

## BRIAN DIBBLE and MARGARET MACINTYRE: Hybridity in Jack Davis' No Sugar

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The story of Australia, as it is constituted in white Australian history and culture, has as two of its powerful underlying themes the achievement of nationhood and the quest for an Australian identity: as Andrew Lattas observes, "[t]he continual questioning of who we really are is the essence of Australian nationalism."<sup>(1)</sup> Lattas' remark is itself an incident in the Australian story, for though it poses an essential, monocultural "we", it admits that this "we" is constituted through doubt, uncertainty, "questioning". Such instability of identity and authority is the product, not only of a Derridean *différence*, but also of the doubleness of colonial discourse in Australia. On the one hand, the Australian "we" is both identified with and opposed to British imperial power - thus, for example, the BBC is reinscribed as the ABC, even as "whingeing poms" are positioned as interlopers in the Lucky Country. On the other hand, the Australian Aborigine is simultaneously excluded from and incorporated into the Australian "we" - witness the state policies (sequentially) of genocide, assimilation and (now) multiculturalism. In short, the story of Australia is both a colonised and colonising narrative.

Thus a central trope in the Australian narrative of nation is what Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra, following Edward Said in *Orientalism*, call "Aboriginalism", which they define as "a class of strategies that colonial powers have adopted to construct the colonised Other."<sup>(2)</sup> Basic to these strategies is the dual definition of the Aborigine as physically, psychologically and social inferior and, at the same time, through their identification with tribe, land, and nature, as metaphysically or spiritually superior. This is the familiar double inscription of sexist, classist and racist discourses: the subject, the "we", is constructed through biologically and culturally essentialist definitions of the Other that simultaneously devalue and idealise, exclude and incorporate. Such double-inscription also underlies the more current, putatively non-racist, strategies of Aboriginalism: that is, multiculturalism, pan-Aboriginality and culturalism. Multiculturalism is at heart a liberal-pluralist discourse that assumes essential ethnic or racial identities, acknowledges their differences, and then subsumes those differences to the narrative of nation. Notions of pan-Aboriginality repeat the same manoeuvre within a black "nation". And recourse to culturally specific definitions of Aboriginality exclude as "inauthentic" those blacks who are distant in space, time, biology and practices from their tribal origins.

Aboriginalism, then, is a colonising discourse which, in the Australian context, has the double function of being a strategy for escaping the position of the colonised, even as it constructs the Australian "we": through it, the "colonial Boy" of the song becomes the independent man of Russel Ward's Australian Legend. In this way white Australia writes itself/himself into history.

Such writing-the-Australian-self-into-history entails writing the Aborigine out of it. From the invasion, white culture has associated Aborigines not with history but with tradition, myth and timelessness. By this means Aborigines are both deprived of historical agency and claim to the land and, by the same token, nominated as spiritual mediators. Thus white Australians displace Aboriginal cultures and bestow on themselves an antiquity and historical past which their recent arrival and colonial status precludes. However, as Hodge and Mishra note,<sup>(3)</sup> many Aborigines now resist their erasure from white history, and indeed see doing so as an important site of their resistance. Necessarily, this resistance is what Homi Bhabha describes as subversive rather than oppositional, for the Australian Aborigine can enter Australian history in no other way than through the language of the coloniser. Aboriginal subversion, therefore, consists of exploiting the double inscription of colonising discourse - that is, the dual definition of the Other as both unlike and like, as devalued and idealised. To exploit this ambiguity is to make clear the arbitrary nature of colonial authority

and the desire on which it is founded. To exploit it is to make a space for a different set of attitudes, values, definitions and knowledges.

In effect, such subversive exploitation consists of a double-speech that, following Bhabha, we can call "hybridity"; that is, it consists of speech whose components simultaneously call into play two belief systems and thus simultaneously have two different, even contradictory, meanings. Hybridity *enables* a subjected peoples, giving them space in which to construct their own subjectivity and solidarity, and it *disables* the oppressor by disguising deviance as compliance. The title of Western Australian playwright Jack Davis' play *No Sugar* alludes to an incident in the play that illustrates hybridity: at the 1934 Australia Day ceremony the Moore River Settlement Aborigines are told to sing "There is a Happy Land" to celebrate the "Saviour King" George VI; but instead they sing to that tune the words "No sugar in our tea/Bread and butter we never see...."(4) Their deviant compliance enables subjectivity and solidarity, and destabilises the authority of the Chief Protector of Aborigines, A.O. Neville - all that is lacking here is the element of disguise.

As the example suggests, *No Sugar* extensively exploits the fault lines of Australian colonising discourse. Textual ways it does so relate to linguistic, cultural and generic codes and conventions, and contextual ways it does so relate to the groupings of his plays and the timing of their premieres.

## Linguistic

On the level of dialogue *No Sugar* is rich with examples of hybridity. It is illustrated when the signifieds or referents of words are not shared - David Millimurra knows families, but not the significance of the nativity tale Sister Eileen tells,(5) just as Bluey does not know the narrative of Jimmy's Nyoongah crab-hunting song nor Sam the story told by Billy's northwest tribal body-paintings.(6) Such instances illustrate how blacks are required to master knowledge of central white myths in order to become "real" Australians, but whites do not act reciprocally in relation to black cultures in the way these men at the corroboree do. Similarly, hybridity is exemplified when two groups share word and referent but give different values to the latter, as when Frank Brown says that Jimmy Millimurra took Frank to his "home" and the question by the incredulous Justice of the Peace ("His what?") forces Brown to correct himself, saying "his camp at Government Well."(7) Under colonial discourse, "home" is where the white is.

But if hybridity, as this last example indicates, is a condition of black oppression, it is also the means for subversive resistance. In the play one major technique of subversion works on the direct-address axis, and there are several illustrations of that in the court house scene.(8) Sam comes late for the call from the Justice of the Peace, causing the latter to say "I hope you're not trying to make a mockery of the court by delaying proceedings" - and then Jimmy comes still later by reason, he cheerfully announces, of having been "on the shit bucket"; next Jimmy interrupts the usual superior-to-inferior address sequence by continually interjecting, helpfully insisting that the Sergeant is "telling it wrong"; and finally Sam, in one of the funniest exchanges of the play, outrages the court-room directaddress formal rubric by responding when not spoken to when the JP says to Jimmy, "Shut up, you bloody idiot, or I'll charge you with contempt of court," and Sam answers "Yes, sir!" When both men are late, when they speak out of turn, when Jimmy admits nothing and Sam takes responsibility for anything - all this might be read as slapstick by a white audience. But to a black audience it can be read as a subversive contempt of the colonial court - a refusal to acknowledge, to engage and to accept the white processes that routinely find them guilty of drinking to escape degradation and the tedium of the reserve to which the whites have consigned them after taking their land. As such, this scene is emblematic of their resistance to the rituals of white colonial discourse.

## Cultural

On the level of character the play lays bare the discontinuities of Aboriginalism. Auber Octavius Neville, Chief Protector of Aborigines, holds his office in a Western Australia government building revealingly named "Fisheries, Forestry, Wildlife and Aborigines". And his actions further embody the contradictions of Australian colonial discourse: as his stirring anti-genocide speech to the Western Australian Historical Society indicates, he can be an idealist, like Governor Stirling was when he said the Aborigines must be respected and protected like "any other of His Majesty's subjects";(9) but, as his outrage at the Aborigines' mocking of the "Happy Land" song indicates, he can verbally "Other" Aborigines as savagely

as Stirling did physically one hundred years before when he led the Battle of Pinjarra which killed dozens of Aboriginal men, women and children - Neville shouts "you will live to rue the day", and, in the most ironic line of the play, "There will be no more privileges from now on." (10) That the double-think intrinsic to colonising discourse is finally contradictory, and that such contradiction destabilises its claim to authority is further strikingly exemplified by Sergeant Carroll, the presiding policeman at Northam, whose sense of British justice both drives his prejudice against blacks and causes him to bully Neville into allowing the Millimurra family to travel to the Moore River with their hunting dogs. Sergeant Carroll is bisected by the contradictions of the colonial discourse that he represents - and which is the condition for black resistance.

With respect to such resistance, Billy Kimberley is the most complex character. He is Other to the whites for being black and not having English as his first language. But he is also Other to the Millimurra family for being still blacker than they - "He ain't black, he's purple!" the young David says (11) - and for speaking a Kimberly dialect whereas they are Nyoongahs. However, the white colonising discourse has reinscribed Billy Kimberley as an agent of its oppression of blacks - he represents himself as a "politjman", and the children call him "black crow", a word which ironically recalls *manatj* (Nyoongah for black cockatoo and also for policeman). At first he conducts himself like a policeman when he pursues Joe and Mary who have run away, and when he whips David who avoids Sunday school, but at the end he defines a third position for himself. At the corroboree he tells the story of the 1926 Oombulgarri massacre, revealing that he is now a man without a people or a place, a family or a home. So, when he offers his whip to Joe at the end of the play (12) he is doing more than betraying Superintendent Neal and more than helping the Millimurra family. After absolute dispossession through genocide and ethnocide, and oppression through reinscription as the white man's lackey, he is fashioning a new identity within the constraints of colonisation. He has been positioned in relation to the Nyoongah people of the southwest as the British were to the colonists. But, through an act of cross-cultural affiliation, he - an ex-Kimberley Aborigine - finds a new position in the discourse of the black Other, and his act is symbolically reciprocated when Joe Millimurra gives him *gnummari* - not the nigger-twist tobacco the government gives the Aborigines, but a packet of Luxors he brought back from gaol. And, finally, this new identity is acknowledged and the affiliation is strengthened when Mary (who is from the same tribe) calls him *dumbart*, the name for a person of the same tribe. The condition of hybridity is Billy's occasion for creating a subjectivity for himself which, in turn, enables him to achieve solidarity with those who are different but similarly Othered.

## Generic

Generically, to a white Western Australian audience *No Sugar* might be regarded primarily as a "protest play", a term used to define its motive as didactic rather than aesthetic and, thereby, paradoxically, to depoliticise it by qualifying its literary status. However, a black Western Australian audience might well regard the play primarily as a documentary where blacks act as subjects in Australian history. Indeed, in the play traditional European generic conventions are skewed to open up a space for this speaking of black history and subjectivity. The semiotics of the staging from the outset announces its differentness from classical European drama: it can be played in a traditional theatre with standard sets, costumes and props, but it could equally effectively be presented in a bush setting; the Perth and Northam offices are literally and ideologically marginalised on the left, the Moore River Settlement and its offices on the right, with the black space - the campfire - central stage. Moreover, the play is European for a plot which presents a coherent and continuous narrative, but also is distinctive for not having closure in the European sense, being an episodic series of unresolved confrontations in which the Aborigines are more agonists than protagonists or antagonists. And, finally, the play is usual for presenting official white history and some of its historical contradictions (like the "Tasmanian solution" of death-by-strychnine, or the Western Australian death-byambush approach), but arresting, for its recording Aboriginal oral history.

This exploitation of generic conventions is one means of writing blacks into Australian history. Difference is emphasised for the play's white audience, who might well not sympathise with the white protagonists for identifying with the black agonists. Simultaneously, the use of Aboriginal dialects and the performance of Aboriginal dances and songs invites black engagement, as does the likelihood that an acquaintance or family member would have experienced some of the events referred to or depicted. Protest

and documentary play *No Sugar* hijacks traditional, European dramatic conventions in the interest of black subjectivity.

## Context

*No Sugar*'s hybrid generic status as protest play and documentary history is produced not only internally but also by the moment in which it was written and performed. Premiered in Perth on 18 February 1985, *No Sugar* is the second part of a trilogy called *The First Born* which traces the history of Aborigines in Western Australia from the white invasion (1829) to the present. The first play, *Kullark* ("Home"), represents "the devastation of the Nyungar (Nyoongah) people and their social and personal subjugation to incoming European settlers," (13) and was written as an angry response to Western Australia's Sesquicentenary in 1979. The second play, *No Sugar*, depicts post-tribal/pre-urban Aboriginal people, and anticipated the 1988 Australian Bicentenary by concluding with the Australia Day celebration of 1934 where the protesting Jimmy Munday collapses and dies with his arms around the flagpole. The last play, *The Dreamers*, depicts urban Aboriginal people in the present day. Thus *No Sugar*, and the trilogy it belongs to, invokes history by representing what has happened; and it constitutes history by intervening in particular moments of white colonising self-writing (the Sesquicentennial, the Bicentennial); and, finally, it proposes history by writing black subjectivity.

## Conclusion

Jack Davis' play *No Sugar* resists Aboriginalism by using language in ways which reveal the contradictions in Australian colonising discourse. It creates characters who dramatise how discourses of oppression can be exploited in order to create Aboriginal subjectivity. And it does so by means of hybridity - by appropriating linguistic, cultural and generic codes and conventions in ways which protest the meanings of the Australian colonisers' "we" and facilitate black solidarity.

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## NOTES

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4. Davis, Jack, *No Sugar*. Sydney, Currency Press, 1986, IV, 5.

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6. *Ibid*, II, 6.

7. *Ibid*, I, 5.

8. *Ibid*, I, 8.

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11. *Ibid*, II, 1.

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