



## COVER SHEET

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## SINGING THE LANDSCAPE : *BRAN NUE DAE*

**Paul Makeham**

Ever since they were first encountered by Europeans, Australia's indigenous peoples have been objectified and misrepresented within an essentialist white discourse of 'Aboriginalism'. It is important to recognise, however, that Aboriginality is not, and has never been, a singular, fixed and empirically knowable thing; rather, Aborigines have always been the bearers and producers of diverse and highly adaptable cultures. The musical drama *Bran Nue Dae*,<sup>1</sup> written by Jimmy Chi and the band Kuckles, celebrates this cultural diversity, but also the sense of racial solidarity which characterises contemporary Aboriginality. In so doing, the play also celebrates Aboriginal survival of and resistance to the continuing oppression of blacks by state institutions, financial interests and broad sections of the public. And while *Bran Nue Dae* certainly alludes to the past, to the forces of history and tradition, it marshalls these forces as ways of working towards new beginnings, towards a 'bran nue dae' in the continuum of Aboriginal culture and history.

A key strategy in achieving these effects is the appropriation of white discourses and white cultural forms. The play subverts dominant discursive constructions of Aboriginality by deploying stereotypical representations self-reflexively and parodically, 'often pointing with urbane wit to the prejudices of the entertainment traditions which inform it'.<sup>2</sup> In particular, by adopting and adapting the European tradition of the popular musical, the play makes strategic use not only of specific images, but of an entire form. As Klaus Neumann has argued, *Bran Nue Dae* 'does not formulate a counter-hegemonical claim, but subverts white cultural hegemony by (mis)appropriating some of its pillars'.<sup>3</sup>

Subtitled 'A Musical Journey', *Bran Nue Dae* takes the motif of the quest or journey and sets it within a musical framework of twenty-two songs; these are interspersed with fairly brief exchanges of dialogue, most of which are spoken in a hybrid type of English called Broome krio. The various musical influences on the play range from country and western, reggae, blues, pop and Broadway to Catholic mass and gospel. Dramatically, its range is equally eclectic, borrowing from genres as diverse as the Hollywood musical, romance, vaudeville, road movie and political drama. The play's episodic narrative, structured in two acts, charts the journey of the young protagonist Willie and his Uncle Tadpole as they travel the fifteen hundred miles from Perth back home to the Lombadina mission at Djarindjin, a Nyoongah community on Western Australia's remote northern coast. This narrative functions through several levels of metaphor, depicting not only Willie's particular journey from youth to adulthood, but also a generalised type of Aboriginal homecoming - a celebration and renewal of origins. Incorporating Aboriginal words, images and ideas, and played by a mainly Aboriginal cast, the musical becomes a contemporary, accessible and dynamic form of hybrid theatrical expression. Amongst many instances in the play of the convergence of disparate cultural forms is its synthesis

of the European popular musical and the traditional Aboriginal song cycle, as this essay will discuss in more detail below.

*Bran Nue Dae* makes a substantial investment in notions of traditional connections between Aborigines and the Australian landscape. However, the play resists stereotypical representations which align the 'primitive' indigene directly with nature. Helen Gilbert points out that 'Willie and Tadpole's movement from the city to the country activates myths-of-origin thematics, but their journey is more picaresque than pastoral and the text carefully avoids linking the bush to a pre-invasion ideal of Aboriginal essence'.<sup>4</sup> Indeed throughout the play the very notion of 'origin' as a pure, essential site or condition is problematised. Rather than presenting Aboriginality in terms of a 'timeless' relationship with the land, and rather than showing it as determined solely by an original (and thus 'authentic') genetic code, *Bran Nue Dae* suggests that Aboriginality is 'inflected epistemologically';<sup>5</sup> it is 'a mode of consciousness which stems from a particular and shared sense of political, cultural and social struggle'.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, any suggestion that Willie's journey traces a transition from Edenic innocence to worldly experience is compromised by the fact that the 'Eden' from which he is expelled (Rossmoyne), like that to which he returns (Lombadina), is a mission, a site of oppression as well as of protection. So instead of being presented as pure or innocent characters representing an idealised condition of authentic (ab)originality, Willie, Tadpole and others are shown as modern Aborigines who nevertheless retain, and are motivated by, traditional cultural and spiritual values.

Yet whilst Willie and Tadpole are accustomed to contemporary urban culture, they are also alienated by it, chiefly because the city is the domain of white society and white institutions. Action set in the more open landscapes of the north-west, on the other hand, as the protagonists approach their home, shows a predominantly Aboriginal and socially cohesive dramatic world. As a consequence, the play does construct an opposition between the city and the bush. Most urban locations in the play are figured as hostile places which constrain and threaten; it is not until Willie and Tadpole reach Broome's Chinatown that a built landscape becomes a congenial space, and even then, most of the action in Broome takes place outdoors, down by the mangroves at Roebuck Bay and at Kennedy Hill. In particular, the gaol in Roebourne represents in microcosm both the literal and metaphoric confinement of Aborigines imposed by European social structures. The lockup scene has a broadly symbolic function in the drama, but it also evokes very pointedly the specific matter of Aboriginal deaths in custody. This scene, and the final scene, are explicit in their engagement with contemporary Aboriginal politics. Directly and indirectly, though, allusions are made throughout the play to the history of black suffering, to questions of political and economic self-determination, land rights, the state-sanctioned fracturing of families, alcoholism, and other issues of particular moment to Aborigines.

Colonial powers control the definitions of the peoples and the landscapes they subjugate. When Europeans saw Australia for the first time, they immediately began constructing and containing the continent's indigenes within a particular discursive field. An early example is provided by the Englishman William Dampier who, following the first of his two voyages to 'New Holland' (in 1688 and 1699), published the first extended description of the Aborigines of Australia. The sentiments expressed therein 'set the pattern of European responses to the Aborigines for many years to come':<sup>7</sup>

The Inhabitants of this country are the miserablest People in the World.  
 ...[S]etting aside their humane shape, they differ but little from Brutes...  
 They are long visaged, and of a very unpleasing aspect; having no one graceful feature in their faces.

Such disparaging representations of Aborigines competed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with the Romantic image of the Noble Savage, the simple, unencumbered Arcadian who represented an idealised pastoral Golden Age which held great appeal for a Europe in the throes of industrialisation.

To many Australians, Aborigines still represent a kind of atavistic vestige of ancient Australia, the past re-emerged in the present; this notion is particularly apparent in popular images which associate Aborigines with the outback. Jeremy Beckett observes that the location of Aborigines simultaneously in the 'remote past and the outback brings together time and space within a unitary concept'.<sup>8</sup> A consequence of this idea is the perception, common amongst Australians, that Aboriginal land claims should only be entertained when they are made by 'tribal' or 'authentic' Aborigines. Aboriginal cultural and political energies are thus fundamentally constrained by having to compete with white constructions of 'Aboriginality'. The suppression of Aboriginal voices, effected by the prevalence of representations generated by non-Aboriginal discourses and institutions, can therefore only begin to be redressed when Aborigines wrest some control over the means of cultural and discursive production in Australia.<sup>9</sup>

*Bran Nue Dae* provides an exemplary illustration of this principle of discursive control. From conception to production and publication, the entire project was overseen by Aborigines. This is not to say that there was no input from non-Aborigines; contributions and assistance came from a wide range of sources.<sup>10</sup> But throughout, the powers of creation and of veto rested with Aborigines themselves rather than with white 'experts'. In this, the process from which *Bran Nue Dae* evolved might be compared to traditional forms of Aboriginal cultural production, in which an individual's right to participate in a community's signifying economy, to re-present a story or image, is both highly prized and strictly regulated.<sup>11</sup>

However, given the predominance of white cultural forms and modes of discourse in Australian public culture, it seems both necessary and strategically astute that Aboriginal

self-representation proceed - for the present at least - within the terms of the dominant discursive order. Robert Ariss suggests that:

...the political status of Aborigines within a dominating culture... necessitates their taking up the discursive practices of that culture in order to assert its separate identity while simultaneously building communication with that culture.<sup>12</sup>

Importantly, Ariss goes on to argue that it is also possible to effect changes in the prevailing symbolic field within which Aboriginality is discussed. And it is precisely this which *Bran Nue Dae* sets out to achieve: to effect change in repressive discursive practices by appropriating, modifying and re-deploying them. 'It is the appropriation of the loci of control of Aboriginal life, including symbolic constructions, which is seen as the only feasible means of approaching true self-determination.'<sup>13</sup>

*Bran Nue Dae* depends for much of its effect not only on stylistic eclecticism, but also on its creation of the sort of hybrid form which is generated by the mingling, and often the clashing, of different languages, practices and ideologies. The play shows that modern Aboriginal subjectivity is constituted by disparate, sometimes irreconcilable, cultural influences, although such influences are by no means portrayed in an exclusively pessimistic way. Klaus Neumann argues that the play:

...lacks reference to an 'authentic' black culture, that is, a culture that is perceived as frozen in time....Instead it depicts a lively and thriving present-day Aboriginal culture that takes and integrates diverse influences from other cultures as well as contemporizing and mimicking 'traditional' Aboriginal concepts, all of which contribute to its distinct Aboriginality and reverse the process of assimilation.<sup>14</sup>

In broad formal terms, then, *Bran Nue Dae* is a musical in the Western European popular stage tradition; it is clearly influenced by the Hollywood musical film genre as well. Yet the play amalgamates the generic conventions of the popular musical with those of Aboriginal oral culture, including those formalised in the tradition of the song cycle. Thus the structural motif of the journey in *Bran Nue Dae* is overlaid onto the specifically Aboriginal form of the song cycle, a type of ritual journey of re-enactment which, like Chi's play, is also 'a musical journey' and a renewal of origins. For the landscapes encountered by the play's travellers are to a large extent sung; through a combination of words, music and images, these landscapes embody aspects of Aboriginal philosophy and consciousness. Obviously as a modern stage musical, *Bran Nue Dae* diverges from the authentic conditions of traditional song cycle performance; nevertheless, the play's fundamentally Aboriginal impulse, its grounding in Aboriginal culture, spirituality and sense of place, suggests that it is informed at least as much by Aboriginal social and aesthetic traditions as by those of the European musical. As such, it is part of a much

broader movement of recent Aboriginal cultural production in which contemporary Aboriginality is defined largely through reference to Aboriginal history and traditions.

Aboriginal societies prior to white invasion employed an elaborate range of media, including physical objects, to communicate. In general, however, these rich archives of iconography notwithstanding, it was primarily with words rather than objects and images that Aborigines communicated: 'Fundamental instructions and information...came through words - not so much through drawings, cave paintings and visual symbols, but predominantly through *words*, spoken and sung: stories and songs were a major means of transmitting and sustaining Aboriginal culture.'<sup>15</sup> Stories, spoken and sung, were thus the primary discursive media of information and socialisation - the constitution of subjectivity. Storytelling remains a characteristic feature of contemporary Aboriginal culture; the telling of stories is normally governed by strict social conventions dictating appropriate speakers, listeners, times and places. Stories, poems and songs describing the exploits of mythological dreamtime heroes often contain a moral message, functioning as lessons in social conduct. In more traditional societies and on ceremonial occasions, these might be performed in the formal, quasi-theatrical conditions of the corroboree.

At other times, travel provides the occasion for storytelling or singing.<sup>16</sup> Since no cities, no centres of geographical or cultural unity existed in Aboriginal Australia, practices associated with nomadism and travel were central to Aboriginal life, and these continue to have a vital cultural role for many Aborigines. Knowledge of traditional practices is an important feature of contemporary Aborigines' sense of identity and pride in their heritage, and amongst these traditions is that of the song cycle. These complex travelling stories are memorised by groups and individuals who recite them in a combination of speech, incantation and song as they travel over particular routes called dreaming tracks or song lines. In so doing, they are re-tracing - or rather re-enacting - the journeys of heroic dreamtime spirits, singing their songs and telling their stories in elaborately codified performance sequences.

The following account of the characteristics and social functions of song cycle performance is very illuminating in the context of *Bran Nue Dae*:

There are various mnemonic devices in traditional performances. Repetition is very important, as song lines are sung over and over with varying cadence in the song-cycles. In performance, these can have a chorus effect called 'tracking'. When the lead singer has sung his or her line, and the voice is just dying away, the group of other singers comes in and repeats the line....Song-cycles are likely to work with memory in that they progress nomadically, going from place to place across a stretch of country, literally following in the footsteps of the ancestor who first walked through there and created the landforms. Knowing the performance text thus means also knowing the country, and what it has to offer in terms of water and game, as well as in

historical and spiritual significance.<sup>17</sup>

*Bran Nue Dae* shares many of the features of traditional song cycle performance. The journey it depicts is narrated by means of a sequence of songs, delivered by individual speakers and singers together with a chorus. Certain lyric and song conventions of the popular musical form, such as repetition and antiphonic exchanges, are evident here too, and can be understood as consonant with the 'tracking' described above. The characters' journey in *Bran Nue Dae*, as with traditional song cycle travelling, enables social and spiritual maintenance and renewal. In the first instance, Willie and Tadpole's journey renews social links amongst themselves and their friends and families - as well as bringing previously unknown or hidden familial ties to light. (In a denouement revealing complex genealogies, it transpires that most of the play's characters, including the 'whites' Marijuana Annie and Slippery, are at least part Aborigine.) Probably more significant than these outcomes, though, is the process of the journey itself as it advances. In moving, in travelling, the characters enact their Aboriginality. Travel is a characteristic and necessary Aboriginal response to landscape and to place, for at the heart of Aboriginal systems of social relations is a philosophy which holds that survival is about movement rather than settlement.<sup>18</sup> Thus, instead of focussing on arriving and attaining, *Bran Nue Dae* is in many respects about moving - away from and into different physical (and necessarily social) landscapes. It is about being 'on the way' to a Bran Nue Dae. In these terms, the play's construction of landscape accords in many respects with constructions of landscape in traditional forms of Aboriginal discourse.

David Tacey describes the relationship which links Aborigines to the natural world in this way:

Aboriginal consciousness and landscape are intimately bound; in fact, Aboriginal spirituality is primarily a spirituality of place....[F]or Aboriginal consciousness, ecological and theophanic awareness go hand in hand; the actual earth itself, its physical features, is their way to the Dreaming.<sup>19</sup>

This is a useful description because it emphasises that the sacred or religious is immanent in the Aboriginal landscape. Physical human and ecological reality is intimately related to, but not the central existential part of, that spiritual reality. Deborah Bird Rose (adapting a term used by Aldo Leopold) sees Aboriginal societies as having evolved an 'Aboriginal land ethic' - a non-human-centred view of the world which encourages 'human beings to treat their environment [including each other] as a moral community':

For Yarralin and Lingara people [for example], all animals are spoken of and treated as moral agents; so too are some 'natural' phenomena such as sun, moon and rain....Ngarinman people see the cosmos as a whole as being conscious, as are most, if not all, of its parts.<sup>20</sup>

By resisting a solipsistic conception of the universe, and emphasising instead the interrelatedness of its infinite parts, the Aboriginal land ethic instils in the individual a sense of responsibility towards the land as a type of custodial obligation.

For Aborigines, then, as for most cultures, land is constructed as landscape, and the process is mediated through social and cultural relations. The Aboriginal landscape is inscribed with and embodies the discursive practices of the social community. Inherent in it is a combination of aesthetic, material, religious and socio-political values. To some extent, this is true of European landscapes too, but for Aborigines these various facets of culture appear to be more holistically integrated; Aboriginal aesthetic expression is in itself political, since Aboriginal culture has not 'learned' to de-politicise the aesthetic.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, representations of landscape in a contemporary Aboriginal production such as *Bran Nue Dae* necessarily reflect a political rather than merely 'cultural' aspect of Aboriginality. The motif of the journey, too, by evoking what is in effect an Aboriginal political practice (the song cycle), also reflects an Aboriginal politics - what might be termed a politics of movement. A description of the play's stage plan, as specified in the published text, will illustrate how this movement from place to place, from city to country, is facilitated in performance.

A thrust forestage, bearing small railway tracks, projects towards the audience from the stage proper behind it. On either side of the thrust are rock pools. This is the basic arrangement. In performance, various other items of set are added for individual scenes, which, together with dialogue and technical effects, evoke numerous locations and landscapes. A stylised, sculpted shape set upstage centre in the opening scene and in later Broome scenes represents the bare sand of Broome's Kennedy Hill Reserve. This structure offers a third tier for performance, in addition to the two levels created by the stage proper and the rock pools. In the play's final scene, a framework structure topped by a cross and garlands of flowers is brought on to represent the Lombadina mission church. This single structure might be understood as encapsulating the eclecticism and hybridity which characterise the whole production. Photos of the church built for the original production are reproduced in the published text, the introductory section of which also features a 'graphic' based on the church building. Referring to this design, Helen Gilbert comments that 'the play enacts a hybrid vision of life and art which is neatly illustrated on the first page by a logo that evokes a church, a corrugated iron shed, a Chinese paddy hut, and a bush dunny, all in one drawing with Japanese and English characters spelling the play's title'.<sup>22</sup> The mission church contributes in this way to the play's depiction of Aboriginal culture as plural and multivalent.

The play's landscapes are constructed according to, and so reflect, characteristically Aboriginal ways of seeing; spaces and objects are 'Aboriginalised'. In the opening scene, for example, a projection screen suspended as a backdrop to the performance area, together with two rows of deckchairs arranged along the forestage, identifies the location

as Broome's Sun Pictures outdoor cinema, 'a site of the sacred and profane, a place where they still show movies after 80 years, and where they say most of the loves of the town were begun'.<sup>23</sup> By beginning in this location, and by featuring the projection screen, the play foregrounds its interest in performance and entertainment conventions, and signals simultaneously its adoption and subversion of traditionally European modes of storytelling. Jacqueline Lo, reading the play from a post-colonial perspective, argues that this scene theatricalises 'the limits of colonial authority as well as suggesting an excess store of alter/native [Aboriginal] potential which is never fully captured or subjugated':

The set suggests an outdoor cinema....'God Save the Queen' is heard as a [headless] picture of the monarch astride a horse appears on a screen at the back of the stage. The 'kids' however subvert the colonialist discourse of the moment. Although they stand up and face the image, their homage is parodic and carnivalesque....So what you have immediately is the foregrounding of tension between competing cultural and political discourses. Although the hierarchy is emphasised semiotically with the Queen...on a higher level...nonetheless [the kids'] youthful irreverence and preoccupation with an embodied sexuality signals a resistance to the oppressive and alien imperialist discourse.<sup>24</sup>

The play's long second scene (pp.4-16) is set in the Rossmoyne Pallotine Aboriginal Hostel in Perth. The location is transformed from Sun Pictures to the mission hostel when Father Benedictus emerges from an explosive cloud of smoke, his black cassock embroidered with the Cherry Ripe bars which appear ubiquitously during the play. His very first words establish the mission hostel's urban location: 'Ah so, Villie! Come een fellow!! Velkom to der city.' In this way, Willie's experience of the hostel is situated immediately in a larger urban context. Indeed, this scene signals the negative tenor of depictions of the city, and of urban experience, which prevails throughout the rest of the first act.

Appearing in this scene, and later at Lombadina, Benedictus embodies the institution, practices and doctrines of the Catholic church. With his comically theatrical German accent, his stentorian manner and hypocritical foibles, Benedictus is roundly satirised; the Christian philosophies and traditions he represents, however, have a much more ambivalent status within the drama, for the play does embrace certain of the values and some of the imagery associated with Christian teaching. Indeed, the final stage direction dictates that the '*cast goes up to heaven*'. In general, though, Christianity in the play is presented in unorthodox and hybridised forms, most notably as Pentecostalism, and it functions as a complement to other Aboriginal social practices and values. And while certain Christian ethics and practices are implicitly espoused, many others are explicitly lampooned. Further, the institutions responsible for instilling Christian values in

Aborigines - that is, the Catholic missions and schools - are shown as complicit in the twin projects of dispossession and assimilation, and hence are derided. As Benedictus makes clear, his 'greatest desire is to see der native people be edercated und trained in der skills ov der modern world'. In the context of its broader commentary on European society, the play implicitly associates the institution of the church with that of the prison system; both are manifestations of European culture and colonial rule, and both are characterised as alien and unsympathetic to Aboriginality.

Expelled '*as if from the garden of Eden*' by the institution which caused him to leave his mission home in the first place, Willie is left to fend for himself in the city. He finds himself at night in a city park - the quintessential urban space of Aboriginal oppression, dislocation and alienation. The park, depicted in gloomy darkness and occupied by homeless drinkers, is shown from an alternative point of view, from the perspective of the urban outcast. For these Aborigines, it is not a haven but a last resort. It offers an escape from the hostile city, but whatever sanctuary in 'nature' might be found there is fragile and inauthentic. At the same time, while the scene does convey the desolation of the fringe dwellers, it also conveys their kinship. Out of isolation, poverty, and a mutual need for security emerges companionship amongst the marginalised. The members of the chorus, each wrapped in a blanket, are huddled around a fire, '*some drinking, handing a flagon around, touching and sharing*' as Tadpole mournfully sings 'I'm a longway away from my country'. Tadpole and Willie meet, discover their familial bond, and determine to leave together for home. The Aboriginal experience of urban alienation is summarised in Tadpole's bitter declaration: 'I'm here in Perth and I got fuckin' nowhere to go.' His melancholia, however, soon gives way to alarm as he and Willie negotiate the chaos of the city in their efforts to escape it.

It is during the 'traffic lights' scene (pp.22-29) that Willie and Tadpole meet (by means of Tadpole's cunningly engineered 'accident') their travelling companions Marijuana Annie and Slippery. In this fast-paced, entertaining scene, the chorus creates the urban space, physicalising the rush and mayhem of pedestrian and motor traffic, embodying the frantic rhythms of the busy city. The threats inherent in the metropolis are thus literally personified, the actors' bodies simultaneously evoking the cityscape and conveying the nervous tension generated by it. Confused and intimidated by the regulated chaos of the streets, by the 'jungle of cars' controlled by a 'white gloved cop' and omnipotent, indifferent traffic lights, Tadpole resorts to guile - more street-dumb than street-wise - and lets himself be hit by Slippery and Annie's car. Despite its depiction of high urban anxiety, the 'traffic lights' scene is rendered comically; Tadpole's sanctimonious outbursts (the script describes him as '*real argumentative drunk*') are especially entertaining.

Both the humour and the danger inherent in this scene's construction of the city reflect a characteristically Aboriginal response to urban locations. 'Going to the City' is a

perilous activity, yet one which must also be negotiated with laughter. Indeed, the 'traffic lights' scene conveys many of the attitudes towards urban landscape upon which a particular type of Aboriginal storytelling is based:

There is a genre of Aboriginal stories about the bush blackfella who comes to town and gets things hilariously wrong. Old uncle so-and-so who goes to a department store and watches people go into a small room. The doors close and later a different set of people get out. Over and over to his greater confusion....This 'going to the city' story can be used to bring out a philosophy of post-colonialism: an approach to culture which starts to see things a little less from the point of view of metropolitan centres, in terms of settlement, capital, and singularity, and a little more in terms of a regional and itinerant philosophy of the bush.<sup>25</sup>

The representation of the urban landscape in this scene, then, is informed by an identifiably Aboriginal experience of the city; the audience's perception of that environment is mediated both by the panic and the laughter of the protagonists, such that the city is seen from an alternative, marginal cultural position.

Even in finally escaping the metropolitan centre, however, Willie and Tadpole cannot escape the constraints, simultaneously physical and cultural, of white society. Guilty by association with Annie's 'totally necessary' marijuana plants, they are ensconced in the Roebourne Lockup. Though personally innocent, Tadpole *'is used to the situation and influences Willie to accept it too'*. So in a country that was itself conceived as a vast, natural gulag by Europeans obsessed with the ideology of incarceration, the protagonists find themselves literally locked into the prison scenario which is still undergone by Aborigines at rates many times higher than those for other Australians.<sup>26</sup> Having travelled hundreds of miles through the coastal landscape north of Perth, they are once again confined within a built structure which actualises a European ideology, and which in many respects represents the antithesis to Aboriginal ways of being. However, while the debasement and fear engendered by captivity are conveyed, the lockup scene also depicts imprisonment as 'a moment of community with many other incarcerated Aborigines, including the legal aid officer'.<sup>27</sup> Indeed for Willie, never before gaoled, imprisonment becomes a rite of passage, an initiation into contemporary Aboriginality: 'Yeah Uncle' he tells Tadpole, 'I'm a man now.'<sup>28</sup>

However, the prison scene also raises the particular matter of Aboriginal deaths in custody, an issue which continues to loom over the national conscience. The choice of Roebourne prison as the setting for this episode is highly significant, as it was in the juvenile cell at Roebourne on 28 September 1983 that John Pat died:

Outrage over John Pat's death...contributed more than anything else to the establishment of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody....  
[I]n the findings of this particular inquiry the commissioner came closest to

ascertaining that the death under consideration had been caused by police intentionally inflicting grievous bodily harm on the deceased, although in 1984 a jury of twelve non-Aboriginal persons had acquitted the five police officers who stood trial for the offence of manslaughter of John Pat.<sup>29</sup>

Despite the levity of its opening moments, then, underlying this scene is a deep resentment of the history of black deaths in custody. The scene concludes on a disturbing note, resisting neat closure and leaving a bitter taste.

This moment is a turning point in performance. The heavy emotionalism of the prison scene marks a crucial, despairing moment in the journey, after which the characters enter entirely new physical and (therefore) social landscapes. They are approaching their home, and renewal. Some unspecified time after the lockup scene, they awake by a pool; open air and bright light, sounds of birds calling and water splashing contrast the gloom of Roebourne. The opening lines of the scene identify and characterise the location, underscoring the developing sense of homecoming:

M. ANNIE: Jesus it's hot.

TADPOLE: This Roebuck Plains, this country.

M. ANNIE: Fuck is it always this hot up here?

TADPOLE: When you come from this country it's not hot. [*Wipes perspiration from his face.*]

That the stage direction appears to contradict Tadpole's last remark is worth noting, since it signals a kind of playful ambiguity or irony of Aboriginal representation which runs throughout the scene. That is, in this Roebuck Plains scene in particular (pp.41-49), there is a genuine celebration of traditional Aboriginal culture - hunting, ceremonial dance and song, tribal language, bush tucker, bindjins, spears and boomerangs - which in performance is also self-reflexive and parodic. There is a level at which these images function as the stereotypical indices of 'Aboriginalism' which characterise European perceptions. They are knowingly theatricalised, drawing attention to themselves as the signs which, in white discourse, connote an essential, museum-piece indigeneity. The scene might be understood as inviting audiences to 'look at us show you how you look at us'. Yet while the representations are self-reflexive, they are not self-deprecating; this scene enacts a celebration of being, and of moving, and of the unique relationship which connects Aborigines to one another and to the natural world. In these terms, the idyllic bush landscape of Roebuck Plains is theatricalised and made ambiguous, a kind of ludic space in which satire and celebration converge in what Jacqueline Lo refers to as 'tropes of ambivalence'.<sup>30</sup>

Most of the second act is set in various places in and around Broome, and the theme of cultural hybridity, woven throughout *Bran Nue Dae*, is interestingly re-worked in the episode set inside the Branding Iron Bar, in Broome's Roebuck Bay Hotel (pp.51-57). Specifically, this scene shows the appropriation and integration into Aboriginal culture of

the originally North American tradition of Country and Western music, dance, costume and even sentiment - in short, Country and Western culture. The pub functions as an ambivalent space in this scene, a space inscribed and acculturated with the mixed forms produced by the adoption of the Country and Western tradition by Aborigines. The particular type of 'Black Country and Western' which results is neither absolute nor essential, but is instead an illustration of cultural hybridity and heterogeneity. More than that, this scene in particular constructs Aboriginality in broadly cultural, rather than specifically racial, terms; the characters are defined by what they do and by how they express their community rather than by any shared racial characteristics. In all of *Bran Nue Dae*, it is only in this pub sequence that an interior location is depicted as a truly convivial space. While there are moments of jocularity and fellowship in the Roebourne lockup, that space is dominated ultimately by the fear and anger associated with Aboriginal incarceration. The Branding Iron Bar, by contrast, is a happy place in which a particular hybrid form of Country and Western culture becomes the medium and expression of celebration - of romance and sex, of community, and for Willie and Rosie, of reunion. And while the pub is a built location in a large town, its country music and ambience explicitly resist any alignment of the space with urban culture.

The pub scene precedes a relatively long sequence set down by the mangroves at Roebuck Bay, and then at nearby Kennedy Hill (pp.58-80). From the interior of the Branding Iron Bar, the action shifts to another exterior landscape, where once again the rock pools, and all the levels and dimensions of the stage, can be used to good theatrical effect. The two songs with which the scene begins create an atmosphere of joyful, unrestrained sexual energy, the cast performing a bawdy dance routine to the sustained *double entendre* lyrics of 'Everybody Looking For Kuckle'. Here too, then, as with the Roebuck Plains scene in Act One, it is outside in nature that human being, especially as it is expressed in sexual love, is celebrated. This is worth remarking: the unembarrassed, often humorous presentation of this aspect of human relations in *Bran Nue Dae* tellingly counterpoints those modes of discourse predominant in Western cultures in which sex and sexuality are fetishised and restricted to the personal and private.

The mangroves by the bay are presented as a site of liberated sexuality, at least in the opening moments of the scene. As such, this location also is 'Aboriginalised' in the sense that it reflects a natural and uninhibited - but for Europeans an atypical - response to being in nature. Importantly, though, this is but one aspect of the landscape, which has a variety of related functions here. For as the scene unfolds, the notion of liberation is transposed from the realm of the sexual into that of the religious and spiritual. Willie's song 'Nyul Nyul Girl' - a love song combining English and Broome kriol lyrics - is interrupted by the arrival of a congregation of Pentecostal Christians. This group, including the new characters Pastor Flakkon and Willie's mother, Theresa, enters in procession, possessed by the spirit of worship and singing 'All The Way Jesus'. The sequence which follows

takes full theatrical advantage of the heightened emotion generated in religious ritual; here, though, the unorthodox practices of the Pentecostals are invested with a special energy in that they occur outdoors, in nature, unconstrained by any formal church building. By virtue of the events occurring in it, then, the landscape in a sense becomes sanctified, a place in which miracles are not only possible, but actually occur.

The liberated sexuality depicted early in this scene is related to notions of spiritual liberation, enacted through a series of revelations and witnessings. Marijuana Annie, spurred on by the charged atmosphere and by a burden of personal guilt, discloses the sins of her past in a moment of cathartic release. Slippery admits that he too is 'evil' and 'a lost indaweeduwal'. The most telling revelation, though, comes when Theresa declares that she once had a child to a German missionary. This information prompts a chain of disclosures revealing a web of hitherto unknown familial relations amongst the play's main characters. These discoveries continue to unfold as the action shifts from the beach to the sandhills of Kennedy Hill Reserve. From behind the hill emerges Willie, naked and triumphant, he and Rosie having consummated their love. Willie's sexual arrival, appropriately, is attained in the open landscape, and it coincides with the reunion and reconciliation - indeed the discovery - of his family. This new experience also parallels his initiation in the Roebourne lockup, his words echoing those he spoke in gaol: 'Uncle - I'm a man now.'

This series of revelations uncovering the network of family ties is clearly designed to push at the limits of credibility, in the tradition of melodramatic coincidence and resolution. At the same time, however, the revision of the family such that it now includes previously 'white' characters also contributes to the play's exposition of Aboriginal hybridity. That is, given that closure is also disclosure - that point at which all events in a text are explained - the 'bizarre set of closures'<sup>31</sup> in this scene startles audiences into a recognition of hybridity. In a sense, a virtue is made of incredulity, whereby attention is drawn self-reflexively not only to the artifice of the revelations, but also to the whole notion of hybridity. Slippery and Annie's incorporation into the family signals the possibility of an inclusive and multifarious, rather than exclusive and singular, Aboriginality. The chorus' declaration that 'we're all born black', and Slippery's exclamation 'Ich Bin Ine Aborigine!!', both accentuate the play's thematic concern with the diversity of experience and subjectivity which constitutes modern Aboriginality.

The narrative moves to its conclusion as the characters finally arrive at their destination. Again, in the opening moments of the play's final scene (pp.81-89), location is established and characterised by means of an economic use of dialogue:

TADPOLE: There him, there hi (sic). There Djarindjin hills.

M. ANNIE: Hey, we're in Lombadina.

SLIPPERY: Wahhh - it's just like Goa.

Arriving at their mission home, the travellers again find themselves in the midst of a Christian ceremony. They encounter the chorus, now the Lombadina community, celebrating the feast of Christ the King. Processing in '*stately movement*', the people bear '*a statue of Christ the King in a bindjin followed by the church in the form of a frame, topped by a cross with garlands of flowers*'. Clearly, both the figure of Jesus and the mission church reflect a hybridised, specifically Aboriginal Christianity; even Father Benedictus, appearing from within the framework structure of the church, is 'Aboriginalised' in this sequence, at least inasmuch as he acknowledges his membership of the extended family. And his alignment with the institution of the church is re-figured here when he announces that the mission is finished.

Amidst this general mood of celebration and reconciliation, it is left to Tadpole to draw the play to its conclusion. In an introductory recitative to the play's title song, Tadpole delivers a monologue which brings together the various experiences of the journey and sets them within an explicitly political context:

TADPOLE: This fella song all about the Aboriginal people, coloured people,  
           black people longa Australia. Us people want our land back, we want 'em  
           rights, we want 'em fair deal, all same longa white man. Now this fella  
           longa Canberra, he been talkin' about a Bran Nue Dae - us people bin waiting  
           for dijwun for 200 years now. Don' know how much longer we gotta wait,  
           and boy it's makin' me slack.

The political sentiment here is unambiguous. The lyrics of the song which follows were apparently written on the back of a truck during the protests against the mining of Aboriginal sacred sites at Noonkambah in 1979. Although relatively little overt political commentary of this type has been made in the play up to this point, the placement of Tadpole's speech here, with the performance signalling its imminent conclusion, endows it with special focus and weight. Tadpole's monologue and the song that follows it place the political claim for a 'fair deal' for Aborigines in direct relation to their demand for land rights. For Aborigines, whether tribal or not, whether urban or rural, access to some of the land which was theirs virtually without contest for eons before white settlement is a requirement of paramount concern. For as this discussion has argued, Aboriginality, insofar as it can be defined at all, is a consciousness of, and an obligation to, the land. Jimmy Chi says the 'definition of Aboriginal is a person of a country. And that's all.'<sup>32</sup> To be dispossessed of the land, therefore, is to have the basis of individual and collective identity, a society's image of itself, fundamentally compromised. In these terms, one of *Bran Nue Dae's* most significant achievements is its 'Aboriginalised' discursive construction of landscape. The various locations along the journey together constitute an Aboriginal landscape, sung into being by means of a hybrid marriage of song cycle and popular musical, and reflecting an Aboriginal consciousness accessible to, but worlds away from, the predominant Australian way of seeing.

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- <sup>1</sup> Jimmy Chi and Kuckles, *Bran Nue Dae* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1991).
- <sup>2</sup> Helen Gilbert, 'Review: *Bran Nue Dae*', *Australasian Drama Studies*, 20 (April 1992), p.137. Tom Zubrycki, maker of a film documentary of the *Bran Nue Dae* project, points out that the use of the popular musical form owes much to Chi's personal affection for musicals of the 1960s and 1970s such as *West Side Story* and *The Sound of Music*. He adds: 'That doesn't mean that issues like land rights, racism and black deaths in custody aren't dealt with.' See Michael Visontay, 'Zubrycki's happy contrast', *Eastern Herald* (Sydney) (April 25, 1991), p.27.
- <sup>3</sup> Klaus Neumann, 'A Postcolonial Writing of Aboriginal History', *Meanjin*, 51, 2 (Winter 1992), p.296.
- <sup>4</sup> Helen Gilbert, p.137.
- <sup>5</sup> Chris Lawe Davies, 'Black Rock and Broome: Musical and Cultural Specificities', *Perfect Beat*, 1, 2 (January 1993), p.58.
- <sup>6</sup> Jacqueline Lo, 'Tropes of Ambivalence in *Bran Nue Dae*', unpublished paper, (University of Newcastle Drama Department, 1994).
- <sup>7</sup> Richard White, *Inventing Australia: Images and Identity 1688-1980* (Sydney: George Allen and Unwin, 1981), p.3. The quotation from Dampier is cited by White, p.3.
- <sup>8</sup> Jeremy Beckett, 'The past in the present; the present in the past: constructing a national Aboriginality', in Jeremy Beckett, ed., *Past and Present: The Construction of Aboriginality* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1988), p.6.
- <sup>9</sup> Bruce McGuinness maintains that 'unless Aboriginal people control the funding, unless Aboriginal people control the content, the publishing, the ultimate presentation...then it is *not* Aboriginal...If it's going to be legitimate Aboriginal literature then it must come, flow freely, from the Aboriginal people, from the Aboriginal communities without any restrictions placed upon them.' See Bruce McGuinness and Denis Walker, 'The Politics of Aboriginal Literature', in Davis and Hodge, eds, *Aboriginal Writing Today: Papers from the first National Conference of Aboriginal Writers held in Perth, Western Australia, in 1983* (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1985), pp.44-45.
- <sup>10</sup> Financial assistance for rehearsals of the original production was provided by the Thatcherite English Lord, Alistair McAlpine. The publication of the printed text was financially supported by many sources including the Wim Wenders Film Production company, BHP Minerals Limited, and two Western Australian members of parliament.
- <sup>11</sup> As Stephen Muecke observes: 'Aboriginal rights to texts are...policed in terms of correct custodianship as well as the textual form. Setting up a performance seems to involve getting the right people to play the parts, as well as debating the precise and correct form of the text.' See Stephen Muecke, *Textual Spaces: Aboriginality and Cultural Studies* (Kensington: University of New South Wales Press, 1992), p.58. Muecke acknowledges as the source for his comments Eric Michaels' *For a Cultural Future: Francis Jupurrurla Makes TV at Yuendumu* (Melbourne: Artspace, 1987).
- <sup>12</sup> Robert Ariss, 'Writing black: the construction of an Aboriginal discourse', in Jeremy Beckett, p.138.
- <sup>13</sup> Robert Ariss, pp.132-133.
- <sup>14</sup> Klaus Neumann, p.297.
- <sup>15</sup> Catherine H. Berndt, 'Traditional Aboriginal oral literature', in Davis and Hodge, p.93.
- <sup>16</sup> Stephen Muecke, 'Aboriginal Literature', in Laurie Hergenhan, ed., *The Penguin New Literary History of Australia* (Ringwood: Penguin, 1988), p.30.
- <sup>17</sup> Stephen Muecke, *Textual Spaces*, p.52.
- <sup>18</sup> See Stephen Muecke, *Textual Spaces*, p.47.
- <sup>19</sup> David J. Tacey, 'Australia's Otherworld: Aboriginality, Landscape and the Imagination', *Meridian*, 8, 1 (May 1989), p.57.
- <sup>20</sup> Deborah Bird Rose, 'Exploring an Aboriginal Land Ethic', *Meanjin*, 47, 3 (Spring 1988), pp.378-381.
- <sup>21</sup> Stephen Muecke, *Textual Spaces*, p.58.
- <sup>22</sup> Helen Gilbert, p.135.
- <sup>23</sup> Peter Bibby, 'Introduction', in Jimmy Chi and Kuckles, *Bran Nue Dae* (Sydney: Currency Press and Magabala Books, 1991), p.vi. Sun Pictures also has particular historical resonances for Aborigines: the published text features a photo of the cinema, circa 1920, which clearly shows the racially segregated audience.
- <sup>24</sup> Jacqueline Lo, p.4.
- <sup>25</sup> Stephen Muecke, *Textual Spaces*, p.47.
- <sup>26</sup> In 1983, Pat O'Shane reported that the rate of imprisonment for blacks in New South Wales was approximately 600 per 100,000 people. This was 'many times higher than the rate of incarceration of other

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indigenous groups around the world', and the figures are even worse in Western Australia. See Adam Shoemaker, *Black Words, White Page: Aboriginal Literature 1929-1988* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1989), p.241. It might be worth noting Shoemaker's observation that an ironical benefit of this institutionalised anti-black bias is that 'some of the finest examples of Aboriginal literature are born of incarceration'. He cites as examples Kevin Gilbert's *Ghosts In Cell Ten* (unpublished, 1970) and Robert Merritt's *The Cake Man* (1978). See Adam Shoemaker pp.239-242.

<sup>27</sup> Helen Gilbert, p.136.

<sup>28</sup> Robert Merritt, author of *The Cake Man* - the first play by an Aborigine ever to be published (in 1978, but written five years earlier in Bathurst gaol) - puts this Aboriginal 'ritual of incarceration' in a rather more sobering light: 'It suits society's purpose to give government mandates to build filthy institutions that keep Aborigines in prison....[I]f you're a drunk, or if you're a crook, you'll get a two-bob lawyer that's been out of law school for five years. You've got an identity. If you want to be a normal person there's no incentive in life whatsoever for ya....To break the law now - it's a substitute initiation.' See Robert Merritt, cited in Adam Shoemaker, p.232.

<sup>29</sup> Klaus Neumann, p.295.

<sup>30</sup> See Jacqueline Lo, 'Tropes Of Ambivalence', cited above, note 5.

<sup>31</sup> Chris Lawe Davies, p.58.

<sup>32</sup> See Chris Lawe Davies, p.58.