

The Monthly

DECEMBER 2020 – JANUARY 2021

ESSAYS

In times like these, what would Oodgeroo do?



Oodgeroo Noonuccal at Sydney Town Hall, 1970. © Mitchell Library

On the influence of Aboriginal poet, activist, Oodgeroo Noonuccal

By Alexis Wright

Oodgeroo Noonuccal is widely acknowledged as a distinguished poet of determination and brilliance. She was also one of the heroes of the Aboriginal struggle for justice in the 1960s, known for her work as an activist, educator and public speaker. Her poetry educated Australians – and people throughout the world – on the plight of Aboriginal people. And she triumphantly let the world know through her poetry that the Australian style was not hers. In “Not My Style”, she yearned for a new time in this country: “I want to do / The things I have not done. / Not just taste the nectar of Gods / But drown in it too.”

In the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* entry for Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Kath Walker), the long-time UQP editor Sue Abbey wrote that Oodgeroo was “Direct, charismatic, quick-witted, and dignified, [one who] taught the spirituality of her

ancestors, responsibility for the earth, and the connection of all people”. The online Koori History Project, created by Professor Gary Foley, names Oodgeroo among the “heroes of the Aboriginal resistance”, celebrating her ability to articulate to the rest of Australia, in a way they had not heard before, the feelings of Aboriginal people. Her first collection of poetry, *We Are Going*, was an immediate commercial success when it was published in 1964. The book sold more than 10,000 copies and made Oodgeroo “the best-selling Australian poet since C.J. Dennis”.

When I read Oodgeroo’s poems, I delight in her extraordinary creative powers and I can see how she celebrated Aboriginal people as the inheritors of a heroic culture, still fighting and surviving, as we have done since time immemorial. On the centenary of her birth, I humbly offer my love and gratitude to this great lady of our culture for her leadership, as a poet and thinker, during the difficult times in which she lived. Oodgeroo created a greater space for our independent creativity and literature. She was fearless, and determined to show the world that we owned what we thought – our creativity, our stories – and that justice was on our side. Our literary efforts today grew from this space that she and others of her generation forged from our traditional roots. We go back a long time as story tellers, story makers and story keepers. We practise many forms of storytelling every day. We have always told and sung stories through adherence to our religious law, and practised a highly sophisticated writing system, encoding thoughts to preserve important stories of responsibility, passed down through the ages to teach new generations to care for this fragile continent – the oldest in the world. These stories have helped us survive as the oldest living culture in the world.

Oodgeroo was exceptional in times when it was very difficult for the great majority of our people to break away from the sheer weight and cruelty of the racism that dominated their lives. Her poetry travelled further than most voices in our communities were able to and she reached far into the souls of people living outside our world. She reached into the lives of families long governed by self-appointed white racist control. A control that continued to deny the theft of our traditional lands, and the massacre, enslavement and subduing of our people – and let’s never deny that this was our widespread experience interacting with colonial Australia. Many of our people were subjected to racist state laws controlling their lives, locking them up in isolated

institutions, reserves and missions. Oodgeroo's poetry spoke of these times. She spoke to us. The poems stayed in our minds, and countered the widespread and ingrained national narratives working against us. She inspired many of the younger generations, from cities to regional towns and isolated communities. We were sick of the racism and wanted change. We were demanding Aboriginal rights, and we wanted what Oodgeroo wrote in "A Song of Hope": "Now brood no more / On the years behind you, / ... To our fathers' fathers / The pain, the sorrow; / To our children's children / The glad tomorrow."

I think of Oodgeroo as being our equivalent of the great South American poets whose work not only spoke to those in high literary circles but also had widespread appeal. These great poets articulated the love of country, the land, the spirit and also the struggles of their people. They spoke the truth about injustice, and strengthened people to continue building their lives in places they loved, and to retain their hopes for justice. The poems of the great Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, for instance, were often recited back to him by people in the fields struggling for basic survival, or those who saw him in the streets of towns and cities.

This was how Oodgeroo spoke through her poetry. She spoke of our loss, despair, sadness, hope, deep love of country, and our ties and responsibilities to the spirit of our culture. She spoke with absolute love of her people. Her voice – its joy, its sadness, its love – was our voice. She told the world what many of our people would not say to those they did not trust, and we heard. Oodgeroo's poetry was like a shield to use against the weapons of government policy, which had long been used to silence our voices. She spoke in a language we understood, and told the stories of our sovereign world, of unceded rights, of the law stories, of the great suffering and poverty of our families battling to survive the theft of land, theft of children, rampant racism, brutal treatment, institutionalisation and living conditions in which you would not have kept a dog. She spoke of decades of genocidal, oppressive laws depriving our relatives – our parents, grandparents and great-grandparents – of basic human dignity, robbing their spirit, and denying their legal rights. Oodgeroo spoke of this genocide in her poem "We Are Going", dedicated to Grannie Coolwell, and published in her first collection. The poem begins with the survivors of a tribe returning to their old bora ground, which is now a rubbish tip, and expressing their defiance and sadness with a powerful rhythm:

They sit and are confused, they cannot say their thoughts:
 “We are as strangers here now, but the white tribe are the strangers.
 We belong here, we are of the old ways.
 We are the corroboree and the bora ground,
 We are the old sacred ceremonies, the laws of the elders.
 We are the wonder tales of Dream Time, the tribal legends told.
 We are the past, the hunts and the laughing games, the wandering camp
 fires.
 We are the lightning-bolt over Gaphembah Hill
 Quick and terrible,
 And the Thunder after him, that loud fellow.
 We are the quiet daybreak paling the dark lagoon.
 We are the shadow-ghosts creeping back as the camp fires burn low.
 We are nature and the past, all the old ways
 Gone now and scattered.
 The scrubs are gone, the hunting and the laughter.
 The eagle is gone, the emu and the kangaroo are gone from this place.
 The bora ring is gone.
 The corroboree is gone.
 And we are going.”

This is a self-governing literature that belongs to our place. Oodgeroo was writing about our house, meaning our traditional lands, our sovereign home where everything is related and interconnected through law and story. The place that lives in our mind and spirit. And this was why her poems were inspirational for all of the activists who had grown up under white domination in the missions and the reserves, or in the country towns and suburbs, across the length and breadth of Australia, where Blacks were made to stay in the back, dominated and oppressed, to stay silent, and to look away with head bent whenever passing a white person. Her poetry was a megaphone for telling our truths and, like our contemporary literature, was linked to our traditions as storytelling people. Story can be a weapon, and Oodgeroo was writing in a time when many of our people were breaking away from white control, from the apartheid

laws of Aboriginal protection, and standing up to the racism engrained in the mindset of Australians.

In 1920, when Oodgeroo was born – a year or so after my mother was born on Waanyi county in the Gulf of Carpentaria – Aboriginal people were still being shot in many parts of this country. She would have grown up with the memories of earlier times, through stories told by her parents and grandparents, of massacres and of working on their stolen lands like slaves. She knew there was no safe place to be Aboriginal in this country, living through the era of “protection” laws that segregated communities and removed children. She would have known that the assimilation and integration laws that followed were designed to break whatever spirit was left in our people.

Oodgeroo and many other great, fearless leaders of her generation led us into a new era of publicly fighting for our rights. She chose the pen as a weapon, and her poems demonstrated that we did not need to mimic other people’s literary ideas, or be assimilated into Western paradigms of thinking about what was “real” English literature. Her rich legacy – to write on our own terms – runs through the generations of poets and writers who came after her. She led by crafting a literature capable of jumping the high hurdles of literary gatekeeping, just as we keep fighting to jump roadblocks, from the cradle to the grave, built to stymie Aboriginal achievement. Her work overturned the long-established negative narratives about Aboriginal people, which aimed to control their lives and country.

I remember a cassette tape of rallying songs, titled *Rebel Voices from Black Australia*, released by the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association in 1984. Each song was an anthem for the Aboriginal rights movement that had grown out of the 1960s, reminding us of why we were marching up and down streets, protesting and demanding our rights. The tape included the song “Uncle Willie” by Joe Geia from North Queensland, and songs from Buna Lawrie and Warumpi Band. The Ernabella Choir sang “Pitjantjatjara Land Rights Song”. There were several songs by Les Collins from Cherbourg, including “Joh” (after Joh Bjelke-Petersen) and “If You Had the Luck of the Abo’s”. And Collins also sang Oodgeroo’s poem “No More Boomerang” on the compilation: “No more boomerang / No more spear; / Now all civilised – / Colour bar and beer.” It was a poem that reminded us of how we were losing the culture in

ourselves and our communities, and I could see this in every word, in every line. We saw our countrymen and women living in dire poverty, sick in overcrowded hot ovens called government-funded shelters, and the dismal education of our children. Our people could not get a job anywhere, or they were treated like slaves, living in worse than Third-World conditions on government reserves, missions and cattle stations. We saw the racism, and knew what to call it. I saw it in the pubs in Mount Isa, particularly the famous “Snake Pit”, the only bar in town where Aboriginal people would be served, no matter how drunk or addicted to alcohol they were. I saw life being totally overwhelmed with grief in the eyes of Aboriginal mothers on remote cattle stations in Queensland, whose sick children had long ago been taken away and never returned. They had absolutely no support to help them get their children back, did not know if they were dead or alive, and begged for help to find them.

“No More Boomerang” was the poem that drove us to attend the huge demonstrations, to stand up and demand justice. This was how Oodgeroo used poetry as a powerful weapon in leadership.

In times like these, what would Oodgeroo do?

Lay down the woomera,
 Lay down the waddy.
 Now we got atom-bomb,
 End *everybody*.

How would Oodgeroo tell the story of our times? In the great Russian writer Vladimir Nabokov’s essay “The Creative Writer”, first published in 1941, he wrote about the two stages of inspiration – rapture and recapture – and the spiritual thrill of disconnecting from reality in order to return to the “home for the spirit”, which was “the emphatically and unshakably illogical world”. From there, a writer is able to reconstruct from the “divinely absurd world of the mind” – or what I would call the sovereignty of the mind, and the sovereignty of imagination. Nabokov opposed the idea of common sense, which he described as being, at its worst, “sense made common”. In her poem “Artist Son”, Oodgeroo wrote, “paint what you feel more than the thing you see”.

I once saw my charismatic old friend Yari Yari Tjampitjinpa Zimran – the late senior Pintubi law man and philosopher from Kintore in the Northern Territory – calling senior law people from across the remote lands of Central Australia to come together to fight against the NT government’s push for statehood in 1997.

It was a time when just about everyone believed that the Country Liberal Party government’s well-planned push for statehood was a *fait accompli*. Indeed, Mr Zimran was told by everyone how useless it was to try to stop the Territory government from becoming the seventh state of Australia. He was told to forget it. *You can’t beat them at their own game*. I worked with Mr Zimran and watched him ignore the threat of white power. He knew this country was more sacred and powerful than politicians. He chose to “paint what you feel more than the thing you see”. While the NT government insisted on putting up a flawed draft constitution, he absolutely believed that Aboriginal people would stop statehood from going ahead. Such a constitution would have removed Aboriginal land from Commonwealth control by placing it under state law. This would have been catastrophic, since the relationship Aboriginal people had with the Territory government was fraught from years of difficult battles over land rights, and little trust existed between them.

Mr Zimran had no difficulty calling more than 1000 of the most senior traditional law men and women to travel to Kalkaringi, on Gurindji lands, approximately 1000 kilometres north-west of Alice Springs. The message he used was the deep symbolism of clapping boomerangs. The senior law people responded by arriving en masse at Kalkaringi to tell, in their own languages, the story of their vision of the future. They told the storylines through ceremony, and by writing their ancient titles of country on several large strips of canvas. The Kalkaringi Aboriginal Constitutional Convention was a ceremony showing their vision of a future as capturing all times.

It was Mr Zimran’s leadership, and his insistence on working with what we feel more than what we see, that unified Aboriginal people in Central Australia. What quickly followed was a united campaign and the defeat of the referendum for statehood in 1998, and, soon afterwards, the end of the Country Liberal Party government’s 27-year reign.

Aboriginal literature today is a complex field with roots in our collective storytelling culture, but it also has many offshoots through the freedom of our individualisation as writers. This is a literature that is unique, and continues to go from strength to strength, with an ever-increasing number of new voices embraced and led by the strong voices of its established writers. We believe in our imagination, vision, voice and style. And by forcing ourselves to reach through obstacles that blur our vision, we know that we are continuing our own literary tradition. Oodgeroo's poetry demonstrates that we do not need to be the parrots of Western thought and theory, which, as recently explained by Professor Aileen Moreton-Robinson, a Goenpul woman of the Quandamooka people, is only about human-centred power.

While our combined literatures are uniquely ours through the interconnectedness of our historical backgrounds and long cultural legacies, we know ours is a literature that reaches into, and expands across, all worlds. A cursory glance over the names of the major Aboriginal poets and writers reminds us of the richness and variety of our literature. They include David Unaipon, Jack Davis, Kevin Gilbert, Ruby Langford Ginibi, Doris (Garimara) Pilkington, Big Bill Neidjie, Roger Bennett, John Newfong, Lisa Belleair, Samuel William Watson, Kerry Reed-Gilbert, Jimmy Chi.

Aboriginal literature today is also highly visible and celebrated, in the life work, for instance, of Kim Scott, Melissa Lucashenko, Tony Birch, Anita Heiss, Tara June Winch, Bruce Pascoe, Stephen Kinnane, Herb Wharton, John Muk Muk Burke, Samuel Wagan Watson, Jim Everett, Nicole Watson, Philip McLaren, Terri Janke, Larissa Behrendt, Jared Thomas, Philip Morrissey, Sally Morgan, Peter Minter, Stan Grant, Stephen Hagen, Natalie Harkin, Vivienne Cleven, Marie Munkara, Timmah Ball, Jane Harrison, Claire G. Coleman and Kev Carmody. We applaud the work of playwrights and filmmakers such as Wesley Enoch, Richard Frankland, Wayne Blair, Warwick Thornton, Rachel Perkins, Ivan Sen, Jon Bell and Nakkiah Lui, and the many songwriters, composers, visual artists, academics and thinkers. And new writers are appearing all the time.

You could only associate our poet laureate Lionel Fogarty, and the phenomenal depth of his poetic vision and imagination, with the mighty force and power of ancestral creation heroes. Perhaps he is their messenger.

The recent anthology *Fire Front*, edited by Alison Whittaker, showcases the work of our poets over many decades, and is a roll call of our contemporary poets, including Evelyn Araluen, Jeanine Leane, Romaine Moreton, Yvette Holt, Charmaine Papertalk Green, Natalie Harkin and Baker Boy. *Guwayu – For All Times*, edited by Jeanine Leane, is another recent brilliant anthology of our poetry.

Ellen van Neerven imagines a “long butterfly pacy sky” in “Terra Nova”, from the stunning new collection titled *Throat*. And then there is our beautiful poet Ali Cobby Eckermann, of these haunting lines: “stumbling we return to memory of her cloud-like voice, the weather in her every word. once more we stand silent at her graveside. we stare at the ground. we are listening to the earth”. Eckermann deservedly won a Windham–Campbell Literature Prize for her poetry in 2017.

Our poets and writers are a source of pride among our people, and they are linked to the real strength of our culture: storytelling. We come from communities with a long, rich cultural appreciation for hearing stories; of close listening to stories, telling stories, and understanding how stories are told; understanding how they are held sacred and how we are responsible for them. These are the stories of all times, which bind humanity together – the heart and soul of who we are. It would take many books to write of the wise men and women who are the caretakers of sacred stories from our communities, from whom I have learnt, and whom I admire, love and respect.

Considering all of the richness, complexity and uniqueness in the individual works of our writers, poets and thinkers, I do not believe in jumbling Aboriginal literature into a small, neat box. It would be dismissive and ignorant to ask us to speak in a generalised way about what is happening in the world of Aboriginal writers today. This is not a regatta of small leisure boats. These are many ships on an ocean, and what they are doing individually is far more exciting than any trivialising overview.

Considerable scholarship is required to understand exactly what is happening in individual works of Aboriginal literature – no less than a comprehensive reading of their varied philosophical reasoning. Our authors and poets carry distinctive storytelling legacies that inform, but do not fully define, the capacity of our imaginative

thinking and creativity. Many of our writers are heavily involved – locally, nationally and internationally – in cross-fertilising ideas, reaching back and forth across literary cultures. We learn from each other over great geographical distances even while we remain rooted to our home places, both of the mind – the home of our spirit, inspiration and vision – and our traditional country.

There should be no more talking about Aboriginal literature as a small offshoot of Australian literature. There is no one basket that fits all in terms of creating from an imaginary shaped by the deep, rich, ancient legacy of this continent, and tempered through the cross-fertilisation with global literatures. Nor is there a straightforward way in which to link Aboriginal literature to worldwide literary thinking. It is a literature freed of constraints, expectations and associations. It cannot be stereotyped. It is not a monophonic literature. There is no little box to squeeze it all into, just as there is no little box for the sum total of Irish literature, or for British literature, or for Asian, Middle Eastern, African, European or Indian literature. You do not see non-Indigenous authors of this country being asked to explain the sum total of Australian literature as if it is one and the same thing.

I have often talked about a self-governing literature that is suited to this place, a belief in creating on our own terms, and recognising that all times in our culture are important and not resolved. This thinking comes from working with phenomenal law leaders in Central Australia and elsewhere, and their insistence on self-government, and of having always governed themselves. If I could call up the words of this self-governing endurance, survival and continuing defiance, it may be found in the rapper, poet and singer Mau Power's brilliant song "Freedom", sung with Archie Roach.

Patrick Mau, or Mau Power, is a lyrical storyteller from Thursday Island, in the Torres Strait, whose powerful song includes these lines: "Hey Past, I can still feel the heartbeat / ... Hey Future, keep a solid vision on me / ... And they said we would fail in time / Showed them up, we stood the test of time / ... So I claim it on time / ... And the show will go on, words shall burn unc's, we came to tell the world – come on".

Then we hear the enormous power of Archie Roach's voice as he sings back: "We have survived, written in our time, carrying our pride / ... keepers of our times ... singing out, Freedom! Free them! Freedom! Free them!"

What would Oodgeroo's poetry say of these times when so many of our people are still fighting to survive, and where we must continue to fight for our sovereign rights? What would she say about a world locked into man-made climate change, of hotter and longer summers with temperatures creeping towards 50 degrees Celsius in Central Australia? How will poetry speak to people who may end up being unable to continue living on their homelands, in baking hot housing that has long been inadequate, and who may be forced to abandon the epicentre of their cultural laws in the not-too-distant future?

How do you create a poetry or literature from our country when it is deadened by prolonged drought? A tinderbox, where a single stroke of lightning from a violent dry storm can trigger raging fires that cannot be extinguished for months. What would Oodgeroo make of the intensity of fires like this, fires that are powerful enough to generate their own weather systems and electrical storms that spread on searing winds, burning everything in sight for hundreds of thousands of square kilometres, as the fires did in 2020?

How can literature speak of 30,000 koalas caught in these fires and screaming in pain? Or lyrebirds gathering by the dozen to shelter in a muddy dam? Or other birds racing down a wombat hole, sheltering down there with the butterflies, while all around people run for their lives from out-of-control fire monsters? How can poetry be awakened in our hearts, and prevent something like this ever happening again? How can literature speak about a billion animals killed, and billions of trees burnt? I wonder how poetry mourns for the animals Oodgeroo loved. What would poetry make of colliding cyclones that end up marching far inland, creating a vast inland sea? What will literature say of rising seas eroding the homelands of people who have lived on islands and in coastal areas for thousands of years? Oodgeroo wrote of such end times for her people in the haunting poem, "Gooboora, The Silent Pool": "Gooboora, Gooboora, the Water of Fear / That awed the Noonuccals once numerous here, / The Bunyip is gone from your bone-strewn bed, / And the clans departed to drift with the

dead. / ... Old Death has passed by you but took the dark throng; / Now lost is the Noonuccal language and song. / Gooboora, Gooboora, it makes the heart sore / That you should be here but my people no more!”

I wonder how we can create a poetry and a literature so grand that it breaks through the nexus of indifference, the violence of forgetting, to make sure these catastrophic weather events never happen again, in this so-called Pyrocene era of collective human suicide, or omnicide, or the Anthropocene. Perhaps we cannot find the answers yet, of how to tell stories that will match the scale of the radical uncertainties of the future, where stories require radically different ideas, and more expanded thinking than individual concerns and personal perspectives. Yet one day we will eventually meet the challenges of imagining how to live in worldwide catastrophic times because, if anything, global warming is expanding our imagination, and it is already eclipsing all normality in our current literary concerns. We will be left to create from the new normalities rupturing the country of the soul.

This poetry is already sung in the songlines left by the ancestors. It is in the songs of the magpies and the lullabies of currawongs sheltering in the tallest trees, and those relaying songs, moving over the vast distances of this fire-prone continent of gum trees, will summon up a wall of enchantment to keep those hot winds away. I say this because we do not seem interested in doing enough to prevent global warming from tipping this planet, our only home, past the point of no return. Instead, those most powerful in the world are carrying on as normal, and looking at the Moon for water, or searching space for superhabitable worlds (that are even better than Earth), or figuring out how to artificially modify the Earth’s atmosphere to cool the planet.

Now the world has been turned on its head by the COVID-19 pandemic, infecting more than 55 million people so far, with a global death toll in excess of a million people. Across the world we have witnessed harrowing scenes of overwhelmed hospitals and the dead being buried in makeshift graves. We have seen people boarded up in their apartments in severe lockdowns, the poorest people in India expelled from cities without notice, and men being harassed by police while walking hundreds of kilometres back to their villages. We have seen some of the richest governments in the world show little to no compassion for the millions of ill and dying in their countries, while their leaders act stupidly or with contempt, continually putting lives at risk.

These lives were expendable, it seems. Black lives are expendable. And what of future lives? We see that our sacred places are expendable when we see the international mining company Rio Tinto blowing up the cathedrals of Aboriginal sacred knowledge in the rock shelters of the Juukan Gorge, in the Pilbara region of Western Australia. These sites held culturally sensitive and vastly important sacred knowledge of the Puutu Kunti Kurrama and Pinikura people, whose stewardship dates back 46,000 years; they are irreplaceable. It is a loss so profound, the only way to think about what happened is in terms of attempted genocide.

In his 1990 Nobel Prize lecture, the great Mexican poet Octavio Paz warned against abandoning global solutions. He thought that the present challenges demand global soul-searching, because the mechanisms that triumph in terms of market efficiency lack both conscience and compassion. He said we must find a way of integrating justice and fairness, because why reach an enviable level of prosperity when all we achieve are “islands of abundance in the ocean of universal misery”? He believed that the poetic experience could be one of the important foundations in the philosophy we create for the present, of which we know “nothing or almost nothing”. It was in this void between the past and the future, that a great poet like Oodgeroo Noonuccal radiated such a poetic experience – the *now* in her time. She contributed a lasting legacy to the philosophy that Aboriginal people were, and are, forging for our time. Her memory shines. Her poetry of the sublime has outlasted government policies, as well as the bureaucrats and politicians of her time. She may not have won the Nobel Prize for Literature, but the wisdom remains in her poems, such as in “Artist Son”, where she advised to create, “Not for reward, acclaim / That wins honour and opens doors”.

We have many Aboriginal heroes in this country, the exceptional men and women in every community carrying the story legacy of our ancestors’ strength. We see in every action, every word spoken, their great inner strength and compassion. We are embraced by the wisdom of these greatest philosophers of the world who live right here, in a culture that espouses caring for country, so that the country will care for us. I want us to build a literary framework based on the ancient storytelling tradition that comes from this country.

Let's have a national Oodgeroo Noonuccal Day to celebrate her poetry, and to begin shaping a new foundational way of seeing this country through the lens of Aboriginal culture. Ireland is proud to celebrate its literature and its importance to the country. Bloomsday honours James Joyce, Yeats Day marks the birthday of W.B. Yeats, and there is a less official Seamus Heaney Day too. Is it possible for a nation to expand its imagination through exploring the works of its greatest writers? "Believe in miracles / And cures and healing wells," Heaney wrote in "The Cure at Troy", a poem recited during the 2020 US elections by President-elect Joe Biden, an Irish American.

In fact, why not take a leap to decency. Let's have more national days backed up by new laws to help us walk into the future. Let's imagine a day so great we celebrate Aboriginal sovereignty and governance, the most important legal entities of this ancient continent. Aboriginal Sovereignty Day, for a land that needs its ancient songs and stories, the ones that have been handed down generation after generation, through thousands of years, to care for this land. Aboriginal people have always known that this country needs its people, just as we cannot live without country. A national Aboriginal Sovereignty Day would recognise the importance of upholding, and keeping strong, the true law-keepers and languages of this country, and their long, rich legacy in story laws passed down through the ages in Aboriginal culture.

Let's set aside another national day for celebrating the ancient library kept in the lands of this country and practised through the knowledge systems of Aboriginal people. This archive of important stories and ideas is about caring for this place for all times, from the law stories of the makings of this land.

We are moving into a new and hard world, and we truly do not know how we will eventually respond to its challenges – changes as dramatic as the ice age and super droughts that our people survived. I am looking at the renaissance of poetry in Aboriginal literature. A poetry perhaps written as we are being sung into greater strength by songlines pushing into the spirit of all things, songlines whose spirits are within us, just as our spirit is in them.

My Gangalidda countryman and wisdom leader Murrandoo Yanner – a man for these times – spoke at the 2020 Cairns Indigenous Arts Festival's symposium on climate

change in August. “We were not always human,” he said. “We came from a time before, and every culture and race knows that in a different way. They call it Buddha, Hindu, Malu law, Jamangi here, Walalu (Rainbow Serpent), Allah, God. They are all the same thing. They all talk about a time before, and talk about living a good life – a thing that, globally, we are not doing right now.”

He explained further: “We must build on the gains of our previous generations, otherwise we will stagnate, go backwards, and be trapped in an amnesia of other cultures. We will lose the knowledge systems and the unbroken stories that go back tens of thousands of years. This is about respecting the legacy that we received through our elders, and the reason why we need the true integral knowledge systems of the oceans and lands found in the stories of Aboriginal law that have allowed us to survive since the time of creation.” When I checked with Murrandoo for permission to use this quote, he wanted to add: “And we never came from Africa. We would have remembered if we had walked all the way from Africa, because we remember everything else.”

Oodgeroo’s beautiful poem “Community Rain Song” calls up the rain, sings it to come back through the memory of all the old rainmakers by hearing the languages of country, of the frog, the cries of the plover, the rainbird, the whine of wind, deep thunder rolling through these beautiful, joyous lines:

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But some of the old men, aloof and grave
 Throughout all the laughter muttered strange words
 Of magic-making as old as the race,
 Handed down through countless generations,
 Not understood now but faithfully repeated,
 Lost rain-words from ancestral times.

In the Aboriginal world, we have been living through the end times for a long time, but we do not accept this as being our reality, just as we refused to accept colonisers’ attempts to “smooth the dying pillow”, expecting that Aboriginal people would die out. Even in the most terrible circumstances in missions and reserves during the time of Oodgeroo and my mother – and the massacres that happened during their parents’

and grandparents' generations – our people remained in the soul of our culture. They maintained their separateness from the cruelty inflicted on their lives by continuing to govern themselves, as our people do to this day by continuing to tell the stories and sing the songs of who we are. I have often heard our senior law people in Central Australia say that Australian law is weak because it changes all the time, and that Aboriginal law is strong because it never changes.

Today, we view the world through the realities of global warming, a deadly pandemic, and through the continuing inequalities that separate us from each other and from all other life on Earth – our only home – and the hope of millions to live a good life. We see the epic and extreme nature of a warming world and the growing number of people losing their ancient homelands, because of droughts or from rising seas now lapping at their doorstep. We see hotter and extended summers where thousands of kilometres are burnt to the ground, in places where fires should not be, and we see no fire in parts of this continent that rely on it, where fire should be. We do not know what the future will bring. The future requires all of us to think far more imaginatively, and to be far more visionary about how we will continue to live in a vastly changing world. The troubles of the world urgently require each of us to work harder to achieve the same goals for all of humanity. Writers will need to know what is happening in the world from every angle, to look at the long view, to imagine infinite possibilities, to stitch together other realities – the new and astonishing terrains unearthed from the country of the mind. The voices of the world must hear and recognise one another as local, and the Earth as the main character in stories extending the shadow of its long arc over generations to come, just as this arc extends back into the realities of deep history, connecting all life on this planet.

Oodgeroo Noonuccal did this in her poetry. In her poem “Time Is Running Out”, she reminded us: “But time is running out / And time is close at hand, / For the Dreamtime folk are massing / To defend their timeless land.”

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