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#THOUGHTS ON ABORIGINAL LITERATURE

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Back in early 1982, a mate in New Zealand wrote to me describing, in a very excited manner, his research into cultural aspects of Maori people, especially with respect to the poetry relating to funeral rites. Concurrently, I was completing the Multicultural Education Diploma, and fostering an infant interest in aspects of Australian literature dealing with the immigrant experience and cultural difference (viz. Judah Waten's *Alien Son*, and Nancy Keesing's *Shalom*). Whilst I had not at that stage successfully made the link between such literature and its effective use in the educational process of students of non-English speaking background, I remember thinking that perhaps I should soon pursue a course which would lead me to an understanding of Aboriginal Australians, in some way similar to Terry's pursuit in New Zealand.

In mid-1982, I was asked to write an article about Aboriginal Australians for a Vietnamese newspaper. I was then writing a weekly column on aspects of Australian life - its multicultural nature, the meaning of public celebrations and areas of possible difficulty for Vietnamese people in negotiating their way through everyday life in this country. I agreed to write the longer article, thinking that it might be the start of a series on different groups who have come to this country and participated in its development since 1788. It was at this point that I was confronted with the meagreness of my own knowledge concerning Aboriginal societies, past and present, traditional or urban, and all the possible permutations defying simple definition.

I went to my school library (Homebush Boys' High) and borrowed a number of volumes, all of recent publication (none earlier than 1978). I recall some new perspectives, but most of the 'facts' fell within the range of general knowledge which I already possessed, and so I felt reasonably assured. Completing the article a little behind schedule, I thought, I made a copy and posted it off. Then came a few doubts about the propriety of writing such an article and so I forwarded that copy to the NSW Department of Aboriginal Affairs. With much tact and detailed analysis, I received a letter outlining the many errors extant in that article. Most existed within the information taken from my sources. I was rather shocked, but pleased nonetheless that I had discovered this earlier, rather than later.

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I wrote a correction of my article and posted it off. However, when my original article finally appeared, it was without corrections and, horror of horror, accompanied by photos of Melanesian peoples of the Pacific. This led to letters being sent by myself to Canberra in order to obtain photographs of contemporary and well-known Aboriginal people, such as Neville Bonner, Charles Perkins and Pastor Sir Douglas Nicholls.

The next decision was to enrol in the Grad. Diploma course in Aboriginal Education at Armidale CAE. If I was to avoid such a situation again, I needed more understanding of the issues. A change of job in late 1982 fortuitously placed me next to Aboriginal colleagues, working in the Aboriginal Education Unit of the New South Wales Department of Education's Directorate of Special Programs.

My work involved a responsibility towards Secondary E.S.L. Education, and I was, by early 1983, bringing my ideas on the use of literature which reflected the experience and interests of secondary-aged students of N.E.S.B. to some degree of logical order. There were a number of important steps in this process, which reflect on the ideas presented hereunder. Firstly, I had experienced a degree of classroom success when using Australian literature which touched on aspects of the students' experiences - (Colin Thiele's *The Sun on the Stubble* and Ronald McKie's *The Mango Tree*). These were not graded readers either, I might add at this point, and in fact came from the same text book room which serviced the mainstream students of English-speaking background. Secondly, I attended an ATESOL seminar addressed by the writer Angelo Loukakis (*For the Patriarch*) who spoke on the importance of broadening the definition of what was Australian literature (i.e. anything written by someone calling themselves Australian, in English or not) pointing out that Morris Lurie's *Flying Home* was equally as Australian as George Johnson's *My Brother Jack*. He also validated my own abhorrence of structured readers for the post-New Arrival student. Thirdly, I was given professional guidance in developing my ideas and had about me some extremely good colleagues who encouraged the debate of ideas. My job also permitted me to trial my ideas in a more concentrated manner, and the publication of some of those results should occur through the Multicultural Education Centre in late 1984.

Lots of challenges within the Aboriginal Education course last year kept me thinking, and the obligation for me to fulfil the requirements of a Practicum (since I am now an employee in the A.M.E.S. in N.S.W.) led me to consider the use of Aboriginal literature. Whilst my collection of Australian literature dealing with

the immigrant experience, ethnicity and cultural difference would have to be one of the most comprehensive in Australia outside of major libraries, I have also been building up my collection of Aboriginal literature; that which is written by Aboriginal writers primarily, as well as some of the more positive written by non-Aboriginal writers :

Margaret Sharpe's *The Traeger Kid*

Rex Ingamell's poetry in *The Jindyworobaks*

Nene Gare's *The Fringedwellers*

Some of the better-known Aboriginal writers are:

Kath Walker - *My People*

Jack Davis - *The First-born, Jagardoo, Kullark, The Dreamers*

Colin Johnson - *Wild Cat Falling, Long Live Sandawara,*
Dr Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the
Ending of the World (a masterpiece of writing)

Robert J. Merritt - *The Cake Man*

Archie Weller - *The Day of the Dog*

Lionel George Fogarty - *Kargun and Yoogum Yoogum*

and you will no doubt know of others, since it is a growing field. Apart from these writers, there are others who have recorded their life stories or who have told traditional stories (at least, those belonging to the public domain).

I have learnt so much over the past two years from my reading of short stories, novels, poetry and plays, that I have undergone something of a renaissance in my approach to the use of literature as an effective learning stimulant. Because I believe in the importance of the experiences which one passes through, I must refer to the stifling effect of my own schooling on any genuine appreciation of literature. Apart from some poetry (especially Douglas Stewart and Judith Wright) there was little reflection for me of my life, growing up at Tamworth, let alone of growing up in Australia. I endured an alienating process which continued into my university experience as well (some relief provided by Patrick White). The process of dissecting literature into its stylistic components further compounded the difficulty of relating to it, especially since the formal language required for such analysis was not a part of my home. I endured, as I said, finally being able to manipulate

that language and the sort of approach countenanced towards literature by my elders.

Linking experiences and interests in life to the literature selected for enjoyment in the school enhances the learning process so much. Dorothy Green, teacher and critic, wrote a strong piece for the *National Times*, October 20, 1979, "Puzzling lack of passion for our own literature", in which she made a strong case for using the Kangaroo variety of literature rather than the nightingale. As we know, education or learning proceeds from the known and familiar to the unknown or unfamiliar. If it starts with the unfamiliar, then the necessary links cannot be made and such learning is pointless, rather like much of my early literary education. Too many people have been turned away from any learning process because their experience has been totally ignored or otherwise rejected as of any value. The validation of our experience is crucial as we climb the ladder of understanding and awareness. That validation has far more weight if it comes from someone who is a 'significant other', such as a teacher. Esland (1971) refers to the work of Berger and Kellner and the main theme of their argument in their article *Marriage and the Construction of Reality*, which is that -

"every individual requires the ongoing validation of his (sic) world, including the validation of his identity and place in this world by those few who are his truly significant others." An individual needs social support if he (sic) is to sustain a particular view of the world as real. (Esland, 1971)

This has strong implications in the domain of the school. The school must provide this validation for children of their identity and importance as a part of the total society. This underlies the following choices and aspects for teaching in schools with Aboriginal and/or non-Aboriginal children.

In New South Wales in 1982, the Department of Education issued an Aboriginal Education Policy Statement, along with a number of Support Documents outlining resources and strategies. Apart from the essential emphasis on an Aboriginal perspective to school curriculum, the Policy outlines the four aspects which must be linked for effective learning to take place: the child; the teacher; the school; and the community. Should any of these elements not be considered and considered as integral, then the process of learning is doomed. It doesn't take much reflection to elicit the fact that the child and the community (or home) have never featured as very important in the past (despite explicit instruction in various official documents and statements of aims, etc.)

In the context of the Aboriginal Education Policy, I would like to take four of the aims which I feel are fulfilled in one way or another through the use of Aboriginal literature. They are as follows:

- 2.5 ensure that the school curriculum contains an Aboriginal perspective;
- 2.6 encourage in all children the development of knowledge, understanding and appreciation of Aboriginal heritage and cultures;
- 2.11 provide opportunities, where appropriate and approved by relevant Aboriginal communities, for the maintenance and development of Aboriginal languages;
- 2.12 ensure an awareness of and respect for Aboriginal English when developing competency in standard English.

Since the teacher's role is so important, the following guideline for Implementation of the Policy cannot be ignored:

- 3.2.1 The teacher's attitude in valuing other cultural traditions is crucial if there is to be an effective effort to understand the Aboriginal child. It is important that all teachers who are involved in the education of Aboriginal children learn about and recognise the values and traditions of the Aboriginal community. (Aboriginal Education Policy, NSW Dept Ed. 1982)

In terms of an Aboriginal perspective to curriculum, it would be a chastening experience to examine any school's curriculum at whatever level in order to see how much perspective exists. Terri Seddon, in a recent article on the 'hidden curriculum' made it quite clear that what is excluded from study from the formal curriculum carries implicit significance for students.

Sexism...is only one form of hidden curriculum. Hidden curricula have also been identified in the structure and organisation of schooling, in the form, materials and teaching of the formal curriculum, and even by the exclusion of areas of study from the formal curriculum.
(Seddon, 1983)

As an ESL teacher in a secondary school in 1981/82, I endeavoured to introduce an Aboriginal perspective in my classes. This was mainly via the poetry of Kath Walker and Rex Ingamells, as well as in the writing of Ronald McKie and by looking at appropriate newspaper articles and photos of significant Aboriginal people. One of my Year Seven students, a Greek Cypriot, thought

that Ms Pat O'Shane looked like his mother - a lovely response indeed. Whilst trialling ideas on literature written by immigrants and/or about the immigrant experience in Australia, last year, I found a strong desire by that Year 11 class to know about Aboriginal people. It was a pleasure to be able to introduce many of those young people to members of the Aboriginal Education Unit, when they came in to visit me at my place of work.

In order to develop knowledge and understanding about Aboriginal heritage and cultures, literature provides an excellent means. André Brink, a South African writer of Afrikaner background, and a member of the Sestiger movement of Afrikaner rebels, was recently in Australia to attend the Adelaide Festival Writers' Week. As a dissident and sometimes censored novelist, he examines and criticizes the traditional Afrikaner values and practices. He won the Martin Luther King Memorial Prize in 1980 and has twice been runner-up for the Booker Prize. The narrator of his book, *A Dry White Season*, states that his reason for writing the story was "So that it will not be possible for any man (sic) ever to say again: I knew nothing about it." He adds that

I think it is one of the major things which a writer can hope to achieve in a situation like the one in South Africa. It seems simple on the surface, but is really an enormous thing to try to effect - to get through to people, to make it impossible for them to forget. The writer can keep that awareness in sight, keep that access to memory unblocked, sharpen people's sensibilities, their awareness, so that some sort of further action can start...I think the largest social dimension, provided always the social and political are elevated to the level of literature rather than the literature descending to that base level of politics, is one of the major aspects of significant literature.

(Honi Soit: 1984)

It is illuminating to look at the reasons given by Aboriginal writers for telling of their life or for writing of the Aboriginal experience. Jack Sullivan (*Banggaiyerri*) had the following to say

These are good stories from the bush...the only important things I would like to hear somebody read about, what we did on the stations, about the horses and cattle, and travelling. Those were the important things in the bush life. After somebody read it they might as well say, "You done a bit of work in your day."

The stories I told you (Bruce Shaw) for the book may help white people understand the black people better. It might help them get back some of their land.

(Sullivan, 1983, p.211)

Paddy Roe, in his retelling of the public stories in *gularabulu*,

This is all public,
You know [it] is for everybody:
Children, women, anybody.

is including white people, thinking that "they might be able to see us better than before". (p.i)

Faith Bandler, in the Preface to Monica Clare's novel *Karobran*, describes it as a Social novel.

Particularly moving are those episodes recalling the suffering of the Aborigines' children at the hands of the self-righteous, authoritarian servants of the state who administered the institutions which destroyed the children's individuality as they enforced conformity to their alien concepts...This is one of the few books to dwell upon the hardships borne by Black Australians, and particularly Black women, in the great depression. And because it is written without rancor or bitterness, the poignancy is brought home to the reader with redoubled effect. (p.ix)

Labumore: Elsie Roughsey, in her introduction to the book *An Aboriginal Mother Tells of the Old and the New*, states:

In the outer parts of the world, people of other states and continents do not know of my people really. Lardil customs, laws, culture and its legends will never be known to the people who never saw the tribes of Goonana people, the Lardil. They have so many things that are interesting...are still not known so far. Only very few have been told, or given to a white man.

I'm sure the world should know what was not mentioned, because other people can live by us if they only know the good laws of one time we had.

(Labumore: Elsie Roughsey, 1984, p.4)

In part of the introductory section to Robert J. Merritt's *The Cake Man*, there is a telling description of the education system given by Kevin Gilbert to the Senate Standing Committee on Social Environment in 1975:

...and then we get the white teacher. He doesn't understand the psychology of that black child in his classroom. He doesn't understand the way in which he, through his school teaching, attacks the psychology of that child, poisons that child. He gets that little black kid to stand up with the rest of the class and sing: "In 1779 we ploughed the loam in our new found home amongst the eucalyptus trees" and he gets that kid to stand up and say Joe Mope and Bill Slope were the first men to cross the Blue Mountains. He gets the little black kid to stand up and sing glory Australia, advance Australia fair and he talks about justice and hope and the wonderful sunburnt country to that kid who has just seen the police burst into his mother's bedroom and drag his father out of bed and give him a belt in the mouth...carting him off to jail for some petty crime. That teacher didn't see the police come out and round up all the kids' pet dogs on the mission and shoot them all and leave the bodies smelling in the sun...the kids know that they're always only talking about justice for whites. The teacher talks about England and Germany and Europe and the countries of the world. And he talks then about Australia. Of how it was discovered and how the blacks were primitive and how the great white race pushed these savages...And he gives the little black kids picture books to read: about Jack and the Beanstalk, about Alice in Wonderland and the legends that came from Europe, the legends written by whites. Sooner or later, he gives the little black kid a book about Aboriginal legends, written by whites. Little campfire stories, passed off as the grown-up, living legends of a people. With all the romance, all the understanding, all the love, all the Law, all the life stripped out of the guts of it by whites. And then the whites say that the only chance that Aborigines have is in education!

(Merritt, 1978, pp.xxiii-xxiv)

Kath Walker dedicated her collection of poetry, *My People*, published in 1970, "to the many people, both black and white, who are fighting for a Makarrata (Aboriginal land treaty)".

In an article in *Meanjin* (March, 1984), Jack Davis discusses his play *The Dreamers*. He says:

The story of *The Dreamers* could be happening to any socio-economically deprived group anywhere. The fact that it is happening to Aboriginal Australians, in one of the most affluent countries in the world, hit audiences hard. These facts of Aboriginal existence have been hidden away in bureaucratic files for decades, to keep alive the 'dying pillow' and 'killing me softly' concepts. To bear out my point readers of this article should endeavour to see the documentary film *A Lousy Little Sixpence*. As a race of people we have one of the highest mortality rates in the world, due to alcohol and alcohol induced diseases. In Western Australia alone, one in twenty-eight dies through alcoholism, before the age of forty-five.

These facts were brought out in *The Dreamers* in the hopeless attitudes of Roy and Eli...the endless fight of Dolly...to make ends meet is the inevitable result of this situation. The only non-Aboriginal in the cast was the fourteen-year-old who played Shane. Although he had only a few lines and was on stage for only one scene, his role was very important, in showing that there is now a much better relationship between black and white children than there was a few years ago. Shane shares their bread and eats his Vegemite sandwich with gusto. I tried to deal with the questions of racism and politics delicately. One cannot divorce either of these facets from Aboriginal existence.

I didn't set out to write an overtly political play. To confront white and black audiences with a truthful, uncomprised picture of urban Aboriginal life is in itself political...

All the characters in *The Dreamers* were taken from real life, people I have known during my lifetime...

These writers have made it quite clear that their intended audience is all people, black and white, to bring understanding and future justice.

If we are to answer the aim which talks of maintenance and development of Aboriginal languages, then many of these writers are also concerned with letting us know that Aboriginal languages are viable and indeed essential to the identity of the Aboriginal peoples

who still speak them. It was through Margaret Sharpe's book *The Traeger Kid* that I first became aware that the Bandjalung language is still spoken in Northern New South Wales. Jack Davis has been instrumental in effecting a revival of the Bibbulmum language of the South-West tribes of Western Australia, compiling lists of words from his memory and from conversations with other older people. One man particularly important in this process was called Warru, the basis for the character Worru, played by Jack Davis in *The Dreamers*, who uses quite a deal of Bibbulmum language in the course of the play, validating it through this powerful art form.

In *gularabulu* there are a number of instances where parts of stories, songs, are rendered in the Nyigina language of the West Kimberley region of Western Australia.

At a recent ATESOL seminar on Aboriginal English, Vic Forrest from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies in Canberra, and now, (or soon) of the Mount Lawley Western Australia C.A.E., mentioned that Aboriginal communities in Victoria where no Aboriginal languages now exist are learning Bandjalung. I understand that in Western New South Wales booklets have been produced in Wangkumara, or at least in the remnants of that language. Parts of Wiradjuri and Gamilroi must still be extant - and someone will eventually find ways of validating these languages in some literary way I am certain, for the Aboriginal children of this state. I feel sure that a lot of that language which does still exist in the informal colloquial register of speech of Aboriginal people in New South Wales often passes unnoticed. I may be quite wrong here, although I base my comment on some conversations with some Aboriginal work-mates last year. Whatever the current state of play, it is unquestionably important to see such languages appearing in the context of literature within the school domain. In the Northern Territory, to assist in the bilingual programs (described by Vic Forrest as bilingual transition) there, a great deal of literature has been produced in the languages of the communities.

At that same ATESOL seminar, Professor Eagleson from Sydney University spoke about Aboriginal English, especially as used in New South Wales. Following a lengthy description of the features as used in a variety of contexts, both informal and formal, oral and written, he finally arrived at the point he was making which was that it was a non-standard dialect of English which can be found throughout such parts of the English-speaking world as England, the United States and Australia, obviously then not just among Aboriginal Australians, but among non-Aboriginal peoples. All varieties of English are dialects. Even standard English is just a dialect, although, as someone once said, it has the back-up

of those in power in the society, which makes it the preferred form. It was interesting to note among Professor Eagleson's examples that the more formal the speech, the more closely it was aligned to and in most cases indistinguishable from standard English. There are features he demonstrated which are identical with what I would call 'working class English', and which I have used and heard used by friends in informal situations, since that was the appropriate intimate register. In fact, there are clear parallels here with my experiences as an ESL teacher. My students quickly picked up the colloquial register in their playground interaction, and continued to use it in the classroom where, as we know, it is inappropriate. This forced me to examine more closely this concept of appropriateness, and engage in explanation. Simplistically perhaps, I referred to 'playground language' and to 'classroom language'. One was for use with friends or in a relaxed situation, the other was concerned with education and distance and formality. I even briefly described the historical amalgam of two languages to form English - the Anglo-Saxon (four letter words/informal/emotions) and Norman French (big words/formal/objectivity). Neither form is incorrect, except when used inappropriately - the teacher's task then is to clarify the appropriate usage of different English registers.

Linda Burney (1981) wrote on the subject of Aboriginal English:

In many communities, Aboriginal English is widely used. It should not be seen as an inferior language but a viable form of communication. Imagine an Aboriginal child just starting school with the language commonly used in the home and in the local Aboriginal community, and being told on arrival at school that it is not the 'proper' way to speak. Already that child's self-esteem is being chipped away...and the use of Aboriginal English should not be denigrated. In time, Aboriginal children should be able to understand the differences between the language used at home and in the classroom, and be able to use both as a viable form of communication.

(Burney, 1981, p.12)

Under the section of the Aboriginal Education Policy headed Implementation, is the following:

There is a need, therefore, for schools to emphasise and develop those skills through the implementation of relevant teaching strategies and educational programs which build on the language, instructional and social needs and experiences of children.

(Aboriginal Education Policy, 1982)

Perhaps this is the clearest instruction that the teacher should begin with the child's experience, be it of language or social experience.

I remember watching a video last year which was produced by the Inner London Educational Authority. A number of senior black students were being interviewed about language - standard English and the non-standard form as used by them at home. Several of these students spoke of the beneficial effects on their educational progress when they were able to reflect their dialect within the school domain, as for example, in dialogues created for drama presentations and in writing down such dialogues. Their culture was being given validity. No, they weren't learning this 'black' English - that had happened even before they went to school, but they were being allowed to bring their identity into the formal education process and so thereby link it to that process. Sad, however, was their allusion to black peers who had been so intimidated by the denial of their culture and language that they had dropped out of schooling.

Muriel Saville Troike, one of my gurus in the E.S.L. field, made a statement which relates to this:

The consequences of viewing and grouping students in terms of their relative 'deficiencies' in English, their verbal 'handicaps' which require remediation, often extend Pygmalion-fashion to expectations of failure and projections of low esteem...Linguistic differences among students and among communities are symptomatic of the differences in the broad scope of culture, of which language is only a part. Teachers must be sensitive to these differences and learn to appreciate and respect their expression...

(Troike, 1976, p.80)

Although I leave it for others to go into the question of standardised testing which really is a euphemism for what most of us know as 'I.Q.' and is actually a measurement in most cases of the ability of the child to manipulate 'middle class' English, it certainly bears consideration when we see an over-representation of Aboriginal and non-English speaking background students in the lower classes of the iniquitous streaming system still very prevalent in the New South Wales system. How did they get there, if not for the fact that their non-standard dialect or lack of formal English was not taken into account? For people wishing to follow this argument further, might I refer them to the work of Helen Andreoni (Armidale CAE) and Kris Allen (CEO Melbourne) or indeed to the work

of Ann Junor (NSW Teachers' Federation) or the Radical Education Dossier 4 of October, 1977 (Sydney 660 0874).

Al Grassby, whilst pointing out that it is the 'Aboriginal contribution which gives Australia as a nation a unique continuity and validity', looked to the school, as the only natural community centre for all Australians, which has the potential to:

be the instrument used to break down the barriers between the sections of the community, lessen resentment among ethnic groups and above all, provide the opportunity for children to respect all backgrounds especially when they are exposed to prejudice and racism at home, through the media and even through textbooks.

(Grassby, 1982:27)

Whilst agreeing with this sentiment, I'd like to use it so as to make a digression for a moment. What does one do with texts which are recognised as racist or sexist, apart from gradually replace them as funds and materials become available, and then keep some aside as examples of an historical progression in understanding. I was confronted with this question when casting around for materials back in early 1982 for my attempt at an Aboriginal perspective. In one of the Junior theme books I found an extract from a book by a writer with the name (I think) Mary E. Patchett. It presented a presumably well-intentioned and sympathetic view of a group of traditional Aboriginal people encountered by Patrol Officer or Ranger. Gross distortions of traditional life-style and custom was only a part of it. We examined the words used to describe the people, looking them up in our dictionaries to be certain, and were all well on the way to being able to analyse such literature in the future. 'Paws' as hands and 'bucks' used to describe men!

At this stage I would like to turn back to the Policy and its Support Statement which refers directly to the importance of literature reflecting the Aboriginal experience:

- 1.3.2 books, stories and poems written by and/or about Aborigines and their way of life;
- 3.3 exploration of Aboriginal traditional stories;
- 3.4 study of poems and books by Aboriginal authors;
- 3.8 inclusion in the school library of crafts, paintings, novels and poems by Aboriginal people.

(Aboriginal Education Policy, NSW Dept of Education, 1982)



I referred above to my success in trialling literature which reflected the background, experiences and interests, of students of non-English speaking background. Some of the literature I used was, in fact, written by Australians who more or less represent the mainstream part of our society. I refer to Les A. Murray, the poet from Bunyah, near Taree. Married to an immigrant from Switzerland whose father was Hungarian, Les reveals that other face of mainstream who has demonstrated a concern and understanding for the non-English speaking background immigrants. It is interesting to note that he also reflects very strongly on his Scottish ethnicity, acknowledging the other immigrant strand in Australia. I also refer to Gwen Kelly, who was a former lecturer at this College when it was a Teachers' College, and who still lives in Armidale. Her novel *Always Afternoon* (1981) is well worth reading if you want to gain some understanding of the role of women as it was changing in Australia through the First World War period, the effects of the Conscription debate and the situation of Germans from around the Pacific and those of German ancestry in Australia who were interned at Trial Bay. However, her short story, *The Street*, included in Ron Holt's *The Strength of Tradition* (1983), is a brilliant description of the range of classes and religious backgrounds represented in a 'typical' country town street. Written in the style I find reminiscent of Hal Porter, this story tends to expose the myth of the stereotype white Anglo Australian, since the differences portrayed are so vast. Perhaps I enjoyed it so much because it was very much like my street, which included an incredible range of backgrounds of English speakers, although with other non-English speaking and Aboriginal backgrounds also represented.

The other writer I am alluding to is Gail Hennessey, a poet and short-story writer now of Canberra, though originally from Cronulla. She brilliantly draws a picture of 'the proper way' as handed down from her Irish grandmother concerning the manner in which one hangs out the washing - a great stimulus for discussion about the ways in which we are acculturated, I suppose, by our parents. The poem, *Mondays*, was printed in one of the quarterly Literary Supplements put out by the *Bulletin* each year under the editorship of Geoffrey Dutton. Watch out for them. November last year saw a Supplement devoted to Aboriginal literature (by and/or about Aboriginal people).

I have been very pleased on a number of occasions this week to find my thoughts validated by various speakers, but especially when Professor Watts stressed the essential unity of underlying principles in education, no matter the particular group being specifically looked at. This encourages me because I have noted a similarity in many of the teaching strategies advocated for use

with Aboriginal children with those I have already successfully employed with students of non-English speaking backgrounds. I strongly suspect the same principles would be highly successful with Anglo-Australians as well. For example, I believe that a class must be moulded into a community, with sharing of personal information all ways, student to student, students to teacher and teacher to students. It is a dynamic process which we at this school can see happening before our eyes as we tentatively make ourselves known to each other and then, with some degree of confidence go on to discuss issues of importance over coffee as well as to contribute to this larger gathering, intimidating as that may be for some of us. In the same manner, I believe that smaller groups work extremely well in the classroom. I have also found that praise given to the group works so much better than the divisive and embarrassing praise of particular individuals who are often presented as paragons of industry and conscientiousness in such a way that others are quite discouraged. I believe that peer-tutoring, or small groups working co-operatively together is very beneficial for all parties. I believe that the teacher must exhibit a degree of enthusiasm rather than the confusing 'laid-back' approach commonly found in classrooms.

These factors aside, I was pleased, too, to find Linda Burney describing a successful teaching/learning situation when she used Robert J. Merritt's *The Cakeman*, with a group of Aboriginal students at Cleveland High School.

While working with an Aboriginal group of junior high school students on the production of a play called *The Cakeman* by Robert Merritt, an Aboriginal, I noticed that at first the students were shy, reluctant and didn't believe they had the ability to perform the play. But slowly they gained self-esteem and, needless to say, the play was a success, largely as a result of the fact they were working with a play written by an Aboriginal about Aboriginal people's history and issues.

(Linda Burney, 1981, p.14)

Paul Buschenhofen, in an article written specifically for teaching Aboriginal children to read, had the following to say in response to standard strategies which obviously haven't worked:

A greater degree of sensitivity and perceptiveness would have enabled this teacher to recognise the fact that his children had entered school not with less knowledge than their urban counterparts, but with 'different' knowledge

and experiences. Because these children are culturally different, not deficient, any sub-major in special education would therefore be of little use in this situation. What is helpful in this case is a willingness on the part of the teacher to discover what the children know, what interests and bores them, and with what experiences they enter the classroom.

(Buschenhofen, 1982, p.3)

Again we are directed back to reflecting the interests and experiences brought to school by our students in the choice of reading stimulus used. It is as appropriate for such literature at the H.S.C. level as it is on entering school, I believe, though certainly more in the earlier stages is essential.

Ruth Lipscombe (1981:19) suggests that storytelling is an important art which all teachers of Aboriginal students should cultivate. Whilst she reminds us of the oral tradition of Aboriginal people, I find parallels in my own background in the stories my brother and I pestered our Mum to tell us. "Tell us about the olden days!" we pleaded as youngsters. Those stories repeated over and over (and she didn't dare change a word or phrase) form the basis of my understanding of the previous family generation on my mother's side of the family. Unfortunately, my father was killed in a car accident in 1951 when I was just two years of age, and despite some contact with my father's family, there are great gaps in my knowledge since there were no stories from him.

Over the past few years, now having a degree of experience upon which to draw, I have developed my own story-telling competence as another way of leading in to the written story or poem which I am planning to study with my students. It's a great way of encouraging the students to make the connections between my story, that of the writer, and their own lives.

Ruth Lipscombe (1981) also refers to other strategies for introducing literature with which I am in solid agreement. She suggests telling our students about the author in question. I prefer to talk about introducing the writer to the students. This is crucial. The writer must become as 'real' as possible. Anecdotes, pictures, other books or articles, radio interviews on cassette, are all ways this can be done. Further, students might write to some authors (the benefit of studying contemporary authors, of course) and even invite them to visit the class if possible. Ruth Lipscombe mentions that the views of noted reviewers could be used as well. I believe that this is an excellent strategy for several reasons. It reveals the importance attributed to the work being studied,

offering opinions which may be quite diverse, as well as providing quite a lot of extra detail and information about the author and the reviewer. In approximately twelve months, and really only from the *Sydney Morning Herald*, plus one or two from the *Age*, I have collected some thirty or so reviews of literature by Aboriginal writers (poets, playwrights, novelists, dramatists and autobiographers) as well as some other personal information about some of these writers.

Earlier on I made mention that I would refer to the writer B. Wongar. The history of this writer is really quite intriguing. I first bought some of his books early last year, thinking he was an Aboriginal writer. A telephone conversation with Nancy Keesing informed me that this is not so and that I should write to the Literary Editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Helen Frizell, who had done some investigation into his background. As it turned out, Michele Field was then the Literary Editor and it was she who had written quite a lengthy paper on the identity and possible motives behind this mystery. Last year, at the July Residential, I mentioned this writer to Alan Fidock, after certain Arnhem Land words suggested that B. Wongar had had some time in that part of the land. Alan kindly looked at a book I sent him, *The Track to Bralgu*, and sent back some of his thoughts. I noted earlier this year that when the Literary Grants for the coming year were announced, B. Wongar had been awarded one. Some of Michele Field's work leads her to speculate that Streten Bozic, Wongar's literary agent, is the real Wongar.

I prefaced this paper by pointing out that it is something like a discussion paper. It is many years since I taught Aboriginal students and so these ideas have yet to be implemented. During the coming term I will be doing just that, in order to fulfil the requirements for this Diploma. Following contact with the Aboriginal Education Unit in the Directorate of Special Programs, I am to follow this up with attendance at an A.E.C.G. meeting and link-up with the liaison committee at Cleveland High School. Following the teaching program, (tentatively a Year 11 group of Aboriginal students) I would hope to write up my findings - and send such a report off to *The Aboriginal Child at School*, as well as use some of the material in my teaching of adult immigrants at the centre where I now teach.

Following is a list of some of the Aboriginal literature I have collected and which might be of use to some people endeavouring to collect such material for their schools. However, might I

also refer people to two bookshops which I have found particularly good -

The Henry Lawson Bookshop, York St, Sydney

The Bookshelf, 116 Bridge Road, Richmond, Melbourne.

In order to evaluate material for use, no teacher should be without *Black Australia* - an annotated bibliography and teacher's guide to resources on Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, by Marji Hill and Alex Barlow, AIAS, Canberra. The last edition appeared in 1978. A new one is just about set to appear, I understand.

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