Sexual Violation and the “Amoral” Woman in Aboriginal Verse

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For many contemporary Indigenous writers, poetry constitutes a popular medium through which control over the construction of Aboriginal identities may be asserted. Adam Shoemaker’s incisive contribution to the study of Aboriginal literature highlights the “overt political commitment” (180) evident in much of this literature, which he sees as “stemming from a long tradition of opposition to the established order” (201). He further articulates the potency of the poetic form in his contention that “the [very] act of composing poetry is an inherently political one which is itself an invaluable form of activism” (180). Much of the verse written by Indigenous writers serves to expose the ways in which historical, social and institutional processes have allowed for the initiation and maintenance of white racial hegemony and the concomitant disenfranchisement and subordination of Aboriginal peoples. Given the continuing lack of Aboriginal representation and status across a range of social, political, economic, educational and legal sites in Australia, the persistently remonstrative nature of literature written by Indigenous authors is certainly not surprising. For Aboriginal women, the injury caused by this dearth in representation is augmented by the persistent sexism and sexual oppression affecting all women in this country. Indeed, Aboriginal women are indisputably situated amongst the most disadvantaged sectors in Australian society, contending with the “inequalities of being born both black and a woman” (Dale 80). As Dolores Herrero outlines, while postcolonial theory has examined “the process of identity construction of subject peoples,” feminism “has put to the test common sense understandings of identity construction [in its contention] that gender plays a prominent role in the formation and understanding of different identity positions” (2). Similarly, Carole Ferrier refers to a “specific oppression associated with gender” and calls for a consideration of this “gender-specificity” in any analysis of the impacts of racism and class oppression on Aboriginal peoples (1). Much of the Aboriginal poetry dealing with past and present experiences of Indigenous women and girls in Australia seeks to explicitly subvert white patriarchal constructions of race and gender. Select works by Kay Gilbert, Lisa Bellar, Aileen Corpus, Archie Weller, Berta Sykes, Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Romaine Moretain, and Mudrooroo Narogin present a multifarious examination of the victimization of Aboriginal women and of the enduring stereotypes that have distorted perceptions of Aboriginal women since colonization. Moreover, this poetry simultaneously explores, impacts and indeed constitutes (in many cases) Aboriginal women’s struggle to carve out a self-determined political, cultural and personal identity. In so doing, it presents a commanding exposé of a decidedly racist and misogynistic national ethos, which continues to sanction the exploitation and oppression of Aboriginal women and girls.

A potent denunciation of the ideologies that have served to initiate and maintain the subjugation of Aboriginal women in Australia is frequently enacted in Aboriginal verse via reference to colonial race relations. Leigh Dale contends that “for Aboriginal people the past remains a crucial means of ‘putting the present into perspective’” (73), a sentiment reflected in Noela McNamara’s very recent investigation into what she calls the “living memory of [. . .] colonial trespass that underpins white dominion” (188). Much of the poetry addresses the frontier abuse, particularly sexual abuse, perpetrated against Aboriginal girls and women. In the poem “Dark, Unmarried Mothers,” Oodgeroo Noonuccal conveys a palpable sense of disgust over the widespread rape of girls “From earliest teens” in this colonial environment. Archie Weller’s poem “Ngungalari” also refers to the “too-young mothers with their tears,” while Roberta Sykes’s “Monopoly” protests, “our country sisters are raped by white stockmen.” To Noonuccal these girls are “Fair game for lechers,” the “Bosses and station hands,” whose cowardice the poet emphasizes in her depiction of them as “Low-grade animals/Prow[ling] for safe prey.” The employment of such a bleak, unsettling metaphor stresses the brutal, animalistic nature of the relationship between the two participants whereby the Aboriginal girl is rendered powerless at the hands of the white male who is made all the more fearsome in his capacity as an insensible, predatory beast. It is little wonder that the works of a number of Aboriginal poets are concerned with the sexual abuse suffered by Aboriginal women at the frontier, given the reported prevalence of such abhorrent behaviors at the time: “On pastoral stations Aboriginal women were preyed on by any and every white man whose whim it was to have a piece of ‘black velvet’ wherever and whenever they pleased” (Reynolds, qtd. in Thomas 140). On many stations there was no attempt to hide the extent of sexual relations between white station workers and black women. A pastoralist from the edge of the Nul-

labor Plains told a South Australia Royal Commission in 1899
that he had known stations "where every hand on the place had a gin, even down to boys of 15 years of age" (Reynolds, qtd. in Thomas 140). The figure of the hapless Aboriginal girl with "No one to protect [her]" at the frontier in Noonuccal’s “Dark, Unmarried Mothers” presents a stark contrast to the "lithe and lovely" girl at the heart of the same poet’s celebratory poem, "Nona," set in pre-contact times. Here, the girl is protected by the "men and women" who "all/Had smiles for Nona [...] At the happy chattering evening meal." Nona is "Naked like the rest" and is unmarried by the burden of sexualization and abuse as she remains "Unconscious of her body."

There is no such providence for the central female figure in Archie Weller’s “The Hunters,” a poem which brings to light the fortunes of the formidable authority and enduring influence of the frontier encounters between white men and Indigenous women and girls. As in "Dark, Unmarried Mothers," the Aboriginal girl in "The Hunters" is rendered quixotic-like; in this instance she is "a bird" at the mercy of "two drunken white hunters." Although she is clearly a victim, readers are positioned to note the composed presence of the girl whose "poised" demeanor contrasts the childish fumbling of her sireine oppressors who "fall down," "whisper [...]" "giggle and stumble." Weller directly links his present-day protagonist’s tragic circumstance to the brutal frontier exploitation of Aboriginal women and girls as the white hunters “devour” her “with rough caresses” and “whisper [...] the things she always has heard” (italics added). Further, the narrative voice questions whether the hunters brought the girl “promises of things to come” or “some beer or wine,” surely an allusion to well-documented instances of frontier stockmen and squatters offering Aboriginal women goods (often food to feed their children) in exchange for sex.

Aboriginal women in Tasmania “visited” the stockmen in return for tea, tobacco and sugar. Assistant Protector James Dredge reported a similar pattern in the Goulburn River district in the late 1830s. He chastised the mounted police for encouraging Aboriginal women to “visit” in return for tea, bread and sugar (Griggs 81).

In her poem “Mamillates and Tresses,” Romaine Moreton offers a disquieting “rationalization” for such exploitative behaviors by alluding to the idea of imperial ownership and the concomitant desire to dominate and debase: “the hollowed and burnt shell of her flesh/that would allow the men to echo their existence across all the land.”

Kevin Gilbert further illuminates the desperation and belittlement of this object position within a more contemporary setting in his brazenly confronting poem “The Other Side Of The Story” : “I’ll sell me moo for half a note/And a bottle of wine if you need.” For Gilbert, in particular, it is always women and girls who suffer the grossest violations at the hands of frontier legacy: “I’ve had a cunt of a life I suppose/As a woman” (“Riches”). In Gilbert’s “Mum,” a son laments his wretched living conditions, which see his blind mother appearing “dead,” lying on a “yellowed sheet” amidst “the squalor of the ragged tent” while in “Guarwundul’s Wish,” it is the narrator’s granddaughter who pays the ultimate price as a result of the unful-filled promise of running water from the “welfare fella”: “The grand-daughter she now gits all the water that she needs/we buried her beside the river where casuarinas bleed/it ain’t much ain’t it.”

Clearly, for both Gilbert and Weller, the enduring impact of frontier disenfranchisement is manifest in the abject poverty suffered by far too many contemporary Indigenous peoples; however, it is resoundingly the (albeit connected) instance and impact of sexual abuse that is central to representations of women and girls in Indigenous verse. Many Indigenous poets are inclined to link the prevalence of sexual violence on the frontier directly to odious stereotypes that, arguably, remain a strong influence on general perceptions of Aboriginal women today. In her highly influential publication The Real Matilda, Miriam Dixon elucidated a dominant frontier stereotype and its implications: the term “black velvet” encapsulates a world of “sensual and oral temptations” [...] but sexual gratification is often fused with feelings of mirthless, dirt and blackness in capitalist cultures. Since European men were often brutal to aboriginal women, this increased the burden of guilt. Guilt, almost unbearable if experienced passively, can be managed better - so we imagine - if we actively turn it against our victims (197).

The widespread use of such terms of disparagement as “black velvet” and “gin” denied Aboriginal women subjectivity, while the inference of an inherent sexuality authorized an attendant assumption of sexual promiscuity and availability. Robertson contends that such “discursive meaning systems” demonstrate how “many Aboriginal women were disempowered, denigrated and deprecated by white men, who felt it their legitimate right to possess, rape, and abuse Aboriginal women” (39). That these colonial notions of Aboriginal women continue to impact contemporary perceptions is evidenced in Lisa Bellear’s “Poor Pretty Polly” in which bystanders comment on the lifeless body of an Aboriginal girl lying in the gutter:

Poor poor pretty Polly, lies silent
in an inner suburban gutter.
“What a sweetie,” “such a shame,”
“so pretty and now she’s dead.”
Some say of a broken heart, others snigger “she gave too much.”

The callous witnesses in Bellear’s poem deny this death any sense of gravity or significance; the girl is reduced to “a sweetie” who was “so pretty” and is made personally culpable as a result of her allegedly promiscuous behaviors. The narrator, however, clearly associates the girl’s demise with a history of abuse at the hands of the white oppressor:

Curse the mother she never knew
curse the white man who raped her mother, the mother she never knew

Here again the relevance of past injustices to present attitudes is unmistakable.

In her address at the 2004 Clare Burton Memorial Lecture,
prominent lawyer and author Larissa Behrendt articulated some of the concerns expressed in the Indigenous poetry presently under study:

Colonial notions that Aboriginal women are “easy sexual sport” have also contributed to the perception that incidents of sexual assault are the fault of Aboriginal women. While behavior and treatment of Aboriginal men is often contextualized within the process of colonization, no context is provided for the colonial attitudes that have seen the sexuality of Aboriginal women demeaned, devalued and degraded. (250)

Behrendt also cites various examples of how white judges have “been quick to accept claims of devalued Aboriginal women’s sexuality that has lowered the standards applied when determining whether consent had been given by Aboriginal women to sexual encounters” (249). Since Behrendt’s address, the case in which a 10-year-old Aboriginal girl from Aurukun in northern Queensland was gang raped and has received international media attention. In her 2006 ruling, Judge Sarah Bradley told the accused that “the girl involved was not forced and she probably agreed to have sex with all of you” (The Weekend Australian 10). Likewise, the prosecutor at the center of the case deduced that “although she was very young, she knew what was going on” (Sydney Morning Herald 1). Bradley ordered that some of the offenders be placed on probation and others be given suspended sentences (BBC News 1). While the outrage over this decision sparked an independent review, which has since led to heavier sentences, it is interesting to note that no disciplinary action has been taken against anyone in the Queensland justice system (The Weekend Australian 1). Legal proceedings such as those surrounding the Aurukun case indubitably imply an intrinsically rampant and somehow debased sexuality on the part of Indigenous women and girls that is disturbingly reminiscent of prevailing colonial perceptions. Such reprehensible attitudes to Aboriginal women’s sexuality are fervently denounced in Aleen Corpus’s compelling poem “Taxi Conversation”:

i never had a woman like you.
what woman do you mean?
you know.
no.

i mean a black woman.
oh.
they say they’re better than white

As the distinctly one-sided conversation proceeds, the female passenger is further affronted (and silenced) by the white driver’s intimation that Indigenous people in general are sexually voracious and uniquely endowed, and by his assumption that the listener has had numerous sexual partners:

i take a drag
exhale
my words are gone.
here it comes, he’s gonna ask
about my men.

Roberta Sykes’s “Black Woman” frankly addresses the frequently empty white rhetoric of reconciliation and equity in her exploration of these simultaneously racist and sexist assumptions:

the present is so un-real
its new liberal views
mouthing anti-racist slogans
in demonstrations of the day—
attempting to solicit your sexual favour
for a dollar and a drink
in the cold reality of night.

In a similar vein, Mudrooro’s “Peaches and Cream” refers to the “white bodies made urgent/With a flare of injustice.” Interestingly, Aboriginal women poets seem more likely to attribute their Indigenous female subjects more assertion in responding to oppression than male poets. In “Taxi Conversation,” this proactive subversion is enacted as the passenger insults the driver’s intelligence and disregards the taxi fare:

why should i pay and submit to cabbage minds like that
when i smell i can tell
a violent racist b—

Likewise, the woman of Romaine Moreton’s poem “Woman-kindness” defies victim-status as she actively rejects the stereotype of the “dutiful courtesan”: “she instead/Will rejoice in her Woman-kindness.”

While many Indigenous poets confront the insidious estimations of white men towards Aboriginal women and girls in Australia across time, a small number of poets also address the particularly sensitive issue of abuse experienced at the hands of Aboriginal men. In Roberta Sykes’s “Monopoly,” the “Faces of attackers—clear, then waning,” are “Black and white faces, taut and straining.” The speaker goes on to insinuate the similarity existing between black and white perpetrators in her declaration that “There is no monopoly on discrimination;” she further decry the tendency to define Indigenous experience in masculine terms: “There is no monopoly on pain.” In her poem “Fallen,” where a “[…] Sister has been raped […] […] by five Brothers,” Sykes describes the wretched impact of this form of abuse:

Brother, flesh of my flesh
You have watched while we your sisters
cried, gave birth, died, went insane, tore out our own hair,
spat on our own bodys, screamed the soundless scream,
sweated blood—

Significantly, Sykes expresses the silence and acute pain and frustration expressed above as “agonies which white men caused.” The speaker continues the address to her “Brother”:

Yet you have still learned from them,
and turn your new craft to us, Rape. Bash. Kill.
We, your Sisters, […]
[…] must learn again to recognize the mad-dog disease
which is again the white man’s legacy.

Larissa Behrendt examines this “mad-dog disease” in her mention of Judy Atkinson’s contribution to the 1994 Queensland
Moreton’s distressing portrayal of child sexual abuse hints at the entrenched nature of such abuses in some communities as the girl is clearly compelled to silence and secrecy. One must question the level of humanity ascribed to victims such as those presented in the poetry under study when considering how customary law has been successfully used as a viable defense for abuse against Aboriginal women and children in the recent past, despite the devastation of traditional Indigenous structures of society and law as a result of colonizing forces (Nowra 63). In his revealing book Bad Dreaming: Aboriginal Men’s Violence against Women and Children, Louis Nowra considers such tensions in his claim that “women remain victims of men’s versions of Indigenous customs and culture”; Nowra’s account further denounces what he sees as a “contradiction between women’s rights and Indigenous rights” in this country (64).

With the exception of Roberta Sykes, Romaine Corpus is perhaps the only poet explored within the confines of the present study to simultaneously address the dynamics existing between and around Indigenous (female) victims and Indigenous (male) perpetrators. Central to Corpus’s representations of Indigenous people, male or female, is the impact of identity effacement. In “blikern-jungil” the narrator relates her experience of being approached by black men “hoo display bliknez” and who offer her salvation:

[...] “iime gonnalifyoo outta
yor blk hole n sho yoo
how t ’wlk n dress n tk”

[...]

Corpus’s narrator indicates that the “bliknez” displayed by these men is far from authentic as she stresses that it is merely “they sens of bliknez” (italics added). For Corpus, Aboriginality (the “blk hole”) has been rendered a “sickness” by the dominant “white” culture, which insists on the denial of Aboriginal heritage and customs, just as the Aboriginal man in the poem wears a “smart soot ol prest n cleen” in order to demonstrate his “success.” For the female protagonist, the refusal to adopt a “white” persona has seemingly led to poverty and prostitution as she “sit[s] in th” gutta/”of regent streer” and notes her own “soiled bliknez.” What is perhaps most striking about the imagery in “blikern-jungil” is the intimacy that the relationship between the two protagonists in the poem is that of a pimp and a prostitute. Clearly, Corpus’s use of language is influenced by Black American vocabulary, a choice perhaps adopted in a bid to draw parallels between oppression experienced in America and Australia; but readers are surely also compelled to identify the highly recognizable and caricatured racist stereotype of the Black American pimp, garishly attired in his “[...] hi heel kork shooz,” his “smart soot ol prest n cleen,” and his “[...] cosmetic afro ring [...]”. Readers could possibly deduce that the poem highlights the exploitative nature of colonizers whose practices and beliefs are somehow taken up by colonized men to the detriment of colonized women. Whatever the case, in this instance, Corpus seems to address the odious stereotypes that have befallen both colonized women and men. Where this
situates Indigenous men is an issue beyond the scope of the present inquiry but is obviously one worthy of further pursuit. Additionally, it would seem remiss not to address Corpus’s seemingly strategic subversion enacted through her choice of language in "blickern-jungal." According to Adam Shoemaker, Corpus, among others, has "articulated that worldview in verse which has an inherently oral, colloquial and [. . .] phonetic character—a trend which represents a unique Black Australian contribution to Australian literature" (180–81). Certainly, Corpus’s verse serves to challenge dominant poetic discourses by “dismantling” what Rob Jackaman refers to as “the implicit hierarchy” which privileges language that is distinctly “English” in character (237). Jackaman notes how Corpus’s verse exposes the need to review the whole business of reading and textuality, particularly since there’s no Aboriginal written language in the sense that such things exist in Western cultures (236). Corpus does not address this “implicit hierarchy” via language use alone; in the final lines of "blickern-jungal," the narrator, like her male compatriot, recognizes her lack of options as she determines to concede to the dominant white culture’s version of “how I walk n dress n t.k.”

Since the early 1960s, the Aboriginal political voice in Australia has frequently been related through the medium of poetry. According to Anita Heiss, poetry "provides a political platform for Indigenous writers in lieu of or in addition to those offered by the more conventional channels for their voice in national political organizations or government infrastructures" (181). Heiss also refers to feelings of “literary inadequacy” in her explanation of why Indigenous women have tended towards poetry over prose in the past: in consideration of “being part of a society with incredibly low literacy rates,” the belief that poetry offers "fewer restrictions on style and technique" renders it an attractive art form through which to express important political statements (31). Certainly the collection of poetry under study here demonstrates the poetic as well as the political achievements of many Indigenous writers in Australia over time, achievements that have been and continue to be inextricably connected. The varied poets referred to in the current study all employ the poetic form in order to carry their voice of protest, in this case providing a contestation of the ways in which Indigenous women and girls have been constructed within established and indeed enduring hegemonic discourses. Importantly, many of these poems also highlight how gender issues have often been overlooked in the pursuit of racial politics; how the abused woman figure is often disregarded in the rhetoric of (male gendered) political struggle. Hence, in its exploration of what it means to be an Indigenous woman in Australia, much of the poetry in the present inquiry situates its female subject as conspicuously oppressed yet politically potent. Moreover, in simultaneously gendering notions of Aboriginality and challenging racialized notions of gender, these writers are able to employ the poetic form to envisage a space where alternative discourses of gender and race can exist.

NOTE

1 While it is now widely believed that Mudrooroo Narogin does not have any Aboriginal bloodline, his socialization as an Aboriginal man and the fact that his work is still held in high esteem by many Indigenous scholars deem him worthy of inclusion in the current study.

WORKS CITED


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