

## Say Goodbye to the Colonial Bogeyman: Aboriginal Strategies of Resistance

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The situation on the Australian continent is a very strange one. Indigenous people, in some ways bolstered by the belated High Court Mabo decision<sup>1</sup>, are recognised as the original inhabitants with (some) rightful claims to land and with an increasingly important role in the constantly changing formations of Australian cultural identity. Yet they are nonetheless an enclosed minority within white Australian hegemonic structures that tend to define Aboriginal people as a fraction of the total multicultural society, as ‘ethnics’ in their own land, paradoxically symbolically central and politically peripheral: at once both ‘us’ and ‘them’. The Aboriginal poet Maureen Watson describes it this way:

We live in our land. We are, we have all around us people who are not of us. We have in our land - there are people all over our land - who are not of our land. Aboriginal people might as well be in a foreign country, you know?... Everywhere around us are the reflections of a foreign race, a foreign people, and they are making us foreigners in our own country.<sup>2</sup>

But this paradoxical situation, fraught with the increasingly evident discursive contradictions of the white settler-colonists, is one that presents striking opportunities for indigenous counter-attack. It is a situation requiring not only the anger of protest but also a certain cultural cunning, camouflage and subterfuge<sup>3</sup> aimed at the dominant definitional terms while coming from *within* them. If Aboriginal people are enclosed then they can reverse that enclosure, ‘rebuilding the walls of the enclosure in new ways, changing its internal environment, making it easier or more difficult for non-Aborigines to visit...’<sup>4</sup> They can - through the appropriation and abrogation of dominant codes - reverse the searchlight of racial surveillance. Through processes of abrogation the ‘categories of the imperial culture, its aesthetic... its assumption of a... fixed meaning “inscribed” in the words’ (as the authors of *The Empire Writes Back* have put it<sup>5</sup>) can be refused. Through a process of appropriation the language codes of the colonisers can be taken on board and then oppositionally transformed and turned against themselves.

These tactics of cultural guerilla-warfare can be readily identified in literary works. One can point, for example, to the poetry of Lionel Fogarty or to Kim Scott’s novel *Benang*<sup>6</sup>. But read (or listen) carefully enough and you will see and hear these tactics in many places, in a range of genres and voices. You can hear them in the widely-acclaimed musical *Bran Nue Dae*<sup>7</sup> (thought by some to be merely a ‘great big happy musical filled with laughter and some tears’<sup>8</sup>) when Uncle Tadpole uses the discourse of the talking-blues to say, in English:

Other day I bin longa to social security, I bin ask longa job – they bin say,  
“Hey, what’s your work experience?”. I bin tell ‘em, “I got nothing”. They say,  
“How come?” I say, “Cause I can’t find a job”.<sup>9</sup>

And you can hear these tactics, too, in the performances of Aboriginal musicians. In this analysis I want to look closely at one exemplary 'counter-attack' song. It was performed (in a pub in Fremantle) to a largely working-class and non-Aboriginal audience: Allan Barker's 'Landrights'.<sup>10</sup>

## LANDRIGHTS

Landrights walkin in  
Whitefella walking out  
See you later goodbye  
No hard feelings

Captain Cook come along ago  
In a bloody big big boat  
But now its 1993  
There's a change going moving down

Landrights walkin in  
Whitefella walking out  
See you later goodbye  
No hard feelings

Well, administration department  
Eatin all the money b'long to the blacks  
But times are on the blackside  
And it's movin on

Landrights walkin in  
Whitefella walkin out  
See you later goodbye  
No hard feelings

Well, whiteman says what is mine and what is yours  
And I say to the whitefella  
You must be putting me on  
A bit of bullshit somewhere

Landrights walkin in  
Whitefella walking out  
See you later goodbye  
No hard feelings

Well, down on the Swan we've a big boat there  
And we built it for all the race of people  
They can all jump on it and go everywhere  
Please don't come back to way down under

Way down way down under  
Don't come back to way down under  
Where the dingoes howl at night

When they got a lot of money  
They go overseas  
But when they broke  
They come back to way down under

Landrights walkin in  
Whitefella walking out  
See you later goodbye  
No hard feelings..... A.MEN.<sup>11</sup>

Consider what Roland Barthes has called 'the grain of the voice' here. There is a celebratory *and* a laconic voice: one of the key ambivalent modalities in the performance (the singing voice is a happy one, in a deadpan fashion). It is a resonant, indigenous voice – grainy in texture – singing the ballad with distinctively Aboriginal English inflections and evidently working-class tones: the voice of 'the battler' (a significant Australian cultural icon). It is the voice from below, the voice of blunt experience, singing to 'the whitefella' and saying goodbye in tones that are both sarcastic towards, *and* collusive with, the audience. That final, stretched, loud and overstated 'Amen' – suddenly borrowed from the African American spiritual tradition – closes the performance on a jokey, satirical note. This voice, then, is a persuasive voice but not necessarily singing quite what it seems to be articulating.

Some of the cunning ambiguity of this performance can be explained by reference to what I have previously called 'ideotones': the tunes of ideology.<sup>12</sup> I see ideotones as being audio-narrative units with particular word/music conjunctions. They become meaningful within a sociolect of Western popular music and therefore function within the field of dominant socio-political and ideological forces. Ideotones may be seen to either affirm or challenge the apparent unity of hegemonic discourses in play at any one time. They are also the key element that allocates a song to one genre or another. In the case of 'Landrights' this genre is clearly 'Country and Western'.

Country and Western music is one of the most popular song-genres with Aboriginal people, particularly in country areas. One commentator has claimed that this music has 'replaced Aboriginal song-structures almost completely'. He goes on:

The subject matter of these songs reflected the new Aboriginal lifestyles: horses and cattle, drinking, gambling, the outsider as hero, a nomadic existence, country-orientation, wronged love, fighting and the whole gamut of an itinerant life romanticised in the stockman/cowboy ideogram.<sup>13</sup>

On the face of it, though, this group of concerns seems of little relevance to the Allan Barker song. Yet, with ideotones, that is exactly the point: they can be performed ‘naturally’ (as in the romantic ideogram) or with dissonance (as in ‘Landrights’). Barker abrogates the normal ideotone, fills it with new cultural content, reverses the ideological enclosure and sings – with satirical wit – against the grain, against the centrality of the colonisers’ discourses. This is now the urban cowboy knowingly projecting, with a type of ironic pseudo-confidence (given the continuing, oppressive situation), indigenous aspirations. He sings into the gaps created by the increasingly-evident contradictions of white Australian claims to identity based on permanent settlement. If this is ‘the outsider as hero’ then it is a man (a people) coming in from the cold, singing now from a central position, wronged not by love but by conquest, and conveying a situation of reversal: saying a friendly goodbye to the newcomers from one of those who never had to arrive. In the process, the song forces (or, better, cajoles) its audience into imagining such a situation of departure, as it plays with white Australian anxieties about the possible impact of the ‘grant’ of land rights to Aboriginal people. At one and the same time the friendly tone of the song suggests a possible, collusive reconciliation, while the lyrics sing out the political claims of Aboriginality. If ‘times are on the blackside’, then it *is* time to really consider the ‘change going moving down’.

The reference to ‘change’ alerts us to the subversive transformational strategies of this song-text. As I have suggested, the ‘counter-attack’ is built on reversals. ‘Landrights’ becomes not a legislative process but, in line with indigenous cultural norms, a personified figure saying goodbye to the colonial bogeyman as if as a result of a collapsed love-affair. The reference to Captain Cook in the song is particularly apposite. At the time of song-performance a full-scale replica of Cook’s boat *Endeavour* was being built in Fremantle amid a certain amount of patriotic fervour. It was subsequently sailed to Sydney Cove to re-enact the original (invasion) landing.<sup>14</sup> The white Australian obsession with building wooden boats (and sailing them around the continent to replicate the earlier arrival) is satirically reversed with the added message: if you can leave as tourists, why not stay away! In fact, the ‘boat’ discourse resonates with powerful tones of critique. As Kevin Gilbert has put it: ‘To us it is like seeing a saga of these British Boat People returning to the wreck to salvage a plank and, holding it aloft, try to make comparisons with the indigenous tree and twist it to the semblance of the “tree back home”’.<sup>15</sup>

Of course, if the hegemonic group is now transitory boat-people not permanent owners, then the whole current Land Rights situation is an obscene joke. Hence the blunt, sardonic tones of Barker’s talking-blues segments in this song: ‘You must be putting me on/ A bit of bullshit somewhere’. The full reversal/critique force of the song can, even then, only be appreciated by recognising that Boat People (for white Australians) are refugees seeking sanctuary on the continent and continuously screened, rather smugly, for their suitability to be absorbed within the celebrated multicultural society. So here is a powerful reversal of codes of control, hitting at the ideological crisis-points of the colonial super narrative as it struggles to still make sense of the changing situation on the island ‘down under’. Nothing is more telling than the confidence, the knowingness, of the song than the placement of that phrase ‘down under’ (yet another white Australian

colloquial sign) *within* the Aboriginal English discourse of a parting and putative final departure. Needless to say, the prevailing cultural paradigms have been stood on their heads. Now it is the Aboriginal people saying, ever so politely, ‘Please don’t come back...’ to *our* land.

Allan Barker’s ‘Landrights’ is typical of much contemporary indigenous cultural production where the texts involve a ‘doing of what is expected and then a laconic flaunting resistance’.<sup>16</sup> The authors of *Dark Side of the Dream* write of a distinctive quality to this production that ‘has made its fundamental coherence and unity difficult to recognise’. They define this quality as ‘a particular way of combining extraordinary innovation with a kind of serene stability, an explosive cultural voraciousness with a capacity to negotiate a series of strategic returns...’<sup>17</sup> Allan Barker’s song, with its humorous reworking of the ideotone formation and its range of counter-attack strategies, shows that this quality is not confined to literary texts. Without closer analysis of contemporary cultural formations in Australia it would be possible to conclude that most indigenous interventions have been either appropriated or silenced. But when you listen to ‘Landrights’ it is difficult to believe that there have not been substantial and tactically-effective interventions from those ‘on the blackside’. And it’s movin’ on.

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<sup>1</sup> On the 20<sup>th</sup> May 1982, Koiki (Eddie Mabo) and four other Torres Strait Islanders began action for a declaration of ‘Native Title’ to their traditional lands. The Mabo case was finally settled in 1992 when the High Court found that Native Title was not extinguished, it continues to exist alongside British common and statute law, and that the finding was also applicable to the mainland. This finding ended the fiction of *terra nullius* (an empty continent on occupation) and has, of course, given fresh impetus to the Land Rights campaign. See Hetti Perkins and Brenda L. Croft, ‘Truths, Myths and Little White Lies’ in *True Colours: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Artists Raise The Flag*. Sydney: Boomali Aboriginal Artists Co-operative, 1994.

<sup>2</sup> Watson cited in Veronica Brady. ‘The Environment: A *Bran Nue Dae* or a Very Ancient One?’ in *Westerly*, 36.4, Dec.(1991): 101.

<sup>3</sup> See Bruce McGuinness and Denis Walker. ‘The Politics of Aboriginal Literature’ in J.Davis and B.Hodge (eds), *Aboriginal Writing Today*, Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1985: 47: ‘When Aboriginal people write they write in a style. They’re able to adopt various styles of writing so that what they really want to write about is there. It’s hidden. It’s contained within their writing, if one can go through the subterfuge, the camouflage that they use...’

<sup>4</sup> Adam Shoemaker. *Mudrooroo: A Critical Study*, Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1993: 144.

<sup>5</sup> Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, London: Routledge, 1989: 38.

<sup>6</sup> See Fogarty. *Yoogum Yoogum*, Ringwood, Vic.: Penguin Books, 1982 and Scott, *Benang: From The Heart*, Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1999.

<sup>7</sup> First performed in Perth, Western Australia in February 1990.

<sup>8</sup> Publisher’s notes, rear cover of Jimmy Chi and Kuckles, *Bran Nue Dae: A Musical Journey*, Sydney and Broome: Currency Press and Magabala Books, 1991.

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<sup>9</sup> *Bran Nue Dae*, p.84.

<sup>10</sup> The Legendary Black Allan (Allan Barker), 'Landrights' on *Fire Burnin*, Abmusic audiotape ABM 001, n.d.

<sup>11</sup> Song lyrics copyright Allan Barker. Transcribed from audiotape with permission of author.

<sup>12</sup> See Webb, 'Conning Popular Music: Up Against *The Wall*'. *Australian Journal of Cultural Studies*, 2.1, May (1984), and 'The Reggae-Folk Protest: Australian Pop Music and Ideology' in H.Ruthrof and J.Fiske (eds.), *Literature and Popular Culture*, Perth: Murdoch University, 1987.

<sup>13</sup> Mudrooroo Narogin. *Writing From The Fringe: A Study of Modern Aboriginal Literature*, Melbourne: Hyland House, 1990: 63.

<sup>14</sup> The process continues with the replica of the Dutch boat *Duyfken*, Fremantle, 1999-2000.

<sup>15</sup> Gilbert, 'Introduction' to K.Gilbert (ed), *Inside Black Australia: An Anthology of Aboriginal Poetry*, Ringwood: Penguin Books, 1988: xviii.

<sup>16</sup> Hugh Webb, 'Doin' The Post-Colonial Story? Neidjie, Narogin and the Aboriginal Narrative Intervention...', *SPAN*, 32, April (1991): 36.

<sup>17</sup> Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra. *Dark Side of the Dream: Australian Literature and the Postcolonial Mind*, Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1991: 92.