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POLYPHONIES OF THE SELF: THE CHALLENGE  
OF ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIA

Veronica Brady

This is a difficult paper to write; to some non-Aborigines it will seem inappropriate and to some Aborigines yet another act of appropriation. It is about the crucial problem facing Australian culture, reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians. For Aboriginal people we were "the bringers of death" (Mudrooroo Narogin). But there is also something lost in and to us as those who bring death, especially since the usual response is denial or repression. My argument will therefore be that non-Aboriginal Australians need to come to terms with this fact, this aspect of our culture and of ourselves and that our sense of who we are in relation to the Aborigines is the key to a proper understanding of ourselves. What is involved, that is to say, is an attempt to move from ethnology to anthropology, arguing that, in this case at least, our relation to Aboriginal people can be seen as an essential aspect of ourselves, as a psychic, ethical, perhaps even metaphysical fact. That is not to deny its actual existence – that would be the ultimate assimilation; but it is to say that in our experience as a people, the Aborigines have come to represent the shadow, "the sum of all those unpleasant qualities we like to hide, together with the insufficiently developed functions and contents of the [...] unconscious" (Storr 87).

By definition this situation arises out of our colonial position. As far as Aborigines are concerned, we are colonisers. Yet the "Manichean allegory" of colonisation in which white is to black as good to evil also has its effects on us (JanMohamed 78-106), locking us into a position of false superiority and out of our own hearts, sometimes our own bodies, leaving us with deep feelings of inadequacy which issue on the one hand in authoritarian habits of mind and heart and on the other the desire to be noticed and to please some distant metropolitan centre, formerly London but now more often New York. For all our talk of "multi-culturalism," Australian society thus remains defensive, essentially ethnocentric and monological, tight-lipped and preoccupied with objective reality. We still live in what Patrick White calls "the Great Australian Emptiness," overwhelmed by the meaninglessness of profane existence – hence the ghost-like character, the somewhat sinister loneliness of much of our writing.

This is not the usual view of Australian culture, I know. But it is the view of us which is increasingly appearing in Aboriginal writing. In his latest novel, *Master of the Ghost Dreaming*, Mudrooroo Narogin, for instance, shows us through the eyes of the Aborigines as ghosts, refugees from the other side of the world, "a cold forbidding realm filled with so much suffering that a human could not survive in it" (Narogin 32). To the Aboriginal characters in this novel, we "seemed to have a horror about humanity." Our whole bodies appear as if "made of solidified fog and [...] if they went unclothed for any length of time, they would slowly begin to evaporate" (Narogin 52). In this view, we have become what the Aborigines often are to us, figures in a nightmare.

But nightmares can influence social reality, as the increasing violence between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians suggests. It is surely crucial, therefore, if we are to waken from the nightmare, to see ourselves through the eyes of others, particularly the others with whom we share this land. Indeed, as I want to argue, it is essential if we are to discover who we really are. As Bakhtin argues, it is impossible to conceive our being or even to figure ourselves to ourselves, much less to others, except through relations which link us to the other (Todorov 94). Our culture needs to be decentred verbally and ideologically if we are to break out of the enclosure of self-sufficiency and become conscious of ourselves in relation to other cultures and languages and thus other ways of being human. For this, according to Bakhtin, we need a "transgredient" element of consciousness which is external to it yet necessary for its completion (Todorov 95). The Aboriginal people and their culture, I would argue, constitute this element, the lost other side of ourselves. Without it our present sense of ourselves is incomplete since, to continue with Bakhtin, every person (and culture, I would say) has an absolute need

for the other, for the other's activity of seeing, holding, putting together and unifying, which alone can bring into being the externally finished personality; if someone else does not do it, this personality will have no existence (Todorov 95).

The other people and cultures who and which are becoming increasingly important in "multi-cultural" Australia do not have the same valency as the Aborigines, however. They are more or less external to this drama of identity which began in 1788, though the Chinese might be a possible exception. But the Aborigines are an essential part of our history, even if this significance has been denied and repressed. Indeed, in the course of time they have become what Bakhtin calls a "diseased transgredient" (Todorov 101). The exotopy

they represent has become morbid, a sign of guilt, of unacknowledged defilement and of our ethical failure.

Yet to say that is not to imply that the disease is theirs. Rather the problem is ours. The chronic unconcern, the sheer indifference, if not hostility, with which most Australians try to deal with the issue is one of the symptoms of this problem, and therefore dangerous. If we are to restore our selves and our culture to health we must break and then relink the chain of signification within which we and they exist.

Here literature becomes important, providing a way out of the self, a means of "finding oneself outside" (Todorov 99) by fictional models – act and reality, as Eliade points out, are a function of imitation (Eliade 4-5). In the present instance this action will come from disrupting the system of representation which has excluded Aboriginal people and our treatment of them.

The first stage in this disruption, however, is not identification and empathy – that leads to assimilation – but the reverse, contemplating the Aborigine as the other, indeed a troubling other. This is the reason why the anger of Aboriginal writers is so important. So, too, is the growing presence of Aboriginal people and culture in the work of non-Aboriginal writers like White, Stowe, Keneally, Drewe, Koch, Hasluck, Winton, Finola Moorhead, and, by powerful implication, in Jolley and Farmer. This presence echoes the question put in 1844 by the barrister Richard Windeyer. Notable apologist for white settlement and defence counsel for the white men involved in the Myall Creek Massacres, he still had to ask himself: "How is it that our minds are not satisfied? What means this whispering at the bottom of our hearts?" (Reynolds 162). Troubling figures like White's Alf Dubbo, Moorhead's Oona or Winton's black Christ by the roadside and on the sea-shore keep these questions alive. What they suggest is that they, not we, are at the centre and that we are the marginal ones. "[Aboriginal] cultural heritage," the Aboriginal dancer Rosalyn Watson insists, for example, "is instilled into the very depths of this continent, into our very beings," whereas we are uneasily aware of ourselves clinging to the fringes of the continent and of ourselves, as *Voss* put it.

This trope of the land is usually, and probably rightly, seen as the key to Australian culture since, as Ricoeur remarks, "Cosmos and Psyche are the two poles of the same 'expressivity.'" We express ourselves in expressing the world, explore our depths in deciphering that of the land (Ricoeur 13). Significantly, for us non-Aborigines, however, the land usually figures as a

place of death, the "dead heart," the desert at the centre "out where the dead men lie," the equivalent of the colossi of ancient Greece, vast, shapeless, immobile, emblem of the fixity of death set over against the warmth and mobility of life (Vernant 65-78). In this way, the myth of the dead heart figures forth the death we have brought to the Aborigines and their culture.

Official histories have repressed this knowledge of death. But in fact, as Henry Reynolds argues persuasively, settlement was marked by "a line of blood" (Reynolds 196). Certainly, the first settlers often saw themselves as engaged in a military operation, and at least 20'000 Aborigines and perhaps a quarter as many whites died in a long and bitter guerrilla war. To the extent that we deny or repress this, the Aborigine becomes a psychological as much as a physical presence, the embodiment of that which we are afraid of in ourselves, a figure of taboo, of the "peril of the soul" which it represents (Ricoeur 12). In this sense his presence is as much oneiric as physical. But it is in this dimension of dream that we catch a glimpse of the most fundamental and stable aspects of ourselves. Consider in this respect the dream of an early squatter, E. Lloyd, published in a memoir in 1846:

I had a dream [...] It did not seem like a dream; of some gentle beings as in time past, speaking words of comfort and soothing; when they rejoiced I rejoiced with them, and when they wept, I sorrowed. Suddenly, the scene changed, and I was conscious of a number of hideous, black faces crowding round me with hostile intent, demanding tobacco. Wherever I retreated they followed; and still the sound of their voices came ringing in my ears [...] in a threatening tone. And to the last their horrible visages, with this detestable sound, pressed on my troubled fancy. But a cold, chilly feeling came over me, and I awoke (Healy 22).

J. J. Healy has also remarked on a "sweaty anxiety" which seems to enter colonial writing whenever Aborigines are mentioned. The Aborigine, especially the half-caste, often figured as "devilish" – Warrigal in *Robbery Under Arms*, for example, and the usual epithet for this was "treacherous." In most colonial fiction the blacks seem to have represented something at once alien and terribly familiar, a part of oneself which has been suppressed but which returns with devastating effect.

The settlers' insistence on the Aborigines' "savagery," ugliness and treachery thus takes on further significance. An early settler in N.S.W. in the 1820s, for instance, writes of the horror of "waiting, waiting, waiting for the creeping, treacherous blacks," and another of feeling them "hovering close around us," living in "constant dread;" one senses here a fear of retribution. Similarly, for the West Australian, Bessie Bussell, in 1837 the word "native" was "fraught with fatigue, fear and anxiety" (Reynolds 10). It is the primitive

anxiety evident here which often pushed and sometimes still pushes us to violence against those we have wronged.

Contemporary Aboriginal writing plays on this anxiety but directs the violence back at us, pointing to the violence implicit in the "Manichean allegory" of racism, a way of giving moral authority to the superiority based on brute force, and suggesting that our hatred of the blacks may be self-hatred. The effect is cathartic.

Challenging merely aesthetic categories, these texts, unlike most "mainstream" Australian writing, demand a reading which is political and ethical, becoming for us as well as for Aborigines an occasion of self-discovery, perhaps even of self-reversal as we see ourselves and our culture through their eyes, as brutal, degrading and destructive. Arguably, however, that is the way to a proper self-knowledge; as Bakhtin observes, "there exists no death from the inside; it exists for no one, not for the dying, nor for others;" and, as Todorov adds: "I can die only for others; conversely, for me, only others die" (Todorov 98). Thus the encounter with the other, in this case the consequences of our destructiveness, can be liberating. The strangeness of form and language in works like Narogin's *Doin Wild Cat* or the poetry of Lionel Fogarty, for example, represent such an encounter not only with other "facts" but also with other voices, other discourses. In this sense they represent new polyphonic possibilities for the self. True, they can also threaten disintegration and even insanity. But to the extent that we embrace rather than resist them, a new, more expansive and inclusive sense of self begins to emerge from the experience.

This brings us to our last and perhaps crucial point, to the confrontation with death, the descent into the underworld or, to use a more characteristically Australian trope, the journey into the centre. This may be the only way resolution will come, enabling non-Aborigines to be accepted into the Aboriginal spiritual world. Patrick White is the key writer here, and *A Fringe of Leaves* the key text. In it Ellen Roxburgh suffers a ritualised death, descending into the underworld of the "savagery" which Western culture projects on to the Aborigine. But she also shatters the ultimate taboo, cannibalism, which represents the climax of the colonial repertoire of violence, the emblem of ultimate savagery, as all that we see as grotesquely different and disgusting. As Ellen's encounter is presented in this novel, we are brought up before the source of this violence, the fear that the Aborigines were not so much our brothers and sisters but rather "distant ancestors who had overstayed their time on earth" (Reynolds 128). Recognising them as her

contemporaries, owning what is "archaic," the shadow within her, Ellen thus renounces the neo-Darwinian justification for our presence in this country, that justification which rests on the image of the unchanging savage as "the benchmark which could be used to measure the reality of colonial progress" (Reynolds 123). The fact that the scene is comic, even parodic, in tone indicates the relief involved.

Between them, therefore, writing by Aborigines and non-Aborigines bear on this encounter between us, generating a new sense of plurality. On the Aboriginal side, new power emerges, a new sense of themselves speaking within our culture and challenging us there. On our side, a closed and defensive unity of self opens out to affirm the Aborigine not as an object but as another subject, an aspect of ourselves and our history. In this way the moral problem we projected onto them is recognised as our own. In the past, we have shrunk from this discovery, fearing the loss of our self-possession as well as our other possessions. Now it may be that recognition of the discourse of the other points us to a different kind of future. As Mudrooroo Narogin puts it: white "souls must be given warmth, warmth, love and forgiveness to all, allowed to flow through to all the planes. The ways must be opened. Bitterness and hatred block the way to [...] empowerment" (Narogin 88).

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## THE MAKING OF A PLURALIST AUSTRALIA: THE DUTCH CONTRIBUTION

Joed Elich

### Introduction

Australia is probably one of the most multicultural societies in the world. More than twenty-five per cent of its population were born outside Australia. It is less well known that the Dutch are the fifth-largest non-Anglo-Saxon ethnic group in Australia, after the Italians, Yugoslavs, Greeks and Germans. Since World War II, more than 200'000 Dutch have migrated to Australia. Who are the Dutch, what has been their contribution to multicultural Australia and what can we learn from their experiences? These questions will be investigated in this paper.

### Research Background

Thomas and Znaniecki, the authors of the famous study *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, showed the importance of studying migrants in both their area of origin and in the area of destination. Although their "double" perspective is widely praised, their method has hardly been followed since 1927. In my study of the Dutch in Australia, I have used this double perspective. This paper is based on research done in the Netherlands and Australia between 1980 and 1986, supplemented by more recent material. Its basis are 289 interviews with Dutch migrants all over Australia and with 124 returnees (migrants who returned from Australia to the Netherlands after several years). Extensive use of statistics and interviews with key personalities in both the Netherlands and Australia were also part of the research.

In this paper I shall concentrate on the contribution of Dutch migrants to Australian society. First I shall briefly discuss the history of Dutch migration to Australia, then describe some specific features of the Dutch community in Australia, and thirdly, pursue the question of what the Dutch contribution to Australian society has been.

### I.1 The Dutch in Australia since 1950

The impression that Dutch migrants have assimilated well into Australian society is widespread. It is said that especially the second generation can