

David Unaipon's Style of Subversion: Performativity and Becoming in “Gool Lun Naga (Green Frog)”

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Metaphors of performance proliferate, unsurprisingly, in those discourses that, however derivative of Enlightenment, begin by questioning its hierarchical relation between the observer and the scene of knowledge. (Benston 20)

To talk of the colonial present is perhaps to talk of the Reserve Bank of Australia's website, where there is a picture of Aboriginal author, activist, inventor and public speaker David Unaipon on the fifty dollar note. Stamped across this picture (as it is across all images of notes on the website) is the word, in capitals: SPECIMEN. The word resonates uncomfortably with Australia's colonial history of collecting Aboriginal people and things for scientific observation. But the word is perhaps even more disturbing to those of us who study Unaipon; as he becomes an object under discussion in academic work, his own words challenge any discourse that attempts to pin him down as a specimen for study. Writing in the *Age* against segregationist policies of the late 1930s, Unaipon urged:

There have been enough scientific investigations already, and no new facts have come to light, and yet there is still a plea to segregate the natives, keeping them practically in bush museums for scientific purposes. (qtd in Markus 79)

Despite this protest, there is evidence to suggest that Unaipon was complicit with colonial practices such as the collection of sacred stories, items and Indigenous remains.¹ Further, Unaipon has been seen as a supporter of assimilation, Aboriginal child removal and boarding schools for Aboriginal children.²

Any discussion of Unaipon's life and writing must either be filled with contradictions or omit certain parts of the story. Other apparent contradictions include: Unaipon's religious belief (he often appears a devout Christian, but remarked at age 90 that Christianity is a “blasphemy” in terms of Ngarrindjeri

religious beliefs);³ his manner of dress (despite his extreme poverty he often dressed in a suit and tie); his accent (often noted as Scottish); as well as his literary writings (his Aboriginal legends obviously reference Biblical stories and mimic classical styles). Contradictions, by their very nature, can only exist where binaries exist. Even more to the point, to seek certainty by finding which element of the contradiction is the “truth” is to necessarily render the other element “fabrication”. Often the sheer difficulty of such a hierarchical ordering of truth leads to the dismissal of significant Indigenous resistance work as uncertain or, worse, illogical. Understanding the *style* of David Unaipon—be it his dress or art—can help destabilise such a “colonial order”.

It is immediately risky to remark on David Unaipon’s style of dressing; it might be seen to imply that Aboriginal people can’t dress well. However, it is erroneous to ignore the fact that Aboriginal resistance is often an embodied practice. As Aileen Moreton-Robinson has argued:

The message of resistance is embedded in local histories and is performed in embodied daily practices such as the public display of the Aboriginal flag and colours on Indigenous bodies [. . .] resistances do not always lead to conflict or self-destruction. Rather, they are profoundly political acts containing logic that is incomprehensible to most white folk [. . .] who want us to perform our politics according to their ideas [. . .] (127)

Wearing a “Cook-who?” or “GST: Genocide, Sovereignty, Treaty” t-shirt, or the colours of the Aboriginal flag, then, might form part of a message of colonial resistance that signifies, amongst other things, a declaration of Aboriginal sovereignty. That Unaipon’s dress suggested dignity, refinement and intelligence is no less significant. Or, as Stephen Muecke has argued, “Unaipon’s *cultivation* [. . .] is intended to prove the point that ‘Aboriginal people can do it too’, his cultivation becomes a culture brought out into battle against the primitivising and historicising tendencies to ‘keep the natives in their place’” (“Between the Church and Stage” 17). Derek Gregory highlights that similar historicising forces are part of modernity’s “order of things”: a fabricated regime of truth that provides (drawing on Said) an “imaginative geography” of power relationships (Gregory 3-4). Such a world is binaristic, where “the double-headed coin of colonial modernity” has two sides of differing value. One side, “the face of modernity as (for example) [. . .] a partitioned, hierarchical, and disciplined space”, is valued over the reverse side, which “exhibit[s] modernity’s other as (for example) primitive, wild, [. . .] irregular, multiple, and labyrinthine” (3-4). Gregory’s argument in *The Colonial Present* is that this order still operates today. Thus, to simply

recognise Unaipon's contradictions (his irregular style, for example) may not be enough. Unaipon must be understood outside of colonial modernity's fabricated order. Logic must be seen to be labyrinthine. Illogicality must be seen to be ordered.

In the colonial order of things, where modernity would be well dressed while its other would be poorly dressed (if at all), Unaipon's suit and tie are not curiosities, but are part of an embodied performance that challenges the truth value of colonialism's fabrications. There is a long history to such a *style* of resistance, where the individual's use of cloth battles the fabric/ation of a naturalised social order. Such a strategy does not begin with colonialism. The particular style in which Unaipon's fashionable resistance was forged stretches back to the dandyism of the nineteenth century. In Europe the dandy rose to prominence as the embodiment of social mobility. In 1805, Beau Brummell became a London hero when his dress and social wit earned him the friendship of Princes as well as regular attendances at Royal balls and Court. He proved that a hereditary social order was not a natural fact. The dandy also became popular in France, not just as an embodied challenge to hereditary classism, but as a "refinement of intellectual rebellion" (Moers 13). In his 1920 *Vanity Fair* article, "The Golden Age of the Dandy", John Peale Bishop nostalgically quotes Barbey d'Aureville, suggesting that dandyism is: "something more than 'the art of costume [. . .] Dandyism is a manner of being, entirely composed of nuances'". As someone who resisted upper-class snobbery by mimicking it, the dandy made a nuanced rebellion against hereditary (or essentialised) class structures and his manner of dress became an obsession for many nineteenth-century artists. Stylistic mimicry combined with subtle irony were the dandy's tools for nuanced intellectual rebellion. Despite such readings of the dandy, for the working class he was nothing but a display of the worst traits of the aristocracy—laziness, unmanliness, and physical weakness. As a result, the dandy himself was mimicked in popular culture for being in opposition to "working-class" values. Particularly in nineteenth-century culture, the dandy, as a figure of social and intellectual rebellion, is ambivalently tethered to his parody in working-class entertainment—from comic-strip caricatures to the nineteenth century's most popular form of stage entertainment: blackface minstrelsy.

Barbara Lewis's study of the minstrel dandy eloquently balances the relationship between real black dandies of the 1820s and 1830s and their fictional onstage counterparts, white actors in blackface make-up. Lewis states that the fictional character of Long Tail Blue (a blackfaced dandy, initially dignified and socially transgressive) enjoyed a short period of

“pandemonic fascination and consternation” (258). She goes on to show, however, that under a new egalitarian president in Andrew Jackson, working-class anxieties toward the growing population of free blacks emerged onstage through the creation of two minstrelsy stereotypes—Jim Crow (a raggedy, trickster, plantation slave) and Zip Coon (a bumbling, pretentious dandy). In opposition to the dignity of Long Tail Blue such characters quickly made a grotesquery of blackness and ended the transgressive potential of the black stage dandy. Lewis tentatively suggests that the onstage grotesquery coincided with actual violence by working-class whites against real black dandies. Discussing a riot in Philadelphia in 1834 where over 300 policemen were required to stop white people injuring black people and destroying their property, houses and churches, Lewis concludes:

Of course the claim is not being made that chronology equals causality. But the closeness in date between Dixon’s portrayal of Zip Coon and the outbreak of mob violence is worth note. The intensity of the riot and the choice of scapegoats toward whom the rioters chose to direct their assaults can be seen as a measure of the animosity white Philadelphians harboured against privileged blacks. This same enmity undergirded the popularity of Zip Coon. (269)

Audiences no doubt also enjoyed how the minstrel dandy “blackened” the image of the white aristocracy. However, the main role of the minstrel dandy was to supply a fiction of race that reduced blackness to being both unwilling and unable to participate in the American working-class. The figure of the blackface minstrel can be read as a metaphor for white constructions of blackness. Such a regime of “truth” operated against an emerging class of free black labourers in order to present the working-class as naturally white.

Ironically, when a black performer wears blackface and performs the dandy derogatory fictions of race are undermined. For Barbara Webb, African-American minstrel performer George Walker (active in the 1890s and early twentieth century) represents the links between European dandies and black dandyism (both onstage and in “real life”). Webb, relating Foucault’s theories of self-fashioning to African American identity, conceptualises Walker’s dandyism within a history of European dandyism. Reading a self-fashioning agency into Walker’s everyday life, Webb sees resistance as evident in his art:

Instead of satirizing his character, however, Walker emphasized the dandy’s point of view. He sought to fuse everyday life and performance in a way that staked out a dandyist claim for the dignity and humanity of African Americans. Walker lived out this claim at a time when performing a dandy in everyday life was still sometimes risky, even dangerous, for a black man. (15)

Walker bridges the tentative relationship between the stage and the street that Lewis suggests is necessary to make significant, albeit nuanced, rebellions. Webb's argument is that black minstrel dandies such as George Walker engaged audiences through the trope of the blackface dandy only to subvert their audience's (pre)conceptions of blackness. For Walker dandyism was not simply a way to challenge imagined constructions of blackness, it was an embodied way of life similar to that of the early European dandies. Black dandyism, then, involves turning the embodied, intellectual and artistic dandyism of Europe against expectations of blackness created in popular culture in order to challenge perceived norms of black identity.

The dandyism of David Unaipon also has strong links to the representation of Aboriginal people on the early Australian stage. For example, Stanley James, a journalist for the Melbourne newspapers the *Argus* and the *Age*, used the pseudonym "Julian Thomas" to publish *No Mercy*, a play that contained an Aboriginal character named Charley (Williams 137-38). Charley, according to the *Australasian*, had "undergone the process of civilization" to be "the best representation of a blackfellow we have ever had upon the Melbourne stage" (qtd in Williams 137-138). The character, who was well-dressed although crudely spoken, proved so popular that an advertisement which ran in both the *Argus* and the *Age* contained threats by James (writing as "the Vagabond") against audience members who had been seen transcribing his character's words. The *Bulletin* later claimed that "Charley" had not actually been invented by James, and that the real inventor was the actor Sam Poole. The ensuing argument between James and Poole displays the ambivalences of blackface dandyism: various white authors/actors admit their creative invention of blackness precisely as they claim the "real" authenticity of their representations of blackness. It is within such a context that Unaipon, like Walker, had to become recognisably "black" (a category defined by whiteness) before attempting to *performatively* renegotiate popular perceptions of blackness.

Performativity is performance *in motion*. Homi Bhabha, for example, would argue that performative language is to be found in any narrative where:

meanings may be partial because they are *in medias res*; and history may be half-made because it is in the process of being made; and the image of cultural authority may be ambivalent because it is caught, uncertainly, in the act of "composing" its powerful image. (3)

Performativity is the sign "in becoming", caught in a state of multiple possible significations. Performativity underscores set meanings, historical fact and cultural authority. It upsets knowledge (in the singular) and

provokes an awareness of possible multiple epistemologies. Because of this, the dandy was able to perform a role that could combat classism. George Walker performatively embodied a certain role to subvert it; his rebellion was performative in that he engaged an audience to negotiate the humanity and ability of blackness. By embodying dandyism the performance never ended and authenticity was undermined. It put blackness itself *in medias res*. The performative negotiation of blackness is the basis of a *style* of resistance that has been theorised in U.S. performance studies.

Kimberley W. Benston, writing on African-American modernism, bases his work on the complications that performativity raises for any essentialised conception of blackness. Benston suggests that “the determination of performance’s construction [operates] in a diversified network of choices and constraints, not bland reiteration of received ontology or iconicity” (16). The “determination of performance’s construction” might be thought of as, for example, blackness negotiated through performance. Caught in the act of performance, and within the realm of critical interpretation, the performance is ongoing. For Benston the artist can performatively open the bounds of blackness for negotiation in spite of, even sometimes because of, artistic restrictions such as audience expectations, publishing opportunities, institutionalised racism, and so on. Contradictions are not so incompatible when the artist is seen as *choosing* a style that negotiates such restrictions.

The artist’s method of negotiating a path through the various constraints and received iconicity crosses many disciplines. Benston, following Stephen Henderson (a critic of black poetry), formulates performances of blackness to be a “*theoretical* as well as aesthetic/political activity” (16). The political/aesthetic theory that Benston derives from black modernist performance (and that potentially overcomes complicity or contradiction) is the artist’s: “*style* of subversion, an elegant cunning that doubles (and thereby slyly ruffles) the appearance of conformity, undermining rigid classificatory norms by seeming to fulfil them with such spirited devotion” (17). Dandies, appearing to conform to the very thing they subtly critique, are haunted by a sense of contradiction. Walker and Unaipon can each be read as complicit with white methods of oppression; such an accusation is the result of their particular resistive styles. Walker and Unaipon each employed a strategic use of the conditions of their (apparent) conformity in order to stress the humanity and ability (amongst other things) of themselves and of blackness more generally. Almost any account of Unaipon mentions his manner of dress because he, like Walker, wore his resistance into everyday life. Given that Aboriginal resistance is embodied as much as it is performed (in writing,

theatre, music or art, for example), an analysis of how Unaipon's fashion of resistance is mirrored in his writing is long overdue.

In the mid-1920s David Unaipon was at the peak of his literary career. Previously, he had published short stories in various newspapers and in pamphlets which he sold. He had also authored a collected manuscript of 32 stories (the "Legendary Tales" manuscript) that he had lodged with the publisher Angus and Robertson and which he believed they would publish under his name. Angus and Robertson, however, sold the manuscript to an anthropologist known to Unaipon—William Ramsay Smith. In one of the most controversial cases of literary appropriation in the history of Australian literature, Ramsay Smith published Unaipon's manuscript in 1930, along with 21 other stories without acknowledging Unaipon in any way. Despite this, in 1929 Unaipon published a small collection of short stories—*Native Legends*—with an Adelaide-based publisher, Hunkin, Ellis and King. During the 1950s and 1960s he also published stories from the "Legendary Tales" manuscript under his name in *Dawn* magazine. In 2001 the "Legendary Tales" manuscript was "repatriated". Unaipon was acknowledged as the rightful author and the introduction of the editors Stephen Muecke and Adam Shoemaker established him as a literary figure of note.

Unaipon has been the subject of a number of published articles, yet his actual stories have not received much critical attention. They often receive survey attention that fails to properly account for the intricacies of Unaipon's writing. In 1988 Muecke, Davis, and Shoemaker criticised Unaipon for: "posing as an expert on traditional Aboriginal customs" (37-38). This criticism precedes Shoemaker's monograph, *Black Words, White Page: Aboriginal Literature 1929-1988*, in which he argues that Unaipon was "indoctrinated by the AFA [Aborigines Friends Association]" (44). In a dated criticism recalling Gregory's definition of the colonial order, Shoemaker states that Unaipon's Christianised stories bordered on the "schizophrenic", striving for "synthesis [. . .] at the expense of logic" (46). Shoemaker, demanding authenticity, can only conclude from the "sanitised European form" of Unaipon's stories that he "did not have a very great knowledge of traditional Aboriginal matters" (49). Such readings, however, ignore the contextual restrictions Unaipon had to creatively negotiate. Nonetheless, Shoemaker and Muecke's efforts to publish Unaipon's manuscript (and particularly the recent paperback edition) has made a valuable contribution in allowing Unaipon's work to be widely available for consideration in Australian literary curricula.

Aside from Muecke and Shoemaker, whose recent individual publications do not provide close readings of Unaipon's work,⁴ Mary-Anne Gale and Sue

Hosking have recently contributed to critical published work on Unaipon. In “Giving Credit Where Credit is Due: The Writings of David Unaipon”, Gale reads Unaipon’s “Legendary Tales” manuscript in order to find consistent themes, styles and rhetoric to suggest the 21 remaining stories in Ramsay Smith’s 1930 publication are in fact Unaipon’s. She finds his style “sometimes Biblical sometimes Miltonic” and notes Unaipon’s “fondness for exotic characters that are arguably more reminiscent of Greek, Roman or Egyptian mythology, than that of Indigenous Australia” (65). Hosking’s most recent survey of Unaipon’s writing concludes that his “imagination and acquired knowledges [. . .] make many distinctive stories. Of course there are times when undigested ideologies clog up the narrative” (11). Contradiction, it seems, plagues Unaipon. However, Hosking allows that Unaipon’s parallels between Christianity and Aboriginal spirituality offer “a syncretic world view and assum[e] the potential for racial harmony” (12). Whilst this view is by far the most nuanced to date, both Gale and Hosking, as with many before them, overlook the agency of Unaipon’s writing. A narrative does not always reflect the essential belief of the author; it represents many choices and concessions within a restricted order of possible self-representations. Further scholarly debate and close reading of Unaipon’s work are required if he is to be granted the authorial agency he deserves as one of the most necessarily inventive writers in the history of Australian literature.⁵

Amongst Unaipon’s *Legendary Tales* is his story of the “Gool Lun Naga (Green Frog)”, a creation story about a Water Spirit who desires to enter the material world. A Lyre Bird, who is adept at singing the songs of other animals, is asked by a spirit to sing into a stream. After much beautiful singing a Being emerges from the water. The Lyre Bird names the Being “Gool lun naga, a son of the clear running stream of water” (54). The Lyre Bird teaches the Gool lun naga to imitate the noises of other things. The Gool lun naga becomes so adept at this that he tricks even his teacher, who admits that the Gool lun naga is “better in the art of ventriloquism than he himself” (56). The Gool lun naga becomes more and more accomplished, until he is a “hypnotist”, causing visions of the very thing he is mimicking. A performance is arranged so that “the great army of Beings—the Kangaroo with all his family, the Animal tribe, the Eagle Hawk and family with his tribe, Snake, Reptile, and Insect tribes” can witness the hypnotism of this strange new Being (58). After the performance the Spirit of the Running Stream gives the Gool lun naga a wife. However, the Gool lun naga swells with so much pride whilst singing to his wife that his voice is strained so that “today he is only heard to Croak-Croak, never more to sing the song of the Birds” (59).

There is a genre of Aboriginal writing involving stories of how particular animals developed distinctive traits. Adam Shoemaker describes such stories as “Unaipon’s more juvenile stories” (*Black Words* 48). Unaipon’s stories occasionally suggest categorisations as “juvenile”. For example, in the third paragraph of “Gool Lun Naga (Green Frog)” Unaipon narrates: “Now some of you little readers will or have noticed some water-courses that have the water-flow murmuring and gurgling songs of these Water Spirits” (53). However, as with most of Unaipon’s writing, and Aboriginal creation stories more generally, the stories are of far greater importance than the narrative might suggest. Whilst Unaipon’s stories no doubt hold great significance for Indigenous communities for cultural, religious and spiritual reasons, they are also significant documents revealing Unaipon’s engagement with colonialism.

Read as narratives of “becoming”, Unaipon’s creation stories mirror his own negotiation of the politics of identification and Aboriginality. In “Gool Lun Naga (Green Frog)”, for example, Unaipon’s opening paragraph is parenthesised within the following two sentences: “This is one of the many stories of a strange Being that came into existence”, and “Everything that exists has some life apart from itself” (53). The story is one of doubled existence. Such doubling is further apparent in the title: “Gool Lun Naga (Green Frog)”. The very subject of the story is suspended between two possibilities: “Gool Lun Naga [. . .]” (traditional Aboriginality) and “[. . .] (Green Frog)” (Anglicised colonial modernity). The story, however, does not function solely to privilege one possibility over the other. Becomings never do, as Deleuze and Guattari argue:

A becoming is neither one nor two, nor the relation of the two; it is the in-between [. . .] constitut[ing] a zone of proximity and indiscernibility, a no-man’s land, a nonlocalizable relation sweeping up the two distant or contiguous points, carrying one into the proximity of the other—and the border-proximity is indifferent to both contiguity and distance. (293)

Through his becoming, Unaipon’s Gool lun naga represents the potential of “carrying one [existence] into the proximity of the other”. The Gool lun naga is a powerful character who transcends the perceived space between the spiritual and material world. Both are the potential identities of this mythical Being. The narrative further complicates its potential definition by using free indirect discourse. Such a narrative device, where the thoughts of a character appear within an apparent third-person narrative structure, works to implicate the author/speaker within the action of the story. In this subtle way, Unaipon inserts his own voice into the text:

the Bubble Spirit sat and watched the little fishes sporting and swimming, darting here and there in the clear waters of the pool. It would watch some strange tiny objects wiggling in the water, then burst forth and take wing and fly out over the water and away to the reeds and rushes and then among the flowers that grew upon the bank. *Oh, what a wonderful life to live, to go where you will and come back in your own approved time.* [emphasis added] (54)

This slippage in the narrative voice can be read as Unaipon's direct enunciation of a desire for freedom of movement (movement of Aboriginal people in the 1920s was heavily controlled by missionary and state authorities). When Unaipon wanted to travel away from the mission, he, like most Aboriginal people at the time, had to seek permission from government and religious authorities. Such narrative slippage is not a one-off phenomenon. In the following passage the Water Spirit watches:

in wonderment at the merry laughter of the Kookaburras, their forms reflected in the clear water as they sat upon the overhanging branch of a large gum tree. Oh, what a wonderful realisation to be able to become part of the material world. (54)

This passage is evidence of Unaipon's skill as a writer. Whilst again emphasising a desire for unrestricted existence, this passage also collapses the space of distinct, essentialised identities. Foreshadowing the themes of performativity and mimicry that are to follow, Unaipon has the Kookaburra's image literally float upon the Water Spirit. Regardless of distance (conceived along spatial or linear lines) Unaipon stages this story (and, arguably, others) in the space between traditional Aboriginality and colonial modernity. In the narratives, the proximity of these realms of existence are so close as to be almost indiscernible.⁶ But, no matter how ideal they may seem in Unaipon's fictional world, this is no ideal setting. The narrative slippages emphasise that the stories cannot ignore the complicated power relationships influencing this space of becoming. The free indirect desires of Gool lun naga (doubled in the same sentence with the narrator's desires) show Unaipon's frustrations with the physical restrictions upon his movement and potential. In Unaipon's writings, everything that exists, including the narrative itself, has some life apart from that which is immediately apparent.

"Gool Lun Naga (Green Frog)" also provides key insights to how Unaipon sought to performatively overcome the restricted space of becoming in which he was entwined. The centrality of performativity to Unaipon's particular style of resistance is mirrored in the Gool lun naga's narrative of becoming. After the Water Spirit has materialised as Gool lun naga, its first wish, as expressed to the Lyre Bird, is "to be able to sing like the Magpie and laugh

like the Kookaburra" (55). Mimicry, referred to as "the art of ventriloquism" by Unaipon, is key to the Gool lun naga's becoming (56). However, simple mimicry will not do in this story of becoming. As Deleuze and Guattari state: "We fall into a false alternative if we say that you either imitate or you are. What is real is the becoming itself, the block of becoming, not the supposedly fixed terms through which that which becomes passes" (238). Becoming undermines the essentialism of identity's origins and destinations—the becoming identity is itself the reality. Even apparent mimicry, for Deleuze and Guattari, gains the status of real identity. Yet Unaipon's story does not need Deleuze and Guattari's defence. "Gool Lun Naga (Green Frog)" exceeds mimicry as the Gool lun naga exceeds the skills of his teacher to become not just the best ventriloquist in the land, but also a "hypnotist": "He would make the sound of a Magpie at a certain spot and would speak to his audience in such a manner that they would imagine the sound and were sure they saw him settling there" (56). Gool lun naga is not only a mimic; he begins to control the visual essence of the very thing he is mimicking. Almost exaggerating the theme of performance, Unaipon has the Gool lun naga organise a great performance for all of the Animals:

So when the night-time approached they were all seated on the bank, and the Beings heard some wonderful songs all round, and when the sun rose the Gool lun naga still performed his wonderful feats; in the still air they imagined the noise of a mighty wind, in the clear sky they fancied they saw the flash of lightening and heard the thunder roar, the sound of rain and hail lashed by the fury of a mighty wind. They all scattered and ran to seek shelter. Suddenly the storm ceased and they all looked about themselves and saw a clear sky, which had been there all the while [. . .] And they all shouted: "Kay hey, kay hey". [translated in the Glossary as "approving applause"] (58)

This is the moment when the Gool lun naga has become: "the Beings all went away to their homes, and for many days afterwards they spoke to each other of the wonderful thing they had seen" (58-59). However much this might seem like an appropriate point to end the narrative, the Gool lun naga's becoming is not finalised. After the Water Spirit gives him a wife, and he sings to her so much that his pride swells and his voice is ruined, he has now become (again) something different: an everyday, croaking Green Frog.

Several things emerge from this series of events. Firstly, Unaipon, not surprisingly in a narrative where everything is doubled (at least), provides two endings. As far as is possible within a narrative episode he seems to be impelling the reader to recognise that becoming itself is never final. Identity

is always open for (re)definition. Secondly, key to overcoming the origins and destinations of becoming is performance. “Hypnotism” functions in the story to exceed mimicry and to undermine notions of essentialised identities. Seemingly, Gool lun naga has no identity other than that of a mimic, but his mimicry is so convincing that it becomes real (if only fleetingly). Unaipon’s hypnotism performatively opens the borders between reality and illusion in regards to both identity (the Magpie) and nature (the storm), thus undermining regimes of truth that structure both. Thus, for Unaipon, becoming is performative, a hypnotism that opens the space between reality and fiction to undermine essentialism. Such a strategy restores agency to the individual’s continual self-fashioning as whatever they may constantly become.

Restoring agency to Unaipon’s writing necessitates a reconsideration of former criticisms of his work. Unaipon, who was familiar with classical writers such as John Bunyan, was no doubt capable of making stylistic arguments. Bunyan, particularly in “The Author’s Apology for His Book”, his preface to *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, overtly discusses how his form and method are part of his argument:

Yea, that I might them better palliate,
I did too with them thus expostulate.
 May I not write in such a style as this?
In such a method too, and yet not miss
Mine end, thy good? why may it not be done? (32)

Bunyan was keenly aware of how style and method might “palliate” the expectations of hostile readers. Unaipon’s familiarity with such a text should not be forgotten when considering his self-styling as an author. In her survey of *Legendary Tales* Sue Hosking states:

Unaipon identifies freely with “my race”, while continually drawing attention to the “Aborigine’s primitive mind” and “our little brain capacity”. He is at once of “them”, and apart: distanced from the “primitive” (non-Christian) beliefs and practices which, he claims at the end of “Witchcraft”, have “prevented the increase of my race”. (10)

I would argue that Hosking has underestimated Unaipon’s agency as author on this point. As “Gool Lun Naga (Green Frog)” begins:

This is one of the many stories of a strange Being that came into existence. No doubt somewhere in the many stories I have written I think I have mentioned that to the Aborigine’s primitive mind there are many Spirits which exist in the elements—Myeyea (Wind Spirit); Pa nee (Rain Spirit); Kallitthie (Hail Spirit) [. . .] (53)

In a story where everything is doubled Unaipon's comment must not be isolated as a derogatory comment on Indigenous intelligence. He brackets the comment with the fact that he has written many stories, indicating intelligence, and with an account of Indigenous beliefs in which English translations are secondary and parenthesised. English itself, or its language of science and anthropology, comes under attack in Unaipon's ironic references to "primitive minds" and "little brain capacity". The seemingly derogatory comment must be read ironically in order to understand Unaipon's style of resistance. It is, after all, this very paragraph that ends with Unaipon's great theme: "Everything that exists has some life apart from itself" (53).

Unaipon's life and writing can be read as the continual passage through and beyond any essentialised identity. Metaphors of performance continually emerge in both Unaipon's work and in readings of his life and writing. This is hardly surprising, as Kimberly Benston observes: "Metaphors of performance proliferate, unsurprisingly, in those discourses that, however derivative of Enlightenment, begin by questioning its hierarchical relation between the observer and the scene of knowledge" (20). Unaipon's performativity (in dress and art) resists being restricted to either face of colonial modernity's currency. Unaipon was the agent of his own self-fashioning. He is not modern at the expense of tradition, or vice versa. If the authenticity of his stories is in question, the words of Stuart Hall should put the issue to rest. Identities, Hall states, involve the "invention of tradition as much as [. . .] tradition itself" (4). For Unaipon, at least, identities are (performatively in the process of invention) an always modern tradition that undermines the hierarchical relationship between the modern anthropological observer and the passive pre-modern specimen. That his resistance to the colonial order took place in intercultural forums shows that Unaipon was keenly aware of the role whiteness plays in the definition of blackness. Even today Unaipon might continue to actively engage white and black audiences in a discussion of Aboriginality *if* his life and writing are given more than a segregated specimen-status in studies of Australian literature. Unaipon's style of subversion (linked as it was to worldwide strategies of resistance) can be understood as foreshadowing, perhaps even enabling, more recent Aboriginal resistance strategies. Such resistances work with and against a present, colonial discourse that continues to limit and define Aboriginality.

What becomes clear from the readings of Unaipon's work is that Unaipon, no matter how he attempted to performatively overcome preconceptions of Aboriginality, will always be embroiled within debates over the influence and effect of colonial power. While Deleuze and Guattari's theory of "becoming-

imperceptible” in a “zone of proximity and indiscernibility” (293) is useful for providing a language with which to discuss Unaipon’s resistances against essentialised identities, it must be remembered that his resistance took place within the power economy of the colonial order. As Gregory reminds us, the currency of modernity is powerful enough to structure realms of existence. The colonial order was ingrained in the discourse of 1920s Australia, as it arguably still is today. Unaipon’s desire to intertwine blackness and whiteness in a space of equality was always limited by the colonial order. As he continually failed to transcend the colonial order in his attempts to make its hierarchy indiscernible, he had to continually alter his method of resistance. Such a performative style of resistance has led to many irreconcilable contradictions in the historic record of his life. For example, Unaipon once helped draft a document to establish a separate Aboriginal state (House of Representatives n.p.), yet three years later he argued passionately against the segregation of Aboriginal people from the Australian nation. Tellingly, he saw (Government sanctioned) segregation as a “bush museum” for the scientific determination of Aboriginality. The performative contradictions of Unaipon’s identity are an effect of his refusal to acquiesce to a colonial order which remained largely unaltered even as he attempted various ways to seek freedom from mission and state controls (“Oh, what a wonderful life to live”). Ironically perhaps, the contradictions which result from an intractable colonial order led to Unaipon’s becoming-imperceptible, and to the particular and distinctive style of his resistance.

NOTES

- ¹ According to the *The Register News-Pictorial* of 30 July 1930, Unaipon “is at present on the Murray collecting blackfellows’ skulls, nardoo stones and other stone implements for Dr. Angas Johnson” (in Gale “A Biographical Sketch” 81).
- ² See, for example, Unaipon’s testimony to the 1913 Royal Commission on the Aborigines, where he states: “In regard to the young people here I would suggest that when the children leave school they should be taken in hand by some one educated to some trade or other useful employment so that they can become independent and self-supporting” (South Australian Government 33).
- ³ In a 1963 interview with Cath Ellis, Unaipon says: “I don’t believe in Jesus Christ [. . .] No, Ngayaringunand is what is born in us—the Great Spirit. Not Jesus Christ, the son of the Virgin Mary. It’s an insult to say that [. . .] And saved by the Holy Ghost. That’s blasphemy, is it?” (in Gale “A Biographical Sketch” 60).
- ⁴ See Muecke, “Between the Church and Stage” and Shoemaker, “The Headless State”.

- ⁵ The length of this article only allows for the close reading of one “Legendary Tale”. General conclusions will be drawn concerning Unaipon’s artistic style. These conclusions are based on my reading of Unaipon’s work and are intended to open an engaged discussion on an important literary figure, rather than providing a final and definitive reading.
- ⁶ In other stories from the *Legendary Tales* certain slippages occur (what Stephen Slemon might call allegorical cues) that indicate how Unaipon’s stories transcend the space between Aboriginal tradition and colonial modernity. For example, in “Confusion of Tongue”, traditional beings perform a ceremony in front of modern stage “footlights” (15). In “Naroondarie’s Wives” a traditional spiritual leader—Nebalee—lives at the “Point McLeay Mission” (123), whilst the legendary wives sleep “near the estate of the late T. R. Bowman” (125). Further, Unaipon describes Aboriginal myths, legends and stories as “stories that stand today as a link between the dawn of the world and our latest civilisation [sic]” (“Aboriginal Folklore” 4). Importantly, in this latter statement, the stories are not historical relics, but “stand today” in the present, a link between tradition (“the dawn of the world”) and modernity (“our latest civilisation”).

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