

Engaging the Public Intimacy of Whiteness: the Indigenous Protest Poetry of Romaine Moreton

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In this article I position the Indigenous poet and performer, Romaine Moreton, within the context of Australian Indigenous protest writing.¹ I take Moreton's poetry as exemplary of a tradition that has inscribed a trajectory in Australian Indigenous literature through the achievements of writers such as Oodgeroo, Jack Davis, Kevin Gilbert, Lionel Fogarty and Lisa Bellear.² In a discussion of Moreton's work, I examine how Indigenous protest writing engages non-Indigenous audiences. I discuss forms of address in Moreton's poetry and how the poetry interpellates non-Indigenous readers. Borrowing from Michael Lipsky, I differentiate between the non-Indigenous "target" group of Indigenous protest (the body of policy-makers that formulates governmental management, legislates in Indigenous affairs and produces a discourse of pedagogical nationalism) and "reference" publics (white liberals who read and disseminate Indigenous literature).

In theorising the issue of audience and readership, I use the term "publics" (Warner 2002) to identify and characterise multiple and differentiated audiences, and to critique the concept of a universal, disinterested, abstract and disembodied readership or audience which subtends much postcolonial and nationalist humanist literary criticism. Extending Habermas's idea of reading as a public sphere where private people come together, I argue that, in elaborating worlds of culture and social relations, reading mediates private and intimate identifications of race and whiteness. Literature in effect composes a zone of interracial sociability. I examine how the rhetorics of both social and political critique and personal address in Moreton's protest poetry solicit affective and political responses in a non-Indigenous reading. If the language of her poetry concretises the particularity of the expressive Indigenous body, then reading (or watching a performance) returns the white reader to the particularity of their own racialised intercorporeality (and intersubjectivity). In foregrounding the affective dispositions and visceral momentum of whiteness, the poetry negotiates the public/private dynamics

of racial separation to challenge the putative privacy of white subjectivity and of reading. In engaging in the critical-rational discourse of protest, the poetry also intervenes directly in public debate. In its functions of social and political critique, Indigenous protest writing plays an ongoing role in interrogating and intervening in the reproduction of the white nation.³

SUBALTERNITY

In thinking about the function of Indigenous protest in Australia, I characterise the positioning of Indigenous people within the white nation as “subalterns”. The term was used by Gramsci in *The Prison Notebooks*, picked up within the Subaltern Studies context in India, and popularised further by Gayatri Spivak and, more recently, Walter D. Mignolo. Marx used the term “proletariat” to describe those at the bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy. Mignolo suggests that the term “proletariat” could be seen as a subset of the wider category “subaltern” (381). His particular interest lies in the “colonial subaltern”, a category that foregrounds racialised oppression and exploitation complementing socio-economic subordination (381). He argues that modern/colonial social stratification is founded on race, following a series of waves of European colonial expansion from the sixteenth century onwards. Colonial subalterns are positioned outside European categories of proficiency and identity such as Christianity, European languages, modernity, history, skin colour and scientific knowledge (386). Mignolo argues that the lowly status assigned to the subaltern dehumanises them and strips them of human dignity (388).

Gramsci suggests that states govern through a system of gaining consent, through state institutions (courts of law, administrative agencies) and various cultural practices. Chatterjee argues that this is true in a developing liberal capitalist society, where even those classes not directly in power consent to the ways in which society is ruled. Active consent produced through institutions and practices, rather than sheer force, is the method of governance. Guha from the Indian Subaltern Studies Group used the phrase “dominance without hegemony” to describe an early stage in Indian postcolonial history (1998). This description can be adjusted to suggest that a postcolonial liberal state like Australia maintains a dominance without hegemony in relation to its colonial subalterns, a constituency that, as the popular slogan has it, has “never ceded sovereignty”. In many ways formal citizenship has not translated into real citizenship for this constituency. Indigenous people historically have had unequal access to citizenship, governed by authoritarian, paternalistic legislation specific to Indigenous peoples such as the Aborigines Protection

Acts. The subaltern is thus disenfranchised in a wide spectrum of ways. Typically the subaltern is defined as having insufficient access to modes of representation (Chattopadhyay and Sarkar 359). While Spivak in her early work insists that the subaltern is a position without agency (1988) (a position she modified in her later work), the Indian Subaltern Studies group takes up Gramsci's recommendation that "every trace of independent initiative on the part of subaltern groups should be of incalculable value for the historian" (55). The work of this group has been aimed at recuperating a sense of subaltern agency and at tracing the various ways that the subaltern resists the colonial and postcolonial state. Mignolo takes up this theme in arguing that the process of decolonisation produces the subalternisation of knowledge; that is, it transforms and disseminates a knowledge of colonial difference (80), thereby undoing the coloniality of knowledge. Indigenous literature can thus be viewed as a technology of decolonisation and of subaltern knowledges (for example, in its elaboration of Indigenous sovereignty).

THE SOCIAL DOMINATION CONTRACT AND PROTEST

As I argue above, the large proportion of Australian society "consents" to the state's governance. It can be said to constitute a zone of civil society that participates in a contractual system, where a contract is a set of intersubjective agreements mediated by institutions and cultural transactions and practices. The concept of the contract can be thought of as an heuristic device, a hypothetical descriptive figure to map the socio-political power relations of the nation. As Charles Mills suggests, the metaphor of the contract can be useful to counter understandings that racial domination is natural (446).

I have argued elsewhere that the Australian nation is contracted on the figure of race (Brewster 2007). In talking about the US context, Mills argues that that nation's contract is one where exclusion, inequality and domination are the norm (445). He defines white supremacy as the "systemic privileging of whites, as manifested in social, economic and political structures" (449). He argues that "race is not anomalous to the American democracy but fundamental to it" (450); the same could be said of Australian democracy. The political production of race and the political production of nationhood are linked (450). To paraphrase Mills, whites did not pre-exist the contract; they came into existence through it (451).

This analysis of the racialised exclusions and inequalities subtending the nation leads to an understanding of the conditions under which the state installs white supremacy through contracting the "consent" of the dominant (non-Indigenous) constituency.⁴ Given Indigenous people's positioning as colonial

subalterns in a late modern postcolonial state system of dominance without hegemony, they have limited ability to participate in a contractual system. In Australia, Indigenous protest can be seen as constituting an intervention into the contractual system of the nation. This intervention effectively critiques what Mills calls the domination contract, which is foundational to the nation (443). In staging this intervention, Indigenous protest (in the form of activism and writing) is an important gesture of decolonisation and instantiation of subaltern knowledge. To borrow from Kimberly W. Benston, I would argue that Indigenous people's relationship with a colonial history of violence and dispossession is characterised by a political imperative for justice in the present (290–2). The expressive vernacular voice of protest poetry is also an instrument of cultural celebration and revival. This article investigates the politico-aesthetics of the work of Moreton as an exemplary instance of Australian Indigenous protest poetry.

Michael Lipsky provides a useful general definition of protest activity as:

A mode of political action oriented toward objection to one or more policies or conditions, characterised by showmanship or display [. . .] and undertaken to obtain rewards from political or economic systems. (Lipsky 1145).

This description can be modified to define Indigenous protest writing as writing in a range of literary genres by Indigenous writers that overtly undertakes political or social critique in objecting to the conditions of Indigenous people's minoritisation. I retain Lipsky's notions of objection and display to argue that Indigenous protest poetry, in its "objection" to cultural and political domination and disenfranchisement by white Australia, mobilises the rhetorical strategies of argument and critique on the one hand and poetic effects on the other. Further, Indigenous protest writing is characterised by "display", which can take the form of "showmanship" or other forms of an expressive performativity and self-fashioning. Lipsky has also said that "there is no protest unless protest is perceived and projected" (1151). The visibility or audibility (either bodily or through technological reproduction) is an essential aspect of protest. Display can be characterised by showmanship, as in the flamboyant career of Gilbert.⁶ Cilas Kemedjio's description of charismatic figures of political liberation as "catalysts of new existential, historic and symbolic legitimacies" (91) is certainly pertinent to Gilbert. Mudrooroo aptly refers to him as a "visionary" and a "national treasure" (Gilbert, *Because* iv). Oodgeroo was also a prominent "larger than lifesize" political activist (Collins 10) who performed her poetry as part of her role as a public speaker.⁵ The poetry often functioned both in

performance and on the page as a rallying call, articulating both demand and protest as a counter to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous divestiture in Indigenous futures. Ghassan Hage characterises Australian nationalism as a paranoid mode of belonging engendered by worrying and an “insecure attachment” to the nation (*Against Paranoid Nationalism* 3). He describes it as the narcissistic effect of white Australians worrying about the nation because *they* feel threatened (3). He sees this as a product of a scarcity of hope among citizens who see threats everywhere. There is thus little distribution of hope for minority people within the nation. He suggests that the recognition of oppression by the majority of Australians is a mechanism that gives hope to marginalised people (20). Indigenous protest, as an instrument of display that convenes Indigenous publics, works to generate hope.

Like Gilbert and Oodgeroo, Moreton is a charismatic performer. Her work has been characterised as “magical” (Ford) and she has been described as a poet whose performance “packs a punch” and has “wowed” audiences (media release, Sydney Opera House). Patrick E. Johnson’s suggestion that the colonised person may appropriate blackness to formulate “new epistemologies of self and Other” (6) is useful here. Johnson uses the trope of performance to describe this process which he characterises as “dynamic and generative” (6). Corporeally expressive performance is a vehicle for celebration, protest and lament. It is both past- and future-oriented in its performance of remembrance and its motivating political imperative for justice and social hope in the present.

AUSTRALIAN INDIGENOUS PROTEST POETRY

Kath Walker (Oodgeroo)’s book *We Are Going* (1964), the first published collection of poetry by an Australian Indigenous writer, was a best-seller that attracted a lot of attention in Australia and overseas.⁶ Adam Shoemaker describes her as “a pioneer in a new form of Australian poetry, embracing directness, environmental values and an overriding Aboriginal worldview” (186). Her poetry was, however, often discussed dismissively and patronisingly,⁷ to the effect that although she had a timely political message and was an important advocate of Indigenous rights, “no-one is ever likely to hail [her] as a great writer” (Doobov 46). Needless to say, Walker herself was comfortable being described as a “protest” poet, commenting that “I’m dead the day I stop protesting” (440). Moreton’s poetry has also been characterised in this way.⁸ She alludes to this ongoing debate in the poem “Enough Suga” by referring to the common pejorative dismissal of poetry that overtly encodes a political “message” or critique:

I heard a popular writer once announce
 when a writer has a message
 we're all in trouble! (2004, 89)

In 1989 in his ground-breaking work, *Black Words White Page: Aboriginal Literature 1929–1988*, Shoemaker suggested that “if there is any “school” of Black Australian poetry it is one of social protest” (201). He argues that “most Aboriginal poets reject the art for art’s sake argument and feel that their work has at least some social utility” (180). His chapter on Aboriginal poetry contains important and astute readings, and continues to be essential reading for any scholar of Aboriginal poetry. His assessment of Indigenous protest poetry is, however, formulated within a binary that demarcates the social from the textual. As a result, in spite of his obvious admiration for the work of all the poets he discusses, Shoemaker finds himself in a position where he becomes defensive and apologetic about what he sees as aesthetic shortcomings, for example in Walker/Oodgeroo’s work (Shoemaker 813-15). The invocation of the form/content binary also leads to contradictory statements such as: “[the] themes and concerns and world-view [of Oodgeroo and Jack Davis] are undoubtedly Black Australian, but not their poetic technique” (Shoemaker 192). I will examine the intersection of western literary traditions and Indigenous literary subjectivities, to which Shoemaker draws attention here, by focussing on a different set of issues to those pertaining to a discussion of political “content” versus aesthetic form. This binary maintains the continuity of postcolonial humanist literary traditions and reading conventions which are understood as self-evident and raceless. In examining how Indigenous writers adapt western literary genres within a range of culturally and politically differentiated agendas, affective and psychic dispositions and intellectual imaginations, I will trace the impact of an Indigenous politico-aesthetics on those reading conventions. In rethinking the zone of audience and reading I hope thus to follow Lyn McCredden’s lead in questioning a “white middle-class schooled assurance . . . about the universalism of its definitions of ‘the poetic’” (35).

This article revisits the category of Indigenous protest writing to elaborate a posthumanist critical perspective founded on a recognition of the mutually-constitutive interaction of the textual and the social within the zone of reading. Reading is an act in which intercultural subjectification is negotiated. My readings of Moreton’s poems do not derive from a juridico-aesthetic concern with value; rather they are framed by an interest in how the textual effects of Indigenous literature inform and shape intercultural identifications for the non-Indigenous reading publics that these texts convene (See

Carter and Ferres). Indigenous protest writers overtly undertake political and social critique, foregrounding the relations between colonial history and representation. This article investigates how the politico-aesthetics of Indigenous protest literature engage white late modern liberalism.

“Protest” of course is not the only dynamic that is played out in Moreton’s poetry, which is an *oeuvre* variously of celebration, community solidarity and wit. At times these various aspects of her poetry work in conjunction with social and political critique; at times they do not. My concern in this article is with how the poetry works as social and political critique: with how Indigenous “critical witness” is rendered “an effective political modality” (Benston 290). Moreton sees black life in Australia as inherently political: “it ain’t easy being black/ this kinda livin’ is all political” (“Don’t let it make you over”, 111). Of interest here is how the relationship between a raced history, representation and embodiment plays out in the expressive black political performativity of her poetry. Moreton’s poetry is marked by overt references to socio-economic issues concerning contemporary Aboriginal peoples; issues such as incarceration, deaths in custody, high infant mortality rates, low life expectancy, suicide, child removal, poverty and institutionalisation. Her writing directly depicts the effects of Indigenous disadvantage in Australia. Moreton addresses these social justice issues through the piercing scrutiny and deft argument she mobilises to expose the institutional and historical processes and logics that maintain white racial privilege, entitlement and disavowal, and the concomitant political, economic and cultural subordination of Aboriginal people across a range of institutions and social sites. With surgical precision and unrelenting courage she lays bare the brutalising impact of the demonisation, infantilisation, criminalisation and institutionalisation of Indigenous peoples. Her poetry strikes me in the first instance as articulating a personal and collective struggle to survive—psychically, physically, financially and culturally. At times the work appears literally to delineate a life and death struggle. Moreton’s poetry, by her own admission, is sometimes received as “confronting and challenging” (“Working Note”).

In her depiction of the oppressive socio-economic conditions of Indigenous people’s lives, Moreton draws on an astute political intelligence. Her poetry often proceeds by way of deductively reasoned analysis. In its lawyerly argumentation, exhortations and postulations, and its appeal to logic in the artful use of questioning and naming, it has the rhetorical power of legal pleading. In one poem the speaker specifically imagines Indigenous intervention in “courts of law” (“I shall surprise you by my will”). Its

address is sometimes overtly persuasive or challenging in tone and cast in the vocative and the interrogative cases, loosely modelling legal procedure. Indeed one of its outcomes is advocacy and rights assertion. The confluence of lawyerly discourse with black protest literature has been examined in other contexts, such as that of black American antebellum literature (McArdle), and I suggest that a legal discourse of advocacy informs the language of many Indigenous activists and protest writers such as Moreton. While several of her poems (such as “Crimes of existence” and “My genocide”) are structured as sustained argument and exposition, the two poems that this article focuses on, while more poetic and elliptical, nonetheless clearly identify the objects of their critique (white liberal nescience and systemic racialised oppression), exposing their hegemonic discursive power with striking analytical acuity.

It is not only the powerful argument and logic of Moreton’s poetry that engages audiences but also the intense feeling solicited by these poems. Feeling has conventionally been cast in a binary opposition to argumentation. The editor of an encyclopedia of protest literature, for example, identifies “emotion” as one of essential characteristics of “protest literature”: “social protest authors encourage readers to empathise with those who suffer from a particular social problem” (Netzley xiii). In order to delimit the genre of protest literature, Netzley contrasts writers in this domain with what she calls “political writers”:

When political writers criticise government policies and regimes, readers are presented with arguments that encourage them to think logically, rather than emotionally, about society’s problems. (xiii)

In the following close readings I demonstrate the unsustainability of this binary. It is true that emotion plays an important role in protest poetry. One of the most visible and prolific exponents of Indigenous protest writing in Australia, Gilbert, who had an extraordinarily active (although relatively short) career as an Indigenous arts promoter, writer, editor and political activist, was a powerful orator, and the affective impact of passionate engagement is evident in all his writing.⁹ In his political treatises, especially *Because a White Man’ll Never Do It*, sharp analytical reasoning combines with rousing, heartfelt rhetoric. Gilbert describes his *modus operandi* as an activist as to “get to the emotional truth of things” (*Because* 179). He addresses difficult subjects such as Indigenous shame and powerlessness frankly. He describes the poets whose work he anthologises in *Inside Black Australia* as dealing with “raw, certainly rugged . . . subjective material” (*Inside Black* xv). He expresses both sorrow and distress at Indigenous suffering, and anger and

frustration at continuing chronic poverty and neglect. His arresting rhetoric registers as shock, especially for white readers. Gilbert argued in the 1980s that Indigenous “psyches still quiver with the shock of these horrendous times [. . .] of the past 200 years” (xix) and it is this trauma as well as a sense of resolute Indigenous determination that he seeks to make impact upon his non-Indigenous readers.

Emotion similarly plays a significant role in Moreton’s poetry. Moreton herself has pointed to the importance of recognising the affective outcomes of the colonial history of invasion, terror and dispossession in Australia. Indigenous and non-Indigenous commentators alike have urged non-Indigenous Australians to examine the personal and collective feelings of guilt, shame, grief and anxiety arising from this history, especially during the decade of Reconciliation (1990–2001).¹⁰ Moreton has stated that her interest in cross-racial relations in the post-Reconciliation cross-racial context is in the “state of communication” between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Her comments in particular on the role of Indigenous affect in “communication” are worth quoting here at length:

there’s a long way to go before there is an actual outcome between the relations between non-Indigenous and Indigenous Australians, and the most we can hope for at the moment is that the emotional impact of colonisation, evasion [sic], being removed from your family, is at least acknowledged. And one thing that has remained absent [. . .] throughout history of this country anyway, is the full understanding of the emotional state of Indigenous peoples, that has not been written about. They’ve documented our bodies, our brain size, our leg size, how we sit and stand, but not how we feel. (Ford interview)

The intercultural publics that Indigenous literature convenes can play an important role in revising the persistent and ongoing objectification of Indigenous peoples through their fashioning of Indigenous literary subjectivities. My readings of Moreton’s poems analyse how the rhetoric of Moreton’s poetry performs feeling and what work this feeling does in the intercultural arena of reading. I will look at two poems which critique white liberalism: “Are you beautiful today?” and “I shall surprise you by my will”.

“Are you beautiful today?” opens thus:

are you beautiful today?
are your children safe and well?
brother, mother, sister too?
I merely ask so you can tell (*post me* 29)

Many of Moreton's poems are rhetorically performative through their first-person speaking position and their direct address to a second-person "you". The addressee's position is open to occupation by numerous subjects or reading positions. Some of her poems invoke an Indigenous addressee.¹¹ In the two poems examined here, the second-person addressee is culturally and socio-economically positioned as white and middle-class. Although the addressee is not identified literally as such, their apparent position of privilege and the fact that their racial identity is unmarked, places them, at the very least, in a position homologous to that of a white person (See Brewster 2007). In my reading of "Are you beautiful today?" I take the white middle-class reader as an exemplary addressee and argue that the poem proceeds, through a series of satirical antitheses and contrapositionings, to defamiliarise white privilege and ontology. Through its expressive performance of Indigeneity, the poem engages whiteness affectively and exposes its investments in the asymmetry of racial relations that subtends the white nation.

DEFAMILIARISING WHITENESS

The poem gives the reader an insight into the everyday micropolitics of race. The setting is a family gathering in the private realm of the home. This is depicted as a site at which the effects of incarceration, suicide and poverty hit home, registering on bodies and spirits. The poem opens with a set of rhetorical questions, which the white reader could read as being addressed to them and which constitute a phatic greeting. The speaker enquires after the addressee's family and home. The addressee is imagined in a condition of physical, psychic and economic comfort. What is elaborated throughout the poem is a contrastive picture of the speaker's family at home, struggling to cope with difficult circumstances.

I laugh with my sisters and brothers
 at things that others wouldn't get
 while talkin' 'bout jail
 while talkin' 'bout death

[. . .]

this is a funny situation
 the life of the oppressed
 this is a funny situation
 much funnier than death

but we cannot be bleak
 and we cannot be meek
 we must call upon greatness
 to get us through this week (*post me* 29, 30)

A sense of farce is established in the burlesque yoking of contraries (“we must call upon greatness/to get us through this week”). The tonality of the poem oscillates extravagantly between despair, anger and hilarity. The laughter is ambiguous and coded, produced by “things that others wouldn’t get”. The poem satirises spiritual tourists who travel abroad to Tibet, perhaps inspired by social justice concerns. The speaker suggests that “what they seek/I find gathered round my door”. Perhaps these same “beautiful” people are those seeking “inspiration” from the Indigenous people whom they imagine to be “peaceful”. The speaker upturns this primitivist cliché by grounding Indigenous experience in material deprivation and suffering: “I am not a peaceful person/simply because I am not/at peace”.

The conversational tone and first-person address of the poem sustains the textual illusion of a dialogue between the Indigenous speaker and the reader. In reiterating a necessarily one-sided enquiry into the addressee’s well-being, the poem foregrounds the absence of a response. This rhetorical absence points to the absence of *responsiveness* in contemporary Australian culture and politics; to the ongoing suffering of Indigenous peoples. The reader is always at one remove from the internal speech act of the poem, so, in observing the repudiation of the internal addressee of the poem, in effect we observe ourselves repudiating Indigenous people. The co-incidence, within the social space of reading, of (white liberal) sympathy and the observed refusal of mainstream Australia (in which category the white liberal is positioned) to accord recognition to Indigenous people, renders the liberal reader’s position ironic.¹² The disinclination to hear or listen is further emphasised by the exaggerated efforts of Indigenous people to communicate; the speaker and her family variously “bellow”, “roar”, “shout” and “speak loudly”. Neither their silence nor their speech is registered. The speaker is doubly “condemned/for the things/[she] might/or might not/say”.

The Indigenous response to this resounding failure of multiculturalism’s touted mutual understanding (between raced, white and ethnic constituencies within the circumference of the white nation) is crying-laughter. Crying-laughter enacts a shift from linguistic signification to a pre-symbolic non-representational bodily expressivity. Where linguistic exchange had failed to touch white Australia, crying-laughter takes us directly into the domain of bodily affect and sensation, the visceral register of racialisation. The violent oscillation between crying and laughter (which generates disturbing oxymorons such as “funnier than death”) typifies the trenchant contrasts that structure the poem (and the social fabric of the nation): beauty/misery, complacency/poverty, peace/distress, inspiration/depredation, health/death,

black/white. This crying-laughter spills over into satirical wit when the repetition of the signature phrase of the poem takes an unexpected turn:

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* 30)

The slowing down of the pace in the short lines and the blunt antithesis (well/dead) makes the phatic greeting (“are you well?”) forcefully ironic, reminding that it is indeed a privilege to assume that one’s family will remain “alive” from day to day.

The second poem, “I shall surprise you by my will”, is also constituted through a first-person address and the positioning of a mainstream Australian addressee (which in these poems I argue is positioned as homologous to white middle-class). If laughter is the unsettling affect of the poem examined above, “I shall surprise you by my will” achieves its defamiliarisation of whiteness through the turn of surprise. This poem, like “Are you beautiful today?”, is pervaded by a sense of despair and exhaustion: the speaker is “weary”, “torn”, “bleary” and “worn”; she “stumbles” over and “dodges” disadvantage and violence. But this is a forward-looking poem that anticipates persistence and renewal. The sense of a spiritual, psychic, political and cultural renaissance is figured in bodily gesture, from sitting and waiting to the actions of rising, turning, and twisting. The verbal tenses convey an ambiguous temporality: although the word “surprise” is often coupled with the auxiliary verbs “will” or “shall”, suggesting a future-oriented sense of anticipation and the possibility of Indigenous hope, the word is also employed in the present tense—“I surprise you by my will”—implying that this surprise already subtends and is contiguous with cross-racial entanglements.

The poem lists civic, institutional and demotic bodily and discursive sites of racialised oppression: alleys, clubs, parliaments, courts of law, cars, buses, houses of education, institutions of reform and policies. Although these are apparently familiar and mundane sites of racial domination where Indigenous histories, rights and aspirations are “pass[ed] by”, they are also simultaneously sites of Indigenous occupation—of intervention, resistance, survival and will—where the Indigenous speaker is “watching you/ watching me”. They are sites of “challenge” where the “inhumanity” of racialised subordination is named and held accountable:

in the alleys, in the clubs, in the parliaments
 in courts of law, parking cars, driving buses,
 and generally watching you
 watching me

 as you pass me by

 I shall wait cross-legged
 wait
 to surprise you by my will

 for I shall stumble from houses of education
 and I shall stumble from institutions of reform
 I shall stumble over rocks, over men, over women,
 over children
 and surprise you by my will (*post me* 137)

The Indigenous occupation of a watching/speaking position thus counters the purported invisibility of Indigenous people, culture and history. Modern literary subjectivism and its self-focussed forms of experience, knowing and desire (modelled in the various genres of fiction, essay, first-person writing and poetry) have been marked out as the exclusive domain of the white European subject. The development of Indigenous literature has interpellated Indigenous forms of expressive individuation and self-articulation within this domain. In protest writing Indigenous literary subjectivities overtly assume agency in engaging white and other non-Indigenous publics directly in a reassessment of history, an enquiry into contemporary cultural and economic inequality and a scrutiny of white privilege, entitlement and denial. As Gilbert says, “white men, or white women [. . .] can study us all they like, but we’ve got them studied too” (*Because* 12).

Indigenous protest writing lays bare the processes of minoritisation, at the level of systemic economic and legal privilege but also in the micropolitical processes of the everyday, which is the site of intersubjective, interaffective and intercorporeal relations. It exposes the reproduction of white privilege and entitlement and the concomitant invisibility of Indigenous peoples. Although mainstream culture might believe Indigenous people “gone” or at least “controlled”, “ignorant” and “ke[pt] down”, the Indigenous speaker turns this invisibility to her advantage. Her protest relies on an element of surprise. The dialogue she initiates in her writing uses “words familiar”—the language of the coloniser, which has been an instrument of power and authority. The speech act of the poem is an act of the appropriation of language (“we will rise from this place where you expect/to keep us down”). The poem itself is an act of surprise and of will.

If this poem, like the one I discussed above, turns on reversals, it demonstrates the oscillation between Indigenous invisibility and visibility. Lauren Berlant has argued that the *a priori* notion of the citizen is a rhetorical veil for white male privilege. The generic “person” is disembodied and abstract, but historically it has only been the white male body that has had the power to suppress the body and cover its traces, which it has done precisely in order to assume the mantle of a disembodied cultural authority. Berlant reminds us that African Americans have not had the privilege of suppressing the body and that the non-hegemonic other body is not abstract but hyperembodied. The colonised female body, she argues, is always burdened with its history, unlike the white citizen who enjoys a “phantasmatic freedom from its own history” (200). While the surplus embodiment of the colonised female is often commodified, Berlant suggests that it may also be a vehicle, in some contexts, for “corporeal enfranchisement” (178). For artists like Moreton, corporeally expressive performance is “a mode of self-instrumentality” (Berlant 198). In enacting the transition from invisibility (or hypervisibility) to self-defined presence, the body/voice becomes an instrument of cultural and political critique. Thus, while racialised hypervisibility is an inevitable corollary of invisibility, the Indigenous artist has some agency in working within this dialectic. If Indigenous people are perceived as invisible, this condition is appropriated as “camouflage” (see Russo 2007); the Indigenous body/voice “will rise” from invisibility and silence, from within the “familiar” hegemony of the English language and the white nation. The familiar is the necessary condition for surprise, which in turn is the “work” that the poem and other Indigenous interventions perform in defamiliarising white hegemony.

I have argued that the rhetoric of protest poetry enacts a particular political and social imperative, and that it positions the reader in quite specific ways. If this is the case, then our engagements with it are specific to this generic form of transaction and exchange. The rhetoric of these poems is declamative and argumentative; the direct address to the second person “you” is immediate and intimate, dramatising the cross-racial encounter. This mood is heightened in “Are you beautiful today?” by the sustained interrogative mode that intensifies the dramatic encounter (Brewster 2007). Moreton’s protest poems could be described as a performative expression of political will. Feeling is also constitutive of the way in which Indigeneity is signed and embodied in the poetry. However, in describing this poetry as performative I do not want to reduce Indigeneity to performance. As Patrick Johnson reminds us in his study of black performance, blackness exceeds performance; it is not always consciously acted out and in part constitutes ineffable experience (8). Nor

do I want to characterise performance as something that Moreton *does* and I, as critic, *observe*, from a (disengaged) distance. If I could describe Moreton's protest poems, in Benston's words, as a "textured field of expressive desire" (7), then I am caught up bodily, as a white Australian middle-class female reader, in the poetry's magnetic pull and the charisma of Moreton's performances, as I am in the weight of a colonial history. My reading of these poems is further informed by a tradition of liberal analytical reasoning and feeling. It is within these entanglements that I engage with Indigenous protest and the "challenge" of the decussation of Indigenous and non-Indigenous feeling.

BLACK PROTEST

An important aspect of Indigenous protest writing is the celebration of Indigenous culture (both past and present), and the endorsement and strengthening of Indigenous identity and solidarity. Mudrooroo, for example, in his foreword to *Because a White Man'll Never Do It*, describes Gilbert's book as "a call to action and a galvanisation of the People" (vii). Moreton indicates that, while she writes for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences, her Indigenous public is "primary" ("Working Note", 1). In an interview on Radio National she identifies performance as a specific vehicle for "communicating" poetry to an Indigenous audience for whom book culture has had less impact:

the whole purpose of even performing poetry in the beginning was to lift it from the page, and deliver it directly to my primary audience which is Indigenous peoples. And having grown up in an Indigenous community the likelihood of having fellow community members embrace books, which is where ultimately poetry would end up, [was low so] I wanted to take it out of that space and re-present it within the oral tradition, to regain that state of communication that pre-dates the written word, that many Indigenous cultures around the world were entrenched in, orality. (Ford 9-10)

I have argued that Lipsky defines protest activity as being directed towards a "target group", that is, a group with the capability (if not the will) of granting or putting into effect the political goals of the protest group (1146). He argues that the category of "protest" is not restricted to civic action, but it can also refer to symbolic action (such as literature), which is often communicated indirectly to its target group through a range of media or publics (1146). In the case of Indigenous protest literature the target group can be identified as the governmental bodies managing Indigenous peoples. Protest writing rhetorically indicts the state and its ongoing failure to address the low health, employment and education levels of Indigenous people. It points to the high incarceration

rates and other indicators of Indigenous disadvantage and the state's failure to respond to the recommendations of various governmental enquiries and Indigenous leaders. Moreton's poetry, for example, is fundamentally and overtly concerned with the systemic nature of Indigenous disadvantage and the reproduction of racialising processes and racism.

Lipsky, drawing on James Q. Wilson, defines protest as "a strategy utilized by relatively powerless groups in order to increase their bargaining ability" (1157). It is important for protest groups to cross the threshold of invisibility in order to gain the attention of various publics. The Australian body politic could be seen as the "target group" of much Indigenous protest writing and its investment in social justice, recognition and redistribution agendas such as land rights, sovereignty and self-determination. Relations with these target groups are in turn, Lipsky suggests, mediated by "reference publics" within the "bargaining arena" who have access to media and audiences and who are supportive of the "protest goals" (1146). Indigenous protest literature has numerous reference publics including Indigenous, non-Indigenous, Australian and non-Australian audiences.

Reference publics, in Lipsky's formulation, can be made up of skilled professionals with the means to further disseminate and prosecute the protest goals. In the Australian context there are white liberals in the education sector, literary and publishing industries, the media, NGOs and the civil service who would imagine themselves supportive of the kinds of Indigenous issues that Moreton's poetry addresses. Of course, the category of "white liberal" is not a homogenous one and is invariably inflected by ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, generation, religion, nationality, region, political affiliation etc. (The additional question of the nature and effectiveness of the "support" of this white liberal reference group is not the subject of my discussion at this point. Indeed, Indigenous protest writers invariably critique their white reference publics, as well as the policies of actions of the target group, as I demonstrate in the readings of the poems).

This discussion of Moreton's poetry has focussed on how the textual dynamics rhetorically engage white readers, concentrating in particular on how the poetry foregrounds the intersubjectivity of race. If race is defined primarily as relational, then, borrowing from Berlant, race can be thought of on the one hand as a "mode of attachment that makes[s] persons public and collective" and on the other as something that makes collective scenes "intimate spaces" (Berlant 8). Because reading displaces the putative public/private demarcation of identity, it creates a zone in which the racialised "mode[s] of attachment" are displayed and negotiated. My aim in this article has been to investigate

how the poetry's representation of black subaltern bodies, affects and identities foregrounds the racialising processes in which white bodies, affects and identities are mutually constituted and embedded. In foregrounding the social and cultural positioning of raced subaltern identities the poetry engages and critiques the political, institutional and cultural reproduction of whiteness. Ghassan Hage has argued that contemporary Australian formations of white panic and paranoia, in their symbolic violence and pathologising of others, refuse intersubjectivity and create a "claustrophobic" national culture where whiteness is seen as constantly under threat and in danger of being lost (*Against Paranoid Nationalism* 119). Contemporary Indigenous protest literature, in convening a cross-racial public, makes the scene of intersubjectivity and entanglement visible to the white reader. Through its critique of colonial instrumental reason and ontology it scrutinises post-1970s liberalism; it undoes "the coloniality of knowledge" and contributes to "a genealogy of de-colonial thought" (Mignolo 390–91).

NOTES

- ¹ Romaine Moreton is of the Goenpul nation from Minjerribah (Stradbroke Island). She has published two books of poetry, *The Callused Stick of Wanting* (1995) and *post me to the prime minister* (2004). She is represented in several anthologies of Australian Indigenous writing, including *Rimfire* (2000) and *unteated* (2001). She has performed at many venues, including the Sydney Opera House and the Yeperenya Festival, which marked Indigenous Federation and attracted an audience of 36,000. Her performance poetry has been included in two compilations of Indigenous music, *Fresh Salt* published by Secret Street and *Sending A Message* (2002) by ABC Music. In August 2002, Moreton was the special guest on an Australian national tour of Sweet Honey In The Rock. She has also made several films, including *Redreaming The Dark* (1988).
- ² Other black Australian poets such as Bobbi/Roberta Sykes and Mudrooroo/Colin Johnson have intersected with this tradition.
- ³ The term I borrow from Hage (1998).
- ⁴ American legal scholar Cheryl Harris defines white supremacy as "a political, economic, and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily re-enacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings" (1714). I would argue that this definition of white supremacy, which Harris formulates in her work on American culture, also characterises the general Australian political, economic, and cultural system.
- ⁵ For discussion of the significance of orality for Oodgeroo and Moreton's poetry see Brewster (1994) and Castro (2005) respectively.

- ⁶ In 1988, the year of the Australian Bicentennial, Kath Walker changed her name and title to Oodgeroo of the Tribe Noonuccal, custodian of the land Minjerriba.
- ⁷ For summaries of reviews and the reception of her volumes of poetry, see Shoemaker (183–5) and Brewster (1994). See also Stilz (1990) which is positioned as a corrective.
- ⁸ One blogger writes that “the foregrounding of the message at the expense of the writing [. . .] strikes me as a problem with much of Moreton’s poetry” (Mahoney).
- ⁹ Gilbert, a Wiradjuri man, is the author of a play, *The Cherry Pickers*, which was the first written in English by an Indigenous person and also the first performed by an all-Indigenous cast (in 1971). He has also written two books of poetry, *People are Legends* (1979) and *The Blackside* (1990); a collection of interviews with Indigenous people (*Living Black*, 1978); two political treatises, *Because a White Man’ll Never Do It* (1973) and *Aboriginal Sovereignty* (1993); and, with Eleanor Williams, two children’s books *Child’s Dreaming* (1992) and *Black from the Edge* (1994). He also edited the magazines *Alchuringa*, *Identity* and *Black Australian News*. His poetry was reviewed in the 1970s in terms similar to that of Walker/Oodgeroo’s, in ways that served to affirm the poetry’s politics and find the aesthetics lacking. See these reviews summarised in Shoemaker (198) and McCredden (35). This syndrome in white commentary had the effect of denying Indigenous literary subjectivities the status required to be included in the canon of Australian literature.
- ¹⁰ Reconciliation was inaugurated with the setting up of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation under legislation in 1991. The Reconciliation process concluded at the Corroboree ceremony at the Sydney Opera House in 2000.
- ¹¹ For example, “Don’t let it make you over” and “Prayer to the old people”.
- ¹² The discussion of irony here draws on Lloyd (286).

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