

# REPRESENTATIONS OF ABORIGINALITY

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## DISCOURSES OF THE SACRED IN ABORIGINAL WRITING

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'Religion', the 'sacred', 'spirituality', 'belief', 'metaphysics' are terms which haven't appeared in many Australian literary or cultural studies writings in recent years. This is in part due to an inevitable backlash against what John Docker, writing in his 1984 volume *In A Critical Condition*, called 'The Metaphysical Ascendency'. In one form or another, many Australian literary critics of the 1980s and 1990s have espoused materialist views of culture, often opposing the category of the sacred or metaphysical. Reflecting something like Docker's Manichean anti-theology, many commentators have moved against the New Critical and old Leavisite methodologies which had set up a hegemonic dichotomy, and which saw, according to Docker:

the social and political [as] 'surface' realms, local and temporary, and therefore 'non-literary'. The metaphysical realm of existence (they said)...because its problems are more abiding and permanent than social and political problems are presumed to be, is somehow, by magical fiat, 'strictly literary'. (Docker 91)

The string of dichotomies which Buckley, Heseltine, Wilkes and their ilk are accused of promulgating include: the social and political against the aesthetic, literary and metaphysical; or the social, national, communal against individualist, internalised humanism. However, Docker's critical net catches an unexpected fish in its attack on metaphysics: himself. Docker's diatribe against such dichotomies merely ends up by placing him, by implication, on the side which, he argues, was crushed by the metaphysical ascendency—that is, political and ideological criticism—and therefore does nothing to deconstruct the dichotomising he condemns.

In the past decade, the development of postcolonial theory has been bogged down in its own versions of these dichotomies, with a number of critics developing versions of post-aesthetic, ideological criticism, often with a secular or sometimes actively anti-religious bias. Such an approach often remains fixed in what American ethnographer Arnold Krupat calls, after Donald Bahr, 'victimist history' (Krupat 20), a simplistic delineating of victim and perpetrator. This article discusses several aspects of the debate concerning postcolonial criticism and Aboriginal claims to sacred sites and beliefs. My argument will be that in the many discourses of academia and the media which surround questions of indigenous spirituality and sacred sites, a very large full-stop appears as soon as the concept of 'the sacred'

is raised. For some it is the full-stop of suspicion, scepticism, and even hatred of such a category. For others, this full-stop is an indication of eager compliance with Aboriginal claims, a compliance which does not always do justice to the category of the sacred it is supposedly embracing.

The Hindmarsh bridge affair has been instructive in this context, in the way it has the potential to loosen up this full-stop, into a comma at least, as commentators swirl around the proposition that Hindmarsh Island is not just a sacred site, but a *women's sacred site*; not necessarily for all Aboriginal women of the Ngarrindjeri tribe either, but for *some*, a select eldership; and not even this, purportedly, is agreed on by female Ngarrindjeris.

Ian McLachlan, in a near-gleeful ABC radio interview, was pleased to keep the conversation going when news of the disagreement *within* the Ngarrindjeris became known. McLachlan transparently tried to keep whipping up the *ambiguity and indecipherability* of the situation, as the reporter asked: 'Well don't you believe the women then?' 'Which ones?' McLachlan replied triumphantly, his political opportunism almost palpable down the airwaves, as he attempted to deliver the question involving declarations of sacred belief safely back into the party political basket.

The headline of the June edition of *Time Magazine* in Australia oxymoronically read: 'Disputed Secrets', and added in its byline: 'The Hindmarsh Bridge affair takes an ugly turn, igniting fresh anger and fingerprinting on all sides' (*Time* 38-39). This report goes on to quote Wendy Chapman, bankrupt entrepreneur and would-be developer of the proposed Hindmarsh marina: 'Everything we've worked for all our lives has been taken from us...these Aboriginal claims came out of nowhere, they can't be tested in court or even seen by anybody other than a chosen few. We tried hiring our own female anthropologist to look at the evidence but we were denied access. What kind of society is this?' (*Time* 39). In response to this, *Time* quotes University of Adelaide anthropologist Deane Fergie, on behalf of the Aboriginal Legal Rights Movement, who says, *in support* of the women's claims to Hindmarsh: 'This is not some remote claim to a patch of desert nobody will ever see; this is in our backyards. And we're going to be seeing a lot more of it' (*Time* 39). Well...the anthropologist must, somewhat foot in mouth, have been accidently figuratively speaking, as the whole point here is that Aboriginal sacred traditions and sites *are* secret, private, belonging not to the global media, not to Western anthropology, male or female, nor to Western developers even if they've worked for it all their lives, but to a tradition of belief and practice, the sacred as living, sustaining and educating a community and individuals in that community over many lifetimes.

How are Aboriginal concepts of the sacred scrutinised by white settler Australia, particularly if it is granted that such concepts are problematic in a 'modern', largely secular, capitalist society? More specifically, how does materialist-oriented *academic* criticism cope with claims to the sacred and traditional? For many white *and* black critics, the discourses of the Aboriginal sacred are *Romantically* constructed by invocations of presence, authenticity, freedom, wholeness, reclamation of an originary past. Whether the individual Aboriginal is imaged alone, discovering his or her 'own poetic voice', or deeply entrenched within a community, a tradition or a past, what is often too easily called for in such humanist discourse is authentic Aboriginal humanity, a humanity not yet constructed by white education or desecrated by colonising impurities. This Manichean approach—white educator/black child, or black innocent/white polluter—is understandable, given the larger political context, with its demands for strategic, polemical representation. But such polarisation too often only leads to breast-beating guilt and accusation, embedded in simple, crude polemics. This is so, for instance, in the many discourses of *Christian mission* and Aboriginal belief. Critic Emmanuel S. Nelson, writing on Mudrooroo's 1983 historical narrative *Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World*, discusses the missionary figure in the novel. The author, claims Nelson:

invests the evangelist in his novel with a variety of colonialist motives and traits to make the missionary function as a metaphor for the imperialist impulse. Artistically,

Johnson does not succeed as much as he does politically. His racial outrage, his secular sarcasm, and his relentless satire render Robinson a pompously self-assured buffoon, almost a caricature rather than an entirely convincing character. Politically, however, Johnson succeeds superbly in articulating the role of the missionary in the colonialist scheme: the missionary's imperial quest, like all other quests to reshape the world in European terms, inevitably fails but not before it inflicts irreparable damage. (Nelson 456-57)

In the face of the globalising polemics of this critique, the need for a reading of the text cries out. I would argue that the novel's art and its politics are much subtler and more flexible, more painfully aware of verbal and human contradictions, than the critic allows. Yes, the buffoonery of the evangelist, the notorious George Robinson, 'Protector of Aborigines' in Tasmania, is a major feature of the representation. But such buffoonery, almost carnivalesque at points, is also a tool (of the author and/or the reader is unsure), I would argue, of a kind of impossible sympathy for the zealous white man full of ambiguous motives and desires, as much a physical, sexual creature as a religious one. In this way, the figures of Robinson and Wooreddy are drawn together, even as racially and historically they are perpetrator and victim.

The realities of Aboriginal genocide, forced migration and Christianisation are the novel's main concerns, and the instrument of government, the servant of imperialism (made up of greed, religious zealotry, class shame, sexual repression) is called George Robinson. But Mudrooroo's text is interested in the why, and the how, of such human actions and decisions. Robinson occupies the space which 'functions as a metaphor for the imperialist impulse', but the novel is much more than a political diatribe. And just as the central Aboriginal character, the clever-man Doctor Wooreddy, functions as the site of black oppression, and as the focus of horrific and grievous injustice, his character too is complexly represented.

Wooreddy is both a prophetic figure, full of wisdom, unique amongst his tribe, and he does nothing to resist the drag of history, merely 'enduring'. And for this representation of passivity Mudrooroo received some strong criticism from within Aboriginal communities. The novel was seen as pessimistic, not sufficiently condemnatory of white, Christian colonisation and not revisionary enough in its depiction of Aboriginal history. It is not difficult to see his 1991 novel, *The Master of the Ghost Dreaming*, as an extended grappling with the textual and larger political developments started in *Doctor Wooreddy*. At the close of the earlier novel, the aboriginal tribes of Tasmania have been pathetically decimated, civilisation hanging limply from them like the tattered clothes they are made to wear. The later novel tells the tale again, and therefore differently.

Only the bare bones of an 'historical novel' remain with *Master*. The white characters have been pared down to 'Fada', 'Mada' and 'Sonny', the names picking up the intonations of Aboriginal pronunciation. The later novel is much more self-conscious, knows more about discourse theory, works cleverly with parody (both thematically and generically), and sets a determined political course, an optimistic one, for its Aboriginal characters. Fada is a loose, baggy representation of an evangelist. He carries many of the traits of the historical 'George Robinson', though here we meet him at the end of his mission, tired, sexually frustrated, knowing at base the failure of his Christian/imperial vision.

Alongside the utopic moments of *Dreaming* which are narrated, another discourse, seemingly less utopic, complicates the novel to the point of straining. This discourse is messier politically, and I offer it here in some knowledge that it may be accused of being a white reading irrelevant to Aboriginal concerns. But I'm seeking to write what has been called by American ethnographer Arnold Krupat a dialogical rather than oppositional criticism. As the novel imaginatively charts a way 'beyond', of writing the morass of history and thus enervating the present, it is at the same time dialogically alive to the ambiguities and fractures which complicate any simple oppositionality. Of such dialogism, critic Arnold Kruput writes:

one of the things that occurs on the borders is that oppositional sets like West/Rest, Us/Them ... historical/mythical ... often tend to break down. On the one hand, cultural

contact can indeed produce mutual rejections, the reification of differences, and defensive retreats into celebrations of what each group regards as distinctively its own...on the other hand, it may also frequently be the case that interaction leads to interchange... (Krupat 15)

Krupat, influenced by the work of ethnographer James Clifford, is writing particularly about white contact with native Americans. In the introduction to his 1992 volume *Ethnocriticism: Ethnography, History, Literature*, he seeks to establish a methodological and ideological framework which will escape political and aesthetic polarisations. He is aware of the dangers of white diminishment of native otherness in such a stance, and is also open to the possibility that the 'ethnocriticism' he seeks to write may be impossible. However, the alternatives, to Krupat, are grim: writing 'victimist history' informed by Manichean notions of good and evil, often accompanied by Romantic images of perfect Indian harmony with the environment, or 'nothing more than sermonizing about "the Indian mind", or the evils of "Western civilization"' (Krupat 15). The role for critique then, is 'to move away from even the majority/minority dichotomy, without, however, denying the differential relations of power it seeks to name' (Krupat 25).

This critical methodology may be utopic. It puts a great strain on discourse, and the understandings it constructs, for the ways of registering otherness are legion, and they do so often collapse simplistically into polarisations, with their attendant burden of sameness, one measure, in the end. But I would argue that *The Master of the Ghost Dreaming* can helpfully be read dialogically. I am not sure at what level of authorial or textual consciousness or intention what I am about to describe exists. It exists though, perhaps in competition with the move towards reclaiming old Dreaming secrets, and often the tension between the two strategies or impulses, politics or aesthetics creates odd moments. What I seek to describe is partly the tension, endemic in the struggles of representation, between 'the missionary function(ing) as a metaphor for the imperialist impulse', and less othering representation; between the generalising polemic and the textually elusive and ambiguous. Fada, Mada and Sonny are represented in all their duplicity of motivation, though not simplistically as mere types of the hypocrite. More controversially, I would argue that they work in the text as *mirror images* of Jangamutuk, Ludjee and their children. This mirroring tells a story of sameness and difference. It scrambles fantasy and reality. It is Lacan's founding moment of identity in otherness, and the moment when desire for the other is instituted. Identity—including Aboriginal identity—is in a compact with the other, which it sees as both murderer/castrator and as shadow of self, implicit in self. This is a potentially dangerous theory, one which could lead to a decay in any contemporary political positioning or strategy. But it may also be necessary in the establishment of less brittle, merely polemical understandings of contemporary situations.

This mirroring is there in the structures of the text, and needs investigating. Fada and Jangamutuk are both clever-men, religious leaders of their people; they are aging and tired, but still full of desires, sexual, material and spiritual. Both strive to initiate their young into the ways of their people. This white man, like all whites, is a 'ghost', immensely other and yet a fantastic projection, a shadow from the imagination of the observer. What could be the relationship of this different other, this invader, to the black self? Mudroorroo's novel staggers between alternatives. The desire to represent total otherness, absolute separation of the colonisers from their victims, is certainly there in the text, particularly in the fantastic Dreaming sequences. But at the very moment otherness and its corollaries—revulsion, difference in colour, sexuality, power, religion—is being set up, the text complicates the polarity with the possibility of desire for the other, dissemination of self in other.

There's time for only one textual example. In the opening chapter, a strange, parodic ceremony takes place in the bush, just as Mada and Fada are trying to sleep. Mada is furious because of the loud chanting of the tribe, and of Jangamutuk 'miming out perfectly words in the very voice of her husband' (*Master* 10). Jangamutuk and his people are in fact involved in a ritual of serious intent, structured through parody, mimicry, cultural cross-dressing:

feeling out the possibilities of the play as the rhythm bounced the shaman towards possession and his people into a new kind of dance. The dancers clasped each other and began a European reel. They kept to the repetitive steps and let the strange rhythm move their feet. It became their master. Each generation including the tragically few children jiggled as Jangamuttuk began to sing in perfect ghost accents.

(Master 4)

No doubt readers of the text will have a range of responses and readings to such a scene, from pity and horror at the Aboriginal submission involved, through to amusement at the parodic ironising of the colonial situation by the Aboriginal players. We are given a narrative statement of the shamanistic intention of Jangamuttuk, a powerful though not of course an exclusive reading of the scene:

Jangamuttuk, dreamer of the ceremony, was painted in like fashion. His work was more elaborate and detailed. A hatch design of red and white encircled his neck in a symbolic collar. Below this were painted the lapels of a frockcoat...

He was not after a realist copy, after all he had no intention of aping the European, but sought for an adaptation of these alien cultural forms appropriate to his own cultural matrix. It was an exciting concept; but it was more than this. There was a ritual need for it to be done. The need for the inclusion of these elements into a ceremony with a far different purpose than mere art. He, the shaman, and purported Master of the Ghost Dreaming, was about to undertake entry into the realm of the ghosts. Not only was he to attempt the act of possession, but he hoped to bring all his people into contact with the ghost realm so that they could capture the essence of health and well-being, and then break back safely into their own culture and society.

This was the purpose of the ceremony... (Master 3-4)

Even as the shaman's proud desire for liberation of his people is registered, so too is the power of that other, parodied, European realm. One effect of the scene is its creation of hybrid figures, in some ways pathetic in their submission, but also agents of metaphysical and physical striving, aware of their real historical entrapment, who must make themselves powerful artistic and spiritual manipulators. We can read both dignity and submission in the ceremony, to register the power of both cultures through the double action of mimicry. Is it parodic power which is drawn on, the power simultaneously to acknowledge the force of the culture parodied and to keep it in its place, to make it yield up the secrets of its force?

How do readers respond to these mirroring effects, and to the different kinds of hybridities produced: victim and perpetrator, sacred, political and material bound together in the parody? Is the mimicry politically, strategically effective, or weakly parodic, nothing more than 'paralyzed gestures of aestheticized powerlessness'? I would want to argue strongly for the impossibility of choice for the Aboriginal people represented here—or perhaps it is the contemporary novelist's impossibility of choice—and therefore for the immense courage of understanding which is realising, through the multiple strategies necessary in the text, 'identity as wound'. Master perceives in such densely-imagined passages the necessary and agonised interventions back and forth between victims and perpetrators. In fact it is the courage of this novel that it constructs a fictionalising history, an interventionary history; at the same time as it struggles not to collapse back into simplistic polarities. This struggle is of course Mudrooroo's, or the novel's, to find a discourse of empowerment—spiritual and political—constantly aware of the entrapments of mere 'victimist history', of mere polarisations, or of mere utopic revisionism.

The novel does not, I think, completely escape the seductions of these easier narratives. But it is in the complex multiple mirrorings of such scenes as the one discussed above that Mudrooroo's language is seeking a discourse at once politically realistic, which calls for political solidarity from contemporary Aboriginals with long and diverse cultural traditions, but which is also striving to write beyond us/them, coloniser/colonised, victim/perpetrator, sacred/political. It is not, I have argued, through any single narrative moment—utopic closure as the Aboriginal remnant heads off into freedom on the stolen schooner: the fantastic

possibilities of the Dreaming; the authenticity of any one character—but in the refusal of simple polemics and polarisation, that Mudrooroo's texts bring about the grounds for dialogue about the past and the future. The multiplicity—in genre, historical method and characterisation—of Mudrooroo's narrative allows the moment of victim and the moment of perpetrator, but it also enables a critical exchange, where sustained rage and imaginative forgiveness can stimulate contemporary dialogues of justice and (inter)change.

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