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### Abstract

If the image of Aborigines in Australian literature is analyzed in semiotic terms, the signifier, the literary image, does not lead back to the implied signified, the Aborigines of 'real life', but rather to other images. This could be seen as simply another version of Jacques Derrida's analysis of semiosis, which might be termed the cereal box view of the sign. The person on the box is holding a box with a picture of the same person holding a box with a picture of the same person holding a box... etc. The root image cannot exist for there must always be another image on the box being held, no matter how small. In the same way, each signifier can refer only to another signifier. Any implied signified is unreachable.

# Signifier Resignified: Aborigines in Australian Literature<sup>1</sup>

If the image of Aborigines in Australian literature is analyzed in semiotic terms, the signifier, the literary image, does not lead back to the implied signified, the Aborigines of 'real life', but rather to other images. This could be seen as simply another version of Jacques Derrida's analysis of semiosis, which might be termed the cereal box view of the sign. The person on the box is holding a box with a picture of the same person holding a box with a picture of the same person holding a box ... etc. The root image cannot exist for there must always be another image on the box being held, no matter how small. In the same way, each signifier can refer only to another signifier. Any implied signified is unreachable.

But the signifier can have a precise value. John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1972)<sup>2</sup> states of the visual image:

An image is a sight which has been recreated or reproduced. It is an appearance, or a set of appearances, which has been detached from the place and time in which it first made its appearance and preserved – for a few moments or a few centuries. (9-10)

A literary representation might seem less absolute but the indigene in literature is similarly a reified preservation, an unusually extreme example of the law noted by Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978): 'In any instance of at least written language, there is no such thing as a delivered presence, but a *re-presence*, or a representation.' (21) Each representation of the indigene is a signifier for which there is no signified except the Image. The referent has little purpose in the equation. In the context of the indigene the unbreachable alterity between signifier and signified is never what many have claimed, an abstruse philosophical concept with nihilist tendencies, but an important aspect of the 'subjugated knowledges'(81) to which Michel Foucault refers in *Power/Knowledge* (1980). The valorization of the image is

defined by a process in which the signified is signifier, in which representation is Image.

Yet there is a significant hidden connection between text and 'reality'. In *Orientalism*, Said suggests that what is important in western representations of eastern culture is not the approximation of presence which seems to be the intention but rather the conformity of the works to an ideology called orientalism. Said studies not the reality which the works seem to represent, the truths which they claim to depict, but the reality of the texts and their ideology, and of the ideology of the authors and their culture. In the case of Aborigines, creative literature is but one reflection of a process which permeates Australian culture, even those aspects which seem most removed from native peoples. In the University of Western Australia, a strangely beautiful example of Spanish colonial architecture, the ceiling of the imposing Great Hall is adorned with Aboriginal paintings. Needless to say, there have been few Aboriginal students to look at them.

This reality of the ideology is shaped by the reality of invasion and oppression. Eric R. Wolf, in *Europe and the People Without History* (1982), comments on the creation of 'race':

Racial designations, such as 'Indian' or 'Negro', are the outcome of the subjugation of populations in the course of European mercantile expansion. The term *Indian* stands for the conquered populations of the New World, in disregard of any cultural or physical differences among native Americans. (380)

At first, 'Indian' was also often used for the indigenes of Australia but soon the vague 'aboriginal' became the term of choice. Still, this change represented no significant variation in representation: 'Aborigine' still means conquered. Neither are the details or even the major events of the Australian conquest significant factors in the image of the native. History awarded semiotic control to the invaders. Since then the image of native peoples has functioned as a constant source of semiotic reproduction, in which each textual image refers back to those offered before. The image of 'them' is not theirs.

This analysis attempts to reveal the semiotic limitations of various texts, particularly of those which have been said to provide 'positive' or 'realistic' views of native peoples. I seek Pierre Macherey's 'ideological horizon' (132), the concealed but omnipresent ideology controlling the text. Yet in

identifying that horizon, in deconstructing that centre of control, I must recognize that I cannot avoid asserting my own centre, as a white Canadian male of a certain age. Like any other critic I must recognize that, in Yeats's words, 'The centre cannot hold'.

The shape of the signifying process as it applies to native peoples is formed by a certain semiotic field, the boundaries within which images can function. A few associations suggest the area: boomerang, myall, black velvet and dusky. The native is a semiotic pawn on a chess board controlled by the white signmaker yet the individual signmaker, the individual player, can move these pawns only within certain prescribed areas. To extend the analogy, the textual play between white and native is a replica of the black and white squares. This basic dualism, however, is not good and evil, although often argued to be so, as in Abdul R. JanMohammed's 'The Economy of Manichean Allegory' (1985):

The dominant model of power – and interest – relations in all colonial societies is the manichean opposition between the putative superiority of the European and the supposed inferiority of the native. (63)

In some early and many contemporary texts the opposition is between the 'putative superiority' of the indigene and the 'supposed inferiority' of the white. In Xavier Herbert's *Poor Fellow My Country* (1975) the mixed-race Prindy has 'at least a degree of realization that he was not truly Aboriginal, while yet his being yearned for Aboriginal community with his environment, rejecting the patent empty alienness of the non-indigenous.' (464) As for Said's oriental Other, positive and negative images are swings of one and the same pendulum:

Many of the earliest Oriental amateurs began by welcoming the Orient as a salutary *dérangement* of their European habits of mind and spirit. The Orient was overvalued for its pantheism, its spirituality, its stability, its longevity, its primitivism, and so forth... Yet almost without exception such overesteem was followed by a counter-response: the Orient suddenly appeared lamentably under-humanized, antidemocratic, backward, barbaric, and so forth. (Said, 150)

All of Said's 'overvalued' are present in *Poor Fellow My Country* but even there the 'counter-response' is always implied.

The complications extend beyond racial opposition, as noted in Sander Gilman's *Difference and Pathology* (1985):

Because there is no real line between self and the Other, an imaginary line must be drawn; and so that the illusion of an absolute difference between self and Other is never troubled, this line is as dynamic in its ability to alter itself as is the self. This can be observed in the shifting relationship of antithetical stereotypes that parallel the existence of 'bad' and 'good' representations of self and Other. But the line between 'good' and 'bad' responds to stresses occurring within the psyche. Thus paradigm shifts in our mental representations of the world can and do occur. We can move from fearing to glorifying the Other. We can move from loving to hating. (18)

The problem is not the negative or positive aura associated with the image but rather the image itself. In this passage from Herbert, the focus turns from the 'Aboriginal community' of the character to the 'patent empty alienness of the non-indigenous', white Australians, the normative culture addressed by the text. The Other is of interest primarily as a comment on the self, a judgement that could correctly be applied to the present study, concerned with not native peoples but the image of the native, a white image.

This image is usually defined, as it is in Herbert, in association with nature. The explorers attempted to make their signifying process represent real experience, to create the 'information' text defined in Mary Pratt's analysis of African explorers, 'Scratches on the Face of the Country' (1985):

the invisible eye/I strives to make those informational orders natural, to find them there uncommanded, rather than assert them as the products/producers of European knowledges or disciplines. (125)

Thus, to define the Aborigine as 'natural' seems to be 'natural' in Edward J. Eyre's *Journals of Expeditions of Discovery into Central Australia* (1845) but it continues to be so in contemporary fiction, as in Randolph Stow's *To the Islands* (1982). The field, that uniform chessboard, has continued, particularly in the few basic moves the indigenous pawn has been allowed to make.

At least since Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin White Masks* (1952) it has been a commonplace to use 'Other' and 'Not-self' for the white view of blacks and for the resulting black view of themselves, an assertion of a white self as subject in discourse which leaves the black Other as object. The terms are similarly applicable to the Aborigine but with an important shift. They are Other and Not-self but also must become self. Gayatri Spivak, in 'Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism' (1985), examines the value of the colonized to the colonizer: 'the project of imperialism has always

already historically refracted what might have been the absolute Other into a domesticated Other that consolidated the imperialist self.' (253) Any imperialist discourse valorizes the colonized according to its own needs for reflection.

But in Spivak's area of study, the Indian sub-continent, the imperialist discourse remains admittedly non-indigenous. India is valorized by imperialist dynamics but it 'belongs' to the white realm only as part of the empire. Australians have, and long have had, a clear agenda to erase this separation of belonging. The white Australian looks at the Aborigine. The Aborigine is Other and therefore alien. But the Aborigine is indigenous and therefore cannot be alien. So the Australian must be alien. But how can the Australian be alien within Australia? There are only two possible answers. The white culture might reject the indigene, by stating that the country really began with the arrival of the whites, an approach no longer popular but significant in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Or else the white culture can attempt to incorporate the Other, as in superficial examples such as pseudo-Aboriginal names for aspects of white Australian culture, or as in sensitive and sophisticated efforts such as the novels of Patrick White.

The importance of the alien within cannot be overstated. In their need to become 'native', to belong there, whites in Australia have required a process which I have termed 'indigenization', the impossible necessity of becoming indigenous. For many writers, the only chance seemed to be through the humans who are truly indigenous, the Aborigines. As J. J. Healy notes in *Literature and the Aborigine in Australia 1770-1975* (1978),

The Aborigine was part of the tension of an indigenous consciousness. Not the contemporary Aborigine, not even a plausible historical one, but the sort of creature that *might* persuade a white Australian to look in the direction of the surviving race. (173)

Of course, the majority of writers have given no, or at most very limited, attention to native peoples but the process of indigenization is complex, as in that Great Hall. Each nineteenth-century reference to the white Australian as 'native', so common in *The Bulletin*, is a comment on indigenization, regardless of the absence of Aborigines in those comments. As Macherey states, 'an ideology is made of what it does not mention; it exists

because there are things which must not be spoken of. (132) In other words, absence is also negative presence, as in the natives not mentioned in Henry Handel Richardson's nation-building trilogy, *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* (1930). This might be opposed by the 'positive absence' of the decorated ceiling or of many poems by the Jindyworobaks, particularly those in Ian Mudie's *Corroboree to the Sun* (1940). There, the Aborigine is usually neither subject nor overt object of the poems but an aid to 'indigenize' the text.

Said notes a number of what he terms 'standard commodities' associated with the orient. Two such commodities which appear to be standard in the economy created by the semiotic field of the Aborigine in Australian literature are sex and violence. They are poles of attraction and repulsion, temptation by the bit of black velvet and fear of the demonic myall black. Often both are found in the same work, as in Charles Rowcroft's *Brandon the Bushranger* (1846), in which the warrior constantly attacks but the maiden, 'the affectionate Oionoo' (223), is an agent to avoid that attack. They are emotional signs, semiotic embodiments of primal responses. Could one create a more appropriate signifier for fear than the treacherous myall? He incorporates the terror of an impassioned, uncontrolled spirit of evil. He is strangely joined by the Aboriginal maiden, who tempts the being chained by civilization towards the liberation of free and open sexuality, not untamed evil but unrestrained joy. They follow the pattern noted in *Difference and Pathology*: 'The "bad" Other becomes the negative stereotype; the "good" Other becomes the positive stereotype. The former is that which we fear to become; the latter, that which we fear we cannot achieve'. (20) Added to this is the alien's fear of the warrior as hostile wilderness, this new, threatening land, and the arrivant's attraction to the maiden as restorative pastoral, this new, available land. The absent Aborigines in *Richard Mahony* and the Aboriginal resonances of Mudie's poems might also be seen in this context. The sign of fear leads to an indigenization which excludes the indigene. Temptation promises an indigenization through inclusion.

An intriguing yet unanswerable question is whether the subject of the Aborigine causes an emphasis on sex and violence, or desire for the frissons of sex and violence suggests the Aborigine. In Charles De Boos' *Fifty Years Ago* (1867) the image of the Aborigine is at one point noble savage, at another a devil, including a stridently gory scene of the massacre of a pioneer family, in which the Aborigine appears as demonic savage par excellence. The



interest seems more in violence than in the Aborigine. Or the motivation might be generic, the historical romance establishing the base for present Australia. The novel presents a vision of the founding of a nation and the Aborigine must fit. Thus before the arrival of the whites the noble Aborigine provides an extended history for the greatness of Australia. After the whites arrive, this arcadian purity is somehow transformed into Aboriginal treachery, which becomes a justification to direct the readers' empathy to the invaders rather than to those recently presented as an indigenous aristocracy. The end of the novel re-establishes the nobility of the Aborigine but only while showing the total decay of his society and personal strength. Nobility before contact, treachery during and nobility as contact fades into memory.

The sexual attractions of the Aborigine are often quite complicated, as in John Mathew's 'The Aboriginal Love-Letter', in *Australian Echoes* (1902). The text states, 'The nymph though dark is fair', (39) an amazing phrase which begins with a mythic signifier of sensuality and follows it with an oxymoron which synthesizes Aboriginality and fragile femininity. Still, while complex, this commodity is usually gender-specific. In Rowcroft, the gentle Oionoo has manifest attractions but when the old chief, Walloo-wombee, who is said to look like 'a very aged baboon', (178) turns his attentions to a white woman it is described as 'unspeakable horror, a fate worse than death itself'. (179) Similarly, Mathew's 'The Black Captor' sees 'My love is bright as the flower' (19) but the object of this love, 'The White Captive', sees only 'My swarthy partner, hated ... hellish scenes, that gall me and defile'. (17-18)

The delicate native maiden, the usual sexual focus in literature of the eighteenth, nineteenth and much of the twentieth century, is most memorably portrayed in the title character of Katharine Susannah Prichard's *Coonardoo* (1929), the archetypal Aboriginal figure in Australian literature. She exists in more ominous forms, such as the violent succubus of Charles Broome's 'The Blood of Marlee' (1939) or the degrading wife in Vance Palmer's *The Man Hamilton* (1928), but she is always very unlike the common repulsive intimidating violence of the demonic male. Until well into the twentieth century the male native was almost always violence, never sex. A major change happens, however, in novels such as John Patrick's *Inapatua* (1966) and Christine Townend's *Travels With Myself* (1976) in which

a native male is a sexual attraction which the white female uses in her own attempt at liberation.

A third important commodity is orality, all the associations raised by the indigene's speaking, non-writing, state. The writer's sense of native peoples as having completely different systems of understanding, different epistemes, is based on an often undefined belief that cultures without writing operate within a different dimension of consciousness. In earlier works, white writers often deemed this a symptom of inferiority or, as in Conrad Sayce's *Comboman* (1934), a sign of demonic possession. Both the good and the bad sides of orality are usually presented as aspects of the natural. One Aborigine in James Francis Hogan's *The Lost Explorer* (1890) resorts to a typical rhetorical exhortation of violence and nature:

I, Wonga, of the swift-speeding spear and the fast-flying boomerang, who vanished from your midst like the star that falls in the heavens at night, have now arisen once more like the sun that comes up out of the stormy sea every morn to give brightness and beauty to our island valley. (146)

Prindy in *Poor Fellow My Country* communes with 'The Voice of the Spirit of the Land'. (669) The philosophical base of the positive representations of natural orality found throughout twentieth century literature is represented by the claims made by Walter Ong in *Orality and Literacy*:

The fact that oral peoples commonly and in all likelihood universally consider words to have magical potency is clearly tied in, at least unconsciously, with their sense of the word as necessarily spoken, sounded, and hence power-driven. (32)

The orality of the native is seen to provide a connection to the inner world of man, unlike the alienating distance of the literary. In a self-reflexive denigration typical of much contemporary literature, texts such as Thomas Keneally's *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1973) express ambivalence about the validity of writing through an elevation of the indigene's orality, represented as Said's 'delivered presence'. The title of Keneally's novel claims a transformation in which white text becomes Aboriginal orality.

The Aboriginal narrator can be an important element of orality, especially in recent fiction. The representation of the text as product of an Aboriginal voice creates 'presence' through appearing to change the Aborigine from object to subject, as in the Aboriginal centre of intelligence of Prichard's story 'Happiness' (1932) or of *Inapatua*. The latter uses the first person to validate

the description of an educated 'de-tribalized' Aborigine who undergoes re-indigenization.

Representations of native language from the outside extend orality in a different direction, as in naming. At one level the conflict might just be between true and false, between an Aboriginal name which represents Aboriginal culture and an imposed white name which produces a false identity. A larger import is asserted in *Women of the Sun* (1983) when Ann finds out her Aboriginal name: 'She is Pand-jel's daughter – a sun woman... Lo-Arna... Her name means "beautiful woman", you know...' (221) The reindigenization of the Aboriginal maiden is validated through the semiotic shift.

It is as if a different semiotic field is glimpsed, not the field in which the writer places the indigene but the field in which the indigene places the whites and, presumably, him or herself. This creates a continuum from early texts which use a few native words heavily glossed to Donald Stuart's *Malloorkai* (1976), in which Aboriginal terms are defined only by context. A simple record of indigene language might be considered more limited in its representation of the indigenous consciousness than the indigene as narrator but its apparent absolute adherence to the indigenous semiosis could suggest that an even greater bridge has been touched if not crossed. Unlike the case of the indigenous narrator, the white reader – and perhaps author – can barely penetrate the meaning. This is most clear when a white person is given an Aboriginal honorific, such as 'mullaka' in such disparate works as *Poor Fellow My Country* and Mrs. Gunn's *We of the Never-Never* (1908). The implied value of such names is suggested by the explanation of the title in John Boyle O'Reilly's *Moondyne* (1880): 'They gave him the name of "Moondyne" which had some meaning more than either manhood or kingship'. (14) The texts suggest that the application of indigenous language connects the white figure with the power which the indigene represents.

The inclusion of Aboriginal 'speech' seems to represent a prime example of Michail Bakhtin's 'Discourse in the Novel':

These distinctive links and interrelationships between utterances and languages, this movement of the theme through different languages and speech types, its dispersion into the rivulets and droplets of social heteroglossia, its dialogization – this is the basic distinguishing feature of the stylistics of the novel. (*Dialogic*, 263)

Bakhtin sees this dialogization as creating an important tension in fiction: 'Every utterance participates in the "unitary language" (in its centripetal forces and tendencies) and at the same time partakes of social and historical heteroglossia (the centrifugal, stratifying forces)'. (272)

This suggests a positive view of the process, in which the 'self' of the white text includes the Aboriginal 'Other' within its vision while at the same time representing the 'social and historical' vision of the Other. Bakhtin goes so far as to call it '*another's speech in another's language*'. (324) In opposition I would suggest that the image of the Aborigine is an example of the negative confluence of the centripetal and centrifugal Other. It is centripetal because always subject to the system of white texts. The Aboriginal voice found in Australian fiction 'lives' only in that fiction. It is centrifugal because that Aborigine always reaches out to a semiotic field which has defined the image before its inclusion in the fluctuations of the individual text. The novel of the nineteen-eighties re-presents the extant Image. The process is 'stratifying' in a particularly pernicious sense.

There are many variants to the power of the oral Aborigine, such as the taciturn Aborigine as the obverse of the inflated diction of the orator. At the beginning of Donald Stuart's *The Driven* (1961), the white Tom observes of the Aborigines: 'Strange, the gift most of them had of silence'. (10) Later, Tom is accepted by the Aborigines because he is able to be similarly wordless: 'Good quiet man, this Tom. Not like some of the whitefellers, wanting to talk all the time...' (57) Stuart's novel, like *Poor Fellow My Country* and many others, links this silence to religious values. It is as though the Aborigine eventually transcends the orality, to become the land, to become presence, and mystically become the silent invocation of the consciousness, the vision, of Other.

But this ultimate transcendence does not deny the holistic nature of the process. The voice is part of the silence is part of the land is part of the vision. In *Reading the Country* (1984) Stephen Muecke asserts, "There is no basis for seeing the dreaming as a mythological past (as in "dreamtime") while it is alive as a *way of talking*.' (14) The oral is part of the native as a sign of oracular power, either malevolent, in most nineteenth century texts, or beneficent, in most contemporary ones. Many early texts suggest orality to be inferior and indigenous beliefs to be absurd superstitions. If such beliefs did represent a different dimension of consciousness, it was not worth achieving,

and certainly not equal to white doctrine. Mrs. Campbell Praed's *Fugitive Anne* (1903) finds her own rendition of *Ave Maria* has an oral power superior to any Aboriginal chant. Her faithful servant Kombo notes: 'By'm by, Missa Anne, you tell me again that fellow "Our Father"', he said, confidentially, to his mistress, 'I plenty forget. Mine think-it that frighten Debil-debil.' (65)

For other texts, however, particularly in the twentieth century, an alien space is attractive. In *Poor Fellow My Country* Jeremy is visited by an Aboriginal spirit and his Aboriginal friend asserts, 'That *Lamala* belong to some old blackfeller before, finish now for good. He lonely. He grab 'old o' you. Now you all-same blackfeller...belong country!' Jeremy himself is convinced by the argument: 'That's what struck me ... if I see things like a blackfellow, then I must belong like one'. (1098) A similar but still more ethereal process is glimpsed in Les Murray's *The Boys Who Stole the Funeral* (1980), in which the rural white Australian meets no Aborigines but is also indigenized by an Aboriginal emanation. In *To the Islands*, the title reflects an Aboriginal belief about where the soul comes to rest. The old Christian missionary, Heriot, is on his own journey 'to the islands' in search of some meaning for his life. As part of the process he sings, 'to a corroboree tune of tearing sadness', 'And Christ receive thy soul' (77), but this synthesis of religions is not successful. Only when he finally approaches 'the islands' and abandons his past beliefs does he achieve something epiphanic: 'My soul', he whispered, over the searidge, 'my soul is a strange country'. (126) In an interesting semiotic variant, the inadequacies of the author's culture, which offers little 'true' knowledge through its own beliefs, in which the alterity of the signifier leaves divine power beyond reach, is met by an indigenous belief system (usually quite asystemic) which offers a Presence to exceed even the presence of orality.

Spivak has commented on the 'soul-making' agenda of imperialist missionaries (Address). They intended to take indigenous peoples who teetered between the absolute material and the false anti-phenomenal and make new creations who would possess the reality of the Christian noumenal. But in many of the texts in this study, the white needs not to instill spirit in the Other but to gain it from the Other. Through the indigene the white character gains soul and the potential of becoming rooted in the land. An appropriate pun is that only by going native can the European arrivant become native. Often in such narratives the Otherness of the

indigene is first heightened, as in the use of an indigenous semiotic field. A similar process is the defamiliarization of common aspects of white culture. When Aborigines are presented as having an intricately metaphorical view of white science, such as gunpowder or a clock, the Aborigines become doubly the Other. They are Other because the white perceives them as such and because their own perception is clearly that of Other.

Often, however, as in *The Boys Who Stole the Funeral* or Helen Hodgman's *Blue Skies* (1976), or any of the many works on Truganini, 'the last Tasmanian Aborigine', the Other is not living Aborigines but memories of people long obliterated. Aboriginal presence but no present Aborigines. This temporal split is a fifth commodity in the semiotic field of the indigene, the prehistoric. Historicity, in which the text makes an overt or covert statement on the chronology of the culture, shapes the indigene into an historical artefact, a remnant of a golden age which seems to have little connection to contemporary life.

Golden age assumptions seem to underly the choice of genre in the various Aboriginal epics, such as George Gordon McCrae's *The Story of Balladadro* (1867). The golden age supports the heroic Aborigine in Henry Kendall's 'The Last of His Tribe' (*Leaves* [1869], 92-93) and the end of the golden age supports the degraded Aborigine of the bush ballads by Kendall and James Brunton Stephens or of the mock epic, *The Raid of the Aborigines* (1875), by William Wilks. Many novels which depict an epic sweep of Australian history, such as Rex Ingamells' *Of Us Now Living* (1952) and Eleanor Dark's *Timeless Land* trilogy (1941-53), show Aborigines as only a beginning of Australia, conveniently dropping off the fictional map of contemporary life. The titles are particularly appropriate: Ingamells' excludes the Aborigines from the us, the now and the living and Dark's replaces the time-less indigenes with the time-full European arrivants.

Robert Drewe's novel *The Savage Crows* (1975) makes a still more specific comment on the prehistoric when the Tasmanian Aborigine William Lanney is said to be treated as a 'living fossil'. (13) Johannes Fabian's *Time and the Other* (1983) states of anthropology:

It promoted a scheme in terms of which not only past cultures, but all living societies were irrevocably placed on a temporal slope, a stream of time – some upstream, others downstream. (17)

When native peoples, perceived to be of the 'early', remain in present Australian society, the 'late', degradation is shown to be inevitable. A corollary of the temporal split between the golden age and contemporary decadence is a tendency to see native culture as either true, pure and static or else not really of that culture, thus the contrast in Kendall between noble and ignoble savage. *Inapatua* eulogizes the remnants of the 'tribal' culture as a specific contrast with the detribalized hero. As implied by the title of John McGarrity's *Once a Jolly Blackman* (1973), the Aborigine of time present is only alienated despair.

Through the commodities the white acquires Aborigine, 'acquires', not 'becomes'. To 'become Aborigine' is an absurdity or madness. Even in one of the most sensitive of the modern white blackfellow texts, Patrick White's *A Fringe of Leaves* (1976), the Aboriginal experience of the shipwrecked Ellen is a transition, a sea change with a necessary surfacing at the end. 'Go native' is necessary, 'gone native' is not. Some psychologists might diagnose even acquisition as a rejection of self for not-self. The typical narrative pattern must modify such a theory, however. The indigene is acquired, the white is not abandoned. Usually, the connection is made through some form of sexual contact, in earlier works, a white male with a native female, in recent often the reverse. But in the majority of works of both types this is followed by the death of the indigene. In *A Fringe of Leaves*, the process is not sex but cannibalism, as Ellen eats the leg of an Aboriginal girl noted for her symbiotic relationship with nature. Ellen swallows the land. In another historical novel by White, *Voss* (1957), still perhaps the most resonant portrait of white contact with Aboriginal presence, the German explorer recognizes that regardless of his egomania his meal will be reversed: "If we are not devoured by blacks", Voss replied, "or the Great Snake, then we shall be eaten by somebody eventually" (379). His Aboriginal guide Jackie kills him, as Voss wills him to perform the sacrificial violence of the land. The white who does not 'surface' from Aboriginality dies.

A variety of factors are involved in incorporating the native for the page but still more are added when the genre requires that the native be corporeally present, in the theatre. There must be presence in the theatre, although the presence is that of the actors and not of the author. If this pawn is played by a white actor in disguise signifying processes are at play similar to those in the novel. If a native actor is used the cross-cultural leap in which

the white author creates the lines and the context for the indigene's speech might seem a beneficial erasing of boundaries but it might also be considered a means of hiding some very necessary distinctions. In the published text of Keneally's play, *Bullie's House* (1981), there is a lengthy comment by Bob Maya, one of the Aboriginal actors in the original production. He states that he overcame his rejection of a white-authored script when a young Aboriginal girl pointed out to him, 'if it's true and it's about our people, does it matter who writes it?' (xiii) There are various possible refutations of this statement but one brief quotation from Foucault's 'Two Lectures' will suffice:

I would say that we are forced to produce the truth of power that our society demands, of which it has need, in order to function: we must speak the truth; we are constrained or condemned to confess or to discover the truth. (93)

The girl's simplistic view of the possibilities of an Aboriginal 'truth' in the theatre shows no recognition of the theatrical power/truth which constrains it within a certain semiotization or of the power/truth of white semiosis which condemns it.

A novel can only attempt the Bakhtinian illusion of representing 'another's voice'. The dramatic text makes it possible for another's voice to speak the other as described by the white self. Maya's role as signifier of 'reality' just made the limits of the image more acceptable, in a play which incorporates all of the standard commodities noted above. It appears that as long as this semiotic field exists, as long as the shapes of the standard commodities change but the commodities remain the same, the chess match can appear to vary but there is still a defineable limit to the board. The necessities of indigenization can compell white players to enter the game but they cannot liberate the pawn.

This chessboard analogy might seem a diminution of the issue. It emphasizes distance between sign, the image of the Aborigine in Australian literature, and referent, the Aborigines of Australia, but it perhaps hides the contradictions of the chessboard of Australian political reality. Still, if, as Derrida claims, there is nothing outside the text, then the image of the native is the textualization of the erasure of native sovereignty in Australia. At a time when native land rights are a major issue in Australian politics, a recognition of the manipulations of white indigenization in literature might be a stimulus to the reinstatement of the indigenous.



## NOTES

1. This paper provides a sketch of a theoretical approach used in various other studies (Goldie) and thus examples are kept to a minimum. The comments refer specifically to Australian literature but the majority of the assertions are applicable to a number of analogous literatures, most obviously Canadian, in both English and French, and American but also New Zealand and various South American. To look beyond the 'Indian' context, South African literature also 'fits', with J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* a perfect example of the valorization of the semiotic field of the indigene. For a general comparison, the ideological framework of Robert F. Berkhofer's *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present* is different from the present study but the conclusions are similar.
2. Dates in the text refer to first publication. For some early texts, these are only approximate.

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