty composed most of his verse; and Gerry Bostock wrote one of the most impassioned, rhythmic, and exhortatory of all the Aboriginal poems: 'Black Children'. In Bostock's words, 'The poem just flowed the day after the Aboriginal Embassy collapsed'¹¹³ and every time he recites 'Black Children', he re-awakens the strong emotions that were aroused at that time:

Prepare Black Children
For the Land Rights fight,
Our cause is true,
Our aim's in sight,
Unite my people,
Unite!

Come on, Black Children
Rise on your feet!
Get out of the gutter
And onto the street;
United together,
Hand in hand,
Heads raised high we stand,
Then, march as one,
Surging forward and onward,
For justice
For freedom
And for our land.¹¹⁴

Above all else, Aboriginal poetry is remarkable for its striking immediacy, which is often augmented by the personal or political stance of the author. It is this factor which conveys its political, literary and, most recently, its colloquial, oral and/or phonetic strength. While Aboriginal poetry underscores the Fourth World dimension of the Black Australian situation, it highlights at the same time the distinctive Aboriginal world-view in Australia. In the introduction to his landmark anthology of Aboriginal poetry, *Inside Black Australia*, Kevin Gilbert highlights most eloquently the independent paradigm of black verse:

Black poets sing, not in odes to Euripides or Dionysus, not Keats, nor Browning, nor Shakespeare; neither do they sing a pastoral lay to a 'sunburnt country' for they know that that russet stain that Dorothea Mackellar spoke of is actually the stain of

blood, our blood, covering the surface of our land so the white man could steal our land.¹¹⁵

Although many of the traditional song-poets have died, Black Australians' awareness of the lyricism and power of the spoken word lives on in the verse of its contemporary poets.

Notes

- 1 Personal interview with Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Stradbroke Island (Queensland), August, 1980.
- 2 Quoted in Adam Shoemaker, 'An Interview With Jack Davis', *Westerly*, vol. 27, no. 4, December, 1982, p. 116.
- 3 W.E.H. Stanner, *After the Dreaming*, (Sydney, 1969), p. 44.
- 4 See the inside cover of Noonuccal's *My People*, (Brisbane, 1970). Noonuccal also asserts this fact in her interview with Jim Davidson in *Meanjin*, vol. 36, no. 4, (December, 1977), p. 428. It was in December, 1987, that Kath Walker officially changed her name to Oodgeroo Noonuccal, to protest the Bicentennial celebrations of 1988. In her words, 'I have renounced my English name because the House of Commons and Lords in England have neglected us for 200 years. They could not spell the Aboriginal names so they gave us English ones'. Quoted in 'Poet Changes Name, Returns MBE in Bicentennial Protest', *The Courier-Mail*, 15 December 1987, p. 4.
- 5 Personal interview with Colin Johnson, conducted by Cliff Watego and Adam Shoemaker, Brisbane, September, 1982.
- 6 See, for example, 'It's Politics as Usual for Independent Bonner', *The Canberra Times*, 13 February, 1983, p. 1, and 'Kath Walker Withdraws', *The Canberra Times*, 15 February, 1983, p. 6.
- 7 *Australian Book Review*, May, 1964, p. 143.
- 8 Jill Hellyer, 'Aboriginal Poet', *Hemisphere*, vol. 8, no. 12, December, 1964, p. 18.
- 9 Noonuccal, 'Then and Now', in *My People*, (Milton, 1981), p. 91.
- 10 Noonuccal, 'Gifts', in *My People*, p. 39.
- 11 Noonuccal, 'Nona' in *My People*, p. 31.
- 12 Noonuccal, 'Verses', (Number 'VII'), in *My People*, p. 83.
- 13 Review of *The Dawn Is At Hand*, in *Poetry Magazine*, no. 1, February, 1967, p. 31.
- 14 Andrew Taylor, 'New Poetry', *Australian Book Review*, no. 36, Winter, 1967, p. 44.
- 15 Jill Hellyer, 'Aboriginal Poet', p. 18.

- 16 'Australian Poets', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 10 September, 1964, p. 842.
- 17 Ruth Doobov, 'The New Dreamtime: Kath Walker in Australian Literature', *Australian Literary Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1, May, 1973, pp. 54-55.
- 18 'Interview: Kath Walker', *Meanjin*, vol. 36, no. 4, December, 1977, pp. 428-429; (Conducted by Jim Davidson).
- 19 Personal interview with Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Stradbroke Island, August, 1982, conducted by Cliff Watego. Quoted with permission.
- 20 Quoted in Adam Shoemaker, 'An Interview with Jack Davis', *Westerly*, vol. 27, no. 4, December, 1982, p. 116.
- 21 Cheryl Buchanan's speech at the official launching of Fogarty's *Yoogum Yoogum*, Queensland Institute of Technology, September, 1982.
- 22 See Colin Johnson's 'Report of the Proceedings of the Second Aboriginal Writers' Conference', Melbourne, November, 1983, pp. 41-42.
- 23 Personal interview with Oodgeroo Noonuccal, conducted by Cliff Watego, Stradbroke Island, August, 1982. Quoted with permission.
- 24 Quoted by L.E. Scott in his unfortunately titled article, 'Writers From A Dying Race', *Pacific Moana Quarterly*, vol. 4, no. 4, October, 1979, p. 430.
- 25 Personal correspondence with Professor J.E. Chamberlin, January 23, 1984.
- 26 John Beston, 'The Aboriginal Poets in English: Kath Walker, Jack Davis, and Kevin Gilbert', *Meanjin*, vol. 36, no. 4, December, 1977, p. 458.
- 27 'The Boomerang', in *The First-born, and Other Poems*, (Melbourne, 1983), p. 7.
- 28 Personal interview with Jack Davis, Canberra, November, 1981.
- 29 Davis, 'Laverton Incident', in *The First-born*, p. 22.
- 30 Beston, 'The Aboriginal Poets in English', p. 461.
- 31 Davis, 'Desolation', in *The First-born*, p. 36.
- 32 Davis has also been involved for many years in the activities of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, as a committee and a council member, and in 1984 both he and Oodgeroo Noonuccal were named as members of the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council.
- 33 Davis, 'From the Ward Window', in *Jagardoo: Poems from Aboriginal Australia*, (Sydney, 1978), p. 20.
- 34 Davis, 'Bombay', in *Jagardoo*, p. 37.

- 35 Kevin Gilbert, 'People Are Legends', in 'Poems 1970', Mitchell Library mss. no. 2429, 1970.
- 36 Kevin Gilbert, *People Are Legends*, (St. Lucia, 1978), p. 54.
- 37 Kevin Gilbert, 'People Are Legends', in *End of Dreamtime*, (Sydney, 1971), p. 14.
- 38 Gil Perrin, 'Songs of Protest and Rural Poems', *Village News and NALA Journal*, 6 September, 1978, n.p.
- 39 Peter Monaghan, 'Fruits of Oppression', *The Canberra Times*, 27 May, 1979, p. 15.
- 40 Gilbert, 'Riches', in *People Are Legends*, p. 17.
- 41 'The Other Side of the Story', in *ibid.*, p. 11.
- 42 'The Flowering . . .', in *ibid.*, p. 51.
- 43 'Shame', in *ibid.*, p. 13.
- 44 'The Better Blacks', in *ibid.*, pp. 26-27.
- 45 Kevin Gilbert, 'To My Cousin, Evonne Cawley', *The Bulletin Literary Supplement*, September, 1980, p. 2.
- 46 Personal interview with Kevin Gilbert, Canberra, May, 1981.
- 47 Gilbert, 'Granny Koori', in *People Are Legends*, p. 42.
- 48 Gilbert, 'Extract From a Letter to a Woman Friend', in 'Poems 1970', Mitchell Library mss. no. 2429, 1970.
- 49 Kevin Gilbert, Untitled Verse, in 'Kids' Poems', National Library of Australia ms. no. 2584, 1979, n.p.
- 50 Personal interview with Kevin Gilbert, Canberra, May, 1981.
- 51 Les A. Murray, 'In Search of a Poet', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 October 1978, p. 16.
- 52 Gilbert, 'The Gurindji', in *People Are Legends*, pp. 44-45.
- 53 Bruce Clunies-Ross, 'Survival of the Jindyworobaks', *Kunapipi*, vol. III, no. 1, 1981, p. 62.
- 54 Les A. Murray, 'The Human-Hair Thread', *Meanjin*, vol. 36, no. 4, December, 1977, pp. 550-551.
- 55 *ibid.*, p. 550.
- 56 *ibid.*, p. 571.

- 57 *ibid.*, p. 551.
- 58 Murray, 'The Ballad of Jimmy Governor', in *Poems Against Economics*, (Sydney, 1972), p. 15.
- 59 Murray, 'Thinking About Aboriginal Land Rights, I Visit the Farm I Will Not Inherit', in *Lunch and Counter Lunch*, (Sydney, 1974), p. 30.
- 60 Personal interview with Les Murray, Canberra, June, 1981.
- 61 Murray, 'The Human-Hair Thread', p. 551.
- 62 Bruce Dawe, 'Nemesis', *The Bulletin Literary Supplement*, 1 November 1983, p. 81.
- 63 Cliff Watego, 'Aboriginal Poetry and White Criticism', in Jack Davis and Bob Hodge, eds, *Aboriginal Writing Today*, (Canberra, 1985), pp. 87-88.
- 64 Colin Johnson, 'Song Twenty-Seven', in *The Song Circle of Jacky, and Selected Poems*, (Melbourne, 1986), p. 40.
- 65 Tracy Maurer, 'More Deaths in Police Custody Than Prisons', *The Australian*, 5 March 1988, p. 3.
- 66 Johnson, 'City Suburban Lines', in *The Song Circle of Jacky*, p. 84.
- 67 'Song Five', in *ibid.*, p. 16.
- 68 Johnson, 'Song Two', in *ibid.*, p. 13.
- 69 'Declaration of the Indigenous Nations of Our Place in Canada's Constitution', tabled at the Third General Assembly of the WCIP, Canberra, April/May, 1981.
- 70 Adapted in brief from the NAC's 'Position Paper on Indigenous Ideology and Philosophy', and published in *Identity*, vol. 4, no. 4, Winter, 1981, p. 36.
- 71 Oodgeroo Noonuccal, 'We Are Going', in *My People*, p. 78.
- 72 Jim Dumont, 'For Joe Mackinaw', in Day and Bowering, eds, *Many Voices: An Anthology of Contemporary Canadian Indian Poetry*, (Vancouver, 1977), p. 49.
- 73 Gordon Williams, 'The Last Crackle', in *ibid.*, p. 61.
- 74 Duke Redbird, 'Tobacco Burns', in *ibid.*, p. 40.
- 75 Dumont, 'For Joe Mackinaw', in *ibid.*, p. 50.
- 76 Noonuccal, 'The Past', in *My People*, p. 93.
- 77 Shirley Daniels, 'Drums of My Father', in *Many Voices*, p. 47.
- 78 Maureen Watson, 'Black Child', in *Black Reflections*, (Wattle Park, 1982), p. 13.

- 79 Eleanor Crowe, 'Shadows', in *Many Voices*, pp. 37-38.
- 80 Duke Redbird and Marty Dunn, Untitled concrete poem in *Many Voices*, p. 45.
- 81 Sarain Stump, *There is My People Sleeping*, (Sidney, B.C.,1970), pp. 14, 116.
- 82 Skyros Bruce, Untitled poem, in *Many Voices*, p. 77.
- 83 Leo Yerxa, 'I Searched', in *Many Voices*, p. 67.
- 84 Wayne Keon, 'Moosonee in August', in *Many Voices*, pp. 69-70.
- 85 Gordon Williams, 'Justice in Williams Lake', in *Many Voices*, p. 63.
- 86 Tutama Tjapangati, 'Wangka Tjukutjuk', *Overland*, no. 80, July, 1980, p. 32.
- 87 Tutama Tjapangati, 'Aladayi', *The Bulletin Literary Supplement*, 1 November 1983, p. 64.
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- 91 Aileen Corpus, 'blkiern-jungal', *Meanjin*, vol. 36, no. 4, December 1977, p. 470.
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- 94 Fogarty, 'You Who May Read My Words', in *Kargun*, p. 78.
- 95 'Mr. Professor', in *ibid.*, p. 23.
- 96 'Please Don't Take', in *ibid.*, p. 95.
- 97 Gary Foley's speech at the launching of *Yoogum Yoogum*, Queensland Institute of Technology, Brisbane, September, 1982.
- 98 Chris Tiffin, 'Language of Anger', *The Australian Book Review*, vol. 48, Feb. /Mar., 1983, p. 18.
- 99 'Sentiment Transcends', in *Yoogum, Yoogum*, (Ringwood, 1982), p. 50.
- 100 'Decorative Rasp, Weaved Roots', in *ibid.*, p. 14.
- 101 'To a Warm Veined Yubba: Billy Gorham', in *ibid.*, p. 98.

- 102 Cheryl Buchanan, Foreword to *Ngutji*, (Spring Hill [Queensland], 1984), n.p.
- 103 Colin Johnson, 'Guerilla Poetry: Lionel Fogarty's Response to Language Genocide', *Aspect*, no. 34, August, 1986, p. 78.
- 104 Lionel Fogarty, 'Ain't No Abo Way of Communication' in *Kudjela*, (Spring Hill [Queensland], 1983), pp. 58-59.
- 105 'Ambitious Nuclear War Whites', in *ibid.*, p. 154.
- 106 Kevin Gilbert, 'Introduction', in Gilbert, ed, *Inside Black Australia: An Anthology of Aboriginal Poetry*, (Ringwood, 1988), p. 156.
- 107 Quoted in Helen Tiffin, 'Looking Back into the Future: Literature in the English Speaking Caribbean', *New Literature Review*, no. 7, p. 6.
- 108 Colin Johnson, 'Paperbark', unpublished lecture delivered at the University of Queensland, 23 March 1988.
- 109 Personal interview with Mona Tur, Perth, February, 1983.
- 110 Ngitji Ngitji [Mona Tur], 'Uluru', unpublished ms. provided by the author in February 1983.
- 111 Leila Rankine, 'The Coorong', *Social Alternatives*, vol. 2, no. 4, June, 1982, p. 9.
- 112 Personal interview with Leila Rankine, Adelaide, February, 1982.
- 113 Personal interview with Gerry Bostock, Sydney, July, 1980.
- 114 Gerald L. Bostock, 'Black Children', in *Black Man Coming*, (Sydney, 1980), p. 18.
- 115 Gilbert, *Inside Black Australia*, p. xxiv.