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The Making of "Our Place": Settler Australians, Cultural Appropriation, and the Quest for Home

Mitchell Rolls

IN EARLY 1997 two instances of non-Aboriginal Australians covertly adopting an Aboriginal persona attracted much comment in the press, and on radio and television. It emerged that Wanda Koolmatrice, an Aboriginal woman who had been taken from her mother as a child and had authored the 1995 award-winning autobiography *My Own Sweet Time*, was in fact Leon Carmen, a forty-seven-year-old white male taxi driver from Sydney's North Shore. At the same time it was learnt that the eighty-one-year-old illustrator and artist Elizabeth Durack, who had spent many of her young adult years in close contact with Aboriginal employees on her family's extensive pastoral interests in the Kimberley, was painting and marketing artwork under the assumed identity of Eddie Burrup, a fictitious Aboriginal man. In an attempt to authenticate his existence Durack had even prepared a biography that accompanied the paintings. It included "quotes" in Aboriginal-English, allegedly taken from tapes of Burrup speaking.

The interest in these two instances of appropriation, and Aboriginal condemnation of them, was not surprising. Significantly, however, these obvious and readily understood examples of non-material cultural appropriation are but two manifestations of a widespread practice. Whereas Aboriginal cultures were still being widely used as evidence substantiating pejorative portrayals of Aborigines until well into the 1950s, today they are being extolled by a rapidly increasing number as a fertile field containing both needed and desired resources. For instance, Aboriginal religious beliefs, spirituality, and other associated features of their cultural heritage are now commonly held to offer the restorative means to overcome the spiritual emptiness afflicting the western world in general and, some argue, Australians in particular. To take another example, certain aspects of the interrelated metaphysical, sociopolitical and economic complex that is popularly but often misleadingly encompassed by the rubric "the Dreaming", are now seen as providing a mechanism through which non-Aborigines can overcome their

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supposed alienation from the landscape they inhabit.¹

The Jindyworobaks were the first nationalist literary group that attempted systematically to harness Aboriginal identity and cultural concepts to such causes. Although much of the work published by this school was not of a high standard and hence in literary terms the movement is accorded marginal status, their attempts to found a nationalist heritage and identity upon an Aboriginal bedrock rehearsed the more general calls for the necessity to do this that are so evident today. Disillusionment with Western materialism, alienation from landscape, Central Australia as spiritual hearth and home of the "real" Aborigines, the Dreaming as a natural feature of the landscape, and the notion of the primitive in all of us and Aborigines representing this supposed aspect of our non-Aboriginal selves (see Devaney 4; Ingamells, *Selected* 31; *Great* 324), are themes that appear over and over in Jindyworobak literature, as well as in much of the present literature promoting the colonisation of Aboriginal cultural property, or surreptitiously participating in this process. In this paper I critically examine the issue of cultural appropriation as found in more contemporary work, work that extends rather than challenges notions promulgated by the Jindyworobaks.

In a letter to Brian Elliott, the acclaimed poet Les A. Murray described himself, albeit partly in jest, as "the last of the Jindyworobaks" (Elliott 283). The reasons for this become clear in Murray's analysis of his own work. Murray considers the Australian landscape as something unfamiliar to a European consciousness. To those Australians with a foreign ancestry, the landscape itself is something Other (Murray, *Persistence* 115-16). However, from a farming community of small holdings on the mid-north coast of New South Wales that provides a simple, frequently precarious and never a monetarily wealthy living for its people, Murray has developed a keen sense of place and spiritual belonging to the farm and surrounds where he was born and where he now writes. In an interview with Barbara Williams, he speaks of remembering always being happy "in my own country", a site-specific reference to the rural area of Bunyah. "It's home", he says later in the interview (Murray, "Interview" 47, 54). Although it is a farm he is not a farmer, and thus for Murray "home" is more a sense of spiritual belonging than the pragmatics of a rural livelihood or simply familiar comforts (see Murray, "Hu-

man-Hair" 569; "Interview" 54). It is his "own spirit country" (Murray, "Human-Hair" 566), and upon this sense of place he attempts to graft an Aboriginal depth. For example, in the last line of an early poem "Thinking About Aboriginal Land Rights, I Visit the Farm I Will Not Inherit", he evokes a sense of belonging to the land arising from an association spanning thousands of years (Murray, *Collected* 83; see Shoemaker 199-200). Murray intimates that through developing conceptual associations such as this, we will not only discover our sense of place, but come to a more complete understanding of ourselves.² For reasons such as these, he believes that the Jindyworobak notion of "environmental value" whereby non-Aborigines adapt to and then identify with the unique conditions experienced, and also with place in both a general and specific sense, meaning the continent and one's locale within it, was and is useful (Murray, "Human-Hair" 569).

As evident, in seeking a spiritual affinity with the landscape, or ways to facilitate this, Murray, like the Jindyworobaks, finds inspiration and material in Aboriginal cultural heritage. It is seen as a "resource" neglected by writers since the Jindyworobaks (Murray, "Human-Hair" 550). Acknowledging his utilisation of this "resource", Murray states that Aboriginal art has given him "a resort of reference and native strength, a truly Australian base to draw on against the constant importation of Western decays and idiocies and class-consciousness" ("Human-Hair" 570).³ This concern with influence from without, Western decadence, and the use of Aboriginal heritage for the purposes of building a domestic culture capable of resisting these forces, continues along the Jindyworobak path. Hence Murray is perpetuating the practice of harnessing Aboriginal culture to non-Aboriginal needs.

Murray is defensively sensitive to and dismissive of accusations of appropriation for incorporating an Aboriginal "presence" in his poetry (see Murray, "Human-Hair" 550,571; "Interview" 53; *Books and Writing*). Nevertheless, he has stated in explaining the Aboriginal influence, that "its centre of gravity" arose from "what that heritage has given me, and how it has contributed and may yet increasingly contribute to a richer and more humane civilisation in this country" (Murray, "Human-Hair" 550). There is no doubting that Aborigines could make (and are making) a contribution in this way, and it is to be expected that non-Aborigines will respond creatively to any such perceived influence. However, at

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stake are the implications of a literary appropriation based on the needs of the appropriator. When placed in the wider context of Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relations the perils of a creative response based on the ascribed value and utility, potential or realised, that Aboriginal cultural heritage has for non-Aboriginal society, become obvious. Values and needs can and do change. If an Aboriginal presence in literature is established on something as fickle as worth according to the needs and tastes of contemporary society, then usefulness can readily become uselessness and value a liability when the interests of the dominant political economy and its attendant culture are perceived to lie elsewhere.

Furthermore, it is no longer necessary to malign Aborigines through literature in order to justify the process of dispossession, but it is certainly now to non-Aboriginal advantage to take spiritual and emotional possession of the land that has been usurped. If this can be contrived in such a way that mimics autochthonous proprietary, non-Aboriginal ownership and control of the land is established on firmer psychological principles than the assumed rights conferred by the legal and political basis of dispossession. However, Aboriginal interests are not served by having their cultural property appropriated or utilised in ways designed to facilitate the building of an intimate relationship between non-Aborigines and their environment. Until the political, economic, legal and social power discrepancies are closed, it will continue to be detrimental to Aboriginal interests for aspects of their culture to be taken in order that they be bent to these non-Aboriginal purposes. This is because the interest in Aboriginal culture is not so much predicated on the desire to right injustices and seek equity for those structurally disadvantaged, but arises in response to the perceived needs and ills of the dominant society and/or individual.

Reacting to the claim of autochthonous groups that white cultures are appropriating their voice, Murray suggests that "if they [Aborigines] had more confidence in their own cultures, they wouldn't regard them as threatened by the attempts of someone from outside them to learn and appreciate their wisdom" (Murray, "Interview" 53). But the uses to which any wisdom gleaned can be put is certainly of concern to Aborigines. For instance, Murray posits that white country people – a group with whom he identifies and whose interests he passionately defends – can and do form a spiritual relationship with the land in much the same

way as Aboriginal people, and that their rights to land based on this spiritual affiliation needs to be considered ("Human-Hair" 569). To this end there can be no doubting the provocative intent behind describing Ella Simon, a woman of Biripi descent born in the district in which Murray lives and for whom he wrote the foreword to the second edition of her autobiography *Through My Eyes* (1987), as a "great lady of *my* country" ("Human-Hair" 552, my emphasis). This leads back to the problem of non-Aborigines claiming similar if not the same entitlement to land as Aborigines. Until the issue of dispossession has been addressed to the satisfaction of Aborigines, such claims will remain contentious.

Furthermore, Aborigines assert that they enjoy a *unique* metaphysical relationship with place, and proprietary rights arising from this relationship. Ties to place on these grounds are currently given priority over other reasons upon which claims for land could be made, such as the need to secure the means by which social and economic equality might be achieved (Mudrooroo 196-219). That the ordering of priorities in how claims are presented reflects what the state accepts as legitimate and hence what is most likely to bear results (Goodall 355, and *passim*; Jacobs), makes the issue of appropriation more, not less pertinent. It is the "overtly traditional" that are rewarded in land rights claims today (Jacobs 32, 31); hence any attempt by non-Aborigines to appropriate or mimic the mechanisms that sanction these claims brings them into direct conflict with Aborigines.

Thus in the current legislative and policy environment, non-Aboriginal identification with land and place on principles appropriated from Aboriginal cultural property, has the potential to undermine the grounds upon which Aborigines base their claims of entitlement, or, perhaps more insidiously, to lessen any apparent non-Aboriginal resolve to address the issue of dispossession, for do we not all belong to the land now? Additionally, what if circumstances, needs, tastes, desires and interests change and what was once held to be the essential wisdom of Aborigines is no longer seen as such? Does literature, like history did for so many years (Stanner, *After* 22-5,17,27), just abandon Aborigines or perhaps simply call upon them to serve as a literary device or the Other as object when needed, or more nefariously, resume a campaign of denigration? There are competing projections of Aboriginality circulating constantly. For example, Hugh Morgan of Western Mining, a frequent and outspoken opponent of land rights

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because of the perceived threats to mining interests, characterises Aboriginal culture "in terms of practices calculated to repel the reader, such as warfare, cannibalism, subincision, polygyny and brutal punishments" (Beckett 210). In seeking to unite non-Aborigines with their environs through a spiritual change along the path chartered by the Jindyworobaks, albeit more sensitively yet at the same time more astutely and thoroughly, Murray, in his contact with and use of Aboriginal non-material cultural property, also has self-interest and national purpose in mind.

Exacerbating these issues associated with the colonisation of Aboriginal cultural property is the fact that the "wisdom" turned to is not the wisdom of a contemporary Aboriginality, but that predominantly found within anthropological interpretations of so-called traditional Aboriginal societies. Murray acknowledges the influence of anthropology and the work of T.G.H. Strehlow, and admits his subsequent over-reliance on Arrernte material ("Human-Hair" 562,554-55; see also Shoemaker 198-200). One significance of this is that the cultural property appropriated is not acquired through personal contact with contemporary expressions of Aboriginality. This makes the prospect of a mutually beneficial exchange, which is desired by Murray ("Human-Hair", 571), nigh impossible, at least in the immediate sense. And any resultant exchange, or convergence of cultures (see Murray, "Human-Hair" 571), takes place between contemporary non-Aboriginal society and a historically situated, anthropologically inscribed, white authored Aboriginality, and assumes the willingness of Aborigines to meet us there. Thus for cultural exchange to take place through the process of appropriation, Aborigines must mimic the beings depicted in anthropological texts, which in turn have predominantly tried to portray Aboriginal society and culture as it was thought to be at the moment of colonisation.

The turning to anthropology in order to encounter "the Aborigine" is a deft move, whether consciously motivated or not. It allows the on-going struggle for land rights and equality to be overlooked or marginalised for the Aborigines located within the texts popularly browsed are by and large politically passive, with activism mentioned briefly in the conclusion if at all.⁴ Thus they have, amongst other cultural phenomena, kinship systems, rituals, totems, initiation ceremonies, a rich sacred life, but not culturally encoded political stratagems resistant to or making demands upon non-Aboriginal society. Political activism is construed as

being imitative and somehow not authentically Aboriginal. The "real" Aborigines, therefore, being those located within the body of popular anthropological texts, are not only not political, they are no more. In seeking Aboriginal cultural property in dated texts that emphasise lives that appear to be lived in accord with an ancestral heritage as it existed before colonisation, non-Aborigines avoid the very thing they claim they are interested in: Aborigines.

There is an obvious purpose to this that reaches beyond a fascination with different cultural practices. As noted, at the same time as resisting or refusing to meet contemporary Aboriginality, Aboriginal cultural heritage is plundered in order to find the means through which non-Aborigines can also establish a spiritual affiliation with their country. Murray acknowledges that the "Aboriginal concept of the sacredness of the land and of one's native region [has been implanted] in the minds of many Australians" ("Human-Hair" 568-69). He goes on to say that non-Aboriginal rights to land claimed on this basis are to be deplored where it "is merely an attempt to trump the Aborigines ... but it does point to the inequality of, as it were, releasing one section of our population from the ordinary law of economics while letting the rest continue to suffer the effects of these" (569). Whilst poverty is not confined to Aborigines, or to rural Australia for that matter, the aetiology is different in each circumstance. For whom are the laws ordinary, and how was the basis of production upon which such laws operate obtained? And who, as a people, have the best opportunity of exploiting such laws for their own gain?

Additionally, in a 1992 interview with Noel Peacock, Murray speaks of inevitably becoming Aboriginal: "Gradually you become them. Every invader, every settler gradually becomes the people who are conquered" (Murray, "Embracing" 32). In some ways Murray is recognising here that dominant cultures too undergo a process of acculturation, both incorporating elements from that which they dominate and being transformed by them, as well as being changed by the strategies of resistance employed by the dominated (Lionnet 102). As Kwame Anthony Appiah has said, "there is, of course, no American culture without African roots" (quoted in Lionnet 102). But whilst Murray is acknowledging that non-Aboriginal society is being ineluctably changed by Aboriginal culture, he does not allow for the fact that the colonisers are in a position to ensure that this is self-

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serving, at least to some extent. For example, the appropriation of Aboriginal cultural property not only instils within non-Aborigines a sense of belonging to the land, it enables a conceptual identification of self as becoming, in this respect, an Aborigine. This serves the two-fold function of uniting non-Aborigines with the landscape from which they are supposedly alienated, whilst at the same time negating Aboriginal claims for land based on a *unique* spirituality. Aborigines and the rural poor (amongst others) converge to the extent that all become equal claimants to their "own spirit country". There can be no doubting the purpose in this contact with Aboriginal culture; although perhaps partially the result of the inevitable process of acculturation, it is for Les Murray, as it was for the Jindyworobaks, a self-conscious pursuit. This purpose is also responsible for what image of "the Aborigines" is selected as informant. As opposed to the contemporary, politically active subject, it is the passive, anthropological object which is chosen.

The same themes propounding the utility that Aboriginal cultural heritage has for non-Aborigines are stressed by A.W. Reed. Since the early 1960s the Reed publishing house has produced many popular books purporting to contain authentic Aboriginal myths, legends, fables and stories. The authenticity of much of this work is questionable. The story-tellers are not named, nor is the material given a geographical location or assigned to any particular language group. It is simply said to be typically representative of Aboriginal beliefs (see Reed, *Myths* 9; *Stories* 7-8). The material is mostly taken from other published, once popular collections of Aboriginal stories, then it is rewritten in a manner that is intended to appeal to the modern lay reader (Reed, *Myths* 11; *Stories* 9). The number of reprints of the Reed books indicates that in this endeavour they have been successful.

However, the "beautiful and amusing" "tales" contained within these books have a function to play beyond the level of mere interest or entertainment. According to the introduction of *Myths and Legends of Australia* (1965) - which appears unchanged in the 1994 edition (renamed as *Aboriginal Stories*) - they are to assist the growth of non-Aboriginal roots into the Australian soil. Reed asserts: "We shall not put our roots down into the soil until we have incorporated their [Aboriginal] folklore into the indigenous literature of the southern continent, and

can see the land through the eyes of the primitive" (*Myths* 9; *Stories* 7). It was the Aboriginal as primitive that appeared in so many arguments justifying the dispossession of their lands; now the Aboriginal as primitive is asked to reconcile their dispossessors with this land. There is a certain irony in the fact that paralleling the growing Aboriginal political activism from the late 1960s to early 1970s that forcefully questioned the legitimacy of European occupation of Australia, non-Aborigines have turned in increasing numbers to Aboriginal culture in order to feel better established here. Hence the much ridiculed rationale of the Jindyworobaks (as distinct from the harsh critiques of their poetry; see for example Hope 44-8) had become accepted and increasingly popular sentiment within two decades of the demise of this movement.

A 1993 book *The Soul Stone*, a first novel by journalist Brad Collis, provides an example of how, despite the changing patterns of appropriation over time, the concerns raised by the Jindyworobaks and their suggestions for overcoming these, have not been abandoned. Instead, Aboriginal cultural property is simply being pressed into serving a wider range of issues. To these ends Collis' novel embroiders the same themes of alienation and salvation obtained through Aborigines around the exploits of a young, rebellious Catholic priest. The action takes place against a backdrop of past atrocities committed against Aborigines and enduring injustices and mistreatment. It has a contemporary setting, though certain markers such as a reference to a Western Australian premier's response to a federal government land rights campaign dates the main events to around 1983-84.

Through his characters Collis gives a reasonably accurate portrayal of the all too prevalent attitudes and prejudices that were (in many instances still are) held by people and institutions involved in the administration of Aboriginal affairs, from community administrator, through to the police and state government. There is almost limitless documentary evidence to support this aspect of the characters which Collis convincingly depicts, along with the institutional structures that nurture them. In this respect, behind the layers of Collis' polemic the novel achieves a level of authenticity. However, injustice and iniquity appear to be not solid enough foundations upon which to build a story, and insufficient in them-

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selves to prompt the young priest's concern for Aborigines, and the battles he sometimes enters seemingly on their behalf. When Father Simon Bradbury is asked whether his interest and concern for Aborigines arises from a sense of professional duty or from a generally loving nature, he dismisses these factors. Instead he admits to "a degree of selfishness behind my motives ... I don't see myself as some social justice crusader or philanthropist. It goes beyond that ... [sic] more to what I think they can give me, teach me ... [sic] and perhaps all Australians if they were given the chance" (Collis 180). Thus the themes of attaching an interest in, concern for, and now also activism on behalf of Aborigines because of the value in what they can offer, is consistently maintained. So too is the notion that the gains to be had from exploiting this resource will be both personal and national.

A major problem faced by the non-Aboriginal characters in the novel is their hatred of or sense of alienation from the land upon which they dwell (113,125). For those not born in Australia – such as the missionaries – this situation is exacerbated for they retain an abiding spiritual association with their place of birth and hence hope to return there before dying. Significantly, it is fear arising from a sense of alienation from Australia, and not the spiritual pull from their birthplace, that gives rise to this hope (285,301,377). According to Father Bradbury, however, Aborigines are to provide the means through which any such feelings of alienation can be overcome. He declares that the reason why "you [the Aborigine] must survive, and hold precious your knowledge of the land", is because Aborigines are the only people who can show the way to the country's spiritual core (131). It is on the basis of this usefulness – that is that Aborigines can furnish the mechanisms through which non-Aborigines can be psycho-socially united with the land (365,400,415) – that activism, aimed at assisting the Aborigines' survival, is urged and conducted throughout the pages of the novel.

As Father Bradbury learns more about Aborigines, he comes to believe that their religious practices and spiritual knowledge are not only valuable to non-Aboriginal Australians, but essential to humankind. They are the only people left on earth who can still demonstrate how to "touch" the spiritual realm (181). It is the notion that Aborigines are the most ancient of all people and that their religious life heads an unbroken line that reaches back into humankind's primal condition that is responsible for Father Bradbury arguing the essential nature of

what Aborigines alone can teach the world (313,319,324). To this end, Collis invokes a sense of origins each time Bradbury encounters Aboriginal ceremonial practices and various other cultural markers. For example, allowing the Aborigines to perform ceremonies banned by the former community minister, and in recognition of his piety, Bradley is an invited participant in a corroboree. The description of the event stresses its "primal" nature (183). A song is "an ancient cry from a time too far back to measure" (185), and the performance offered the chance of a "glimpse into a deep pocket of human memory" (181). The concept that Aborigines enable, through being a "pure human lineage" (355), an acquaintance with "primordial humanity" (319), is a constant that lies beneath the surface of the novel, erupting at numerous points (see for example 313,319,324,347,357). Aboriginal religious practices are viewed as enabling the prior sacred condition of humankind to be witnessed. As opposed to a celebration of a contemporary religiosity and spirituality, their practices are depicted as the ritual polishing of archaic concepts that have been transmitted through countless generations.

It is not without irony that the interest in Aboriginal cultural property that stresses its alleged primal nature or great age is at least partly a reaction against the progressive historical linearism that has prevailed since the seventeenth century, and which found such favour in the evolutionary theories of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Eliade 145-46; Lowenthal 1269-271). Thus the young priest wonders if the "brash young country [could] be anything else but the brutalised end product of agrarian reform and industrial revolution" (397). Under these conceptions it is only Western society that continually evolves (see Lowenthal 1269). Aborigines live the past in the present through ceremonial repetition of the primordial acts that brought them and the landscape into being. They "have lived and kept the earth as it was from the first day" (Collis 347). The contradictory point here is that the search for a set of beliefs and practices that appear stable over time is in part a reaction against the concept of progress, yet it is essential to subscribe to time as a linear, progressive actuality in order to locate Aboriginal cultural heritage in the far distant past so as to accentuate its alleged and desired primordial nature.

The notion that Aboriginal religious beliefs and sense of the sacred point the way to a distant primal state is a non-Aboriginal imposition. Although replete

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with references to a creative period in which all life forms appeared and the landscape was shaped, this was not, in common with other non-modern societies, conceived as being a point located in antiquity from which one is progressively removed by a historical reading of time. Such a chronology is disrupted by the process of re-actualising creation events in ceremony, and through the ritualistic repetition of sacred myths in which the laws, social rules and codes of behaviour that govern society are encoded. These practices break the linearity of history, in that the past events of the creation epoch are continually brought to or into the present (Eliade xiv,4-6,141-43). As Mircea Eliade argues, this creates a " 'history' that can be repeated indefinitely" (xiv). Time thus becomes a regenerative concept, and this sense of being able to reanimate the past in the present is what led Stanner to state that "one cannot 'fix' The Dreaming *in* time: it was, and is, everywhen" (*White Man*, 24). This does not, as is frequently held, emancipate Aborigines from the experience of change over time up until the point of colonisation. Nor does it mean that Aboriginal culture is static and appears as it always has been. Nevertheless, although anthropologists and cultural historians rejected this notion long ago, it is still found in much contemporary literature as a commonplace understanding, the veracity of which is not doubted.

The Soul Stone also promulgates the notion that Aboriginality is threatened by any move away from a lifestyle lived in accordance with the ancestral heritage. Karl, the wise, mysterious, philosophising German mechanic on the community, perhaps an erstwhile war criminal but now of gentle disposition, appears empathetic towards Aborigines. Yet he tells Father Bradbury that money in the form of government grants is eroding their "natural virtues" (Collis 165). It is making them more white by the day (166). The virtues of Aboriginal life are not to be found in the necessary adaptations made in accommodating the dominant political economy, but are found in their supposed Rousseauian natural disposition. The uncivilised are debased by civilisation. Aboriginality is apparently impoverished by contact with non-Aboriginal culture. Karl, on the other hand, had unproblematically entered the Aboriginal spiritual realm. Through fishing he had acquired a Barramundi Dreaming (80-2). He never actually catches the fish, but communicates with their spirit. This Dreaming gave the alien Karl - whose war-time experiences prohibited a return to Europe - an affiliation with place and

made the community his spiritual home (80,82,165,400).

Perhaps of even greater significance than the assumption of Aboriginality by an individual such as Karl, is the broader, indirect manner in which Aboriginality, or control of this quality, is transferred to non-Aborigines in the pages of the novel. This is undertaken in two key ways. Firstly, the source of Aboriginality is located in remote regions and in a traditional lifestyle. For example, when Father Bradbury accompanied an Aboriginal father and son to their spirit country for ritual purposes, they adopted the ways of the hunter-gatherer. The only non-traditional tools to accompany the spears, digging sticks and wooden carrying dishes was an axe and a billy (312). Even clothes were discarded (349). Because of the virtual impossibility of maintaining even briefly such a lifestyle today, Aboriginality – as defined and controlled by non-Aborigines—is effectively removed beyond the grasp of most Aborigines. In other words, Aboriginal peoples are no longer able to replicate the lifestyle that non-Aborigines decree as being authentically Aboriginal.

Secondly, in Collis' novel the acquisition of Aboriginality is still based upon the necessities of male circumcision and the undertaking of other painful, arduous initiation rites (349-50). Whilst statistics are unavailable as to what percentage of Aboriginal men now submit to having their chests slashed three times with a rock heated in a fire in order to demonstrate control of pain and to display cicatrices (350,359-60), it is no longer a common initiatory practice. Erich Kolig, for instance, has found that pain is rarely a feature of contemporary rituals (71). In making such practices an ongoing and essential initiatory procedure, Collis is effectively removing another signifier of Aboriginality from Aborigines. Furthermore, by having the non-Aboriginal Father Bradbury participate in these ordeals which bestow identity, whilst having the elders infer a reluctance in young Aborigines to undergo this experience (Collis 310), Collis imbues his principal white character with an "authentic" Aboriginality, at the same time as stripping younger Aborigines of this authenticity. The young Catholic priest becomes an Aborigine, but for those Aborigines with or without dark skins that live in the suburbs or away from their spirit country or who have not been initiated in accordance with ancestral practices, doubt remains as to their identity. They are "trapped between two worlds" (213). Non-Aborigines, on the other hand, not only have the land

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and now through cultural colonisation the principles by which they can overcome any sense of alienation; they can also from their position of privilege, become an Aborigine too if they so choose. As opposed to being an identity biologically conferred or something that is a result of socialisation, or the manifestation of a multiplicity of contextual factors – psychological, biological, social, religious, political, philosophical and so on – Aboriginality becomes something that can be acquired through experiences gained whilst participating in such events as a brief initiatory ordeal.

The possibility of non-Aborigines becoming the idealised Other through the acquisition of abstracted aspects of Aboriginality is a theme that can be traced through the Jindyworobak literature to contemporary novels. So too is the notion that, for one reason or another, the acquisition of this property and/or the transformation to an Aboriginal consciousness is not only a possibility, but an imperative. That such notions are being promulgated during a period when reactionary responses to the so-called “black-arm band” of history are asserting that Native Title (and for some land rights in general and any other entitlements based on Aboriginality) are divisive if not racist, has potentially pernicious consequences. This is because if through the efforts of those seeking to “Aboriginalise” non-indigenous Australians we can all imagine ourselves “as one” in terms of our spiritual attachment to place, why the need for continued recognition of indigenous rights?

Whereas Les Murray could argue in the late 1970s that since the Jindyworobaks – their anthologies ceased in 1953 – the “resource” of Aboriginal cultural heritage has been neglected (“Human-Hair” 550), such a statement is certainly no longer true. As non-Aboriginal Australians turn to face more inclusive accounts of colonial history and realise its legacy, and as many in the Western world begin to seek alternative values and their “inner selves”, and become concerned with environmental degradation and the depletion of non-renewable resources, more and more are turning to Aboriginal culture in search of redemption and answers. As this interest in Aborigines and their cultures is precipitated by a sense of crises, be they personal, social, national, environmental, whatever, it tends towards being acquisitive and exploitative. The interest is not in working collaboratively with Aborigines to assist in the realisation of equity and justice,

but in finding within Aboriginal cultures the answers to our needs, wants and desires.

Notes

- 1 The term non-Aboriginal is used throughout with few exceptions to describe non-Aboriginal Australians. "Settler Australians" is an increasingly favoured term, and one I would use in other contexts. I use the term non-Aborigines here to highlight the sense of lack, loss, despair and alienation that underpins much of the contemporary acquisitive interest in Aboriginal cultures and identity. Many of those turning to Aborigines with appropriate intent argue that by "reclaiming" those facets of Aboriginal life signified in the qualifier "non-", we can all emerge as Aborigines, and that is the objective they pursue. See for example Cowan *Messengers, Two Men*; Cowan and Beard; Tacey. For a critical examination of this work of Tacey's, see Rolls.
- 2 See also Catalano 47.
- 3 This article - "The Human-Hair Thread" - also appears in Murray, *Persistence*, with additional explanation on his use of Aboriginal material appearing in the preface. In interviews conducted in the 1990s - "Interview", "Embracing" and *Books and Writing* - Murray does not contradict opinions expressed in this early essay, but reaffirms them.
- 4 It is difficult to find any work seeking the incorporation of Aboriginal concepts that does not make reference to, or obvious use of, at least one and usually more of the following: *The World of the First Australians* (Berndt and Berndt); *The Australian Aborigines; How to Understand Them* (Elkin); *Aboriginal Men of High Degree* (Elkin); *The Arunta. A Study of a Stone Age People* (Spencer and Gillen). T.G.H. Strehlow's work, particularly his *Aranda Traditions* and *Songs of Central Australia*, are also frequently cited.

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