8. Robert Ariss

Writing black: the construction of an Aboriginal discourse

It is generally acknowledged that the modern nation state is the major locus of power in the contemporary world, and that all power relations which come into operation within the nation state are ultimately circumscribed by this dominant stage of power. As the final voice of authority the state establishes the conditions of possibility within which all power relations, all resistances, may operate. Beckett (1986, 3), in discussing the relations of power between Australian Aborigines and the white colonial state, identifies the final locus of control in the latter.

The state has not only controlled most of the information and expertise, as well as the means for its propagation; but has had the power to bring Aborigines some way towards external conformity with its constructions. When Aboriginal people have participated in the process it has been largely through government funded—and in the final analysis controlled—agencies.

Recognising this, how are we to better understand the position of Aborigines in contemporary Australia? The above analysis is only a beginning. Foucault has attempted to demonstrate that power relations must be seen, not as static situations, but as processes, relations of strategy, and sometimes of confrontation. Nor is it useful to visualise power as congealed into a single source. It is, rather, a dynamic system resulting from the interplay of multiple sites of power. There is a necessary reciprocity involved in any relation of power (cited in Rabinow 1984, 63–64):

If one describes phenomena of power as dependent on the state apparatus, this means grasping them as essentially repressive...[but] relations of power, and hence the analysis that must be made of them, necessarily extend beyond the limits of the state. In two senses: first of all because the state, for all the omnipotence of its apparatuses, is far from being able to occupy the whole field of actual power relations, and further because the state can only operate on the basis of other, already existing power relations.

The issue pursued in this chapter is the place of Aboriginal literature, as a discursive field, within the relationship of power prevailing between the Aboriginal community and the dominant Euro-Australian community. I wish to show Aboriginal discourse, not simply as an image of state constructions, but also as a creative force.
which contributes to public constructions of Aboriginality. By focusing on the Aboriginal side of the power equation it becomes possible to see the relationship between blacks and whites in Australia not simply as one of domination and subordination, of oppressor and oppressed, but as a power relation in Foucault's sense—a relation where transformations are possible, if not necessary, in social life.

Certainly Aboriginal discourse is constrained by the dominant symbolic forms it is forced to adopt when moving into the public domain, yet this structured limitation does not exclude the possibility of a counterdiscourse having a coercive and innovative potential, a potential to effect changes in the symbolic field within which Aboriginality is discussed. The position of Aborigines is changing in Australia and I do not think this is attributable to an evolving state benevolence in itself. The intervention of Aborigines has been an essential force behind these innovations. It is they who are establishing progressively greater control over the constructions of Aboriginality. It is this intervention I wish to discuss.

Ways of seeing, styles of discourse, are a reflection of the power relationships within which they are embedded. Aboriginal discourse itself asserts an essential Aboriginality that is absent from white authored constructions. It is apparent in the analysis that this position is itself more a reflection of, and an assumed ideological weapon against, prevailing power relations between Aboriginal and European cultures, rather than having any readily identifiable reality in symbolic constructions. But it is not so much the uniqueness of its symbolic forms that is significant, as the political meanings with which such black authored constructions are imbued. This counterdiscourse is undergoing a constructive process in the attempt to locate that precise Aboriginality. The apparent essence of the discourse is a pervasive and shared sense of experience. It is the existential experience of being Aboriginal that lies at the base of Aboriginal constructions. Although the discourse is itself fragmented, an emerging (dominant) Aboriginality asserts the impossibility of the complete merging of black and white understandings. It is anti-anthropological in the sense that it defies crosscultural emic communication which lies at the theoretical root of the anthropological enterprise. It is only through the adoption of this separatist ideology, an Aboriginality of concrete otherness, that the dominant strains of black discourse seek to actualise a future offered by the dominant European culture—self-determination. Because black discourse seeks to detach Aboriginality from any form of intrusion from the dominant culture, it professes an ideology of self-determination which is qualitatively different, truer, than that sustained by the dominant culture embodied in official government policy. It is the appropriation of the loci of control.
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of Aboriginal life, including symbolic constructions, which is seen as the only feasible means of approaching true self-determination. Superficially this is a logic identical to that of government policy, yet black discourse seeks to demystify, to expose the hypocrisy and unreality of government policy, and to reassert a more realistic ideology of self-determination.

This position of otherness raises problems of a semiotic nature. It is the problem of interpretation arising when two cultures attempt to redefine the channels through which each communicates to the other, one seeking to actualise its uniqueness in stressing its insurmountable cultural differences, while simultaneously adapting the discursive practices of the culture it is seeking to distance itself from. This raises the problem of interpretability for any non-Aboriginal reader and places a non-Aboriginal commentator in a particularly difficult position.

Cultural cohesion and political power is enhanced for the subordinate culture by entering the public discursive realm. In so doing it must to some extent adopt and work with the symbolic forms of the dominant culture. The discourse is forced, thereby, to assert its otherness without appearing to mimic cultural forms alien to it, for such a situation undermines its very authenticity. Considering this it is something of a surprise that contemporary Aboriginal cultural expressions defy cliched expressions of traditionality by espousing an adaptability and eclecticism. It is in fact popular European folk models which cling to more conservative constructions—the corroboree, the boomerang, the naked savage eking out an existence in the harsh desert environment. Such romantic images reflect (or are remnants of) an ideal power relationship. A counterconstruction which stresses cultural dynamism is seeking to negate the cultural hegemony implicit in such conservative constructions. A further difficulty arises for black discourse in the task of redefining Aboriginality in this way. There is conflict in an immutable Aboriginality which is simultaneously capable of adaptation and cultural eclecticism, an eclecticism which must not threaten a cohesive and politically efficacious construction of Aboriginality.

There are a number of distinct but interrelated loci of production of discourse within the Aboriginal domain. One is the government established, supervised and financed political and social organisations whose raison d'être is (theoretically) the advancement of Aboriginal interests—for example the National Aboriginal Conference (NAC), Aboriginal medical and legal service organisations, individual parliamentarians and advisors. Another area is represented by those individuals and organisations who articulate through the media of the arts. I will focus here on the media of literature. Their presence is sustained in the public domain, through the
English language, by predominantly white controlled publishing organisations. Literature in this case is a broader range of discourse than that traditionally associated with European literature. It encompasses critical essay, interview and autobiography, myth and legend transcription and interpretation, as well as the more familiar forms like prose, poetry and dramatic text. 'I think we need to take literature in its broader aspect, and any expression of that Aboriginal culture is literature, black literature' (McGuiness and Walker 1985, 50).

The writers I will mainly concern myself with include Gilbert, Sykes, Johnson, Mary Coe, Bropho and Roughsey. These authors seek to give a representative voice to the differentiated mass of the Aboriginal population through the process of literary fixation. The base of their approach is personal experience, the particularistic, articulated through its identification with a community, often genealogical, which is localised but suggestive of a broader social context. This could be characterised as a pan-Aboriginality; one which transcends specific kinship ties to encompass all those who identify as Aboriginal. The process of literary fixation lifts the private into the public domain by entering, via the written word, the mainstream Australian literary tradition. These writers seek to unify diverse experience under a single rubric of Aboriginality. Aboriginal authorship is the simplest common source of identification. Locating Aboriginality separate from but simultaneously within the dominant European society, this discourse is implicitly and sometimes explicitly conscious of its Fourth World political status, as an entity subordinate to and in opposition to the dominant culture. It is by nature a political construction grounded in a post-contact history. Its second feature, integral with the first, is its identification of Aboriginality through concepts of 'tradition'. The overriding concern of this discourse is to construct a continuity of Aboriginality through the linking of the traditional and the contemporary via the common suffering of all Aborigines at the hands of the European intrusion, and through that to project a course for the future. The survival and/or reworking of particular traditional cultural forms in the face of this potentially genocidal force into the present is a recurring theme. These central tensions shape the discursive form—the tensions between the traditional—contemporary and the particular—universal.

Aboriginal discourse firstly locates its identity in its historicity. Its discursive task is to deconstruct European representations and to re-present Australian history as Aboriginal history, history from the perspective of the oppressed, the indigene, rather than the colonialist. In placing Aborigines in history as victims it seeks simultaneously to project the image of Aborigines, not as passive social 'agents' as in many dominant representations, but as active resisters, first against colonial intrusion, then as active...
repossessors of a fragmented culture. The activation of Aborigines in history is latent in the perspective of the first person. The discourse is primarily actor-oriented, first person, experiential. As the central characters in the historical drama, Aborigines are interpretable, not simply as acted upon, but as responding to external forces and themselves constitutive of historical events. Contrast, for example, the following two perspectives, the first white, then black (Rowley 1970, 149; Coe 1986, 30):

we cannot, I think, fairly write a guerilla war waged by Aborigines...The lack of effective leadership was a handicap not only for physical resistance but for treaty and discussion.

the warriors led by Windradyne, started out on their campaign for justice...the warriors divided into smaller groups which carried out guerilla-style warfare against the white man.

A further example, this time a contemporary political analysis from Bobby Sykes (1986, 16-17):

no black community initiated and controlled organization known to me...has had an easy birth. All have been obliged to deal with negativism and opposition from government in their formative stages, and engage in a constant struggle for control of their organizations if and when federal funding was eventually extended to them...The active role of the Blacks must be minimized and passivity maximized so that the government can be viewed as both supportive and benevolent.

In this passage, Sykes identifies the prevailing passive construction of Aboriginality as an explicitly political ideology sustained for the benefit of the state. The Aboriginal response is to demystify this construction by portraying black culture, past and present, as dynamic, adaptable and the product of struggle.

The patterns of change are attributed to an immutable Aboriginality—the continuation of indigenous cultural forms, or the production of new forms under the constraints of this traditionality. The constraining and creative forces behind this construction of Aboriginality are as much located within Aboriginal culture as in the dominating culture of the white man.

This identification of cultural traits is fraught with difficulties, however. Because of the absence of written records before the European invasion, and the fragmentation of Aboriginal societies, and consequently of Aboriginal knowledge of such times, the precise nature of pre-contact culture is lost. Blacks are as aware of this as are whites. This forces black discourse to use frequent reference to European constructions to discover and sustain its own identity.
No one can recall any such history of the third or fourth generation...that's the limit to our race of people...just lucky you have some Europeans who are interested in black peoples way of living from the past (Roughsey 1984, 120, 98).

I am thrilled at the knowledge that has come through archaeologists and scientists about the Aborigines. To me, it is as though the ancients are trying to relay a message not only to the Aboriginal race, but to the human race (Tucker 1977, 149).

Likewise, the concept of a pan-Aboriginality is quite foreign to traditional (pre-contact) Aboriginal consciousness. It is only in juxtaposition with a foreign presence that an Aboriginal otherness becomes meaningful. Pan-Aboriginality is a politically necessary concept for Aborigines to present a united, and therefore more efficacious front to a government reluctant to recognise their demands. The recourse to traditionality is perhaps as much politically induced as a felt reality in the minds of Aborigines. In emphasising traditional culture, its otherness, Aboriginal discourse establishes itself firmly in opposition to the dominant culture. It is only from this position that Aboriginal people can resist the seduction of assimilation and confidently work at rebuilding a unique identity. The use of non-Aboriginal sources becomes a task of reinterpretation. Its origin outside the Aboriginal community does not negate its validity as an indicator of Aboriginal culture, nor of its political efficaciousness. The essential point is that when it is reinterpreted and articulated from within the political community it becomes valid, accountable. I return to Mary Coe’s historical reconstruction to demonstrate this process.

Coe’s book is a re-presentation of a localised Aboriginal history told through the life history of an Aboriginal culture hero, Windradyne. Interestingly, two distinct Aboriginal histories are presented in the text, the first is pre-contact, a history undifferentiated: life is in balance; cataclysmic events are absent from the Aboriginal experience; people and nature are in harmony, almost undifferentiated themselves: ‘They were so close to nature that they were in it. The land owned them as much as they owned the land’ (Coe 1986,7). It is instructive to compare Coe’s characterisation of pre-contact culture with one of her European sources to reveal just how directly this discourse is appropriated. Compare, for example, the following two texts, white and black (see Merritt 1978; Coe 1986, 5, 7):

A more significant proof of their integration into the environment was their effective conservation of its resources, for they lived in harmony with the environment, animal, bird and plant life...they did, however, set light to the country at times to foster fresh grass regrowth, thus making ideal browsing conditions for kangaroo and emu.
Many large treeless areas were kept clear by controlled burning to encourage the growth of grass which kangaroos came to graze on...their culture was based on cooperation and conservation. They never needlessly killed or injured any living being.

In Coe's text history only becomes dynamic and directional with the arrival of the European. Aboriginal history becomes a history of resistance, of war. 'The white man's law did not protect Kooris from their guns so Kooris must apply their own law to the whites—for the white men were lawless' (Coe 1986, 23). Today resistance continues in different political guises but the ideology of political practice is the same. The final images in the text are of a land rights demonstration and the Aboriginal flag emblazoning the back cover—'we have survived as a nation' (Coe 1986, 62). The construction at work here is that of an immutable Aboriginal Law in operation, ensuring the continuation of Aboriginal existence in the face of the hypocritical and inimical law of the European: 'the invaders preached Christianity but few practised it' (Coe 1986, 22).

Note the shift from past to present tense, in speaking of this Aboriginal political action in the quote from page 23. This seems to reinforce the sense of the immutability, the timelessness of the Aboriginal Law. Characteristically, land and Law are one and the same: Aboriginal is land is Law. Hence this history is one of the threat to Aboriginal culture through the appropriation of land, and the continued resistance and struggle to reclaim it. Land is appropriated but identity is sustained through the operation of its ideological metaphor—the Law:

'... unlike our Law, the white man's law, for good or ill, could be changed, or 'amended' with the stroke of a pen...there was nothing sacred or constant in that law...Justice and honour and national integrity had no bearing on such matters' (Gilbert 1985, 37).

It is through the idiom of Law that the traditional land owning Aborigine is linked to the contemporary alienated Aborigine. Aboriginal history becomes a history integral with the fight for social justice.

The fact that the material Coe uses to construct a text is recognisably historical in the European tradition, does not detract from the text's Aboriginality. What is important is the orientation of the author and to whom the text is ultimately accountable. Langton, writing in Identify, stated that any discourse about Aborigines must also be written for Aborigines, that is, accountable. It is only when discourse is generated outside that community that it is questionable, non-representative, myth-generating and inevitably coloured by the power dimensions which are, because outside, inimical to that community (Langton 1981, 11). If this is correct then the source
of information used is irrelevant to the overall presentation of the Aboriginal perspective. The orientation of the author is sufficient. Coe, writing from within the Aboriginal community, is creating a counterdiscourse using material from the very discursive arena that she is attempting to negate. Interestingly this method enhances her success in the eyes of the reader. The material from the public, white stage speaks against itself when placed in the context of the black viewpoint, black authorship. Coe's work demonstrates that with careful construction and the aid of the perspective of the oppressed, public, dominant discourse can be turned against itself. Black discourse does not need to create afresh new material, it need only expose the hypocrisy of the dominant modes of expression. The problem raised by this faith in black authorship is that it attributes a homogeneity to Aboriginal opinion and disregards the fact of diversity within the Aboriginal community for the sake of sustaining an image of a pan-Aboriginality—a mythical reality in itself. I will return to this problem later but first I wish to discuss further literary styles in Aboriginal discourse.

Another method by which Aboriginal discourse seeks to reconstruct its historicity, one which does not rely on the direct appropriation of European historical records, is a discursive form which asserts oral history as characteristically Aboriginal. The fascinating complexity at work here is the attempt by these writers to sustain oral traditions through written language. Two forces are at work. First, the felt need by many writers to cultivate literary forms that are identifiably Aboriginal in a traditional sense, and second, the political drive for a construction of a pan-Aboriginality which demands a crosscommunity communication and identification. 'The problem...is getting blacks just to know about each other, in such a vast country as this' (see Gilbert 1977, 115).

Aboriginal writers are conscious of the contradictions and difficulties associated with experimentation in written media. The tension between the old and the new is again a concern. As I have noted, it is the political status of Aborigines within a dominating culture that necessitates their taking up the discursive practices of that culture in order to assert its separate identity while simultaneously building communication with that culture. What each example of this particular genre attempts to do is transform instances of an oral tradition into written discourse yet simultaneously attempting to retain or even recreate its oracy. It pretends to overcome the semiotic transformation which occurs in the act of writing—the fixation of the personal and experiential into an independent, context free, open-ended text capable of generating a multiplicity of meanings. The potential interpretive problems are made
more complex when one considers that this discourse is seeking to distance itself, in terms of cultural uniqueness, from the audience it is creating.

Non-Aboriginal critiques of such texts point to these interpretive difficulties. Readers familiar with their own traditional literary forms express difficulties when experiencing texts which seek deliberately to violate comfortable norms. Tess de Araugo (see Barwick 1981, 79) complains of a ‘rambling, conversational and sometimes confusing style’; Ryan (1986) that the photographs tend to be ‘more revealing than the text’; Corns (see Barwick 1981) of a ‘thinness of information’ and a ‘rambling anecdotal character’. The problem here appears to be that the absence of familiar narrative structures, grammatical indicators (eg tense), or a reader’s lack of culture-specific knowledge impairs a fluid reading of the text. Contrast this with a reading by an Aboriginal person and the interpretive problem seems to disappear. Kath Walker (1975, 38) of Bropho’s Fringedweller reports that the monotony and lack of system in the unedited narrative makes ‘the book not easy to read’, however it bears a positive effect for her—‘bound in the repetitiveness are the voices of people calling to the...government to lift them out of their misery and degradation...I became aware of a culture of poverty...I can understand the author’.

It is rather hazardous to imply that this variation of interpretation is solely due to the cultural identity of the individual reader. The diversity of the reader’s experiences and expectations, black or white is an important influence in the response. It may be argued that the penchant for experimentation in European literature is well suited to accommodating challenging new styles and indeed readers should not be too surprised to be challenged themselves. Ryan (1986, 50) has likened Aboriginal oral histories to the broken narrative, ‘flow of consciousness’ styles of Joyce and Proust. Indeed it is precisely through breaking with conventional styles that European literature has continually sought to recreate its audience— to challenge its perceptions and to win allies. With this in mind, I would argue that it is through entering written discourse that the social and political objectives of Aborigines take on exciting new possibilities in terms of self-definition and the reorientation of white perceptions to increase receptivity to the Aboriginal presence.

Whatever the precise nature of traditional oral literature, it is certain that it undergoes a number of transformations in the process of fixation into writing. Such changes must give the literature a qualitatively different form and potential meaning. Berndt, in an introduction to the 1983 Aboriginal writers’ conference, characterised traditional oral literature as encompassing a plurality of aesthetic media. The spoken word is supported by dramatic and musical accompaniment as well as the more
linguistic elements of imagery, symbolism and metaphor. It is this discourse which is familiar to Aboriginal culture as the media of information and socialisation—the constitution of subjectivity (Berndt 1985, 8). In the written form, this plurality of media is reduced to the written word, with the possible support of photographic images (this is a particularly common feature). In this context the word carries a greater responsibility in conveying meaning. Also the context of illicitation has changed. Instead of being directed to a specific, culturally homogeneous and visible audience, the written discourse is generated for an invisible, culturally diverse audience of unknown size. Colin Johnson (see Davis and Hodge 1985, 88), in searching for compatible written forms finds poetry and short story ‘closer’ to traditional Aboriginal forms because of their greater ‘immediacy’; they ‘come from the heart’ rather than the more deliberately worked forms of prose that come ‘from the head’; the audience can ‘hear the sounds of the words rather than the content’. Emotional immediacy seems to be a critical element in the conveyance of meaning to Johnson, much as one would suspect from a tradition which did not rely so fully on the word. In terms of content, Johnson (see Davis and Hodge 1985, 87) characterises the present literature as ‘protest’ literature and in that sense not ‘traditional’. It is only after the political struggle that Aboriginal expression can begin to approach a truer Aboriginality—we can go back to our roots, to our culture, and develop a much more vital Australian poetry.

For Johnson, then, present Aboriginal expression is very much a product of its political status; it is as much a product of struggle as it is for Coe or Sykes or Gilbert. But its present form is still a perversion, an Aboriginality forced into an unfamiliar mode—the protest mode, even the written literary form itself, it is made unnatural perhaps, by the very corruption of traditional Aboriginal culture. There is an Aboriginality, yet still elusive. He glimpses its roots in the past, and anticipates it in the future. In this future Johnson sees a necessary depoliticisation of Aboriginal culture, a move I imagine the prevailing powers would condone.

This present political dimension in the production of discourse is a determinant force shaping Aboriginal writing. The fact of the necessary interaction between blacks and whites gives the discourse a political status. To be specific, it has emerged over the last few decades or so that the issue of control of production is crucial to the construction of a truer Aboriginality. There has been a gradual appropriation of control of the production of discourse. In this we can see an emergence of more fully controlled texts, though not necessarily an identifiable, coherent and singular Aboriginality, least of all anything suggestive of Johnson’s apolitical traditionality. Since
the white authored texts of the 1960s which narrated biographies of particular Aborigines known to whites, Aboriginal writers have gained increasing control over black input, editing and publishing. (The establishment of Black Books as an independent publishing organisation is the latest event in this history of repossession.)

The enhancement of political control over discursive production is seen within the Aboriginal community to be determinant in the emergence of a move toward, a truer Aboriginality purged of white interference.

We maintain that unless Aboriginal people control the funding...the content, the publishing, and the ultimate presentation of the article, then it is not Aboriginal; then it ceases to be Aboriginal when it is interfered with by non-Aboriginal people who exist outside of the spectrum of Aboriginal life (McGuinness and Walker 1985, 44).

White Anthropologists, lawyers, and historians have a great deal of difficulty in translating Aboriginal concepts into white terminology. They simply cannot do it well. They cannot readily understand what we are doing, why we are here and who we are (Langton 1981, 11).

The issue of control and therefore of interpretation remains an operative concept in black writing.

A truer Aboriginality recognises itself less in notions of pristine traditionality than in terms of its accountability. Authorship and political motivation are more important in the definition of Aboriginality than cultural indicators such as narrative shape. This Aboriginality emerges after political control is secured. Aboriginal discourse is too concerned with the presentation of a realism of contemporary Aboriginal existence—an existence which is only thrown into relief when articulated in terms of its relationship with the dominating European society—to speak of traditionality as more than a point of reference, a symbolic counterculture. Certainly, traditional concerns have a reality in Aboriginal discourse, particularly the concerns of kinship and geographical identity, yet these are secondary, or perhaps contained within, the overriding political concerns.

Robert Bropho's Fringedweller has been described by Johnson as the first 'true autobiography' of an Aboriginal untainted by white interference. Having been 'more or less directly translated from the tape', it speaks more directly to the reader than would have been possible with the interference of a white editor (Johnson 1985, 25). Yet its Aboriginality is not articulated in terms of traditionality, but rather the political and social reality of the narrator. For Bropho, the issue of control over the text becomes
a metaphor for his central theme—Aboriginal control over their own lives. Targeted specifically to a white audience, communication is his primary objective and he is most matter of fact in his task. There is little possibility for misinterpretations: 'You are masters of your own destiny, that's you the white man. Let us, the fringedwellers be masters of ours (Bropho 1983, 31).

Johnson (1985, 25) anticipates this form of writing to be a 'forerunner of a new Aboriginal literature'. The fact that it is the control over production rather than any inherent discursive style that is indicative of Aboriginality is evident in his description of other autobiographies. The oracy of Bropho is missing in the work of Sykes and Smith (Mum Shirl), the text is polished and 'articulate' yet it still 'feels' Aboriginal (Johnson 1985, 25). The problem with this vagueness of Aboriginality, an Aboriginality capable of eclecticism, quirky individualism or educated articulateness, is that its degree of Aboriginality cannot be located in the text itself. It must be sought in an extra-discursive realm, in a commentary or introduction (often supplied by a non-Aboriginal).

This preoccupation with the purity of Aboriginality found in literature has become manifest by the frequent inclusion, in introductions, appendixes or back page commentaries outlining the precise circumstances of the texts' production. The role of interpreters, editors, authors and non-Aboriginal authorities is spelled out for the benefit of the reader. These entrees to the text proper are themselves integral to the production of an assured and confident Aboriginality for the unsuspecting reader.

Roughsey's An Aboriginal Mother Speaks (1984) is a recent example. Roughsey's text comes from her own pen, minimally edited, with her supervision, by two white academics whom she 'decided to get help from'. These editors themselves comment on the complexities of editing while remaining true to the original text. A system was devised to do so while simultaneously trying to 'make easy the reading of the text for the non-Aboriginal reader'. Hence the text was structured into paragraphs and chapters, tenses standardised to differentiate more clearly past and present, spellings corrected and footnoted commentaries added where ambiguities interfered with the reading (Roughsey 1984, 241). To what extent does the text remain interpretable to both black and white readers within the bounds of the author's intentions—to educate the reader 'to read with the most interest and learn from it, so we can closely contact with love' (Roughsey 1984, 236)?

To ask whether this text is more or less Aboriginal than the autobiographical sketches of Bropho or Gilbert, or the representations of Stanner or Elkin, is to require an analysis which looks beyond the text itself to its history of production, for by itself it cannot convince us of its authenticity. Ultimately it is Aborigines themselves, the
authors, the black readers and all who place themselves within the identity of ‘Aboriginal’ who must be the judges. The validity of the text becomes a problem of accountability.

It would be naive to expect a homogeneity of opinion within the black community. There is a wide range of opinions and aspirations as well as experiences. Gilbert (1977, 1, 93) has criticised, and directs his work to the correction of, certain myths which Aborigines as well as whites are inclined to perpetuate:

together with a number of sympathetic whites, they embrace and propagate a number of myths...There are a few vague dreams about...‘self-determination,’ ‘land rights,’ ‘we must get back to our Aboriginity,’ but there is no cohesive drive to achieve any of these things. Because so many of the leaders have no wider vision, no standard and no rules, the black movement at the present time is a game played solely according to their moods.

In speaking in these terms Gilbert is hinting that the next step in Aboriginal discourse is the move toward more direct control of Aboriginal writing, and hence a more guided and intelligent construction of Aboriginality. It is not only white myths which must be debunked, but also inappropriate black ones. In another field, Rob Merritt, on the film production of his screenplay ‘Short Changed’, commented that his conflict with white director Ogilvie has left him determined to direct his next screenplay himself, to avoid misrepresentation (Sydney Morning Herald, 8 November 1986). (It should be noted that neither Merritt’s ‘Short Changed’ nor two other films on Aborigines—the white authored and produced ‘Fringedwellers’ and ‘Backlash’—were successful at the box office. Despite ‘Short Changed’ and ‘Fringedwellers’ being critically acclaimed and nominated for awards, none of these films ran for more than a few weeks on the Sydney cinema circuit.) Merritt’s position in the Aboriginal Arts Board (AAB) places him in a position of some influence to pursue his ambitions. The role of leading individuals such as Gilbert and Merritt may become more central in the future as this counterdiscursive stage becomes more coherent and articulate.

The ascent of individuals such as Gilbert and Merritt clarifies the political problem of accountability—accountable to whom? Clearly it is the intention of such publicly prominent figures to exert their own judgement more decisively on the issue of selecting and propagating a particular Aboriginality over any other. These figures seek to further clarify, solidify, a politically efficacious Aboriginality. Their success depends on financial allocation (sponsorship for Merritt, or fund allocation to the AAB), as much as more purely ideological issues. It is here that the construction of
Aboriginality becomes an issue of personal as much as community politics—the myth of Aboriginality as community-centred breaks down. Though such individuals invariably feel to some extent representative, accountable to their communities, it is their actions on the personal level that largely determines their success.

The plurality of the Aboriginal community compounds the complexity of the self-determination issue. How much is Merritt’s accountability reaching beyond his political ambitions, as an artist and an administrator and organiser to the particular theatre or film group he may be working with, to his tribal identity (eg to the Wiradjuri in the Cake Man), to all Aborigines, to all blacks, all oppressed people ad infinitum? Can we equate Merritt’s sense of accountability with the nebulous nationality and sense of responsibility such as Walker or Tucker alude to? In the latter views Aboriginality is finally subsumed under a general humanism, a concern for all persons regardless of cultural or racial identity.

White people have many different nationalities in their inheritance too. I am always saying that color is not the issue, it is character that counts (Tucker 1977, 87).

My love is my own people first
And after that, mankind.
I don’t see myself as an Aboriginal poet. I see myself as a universal poet who happens to be of Aboriginal descent (see Davis and Hodge 1985, 82).

In counterpoint, Gilbert, long a radical exponent, continues to warn against a too accommodating stance toward the colonial aggressor. In his own poetry Gilbert states (see Davis and Hodge 1985, 85):

In another time, another age,
If fate had reversed the play,
And a hard black boot pressed on your white throat,
When released what would you say?
Friends and pals forever together
In a new fair dawn?
Or meet like you and I shall meet
With flames and daggers drawn?

The politics of Walker or Tucker are quite different from that of Gilbert. It is even quite tempting to pass off Gilbert as a discursive eccentric in the continuum of Aboriginal discourse. The heady Black Power rhetoric of the politically charged early 1970s was something of an interference in the discourse which redirected the psychophantic nationalism of the early assimilationist days into a more resistant,
separatist discourse more aware and assertive of its otherness. Black discourse adopted self-determination as a means of further constructing this otherness. We are charged with the impression in the 1980s that Aboriginal life is less politically volatile, less violent than the threatened aggression of the 1970s rhetoric, than those early years of self-determination. This impression, imparted by the relative absence in recent years of the political Aboriginal in the media generally, is a result of the increasingly effective appropriation of black political action within the state apparatus. This appropriation has seen the effective retreat of a public political Aboriginality. As power struggles become more firmly located within the state apparatus, the more obvious political machinations of the Aboriginal struggle recedes from public view. What is left is an apparent ‘cultural Aboriginality’ devoid of an overtly political struggle. Aboriginality as culture, as art, literature and dance emerges as the predominant expression. This apparent teasing of the political from the cultural, I would suggest, is rather misleading. Aboriginal organisation rely more than ever on the allocation of federal and state funds. The financial struggle is becoming a pervasive aspect of Aboriginal life. Perhaps soon the vying for private funds will become a more feasible alternative and new possibilities of struggle and control may emerge.

It is misleading to attempt to separate culture and politics at all in the field of Aboriginal discourse. I do not think Aborigines readily abstract culture from politics, particularly when so much cultural activity today relies on government funding. In many ways the continuing efforts of Aborigines to pursue their social and political integrity is seeing this diversification of expressions, in the areas of literature, dance, film and the visual arts. Such cultural growth is dialectic. Black and white communities are communicating more with each other. Through its entry into public discourse, Aboriginal consciousness is reasserting its own integrity and uniqueness, while non-Aborigines can only find it increasingly difficult not to hear the voice of a people once written out of history. Only by speaking for themselves can that presence be a real force for change. The process of becoming public forces Aboriginal discourse into recognising and taking up (at least the outward) forms of the public cultural stage. Aboriginality becomes contemporary, in literature, film, theatre, in political organisation and action. None of these contemporary forms is recognisably traditional, except in the most nebulous of senses. But they are nonetheless Aboriginal when in the hands of those who identify and seek to assert their identity, as Aborigines, through those media.
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