

BLACK WORDS
WHITE PAGE

ABORIGINAL LITERATURE 1929–1988

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Adam Shoemaker



THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY

E P R E S S



Published by ANU E Press
The Australian National University
Canberra ACT 0200, Australia
Email: anuepress@anu.edu.au
Web: <http://epress.anu.edu.au>
Previously published by University of Queensland Press
Box 42, St Lucia, Queensland 4067, Australia

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry

Black Words White Page

Shoemaker, Adam, 1957- .
Black words white page: Aboriginal literature 1929–1988.

New ed.
Bibliography.
Includes index.
ISBN 0 9751229 5 9
ISBN 0 9751229 6 7 (Online)

1. Australian literature – Aboriginal authors – History and criticism. 2. Australian literature – 20th century – History and criticism. I. Title.

A820.989915

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All electronic versions prepared by UIN, Melbourne
Cover design by Brendon McKinley with an illustration by William Sandy,
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The Australian National University Art Collection

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*To Johanna Dykgraaf,
for her time and care*

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Preface to the 2004 Edition

When I first arrived at the English Department of The Australian National University in 1980 I had little idea what lay ahead.

The facts were these: I had been very fortunate to receive a Commonwealth Scholarship in the field of 'Comparative Commonwealth Literature'. I knew that I had been moved and fascinated by race relations (defined in literary and postcolonial terms) during my first degree at Queen's University in Ontario. I also had a passionate interest in writing about, and by, aboriginal peoples. I was convinced that this literature was of crucial socio-political importance – but I had only a vague idea how the shape or trajectory of that interest would be played out in Australia.

One meeting with my supervisor, Bob Brissenden, changed everything. Bob, who was then Reader in English at ANU, was not only an accomplished poet and academic but was also Chair of the Literature Board of the Australia Council. Even more: he was a person of inspiration. When we sat down for the first time in his office, Bob produced a slim Currency Press volume in paperback and offered it to me. It was the play *The Cake Man* by Robert J. Merritt. He simply said, 'I think you should read this. And why don't you see if there is anything else out there like it?'

That challenge was enough. In the course of the next four years I did exactly as he proposed. In the process, I discovered – in person – the talent of scores of Indigenous Australian authors, writing in all genres and in every state and territory. It was a revelation. At the same time, I was amazed to find how little-known these writers were in the literary world, in academia and in the broader arts community, let alone in Australian society as a whole. When I met someone for the first time and said I was researching 'the nature and history of Australian

Aboriginal writers' I was often met with total silence – or else the quip 'it would have to be a pretty short thesis then, wouldn't it?'

That disparaging observation was not true then – nor had it been for a number of years. Nevertheless, the need to address this public misconception became a strong motivation for the research I was pursuing. And there was no doubt that I had come to a place, and come at a time, when it was possible to enter into a different frame of reference with respect to Indigenous culture.

Take the year 1981, for example. In that year, Sir Zelman Cowan, the then Governor-General, opened the World Council of Indigenous Peoples' (WCIP) Third General Assembly – in Canberra, at ANU. One of the most memorable aspects of the assembly for me was that it was there that I met Kevin Gilbert for the first time, as well as delegates from New Zealand, Japan, Finland, North and South America. There is no doubt that this experience influenced both the theoretical underpinnings of my work as well as my convictions concerning the 'Fourth World' commonalities shared by Indigenous minorities around the globe. It also reinforced my academic belief that publishing was itself a powerful expression of the political; the socio-cultural project.

There could have been no more relevant gathering than the WCIP assembly – except, perhaps, for the annual Australian National Playwrights' Conferences (held at ANU Arts Centre). Throughout the 1980s, the playwrights' conference turned its attention even more seriously to the workshopping and showcasing of new Indigenous Australian dramatic works; this at a time when Jack Davis was at the height of his powers on the stage. Many Indigenous playwrights – such as Richard Whalley, Eva Johnson and (later) John Harding – saw their works transformed by this process; the national conference undoubtedly played a vital role in this area.

There is no question, then, that my timing was very fortunate. Equally important was the strong encouragement I received for my project from prominent members of the Indigenous community – in particular, from Oodgeroo and Jack Davis. At the same time, I was strongly influenced by the ground-shifting work of Stephen Muecke in the area of oral literature or 'verbal art'.

For all of these reasons, *Black Words White Page* was always much more than a doctoral project; it became a highly personal one. The work is very much one of its time; a 'door opening' study rather than being – in any sense – a definitive treatment. I always assumed that it would be

superseded in various ways by the work of others – especially by Black Australian critics – and this has proven to be the case.

For that reason, I have always resisted the concept of issuing an updated, completely re-written edition of this book. I believe that *Black Words White Page* captured a certain period in Australian social and literary history: a time when writers festivals were only just beginning to consider a possible role for Indigenous authors; when there were no dedicated literary prizes for Aboriginal writers and their works; when the teaching of Aboriginal writing courses was still in its infancy; when there were few significant Indigenous Australian stage companies, film producers or publishers.

Since the early 1980s that situation has changed out of sight. There have been scores of achievements by Indigenous Australian artists in every genre, in every city, in every way: the winning of the Miles Franklin Award in the year 2000 by Kim Scott for his novel, *Benang*; the influential work of Josie Douglas at IAD Press in Alice Springs and the achievements of Magabala Books in Broome; the important contributions of Yirra Yaakin, Kooemba Jdarra, Ilbjerri and other Indigenous theatre companies; the ‘new ground’ films of Tracey Moffatt, Rachel Perkins, Darlene Johnson and Frances Peters-Little. There is arguably no area of the literary or visual arts in which Indigenous Australians have not made the most significant contribution to Australian culture *as a whole* over the past 15 years.

No single book could have done this cultural revolution justice; certainly not mine. In fact, the most relevant question for any cultural critic to answer is ‘Why did it take until the last two decades of the twentieth century for this recognition to occur, when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander talent has always been so prodigious?’

It is so clear that it is Aboriginal and Islander people who have captured this new cultural space themselves and, especially over the past decade, it has been Indigenous women who have stood out above all others with their achievements. Whether it was Emily Kame Kngwarreye in painting, the one-woman shows of Leah Purcell (*Box the Pony*) and Josie Ningali Lawford (*Ningali*); the wide-ranging film, television and stage successes of Deborah Mailman; the significant writings and national reconciliation work of Jackie Huggins; the novels of Melissa Lucashenko, Alexis Wright and Vivienne Clevelin; the plays of Cathy Craigie, Jane Harrison, Kamarra Bell-Wyke, Pauline Whyman and Maryanne Sam; the cultural and literary criticism of

Anita Heiss¹ or the curatorial and visual arts achievements of Brenda Croft and Margo Neale, it is women who are setting the pace, breaking down the barriers and changing the whole dimension of Indigenous arts.

This is not to deny the continuing role of Indigenous men, but it is undeniable that the gender dimension of 'strong sisters' is central to so many projects today.

Meanwhile, the international impact of Indigenous writing has been far greater than anyone could have imagined. From Delhi to Dubai to Denmark, Indigenous Australian literature has been promoted and debated at conferences, colloquia and current affairs meetings. The theoretical and practical impact of such writings is still a topic of fascination, especially in Western Europe and in North America. Translations continue apace. Plays regularly have seasons in London. Critics (both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) keep on writing, and now have begun to publish entire monographs on specific genres of Indigenous literature². So much that seemed only distantly possible in the mid-1980s has now been achieved.

One aspect of *Black Words White Page* which I believe has not dated is its oral dimension – its reproduction of the words of more than 30 Indigenous Australian authors and spokespeople, from Gerry Bostock and Charles Perkins to Maureen Watson and Leila Rankine. While the political situation has changed, their words and concerns are assuredly as relevant today as they were 15 years ago. So, even if the text of this book has not been revised, I hope it will still be of use; perhaps it may prove to be even *more* useful as a work which remains all 'of a piece' and has not attempted to bridge an unbridgeable gap between the decades.

Adam Shoemaker
Canberra, March 2004

¹ Anita M Heiss's *Dhuuluu-Yala: To Talk Straight*, Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2003, is one of the most significant recent books of criticism regarding the publishing of Indigenous literature worldwide.

² See, for example, Maryrose Casey's *Creating Frames: Contemporary Indigenous Theatre*, St Lucia: UQP, 2004.

Acknowledgments

Every writing project starts with an idea and ends with a sigh of relief. *Black Words White Page* is no exception.

In this case the original idea was especially important since the subject had never really been explored in depth. For his suggestion that I should research Aboriginal literature I will always be indebted to Bob Brissenden, former Reader in English at The Australian National University.

Two of my first interviewees have become both friends and collaborators on other projects. Mudrooroo Narogin (formerly Colin Johnson) and Jack Davis are two of the many Black Australian authors whose talent and openness have made this book possible. I would also like to offer special thanks to Mona Tur, Cliff Watego, Maureen Watson and Archie Weller for their help.

Many non-Aboriginal individuals have encouraged my work in its growth from research to publication: Livio Dobrez, Johanna Dykgraaf, Tony Hassall, Campbell Macknight, Stephen Muecke and Craig Munro have all played an important role. The University of Queensland Press has been supportive throughout, and especially Clare Forster. I also owe thanks to Barry Maher and Miguel Peirano for their computing and typesetting expertise.

Although this manuscript was completely revised and updated in 1987-88 I cannot claim that it is totally comprehensive or up-to-date. Black Australian writing – like Aboriginal politics – is changing and expanding so rapidly that each study becomes like a frame frozen in a point of time.

It is my hope that by providing a socio-historical context for Black Australian literature I have given the subject some of the depth of attention – and respect – it deserves. In this sense the most important

acknowledgment will be public recognition that Aboriginal voices tell the unique and vital story of Australia's Fourth World.