

Poetics and Politics of Indigenous Australian Verse

Danica Čerče

Faculty of Economics, University of Ljubljana
Kardeljeva ploščad 17, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia
danica.cerce@ef.uni-lj.si

ABSTRACT

The article is written in the light of the recent emergence of the field of critical whiteness studies and the new perspectives on the issues that have occupied postcolonial literary studies over the last four decades. It deals with the verse of Australian indigenous author Romaine Moreton, notable for the overt objection to the institutional and historical processes that have enabled and maintained the dominant position of those identified as white on the one hand, and the concomitant political, economic, and cultural subordination of indigenous Australians on the other. Focused on strategies and poetic devices used by the poet to engage non-indigenous readers in the experience of her writing, the article examines how the rhetoric of her critique and personal address solicit affective and political responses. In particular, it aims to show that, by challenging the public dynamics of racial separation, her poetry performs an ongoing role in destabilizing the assumptions of white privilege and entitlement.

Keywords: Australian indigenous poetry, Romaine Moreton, socio-economic and political critique, destabilizing whiteness

Introduction

As one of the traditions of the new postcolonial literatures in English, Australian indigenous literature “writes back” to the literary traditions of empire (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 1989) and their European literary subjectivity (Lipsitz, 1998). Written in English in order to be heard in a form recognizable to British authority, Australian indigenous literature challenges—in Walter Dignolo’s words—the “authority and legitimacy of Euro-centered epistemology, [...] assuming or explicitly declaring the inferiority” of all those positioned outside European categories of proficiency and identity such as Christianity, European languages, modernity, history, skin color and scientific knowledge, the so-called “colonial subalterns” (2005, p. 386, cf. Brewster 2008, p. 57). It is true that indigenous Australians were given civic rights in 1968, but the new legislation did not address all inequalities (Wimmer 2009, p. 114). According to Anne Brewster, a “postcolonial liberal Australia maintains a ‘dominance without hegemony’ in relation to its colonial subalterns, a constituency that [...] has never ‘ceded sovereignty’” (2008, p. 60). Because of the “systemic privileging of whites,” as Charles Mills defines white supremacy apparent in social, economic and political structures (2000, p. 449), indigenous communities continue to manifest their protest. In addition to various forms of activism, literature has had a vital role in giving impetus to the indigenous peoples' cause. By constituting an intercultural encounter for the white reader, it represents a site for the negotiation of inter-racial relationship.

However, as recently as the early 1970s, indigenous Australian authors were a marginalized voice in Australian literary studies. With the exception of critically-acclaimed David Unaipon and Sally Morgan in the field of narrative prose, poets

Oodgeroo Noonuccal and Lionel Fogarty, and playwrights Kevin Gilbert and Jack Davis, there were very few “celebrated Aboriginals” (Wheeler 2013, p. 1). Although the success of these authors attained in the face of colonial pressure motivated several other indigenous Australians to share their thoughts and feelings, it was not until the Commonwealth Bicentenary celebrations in 1988 that the wider Australian public showed interest in this literature and culture. Consequently, there was a veritable outburst of indigenous Australians’ expression in various genres, including autobiography, fiction, poetry, film, drama and music.

Poetry has attracted more indigenous Australians than any other mode of creative expression and has become an important medium for the articulation of their political thought. Adam Shoemaker is right to claim that, “if there is any ‘school’ of Black Australian poetry, it is one of social protest” (1989, p. 201), arguing that most Aboriginal poets reject the art for art’s sake argument and feel that their work have at least some social utility (1989, p. 180). Indeed, in accordance with Michael Lipsky’s definition of protest activity as a “mode of political action oriented towards objection to one or more policies or conditions” (1968, p. 1145), the distinctive feature of much of contemporary indigenous poetry is its “political or social critique in objecting to the conditions of indigenous people’s minoritization” (Brewster 2008, p. 61), i.e. cultural and political domination and disenfranchisement by white Australians. Another essential aspect of protest poetry is its capacity “to offer revelations of social worlds [...] to which readers respond with shock, concern, sometimes political questioning” (Coles 1986, p. 677). As this discussion will also show, Australian indigenous poetry is capable of ensuring strong effect on its readers. The verse of Romaine Moreton is perhaps among the most illustrative of this claim. In her struggle for social and political transformation, she addresses a plethora of pressing social justice issues, unrelentingly exposing the institutional and historical processes and logics that have retained the Australian indigenous population in the web of hegemonic power. In so doing, she uses the structure and style that allow her to create a maximum quality of readerly participation.

Methodology

In this article, I position Moreton within the context of Australian indigenous protest writing. Drawing on Christopher Fynsk’s 1991 observation that “literature addresses an anonymous collective, but convokes us as singular beings” (p. xxviii), I examine how the poet’s social critique involves a non-indigenous reader in the experience of her writing and consequently solicits political response. The textual analysis of some of the most representative Moreton’s poems against the background of post-colonial critique and social criticism aims to show that, in performing the interrogation and intervention in the ongoing racialized exclusion and inequality of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia, and foregrounding the need for inter-subjectivity of race rather than racial exclusion, Moreton’s protest can be seen as an important contribution to decolonization and the elaboration of indigenous sovereignty, as pointed out by Anne Brewster among others (2008, p. 58). In this sense, this discussion provides additional evidence in support of George Levine’s view that works of art not only had “a deep implication in the politics of Western imperialism and the suppression of ‘inferior’ races and cultures,” but also displayed a clear capacity “to disrupt the exercise of power” (2000, p. 383–384).

Challenging Whiteness in the Poetry of Romaine Moreton

Addressing a plethora of pressing social justice issues by exposing the institutional and historical processes and logics that have maintained political, economic and cultural

subordination of Aboriginal people, the poetry of Romaine Moreton is perhaps among the most penetrating fictional indictment of colonization in Australia (cf. Brewster 2008, 2009, Russo 2005, Čerče 2010). Moreton's angle of vision, coupled with the anger and generative urgency, make her work sought after by a huge participatory audience. The poet has ensured the maximum affective impact of her verse by employing various poetic structures, such as rhetorical questions, direct address to the reader, satirical antitheses and repetitions, which all invite the readers' active participation through emotional identification and their subsequent conversion. Her verse engages white and other non-indigenous publics in "a reassessment of history, an enquiry into contemporary cultural and economic inequality, and a scrutiny of white privilege, entitlement and denial" (Brewster 2008, p. 68). "The first sin," one of many poems that perform this function by pointing to the political, institutional and cultural reproduction of white privilege on the one hand, and the invisibility of indigenous people on the other, thus begins:

He was guilty of the first sin—
 Being Black
 He was sentenced very early in life—
 At birth
 and only substances appeased his pangs of guilt. (Moreton et al. 2000, p. 3)

Clearly, Moreton sees black life in Australia as inherently political. As she writes in one of her poems, "It ain't easy being black / this kinda livin' is all political" (2004, p. 111). Despite her awareness of the common unappreciative stance towards engaged writing, she continues to view her verse in the first place as a site of resistance: "To create works that do not deal with the morbid and mortal effects of racism for one, and the beauty of indigenous culture for another, would be for me personally, to produce works that are farcical (Moreton 2001, p. 1). Moreton has manifested her objection to the social and political marginalization of Black Australians, and her Goenpul nation in particular, by writing poetry, performing her verse, and making films. However, and despite the compelling nature of her work, she is not yet widely known in the field of indigenous literary studies. Perhaps this is attributable to the fact that her output has been comparatively slight, speculates Brewster (2009, p. 109). Her poems are collected in three books, *The Callused Stick of Wanting* (1995), *Post Me to the Prime Minister* (2004), and *Poems from a Homeland* (2012). She is represented in several anthologies of Australian indigenous writing, such as *Rimfire: Poetry from Aboriginal Australia* (2000), *Untreated: Poems by Black Writers* (2001) and the *Macquarie PEN Anthology of Aboriginal Literature* (2008). Her performance poetry (or spoken word poetry) has been included in two compilations of indigenous music, *Fresh Salt* (2002) and *Sending a Message* (2002).

Protest is not the only dynamic of Moreton's poetry; however, it is the main one. Aroused by both her anger at those inflicting injustice on other people and her affection for those experiencing the inhumanity of racial subordination, Moreton unrelentingly exposes and condemns the brutalising effects of the Crown's acquisition of 1770, which made sovereign Aboriginal land *terra nullius* and Aboriginal peoples *vox nullius* (Heiss and Minter 2008, p. 2). The poet reflects on incarceration, deaths in custody, child removal, high infant mortality rates, low life expectancy, suicide, poverty and similar socio-economic issues concerning contemporary indigenous Australians. The poem "You are Black," for example, abounds in references to injustices the Black communities have had to endure under the white settlers' dominance. It begins in the manner of English mock-epic poetry and proceeds by piling on fact after fact about flagrant violations of the

POETICS AND POLITICS OF INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIAN VERSE

native Australians' civil and human rights, and their loss of dignity through threats, reprisals and violence.

If you are oppressed in any way,
you are Black.
If you are a woman who loves women
or a man who loves men,
you are Black.
If it is that people do not accept you
simply for what you do,
you are Black.
If they do not accept that their God is not yours
or yours is not theirs, and would want to crucify,
you are Black. (Moreton et al. 2000, p. 55)

In very much the same vein, Moreton reflects in "Genocide is never justified," in which she signals her moral outrage and the outright disapproval already in the poem's title. Her fusion of intimate narrative sentences with a set of rhetorical questions enforces a symphonic quality of the poem, with voices overlapping, complementing or opposing each other. The opening part reads:

And the past was open to gross misinterpretation.
Why do the sons and daughters of the raped and murdered
deserve any more or any less than those who have prospered
from the atrocities of heritage?
And why do the sons and daughters refuse to reap
what was sown
from bloodied soil?
And why does history ignore their existence? (Moreton et al. 2000, p. 31)
The poem is a powerful protest against the practices of the white colonizers.

Characterized by a direct manner of writing, which gains poignancy by the ironic subtleties of her statements, the poem exposes the key social injustices, including the tyranny of oppression and abuse, arrogance of power, poverty, and wilful destruction of indigenous peoples. Although not an autobiographical confession, the poem is acutely personal; it is a harrowing cry against all the forms of suppression and victimization of the people who lived in Australia for thousands of years before the white settlement. "Who was here first is not the question, anymore," Moreton continues her hard-hitting exposure of social injustices, suggesting at least the recognition of oppression by majority Australians:

It is what you have done since you arrived,
the actions you refuse to admit to,
the genocide you say you never committed!" (Moreton et al. 2000, p. 31)

A startling effect is achieved by finally pointing to the indigenous peoples' spiritual and emotional depth. This inherent quality has not only helped them survive in a hostile, morally decayed and emotionally sterile white environment, Moreton suggests at the end of this deeply felt elegy, but also distinguishes them from it. Several other poems also humanize indigenous Australians and attack the atrocities performed in the name of "civilising the uncivilized," as Moreton ironically refers to the inhuman practices of those who have "elect[ed] themselves as the supremacist race" in the poem "What kind of people" (Moreton et al. 2000, p. 45). "What kind of people would kick the heads off

babies / or rip at the stomach of the impregnated, / as would a ravaged wolf,” she continues in her disdainful address to apathetic readers, who repudiate any suggestion that their ancestors were capable of “such murderous feats” (Ibid.). The poem proceeds in true Moreton fashion, compiling a catalogue of evidence to show the inhumanity of racial subordination.

“Are you beautiful today,” a poem included in Moreton’s second collection (*Post Me to the Prime Minister*, 2004), mobilizes the rhetorical strategies of argument and critique on the one hand, and poetic effects on the other. It opens:

Are you beautiful today?
Are your children safe and well?
Brother, mother, sister too?
I merely ask so you can tell. (Moreton 2004, p. 29)

It is through such conversational tone and a direct address to a reader that Moreton establishes a textual illusion of a discourse and dramatizes the inter-racial encounter (cf. Brewster 2008, 2009). With a series of satirical antitheses that elaborate a contrastive picture of the speaker’s family, affected by the struggle to cope with difficult circumstances, and that of the addressee, a white woman with the apparent position of privilege and economic comfort, Moreton provides for an insight into the asymmetry of racial relationships and reveals the tensions underlying the relationships between white and black Australians.

I laugh with my sisters and brothers
at things that others wouldn’t get
while talkin’ ‘bout jail
while talkin’ ‘bout death. (Moreton 2004, p. 29)

The repetition of a one-sided enquiry into the addressee’s well-being foregrounds the absence of a response, pointing to the “absence of *responsiveness*” in contemporary Australian culture and politics to the on-going material deprivation and suffering of indigenous Australians (Brewster 2008, p. 66, cf. Wheeler 2013, Wimmer 2009, Heiss and Minter 2008). It has to be borne in mind that it was not until February 2008 that the Prime Minister Kevin Rudd opened a new chapter in Australia’s relations with its indigenous peoples by making a comprehensive apology for the past policies, which had—in the Prime Minister’s words —“inflicted profound grief, suffering and loss” (Johnston 2008, p. 3) on fellow Australians. The indigenous response to the failure of multiculturalism’s proclaimed mutual understanding is crying-laughter, established by the oscillation between the tonality of despair, anger and hilarity. Several forceful contrasts (e.g. “complacency/poverty,” “health/death,” “peace/distress”) provide for a sense of farce. True to Andrew Ford’s observation that Moreton’s poetry “packs a punch” (2003, p. 6), this can be found at the end of the poem, where the repetition of the catch phrase reminds us of the indigenous peoples’ continuing poverty and neglect, resulting in high mortality rate.

Are you beautiful today?
your brother, mother, sister, too?
are you well clothed and well fed?
and are they alive
and
well
not dead? (Moreton 2004, p. 29)

Despite the seeming darkness of much of Moreton's verse, the poet's conception of art is not pessimistic and her thorny plight is often brightened with instances of hope and optimism. In "Time for Dreaming," for example, she alludes to the passing of white supremacy by addressing the reader with the words: "Do not wonder about the ways of the whiteman / for they have already run their course" (Moreton et al. 2000, p. 1). The poem "My tellurian grandfather," too, ends on an optimistic tone, pointing to the native Australians' capacity for survival in a hostile world: "[...] you can put the flame out / [...] but there will always be fire" (Moreton et al. 2000, p. 29).

It is not hard by now to see that, despite her overt social criticism which has had an important role in destabilising the white Australians' position of privilege, Moreton is a very ingenious and creative author who relies heavily on her Aboriginality for texture, diction and rhythm. Writing out of the intense presence of her whole self and embracing a poetic mode that allows an apprehension of, and participation in the quality of her experience, Moreton has produced the verse that not only creates what Wendy Brady calls "a zone of discomfort around notions of what it means in contemporary Australia to be black" (Andrew 1998, p. 15), but evokes strong feelings of culpability in non-indigenous Australian readers. At the same time, given that the major issues faced by indigenous Australians today, "equal rights, equal opportunities, equal housing, better health, better education. Everything equal" (Brewster, O'Neill, Van Den Berg 2000, 189) are common to many other minorities placed in "subaltern relations of power" (Mignolo 2005, p. 382–383), Moreton's protest stimulates readers all over the world to draw parallels across national lines and consider the critique in the context of their own national traumas.

Conclusion

Moreton owes her fame and recognition more to the fact that her verse embodies the shape of her faith and devotional posture than to the technical perfection of her expression. This quality of her writing places her in the league of poets who have considered verse as a "verbal discourse in which message is dominant and the aesthetic function is subordinate," as Narodin Mudrooroo defines Australian indigenous poetry (1990, p. 35). Given the increasingly wider public and scholarly interest in this poetry, which culminated in the Prime Minister's apology to indigenous Australians for past mistreatment and in the subsequent process of reconciliation, Moreton has provided additional evidence that works of art are an important site for negotiating change. Indeed, written against the background of critical whiteness studies and based on the premise that works of art are able to "produce critical disruptions" and create a desirable community, as noted by Letitia Guran drawing on George Levine and Hillis Miller (2003, p. 96), this discussion about the poetry of Romaine Moreton has shown how the poet's intervention in the racist structure of power destabilizes white readers' assumptions about the legitimacy of the reproduction of colonial differences. In this sense, her work contributes to what Mignolo defines a "genealogy of de-colonial thought" (2005, p. 391), thereby "undoing the colonial and imperial differences" (2005, p. 392; cf. Brewster 2008, p. 74).

Although, in Gayatri Spivak's words, "what is called history will always seem more real to us than what is called literature" (1988, p. 243), it is probably safe to claim that the creative imagination of these authors and their call for intersubjectivity of race, in particular, deserve to be brought into the global exchange of values and messages. Judging by numerous translations of these works into popular and well-known European languages as well as into lesser-known ones following the increased interest in "all Others, marginal, minority, and peripheral literatures," proposed by Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek (1999, p. 15) among other critics that have stressed the need to expand Westerners' knowledge of non-Western literature and culture, this process has already come a long way.

References

- Andrew, B. (1998). *Blak Babe(z) & Kweer Kat(z)*. Chippendale: Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-operative.
- Ashcroft, B., Griffiths G., & Tiffin, H. (1989). *The Empire Writes Back. Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Brewster, A. (2009). Indigenous Sovereignty in the Poetry of Romaine Moreton. *Australian Literary Studies*, 24(3–4), 109–121.
- Brewster, A. (2008). Engaging the Public Intimacy of Whiteness: the Indigenous Protest Poetry of Romaine Moreton. *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature, Special Issue: The Colonial Present*, 56–78.
- Brewster, A., O’Neill A., & Van Den Berg, R. (2000). *Those Who Remain Will Always Remember: An Anthology of Aboriginal Writing*. Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press.
- Coles, N. (1986). Democratizing Literature. *College English*, 48, 64–80.
- Čerče, D. (2010). Generating Alternative Worlds: The Indigenous Protest Poetry of Romaine Moreton. *Elope*, 7(Spring), 49–60.
- Ford, A. (2003). Kerriane Cox, Romaine Moreton. Transcript of an Interview with Cox and Moreton. Retrieved from <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/music/mshow/s751864.htm>
- Fynsk, C. (1991). Experiences of Finitude. In N. Jean-Luc (Ed.), *The Inoperative Community* (vii–xxxv). Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Pres.
- Guran, L. (2003). The Aesthetic Dimension of American-Romanian Comparative Literary Studies. *The Comparatist*, 27(1), 94–115.
- Heiss, A., Minter, P. (Eds.). (2008). *Anthology of Australian Aboriginal Literature*. Montreal et al.: McGill-Queen’s UP.
- Miller, J. H. (1987). The Triumph of Theory, the Resistance to Reading and the Question of the Material Base. *PMLA*, 102(3), 281–291.
- Johnston, T. (2008, February 13). Australia Says ‘Sorry’ to Aborigines for Mistreatment. *The New York Times*, p. 12.
- Levine, G. (2000). Reclaiming the Aesthetics. In D. H. Richter (Ed.). *Falling into Theory: Conflicting Views on Reading Literatures* (378–391). New York: Bedford, St. Martin’s.
- Lipsky, M. (1968). Protest as a Political Resource. *The American Political Science Review*, 62(4), 1144–1158.
- Mignolo, W. D. (2005). On Subalterns and Other Agencies. *Postcolonial Studies*, 8(4), 381–407.
- Mills, C. W. (2000). Race and the Social Contract Tradition. *Social Identities*, 6(4), 441–462.
- Moreton, R. (1995). *The Callused Stick of Wanting*. Rozelle, Sydney: Breakout Design.
- Moreton, R. (2001). Working Note. *How* 1(5), 14.
- Moreton, R. (2004). *Post Me to the Prime Minister*. Alice Springs: Jukurrpa Books.
- Moreton, R. (2012). *Poems from a Homeland*. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz.
- Moreton, R., Taylor A., Smith, M. J. (2000). *Rimfire: Poetry from Aboriginal Australia*. Broome: Magabala Books.
- Mudrooroo, N. (1990). *Writing from the Fringe: A Study of Modern Aboriginal Literature*. South Yarra: Hyland House.
- Russo, K. E. (2005). Post Me to the Prime Minister: Property, Language and Indigenous / Non Indigenous Relations in the Australian Nation. *Anglistica*, 9(2), 103-125.
- Shoemaker, A. (1989). *Black Words, White Pages: Aboriginal Literature 1929-1988*. St. Lucia: Queensland University Press.

POETICS AND POLITICS OF INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIAN VERSE

- Spivak, G. C. (1988). *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*. Routledge: New York, London.
- Totosy de Zepetnek, S. (1999). An Introduction to Comparative Literature Now. In S. Tötösy de Zepetnek (Ed.). *Comparative Literature Now: Theories and Practice* (13–18). Paris: Champion.
- Wheeler, B. (2013). Introduction: The Emerging Canon. In B. Wheeler (Ed.). *A Companion to Australian Aboriginal Literature* (1–13). Rochester, New York: Camden House.
- Wimmer, A. (2009). Autonomous Aboriginal Communities in Australia. *Acta Neophilologica*, 42(1-2), 111–122.