

# Redefining Female Subjectivity in Australian Indigenous Women's Poetry

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## **Abstract**

This article discusses the poetry of Romaine Moreton and Lisa Bellear, particularly the poems in which they address the violence against Aboriginal women and girls. It demonstrates how the two poets' representation of Australian historical and cultural memory destabilises the continuum of colonial power relations and confronts the ongoing stereotypes of Aboriginal women constructed on the basis of a decidedly racist and misogynistic colonial ethos.

**Keywords:** Australian Indigenous protest poetry, Romaine Moreton, Lisa Bellear, Eurocentrism, racialised and gendered violence

## ‘INTERACTING WITH THE ARCHIVE’

In Australia, since the late 1970s, literature has been at the forefront of Indigenous peoples’ political expression. Together with other forms of activism, it has served as a vehicle for “retrieving previously repressed history of colonial violence” (Horakova 54), challenging the processes that have enabled the imposition and maintenance of white hegemony, and the concomitant subordination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia. As Lisa Slater has observed, well into the 1990s, “the statement that Australia was colonised was for many [white Australians] radical and divisive,” and it was not until the publication of reports, such as Elliott Johnston’s *Deaths in Custody* (1991) and Sir Ronald Wilson’s *Bringing Them Home* (1997), that a “deeply unsettling image of white Australia came into frame” (14). Particularly Wilson’s report on the traumas of the Stolen Generation, was a “transforming force” (Slater 14), inciting a number of white Australian writers and academics to align with the protest voices of Indigenous Australians.

However, and despite the enlightened views of white Australian intelligentsia, articulating what may be termed a “disturbed settler Australians’ sense of belonging and legitimacy” in the land that bears scars of colonial violence (Slater 6), and Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s formal apology to Australia’s Indigenous peoples in February 2008—the event that signalled Australia’s revised policy of social and cultural coexistence, Indigenous Australians have not yet been granted “the deserved discursive and material space in Australian society and identity formation” (Renes 93). Doubts such as those expressed by Michael Griffiths, as to whether Australia has “in fact moved beyond colonialism” (15), or Aileen Moreton-Robinson’s suggestion to conceptualise Australia as a “postcolonising” nation (2003), are neither unusual nor unjustified, considering the ongoing interventions into and invasions of Indigenous peoples’ property and bodies.<sup>1</sup> As Waanyi nation writer Alexis Wright claims, “Our history spurs me to write, just as much as our present-day realities” (18).

To deconstruct the logic of presumably irredeemable binaries of colonial discourse, Indigenous Australian authors “interact with the archive,” claims Jeanine Leane, Wiradjuri poet, short story writer and academic from New South Wales (2017, 242). As Leane further explains, the term ‘archive’ is to be understood in Jacques Derrida’s sense as something that includes “storehouses of official paperwork and records” and “evokes voices from the past that recall and remember trauma and resilience through ‘blood memory’” (2017, 242). In other words,

1 For instance, the 2007 Northern Territory Intervention seized control of many aspects of the daily lives of residents in 73 Indigenous communities.

Indigenous Australian authors interrogate the discursive history of colonisation and reappraise it through “informed imagination,” filling the gaps missing or intentionally left out of the official records with “transgenerational blood memory” (Leane 250).<sup>2</sup> Beginning with the poetry of Oodgeroo of the Noonuccal tribe of Minjerriba, formerly known as Kath Walker,<sup>3</sup> Aboriginal literature foregrounds memories and traumas that the state archives conceal, constituting an integral part of an organised struggle against the colonialist authority.

Indeed, as is generally believed, Australian Indigenous literature cannot be truly understood by severing it from its historical and socio-cultural context. As one of the traditions of the new postcolonial literatures in English, it “writes back” to the literary traditions of Empire and their white literary subjectivity (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 6), challenging what George Lipsitz in the US context calls “the exclusionary concept of whiteness” (370). However, it was not until the 1988 Australian bicentennial celebration that the wider Australian public showed interest in this literature and culture (Wheeler 5). This resulted in an increased production of Indigenous authorship in various genres, including autobiography, fiction, poetry, film, drama, and music; in each of these areas of creative expression, Indigenous Australians have made a significant contribution (Čerče 2017, 33).

For many Indigenous Australians, poetry seems to have been a preferred medium for the articulation of their political thought, constituting an indictment of white Australian racial hegemony, a recuperation of neglected Aboriginal history, and a call for redefining Indigeneity. As Narungga poet and activist Natalie Har-kin writes,

The only way for me to shift and transform the archive-box was to write poetry and weave my way out; an embodied reckoning with history's record in an attempt to better understand my family's place in a broader history of colonialism. As contemporary agents of memory, we can re-signify, assert and re-insert our family stories, beyond symbols of servitude and subjection, and privilege the voices of our ancestors.” (qtd. in Whittaker and Watson 182)

Anita Heiss rightly contends that, belonging to the society with “incredibly low literacy rates” and entering the field which used to be monopolised by the white elite, many Indigenous Australians have embraced poetry rather than prose or drama as their “political platform,” believing that it offers “fewer restrictions on

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2 For the poetry of Jeanine Leane, see Danica Čerče's *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* article, “Jeanine Leane's counter-reading of Australian historical and cultural memory locally and internationally.”

3 Kath Walker changed her name to Oodgeroo to protest against the Australian bicentennial celebration in 1988 (Brewster 2017, 256). Her 1964 collection *We Are Going* is the first book of poetry by an Aboriginal writer and the first book by an Aboriginal woman (Heiss and Minter 40).

style and technique” (181). In addition, poetry has proven to be a useful vehicle for creating an “activist discursive space” for a dialogue with the mainstream discourses and constituencies which otherwise has been constrained (Brewster and Kossew 121). According to Adam Shoemaker, for Indigenous Australians, “the [very] act of composing poetry is an inherently political one which is itself an invaluable form of activism” (180).

Although any reading that acknowledges only the socio-political relevance of Australian Indigenous poetry and neglects its artistic merit is too narrow to do it justice, protest continues to be its most resonant characteristic. In accordance with Michael Lipsky’s contention that the category of protest can also refer to a symbolic action (such as that undertaken by literature), and his definition of protest as a “mode of political action oriented toward objection to one or more policies or conditions” (1145), this poetry makes overt references to and objections against the ongoing position of Indigenous population as “the ethnic minority submerged in and governed by a surrounding majority” (Mudrooroo 231). Another essential aspect of protest writing is its capacity “to offer revelations of social worlds to which readers respond with shock, concern, sometimes political questioning” (Coles 677). By focusing on the poetry of Romaine Moreton and Lisa Bellear, this article will demonstrate that Australian Indigenous poetry is capable of ensuring strong emotional impact on its readers, urging them to contest the myth of objectivity of the imperial idea of history and its traditional discriminatory dialectic of self and ‘other.’

## **ABORIGINAL WOMEN’S POETRY**

According to Anne Brewster, the emergence of Indigenous writing has provided a new understanding of contemporary Australian culture and nation, demonstrating that the social contract of the nation is both “gendered and racially inflected” (2009, 109). Several feminist writers and scholars have stressed a prominent role of gender in the identity construction of subject peoples and called for “gender specificity” in analysing the impact of racism on Indigenous peoples (Ferrier 1). In Australia, Aboriginal women, who are amongst the most subjugated, have struggled with the inequalities of being both black and women. Their urge to denunciate the ideologies that served to establish and maintain Aboriginal women’s double colonisation may explain why the protest poetry tradition, initially dominated by Aboriginal male poets, has recently taken a “gendered turn” (Brewster 2017, 246). Much of the verse by Lisa Bellear, Anita Heiss, Ali Cobby Eckermann, Roberta Sykes, Romaine Moreton, Yvette Holt, Jeanine Leane and Natalie Harkin, among others, thematises the oppression and abuse of Indigenous women in Australia,

seeking to repudiate white patriarchal constructions of race and gender. This is by no means to suggest that male poets have not reacted to the violence against Aboriginal women. The Wirajuri Nation poet and activist Kevin Gilbert, in particular, saw them as those “who suffered the grossest violation” at the hands of the white oppressor, which is evidenced in his poems “The Other Side of the Story,” “Riches,” “Mum,” “Guarwundul’s Wish” and a few others (Rooks 50).

With the focus on Moreton’s and Belleair’s poetry, this article will analyse how Australian Indigenous verse problematises the politics of polarity and encourages the dismantling or subversion of what Nicholas Birns (2002) calls the “sundry truisms of standard literary histories” (116). My approach to the two poets’ writing, which I find particularly powerful in their depictions of racialised and gender-based violence, is aligned with the views of Martha Nussbaum (2000), who sees literature as “a bridge both to a vision of justice and to the social enactment of that vision” (364). I argue that, by re-writing the European historical and cultural memory, the two poets intervene in the continuum of colonial power relations and contribute to the recovery of independent and vital Indigenous identity. In particular, they expose the history of sexual abuse suffered by Aboriginal women and girls and confront the ongoing stereotypes constructed on the basis of a decidedly racist and misogynistic colonial ethos, graphically described in Carol Thomas’s *Sexual Assault: Issues for Aboriginal Women*: “On pastoral stations Aboriginal women were preyed on by any and every white man whose whim it was to have a piece of ‘black velvet’ wherever and whenever they pleased” (140).

Throughout colonial and postcolonial history, Indigenous women have been subjected to a high level of violence. Although, in the words of Eualeyai/Kamillaroi scholar Larrissa Behrendt, violence has become a normal part of life of many Aboriginal women (2000, 360), it has not been given the same public attention as other instances of Aboriginal mistreatment. Given a broad range of women’s relationship to violence (as victims, survivors, advocates, accomplices or perpetrators), the protest against it mounted by Indigenous women voices also takes various ways and modes. Most often, they reconfigure the trope of Aboriginal women as victims by representing them both as victims and “agentic survivors” (Brewster and Kossew 229). The category of ‘survivor’ undoes the binarism of victimhood and agency and, in Linda Alcoff’s words, allows women to “turn shame into anger, or fatalist desolation into the capacity for regaining one’s self-regard (qtd. in Brewster and Kossew 5). As Leane has observed, [Aboriginal women] were indeed victims [...] but they are not perpetual victims – ultimately, they were survivors” (qtd. in Brewster 2015, 87). In this article, I will focus on men’s violence against Aboriginal women, although white women also participated in the British project of colonisation as complicit accomplices or perpetrators “in the name of so-called goodness and a more civilised world” (Vernay 65).

## RECONFIGURING OF THE TROPE OF ABORIGINAL WOMEN AS VICTIMS IN MORETON'S VERSE

Critics tend to concur that Romaine Moreton's verse is among the most penetrating indictment of colonialism in Australia. Moreton expresses her indignation at the social and political marginalisation of Indigenous Australians and her Goenpul Jagara nation 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 writing. Moreton sees black life in Australia as inherently political and considers her verse in the first place as a site of resistance. In "Working Note," she writes, "To create works that do not deal with the morbid and mortal effects of racism for one, and the beauty of indigenous culture for another, would be for me personally, to produce works that are farcical" (1). Similarly, one of her poems in the collection *Post Me to the Prime Minister* includes these revealing lines: "It ain't easy being black / this kinda livin' is all political" (111).

Driven by the creative urgency arising from 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 brutalising effects of the "Crown's acquisition of 1770, which made sovereign Aboriginal land *terra nullius* and Aboriginal peoples *vox nullius*" (Heiss and Minter 2). Moreton's combination of sharp analytical reasoning and affective rhetoric establish confidentially toned narrative sentences, which are characterized by rhetorical questions, direct address to the reader, satirical antitheses and repetitions, thereby thematizing a string of pressing socioeconomic issues pertaining to contemporary colour communities in Australia. "Silence can mean / death, / if you accept and obey / without question," Moreton warns her people in the poem with self-explanatory title "Poverty is silence" (47). Written in a direct manner, which gains poignancy by bleak metaphors and ironic subtleties of the statements, Moreton's poems not only disconcert and puzzle the more familiar representations of Aboriginal experience; by documenting the tyranny of oppression and abuse, arrogance of power, poverty and wilful destruction of Indigenous peoples, they also exact readers' confrontation with their own thoughts and require active participation through personal or collective responses.

Moreton's moral outrage is best evidenced in the poems that lay bare the widespread "racialised gendered violence that often informed the colonizing mission" (Brewster 2017, 252). Bringing her whole sensibility to bear upon her writing, Moreton piles detail on detail until the whole throbbing picture or experience emerges. In the poem "Womankindness," the lyrical persona strongly defies the

imposed status of a powerless victim and is adamant in her decision to never be “the misinformed, / menial, / meek, / dutiful courtesan again;” rather, she “will rejoice in her Womankindness” (2000, 51). This poem is also formally unique by commanding attention with the opening series of rhythmical repetitions of lines (as in oral delivery) to establish a sense of growing determination to repudiate the ongoing assumptions about “the static lines of demarcation between empowered and disempowered cultures” (Suleri 112). As Igor Maver has observed, contemporary Aboriginal poetry is characterised by “oral and colloquial elements of the Aboriginal tradition, [...] reconnect[ing] the contemporary Aboriginality with traditional aboriginal mythology and orality” (20):

She is trying to get out  
 She is trying to get out  
 She is trying to get out  
 This woman inside of me  
 This woman inside of me  
 This woman inside of me  
 She is ready to come out  
 She is ready to come out  
 This woman inside of me  
 This woman inside of me. (Moreton 2000, 50)

Moreton's poem “Mr. Slave Mentality” also seeks to reverse various forms of patriarchal domination. In this imaginary encounter between a black female speaker and a white man, the former makes an emphatic statement that nothing can make her be a white man's “brown sugar” again. As Brewster and Sue Kossew have suggested, the black woman's refusal “to be part of sexualised transaction” can be seen as an “escape from the colonial ‘slave’ economy in a history that has made Aboriginal women's bodies commodities and vehicles for sex and labour” (2019, 114):

Because money bought the slaves  
 that cut the sugar cane field,  
 and money killed the black men and women  
 who sweeten a nation's tea,  
 but money won't buy a little sugar  
 like me. (Moreton 2000, 6)

Like several other black Australian authors who have shed light on the erroneous and historically entrenched representations, Moreton seeks to establish Aboriginal women as “subjects in direct opposition to the identities inscribed to them in colonial ideology” (Attwell 3). The poem “Truganini or piccaninny” is a good example. In line with today's conviction that violence is not limited to the physical abuse but

also includes “the perceived threat’ of violence that emanates from and is embedded in power relationships” and “the negative characterisation of victim identity and politics” (Bessel 12-13), Moreton energetically opposes the enduring assumptions of Aboriginal women’s allegedly promiscuous behaviour and availability, formed on the basis of frontier stereotypes. Through a distinctly one-sided conversation, characterised by the blending of long and short unrhymed lines, the inbuilt phonetic imperative and the enunciative ‘I,’ the female persona asserts and refashions her black subjectivity by employing the rhetorical strategy of argumentation, indictment and advocacy. The poem’s passionate intensity culminates in the last line, composed of a string of monosyllabic imperatives. The overall effect of this strategy is that of self-regard and agency: “You have the ability to say / Woman, / and make it sound like / Whore. / I am not a whore. But / I / Am / A / Black / Woman. / So / Black, Nigger, Coon, Djin, Truganini or Piccaninny, / how I identify / Is! Up! To! Me!” (54).

A similarly assertive response to insidious gender estimations is provided in the poem “Objectify my sex,” uttering Moreton’s outright disapproval with men’s assumption about their unreserved entitlement to the Aboriginal woman’s body already in the poem’s title. The poem opens with the declaration “[b]ecause I place / my feet / on the street / does not mean that I am / available” (2004, 8) and proceeds in true Moreton fashion, compiling a catalogue of evidence to illustrate and reject the patterns of manhood that “vandalise” a black woman’s body. “This definition of manhood has failed me” (9), the speaker brazenly decries the idea of imperial ownership and the settler’s desire to maintain the brutal exploitative nature of relationship with Aboriginal women.

Moreton is among those women voices who critically reflect on both the frontier abuse of Aboriginal women and girls as well as their abuse by Aboriginal men, the so-called “black on black violence.”<sup>4</sup> Rooks notes that “colonised men take on the behaviours and attitudes of their male colonisers” and act in collusion to further oppress colonised women and enforce the structures of patriarchy (52). According to Alison Whittaker and Nicole Watson, the implications of past injustices are well seen in Australia’s legal system: not only has it contributed to the stereotyping of Aboriginal women, but it is still far from being race and gender neutral (183). In her 2019 article “Law Stories and Life Stories: Aboriginal Women, the Law and Australian Society,” Behrendt contends that colonial perceptions about Aboriginal women’s alleged sexual promiscuity have lowered the standards applied when determining whether allegations about sexual assaults are justified. The scholar draws attention to the 2006 gang rape of a ten-year-old Aboriginal girl and the court’s decision that

4 Moreton uses this phrase in the interview with Estelle Castro-Koshy to refer to the abuse that Aboriginal women experience by Aboriginal men. <https://www.austlit.edu.au/interviewLisaBellar>



“the girl involved was not forced but probably agreed to have sex with the men of the gang (qtd. in Rooks 51).

In the wake of such despicable attitudes towards Aboriginal women and girls, it is therefore necessary to expose how “law reproduces race and racism” and challenge dominant narratives that “normalise the status quo” (Whittaker and Watson 183). For Moreton, writing is the space that provides the site of resistance for those who have not been able to speak for themselves. She forcefully responds to colonial legacies, mobilizing her activist language to unsettle the manifestations of patriarchal domination and reconstruct meaningful models of kinship and community. In so doing, Moreton is likened to Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong’o, who has reminded us that there is “no cultural liberation without women’s liberation” (Petersen 254). Her epistolary poem “Dear Siss” is among those that interrogate the oppression and sexual abuse Aboriginal women have been exposed to within their own community. Imbued with frankness and intimacy, the poem not only testifies to black women’s exclusion from definitions of modernity, thus vividly illustrating the historian Patrick Wolfe’s claim that “colonised populations continue to be racialised in specific ways that mark out and reproduce the unequal relationships into which Europeans have co-opted these populations” (67–68). It is also a powerful forward-looking statement of black women’s resilience and struggle, anticipating change. As Moreton closes the poem, despite having “no job, no reason, no true life” and being “raped [...] by [their] own cultural brothers” (Moreton 2000, 10), they will challenge their status of doubly colonised and “make a difference for someone following—not just signatures in the sand to be erased effortlessly by an indifferent wind” (11).

In the poem “Pretty little china dolls,” Moreton fervently denounces child sexual abuse, another instance of what Louis Nowra describes as “contradiction between women’s rights and Indigenous rights” (64). A young female narrator lays bare the origin of acute anger and resentment she feels upon meeting an old male. Forced to silence and secrecy, the narrator had to endure the man’s lust whenever he wished to find “pleasure in revealing his only right to manhood” (2000, 17). The girl’s little dolls displayed “in a row [...] upon her dresser” were the only witnesses to this insidious act, so two decades later, “nobody knows / why she is so rude / to the old man / down the road” and “turns her head / as she passes by” (18).

A history of violent victimisation of black women and children is also affectively presented in Moreton’s poem “Raggedy Anne.” In the opening lines, the female lyrical subject reveals that, as a child, she was taught not to dissuade the “open arms” of “any male member of the family” or a “dear family friend”; rather, she was expected to let herself to his animalistic instincts and pretend to like his abhorrent ‘play.’

The young  
vulnerable female  
should go forth and be bounced  
upon his strategically positioned,  
child entertaining,  
child penetrating  
knee  
and pretend to like it. (Moreton 2000, 61)

The narrative tone suddenly takes an unexpected turn, juxtaposing “no” and “yes,” “I will” and “I won’t,” “I do” and “I don’t,” each word or phrase foregrounded on a single line to make the indictment of men’s lustful hanger and disgusting behaviour even more emphatic: “I was never heard, / for being a child meant having no rights to choose, / to say / Yes / I will / or / No / I won’t / or / Yes / I do / or / No / I don’t” (62–63). The poem closes with the speaker’s lament that, unlike a man, who can quickly “pay homage to his conscience” and “redeem his innocence,” a woman is “sentenced to a lifetime of never being able to forget / for his Crime” (64).

Without quoting from other poems, it can be seen that Moreton relies heavily on her Aboriginality in terms of both reconnecting with traditional texture, diction and rhythm, and responding to the colonial legacies. Articulating discourses of “conscious antagonists,” as Edward Said refers to those who, “compelled by the system to play subordinate or imprisoning roles within it” react by “disrupting” it (335), her verse serves as a counter-reading of Australian historical and cultural memory. In particular, it explores, impacts and constitutes Aboriginal women’s struggle to “regain a self-determined, political, cultural and personal identity” (Rooks 49).

## **BELLEAR’S CONDEMNATION OF RACIALISED AND GENDERED VIOLENCE**

The dynamics that have kept Aboriginal women in servitude and were accountable for the enduring stereotypes are also strongly contested by Lisa Bellear, a Goernpul woman of the Noonuccal people of Stradbroke Island. As introduced by Anita Heiss and Peter Minter, Bellear was not only a “notably political poet” but also a photographer, academic and social commentator actively engaged with Indigenous affairs (179). By her death in 2006, she had published the poetry collection *Dreaming in Urban Areas* (1996) and co-authored the theatrical work *The Dirty Mile: A History of Indigenous Fitzroy* (2006). Posthumously, the collection *Aboriginal Country* (2018) was published, edited by Jen Jewel Brown and described by the reviewer Estelle Castro-Koshy as “an ambassador of change.” Bellear’s poems

have been widely published in journals and included in several anthologies, such as Heiss and Minter's *Anthology of Australian Aboriginal Literature*, Nicholas Jose's *Macquarie Pen Anthology of Australian Literature* (2009) and Louise Craig's *Perseverance Poets' Collection 1991-1992*.

A number of Belleair's poems are concerned with the topic of how the colonial rhetoric continues to preclude the productive cross-cultural relationality. One of them is "Poor Pretty Polly," which affectively discloses how the colonial notions of Aboriginal women as "easy sexual sport" (Behrendt 2005, 250) continue to impact the assumptions about their sexual promiscuity. The speaker of the poem relates how the black girl who is found dead at the edge of the road is denied any sense of gravity or significance by callous bystanders. Rather, and neglecting the history of abuse alluded to in the second stanza ("Curse the mother she never knew / curse the whiteman who raped her"), they attribute the girl's death to her allegedly intense sensuality. The poem is a strong condemnation of the practice of blaming Aboriginal women for sexual activity into which they were forced:

Poor poor pretty Polly, lies silent  
 in an inner suburban gutter.  
 "What a sweetie," "such a shame,"  
 "so pretty and now she's dead."  
 Some say of a broken heart, others  
 snigger "she gave too much." (Belleair 2018, 30)

Another perennial issue discussed in Belleair's poems is the multi-generational and societal impact of government legislation that led to the forced removal of more than a hundred thousand children from their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families between 1885 and 1970. The issue of Stolen Generation and the "maternal trope" - the figure of the suffering mother and child (Brewster and Kosssew 160), is movingly contextualised in the poem "Ruby was never seen again," which reads as an embittered voicing of trauma and the feeling of loss experienced by a mother, when her child was stolen from her after "three long years of hiding from the tentacles of institutionalised racism" (2018, 29). Belleair makes visible not only the government violence, but also how that violence was enacted at different levels of society, by "the bullyman, welfare, local school-teacher-informant," who "would not relent till Ruby was removed" (2018, 29). The closing lines, in which the mother wonders "what their life could've been / like without this government sanctioned cruelty" (29), can be read as an interruption in traditional interpretations of colonial power, poignantly evoking a feeling of guilt and remorse in non-Indigenous readers and creating a space for what Sara Suleri calls the "intimacy" between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people (113).

By giving voice to the silenced, the kidnapped and the stolen, Bellear's poetry performs a powerful protest against the colonisers' practice of not only taking someone else's land by force but also imposing the system that provides them with "unearned privilege and conferred dominance" (Dyer 9). In Brewster's words, Bellear makes whiteness visible to white people by defamiliarizing it (2007, 210). However, she does not speak only on behalf of other women who were compelled to silence or found their stories of violence too shameful to reveal; several Bellear's poems spring from her own acutely felt personal experiences of sexual abuse by her adoptive white father. Such is the poem "A Suitcase Full of Mould," in which the persona reveals how desperately she is trying to forget what happened to her after being separated from her Indigenous relatives: "Forget forget forget / as much as I try / I cannot" (2018, 47). The poem is centrally about the issue of breaking the enforced silence surrounding the sexual abuse.<sup>5</sup> Unlike in essays, in which Bellear writes about her trauma of being sexually and psychologically abused in expository language, in the poem, the abuse is only obliquely hinted at. Rather than with graphic rendition of abuse, intensive readers' attention is assured with intentional repetitions, such as gemination ("forget, forget, forget") or anaphora:

Imagine a bonding process of  
23 years of lies,  
Of 23 years of guilt  
Of being estranged  
Of trying to let go ...  
Of wanting to but ... (Bellear 2018, 47)

The strategy of deploying a more subtle rhetoric allows Bellear to illuminate the affective impact of abuse, that is, the ways in which trauma "becomes sedimented psychically and bodily" (Brewster and Kossew 104).

## **OBJECTING TO THE NOTION OF UNIVERSAL FEMINISM**

In the poem "They said I could be a feminist," Leane reminds us that the price of the notion of universal feminism is often paid by Indigenous women and those belonging to marginalised communities. Similarly, Bellear was cognisant of the dangers inherent in interpreting women as a "singular monolithic subject" (Mohanthy 262), the misconception apparent in some recent Western feminist discourses. The absurdity of viewing Indigenous woman's experience in the white

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5 Bellear also writes about the importance of breaking silence in her essay "Healing Through Poetry."

context of the feminist movement is particularly poignantly addressed in Belleair's poem "Women's liberation." Written as a multi-voiced monologue, the poem satirises the feminist movement that is predominately preoccupied with white middle-class concerns and too easily ignores historically specific material reality and the heterogeneity of women's goals and interests. From the very beginning of the poem, the notion of a unified female subject is treated with sharp irony and ridicule:

Talk to me about the feminist movement,  
 The gubba middle class  
 Hetero sexual revolution  
 Way back in the seventies  
 When men wore tweed jackets with  
 Leather elbows, and the women, well  
 I don't remember or maybe I just don't care  
 Or can't relate. (Belleair 1996, 6)

The opening Indigenous woman's voice, unrelentingly mocking white women's concerns that seem particularly trivial in the face of widely differing anxieties and worries of black women, constantly switches with a white woman's voice to produce a blending of subjectivity. The white woman's voice is associated with various brand names and activities that testify to her economic advantage, obtained through the racialised nature of social policy in Australia. Preoccupied with her own needs, the white woman has no knowledge about the socio-political urgencies of her black counterparts and pays scant regard to the social structures that prevent them from having access to privileges and opportunities:

Yes, I'm for the women's movement  
 I want to be free and wear dunlop tennis shoes.  
 And indigenous women, well surely, the liberation  
 of white women includes all women regardless ...  
 It doesn't, well that's not for me to deal with." (Belleair 1996, 7)

The confession, "I don't even know if I'm capable / of understanding / Aborigines in Victoria? / Aboriginal women, here, I've never seen one" (7), clearly contrasts white women's perception of Indigenous women with the way how they represent and understand themselves. The poem's strategy with a shifting subject position of the speaker additionally foregrounds the view about the fundamental complexities that inform the lives of women of different races, classes and cultures, and challenges the feminist discourse that elides this distinction. Belleair's representation of the feminist movement as predominately focused on white middle-class

concerns is in line with the critique of whiteness in Western feminist discourse in Moreton-Robinson's ground-breaking study *Talkin' Up to the White Woman: Indigenous Women and Feminism* (2000), which reads:

What is evident from the relations between white feminists and Indigenous women is that our respective subject positions speak out of different cultures, epistemologies, experiences, histories and material conditions which separate our politics and analyses.  
 [...] White women come to feminism which already formed subjectivities linked to different histories, privileges, power and oppression. They are socially situated subjects who are located in power relations where whiteness remains invisible, natural, normal and unmarked. (Moreton-Robinson 182–183)

In several other poems, Bellear illustrates the fact that whiteness dominates from the position of power and privilege as an invisible norm and unchallenged practice, whereas black people continue to be relegated to the position of 'Other.' In the poem "Taxi," Bellear writes, "Splashed by a passing cab, and another and another / there's rules you see; / don't stop for / black women, accelerate / past black men" / [...] the poor people of colour / are at the mercy of even taxi drivers" (1996, 70). However, as a whole, Bellear's poetic world is not imbued with pessimism. Particularly the poems "Woman of the Dreaming" and "Chops n' Things" end on an optimistic tone, pointing to the nurturing bond between Aboriginal women and their ancestors as the force that can reinscribe traditional notions of Aboriginal culture and identity. The closing lines in the former read,

Woman of the dreaming  
 find your soul  
 and peace and love and  
 connect with our ancestors  
 and our land  
 will begin to smile again (Bellear 1996, 11),

whereas "Chops n' Things" closes with the imperative: "Keep on dreaming / keep on believing" (1996, 8). Clearly, in both poems, the central emphasis is on the spiritual, transgenerational role of Aboriginal women: they are seen as "gatherers and keepers" of the country's histories and knowledge (Leane 2017, 245), the transmitters of the haunting stories of genocidal horror and the advocates of change.

Harkin comments that Indigenous Australians “write to create, to survive and to revolutionise; [they] write to haunt and [they] ache because [they] refuse to leave the past alone” (quoted in Kilner and Minter 2014, n. p.). This observation surely applies to Belleair and her poetic oeuvre. Like many other forms of Indigenous aesthetics in (post)colonial Australia, Belleair’s poetry represents what Leane refers to as a “rite of passage back into [Indigenous] history and country” (2017, 250), reporting on and deconstructing the enduring impact of frontier disenfranchisement. Inspiring, lucid and confronting, Belleair’s poetry is a haunting account of colonial violence against Aboriginal people and Aboriginal women, in particular, and a testimony to their physical and mental strength.

## CONCLUSION

Several postcolonial theorists have drawn attention to the historical construction of a Eurocentric world – that is, to the way that Europe has established its dominance through historical narrativity. In their view, the postcolonial task is not only to “contest the message of history” as embedded in a single representation of the past, but also to engage the medium of narrativity itself to re-write the rhetoric that has established European cultures as superior and all others as necessarily inferior (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 356). This task has been undertaken by many Indigenous Australian authors; by intervening in the authoritative rhetoric of those for whom history was an instrument of control of subject peoples, they continue to “empower themselves and take control of the past, present and future,” as Native American playwright William S. Yellow Robe has noted for his people (qtd. in Pulitano 19).

Focused on the poetry of Moreton and Belleair, the article has demonstrated that Aboriginal women’s poetry represents an important site for the renegotiation of asymmetrical power relations in Australia. Deploying the language of an eyewitness quality and the style that assures the tonal and visual acuity of writing, this poetry questions the foundations of white supremacy and confronts the racialised and patriarchal notions of gender. In their effort to reinscribe Aboriginal women’s subjectivity and sexuality, Aboriginal women poets are supported by their male counterparts as well as many progressive Australian settlers, who “examine their own complicity in maintaining power and privilege” (Slater 2019, xiv). Without embracing the myth of universality of the human condition, that is, ignoring the multiplicity of cultural realities and material specificities of postcolonial societies, it is probably safe to claim that Aboriginal women’s poetry explores themes of wider relatability and speak to the myriad of women around the world who are still yearning to be heard and recognised.

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## Redefiniranje ženske subjektivitete v avstralski staroselski poeziji

Članek se ukvarja s poezijo Romaine Moreton in Lise Bellear. Osredinjen na pesmi, ki razkrivajo nasilje nad aboriginskimi ženskami in deklicami, raziskuje, kako njuna naracija avstralskega zgodovinskega in kulturnega spomina destabilizira kontinuum kolonialne strukture moči in identitetnih konstruktov, ki so nastali na osnovi rasističnega in misoginističnega kolonialnega etosa.

**Ključne besede:** avstralska staroselska poezija protesta, Romaine Moreton, Lisa Bellear, evropocentrizem, rasno in spolno zaznamovano nasilje