

The lady in black

Kath Walker, an elderly woman, is perhaps the best known Aborigine poet in Australia. After four books of verse she has become recognised as the one and only "official poet" of the Aborigines. Placed in this situation, she has encountered problems on both sides of the fence. Whites made the mistake of not understanding how deep her anger ran and Blacks feel that she is not coming down as she should on the whites of Australia.

Despite the criticism, Kath Walker is highly respected by her people. She is viewed as the mother image of black writing, and her home is open to all Black writers.

Kath Walker says she began "searching" with words in the 1960s and her first book of verse (*We Are Going*) was published in 1964. The title itself was a warning to the white man: either the genocide of the Aborigine race will be your burden, or with your help we can learn to live together. The answer was unmistakably clear — die nigger.

As to why she chose poetry as a means to communicate her people's aspirations and frustrations, she says that her people have always been natural storytellers and songmakers, and so it was a natural process for her to choose poetry to communicate with her people.

Seven years ago on Stradbroke Island, about ten miles from Brisbane, Kath Walker started a community called Moongalba, which can best be described as a programme to "Save the Children" and a multi-cultural education experience. At Moongalba all races are welcome and there is an exchange of learning about different cultures. This programme is run without any aid from the government, the money comes from Kath Walker and anyone who is willing to give.



I dare not live too long
Life may last for ever.
In a span of life
Ten million lives are lost
And few are found.

Dead men roam
The streets
Screaming obscenities,
Cursing, damning.
Forcing me to look
At my dead life
And theirs.

Kath Walker



Bobbi Sykes

Bobbi Sykes is probably the most prolific Black writer in Australia and the most vocal in her attack on racism. Her background statistics are the same as the other Aborigine writers: self-educated, self-made. Over the last ten years she has become the closest thing to a national Black leader of her people.

She is a household name in Australia. Blacks fondly call her "Bobbi Angela Davis Sykes" and whites seem to hate her more than any other Black person in Australia. Over the last 15 years she has been beaten up, locked up, shot at, called a front for the Communist Party, and even accused of being not a "real black".

Bobbi Sykes is one of the few Black writers who has travelled widely outside of Australia. As a result of her writing she has been invited to speak in many parts of the world and while in America she made contact with Black American leaders.

Of the writers mentioned, Bobbi Sykes is by far the youngest, but within her 34 years she has had a full life already. She writes of her life: "I was born in Townsville, Queensland, the deep North. Formal education only to primary level, further education received in learn-or-perish situations. I have had a distinguished career in dishwashing, waitressing, floor-scrubbing and factory work. A short career in exotic dancing, but failed the "casting couch" as a "non-starter"."

In 1975 Bobbie Sykes set up the Black Women's Action Committee which published the first newspaper (*Koori-Bina*) for Blacks in Australia.

In response to whites who say she is nothing but a protest writer, she replies: "Have you ever heard any white person in the so-called free world calling Alexander Solzhenitsyn a protest writer? The protest literature title that whites try and lay on Black writers is no more than an attempt to try and negate the value of what Black writers are saying about the devilish ways of the white man."

Life

Sitting up there, bewigged, on your right —
your twelve just men, just what? My peers
equal —

Does it take 12 white men to equal one
Black man,
One beaten Black man,
One lonely broken Black man?

What do you know, in your powdered wig
And my equal — all white-what a joke,
Of my life and my love for a little Black gin
With her big, soul-sad-eyes.

And what do you know of your comrades —
white brothers,
Who raped her when she was nine, and ten,
and 12, and 20
Until she thought that "not to" was the
biggest sin?

And what do you know of my raging hate
When I come home and walk in
To find a hunched back rearing over
My Black and beautiful gin?

So I cleft the back and broke the chain
And my wife will never sin again,
My peers find me guilty
And the wig gives me "life" and
LIFE is a four-letter word.

Bobbi Sykes

Lorraine Mafi-Williams

In 1941 there were only 800 "full-blooded" Aborigines living in New South Wales. Lorraine Mafi-Williams is one of that eight hundred. Lorraine Mafi-Williams is in her late 40s and lives in Redfern, the Harlem of Sydney.

There is a spirituality about her personhood; she is a woman who seems to be in unison with the earth. Her skin is midnight black and she is deeply aware that she is Black, beautiful and strong. The only thing that seems to speak about her life are her eyes. They are the eyes of a person who has lived all the pain of her life more than once.

Perhaps this is why she is a poet, although she does not think of herself as one. She says simply that she is a person who very recently began to put words on paper to try and make the white man understand what it is like to die a little each day of one's life.

It is unfortunate that Lorraine Mafi-Williams has had only a few of her poems published, because she carries with her the whole oral culture of her people.

Anthropology Theology

Anthropologist digging in the blazing sun
Wants to know from where the Blackman
come;

Jackie lying in the shade of the tree,
Wants to know from where he come too:
Hey, Boss, where we from now?
Oh, Asia, Jackie. There's signs that China
Could be ...

Hey, Boss, we come from that China yet?
No, Jackie, perhaps you come from Africa ...
Hey, Boss, what that Africa look like?
The rocks down here don't look too good ...
Indian ... European ... you be ... perhaps
I'll dig some more and then we'll see.
Don't that whiteman know we come from
dreamtime long ago?

Hey, Boss, you keep digging there
Maybe you'll get to hell.

Lorraine Mafi-Williams