

Black Australia 'Writes Back' to the Literary Traditions of Empire

Danica Čerče

University of Ljubljana

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Education Commons](#), [European Languages and Societies Commons](#), [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), [Other Arts and Humanities Commons](#), [Other Film and Media Studies Commons](#), [Reading and Language Commons](#), [Rhetoric and Composition Commons](#), [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#), [Television Commons](#), and the [Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#)

Dedicated to the dissemination of scholarly and professional information, [Purdue University Press](#) selects, develops, and distributes quality resources in several key subject areas for which its parent university is famous, including business, technology, health, veterinary medicine, and other selected disciplines in the humanities and sciences.

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <clcweb@purdue.edu>

Recommended Citation

Čerče, Danica. "Black Australia 'Writes Back' to the Literary Traditions of Empire." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 19.4 (2017): <<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.3158>>

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

The above text, published by Purdue University Press ©Purdue University, has been downloaded 184 times as of 11/07/19.

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the [CC BY-NC-ND license](#).

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and CultureISSN 1481-4374 <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>>

Purdue University Press ©Purdue University

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." In addition to the publication of articles, the journal publishes review articles of scholarly books and publishes research material in its *Library Series*. Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <clcweb@purdue.edu>

Volume 19 Issue 4 (December 2017) Article 3**Danica Čerče,****"Black Australia 'Writes Back' to the Literary Traditions of Empire"**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol19/iss4/3>>

Contents of ***CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 19.4 (2017)**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol19/iss4/>>

Abstract: In her article "Black Australia 'Writes Back' to the Literary Traditions of Empire" Danica Čerče discusses the verse of Australian Indigenous authors Romaine Moreton and Alf Taylor, notable for the overt objection to the institutional and historical processes. These have enabled and maintained the dominant position of those identified as white on the one hand, and the concomitant political, economic, and cultural subordination of Indigenous Australians on the other. Focused on strategies and poetic devices used by the two poets to engage non-Indigenous readers in the experience of their writing, the article examines how the rhetoric of their critique and personal address solicit affective and political responses. In particular, it aims to show that, by challenging the public dynamics of racial separation, their poetry performs an ongoing role in destabilizing the assumptions of white privilege and entitlement.

Danica ČERČE

Black Australia "Writes Back" to the Literary Traditions of Empire

Despite the progressive suppression of discriminatory legislation in Australia, following William E. H. Stanner's 1967 dictum to break "the great Australian silence," that is the absence of Indigenous peoples in Australia's mainstream history and nation-making, the government's political action and policy have been "too ambivalent to grant Australians the deserved discursive and material space" in Australian society and identity formation (Renes, "Anne Brewster" 93). According to Anne Brewster, a postcolonial liberal Australia has maintained "dominance without hegemony" in relation to its indigenous population, a "constituency that [...] has never 'ceded sovereignty'" ("Engaging" 60). Because of the "systemic privileging of whites," as Charles Mills defines white supremacy apparent in social, economic, and political structures ("Race" 449), indigenous communities continue to manifest their protest against the racialized exclusions and inequalities, demanding the opportunities for "asset accumulation and upward social mobility" (Lipsitz, *The Possessive* viii). In addition to various forms of activism, literature as a key element in the formation of national identity has obtained a vital role in giving impetus to the Indigenous peoples' cause. Constituting an intercultural encounter for the white reader, it represents a site for the renegotiation of what Anne Brewster refers to as the "literary contract—recoding and resignifying subjectivity, aesthetics, canonicity, indigeneity, whiteness and the nation, and transnational connectivity" (Brewster, *Giving* xii).

Indeed, as one of the traditions of the new postcolonial literatures in English, Australian Indigenous literature "writes back" to the literary traditions of empire (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *The Empire*) and their white literary subjectivity (Lipsitz, *The Possessive*). Written in English in order to be recognizable to British authority, Australian Indigenous literature challenges—in Walter Mignolo's words—the "authority and legitimacy of Euro-centered epistemology, [...] assuming or explicitly declaring the inferiority" of all those positioned outside "European categories of proficiency and identity," such as Christianity, European languages, modernity, history, skin color and scientific knowledge, the so-called "colonial subalterns" (Mignolo, *On Subalterns* 386; Brewster, "Engaging" 57). Disenfranchised in a wide spectrum of ways, Australian Indigenous authors have become involved in the production that used to be reserved as the "exclusive domain of Europeans" (Brewster, *Giving* xii). By rewriting history and retelling their stories so as to meet Indigenous peoples' needs and truths, these authors have participated in redefining the hegemony of the English language and the white nation, and "developed spaces of cross-cultural encounter between the mainstream and the Indigenous populations" (Renes, "Anne Brewster" 94).

However, as recently as the early 1970s, Indigenous Australian authors were a marginalized voice in Australian literary studies. With the exception of critically-acclaimed David Unaipon and Sally Morgan in the field of narrative prose, poets Kath Walker (better known as Oodgeroo) and Lionel Fogarty, and playwrights Kevin Gilbert and Jack Davis, there were very few "celebrated Aboriginals" (Wheeler, *The Companion* 1). The success of these authors attained in the face of colonial pressure motivated several other Indigenous Australians to share their thoughts and feelings. A major event in opening up the field of Aboriginal literature and bringing it to wide public attention was the success of Sally Morgan's autobiography *My Place* (1987). Another important milestone in the recognition of this literature and culture was the Commonwealth Bicentenary in 1988, when nationwide demonstrations led by indigenous authors and activists were held. Consequently, there was a veritable outburst of Indigenous Australians' expression in various genres, including autobiography, fiction, poetry, film, drama and music.

Poetry seems to have been a popular form for reaching the audience and has become an important medium for the articulation of Indigenous peoples' political thought. Adam Shoemaker is right to claim that, "if there is any 'school' of Black Australian poetry, it is one of social protest," arguing that most Aboriginal poets reject the art for art's sake argument and feel that their work have at least some social utility (*Black Words* 201, 180). Indeed, in accordance with Michael Lipsky's definition of protest activity as a "mode of political action oriented toward objection to one or more policies or conditions" ("Protest" 1145), the distinctive feature of much of contemporary Indigenous poetry is its "political or social critique in objecting to the conditions of Indigenous people's minoritization" (Brewster, "Engaging" 61), that is cultural and political domination and disenfranchisement by white Australians. Another essential aspect of protest poetry is its capacity "to offer revelations of social worlds to which readers respond with shock, concern, sometimes political questioning" (Coles, "Democratizing" 677). As this discussion will also show, Australian Indigenous poetry is capable of ensuring strong effect on its readers. The verse of Romaine Moreton and Alf Taylor is perhaps among the most illustrative of this

claim, although—compared to the above mentioned acclaimed poets Oodgeroo and Fogarty—their popular and critical acclaim is still gaining ascendancy. In their struggle for social and political transformation, Moreton and Taylor address a plethora of pressing social justice issues, unrelentingly exposing the institutional and historical processes and logics that have retained the Australian Indigenous population in the web of hegemonic power. In so doing, they use the structure and style that allow them to create a maximum quality of readerly participation.

Positioning Moreton and Taylor within the context of Australian Indigenous protest writing and drawing on Christopher Fynsk's 1991 observation that "literature addresses an anonymous collective, but convokes us as singular beings" ("Experiences" xxviii), the article examines how the two poets' social critique involves a non-Indigenous reader in the experience of their writing and solicits political response. The textual analysis of some of the most representative poems by each author against the background of postcolonial critique and social criticism aims to show that, in performing the interrogation in the ongoing white supremacy and the concomitant subordination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia, and foregrounding the need for "intersubjectivity of race" (Hage, *Against Paranoid Nationalism* 119) rather than racial exclusion, the two poets' protest can be seen as an important contribution to decolonization and the elaboration of indigenous sovereignty, as pointed out by Anne Brewster among others ("Engaging" 58). In this sense, this discussion provides additional evidence in support of George Levine's view that works of art not only had "a deep implication in the politics of Western imperialism and the suppression of 'inferior' races and cultures," but can also display a capacity "to disrupt the exercise of power" ("Reclaiming" 383–4).

Moreton is expressing her indignation at the social and political marginalization of Black Australians, and her Goenpul nation in particular, by writing prose and poetry, performing her verse, and making films. Her poems are collected in three books, *The Callused Stick of Wanting* (1995), *Post Me to the Prime Minister* (2004), and *Poems from a Homeland* (2012), and included in several anthologies of Australian indigenous writing: *Rimfire: Poetry from Aboriginal Australia*, 2000 (all quotations from Moreton's collection *The Callused Stick of Wanting* and Alf Taylor's collection *Singer Songwriter* refer to this anthology), *Untreated: Poems by Black Writers* (2001), and the *Macquarie PEN Anthology of Aboriginal Literature* (2008). Moreton's performance poetry has been included in two compilations of Indigenous music, *Fresh Salt* (2002) and *Sending a Message* (2002). Several critics have noted that Moreton's verse is a penetrating indictment of colonization in Australia (Brewster, "Indigenous sovereignty"; Russo, "Post Me"; Čerče, "Generating," "Social Protest"). Moreton's angle of vision, coupled with her anger and generative urgency, ensure a strong affective impact of her verse. This participatory quality of her writing is also obtained by employing various linguistic structures, such as rhetorical questions, direct address to the reader, satirical antitheses and repetitions, which all invite the readers' active participation through emotional identification and personal or collective response. Indeed, as Brewster has observed, Moreton's verse engages white and other non-Indigenous publics in the form of "reassessment of history, an enquiry into contemporary cultural and economic inequality, and a scrutiny of white privilege, entitlement and denial" ("Engaging" 68). "The first sin," one of many poems that perform this function by pointing to the political, institutional and cultural reproduction of white privilege on the one hand, and the invisibility of Indigenous people on the other, begins: "He was guilty of the first sin / Being Black / He was sentenced very early in life / At birth / and only substances appeared his pangs of guilt (Moreton, Taylor, and Smith, *Rimfire* 3).

Clearly, Moreton sees black life in Australia as inherently political and considers her verse in the first place as a site of resistance. In "Working Note," she writes: "To create works that do not deal with the morbid and mortal effects of racism for one, and the beauty of indigenous culture for another, would be for me personally, to produce works that are farcical" (1). One of her poems includes these revealing verses: "It ain't easy being black / this kinda livin' is all political" (*Post Me* 111). Aroused by both her anger at those inflicting injustice on other people and her affection for those experiencing the inhumanity of racial subordination, Moreton unrelentingly exposes and condemns the brutalizing effects of the Crown's acquisition of 1770, which made sovereign Aboriginal land *terra nullius* and Aboriginal peoples *vox nullius* (Heiss and Minter, *Anthology* 2). The poet reflects on incarceration, deaths in custody, child removal, high infant mortality rates, low life expectancy, suicide, poverty and similar socioeconomic issues concerning contemporary color communities in Australia. The poem "You are Black," in particular, abounds in references to injustices the Black communities have had to endure under the white settlers' dominance. It begins in the manner of English mock-epic poetry and proceeds by piling on fact after fact about flagrant violations of the native Australians' civil and human rights, and their loss of dignity through threats, reprisals and violence. The first stanza reads: "If you are oppressed in any way, / you are Black. / If you are a woman who loves women / or a man who

loves men, / you are Black. / If it is that people do not accept you / simply for what you do, / you are Black (*Rimfire* 55).

In very much the same vein, Moreton reflects in "Genocide is never justified," signaling her moral outrage and the outright disapproval already in the poem's title. Her fusion of intimate narrative sentences with a set of rhetorical questions enforces a symphonic quality of the poem, with voices overlapping, complementing or opposing each other. In the first part, Moreton writes: "And the past was open to gross misinterpretation. / Why do the sons and daughters of the raped and murdered / deserve any more or any less than those who have prospered / from the atrocities of heritage? / And why do the sons and daughters refuse to reap / what was sown / from bloodied soil? / And why does history ignore their existence?" (*Rimfire* 31). The poem is a powerful protest against the colonizers' "possessive investment in whiteness," accountable for racialized hierarchies in the "distribution of wealth, prestige and opportunity" (Lipsitz, *The Possessive* 72). Characterized by a direct manner of writing, which gains poignancy by the ironic subtleties of her statements, the poem exposes the key social injustices, including the tyranny of oppression and abuse, arrogance of power, poverty, and willful destruction of Indigenous peoples.

Although not an autobiographical confession, the poem is acutely personal; it is a harrowing cry against all the forms of suppression and victimization of the people who lived in Australia for thousands of years before the white settlement. However, "who was here first is not the question, anymore. / It is what you have done since you arrived, / the actions you refuse to admit to, / the genocide you say you never committed!" (*Rimfire* 31), Moreton continues her hard-hitting exposure of social injustices. It seems that Moreton is suggesting that white Australians should at least concede the oppression, rather than denying its existence—the attitude that Mills considers a "cognitive handicap" of whites, when it comes to the recognition of racial discrimination and oppression ("Race" 15). A startling effect is achieved at the end of the poem by pointing to the Indigenous peoples' spiritual and emotional depth, and suggesting that this inherent quality has not only helped them survive in a hostile, morally decayed, and emotionally sterile white environment, but it also distinguishes them from it: "Why are you so rich, by secular standards / and we now so poor, by secular standards / The remnants of a culture though, / still / Rich / In Spirit / and / Soul (*Rimfire* 32).

Several other poems also humanize indigenous Australians and attack the atrocities performed in the name of "civilizing the uncivilized," as Moreton ironically refers to the inhuman practices of those who have "elect[ed] themselves as the supremacist race" in the poem "What kind of people" (*Rimfire* 45). "What kind of people would kick the heads off babies / or rip at the stomach of the impregnated, / as would a ravaged wolf," she continues in her disdainful address to apathetic readers, who repudiate any suggestion that their ancestors were capable of "such murderous feats" (*Rimfire* 45). The poem proceeds in true Moreton's fashion, compiling a catalogue of evidence to show the inhumanity of racial subordination. "Are you beautiful today," a poem included in Moreton's second collection, *Post Me to the Prime Minister* (2004), mobilizes the rhetorical strategies of argument and critique on the one hand, and poetic effects on the other. It opens: "Are you beautiful today? / Are your children safe and well? / Brother, mother, sister too? / I merely ask so you can tell" (*Post Me* 29). It is through such conversational tone and a direct address to a reader that Moreton reveals the tensions underlying the relationships between non-Indigenous and Indigenous Australians. While in some poems, Moreton invokes an indigenous addressee, in this one she provides for a textual illusion of a discourse between the indigenous speaker and the white reader, thus dramatizing the cross-racial encounter. Through a series of satirical antitheses that elaborate a contrastive picture of the speaker's family, affected by the struggle to cope with difficult circumstances, and that of the addressee—a white woman with the apparent position of privilege and economic comfort—Moreton provides for an insight into the asymmetry of racial relationships: "I laugh with my sisters and brothers / at things that others wouldn't get / while talkin' 'bout jail / while talkin' 'bout death" (*Post Me* 29).

As Brewster notes, the repetition of a one-sided enquiry into the addressee's well-being foregrounds the absence of a response, pointing to the "absence of *responsiveness*" in contemporary Australian culture and politics to the on-going material deprivation and suffering of indigenous Australians ("Engaging" 66). It has to be noted that it was not until February 2008 that the Prime Minister Kevin Rudd opened a new chapter in Australia's relations with its Indigenous peoples by making a comprehensive apology for the past policies, which had—as the Prime Minister puts it—"inflicted profound grief, suffering and loss" on fellow Australians (Johnston, "Australia says" 3). The indigenous response to the failure of multiculturalism's proclaimed mutual understanding is crying-laughter, established by the oscillation between the tonality of despair, anger and hilarity (Brewster, "Engaging" 66). True to Andrew Ford's observation that Moreton's poetry always "packs a punch" (<<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/musicshow/kerriane-coxromaine-moreton/3532492#transcript>>), this can be

found at the end of the poem, where the repetition of the catch phrase reminds us of the Indigenous peoples' high mortality rate as a result of ongoing poverty and neglect: "Are you beautiful today? / your brother, mother, sister, too? / are you well clothed and well fed? / and are they alive / and well / not dead?" (*Post Me* 29).

Despite the seeming darkness of much of Moreton's verse, the poet's conception of art is not pessimistic and her thorny plight is often brightened with instances of hope and optimism. In "Time for Dreaming," for example, she alludes to the passing of white supremacy by addressing the reader with the words: "Do not wonder about the ways of the white men / for they have already run their course" (*Rimfire* 1). The poem "My tellurian grandfather," too, ends on an optimistic tone, pointing to the Black Australians' capacity for survival in a hostile world: "You can put the flame out // [...] but there will always be fire" (*Rimfire* 29). Without quoting from other poems we can see that Moreton relies heavily on her Aboriginality for texture, diction and rhythm. Her verse rhetorically indicts the "coloniality of knowledge and of being," as Mignolo refers to the state of being deprived of the "potential to know, to understand and to be" ("On Subalterns" 391), and through the critique contributes to the "undo[ing of] the racist structure of the colonial matrix of power" ("On Subalterns" 391). An important indication of this social transformation process was the Prime Minister's apology in 2008, as pointed out above. A similar intervention into what Mills calls "the social domination contract" ("Race" 443) is also performed by Alf Taylor, a Western Australian Nyoongah poet and prose writer. By exposing the Australian government's failure to address the indicators of indigenous peoples' disadvantage, and pointing to the white Australians' maintained position of privilege, Taylor's writing, too, creates what Wendy Brady calls "a zone of discomfort around notions of what it means in contemporary Australia to be black" (Andrew, *Blak* 15), and functions to "unsettle whiteness" (Brewster, "Indigenous Sovereignty" 118).

Born in the late 1940s and growing up in the Spanish Benedictine Mission at New Norcia, Taylor represents an older generation of writers, the members of the "Stolen Generation." He has written two collections of poems, *Singer Songwriter* (1992) and *Winds* (1994). Taylor's short fiction is collected in the *Long Time Now* (2001). Excerpts from his unpublished life story, "God, the Devil and Me," are included in the anthology of indigenous writing, *Those Who Remain Will Always Remember* (2001), and in the literary journal *Westerly* (2003 and 2005). The first *Westerly* excerpt was awarded the Patricia Hackett Prize.

Taylor seems to have turned to poetry for various reasons, including his desire to cope with the traumas of racial suppression and his painful upbringing. As he writes in the poem "This Flame," "Only love / and / the pen / can quell / this flame / that / burns within" (*Winds* 39). For him, writing seems to have become a kind of sustaining addiction, a way of establishing his personal and economic identity and above all, a necessary condition of existence. "Now I can talk about the life of the child, and I'm free of hurt, free of resentments, regrets [...]. In other words, bearing a grudge," he told Brewster in the 2007 *Aboriginal History* interview (Brewster, "That child" 170). Although writing has made him comfortable in the social and emotional spheres of ordinary life and provided therapeutic value for him, it would be wrong to believe that he deals only with painful experiences of being Aboriginal. As Philip Morrissey notes, "Taylor presents us with an Aboriginal subject moving through space, apparently rootless in the manner of a country and western balladeer, but bound by a network of affective webs to family, lovers, places and strangers" ("Introduction" vii). In contrast with Taylor's short fiction, tinted with humor, so that the "tensions that are aroused can be released as laughter" (Rapoport, *Punchlines* 50), his verse is often pervaded by a spirit of sadness and sometimes even despair. This is particularly true of poems in which Taylor deals with such typical characteristics of Aboriginal life as solitude, isolation and loss.

In terms of structure, because of Taylor's accessible mode of writing and colloquial diction, his poems often seem pedestrian, particularly if assessed by strict rules of formalism. Admittedly, and as indigenous poets are often reprimanded, Taylor indeed seems to feel comfortable in the short line lyric with a meter of four stresses or fewer, or in free verse which often lacks fluidity (Čerče, "Making"). Critics concur that a failure to achieve high-standard English, symptomatic of much Indigenous writing, has to be attributed to the limited formal education of these authors and their lack of confidence when entering a field that was previously monopolized by the white elite. Another aspect is political. For many Indigenous Australians the English language is synonymous with colonial authority, thus they are reluctant to purify it of tribal and colloquial speech patterns (Maver, *Essays*; Shoemaker, *Black Words*). Rather than because of conventional aesthetics, Taylor's verse is impressive because of the directness and sincerity that springs from deeply felt personal experience. In his poems, he returns to his painful childhood and adolescence, to his hard-won struggles with alcohol, and what appears to be an attempted suicide, reviving memories of his tribe, parents, friends, youthful love, and

heartfelt yearnings. Compared to Moreton's poetry, which is by her own admission very often received as "confronting and challenging" (Moreton, "Working Note" 1), Taylor's poems are more lyrical, generated by his urge to reach a significant metamorphosis in his psyche, and as a means of reconciliation with his own past. Generally speaking, they are also less poignant. As the poet reveals in his interview with Brewster: "The pencil is my weapon, but I try to write from a neutral corner and go between the center of that uneasiness, because I don't want my readers to be uncomfortable when they read" (Brewster, "That Child" 175). However, as this discussion will show, taking white readers into what Frantz Fanon calls the "zone of occult instability where the people dwell" (*The Wretched* 183) and mobilizing various strategies of indictment and advocacy in the service of social justice agendas, several of Taylor's poems stir strong feelings of guilt, shame and remorse in non-Indigenous readers.

One would search in vain to find any kind of arrangement or logical sequence of poems in Taylor's collections. They follow each other like uncontrolled thoughts, moving back and forth from childhood to adulthood, and veering from public to private realms. Both collections start in *medias res*, bluntly exposing the brutalizing effects of Indigenous socioeconomic subordination in Australia. The collection *Winds* opens with the poem "People of the Park," which begins and proceeds as an idyllic description of a tribal gathering. It is not until the end of the poem that Taylor overturns this one-dimensional cliché and surprises the reader with the heart-breaking claim: "People outside / the circle / think / the people / of the park / have / got no tomorrow" (*Winds* 1). A similarly embittered voicing of the hardship experienced by the Black communities pervades "Black skin," the opening poem in *Singer Song-writer*. The poem's tone oscillates between despair and anger. A sense of hopelessness is achieved by the overwhelming presence of the color black, which has a negative connotation in color symbolism as it is connected with death and sorrow. The rhyming companions, such as tomorrow/sorrow, cry/die, hope/rope establish a feeling of farce.

Several other poems also deal with the consequences of racial exclusion. In "Sniffin'," for example, Taylor meditates on widespread drug use as a means "to get away / from that shadow / of pain" (*Rimfire* 107). Many Black Australians seek refuge in heavy drinking, Taylor regretfully observes in the poems "The trip," "Dole cheque," "A price," "Last ride," "Hopeless Case," "Ode to the Drunken Poet," and "No Hope," to mention only a few. It must have been also because drinking used to be Taylor's escape from the thoughts of his cruel upbringing that in the latter, he writes: "These are the people / of no life / and no hope" (*Rimfire* 125), unreservedly taking the side of those who disapprove of this kind of escapism. Similarly, Taylor reflects on the effects of drinking in the poem "Gerbah:" "The time he's forty body wrecked his life nearly done. / Dead brain cells and a burnt out liver, / lays in a cold sweat and starts to shiver" (*Rimfire* 128). The poem proceeds as a deductively reasoned analysis, piling up arguments and closing with an appeal to the youngsters to learn and obtain education: "With no schoolin' what have they got? / A dole cheque and a bottle, that's what" (*Rimfire* 128).

That these poems are highly illustrative of the poet's own problems with alcohol is also clearly evident from his confession: "I was quite lucky to realize that alcohol does not solve any problems; it adds problems to problems" (Brewster, "This Child" 174–6). It is important to note that, until 1967, selling alcohol to Indigenous population was banned. With the 1967 referendum, through which Black Australian communities became autonomous, the ban was repealed. According to Adi Wimmer, several politically correct advisors to the government did not consider alcohol as a problem, arguing that alcoholism was not any worse amongst Aborigines than amongst the whites: "It is just that they [Aborigines] drink in public, whereas the whites drink at home" ("Autonomous" 115). This might have been well intentioned, but it was also totally wrong, observes Wimmer. The dimensions of alcohol abuse and its direct connection with violence and death became collective awareness with the publication of several studies in the last two decades, including those by anthropologists Peter Sutton (2001) and Louis Nowra (2007) (Wimmer, "Autonomous").

Unlike several of Taylor's poems imbued with pessimism, "Leave us alone" offers an optimistic view and can be regarded as an exemplary instance of protest poetry, articulating an indictment of injustice and "advocating change," as proposed in the eleventh of Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach* and later embraced by the Subaltern Studies group: "Challenge problems, not running away, / Forget about the booze and family fights, / Let's stand up as individuals and make it right" (*Rimfire* 134). A rallying cry to his peoples to jointly strive for their rights, which underlies the recurrent themes of alcoholism, unemployment, poverty, and deaths in custody, is also heard in the poem "We blackfellas." Structured as a sustained argument and exposition, it criticizes the debilitating role of the media in their portrayal of Indigenous peoples and closes with the conviction: "We blackfellas must stand / as one / as the fight still goes on" (*Rimefire* 129).

In an accusatory and disconcertingly direct poem in clipped line lengths, "No names," Taylor reveals his deep concern about numerous deaths in custody. He is critical of non-Indigenous Australians,

who are aware of the shocking statistics, but do not react to them. Taylor hints at their passivity with a set of rhetorical questions underpinned with sardonic bitterness: "Who is / to blame? / Who is / to blame? / Lots of questions / but no names (*Rimfire* 110). Taylor's experimentation with the syntactic markers of the language, such as direct address to the reader, rhetorical questions, and satirical antithesis to establish the point of view and evoke emotional and cognitive states in the readers, ensures the maximum participatory effect of his verse. In the poem "Why," for example, Taylor employs rhetorical questions to draw attention to various aspects of contemporary cultural and economic inequality and to stir intense feelings of guilt and shame: "Why / is he / living / in this room / infested with / alcohol, drugs / and pills / [...] he just can't / take it / no more / but why" (*Wings* 20). Reading this poem is certainly not a passive activity: it deeply engages white readers and evokes moral indignation, anger and empathy pervaded with the feeling of guilt and remorse. A survey of Taylor's poetic achievements can perhaps best be completed by noting the poem "Makin it right," where he writes: "I'll try and make things right / through writing and poetry / I just might / but we'll all have to pull together. / Never mind how far apart / someone somewhere gotta make a start (*Rimfire* 112).

Indeed, by describing the multiple forms of trauma within the Indigenous communities, and advocating the Indigenous peoples' unconquerable spirit in the face of adversity and loss, Taylor has had an important role in documenting the shocking consequences of imperial expansion on *les damnés de la terre* (the wretched of the earth), as Fanon refers to all those whose dignity continues to be "stripped away by the logic of coloniality, and whose lives do not correspond to the criteria of humanity established by the rhetoric of modernity" (Mignolo, "On Subalterns" 388–9). In addition, writing out of the intense presence of his whole self and embracing a poetic mode that allows an apprehension of, and participation in the quality of his experience, Taylor has produced the verse that not only "creates discomfort" (Andrew, *Blak* 15) because of the social and cultural positioning of black subaltern identities, but evokes strong feelings of culpability in white Australian readers. At the same time, given that the major issues faced by Indigenous Australians today, "equal rights, equal opportunities, equal housing, better health, better education. Everything equal" (Brewster, O'Neill, Van Den Berg, *Those Who Remain* 189) are common to many other minorities placed in "subaltern relations of power" (Mignolo, "On Subalterns" 382–3), Taylor's protest, just as Moreton's, stimulates readers all over the world to draw parallels across national lines and consider the critique in the context of their own national traumas.

Written against the background of critical whiteness studies and based on Levine's views about a "potentially disruptive force" of literary works and their ability to "help create a desirable community" ("Reclaiming" 384, 387), this discussion about the poetry of Romaine Moreton and Alf Taylor has shown how the two authors' intervention in the racist structure of power destabilizes white readers' assumptions about the legitimacy of the reproduction of colonial differences, and contributes to what Mignolo defines as a "genealogy of de-colonial thought" ("On Subalterns" 391). Although, in Gayatri Spivak's words, "what is called history will always seem more real to us than what is called literature" (*In Other Worlds* 243), it is probably safe to claim that the creative imagination of these authors and their call for intersubjectivity of race in particular, deserve to be brought into the global exchange of values. Given that Moreton and Taylor's sentiment continues to be a challenge and an invitation to many other authors who wish to speak of the common experience of Indigenous communities and promote a spirit of reconciliation, and judging by numerous translations of these works, following the increased interest in "all Others, marginal, minority, and peripheral literatures," proposed by Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek ("An Introduction" 15) among others, this process has already come a long way. At the start of the twenty-first century, Australian Indigenous literature is an integral component of Australian literature and a recognized canon in its own merit. With several prominent and awarded practitioners in all major literary genres, it is undoubtedly worthy of readers' attention and scholarly inquiry.

Works Cited

- Andrew, Brook. *Blak Babe(z) & Kweer Kat(z)*. Chippendale: Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-operative, 1998.
- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back. Theory and Practice in Postcolonial Literatures*. London: Routledge, 1989.
- Brewster, Anne. *Giving This Country a Memory: Contemporary Aboriginal Voices of Australia*. Amherst: Cambria P, 2015.
- Brewster, Anne. "Indigenous Sovereignty in the Poetry of Romaine Moreton." *Australian Literary Studies* 24.3–4 (2009): 109–21.
- Brewster, Anne. "Engaging the Public Intimacy of Whiteness: The Indigenous Protest Poetry of Romaine Moreton." *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature. Special Issue: The Colonial Present* (2008): 56–78.

- Brewster, Anne. "'That Child Is My Hero': An Interview with Alf Taylor." *Aboriginal History* 31 (2007): 165–77.
- Brewster, Anne, Angeline O'Neill, and Rosemary Van Den Berg, eds. *Those Who Remain Will Always Remember. An Anthology of Aboriginal Writing*. Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre P, 2000.
- Coles, Nicholas. "Democratizing Literature." *College English* 48 (1986): 64–80.
- Čerče, Danica. "Social Protest and Beyond in Australian Indigenous Poetry: Romaine Moreton, Alf Taylor and Michael J. Smith." *Antipodes* 26.2 (2012): 143-49.
- Čerče, Danica. "Generating Alternative Worlds: The Indigenous Protest Poetry of Romaine Moreton." *Elope* 7 (2010): 49–60.
- Čerče, Danica. "'Making It Right' through the Poetry of Alf Taylor." *Acta Neophilologica* 42.1–2 (2009): 83–92.
- Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. 1961. Tran. Constance Farrington. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971.
- Ford, Andrew. "Kerriane Cox, Romaine Moreton. Transcript of an Interview with Cox and Moreton." *abc.net.au*. ABC, 25 January 2003. <<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/musicshow/kerriane-coxromaine-moreton/3532492-transcript>>.
- Fyns, Christopher. "Experiences of Finitude." *The Inoperative Community*. Ed. Nancy Jean-Luc. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1991.
- Hage, Ghassan. *Against Paranoid Nationalism: Searching for Hope in a Shrinking Society*. Annandale: Pluto P, 2003.
- Heiss, Anita, Peter Minter, eds. *Anthology of Australian Aboriginal Literature*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 2008.
- Johnston, Tim. "Australia Says 'Sorry' to Aborigines for Mistreatment." *The New York Times* 13 February 2008.
- Levine, George. "Reclaiming the Aesthetics." *Falling into Theory: Conflicting Views on Reading Literatures*. Ed. David H. Richter. New York: Bedford, 2000. 378–91.
- Lipsky, Michael. "Protest as a Political Resource." *The American Political Science Review* 62.4 (1968): 1144–58.
- Lipsitz, George. *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1998.
- Marx, Karl, Engels, Friedrich. *Selected Works*. Volume 1. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969.
- Maver, Igor. "Contemporary 'New' Aboriginal Poetry in English." *Essays on Australian and Canadian Literature*. Eds. Jurak, Mirko, Igor Maver. Ljubljana: Znanstveni inštitut Filozofske fakultete, 2000. 13–20.
- Mignolo, Walter D. "On Subalterns and Other Agencies." *Postcolonial Studies* 8.4 (2005): 381–407.
- Mills, Charles W. "Race and the Social Contract Tradition." *Social Identities* 6.4 (2000): 441–62.
- Moreton, Romaine. *The Callused Stick of Wanting*. Rozelle: Breakout Design, 1995.
- Moreton, Romaine. *Post Me to the Prime Minister*. Alice Springs: Jukurpa Books, 2004.
- Moreton, Romaine. "Working Note." *How* 1.5 (2001): 14.
- Moreton, Romaine, Alf Taylor, and Michael J. Smith. *Rimfire: Poetry from Aboriginal Australia*. Broome: Magabala Books, 2000.
- Morrissey, Philip. "Introduction." *Winds*. Alf Taylor. Broome: Magabala Books, 1994. vii–viii.
- Nowra, Louis. *Bad Dreaming: Aboriginal Men's Violence Against Women and Children*. North Melbourne: Pluto P, 2007.
- Renes, Martin. "Anne Brewster, *Giving This Country a Memory: Contemporary Aboriginal Voices of Australia*." *The Journal of the European Association for Studies of Australia* 7.1 (2016): 93–6.
- Rappoport, Leon. *Punchlines: The Case for Racial, Ethnic and Gender Humor*. Westport: Praeger, 2005.
- Russo, Katherine E. "Post Me to the Prime Minister: Property, Language and Indigenous / non-Indigenous Relations in the Australian Nation." *Anglistica* 9.2 (2005): 103-25.
- Shoemaker, Adam. *Black Words, White Pages: Aboriginal Literature 1929-1988*. St. Lucia: Queensland UP, 1989.
- Spivak, Gayatri C. *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*. London: Routledge, 1988.
- Stanner, William, Edward Hanley. *After the Dreaming*. Sydney: Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 1968.
- Sutton, Peter. "The Politics of Suffering: Indigenous Policy in Australia since the 1970s." *Anthropological Forum* 11 (2001): 125–73.
- Taylor, Alf. *Singer Songwriter*. Broome: Magabala Books, 1992.
- Taylor, Alf. *Winds*. Broome: Magabala Books, 1994.
- Taylor, Alf. *Long time now*. Broome: Magabala Books, 2001.
- Totosy de Zepetnek, Steven. "An Introduction to Comparative Literature Now." *Comparative literature Now: Theories and Practice*. Ed. Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek. Paris: Champion, 1999. 13–18.
- Wheeler, Belinda. "Introduction: The Emerging Canon." *A Companion to Australian Aboriginal Literature*. Ed. Belinda Wheeler. Rochester: Camden House, 2013. 1–13.
- Wimmer, Adi. "Autonomous Aboriginal Communities in Australia." *Acta Neophilologica* 42.1–2 (2009): 111–22.

Author's profile: Danica Čerče teaches English at the Faculty of Economics, University of Ljubljana. Her interests in scholarship include contemporary American and Australian literature, Indigenous Australian literature, and translation and cultural studies. Čerče's recent publications include "*John Steinbeck in East European Translation* (2017), "*Between Translation and Transformation: Recreating Steinbeck's Language in Of Mice and Men*," *The Translator* (2016) and "*Shared affinities in the portrayals of Californian paisanos and Australian battlers*," *Neohelicon* (2016). Email: <danica.cerce@ef.uni-lj.si>