

# The BlackWords Symposium: The Past, Present, and Future of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Literature

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*We write to create, to survive, and to revolutionise; we write to haunt and we ache because we refuse to leave the past alone. We aim to disrupt the State's founding order of things, to disrupt 'patriarchal white sovereignty' (Moreton-Robinson), white heteronormativity, and the colonial-continuum of history. (Harkin, herein)*

The BlackWords Symposium, held in October 2012, celebrated the fifth anniversary of the establishment of BlackWords, the AustLit-supported project recording information about, and research into, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers and storytellers. The symposium showcased the exciting state of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander creative writing and storytelling across all forms, contemporary scholarship on Indigenous writing, alongside programs such as the State Library of Queensland's black&write! project, which supports writers' fellowships, editing mentorships, and a trainee editor program for professional development for Indigenous editors. But really, the event was a celebration of the sort of thinking, the sort of resistance, and the re-writing of history that is evident in the epigraph to this introduction.

The speakers, who included Melissa Lucashenko, Wesley Enoch, Sandra Phillips, Ellen Van Neerven, Jeanine Leane, and Boori Pryor alongside the authors of the works in this collection, explored a diverse range of topics that opened dialogue and demonstrated the rich and continuing tradition of storytelling in Indigenous cultural practices. In sessions titled 'Writing Us,' 'Writing the Record,' 'Writing and Editing,' and 'Writing across Land and Country,' the speakers addressed representations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in non-Indigenous literature; the diversity of styles and genres in contemporary Indigenous publishing which is re-writing the accepted history of Australia through fiction, poetry and life-writing; and explored collaborative processes within academic frameworks. The symposium ended with an exciting performance by local hip hop artist, Kayemtee (aka Kaylah Tyson) and her band, who rapped about life in contemporary Brisbane and Australia. With support from the University of Queensland's School of English, Media Studies and Art History, AustLit, the UQ Art Museum, and the Faculty of Arts, the Symposium was held at the UQ Art Museum. It was framed by the exhibition *Desert Country*, curated by Nici Cumpston, an historical survey of the internationally acclaimed desert painting movement, with works from the Northern Territory, South Australia and Western Australia providing a colour-filled backdrop written large with stories of country.

In her powerful keynote address, 'Writing as Decolonising Practice—we are the ones we've been waiting for,' Bundjalung-Yugambah writer Melissa Lucashenko spoke with great insight and passion about the important role of writers in maintaining and representing the sovereignty of the Aboriginal imagination. 'We writers must weave blankets of stories to

warm us from the coldness of Dugai (non-Aboriginal people's) hearts; we have to weave ropes of stories that we can throw to each other across the canyons of Dugai ignorance and greed and hatred, so that we can find and guide each other across these chasms' (Lucashenko, Abstract). Lucashenko's central thesis, that Aboriginal literature is flourishing and can celebrate its aesthetic and political autonomy, marked a special moment in the historical evolution of literatures of dispossession, suffering, healing and cultural renaissance. Lucashenko's words set the tone for a day of truly inspiring congress between Aboriginal writers, scholars and editors, all exemplary contributors to the independence, growth and vitality of contemporary Aboriginal literary cultures.

Lucashenko was joined by Kuku-Yalanji, Darumbal, Waanyi poet, Steven Oliver, who gave a poetic response to a major theme in Lucashenko's address: how some in white society frame 'legitimate' Indigenous identity through skin colour and looks. He performed, to great applause, his poem 'Real' which begins:

Half caste, he said to me  
That I wasn't one of those  
real Aborigines  
Said he spent some time  
with them in the outback  
Then he looked at my skin  
said I wasn't even black  
I was more of a brown he  
went on to explain  
His voice the whole time  
with a certain disdain  
He stared a bit longer then  
Said I suppose  
When I look at your face I  
See a bit of the nose  
Oh, I said, a bit taken aback  
To this obvious expert on  
Everything black  
My head in a muddle just  
Trying to see  
Why this man had a need to  
be questioning me  
He stared a bit longer so I  
said to the guy  
Are you waiting for me  
to try and justify  
The complexities of identity  
When it comes to Aboriginality?

Lucashenko identified 'reverence for country, efforts to restore stolen language and precious traditions, adherence to Aboriginal social values' as the real attributes of contemporary Aboriginality (Lucashenko).

Aboriginal theatre and performance have always been central to the values and success of contemporary Aboriginal literary cultures. Following Lucashenko's opening address, leading

playwright and dramaturge Wesley Enoch gave a candid and compelling talk about his then-recent appointment as Director of the Queensland Theatre Company, and the place of theatre in contemporary Indigenous storytelling practices. As Director of a nationally prominent theatre company, Enoch spoke about the great opportunities to communicate with the wider community and take Indigenous stories, and ways of telling stories, to the world. At work on the play *Black Diggers*, which is being performed in September and October 2014, Enoch spoke eloquently about the experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander soldiers in Australia's encounters with war, noting the significance of being an Aboriginal man in the Director's role. He made some powerful observations on the possibilities for re-visioning the classics in ways that might otherwise not be imaginable. For instance, Enoch explained how he had begun work on the June 2013 adaptation of *Mother Courage and her Children*, a retelling of Bertholt Brecht's play set in the conflict zone of an Australian mining region. A stellar cast included Ursula Yovich as Mother Courage, with Luke Carroll and Eliah Watego as Elif and Swiss Cheese.

Nukunu novelist Jared Thomas followed Enoch with a captivating and at times moving talk about the necessity of being aware of, and adhering to, appropriate cultural protocols when planning to use personal experiences or cultural knowledge in creative work. Included here, Thomas's paper affords non-Indigenous readers and scholars a unique insight into the importance of cultural protocols to Indigenous creative expression. Thomas's recently released young adult novel, *Calypso Summer* (Magabala, 2014), breaks new ground as a case study for demonstrating how negotiations about the use of cultural knowledge are managed. Long-term *BlackWords* collaborator and prominent Wiradjuri author Anita Heiss then gave an inspiring appraisal of the pivotal role that the politics of identity plays across all forms of Aboriginal literature, from the earliest poetry to the most recent children's literature and autobiography.

In a thoroughly delightful storytelling exchange with Anita Heiss, Birri-Gubba Juru man, Boori Monty Pryor, the 2012/13 Children's Literature Laureate (with Alison Lester), shared his life of storytelling and the impact and value of school visits for breaking down cultural and political stereotypes. Pryor is widely celebrated for his culturally vibrant and entertaining school visits, in which he is always a hit with both children and adults alike. He spoke in fine fettle about the way his children's book *Shake a Leg* (2010), gives children insights into cultural knowledge and lasting traditions through an encounter in a pizza parlour with an Italian-speaking Aboriginal chef. That session demonstrated that we are never too old for a story as the audience sat with rapt attention listening to this master storyteller.

Through a scholarly but deeply personal analysis of the impact of the State on her family as represented in archives and archival practices, Natalie Harkin took a passionately deconstructionist approach to re-mapping the archives through art and poetic-prose. Based at Flinders University, Harkin, who has Narungga heritage, is making an increasingly notable contribution to Aboriginal writing and thinking. Her paper, included here, presents a counter-reading of the colonial archival, filial and cultural memory, and modes and ontologies of representation and narration. Using ideas of haunting through 'memory in the blood,' Harkin pushes against the racist assumptions about her grandmother's life embedded in the intense surveillance evident in the files. Harkin powerfully explores the ways that the archive is 'both sacred space and colonial object' to Indigenous peoples as they 're-memory' their histories. She sees

[l]iterary practice and the arts offer[ing] a space to interrogate the racialised-archive and its role in forming national consciousness and identity. This includes methods to creatively address issues of knowledge production as it intersects with colonialism; new ways to critically unsettle linear modes of history-making which claim the ability to recover the past objectively, wholly and completely, via the archive. (Harkin, herein)

Harkin's thesis sheds further light on the cultural and political significance of the BlackWords database. As the central national archive of information on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander literature and its various engagements with story, scholarship, and knowledge production, alongside detailed biographical and historical information, BlackWords aims to be a demonstration of how both cultural diversity and Indigenous ownership can be made central to the archive's *raison d'être*.

Bruce Pascoe's inspiring talk foreshadowed the publication of his latest book, *Dark Emu Black Seeds: Agriculture or Accident?* (2014) with a fascinating insight into historical and archaeological evidence for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander agriculture, community sedentism, and food production industries, which has been largely ignored, or actively disparaged, in accounts of Australian history and encounter experiences. He pleaded with the young people of Australia especially to look beyond histories written by partisan historians to the landscape itself and to the accounts of explorers, early settlers and colonial writers such as Mary Gilmore. These writers recorded encounters with Indigenous people living within incredibly well-organised social and cultural systems of land management. *Dark Emu* is a powerful, evidence-based study of Aboriginal agriculture and industry that supports Bill Gammage's *The Greatest Estate on Earth: How Aborigines Made Australia* (2011) which also retells Australian history by returning to early records and remnant topographical features that retain evidence of the complex systems of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander agriculture and industry.

This collection opens with Pascoe's 'Peekaboo Australia,' a manifesto of sorts that sets the tone for the energy of the essays that follow. Every essay, whether overtly or in its preoccupations, engages with Pascoe's call to recognise our true history, to think again about place and an ethos of habitation, to imagine changes in how we all live on, use, and care for the land. 'Peekaboo Australia' is emblematic of the ways that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers are doing precisely that. At the symposium, Pascoe's decolonising geophilosophies were followed by a remarkable presentation which again demonstrated the sovereign space of Aboriginal literature and thought. Simone Ulalka Tur and Faye Rosas Blanch, also at Flinders, gave a superb reading of their outstanding collaborative paper (with Gus Worby) 'Writing forward, Writing Back, Writing Black—working process and work-in-progress.' Echoing Harkin's work, Worby, Tur and Blanch undertake a spirited deconstruction and reconstruction of colonial archiving, family and cultural memory, and ontologies of literary representation and performance, drawing on 'song-cycle and biography in Ngitji Ngitji Mona Tur's *Cicada Dreaming* (2010), rap in Nunga space and the poetics of Faye Rosas Blanch's search for family and a place called Pinnacle Pocket, among memories and fragments of the "official record." Written as a collaborative text combining scholarly, performative and pedagogic elements, their work articulates and substantiates a discourse of connection, belonging and process. Interestingly, Worby, Tur and Blanch join Harkin in citing Jacques Derrida, and Thomas in citing Linda Tuhiwai Smith, posing a compelling triangulation between Derrida's *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* and *Writing and Difference* (1995), and Tuhiwai Smith's *Decolonising Methodologies* (1999). These complex

iterations of literary speculation and reimagining are perhaps ultimately resolved by Harkin's quote from Tracey Bunda's 'The Sovereign Aboriginal Woman' (2007), that 'writing by Indigenous people is a sovereign act.' It is through this lens, among others, that J. Linda McBride-Yuke's 'Journeys of a Lifetime' and Irene Howe's 'The Uniqueness of the BlackWords Resource: Memoir of an Indexer' can be appreciated as testimony to the significance of Aboriginal storytelling, writing, publishing, and editing to the maintenance and advancement of Aboriginal cultures. These creative memoirs provide insights into the personal impact that work which connects with one's own cultural heritage and family background can have. In Howe's experience, that work has been of a revelatory nature as well, with her indexing work for BlackWords leading to discovering some 'hidden stories' in her family's past.

### **The BlackWords Database**

The BlackWords Symposium was a great success for the Aboriginal literary community and its ongoing conversations, considerations and collaborations. Leading Aboriginal writers and thinkers came together to tell stories of lives lived both at the margins and at the centre of Australian literature, bearing witness to the creative ways their work has changed their own and others' worlds. The Symposium and a feature article in the *Koori Mail* (31 October 2012) drew attention to the remarkable achievement of the BlackWords project since it began in 2007. This collection reminds us of the event and provides an opportunity to reflect on what BlackWords can tell us about the rise and rise of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander literature over the past half a century.

The growth and success of BlackWords is a demonstration of a collaborative and relational literary economy from which a significant cultural story can emerge. Established as a research project under the auspices of AustLit in 2007, BlackWords had, as its foundation requirement, the aim to extend and expand AustLit's coverage of Australian literary culture in order to take proper account of the rich Indigenous storytelling history. An initial collaboration between AustLit at UQ and Flinders University's Yunggorendi First Nations Centre has allowed the building of a network of researchers at AustLit's partner universities. Employing Indigenous researchers and coordinators at collaborating universities around Australia and working with the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) in Canberra, BlackWords has grown from a modest beginning of 700 biographical records for writers who had publically identified as having one or more Indigenous heritage, alongside information on their published works, to a database of more than 5,400 records for people associated with storytelling in all its forms.

Since 2007, BlackWords has had, for periods of time, research staff working at the University of Queensland, Flinders University, the universities of Western Australia, Wollongong, Sydney, and at AIATSIS. Team members have included multi-award winning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers and academics. Dr Anita Heiss was the inaugural national coordinator (and returns regularly to undertake special projects), followed by Dr Jeanine Leane; researchers and indexers who have been responsible for building the rich content have included Yvette Holt, Jake Milroy, Carolyn Pitt, Elizabeth Hodgson, Cathy Craigie and Samantha Faulkner; and continuing as the primary content producer now, is one of the contributors to this issue, Irene Howe. At the University of Sydney under Peter Minter's leadership, BlackWords is undertaking research and data analysis in Indigenous Ecopoetics, providing researchers in the environmental humanities with unequalled tools in the study and interpretation of country, landscape and the environment in Aboriginal poetry. BlackWords

has enjoyed the support of many prominent Aboriginal scholars such as Dr Jackie Huggins, Uncle Samuel Watson, Dr Ernie Blackmore, Professor Tracy Bunda and others. Professor Gus Worby, former Director of Yunggoendi, was instrumental during the establishment years and has continued to be a strong supporter. After the enormous expansion of content over the first five years of BlackWords and through the endeavours of those listed above, it has now become a permanent aspect of UQ's AustLit responsibilities. BlackWords is now the most comprehensive record of Australia's Indigenous storytelling culture. It is unique on the world stage as no such project has been attempted elsewhere.

That original small dataset has grown in a number of ways. A great deal of research and data collection has identified further Indigenous writers and their works. Importantly, the scope of the project expanded beyond the boundaries ordinarily set by AustLit's data collection policies to recognise the role of storytellers who may not have published work but who are recognised by communities as custodians of story. Other scope changes included exploring publications and resources where life stories, oral histories, and cultural stories are shared. This has meant examining anthropology, linguistics, historical, and educational texts to identify and record details of works that would not usually be regarded as 'literary' in nature. We have also focused on educational texts that use stories published in English and in Australian languages and have identified and included digital initiatives such as the *Living Archive of Aboriginal Languages*, which makes accessible books in languages from around the Northern Territory through a map-based interface that most obviously ties the stories to the land. As more of these initiatives are produced, BlackWords will record details and link to them. It is worth noting that we are currently working on the development of a map interface for the display and exploration of BlackWords data on a geo-located Tindale map of Aboriginal Australia.

BlackWords now provides details about the lives and works of more than 5,400 individual Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people alongside approximately 13,400 records for individual works. The vast majority of these recorded works are published in newspapers, magazines, or anthologies. There are, however, more than 2,600 separately published or full length works indexed in BlackWords. These include novels, books of poetry and short stories, biographies and autobiographies, critical works, theses, works for film, television, and theatre, and children's literature, among many others. They tell individual and collective stories of amazing resilience and, sometimes, immense trauma; of endeavours to maintain and share cultural tradition and create spaces for alternative histories and for many more voices in Australia's cultural landscape. As these figures evince, the depth of coverage in the BlackWords database reflects how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors are increasingly recognised for their ongoing and important contributions to contemporary Australian literary production and storytelling practice across all genres and forms.

An analysis of the rich data available through BlackWords reveals the genres and literary forms where Indigenous voices have been raised and the periods during which those voices have been heard. The data exposes social and political dynamics manifesting in cultural production. The publication record of book length works of creative writing and biographical narratives between 1950 and 2014 shows that the publication opportunities for Indigenous Australians rose from a virtually non-existent base before the 1950s to today's much stronger position. (These data were recorded in August/September 2014 and, as is the nature of database information, the figures will change over time.)

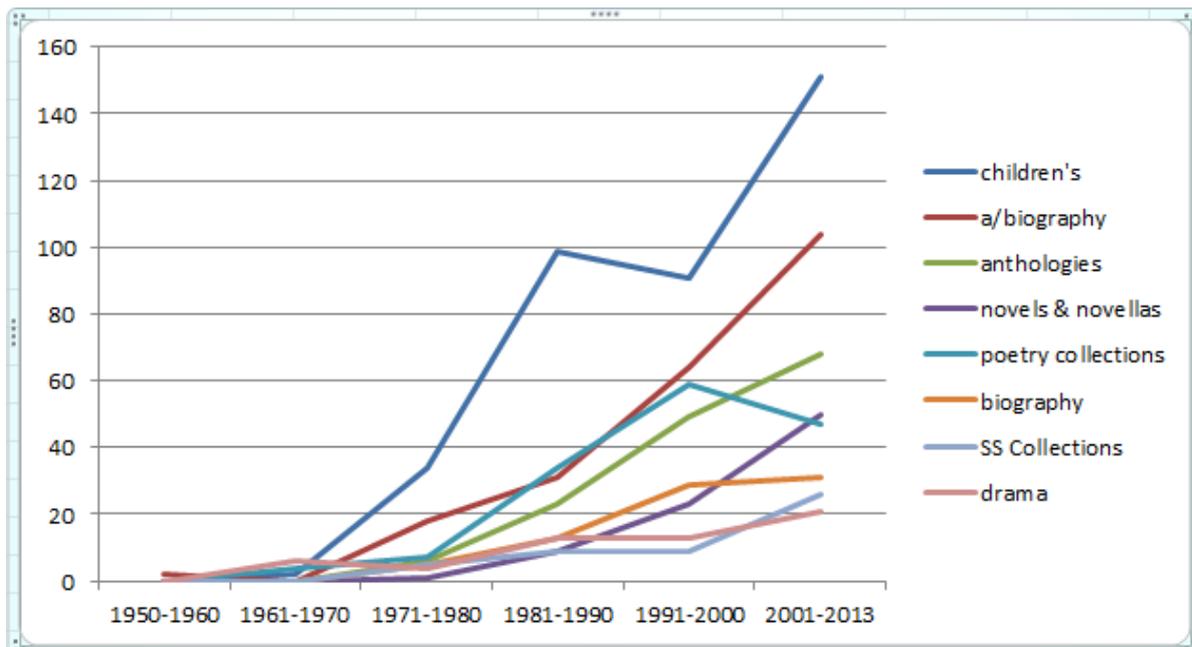


Figure 1. Publication of book-length works (1950-2014).

Only nine book-length works were published under Aboriginal authorship between the arrival of print culture in Australia (around 1800) and 1950. The impact of the 1967 referendum appears in the data as a turning point for recognition and a steady rise in publication across genres occurs from them. The first novel by an Indigenous writer was published in 1978: *Karobran: The Story of an Aboriginal Girl* by Monica Clare. BlackWords now lists 86 novels though there are more than 430 collections of short stories, some of which, like Tara June Winch’s *Swallow the Air* (2003) can be read as a novel. Many of the works by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers are autobiographical in nature, and political in subject matter and theme.

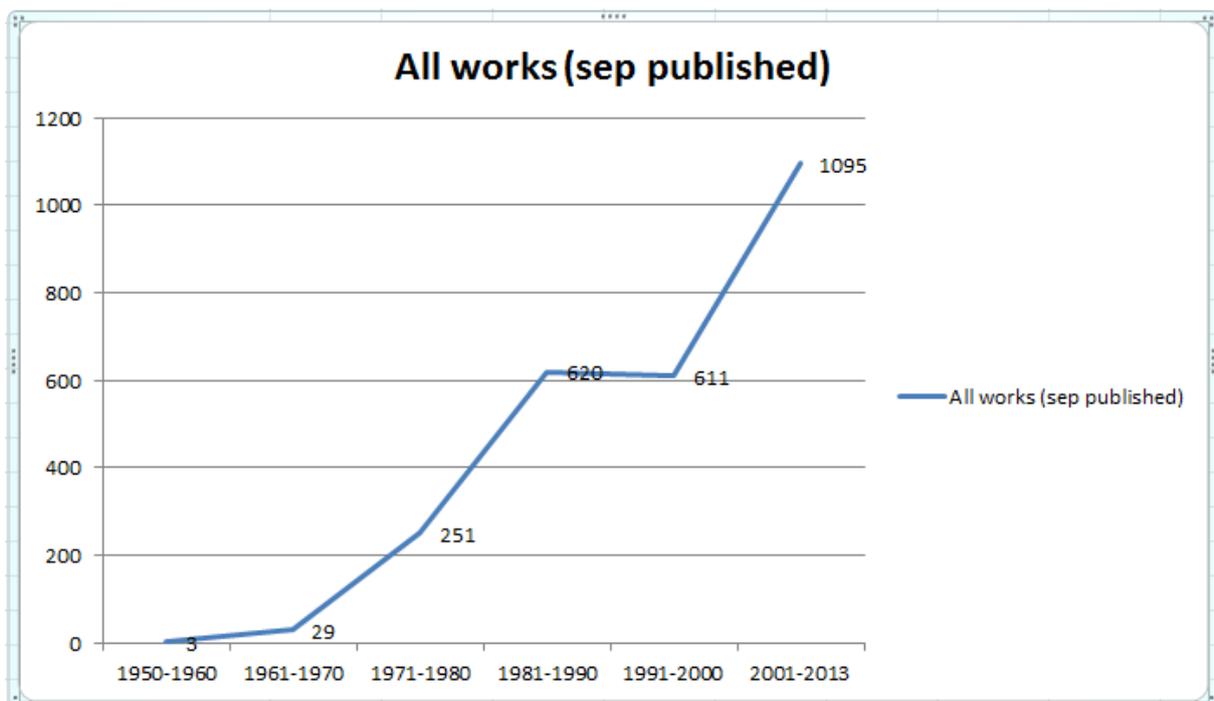
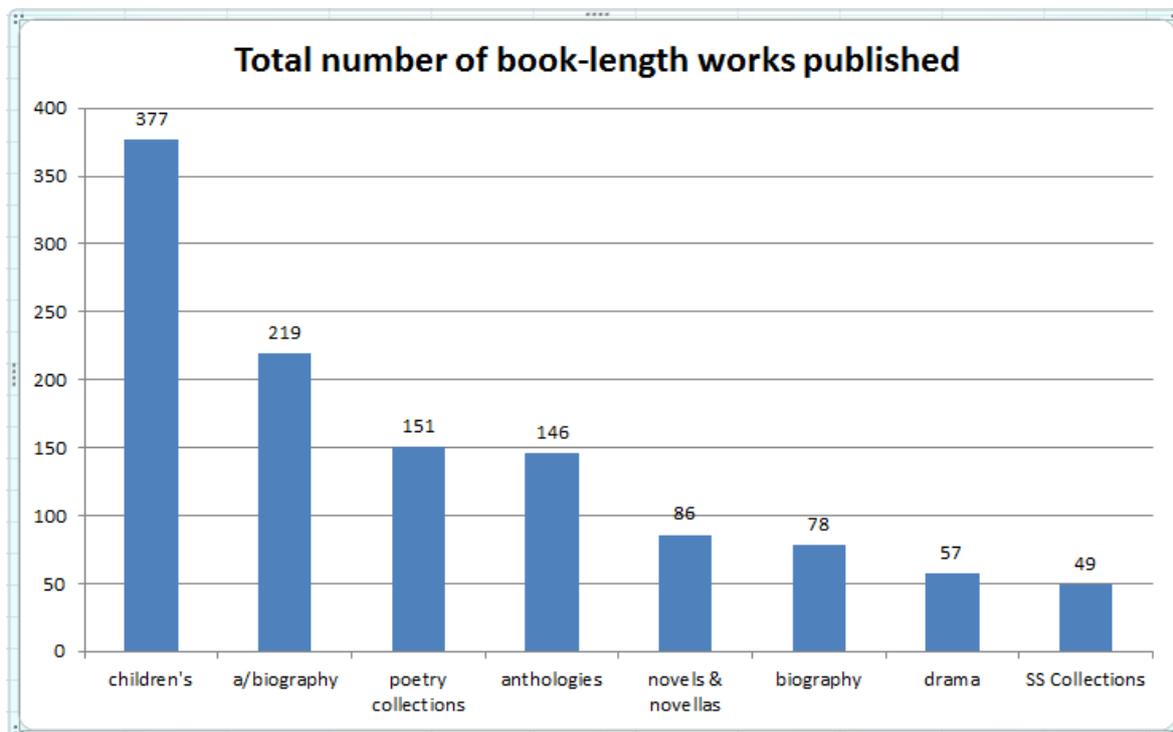


Figure 2. All book length works published (1950-2014).

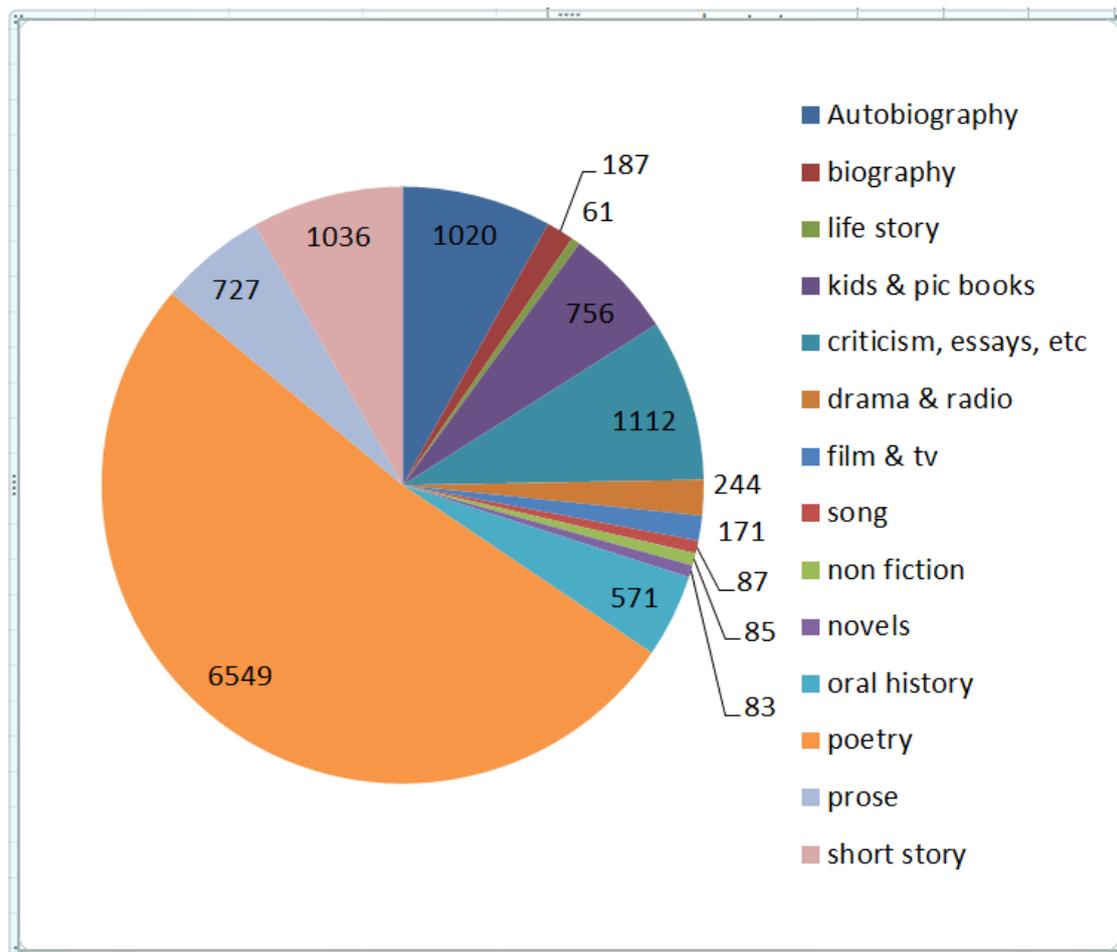
The struggle for recognition and for the right to publish has led to major successes over the past 40 years with the establishment of Indigenous publishing houses, literary awards for emerging writers, editing and writing courses, and government funded fellowships. More than 150 works of literature, life writing and storytelling have been published by Broome-based Magabala Books since it was established in 1987, starting with Glenys Ward's autobiography *Wandering Girl*. This autobiography rests alongside the more than 350 book length works of biography, autobiography and life writing recorded in BlackWords. Magabala, Aboriginal Studies Press, IAD Press, Keeaira Press, Indij Readers have all published primarily Indigenous authored works, while Black Ink Press, which started out publishing only Indigenous writing has expanded out into political and social commentary. These publishers, alongside UQP, through its BlackWriters Series and support for the David Unaipon Award, and Fremantle Press provide strong support for the publishing aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers and thinkers.



**Figure 3: Total number of book-length works (1950–2014).**

There is a sharp distinction between the numbers of book-length works and works published in anthologies, collections and periodicals. Works for children have been the most commonly published with 377 books; autobiographies at 219; poetry collections at 151, and so on.

When looking at all works published, and taking into account individual works published within other works (anthologies, periodicals, etc), the figures dramatically show the importance of poetry in the literary activities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers. There are slightly more Indigenous women publishing than men with 2,721 and 2,459 respectively, while those born in the 1930s and 1940s are represented in higher numbers than those born in later decades. The database lists Noongar and Yolngu writers and storytellers in the largest numbers with 158 and 119 respectively. The most frequently used subject term to describe the works of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers listed in BlackWords is 'Aboriginal-White Relations,' after the more common 'Aboriginal Australians' and 'Aboriginal Culture.'



**Figure 4. Total number of works listed in BlackWords.**

The data in BlackWords bears witness to a history of Australia as seen, experienced and expressed through an Indigenous world view. BlackWords is much more than simply a database or collection of data elements that record the bibliographical history of literary works. And it is much more than a dictionary of biography. These forms of knowledge production and dissemination are remediated by the database into a cultural space where communities speak and history can be retold. The power of databased information rests in the ways data can tell evidence-based stories. Researchers gather data in order to understand the world, to represent it, and, in the case of cultural material, to reflect upon what the data can say about cultural shifts and changes over time.

In our work in the digital humanities we are sometimes reminded of N. Katherine Hayles' use of the term 'symbionts' to describe what she sees as the inevitable relationship between databases and narratives. As Hayles says, '[b]ecause a database can construct relational juxtapositions but is helpless to interpret or explain them, it needs narrative to make its results meaningful' (1603). Quoting John W. Tukey's ideas of the data analyst's responsibility to learn 'what his data are willing—or even anxious—to tell him' and 'what story each dataset tells' (1606), Hayles shows the symbiotic relationship between data and the stories they contain. BlackWords is a case in point. Narratives of all forms underpin the data that is stored in the database and each datum can be used to produce a narrative that tells a story of capacity and opportunity to engage in print culture. It also speaks about relative advantage, discrimination and activism. In *Writing Never Arrives Naked: Early Aboriginal cultures of writing in Australia* (2006), Penny Van Toorn writes that 'it is historically valid and

politically neutral to say that Aboriginal book history begins with the arrival of European material culture on Australian shores' (223). The records in BlackWords reflect what has been the relatively short period that Aboriginal people have been in control of the production and dissemination of their own stories.

For instance, one of the many ways researchers can engage with BlackWords 'symbionts' and their narrative potential is through the compilation and online publication of information trails and exhibitions that draw together a number of interlinked web pages from inside and outside AustLit (<http://www.austlit.edu.au/austlit/page/6939348>). These trails allow users of the database to explore datasets representing the stories and experience of, for example, people from specific cultural backgrounds or organised around specific themes. It is possible to explore the lives and works of writers with Noongar or Bunjalung, Wiradjuri or Adnyamathanha heritage by navigating through an array of links that gather and direct attention to literary works and contextual information. Researchers can discover texts that reflect the lives and experiences of writers and their imaginations, find works for children or biographies and novels about Indigenous sporting heroes, or texts that deal with issues of identity. The trails and exhibitions, put together by BlackWords team members, are designed to support discovery and represent the diversity of experience and writing by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. They are particularly useful for teachers and students who are keen to incorporate Indigenous writing in their teaching. In this way, BlackWords also provides resources to meet the expectation within the national curriculum that Indigenous knowledge will be embedded across subject areas.

BlackWords tells stories in many ways. As a database it records so much more than bibliographical history and it is much more than a dictionary of biography, though it is these things too. BlackWords is a repository of knowledge and a place where Indigenous voices are recorded, archived and heard. What the papers in this collection and the many more delivered at the Symposium demonstrate is the vibrancy and passion of the writers, thinkers, and storytellers represented here and in the BlackWords database. They also speak to the incredible hard work, persistence and dedication that goes into making such a resource on the history of the publication and reception of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander literature available to everyone.

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