

UNFAMILIAR SELVES: ION L. IDRIESS AND MELANESIA

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Imagine yourself suddenly set down surrounded by your gear, alone on a tropical beach close to a native village while the launch or dinghy which has brought you sails away out of sight. (Malinowski 4)

...nowhere are the notions of normal, familiar actions and given systems of difference in greater jeopardy than on the imperial frontier. There Europeans confront not only unfamiliar Others but unfamiliar selves... (Mary Louise Pratt 121)

In his history of relations between white Australians and Melanesians, Hank Nelson observes that 'Australians going north have always been ambivalent towards the land across Torres Strait. They have thought of it [both] as a foreign country...and as an extension of Australia' (176). That ambivalence has produced an obsession with symbolic boundaries. In New Guinea in the 1920s and 1930s, for example, a battery of regulations defined the often porous divisions between white and black. Whites even found it difficult to cope with natives dressed in European clothes. The Native Regulations of 1922 state that 'natives whether male or female are forbidden to wear clothes on the upper part of the body' (Qtd in Nelson 6). It was common for police to tear singlets off the backs of Papuans who, unaware of the law, had bought them in the stores (Nelson 7). A government magazine, *The Papuan Villager*, warned its black readers: 'You can never be quite the same as the white man; and you will only look silly if you try to be. When we see a native in European clothes we usually laugh at him' (Qtd in Nelson 6). 'Even in the towns', Nelson observes, 'the white community was conscious that it was a minority—the defender of an island fortified by laws, conventions and a few guns against a sea of savages' (178-9). Such is the ambivalence of the discourse on nation that that island 'fortressed against a sea of savages' could equally be, indeed symbolically is, Australia itself.

In 1938, an Ordinance decreed that any white person 'found lodging or wandering in company with any of the natives of the Territory' would be penalised (Qtd in Bulbeck 196). Yet only a few years later, Australian military personnel stationed in New Guinea to defend the boundaries of their nation found themselves in breach of that very regulation by working in the company of natives. As a boy growing up in Sydney in the 1950s, I poured over drawings and photographs of the Pacific war in books with titles like *Soldiering On: The Australian Army at Home and Overseas*, and *Jungle Warfare: With the Australian Army in the South-West Pacific*. These books, which seem to have been in every Australian home of the

period, were published by the Australian War Memorial in Canberra during the war in 1942 and 1944. On looking through them again after many years, I was surprised to see picture after picture of Australian soldiers breaching the 1938 Ordinance by loitering with natives. In one photograph, for example, a group of native bearers carry what looks like a munitions case slung across a pole; in a matching photograph, a group of Australian diggers is shown carrying a catch of fish also slung, native fashion, on a pole. Not only had the diggers exchanged roles with the natives; they were even dressed like them, bare to the waist. If dress codes had been so strict only a few years before, and if the Ordinance states that *natives* have bare tops, what did it mean for white men to expose their chests? If natives dressed in singlets were thought to be comical in the 1930s, were the bare, white chests of the diggers equally laughable in the 1940s?

Another recurring image in the pages of *Soldiering On* and *Jungle Warfare* is the native mask. In one typical montage, a group of diggers is shown commandeering a dugout. Another digger, again bare to the waist, is about to put on a native mask. Dredged up from my own childhood, these images connect with post-colonial theory in ways that I find unsettling. Since Franz Fanon's seminal work, *Black Skin White Masks*, the mask has been a powerful trope in theories of postcolonial subjectivity. In her study of cross-cultural dressing, 'White Skins/Black Masks', Gail Ching-Liang Low associates masks with the instability of national and personal identities. And Marianna Torgovnick has argued that the European fascination with masks is iconic of the complicity between modernism and what she calls the discourse of primitivism (8).

These connections have led me to the subject of a new book, which I've now begun to research, on writing, travel, anthropology, modernism and the discourse of primitivism in Australian between 1930 and 1950. The proposed title is *Unfamiliar Selves*. As Mary Louise Pratt observes, 'nowhere are the notions of normal, familiar actions and given systems of difference in greater jeopardy than on the imperial frontier. There Europeans confront not only unfamiliar Others but unfamiliar selves' (121).

In the present paper, I want to begin this work by considering some other books that are also familiar to me from my childhood—the novels of Ion L. Idriess. My impression that Idriess' books were virtually ubiquitous in middle-class Australian homes of the period is borne out by the statistics of their publication. Idriess' first book about New Guinea, *Gold-Dust and Ashes*, was published in 1933; over the next 10 years it was reprinted 19 times, selling over 40,000 copies. *Drums of Mer*, also published in 1933, was the first instalment in what became a quartet of novels set in Torres Strait. In the 10 years to 1944, it was reprinted 14 times and sold just under 24,000 copies (Bonin 398-400). *Drums of Mer* was followed in 1940 by *Headhunters of the Coral Sea*, then *Isles of Despair* in 1947 and *The Wild White Man of Badu* in 1950.

In the Author's Note to *Drums of Mer*, Idriess stressed that 'Ethnologically...the story is correct', citing among his sources the *Reports of the Cambridge Anthropological Expedition to Torres Strait* and interviews with native informants (viii). Contemporary reviewers were certainly impressed by the anthropological content of the book, one even claiming that it would provide the evidential basis for future scientific studies of Melanesia (Bonin 111). In the present paper, however, I am less concerned with the accuracy of Idriess' novels than with their role in Australian culture of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. It seems to me self-evident that the remarkable popularity of these works has less to do with any sense in which they are capable of representing Melanesian society than with their role in the production of discourses on nation and gender in white Australia. Like many novelists of the period, Idriess had obviously absorbed certain popular anthropological concepts, though without necessarily having any systematic ethnographic theory in mind. As Marianna Torgovnick argues of the Tarzan novels of Edgar Rice Burrows, the discourse of primitivism in popular culture serves the function of narrating what is symbolically central from the site of what is socially marginal: 'to study the primitive brings us always back to ourselves, which we reveal in the act of defining the Other' (11); 'we imagine ourselves through the primitive' (18).

The story of *Drums of Mer* takes place in the 1840s, during the reign of Kebisu, the so-called 'last' traditional chief of Torres Strait. Like Cetsbwayo in Haggard's writings, Kebisu is the object of imperialist nostalgia, the paradox that one society alters another, 'and then regrets that things have not remained as they were prior to the intervention' (Rosaldo 69). Kebisu's people are coming to terms with the increasing presence of Australians brought north in search of pearl shell and *beche-de-mer*. The protagonist, Jakara, is a white castaway loosely based on four young men who survived the wreck of the ship *Charles Eaton* in Torres Strait in 1834. Although he has become a warrior of Mer, Jakara is known as 'Jakara the strange' (11), because he resists both ritual cannibalism and the love of native women. Jakara's own quest is to preserve his integrity as a white man and return to civilisation with his fellow castaway, the white woman Eyes of the Sea, a character based on the castaway Barbara Thomson. Despite his twelve years' 'study of the native mind', Jakara has 'done well—preserved his life, his intelligence, and a clean white heart' (12).

Against the background of contemporary race relations in Melanesia, it is hardly surprising that Idriss' interests were displaced from the mid 1930s, when the novel was published, to mid 1840s, when it is set. *Drums of Mer* was published at a time of intense moral panic about relations between white and black in Melanesia, when, as we have seen, even loitering with natives was proscribed by law. Setting aside questions of the text's mimetic relation to an historical Melanesia—which I regard as a kind of category mistake—the important question is, exactly what did middle-class Australian readers of the 1930s make of this material?

I want to approach the problem of reading Idriss' text initially through Jane M. Gaines's discussion of Robert Mapplethorpe's photography. Developing the idea that different readers make different readings, Gaines argues that the photographs in Mapplethorpe's *Black Book* lay bare for exhibition a complex network of 'taboo couplings'—that is, 'sexual relations that confound white male culture'. These couplings 'disturb the dominant model' in different ways, and to different degrees, forming a hierarchy of transgressions. Mapplethorpe's photographs, which address themselves to interracial homosexual desire, constitute a triple transgression, violating class, racial and sexual norms (31-33).

I want to argue, then, that the power of *Drums of Mer* arises from its setting in play a range of possibilities around a repertoire of such 'taboo couplings'. *Drums of Mer* is remarkable in its time for bringing into visibility at least four such taboo couplings. In this novel, a white man cross-dresses as a native; a white man is attracted to Melanesian women; Melanesian men lust after a white woman; a white woman is attracted to black men; and last—but certainly not least—a white man acknowledges the physical strength and beauty of black men. As Stephen Neale argues of desire in pornographic cinema, the process of identification involved is never simply a matter of men identifying with male figures and women with female figures: 'Cinema draws on and involves many desires, many forms of desire. And desire itself is mobile, fluid, constantly transgressing identities, positions and roles' (278).

In 1933, when Idriss published *Drums of Mer*, Melanesia was already strongly associated with masculinity and militarism. Commenting on photographs taken in the Pacific early this century, Nicholas Thomas observes that while Polynesia was seen as 'a feminised and sexualised space', Melanesia, 'was understood as a masculine domain...it was characterised by the aggression of warriors, cannibals, and headhunters' (49). By the 1930s and 1940s, Australian nationhood was also associated with the masculinity and militarism of the Anzac tradition, to which Idriss himself had made an important contribution in his first and prodigiously successful publication, *The Desert Column: Leaves from the Diary of an Australian Trooper in Gallipoli* (1932). Yet that tradition also had its dangers. In much of its symbolism it resembled a primitive cult, and the homosocial implications of mateship were strongly disavowed.

Idriss' descriptions of the warrior life of Mer suggest the fascist aesthetic of Leni Reifenstahl's films of this period, particularly *Triumph of the Will* and *Olympiad*, her

documentary on the Berlin Olympics of 1936. This is characterised by a glorification of the athletic and disciplined male body, both in isolation and in military formations, and in the cult of charismatic leadership. Idriess' supreme narrative moments involve de-personalised accounts of large numbers of warriors moving in formation to the will of their leaders, whose 'ecstasy of power' over these serried ranks suggests the fascist dictators of the 1930s. These descriptions are like the troop formations described in Klaus Theweleit's account of the Freikorps in *Male Fantasies*, a site at which the individual masculine subject mediates between his own socially constructed male body and the larger totality of the body politic as a collective of men. Theweleit argues that as a discourse, nation has nothing to do with actual borders: 'the concept refers to a quite specific form of male community...the nation is a community of soldiers' (2.81). The 'bliss that accompanies the unification of "nation"' specifically excludes the feminine, but 'through the fusion of masculine with masculine, the "nation" proves to be fertile' (2.87).

The power of *Drums of Mer* therefore emanates from its exploration of the potentially dangerous relation between fascist aesthetics and the cult of Anzac, which it displaces on to the relatively safe symbolic domain of Melanesia. The mechanism used to enter this space of desire is the fantasy of cross-cultural dressing. In the introduction, Jakara is said to resemble his fellow savages in every way, except for his hidden racial difference: 'Outwardly he was just like the others...[but] there the resemblance ended...[for] strangely, among that black-eyed throng, his eyes were grey' (4).

The fullest discussion of cross-cultural dressing and its role in the discursive economy of adventure tales is Gail Ching-Liang Low's work on Kipling. Citing the example of wearing a Balinese mask, Low writes of 'suddenly...find[ing] oneself immediately for a certain time liberated from one's own subjectivity' (92). While acknowledging that cross-cultural dressing is motivated by the promise of 'transgressive' pleasure, Low also argues that it is a technology of power/knowledge; it is not so much a fantasy about changing *into* the other as about the ability to know and possess the other while secretly and finally remaining the same. What is achieved in such texts is 'a dream of surveillance' (95). The fantasy of donning a native costume is not mere play or liberation into another world, but another attempt at control of subaltern peoples.

In *Drums of Mer*, the fantasy of cross-cultural dressing confers upon the middle-class Australian reader the freedom to explore homosocial desire in a world of soldier males. This play on identity can be seen in the illustrations to *The Wild White Man of Badu*, the last of Idriess' Torres Strait novels. The frontispiece shows a warrior of Badu in full ceremonial head dress, and conforms to the militaristic stereotyping of Melanesia common in photography of the period. The cover features an artist's impression based on the photograph, showing a white castaway cross-dressed as a Melanesian warrior—white skin in a black mask.

Jakara's ambivalent relation to savagery is reflected in the split narrative structure of *Drums of Mer*, which is narrated by a third person narrator, yet often focused on Jakara. In this way, the experience of the Australian reader is similar to donning a mask in cross-cultural dressing. The narrative allows us to get inside the savage sensibility through focalisation on the wild white man, yet it safely modulates back to the seeming objectivity of the third person ethnographic mode. This splitting of the narrative point of view takes on a special biographical significance in view of the fact that Jack was Idriess' preferred form of his Christian name. In *Jakara* might then be read as Idriess' descent into his own alter ego in his flirtation with the uncivil.

Idriess' unmanly descriptions of black male bodies are the projection of a homosocial desire that must be authorised and controlled through the discourse of ethnography. Mary Louise Pratt observes that the portrait of manners and customs is one of the central tropes in travel writing and anthropology, 'a normalizing discourse, whose work is to codify difference, to fix the Other in a timeless present' (120-21). Yet Pratt goes on to argue that this work of fixing difference 'is not and never can be complete' (121).

In Idriess' descriptions of Melanesians there is a contradictory logic in which white men

are trapped in an equation with black men. The very 'mirroring' which allows the Australian male reader to see the Anzac tradition projected on to Melanesia must also provide an escape mechanism, a way of distancing the white soldier male from the black warrior. Here the fantasy dynamics of cross-cultural dressing and the discourse on race work to rescue the white reader from his own worst excesses. Cross-cultural dressing is posited on a knowledge of return, of taking off the native clothes. As Low observes, its 'primary attraction...is...the promise of "transgressive" pleasure without the penalties of actual change...the cross dresser may always reveal or revert to the white identity underneath the native clothes' (93). Melanesian culture is therefore a mirror in which the white reader can see himself belonging to an imagined community of soldier males; but the visible difference of the skin sign allows him to deny that fantasy: finally, the Australian reader is not black. This process of alternate projection and disavowal is achieved at the expense of the other, involving as it does the discourse of imperialist nostalgia, as Australian readers 'mourn the passing of what they themselves have transformed' (Rosaldo 69). Idriess laments the death of Mer culture, even as the psychic economy of his novel conspires to destroy it. For this reason, the final chapters of *Drums of Mer* are compelled to narrate the passing of traditional Melanesian life.

In a review of *Gold-Dust and Ashes* in May 1933, it was claimed that Idriess 'compels an inference to be drawn that what India meant to England a few generations ago, New Guinea might mean to Australia in this generation' (Qtd in Bonin 59). This claim draws attention to the role played by Melanesia in constructing the Australian discourse on nation. It suggests that the pleasures of reading Idriess' books involved not just surveillance and mastery of the other, but the very constitution of the national self through that process of mastery. As Robert Young argues of colonial desire, it is 'a social rather than an individual product...fantasy is never individual: it is *group fantasy*' (168-9). By constructing Melanesia as the domain of masculine fantasy, *Drums of Mer* allows the projection of nation as an imagined community of soldier males from which the reader can safely withdraw at the first hint of un-Australian behaviour.

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