

## Politics of Indigeneity in Fogarty's Poetry

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**Abstract:** In his article "Politics of Indigeneity in Fogarty's Poetry" Sean Gorman discusses Indigenous themes and issues with regards to the poetry of Murri writer Lionel Fogarty. As Fogarty is seen as a poet who writes complex prose, his material challenges non-Indigenous readerships by subverting Standard English and conventional reading practices. Gorman suggests strategies by which to engage with Fogarty's material and, employing the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin, namely heteroglossia and dialogism, to arrive at a better understanding of the rich and complex nature of Fogarty's work. Gorman executes his analysis in relation to the political debates that have arisen since the *Little Children Are Sacred* report was made public and the intervention in Australia's Northern Territory occurred in 2007.

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**Sean GORMAN****Politics of Indigeneity in Fogarty's Poetry**

The Murri writer Lionel Fogarty is perhaps best known to a non-Indigenous readership as an Indigenous poet who writes in a complex way. This complexity is bound up in the way he challenges and subverts the conventions of standard English and filters it through his Indigenous reality to create a distinct anti-colonial position. Fogarty has therefore been described as a guerrilla poet because of his complex poetry and the difficult themes he writes about. In this article I suggest some ideas on how Fogarty can be read by engaging with his role as a songman, thereby providing a critical framework to engage with his poetry. To do this, I employ Mikhail Bakhtin's theories of heteroglossia and dialogism to engage with Fogarty's poetry, as those theories provide an avenue for reading complex literary constructions. Finally, my analysis of Fogarty's poem "The Buzz" (*New and Selected Poems* 69) shows how Fogarty deals with gender relations and sexual issues within his Murri community. This analysis is performed in relation to the political debates that have arisen since the *Little Children Are Sacred* report was made public and since the intervention in Australia's Northern Territory, both of which occurred in 2007 (see Anderson and Wild).

Many non-Indigenous readers attempting to read Fogarty's poetry are confronted with a construct of aboriginality that is unfamiliar or inaccessible and many non-Indigenous Australians have little first-hand knowledge or experience of Indigenous Australians or, if they do, it is filtered by a limited understanding of Indigenous history and negative media constructions. This situation is problematic, as Marcia Langton suggests: "Textual analysis of the racist stereotypes and mythologies, which inform Australian understanding of Aboriginal people, is revealing. The most dense relationship is not between actual people, but between white Australians and the symbols created by their predecessors. Australians do not know and relate to Aboriginal people. They relate to stories told by former colonists" (33).

Doubt, inaction, and fear take root when little or no dialogue prevails between Aboriginal and settler Australians. The ramifications of this are that indifference becomes a normative response from non-Indigenous Australians and pervades all spectra of Australian society. For example, many Australians do not know that the life expectancy of the Indigenous population is seventeen years less than the rest of the population or that infant mortality is triple the broader population (see, e.g., *Births*). These conditions then create a socio-cultural disconnect that situates the colonized as the "other," a position that humiliates, frustrates, and oppresses "them" and diminishes "us." As musician and activist Bob Geldof pointed out recently at a Generation One breakfast: "You are beginning to deal with a problem that has been festering, but can be resolved and needs to be resolved, if the potential of this country is to be genuinely realised...I don't see how you can become one with yourselves when you exile from yourselves an entire part of your nation. This is what has happened I believe to the Aboriginal peoples of this country. They were forced to be exiled from themselves. That must stop" (Geldof qtd. in Moore 12). Perhaps the first thing to recognise when reading a Fogarty poem is that one is entering a different textual reality, reflective of a different lived reality. Fogarty's poetry needs to be read as coming from a place that many non-Indigenous Australians have never been and do not know about — the Indigenous margin. Having grown up on Cherbourg mission in Queensland, Fogarty is aware that his skin color has dictated how he was to be treated by state and federal agencies and associated institutions. This experience of institutionalisation has created the voice that Fogarty speaks with and spawned such poems as "The Worker Who, the Human Who, the Abo Who" (110-12), "Fuck All Departments" (70-71), "Fuck Off" (75), and "Stranger in Cherbourg Once Knew" (141): "Cherbourg / 15 years of maddened dreams / Hoping, hoping / Waiting to overtake / Misery, punishing underlying / Conditions in bitter shame / Cherbourg" (141). The anger in this poem is explicit, but this is not simply because Fogarty is using it to be gratuitous. I believe his strategy is to create a tension that the reader must work through as it acts like a kind of test: "Fogarty pushes not only the English language to its limits but his non-Indigenous readers to their limits too" (Hopfer 60). Hence, I would argue that the overt anger in Fogarty's poetry does not reduce the poetry to a diatribe if one engages with it and reads it in a socio-cultural and political context. In this way, one can see that Fogarty is seeking to show the frustrating paradox of being a Murri songman forced into using the colonisers' language to educate and inform the colonizer.

It was the awakening of this songman role with which Fogarty provides insight as to how his poetry is informed by his status and the responsibility of his role within his community. Becoming a songman was not a simple process, but one that was a struggle for Fogarty himself to come to terms with: "I didn't know what was going on. I was frightened by all these new political ideas.

One day a group of us went down to the Queensland Institute of Technology for a meeting. Reggie Lawrence, a cousin of mine from Cherbourg, was talking about the shit wages there. Then someone said to me: "Get up and tell the people about Cherbourg Lionel" ... And so it began to happen to me. Every black person knows there is something there for them, though they mightn't know what it is ... it might be a woman or a settled life ... I had never known what it was for me. That something got into me. But then I stood up and grabbed the mic" (Fogarty qtd. in Johnson 52). The songman's role that Fogarty occupies acts as a key to his poetry. For Fogarty, being a songman requires a great deal of responsibility in the maintenance of the social codes and values that make up his Murri community. As a songman, Fogarty's duties include: "Mediating in quarrels; offering advice; foretelling coming events; healing; counteracting negative forces" (Mudrooroo 147). Fogarty's role as a songman also acts as a source of great strength, focussing his writing from within a "traditional" Murri framework and maintained through an ongoing interaction with his community. Fogarty's position within his community then enables the reader to see the crucial nature of his role, which in turn empowers him to speak with his own voice about his dreaming on his own terms.

The paradox of Fogarty using English is amplified further because he is located at a cultural nexus that most non-Indigenous Australians do not recognize in many respects. That is, Fogarty is an urban, anti-colonial, post-modern speaking subject, rather than a remote, essentialized, "authentic," silent object and the challenge for any reader of Fogarty's texts "lies in making visible the value of a writer who, with a unique style forces us to feel rather than intellectually grasp what it means to be an Indigenous person of Australia" (Hopfer 46). What Sabina Paula Hopfer is saying is that one cannot afford to assume one "knows" Fogarty's position or that one is familiar with Fogarty's aboriginality. One must allow Fogarty to inform us of it on his terms and if one chooses to ignore him thinking that his anger is too overt or his speaking position too abstract we will then miss the many messages that his writing contains. It is because of Fogarty's unique power and style as a poet, combined with the quality of his poetry, that I am compelled to engage with it. Initially, I was quite uncomfortable owing to my perception that the writing was overtly hostile. The attraction, however, was to witness a guerrilla poet attacking the conventions of the colonizer's language. I came to realize that Fogarty is "no ersatz Bourgeois black in white face, but an Aboriginal man, a poet guerrilla using the language of the invader in an effort to smash open its shell and spill it open for poetic expression" (Johnson 49). The anger is linked, I suggest, to Fogarty's development and location of being in a paradoxical position socially, politically, culturally and historically. He is simultaneously a songman using traditional themes and motifs and an urban postmodern subject grappling with the challenges of modern life. Hence, Fogarty's anger is part of the way in which he is able to mediate between his disjointed worlds, without unduly diluting the importance of his role in those worlds, or the importance of those worlds to him.

For others, Fogarty's poetry can be read in a number of ways. For example, Eva Rask Knudsen provides a succinct, yet at times wavering position on Fogarty's work ("Fringe Finds Focus"; see also Knudsen, "On Reading Grace's *Potiki*"). This could be read as deriving from the issue of engaging with the construct of aboriginality as Fogarty presents it. Knudsen identifies with the strength of Fogarty's poetry by locating it within an Indigenous literary tradition that has been established by poets like Jack Davis, Oodgeroo, and Kevin Gilbert. I agree with Knudsen when she suggests that it offers a great deal more than the poetry of those writers. The subversive strategies of Fogarty are undermined, however, when Knudsen states that Fogarty's poems use language "experimentally to project identity" (36). I do not believe Fogarty is using language speculatively but in a very deliberate and complex way. He is trying to describe both his Indigenous reality and the paradox of educating non-Indigenous people in regard to Indigenous issues and history using the language of the colonizer. In Fogarty's own words: "I see words beyond any acceptable meaning and this is how I express my dreaming" (Fogarty ix). One of the ways in which Fogarty's poetry can begin to be understood is through the work of the Russian Formalists, in particular Bakhtin. For the Russian formalists, language and its various applications within literature differed from standardized language usage because of literature's "literariness." They contended that the language of literature revived, or resurrected, the word "from the stale clichéd usage of everyday discourses [by reanimating] their meaning" (O'Toole 2). For Victor Shklovsky everyday discourses become habitual, and thus automatize perception. This automatized perception diminishes the individual's scope of understanding: "Through this algebraic mode of thinking we grasp things by counting them and measuring them; we do not see them, but merely recognise them by their pri-

mary features. The thing rushes past us, prepacked, as it were; we know that it is there by the space that it takes up, but we see only its surface. This kind of perception shrivels things up, first of all in the way that we perceive it, but later this effects the way we handle it too ... Life goes to waste as it is turned to nothingness. Automatization corrodes things, clothing, furniture, one's wife, one's fear of war ... and so that a sense of life may be restored, that things may be felt, so that stones may be made stony, there exists what we call art" (Shklovsky 105). Shklovsky suggests that to counter the insipidness of automatized language, the word needs to be resurrected by deautomatizing it. The word needs to take on (an)other dimension(s), which is essential in "making strange" one's world. He argues that this "strangeness" makes one appreciate the wider communicative, descriptive, cultural, and political spectrums that language offers. Shklovsky suggests that deautomatization, or the slowing down of the word within literature, is a textual strategy for "making things strange" (3). In this way, word sequences and sounds may be deliberately hard to pronounce and any number of strategies may be employed that force the reader into different engagements with the text. It would appear that Russian formalism offers us a way of speaking about Fogarty's poetry without reducing its power or misrepresenting his anger within it.

For Bakhtin, the social always determines the utterance (the word), which enters into a continual and ongoing process of speech-acts and dialogue and understanding how we communicate as social subjects relies on identifying the process whereby utterances are enacted with the expectation of receiving a reply. This is known as dialogism: "everything means, is understood as a part of the greater whole — there is constant interaction between meanings all of which have the potential of conditioning others" (Bakhtin 426). Hence the dialogised word co-exists as "a two-sided act ... territory shared" (Morson 6). According to Bakhtin "A word, discourse, language or culture undergoes "dialogization" when it becomes relativized, de-privileged, aware of competing definitions for the same things" (426) and this textual construct of de-privilege and competition is, I argue, is precisely what Fogarty has set out to achieve, not just to challenge the non-Indigenous readership, but to invite it to begin an intersubjective, dialogic relationship with Indigenous people. While dialogism underpins the communicative interaction, heteroglossia determines the form of the utterance (debate, gossip, command) and the tone (sober, whispering, barking) due to the social context of it: "The base condition governing the operation of meaning in any utterance. It is that which ensures the primacy of context over text. At any given place there will be a set of conditions — social, historical, meteorological, physiological — that will ensure that a word uttered in that place and at that time will have meaning different than it would under any other conditions" (Bakhtin 428). Many would be aware that Bakhtin's understanding of language and literature was interconnected with the novel, not poetry. However, it was the social drivers and conditions that underpinned the novel as a political device that interested Bakhtin greatly. I argue that many oppressed groups have used poetry to speak out and reclaim their realities and autonomy and Bakhtin would be accepting of the application of heteroglossia to poetry, in this case Fogarty's poetry.

A central trait of heteroglossia is the way it operates within the social stratification of language and communication. Bakhtin identified heteroglossia as the centrifugal force that attempts to counter the centripetal force that seeks to contain and stabilize language, hence making it uniform and automatized. Language thereby acts as a social agent to produce an endless play of potential meaning. Fogarty's poetry can be engaged with if the reader is aware that he [Fogarty] is not using language experimentally but strategically. This allows him to deconstruct non-Indigenous paradigms like history and the conventions of the English language that underpin it. Fogarty's textual critique of society can be identified as a dialogic rejoinder that speaks about the political, social, and historical ascendancy of the invading group at the expense of the Indigenous "other." Fogarty uses language to contest standardized and automatized discursive constructions, which seek to contain him and speak on his behalf.

I now turn to Fogarty's poem "The Buzz" and I am presenting the original version with an alternative version: The one on the left is the text as it appears in Fogarty's book of poetry and in the one on the right Indigenous words are replaced with non-Indigenous words in italics following Bakhtin (147-49). The reading I perform is dialogic in an attempt to engage in an inter-subjective dialogue with the poet and to highlight the Indigenous themes I believe he is discussing:

City babes that now, were we moot moot  
When he came nyarndi up  
Him sweet Koori  
still, noondang him got jambi

City babes that now, were we *vagina vagina*  
When he came *dope(d)* up  
Him sweet *Indigenous person from Victoria/ N.S.W.*  
still, *dog* him got *leg*

boodoo between legs resting  
 heavily nya to camp late  
 at her calling  
 Binjou Binjou I am  
 Poor rich buildinging  
 Goongal Goongal  
 Yeah moonoo moom same  
 have inter-understanding  
 take it brother, did you have a snort  
 aw cooni goona, buzzing on  
 you beena lied again  
 gubba sell this shit  
 We speak nya nya, nah  
 Koori his bro's to you  
 Bingoing and looking for good joonoo  
 In your moonoo  
 come on babes this snort  
 snort is mirigran  
 you.  
 Ha, get up and see the brother  
 fight now for his judija  
 help you to know we is sacred  
 people takin'  
 My friend is cooni  
 My mates is rooted on  
 Dirty dirty words  
 Like me only know this way  
 So babes, don't old  
 Don't moot doori we. (69)

*penis* between legs resting  
 heavily nya to camp late  
 at her calling  
*Woman in menstruation* I am  
 Poor rich buildinging  
*Husband Husband*  
 Yeah *head lice* moom same  
 have inter-understanding  
 take it brother, did you have a snort  
 aw *shit* goona, buzzing on  
 you beena lied again  
*white man* sell this shit  
 We speak nya nya, nah  
*Indigenous person from Victoria/N.S.W.*  
 his bro's to you  
 Bingoing and looking for good *vagina*  
 In your *head lice*  
 come on babes this snort  
 snort is *dog*  
 you.  
 Ha, get up and see the brother  
 fight now for his *trousers*  
 help you to know we is sacred  
 people takin'  
 My friend is *shit*  
 My mates is rooted on  
 Dirty dirty words  
 Like me only know this way  
 So babes, don't old  
 Don't *vagina sexual intercourse* we.

The most overt marker of this poem is its challenging textual features. It begs the question: what is being said and how can I engage with it? One of the main features of this poem is that it appears to be a more coherent text than many of Fogarty's other poems. This is in part due to my cross-culturalized understanding and to the glossary that Fogarty provides, which is a very helpful and generous provision as the reader can interchange Murri words, or Lingo, for English (such as noondang: *dog*, goongal: *husband*, cooni: *shit*). Lingo, heteroglossically, works on different levels in Indigenous communities and is vital to analysing specific communicative styles and practices that are inherent to Fogarty's Murri community. Lingo acts as a means of interpellation, or a linguistic badge, for Murris to recognise one another. In this way Fogarty is hailing his community. As a means of maintaining social, cultural and dialogic cohesion, Lingo allows Indigenous Australians to transmit and access information heteroglossically. They shift from within their language group to the language of the broader community.

Linguistically, there is an immediacy in "The Buzz" that permits the reader to identify with the conversational style of a group of people in a public space, like that of a park. It could be assumed that the more explicit theme of this text is the socialising and exchange of drugs, alcohol, and stories amongst a group of Indigenous men. This social reality is articulated through the expressed frustration of being "ripped off" or cheated by a "gubba" (*whitefella*) drug dealer: "you beena lied again/gubba sell this shit." "Shit" is a colloquial street term referring to marijuana or drugs generally, which suggests that they are smoking and/or drinking. Hence, the term "snort," the action of ingesting drugs and/or alcohol. This is developed further by the phrase "buzzin on," a specific colloquial reference to one feeling the effects of the drugs and/or alcohol. In recognizing this everyday occurrence in many communities, Fogarty is also trying to warn his community about the devastating effects of drugs and alcohol. He is using communicative strategies of indirectness and ambiguity to ask those in his community to be socially responsible (see Ashforth 43-48; Rhydwen 134-35, 170). The text is linked into his songman role to give his "brothers" a message. Fogarty is not documenting merely the social habits of his community for the wider audience but trying to connect to his community on a number of levels; for example, he is drawing to the attention of the readership and his community a pan-Indigenous identity: "him sweet Koori/Koori his bro's to you." In doing so Fogarty is educating his Murri community about the interconnectedness of Indigenous experience in Australia with regard to the socio-historical forces, such as dispossession, assimilation, and child removal, which have shaped their lives. This line works like a public awareness



campaign by stating that difference does not require disassociation, but an understanding that there is a commonality and a plurality of Indigenous existence and that it needs to be recognised and respected. In this way, Fogarty also acknowledges previous poets' work, especially Indigenous poet Kevin Gilbert, who asked; "Aboriginality eh? You say you want your Aboriginality back? That means having some rules don't it? You *build* Aboriginality boy or you got nothing" (304). Fogarty has heeded Gilbert's suggestion and is doing just that. However, there would appear to be a more pressing theme that Fogarty is attempting to address, a deeper message that is more implicit but of greater concern. Fogarty is using certain lexical markers to speak to his community, but specifically to the men about the way they live and the importance of their role as providers and protectors in a modern world. Terms such as "his," "bro," "husband," and "brother" are made explicit with further masculine motifs like *judija* (trousers) and *mirigran* (dog). The masculine subtext of the poem relates explicitly to the role men have in relation to women. This is borne out by the comment on sexual relations: "Bingoing and looking for a good joonoo" (vagina). Initially, the use of such a word could be seen to act heteroglossically as a form of verbal competition or display between the men. It seems, on the surface, to be a boastful gratuitous remark as the women are reduced to sexual objectification. In my opinion, this interpretation would be far too restrictive, knowing that Fogarty, as a songman, does not use language to elicit a base reaction; rather, it is a textual strategy to get the reader to stop and question Fogarty's reason for using it. Thus, the purpose of the poem is two-fold and Fogarty is using it to communicate generally. However, he is also using it to speak specifically to the men in his community about gender issues and their interpersonal relations with their women and to show the broader community how the men discuss and resolve these topics. The strongest marker of the importance of gender and sexual relations in this poem is the affirmation of the potent female symbol, menstruation: "Binjou Binjou I am." This is a key line, which is attempting to guide the reader's gaze from the overt machismo of the text to the more subtle masculine themes of guardianship and community leadership. "Binjou Binjou" refers to the ancestral understanding of the cyclic phenomenon of menstruation and menstrual blood: "in all Aboriginal communities and clans [this] was a source of djang, power and magic" (Mudrooroo 105). Hence, when a woman was menstruating, she had to stay apart from the main camp. This may be advice that Fogarty is offering to assist Indigenous Australians to re-connect with the essence of their traditional beliefs and understandings.

For Fogarty, the role of the men in a traditional sense is an important one, as they were the providers for and protectors of their clans and families. Sadly, a great deal of negativity is focused upon Indigenous men, who are often viewed as the perpetrators of sex crimes and domestic abuse in Indigenous communities. These abuses have then been the catalyst for documents like the *Putting the Picture Together* report (2002) and more recently the *Little Children Are Sacred* report (2007), and has seen the federal intervention into the Northern Territory. Fogarty is saying that if domestic violence and abuse are to stop, it is the men who need to take responsibility. This plea by Fogarty can be seen in "The Buzz": "help you know we is sacred." He may well be saying "we" (the men) are sacred. The poet is using "sacred" in a context that recognizes Indigenous peoples' heritage that relied on 60,000 years of cultural knowledge and social practice to deal with social problems. What Fogarty is suggesting is that Indigenous Australians are sacred (powerful) and the men have the power to reclaim their communities and protect and provide for their women and children. Fogarty tries to mediate between the men and the women by asking the women for tolerance and understanding towards the men as "providers." He suggests that the men are perhaps frustrated in their attempts to find social acceptance or economic stability and are trapped in the cycle of passive welfare and dysfunction. This lack of economic autonomy and the breakdown of interpersonal and community relationships leads to a problematic situation, resulting in low self-esteem and the reliance on drugs and alcohol to deal with social dysfunction: "like me only know this way" is a plea for help and understanding and a statement that, if things are to change, then community involvement, resources, and political concerns need to be mobilized and synchronized. This social reality is made evident throughout the poem as, for Fogarty, social struggle is an everyday occurrence for Indigenous people. This struggle occurs on many different social and cultural levels but is perhaps at its most insidious in institutions and their language: "Ha get up and see the brother/fight now for his judija." This could be read as the fight of all Indigenous Australians to maintain ancestral links and conventions whilst struggling with the difficulty that is the modern, material, "white" way. Economically speaking, keeping the shirt on your back when you are living as an economic under-class is something that most Australians

would have little comprehension of, especially in the current resource boom that Australia is experiencing. In the second last line of the poem we read: "So babes don't old." Is this a pun? Perhaps Fogarty is pleading on behalf of his "bro's" to the women of his community to understand the monolithic immensity and social complexity of the status quo. Perhaps he is saying, "Don't hold 'me'" to something that cannot be changed or at least is very difficult to change due to institutionalized and systemic racism that has been so effective in causing and maintaining social and economic division between the coloniser and colonised.

In conclusion, by employing Bakhtin's heteroglossic and dialogic functions of language, we are able to process information differently and so make new meanings. In order to analyze Fogarty's work, the understanding of language needs to be critiqued and analyzed in conjunction with how Fogarty articulates the world as he sees it. As a songman, Fogarty can be seen to be dealing responsibly with the negative effects of society by concentrating on specific themes like drug abuse, social organisation, kinship ties, gender roles, community respect, and the loss of specific "traditional" cultural understandings. He does this by challenging the reader's perception of things through major themes and binaries: park/ceremonial site: drug (ab)user/custodian: contemporary / traditional. Despite Fogarty's seemingly explicit textual hostility, I argue that he is appealing to non-Indigenous people to come to a greater appreciation of what it means to be an Indigenous Australian. This is a difficult task because of differences in socio-cultural abilities to conceptualize and comprehend the "other" and his/her history. Fogarty's voice operates in the context of the songman who is compelled to speak of his vision/dream as a means to foretell, warn, heal, or counter the forces of negativity but it also operates dialogically expecting that the readers will open up and discuss with him and others the themes of his ideas. The only way we can do this is through the language that Fogarty uses and how he understands, frames, and articulates his version of the world. Fogarty's explicitly different articulation demands a different perspective of standardized language if one is to begin to comprehend what he is saying. Through his obliteration of automatized, routine perception and the foregrounding of socio-political and cultural themes he deems important, the reader can begin a process of engaging with the margin and those that occupy it. In this way, Fogarty's poetry allows one to challenge the master narrative of Australian history and it does this by stifling the establishment's centripetal boasting, thus allowing the centrifugal Indigenous voice to speak and be heard.

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