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Aboriginality and Writing

Anita Heiss

Kerry Reed-Gilbert, whose poetry in *Black Woman, Black Life* is heavily influenced by her identity, is clear about the role of Aboriginality in writing, saying, 'Aboriginal identity is who we are as writers, as people. We live our lives as the Indigenous people of this land, we write as Indigenous people of this land.'

Jeanie Bell agrees that Aboriginal identity plays a definite role in the way she writes and in the reasons for Aboriginal authors writing,

It [identity] gives you an opportunity to write, to look at your own position and how you feel about yourself and where you see yourself in relation to history, and your community in terms of the bigger picture. But it also reaffirms who you are, and it's a statement to the world of, 'This is who I am and I'm proud of who I am.'

Kenny Laughton says it is important to retain our Aboriginality in our writing, believing that we have a moral obligation to be role models, proving that 'we as Aboriginal people can not only achieve but mix it with the best of them, in any field, be it sport, work or writing.' Finally, Alexis Wright is adamant that she doesn't want her Aboriginality separated from her writing as it is, she says, 'what's producing the writing. Without it I wouldn't be able to write the way I do.'¹

As publisher at FACP, Ray Coffey says the number of autobiographical works, family and community histories by Aboriginal writers is evidence that through personal testimony, there is an obvious attempt to establish and project a sense of Aboriginal identity.²

The concept of Aboriginality is certainly a difficult thing to grasp for contemporary Australians; indeed, sometimes even for Aboriginal people themselves, especially those who have been denied access to family, culture and community due to

¹ Alison Ravenscroft, 'Politics of Exposure: An Interview with Alexis Wright', in *Meridian*, vol. 17, no. 1, p.78.

² Ray Coffey, email to the author, 12 August 1999. All other quotes from Coffey in this chapter are from this source unless otherwise indicated.

Excerpt from:

Anita Heiss, *Dhuuluu-Yala: To Talk Straight*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 2003, pp. 41-43

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government policies of the past. The effects of the differing experiences of Aboriginality, though, are nevertheless evident in writings by Aboriginal people, regardless of genre. The act of writing often becomes more than something creative for some Aboriginal people who seek to use the process as a vehicle for analysing, processing, determining, understanding and asserting their identity. The process of writing also allows individuals, like Sally Morgan for example, to follow their journey of discovering their Aboriginality and document it for their own and other's benefit.

The way in which Aboriginal people have been categorised by race in terms of where they fit into literature is no different to the way in which they have been defined in sports, history, the arts and politics. Although many would like to be regarded and critiqued for their writing, rather than their race, 'Aboriginal author' is also a cementing of identity for the writer, and a categorisation that doesn't offend most Aboriginal writers. Most writers are proud of their identity as well as their ability to write in a profoundly white world, because, in the words of Ruby Langford Ginibi, 'we are reclaiming our history, our heritage, and our identity, and that's very important to our cause.'³

As to whether or not publishers are more wary since the Johnson/Sykes controversies, Ray Coffey, speaking for the FACP, says they probably aren't, 'because we have always been fairly careful.' As a publisher of only Western Australian writers Coffey says it is perhaps easier for them to check on the credentials of writers who present as Aborigines, 'we are perhaps more easily able to determine whether an individual is known and recognised by the local Aboriginal community as being Aboriginal'.

In response to the never-ending questions around whether or not a particular writer is or isn't 'Aboriginal', Bruce Pascoe raised some interesting points at the 1998 Spring Writing Festival, when in the 'Land, Life and Literature' session he asked if Bryce Courtenay was really South African, or just 'jumping on the bandwagon' and whether or not David Malouf was really Lebanese or 'just trying to sell books.'⁴ He taunted the audience with 'I'm surprised you haven't put that question to him because it's a crucial literary concern'.⁵

³ Ruby Langford Ginibi, *The Strength Of Us As Women: Black Women Speak*, Ginninderra Press, Canberra, 2000, p.19.

⁴ Bruce Pascoe, 'Land, Life, Literature', presented at the Spring Writing Festival, Sydney, September 13, 1998.

⁵ *ibid.*

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