

Voicing the Land – 1

RUBY LANGFORD GINIBI

The theme 'voicing the land' is very appropriate for this conference, because this country only teaches an Anglo concept of history, which says nothing about our Aboriginal history, the first history of this land, which has survived since time immemorial.

And because we Aboriginal people come from an oral tradition, it is we who have always had to conform to the standard of the invaders, and learn the Queen's English so you mob out there can understand what the hell we are on about.

With our oral traditions, our laws, legends and song were handed on from one generation to another, this was our way of keeping our culture alive, but it is always us Kooris who have to conform to other people's laws and rules, because we were never allowed to be ourselves. And, I might add, Aboriginal people never ceded this land to any foreign power, because there were no treaties with my people. When Captain Cook landed here in 1770, he brought with him the 'common law of England', which meant that Aboriginal people became part of the British Commonwealth, and so should enjoy the same privilege as every other Australian—rights to life, land, and the pursuit of happiness; but it never worked that way for my people: dispossession and oppression, is what we got, not equality.

Over the past ten years, there has been a revolution in Aboriginal writing. I know of twenty-two Aboriginal women's books, and that's not counting the men writers, like Mudrooroo, Jack Davis, Archie Weller and Herb Wharton. Because of that non-history of ours, our Aboriginal writers' stories are our histories, because they tell of our lived Aboriginal experiences in Australia since our invasion.

My first book, *Don't Take Your Love to Town*, has been in the [NSW] Higher School Certificate curriculum for the last five years, educating white and multicultural Australia about us Koori people. I'm amazed that it has never been used as a historical text: it has been used in the themes Aboriginal experience, family, cultural identity, and many others, but never in a historical context.

Maybe it's because I don't have a BA or MA or PhD after my name. As a matter of fact, I only went to second form, eighth class—2F actually, and that's a long way from 'A, B, C, ...':—and the rest of my education I got in the school of hard-knocks. There's no better teacher, and it's lived experiences I write about. I tell people that I haven't discovered fiction yet. I'm too busy writing the truth! because so many lies have been told in this country about us Aboriginal people, and I feel a good dose of the truth of the matter must be told, to combat all the lies, like Lie Number One, that Captain Cook discovered Australia—there were the Dutch, the Portuguese, and French, who came along before he graced our shores in 1770, but they saw the land was occupied by my people so they left. The never stayed to dispossess my people like Cook did! And Lie Number Two, that the land was *terra nullius*, a Latin term that means uninhabited, no one here! Now I don't think my people—big, black people!—were bloody invisible!

Back to the writing. Our Aboriginal writing was not seen as real literature by lots of people. I heard Tom Keneally at a writers conference ask *Wanderin' Girl* author Glenys Ward, did she think her writing was real literature? I was stunned at such a stupid

question, because what is literature? In the dictionary it says, 'writings in which expression and form, in connection with ideas of permanent and universal interest, are characteristic or essential features, as poetry, romance, history, biography, essays, etc.'. In other words, 'form of the written word'. But, here I go repeating myself again. We Kooris have been the only ones to conform, learn the Queen's English, so we can write our stories, so you mob can understand what we are on about! So if people want to learn more about us Kooris, maybe they should conform to our Koori ways, it might make Australia a better place to live in. That's my opinion.

There has been a tremendous amount of misappropriation of Aboriginal content in some writings about us, and we have had big problems with white editors, because we don't have many Koori editors. White editors tend to Anglicise, or 'gubbise', our texts, or want to use the 'proper English' which denied us Kooris our own authentic Aboriginal voice! And then they wonder why we Kooris can't advance ourselves or our causes.

Down in Canberra at the Institute of Aboriginal Studies, which houses all our Koori resources—the language, and all written material by Aboriginal people for many years—80% of the funded writing is funded to white people to write about us. And how they write, and perceive us to be, through their eyes, perpetuates the racial stereotyping of Aboriginal people and marginalises us even more, and again denies us Kooris a voice.

Look at the white man named Leon Carmen, dressed up in the disguise of Wanda Koolmatrerie, who wrote a book titled, *My Own Sweet Time*. He won a \$5,000 award after he was able to hoodwink the West Australian publisher Magabala Books. Then there's Marlo Morgan, who wrote a book called *Mutant Message Down Under*, a self-published non-fiction account of a middle-aged, white, Missouri woman, who claimed to have undergone a spiritual transformation while trekking across the Australian desert with the last extant tribe of traditional Australian Aborigines. It was published by Harper Collins in 1994. Then there was Elizabeth Durak, an 82-year-old daughter of Michael Patrick Durack a pastoralist, in the Kimberley district of Western Australia, using the name of Eddie Burrup, doing Aboriginal art under that made-up Aboriginal name, when she's an acknowledged artist under her own name.

These are just some of the obstacles we Kooris have to try hard to overcome. We have enough going against us in this land just to survive, without having to put up with this misrepresentation and misappropriation of our Koori voices! It's disgusting. Same as you seldom see articles written by Aboriginal people in the media because they have all those so-called experts like Piers Ackerman, John Laws and Alan Jones. And like the Pauline Hanson book which states we Aboriginals were cannibals! All this racist, bigoted, tripe! She espouses her 'One Nation policy', which has certainly divided this nation, and some of these so-called experts have never even met an Aboriginal person.

These are some of the barriers that Aboriginal authors have overcome to get anything published, but the revolution of Aboriginal writing has started and it won't stop, because we Kooris have always had all the arts, the songs, the dance, the legends, and myth-making in our culture. It's a very valuable human resource that this country has never nurtured or acknowledged before, but used for their own gain, not ours. Look now, before the year 2000 Olympics you will be knocked down with so much Aboriginal cultural performance, it's mind boggling. And I ask myself why has all this timeless, ageless culture of ours never been acknowledged before the year 2000? It's really to show the whole world how well Australia looks after it's indigenous people,

when we are fifteen to twenty years behind everyone, even the people who migrated here, in life expectancy and in all those basic human rights such as health, housing, employment and education. That we are the most goaled people here, when we make up 1.97% of the total population of 18 million, and we are ten times more likely to be jailed than non-Aboriginals. Also infant mortality rate is tentimes the non-Aboriginal rate, and some of our communities don't even have fresh drinking water, and sanitation, and are dying of curable diseases, and our people are the only indigenous people in the whole world who don't have deed title, or rights to our own lands.

With the Mabo decision in 1992 the High Court stated this land was not *terra nullius* as claimed, and that native title still existed. Then Mr Howard introduced his ten point plan, giving more rights to pastoralists and the mining companies, who have always had the wealth from the land, and if it's passed in the Senate it will dispossess us Kooris all over again! And his failure to apologise about the stolen children is a mean-spirited attitude from the so-called leader of our country!

So I've not only talked about our literature, and writings, but I've managed to give you a very much needed Aboriginal history as well.

Terra Nullius

by Ruby Langford Ginibi, 1995

Where is our land that used to be, not ravaged by careless hands, cutting down all the trees that help us to breath, eroded soils and polluted rivers, 'Oh, mother earth I cry for the pain you must feel!' All our native flora, and fauna, almost gone! Even the little forest creatures too, our Boorbi's (Koalas) the proud symbols of our native lands, the cuddly furry animals that the tourists love to nurse and touch, will soon becomes extinct! Once my people lived in a virtual 'garden of Eden' we did not desecrate our mother earth. She was looked after, and cared for since time immemorial. Until the invaders came in 1788, we welcomed them thinking they were the spirits of our dead, returning to us. But they came in tall ships to inflict their laws and rules upon us, and to enslave us.

They took everything from us leaving us destitute, and dispossessed us in our own lands!

Now, 210 years after they came, we are still suffering from curable diseases, and are the most jailed people here, and on the lowest rung of the social ladder in this country. Even the people who migrated here, are on a higher social level than us! The governments have adopted multiculturalism right over our heads, like we were never ever here and the country really was *terra nullius* as claimed, but we have never been invited into their white social enclaves ever! So it's nothing new to us Kooris. They have excluded us all our lives, but they use our Koori images on TV for their gain, not ours, for big bucks. And never acknowledge us in any way, but our cries for justice will be heard one day, for the circle is turning, and what goes around, comes around! And it's our turn!

Black Woman

by Ruby Langford Ginibi

I am every black woman who's ever been loved. I am every black woman who's been serenaded by a guitar on a starry night. I am every black woman who's ever been betrayed by a selfish lover. I am every black woman who's given birth to loved children. I am every black woman who's had to work on fence lines to raise them too! I am every black woman who's hungered after truth! I am every black woman who's ever carted water buckets on yokes, to fill a forty-four gallon drum, for drinkin', washin', and cookin' purposes. I am every black woman, who's had a son, or husband jailed! I am every black woman who's had iron doors slammed shut, going to visit them too! I am every black woman who's struggled to raise a fine. I am every black woman who's heart has been broken over the deaths of loved ones. I am every black woman who has survived this calamity called life, in this now multicultural Australia.