

Returning and Re-membering: Reading Kerry Reed-Gilbert's "Wiradjuri Country"

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Historically, Australian literature has been a deeply contested site where aboriginal authors have persistently struggled to make their voices heard, not only to challenge the exclusion of their own agencies but also to challenge the historical omissions and silences. Literature has been a crucial political instrument for forming connections with the past despite the forced disjunctions, dislocations, and displacements that aboriginal communities have had to endure in the face of relentless settler aggression and colonial expansionism for hundreds of years. To understand the context within which these contestations in Australian literature emerge, the following passage by Emmanuel S. Nelson is worth quoting in full despite its length:

[...]indigenous Australians have not only been colonized but have been permanently rendered a mistreated and marginalized minority group on a continent which was once theirs. They constitute less than 2 percent of Australia's population of about sixteen million, so the possibilities of any radical political action or even any sustained cultural resistance are minimal. Furthermore, the Aboriginal culture remains deeply traumatized by the profound postcontact dislocations of the last two hundred years. It is necessary, then, to confront, examine, understand, accept, and affirm that past—though that past might represent defeat, dispossession, and discontinuity. Such a meaningful connection with the past is essential for racial self-retrieval, for forging a valid and liberating sense of personal and cultural wholeness. It is indispensable for healing the cultural fracture caused by the catastrophic impact of colonial intrusion; it is a prerequisite for cultural reclamation, for continued resistance. (Nelson 30)

Therefore, as J. J. Healy aptly observes, Aboriginal literature is a “literature of protest, discovery, recovery” [sic] (79). It is hardly surprising that Australian Aboriginal writing, which, according to Healy, emerged in its modern form in the 1960s, is often deeply political and infused with an awareness of history (Healy 79). Some of the most prominent Aboriginal writers and poets, such as Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Alexis Wright, Kerry Reed-Gilbert, Kim Scott and others, have found in their writing the scope for self-assertion, both individual and collective, as well as the possibility of cultural re-membering that which is forgotten, lost, fragmented, or silenced. I use the hyphenation in “re-membering” consciously, to highlight that the process of remembering in this context is often a painful exercise of putting together a dismembered cultural and social mode of existence and belonging as well as journeying through a long history of violence, trauma, and uprooting.

An unrelenting advocate and activist for preserving the rights of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, Kerry Reed-Gilbert’s writing embodies the scope for both resistance and cultural self-articulation, intricately intertwined with each other within the richly layered textual space of her poems. One of the foremost aboriginal voices in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century Australian literature, Reed-Gilbert, a poet of Wiradjuri origin who would eventually go on to become one of the “elders” of the Wiradjuri people, frequently foregrounded her poetry as an instrument to highlight not only the systematic dispossession and exploitation of the aboriginal people in Australia since its colonisation but also the urge for reclamation--of aboriginal history, identity, and agency. Prolific in her writing career, Reed-Gilbert produced many significant volumes in the span of three decades, such as *Black Woman Black Life* (Wakefield Press, 1996), *Talkin’ About Country* (Kuracca, 1997) *Message Stick: Contemporary Aboriginal writing* (IAD Press, 1997), *Ngununggula (Belonging to Here): Stories and poems* (FreeXpression, 1997), and *The Strength of Us as Women: Black women speak* (Ginninderra Press, 2000). She has also served as an editor to collections such as *A Pocket Full of Leadership* (ACT KLA 2016) and *Too Deadly: Or Voice Our Way Our Business* (2017). Her memoir, *The Cherry Picker’s Daughter* (Wild Dingo Press, 2019), was published

posthumously.¹ Her active involvement in the First Nations Australia Writers Network, where she worked tirelessly to promote and support indigenous poets and authors, strengthened the articulation of marginalised aboriginal voices in the country. In this brief essay we explore Reed-Gilbert's poem titled "Wiradjuri Country," published in the *Australian Poetry Anthology* (Vol. 8) in 2020. The poem, as we shall see, is both a personal tribute and an act of remembering, strongly tinged by the desire to return to one's roots. Within this context, the essay explores how the poem foregrounds a deep spiritual connection with one's ancestral land that transcends history.

The poem, in its opening stanza itself, offers a glimpse into a profound symbiotic bond where land and the people are inseparable; the land has offered the people a place in the world and a home for many generations, as it does today. The people, on the other hand, carry with them the history of the land and its little souvenirs—"eagles," "angels," "sun bursts," "gum trees," and "geraniums"—that give the land its own ontological and immanent agency. The poet-speaker in Wiradjuri country proudly declares herself to be one among them. Like a medieval troubadour who roams the land with his songs, she travels this land with a "pocket full of poetry" (Wiradjuri 11). She ends the first stanza with an emphatic anaphora: "I travel my country, /my land, /my life,/ my religion" (Wiradjuri 11). The poem thus also foregrounds a spiritual consciousness that challenges both anthropocentric thinking and the assumptions of post-Enlightenment Western philosophy. Rejecting the separation between "Man" and "Nature," it emphasizes a sense of belonging and oneness shared by the land, its people, the flora, and the fauna, each as a part of a larger harmonious whole. It strips human beings from their role as masters of the land and repositions the human as a "presence," one among many presences in a shared existence.

The poet-speaker hears in the wilderness a call to return, presumably to a past that has not been tainted by the cancerous

1 Kerry Reed-Gilbert's publication information in this essay has been borrowed from Jeanine Leane's obituary in the *Overland* magazine after Reed-Gilbert's passing. Check the words cited section for more details.

encroachment of modern, urban, industrialised civilization into ancestral Aboriginal land:

The bush calls me back
to the time of before.
Before tar and cement.
Brick walls and tin roofs.

To the time of Creation (Wiradjuri 11)

This is a return both to a time of simplicity and innocence, before the long history of violence and forced dispossession tarnished the harmonious existence of the people. This existence, the poem affirms, is one of “honesty,” “dignity,” “truth,” and “justice”—attributes that are inextricable from the “red dirt” of the land, as opposed to the colonial and the post-colonial periods marked by violence, treachery, and cruelty. Interestingly, the poem imagines attributes such as “truth” and “justice” beyond the institutionalised legal and judicial frameworks established by the colonial settlers and their modern incarnations. After all, the experience of the Aboriginal people with colonial laws and those who enforced them is entrenched in a vicious and traumatic past, as the following lines from the poem “Just Leave Your Mark Here”:

We, gubermment men,
sent by the King we steal their land
by one stroke of the mighty pen.
But don't tell anybody that.

Not our fault if some settlers kill the native born
with a shotgun placed between their eyes.
Shoot their families dead.
We wipe our hands of the mess we do
and look the other way. (Reed-Gilbert)

However, might be argued that the poem “Wiradjuri Country” does not participate in lamentation and mourning in a state of victimhood but offers an exuberant and optimistic call for reclamation and remembering of the past. The poet-speaker describes a transformative spiritual experience as the wind

infuses her with memories of the ancestors, extending her an invitation to walk the path, i.e., partake in the essence, experience, and wisdom preserved by the Wiradjuri for generations upon generations, making her one of their own. She has finally become aware of “dreamtime” – the inviolable spiritual connection among the past, the present, and the future and a continuity that transcends the limits of “History” as Western Enlightenment framed it. The symbolic return of the poet-speaker and a reaffirmation of her sense of belonging at the individual level is also mirrored by the return of elders to their position of respect and reverence, indicating that an individual’s return and reclamation of her Wiradjuri identity might also extend a path to a collective reclamation of lost honour and courage for the Wiradjuri people.

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