

SCHWERPUNKT

Australiens Dynamik in Politik, Wirtschaft, Gesellschaft und Kultur

The Vitality of Aboriginal Culture

Xavier Pons, University of Toulouse-Le Mirail

It is no shattering revelation to say that Aboriginal culture is in strife. Three years ago, Aboriginal leader Pat Dodson warned that Australia might have only 10 years to save the world's oldest living culture from extinction. "The survival issue for the indigenous people in terms of their cultural and spiritual connections, the uniqueness of that, is very much at risk," he said. "And if we don't address it in the next five or 10 years we will lose something that is of great value not only to Australia but for the rest of the world."¹

Viewed from whatever angle, Aboriginal society presents massive and intractable problems. All social indicators confirm the enormous extent of Aboriginal disadvantage—on virtually every measure, Aborigines are at the bottom of the socioeconomic heap. Indigenous Australians have a life expectancy that is shorter than the whites' by a staggering twenty years – they are worse off, in this as in other respects, than other indigenous peoples such as Native Americans, Indigenous Canadians or Maori. Poverty is far more prevalent among them than among non-Indigenous Australians; indeed, Aboriginal Australia, though located within one of the most prosperous countries in the world, is all too often reminiscent of the Third World. Poverty and unemployment are rife, and the low educational attainments of most Aborigines only perpetuate this situation. Remote communities bear the brunt of this and other disadvantages.²

Many Aborigines have no choice but to rely on welfare for their survival, since they have very little to expect from the job market. This creates a dependency which Noel Pearson called a poison, and which gradually erodes Aboriginal dignity and initiative. The resulting loss of pride and purposefulness has a very destructive impact on communities: bored Aborigines turn to alcohol and other drugs to escape from their depressing reality and idle, intoxicated males, deprived of the responsibilities which were theirs in traditional society, become frustrated and take it out on their wives and children, inflicting sometimes horrific injuries. "The reality is that sexual assault and

¹ "The end is nigh, warns Dodson", *The Age*, 24 June 2001.

² cf. D. Jopson, 'Aboriginal children cut off from schools', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 May 2002: Students in nearly seven in 10 of the nation's most remote indigenous communities are 100 kilometres or more from a high school offering classes up to year 12, a report says. More than 500 of these communities, with a total population of more than 40,000, are even more distant - 250 kilometres or more - from the nearest school providing the full six years of secondary education, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics report, released this week.

violence is an epidemic in Aboriginal communities, Winsome Matthews, chairwoman of the NSW Aboriginal Justice Advisory Council, said in 2002.³

All this contributes to the mostly negative image white Australians have of the Aborigines, who appear to be nothing but drunken, violent parasites, incapable of coping with the requirements of modern civilization. This is in a sense a resurgence of the 'doomed race' theory which in the 19th century held that Aboriginal extinction was inevitable. The difference is that today this sense of impending doom is shared by the Aborigines themselves, as witness the speech made in March 2002 by John Ah Kit, the nation's most senior black politician, in which he highlighted

the dysfunction that is endemic through virtually all of our communities, both in towns and the bush. We cannot pretend that a community is functional when half the kids do not go to school because they have been up most of the night coping with drunken parents, or because they themselves have been up all night sniffing petrol.

We cannot imagine that a community is functional when less than one in 10 people can read or write, or where people are too ill through chronic disease or substance abuse to hold onto a job let alone receive training, or where kids are born with illnesses that have largely disappeared from most of the Third World and those who survive into adulthood can be expected to die two decades earlier than their non-indigenous counterparts, or where only 14% of our kids reach Year 12 compared to 80% of their non-indigenous brothers and sisters in the cities and major towns.⁴

Ah Kit went on to evoke the 'downward spiral of despair' that is the lot of so many Aborigines, 'a spiral of being ill before birth, of being poorly fed in childhood, of being deaf at school, of a life without work that will be cut short by a litany of disease and violence. For far too many people, each week that goes by it is not marked with the simple joys of living, but with the need to organise funerals.'⁵

This pessimistic assessment does not apply only to northern Australia. As the *Age* reported in April 2003, 'Four deaths, eight attempted suicides. That's the frightening reality of just one month in South Australia's timelessly beautiful Anangu Pitjantjatjara lands, where every day scores of young Aborigines petrol-sniff their way to hallucinatory madness, brain damage - and early death'.⁶

Nor are future prospects much brighter. A few years ago, Social Justice Commissioner Bill Jonas noted that the sense of urgency and commitment to addressing indigenous over-representation in criminal justice processes has slowly dissipated. Indigenous people have continued to die in custody at high rates in the decade since the Royal Commission, and the average rate of indigenous people in corrections has steadily increased on a national basis since the Royal Commission. Yet in 2001, he went on to say, 'this hardly raises a murmur of discontent let alone outrage among the broader community. These facts either go unnoticed, or perhaps even worse in the age of

³ cf. D. Jopson, 'Black violence and sex assault "is an epidemic"', *ibid.*, 1 March 2002.

⁴ <http://notes.nt.gov.au/lant/hansard/hansard9.nsf/WebbyDate/FDBE38F9A2DA743469256BA0000B7A71>

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ P. DeBelle, 'A Community haunted by death', *The Age*, 20 April 2004.

reconciliation, are simply accepted and not challenged.⁷ The same is true of many other terrible facts of Aboriginal life.

Reconciliation has failed to materialise and PM John Howard remains as unsympathetic as ever to Aboriginal aspirations. The issues of land rights, of recognition of customary law and of a treaty have fallen off the national political agenda. ATSIC, the distinctively Aboriginal political and administrative structure which was to allow Aborigines to manage their own affairs, has long been bogged down in controversies and personal rivalries, to the point of becoming so dysfunctional, so incapable of reflecting the grassroots aspirations of its constituency⁸ that both the Government and the Opposition have concluded that it has to be abolished. A Newspoll survey conducted in June 2002 found that Aboriginal issues ranked at the very bottom of the public's preoccupations, far behind education, health, immigration and even inflation.⁹

Small wonder the conservative thesis which holds up assimilation as the only solution to the Aboriginal question is regaining the ground it had lost to self-determination. Assimilation would spell the end of Aboriginal culture as a distinct component of Australia's cultural landscape. Decades ago, it was defined in the following terms by Paul Hasluck in 1963: "The policy of assimilation means that all Aborigines and part-Aborigines will attain the same manner of living as other Australians and live as members of a single Australian community enjoying the same rights and privileges, accepting the same responsibilities, observing the same customs and influenced by the same beliefs, as other Australians."¹⁰ The assimilation process is far advanced today, as was pointed out by assimilationist ex-Liberal politician Peter Howson: 'Nearly 70 per cent of Aborigines are already married to non-indigenous spouses. With the majority now of mixed descent, more than 70 per cent professing Christianity and few even speaking an indigenous language at home, most Aborigines are now part of the wider community'.¹¹ This is all the more reason to try and save Aboriginal culture from absorption, and ultimately extinction.

The idea that there should be a single Australian community, what Mike Steketee called 'conservative notions of Australia as one nation',¹² denies the Aborigines the right to be different and to assert their cultural specificity. The continuing desire to 'mainstream' them threatens their ethnic identity, and therefore their culture. Aboriginal activists like Michael Mansell assert that there are two nations in Australia, comprising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders on the one hand, and non-indigenous Australians on the other hand. This is a proposition that many whites find unpalatable and which raises thorny political problems. But it is significant of the

⁷ *Social Justice Report 2001*, p.7.

⁸ cf. the pronouncement by indigenous Senator Aden Ridgway that ATSIC is "dead in the water and exists in name only" in Stuart Rintoul, 'Few lament death knell', *The Australian*, 1/4/2004.

⁹ cf. *The Australian*, 7 September 2002.

¹⁰ 'Statement of Policy' presented in statement by leave by the Hon. Paul Hasluck MP, Minister for Territories in the House of Representatives, 14 August 1963.

¹¹ P. Howson, 'Now to really help remote Aborigines', *The Age*, 20 April 2004.

¹² M. Steketee, 'Hawke's vision was starved', *The Australian*, 16 April 2004.

indigenous determination to survive and keep their culture going. Aborigines are not likely to forget that it was the belief that they should become assimilated which fuelled the 'social insanity', as Bishop Bruce Wilson called it,¹³ that was the policy of removing indigenous children from their mothers, thereby creating the Stolen Generation.

The condition of Aboriginal Australia is undoubtedly a depressing one to contemplate. The tribal way of life, respect for the law and customary power structures have all been seriously weakened since the coming of the whites. One would expect this demoralizing situation to have had a very negative impact on indigenous cultural productions. How can artists thrive when their communities are falling to pieces? What can they do apart from recording the misery and the hopelessness?

Against all odds, Aboriginal art—whether literature, painting, music, etc.—has seldom seemed so vibrant, so full of vitality. The fact that Aboriginal culture has survived for some 60,000 years suggests it possesses enormous strength and an unrivalled capacity to endure. Art was always a mainstay of that culture, the embodiment and expression of its vision of man, society and the world. Art was a way of keeping all three going by appropriate celebrations that affirmed the permanence of the Law. Today, much Aboriginal art has become secularised, adapted to a non-indigenous audience. Yet it continues to serve the cause of Aboriginal culture, and its survival. Indigenous cultural and spiritual identities continue to be expressed via song, music, dance, stories etc., so that the latter's purpose has not become fundamentally different. As the ATSIC report on Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property Rights noted, 'For Indigenous peoples, cultural heritage is a living and evolving tradition. Its continued practice is vital to the identity and cultural survival of Indigenous groups.'¹⁴

Perhaps the most notable illustration of the continuing vitality of Aboriginal culture is provided by painting, which effortlessly combines tradition and innovation. Traditional Aboriginal paintings were mostly done on bark, and served ceremonial purposes. Contemporary Aborigines continue to paint on bark but new purposes have been added to the traditional one. As the *Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture* notes, 'bark painting flourishes in northern Australia: it is the basis of a major industry and works are eagerly sought in the contemporary world art market'.¹⁵ Bark paintings also have political purposes, as appears from the 1963 bark petitions from the Yolngu people of Yirrkala, which combine painting and writing. These petitions were the first traditional documents recognised by the Commonwealth Parliament and are thus the documentary recognition of Indigenous people in Australian law. A similar purpose is served by the 1988 Barunga Statement. Written on bark, with the text surrounded by painting by various artists from Arnhem Land and central Australia, it was presented to Prime Minister R.J.L. Hawke and it called for Aboriginal self-management, a national system of land rights, compensation for loss of lands,

¹³ cf. G. Windsor, "'Social insanity' fuelled crusade', *The Australian*, 21 May 1997.

¹⁴ *Our Culture, Our Future*, 1998, p.7.

¹⁵ S. Kleinert & M. Meale (eds), *The Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture*, Melbourne: OUP, 2000, p.535.

respect for Aboriginal identity, an end to discrimination, and the granting of full civil, economic, social and cultural rights.

It would in any case be artificial to try and separate the aesthetic, commercial and spiritual purposes of Aboriginal paintings. As artist Gawirrin Gumana pointed out about his own works,

"These paintings are to tell people here something important. It is to tell them we are cultural people, we are original people, we are living culture. It is to show them we have dance, we have song and we have language.

"I am here to show the people that I have law," he says with emphasis. "I am here to show the people that I have a culture, I have ceremony, I have a land. That is why I bring my paintings."

Gumana doesn't mince words. In many ways, his paintings are deeply religious works. They depict events that took place on the first morning of time, the sacred components reduced to abstract symbol or design, superimposed with straightforward imagery so that outsiders might more easily understand. They document how the ancestors gave the people their language, song and dance. They also trace the topography of the land and show the spirits cradled in the living earth.¹⁶

Most contemporary black artists now paint on canvas. Some continue to use the traditional pigments they find in their natural environment, based on clay, red ochre, charcoal, etc. This is the case of the Gidja painters of the Kimberley, such as Mark Nodea. But many more use Western materials, whether watercolours in the tradition of Albert Namatjira or acrylics. Again, this modernity is in no way incompatible with traditional spiritual purposes. The point is still to assert a continuing Aboriginal identity, no matter how inflected by contemporary developments such as the advent of Christianity or the need for political activism to proclaim and defend Aboriginal rights. The former has resulted in paintings which combine Christian and traditional elements, such as Oscar Namatjira's *The Lord Jesus on the Cross*, where the traditional crucifixion takes place against the background of a central Australian landscape or Jarinyanu David Downs' *Moses Belting the Rock in the Desert*, where traditional Aboriginal representational codes are used to tell the Biblical story. As for political activism, it is the basis of the many mural paintings to be found in urban Aboriginal areas, whose stylistic simplicity does not impair the force of the message.

Many Aboriginal painters have attained celebrity status, and their works are eagerly collected by institutions and individuals the world over. Names like Rover Thomas, Queenie McKenzie, Emily Kame Kngwarreye, Jimmy Pike, Clifford Possum or Johnny Warrangula Tjupurulla have become familiar in Western art circles, and testify to the continuing vitality of Aboriginal art.

Much the same could be said of Aboriginal music, whose original purpose was to accompany traditional ceremonies. Song, the *Oxford Companion* says, 'is one of the primary means by which Aboriginal Australians, of whatever background, express and maintain their identity and culture'.¹⁷ The Aborigines had 'songs for every occasion,

¹⁶ Angela Bennie, 'Barks with bite', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 August 1998.

¹⁷ *Oxford Companion*, op.cit., p.328.

hunting songs, funeral songs, gossip songs and songs of ancestors, landscapes, animals, seasons, myths and Dreamtime legends.'¹⁸ Traditional instruments such as the didgeridoo—'the major musical symbol of Aboriginality', as Karl Neuenfeldt put it¹⁹—have become very popular in Western countries: the 'didge' is a hot tourist item in northern Australia, and many non-indigenous individuals on several continents have learnt to play it (I was more than a little surprised to hear that tuition was available in the town of Albi, near Toulouse).

Contemporary Aboriginal music continues to rely on the traditional instruments, didgeridoo and clapsticks especially. But it has added many western instruments such as drums, keyboards or electric guitars. Aborigines have entered the field of pop music, with bands such as No Fixed Address, Sunrize Band or Warumpi Band. The most popular of them all is no doubt Yothu Yindi, whose early 1990s *Treaty* was the first Aboriginal song to top the national charts. Contemporary Aboriginal music combines traditional rhythms with non-indigenous influences such as rock and reggae, which makes them accessible to a wider public even though the lyrics may be in an Aboriginal tongue. As *Treaty* illustrates, contemporary Aboriginal music often has a political edge to it, and thus participates in the defence of Aboriginal rights and traditions.

It is perhaps where literature is concerned that the development of Aboriginal culture in a society where Western cultural norms and values predominate has been most problematic. Story-telling was an essential feature of traditional Aboriginal culture but this hardly facilitated its expansion into a full-blown body of texts that could be described, in Western terms, as literature. Unlike painters, writers use a medium, language, which is on the face of it more culture-specific than paint, and the genres in which some Aboriginal writers work, such as the novel, appear far removed from indigenous traditions. As a result, cultural compromises that might combine Aboriginality with membership in a predominantly Western culture would seem harder to achieve.

Mudrooroo is no doubt the pre-eminent Aboriginal intellectual to have addressed these issues.²⁰ He stressed the political and cultural importance of literature for the survival of Aboriginal culture: 'I believe we should recapture our history and culture', he wrote, 'and a means of doing this is through literature and art.'²¹ But writing literary works is a challenging task for Aborigines because of the apparent contradiction between authentic Aboriginal culture and Western literary forms. As Mudrooroo said too, 'We have to forge our own novels if we are to write novels, and they should not be placid copies of the too often dreary

¹⁸ http://aboriginalart.com.au/didgeridoo/dig_intro.html

¹⁹ *Oxford Companion*, p.335.

²⁰ Mudrooroo's Aboriginality is in dispute, as is Archie Weller's. There is no scope to debate the issue of what is an authentic Aboriginal identity – I simply want to make the point that Mudrooroo's critical pronouncements are not necessarily invalidated by possible genetic shortcomings.

²¹ C. Johnson [Mudrooroo], 'White forms, Aboriginal contents', in Jack Davis & Bob Hodge (eds.), *Aboriginal Writing Today*, Canberra: Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1985, p. 29.

stuff being produced by white authors in Australia'.²² The solution is to try and negotiate cultural compromises, that is to say write texts that express unquestionable Aboriginality but to which non-Aboriginal readers can relate, texts that are of relevance to both indigenous and non-indigenous readers. As Mudrooroo put it, 'The Aboriginal writer is a Janus-type figure, with one face turned to the past and the other to the future while existing in a postmodern, multicultural Australia in which he or she must fight for cultural space'.²³ In other words, Aboriginal writers must develop cross-cultural strategies, which is easier said than done.

Those strategies include using a kind of English that reflects Aboriginal usage but remains intelligible, bending Western literary genres to suit Aboriginal preoccupations, and borrowing from a variety of literary traditions which reflect preoccupations akin to those of the Aborigines and at the same time are acceptable to a Western readership. More generally, it means using the whites' literary weapons to challenge white culture.

Whether we are talking of Aboriginal poets, novelists or dramatists, the first issue they have to address is that of the English language, which is the language of their former oppressors, the language of those who tried to destroy their culture, and which is in this sense inimical to them, loaded as it is with negative connotations, as Rita Huggins's memories testify: 'My people were made to use English words at Cherbourg rather than our Pitjara language. If we used our own language in front of the authorities we would face punishment and be corrected in the Queen's English. The authorities tried to take away all our tribal ways and to replace them with English ones'.²⁴

How can English be made to express Aboriginal culture and to serve Aboriginal purposes? One solution is to pepper it with Aboriginal words and phrases, thereby embedding an Aboriginal identity in the very heart of the English language text and asserting, in perhaps vestigial form, the survival of Aboriginal culture despite the colonizers' efforts to wipe it out.

Those Aboriginal words can either be translated or not. Translations are usually provided in Aboriginal life stories, which are an example of *literatura de testimonio*. They are meant to bear witness to the Aboriginal experience under white rule, and intelligibility is therefore of major importance. Thus in Alice Nannup's *When the Pelican Laughed*:

He'd be saying to me, 'You my woman, you feed me.'

I said to him, 'Mirda, nyinda buga,' That means, no! you buga, you stink.

'Never mind about the buga,' he said, 'You my manga (woman)'.²⁵

Where fiction and verse are concerned, it is more common to find untranslated Aboriginal words, as reminders of the unassimilable Aboriginal distinctiveness. Here are a few examples:

²² *ibid.*, p.28.

²³ Mudrooroo, *Writing from the Fringe: A Study of Modern Aboriginal Literature in Australia*, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1990, p. 24.

²⁴ in J. Sabbioni et al. (eds), *Indigenous Australian Voices – a Reader*, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1998, p. 52.

²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 83.

lubra [woman];²⁶ *goona* [shit];²⁷ *migloo* [white man];²⁸ *mardong* [in love];²⁹ *goom* [alcohol].³⁰

The non-indigenous reader can either try to figure them out or simply attune himself to the sound and shape of those enigmatic pieces of language that defy his understanding, like black holes in the midst of a familiar sky. In both cases the reader is compelled to engage with what is for him an alien culture, and is very much made aware of Aboriginal difference.

Of the hundreds of Aboriginal languages and dialects that existed before the coming of the whites, many have become extinct, and the surviving ones are spoken by very small groups – sometimes a few thousand people, sometimes just a handful. The presence of what we might call Aboriginal linguistic drops in an ocean of English is a reminder of this cultural devastation. Mudrooroo's recommendation that 'wherever possible Aboriginal languages must be allowed to live and grow so that they may form the basis of the means of expression'³¹ is a forlorn hope. Yet Aborigines have succeeded in developing their own variety of English, long dismissed as 'bad English' but now recognized by linguists and educators as a valid, rule-governed language variety.³² Using Aboriginal English allows Indigenous writers to express their difference while remaining essentially intelligible to non-Indigenous readers.

most Aboriginal writers do resort to the kind of English that is prevalent in their community. The first paragraph of Vivienne Cleven's *Bitin' Back* is a significant example:

*The boy is curled up in his bed like a skinny black question mark. Ain't like he's got a lot of time to be layin bout. A woman gotta keep him on his toes. That's me job, to keep the boy goin. Hard but, bein a single mother n all. Be all right if the boy had a father. Arhhh, a woman thinks a lot of shit, eh? A woman's thoughts get mighty womba sometimes!*³³

This is the opening of the novel. The metaphor 'like a skinny black question mark' unobtrusively establishes the characters' Aboriginality. The situation described is typical of many Aboriginal households, with a single mother raising her children in poverty-stricken circumstances. Not only has the father cleared off but the woman finds herself further disadvantaged by the culture's male chauvinism ('a woman thinks a lot of shit'). The thematic Aboriginality is reinforced by stylistic Aboriginality. This is apparent in the ungrammaticality of many utterances ('ain't', 'gotta', 'me job', etc.) but this signifies lack of education, not necessarily Aboriginality, though in practice, unfortunately, the latter often goes with the former. Other stylistic features, however, give a definite Aboriginal flavour to the writing. We could mention the use of 'but' at the end of a clause or sentence ('Hard but'), the use of a closing, interrogative 'eh?' to

²⁶ Kevin Gilbert, 'Baal Belbora – The Dancing Has Ended', *ibid.*, p. 146.

²⁷ Kim Scott, *Benang*, Fremantle: FACP, 1999, p.118.

²⁸ Sam Watson, *The Kadaitcha Sung*, Ringwood: Penguin, 1990, p.8.

²⁹ Archie Weller, *Going Home*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1990 [1986], p.182.

³⁰ Ruby Langford, *Don't Take Your Love To Town*, in J. Sabbioni, op. cit., p.158.

³¹ C. Johnson [Mudrooroo], 'White forms, Aboriginal contents', op. cit., p. 28.

³² cf. <http://www.une.edu.au/langnet/aboriginal.htm>

³³ V. Cleven, *Bitin' Back*, St Lucia: UQP, 2001, p. 1.

bring a previous statement into question ('a woman thinks a lot of shit, eh?')³⁴: the use of the exclamation or expletive 'Arhh' to signal a reflective passage, and finally the presence of the untranslated Aboriginal word 'womba' (distressed).

The passage relies on a mix of linguistic and stylistic references – to standard uneducated English, to Black American English ('mighty' for 'very'), and to Aboriginal languages. The Aboriginal reader will experience a sense of immediate recognition or familiarity and will easily identify with the narrator. Non-indigenous readers, on the other hand, will find the language partly familiar (because of elements that are not specifically Aboriginal) and partly unfamiliar (because of the Aboriginal turn of phrase). This combination ensures that the writing remains intelligible without losing its Aboriginal flavour. The cross-cultural strategies at work here, relatively simple though they are, are effective to endow this piece of Aboriginal writing both with readability and Black specificity, which is precisely their point.

Yet another way of indigenizing the English language so that it might express Aboriginal perceptions consists in using metaphors and comparisons laden with Aboriginal connotations. Thus, in Archie Weller's short story 'One Hot Night': 'Over on the other side of the river, the flats stand high and alert, like a tribe of advancing warriors.'³⁵ Or again, in 'Cooley': 'Thunder rolled like the droning of a didgeridoo and clouds twisted and wreathed in a sky corroboree.'³⁶

This is a valuable but rather limited strategy because it is apt to reduce Aboriginal culture to just a few stereotypes, and the metaphors simply encrust the surface of the language, so that Aboriginality cannot infiltrate it thoroughly, inhabit it from within, as it does with other strategies I have examined.

One of the problems faced by Aboriginal writers is indeed to write in a mode that is intelligible beyond their own community yet remains adequate to express that community's cultural preoccupations. This is why the writers have borrowed from non-Indigenous cultures that in some respects offer similarities with Aboriginal culture. The similarity generally resides in a common history of oppression, discrimination and sometimes near extermination.

America's black community is one with which Aborigines can identify, politically as well as culturally. Its struggles for civil rights in the 1960s provided a model for the Aboriginal activists, who embarked on 'freedom rides' in the heartland of NSW, and even formed their own 'Black Panthers Party'. In literary terms, Aboriginal borrowings from Black America include the use of black-connoted terms such as 'mighty' for 'very', as in Vivienne Cleven's *Bitin' Back*³⁷ or 'honky' to designate

³⁴ Cf. Diana Eades, 'Aboriginal English', <http://www.une.edu.au/langnet/aboriginal.htm>: 'Perhaps one of the most persistent and widespread grammatical features of Aboriginal English involves the structure of questions. It is common for Aboriginal English speakers to ask a question using the structure of a statement with rising (question) intonation. This structure is also used sometimes in colloquial Standard English. It is common for Aboriginal English questions like this to be finished with a question tag. In much of Australia this tag is eh?'

³⁵ A. Weller, *Going Home*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1990 [1986], p. 75.

³⁶ *ibid.*, p. 208.

³⁷ V. Cleven, *op.cit.* p.1: 'A woman's thoughts get mighty womba sometimes!'

whites³⁸ or again the appropriation of the black musical term 'blues', as in Sam Watson's collection of verse *Itinerant Blues*.

Jews are another ethnic group whose tragic experience has inspired Aboriginal writers who found similarities with their own experience – Sally Morgan's grandmother observed 'We're like those Jews, we've got to look out for ourselves'.³⁹ In Melissa Lucashenko's novel *Steam Pigs*, Sue has got an identity problem – she is part Aboriginal but was brought up white so that she doesn't know where she truly belongs. Her friend Kerry makes a comparison with Rachel, who is Jewish but was 'brought up outside her faith': 'She knows she's not a gentile but she sure as fuck don't feel like no Jew... and that, I'd lay good money, is pretty much the way you fit, or rather don't fit the picture, am I right or am I right?'⁴⁰ The atrocities visited on both communities are suggested for instance by the title of Graeme Dixon's poem 'Holocaust Island'.⁴¹ More suprisingly, Melissa Lucashenko borrows a typically Yiddish turn of phrase when, in *Steam Pigs*, a black woman complains 'I'm getting so fat anyway', and her friend replies, 'Ah, fat shmat'.⁴² While this is probably not intended to establish an explicit connection between Jews and Aborigines, it does have this effect, making the Aboriginal experience more familiar to readers with a Jewish background or familiar with Jewish culture.

Another relevant cross-cultural connection has to do with South Africa at the time of apartheid, and the violence done to black people there as well as in Australia. It appears in Jack Davis's poem 'earth people', which denounces Aboriginal deaths in custody, and goes:

Blacks in South Africa are clumsy
They fall off balconies
Out of windows
Tumble down stairs
Maybe they don't like tall buildings
They are earth people

Blacks in Australia
Have strange habits also
Such as climbing up walls
With singlet or sock
Or perhaps they don't like the symmetrical

³⁸ Melissa Lucashenko, *Steam Pigs*, (in S. Abbey & S. Phillips, *op. cit.*, p. 51): "'So when did you get to be the fucken expert on this, honky?'" Sue asked'...

³⁹ S. Morgan, *My Place*, London: Virago, 1988 [1987], p. 105. A connection between Aborigines and Jews also appears in a novel written by a white Australian, John Tittensor (*Carmody Comes Home*, Richmond: Heinemann, 1988), which features Abe Rosen whose mother is Aboriginal and his father Jewish. With reference to the hard times he's had, Abe says 'Us Jews are used to suffering' (p.58).

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p. 50.

⁴¹ in J. Sabiani, *op.cit.*, p. 257.

⁴² in S. Abbey & S. Phillips, *op.cit.*, p. 42.

Precision of iron bars
They too are earth people⁴³

By explicitly associating the struggle against Australian racism with the struggle against South African racism Davis gives an additional resonance, and relevance, to his denunciations.

Aboriginal writers thus have formed cultural alliances with a variety of victims of basically the same kind of oppression that they endure themselves.⁴⁴ Those alliances or associations make them part of a resistance network which encompasses the entire planet and enhances their own struggles.

Conversely, they have proved quite adept at using the white man's culture to denounce the white man and his racist behaviour. This is a kind of cultural judo in which the opponent's very strength is turned into a weapon to destabilize him. This strategy often takes the form of mimicry, not in the sense of 'a mimicry of the centre proceeding from a desire not only to be accepted but to be adopted and absorbed,' as B. Ashcroft et al. put it,⁴⁵ but with a parodic, critical intention, with black writers using white discourses against white culture. A significant example occurs in Lisa Bellear's poem 'Artist Unknown', which reproduces the captions appended to Aboriginal paintings in a white art gallery:

Artist unknown
Location Milinginbi
Hive of wild honey 1948
Ochre on cardboard
Acc p 24 1956

Such captions are made to represent Aboriginal dispossession at the hands of the whites, as appears from the poem's last stanza:

Artist unknown
Ochre on cardboard
Acquisition number
No name
No tribe
No clan
Or language group
No gender
No spirituality
The unknown artist reads like a memorial.⁴⁶

⁴³ *ibid.*, p. 114.

⁴⁴ This sense of solidarity with all victims of European racism is made explicit in Sally Morgan's *My Place*, through the attitude of the narrator's grandmother Nan: 'To Nan, anyone dark was now Nyoongah. Africans, Burmese, American Negroes were all Nyoongahs. She identified with them. In a sense, they were her people, because they shared the common bond of blackness and the oppression that, for so long, that colour had brought' (Sally Morgan, *op.cit.*, p. 138).

⁴⁵ B. Ashcroft et al., *The Empire Writes Back*, London: Routledge, 1990, p. 4.

⁴⁶ In J. Sabbioni, *op.cit.*, pp. 254-55.

Bellear uses a 'white' style, administrative rather than literary, but no less significant for that, in order to show up its inability to capture Aboriginal reality. The poem subverts the European approach to Aboriginal art, asserting as it does that its focus leaves out the essential. A 'white' style is used as a critical tool against white culture.

The cross-cultural strategies adopted by Aboriginal writers testify to the latter's inventivity and adaptability. Black Janus does succeed in facing both ways, in asserting his Aboriginality while reaching out to a non-Aboriginal audience.

Cultural productions of various kinds, whether traditional or modern (lack of space here prevents an examination of Aboriginal dancing, photography or film-making) have always sustained Aboriginal society. This is still the case today, and the undoubted vitality of Aboriginal culture should temper the pessimism generated by the current condition of Aboriginal society. Aboriginal cultural productions are now a major part of Australia's international image, and they are obviously here to stay. Indeed, Aboriginal culture has proved so successful that it has spawned a veritable counterfeiting industry—another example of white exploitation of Aboriginality.

How can this cultural vitality make up for the poverty, lack of educational and employment opportunities, poor health, etc., that far too many Aborigines experience? There are no immediate trade-offs between the cultural and the social, and we should keep in mind Martin Daly's description of Alice Springs as 'a town where some of the biggest names in indigenous art live in broken-down huts or sleep in the open in dirt-strewn desert camps, while their best works draw gasps of appreciation on the cocktail circuit and in plush galleries'.⁴⁷ This is not the bogus romance of the gifted but unrecognized artist starving in his Montmartre garret but a genuine tragedy. Yet the cultural achievements of Aboriginal Australians do suggest that all is not lost. They have brought recognition, and a degree of prestige for the creators. There is an undoubted flow-on effect which has the potential to counteract the negative image many non-indigenous Australians have of Aborigines, and help preserve the culture which has made such a strong contribution to the image of Australia. Aboriginal art is not the magic bullet that will solve all the problems faced by Aboriginal communities. But, as the embodiment of Aboriginal culture and the expression of its continuing vitality and creativity, it is one the most powerful factors working to that end, and as such it deserves to be celebrated.

⁴⁷ M. Daly, 'Australian tragedy – our Aboriginal icons', *The Age*, 17 May 1997.