Jordan Hallock

The Paperbark of a People

Aboriginal literature is a unique specimen among many varieties of English literatures; it is young, original, and most of all, insightful. The Aboriginal people of Australia have fought since they became literate in the English language to pursue just rights for their people and preserve their fleeting ethos. In their struggle, many authors like David Uniapon and Oodgeroo Noonuccal found within their writing a timeless voice that reflects the very essence of the “Dream Time,” which they wholeheartedly embrace. However, it is more than just a voice that these ancient people have developed with a language that was alien to them—they certainly had a voice long before they were colonized. No, what they found was much more than that. These writers, in their efforts to communicate to an oppressive people the struggles of their past, present, and future, made a breakthrough in another culture’s language: something that could only be called Aboriginal.

The arrival of Lieutenant James Cook in 1770 marked the arrival of the British and its imperialistic language, English. When Lieutenant Cook declared Australia “Terra Nullius,” little did he know that two hundred years of literature would react to this first imperialist lie imposed on the most ancient people of the earth (Gilbert “Introduction” xix). Twenty-six years later, the earliest known Aboriginal writer to utilize English, Bennelong, wrote a “disarming” letter to his sponsor, Lord Sydney (Heiss and Minter 1). This marked the beginning of a tumultuous relationship between the Aborigines and the language of their oppressors, English. After just a few generations, almost two-thirds of pre-contact Aboriginal languages were exterminated.

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(Heiss and Minter 2). Over the course of the next century, many Aboriginal writers were occupied with using English as a communicative language only and not a means for illustrating their culture. These writers from the late eighteenth and nineteenth century were concerned with writing political letters to improve life for their people. This period was unsuccessful for writers as far as achieving very much in the way of political reforms or creating anything artistic in English. The White authority committed the most heinous acts during this period: Gilbert says that his people were herded like cattle and killed, beheaded so that the skulls could be preserved in England, and mutilated into “tobacco purses” (“Introduction” xx-xxi). This period is often referred to as the “Assimilation Era” because it was the period where the colonizers were the most proactive in attempting to extinguish Aboriginal culture and convert Aborigines into Europeans (Heiss and Minter 2). This history of genocide along with the mass Aboriginal child abduction that was occurring during this period gave birth to a generation of writers that spoke out more fluidly and artistically with another culture’s language than has ever been witnessed.

The first writer of this post-assimilation or protest movement is arguably Oodgeroo Noonuccal, the second Aboriginal author published and the first Aboriginal poet published; however, it is necessary to look to David Uniapon, the first published Aboriginal author, for the basis of the movement. This is because he not only preserved, in English, his rapidly dying culture, but also provided the foundation for all writing concerning the “Dream Time” in his collection and translation of Aboriginal oral history in Native Legends, published in 1929 (Heiss and Minter 4). Native Legends began the literary movement of the Aborigines as it is known today.

A closer look at Uniapon’s writing shows that Aborigines have a unique and ancient culture that gives the content of their writing something original in the English language. While

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writers in other colonies chose to imitate or allude to the canonical works of American and British writers, few Aboriginal writers actually incorporate any references to the canon. Instead, many writers embrace their oral traditions and native culture in their writing. Since they use a language and form that was ultimately alien to them, they deserve more credit than most English writers. Adam Shoemaker appropriately titled his 1989 collection of Aboriginal Literature: *Black Words, White Page*, giving his readers a nice metaphorical illustration of how Aboriginal writers bridge cultures with a medium that is foreign to them.

Uniapon, the pioneer of translating Aboriginal oral culture, explains what we would call Aboriginal myths in his writing. In the short story “Hungarrda,” the speaker, Nhan-Garra Doctor, tells the tale of the Hungarrda, the Jew Lizard. Uniapon emphasizes that the stories came to the speaker “in deep sleep” (21). This is important because the way that their spiritual journeys translate into English makes them similar to the word “Dream.” However, the concept of Dream Time, the English translation of the spiritual world, is not quite capable of fully explicating one of the oldest cultures on the planet. W.E.H. Stanner expands upon this theme in *After the Dreaming*, saying, “No English words are good enough to give a sense of the links between an aboriginal group and its homeland” (*Black Words, White Page* 180). Modern English has only existed for about half a millennia; whereas, the Aboriginal languages have existed since before the Ice Age (Gilbert “Introduction” xix).

Uniapon’s story explores the relationship between Aborigines and their spiritual world or Dream Time. This aspect of their culture is unique because this is not fiction—these are real stories much like our western Judeo-Christian parables. The speaker continues to describe the connection he has with the Spirit world saying, “my Spirit Self gently stepped outside my body...
frame with my earthly body subjective consciousness” (21). This line is perplexing to western readers because we don’t consider dreams real, but these people aren’t dreaming; this is more similar to our notion of praying, but they actually enter their spiritual world, transcending all western notions of time, space, and existence. He continues to say that he “went through period after period of ten thousand, thousand years of ages past” (21). Inside the Dream Time, his spirit travels without the constraints of time. Again, the speaker shatters western philosophy with a seemingly more innate and powerful sense of spirituality—one that comes and goes without warning like a natural phenomena.

In his dream, the narrator sees creatures inside a “slimy sea” that aren’t born yet, but are waiting to be born in what the narrator calls “the winding pathway of the Gulf of Time” (22). This concept is very interesting, as well, because the narrator observes a place that is without time. Western culture cannot fathom the absence of time because we live and die in time. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the narrator also points out that these beings were preserved by the “hand of Time” (22). This is definitely a unique concept: the personification of time by giving it a capital letter and a “hand” makes the Aboriginal perception of Time is similar to the word being. This makes sense because they also consider land formations, animals, and themselves beings. Though, the word “being” is not meant to be physical in the context of Aboriginal culture, it’s much like the word “spirit.” The OED defines “spirit” as “Incorporeal or immaterial being, as opposed to body or matter; being or intelligence conceived as distinct from, or independent of, anything physical or material.” This means that Aborigines can communicate and interact with, at least on a spiritual level, their surroundings and their creator. Unfortunately, the English language, even with its overwhelming vocabulary, still is inadequate when it comes to giving its readers a sense of the true nature of Aboriginal oral tradition.
As the story continues, the narrator watches the birth, evolution, and extinction of a race, which places him in a position equal to Hungarrda (22). The idea that a person can view the rise and fall of an entire race without the constraints of time is a notion that Judeo-Christian doctrine reserves for God, its supreme creator. He then watches a new race emerge in the form of half-humans with a mixture of animal and human body parts (22). These creatures are similar to the creatures of Greek mythology, and it is unknown whether or not they share any origins. The narrator then connects to a certain creature that also feels their connection, and it comes to talk to him (22). This creature tells him the “secret code of initiation. The origin and adoption of totemism and its laws that marriage custom must obey” (22). This is very similar to the Judeo-Christian stories of their prophets such as Jesus and Moses speaking to God. However, what separates the two spiritualities is that the Aboriginal notion of the Dream Time is less hierarchical than that of Judeo-Christian beliefs. As the “being” explains to the narrator that he must relay this story to his neighboring tribes, he says that his word “is the word of Hungarrda, the great prophet who came out of the slimy sea, the Land of Mist” (22). This hierarchy is interesting because this “being” doesn’t identify himself as Hungarrda, but it is implied that he is not Hungarrda because he refers to Hungarrda in the third person. Also, at no point in the story does the speaker identify himself as a prophet because he has this interaction with the Dream Time. This important lack of hierarchy is reflected in the idea that everything has a spirit, and it appears in almost all Aboriginal literature. It also helps us understand why Aborigines cannot agree with the western need for everything to be hierarchical.

David Uniapon’s translation of their oral history preserved their culture, but since he was only attempting to recreate the informative stories of his culture, he was confined mostly to a narrative style of writing. Other writers have incorporated some of these themes in their writing.
as a way of keeping their voices unique and insightful but still retaining a strong message of their
own—something Uniapon often fell short of. Building upon Uniapon’s work, Oodgeroo
Noonuccal, the first Aboriginal poet, published in 1964, uses the Dream Time as a way of
embracing her heritage when she writes out against the modern society of Australia (Heiss and
Minter 40). She paved the way for the rest of the literary movement that followed. Her writing is
worth literary merit as well as political merit. She makes it a focus of her poetry that the Dream
Time is in danger of being lost, something she is attempting to preserve much like Uniapon.

Adam Shoemaker explains that, “In some ways, Australians are more occupied with their own
past than they have ever been at any other stage in their history” (127). Shoemaker is referring to
the loss of their history and culture; since their people
are almost extinct, there is a general
consensus among them to attempt to preserve what they have left.

Noonuccal’s poem, “The Past,” illustrates her use of Dream Time style and voice in a
way that combines her concern for the preservation of her culture and her discomfort with
modern Australian society. The first line of the poem is direct, as much of Noonuccal’s poetry
is, stating, “Let no one say the past is dead” (1). The past, as Shoemaker said, is something many
writers are concerned with. As the poem continues, the poet says that she is “Haunted by tribal
memories,” and she continues to say that her present is “accidental” (3-4). These lines emphasize
the impact and importance of the Dream Time on her as a writer. She feels connected to her
tribal past to the extent that she believes her present existence is “accidental,” as if she was not
meant for the present. She continues with a powerful statement: “[my] long making/ Is so much
of the past” (5-6). This concept that she is connected to her culture in a timeless way, that her

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1 See full poem in Appendix.

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identity has been a work in progress. This connects directly to the story of Hungarrda when the speaker sees the beings waiting to be born for centuries in the Gulf of Time.

The next stanza opens with the poet sitting in “Suburbia” with modern luxuries like an “electric heater” and an “easy chair” (7-8). The contrast between the first stanza of longing for the past and the beginning of the second stanza referring to modern technology reflect the poet’s disdain for modernity, so that she actually falls into a “dream” in line nine. The “dream” then carries her back to the “bush” with her people sitting around campfires (10-12). This dream is much like the speaker’s dream from the story of Hungarrda. The poet continues to personify nature by saying, “The tall surrounding trees that stir in the wind/ Making their own music./Soft cries of the night coming to us, there/ Where we are one with all old Nature’s lives/ Known and unknown,/ In scenes where we belong but have now forsaken” (15-20). These lines, like lines from “Hungarrda,” personify nature in a way that is different from canonical western literature because the poet transcends the theme of humans vs. nature. She embraces nature as her equal when she says “we are all one,” and she continues to express that with her people/nature is where she “belong[s]” (18, 20). The poet then returns to the initial lines of the stanza, referring the reader back to modernity, saying, “Deep chair and electric radiator/ Are but since yesterday” (21-22). This section of the poem is particularly different from the rest of the poem because she changes the tense of her expression of modernity by saying, “Are but since yesterday” instead of using “Tonight” again from line seven (22). She explicates that modernity is young compared to her culture, emphasizing that is only “since yesterday” (22). What follows is a direct and powerful statement from the poet: “But a thousand camp fires in the forest/ Are in my blood./ Let none tell me the past is wholly gone. Now is so small a part of time, so small a part/ Of all the race years that have moulded me” (23-27). Noonuccal’s voice in this passage speaks directly to 2012 North Hall Prize Honorable Mention, Mansfield University of Pennsylvania
and from her people, embracing the timelessness of her culture and reacting to the western notion of “carpe diem,” where we feel like we must live in the present and only care about the present.

Noonuccal’s style is often direct, something she is criticized for, but she does this so that her readers have an understanding of her determination to save her culture (Shoemaker 182-184). At first, critics were classifying her poetry as “Propagandistic” in nature, but Shoemaker cites the reason for this, saying, “poetry which was critical of White Australian society was invalidated because it did not conform to a limited conception of the ‘permissible’ forms of that society’s literature” (Shoemaker 182-184). The poem “The Past” isn’t as critical of White Australian society as some of her other poetry is; however, it does point out the difference between the two cultures’ sense of time. Poems like “Colour Bar” attack White Australian society with fierce, undermining assertions. “Colour Bar” opens with a modernistic sense of racism because the men in the first lines are, “…vile men [that] jeer because my skin is brown/ This I live down” (1-2). The poet emphasizes that this does not affect her, “But when a child comes home in tears,/ Fierce anger sears” (3-4). She is reacting to the treatment of her race by assumedly White men, and she continues to become more vibrant with her counter-attack to these men. She continues to call these men “moron[s],” and “medieval,” and eventually a “colour-baiting clod” (5-9). She progressively degrades the men of her poem until she reaches the word “clod,” which implies dirt (9). Line ten changes the target of her “Fierce anger” because she says that these men blame God for their behavior (4,10). She then quotes the Bible, saying, everyone is made equal and that everyone is loved by God (11-12). The climax of the poem follows: “As long as brothers banned from brotherhood/ You still exclude,/ The Christianity you hold so high/ Is but a lie./ Justice a cant of hypocrites, content/ With precedent” (14-19). These lines are so vivid and powerful; the idea of turning Christain doctrine back on those who preach it is often the approach of secular 2012 North Hall Prize Honorable Mention, Mansfield University of Pennsylvania
writers. However, the poem is personal to the poet, and she cites segregation and hypocrisy in the seventh and ninth couplets as the reason for her disdain towards Christianity. She expresses that Christians do not understand the concept of Justice; instead, it is only a word to them and not an action. Oodgeroo Noonuccal’s voice as a poet is enhanced by her use of the Dream Time to aid her in her preservation of culture, as well as support her claims against the oppressive, White Australian society.

Aboriginal literature is a unique form of English literature; it is young and ancient in the same breath. David Uniapon’s first publication and Oodgeroo Noonuccal’s first publication were the parents of modern Aboriginal Literature. These writers gave birth to a genre that grew more in fifty years than any other genre has ever developed. A culture almost as old as the earth itself lives and breathes in a way even westerners can feel a deeper connection to. It is this culture that challenges one of the youngest languages on the planet, English, to articulate the hearts and souls of the most ancient people on earth. These writers, in their efforts to preserve their ethos, broke all the physical rules of western literature to create something that will always be called Aboriginal.
Works Cited


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Appendix

“The Past”

Let no one say the past is dead.
The past is all about us and within.
Haunted by tribal memories, I know
This little now, this accidental present
Is not the all of me, whose long making
Is so much of the past.

Tonight here in suburbia as I sit
In easy chair before electric heater,
Warmed by the red glow, I fall into dream:
I am away
At the camp fire in the bush, among

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My own people, sitting on the ground,
   No walls around me,
   The stars over me,
   The tall surrounding trees that stir in the wind
   Making their own music,
   Soft cries of the night coming to us, there
   Where we are one with all old Nature's lives
      Known and unknown,
   In scenes where we belong but have now forsaken.
      Deep chair and electric radiator
      Are but since yesterday,
      But a thousand camp fires in the forest
      Are in my blood.
   Let none tell me the past is wholly gone.
   Now is so small a part of time, so small a part
   Of all the race years that have moulded me.