

FILLING *TERRA NULLIUS*: BONY IN THE DEATHSPACE

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The vicious legal fiction of *terra nullius*, so recently laid to rest by what we call Mabo, fitted well with European Australia's vision of what it ambiguously knew as the Dead Heart at its centre. Today, I want to consider one writer's representation of life in a landscape imaged as, on the one hand, rich with the raw materials needed for Western culture and industry (pearls, livestock, uranium), but, on the other, as violently emptied of psychological resources, and containing terrifying spaces into which people and whole cultures disappear. The fantasy of the Dead Heart with a powerful gravity which sucks out human spirit is, I shall argue, a specific product of the history that shaped the contemporary Australian landscape, best understood as a guilty response to living on the site of innumerable massacres. Deborah Bird Rose has named the world produced by mass murder and theft in Far North Queensland a Deathspace, and in this paper, in order to emphasise the psychic rather than the physical-geographical implications, I have adapted her word for the post-massacre emptiness to 'the Deathspace'. A space made available for use by the obliteration of the original owners may be a wealthy and spacious one, but such places are so marked by the circumstances of their production that they affect the inheritors profoundly. How can the deathspace be written about, its history of liveliness, intelligence and generativity as well as of atrocity?

The detective novels of Arthur Upfield are useful for my purpose in thinking about the representation of *terra nullius* and the Dead Heart because they provide a sort of mythological envisioning of the effects of the creation of a Deathspace, one which involves dizzying shifts of perspective as received ideas are inverted and reversed. Upfield migrated to Australia from England as a young man in 1911, and led a lively life as a novelist and Outback worker thereafter. His still popular 'Bony' novels, which concern the amazing successes of a so-called 'half-caste', the educated and elegant Detective-Inspector Napoleon Bonaparte, fight what might be thought of as the deadly 'Maralinga syndrome' (currently being evidenced by France in its activities in the South Pacific), which represents a region as more or less empty—at least of any intelligent life, as they used to say on *Star Trek*—and thus available for nuking, or any other destructive act that seems a good idea to the imperial power. Upfield's novels (there are about 20) assert that the fantasised emptiness of *terra nullius* is in fact full of things: love affairs, murder victims, food, shelter, tribal learning, human and animal intelligence, and especially babies, lots and lots of them. The very name of Upfield's hero, who insists that everybody call him 'Bony' (which Upfield spells without the 'e' usual in the contraction of Bonaparte) links him with the conflicts and contradictions of the Deathspace: his name embodies the deathly translation of European imperialism in the person of the Aboriginal.¹ Bony's mixed-race reading of the Deathspace re-inserts murder, massacre, theft and cross-race passion back into the story of the landscape.

Upfield's novels are concerned with a landscape in which crimes have been made in some way difficult to read, often by the freaks of the landscape itself (its windstorms or floods or

simple hugeness), and usually also with the co-operation of two or more ethnicities. In short, the usual whodunnit problem posed by a mysterious corpse in Detective Fiction becomes a problem involving both ethnicity and landscape—strikingly removed from the class preoccupations of British crime fiction, where it might very well be the butler or some horrid social climber who dunnit.² Moreover, the conventional racial tables are inverted: whiteness, though generally perceived as racially superior by the characters themselves, is broadly represented as a handicap by the novels as wholes. Take this account of a citizen of Broome, for example:

'To appreciate [Broome] you must stay at least a year. There is none other like it in the world....Should you have an interest in such matters, you will find the white section of the community of exceptional psychological interest. The whites are entirely lacking in the spiritual attributes making for personality. Observe this person approaching' [says the town eccentric].

The person was arrayed in white duck and wore a white sun-helmet. He was well nourished. His gaze did not deviate from a point exactly to his front and distant probably a thousand miles. His facial expression was that of a Yogi meditating in a blizzard...

'Ninety per cent of them are like that, atrophied from the frontal bone upward'.

(*The Widows of Broome* 40)

This exchange shows the white section of the outback town cast as the focus of ethnographic interest, with an interesting reversal of the usual terms. Instead of the expected formulation: 'the blacks are entirely lacking in the intellectual attributes making for civilization' (for instance), it is the whites who are entirely lacking in the *spiritual* attributes making for personality. As well as these character defects, the white man is seen as physically deficient: his clothes are blankly white, his face is white, and his mind is white too, a quality here which signifies not Blakean innocence, but chilly vacuity, 'a Yogi meditating in a blizzard'. Neither the man's eyes nor his emotions work properly either, unlike the brilliant darting eyes, warm spontaneity and sparky intelligence of the trackers. Upfield thus typically shows the white settler as absolutely spiritually and physically lost in the bush, as the tribalised Aborigine is at a loss in the European-style culture.

But although he celebrates the skills of the initiated Aborigine as miraculous and integrative compared to the dull administrative competence of the bush copper, Upfield insists that neither the whitefella policeman nor the blacktracker alone can crack the crimes of the Outback, or at least those which have attracted the attention of Bony's big-city superiors. This is because of the nature of these crimes, which is related to the strains of life in the Deathspace. Firstly, in Upfield's work, the prototypical Outback crime is a mixed-race one: both races are in some way involved in it, either as aggressor, victim or as joint perpetrator, or in some bizarre combination of these; and both races are therefore needed to solve the crime. Upfield represents the archetypal victim of this cross-race violence as, logically enough, an abused mixed-race child, or a child abused by two races or ethnicities. Secondly, Upfield argues that Aboriginal life—though often materially impoverished—is intelligent, rich and full in the Outback, and that white life in the bush is stupid, bleak, and spiritually impoverished. Thirdly, he represents the landscape itself as a vital force in the process of crime and mystery, tending to hide and reveal crimes unpredictably, with its winds, shifting sands, and caves.

Upfield's first novel, *The Barrakee Mystery*, shows his initial engagement with these ideas about what happened to the original owners of Australia, and how it affected the white settlers and the surviving black population.³ The novel's mysteries come thick and fast. Why is the magnificent full-blood, King Henry, murdered? and by whom? why does the public-school-educated young squatter, Ralph, begin to show such lapses of good taste as the wearing of loud socks when he comes home from college? why does he even more tastelessly fall in love with the full-blood Aboriginal beauty, Nellie, and slight the Darling of the Darling, his cousin Kate? what is the mystery of Ralph's birth? The answer to all these questions turn on the twin mysteries of maternal passion and racial mixture, each represented as so powerful as

to overthrow the strongest rational intentions. The story turns out to be that Ralph was exchanged at birth for the still-born son of the squatter, given freely by his dying mother, Mary Sinclair. His adoptive mother falls in love for ever with the baby when she suckles it, and is then told with the biological mother's last breath, that the infant's father is---King Henry! whom she describes as 'so magnificent a man that I became as putty in his hands' (236). Mrs Thornton takes comfort in the baby's fair skin and tells no one, including her husband, about the baby's paternity; but when King Henry comes back to claim the child, she pays him £10 and sends him packing. King Henry keeps returning, and is thought to be blackmailing (though there is very little curiosity about his motives). So Mrs Thornton organises Mary Sinclair's brother to avenge the family shame and simultaneously allow the adopted child to live a happily reconsigned life. Twenty years later, Mrs Thornton and Sinclair jointly murder King Henry, and Bony comes to sort it out. But the wisdom of this novel is that puberty causes the skin to darken and racial yearnings which are figured as regressive to appear. Bony in fact asserts that that was his own experience, and argues that Ralph's Aboriginality will always re-appear. Mrs Thornton dies of grief when the truth comes to light, and the squatter, who now knows the truth, adopts a more appropriate heir who obligingly marries cousin Kate.

The plot here is often distasteful, bordering on eugenics at times in a way that is more than characteristic of the period, particularly in its account of the appearance and behaviour of mixed-race individuals.⁴ It does, however, display a number of the powerful motifs which will be refined in Upfield's later work. First, there are primal acts of what Upfield, particularly in his early work, represents as genetic defiance: the racially joint crimes of miscegenation and adoption, which are then covered up jointly by both races. In three Bony novels written three decades on, the issues are clarified somewhat, and, crucially, a sort of compliance is located in the landscape itself. *Bony and the Black Virgin* (1956) involves the murder by another beautiful full-blood girl, Lottee, of two white men who rape her. She and the squatter's son Eric, a former medical student, gone as it were native because of the pull of the bush, are *in love*.⁵ Lottee's assaulted virginity is magically restored with the ceremony of tribal fire, and she and Eric attempt to cover their crimes by staging the murder of one of the rapists by the other. When the body of the second man is unexpectedly uncovered in a sandstorm, Lottee and Eric commit a triumphant ritual suicide by ceremonial drowning in the duck lake. Capulets and Montagues of race, they look forward to being tribally united after death, in the spirit of a tree. The crimes of rape and murder are all racially mixed, the love is racially mixed, and murder, rape and love can all be buried in the land itself. The problem is that the emptied landscape itself reveals and conceals unpredictably, foiling black and white together. Similar themes appear in *The Man of Two Tribes* (1959), where Bony finds himself imprisoned in subterranean caves under the Nullabor, for snooping about after a disappearance. A group of vigilantes have used the brilliant tracking and telepathic skills of the 'wild' blacks of the Nullabor to punish murderers who have had their sentences commuted. The scheme was hatched by the mother of a child killed by one of the prisoners, a Polish Holocaust survivor weirdly named Igor Mitski, but it is made clear that Mitski was unlucky, and did not mean to kill the little girl, equally oddly called Mayflower. The conflict between the traumatised Mitski and the flower of Puritan civilisation, the apparently obnoxious little Mayflower, means death, and the killing of the child by another deathspace survivor means that the resources of black and white co-operatively mobilise the literal spaces of the land to hide the bodies of killers. These plots are characteristic of Upfield's work. The primal crime involves racial mixture, suffering and cruelty, and the land, emptied by countless such incidents, is now spacious enough to hide numberless dead in its emptiness. Bodies are hidden in caves, burnt, mummified, re-buried: even the living can be swallowed up by these huge emptied spaces which the tribal remnants still control. The spaces of massacre allow the land itself to avenge murder.

The novel of Upfield's that most strikingly embodies the motifs of racially joint crimes in the Deathspace is *Murder Must Wait* (1953). What the solving of the murder must wait for,

in this case, is the solving of the crime of childstealing. Five tiny white male babies have been taken from their mothers in the Victorian town of Mitford, and public feeling is running high. When Bony is called in, he realises he cannot solve the mystery without a good woman, and recruits policewoman Alice McGorr, the daughter of a (deceased) master safe-cracker, and whose maternal instincts are described as very intense. What Alice and Bony discover is a plot hatched by a cold-blooded psychiatrist, Dr Nonning, to transfer unwanted infants to desperate women who are 'figuratively dying for want of one' (244). Nonning chooses Mitford for his activities, because his equally cold-blooded sister who lives there, married to the local doctor, has just such a child, and is very keen to get rid of it. Dr Nonning believes that it won't help matters much for an infertile woman to select 'a child from an orphanage as one might choose an appealing object' (243). No, he wants them to believe that the child is spiritually theirs by right. So, with the help of the loopy anthropologist, Professor Marlo-Jones, and his overbearing wife, an intrusive blue-stocking type, he stages an Aboriginal legend, whereby Altjerra, the creator of all things, allows spirit babies to fly from a tree to a woman, by a mixture of 1950s style deep sleep therapy and Aboriginal co-operation. The extraordinary thing is that Nonning organises neglected infants to be taken by the Aborigines and given to people who wanted them, and would give them wise attention and affection' (245). This idea mixes the ideology of stealing 'neglected' infants with the ideology of providing wise (though neurotic) people with them. The first two women actively surrender their children: they are vile sherry-drinking upperclass types whose socialising is inconvenienced by the babes. The next three women, however, are simply deemed to be unfit mothers; one leaves her baby outside the pub while she knocks back gin squashes, one has the temerity to neglect her maternal duties to write novels, and a third leaves baby alone while she slopes off to meet with the child's father (who subsequently murders her). The plot mechanism here is the loving Aboriginal mother, who provides care in the black settlement near the river. This novel represents a startling reimagining of Australian social history, where white officials deemed black babies 'neglected' and took them away, combined with the fiction that neurosis in respectable infertile women could be helped by rearing another woman's baby. The extra detail of the deep-sleep charade is a sort of mythological version of present-day IVF pregnancy with donor ova. In *Murder Must Wait*, the issues of cross-cultural child-stealing in Upfield's work are put with appalling clarity: the death of an adult is a small thing, epistemologically speaking; the abduction of children is an atrocity, however it may be rationalised. Professor and Mrs Marlo-Jones, like Macbeth, have no children, so they cannot really understand what forces they are interfering with, and Nonning is represented as the worst sort of manipulative psychiatrist. The image of the sane and loving Aboriginal people rescuing neglected white infants from their drunken and irresponsible mothers, taking them to the warmth and safety of the Black Camp, and then accessing their own mythological 'administration' to send the babies to a safer future reads like a return of the repressed. Well- and ill-intentioned blacks and whites make the trouble; Bony sorts it out, a human 'Bridge', as he calls himself, between the two cultural imperatives (232). And the trouble is always caused by a diabolical mixture of ancient tribal realities, contemporary needs, and the wish to believe that babies, black and white, are *tabula rasa*, mere cultural fodder.

In Upfield's work, the primal crime is a form of ethnic cleansing, that is, forced cultural vandalism, racial mixture, child-stealing and murder. The novels' representation of attempted genocide is insistent: each one involves a fully initiated Aboriginal who clearly remembers the European invasion and knows himself to be 'robbed of his birthright by the white man, and shackled by the white man's laws and taboos' (*Murder Must Wait* 221). The mixed-race detective, like the patriarchal father of psychoanalysis, is both a symptom and a decoder of the illness he comes to read: Bony's endless labours to understand and expose the meanings of the stolen children, raped women and concealed corpses of Australia—meanings inscribed on his own body, as well as in the bush—help to return the repressions of the Deathspace to the fullness of completed narrative.

Works Cited

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- Rose, Deborah Bird. *Hidden Histories: Black Stories from Victoria River Downs, Humbert River and Wave Hill Stations*. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1991.
- Squier, Susan. *Babies in Bottles*. New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 1994.

Notes

- 1 The name of Napoleon Bonaparte is heavily burdened with signification for the early and mid-twentieth century reader. 'Boney', the English contraction of the first Napoleon's name, was the emblem of xenophobic anxiety used to frighten nineteenth-century children into good behaviour. Also, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century madmen would stereotypically insist that they were Napoleon Bonaparte, complete with one hand in waistcoat. The name of Upfield's Bony, then, brings together a range of psychological and colonial questions which are given frightening emphasis in the character's status as mixed-race offspring of a dead black mother. They could be summarised as: can the individual survive colonial construction without himself becoming brutally destructive or mad?
- 2 See, for example, P.D. James, *Innocent Blood*, where the problems of child reconignment are class issues, not Deathspace ones.
- 3 In the light of these ideas, such works as *The Barrakee Mystery*, which Tamsin Donaldson describes merely as part of the 'sexual contact history' of Australia, look rather different. In one of the rather few analyses of Upfield's work, Donaldson contrasts *The Barrakee Mystery* with Sally Morgan's autobiographical detective story *My Place*, where young Sally persuades her mystifying relatives to tell her where they all came from, and Upfield comes off the worse: Donaldson considers Morgan's account to be more authentic and driven. At a political level, I have no argument with this assessment. But Upfield's work provides a much more dispassionate envisioning and analysis of the cultural effects of murder and miscegenation than Morgan could possibly be expected to do, precisely because the trials and insights of the fictional Bony can be approached with a sort of analytical callousness which is not available to Morgan's representation of her family. Upfield's treatment of the landscape, for instance, concentrates on its frightening capacity to swallow up huge numbers of murdered bodies, generally black, rather than on its religious or personal significance. His protected, distanced and analytical point of view allows the fantasies of engulfment and destruction which underpin the image of the Dead Heart to be teased out, an unimaginable result for writers who are concerned with grief and loss.
- 4 See, for example, Susan Squier, *Babies in Bottles*, for an account of the fictional representation of eugenic fantasy in the 1920s and 1930s.
- 5 'Love' is always a plot solver for Upfield: he shows little sense of the shadings of the idea, so that whenever Bony asks a young couple who have been behaving oddly, 'Are you two in love?', they simply say 'Yes'. Being in love seems to act as a container for generational misunderstandings, and indicates Upfield's utter lack of interest in purely interpersonal ways of relating.