

**Excerpt from: Poetry and politics in Oodgeroo:
transcending the difference (Hodge 1994)**

“Oodgeroo's work in constructing her complex Aboriginal persona is complemented by her work in constructing an object of her address. From the point of view of understanding the political effectiveness of her poetry, this is perhaps, her most subtle and important quality.

Some of her poems address other Aborigines, either individuals or collectivities, her "people". In these poems a white reader is positioned as a privileged hearer, admitted into the exchange which constitutes the poem, tacitly welcomed into Aboriginal society itself. It is an effective tactic for overcoming the prejudice of white readers.

However, the majority of her poems address white readers directly and polemically. This is why they are experienced by many of those readers as uncomfortable; as "protest" works, not poems. She made it difficult for her readers simply to feel good and do nothing. Tactically it was a risk, since it could have alienated those readers, who had the power of all readers not to read, to close the book and continue to think their racist thoughts.

In spite of the risk, the tactic worked. Her poetry engaged with white people, challenged and transformed them. That is no small achievement for a poem, and it is worth inquiring how she did it. The secret was the place she constructed for her white reader, as complex as the Aboriginal places she constructed from which to speak. She explicitly excludes some whites from her condemnation of white actions ("*the good white hand stretched out to grip the black*": "*United we win**"). She also addresses whites as capable of shame and self-correction...

Non-Aboriginal readers, then, have a choice. They can acquiesce in the claims of the racists of *Whynot Street*† to speak for them, or they can repudiate their racism and injustice, and accept Oodgeroo's more positive construction of them as "decent" people who have knowledge of the past and are willing to act on that knowledge...

Oodgeroo's polemic address, then, is designed to miss its target, or to strike merely a glancing blow, allowing white readers to evade the designated reading position in one way or the other. One way of putting it is to say that she appeals to their "better" (non-racist, egalitarian) nature, but it is also the case that she is constructing this better self, a white person who is both racist and potentially decent, responsible for or implicated in the crimes of the past but also committed to justice for all, especially for Aborigines. This new self is constructed in the act of reading, coerced to choose to disidentify with "typical" Australians while not being offered the choice of supposing it possible to become an honorary Black.

The complexities of this tactic and of the reading position that she has constructed directly reflect the political complexity of the situation that she was writing in. Political and aesthetic qualities grow out of precisely the same source. It is for this reason that there is not an opposition between her poetic and her political purposes, or between the value of her work from the two

perspectives. Her poetry is more varied, subtle and complex than it has been seen to be, more postmodern and more Aboriginal, and all of this because her political experience was wider and her political sense more nuanced and better developed than some have given her credit for. Oodgeroo was not simply the first Aborigine to publish a book of poems; she laid down a legacy that was broad enough to encompass a wide range of possibilities for those who followed her. If this fact is not recognised then not only will justice not be done to her work, but it will be deprived of some of its power to inspire and teach Aboriginal writers of today and tomorrow.

* *United We Win* first published in *My People* 1970

† *WhyNot Street* first published in *We Are Going* 1964

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