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Culture, Race and Identity: Australian Aboriginal Writing



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This paper looks at the relationship between culture, race and identity in English-language Aboriginal writing from Western Australia. In recent years fiction has become an important medium in which Aboriginal people are defining what it means and has meant to be Aboriginal in Australia since white settlement. Aboriginal writing is chiefly concerned with the effects of colonisation, white racism and cultural imperialism on both individuals and Aboriginal culture more widely. By cultural imperialism I mean the forced imposition of European cultural forms, social meanings and values on the indigenous people and the simultaneous denial of the value of their own culture. Aboriginal writing is concerned with how Aborigines can fight at the level of culture for a new sense of value, history and identity.¹

The publication of fictional texts in English by Aboriginal writers is a fairly recent phenomenon. The first complete published work by an Aborigine, David Unalpon's *Native Legends*, appeared in 1929. Yet it was not until the 1960s that Aboriginal writing began to be published regularly. Thus the first volume of Aboriginal poetry, Kath Walker's *We are Going* appeared in 1964, the first Aboriginal novel, Colin Johnson's *Wild Cat Falling* in 1965 and the first written aboriginal play, Kevin Gilbert's *The Cherry Pickers* was written in 1968, though not published until 1988. Most Aboriginal writing deals with the experience of urban and camp life, often coupled with historical perspectives which offer accounts of why urban and fringe-dwelling Aborigines have come to be in the position in which they now find themselves. A few texts, for example, Colin Johnson's novel *Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World* (1983), are concerned with Aboriginal history, though even here history is presented in a way that throws light on the social relations of the present. An increasing number of life histories of rural Aboriginal people, are also being published. This paper concentrates on writing from Western Australia, the main source of Aboriginal writing.

The Australian bi-centenary of white settlement in 1988 was the occasion of much public debate about white Australian history. Aboriginal activists spoke at the time of making the bicentennial a time of remembering, of placing Aboriginal history and contemporary life and human rights on the mainstream political agenda.² Yet this was the culmination of more than 20 years of Aboriginal activism which sought to give Aboriginal people full civil rights and self-determination. The recent proliferation of Aboriginal writing is very much a product of this political culture.³ The key themes of Aboriginal texts include the quest for identity, the problem of mixed-race children, spiritual and material poverty and the links between the past and present. These themes are explored in the context of representations of the rather different situations of tribal people on reserves, fringe dwellers and poor urban Blacks. The history of two hundred years of white oppression forms the backdrop to contemporary Aboriginal fiction, drama and poetry.

The links made between past and present in Aboriginal writing are important to the politics of representation in the texts. Both fiction and drama are almost exclusively realist in their mode of representation, presenting images of material and spiritual poverty and degradation. The texts are first and foremost a testimony to the conditions under which Aborigines live today, but they also offer accounts of why things are as they are and how the current state of affairs has come about. Kevin Gilbert's *The Cherry Pickers* (1988) indicates how a proud tribal people have been reduced to alcoholic camp dwellers. History is also used forcefully in Jack Davis' plays to explain the present. The action of *Kullark*, for example (1982), spans three periods of Aboriginal history: the years of white settlement in Western Australia 1829-34, the Moore River Native Settlement in the 1930s and 1945 and a country town in the south-west of Western Australia in 1979. It offers a history of white treatment of the Aboriginal people of Western Australia to the present and of their resistance to colonisation. The play shows different stages of white government policy aimed at containing or integrating Aboriginal people, the differences in beliefs and value systems between the Aborigines and whites and the racist attitudes which Aborigines face even when they attempt to integrate into white society. It does not have the romantic vision of Aboriginal people communing with the land and tending their true selves in the bush that can be found in much urban Aboriginal writing, for instance, Archie Weller's short stories or Colin Johnson's novels. Even where the action is contemporary as in Davis' play *The Dreamers* (1982), which takes place in the present over a period of six months in South-Western Australia, the past is used to explain the present. *The Dreamers* juxtaposes brief images of a proud Aboriginal past, and its destruction by white settlement, with the lives of a family of contemporary urban dwelling Aborigines. Past and present are linked through the character of old Uncle Worru who still remembers aspects of traditional life.

The Wallitch family, who are the focus of the drama, are caught in a trap of poverty, alcoholism and petty crime, living in a home that Dolly the central female protagonist, describes as having 'No hot water, no locks on the doors, worse than livin' in a bloody camp'.⁴ Spells in 'Freeo', Fremantle Gaol, with its three meals a day, hot showers and violence against Blacks are depicted as part of the everyday Aboriginal experience. The family subsists on a mixture of welfare benefits and begging. Some of the characters interpret this experience as inevitable, others as the effect of a social system which can be changed. Uncle Worru, himself destroyed by alcohol and near to death, offers a perspective on this life, explaining it as an effect of colonisation: 'You have turned our land into a desolate place. We stumble along with a half white mind. Where are we? What are we? Not a recognised race: There is a desert ahead and a desert behind.'⁵ The history of Aboriginal people since colonisation, the text suggests, has undermined the possibility of positive identity.

The problem of identity is central to texts about urban Aboriginal life. Whether stories of the rootless, often violent youths who people Colin Johnson's and Archie Weller's novels and short stories, or the autobiographical and life history work of Sally Morgan. These texts present the problem of the partial and unsuccessful white colonisation of Aboriginal identity together with the impossibility of simply 'living white' when you are black or mixed-race in a racist society, even if this were desirable. The first Aboriginal novel to be published, Colin Johnson's *Wild Cat Falling* (1965), addresses these questions. First published in 1965, *Wild Cat Falling* tells the story of a young mixed-blood Aboriginal youth gaoled for petty crime, who, on his release from Fremantle Gaol attempts a robbery in order to obtain the means to go East and escape his old life. It traces the youth's early life showing how he has been a victim of poverty and racism but also of his own mother's attempt to keep him from his Aboriginal relatives. He grows up with no positive sense of identity, only beginning to develop this at the end of the novel when an old fullblood Aboriginal relative shelters him, after he has shot a policeman. The old man, the text suggests, who has maintained his traditional sense of Aboriginal identity is able to show the youth a more positive sense of self and attitude to life.

The novel, a first person narrative, opens in prison, and gives a vivid evocation of prison life. It tells how integration into prison life, after a spell in solitary confinement, gives the youth a feeling of belonging that he never felt in the world outside. Prison gives him a 'certain evenness of mind' and the security of 'three meals a day and a decent bed'. The lack of a positive sense of self which prison life fills is shown in the text to be an effect of not belonging to either of the opposed racial groups in Perth society. He perceives whites as belonging to the dominant group and Noongars (Western Australian people of Aboriginal descent) as having their own identity in opposition to the values of white society. Yet he sees himself as 'an odd species of native fauna, cross-bred with the migrant flotsam of a goldfield'. It is not that the Noongars are not also of mixed race, it is rather that his mother kept him from mixing with them: 'That side of my heritage must be kept from me at all costs. I must live white and learn to think with a white man's mind'. White society, however, has refused to accept him. As a result, his life is a search for belonging which leads him to identify with a violent urban youth sub-culture. Stripped of the persona given by prison or youth culture or criminality, he is shown to feel weak and contemptible.⁶

The local Aboriginal community, from whom his mother keeps him, but to whom she returns to die, since she herself has no one else, is not romanticised, it offers a tough alternative to life on the margins of white society:

The Noongars have their vices alright. They take their sex like they take their grog — wherever and whenever it comes along. They brawl and bash each

other up, gamble the shirts of their backs and make fools of anyone who tries to help them, but they have a warmth and loyalty to each other and a sort of philosophy of life the whites will never know or understand.⁷

As a child, still at home with his mother, the narrator is depicted as positive and optimistic in spite of the racism of the whites who bully him. This optimism is broken when, at the age of nine, he is sent to a reformatory for stealing bed sheets that he and his mother cannot afford to buy. Reformatory life and subsequent prison are shown to turn him into a resigned nihilist, though prison also enables him to acquire some education. He resents both the white attitude that it is up to Aborigines to succeed and the white liberal position that 'given ordinary descent conditions they would behave like ordinary descent citizens,'⁸ a position which denies cultural difference:

I feel the old bitter taste of resentment in my mouth. Nothing ever up to *them*. only up to us. The outcast relics on the outskirts camps. The lazy ungrateful rubbish people, who refuse to co-operate or integrate or even play it up for the tourist trade. Fly-blown descendants of the dispossessed erupting their hopelessness in petty crime.⁹

The text links the youth's inability to stay out of trouble to his lack of positive identity, something that it suggests can only be found in the knowledge and acceptance of Aboriginal heritage. This is the meaning that the novel gives to the image of a wild cat falling in the title of the text. Since childhood, he has had a recurring nightmare 'of dark wings and scared wild cat eyes....Falling, falling. Plunging and twisting out of the sky and the hard ground rising up'¹⁰. It is the old full-blood, the youth's great uncle, who is able to explain this dream to him, giving him access to his origins which can, the text suggests, be the basis for a positive identity.

He begins to sing again, softly, like the humming of a bee, then the words shape on his lips and he breaks off.

'You know that song, son.'
'Suppose I heard it somewhere before,' I say.
'You dream it,' he says. 'It belong your country.'
'I haven't got a country,' I say. 'I don't belong anywhere.'
'You can't lose it,' he says. 'You go away, but you keep it here.'
He claps his hands under his ribs. 'Inside. You dream that place and that song too. I hear you sing it in your sleep.'
'I have a dream,' I say, 'but I don't remember when I wake up. A sort of falling dream.'
'Might be your granny teach it when you been a little fella. Desert country.'¹¹

It is a Dreamtime story which the youth remembers he has been told as a small child and which became linked to a childhood experience of falling from a high tree. Knowing this, the

text suggests, gives the youth the strength to face the consequences of his actions.

Colin Johnson's second novel, *Long Live Sandawara* (1979) takes up the question of identity and resistance, making explicit connections between Aboriginal history and the present. The novel contrasts the story of the Aboriginal resistance fighter Sandawara, as told by an old tribal leader, Noorak, and the aspirations and actions of a group of unemployed Noongar youth in the suburbs of Perth. Formally a law-giver, Noorak has been arrested for a tribal killing and reduced by his prison experience to an alcoholic vagrant. Teenage Alan is equally rootless. A victim of the urban Aboriginal condition, he has been taken from his mother as a young child and put in a home, from which he ran away five times. He has only had a primary education and has difficulty writing. He learns the story of Sandawara from Noorak and is inspired by his image of Sandawara to fight back against white society. The plot tells how Alan leads a group of young Noongars as they steal weapons to raid a bank in order to get money for an Aboriginal youth centre where, according to his vision, young Blacks are to be taught to resist. The raid ends with the death of all the group apart from Alan himself. Alan's inadequate political analysis is based on the stories Noorak has told him:

The main thing is that the white people took everything from us Nungars and now we want some of it back. It belongs to us and we want it back. They won't give it to us and so we'll take it.¹²

His lack of knowledge and political insight have dire consequences, yet the text suggests that like Sandawara, Alan has the makings of a leader. This leadership role will eventually take him into the structures of white Australian society.

Noorak's tribal past is depicted as a time of dignity, power and honour. Although he has been reduced to despair by his arrest and imprisonment, he remembers a different past:

His sunken eyes, red with age and too much cheap wine, watch the few flickers of his fire.
Again, the old man sees himself standing strong. His hair caked with grey mud from the waterhole; his man scars marked with white clay, taut like the strands of rope across his back and chest. On either side of him other old men squat, copies of him. Behind them in terrible silence, the men of the tribe sit; behind him the youths and further back the women and children. Together, bound and unified by the Law, they watch and wait for the Keeper to speak — wait in dread as no one will ever wait again. They have taken his power from him as they have taken his land.¹³

This positive image of the past is contrasted with a present that offers little either to urban Aboriginal youths or to old tribal Aborigines like Noorak who have been reduced to alcoholism and are dependent on selling their culture, identity and traditions for drink. Whites, the text suggests, have turned traditional culture into a spectacle for tourists, as

Noorak and others like him perform a makeshift corroboree in front of strangers in return for the money to buy cheap sweet wine. Yet even in this context Aboriginal history is a powerful force for positive self image and dignity. The image of Sandawara has the power to transform Noorak, even as he performs for tourists:

With a wild shout Noorak leaps from Jacky Jacky and springs high into the sky. His old body is forgotten; strength flows through him; he feels as if the old times have returned. Around him the voices chant out the legend, each word a grunt of acknowledgement. The men swarm to defend their earth —, as firm as Sandawara.¹⁴

If Alan's future is to be a leader of his people and parliamentarian, the text is ambivalent about this way forward.

Ken Rawlings, an Aboriginal leader 'on the way to a safe seat in parliament' is described as sincere but full of platitudes: 'His party finds him an asset on the platform, a symbol of Australia; but to the boys he is heavy and inert. The solid hand of adult authority. He's made it and knows it, and to these kids this is somehow a sellout.' His aim is integration and acceptance in the mainstream of Australian society. He subscribes to an individualist liberal ideology:

'Just like any other citizen in Australia, we have our rights, equal rights with every other person. Everyone's the same as us, mate, all Aussies, and don't you forget that. You know, I met this Nungar bloke today. He got his own truck and is doing contract work and getting jobs too! That's progress mate; that's how we earn respect. Not by lying around, not by thinking that the state owes us a living, but by good, honest, hard work.'¹⁵

This mode of thinking is shown to have distanced the politician from the plight of his own people. Thus he accuses the old people who drink on the streets of spoiling the Aboriginal image. He wants to put them away in an old folks home. They need 'A nice home for the old fellows, like the white blokes have, but one with a bit more bush around it.'¹⁶ This, the text suggests, is not an adequate rearticulation of the tradition of resistance that Sandawara embodies. Aboriginal people need knowledge of their history and of traditional Aboriginal culture which can, the text indicates, create a bond between past, present and future. What remains open is how resistance is best conducted. Armed struggle, it is suggested whether in Sandawara's day or now, inevitably leads to annihilation but merely working within white structures leads to a denial of the specificity of Aboriginality, something which the text suggests is to be found by maintaining links with traditional Aboriginal society.

The absence of a positive alternative for Aborigines to an inevitably partial integration into racist white society is also a key theme of Archie Weller's volume of short stories *Going*

Home (1986). These stories take up the theme of the lack of positive identity available to people of Aboriginal descent in a world dominated by white racist attitudes and Aboriginal poverty. This poverty is depicted as material, spiritual and cultural. Like older writers Weller suggests in many of his stories that white settlement has destroyed Aboriginal culture and identity, unsuccessfully forcing white values and ways of living on people of Aboriginal descent while at the same time shunning them for their ethnic origin and failure to conform. This point is made forcefully in 'Cooley' the story of a mixed-race boy who has come to Perth from the north and who has no place either in the local white or Aboriginal communities. Weller traces the lack of positive identity experienced by Aboriginal people back to the effects of white colonialism which, it is argued, destroyed their culture and identity. Indeed it is no longer clear what it means to be Aboriginal beyond the negative definitions proposed by the dominant white society:

Cooley looked at their hybrid faces and strange thoughts churned in his mind. What were these people? Were they Aborigines? With clothes and boots, cigarettes and cars, radios and money? Greed and hate and jealousy? And a strange mongrel language, product of their mongrel breeding. Once upon a time there had been a naked man on a red hill. Strong and healthy, with his spears and family and dogs - with his laws and religion. Then another man had come, white and weak and diseased, with his beer and smokes and clothes and hatreds. He said to the first man, 'Come with me and I'll teach you things you've never seen the likes of.' So the Aboriginal had followed - now he died of white man's pox and drowned in cheap wine and suffocated in prejudices and his laws were trampled by the white man's laws. They cried as all they had was turned to dust when they listened to the whiteman's lies. And the white man laughed and jeered at their plight and their efforts to mimic their masters.¹⁷

The tone of Weller's stories is often emotive, depicting not only the material reality of Aboriginal life but also attempting to convey what it feels like to be Aboriginal in Australia today. Weller's stories depict a range of mixed-race male protagonists whose lives are destroyed by the society in which they live. Some become successful in the white world, usually as sportsmen, yet even here they cannot escape their primary definition as racially inferior. Once they move outside the immediate sphere of their success, a success that always means the denial of their own people, they become just another black man, denied full humanity and abused.

Weller is particularly fierce in his depiction of police treatment of Aboriginal people suggesting that it is this, as much as anything, that drives them to crime. In the story that gives the volume its title, 'Going Home', the successful footballer and painter Billy Woodward, who has been living as if he were an honorary white, spurning his own 'dark, silent, staring people, his rowdy, brawling, drunk people', returns to the reserve where the rest of his family live. Billy has become part of a white world in which he has learned to deny and despise his

origins. He considers himself white and has no time or sympathy for his black relations whose world of poverty, drink and degradation he wants to forget:

He was white now. Once in the middle of the night, one of his uncles had crept around to the house he rented and fallen asleep on the verandah. A dirty pitiful carcass, encased in a black greatcoat that smelt of stale drink and lonely, violent places. A withered black hand had clutched an almost-empty metho bottle. In the morning, Billy had shouted at the old man and pushed him down the steps, where he stumbled and fell without pride. The old man had limped out of the creaking gate not understanding. The white neighbours, wakened by the noise, had peered out of their windows at the staggering old man stumbling down the street and the glowering youth muttering on the verandah. They had smirked in selfrighteous knowledge. Billy had moved on the next day.¹⁸

On his return to the reserve Billy encounters the full force of hostile white attitudes to Aborigines and police treatment of blacks when he is violently arrested for a robbery which is nothing to do with him. The language of the story emphasises the brutality of the world that Aboriginal people inhabit, the power of white over black and how being black takes away the right to speak, be heard and believed.

Other stories in the anthology focus on how the destruction of Aboriginal culture has left people of Aboriginal descent with white western models of living and success in a society that is bitterly racist. Mixed race people are shown to lack both positive identity and self-respect. For example, young Perry, who has committed robbery and murder in 'Saturday Night and Sunday Morning' wants to explain his behaviour to the white girl he has taken as hostage, yet he has no words for it:

He would like to tell her how once everyone shared everything and no one was poor. How could anyone be poor with the silver songs of the birds raining down from the cool leaves, and honeyed flowers for jewels, and diamond-eyed children with hearts of gold? Now their hearts are stone and they are cracking up, with moss dragging them down into gentle destruction. He would like to tell her how the white man stole his soul and filled the empty husk with white man's thoughts and hate instead of love of his people. He would have told her how they stole her away from his mother when he was only young and adopted him to an ugly white brick mother called a reformatory. There he learned a new type of kinship.¹⁹

What he is said to lack is any knowledge of his Aboriginal heritage with its strong sense of alternative values and identity. Here, as elsewhere in Aboriginal writing, the spiritual and material poverty of the present is contrasted with an image of a very different past the reality of which rarely features in the novels. Colin Johnson's *Dr Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World* (1983) would be a notable exception here. White ways of living, Weller's stories imply, are fundamentally unsuitable for Aboriginal people who are bound to fail and end up living impoverished lives, often governed by drink, on state welfare

handouts. This is partly because the white society denies Aborigines the prerequisites which they need to succeed in white terms and partly because traditional Aboriginal culture and values are radically different from those of the white society. Even those young Aborigines who do achieve in white terms cannot escape the social attitudes which define them negatively in terms of their race.

The most damaging effect of white racism, the stories argue, is the way in which it destroys self-respect. In some this provokes fear and compliance, for example, Mrs. Waranda in the story 'Herbie' whose youngest son has been killed by the local white boys and who, we are told:

had [until then] never hated anyone really. She was too humble and afraid to hate the white kids who teased her, and the white men, who had put her oldest boy in jail on a false charge, and the white women who stared at her as though she were the filth of the nation.²⁰

In others it provokes violence, often modelled the stories suggest, on the violence of American gangster films and Westerns which are the local Aboriginal youths only source of entertainment. Crime which usually begins as robbery is shown to escalate quickly to violent assault and killing — a theme developed in Weller's best-selling novel *The Day of the Dog* (1981). The picture of Aboriginal violence is stark but it is shown to be socially produced by poverty and a racism which is itself often extremely violent. Those who turn to crime, usually do so in order to escape the poverty of the reserves and camps where conditions are degrading.

The remnants of Aboriginal culture which persist in the settlements and suburban slums include both elements of the old law and an affinity with the land. Thus for Reg Cooley, a mixed-race youth from the north, and Snowy Jackson, a full-blood Aboriginal from a rural area, it is not images taken from American cinema that legitimate killing, but tribal law:

An eye for an eye. That was the law from long ago, as ageless as the purple jagged ironstone mountains the boy could just remember. That was the law that kept people's pride aglow, like the fire that never went out.²¹

Yet more than tribal law, affinity with the land is perhaps the key feature in Weller's stories that marks Aboriginal people as positively different from whites. Sammy, the one expert Aboriginal surfer in the story 'Violet Crumble':

is different from the other surfers, not just in his quietness and skin colour. He thinks differently from them about the ocean that was his ancestors' feeding ground for centuries. He can tell you where the hidden middens lie, holding the skeletons of shell-fish and stories going right back to where man's footprints

first touched a truly virginal land. He can tell you where fish and crayfish reside in the nooks and crannies of a thousand jagged reefs. Unlike the white surfers, whose language is often inarticulate and sparse at the best of times...Sammy speaks of his ocean with a knowledge and love that no one ...could hope to understand.²²

For Reg Cooley the bush is the one place where he feels himself and is free from white persecution:

After school Cooley made his way through the dripping quiet bush. For a white person there were burnt slimy logs to trip over, hidden red rocks to stub toes on, prickly bushes to scratch the face. But Cooley's lithe brown form slipped silently through his bush. Tall, green, old trees with scratched scraggly bodies rustled to him from the grey drizzle and Cooley grew wet and cold. But he didn't mind. Away over the hill a kookaburra laughed. The green moss on the knobby rocks caressed his big flat feet, while his boots danced a jig around his neck, Greeneyes flitted in amongst the moaning, olive-coloured leaves and whistled to him. Parrots fled, shrieking over the hills at his approach. Cooley blended into the swirling shadows of the bush and the black cockatoo's cry echoed in his mind. Back, back to a thousand years ago when a wild short full-blood had also fled into his sanctuary. Cooley's slouch and sullenness were gone, and a rare glint shone in his yellow, evasive eyes. Cooley was home. The wind that sang for him told him this, the leaves that brushed gently against his face told him; and Cooley was free, alone, a man again.²³

Like images of the past, affinity with the land figures in Aboriginal writing as a positive point of opposition to the reality of Aboriginal life, an image that can function as the basis of a different positive identity. Thus even the most violent of Aboriginal youths (as depicted, for example, in Weller's *Day of the Dog*) find a peace and fulfilment outside the city, working on the land.

Women, their experience and perspectives, are under-represented both in Aboriginal texts and among Aboriginal writers. Whereas women figure in texts about reserve and camp dwellers, which tend to take family and kinship groups rather than individuals as their subject, they are largely absent from texts about urban youth. Both types of text reproduce the patriarchal relations of Aboriginal life, relations which take an arguably more brutal form in representations of urban living. Here women feature in relation to men, often as sexual objects in extremely sexist social relations. Mothers are often blamed for the lack of belonging experienced by young male protagonists, as they have tried to integrate their mixed race children into white society by denying them access to their Aboriginal heritage. Yet this is also a theme taken up by the single best-selling text by a woman of Aboriginal descent, the autobiography and life history, *My Place* by Sally Morgan (1987).

The key themes of this text are the experience of growing up Aboriginal in the suburbs of Perth, twentieth-century Aboriginal history and the positive value of recognising and claiming

Aboriginal heritage. *My Place* tells the stories of three generations of a mixed-race Aboriginal family in Western Australia. Narrated by the eldest daughter of the third generation, who has grown up believing that she is ethnically Indian, the text encompasses the life histories of her mother, Gladys, great uncle Arthur and grandmother Daisy, known as Nan. It offers a picture of the real effects on individuals' lives and identities of successive racist attitudes and policies towards Aboriginal people. Although technically a mixture of autobiography and life history, the text is written very much like a novel. Its plot is the search for a suppressed family history, Aboriginal heritage and identity.

If racism and the loss of a culture and identity are the key themes of the text, their location as part of the texture of the everyday lives of the characters and the concentration on how they affect people's sense of self-worth and emotional life engage the reader's sympathy creating a plural history that demonstrates different perspectives on past events. The narrative poses a series of questions which lead to a full-scale quest for origins and identity. In this quest Sally Morgan seeks out that aspect of her past which has been denied her, her Aboriginal family history.

The nature and effects of white racism on Aboriginal people are made clear in the text through the attempt to explain why Sally Morgan's grandmother and mother hide their past, trying to pass for white and denying their Aboriginal origins. Racial difference and the social stigma attached to Aboriginality is first brought home to the narrator at school:

The kids at school had also begun asking us what country we came from. This puzzled me because until then, I'd thought that we were the same as them. If we insisted that we came from Australia, they'd reply, 'Yeah, but what about your parents, bet they didn't come from Australia.'

Being Australian is assumed to mean being white. 'They could quite believe we were Indian, they just didn't want us pretending we were Aussies when we weren't.'²⁴

This implicit racism has long been part of Aboriginal experience and is central to the family's attempt to hide their origins. It has dire effects for the individuals concerned, the chief of which are fear of anyone in authority and shame at being black. The text offers numerous examples of how racism affects identity. Sally's grandmother hides when her grandchildren bring friends home from school. Her mother, Gladys, tells how her experience at a children's home taught her to be ashamed of her ethnic origins, and Aboriginal people are shown to feel ashamed of speaking their language. The text relates many incidents which mark both Nan and Gladys' sense of themselves. Gladys, for example, relates an incident in the house where her mother's as a servant:

'I remember one holiday at Ivanhoe when I was very upset. I was in the kitchen with my mother. She had her usual white apron on and was bustling around, when Alice [the mistress of the house] came in with June [her daughter]. I couldn't take my eyes off June. She had the most beautiful doll in her arms. It had golden hair and blue eyes and was dressed in satin and lace. I was so envious, I wished it was mine. It reminded me of a princess.

June said to me, 'You've got a doll, too. Mummy's got it.' Then, from behind her back, Alice pulled out a black topsy doll dressed like a servant...I stared at this doll for a minute. I was completely stunned. That's me, I thought, I wanted to be a princess not a servant.

I was so upset that when Alice placed the black doll in my arms, I couldn't help flinging it onto the floor and screaming, 'I don't want a black doll, I don't want a black doll.' Alice just laughed and said to my mother, 'Fancy her not wanting a black doll'.²⁵

The life histories in *My Place* offer a very accessible account of the history of how Aboriginal people have been treated by whites. Arthur, Gladys and Daisy tell of their experience of forced labour on the stations backed up by police repression, of women taken away and trained for service, of mixed-race children taken from their mothers and brought up in homes on missions where darker children were separated from lighter children and where they were forbidden to speak Aboriginal languages. Arthur remembers seeing people in chains and hearing of whites shooting blacks for sport and he tells of internment during the war and lack of citizenship. Gladys tells of how Aboriginals were under the control of the Native Welfare Department and required permits to travel.

The stigma attached to being Aboriginal is shown to cause Nan's attempt to buy white friends and to convince them that really she is white. It also motivates her and Gladys' to deny their racial origins. Once they admit to being of Aboriginal descent, further questions are posed as to what this can actually mean. Sally reflects:

What did it really mean to be Aboriginal? I'd never lived off the land and been a hunter and gatherer. I'd never participated in corroborees or heard stories of the Dreamtime. I'd lived all my life in suburbia and told everyone I was Indian. I hardly knew any Aboriginal people. What did it mean for someone like me?²⁶

These questions lead to an emotional pilgrimage in search of her origins and of positive meanings of Aboriginality to set against the negative ones provided by white society.

Negative white attitudes are shown not merely to be part of history but cross generational. Sally still encounters white embarrassment and pity when she applies for an Aboriginal scholarship at university. She finds that the Commonwealth Department of Education does not expect its Aboriginal students to do well. However the text does stress that things have

changed for the better. Looking back on her life Daisy reflects:

'Well I'm hopin' things will change one day. At least we're not owned anymore. I was owned by the Drake-Brockmans and the government and anyone who wanted to pay five shillings a year to Mr. Neville to have me. Not much is it?... I been scared all my life, too scared to speak out. Maybe if you'd have had my life, you'd be scared, too.'²⁷

Daisy's and Gladys's experiences are very much female, compounded by patriarchy as well as racism. Sally's great uncle Arthur, for example, manages to achieve a positive sense of identity despite a hostile white society. He is proud of being a *blackfella*. As a man he'd been able to make his way in the world eventually becoming independent of whites and this position enables him to develop a political perspective on the Aboriginal question which his sister and niece only achieve as they come to accept their heritage. The importance of belonging and being owned, which the family experience on discovering their tribal relations in the north, is depicted as a two way process. People of mixed-race Aboriginal descent, the text argues, who have been disowned by their white fathers, need to find their Aboriginal heritage and to belong. But the tribal people on the reserves whose mixed-race children were taken away or have left need to be owned by them. When they visit the reserve Sally recounts how: 'An old full-blood lady whispered to me "You don't know what it means, no one comes back. You don't know what it means that you with light skins want to own us".'²⁸

Reading Aboriginal writing offers a way into Aboriginal history that demonstrates its importance for an understanding of the present and for thinking the possibility of a different future which will undoubtedly require change on the part of the dominant white society. It is the particular quality of fiction, drama and poetry to be able to combine images of social groups and social relations with an emotional dimension an evocation of how people experience and feel about social relations. This is one of its particular strengths. Effective consciousness raising, it can be maintained, requires a degree of empathy and this is particularly important when cultural difference is at stake.

It is the articulation of cultural difference, of a different Aboriginal perspective both on different forms of Aboriginal society and on the dominant white society that is crucial to Aboriginal writing. This difference encompasses not only questions of social and spiritual values and desirable ways of living, but questions of identity and history. The problems and issues that Aboriginal writing explores for the reader are manifold. They include the articulation of an alternative to popular mainstream versions of history and the inadequacy of integrationist strategies determined by the dominant society. The text points out the resistance to integration on the part of the white as well as the black communities and the particularly negative effects of partial integration on the identity of mixed-race children. They also

indicate the negative consequences for Aboriginal people of attempting to 'live white', in a society which still regards Aborigines as inferior.

On a more positive note, the texts examined here offer a sense of the value of aspects of traditional Aboriginal society, in particular kinship networks and material and spiritual values. They suggest that black Australians need a knowledge of the past on which they can draw a positive self-identity and that they must create positive cultural links between past, present and future. In order to do this they need material independence from white society. It seems that Aboriginal writing is an important cultural-political intervention for both black and white Australians, with lessons for people beyond the boundaries of Australia. It articulates otherwise marginalized Aboriginal voices, creating a space for a number of important issues. These include the exploration of the relationship between past and present, the interpretation for a wider audience of what it means to be Aboriginal in Australia today, and the beginning of attempts to develop new, positive forms of identity. Aboriginal writing is also a vehicle for the articulation of critiques of mainstream white Australian values and for exploring the possibility of new ways of thinking about Aboriginal culture and identity for the non-Aboriginal population. It raises the question of the importance of a respect for difference both between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal people and among different groups of Aboriginal people.

Until now Aboriginal writing has relied heavily on government sponsorship. As many Aboriginal writers have argued, Aboriginal people need the material basis for self-determination in the field of culture as elsewhere. This is equally the case whether it be a question of land or of publishing outlets. Aboriginal writing is one important arena where these issues can be raised for the broader Australian society in a form which is both accessible and engaging, but which above all allows Aboriginal people to speak for themselves.

Notes

1. For Aboriginal views of the role of writing in the struggle for self-determination see Jack Davis and Bob Hodge (eds.) *Aboriginal Writing Today* (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1985)
2. See, for example, discussion of the Bicentennial Anna Rutherford (ed) *Aboriginal Culture Today* Vol X, Nos 1 & 2 of *Kunapipi* (Sydney, Dangaroo Press, 1988). This volume also includes a useful bibliography of Aboriginal writing.
3. For background material on Aboriginal life and political struggle see Kevin Gilbert *Living Black* (Ringwood, Penguin, 1978) and Lorna Lippman (ed) *Generations of Resistance* (Melbourne, Longman Cheshire, 1981)
4. Jack Davis, *The Dreamers*, (Sydney, Currency Press, 1982), p. 76.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 109.
6. Colin Johnson, *Wild Cat Falling*, (Sydney, Angus and Robertson, 1979), pp. 21, 43, 69, 122.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 123.
8. *Ibid.*, p.74.
9. *Ibid.*, 44.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 126.
12. Colin Johnson, *Long Live Sandawarra*, (Melbourne, Highland House, 1979), p. 93.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 70.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 46.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 47.
17. Archie Weller, *Going Home*, (Sydney, Allen and Unwin, 1986). p. 196.
18. *Ibid.*, p.2.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 60.
20. *ibid.*, p. 98.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 207.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 110.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 180.
24. Sally Morgan, *My Place*, (Fremantle, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1987). pp. 38-39.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 261-2.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 141.
27. *Ibid.*, p.350.
28. *Ibid.*, 228.