

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Adam Goodes and the racism of letters

Robert Wood · Wednesday, August 26th, 2015

In Australia of late there has been a public controversy involving the current Australian of the Year Adam Goodes. Goodes is a professional football player and has been subjected to booing and taunts by opposition fans in stadiums throughout the country. Given that he is a proud Indigenous man who has spoken out and worked for black issues, this is without doubt racially motivated.

That racism is present in Australia should be unsurprising. There has been a long and less than distinguished tradition from the initial invasion of the country to the first piece of legislation in 1901 that only allowed white immigration. This has extended to more recent occurrences such as Pauline Hanson, the Cronulla race riots, the ongoing fear of yellow peril and Islamic takeover, and how the major political parties treat refugees on a daily basis. I do not want to speculate on whether this is an essential national character but to highlight its historical symptoms.

What though of race and poetry? One could imagine an Australian graph similar to ‘[Submissions Are Blind](#)’, which called out the hegemonic whiteness of Canadian poetry prizes. There are few prominent people of colour in literature in Australia. In poetry there are even fewer.

Mascara is the leading poetry journal in Australia that has an editor of colour (Michelle Cahill) and routinely features and focuses on poets of colour and race issues, including refugees, immigrants, cultural and linguistically diverse (CALD), and Indigenous peoples. There are other non-white poetry editors (Peter Minter of *Overland* and all of us at *Peril*) and plenty of white women (Cassandra Atherton of *Westerly* being a recent appointment). However, *Mascara* at the level of staff and content stands out. This is markedly different to the North American environment, which is far more diverse and various.

Recently, *Mascara* has sought support from the sector for the government to acknowledge CALD practitioners who are non-Aboriginal. This is without a shadow of a doubt a good thing. Australia, and the state, need to support marginalised people who produce excellent artistic work but find it difficult to access the economies of literature. What argument against it could be made without a racial element? There is state led support for other marginal communities, particularly Indigenous people, which has led to an increase in their artistic production and acceptance and CALD communities get support in other sectors. This has been a good thing.

Australians of non-Anglo-Celtic heritage are a significant proportion of the population. 44% of Australians are born overseas or have one parent born overseas and 10% are Asian. For example, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, in 2014 there were 844,600 people born in India and China who now reside in Australia. This is approximately 4% of the population, which does

not, of course, include people of Indian or Chinese origin. There are also sizeable proportions of people from Greece, Italy, the Philippines and Malaysia, all of which suggest that Australia is less 'white' than some would like to believe. But, unfortunately, that is not represented in the poetic economy.

Part of the opposition to a push for recognition of culturally and linguistically diverse artists has, quite presumably, come from people who see their domain being infringed upon. They take it personally, all the while decrying, like men's rights activists, that art isn't about the individual author, that the work stands alone, that it is already a level playing field. In opposition to this, that the pie can grow and that there are historical and structural barriers to entry for all kinds of Others are points too obvious to elaborate upon. What continues to disappoint is how the racism gets continually reinscribed and refuses even to acknowledge itself.

The invisibility of whiteness is transnational – America labours in tension; Europe believes itself to be a particular way; the world over people suffer embodied indignities from whitening creams to systemic discriminations in marriage, work and family. That this raced lens means prominent poets would refuse to support a push for CALD promotion betrays a fear and resentment that what is rightly 'ours' (albeit contested and even stolen) might indeed be up for debate. To continue to silence diverse voices is an injustice to all.

The galling aspect of this particular symptom I cited is the dual position of entitlement and disavowal, which is to say that one can fail to recognise one's unsettlement. In other words, the belief that one has an incontestable sovereignty and a lack of compassion for marginalised people does not simply allow, but also enables a set of social relations and conditions that are plainly unethical and end up being anti-poetic.

This entry was posted on Wednesday, August 26th, 2015 at 8:20 pm and is filed under [Fiction](#), [Poetry](#), [Lifestyle](#)

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