

## The Aboriginal Intervention in Colonial Discourse: Challenging White Control of Cross-Racial Intersubjectivity

Danica Cerce

[danica.cerce@ef.uni-lj.si](mailto:danica.cerce@ef.uni-lj.si)

University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

### ABSTRACT

Written against the background of critical whiteness studies, the article deals with the poetry of Romaine Moreton and Alf Taylor, two contemporary Aboriginal voices who are not yet widely recognised, although their work is powerful and compelling. They both use their medium to explore various aspects of indigeneity and to intervene in the public dynamics of racial separation. In their attempt to instil agency for the postcolonial Indigenous subject, they challenge what Sara Suleri (2003) calls “the static lines of demarcation” between colonial power and disempowered culture – the assumptions about such binary oppositions as domination and subordination, centre and margin, self and other, upon which the logic of coloniality often stands. In convening a cross-racial public, the rhetoric of the two poets’ critique generates a discursive guilt in non-Indigenous readers and foregrounds the need for the intersubjectivity of race; that is, a zone of mutual respect and cooperation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

**Keywords:** Australian Indigenous poetry; socio-economic and political critique; destabilising whiteness; cross-racial intersubjectivity

### INTRODUCTION

Much of the drama of colonialist relations and the postcolonial examination and subversion of those relations has taken place within vast areas of “representation and resistance” (Ashcroft, Gareth & Tiffin, 2003, p. 85). Texts, such as anthropologies, histories and literary works have played a major role in both establishing whites as authoritative in relation to non-white subjects and in the processes of decolonisation. The latter have involved “a radical dismantling of European codes and a postcolonial subversion and appropriation of the dominant European discourses” (Tiffin, 2003, p. 95). Interrogating these discourses and the existing social context in which white bodies “dominate in the name of a cultural supremacy” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 51), the resistance literature can be seen as “an integral part of an organised struggle” against colonialist authority (Slemon, 2003, pp. 107–108). Drawing on recent postcolonial resistance theories, with the general trajectory towards what Sara Suleri (2003) calls “the intimacy of the colonial setting” (p. 112), presupposing the concept of cultural exchange between dominating and subjugated bodies rather than “the fixity of dividing lines” between them (Suleri, 2003, p. 112), this discussion addresses contemporary Indigenous Australian protest poetry. In particular, it examines how, in convening a cross-racial public, the rhetoric of social and political critique challenges what George Lipsitz (1995) describes as “the exclusionary concept of whiteness” (p. 370), held in place to preserve the racialised white supremacist notions of Australian identity.

It has to be noted that, despite the progressive suppression of discriminatory legislation in Australia, following the success of 1967 referendum, held to alter the Australian constitution and recognise the Aboriginal people as full Australian citizens, the Indigenous Australians have not been granted “the deserved discursive and material space” in Australian society and identity formation (Renes, 2016, p. 93). According to Anne Brewster (2008), a

postcolonial liberal Australia has maintained “dominance without hegemony” in relation to its Indigenous population, a “constituency that [...] has never ‘ceded sovereignty’” (p. 60). Because of the “systemic privileging of whites” apparent in the country’s social, economic, and political structures (Mills, 2000, p. 449), Indigenous communities continue to manifest their protests against the racialised exclusion and inequalities, demanding full rather than what in the American context Toni Morrison (1992) describes as a “shadowless participation in the dominant cultural body” (p. 3). 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 white readers, it represents a site for the renegotiation of what Brewster (2015) refers to as the “literary contract, recoding and resignifying subjectivity, aesthetics, canonicity, indigeneity, whiteness and the nation, and transnational connectivity” (p. xii).

Indeed, as one of the traditions of the new postcolonial literatures in English, Australian Indigenous literature challenges the positioning of Indigenous peoples within the white nation as “subalterns,”<sup>1</sup> a category that – according to Walter Mignolo (2005) – refers to all those positioned outside European categories of proficiency and identity, and foregrounds racialised oppression and exploitation (p. 386). Reappraising Australian social history from Aboriginal perspectives, Indigenous authors have become involved in the production that used to be reserved as the “exclusive domain of Europeans” (Brewster 2015, p. xii). By articulating criticism of and resistance to colonial rule, they 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, 2016, p. 94).

Taking up the work of the Indian Subaltern Studies group aimed at recuperating a sense of subaltern agency and at tracing the various ways that the subalterns resist the colonial and postcolonial state, Mignolo (2002) argues that the process of decolonisation produces the subalternisation of knowledge. It transforms and “disseminates knowledge that is not dependant on the epistemology of North Atlantic modernity, but responds to the need of colonial differences” (p. 80). According to Brewster (2008), Australian Indigenous literature can thus be viewed as “a technology of decolonisation and of subaltern knowledge” (p. 58), given that it shares with other postcolonial texts the fact of having “asserted [itself] by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power, and by emphasizing the differences from the assumptions of the imperial Centre” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin, 2002, p. 2). Focused on the verses of Romaine Moreton and Alf Taylor, and drawing on Christopher Fynsk’s (1991) observation that “literature addresses an anonymous collective, but convokes us as singular beings” (p. xxviii), this article examines how the two poets’ protest involves non-Indigenous readers in the experience of their writing and solicits affective and political responses. 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 the “intersubjectivity of race” (Hage, 2003, p. 119) rather than racial exclusion, the two poets’ protest can be seen as an important contribution to decolonisation and the elaboration of Indigenous sovereignty. My reading is not concerned with the ‘literariness’ as a principal object of study and appreciation; rather it is framed by an interest in how they function as “a form of public good” (Gonzales, Agostini, 2015, p. xvi) or what David Carter and Kay Ferres define as “the public life of literature” (2003, p. 140). In this sense, this discussion provides additional evidence in support of the 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” (Levine, 2000, pp. 383-384).

## LITERATURE WITH A PURPOSE<sup>2</sup>

Jace Weaver has noted that the remark made by James Ruppert with regard to the contemporary Native American fiction can be applied to all postcolonial literatures: they are “literatures with a purpose” (cited in Weaver, 1997, p. 44). Weaver further observes that “to write means taking part in the healing of the people” (p. 43). Jack Davis (1988) considers writing as “the best means of influencing public opinion and bringing about an improvement in the Aboriginal situation” (p. 191). It has to be noted that, of the two main traumas that are in the centre of Australian consciousness – Australia’s original function as a penal colony for Britain, and the devastating impact of white invasion on the Indigenous population<sup>3</sup> – only the former has been explored extensively, while the latter has not received much penetrating and thoughtful treatment in the mainstream Australian literature; rather, it has been “largely ignored and even suppressed” (Crow & Banfield, 1996, pp. 61-62). For the last three decades, Australian Indigenous literature has successfully performed this educative and healing function by constituting an indictment of white Australian racism, a recuperation of neglected Aboriginal history, and a call to action for white and black Australians. Making important statements on covert but no less systematic racism inscribed within the Australian society, Australian Indigenous literature continues to disturb – in the words of Brian Crow and Chris Banfield – “the nostalgic, myth-laden account of many white Australians, including some of its leading authors” (1996, p. 77). As such, it rapidly expands its global audience.

However, as recently as the early 1970s, Indigenous Australian authors were a marginalised 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, 2013, p. 1). Although the success of these authors attained in the face of colonial pressure motivated several other Indigenous Australians to share their thoughts and feelings, it was not until the Commonwealth Bicentenary celebrations in 1988 when nationwide demonstrations led by indigenous authors and activists were held, that the wider Australian public showed interest in this literature and culture. 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 forged new possibilities for reaching the audience for more indigenous Australians than any other mode of creative expression. Most Aboriginal poets reject the art for art’s sake argument and feel that their work should have at least some social utility, observes Adam Shoemaker (1989, p. 180). Indeed, the distinctive feature of much of contemporary Indigenous poetry is its political or social critique in objecting to what Charles Mills (2015) calls the “majoritarian white perspective” – a centuries-long legacy of “holding and benefiting from the supposedly superior race” (p. 45).

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, 1986, p. 677). As this discussion will show, Australian Indigenous poetry is capable of ensuring strong effect on its readers. The verse of Moreton and Taylor is perhaps among the most illustrative of this claim. Their critical exposure of the institutional and historical processes and logics that have retained the Australian Indigenous population in the web of hegemonic power, deeply engages both “the target publics,” which – according to Michael Lipsky (1968) – has the capability of putting into effect the political goals of the protest

group, and the “reference publics,” all those who are supportive of the “protest goals” (p. 1146).

### DEMISTIFYING WHITENESS IN THE POETRY OF ROMAINE MORETON

Moreton is expressing her indignation at the social and political marginalisation 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 perhaps among the most penetrating indictment of colonisation in Australia (Brewster, 2009; Russo, 2005; Čerče, 2010, 2012). 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 (2008) has noted, 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” (p. 68). “The First Sin,” one of many poems that perform a questioning of historical 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 appeased his pangs of guilt (Moreton, Taylor & Smith, 2000, p. 3).

Clearly, Moreton sees black life in Australia as inherently political and considers her verse in the first place as a site of resistance against what Lipsitz (1995) defines as enduring “racialisation of experience, opportunities and rewards” inscribed within federal, state, and local policies towards groups designated by whites as “racially other” (p. 372). In “Working Note,” Moreton (2001) 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” (p. 1). One of her poems includes these revealing verses: “It ain't easy being black / this kinda livin' is all political” (Moreton, 2004, p. 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,<sup>4</sup> which made sovereign Aboriginal land *terra nullius* (nobody's land) and Aboriginal peoples *vox nullius* (people with no voice) (Heiss & Minter, 2008, p. 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 colour communities in Australia. These themes feed her unyielding imagination and are found in many of her poems. “You Are Black,” for example, uses references to racial stances ordinarily taken against the Black communities, and how other, equally rejected groups may be categorised as “Black.” It begins in the manner of English mock-epic poetry to make observations about the social issues in a funny, meaningful style and continues with allusions to everyday violations of basic civil and human rights, leading to rampant disrespect of non-

conforming forms of individual identities: “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 (Moreton, Taylor, and Smith, 2000, p. 55). The poem’s final connotations address the Indigenous peoples’ non-violent adaptability and resourcefulness, qualities that continue to ensure their communities’ durability, allowing them to retain their sense of dignity on their own land: “And should they attempt to / silence your voice / or / remove your rights, / you have glimpsed the gestapo, / the gas chambers, the enforced cultural emaciation, / you have felt the searing nullity of the branding iron, / [...] for you know how it is to fight / for the simple right / to exist / As You Please” (Moreton, Taylor & Smith, 2000, pp. 55-56).

In very much the same vein, Moreton reflects in “Genocide Is Never Justified,” uttering 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 choric quality and turns the poem into a lamentation: “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? (Moreton, Taylor & Smith, 2000, p. 31). The poem is a powerful protest against the colonisers’ practice of not only taking someone else’s land by force but also imposing the system that enshrines the racialised hierarchies in “the distribution of wealth, prestige and opportunity” (Lipsitz, 1998, p. 72). Characterised 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 wilful destruction of Indigenous peoples. Although Moreton does not speak from her experience alone, the poem is deeply personal; it expresses her heartbreaking mourning for the ancestors who lived harmoniously in Australia for a long time before the white settlers arrived and took their lives away. Moreton continues her hard-hitting exposure of social injustices by suggesting that the majority of Australians should at least concede the oppression, rather than deny its existence—the attitude that Mills (2000) considers the whites’ “cognitive handicap,” when it comes to the recognition of racial discrimination and oppression (p. 15). In Moreton’s words: “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!” (Moreton, Taylor & Smith, 2000, p. 31). Ghassan Hage (2003) has observed that the recognition of oppression by the majority of Australians is a mechanism that would give hope to marginalised people (p. 20). Moreton’s protest, as an instrument of display that convenes Indigenous publics, thus works to generate hope.

Several other poems also castigate the white settlers for the atrocities they performed for the sake of “civilising the uncivilised,” a typical coloniser’s excuse and an expression Moreton ironically uses herself to denounce the inhuman practices of those who have “elect[ed] themselves as the supremacist race,” as she writes in the poem “What Kind of People” (Moreton, Taylor & Smith, 2000, p. 45). Proceeding in true Moreton fashion, the poem compiles a catalogue of evidence to show and interrogate the patterns that established the English as superior and Aborigines as inferior: “What kind of people would kick the heads off babies / or rip at the stomach of the impregnated, / as would a ravaged wolf, / or castrate the manly, all in the name of civilising / the uncivilised?” (p. 45). Moreton also targets the apathetic readers, who repudiate any suggestion that their ancestors were capable of “such murderous feats” (p. 45).

Moreton talks directly to them in “Are You Beautiful Today,” a poem included in Moreton’s second collection, *Post Me to the Prime Minister* (2004). The first lines give a false impression of the speaker’s concern for the white reader’s well-being – “Are you

beautiful today? / Are your children safe and well? / Brother, mother, sister too? / I merely ask so you can tell” (Moreton, 2004, p. 29) – but in fact her bitter tone tells a different story. By using an ambiguously conversational tone, Moreton uncovers the strained relationships between white and black Australians. While in some poems, she 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. The contrast between the lives of the two characters is underlined by confidentially uttered details about the speaker’s family. At first evoking images of brotherly love, the speaker also reveals the impossibility of happiness for Indigenous peoples due to the usual impasse in which they find themselves: “I laugh with my sisters and brothers / at things that others wouldn’t get / while talkin’ ‘bout jail / while talkin’ ‘bout death (Moreton, 2004, p. 29). The repetition of a one-sided enquiry into the addressee’s well-being demonstrates the indifference not only of the non-Indigenous interlocutor, but more widely, of contemporary Australian society, with regard to the systematic dispossession of black Australians (Brewster, 2008, p. 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, in the Prime Minister’s words, “inflicted profound grief, suffering and loss” on fellow Australians (Johnston, 2008, p. 3). This development was meant to open a new chapter in Australia’s relations with its Indigenous people, and put an end to the injustice and indifference that had thus far prevailed. However, social inequities are still in place. In the concluding lines of “Are you beautiful today,” a seemingly superfluous synonymous phrase is introduced to remind the reader that, for an Aboriginal, in light of high mortality rates, a person’s prolonged wellness is not to be taken for granted. “Are you beautiful today? / your brother, mother, sister, too? / are you well clothed and well fed? / and are they alive / and well / not dead?” (Moreton, 2004, p. 29).

Underneath the despair that inhabits much of her verse, Moreton’s art is not pessimistic, and is often lightened by a sense of hopeful anticipation. In “Time for Dreaming,” for example, Moreton 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” (Moreton, Taylor & Smith, 2000, p. 1). The poem “My Tellurian Grandfather” also 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” (p. 29). Without quoting from other poems, we can see that Moreton relies heavily on her Aboriginal history. In documenting the violence of colonial imposition and scrutinising the political, institutional and cultural reproduction of whiteness, she draws on performative and oral rhetoric, creating a readership that is challenged to listen to her interrogative voice either through self-recognition or as a witness. Moreton’s verse rhetorically indicts the “coloniality of knowledge and of being,” as Mignolo (2005) refers to the state of being deprived of the “potential to know, to understand and to be” (p. 391), and through the critique contributes to the “undo[ing of] the racist structure of the colonial matrix of power” (p. 391). The first indication of this social transformation process was the Prime Minister’s apology in 2008, as pointed out above. Articulating discourses of “conscious antagonists,” as Edward Said (1994) refers to those who, “compelled by the system to play subordinate or imprisoning roles within it” react by “disrupting” it (p. 335), Moreton’s work continues to represent a site for a disenfranchised minority, foregrounding “a productive disordering of binary dichotomies” (Suleri, 2003, p. 112) and paving the way for a cross-racial interaction.

## ALF TAYLOR'S VERSE AS PROTEST AND SOLACE

Alf Taylor, a Western Australian Nyoongah poet and prose writer, also performs an intervention to what Mills (2000) calls “the social domination contract” (p. 443), involving the creation of “an oppressive social ontology, an ontology of persons and sub-persons” (p. 459). 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, 1998, p. 15), and functions to unsettle whiteness.

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.”<sup>5</sup> 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 & 2005). The first *Westerly* excerpt from his short fiction 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. By writing about emotions suffered due to degradation, humiliation and the ostracism, he found the relief he had initially searched for in vain through drugs and alcohol. As he writes in the poem “This Flame”: “Only love / and / the pen / can quell / this flame / that / burns within” (1994, p. 39). For him, writing seems to have become a kind of sustaining addiction and a way of establishing his personal and economic identity. Above all, writing is a necessary condition of existence, or – in Homi Bhabha’s (1994) words – “a vision and a construction that takes you 'beyond' yourself in order to return, in a spirit of revision and reconstruction, to the political *conditions* of the present” (p. 4). 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 the experiences of being Aboriginal. As Philip Morrissey (1994) notes in his “Introduction” to *Winds*, “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” (p. vii). In contrast with his short fiction, which is often tinted with humour, 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, Taylor’s accessible mode of writing and colloquial diction often makes his poems 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, 2009). He writes in non-standard English, coloured with tribal and colloquial speech patterns. Critics concur that this characteristic, 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 monopolised by the white elite. Another aspect is political. As the authors of *The Empire Writes Back* have observed, “the crucial function of language as a medium of power demands that post-colonial writing define itself by seizing the language of the centre and re-placing it in a discourse fully adapted to the colonised place” (Ashcroft, Griffin & Tiffin, 2002, p. 37). Many Indigenous authors have thus liberated themselves from the linguistic and cultural chains, re-

appropriating the language of subjection and reforming it to become an expression of their own experience (Crow & Banfield, 1996, p. 7).

Rather than aesthetic purity, 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 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, 2001, p. 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 centre of that uneasiness, because I don't want my readers to be uncomfortable when they read" (2007, p. 175). However, as this discussion will show, describing postcolonial traumatic conditions of Indigenous people and mobilizing various strategies of indictment and advocacy in the service of social justice agendas, several of Taylor's poems passionately engage non-Indigenous readers, evoking in them strong feelings of guilt, shame and remorse.

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 "in the softness of the park / [where] drinks / circle the tribe / laughter, music" (Taylor, 1994, p. 1), until the poet overturns this deceptive appearance and takes the reader into the haunted reality of the postcolonial nation. In this "zone of occult instability where the people dwell," as Frantz Fanon (1968) refers to postcolonial traumatic conditions of Indigenous population (p. 183), people drinking together in metropolitan parks exist for the present and have little or no agency in influencing a nationally recognized and ratified future of the state: "People outside / the circle / think / the people / of the park / have / got no tomorrow (p. 1).

A similarly embittered voicing of the hardship experienced by the Black communities pervades "Black Skin," the opening poem in *Singer Songwriter*. It reads as a list of wretched conditions that pertain to the Black community's circumstances. The resentful voice uses repetitious formulas to indicate the perceived impossibility to escape such a predicament. Indeed, the colour black, repeatedly referred to, not only reasserts the root of the permanently imposed injustice, but is also associated with death and distress. The assonances found in illustrative terms (as in tomorrow/sorrow/hope/rope) establish a sense of doom: "Black skin see no tomorrow / black skin head in sorrow / black skin fight / black skin see no right. / Black skin cry / black skin die / black skin no hope / black skin grabs rope (Moreton, Taylor & Smith, 2000, p. 79).

In several poems, Taylor deals with the detrimental effects of racial exclusion. In "Sniffin'," for example, he meditates on widespread drug use as a means "to get away / from that shadow / of pain" (Moreton, Taylor & Smith, 2000, p. 107). Many Black Australians seek refuge in heavy drinking, Taylor regretfully observes in the poems "The Trip," "Dole Cheque," "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 own escape from the thoughts of his cruel and unhappy upbringing that in the latter, he writes: "These are the people / of no life / and no hope" (p. 125), unreservedly taking the side of those who disapprove of this kind of escapism. Similarly, Taylor reflects on the devastation of excessive drinking in "Gerbah." The poem proceeds as a deductively reasoned analysis, piling up



evidence of the damage done by alcohol: “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 (Moreton, Taylor & Smith, 2000, p. 128). It closes with an appeal to the youngsters to learn and obtain education for their own benefit and the impact it would have on their community: “With no schoolin’ what have they got? / A dole cheque and a bottle, that’s what. / Schoolin is a must for today / For the kids so that they can help pave the way” (p. 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 realise that alcohol does not solve any problems; it adds problems to problems” (Brewster, 2007, pp. 174-176). It is important to note that, traditionally, Indigenous Australians did not know alcohol, so it is much more addictive to them than to white Australians (Wimmer, 2009, p. 115). 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 (2009), 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” (p. 115). This might have been well intentioned, but it was also totally wrong, observes Wimmer (p. 115). Wimmer further claims that the real dimensions of alcohol abuse and its direct connection with violence and death did not become collective awareness before the publication of studies by anthropologists such as Peter Sutton (2001) and Louis Nowra (2007) among others (p. 116).<sup>6</sup>

In “Leave us alone,” the tone changes to a proactive plea, arguing that change can only come from within before exterior forces are prepared to listen: “Challenge problems, not running away, / Forget about the booze and family fights, / Let’s stand up as individuals and make it right (Moreton, Taylor & Smith, 2000, p. 134). The poem 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. A rallying cry to Black Australians to gather under the same contestation banner in order to erase the recurrent stereotypes attached to their community is also expressed in the poem “We Blackfellas.” Structured as an exposition of such afflictions as alcoholism, unemployment and poverty, the poem criticises 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” (Moreton, Taylor & Smith, 2000, p. 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, given that “the chains / of silence/ have been / broken” (Moreton, Taylor & Smith, 2000, p. 110), 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 (p. 110). His 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,” Taylor employs rhetorical questions to expose how white people benefit from identity politics to have preferences over the Indigenous minority in housing, education and employment: “Why / is he / living / in this room / infested with / alcohol, drugs / and pills / [. . .] he just can’t / take it / no more / but why” (Taylor, 1994, p. 20). Pointing to high incarceration rate and other indicators of Indigenous Australians’ disadvantage, the poem deeply engages both the “target” and the “reference” groups. The protest is directed towards governmental bodies and their failure to

prevent further creation of social structures that reinforce the supremacy of whiteness. In its simplicity and having origin in feelings, the poem stirs strong feelings of moral indignation, anger and empathy.

This short presentation of Taylor's poetry 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 (Moreton, Taylor & Smith, 2000, p. 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, 2005, pp. 388-389). 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, 1998, p. 15) because of the social and cultural positioning of black subaltern identities, but evokes strong feelings of culpability in white Australian readers. On the other hand, advocating the Indigenous peoples' unconquerable spirit in the face of adversity and loss in the society in which "access to hope is seen as a white entitlement," as observed by Hage (2003, p. 22), Taylor's poetry – just as Moreton's – restores hope and dignity to Indigenous communities. 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, 2000, p. 189) are common to many other minorities placed in "subaltern relations of power" (Mignolo, 2005, p. 385), the two poets' protest stimulates readers all over the world to draw parallels across national lines and consider the critique in the context of their own national traumas.

## CONCLUSION

According to Fanon (1986, p. 216), self-consciousness exists only by being acknowledged or recognised by the other. In the historical relations between whites and black subaltern bodies, the "reciprocity of recognition" (p. 225) crucial for "the certainty of oneself" (p. 216), has been disrupted because of the whites' belief in their racial superiority. In the process of mutual recognition and cultural relationship, literary works play an important role. As this discussion has shown, they can have both disruptive potential (Levine, 2000, p. 384) and the ability to "help create a desirable community" (Levine, 2000, p. 387). Indeed, bringing into light some episodes in Australian history about which white Australia would prefer to remain conveniently silent, Moreton and Taylor's verse intervenes in the universal fixities of colonialist epistemology, destabilising assumptions about the legitimacy of the reproduction of colonial differences. In engaging a cross-racial public, the two authors' protest makes the scene of cross-racial intersubjectivity visible to white readers.

It is probably correct to conclude that, interrogating and intervening in racial polarisation, and developing what Brewster (2008) calls "a zone of interracial sociability (p. 56), Moreton and Taylor have expanded the whites' ability to think – as Said (1994) puts it – "contrapunctually," that is, with an awareness of the "interdependence of various histories [...] and the necessary interaction of contemporary societies" (p. 38). In these turbulent times, critically lacking interaction and characterised instead by an orthodox insistence on the "rhetorical separation of cultures" (Said, 1994, p. 38), this is just what we need.

END NOTE

<sup>1</sup> The term was first used by Antonio Gramsci in his *The Prison Notebooks*.

<sup>2</sup> The term is borrowed from James Ruppert's *Mediation in Contemporary Native American Fiction* (1995, p. xii).

<sup>3</sup> Between 1788 and 1900, the Aboriginal population was reduced by 90 per cent. The main reasons were new European epidemic diseases and famine due to the loss of land. Aboriginal population was also decimated in direct battles with the settlers. Before the arrival of the British, there were about 250 Aboriginal tribes; more than 200 of these have been extinct since then. See Wheeler (2013) and Heiss and Minter (2008).

<sup>4</sup> On 22 August 1770, Lt. James Cook claimed possession of Australia's east coast for Britain. Eighteen years later, the First Fleet led by Cpt. Arthur Phillip and comprised of convicts and naval officers and their families established the first European colony in Sydney (Wheeler, 2013, p. xiii).

<sup>5</sup> Until the early 1970s, the government systematically removed Aboriginal children, particularly half-castes (those that deemed to have at least 25 per cent Aboriginal blood), from their families and relocated them to various government-run facilities or missions to acculturate them into white society. Forcibly removed from their homes, these children were forbidden to speak their native language or practice their tribal rituals. Most of them were kept away from their families until the age of eighteen. The forced removal of nearly a hundred thousand Aboriginal children had a devastating effect on the Indigenous populace (Wheeler, 2013, p.5).

<sup>6</sup> According to the Child Rights International Network Report, among several other reports that mention a concrete connection between violence and alcohol, "alcohol and drug abuse have caused many impoverished native settlements to self-destruct" (Wimmer, 2009, p. 115-116).

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Danica Čerče is an Associate Professor of Literatures in English at the University of Ljubljana. Her research interests include contemporary American and Australian literature, and translation studies. Čerče is the author of three monograph publications, several book chapters in edited collections, and articles in academic journals. She serves on the editorial board of *Coolabah*, and *Steinbeck Review*.