

BlackWords: Celebrating the New Australian Literature

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Introduction

The last 40 years have seen a steady rise in the volume of Aboriginal writing published as authors across genres write stories that reflect not only the diversity of who we are today, but also demonstrate the skills we have collectively and individually honed over time. This paper looks at writing and publishing over the past decade (2005-2014) and explores the resources and milieu around Indigenous authored and controlled activities during the period.

Aboriginal people, along with Torres Strait Islanders, are collectively categorised as the Indigenous peoples of Australia. At the point of first contact there were approximately 700 different Aboriginal nations and languages across the continent, with an estimated population of 750,000. According to population statistics from the most recent census in 2011 the Indigenous population was 669,900 people or 3% of the overall Australian population.

Considering the size of the population and the relatively short history of our participation in the writing and publishing industries, there is much to celebrate in what our writers, publishers and editors have achieved in the past decade.

Aboriginal Literature

Defining Aboriginal literature can be difficult as, together, writing and storytelling serve many purposes. Our writing records our 'truths' about history up until the present day. Our books function as tools for reconciliation allowing non-Indigenous Australians to engage with us in a non-challenging and non-confrontational way. Our writing provides a means of self-representation in Australian and world literature, and assists readers to understand the diversity of our identities in the 21st century. Much of our writing challenges subjective and often negative media stereotypes and interpretations of our lives as Australians and as human beings. In this way, our literature has become an important resource in assisting teachers to embed Indigenous perspectives into the educational curricular around the country.

Our writers, like other artists, showcase the diversity of our many communities and cultures today. With that in mind, it's important to look at our demographics because where we live often influences what our stories are about, especially when talking about place and connection to country.

The development of our literature is currently propelled and supported by editing and publishing initiatives such as the black+write program at the State Library of Queensland, which has mentored both editors and writers to produce new publications since 2011, and the Laguna Bay Press and Oxford University Press *Yarning Strong* series.

Success across genres 2005-2014

When looking at Indigenous fiction writing over the last decade an exciting story emerges. Upwards of 90 adult novels by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writers have been published or republished in the period. These include award-winning authors such as Melissa Lucashenko (*Mullumbimby*, UQP, 2013), Alexis Wright (*Carpentaria*, Giramondo, 2006 and *The Swan Book*, Giramondo, 2013), Kim Scott (*That Deadman Dance*, Picador, 2010), Tony

Birch (*Blood*, 2011) Larissa Behrendt (*Home*, UQP, 2004 and *Legacy*, UQP, 2009), Terri Janke (*Butterfly Song*, Penguin, 2005) Nicole Watson (*The Boundary*, UQP, 2009) and Fabienne Bayet (*Watershed*, IAD Press, 2005) to name a few.

My own publications have broken new ground in the commercial fiction area with five novels in seven years; *Not Meeting Mr Right* (Random House, 2007), *Avoiding Mr Right* (Random House, 2008), *Manhattan Dreaming* (Random House, 2010), *Paris Dreaming* (Random House, 2011) and *Tiddas* (Simon & Schuster, 2014)

At the time of writing, BlackWords listed more than 1,700 separately published works (i.e. books, plays, films, etc.) appearing in the past decade across all forms, of over 8,000 individual works. These include, to name a few, more than 700 works for children and young people; more than 100 collections of poetry; and at least 180 works of biography and autobiography. In terms of works for children – including fiction, picture books, prose, poetry, and dreaming stories – there are over 1000 individual works associated with 600 people and/or organisations.

Successful writing for young people

The list of young adult novels has developed strongly over the past decade with recent additions including the fantasy “Tribe series” by Ambelin Kwaymullina, *The Interrogation of Ashala Wolf* (Walker Books, 2012) *The Disappearance of Ember Crow*, (2013) and *The Foretelling of Georgie Spider* (2015). These join the novel by Jared Thomas (*Calypso Summer*, Magabala Books, 2014), Teagan Chilcott (*Rise of the Fallen*, Magabala Books, 2013), and Sue McPherson (*Grace Beside Me*, Magabala Books, 2012).

Bruce Pascoe – former long-time editor of *Australian Short Stories* – took out the 2013 Prime Minister's Literary Award for his YA novel *Fog A Dox* (Magabala Books, 2012). While Ali Cobby Eckermann's verse novel *Ruby Moonlight* a novel of the impact of colonisation in mid-north south Australia around 1880 (Magabala Books, 2012) won the 2013 NSW Premier's Literary Awards Book of the Year and the Kenneth Slessor Prize for Poetry. *Ruby Moonlight* also won the 2012 Deadly Award for Outstanding Achievement in Literature.

Recently published novels for primary school readers includes the *Yarning Strong* series – focussing on urban Indigenous stories that break down stereotypes and are designed for an educational market. The first series for upper primary students was released in 2011 and includes 12 short novels and four graphic novels. The series also comes with an anthology covering four central themes: land, law, family and identity. The second series targeting lower primary was released in 2014 with the same key themes.

Aboriginal-authored children's books are generally not only beautifully illustrated works, but the genre can also make a powerful educational impact on the teaching and understanding of Australian history and contemporary social issues.

History and contemporary issues have their personal dimensions. In 2012 Australia appointed its first Children's Literature Laureates in author and storyteller Boori Monty Pryor and non-Indigenous illustrator Alison Lester. Boori Pryor is a descendant of the Kungganji and Birrigubba people of North Queensland. He has worked in the film and television industry and also theatre-in-education. He is best known as a storyteller, travelling widely to introduce his culture to young Australians. In collaboration with Meme McDonald has published a

series of books based on his life and the stories of his family. His children's book *Shake-A-Leg* (illustrated by the late Jan Omerod) was awarded the Prime Minister's Award for Literature for children's fiction in 2011.

Poetry as protest and for identity

In Aboriginal communities today, particularly with young people, the introduction to writing often comes in the form of poetry, through such literary forms as raps and song lyrics. Poetry currently holds the strongest place and largest list of published works by Aboriginal authors in Australia, with over 3,500 individual works published in the past decade in anthologies, collections, and newspapers like the *Koori Mail* and *National Indigenous Times*.

Poetry attracts Aboriginal writers because the form provides a powerful platform for making political statements succinctly, in lieu of having a voice projected through meaningful but often inaccessible national organisations or government infrastructures, which would normally provide individuals their rightful political voice. It is also a very democratic art form. It's short, can pack a political punch and doesn't have to have the extended literary demands of a novel or other longer work.

Much of the work Aboriginal poets have penned in the past decade can be regarded as political because of the issues they raise. Subjects addressed include: the politics of Aboriginal identity; the enduring impacts of policies of protection and separation on individuals and communities; the consequences of colonisation including dispossession from land; the high rates of Aboriginal incarceration and black deaths in custody; the ongoing grass-roots Reconciliation movement; and, in recent years, the Northern Territory intervention.

Autobiography as the writing of history

The main role of autobiography for Indigenous people is to provide a vehicle for the author to write their own history, to educate and often entertain a wider audience who may have a narrow perspective on Aboriginal Australia. Writing autobiography, biography and memoir is a vital way of retrieving and reclaiming a past that in many parts of Australia has not been either written down or recorded accurately.

Autobiography, in particular, is an important way that older Aboriginal people start writing, empowering them to use (and at times change) the English language: a language that was once used against us, describing us as 'barbaric' and 'savage'.

In the past decade there have been over 300 works of biography published associated with 280 authors. These are either in complete book form or as short works included within anthologies, newspapers, or magazines.

One of the most successful pieces of 'life writing', in terms of sales and coverage, is Lorraine McGee-Sippel's, *Hey Mum – what's a half-caste*, (Magabala Books, 2009). It has been widely reviewed and is available in reprint. Six years on from the first publication, the author is still doing speaking engagements on the work.

The title alone invites discussion as it addresses the contested subject of the meaning of 'half-caste'. Historically, definitions of Aboriginality did not emanate from Aboriginal communities. In general, Aboriginal people or communities have not perpetuated or accepted labels such as, half-caste, quarter-caste, quadroon and so on. In Australia, definitions of

Aboriginality based on blood underpinned the racist notion that Aborigines fathered by white men were more intelligent and indeed more tractable than their 'full-blood' counterparts. Blood-based definitions of Aboriginality were used to justify 'integration' into European society and also underpinned the later and official policy of assimilation. Being defined as 'half-caste' or 'part-Aboriginal' also detracted from the person's Aboriginality, forcing even Aboriginal people to question their own identity.

The issue of identity and belonging is at the heart of Lorraine's book and is a major recurring theme in many Aboriginal works.

Indigenous Publishing

Australia has three main Indigenous publishing houses today, with smaller publishers filling the gaps in the market. These businesses publish across genres for diverse audiences, and excel in their own areas.

Magabala Books, set up in 1988 in Broome, continues to publish culturally rich and beautiful children's books, as well as autobiographies and memoirs like Lorraine McGee-Sippel's, and manuscripts that come through the previously mentioned black+write fellowship program.

Aboriginal Studies Press in Canberra is largely an academic press that, in recent years, is publishing more works by Indigenous academics including Wiradjuri academic, Dr Lawrence Bamblett's, *Our Stories Are Our Survival* (2013), which details stories relevant to Koori's from the Erambie Mission.

The Institute of Aboriginal Development Press (AID) in Alice Springs which focuses on cultural, language and historical texts has, through its imprint Jukurrpa Books, published a few novels but only Fabayenne Bayet-Charlton's *Watershed* (2005) in the last decade.

In recent years the Gold Coast based Keeira Press run by Michael Aird has continued to publish Aboriginal history and culture and art books such as *A Special Kind of Vision: Contemporary Aboriginal Art from the Northern Rivers* (2009).

Other writing projects that focus on publishing works by Indigenous authors includes the Black Ink Press in Townsville. This community-based Indigenous writing, illustrating and publishing project trains and mentors emerging writers and artists in order to create contemporary illustrated books especially for young Indigenous readers.

Mainstream publishing houses like University of Queensland Press (UQP) has its own Black Australian Writers Series established and maintained by the important annual David Unaipon Award. Fremantle Arts Centre Press (FACP), which focuses on writing from Western Australia, is the publishing home of successful authors Sally Morgan and Kim Scott. And on an ad hoc basis, Aboriginal writers are published through mainstream houses like Random House, Penguin, Scholastic and Allen and Unwin.

Professional recognition for our writers

In the past decade Aboriginal authors have taken out the prestigious Miles Franklin Award and trophies in almost every State and Territory Premier's Literary Award. Recent publishing initiatives like the *Yarning Strong* series create opportunities for writers to enter the educational market and to win awards in that sector. Indigenous authors have also won mainstream awards, of course, and while such public recognition is not necessarily why

authors write, industry awards recognise our contribution to Australian literature generally, and our contribution culturally to Australian reading.

UQP established the David Unaipon Award in 1988 to honour the inventor and writer. David Unaipon, who also appears on the Australian fifty-dollar note, was born at the Point McLeay Mission, South Australia, attending the mission school until 1885 when he left to become a servant. Encouraged by others to pursue his interest in philosophy, science and music, Unaipon read widely and became well known for his intellectual capacity and inventions. He spoke regularly at schools and learned societies, and often attended government enquiries.

In the 1920s, he began studying western mythology and collecting his own people's myths and legends. He wrote for Sydney's *Daily Telegraph* from 1924, and began publishing compilations of his myths. He is considered to be the first Indigenous Australian author, publishing Aboriginal legends in the 1920s. Without permission, the publisher Angus and Robertson sold the copyright of the stories to William Ramsay Smith who published *Myths and Legends of the Australian Aboriginals* (1930) without acknowledging Unaipon. Smith's appropriated versions of some of Unaipon's stories was published as late as 1984 as *Australian Legends* with notes in Japanese.

Finally, in the 1990s, Unaipon's original manuscript of Aboriginal legends was edited by Stephen Meucke and Adam Shoemaker and published as *Legendary Tales of the Australian Aborigines* (MUP, 2001). It adopted his original title and acknowledging Unaipon's authorship.

David Unaipon was chosen as one of 150 great South Australians by a panel senior writers from *The Advertiser* to celebrate the newspaper's 150th Anniversary in 2008.

UQP's annual David Unaipon Award is for an unpublished manuscript by emerging authors and includes prize money and a publishing contract. The past decade has seen the award help establish new writing careers with the publication of the following titles through UQP's Black Australian Writers Series:

- 2014: *It's Not Just Black and White*, Lesley & Tammy Williams (novel)
- 2013: *Heat and Light* by Ellen van Neerven-Currie (novel)
- 2012: *Story* by Siv Parker (novel)
- 2011: *Mazin Grace* by Dylan Coleman (novel)
- 2010: *Purple Threads* by Jeanine Leanne (short stories)
- 2009: *The Boundary* by Nicole Watson (novel)
- 2008: *Every Secret Thing* by Marie Munkara (novel)
- 2007: *Skin Painting*, Elizabeth Eileen Hodgson (poetry)
- 2006: *Me, Antman, and Fleabag* by Gayle Kennedy (novel)
- 2005: *Anonymous Premonition* by Yvette Holt (poetry)

The list of winners in the past decade makes a strong statement about the role women writers are playing in storytelling. Added to this is the success of writers like Melissa Lucashenko and Alexis Wright, both long-listed for the Stella Prize and the Miles Franklin Award, as well as Ellen van Neerven who was shortlisted for the Stella Prize and Longlisted for the Dobbie Literary Award.

The strength of such writing is that these authors combine literary craft with their own

cultural stories, providing unique perspectives to challenge the reader and makes them see Australia through different eyes.

One of the most prestigious Indigenous Art Awards in Australia is the Red Ochre Lifetime Achievement Award. Presented by the Australia Council for the Arts in 2008, it was given to the now late Doris Pilkington – author of *Follow the Rabbit Proof Fence*. She was also awarded an Order of Australia – something that few Australian authors have been honoured with.

International language translations

Aboriginal writing is not only appreciated nationally but, internationally, the interest in and desire to engage with Aboriginal Australia grows. Our novels, our poems and life stories are being translated into foreign languages. Over the past ten years the following complete works are among those that have received international translations:

- French: *Butterfly Song* (2009), *Carpentaria* (2009) *Murder in Utopia* (2007), *First Australians: An Illustrated History* (2012)
- Italian – *Heartsick for Country: Stories of love, spirit and creation* (2008), *Carpentaria* (2008), *Home* (2008)
- German: *Aunty Rita* (2010)
- Greek: *Women of the Sun* (2008)
- Chinese: *Sam's Bush Journey* (2009)
- Polish: *Carpentaria* (2009)

Perhaps the most translated work is Doris Pilkington's *Follow the Rabbit Proof Fence*. In the past decade it has appeared in Italian (2004), Swedish (2005), and Slovenian (2008), having previously been translated into Chinese, Turkish, German, Dutch, French and Japanese.

My own historical novel on the Stolen Generations *Who Am I? The Diary of Mary Talence, Sydney 1937*, first published by Scholastic in 2001, has been translated into Spanish (2005), French (2008) Farsi (2009), and Mandarin – with the foreword written by former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd.

Indigenous language translations

As part of the process of improving the appalling literacy rates in remote Indigenous communities in Australia, the Indigenous Literacy Foundation has published 37 books as part of its community literacy projects.

These books, many of which have been written by children, recognise the importance of community stories, respond to requests from community, and have positive literacy outcomes. There are two distinct categories of books that the ILF has been involved in publishing. These include stories written by children and educational book resources written in consultation with community members.

Twenty-two of the ILF's published books are written in nine Indigenous languages and English (dual language), and another five books include key words in a first language. In 2014 the ILF was working on publishing another three books in the Ngaanyatjarra Aboriginal Language (Wharburton).

Other language-publishing projects include the Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Project (WNLSP) which has Miles Franklin Award winner Kim Scott working with the local Noongar mob. Two titles, *Mamang* (2011) and *Noongar Mambara Bakitj* (2011) were completed after much community collaboration. With a responsibility to a Noongar audience in mind, both stories were first told to, and recorded by, linguist Gerhardt Laves at Albany, Western Australia, around 1931.

The story of *Mamang* as told by Freddie Winmar to Laves, and *Noongar Mambara Bakitj* - first shared by Rob Roberts with the linguist - were both workshopped in a series of community meetings from 2007-2010 which included members of the Roberts, Winmar and Laves families.

Mamang, which means whale, is the story of a Noongar fella who goes for a journey inside the belly of a whale, squeezing the whale's heart and singing all the while, until he arrives at a beautiful sandy beach with a welcoming community. The story, re-told in English and Noongar by Kim Scott and Irish Woods and the WNLSP, is vividly illustrated with artwork by Jeffrey Farmer, Helen Nelly and Rome Winmar

In 2013 One Day Hill published *Vullah Vunnah Nah: A Gunditjmara Lullaby* written and illustrated by Patricia Clarke. *Vullah Vunnah Nah* is an ancient Gunditjmara song about a rainbow and is presented as a brightly coloured book with accompanying CD for all to enjoy.

Support for Indigenous literary production

In 2002 the Australia Council for the Arts released protocol guides to assist artists and arts administrators in developing respectful and ethical projects and project methodologies. In 2007 the fully revised second edition went further to help Australians better understand how to use Indigenous cultural material appropriately in literature.

Written by Indigenous Intellectual Property Lawyer and novelist Terri Janke, the nine principles included in the guides are: respect; Indigenous control; communication, consultation and consent; Interpretation, integrity and authenticity; secrecy and confidentiality; attribution and copyright; Proper returns and royalties; continuing cultures; and recognition and protection. The principles are accompanied by case studies that help both Aboriginal artists and those being 'researched' or 'recorded' to know their rights, and anyone working with Indigenous heritage and culture to know their responsibilities.

While Indigenous control of projects is important, collaborations between communities and those who have particular industry skills (such as writing and painting for publication) are essential in ensuring Aboriginal stories are prepared for general audience exposure. The Australia Council guide, *Protocols for producing Indigenous Australian Literature*, lists "communication, consultation and consent" (11) as integral to producing the best Aboriginal literature possible. Importantly, even with such collaborations, copyright should rest with the Aboriginal parties — individuals or organisations.

BlackWords: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Writers and Storytellers

(www.austlit.edu.au/BlackWords)

BlackWords is an AustLit supported project that is the only one of its kind in the world. There are currently over 5,600 individual authors, storytellers and Indigenous organisation

included in BlackWords with rich information about their lives, publishing and other activities.

On BlackWords you'll find:

- Biographical records for Indigenous writers and storytellers including, where known, their Indigenous heritages. Information on BlackWords is derived from the public domain and that provided to AustLit by the authors or their families.
- Bibliographical records for all known Indigenous-authored works, published and performed.
- Information about Indigenous organisations such as publishers, theatre groups and other cultural groups. For example you can search for Aboriginal Studies Press, Magabala Books, IAD Press, Black Ink Press and so on and find out about them and the works they have published. There are also links to other Black writing sites internationally.
- Critical articles on a range of relevant subjects and excerpts from scholarly works on a wide array of topics.
- A [Calendar of Events](#) tracing key historical moments since 1788 until the present day. For example you can go to the Calendar and click on something as simple as 'Cathy Freeman winning gold at the Sydney Olympics' and you will find a pathway to works on the subject and to Cathy's biographical record.
- Information trails and exhibitions supporting teaching, information discovery, and knowledge building around a variety of subject areas.
- BlackWords also provides links to other sites and resources for study, teaching and general interest.

Macquarie PEN anthology

Finally, one of the greatest achievements in Aboriginal publishing in the past decade has been the groundbreaking collection titled the *Macquarie PEN Anthology of Aboriginal Literature* (Allen and Unwin, 2008). The *Anthology* includes works that could perhaps be considered 'Aboriginal classics' and the diversity of material, because of the broad definition of 'literature' the editors chose, means a greater exposure of Aboriginal voices. This is particularly useful in the classroom. It also means that many of our 'out of print' works are back in circulation. The *Anthology* has since been published in North America by McGill-Queens, and as an e-book in 2014. Much of what appears in this anthology is also included in the much broader *Macquarie PEN Anthology of Australian Literature*.

The *Macquarie PEN Anthology* is a nationally and internationally significant literature project, because it is the first fully representative anthology of Australian Aboriginal writing from the late 18th century to the present. The works chronicled in *The Macquarie PEN Anthology of Aboriginal Literature* demonstrate not only the ongoing suffering caused by dispossession, but also the resilience of Aboriginal people across the country, and the hope and joy in our lives. Included are selected pieces of literature, poetry, drama, letters, autobiography, radio broadcast and political statements —beginning with a 1796 letter by Bennelong (the first known text in the English language by an Aboriginal author) and culminating in the most recently published writing, from Tara June Winch's *Swallow the Air* (2003).

The rise of Aboriginal writing in recent years has taken place during a widespread and vigorous renewal in Aboriginal culture, which has seen the production of highly significant works that appeal to readers around the world.

A central motivation for the *Macquarie PEN Anthology* is to encourage the study of Aboriginal literature in schools and provide a much-needed text to which teachers and parents can refer, to expose Indigenous children to their own literary heritage, and non-Indigenous children to that same heritage. An online teacher's guide is available and makes it really easy for teachers to incorporate it into the classroom as well.

The *Anthology* is ordered chronologically to show the evolution of Aboriginal writing and to give the historical, political and cultural landscape of Australia over time from the perspectives of the 81 Aboriginal contributors. Those perspectives have common themes and the *Anthology* itself is a highly political publication because the arts provide the most 'accessible' platforms we have in Australia. The common themes include: the struggle against assimilation, the impact of protection and stolen generations, the cry for human rights, and equal rights with other Australians

The *Anthology* gives access to some of the most political writing by Aboriginal people. It includes:

- William Cooper's Petition to the King in 1933 that received 1,814 signatures calling for Aboriginal representation in Federal Parliament;
- The 1938 Aborigines Progressive Association's Manifesto 'Aborigines Claim Citizenship Rights' that shows the injustice and inequities for Indigenous Australia, which weren't actioned until 1967 and in some areas, haven't been realised at all;
- The Yirrkala Bark Petition of 1963 – typed on paper in Yolgnu and English and glued to sheet of stringybark bordered by paintings that express Yirrkala law. This represents the first recognition in Australian Parliament of Aboriginal language and culture in Australian law and relates to 390 square kilometers of Yirrkala land leased, without permission, to a bauxite mining company by then Prime Minister Robert Menzies;
- Vincent Lingiari's Gurindji Petition related to the walk off of Aboriginal workers from the Wave Hill station in 1966 calling for better pay and conditions and equality for Aboriginal workers; and,
- The 1988 Barrunga Statement by Galawrrury Yunipingu calling for rights to land, sites, and recognition of customary law.

Conclusion

In launching the Macquarie PEN Anthology, Hetti Perkins, curator of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art at the Art Gallery of NSW, and daughter of the late Charlie Perkins, who lead the freedom rides through NSW in 1965, celebrated Aboriginal literature in this way:

The panoramic perspective of the Aboriginal experience that is the Macquarie PEN Anthology of Aboriginal Literature will shed light on our history and our contemporary realities, ideas, dreams and memories for a wide reaching audience. It testifies to the fire in our bellies that sustained us over millennia and has especially in the last 200 or so years, and definitely the last decade. Which brings to mind the words of my father, writing in 1968, when he said; 'I, and approximately 250,000

*others like me, claim our ancestry. We are Aboriginal Australians – proud of our country and our race.’ For me, this compilation of voices by ‘others like me’ is a guiding star, by which we can animate the past and navigate the present and forge a path ahead together. In this book, to quote the observations of Jennifer Martiniello on the art of the late cultural activist Emily Ngwarray: ‘I see a light more eternal kindle’.*ⁱ

These ground-breaking, award-winning, and internationally recognised works published over the last decade deserve to be celebrated. Aboriginal writing and publishing is sure to continue to flourish over the next ten years and beyond, further cementing the place of First Nations voices in the Australian literary landscape.

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