

BONY AS GROTESQUE: THE DILEMMA OF NATIONAL IDENTITY IN ARTHUR UPFIELD'S BONY SERIES, 1930-1950

Glen Ross - University of Southern Queensland

When we use the word "grotesque" we record, among other things, the sense that though our attention has been arrested, our understanding is unsatisfied. Grotesqueries both require and defeat definition ... They stand at a margin of consciousness between the known and unknown, the perceived and the unperceived, calling into question the adequacy of our ways of organizing the world (Harpman 3).

The anthropologist A.P. Elkin regarded the year 1934 as "The Turning Point" in the changing understanding of Aboriginal people in Australia. In that year Elkin published an article entitled "The Aborigines, Our National Responsibility", followed by the booklets *Citizenship for the Aborigines* (1944), *Post-War and the Aborigines* (1945), and *Aborigines and the Franchise* (1946) (Berndt 19). The titles of these publications indicate the emergence of a changing attitude towards the country's indigenous peoples and a grudging realisation of the impossibility of developing a "pure" European population in the Australian space. This gradual acceptance of the inevitability of the "contamination" of the white "race" can be at least partially related to the difficulty in policing the White Australia Policy. The decline of the Aboriginal population from approximately 93,000 in 1901 to 71,000 in 1921 was in reversal by 1933, by which time official figures showed the Aboriginal population had recovered to 80,000 people (Macintyre 318).

Western constructions of difference between the white and Aboriginal were achieved by ideological adaptations of temporal discourses circulating in the period. In his book *Time and the Other* (1983), Johannes Fabian points to the imperialist practice of denying the presence of Other peoples in the space of the white colonisers through the ideological division of time. Seen as lower on a temporal scale defined by Social Darwinist ideas, indigenous peoples were ideologically, and often physically, segregated from the white population in the expectation and hope that they would succumb to the "superior race". This temporal division organised the people in the Australia space into those who were to be part of the teleological advancement into the bright future of the nation and those who were to disappear into the dark stone-age past.

While the expected decline of the Aboriginal population functioned to salve the anxieties of a white population seeking to establish a Eurocentric culture in the Australian space, discourses on race were less successful in dealing with those who did not fit neatly into either category: the so-called "half-castes". The difficulty presented by "half-castes" was that they were at once the physical embodiment of the Australian people and their "low Others". As such, they caused a disturbance in the national psyche by threatening to take on a hybrid identity symbolic of a future deviation of the Australian people from a pure Eurocentric

cultural identity.

This concern with half-castes can be detected in the words of Queensland's Chief Protector of Aborigines, J.W. Bleakley. In 1929 Bleakley conducted an inquiry into "all aspects of the mixed and fullblooded communities of Aborigines in northern and central Australia" and concluded that "the most difficult problem of all to deal with [was] that of the half-castes". How, he asked, "in a country where climatic and other conditions discourage the presence of white women", was the "evil of miscegenation" to be checked, and how were those "half-castes" already present in white society to be dealt with?. His own solution was to split the "half-caste" population between the two temporal frames described above: between those who were to slip back into the past and die out, and those who could enter the progressive time of the people of the nation. In practice, this meant recommending that children in Alice Springs with "50 per cent. or more Aboriginal blood" be transferred to a mission, while those with less than 50 percent be transferred to "European institution[s], where they [could] be given a reasonable chance of absorption into the white community" (cited in Stone 156-9).

This solution to the "half-caste problem" coincides with the gradual acceptance through the 1930s of ideas of the assimilation of the Aboriginal population. This acceptance was not, however, an indication of a more enlightened attitude towards the Aboriginal population, but was informed by anthropological ideas regarding the genetic "absorbability" of the Australian Aborigines into the white population, the gradual effacement of the Aboriginal people from the Australian space through their expected decline *within* the teleological time of the whites. Speaking before the 1936 Mosely Royal Commission, Dr C.P. Bryan argued that Australians faced a choice "between the setting up of a black population in ... 'White Australia', or the policy of miscegenation—a mixing of Blacks and Whites". "The gradual disappearance of the black colour and other physical characteristics that go with it", he argued, "is more likely to eventuate and more certain to be tolerated than the deliberate raising up of a separate black population that might threaten to last for all time" (cited in Healy 159).

However, the change from policies of segregation to assimilation during the 1930s and 40s cannot be seen as a period of smooth transition. Instead, it was a period during which the ideological construction of a homogenous national identity was under threat from a complex array of conflictual ideas. In fact, the conspicuousness of constructions of Aboriginal peoples in political, scientific, and cultural discourses of the time reveals "the areas of central anxiety, the space where the ideology work[ed] at its hardest to assert that all [was] normal, [that] change need not be feared" (Knight 5).

I want now to explore the literary manifestation of this identity dilemma in the detective fiction written by Arthur Upfield during the 1930s and 40s. It is remarkable that Upfield enjoyed a steady increase in the sales of his "Bony" books despite building the series around a part-Aboriginal detective hero. At first he had difficulty having his books published in Australia, and turned to England for the publication of the first Bony book in 1929 (Asdell 2). In all, there were 14 Bony

titles published in either Britain, the U.S. or Australia during the 1930s and 40s, and 15 published after 1950 (Asdell 2-3), and as early as 1937 Upfield was able to say in a private letter that "Angus and Robertson ... want more of Bony and say they will make him a national figure" (letter to Charles Lemon, 18 July 1937).

It is remarkable that Upfield enjoyed a steady increase in the sales of his "Bony" books despite building the series around a part-Aboriginal detective hero. This acceptance of a part-Aboriginal character in Upfield's books raises the question of the function of detective fiction in the construction of national identity, since it has generally been asserted in critical investigations of the genre that popular fiction salves national anxieties by offering fictional resolutions to real social contradictions (Knight 4). If the Aboriginal presence can be seen as a threat to the psychic stability of the nation at this time, how was it that the white people of the nation accepted and enjoyed reading about a university educated "half-caste" successfully negotiating a position in white society? And how did Upfield re-present the "half-caste" in such a way that this threat was undermined and neutralised?

The typical formal structure of the Bony series can be seen in *Winds of Evil* (1937). In this book, the outback town of Carie has been plunged into social disorder by the threat posed by two murders and the inability of the "city" police to solve the problem. A "sort of bush Sherlock Holmes" (48) working under the pseudonym "Joe Fisher", Bony arrives at the bequest of a local grazier who has a personal connection with the police chief, Colonel Spendor. Bony immediately adopts the plodding local constable as his "Watson", confiding in him his outstanding methods and successfully impressing upon the constable his remarkable ability to progress where the city police had failed. "Remember Lee", he tells the policeman, "that although some people sneer at me on account of my mid-race, I am superior to the blacks because I can reason, and superior to many white people because I can both reason well and see better than they" (65). For the reader, Bony's presence in Carie's disrupted social space offers an immediate sense of the beginnings of the re-ordering of events. His drawing together of information as part of the investigation into the murders works to unify disparate knowledges from a central position in a way that parallels the ideological unification of the nation. This homogenising of knowledges allows him to identify the murderer—who happens to be the grazier who called upon Bony to solve the crime—and the restoration of order to Carie, closing off and concealing the crime within the book, allowing Bony to move to another site of social disruption in a perpetual and repetitious solving of the nation's crimes.

Nevertheless, the formal structure of Upfield's Bony books fails to completely close off another social disruption epitomised so clearly in the characterisation of Bony as a "half-caste". The progeny of a black mother and a white father, and found in the shade of a sandalwood tree in Far North Queensland, Bony's name was derived from the fact that he was "eating the pages of Abbott's *Life of Napoleon Bonaparte*" (*Battling Prophet* 99). Described as "of average height and build, [and] remarkable for the dark colouring of his skin, which emphasized his blue eyes and white teeth" (*The Bone* 29), as a youth Bony was

offered the choice "to be an Aboriginal or a white man". Choosing to become white, he did so "with distinction in all but blood" (*The Bone* 164). His incorporation into white society was effected by his early mission education and the subsequent taking of an M.A. from Brisbane University (*Death of a Swagman* 10). With this educational background, Bony returned to the bush to be initiated into an Aboriginal tribe and to learn the culture of his mother's people. After joining the Queensland police force as a tracker, he was able, with the combination of his Aboriginal and European knowledges, to rise quickly through the ranks to the position of Detective Inspector (Browne 33-4).

Bony's incorporation into the teleological time of white society is never complete, however, since he is white in "all but blood". The Aboriginal "side" of Bony relegates him to at least a partial identification with the type of "primitive" Others constructed in anthropological discourses. These opposing "sides" are imbricated in Western notions of Time, allowing the university educated Bony to apply the historical/scientific knowledge of the Eurocentric culture in the timeless void of the disappearing Aboriginal culture. Throughout the series Bony cites as his "greatest asset" an "unconsciousness of the value of time" (*The Bone is Pointed* 161), yet as a member of the Queensland Police Force he is expected to complete one case then efficiently progress to the next. This ability to slip in and out of the time of white society is re-enforced by the Western constructions of Aboriginal time as a natural cycle within the static time-frame of a dying people. According to this view, time for the Aborigines is not a linear progress away from the past and towards the future, but a closed circuit of regeneration/degeneration tethered to a timeless present. From his base within the teleological time of civilisation, then, Bony slips into a mode of an unconsciousness of the value of Western time to await the revelation of clues to crimes through their exposure by the "natural" world, to simultaneously read the landscape as both an Aboriginal and a European. He is able to use his white education to analyse the context of the crime, and "able when in his beloved bush to tense his senses to the acuteness of the aborigines" (*Bushranger of the Skies* 138).

Bony's ability to oscillate between these two positions in the reading of the national space undermines the attempted temporal distinction between the white people and the Aborigines. The difficulty presented by a character such as Bony is that he cannot be excluded fully from the temporal frame of the people of the nation because he is white in "all but blood". As a "bridge spanning the gulf between" the white world and the world of the indigenous peoples (*The Widows of Broome* 17), Bony is a symbolic amalgamation of both the people of the nation and the "Low Others" through whom their identity is partially differentiated. Situated between the future and the past, life and death, the civilised and the primitive, the people and their "Low Others", Bony functions as a simultaneous presence/absence that takes on a character of its own. As he says, "in me you see neither black nor white, you see a hybrid" (*Mystery of Barrakee* cited in Brown 228).

In his work on popular fiction and national identity, James Donald uses the term "grotesque" to describe "Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde" characters such as Bony

who oscillate between identifications with an idealised national type and their degenerate low Others. Drawing upon the work of Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, he argues that "Grotesque characters" are "a complex hybrid fantasy emerging out of the very attempt to demarcate boundaries, to unite and purify the social collectivity" (37). The social function of these fantasies is "aggressively centripetal". "Conjuring up chaos, they drive towards unity, order and wholeness. The textual rendering and widespread circulation of such fantasies...gives at least some stability to the restlessness of desire, demarcating its familiar boundaries" (40).

One method used by Upfield to re-establish the boundaries between the white people and their "low Others" was to portray Bony as a character internally divided between the pull of the bush and its decivilising influence and the power of knowledge used to combat it. In many revealing passages throughout the series, Bony expresses a fear of "degeneration" to the position of an inferior Other. While "ambition" drives him towards the white "land of great achievement", the influence of his maternal ancestors threatens to "drag him under" to the black past. Paradoxically then, at least a part of the fear of the nation symbolised by Bony's hybrid identity is neutralised in Upfield's texts through its displacement as Bony's internal dilemma. Like the people of the nation, Bony wishes to be white, to repress the threat to purity posed by his ancestry.

Another method of negating the threat of Bony's hybrid presence is in the traditional function of the detective hero as a type of superhuman character. Bony may be internally divided between the people and their Others, but it is this very combination that provides him with extraordinary powers as a detective. It is Bony's exceptional ability to make a difference in a society continually threatened with disorder that provides the reader with the vicarious pleasure of the power to effect change. Not only does Bony have at hand the same kind of reasoning power and scientific knowledge which enabled Sherlock Holmes to contest the criminal threat in British society; he also has the sharply-honed "animal instincts" and cultural knowledge of the Australian space provided by the Aboriginal people. As Bony says, "added to my inherited maternal gifts are those inherited from my white father. I see with the eyes of a black man and reason with the mind of a white man, and in the bush I am supreme" (*Winds of Evil* 65).

At least a part of the appeal of Bony as a character, then, can be related to what Donald calls "the ambivalent 'repugnance and fascination' evident in representations of the low-Other" (37). It is this ambivalence of identity which allows readers simultaneously to accept Bony's prowess as a "half-caste" detective and disavow his black presence. Bony, it seems, is to be accepted into white society, but only on the condition that he does not see himself as white, and that his black ancestry is slowly displaced from the Australian space through assimilation. No better example of this expected displacement can be seen than in the portrayal of Bony's eldest son, Charles. Already "whitened" to an extent through Bony's marriage to another "half-caste", Charles is following his parent's absorption into the teleological time of the nation by studying at the university Bony himself attended (Bone 31), to "be a medical missionary to his grandmother's

people" (Swagman 27).

As a hybrid, Bony can therefore be seen as a point of intersection between an array of conflictual, ambivalent, and contesting ideas imbricated in the construction of a national identity for White Australia. As synecdoche of the ideological dilemma threatening the purity of White Australia, Bony functions simultaneously as a neutralised hybrid character through his inability to take on a stable identity, and as a symbol of an extraordinary Australian type of the future. This, in effect, returns us to Chief Protector Bleakley's nexus between those who were to slip back into the past and those who were to be accepted grudgingly into the future, and it was Upfield's ability fictitiously to enact the dilemma of a half-caste character caught perilously between these two positions, I suggest, that allowed Bony to be accepted by the white population. Almost invariably, the critical reception of Upfield's texts in the 1930s and 40s highlighted the fact that Napoleon Bonaparte was a Detective Inspector with exceptional powers derived from his "mixed blood". At the same time, some of the reviews indicate an uneasiness with this black intrusion into a White Australia. One Brisbane review described Bony as "almost too good to be true" (15 August 1940, *Producer's Review*).

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