

## Conclusion: Black Words on White Pages

### Abstract for chapter 10

Aboriginal literature is centrally involved with the maintenance and extension of Aboriginal confidence and the feeling of self-worth. Three major elements coalesce in Black Australian literature – cultural nationalism, literary talent, and Aboriginal pride.

The author concludes with the view that Aboriginal literature deals above all with identity – with that complex of attitudes, beliefs and mores which constitute Aboriginality.

#### *Keywords*

Aboriginality, literature, poetry, politics

## Conclusion

### *Black Words on White Pages*

Mining in Australia occupies less than one-fifth of one percent of the total surface of our continent and yet it supports 14 million people. Nothing should be sacred from mining whether it's your ground, my ground, the blackfellow's ground or anybody else's. So the question of *Aboriginal land rights* and things of this nature shouldn't exist.<sup>1</sup>

'I didn't know the buggers could write!'<sup>2</sup>

The gap between multinational mining companies and Black Australian poetry may appear vast, but both activities are very important to Aboriginal Australians today. The first brings them directly into contact with European technology, politics and mores in remote areas of Australia's north. The second brings them into contact with writing achievements which engender Black Australian pride and confidence. The two activities are related in the further sense that Aboriginal writers frequently tackle socio-political issues – such as mining – in their work. A fine example of this is Gerry Bostock's sardonic poem, 'An Australian Miner':

A young Australian Miner  
Sat in his Company's diner  
Having coffee and Yellow Cake;  
He seemed quite amused  
By the Black's land he'd abused  
In the National Interest's sake.<sup>3</sup>

In this study, I have highlighted the fact that Black Australian literature is attuned to, and involved with, the Aboriginal political movement. Repeatedly, Aboriginal writers emphasise this aspect of their work. In the words of Bruce McGuinness:

All our struggles I think aim towards that one area, of ultimately achieving the land back so that we can become truly economically independent, so that we can achieve our own ends, so that we achieve those things that we want to achieve. Aboriginal writers have a responsibility here, a very important responsibility, to take that message not only to white people but to Aboriginal people as well, so that we can foster within our own communities a very important concept. That concept is that if we are going to survive, we are going to have to do it as a community, we are going to have to do it as a nation and not as individuals.<sup>4</sup>

Speaking more generally, Colin Johnson underlines the significant role of black writers in continuing and promoting Aboriginal culture:

We are already writing of the present. It is being detailed and made a part of history almost as fast as we act it out, but the future still remains a mystery. Writers are torches lighting up that mystery. They can show us the path or paths along which to travel just as much as the song-cycles of our ancestors mapped out the waterholes. Writers through their writings make us aware of the past, the present and the future.<sup>5</sup>

Not only the content but also the fact of Aboriginal literature is an important focus for Aboriginal pride. Writers such as Noonuccal, Gilbert and Davis have become role models of success for their own people. As Mick Miller observed:

they are taking their place amongst the greats in this country and the further we go on, in years to come, they're going to be standing out there for everybody to see – Aboriginal people to see – that we have somebody out there who is just as good as anybody else in the country.<sup>6</sup>

Miller's positive optimism is echoed by Jack Davis, who has commented:

People are going to turn over one morning and say, 'Christ! Look what I've got in my library!'. You know, I really think so . . . I talk in terms of decades – ten years – everything I think of in terms of ten years. And I see the changes in my lifetime. And I'm going to see it in the next ten years – and I think I'll live to see that – the people are going to have, not half a dozen; they're going to have thirty or forty books on their shelves which are going to be written by Aboriginal writers. And I think they'll cover the whole field.<sup>7</sup>

It can be argued that as Aboriginal authors, the majority of these spokespeople have a vested interest in publicising and extolling the virtues of Black Australian writing. But those such as Mick Miller are political activists, not creative writers, and his optimistic enthusiasm matches that of the authors themselves. However, it is true that some Aboriginal representatives view the close interrelationship of socio-political concerns and Black Australian literature as a necessary but

temporary phase, which will be transcended in the future. Charles Perkins notes the contemporary political utility and impact of Aboriginal literature but adds:

The ultimate is not to dabble too long in obvious political problems . . . because in three or four years' time those problems will no longer be with us. And what we should be aiming towards through art and theatre and writing is creating a society of people that can develop their intellect to the highest possible level, where they can appreciate each other, their environment, and the things that are more important than those we think at the present time are important. I mean you can find . . . great satisfaction and get good appreciation from what we do at the present time, but it's only the first couple of rungs on the ladder.<sup>8</sup>

Implicit in Perkins's assessment is the confidence that Aboriginal literature will continue to expand in volume and popularity, as well as in range of subject and focus, and will win even more domestic and international recognition.

An examination of the performance in the market-place of the most popular examples of recent Black Australian writing shows that the process of recognition has begun in earnest. For example, Archie Weller's *The Day of the Dog* sold out its 2000 copy, hard-cover print run in less than ten months, and the paperback version of the novel rose to number four on the *Age's* bestseller list. In excess of 30 000 copies of the novel had been sold by mid-1984<sup>9</sup> and, significantly, the novel is just as popular amongst Aborigines and is considered by many black spokespeople to exemplify both Aboriginal achievement and black social commentary. In the words of Bruce McGuinness:

*The Day of the Dog* is . . . an excellent account of Aboriginal urban life and of our culture as developed within urban Perth, and it's very similar to what's happening in Fitzroy in Victoria, Musgrave Park in Queensland and Redfern in New South Wales . . . I believe that Archie Weller has been able to give us an insight into the very distinct cultural forms that are kept [in the cities].<sup>10</sup>

Jack Davis concurred, and praised the book simply and directly: 'to me as an Aboriginal it had the power of harsh reality'.<sup>11</sup>

The popularity of the *The Day of the Dog* is an index of the growing awareness amongst White Australians of the value and impressiveness of Black Australian writing. There are many others. In 1987 and 1988, both Sally Morgan's *My Place* and Glenyse Ward's *Wandering Girl* were exceptionally well-received by Australian critics and book-buyers alike. Already, eminent publishers like Virago Press have offered contracts to produce both of these autobiographical books in Europe and North America.<sup>12</sup> Overseas, Jack Davis has joined the select ranks of Australian

playwrights whose works have been produced to popular and critical acclaim in London. In June-July 1988, *No Sugar* enjoyed an extremely successful season at the Riverside Studios in the British capital.

In the sphere of education, the first university-level course in 'Aboriginal Literature' began at Murdoch University in 1983 and Colin Johnson was the founding tutor in that course, after having been writer-in-residence at the university in 1982. In 1984, Archie Weller was named as writer-in-residence at the Australian National University and Jack Davis was contracted by the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust to write two new plays, which became *Honeyspot* and *No Sugar*. More and more 'Aboriginal Studies' units are being introduced throughout Australia and Aboriginal literature is playing an increasingly significant role in such courses. To cite two examples, Murdoch University and the University of Queensland now offer Aboriginal literature as a degree-option course at the tertiary level. This process is not only providing exposure for Black Australian writers but is also creating opportunities for Aboriginal lecturers in the same fields. Especially since 1984, and because of the impetus provided by former Director Gary Foley, the Aboriginal Arts Board has taken a particularly strong stance encouraging the publication and distribution of Aboriginal writing. All of these trends signal an expanding and positive awareness amongst the Australian community of the talent of Aboriginal writers and the importance of their works. There is also a growing realisation that activism is often an essential – and inevitable – component of the Aboriginal writer's experience.

That realisation has been heightened during 1988 by the welter of Black Australian protests against the Bicentenary. The clearest example of this was the highly-publicised involvement of Kevin Gilbert in an Aboriginal demonstration during the official opening of the new Parliament House in Canberra. Gilbert made front-page headlines across Australia when he alleged that the new parliament was 'cursed' by the Aboriginal mosaic built into the forecourt of the building.<sup>13</sup> Although Gilbert's claim proved to be a hoax, he actually publicised Black Australian grievances far more effectively than if he had taken part in a 'conventional' protest. That same month, Gilbert's ground-breaking anthology of Aboriginal poetry, *Inside Black Australia*, was released. The timing could not have been more appropriate. The launch of the first national anthology of Black Australian poetry coincided with some of the most publicised and innovative black protest activity ever seen in the country. It is ironic

that even though the Bicentennial has been strongly opposed by most Aborigines, it has undeniably provided opportunities for Black Australian voices to be heard as never before – and has created a climate of heightened public interest, and involvement in, Black Australian issues.

In the anthology itself, Gilbert has assembled and superbly edited the verse of over forty Black Australian poets in a collection which will be an invaluable tool for any student of Aboriginal literature. What is particularly impressive is the range of Aboriginal poetry which Gilbert presents; from simple blank verse to clever satire, from parody to heartfelt lamentation. There is a real sense of discovery in *Inside Black Australia*. For example, in his parody of Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen, W. Les Russell demonstrates that the traditional Aboriginal skill of mime can be transformed into verse in English:

But here in Queensland we don't let the Federal Government  
down there in Canberra tell us what to do  
– and why should we?  
If they come up here we soon give them short shrift and short  
change.  
We send them running back down south with their tails  
between their legs  
and their hats behind their backs like little school boys.  
That's the way to do it – you've got to show them who's boss.  
And so I would tell Mr Cain not to worry about those  
conservationists,  
just run right over them:  
cut right through the lot of them as if they weren't there.  
Golly, that's the way we do it in Queensland.<sup>14</sup>

Maureen Watson has always approached contentious issues bravely and forthrightly; she does so in 'Memo to J.C.' with an undertone of bitterness:

But they don't call us religious, mate.  
Tho' we got the same basic values that you lived by,  
Sharin' and carin about each other,  
And the bread and wine that you passed around,  
Well, we're still doing that, brother.  
Yeah, we share our food and drink and shelter,  
Our grief, our happiness, our hopes and plans,  
But they don't call us 'Followers of Jesus',  
They call us black fellas, man.<sup>15</sup>

But the most impassioned plea for understanding and change in *Inside Black Australia* comes from Robert Walker, who later became one of the victims in the incredible succession of black deaths in custody:

Have you ever heard screams in the middle of  
the night,  
Or the sobbings of a stir-crazy prisoner,  
Echo over and over again in the darkness –  
Threatening to draw you into its madness?

Have you ever rolled up into a human ball  
And prayed for sleep to come?  
Have you ever laid awake for hours  
Waiting for morning to mark yet another day of  
being alone?

If you've ever experienced even one of these,  
Then bow your head and thank God.  
For it's a strange thing indeed –  
This rehabilitation system!<sup>16</sup>

Some of the most apparently simple poems in Gilbert's collection carry the greatest weight: one of Ernie Dingo's quatrains can be taken as a symbol for Black Australian talent – and frustration – throughout the entire country:

Aboriginal achievement  
Is like the dark side of the moon,  
For it is there  
But so little is known.<sup>17</sup>

Thanks to the compiling and editing skills of Gilbert, that achievement in the area of Aboriginal poetry is becoming more and more appreciated. In July 1988, *Inside Black Australia* became one of the highest-selling paperbacks in the nation, giving rise to optimism that Aboriginal voices will be heard even more clearly in the future.

However, not all the signs are optimistic ones. In recent years there has been increasing evidence of a White Australian backlash against minorities which may seriously affect the Aboriginal movement in the late 1980s and early 1990s. An increase in Asian immigration and the allowance of land rights in parts of the nation have both prompted shrill and reactionary responses from some vocal Australian minority groups. To cite one example, Geoff McDonald reasons from inaccuracy to racist absurdity in his book, *Red Over Black: Behind the Aboriginal Land Rights*:

In the phoney debate about Aboriginal 'land rights', it is generally overlooked that irrespective of what happened in the past, there would be no debate at all if young white Australians had not died on the Kakoda [sic] trail and other parts of South-East Asia in stemming the Japanese assault during the Pacific War. A Japanese victory would have eliminated any Aboriginal problem – by the simple process of liquidating the Aborigines!<sup>18</sup>

Not only does McDonald totally ignore the Aboriginal contribution to the war effort, but he also argues that sacrifice of life in the defence of the nation gives White Australians the right to ownership of the country. If one were to accept this form of reasoning, the Aboriginal people who died in defence of their homeland between 1788 and 1929 would therefore be entitled to far more territory than is embraced by any land rights claim.

McDonald's book is so prejudiced and devoid of logic that, were it not for the fact that it has gone through six printings and was enthusiastically received by such notables as the former Queensland premier, Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen, and the president of the Victorian branch of the RSL, Bruce Ruxton, it would not merit discussion. But the unfortunate fact is that the brazenly bigoted viewpoint which McDonald presents is still espoused by many Australians. McDonald tars the policy of multiculturalism and the concept of land rights with the same biased brush:

If they [the returned soldiers from the First World War] were around today Mr. Al Grassby would have been sacked long ago and there would be no nonsense about multi-culturalism and the wrecking of Australia by the setting up of a separate nation, allegedly for the benefit of the Aborigines.<sup>19</sup>

Such attitudes threaten a return to the illiberal racial intolerance of an earlier period. Unfortunately, as federal Opposition leader John Howard has indicated in 1988, the debate over racially-based policies such as immigration is still on the political agenda. It seems that numerous Australians still retain a profound antipathy towards the rights of minorities, whether they are Chinese, Vietnamese, or Aboriginal. What is important in this connection is that the land rights issue is an emotive and contentious one which is a prime indicator of racial tolerance – and intolerance – in the nation. There is no doubt that it can incite nearly hysterical defamations. In 1984 Hugh Morgan, an executive of the Western Mining Corporation, maligned the concepts of land claims and the protection of sacred sites as being:

a symbolic step back to the world of paganism, superstition, fear and darkness . . . On what grounds can a minister or a parliament say on the one hand we respect, recognise and give legal support to the spiritual claims you [Aboriginal people] have to a very substantial portion of this country, but on the other hand we cannot sanction infanticide, cannibalism and the cruel initiation rites which you regard either as customary or as a matter of religious obligation.<sup>20</sup>

Such statements cannot be ignored, especially when they are uttered by an executive of a major Australian mining and exploration company and when they are generally sanctioned by the then federal Minister of Energy and Resources. These are crude and emotive arguments as much as they are inaccurate and illogical. According to the scenario which Morgan has sketched, the citizens of Salem, Massachusetts could not morally or legally own houses in their town in the twentieth century because they had practised exorcism and witch-burning two hundred years earlier.

The question remains: 'how do such issues pertain to Aboriginal literature?' The connection is very significant: Black Australian writing and Aboriginal/white race relations are so closely interrelated that a denigration of Aboriginal culture demeans the productions of that culture, while it also potentially threatens Australian intercultural harmony. As I have shown, much Aboriginal literature is overtly and unashamedly socio-political; much of it examines Aboriginal/European conflict; much is based upon an observation and analysis of actual events. Not all Aboriginal writers are activists and spokespeople and some eschew that role. But their work – Black Australian writing – is inescapably socio-political, for two main reasons. The first is that it expresses a culture which has survived in a tangible and ongoing sense despite nearly two centuries of oppression. It is therefore frequently self-analytical, self-referential and self-defining. The second reason is that Aboriginal writing is consciously produced to express and investigate relationships with the dominant White Australian society. In short, to echo Healy, it is both black on black and black on white<sup>21</sup> – and both elements are often clearly socio-political.

I have illustrated the fact that some of this writing is extremely personal, while other examples of Black Australian literature reach towards a pan-Aboriginal, national framework. In the words of Charles Perkins:

I think, for example, the play *The Cake Man* has national expression. Some things that Kevin Gilbert has said can be projected on the national scene . . . And . . . Jack Davis's play: I think that that has national expression too . . . I think that we're getting there.<sup>22</sup>

This leads to a very important point. Many Aboriginal spokespeople are now articulating their grievances and demands on the basis that their people are the first citizens of the country; that Aboriginal society represents the first Australian nation. Numerous Aboriginal writers have lent their creative support to this notion. For example, it underlies Kevin Gilbert's conception of the Aboriginal 'patriot':

The Aboriginal nation, as a nation of the spirit . . . a nation without land or hope, a nation of underprivilege, has existed, probably, from about a generation after Captain Cook landed. Occasionally you meet one of its patriots, one of those people, who, whatever their intermediate likes and loyalties, can be seen to cast their ultimate sympathy, the core of their feelings with this Aboriginal nation . . . one does not meet many Aboriginal patriots because it takes a special kind of vision to be one. And it takes courage.<sup>23</sup>

Similarly, much of the poetry of Gerry Bostock, Lionel Fogarty, and Maureen Watson is imbued with the sense of an Aboriginal nation. It is clearly a concept which is given expression in Colin Johnson's novels, *Sandawara* and *Wooreddy*. The very fact that Johnson – as a West Australian Aborigine – has written in such a penetrating way about Tasmanian Aboriginal history is, in itself, evidence of the developing pan-Aboriginal sense of nationhood.

Aboriginal politicians, too, have voiced their aspirations using terms derived from discussions of the nation-state. For example, Neville Bonner has said:

I hope to see the Aboriginal race firmly established as a nation, an individual nation, with a strident voice which will be a force in government, and one which will establish social justice and equality for all of us, whether tribal, semi-tribal or urban, through sensible, well-planned programmes.

This is my dream for the 1990s, to see our race gain its rightful place within Australian society, at the same time preserving the richness of our proud culture and customs.<sup>24</sup>

The deliberate choice of this terminology is noteworthy. First, it emulates the western rhetoric of the nation-state, normally defined as a geo-political and military entity. It is therefore no surprise that the Black Australian use of the term 'nation' conjures up a welter of fears of insurrection in the minds of many Australians, who view the concept as a direct threat to the security and/or the viability of the country. To those who have formulated slogans such as 'One Nation, One Future' for use in the propaganda of Australia Day and 'Celebration

of a Nation' for the Bicentennial, the claims of Aboriginal spokespeople and writers to citizenship in a prior or separate nation border upon heresy. It is little wonder, then, that McDonald seized upon the notion of 'a separate nation'<sup>25</sup> in order to excite indignation in the White Australian reader and in so doing, discredit the land rights movement. A second relevant point is that the term is one which has been taken up in the wake of claims for indigenous rights in other sectors of the globe. North American Indians have asserted that they are members of 'first nations' consistently and effectively over the past fifteen years. In the United States, reference to the existence of, for example, the Cherokee Nation has been in common parlance for many years; the term therefore does not excite as vociferous and indignant a reaction amongst White Americans when it is used to buttress native land claims.<sup>26</sup>

This introduces a third major point. It is that the negative reaction of White Australians to the vocal Aboriginal assertions of nationhood is unwarranted and excessive. The Aboriginal nation is a *symbolic* nation but it is unlikely that it will ever be expressed in conventional geo-political terms. It is important to realise, though, that this does not lessen the importance of the concept in terms of fostering Black Australian solidarity. In recognition of this fact, the realm of symbols is one which is given serious consideration by political scientists. As Hugh Collins has observed:

Any account of the domestic dimensions of Aborigines and Australian foreign policy cannot fail to notice that the three most prominent symbolic representations of Aboriginal politics borrow directly from the symbols of international politics and state sovereignty: the Aboriginal Flag, the Aboriginal Embassy, and the Aboriginal Treaty (or Makaratta).<sup>27</sup>

It is ironic that Black Australian promotion of the concept of nationhood – which has such a potentially unifying attractiveness for Aboriginal people – will almost certainly ensure that they never will be citizens of a separate geo-political nation in the Australian continent. To the extent that any threat of separation or 'secession' is taken seriously by White Australians, propaganda against Aboriginal rights will intensify. Even those sympathetic to the Aboriginal cause may react strongly against their own interpretation of what an Aboriginal nation implies. For example, Bernard Smith observes:

Is Australia two nations: a white, intrusive majority and a black, original minority? That might be a fair summary, in a nutshell, of our past. But it would be absolutely

disastrous to attempt to erect a cultural policy upon it. For if we take the notion of two nations seriously, that posits a division in law, in territory, in diplomatic representation, and much more. It sounds remarkably like apartheid to me.<sup>28</sup>

Smith is arguably unaware of other possible definitions of nationhood – involving such concepts as concurrent and contingent sovereignty – which do not imply such arbitrary and far-reaching divisions.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, it is tenable that Black Australian spokespeople do not intend the rhetoric of nationhood to be interpreted in the conventional political and diplomatic fashion which Smith has outlined. Finally, his reference to apartheid is both alarmist and inaccurate for, in the words of Ruby Hammond, ‘Apartheid is practised by dominant groups; not by oppressed minorities.’<sup>30</sup>

Paradoxically, Aboriginal people may have more to gain by de-emphasising their claims to nationhood when making public demands. They will probably achieve more success by highlighting moral and legal obligations which could motivate White Australians to grant compensation and land rights. But this does not negate the fact that their belief in the symbolic existence of a separate Black Australian nation can have a significant socio-cultural impact upon Aboriginal attitudes. For example, Collins observes how the ambiguity of the Aboriginal flag can actually be a source of strength:

Is it a distinctive identity within the Australian nation? Or is it an incipient nationhood of an Aboriginal people? That ambiguity reflects a tension within Aboriginal politics, but the effectiveness of the symbol derives largely from its capacity to represent either notion and thus to unite both.<sup>31</sup>

Aboriginal literature also belongs largely to the realm of symbolic politics. However, it is far more complex than a flag or a tent on the lawns of Parliament House. While their symbolism is overt and striking, that of Black Australian writing is usually more subtle and covert. Aboriginal authors can persuade and educate the reader without the potentially alienating intensity of a march or a demonstration, even though the aims of both may be identical. In that sense, Aboriginal literature may, in the long run, have an even more important role to play in advancing the Black Australian cause than public exhibitions of grievances, which can be misconstrued by the average White Australian as intimations of so-called ‘Black Power’.

I have underlined the fact that distinctive and talented black voices have begun to be heard in this country, and will continue to make a very noteworthy contribution to Australian, and indeed, to world

literature. Black Australian authors agree that no white writer can fully appreciate what it is to be a 'First Australian' and that Europeans' work in this area is, therefore, limited and often distorted. Colin Johnson puts the matter succinctly when he says 'Only Aborigines can really write about Aborigines'.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, Oodgeroo Noonuccal feels that 'Only Aborigines can understand what is happening to themselves at this moment'<sup>33</sup> and Gerry Bostock adds, 'White writers have their own terms of reference'.<sup>34</sup> The point is that Aboriginal writers feel that they are singularly qualified to explain a unique racial experience to their fellow Australians.

The corollary of the viewpoint which Johnson, Noonuccal, and Bostock express is that no Europeans can claim to have 'expert' knowledge of Aboriginal Australians. As Jim Everett put it, 'The real experts are out there – we are the real experts of our own cultural beliefs'.<sup>35</sup> While Everett's view is a reasonable one, Gary Foley carries this concept of exclusivity too far when he states categorically to white audiences that 'I don't feel that any of you could write about racism any more than I could write about sexism'.<sup>36</sup> While one can understand and sympathise with Everett's position, Foley's is ultimately an untenable one. As Smail has noted with reference to Southeast Asian history,<sup>37</sup> when extended to its logical limit, this view precludes all non-Aborigines from making valid criticisms of, and observations on, Black Australian literature. In turn, it implies that blacks cannot pass accurate and justified judgements on White Australian literature, let alone its society and politics. Black Australians have special insights into Australian society and a unique understanding of both Aboriginality and White Australian culture. Everett has every right to criticise self-proclaimed white 'experts' on Aborigines. But to contend that whites cannot write in any valid way about racism and the Aboriginal experience – as Foley does – distorts reality and, ironically, also undermines the legitimacy of the socio-political critique made by Black Australians.

There is little doubt that Aboriginal experience dictates, to a significant extent, the form and content of Aboriginal creativity. As this study has shown, it is the experientially based nature of Black Australian literature which gives the writing so much of its power and impact. As Johnson, Noonuccal, and Bostock have stated, this experience is one which is foreign to the vast majority of Australians. However, these sorts of experiences are not foreign to other indigenous minority groups. As David Callaghan has observed:

The culture of Australia's indigenous people is more akin to those of the American Indian, the tribespeople of the Kalahari, the Ainu of Japan, the Eskimo and many other gatherer-hunter cultures . . . These cultures have been the subject of enormous misunderstanding by those girdled by what is called civilization, by the beneficiaries (and victims) of post-industrial high-tech societies.<sup>38</sup>

It is for this reason that the Fourth World connection has provided Aboriginal Australians with important terms of reference which they have marshalled in support of their campaign for compensation and for the recognition of rights to land. Such organisations as the World Council of Indigenous Peoples reinforce and develop Fourth World ties as well as the possibilities for mutual inspiration and support. In exploring the Fourth World dimension of their experience, Black Australian writers display an awareness of the parallels which unite them with other oppressed, indigenous minorities. This awareness encourages, rather than hinders, the developing sense of 'first nationhood' which Aboriginal literature presents.

Aboriginal literature deals, above all, with identity – with that complex of attitudes, beliefs and mores which constitute Aboriginality. Aspects of Black Australians' view of themselves and of other Australians have been examined at length here: the preoccupation with history and dispossession, the emphasis upon sex and violence, the possible transformation of literature into socio-political propaganda highlighting the campaign for land and other rights, and the use of humour as a figurative lifeline in the midst of sorrow and oppression. These are some of the most striking elements of the Aboriginal self-definition in literature; others will be isolated in the future. What is significant is that throughout this process of self-assessment, Aboriginal people frequently walk a tight-rope, attempting to balance their self-perception and society's perception of them. It is not an easy task. Their identity is continually placed under stress by the dominant European culture of Australia, especially in the urban context. Bruce McGuinness aptly describes this dilemma:

It's important that people understand that Aboriginal lifestyles don't change a great degree when they are removed from a rural situation to an urban situation. It's just that they need to become less visible, because Aboriginal people are very visible within an urban situation. One Aboriginal person gets drunk and walks up the street and all Aboriginal people are drunk. Whereas if it's a white person who gets drunk and walks along the street of course, it's just another white guy walking along the street . . . So while being visible in terms of maintaining their rights to exist as an Aboriginal nation, they must also remain invisible so as to escape the stereotyping and stigmatising that goes on when Aboriginal people do things that other people do.<sup>39</sup>

Aboriginal literature reflects these sorts of dilemmas and, in so doing, portrays the essential dissimilarities between Black and White Australians. For, despite co-operation on many fronts, these differences do exist and persist. As Jack Davis has commented, the assimilation policy never could have worked because, 'There will always be differences. I don't care where it is: there will always be differences between black and white'.<sup>40</sup> Aboriginal literature explores the positive side of this fact: the resilience and vitality of the Black Australian experience. It also examines one of the most dramatic results of the polarisation of black and white world-views in Australia: the alienation of individual Aborigines that can result from being, in figurative terms, assailed by a vast white cultural wave. Perhaps no Aboriginal author has expressed this sentiment more lucidly than Maureen Watson. In interview she detailed the distress of being an Aboriginal child in Australia so eloquently that it would be unjust not to quote her comments in their entirety:

Black reflections aren't in white mirrors, you know. We live in our land. We are, we have all around us people who are not *of* us. We have on our land – there are people all over our land – who are not *of* our land. Aboriginal people might as well be in a foreign country, you know? Who built those buildings? Not Aboriginal people. The electric lines out there? Not Aboriginal people. That tape recorder you've got – who do you associate with that? . . . The pen in your hand, the pad you're holding? The clothes you're wearing, the clothes *I'm* wearing – the watch on my hand? You know, the ribbons in my hair? Aboriginal people didn't make these things. Everywhere around us are the reflections of a foreign race; a foreign people. And they are making us foreigners in our own country.

And the Aboriginal child in the school room . . . where is there *anything* she can relate to? Now a child *must* have the right to grow up feeling good about herself and her parents and the way she lives. And, for Aboriginal people it doesn't happen. Where do they see the reflections to make them hold up their heads? . . . I mean, where *are* the reflections of black people? You hold up the mirror and it's like you're invisible. You see everything else except yourself . . . How does a child develop any sort of self-confidence, or pride, or dignity, without these things? And here in the city, we must be aware of that. And we've got to put up those images for our children. And, it's happening slowly, like the T-shirts that say, 'I'm proud to be an Aborigine', or 'I didn't get my tan on Bondi Beach'; 'I walk on Aboriginal Land'; 'I'm a Koori Kid' . . . So those images *are* coming. You know, we are holding up black mirrors for black reflections.<sup>41</sup>

Above all, Aboriginal literature is centrally involved with the maintenance and extension of Aboriginal confidence and the feeling of self-worth. Many Black Australian authors highlight positive

examples of black success in their work, and many are demonstrating that success through the fact of their own literary achievements. It could be said that three major elements coalesce in Black Australian literature – cultural nationalism, literary talent, and Aboriginal pride. Throughout, the Fourth World dimension of the work is significant, but its locus is singularly Black Australian. There is no doubt that the important first chapters in the book of Aboriginal literature have now been written. That volume will continue to grow in size and impressiveness in coming years as Australia and the world become increasingly aware of this country's black words on white pages.

## Notes

- 1 Lang Hancock, quoted in Michael Coyne and Leigh Edwards, *The Oz Factor: Who's Doing What in Australia*, (East Malvern, 1990), p. 68.
- 2 Quoted from a conversation with a Canberra bank manager, Canberra, February, 1980.
- 3 Gerald L. Bostock, 'An Australian Miner', in *Black Man Coming*, (Sydney, 1981), p. 11.
- 4 Quoted from Bruce McGuinness's paper, 'The Politics of Aboriginal Literature', in Jack Davis and Bob Hodge, eds, *Aboriginal Writing Today*, (Canberra, 1985), pp. 49-50.
- 5 Quoted from Colin Johnson's paper, 'White Forms, Aboriginal Content', in *ibid.*, p. 29.
- 6 Quoted from Mick Miller's speech at the launching of Lionel Fogarty's *Yoogum Yoogum*, Queensland Institute of Technology, Brisbane, September, 1982.
- 7 Quoted in Adam Shoemaker, 'An Interview with Jack Davis', *Westerly*, vol. 27, no. 4, December, 1982, p. 116.
- 8 Personal interview with Charles Perkins, Canberra, January, 1983.
- 9 This information kindly provided by Archie Weller during a personal interview in Canberra, May, 1984.
- 10 Quoted from Bruce McGuinness's paper 'The Politics of Aboriginal Literature' in Davis and Hodge, eds, *Aboriginal Writing Today*, pp. 46-47.
- 11 Quoted from Jack Davis's speech at the biennial conference of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, May, 1984.
- 12 Information supplied by Colin Johnson and Glenyse Ward in personal discussions in Brisbane, May, 1988.
- 13 See, for example, 'Parliament Mosaic "Puts a Curse on Whites"', *The Australian*, 10 May, 1988, p. 1.
- 14 W. Les Russell, 'God Gave Us Trees to Cut Down' in Kevin Gilbert, ed., *Inside Black Australia*, (Ringwood, 1988), p. 6.
- 15 Maureen Watson, 'Memo to J.C.', in *ibid.*, p. 50.

- 16 Robert Walker, 'Solitary Confinement', in *ibid.*, p. 129.
- 17 Ernie Dingo, 'Aboriginal Achievement', in *ibid.*, p. 29.
- 18 Geoff McDonald, *Red Over Black: Behind the Aboriginal Land Rights*, (Bullsbrook, 1982), pp. 141-142.
- 19 *ibid.*, p. 142.
- 20 Quoted in Robert Bowden, 'Walsh Backs Morgan on NT Land Rights', *The Australian*, 13 May 1984, p. 2.
- 21 J.J. Healy, *Literature and the Aborigine in Australia*, (St. Lucia, 1978), p. 3.
- 22 Personal interview with Charles Perkins, Canberra, January, 1983.
- 23 Kevin Gilbert, *'Because a White Man'll Never Do It'*, (Sydney, 1973), p. 193.
- 24 Quoted by Colin Johnson in his paper, 'White Forms, Aboriginal Content', in Davis and Hodge, eds, *Aboriginal Writing Today*, (Canberra, 1985), p. 30.
- 25 McDonald, *Red Over Black*, p. 142.
- 26 Admittedly, this usage of the term has an anthropological connotation, which partly explains its more ready acceptance in North America.
- 27 Hugh Collins, 'Aborigines and Australian Foreign Policy: Some Underlying Issues', in Coral Bell, et al., eds, *Ethnic Minorities and Australian Foreign Policy*, (Canberra, 1983), p. 69.
- 28 Bernard Smith, 'Five Choices of Culture', *The Age Monthly Review*, vol. 2, no. 7, November, 1982, pp. 9-10.
- 29 Professor J.E. Chamberlin has pointed out the fact that North American lawyers representing Indian clients in land claims cases have successfully argued more fluid definitions of the concept of nationhood before the courts. This point was made during personal discussions in Sydney, July, 1984.
- 30 Quotation taken from Ruby Hammond's comments concerning Jeremy Beckett's paper, 'Aborigines and Welfare Colonialism', delivered in 'The State and Ethnic Minorities' section of the ANZAAS Conference, Canberra, May, 1984.
- 31 Collins, 'Aborigines and Australian Foreign Policy', p. 69.
- 32 Personal interview with Colin Johnson, Brisbane, August, 1980.
- 33 Personal interview with Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Brisbane, August, 1980.
- 34 Personal interview with Gerry Bostock, Sydney, July, 1980.
- 35 Quoted from Jim Everett's speech at the biennial conference of the Australian

Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, May, 1984.

- 36 Quoted from Gary Foley's speech at the Australian National Playwrights' Conference, ANU, Canberra, May, 1984. Foley's view is revealing. If one examines his statement, one notes the admission of ignorance concerning sexism – yet sexual prejudice often reinforces racial prejudice in relationships between Black and White Australians. Much work remains to be done regarding the connection between sexism and racism in Australia for, as Pat O'Shane has observed, 'Quite frequently in our dealings in Australia – Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal – racism and sexism are so entangled that they cannot be disentangled' (Quoted from Pat O'Shane's speech at the ANU, February, 1983).
- 37 John R.W. Smail, 'On the Possibility of an Autonomous History of Modern Southeast Asia', *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, vol. 2, 1961, pp. 72-102.
- 38 David Callaghan, 'What Future the Aborigine?', in *TIME Australia*, vol. 3, no. 32, 8 August, 1988, p. 13.
- 39 Quoted from Bruce McGuinness's paper, 'The Politics of Aboriginal Literature' in *Aboriginal Writing Today*, p. 47.
- 40 Quoted in Adam Shoemaker, 'An Interview With Jack Davis', *Westerly*, December, 1982, p. 114.
- 41 Personal interview with Maureen Watson, Perth, February, 1983.