

# Reading Kevin Gilbert: Nuclear Weaponry, Media Ecologies and a Community of Memory

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I smell the smoke  
of the gum leaves burning  
I smell the tang  
of my peoples' hair  
here where the smoke  
blows past and o'er me  
I stand alone  
in a desert bare.

(Kevin Gilbert, 'Genocide')

Born on Wiradjuri land in country New South Wales, Kevin Gilbert was orphaned at a young age. He was raised by relatives on an Aboriginal reserve and moved in and out of welfare homes, then left school to look for work at the age of thirteen. As per the biographic detail provided in *Inside Black Australia*—a collection which would earn Gilbert the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's 1988 Human Rights Award for Literature, an award he would reject on ethical grounds—Gilbert was sentenced in 1957 to a life of penal servitude for the murder of his first wife. While in prison, Gilbert undertook studies in printmaking and learned to read and write. While he gained notoriety as an Indigenous printmaker, his first play, *The Cherry Pickers* (1968), was smuggled out of jail and later produced at the Mews Theatre in Sydney upon his parole. From here, Gilbert would go on to become one of Australia's most prominent playwrights and poets, known for his involvement in Aboriginal land rights and Black Power movements, as well as for playing a major role in the founding of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy in Canberra in 1972. Gilbert's political, literary and artistic life were widely celebrated and continue to provoke admiration and debate. Many of his publications have remained in print since his death in 1993, including *Living Black: Blacks Talk to Kevin Gilbert*, which earned him the 1978 National Book Council prize, *Because a White Man'll Never Do It* (1973), and the landmark anthology of Aboriginal poetry *Inside Black Australia*, published by Penguin Books in 1988.

This analysis will attempt to conceptualise Gilbert's approach to nuclear weaponry as threat to Country, by focusing on the poetic essay he contributed to *Imagining the Real: Australian Writing in the Nuclear Age*, edited by Dorothy Green and David Headon in 1987. Multiple poetic fragments were imbedded in this essay which were later to be published as the poems 'Won't you Dad?' and 'Seeds of thought' in Gilbert's posthumous collection, *Black from the Edge*. In his commentary in 1988 on contemporary Aboriginal poetry and poetics, Gilbert argues that Indigenous poetics shares in the universality common to all poetry, but underlying this is a traumatic and lived material experience of Indigeneity, which reifies conditions of violence and oppression in the postcolony (Gilbert, *Inside* xviii). This commentary from Gilbert's introduction to *Inside Black Australia* explicates the way in which Aboriginal life and the patterns of Aboriginal narration shape and substantiate the formal structures of Indigenous poetry, much as Gilbert's poetic essay posits nuclear threats to Country as having been shaped and substantiated by colonisation's genocidal logic.

The nuclear imaginary, as identified by Gilbert, is informed by and reflects relations of subjugation for Indigenous people. It is the contention of this article that the thematic focus on nuclear weaponry and the nuclear imaginary in Kevin Gilbert's poetry—as well as in the poetry of his contemporary, Kath Walker (also known as Oodgeroo Noonuccal)—reads historical, spiritual, and existential threats to Country in individual and collective trauma.

According to N. Katherine Hayles and Matthew Fuller, the codes and symbols of a literary environment are transmitted generationally, and thereby inform the 'ecology' of the present media-scape (Fuller, *passim*). The thematic focus on nuclear threats in Australian Indigenous poetry can be viewed as partly constituting such a media ecology, reflecting the generational trauma of violence through technological expression of the bio-politics of colonisation. Jussi Parikka and Michael Goddard argue that the developmental transmission of media ecologies generally functions 'through artistic/activist practices rather than pre-formed theories, which precisely work through the complex media layers in which on the one hand subjectivation and agency are articulated and, on the other hand, the materiality of informational objects gets distributed, dispersed and takes effect' (Goddard 2). Given this consideration, a reader can conceptualise the impact of Oodgeroo's and Gilbert's focus on nuclear poetics and nuclear activism as establishing a media ecology in which Indigenous poetry engages with nuclear activism.

In the case of Indigenous poetry that articulates a nuclear threat, this media ecology is generated through a poetic which incorporates processes and acts of subjectivation, mapping dimensions of relationality established between the individual, Indigenous narrative histories, and the collective, while addressing broader social forces through which the power of nuclear technology is wielded (Fuller 174). Specific poetic expressions of the nuclear devastation of Country—such as the nuclear testing at Maralinga alluded to in Jack Davis's plays and Lionel Fogarty's poetry, and explicitly referenced by Ali Cobby Eckermann's 2016 poem, 'Thunder raining poison'—can be viewed as operating within a pre-established media ecology. Contemporary Aboriginal poetry which is nuclear-focused, and the networks of relation and subjective-symbolic assemblages they rely upon, stem from a history of expression in which nuclear power and oppression are interdependent racial formations that extend the continuum of colonial logic. If, in following Patrick Wolfe, we consider colonisation as a structure of society rather than an event (2), the reader may begin to see how patterns of nuclear exploration, refinement, and devastation function to exploit the same oppressive, racialised endpoints as colonisation. The patterns of sensation expressed in these poems demarcate them within the political context of Australian literary history, and evidence a unification of aesthetics and activism in the struggle against the destruction of Country. This essay will analyse Kevin Gilbert's literary work and vocal politicisation as laying the foundation for the present media ecology surrounding nuclear poetry in Australia.

The recording and sharing of histories of Country which were otherwise erased by a mono-historicising nationalism entails an ethical act and remains the ethical imperative for many Indigenous writers. This ethical drive is to create a community of memory, essential to Indigenous culture and to the preservation of Country, which stands as testimony to the atrocities of Australia's colonial history. Ethnographer and sociologist Deborah Bird Rose argues that within Australian Indigenous communities a claim on the past has a high degree of importance because in communities of relation 'one's death belongs not only to one's self but to others as well: to those who mourn, to those who remember, to those who incorporate the death into a community of memory' (27). The desire to maintain communities of relations and communities of memory testifies to the broader poetics that Gilbert sees as fundamentally

linked to Aboriginal narrative traditions. The spectre of nuclear death in Gilbert's poems both stands in for and ruptures the silence of Indigenous suffering, embodying the epistemic and ontological threats to Indigenous communities as an ongoing apocalypse that must be stopped.

### **The Subject of the Song**

The ten-year process of gathering the material for *Inside Black Australia: An Anthology of Aboriginal Poetry* gave Gilbert much time to ruminate on the state and structures of meaning within Indigenous poetry. The introduction that he provides to the anthology represents his most extensive examination of the interanimations between Indigenous narratology, image-complexes and poetic expression. Undertaking his exploration through anecdotes demonstrative of Indigenous narratives and the metonymic and mnemonic frames they employ, Gilbert chronicles networks of relation and interconnectivity. For Peter Minter, the relation to Country which Gilbert is expressing can be considered as part of the ethos of Country, a relation to 'totemic geography' (Morphy 103) that 'is manifest in its substantiation of dimensions of correlation and habitation. More than just caring for or appealing to Country, an *ethos* of Country calls upon histories of "character" as they appear within networks of connection, interdependence and signification' (Minter, 'Transcultural' 264). For Gilbert, as for Minter, Aboriginal painting and poetry are contiguous expressions of a site-specific spiritual praxis, formed by and constitutive of Country. Gilbert articulates this contiguity as a symbolic, mythological expression of place:

As Aboriginal bark paintings reveal the fundamental elements of the subject, so too does the Aboriginal poet reveal the fundamental subject of the song. The emotional symbolism is, to a great degree, an extension of the traditional oral language, where the history or song cycle is recorded on bark paintings—symbolic mnemonics which link together the beginning and end of the complex whole—stimulating recall of the intervening details. (Gilbert, *Inside* xix)

The 'emotional symbolism' which Gilbert sees as inherent to Aboriginal poetics can be considered within a pattern of symbolic and semiotic signification, a network of relations designed to facilitate recitation and the transmission of 'a complex set of trans-historical, mythological and religious concepts' (Minter, 'Transcultural' 260). The anecdote Gilbert recounts to explain the processes of articulation within Aboriginal poetics is decidedly modern, and one might consider its connection to the linguistic structures of Lionel Fogarty's work or the more recent conceptualism of Natalie Harkin. Gilbert identifies continuities between various strands of postcolonial writing and establishes resonances across poetic structures of global Indigeneity. While establishing points of differentiation from European traditions, Gilbert discusses Aboriginal song and oral traditions as both informing the work of contemporary Aboriginal poets and as a misconceived label commonly applied by non-Aboriginal critics looking for an easy foothold. Gilbert argues that Aboriginal poetry emerges in opposition to the stranglehold of European poetic antecedents and expression, an argument also made by John Kinsella, who contends that Aboriginal poetry in English 'enhances and strengthens the message of resistance in th[e] poems' (17). Against the traditions and conventions of English verse, Gilbert claims, Indigenous poetry 'rattles, flings and bends the chains and rules of verse, sometimes in a remarkable manner. But within each bending one can see the cyclic incantation, the emotional mnemonics, the substance from which European poetry is made' (Gilbert, *Inside* xvii). For Gilbert, a genealogical cultural history is imbedded within each poem, and articulated through 'an emotional visual shorthand [and] key symbols selecting the poetic metaphor' (xviii). In their capacity to express an alternate version of history, poems such as Gilbert's are a call to break with, in the words of Aileen Moreton-Robinson, 'the

possessive logic of patriarchal white sovereignty' that 'denies and refuses what it does not own—the sovereignty of the Indigenous other' ('Possessive' n.p.).

### White Weapons

The essay Gilbert contributed to *Imagining the Real*, and the poetic fragments that this work contained, represents narratives of nuclear technology and its discharge on Indigenous lands as reinforcing the same colonial tendencies through which *terra nullius* was claimed. The exposure of Indigenous communities to nuclear devastation at Emu Field and at Maralinga, South Australia, as well as the government-led cover-up of details of the events, underpin a history of racist violence through which technological progress benefits those in positions of power at the expense of those at the margins of society. That both trauma and the prospect of redemption can be unified within a single place reflects a system of belief through which Indigenous Australians understand traditional lifeways. As an overarching disruption to Country, nuclear exploration, refinement, usage and waste are part of a cyclic system that threatens physical presence within the 'symbiotic and synonymous' complexity of Indigenous mythos (Moreton-Robinson, 'Possessive' n.p.). As it overrides Indigenous people's right to act as sovereign on their own land, nuclear science in Australia has only reinforced the oppression Indigenous people have faced since colonisation. Government-backed industry incursion on Indigenous lands has served to extend the exploitative power-dynamic of the settler state.

The care extended to those suffering potential nuclear exposure has likewise been parsed out unequally along racial and class divisions, symptomatic of a system that coldly calculates 'the permutations and limitations of human life' (Williams 12). In coming to terms with the media ecology surrounding nuclear poetry, readers are forced to consider when 'an engagement with racial politics and the nuclear threat seem to be taking place beyond the level of explicit depiction, where the terms of reference are encoded in narrative, iconography and rhetorical figuration' (5). The networks of relation that are intrinsic to these poems and the political history they carry establish the nuclear activist poetics as a rhetorical space, pre-populated with the foundational substrata of a political poetics.

The technological achievement of nuclear weaponry represented in the West as civilisation's greatest achievement exposes the reverse: a nuclear lifecycle that manifests the 'destructivity, racism and recklessness of white civilization' (1). This lifecycle inherently and disproportionately shifts the material, psychological and cultural threat of nuclear waste and weaponry onto those with least access to power in the postcolony. Given the disproportionate risk Indigenous communities bear for the economic gains of industries of extraction, it is little wonder that many Indigenous Australians consider the nuclear cycle as an extension of colonial threat. The Australian nuclear industry and its threat to existence—as manifest most prominently in the nuclear bomb—is reliant upon the same circuitry and aims to protect the same power-relations as were manifest during colonisation. Given this history, nuclear weaponry can be considered as inherently 'white,' for it symbolises the 'advancements and atrocities of European and American modernity' (15) in preserving the status quo for those in positions of power. The racialised enactment of power works to define the limits of the human, denying empathy for test subjects caught in the fallout of nuclear experimentation—as was the case in Maralinga—and this provides another parallel with Australian colonial relations. Ken Cooper argues that the bomb embodies 'the properties of idealised whiteness [which] are inseparable from its power' (80–81). Given that the colonisation of the country was justified through laws that excluded Indigenous Australians from being counted as citizenry, it is little wonder that the continued exposure of Indigenous communities to nuclear threats continues to reinforce the boundaries of the colonial social corpus. In its rupturing of Indigenous settlement

and spiritual sovereignty, nuclear technology can be understood as signifying the ultimate manifestation of the existential threat of the settler state.

### **‘Seeds of thought’: Reading Gilbert’s Late Poetic**

The reading and reciprocal writing of stories of Country may be conceptualised as the recitation of narratives encoded in one’s ancestors’ ‘totemic geography’ (Morphy 103). The connection to the past and its ability to speak to Indigenous futurities is substantiated through a series of signifying systems ‘implicitly encultured’ in the land ‘at the moment of its creation in the Dreamtime’ (Minter, ‘Transcultural’ 260). By exemplifying how, from the midst of nuclear devastation, practices of mourning for people and Country animate a community of memory which can enlarge and enliven social history, Gilbert’s poetry aims to speak to Indigenous suffering through an untold history of the nation. The poems enact what Philip Morrissey argues is a necessary step in addressing Indigenous sovereignty: the poems commemorate a history for those ‘Aboriginal people who are still around and whose corporeality bears witness to an earlier sovereignty’ (66). The publication of the poems ‘Won’t you Dad?’ and ‘Seeds of thought’ in the *Black from the Edge* collection help characterise the narratology of Gilbert’s late poetic. A resistance to complicitous societal systems and to the imposition of fear as a construct of power speak to a ‘venerable, autonomous Aboriginal history,’ as Adam Shoemaker argues (129).

The rhetorical force of ‘Seeds of thought’ in evoking the propagation of nuclear threat through commonplace image sequences is crucial to realising the poem’s power. Gilbert’s invocation of literary antecedents in the opening line, ‘The pen is mightier than the sword’ (1), establishes connections to the English literary traditions, but also relates the poem to international political movements engaged in nonviolent resistance. While the poem’s opening line could be read as a cliché, or as mediated by some degree of irony, the political motivation behind the line and its accessibility open lines of communication to ‘sow . . . the seeds of thought’ (3).

The poem’s five stanzas evoke the notion of seeding and rhizomatic growth to establish an alternate poetic history in which the forces of pacification fail. The poem’s image-complexes draw upon a staged history of conflict, from pre-modern ‘huns and vandals in their rage’ (7) to the evocation of the sword transformed into a plough which in ‘russet hues lies mouldering’ (8) waiting for ‘some brute hand to wield her hate’ (13). The transformation of a sword into a ploughshare has biblical connotations, relating back to the book of Isaiah (2:3–4), as well as currency as a political slogan widely used in antiwar movements. While Gilbert’s phraseology may seem restrained, the intricacy with which expressions are set against literary and political history adds layers of depth and dimension to the work. The opening stanzas highlight the transformation of a ‘wild’ landscape into a pastoral realm beset by military contest. The ‘bugler’ and the ‘drummer’ (14) of the poem’s third stanza bring the staccato rhythms of war and mark a shift in the reader’s sense of duration. This stanza’s recurring singularities—‘the eye,’ ‘the soul,’ ‘the dance of death’—and their contrast with the plurality of ‘Seeds’ in the poem’s title accentuate the singular position of the poem’s subject through the breakdown of forms of communal sociality. The ennui of modern life that Gilbert claims ‘entrap[s] the eye, the soul till madness sways’ (17), and the accosting rhetoric of ‘meritorious lie[s]’ (20) which justify the ‘carnivore / called man’ who ‘can’t evolve in his estate’ (21–22), firmly sets its sights on the self-justifying rhetoric of colonial oppression. The opening sections of the poem evoke the ‘anti-human, anti-earth, anti-god regime’ that Gilbert claims, in his *Imagining the Real* essay, has gained world ascendancy (81).

The evolutionary hierarchies through which justification for colonial dispossession was claimed are linked to what Gilbert identifies as ‘the political shadowplay behind the scenes of the

nuclear stage' (*Imagining* 80). The poem's fourth stanza finishes with a condemnatory linking of this shadowplay to the 'civilising' effects represented by modernity:

Clothed and fed, his universities  
and halls of learning yet avail him nought  
the jungle beasts enact the same stage plays. (23–25)

Gilbert raises questions about the privilege of exemption and the privilege of rhetoric by linking the 'man who can't evolve in his estate' (22) to those with the most access to education. This political jibe seems to elucidate the reasoning behind the incorporation of lines with biblical and literary connotations, ascribing racial prejudice to a colonial ideology rather than to any inherent differences. Gilbert pointedly contests the fabrication of *terra nullius* in his *Imagining the Real* essay, arguing that the non-occupation claimed of the Australian continent can be equated with the 'unoccupied' desert of Maralinga, where nuclear tests were conducted between 1956 and 1963. About this case, he argues, 'Disinformation [is] a euphemism for a government lie, a continuation of the colonists' original lie that this land was wasteland and unoccupied, *terra nullius*' (82). The poem's final stanza also evokes this critique of a racially divided nation-state, through the lines 'One kind, one king, one death the same / in duty and in worship all the same / differing nought / for death wears the same cloak' (26–29). The force of this poem through its ascending metrical and rhetorical tensions poses the question: when shall the pen be mightier than the sword? Despite the assertion in the poem's opening line, pacifism, as it relates to world events and the continual oppression and dispossession of Indigenous peoples, seems to have failed. Gilbert posits that the hierarchisation of human beings leads to the enactment of greater violence. This returns Gilbert to a final rhetorical question, 'what effect DOES the written word HAVE in the long term? Does it signify nought but a moment of hope?' (*Imagining* 77).

Gilbert's 'Won't you Dad?' starts from a familial place, which Gilbert describes as 'our exiled outstations, called Aboriginal Reserves' (*Imagining* 76), where the speaker contemplates the disproportionate threat of nuclear technology to those closest to him. The exploitation of Indigenous communities by colonial forces and their continued exposure to undue risk highlights the fact that Indigenous communities 'were—some might say still are—zones of death that regulated and regulate the movements of Indigenous bodies . . . in order to preserve settler-colonial futurities' (Belcourt 26). From the colonial imaginary to contemporary policies on segregation, the declaration of Indigenous land as empty and ultimately unknowable has enabled the justification and continuance of colonial exploitation and incursion on sovereign land. Thematically, the poem contemplates the destruction of the world's artistic, musical and literary masterpieces, and compares this destruction to the existential threat faced by the speaker, who sees 'the threat of death by nuclear extermination hanging . . . above the heads of my children, my world, my land' (*Imagining* 78). From the poem's opening invocation of patriarchal protection and the power of belief in the poet to diminish the threat of the nuclear bomb, the speaker tries to establish a position of redemptive hope from within a system saturated with trauma. As discussed in Gilbert's untitled *Imagining the Real* essay, the nuclear threat appears as an abstract threat, a toxic future which heralds psychological and cultural consequences. Instead of falling towards an eschatological mythology, the poet contemplates his own inauguration into a system in which weaponry has historically been used to reinforce power relations. The poem seems to express a desire to commemorate history for those 'Aboriginal people who are still around and whose corporeality bears witness to an earlier sovereignty,' as Morrissey posits (66). The overwhelming anxiety the poem extends to contemplation of a mass death event is discussed by philosopher Edith Wyschogrod, who

argues that the impact of the bomb and a potential ‘death event’ provokes immense philosophical and experiential change within a given society. Wyschogrod writes that ‘the meaning of self, time, and language are all affected by mass death: from now on the development of these themes and the meaning of man-made mass death wax and wane together’ (ix). The radical alteration Wyschogrod notes in the constructs and interplay between life, language and technology is admixed in Gilbert’s assurances to his children, and presents nuclear threats not only in terms which express damage to human subjects but also in terms which register damage to the longevity of ontological beliefs themselves.

Gilbert’s ‘Won’t you Dad?’ was originally presented in his untitled *Imagining the Real* essay, with a prefatory outline of the history of nuclear weaponry in Australia. The threat of re-colonising land and life echoes the geo-spatial control enacted through the decree of *terra nullius*, which excluded Indigenous Australians from the country’s citizenry to justify colonisation. For Moreton-Robinson, ‘In this sense citizenship rights are a means by which subjugation operates as a weapon of race war that can be used strategically to circumscribe and enable the biopower of patriarchal white sovereignty’ (*Imagining* 65). The histories of nuclear testing in Australia are thus intertwined with a history of Indigenous oppression, with technological hegemony functionally continuing the colonial project. This history further lays bare the political alliances between nuclear economies and the colonial forces which defined the nation as ‘White,’ and Gilbert’s exposure of true history acts as a force of resistance in his poetic.

The British government’s explosion of nuclear weapons at Maralinga—which is the thematic focal point of ‘Won’t you Dad?’—was conducted without the authorisation or even notification of the Indigenous people in the area. It was supported by the ‘wheat-straw chewing, merino dragging mentality of the then Prime Minister Robert Menzies’ (*Imagining* 81). Gilbert’s essay describes the exposure, illness and mistreatment suffered by those who lived upon this land. He relates, ‘The test explosions carried out in the Monte Bello Islands, Maralinga and Emu Field . . . exposed servicemen and merchantmen, as well as the Australian mainland and untold numbers of Aboriginals and civilians, to nuclear fallout’ (82). The Pitjantjatjara, Yankunytjatjara people were displaced from their land and suffered the effects of nuclear radiation, consequences still suffered to this day. The corruption and devaluation of Indigeneity as a sovereign and sacred whole is at the heart of Gilbert’s poetry and essays. The accrual of these critiques reinforce how the bio-political forces at work in colonial expressions of power are emblematised under the broad banner of nuclear threats. Gilbert discusses the ultimate reporting on Maralinga as a ‘historic day when the national newspapers carried the headlines notifying the public that Australia and Britain were to explode the atomic bombs and that the radiation was going “to blow out to sea and across the ‘unoccupied’ desert” was but another day of disinformation’ (*Imagining* 82). The exposure of the colonial lie of non-occupation once again uncovers the permutations and limitations of human life divided by race and place.

When Gilbert juxtaposes the destruction of the world’s artistic masterpieces with a child’s fear of personal destruction, he attempts to lay bare the logic of racism underpinning even what may be considered the greatest achievements of Western civilisation. Just as his essay critiques the logic that justified Aboriginal genocide, this poem looks in vain for the value of the highest achievements of artistic expression when read against a contemporaneous history of genocide. The terror induced by the nuclear imaginary is so far-reaching that even the child’s question, ‘You won’t let them drop that / bomb / on me Daddy’ (11–14) reflects a position of indictment. For Gilbert, the child’s question summons a level of complicity that the poem’s speaker seems to share, when he writes of the child, ‘His question mark / was like an arc all ringed around /

with burning flame' (15–17). This complicity is illustrated by the shrinking proximity between the poem's subject and the actions of those with nuclear might. Gilbert writes, 'I keep the war-dog on his chain / I help to feel and feed his hate / I *pay the man* to make the bomb / to hold the world and my child in fear' (25–28). The personification of a dynamic, government–military complex of nuclear technology and the will to power into a singular 'man' (27) has the added effect of reducing the processes of political decision-making to the singularity of an individual life. The child's reaction to the threat also speaks to the contaminating trauma of Cold War rhetoric and nuclear paranoia. The singularity of address in the poem indicts the masters of war for their specific part in this dark history, but also heightens Gilbert's ability to respond as an individual citizen and a father.

The poem's final stanza stands in contradistinction to the rest of the narrative. The speaker adopts the role he was previously criticising, either taking on a position of blame or adapting the role of the master of nuclear technology. Returning to conclude with the child's haunting question, the final stanza reads:

It's *me* who's wrong  
 it's *me* who'll burn the song  
 it's *me* who'll burn the lovely melody  
 because I fear other humans near  
 who may somehow flood human love to me  
 the flames will burn and melt the eyes  
 of my children as they turn  
 to me and say with love for me  
 and faith today:  
 'You will stop them from dropping the bomb  
     on me  
 won't you Dad?' (33–44)

The destruction called forth in the act of love, and its threat to songcycles, chthonic belief and the places of Indigenous cultural existence, signifies a danger both ontological and existential. That the poem's speaker takes on such an exaggerated role in these destructive tendencies highlights a position of perilous hypocrisy. Detonating an atomic weapon while one's children are in the fallout zone is an action no sane person could consider, yet the poem represents this scenario to underscore the divide between one individual and another. This stanza seems to indict the poem's speaker as an individual and as a father, as someone who bears responsibility for the machinations of government. The question posed seems to accentuate the powerlessness of the individual, despite his or her desire to enact change. The 'lovely melody' potentially destroyed is that song of love through which Gilbert enacts a belief of home; an old threat, now technologised, which continues to haunt the creative imagination. Through the convention of asking questions, the poem accentuates the literary voice's function of transforming patent and latent social energies into revolutionary change, responding to crisis through writing of Country.

### **Radioactive Immortality and Distant Songs**

The history of nuclear threats carried out on the lands of Indigenous Australians underscores why the nuclear industry and the nuclear imaginary remain such prominent features of Indigenous activism and writing. This is a cultural phenomenon that has extended forward from the events at Maralinga through the nuclear rhetoric of the Cold War, continuing into the present with government initiatives to bury nuclear waste on Indigenous lands. From this history,

Indigenous authors have inherited a poetic-based media ecology where the threat of nuclear damage and destruction reifies the colonial power-dynamics that justified the colonisation of Country. The literary ecologies inherited by contemporary Indigenous poets consist of cultural, ideological and historical assemblages through which literary meaning is made. A literary reaction to crisis, such as Gilbert's poems enact, encompasses practices of critique and dissent and expresses complex political and aesthetic histories through poetic structure, address and modes of resistance.

Writers such as Oodgeroo and Kevin Gilbert laid the groundwork for a media ecology based on the critique of nuclear technology, materially constituted through a poetic historicity, which can speak back to the state. The literary antecedents that contemporary Indigenous writers have inherited include nuclear poems that enact a political counter-discursive strategy set to challenge and reformulate how the history of Country is told. In utilising his poetic to document nuclear atrocities, Kevin Gilbert's poetry records one of the first literary attempts to conceptualise the inestimable trauma posed in Australia by the nuclear threat.

**Note:** This body of scholarship began with the advice of Gary Foley, Karen Jackson and Edwina Howell at the Moondani Balluk Centre at Victoria University, whom I approached for cultural and historical insights in reading decolonial histories within the poems of Lionel Fogarty, and grew from there. My investigation of trans-Indigenous literature became a much larger project with the structure and framework they helped establish.

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