'Aboriginal representations in Australian texts'

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The task taken up here is essentially one of Aboriginal cultural representation in film and literature. [1] How is Aboriginal culture represented and how does it represent itself? What are the limits of these forms of representation? Who can claim unmediated access to the laws which govern the forms by which Aboriginality is represented? What discursive practices impinge upon the processes, how do they advance or modify power relations between the subject of representation and the form of representation? Is there a continuous, identifiable, hermetically sealed discursive practice or are these practices fractured, discontinuous, part of a serial which resists totalizing tendencies? [2] Because there is no natural, unmediated, culturally untainted Aboriginal discourse as such in the borrowed language of the coloniser - though claims on radically political grounds may be made for it - Aboriginal representation (by Aborigines themselves and by whites) is an extremely complex and varied phenomena. It is impossible for one "ideological fiction," one discourse of power, one system of thought to account for the heterogeneous nature of Aboriginal people's "histories." Their, the Aborigines', outburst against white inhumanity might well be unrelieved, but their discourses are varied, competing and even contradictory. This proliferation of discourses thwarts any easy reduction of a culture to a dominant discourse. But such a reduction has not only been attempted, but has partially succeeded in swamping the plurality of Aboriginal voices. This reduction is designated by my use of the word "Aboriginalism".

Let me begin by opening up the field of representation by examining, firstly the discourse of "Aboriginalism," which is perhaps one of the most powerful "fictions" in Australia today and, secondly, a number of literary and filmic texts through which Aborigines have been represented. My examination of "Aboriginalism" draws upon the concept of Orientalism; my textual analysis draws upon that discourse analysis which looks to the ways in which genres and conventions govern. and indeed dictate, what is being represented. I will be arguing that generic structures organize and pre-determine Aboriginal representations to a significant extent In arguing such a case this paper is not only tentative and exploratory but is narrowly blind to a host of urgent social questions.

Orientalism and 'Aboriginalism'

One of the great themes of Orientalism, writes Edward Said, is that since they (the other) cannot represent themselves, "they must therefore be represented by others" [3] who know more about them than they know about themselves. As Said argues, this particular ideological structure of thought should not be allowed to go unchallenged since we must always ask what kinds of intellectual, cultural and material energies went into the construction of this hegemony. It is as Said says "a created body of theory" with material and cultural investments, which go well beyond academia into politics and even global perceptions of nations and races. 4

In the narrow area of Orientalism with which I am familiar, that of Indian Orientalism, the issue of the hegemony of a dominant discourse may be discussed through an examination of a seminal text such as Charles Wilkins' first English translation of the Bhagavadgita (1785). In Warren Hastings' introduction to the translation we find another discourse present, a much more balanced and sensitive discourse which vies, momentarily, for ascendency but is subsequently
suppressed by those of William Jones and Hegel. At the very moment that William Jones and other Orientalists were writing the founding discourses of Orientalism, Wilkins and Hastings, in the critical apparatuses which go into the making of a "book", affirmed the source race's radical otherness. The Indians could be understood only through a reading and understanding of "their writings" which, wrote Hastings with a much finer grasp of history, "will survive when the British dominion in India shall have long ceased to exist." 5 This recognition of identification and difference was overtaken by an imperialist discourse based on the political ideology of racism with its ontological categories of exclusivism and otherness. A crucial figure here is Hegel who in The Philosophy of Fine Art (1835-38) reduced Hindu thought to "Fantastic Symbolism," a term reflecting the "absence" of an historical consciousness in the Hindu. 6 Orientalism denies the possibility of a number of conflicting discourses which themselves are probably in a stale of contestation and struggle. The triumph of the Hegelian discourse, as constitutive of Orientalism, parallels the triumph of "Aboriginalism" in Australia - itself a similar ideological construct. I use Hegel to mediate between Orientalism and "Aboriginalism". I am inclined to think that as a hegemonic system which saturated while Australian consciousness and became a system of thought in its own right, "Aboriginalism," like Orientalism, simply confirmed prejudices based on doctrines of evolutionary difference and intellectual inferiority.

Nowhere is this more evident than in an essay entitled "Literature and the Aborigine" by Frederick T. Macartney (1957). In it he claims that the Aborigines blur the "distinction between self and external objects" 7 - precisely what Hegel was talking about. Armed with this kind of "Orientalist" (or quasi-Helgelian) ammunition, Macartney can then deny this race the ability to produce its grandest cultural artifact that is the literary text. He refuses to use the word "literature" in discussing Aboriginal narratives, which are considered either "tediously discursive and inchoate" or incapable of "critical reflectiveness." Thus Macartney cannot understand how Eleanor Dark's character Booron in The Timeless Land (1941) could "say," "A Law, if it was anything at all, was surely something to live by, something to which one might anchor one's spiritual life. Among her own people it was exactly that."8 Macartney quotes selectively here for the passage concludes with the words, "[The Law] was so intricately interwoven not only with their own physical and spiritual needs, but with the peculiarities of the land itself, that all three became one, a mystical trinity functioning in harmony - the Law, the Land, the People." For a man who was an early defender of Australian Literature and is perhaps best known as one of the first Commonwealth Literary Fund Lecturers of the 1940s (Queensland, Tasmania, Melbourne and Sydney Universities), it is surprising that he should have been so insensitive towards Aboriginal culture and so oblivious of the subtle ways in which that culture has interacted with while Australian Literature. My point, however, is that in Macartney we get, as late as 1957, a "replay" of "Aboriginalism's" imperialistic discourse, unameliorated unqualified by almost fifty years of anthropological work (including those of Malinowski and Ashley Montagu) and insensitive to the strengths of the culture under discussion. It is true that like Wilkins and Hastings, for "Aboriginalism" too there are the discourses of Elkin, Dark and many more but these discourses do not form part of the construction of "Aboriginalism," which, as C.D. Rowley again has pointed out upon analogy with Solzhenitsyn's 'Gulag', may be deemed an "Aboriginal Archipelago," signifying both exclusion (by refusing to acknowledge the Aboriginal presence in society) and ubiquitous presence (by denying land rights for instance).9

Available Discourses

The "problematic" thus outlined gets complicated when we try to put the representations of Aborigines through discursive modes which may be available to black and white writers. As an initial strategy, and in very general terms indeed, I would like to postulate that in this case there are two over-riding discourses which are readily available, and we may call them $A$ or Aboriginal discourse and $W$ or white discourse. $W$ is easy to define because it is marked by all the characteristics of post-Gutenberg written textuality: closure, graphology, mechanical reproduction, editorial apparatus, commentaries, critical metatexts, intertextuality and so on and so forth. A, on the other hand, is pre-Gutenberg oral. Its characteristics are absence of closure, narrative dominance, epic style, absence of authorship, collective recitation, generic fluidity, the use of circumlocution to avoid sacred words, cults or myths, an over-riding sensitivity towards the special nature of the message, its intrinsic power and so on. As Bruce Shaw shows many of these are features also of "Aboriginal English:" "... non-verbal and semi-verbal markers, repetition, reversals, standard substantives, a vocabulary of special terms, scatology, dialogue, interrogatives, verbal punctuation, mythological allusions, onomatopoeia, similes and the maintenance of suspense."10 It is important to note in passing that Macanney's trivializing of the Aboriginal song (p.121)
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Forgotten I lost dreaming
Country I left forgotten lost

which is epigrammatically reduced, by the translator T.G. H. Strehlow, to "He who loses his dreaming is lost," is directly related to a failure to perceive the radical difference between oral poetics (the fluid verse translation) and the written text (the epigrammatic reduction). Obviously no one can maintain a total separation of the oral from the written. Written epics, for instance, still show the marks of their oral origins: retarding narratives, prolepsis, bricolage, the surfacing of residual matter. Again in Bruce Shaw's words: "The [Aboriginal] narratives, then, contained a mix of history, mythology, legend, customary law and art and were thereby characteristic of oral literature in general (including its written forms in other societies - Homer's Iliad, the Bible and the Ramayana)."

These distinctions acquire a sharper focus and greater heuristic precision if we put them through a sophisticated model such as Halliday's register theory. 12 In terms of this theory we could say that A discourse shows the dominance of tenor and of the interpersonal function while W discourse is more readily identified with field or mode and has more marked ideational and textual functions. The domain of the interpersonal function generates prayers, greetings, gossip, etc., while we would associate the ideational and textual with political debate, philosophy, oratory, sermon, sacred or spiritual discourse, etc. 13 Obviously, A discourse has its own textual functions since sacred or scriptural discourse, jokes, parody and impersonation may all be round in that discourse. We could therefore say that A discourse is dominated by tenor and mode (in that order), a high degree of interpersonal function (though some textual functions clearly exist) with a conscious marginalizing of the ideational function. The ideal A text would therefore be oral, interpersonal and "dialogic." The ideal W discourse will be written ideational and "non-dialogic." These are ideal types only and may have little relationship with what actually happens. But they do offer two variables through which Aborigines can be represented. Since the subject culture represents itself better than another, different culture, it is A discourse which could be the carrier of whatever is distinctive about Aboriginal culture. As a consequence, A discourse has produced, in Australia, the positive text while W discourse has produced the negative, ironic text. Furthermore it is now becoming increasingly clear that when Aborigines write their own histories they appropriate those formations of A discourse which could be easily handled within the rules of W discourse. Bruce Shaw's "autobiographies" or "ethno-histories" of Grant Ngabidj (My Country of the Pelican Dreaming) and Jack Sullivan (Banggaiyerri), 14 Ida West's Pride Against Prejudice, Hazel McKellar's Matya-Mundi and Elsie Roughsey's An Aboriginal Mother tells of the Old and the New 15 are all marked by a mode which is fragmented and centred on the subject. These histories are concerned not so much about objective terrains but about family relationships, about survival, about ritual and they possess a strong, almost mythical, sense of place. Above all these histories in their varying ways, are marked by the effects that historical forces, including prejudices, had on the individual through whose mind the text or history is being articulated. 16 As Bob Reece has argued with reference to "massacre histories," 17 metaphysical issues such as injustice and inhumanity are often transformed in Aboriginal versions of those histories into tales about quasi-comic heroes capable of outsmauling white men at their own game. There is clearly a type of history which sits more comfortably within A discourse. But there is nevertheless a high level of suppression/repression operating in these histories precisely because they are written.

Literary Genres

The central category of all literary discourse, according to Georg Lukacs 18 is genre. As structures of "potentially realizable meanings," genres realize, reflect, distil or mediate the "historical real." They also designate the presuppositions upon which any generic actualization is based. They are, essentially, organizing principles which channel discourse towards a particular mediated expression. I use the term "mediated" because genres are bonded to history, in a state of flux and are themselves not free from ideology. If we therefore project the two available discourses (A and W discourse) onto generic possibilities, we find that different kinds of genres are produced.

With genres arising out of or interacting with a powerful inter-personal domain (where tenor is dominant), the forms of representation would be fluid, endless and not marked by a self-conscious concern with origins. Their "ideational dimension" would be recast into a ceremonial discourse about ritualistic beginnings, relating directly to a sense of the collective ethos of the race itself. This is what leads to the impossible "otherness" of its representational forms and its virtual incapacity to construct in terms of the available discourses its own tragic history. Where the Latin-American natives could cite apocryphal or real incidents of their race committing suicide or jumping off cliffs upon seeing the
Spanish galleons (features which seem to have influenced the later versions of the Guatemalan/Mayan *Popot Vuh*), 19 the Aborigines did nothing of that kind — though filmic representations such as *Manganinnie* and *Jedda* tend to suggest a similar psychic "drift." Their vision was not such that the glorification of death could be countenanced; since self-origin was not all that important, individual death could not readily become the subject of literary representation. Thus this simple generic unavailabilily virtually precluded Aboriginal representation from perhaps the most powerful of all available genres of personal suffering and loss.

Yet genres of *A* discourse have their own ways of cultural affirmation and representation. The best example of this is *Gularabulu, Stories of the West Kimberley* by Paddy Roe.20 What we get here is precisely the kind of fractured, ludic discourse, where a diversity of subject positions are taken up and a multiplicity of discourses, interpersonal positions, body language and so on are manipulated with remarkable ease. Paddy Roe’s sense of "place," his "dialogic fascination with juxtapositions of different typical consciousnesses"21 forcefully brings home the kinds of literary genres available to *A* discourse. The opening "verse" of one of the "Trustories" ("true stories") "Mirdinan" makes this abundantly clear:

Yeah -
well these people bin camping in Fisherman Bend him
and his missus you know -
Fisherman Bend in Broome, karun -
we call-im karun -
soo, the man used to go fishing all time -
get food for them, you know, food, lookin' for tucker -
an' his, his missus know some Malay bloke was in the
creek, Broome Creek -
boat used to lay up there -
so this, his missus used to go there with is Malay
bloke -
one Malay bloke, oh he's bin doin' this for -
over month 22

Against these, what we have is *W* discourse with its *W* genres. These genres may be deemed much, more complex and historically overdetermined but they have been disseminated in such a way as to make them available even to a culture whose original forms of representation were through genres of *A* discourse. Thus the "Redfern discourse" of the Aborigines would be more easily analyzed through *W* genres than through *A* genres even when the forms of *A* discourse obviously enter into, destabilize, and juxtapose that discourse’s appropriation of *W* genres. My point here is that the relationship between these two forms is virtual rather than real heuristic rather than practical.

The rest of this paper examines this problematic through an examination of the ways in which generic structures organize and pre-determine the representations of the Aborigine in novels and films.

**Novels**

Novels of *W* discourse under discussion in this section may be categorized as Romance or Epic. Moreover *Coonardoo, Capricornia, Riders in the Chariot, and The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* are novels which transform these dominant genres. Since genres are structures or possibility, it can be argued that the representations of the Aborigine in these texts are governed to a considerable degree by generic conventions. This claim needs to be made because the issue of literary representation is too often couched within a critical framework which overlooks the determinants of form and which, consequently, advances exclusivistic and dichotomous modes of reading. Furthermore, a generically informed analysis allows us to not only examine the specificity of filmic representation but also to see the degree to which *W* discourse is radically undermined and contested by Aboriginal writers like Mudrooroo Narogin (Colin Johnson) who choose to write in that discourse.

It is useful here to comment briefly on the theoretical status of Epic and Romance. I see the bourgeois novel as relating essentially to these two forms. Further, as Bob Hodge 23 has argued, it is possible to claim that Epic is the Male or *M* text and Romance is the female or *F* text with a corresponding dispersal of love and power. Where the *M* text places
power in the mate, but denies him love, the F text places love in the domain of women but denies them power.

The Epic is dominated by power relations where the male holds centre space but is effectively denied any real satisfaction through love. It is more clearly the text of civilizations which have lost a sense of concordance and in which the ironic mode dominates. It confronts the break down of society at a moment when the Law of God is dispensed with. Romance is less affected by ideological guilt (again one of its presuppositions) since it proposes to rewrite history through fables which still have a redemptive capacity. It is possible to map my definition of Romance and Epic onto Abdul R. Jan Mohammed's generic use of the Lacanian Imaginary and the Symbolic.24 Given that the Imaginary is actually narcissistic (like Romance), it is only in the Symbolic, that is in the Epic, that self and other are historically differentiated. Not surprisingly, for Aboriginal writers it is the Epic-novel which constitutes the most exciting literary form. Not only do its antecedents relate directly to features of A discourse, but its ironic potential and historical sense make it more appropriate for the dissemination of the Aboriginal experience.

Novels: Discourse of Romance

I begin with two Romances written within a relatively short period of each other. Coonardoo was published in 1929 and Capricornia in 1937. In lumping them together I am aware of their discrete and irreducible historical differences, especially insofar as every text has its own disparate moment of production and circulation. Coonardoo in 1929 is not the same text as Coonardoo in 1988. But my concern here is not so much with a cultural history as with generic transformation, diffusion and control. For this reason Coonardoo is one of the more complex examples of a genre available to W discourse. But what Prichard does is to recognize the fundamental otherness of the race being represented, a point which is effectively underlined by Aboriginal chants breaking into the text throughout. In doing this she gives A discourse a certain autonomy and effectiveness hitherto unacknowledged. As chants or song texts of various kinds, these passages act as a supplement to the text and direct our reading away from the overt narratives around Wytabila station and Hugh's own dilemma, to a discursive practice which surfaces only through names, stories or chants. But it surfaces also through a radical re-reading of genealogy. And this is important because in Romance correct genealogical transmission is important. Whilst Romance is governed by intricate reversals of genealogy, it is also marked by a desire to establish genealogical secrets at the level of human biography. That feature of Romance is variously manipulated by A discourse, a fact which is made evident early on in the novel.

Meenic loved Coonardoo as Mrs Bessie loved Hugh, although Coonardoo was not her child. 25

In a W Romance this genealogical subversion would be an enigma which would be gradually unfolded. Aware of this narrative principle, Prichard does not reduce her material to conform to the laws of a W genre. Thus she is prepared to countenance the varying readings of desire in the society being represented Prichard's awareness of this difference may be seen in an episode towards the end of the novel when Coonardoo is seduced by Geary, a detestable bloke for whom Hugh has nothing but scorn. Yet there are reasons for this seduction which, from the point of view of W discourse, would damn Coonardoo. She recalls just before her seduction how Hugh "did not want her" (p. 202) even though as we hear from Hugh's own mouth she was "my woman" (p. 209). Ownership without sex was not part of Coonardoo's system. Hugh's rigid morality precluded that fundamental insight. Geary, on the other hand, fulfilled one of her conditions: "Yet male to her female, she could not resist him" (p. 203). This is clearly not the code of W Romance but perfectly legitimate and non-contradictory in Coonardoo's own A discourse. And when as a broken, defiled, sick woman, she remembers her youth her language is filled with contradictory genealogies, doubts, absence of causality and so on. Hugh's unbelievable anger in dragging her over fire as if like a Sati she had to atone for her sexual lapse (if such a thing indeed existed in Coonardoo 's own mind), is remembered as an impulsive, irrational gesture - but is also symptomatic of a total failure to understand the underlying deep structures which constitute that essential difference between white and black societies. Yet the genre available to Prichard is never the less marked by practices which either lead to excessive sentimenality or, in terms of white liberalism, to an allegorical rendition of the Aboriginal condition. There is neither that loosening of discourse, even though songs do erupt from deeper cultural recesses into the text, nor a radical moment of confrontation to make that difference valid.

Xavier Herben's Capricornia 26 can be situated within the broad parameters of the discourse of Romance. As with Coonardoo Xavier Herbert's work is controlled by the formal elements of Romance and is bonded to them. As a text
which has entered Australian cultural history, its reading here and now is complicated by our understanding of its original editor, P.R. Stephensen, who indeed claimed co-authorship on the basis of his editorial work on the text. Moreover Stephensen's own ambivalent politics—he endorsed neo-Nazism, was defiantly anti-Semitic and pro-Japanese—touched its most bizarre twist in his endorsement of the Australian Aborigine as essential to Australian nationalism. On this point he may be associated with the Australia First Movement and, ironically enough, with the Jindyworobaks, insofar as his utopian vision of Australian culture also needed a positive acknowledgement of the Aboriginal past. I invoke Stephensen because he is indicative of the complex ways in which cultural capital functions—and the contradictory ways in which "Aboriginalism" is articulated. My aim here is to draw attention to this complexity, and to show how the genres of W discourse control the representation of the Aborigine in texts as sensitive as Capricornia.

First published in 1937 Capricornia was affectionately, though perhaps ironically, called "that old botch" which nevertheless brought the author, Xavier Herbert, in his own words, "quite a lot of dough." It is in many ways a Picaresque Romance, heavy on caricature, on mythology and utilizes simplistic oppositional symbolism and polemical diatribe (most of the sympathetic characters are given set-speeches on the Aboriginal problem) to define its ideological nexus. These characteristics of Romance and the Picaresque tend to gloss over the deeper fissures which the subject matter of the text explores. In some ways Vincent Buckley's well-known pronouncement that "The book is about the universe which ... Herbert seems not to accept" is endorsed by Herbert. The text does offer the author's refusal to accept a world in which anarchy and ungodliness reign supreme. There is an over-riding sense of fate which plays "dingo to all men," black and white.

How is "Aboriginalism" negotiated here? How do the formal constraints of the generic form finally trap the text within its own signifying practices? What are the terms of Herbert's argument? How does he propose to explore the relationship between the literary text and race? On the narrative level, the problematic is offered as a gradual self-realization of Norman ("No-name"), a product of white dominance and white shame in the union of the grazier Mark Shillingworlh and an unknown lubra. While dominance and white shame: initially a paradox, but an essential set in white/Aboriginal sexuality in Australia. Dominance because it denotes the supremacy of the white phallus; shame because it also signifies guilt and need. The symbolic working out of these oppositions denotes the larger patterns of conflict and tension which exist in the matrix of the society. There is a typological re-statement of the social realities and racial differences which we observe ourselves. Insofar as this typology may be discovered and then related to its matrix, the novel affirms the literary text's "power" to transform and mediate social formations.

The convergence of a mythic form and caricature to represent Australia's racist past tends to shift the focus of the problematic to an almost outmoded literary form, the Picaresque. That Herbert should, nevertheless, employ this is indicative of the organizing strengths of the genres of W discourse which, finally, impose their own structures of meaning upon a text. There are certain laws of discourse, certain conventions of what remains a significantly autonomous system, which impinge upon the manner in which the Aborigine is represented in a literary text. In speaking about a discourse of Romance it is argued that discourse traps consciousness and thwarts the "real" representation of the radically other.

Novels: Discourse of Epic

If there is the novel of the degraded "Romance," there is also the novel of the degraded "Epic." This genre is perhaps the single most powerful modern literary norm. It has remained pre- eminent since the bourgeois novel broke new ground in the eighteenth century. I should like to examine the capacities of this complex literary genre (and one which, I believe, the Aborigines themselves are more likely to adopt) by examining two texts. The first, The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith (1972), comes, I think, closer to the formal laws of Realism. The second, Patrick White's Riders in the Chariot, comes closer to being an "allegorical epic." My concern will be with the ways in which the formal rules of Epic discourse govern representation. I begin with The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith. Thomas Keneally is aware of the dangers of seeing an alien culture through a form enriched by the history of another civilization. It is for this reason that he self-consciously grapples with the larger question of representing black consciousness through the discourse or the degraded Epic - the bourgeois European novel. The title of the novel thus relates itself to two traditions: The positive ("oral") Epic and the Novel. As a "chant," the text moves towards its "unitary" beginnings and proposes to recapture the positive, "available" discourse of the Aborigines, the discourse in which the tales or integrated cultures...
are spelled out. The Aboriginal chant then has an Epic dimension and there are characters in the novel who chant though Jimmie himself, in the style of the Epic hero, chants only in the early stages of the novel. The only way in which a chant could float in and out of the text is by rendering it ironic. Since the degraded Epic has no room for the positive chant, an ironic conception of the world must be brought to the text. Irony, the structural principle that controls The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith, wrote Georg Lukacs is "The self-correction of the world's fragility."34 This leads us directly to an essential problematic.

We have an Aboriginal chant which needs an Epic framework - this is implied in the title. We also have a white writer (also liberal intellectual, moderate Catholic and Irish in origin) incapable of handling that form and conscious of the impossibility of its existence in our world. He therefore inscribes the chant in the novel form, in a discourse of the "degraded Epic." Herbert overcame the problem by writing in the discourse of Romance where a comic vision cancelled irony, and where caricature distanced character. The only way in which Keneally can handle this impasse is, to use Wayne Booth's well-known definition of the "unreliable mode," through "an ironic collusion between the author and his [white] readers,"35 correcting as he goes on the implied heroism of the characters which the characters themselves (the Aborigines, in this instance) see as enactments of some larger collective consciousness.

The ironic mode necessitates the writing of two commentaries about Aboriginality. In this manner the novel can gesture towards a full Epic representation of a total culture and yet demonstrate the impossibility of that enterprise in the modern world. Insofar as the Realist Novel is ironic, it follows after Lukacs that "totally" cannot be retrieved for any culture whatsoever. Thus the novel hovers precariously as John Frow has pointed out, 36 between a chant (the Epic) and disenchantment (the Novel), between poetic discourse (Aboriginal chant) and ironic discourse (the degraded world of the novel). Where Romanee found a space for genealogical difference as a signifier of racial identity and an alternative historicity, Epic discourse makes that difference an explosive moment in the text. When Gilda's child turns out to be white (the cook's in fact), Mort and Tabidgi are unruffled because for them the only begetter is Emu-Wren, about which the white world is ignorant. In Coonardoo that proposition is avoided; in The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith Mort and Tabidgi's perspective possesses no genealogical power and is quickly suppressed. Its very suppression, and its ironic rejection to be sure, is necessitated by the Epic discourse.

Patrick White's novel Riders in the Chariot might, as we have seen, be adequately designated an "allegorical epic novel." Of particular interest is the first major interaction between Alf Dubbo, an Aborigine, and Himmelfarb. This "moment" is not Dubbo's first entry into the text but it is of crucial importance to the text. The "moment" occurs in Part III, Chapter 8, and is part of what may be called "The Book of Himmelfarb" (p. 223).

The"blackfellow" enters this sprawling discourse through Himmelfarb's point of view. There are four essential markers of difference: firstly, he, the blackfellow, is excessively thin; secondly his racial position is ambiguous since in Patrick White parenthesis often designates doubt, if not ironic underculling; thirdly, he seems to be involved in some inner life; and finally, people react to him ambivalently, smiling "not exactly at him." This discourse, however, enters a generic register of the initiated: the intensity of physical description amplifies his "thinness," authenticates his "solidity," his "being." If we are not careful, the blackfellow can very easily lose all his hard-won cultural specificity. White I believe is conscious of the possibility of this collapse into allegory especially since the allegorical mode itself has such a special significance for Patrick White.37 I think a crucial point occurs with the sentence: "Some of the women lowered their eyes as he passed, others smiled knowingly, though not exactly at him" (my emphasis). The preposition "at," in this instance, carries immense semantic value. It is the ironic smugness of the smile, its total detachment and isolation from its object that makes the blackfellow an "alienated"- being, a social outcast. The preposition thus allows Patrick White to combine the blackfellow's menial job with a social formation threatening to explode.

The over-riding question posed by Patrick White's Riders in the Chariot is how one should read an "allegorical epic" and what laws govern its mode of representation? We know that theories of typification (Lukacs, Goldmann) imply that you can generate from the individual the whole social group. Indeed this is one of the ways in which it is argued, the novel can mediate between fiction and social reality. Thus allegory is a way of articulating (through the typical) identity between fictional and real orders. Obviously this reading cannot work. Yet in Riders in the Chariot, the overlapping/overdetermination of the four initiated ones, the "riders," the selection and superimposition upon Australia of their identities (the primal Australian, the Australian born, the immigrant from the Mother Country, the refugee)

http://wwwmcc.murdoch.edu.au/ReadingRoom/2.1/Mishra.html[8/02/2013 2:35:44 PM]
seem to suggest as much. We can either throw our hands up in the air and endorse Mudrooroo Narogin's (Colin Johnson's) remark ("He's not a bloody Aborigine!") or refine the system of allegorical identification. I should like to do the latter. Allegory in this instance works as an organizing principle into which Alf Dubbo is inserted. Yet instead of collapsing the individual and the abstract, it is clear that the abstract, seen here as Dubbo's "inner life," is the only realm in which an Aboriginal can find expression in a "degraded" world. This is part of an historical formation, an observation, so callously omitted from white Aboriginal cultural histories - that this race has an inner strength, a retrospective store of experience, a racial memory capable of generating moments of the most intense, and satisfying, illumination. "Jouissance" or "orgiastic joy" (to which mysticism has strong parallels) for the Aborigine, as for the other three "riders," is always a matter of retrospect, of history, not to be fought for or validated but an inexplicable given, a ground of being.

The representation of the Aborigine in Patrick White's Riders in the Chariot is thus framed and mediated by the discourse. While Dubbo's obvious "difference" places him apart and makes way for a special "non-relationship" between him and Himmelfarb, White's discursive practice nevertheless removes him from that irreducible historical and racial difference which is constitutive of the Australian Aborigine. The allegorical ploy employed here is meant to demonstrate not so much uniqueness of experience but collapse and unity, to show that, in the final analysis, history only prepares people for a moment of non-historical illumination. This moment of oneness redeems history.

In some ways White comes closest to a filmic discourse, but he remains ambiguous to the end. The kinds of inversions and "iconoclasms" he advances suggest the impossibility of writing about Aborigines within available discourses. What the moment of writing suggests, furthermore, is the impossibility of writing about the "other," and the tenuous, and ambiguous nature of this form of representation.

Filmic Representation

Many years ago, Walter Benjamin 38 suggested that in the age of mechanical reproduction, the film gives rise to new possibilities of meaning, new political expressions and a totally different mode of distribution and dissemination. It also changes the whole relationship between the "original" text and its copies or reproductions. With film, each moment of the text is wholly original or wholly new as it can be made accessible in an equally authentic form to a vast audience at the same time. Obviously, the film is also a marketable commodity and "accessibility" is dependent upon whether the viewer can afford to see a film. In the area with which we are concerned, i.e. the filmic representation of the Aborigine, our texts are therefore already "tainted," in that most have been produced by non-Aborigines. Both the viewers and the producers of these texts are primarily whites who may be accused of representing the Aboriginal people simply "as objects of knowledge." But since we are exploring the overall "problematic" of the relationship between discourses (and their generic constraints), whether produced by white or black, and their objects of representation (in this instance the Australian Aborigine), the precise ideological motive may be momentarily dispensed with. The films examined are Jedda (1954), The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith (1978) and Manganinnie (1980). I begin with what, I believe, is the most successful of Aboriginal representations in a white Australian literary or fiction film form. The film I refer to, Jedda, is framed within available discourses and generic limitations - its high melodramatic note, mythic resonances and epic vistas are obvious to even the most casual viewer - but it has a strong authorial presence, an excitement and an awareness of the very radical nature of the experiment itself. For Charles Chauvel, who had already introduced the Aborigine as an object of legitimate, though melodramatic, knowledge in Uncivilised (1936) the film was more than an acknowledgement of Australia's "unsayable" past; it was a revolutionary act which enabled the return of the repressed, for both whites and Aborigines.39 This surfacing of the "repressed" is articulated through a number of distinct modes. The first mode is essentially "dialogic." Here Sarah and Doug McMahon are shown discussing the relative merits of adopting an Aboriginal child. Where Doug is in favour of allowing the Aborigines to "regain their pride of race" by basically leaving them alone ("Still trying to turn that wild lilla magpie into a tame canary;" he expositules with Sarah), his wife would wish to "bring them closer to our way of living." Against this self-conscious dialogue, we get snippets of Aboriginal language ("White baby fly out, black baby fly in," exclaims one of the kitchen maids, or "I think more better you do see her," suggests an Aboriginal stockman to Felix). There is, of course, a dominant voice-over, that of the half-caste son, played by a white, who introduces himself as follows: "My name is Joe, I am a half-caste son of an Afghan teamster and an Aboriginal woman." Joe's "voice," is however, dispersed somewhat neutrally throughout the text, though this voice introduces, too, another mode through which the Aborigines are represented here. This mode is essentially "mythic."
The relative "serenity" of the Mungalla Buffalo Station is broken by the entry of Marbuk, played with extraordinary skill by Robert Tudawali who subsequently became something of an Aboriginal "apocryphal" text in his own right. With Marbuk's entry, the text ceases to possess a recognizable stability and since Marbuk has no filmic intertext, he has to be "crudely" constructed through mythic antecedents alone.

Marbuk signifies both sexual threat and the domain of the unconscious where human histories are formed. If Jedda is ambivalently attracted towards Marbuk, she is, nevertheless, allowed the power of resistance throughout. This is Chauvel's real strength in that he avoids the total inevitability of genetic forces and leaves a certain space open within which Jedda may respond to Marbuk. Perhaps that space is not large enough cinematically, a fact which explains why it is Marbuk who so totally dominates the text. Given this degree of individual freedom and emphasis on motivation, this level may be loosely termed "humanistic."

A third mode of articulation of the object of representation draws attention to the relationship of the "cinematic" gaze to the text, and presupposes cinema as "a technique of the imaginary." The eye of the camera may be specularly identified with that of the viewer who in turn identifies with the hero/heroine's gaze. Now in some cinema theories, this specular identification makes the "cinematic syntagm," a "dream syntagm" which has an unconscious structure of meaning. The kinds of questions we ask ourselves here relate to the extent to which identification is possible between the viewing subject and the textual signifiers. *Jedda* encourages that identification with a refusal to break suture (through shot, reverse shot for instance), reinforcing, as a consequence, the specular identification of viewer/subject with signifier/object.40 But since the white viewer never makes that identification, the gaze and the look may be fetishized without trivializing the object itself. I think this is important because the text encourages identity but the "real" world rejects it even when the film begins by reminding us that "the story of Jedda is founded on fact." In this very rejection, I think, lies the power of *Jedda* the film, in this very rejection lies a whole history of cultural difference, insensitivity and marginalization. But the rejection is also symptomatic of "unassimilated" and "unassimilable" textual features. Jedda (Narla Kunoth) and Marbuk (Robert Tudawali) have no "star" status or capital; Aboriginal sexual laws and mores, the subtle distinction between one tribe and another on the basis of skin ("she's no good for you, she's wrong skin," pleads Joe to Marbuk before their cataclysmic end) are not easily understood, given a dominant while culture's view of everything black; Marbuk's laughter, his triumphal sense when he realizes that Jedda will die with him, these are textual markers of such a high degree of otherness that the text is irrevocably destabilized, fractured, broken.

If *Jedda* enables representation to surface on its own terms (almost) without the "imperialism" of the laws of cinematic practice, this is not necessarily the case with either *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* or *Manganinnie*. There is a way in which Marbuk, Jimmie and Manganinnie belong to the same specifically "Aboriginal" filmic system. I think that the intertextual connection between the three (and many others) is strong, a fact which may well demonstrate *Jedda's* historical position as a founding text. What Fred Schepisi's *Jimmie Blacksmith* does, however, is to simulate its discourse more centrally, as the novel did, within epic formations. Where Marbuk's rebelliousness took the form of the abduction of native girls, Jimmie's, quite naturally, is a rebelliousness of the revolutionary. Keneally had situated that revolution in the genre of the bourgeois European novel: the film, likewise, situates it in the tradition of the realistic film. For a film based on a novel, the verbal dimension of the film is extremely sparse. The only sustained dialogue is between the Reverend Neville and his wife on the value of an assimilationist policy which, needless to say, they endorse. What an achievement if Jimmie's children were only a quarter black! ("Scarcely black at all," suggests the Rev. Neville). Instead, the film employs a large number of cuts, montage and juxtapositions to designate Jimmie's epic quest towards self-respectability. The first shot of the film is of a group of Aboriginal children playing games. This is broken by the words of Rev. Neville, "Blasted blacks, at least they're likely to disappear at any time." (In fact Mudrooroo Narogin too has been quoted as saying, "I don't think it is possible for such a small minority to survive."41) Before the title of the film and credits are flashed onto the screen, we get no fewer than fourteen cuts which collectively establish the Aboriginal "scene." This "scene" is broken by shots of only two white persons - the Rev. and Mrs Neville. The film is thus a relatively "inarticulate" text, since its meaning is established largely through the dominant discourse of film, i.e., the visual image. In some ways the cinematic image may be a "floating signifier," since it reaches us in a relatively unmediated form. The position of the "camera eye," naturally, is important and often it does designate a point of view (the mise-en-scene against which the hero is pictured, other people in the frame, and so on), but it has the potential for a more radical form of representation. In the figures of both Jedda and Marbuk that
advances is made with not inconsiderable help from the musical score of Isadore Goodman. However, the "camera eye" is less successful with Jimmie, Mort and Tabidgi and this is because the film is less sure of its aims, more diffuse in its execution, too close to the dominant mode of filmic representation.

We return to first person narration again in *Manganinnie*. In *Jedda* the narrator Joe, tells the story of Jedda the girl he loved; in *Manganinnie*, it is the little while girl Joanna who recalls her relationship with Manganinnie ("I remember as clearly as a dream") and functions as a guiding "beacon" throughout the narrative. If narrative technique connects the film with *Jedda*, its cinematic images are perhaps closer to *Jimmie Blacksmith* if only at a superficial level. The title sequence for instance follows both a series of shots and the voice-over. The controlling image of the film is captured right at the beginning with Manganinnie holding "fire" in her hand. "She knew the secret of things that burnt" we are told by Joanna before the name of the director, John Honey, is flashed to complete the credit skills. The presentation of the initial image without the intervention of words is not just a concession to oral traditions; it is aimed at giving the viewer an unmediated text linguistically too, Manganinnie is allowed no access to white discourse just as the little girl Joanna must finally learn to chant in the native language.

Politically, it may well be that films like *The Last Tasmanian* (1978) and *Manganinnie* while the present Tasmanian Aborigines" out of existence just as they are struggling to gain political effectivity" 42 and I have not taken up that issue in this paper. It should be sufficient to point out the quite unabashedly "commercial" connections between *Manganinnie* the film and the re-constructed life of the last Tasmanian, Truganini, by Tom Haydon and Rhys Jones. Furthermore, given that connection, *The Last Tasmanian* itself must be more fully brought to the fore. As "The Last Tasmanian Monday Conference"43 so clearly demonstrated a large part of the debate between the director Tom Haydon and, in particular, today's Tasmanian Aborigines (or"descendants" as Haydon calls them in *The Last Tasmanian*) might have been resolved if Haydon had not, by implication, insisted upon the absolute truth value of his documentary text. It should be clear that the genre of documentary cinema, no matter how objective its claims may be, is propelled by a desire for structural closure. No such closure at the level of "cinematic intentionality" would have been possible if "The Last Tasmanian" were not Truganini. Haydon clearly believes this to be so and hence *The Last Tasmanian*s more dramatic impact. In short the form requires a fully accomplished genocide theory to give it the necessary effect and momentum. If this concession is never made, as Haydon seems not to do so, the text becomes fetishistic and threatens to displace the real. Hence the ire of Tasmanian Aborigines who, like Michael Mansell, could rightly accuse Tom Haydon of "ignoring a fact of life. "Or in Noel Bullin's unqualified challenge,"The Tasmanian Aborigines are not extinct."44

As a mode of representation, however, *Manganinnie* uses both "memory" and "myth," but distorts the text by setting up easy positions for the white audience through the innocent voices of a young girl. In doing so, it becomes too easily the first person discourse of established genres and the power of Manganinnie's own narrative is consequently neutralized. For the white audience, the film may become too allegorical, a representation, symbolically, of the conditions under which a race may disappear. Since struggle is only peripherally shown (there is a shot of Manganinnie viewing her tribesmen attacking a homestead only to be repulsed by guns), there is a strong tendency to read it lyrically no doubt, but negatively. The representation endorses the inevitability of racial extinction. Yet the great strength of filmic representation is that "margins" (spirits and myths of fire bisect the text) constantly invade the centre; images acquire significances of their own and, when effectively juxtaposed, become a meaning-making system in their own right. So *Manganinnie* "collects" diverging musical traditions (the ubiquitous piano), manifold voices and chants, cries and laughter, as residual elements along the way. For the viewer, then, cinema denies easy closure.

**Conclusion: Mudrooroo Narogln (Colin Johnson)**

I have claimed that there are degrees of "authentic" representations but no absolute representation of the Aborigine as such. In the case of Aboriginal/white interaction (the most important cultural fact in Australia today in spite of the country's largely mistaken, and probably only symbolic, obsession with multi-culturalism - the real other for the white in Australia will always be the black), I have suggested that the "available discourses," with their varying generic presuppositions make "real" representation virtually impossible. This is partly because of the complex ways in which, as Homi Bhabha has written, a particular discourse as an "apparatus of power" operates. 45 While it is true that Bhabha is concerned here with "colonial discourse" and advances an inter-related theory of the unity of the colonial subject and the ambivalence of the discourse Or both the colonizer and the colonized, his overall claim about the...
What is exciting about Narogin's first novel is that it explores ways in which an "Aboriginal novel" may be given form. Yet Narogin is aware of the fact that he is writing in English, that he is working within the established generic and discursive conventions of a borrowed form, that Aboriginal "life" itself might, in the final analysis, reject the kinds of constraints which go with this form. There are significant strategies which he adopts and because this is an early work, these strategies are more readily recognizable. The work's structured designations ("Release," "Freedom," and "Return") have different meanings in white and black cultures, but since their specific meanings are yet to be established for blacks, the section headings are, in this respect, ironic. Within this tripartite structure the nameless hero casually moves. He is aimless, a petty thief, a fifties "bodgie," and seems to wander from one minor misfortune to another. There is little by way of the kinds of "motivating principles" we would seek in a fully accomplished realistic novel. In this way the novel gestures towards the German Bildungsroman, the novel of self-reflectivity, personal growth and discursive looseness. But where the Bildungsroman is, nevertheless, bound to an epistemology of "organic growth and self-realization," 50 which affirms the specifically aesthetic, Narogin's novel avoids the rendition of his hero through these aesthetic categories. He recognizes the impossibility of "pure," "unmediated," Aboriginal representation through a borrowed form, but he would like to break the presumed harmony of "consciousness" and textual unity. Clearly, he could have opted for the metafictional alternative of distributing perception through a number of (conflicting) discourses and time spaces. He could have "done a Paddy Roe" in writing a pure "monologue," without any "editorial" intrusion or collusion. He obviously needs "form," and the form of the degraded epic, the bourgeois novel that is, would do just as well.

It is crucial that criticism should acknowledge a writer's own history and not simply adopt formal aesthetic categories of reading uncritically. The opening paragraph may be cited to show how very important such a "history" is.

Today the end and the gates will eject me, alone and so-called free. Another debt paid to society and I never owed it a thing. Going outside into the fake heaven I have dreamed of these last eighteen months. Lifetime lousy months. Lifetime boredom of sameness. Same people, same talk, sick sameness of dirty jokes. Same sick sagas of old jobs pulled and new jobs planned. Heroic memories. Swell hopes.

There is nothing culturally specific here. Apart from certain truncated usages ("Today," "Lifetime") and sparse use of verbal forms, little else by way of linguistic difference are given. Here, of course, the filmic version would use an Aboriginal voice to make this a specifically Aboriginal utterance. Thus in the screenplay the opening paragraph is kept intact as a voice-over to be spoken by Wildcat. The introduction of the hero's name, Wildcat, both endorses the hero's original anonymity and identifies him with childhood memories of an Aboriginal myth about a cat trying to imitate a bird and, Icarus-like, forever falling. The screenplay is written some twenty years after the novel, a fact which reminds us that the literary text and the screenplay are relatively distinct. Many of the "novelistic" procedures nevertheless remain intact. The single most important feature of this is the way in which Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot invades the text throughout. This is a feature of the novel too but in the screenplay it is given an added twist since passages from Waiting for Godot are presented as surrealistic projections of Wildcat's own state of mind. There is a little "archaeological" work necessary here because I think in this instance, the author's own autobiography should be kept in mind as a parallel text. I believe this to be true of all Aboriginal works. Wild Cat Falling, the novel, was published in 1965. That was also the year in which the second edition of Waiting for Godot was published in paperback. I think Narogin, like many other readers of the sixties, shared the excitement of a work which suddenly broke new ground and gave writers a mode of representation hitherto unavailable to them. It is in this context that the passages taken verbatim from Waiting for Godot are not gratuitous; they are crucial markers of the author's own growth.
The sections from Beckett's play which Narogin incorporates in the screenplay are those which gesture towards the possibility of an ambiguous redemption ("One is supposed to have been saved and the other ... [damned]") or endlessly trap us in time and space. Since "talking" is the ultimate cure and since it reflects the dominance of the interpersonal (a distinctive feature of one of the available discourses), the screen play is unusually wordy. Thus memories of the Boys' Home lead to a lengthy "cut to surreal setting" in which Wildcat is the Boy, the Principal of the School is Vladimir and an old Aborigine man in ragged clothes is Estragon. Here the discussion is about a message from "Mr Godot" which remains unsaid. For Narogin however Vladimir's (the Principal's) question is crucial:

*Vladimir:* Are you a native of these parts? (silence) Do you belong to these parts?
*Wildcat as a Child:* Yes, sir.
*Estragon:* That's all a pack of lies. (shaking Wildcat by the arm) Tell us the truth.
*Wildcat as a Child:* But it is the truth, sir!

At this point in the screenplay the voice of June, a psychology student Wildcat met at the beach on the day of his release from prison, is heard:

*(voice off)*

So here you are, lost to the world in a book. I hoped that you would turn up.

Narogin's work is a powerful fiction which tries to confront the equally powerful fiction of "Aboriginalism," the kind of "fiction" which seems to ask of an Aborigine, "Do you belong to these parts?" It attempts radically to deconstruct he presumed "totality" of "Aboriginalism" through a discourse which is essentially unstable and extremely self-conscious of its capacity to distort representation. Narogin accepts the referential power of realistic discourse and concedes its expressive strengths, but he is trapped nevertheless in textual politics.

At the level of production, this textual politics took a dramatic turn when the director designate of the proposed film version of *Wild Cat Falling* asked Narogin to change the screenplay to indicate a more dramatic end to the story. The original screenplay ending followed the novel in that the hero was simply taken into custody by the police with a "cyclical confirmation" of an inevitable pattern of life. In this way the screenplay, like the novel, would have confirmed an historical "truth" about The Aboriginal in while judicial (prison-oriented) culture: the "Truth," that is, about a race's relatively complete alienation from the norms and expectations of the dominant society. In the new ending, "tragedy" and "peripeteia" (the essentials of closure in this cinematic genre) are endorsed and the screenplay ends with a "freeze" after Wildcat is shot by the police. I think this feature of the rewriting of the screenplay is indicative both of the power of generic expectations and of the transformation of a specifically Aboriginal text into a popular commodity.

For the Aboriginal, then, representation is not simply a matter of art, it is a matter of a political struggle through which alien discourses may be legitimated as belonging to them as well. This struggle would require, among other things, the fulfilment of two conditions. The first condition is the writing of Aboriginal texts. But the second equally important condition is a radical re-entry into the unitary subject of colonial discourse so that the double bind of the Aboriginal writer - that language releases yet marginalizes: "You talk like a book,"51 one remembers - is split open. If Aboriginal representation is to escape from the clutches of "Aboriginalism," this high degree of self-reflexivity is essential. The issue at slake is not how a more fully articulated, or "authentic," representation can be achieved but how to explode the processes, the energies and investments which have gone into that representation. My claim is that whilst there is no easy escape from the tyranny of discourse, it is nevertheless important to open up the field through a radical contestation of its limits. In some ways such a program might conceivably bring "Aboriginalism" itself to an end.

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Notes


21. Paddy Roe, p.3.

22. R. Hodge, "Feminism and Power in Greek Epics," unpublished paper, Murdoch University.


30. A derogatory term for an Aboriginal woman.


45. Homi Bhabha, "The Other Question-the Stereotype and Colonial Discourse, "*Screen* 24 (1983), pp.18-36
49. Colin Johnson (Mudrooroo Narogin), *Wild Cat Falling*. A Screenplay, unpublished MSS