Postcolonialism: yet another colonial strategy?

Kathryn Trees & Mudrooroo Nyoongah

This paper was designed as a spoken dialogue. The voices have been differentiated by a change in font color:

green - Kathryn Trees, presentation and voice of mining interests

plain - Mudrooroo

During the organization of this conference, a colleague commented on the way writers of fiction have the same status within the programme as academics. She said she had not been to a conference where this had occurred before. For me, this is vital because written Aboriginal histories are being produced in the form of fiction or literature, and further, since the arbitrary nature of the boundaries between fiction/literature and academic writings can be more easily appreciated, Aboriginal histories or life stories have not been given the status of history in the official, nation building sense, though this is changing. The most outstanding example of this for me is Living Black, a collection of histories edited in 1977 by Kevin Gilbert. This book won the Australian Literature Award (I am not suggesting that Living Black was not deserving of such an award). Because of the relationship of literature to fiction its status in portraying history is undermined.

Alice Nannup, author of When the Pelican Laughed, who unfortunately has not been able to make the trip to Perth as planned, has reminded me again of this strategy for marginalizing Aboriginal histories. When we first discussed this conference and I asked her if she would like to participate in her role as writer of life stories, Alice said "You know Kathy, my work is not fiction, but perhaps post-colonialism is." Alice went on to say that in the very least we need to ensure the inclusion of Aboriginal life stories into our education syllabuses before we can even begin to stem the tide of colonialism.

When I began thinking about this paper I wanted to speak with Mudrooroo about the "postcolonial beast" as it exists within Australia because postcolonialism is a concept that I and others at this conference are very uneasy with. Other speakers have raised the central problematic: Does the term postcolonial suggest that colonialism has passed? For whom is it "post"? Surely not for Australian Aboriginal people at least, when land rights, social justice, respect and equal opportunity for most does not exist because of the internalized racism of many Australians. However, I think the term postcolonial does provide a point for discussion to interrogate the layers of racism that constitute it. To this end, we could employ a reformulation of the concept to find common points in theory and every day lived practices which could then be useful to expose and breakdown internalised racism. In countries such as Australia where Aboriginal sovereignty, in forms appropriate to Aboriginal people, is not legally recognized, postcolonialism is not merely a fiction, but a linguistic manoeuvre on the part of some "white" theorists who find this a comfortable zone that precludes the necessity for political action.

Suddenly on the literary horizon has appeared a beast of somewhat dubious appearance. It has a sweet sensuous mouth, but under the soft invitation, the sharp teeth are ready to bite. This beast is called postcolonial literature, and like all predators it will eat your writings up, digest them, and shit them out as turds of colonial bullshit. Here, the "your" refers to those practitioners of contemporary Aboriginal culture, who participate in, say, seminars and conferences devoted to the postcolonial. It is one of those postcolonial problems, perhaps inherent in language, and the academic and colonial process, that even if
you deny the postcolonial beast, your discourse still continues to feed its voracious appetite.

I fail to see why the postcolonial was let loose on us Aborigines, and why, whether we like it or not, we are to be digested and displayed as part of the postcolonial. In fact, I, as an Aboriginal writer, feel that this non-Australian predator should be captured and taken back to its own native land, wherever that might be.

Postcolonialism is a "white" concept that has come to the fore in literary theory in the last five years (while Mudrooroo was in Ruby Langford-Ginibi's land) as Western nations attempt to define and represent themselves in non-imperialist terms. What is it that has prompted this reaction? Is it the panoptic gaze of international communications highlighting human rights violations that provokes the need to develop a liberalist rhetoric? Does this concern stem from the reality of economic sanctions imposed on South Africa from like nations? Is it a ploy intended to divert attention away from social and political oppression? Or has it become politically correct internationally, where assimilationist policies and practices have been discredited? And what is Australia's position?

In 1988 Anglo-Australians celebrated 200 years of settlement which was simultaneously an effacement of what, for many Aboriginal people, was the invasion 200 years ago of the lands of approximately 500 different language groups. These celebrations reinscribed an Anglo-Australian history superimposed on a landscape deemed terra-nullius. This painted canvas forms the backdrop for Prime Minister Paul Keating's republicanist impressions. In his view, in order to move toward republicanism, Australia must expunge racism through a series of policies and programmes that promote self-determination for Aboriginal people, seen primarily achievable through education and employment opportunities, rather than a negotiated process of political decolonization. Government policies of self determination are merely a postcolonial rhetoric that excuses the "white" public from taking responsibility for its own racism and colonialism. Within an unproblematized postcolonial frame, "self-determination" is a politically correct term which can be repeatedly uttered without there being any real expectation of the transfer of power and control to Aboriginal people and communities. Government rhetoric of self-determination is quite clearly not connected with Aboriginal people's own self determination or self identification.

These Governmental brush strokes of self-determination can be characterised by what Trinh Minh-Ha says are part of the liberalist push to "preserve the form remove the content" of indigenous cultures in an attempt to disguise the latent racism through a distorted use of Western liberalism. Trinh Minh-Ha exposes us to the colonialist declaration: "I, not you, will give you freedom."

By promoting self-determination as the path to freedom, Western liberalism determines the political, economic and social boundaries within which indigenous cultures are to be managed and tolerated. Self-determination, then, on the condition that I cut the cake. For Trinh Minh-Ha that cake refers to land.

The slicing of the cake, in the Australian context, has and does reflect the interests of big business and economic dependence on mining rather than the sovereign rights of Aborigines. Land rights as the basis of economic and political power, and spiritual and cultural belonging fails to be a determining factor in the apportioning of the cake. (Around the time of this conference, this began to change.) Even when the Federal Government granted permanent protection for a site of spiritual significance to the Nyoongar people of W.A., the State government responded by interpreting permanent protection as the need for special permission if construction disturbed the ground. In W.A. the Swan Valley Fringe Dwellers have been protesting at the redevelopment of Goonininup, known to some as the Old Swan Brewery site, and demanding this significant slice of the cake. The State government appears to have won the battle for the Old Brewery site and claims it as a victory for democratic processes which it presents as majority interests. The boundaries of the liberal democratic processes eliminate the possibility for the content of self-determination and retain it only as a form. Even in the positive examples wherein leases have been granted, real control remains located in government hands manipulable by mineral markets and short term economic gains. The form is in place, divorced of content.

As the right to land is fundamental to Aboriginal people's own acts of self-determination or identity, and
as their sovereignty is for the most part being denied them, Governmental rhetoric of self-determination is hollow, there is no content, it is merely part of the postcolonial fiction. The actions of mining companies provide an example of how capitalism's greed overrides all considerations of Aboriginal relationships to the land.

Track begins, Wardongup, Crow water place, now Subiaco. Subiaco where St Bernard formed his order to order us in this suburb of Perth, Wardongup, Crow Watering place he greets the darkness of the street, silvered by the lines of mudrooroo, paperbark trees, another dreaming following along as he finds the track north. Morning flooded. The outstreaming lights of the taxi driver illuminating each tree in this metropolis of the Wardongmat people, fluttering crows descending into the pits of Capitalism. We develop ourselves; we lose ourselves; we gain ourselves, while they develop the world in multi-tracks of heavy metallic ore.

I forego the discourse on Aborigines. Everyone, it seems, has solutions to the problem. Aboriginality is like religion and politics. The discourse gets me to my plane in time. I forgot to discuss mining with my mine of information and opinions.

This visit to mining areas in the Pilbara has been arranged at the invitation of The Chamber of Mines and Energy of Western Australia Inc. and hosted by the North West Regional Council. The aim of the seminar is to improve the level of understanding of members of university campuses and the North West Community colleges and minors of industry issues in the Pilbara.

And so the plane follows along the track from Perth to Paraburdoo, to Marandoo where everything is given to us in millions of tonnes and dollars and the need for this new area to be at first excised from the Karihini National Park and then excavated beyond the bedrock.

Development may cost millions; but it gives millions. We need it to keep our state of being entire and our standard of living. Suddenly, I feel that I am encased in a fifties science fiction story, an alien facing Terrans in a modernism encrusted about a discourse in which words like progress and development are filtered through abbreviations. Somewhat precariously perched atop this man's world of endless, well, they did approach mining operations as if it was a sexual act, hard thrusting without a care for the woman beneath, without a care for the universe, the land beneath. 'We'll fix it up when we are done with her.' Much like a battered wife syndrome.

1990 was a record year for iron ore as production increased 112 million tonnes. The outlook for the future is for a projected increase in production.

KARIJINE PARK

The national park is incised and cut asunder,
For the rattling wagons to carry away our earth blood,
Deposit it on the coast to cover the sea foam red.
Maami, Maami, no good or bad scenarios, only scenarios;
Their ironware teeth bite away our mother.

Like our bodies, the earth is made up of traces of minerals and salts; like our minds, the earth bears traces of the birth of the species. Sacred phosphorus burns to protect the earth blood. Undaunted, they mix the grade. Vampires sample and suck up more. Will transformation lead us to health? When they have transformed all the world into a wrecked image of our wrecked image, how ugly will that image be; how beautiful, how sad, how joyful, how desolate - a vampire lacks the grace to be satisfied.

The Mt Newman joint venture in Western Australia is one of the world's largest iron ore producers.

The mine supplies much of Australia's steel industries iron ore requirements, as well as
exporting under long-term contracts to steel industries in Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and other countries. Railroad and port facilities at Port Hedland are owned as part of the joint venture which is made up of BHP (85%), Mitsu C Itoh (10%) and C I Minerals (5%). The enterprise takes its name from a peak which lies 21kms north of Mt Whaleback named after explorer Aubrey Woodward Newman.

How great are the works of man. Ten billion tonnes mined; 40 million tonnes of ore a year, and efficiently. The Whaleback, once a mountain, is now a vast pit; the largest earth wound in the entire world. Twenty million tonnes of flesh has been blasted to get at our spine. Everything is big, large, massive. The longest trains in the world take the iron ore to the port which is only reasonably impressive, alas! Nothing is said of the ever present problem of dust and the vast amounts of water leached from the earth. Now our trees are dying; but that is progress and one day here there shall be a vast lake lined with resorts. Not much Aboriginal employment; but well, we can mow lawns, and later on, if the lake eventuates, then we can serve the customers with the happy black grin so much a trademark of the tourist poster.

Telfer Gold Mine in the Paterson Range is the largest gold producer in Australia with the production of some 2 million ounces.

The Kintyre Uranium project is located on the edge of the Great Sandy Desert. Given the right political and economic circumstances, the Kintyre Project would involve a mine and associated treatment facilities at the Kintyre site.

They do not write that nearby is Mount Cotton with an Aboriginal settlement, Pungurr, and although exploration has been stopped, they are eager to get at it. Unfortunately, the Regional Land Council is against them; but they are cultivating the local community. If only there were no land councils and no legal service, then things would be much easier.

Access to Aboriginal land for exploration and mining should be determined by the Northern Territory government, developed to best reflect the general needs of the Aborigines, miners and the general community.

Bruce the Geo knows the Aborigines, more than you can ever know; The locals will get a lot from mining, unlike the others, The Land Councils and all that lot who get between us And the community, just like union organiser and the workers, 'Leave them to us, we'll deal with them, man to man, Woman to woman, simple isn't it when you know the score, And before you know it, they'll fall in with our plans. There'll be mining everywhere when dealing man to man, Woman to woman without organisations and ill-intentioned advisers. "We believe in equality, rough justice for one and all; We've got the assets, the lobbies, the paid advisers To see that each and every one of you give us the best of deals."
If I preferred monstrous holes in our earth, To the slow erosions of the seasons, I would not be a poet overawed by their ugliness. If I could find desire in billions and millions; Find aesthetic joy in demountables and hard angles, I might essay a salient into an ore body, Move my tired arse a fraction, dig up my foundations, And find that I was not on my way to millions. I am a member of a union, of a race under attack Without a slogan of an idea to evade the bullshit of Capitalism.
ROBE NEWS

The Robe River Joint Venture entered the iron ore industry with substantial start-up capital designed to attain world class, cost effective and competitive operations. Robe sells approximately 65% of shipments to Japan, with a balance to Europe, China, Korea, Taiwan and BHP Australia.

In 1986/87 Robe adopted a new management and industrial relations policy. Since that time, employment numbers have steadily decreased, production and productivity has dramatically increased.

National parks, reserves, land under Aboriginal control and world heritage areas form the bulk of restricted land. Other vetoed areas vary from state to state.

It is possible that a further 20 percent of Australia could become inaccessible if proposals already announced by single issue groups representing conservation and Aboriginal interests are successful. In total more than half of Australia could be locked away.

The mining industry is vital to the Australian economy. The combined taxes of all mining industries form the backbone of our country.

The R disjointed, broken, designed for foreign market way,
Where utterly different ideograms reject the issue of Greece and Rome;
The O dismembered into lumps of iron, fines or pellets;
Separated out, or twisted together into a samurai sword;
The B bifurcated into heaps of metallic dust, or market or producer;
The E, the factory gate extending out into the lives of labour lost;
The company enclosing others in paternal arms of unsafe accords:
The arms are always open as the entire icon signals blankets
To those who believe in the charms of a smiling capitalism.

The Dampier solar saltfield was built in the late 1960s as a result of increased demand for industrial salt by the Japanese chemical industry. The use of up to date technology makes the Dampier saltfield one of the most advanced and efficient in the world.

THE FIRST DAMPIER

(William Dampier was the first Englishman to reach this coast in the 17th century. Naturally, he killed people here.)

In memory of Camus' missionary
On the salt pad, I suck a crystal of salt
In memory of that mouthful of salt.
Across the snow-fired-salt, real as time iron ore gleams,
Blood red it assigns a sightline to piles of licid dreamings.
A kitchen midden tumbles out thousands of years of shells;
Boulder faces are marked with the constellations of culture;
An American eye in bright pants clambers up to capture
The hairy Thangarra of the strong penis in a petrifying gaze.
He and the other figures, ignoring salt and iron ore piles,
The rattling of a ship loading the whine of the conveyor belt,
Continue to dream out sun rays of unconcern.
They have yet to make connection with the last 200 years;
Even Dampier is only a memory of the flight of the people
Inland leaving Thangarra and his brood to meet the monster.
It worked, at least he left and they returned;  
But then others came to circle and infiltrate their camps.  
Monsters are all the same, killing and stealing women;  
Bringing new dreams and ceremonies, lying and stealing;  
Changing and altering;