

# **Dreaming in the Present Progressive: Kath Walker *Across, Beyond, and Through* an Indigenous 1964**

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I should confess up front: I did not deliver the paper I intended at the 2016 Association for the Study of Australian Literature conference convened in July in Canberra. At least not that exact paper. Months earlier, when I received the invitation to present a keynote, I had imagined the possibilities for engaging ASAL members as a particular kind of informed audience—one able to recognise, for instance, that in the Australian context the English-language term ‘Dreaming’ evokes Aboriginal understandings not only of the distant past of creation but also of the considerable force of creator ancestors continuing into the present and future. I thus immediately thought to address the intersections of Indigenous activism and publishing, two modes of contemporary Indigenous creation, both within and outside Australia, and to focus that address specifically around the significance of 1964.<sup>1</sup> That year has been much on my mind, and my original idea was to juxtapose the historic 1964 publication of the first book of poems written by an Indigenous author in Australia, *We Are Going* by Oodgeroo Noonuccal, then known as Kath Walker, with the 1964 publication of the first book of poems written by a Maori author in Aotearoa New Zealand, *No Ordinary Sun* by Hone Tuwhare, and the 1964 publication of the first book of poems written by a contemporary Native American author in the United States, *Raising the Moon Vines: Original Haiku in English* by Gerald Vizenor (although Vizenor had privately published an earlier volume of haiku in 1962).<sup>2</sup> The serendipity of synchronous first publications of books of poems by diverse Indigenous writers situated within the confines and possibilities of different English-speaking settler nation-states would help me demonstrate a version of literary contextualisation, analysis, and appreciation I have been calling *trans-Indigenous*.<sup>3</sup> The term is meant to be expansive; here it is deployed in the sense of a critical practice of purposeful juxtaposition, of reading *across, beyond, and through* specifically located Indigenous literatures, histories, and cultures.

In addition, and also reflected in my title, I intended to bring to bear on my trans-Indigenous project the generative work of my University of Washington colleague Dian Million, an Athabaskan poet and an innovative scholar of Indigenous literature, affect, and critical theory. In particular, I planned to engage Million’s essay ‘Intense Dreaming: Theories, Narratives, and Our Search for Home,’ published in *American Indian Quarterly* in 2011, in which she theorises ‘intense dreaming’ as productive acts of imagination and critical thinking toward Indigenous futures.<sup>4</sup> I hoped to harness this serendipity, too, between an Aboriginal sense of Dreaming as linked to ongoing forces of creation and Million’s sense of intense dreaming as linked to the productive power of imagination. Moreover, I planned to pun Million’s key term in order to complicate my decision to highlight the dimension of time and the importance of occasion in organising my contextualisation, analysis, and appreciation around a specific year rather than a specific author or geography. That is, I planned to emphasise the idea of an *in tense* dreaming: Million’s productive acts performed within a specific verb tense, inspired by Kath Walker’s intense dreaming within the specific verb tense of the present progressive—also known as the present continuous—in the title poem for her historic 1964 first book of Indigenous Australian poetry, *We Are Going*.

Those were my primary intentions. But we all know what can happen to best laid plans.

As I began to lay out more precise ideas for my ASAL keynote, and as I began to read and reread my chosen primary texts and relevant scholarship and theory, I became increasingly distracted by a related but distinct set of concerns also centered on Walker's 1964 achievement. It is to these less expected concerns, which arose out of my last-minute reading in preparation for the ASAL conference, that I will turn in the latter part of my essay. Before arriving there, though, I want to retrace parts of my original trans-Indigenous itinerary. *Where* I became distracted and *how* I veered from my original contextualising and analytical course—focused on the congruities and potential complex coherence of an Indigenous 1964 intensely dreamed within the verb tense of the present and the grammatical aspect of the progressive—will help clarify *why* I ended up focusing, instead, and perhaps more significantly, on the surprisingly limited nature of our expectations for Indigenous literatures as readers, critics, and scholars. In other words, I shifted emphasis from how we understand literary history and how we perform literary interpretation to how, in the end, we form an appreciation of literary value. For I came to ask not only how Walker, Tuwhare, and Vizenor dream intensely, in Million's sense of actively imagining Indigenous futures that can encompass larger sets of relations, but also how *we* dream as readers, critics, and scholars. How *do* we dream? And in which verb tense and in which grammatical aspect or aspects do we dream important but often confounding works of Indigenous literature, perhaps especially works like *We Are Going*, *No Ordinary Sun*, and *Raising the Moon Vines*, which were published without precedent within the exciting and turbulent post-World War II era of renewed Indigenous activism and renewed Indigenous movement? However well-intentioned we may be as readers, critics, and scholars working from diverse backgrounds and affinities, our efforts at contextualisation, analysis, and appreciation, and, indeed, our efforts at intense dreaming are often situated noticeably *outside* rather than firmly *within* critical notions of relationship, time, and occasion.

### **What I meant to say . . .**

I will offer a second confession: my interest in 1964 derives, in part, from personal circumstances beyond my control. Let's just say 1964 happens to be a significant year in my own life history, and the recent arrival and passing of 2014 has forced a reckoning with a certain milestone about which dominant Western cultures tell us we should definitely not be excited. (Fortunately, Indigenous cultures have other, more positive things to say about such milestones.)

More germane to my immediate purposes, 2014 marked a number of fiftieth anniversaries for important events in the U.S. Civil Rights movement and the U.S. War on Poverty. In 2014 I was a professor at Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio, and my OSU colleagues and I marked these fiftieth anniversaries with a series of campus events organised around the theme 'Honoring Civil Rights Struggles.'<sup>5</sup> One of our goals for these lectures and panel discussions, which we hoped would attract a broad range of students, faculty, staff, and community, was to disrupt what have become conventional but limited understandings of U.S. rights struggles, and thus to expand the narrative to articulate not only the efforts of African Americans to gain access to the guarantees of the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights, but also the efforts of other U.S. racial and ethnic minorities, new immigrants, women, gays and lesbians, the poor, the disabled, and, importantly, Indigenous peoples—including not only Native Americans, Alaska Natives, and Inuit, but also Kanaka 'Oiwi (Indigenous Hawaiians), Samoans, Chamorro from Guam, other Micronesians, and other peoples Indigenous to territories now occupied, claimed, or administered by the United

States. Our autumn kick-off event in September 2014 traced the evolution of academic fields and interdisciplinary programs devoted to ethnicity, gender, and other forms of difference; my contribution addressed the specific topic ‘American Indian Studies and 1964.’

The following spring, in April 2015, I was invited to Northwestern University near Chicago to participate in a symposium on ‘Radical Poetics.’<sup>6</sup> As at Ohio State, the organisers at Northwestern were interested in disrupting conventional narratives, in this case the standard accounts of the poetry and poetics of the so-called radical 1960s and 1970s. The symposium organisers hoped presenters would explore relationships among archives, poetic forms, and social movements, particularly as these intersected specific events of activism and specific radical poets of color. Although the majority of presentations celebrated U.S. Black and Latino poets and poetics, I was asked to present on relevant works produced by American Indians. I titled my paper ‘Just How Radical Were Native Poetics?’ and I did my best to pose questions about the category of the ‘radical’ in relation to Native American and Indigenous poetry produced in the politically and socially volatile period of the 1960s and 1970s. I asked: What counts as ‘radical’ and what counts as ‘poetics’ in the context of an American Indian activism driven not by the pursuit of civil rights but rather by the reclamation of land and resources rights and by the assertion of political, intellectual, and artistic sovereignty?

For both presentations, I focused on a series of iconic images to help spotlight four key events related to Native American activism and the importance of 1964. First, the 1964 fishing rights demonstrations, or ‘fish-ins,’ staged in the U.S. Pacific Northwest among the Puyallup, Nisqually, and other Coast Salish peoples of the southern Puget Sound region of what is now Washington State. In the fish-ins we witnessed local issues involving the violation of guarantees made to Indigenous nations in nineteenth-century treaties garner national attention—including the support of Hollywood celebrities such as the actor Marlon Brando, Black and civil rights organisations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), and emerging Native American rights organisations such as the National Indian Youth Council (NIYC), which had formed in 1961. The ongoing fish-ins would also serve as a catalyst for American Indian veterans returning from the war in Vietnam to become involved in political and social activism. The fish-ins would become a catalyst as well for future Native activism on a truly national scale.<sup>7</sup>

Second, the first invasion of Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay by a group of Lakota men living in San Francisco, California. These men made their claim to the abandoned island, most famous for having been the site of a high security prison, based not on civil rights or on articles of the U.S. Constitution but rather on articles of the 1868 Treaty of Fort Laramie, and although their activism was short-lived in 1964, it planted the idea for the subsequent invasion of Alcatraz in 1969, conducted by the group that called itself Indians of All Tribes, which would last for nineteen months. The second Alcatraz occupation would draw the support of the American Indian Movement (AIM), which formed in Minneapolis in 1968, as well as extensive coverage by national and international media. Alcatraz would become a focal point for Indian activism across the United States from the late 1960s into the mid-1970s, and it would spur the production of a range of discourses, including poetry, other literary and activist texts, and even popular music. (Admittedly, songs such as ‘We Were All Wounded at Wounded Knee,’ released as a single in 1973 by the Native rock band Red Bone, were more popular in Europe than they were in the United States.)

Third, 1964 saw the establishment of the American Indian Historical Society, based in California, and the publication of the first issue of the society's journal, *The Indian Historian*. The explicit goal of the journal's editors was to write Native history from Native rather than non-Native points of view—which, at the time, was still a radical concept—and in its pages the journal unflinchingly named and addressed perennial issues of Indian invisibility and the lack of Indian perspectives in dominant scholarship and other authoritative discourses. Moreover, *The Indian Historian* made it a point to explicitly link scholarly historical research to local activism in Native communities.

And fourth, in 1964 Vine Deloria, Jr., the acclaimed Dakota intellectual, writer, and activist, was elected Executive Director of the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI). The NCAI had formed twenty years earlier, in 1944, toward the end of World War II, but it had become somewhat moribund and largely ineffective as a persuasive voice on behalf of Native American nations. Deloria served as Executive Director from 1964 through 1967, and he revived the organisation, grew its membership, and made it financially stable. He also helped the NCAI deliver a clear and unapologetic platform of tribal sovereignty to the U.S. Congress and U.S. President. Deloria went on to publish his breakout book, *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto*, in 1969, and then published another twenty books over the next decades. He is arguably the most influential American Indian intellectual of the twentieth century.

In addition to spotlighting these four major events intersecting 1964, which connect locally focused activism with nationally focused activism and which connect formal academic scholarship with public intellectual work, in both talks I mentioned that the period of the mid-1960s through the mid-1970s also marks the beginnings of similar large-scale contemporary Indigenous activism in other English-speaking settler nation-states, including Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand, as well as the beginnings of contemporary Indigenous organising on a global scale, notably the formation of the International Indian Treaty Council (IITC) and the formation of the World Council of Indigenous Peoples (WCIP).<sup>8</sup>

In neither account did I spotlight the publication of an American Indian literary text associated with 1964. Within U.S.-based literary criticism, Vizenor's achievement in publishing *Raising the Moon Vines*—a book of poems written in English by an Anishinaabe author in the Japanese form of haiku—is typically overshadowed by Kiowa author N. Scott Momaday's achievement in publishing his first novel, *House Made of Dawn*, in 1968, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1969. It is Momaday rather than Vizenor who is credited with initiating a so-called Native American literary renaissance. Moreover, *Raising the Moon Vines* does not obviously resemble Vizenor's best known works, especially his own novels and his works of nonfiction, which are celebrated for their formal complexity and stylistic innovations, for their enactments of the aesthetics and wry humor of oral traditions, and for their grappling with postmodern theory in the service of articulating Indigenous survivance (survival as active presence) and sovereignty.<sup>9</sup> Vizenor's early publishing achievement becomes more salient, however, when placed in conversation with Walker's achievement in publishing *We Are Going* in Australia and Tuwhare's achievement in publishing *No Ordinary Sun* in Aotearoa New Zealand. Although there are wide differences in the cultural backgrounds and lived experiences of these Indigenous poets with first books published in 1964, all three had grown up in economically and socially difficult circumstances and all three had received limited early educations. (Vizenor eventually attained university and postgraduate

degrees.) All three had been involved with their settler nation-state's armed forces during or following World War II: Walker, born in 1920 and the oldest of the three, enlisted in the Australian Women's Army Service in 1941, was promoted to the rank of corporal, and served until 1943; Tuwhare, born in 1922, served in the Allies' occupation of post-war Japan as part of New Zealand's Jayforce and saw first-hand the nuclear devastation at Hiroshima; and Vizenor, born in 1934 and the youngest of the three, similarly served with occupation forces in Japan in the early 1950s, where, like Tuwhare, he witnessed the vast destruction of the United States's nuclear attacks. And, as has been established by other scholars, all three Indigenous poets were involved in community and labor organising and in locally and nationally focused Indigenous activism.<sup>10</sup>

Reading across *We Are Going*, *No Ordinary Sun*, and *Raising the Moon Vines*, one is struck by how these first collections of poems look outward rather than inward, how they assume a global rather than an exclusively local, regional, or even national perspective. They defy any stereotypical expectation that Indigenous poets—perhaps especially 'first' Indigenous poets—will necessarily produce work that is limited in scope or is in some way parochial. Walker's collection opens with an epigraph taken from the United Nations' 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, followed immediately by her first poem, 'Aboriginal Charter of Rights,' which picks up the Declaration's globally focused, universalist language and sentiment. Tuwhare's title poem 'No Ordinary Sun' laments the nuclear bombings in Japan and how those singular events changed world history and affected all of our relationships to the planet.<sup>11</sup> More obliquely, Vizenor engages that nuclear history by embracing a quintessentially Japanese form in *Raising the Moon Vines*.<sup>12</sup>

These early observations were meant to form the basis for a trans-Indigenous contextualisation and analysis, leading to a trans-Indigenous appreciation. Since my keynote would be delivered at the ASAL conference in Australia, my intention was to place Walker's work at the productive centre of discussion.

### **What needed to be said instead . . .**

As I began to draft a trans-Indigenous reading across, beyond, and through the significant literary firsts of *We Are Going*, *No Ordinary Sun*, and *Raising the Moon Vines*, I kept thinking about why Walker's text was especially on my mind. And that's when I got distracted. While conducting research for what became the first chapter of my most recent book, *Trans-Indigenous: Methodologies for Global Native Literary Studies*, published in 2012, I had stumbled on a 1964 publication from Australia titled *Aborigines Now: New Perspective in the Study of Aboriginal Communities*.<sup>13</sup> The title is immediately arresting for its provocative use of the time marker 'now' and for its idiosyncratic use of the singular noun 'perspective.' I remember thinking how this 'now' is an interesting variant on the more common time marker 'today,' as in the many U.S. and Canadian publications titled 'The Indian Today' or the many New Zealand publications titled 'The Maori Today.' In addition to suggesting the present moment, as an adjective 'now' also suggests something up-to-date and even fashionable, as in someone from the mid-1960s remarking, 'That pantsuit is so *now*.' And I remember thinking as well: in 1964 did the collection's publisher, the well regarded Angus and Robertson, or its highly qualified editor, Marie Reay, really mean to introduce a *single* new perspective into the discussion of contemporary Aboriginal communities? If so, why only one? And to what possible purpose?

As scholars of literature, members of ASAL may be unfamiliar with *Aborigines Now*, a signal collection of anthropological essays edited by the Australian anthropologist Marie Reay, who in 1964 was a fellow in the Department of Anthropology and Sociology at the Australian National University and a member of the Advisory Panel on Anthropology for the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies in Canberra. It may go without saying, but for my purposes it is important to articulate that, unlike Kath Walker, Marie Reay was not an Indigenous Australian but rather a white Australian of settler descent. In *Trans-Indigenous* I offer a broad overview and several focused analyses of the thirteen essays and accompanying photographic and other illustrations Reay gathered together in *Aborigines Now*. One point I relegated to a footnote, however, has felt incomplete, its context less than fully explored, its meaning less than fully theorised, and it has continued to tug at the back of my mind. That tug became a primary impetus for distraction while writing my ASAL keynote; eventually, it became a clear prompt for changing direction.

In the footnote I wrote for *Trans-Indigenous* I point out that, although *Aborigines Now* is a work of anthropology, it includes an essay by Randolph Stow, the award-winning Australian poet and novelist who in 1964 was a lecturer in English at the University of Western Australia. Titled ‘Negritude for the White Man,’ Stow’s essay offers a compelling analysis of white representations of Indigenous Australians. As I remark in the footnote, at one point Stow laments the lack of any Aboriginal writers who can represent themselves as individuals or their people as communities within the realm of ‘literature.’ Stow writes: ‘What is needed, of course, is an aboriginal writer, a literary Namatjira [referring to the Western Arrernte painter], an Australian Camara Laye [referring to the West African novelist]’ (6). In the footnote I remark, too, that it appears Stow was unaware of Walker’s recently published book of poems at the time of writing. That may be perfectly understandable: Stow likely completed his essay well before its 1964 publication date. What makes Stow’s omission stand out is the fact that his editor draws considerable attention to Walker as an ‘aboriginal poet’ and to *We Are Going* as a ‘volume of verse’ in her introduction to *Aborigines Now*. We can thus surmise that Walker’s book was available prior to Reay’s final submission of the manuscript to Angus and Robertson. More significant than the timing, though, is that Reay, an anthropologist editing a collection of primarily anthropological essays, does not simply note the appearance of *We Are Going* but offers critical commentary on its specifically literary achievement—or lack thereof. Here is Reay’s commentary, and I quote the passage in full:

Kath Walker, an aboriginal poet, has shown considerable promise in a volume of verse that is mainly propagandist for her people, but I see a real danger that she and others may find recognition before their grasp of the craftsmanship of writing gives them the literary stature to justify it. I would not like to see their work acclaimed just because it is written by aborigines and not because of any intrinsic merit it may have: the prospect calls to mind a circus in which fleas and elephants are applauded because they perform actions that are commonplace in humans. (xvi)

Reading Reay’s critical assessment of Walker and her work today—reading it ‘now’—the self-confident attitude of paternalism and the starkly racist dismissal of Aboriginal ability and achievement, emphasised as much in the overall tone of Reay’s prose (‘I see a real *danger*’) as in her calculated evocation of trained animals performing rote routines in a circus, seems rather shocking. Her reactionary ‘perspective,’ however, is in no way singular. All too predictably, this

kind of colonial, elitist, and dismissive response to Walker and her poetry was confined neither to Reay nor to the field of anthropology.

A number of scholars have offered cogent analyses of the early critical reception of *We Are Going*. In his important study of contemporary Aboriginal literature produced between 1929 and 1988, *Black Words, White Page*, published in 1989, for instance, Adam Shoemaker quotes an anonymous review from May 1964 he considers typical of contemporary responses. The reviewer complains:

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. (182)<sup>14</sup>

Even a cursory search of the initial critical response to *We Are Going* confirms that ‘Is it poetry?’ was the central concern of non-Indigenous reviewers, and that, ever since 1964, the ‘poetry’ vs. ‘protest’ binary has been the central rubric of critical assessment and formal scholarship on this work, sometimes rendered ‘literature’ vs. ‘propaganda’ or ‘techniques’ vs. ‘themes.’ The centrality of the binary only intensified with the publication of Walker’s subsequent works during the era of major Indigenous activism, *The Dawn is at Hand* in 1966 and *My People* in 1970.<sup>15</sup>

In 1989 Shoemaker appears largely to accept the ‘poetry’ vs. ‘protest,’ ‘literature vs. propaganda,’ ‘techniques’ vs. ‘themes’ binary. His own assessment of Walker’s poetry is that it is ‘uneven’ and suffers from ‘technical failings’ and ‘technical weaknesses’ (183). At its most successful, he states, echoing the anonymous reviewer from 1964, the poetry offers ‘a clear and strong socio-political message’ and ‘is often impressive in its directness and poignancy’ (183). Mudrooroo Narogin begins to question the binary in 1990 in his *Writing from the Fringe: A Study of Modern Aboriginal Literature* by focusing, in part, on the issue of appropriate genre classification (35) and the need for Aboriginal works to be assessed by Aboriginal critics (37). Bob Hodge then builds on Narogin to question the binary in more precise terms in 1994, following Oodgeroo’s death at the age of 72 in 1993, in an essay titled ‘Poetry and Politics in Oodgeroo: Transcending the Difference.’ Hodge acknowledges that the complaint that Walker’s work is not ‘poetry’ stems from a ‘basis of racism’ (69), and he notes, perceptively, that the other side of this particular coin is the simultaneous complaint that Walker’s work is not ‘traditional’ and therefore not authentically Aboriginal (67). The anonymous review quoted by Shoemaker, for instance, includes the following line, which, in addition to trading in sexism and anachronism, seems intent on being especially dismissive in its invocation of a distinctly male Aboriginal oral tradition the reviewer deems absent from Walker’s volume: ‘The authentic voice of the song-man using the English language still remains to be heard.’ But even in these early questionings and early acknowledgements of the rhetorical complexity of Walker’s negative reception, the binary remains central to the critical discourse, and scholars offer few options for how we might approach Walker’s poetry otherwise. Hodge makes an admirable attempt to promote the idea of an Aboriginal aesthetics in English, what at one point in his analysis he describes as ‘show[ing] in a modern form the traditional Aboriginal genius’ (72); and Hodge works to demonstrate ambiguity in Walker’s best-known poems, as well as these poems’ potential to produce multiple meanings (73). In the end, since he ultimately cannot escape the binary of ‘poetry’ vs. ‘protest,’ Hodge proposes reconciliation. At the conclusion of his essay

he writes: '[Walker's] poetry is more varied, subtle and complex than it has been seen to be, more postmodern and more Aboriginal, and all of this because her political experience was wider and her political sense more nuanced and better developed than some have given her credit for' (76).

Others argue similarly that we should assess Walker's poems from the vantage of her achievements as a committed and savvy activist. In an essay also published in 1994, appropriately titled 'The Poetry: An Appreciation,' the poet and Australian intellectual Judith Wright, who played a significant role in helping Walker publish *We Are Going* with Jacaranda Press in 1964, situates the poetry within the context of Walker's extensive political activism and directly addresses the repetitive question 'Was it poetry?' (166). Similar to Narogin and Hodge, Wright evokes the spectre of racism and the limitations of standard genre classification. And then she says something both completely obvious and completely unexpected about the initial, dismissive critical reception of *We Are Going*: '[The poems] seemed bizarrely dangerous to all preconceptions of what Aborigines were, and all principles of what they should be' (167). Wright's assessment, and the weight it places on the idea of a 'bizarre' danger, further distracted me. For I think Wright is correct to emphasise the potential danger of Walker's poems, bizarre or otherwise, especially for non-Indigenous readers in 1964—and hence Wright's echo, reverberating across three decades of scholarship and critique, of Marie Reay's dismissive assertion in *Aborigines Now*: 'I see a real danger.' My own sense, however, is that the source of this danger is somewhat other than that which Wright is able to articulate. Wright locates the danger of the poems primarily in how they make apparent, on the authoritative pages of the Euro-Australian book, the potential 'for a new kind of Aboriginality' (168) that was in the process of emerging from the ranks of the so-called half-castes, part-Aborigines, and fringe dwellers, an Aboriginality that was neither clearly 'tribal' nor clearly 'assimilated' (167). Wright remarks that the poems, thus, 'were startling because they came from a region of Aboriginality that had not been supposed to exist, the city suburbs . . .' (171). Although I do not disagree with Wright's overall account, which I find nuanced and persuasive, I am struck by how much it, too, relies on the binary of 'poetry' vs. 'protest,' and by how much it centres its critical assessment of the poems, the writing itself, in a celebration of the strength and inherent interest of the author's biography. For all her work to disrupt the typical conversation about *We Are Going*, Wright's strongest valuations of Walker's explicitly 'protest' poems are that they are most effective when 'read aloud' (178), a point made by Shoemaker and others, and that the poems are 'functional'—that is, they take on and are able to accomplish the difficult job of activist protest (173).

Distracted by the early and ongoing critical response to *We Are Going*, and in particular by Reay's and Wright's invocations of danger, I found myself asking: What about the poems themselves? After all these many years following 1964, what are we to make of the poems' enunciated presence on the spoken voice, their alphabetic presence on the printed page, their power to produce emotional effect and intellectual meaning for listeners or readers who may or may not be fully aware of or especially interested in the author's biography? What kinds of readings are possible if we focus on the poems, on the voice and on the page? What kinds of readings are possible if we take seriously the poems' language and form? The scholars I have cited thus far, along with others I have not reviewed here, all point to the fact that Walker stated repeatedly in interviews that she was not speaking or writing to express her individual voice but rather to express the voice of her people. As Shoemaker remarks, Walker intended her poetry 'to be a distillation of the feelings and



concerns of all Aboriginal people in Australia' (186). If we take Walker's statements of intention seriously, and if we take the assessments of scholars and critics such as Shoemaker and Wright seriously as well, how might we describe that composite voice spoken out loud or rendered on the printed page?

Here I might pause to offer a third confession. As I was researching and writing a first version of this paper over the several weeks before the ASAL conference in July 2016, I was repeatedly interrupted with other duties, including an urgent request to provide a critical assessment of a major Native American poet who was being hired as a Distinguished Professor at a research university and who thus required promptly delivered letters of admiration and positive scholarly accounting. In writing that assessment of another history-making activist Indigenous poet, I came up with the following formulation, which I realise is in no way original. My formulation runs like this:

Some poets are primarily technicians who help us experience language, sound, rhythm, and form anew. Some poets are primarily historians, journalists, and documentarians who invite us to see our world from surprisingly new perspectives. Some poets are primarily memoirists whose focused explorations of interiority challenge us to contemplate the meanings of our own lives and identities. Some poets are primarily activists whose strident voices demand that we not simply pay attention but actually take action. Some poets are primarily visionaries who open us to possible futures and to worlds as yet unimagined. When poets are marked as Indigenous, especially when they are marked as the 'first' to publish in a particular era, genre, media, or form, readers, critics, and scholars tend to want these poets to serve, as well, as prophets, to be poets distinctly *ahead* of their time.

Literary scholars based in the academy, in particular, seem to yearn for Indigenous poets of all historical periods to always-already embody contemporary political and aesthetic values. In our present moment, that means scholars tend to want to find in Indigenous poets from all historical periods evidence of subversion of the dominant settler culture, evidence of strident and unflinching demands for land rights and for political, intellectual, and artistic sovereignty. And that means scholars tend to want to find, as well, sophisticated stylistic and aesthetic manoeuvres clearly identifiable within the realm of the postmodern or even the avant-garde. Only rarely, and perhaps for understandable reasons, do scholars seem invested in engaging Indigenous poets firmly *within* rather than ahead of their own time.

How might we begin to engage Walker's *We Are Going* within its specific occasion of a 1964 marked by both national and international Indigenous activism and publishing, and within its specific verb tense and grammatical aspect of the present progressive?

In addition to the work of the Athabaskan poet and theorist Dian Million and her ideas about intense dreaming, in my distraction from my original trans-Indigenous itinerary I also turned to the work of Mohawk anthropologist Audra Simpson. In particular, I turned to Simpson's provocative concept of 'ethnographic refusal,' which she first developed in an essay published in 2007 in the New Zealand-based interdisciplinary journal *Junctures*. The essay is titled 'On Ethnographic Refusal: Indigeneity, "Voice" and Colonial Citizenship'; Simpson builds from the work of Indigenous Australian scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson to apply critical pressure to how

the field of anthropology ‘has imagined itself to be a voice, and in some disciplinary iterations, *the* voice of the colonised’ (67). Simpson notes how cultural analysis begins with ‘difference’ as the primary unit of critical engagement, and she asks what analysis might look like ‘when difference is *not* the unit of analysis’ (68). For Simpson, who works as a Mohawk anthropologist studying her own Mohawk community of Kahnawake on the U.S.-Canadian border, the question is of deep personal as well as professional significance. And, increasingly, the interdiscipline of Indigenous studies includes a range of scholars who work either with and among specific peoples to whom they belong by genealogy or affiliation, or with and among diverse Indigenous communities to whom they feel some level of kinship and obligation. What kind of analysis is possible under these particular conditions of ‘insider’ knowing, which cannot escape a reckoning with the facts of colonialism or the ongoing condition of coloniality—including the condition of coloniality experienced by the researcher herself?<sup>16</sup> What kind of analysis is possible under the particular conditions where both the researched and the researcher similarly encounter the dominant settler culture’s refusal to recognise Indigenous ability and achievement?

In 1964, faced with the declaration of sovereignty embodied in the act of a ‘first’ Indigenous poet ‘speaking for [herself]’ on the authoritative pages of a printed book and daring to ‘interrupt anthropological portraits of [Aboriginal] timelessness’ (Simpson 68), the white Australian anthropologist Marie Reay responds to Walker and her poems with this kind of stark refusal. For Walker’s poems reveal actual living Indigenous Australians who appear, in Simpson’s words, ‘anomalous against the literature written upon them’ (Simpson 68), anomalous against the literature Reay herself was either writing upon Aboriginal peoples or helping others to shepherd into publication. As I note in my analysis published in *Trans-Indigenous*, Reay makes an explicit point of advertising her refusal to recognise the dignity and self-determination of Indigenous Australians by pointing up her refusal to write the word *Aboriginal* with a capital ‘A’ in her own submissions to the volume, as well as her refusal to allow any of her contributors to write *Aboriginal* with a capital ‘A’ in their submissions, either. She denigrates Indigenous status and assumes the colonial authority to grant or withhold political, social, or critical recognition.<sup>17</sup> My surmise is that Walker and her poems confound Reay because she and they refuse to situate contemporary Indigenous identities outside asymmetrical relations of power and because she and they refuse to situate contemporary Indigenous utterance outside time and specific occasion. Quite the contrary.

Whether she consciously intended to or not, I want to suggest that in the poems collected in *We Are Going* Walker refuses to conceal the condition of coloniality that she as an individual and her people as a community—as a network of communities—could not escape. She refuses to perform as the literary Aboriginal exception Stow and others seem to long for, as ‘the authentic voice of the song-man using the English language.’ Instead, Walker puts to voice and paper her actual experience of Aboriginal identity and Aboriginal knowledge, including her gendered Aboriginal self-knowledge, which is necessarily embedded within settler colonial history and within the settler colonial society of her present moment, rather than sequestered in a timeless Aboriginal past or projected into some fantasised post-colonial future.<sup>18</sup> Her poems perform Aborigines ‘now’ in ways that Reay and much of settler Australia cannot embrace and perhaps cannot imagine—or intensely dream.

### **Intensely Dreaming Kath Walker . . .**

Walker's *We Are Going* accomplishes a great many things, but having arrived at the end of a paper that is other than originally intended, I arrive at the conclusion that perhaps Walker's greatest achievement both for 1964 and for 'now,' more than fifty years later, is her refusal to conceal the colonial conditions of contemporary Indigenous being and the colonial conditions of contemporary Indigenous utterance. The 'uneven' quality of her poems, the 'technical failings' and 'technical weaknesses,' the 'oral' quality of simple rhyme schemes and sometimes awkward metre, identified by early critics and by Shoemaker and other scholars—these qualities, on their own and in their defiant accessibility on the voice and their defiant banality on the page, enact a refusal to conceal the constraints of coloniality, of forced and yet limited education, of settler condescension, of settler surveillance. The lack of sanctioned and thus recognisable poetic 'art' in these poems enacts a refusal of Indigenous compliance with the settler colonial expectation to conceal the coloniality of the settler nation-state's knowledge and power. It is important to emphasise this point: a refusal to comply with the expectation that an *Indigenous* voice will conceal and thus naturalise the coloniality of settler knowledge and power.

Intense dreaming, Million argues, is not a luxury for Indigenous peoples, but vital to moving forward the causes of Indigenous political, intellectual, and artistic sovereignty. Walker's intense dreaming pushes against colonial forces in its coupling of lament for what has been lost or destroyed with assertion of ongoing presence—what Gerald Vizenor names an active survivance—a fact that is often celebrated by sympathetic critics. But in its supposedly flawed accessibility and banality, this intense dreaming also enacts a kind of monstrous clarity about the contemporary status of Indigenous Australians, a clarity that is 'bizarrely dangerous' to the callously limited settler colonial dream of and for Aboriginality. In the charged moment of 1964, Walker refuses to dream herself or her people outside of time, as either locked into an idealised past or assimilated out of recognisable existence. She dreams instead in a present she did not ask for but is forced to actively live within if she and her people are to survive. From within this dreaming, this ancestral force of creation, she and they look progressively toward alternative Indigenous futures:

'Aboriginal Charter of Rights'

We want hope, not racialism,  
 Brotherhood, not ostracism,  
 Black advance, not white ascendance:  
 Make us equals, not dependents.  
 We need help, not exploitation,  
 We want freedom, not frustration.  
 Not control, but self-reliance,  
 Independence, not compliance,  
 Not rebuff, but education,  
 Self-respect, not resignation.  
 Free us from a mean subjection,  
 From a bureaucrat Protection.  
 Let's forget the old-time slavers:  
 Give us fellowship, not favours;  
 Encouragement, not prohibitions,  
 Homes, not settlements and missions.

We need love, not overlordship,  
Grip of hand, not whip-hand wardship;  
Opportunity that places  
White and black on equal basis.  
You dishearten, not defend us,  
Circumscribe, who should befriend us.  
Give us welcome, not aversion,  
Give us choice, not cold coercion,  
Status, not discrimination,  
Human rights, not segregation.  
You the law, like Roman Pontius,  
Make us proud, not colour-conscious;  
Give the deal you still deny us,  
Give goodwill, not bigot bias;  
Give ambition, not prevention,  
Confidence, not condescension;  
Give incentive, not restriction,  
Give us Christ, not crucifixion.  
Though baptized and blessed and Bibled  
We are still tabooed and libeled.  
You devout Salvation-sellers,  
Make us neighbours, not fringe-dwellers;  
Make us mates, not poor relations,  
Citizens, not serfs on stations.  
Must we native Old Australians  
In our own land rank as aliens?  
Banish bans and conquer caste,  
Then we'll win our own at last. (9-10)

However much readers, critics, and scholars may desire Oodgeroo Noonuccal to have been a prophetic poetic voice ahead of her time, Kath Walker's tremendous ability and tremendous achievement deserve to be acknowledged as absolutely situated within her time.

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Notes

<sup>1</sup> The title of my keynote address, printed in the conference program, was ‘Dreaming in the Present Progressive: Reading Across and Through an Indigenous 1964.’

<sup>2</sup> Oodgeroo Noonuccal reclaimed her Aboriginal name in anticipation of the Australian Bicentennial celebrations in 1988.

<sup>3</sup> It also occurred to me to widen the scope of juxtaposition to include at least a few of the notable ‘postcolonial’ texts published in 1964 in other parts of the world, such as the African novels *Weep Not, Child* by Ngugi wa Thiong’o and *Arrow of God* by Chinua Achebe.

<sup>4</sup> Million’s concept of intense dreaming feels closely related to Kiowa author N. Scott Momaday’s understanding of the role of ‘imagination’ in Indigenous personal and communal identities, first developed in his seminal essay ‘The Man Made of Words.’

<sup>5</sup> The series of events was organised by the Diversity and Identity Studies Collective at Ohio State (DISCO).

<sup>6</sup> The Radical Poetics: Archives, Forms, Social Movements symposium was convened by John Alba Cutler and Harris Feinsod on behalf of the Northwestern Poetry and Poetics Colloquium, April 23-24, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> I write about this period of Native American activism in more detail in *Blood Narrative: Indigenous Identity in American Indian and Maori Literary and Activist Texts*; see, especially, 117-26.

<sup>8</sup> The first International Indian Treaty Council was held in June 1974; the World Council of Indigenous Peoples held its First General Assembly in October 1975.

<sup>9</sup> This is not to suggest scholars have ignored Vizenor's poetry. The early study *Gerald Vizenor: Writing in the Oral Tradition* by Anishinaabe poet and scholar Kimberly Blaeser, for example, includes a chapter on Vizenor's experiments with haiku.

<sup>10</sup> In the case of Walker/Noonuncal see, for instance, Shoemaker, Cochrane, and Rooney.

<sup>11</sup> See DeLoughrey for a strong reading of Tuwhare's poem within its nuclear context.

<sup>12</sup> In this work and in subsequent volumes, Vizenor links the Japanese form of haiku to Anishinaabe dream songs. He returns to the theme of atomic destruction in Japan more explicitly in his 2003 novel *Hiroshima Bugi: Atomu 57*.

<sup>13</sup> My chapter is titled "'Being" Indigenous "Now": Resettling "The Indian Today" within and beyond the U.S. 1960s.'

<sup>14</sup> The anonymous review was published in *Australian Book Review*, May 1964, 143.

<sup>15</sup> Although they are ultimately interested in a different set of questions related to Australian Aboriginal literature, Michelle Kelly and Tim Rowse review the reception of Kath Walker's early publications in a 2016 article in *Australian Literary Studies*. Anne Brewster engages this early reception, as well as the 'poetry' vs. 'protest' binary so prevalent in the scholarship, in her 2008 essay 'Engaging the Public Intimacy of Whiteness' and in her 2017 chapter 'Australian Aboriginal Women's Protest Poetry.'

<sup>16</sup> See Mignolo for a more expansive exploration of the concept of coloniality and its relationships to knowledge and power.

<sup>17</sup> Quoting Reay 168 in Allen, *Trans-Indigenous* 23-24.

<sup>18</sup> Space does not permit a detailed investigation of how Walker represents her self-knowledge as an Aboriginal person in gendered as well as more universalist terms. Several poems collected in *We Are Going*, however, are highly suggestive of the possibilities for this line of inquiry, including ‘My Love,’ which Walker positions to immediately follow the collection’s opening poem, ‘Aboriginal Charter of Rights’ (‘Possess me? No, I cannot give/ The love that others know,/ For I am wedded to a cause:/ The rest I must forgo.’), as well as ‘Son of Mine (*To Denis*)’ and ‘Cookalingee (*For Elsie Lewis*).’