 Prescribed Text: Contemporary Asian Australian Poets

‘Circular Breathing’ – Jaya Savige

Pre-Reading

* Have you ever been travelling in a different country and come across something from your home country? How did it make you feel to see something from your home country in such a different context?
* This poem is set in front of a cathedral in Rome. Find some images of the Piazza di Santa Maria to help you imagine the setting of the poem. Compare them with images of King George's Square, which is also mentioned in the poem.
* What ideas are associated with the cathedrals of Rome? How might these ideas be connected to Australian Indigenous culture, represented by the didgeridoo?

The Poem

1. Identify words or phrases that you don’t understand. Find out what they mean in the context of this poem.
2. What is suggested by the image of the man ‘playing the didgeridoo’? What does this represent?
3. How does Savige contrast:
   1. The music of the didgeridoo and the surrounding environment of the piazza?
   2. The didgeridoo player and the other people in the scene?
   3. The history and religion of Rome and the history and culture of the didgeridoo?
4. Explain the significance of the lists of objects (stanza 1) and brand names (stanza 2).
5. The last stanza begins with the persona saying, “I want to bolt up the stairs of the fountain and claim that sound as the sound of my home …” Compare the tone of this statement with the tone of the previous two stanzas.
6. Why does the persona respond differently to the didgeridoo? Why is it significant that the persona ‘speaks for’ the other onlookers? (Consider how this shapes the reader’s response to the onlookers.)
7. What is ironic about the persona’s response to hearing the didgeridoo? What does this suggest about the impact of displacement on his sense of cultural identity? What is implied about the place of the didgeridoo in his “homeland”?
8. What kind of feeling indicated by the statement “Memory kinks my measured walk into a lurch”? Why does the persona invoke memory?
9. What does the persona mean by the following line “My stomach fills with fire”?
10. What is “circular breathing”? Why might Savige have chosen this as the title of the poem? What might be symbolically represented by the title?

Reflecting

* In your own words, describe the persona’s sense of cultural identity in this poem. Use evidence from the poem to support your response.
* How has moving to a new place affected your sense of affiliation with the culture of your homeland? Do you feel a stronger connection or has your sense of affiliation become weaker? What factors do you think have influenced this change?