

BLACKWORDS: Writers on Identity

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*I am black of skin among whites,
And I am proud,
Proud of race and proud of skin.*
(Walker 14)

In the 1960s Oodgeroo Noonuccal (then Kath Walker) hit the literary limelight as Australia's first published 'Aboriginal poet' and since then Aboriginal writers have used their work as a form of self-definition and to defend our rights to our identity. Many authors are inspired by the need to redress historical government definitions of Aboriginality, to reclaim pride in First Nation status, to explain the diversity of Aboriginal experience, and to demonstrate the realities and complexities of 'being Aboriginal' in the 21st century.

Aboriginal writing across genres—particularly through poetry, children's literature and memoir—highlights how the discussion of identity has increased over time since the above quote was written, and that self-representation in the public domain is not only desired but also essential for self-respect and dignity in Australian society today. Definitions of Aboriginality from outside the community—sometimes through media commentary—continue to provide the motivation for many authors to pen responses and reactions.

The concept of Aboriginality has proven at times difficult for Australians generally to grasp, and sometimes even for Aboriginal people themselves, especially those who were denied access to family, culture and community due to past government policies of enforced separation. The affects of the differing experiences of Aboriginality are, nevertheless, evident in writings by Aboriginal people, across all creative genres. Aboriginal-authored poetry, short stories, plays, songs, autobiographies, biographies, community histories and even children's books have tackled head-on the issues related to 'being Aboriginal.' In this way writing is used as a tool to educate non-Aboriginal readers in understanding Aboriginal Australia better, which in turns aids race relations between Black and white Australians.

Many authors are also 'writing Aboriginality' as a means of catharsis. The act of writing often becomes more than solely creative for many authors who use the process as a vehicle for analysing, understanding, asserting, determining and defining their own sense of identity. The process of writing also allows individuals, like Sally Morgan (*My Place*, 1988) for example, to follow their journey of discovering their Aboriginality and documenting it for their own and others' benefit.

The way in which Aboriginal people have been categorised by race in literary representations and criticism by white authors, is no different to the way in which they have been defined by race in sports, history, the arts and politics. Although many individuals would like to be regarded and

critiqued for their writing, rather than their race, ‘Aboriginal author’ is also a cementing of identity for the writer, and a categorisation that doesn’t offend. Rather, most writers are proud of their identity as well as their ability to write in an overwhelmingly white world, because, in the words of the late Bundjalung writer, Ruby Langford Ginibi, ‘we are reclaiming our history, our heritage, and our identity, and that’s very important to our cause’ (19).

Alexis Wright, author of the Miles Franklin Award-winning novel *Carpentaria* (2006), and *Plains of Promise* (1997) and *The Swan Book* (2013), is a Waanji woman from the Gulf of Carpentaria. Alexis is adamant that she doesn’t want her Aboriginality separated from her writing because it is, she says, ‘what’s producing the writing. Without it I wouldn’t be able to write the way I do’ (78).

Wiradjuri writer Kerry Reed-Gilbert, whose poetry in *Black Woman, Black Life* is heavily influenced by her identity, is clear about the role of Aboriginality in writing: ‘Aboriginal identity is who we are as writers, as people. We live our lives as the Indigenous people of this land, we write as Indigenous people of this land’ (41).

Yuggera and Dulingbara linguist Jeanie Bell is the author of the biography *Talking About Celia: Community and Family Memories of Celia Smith*, and she agrees that Aboriginal identity plays a fundamental role in her ability to write and in the motivations of Aboriginal authors. Jeanie writes:

It [identity] gives you an opportunity to write, to look at your own position and how you feel about yourself and where you see yourself in relation to history, and your community in terms of the bigger picture. But it also reaffirms who you are, and it’s a statement to the world of, ‘This is who I am and I’m proud of who I am.’ (41)

The importance of self-identifying, and saying ‘This is who I am and this is how I want to be identified,’ is made clear in Jackie Huggins’s essay ‘Experience and Identity Writing History’:

I always say that I’m Aboriginal first . . . Then I’m a mother, daughter, sister, aunt, cousin, woman, historian etc . . . Certainly I am very proud to say that I am an Aboriginal historian because of what I did in terms of identity and reclamation. I’m an Aboriginal historian rather than an historian who happens to be Aboriginal. There’s a huge difference. There are no other identities more important to me. (120)

In her essay ‘Being “One of those” Makes Me Write,’ Wiradjuri poet Elizabeth E. Hodgson opens with an extract from a conversation with a friend who ignorantly suggests Hodgson can pass for white because she is light-skinned, asserting that she is indeed ‘white anyway.’ Hodgson responds with a critical distinction: ‘I am fair skinned, you’re white!’ (133). She says that as a child she wasn’t aware that her father’s skin was black and hers was fair. As a child growing up in the 1960s, she had been told that ‘the only true Aboriginal was the very black skinned, “full-blood,” “traditional living,” outback Aborigine.’ As a fair skinned Aborigine she didn’t figure on the ‘Aboriginal radar,’ even though she had heard of the term ‘half-caste’ when she had been in a Children’s Home. Hodgson acknowledges the complexities of her mixed ancestry:

Being a fair-skinned Indigenous woman/writer, I tend to straddle more than one world and for me maintaining a balance is crucial, as I want my words to reach both Black and white Australia . . . Being ‘one of those’ gives me the freedom and confidence to write. To write my history, my life story. (137)

Identity in Poetry

With over 900 poetic works by Aboriginal writers on the subject of ‘identity’ (as indexed in BlackWords), community discourse around self-representation and definition is strong. The writings, as demonstrated below, often challenge outsider concepts and prescriptions of Aboriginality, while offering alternative ways of considering diverse experiences and explanations of identity.

For example, the notion of ‘mixed blood’ and ‘watering down’ of Aboriginality is not an accepted concept for many Aboriginal people. In ‘Koori Pride,’ B. Smith writes of the so-called ‘watering down’ of Aboriginality through interracial marriage between Black and white, and questions the caste system thereafter imposed on Aboriginal people by government policy:

When two half-castes bred and bore a son or daughter,
The Koori connection was cut to a quarter.
Why a quarter Koori, isn’t it equally right
To say the quarter could be white? (76)

Michelle Carr’s poem ‘Proud Coloured’ demonstrates how she remains psychologically unaffected by terminology or other people’s issues with biculturalism:

I have no problem with who I am—
Not black, not white—a quarter cast as they say . . .
I cannot choose a side, I will not be made to, my life is not a game . . .
Not black, not white, that’s why I write—I am not ashamed. (14)

The continuing growth of the Aboriginal population nationally shows the practical failure of assimilation and protection policies of the past, the purpose of which was to break down and ‘breed out’ Aboriginal society. The psychological scars left on those who were victims of such policies remains though, and the issues are articulated in poems like Lorraine McGee-Sippel’s ‘Belonging Where?’:

Stolen, separated
Leaving mothers
Behind . . .
As a child—wondering
What did I do wrong?
Who the hell am I?
A feeling so strong.
The taunts of a childhood
All a whirl.
‘Half caste—half-caste’
a little black girl. (41)

Romaine Moreton is from the Goernpil people of Stradbroke Island. Her poem ‘Part the Bastard’ expresses the human consequences of the assimilation policy, and its continuing impacts on the Aboriginal psyche:

Part
Black
part
White
part
Truths
part
Lies
part the Bastard
part the Damned
part the Chosen
part the Saved
part the Savage
part the Civil
part the Whiteman
part the Black
part the seas and let them drown
Yes,
these are
 part my brother
 part my sister
All
My
People. (42)

Similarly, Jimmy Chi writes in the poem ‘Acceptable Coon’ of the complex issues of being socialised through white education and social systems, only to be criticised by the Aboriginal community and still looked down upon by whites:

My world was so rosy until I saw
that nothing that I did could open the door.
‘Cos when you reach somewhere no matter how soon
you’re nothing more than an acceptable coon . . .
Look down on the bucks look down on the gins
The old roads are evil and pathways to sin.
So learn all the white things they teach you in school
And you’ll all become acceptable coons. (131)

Even in the 21st century, many non-Indigenous Australians feel that they have the right to determine, frame, and comment on Aboriginal identity. In response, it is pride in identity that inspires and often compels Aboriginal authors to respond to ‘outsider definitions,’ and to write the wrongs in how non-Indigenous Australia perceives us. Because of this, explaining Aboriginality and all the complexities that make up Aboriginal identity is a common theme in

writing across genres, but especially in poetry. The late Jack Davis, prolific playwright and poet, articulated his views in the poem ‘Aboriginal Man’:

I am not sad or bereft,
I am still of this land,
And my people have left
Wonder and word
To praise and gird
The heart of it.
Yes, I am Aboriginal man
And I will always be
For all eternity
An undisputed part of it. (26)

One of the complexities of contemporary Aboriginality is the mental state of what many call ‘straddling two worlds’—that of the white and Black world in Australia. For some this ‘straddling’ is not an issue, but for others it raises the issue of belonging, highlighted in McGee-Sippel’s ‘Belonging Where?’:

Too black to be white.
Too white to be black.
Caught in the middle
Belonging no where. (42)

Yamitji poet Charmaine Papertalk-Green questions her sense of belonging in the poem ‘Identity’:

Where do I belong?
Do I float
Between two worlds? . . .

I know where I belong
But society
Is trying to place me
Who Am I? (21)

The struggle to belong comfortably in one’s skin comes through in Michelle Buchanan’s poem, also titled ‘Identity.’ Michelle is a Kooma woman who grew up in the south-western Brisbane suburb of Inala. She writes:

My spirituality feels like it has been
In a tug of War . . .
The Murri blood flows through my veins
My Murri heart feels torn inside
My spirituality needs to confide
And reject the things that make me hide
And all I do is be myself
And stop pretending to be someone else. (61)

Finally, it must be understood that whitefellas have largely constructed ‘Aboriginal identity’ in a way that makes it easily understood to themselves. Many whitefellas may not be sure of who *they* are, but they are sure that they are not like their ‘other.’ My own story, ‘Making Aborigines,’ inspired by fellow Wiradjuri teacher, Professor Michael McDaniel, reads like this:

I was born and raised
a young girl

I went to school
I played with dolls
I ate McDonald’s
I spoke English
I watched Romper Room
and Sesame Street

I fell I bled
I hurt I cried
Happy I laughed

One day
you called me abo,
boong and coon
You spat at me
You said I was dirty

You made me
your idea of what
you thought
I was.

What you thought
an Aboriginal was.

Why couldn’t you just let me be?
I was just another little girl
Skipping home from school

Instead, you created me,
You politicised me
You made me an activist
You made me have to be vocal
You gave me the chip you now criticise me for

My parents didn’t create me
I didn’t create me

You created me

You made me different
Then asked me why I was so
You said I was an Abo
But I could only be half-caste
To you I can't even be a whole person

I am not half a daughter
Or half a woman
And I am not half an Aborigine

Are you half-caste Australian?
Do you call yourself 'part-Australian' because of your mixed heritage?
No, you are wholly your identity.

Well guess what?
So am I!

I am whole
I am complete

But if you are struggling
with who you are
then deal with it
But don't project
your own identity issues
onto me' (Heiss 20)

Another personal response but reflecting community impact is the effect of the media on Aboriginal self-esteem and pride in identity, and the need for unity within the community. These are the subjects of Noongar poet and storyteller Alf Taylor's poem 'We blackfellas.'

We blackfellas are trying
to stand tall.
Our enemy the media
are always making us fall.

We have been stripped
of our pride.
The media have got a hide.
We blackfellas must stand
as one
as the fight still goes on. (129)

Children's Literature and Identity

Over 60 Aboriginal authored children's works consider the subject of identity. They range from Jack Davis's play *Honey Spot* (1987) to Boori Pryor and Meme McDonald's children's novel *Flytrap* (2002) amongst short stories, graphic novels and picture books. Each work provides a unique way to simplify a sometimes complex issue for young readers and frequently works to instil pride in identity in young Aboriginal readers.

As Australian educators in primary and secondary schools work to embed Indigenous perspectives into the classroom, children's literature provides the most accessible resource to achieve that goal. Indigenous perspectives are those opinions, world views, knowledges and experiences which writers are sharing on the page, and those perspectives specifically on identity add much to the learning experience about Indigenous Australia today. They break down common stereotypes about where people live, how they dress, and what they do for work and play. This greater understanding of Aboriginal identity today will improve race relations in future generations of Australians generally.

The picture book, *Tell Me Why* (2004), is Sarah Jackson's story, but it is also the story of many Aboriginal people dealing with preconceived ideas of Aboriginality, and the use of skin colour to determine identity. At seven years of age, Sarah is simply a fair-skinned Aboriginal girl who goes to school, has dolls and plays chasey, just like other girls her age. White-skinned with freckles, one day she realises her friends and family are different shades of colour and she starts asking questions like: 'Nana, how come I am Aboriginal like you, but you have brown skin and I have white skin?' (Templeton & Jackson 12).

Sarah then spends time with her Nana Mac and Grandma Doris, and by asking questions and listening to her elders she resolves the issue of marrying fair skin with Aboriginal identity. This was an issue for Sarah, one presumes, because so many non-Indigenous Australians do not understand the historical constructions of Aboriginality. Aboriginality is based not on skin colour, but on connection to Country, kin, spirituality, family history, and life experience.

Tell Me Why is a valuable tool for teachers to use in the classroom because it is an upbeat, positive story about Aboriginal identity in the 21st century. The questions kids like Sarah ask, the same questions often asked of Aboriginal children in the playground, raise issues that we deal with on a daily basis, such as: 'How can you be an Aborigine if you've got fair skin, blonde hair, blue eyes, and live in the city?'. *Tell Me Why* takes an honest look at such questions through a child's eyes and the answers help young people, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, to understand how people like Sarah are Aboriginal and proud to be so.

The book provides a gentle and accessible way to learn about the history of life prior to invasion and the impact of the policy of protection on those of the stolen generations and their families—including young Sarah. *Tell Me Why*, written with the assistance of Sarah's mother Robyn Templeton who also illustrated the text, will encourage students to research their own backgrounds and heritage, and help to build a stronger social awareness of celebrating cultural diversity in the Australian community.

Also focusing on skin colour, Renee Fogorty's *Fair Skin Black Fella* speaks of her own life experiences as a 'fair skinned' Koori in Sydney, although she is from the Wiradjuri people of the Lachlan River in New South Wales, and her young character Mary lives on a dusty red cattle station. There is a peppering of Wiradjuri language words throughout the book, and while the images are intriguing they don't necessarily reflect a contemporary lifestyle—even on the land.

Regardless of location, the experience of racism—white on Black, Black on Black, and Black on white—is universal. In this story, young Mary is made to suffer because she looks different to the other Aboriginal kids. While many will relate to Mary's negative experiences, there is also a positive ending and a helpful message; just as kids can learn the nasty aspects of life from adults—kids aren't born racist they learn it—so too, they can learn from the wisdom of their elders. When they are taught that identity comes from family, community, Country, culture and spirituality, then pigment becomes irrelevant. The central concept and message of *Fair Skin Black Fella* is that Aboriginal identity is not about the colour of your skin. As the character, Old Ned, says: 'We all brothers and sisters in this life, no matter what colour we are' (Fogorty 21).

A different perspective on contemporary identity appears in Boori Monty Pryor's *Shake A Leg* (2010). Illustrated by Jan Ormerod, the work was awarded the 2011 Prime Minister's Literary Award for Children's Fiction. Inspired by members of his own family from the Birri Gubba and Kungganji nations of North Queensland, Pryor has woven his ancient traditions, culture and stories into a modern day yarn. Through the story of three young fellas hunting for pizza, the reader gets an insight into contemporary Aboriginal life. It depicts a place where Blackfellas speak Italian, where Murris are chefs, nurses, and sound engineers, where crocodile-shaped pizza is washed down with milkshakes, and where the busy street acts as the bora ring today. It also shows that Aboriginal people can live in cities and still respect and value thousands of years of culture. This a story that breaks down stereotypes of what it means to be Aboriginal today.

Not all books are award-winning or come out of established publishing houses. *Old Way New Way* was written and produced by Weetangera Primary School in Canberra, and looks at the demonstration of identity through traditional art and culture alongside modern day mediums and ways of doing things. For example, the kids use clapsticks old way and play musical instruments like the sax, new way. They like rock art old way and digital art new way.

The book was designed by the students as a 'home reader' style of book, as well as a celebration of a journey the school's Yirri Dancers have been on.

The involvement of young people in the production of *Old Way New Way* is akin to my own experience of developing two novels with students from La Perouse Public School in Sydney.

Between 2004 and 2011, I wrote two children's novels featuring the main characters of Yirra, a young girl, and her dog, Demon. The book project was a chance to do something for, and with, the local community near where I have spent most of my life: the coastal suburb of La Perouse.

In deciding to write books on the local area my key goal was to show the similarities that young local Koori kids have with other young Australians, and to de-marginalise them. I wanted also to show that these kids were strong in their own Aboriginal identities.

In 2004 I began working with the students from Years 3 to 6 at La Perouse Public School with the assistance of the New South Wales Premier's Indigenous Arts Fellowship. Our first book began as a picture book but quickly became a short novel titled *Yirra and Her Deadly Dog, Demon*. It was published by ABC Books in 2007.

The students came up with the content: the characters, the settings, the voices, and details of Yirra's lifestyle and personality. I wove their ideas into a story that resembled something similar to their own lives but perhaps with a little more dog-related drama. The story is about ten-year-old Yirra—named after the Wiradjuri word for 'sun'—who lives on the Aboriginal mission, goes to La Perouse Public School, likes the beach, yoghurt, her iPod, Kasey Chambers, a boy at school called Matt and her Siberian husky, Demon. But Yirra's mum is sick of vacuuming up fur balls, the neighbours are fed up with having their undies nicked from the clothesline, and her stepdad just wants his slippers back. If Yirra doesn't find a dog trainer soon, she'll have to give her beloved Demon to a new family—one who likes dogs who run and dig a lot!

The sequel, *Demon Guards the School Yard*, was produced with a different set of students at the same school and was released through Oxford University Press in March 2011. This book allowed us, as co-authors, to talk about local native plants and the history of the Bondi Beach area. The characters also discuss identity based on skin colour. The following scene unfolds on Bondi Beach:

'So how many Kooris live in Bondi then? You don't see many round here,' John says innocently.

'What's that supposed to mean?' Judy attacks him.

'What?' John's a bit confused.

'You don't see many Kooris, but what're you looking for? Some Kooris aren't that dark you know,' Judy says. Mary puts her arm over Judy's shoulder. In the past, Judy's been given a hard time about being a fair-skinned Koori.

'I just meant that I know there's an Aboriginal mission at La Pa so there's lots of Kooris around all the time, but I didn't know if there's one here. Am I saying the wrong thing?' John's from England—and he's still learning about Australia.

'Did you know there are more Blackfellas living in Sydney than in the whole of the Northern Territory and that one third of Aboriginal people live in big cities?' Judy is really worked up.

'How do you even know this stuff?' Matt, like everyone else, is surprised at what Judy knows.

'Cos that's what you do when you're a Blackfella in the city. You learn about where your mob have come from and why they are here and I want people to know that we didn't die out just cos there's cement and houses and other stuff in the city. My mob's from down south, but this is my home too,' Judy continues. Mary rubs her

shoulders, trying to calm her down.

‘I didn’t mean to upset you Judy, really,’ John says, embarrassed.

The Yirra books give young Australian readers a contemporary view of an urban Aboriginal world in coastal Sydney. Both books are now in school libraries nationally, helping Australian students understand the diversity of Aboriginal identity and how it is possible to appreciate a relationship to land even with an environment of tar, concrete and skyscrapers.

Autobiography and Identity

There are more than 150 autobiographies, biographies, life stories and memoirs written specifically (or co-incidentally) in ways that help readers understand the historical definitions and contemporary realities of ‘being Aboriginal.’ In my memoir *Am I Black Enough for You?* (2012) I wrote of my own experiences here and abroad, to demonstrate how identity impacts on, and plays out through, everyday activity and life—whether that’s in a classroom, writing a novel about Aboriginal women, or just hanging out with my friends and family.

The aim of the memoir was to make it clear that my ‘Aboriginal’ identity is not simply about race. My identity is about my family history, the history of Aboriginal Australia generally, and about the way *I* have been shaped as a human being since birth. My immediate and extended family and my Aboriginal peers are academics or business people, others work in community organisations, they write policy, chair boards, they’re sportspeople, playwrights, media professionals, school teachers and youth workers. All are active in their own way, improving the lives of those in their own world, a world we share. And it should come as no surprise to *anyone*, that they come in all different shapes and shades. Aboriginal identity is *not* about blood quantum or the colour of one’s skin, or whether or not we work in an Aboriginal organisation, or wear red, black and yellow beads or land rights t-shirts.

Another memoir that considers identity—briefly but succinctly—is that of AFL legend and Aboriginal sporting role model, Michael O’Loughlin. His story *Micky O: Determination. Hard Work. And a Little Bit of Magic* (written with Jim Main) describes the pride he feels in his Indigenous heritage and how being strong in identity means he has never let racists upset him. O’Loughlin writes that he was rarely subjected to racist abuse as a player but as a child he learned about the realities of being Indigenous and how to deal with racism:

I was often called an ‘abo,’ but I learned to live with this, even if I could never accept it. More hurtful names, like ‘blackie’ or ‘darkie’ were a different matter. Although I bristled, Mum had taught me the best way to deal with such comments was to prove myself a better person and, on the football field, a better player. (22)

The average white Australian has no real idea of what Indigenous communities went through, and still doesn’t. Imagine needing permission to travel, to seek employment elsewhere, etc! We were regarded as second-class citizens, had no voting rights and often were shunned and relegated to the poorer and unwanted parts of towns and cities. (31)

Michael credits his Mum for teaching him to ignore racist taunts and he never as a youth accepted invitations for a brawl behind the sheds. As a young man, he was proud of his Aboriginal heroes like Graham ‘Polly’ Farmer, Nicky Winmar and Syd Jackson, brilliant players who ignored ‘the verbal barbs of narrow-minded racists.’

While Michael is proud of his Aboriginal identity, the reader also learns of his varied heritages, including his ‘strong element of Hebrew and dash of Irish’:

It might sound like a strange mixture, but I am an Indigenous Australian, just like most Aborigines who have Caucasian or other elements in the DNA. To explain this, I use an analogy about coffee. A cup of coffee can be black, white or somewhere in between. But no matter whether you add a tiny dash of milk or whole dollop of cream, it is still coffee. I am black coffee with just a drop or two of milk. (O’Loughlin 8)

Pride in our identity forces Aboriginal writers to challenge the imposed, historical, government-designed definitions and caste systems given to Aboriginal Australia since first contact. Self-identification and diversity of lived experiences are some of the elements discussed by Aboriginal writers trying to define their own and communal identities.

Poetry, picture books for children, YA novels and personal memories are now being used to ensure that more Aboriginal people have their say about who they are as First Nations writers within Australia’s literary landscape. This pool of writing will inevitably grow as more authors come through initiatives such as the State Library of Queensland’s black&write! program targeting—intentionally or otherwise—identity and what it means to be Aboriginal in the 21st century. These diverse voices and views from within the Aboriginal community will continue to add depth and value to the larger pool of Aboriginal literature and to the wider Australian literary landscape.

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