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Abstract
Paul Carter’s observation in The Road to Botany Bay, regarding Australia’s past, that ‘the gaze of most historians has been … partial’,1 is now fairly commonplace. Perhaps not so commonplace is his comment, ‘We have no grounds for presuming that Aboriginal history can be treated as a subset of white history, as a history within a history’ (p. 325). Now that black versions of history are being told and written down, white critics must learn how to witness and read and listen to these versions, since they must be approached from a different perspective than white texts which generally have as their cornerstone ‘official’ History. One method that has already been attempted is applying western critical theory to indigenous texts in the same way as one would apply it to a text written by an AngloSaxon, middle-class male. Such a scheme, it is being discovered, is not the answer because it creates a new field of colonisation. This paper looks at the ways one such critical method, the binary opposition, does not fit Aboriginal drama, in particular Jack Davis’s plays.
JOANNE TOMPKINS

History/history/histories: Resisting the Binary in Aboriginal Drama

Paul Carter's observation in *The Road to Botany Bay*, regarding Australia's past, that 'the gaze of most historians has been ... partial',¹ is now fairly commonplace. Perhaps not so commonplace is his comment, 'We have no grounds for presuming that Aboriginal history can be treated as a subset of white history, as a history within a history' (p. 325). Now that black versions of history are being told and written down, white critics must learn how to witness and read and listen to these versions, since they must be approached from a different perspective than white texts which generally have as their cornerstone 'official' History. One method that has already been attempted is applying western critical theory to indigenous texts in the same way as one would apply it to a text written by an Anglo-Saxon, middle-class male. Such a scheme, it is being discovered, is not the answer because it creates a new field of colonization. This paper looks at the ways one such critical method, the binary opposition, does not fit Aboriginal drama, in particular Jack Davis's plays.

Binary oppositions – such as male/female, white/black, good/evil – emerging from the structuralist movement, were for a time, the answer to many critics' prayers.² These terms, which were to be found in every text, could categorize the experiences of all that a critic could wish to discuss about a work. But nothing lasts forever without significant modification, least of all a literary theory: post-structuralism challenged binary oppositions for a variety of reasons. Perhaps feminist, marxist, and post-colonial theorists and theories have demonstrated most explicitly the shortcomings of binaries: Barbara Christian, for instance, a specialist in Afro-American women's writing, condemns the use of binaries on the grounds that they predetermine that one term is always more central than another. Her example is major/minor, which also becomes us/them and known/Other. She says,

we can say that the terms 'minority' and 'discourse' are located firmly in a Western dualistic or 'binary' frame which sees the rest of the world as minor, and tries to convince the rest of the world that it is major, usually through force and then through language, even as it claims many of the ideas that we, its 'historical' other, have known and spoken about for so long. For many of us have never conceived of ourselves only as somebody's other.³
One of the most popular ways proponents of binaries justify their use is switching the power dynamic, that is, in a male/female binary, pointing to instances when ‘female’ is empowered. Yet if ‘female’ is still operating within a ‘male’ hierarchy, ‘female’ cannot be experiencing equal power with ‘male’. Two of the post-colonial critics who have most extensively explored this theoretical dilemma are Homi Bhabha and Benita Parry. Bhabha and Parry have challenged the supposition that a reversal of binary oppositions can empower the subordinate element of the equation. Bhabha maintains that texts that invert white/black to create an authority position for the black subset will ultimately fail, since these inversions merely reinscribe the dominant colonial power formations. As Parry explains further:

a reverse discourse replicating and therefore reinstalling the linguistic polarities devised by a dominant centre to exclude and act against the categorized, does not liberate the ‘other’ from a colonized condition where heterogeneity is repressed in the monolithic figures and stereotypes of colonialist representation, and into a free state of polymorphous native ‘difference’.4

To create a literary and political distance from the colonial power structures, then, post-colonial literatures - especially indigenous literatures - must and do refuse what Parry calls ‘the founding concepts of the problematic’ (p. 28). Bhabha’s emphasis is slightly different. He rejects binary oppositions on the grounds that clear, consistent constructions do not exist for both halves of the binary equation. Rather, he sees a constant state of ambivalence within each part of the equation, which precludes not only a convenient summation of a complex concept or situation, but also a simple reversal of the concepts to empower the powerless.5

This state of ambivalence is not quite the same as Mudrooroo Nyoongah’s perception of the Aboriginal writer’s existence in a state of ambiguity of writing black narratives in an essentially white form.6 Rather, Bhabha’s term, ‘ambivalence’, accurately accounts for the position of Aboriginal history within Jack Davis’s plays: the issue is not one of white versus black. Davis’s plays demonstrate the necessity of foregrounding and validating the Aboriginal past, but also recognizing that that past is caught in the more ‘powerful’ (in the sense of more widely accepted) presence of white history.

Mudrooroo maintains in Writing from the Fringe that when considered at all, the white view of Aboriginal history is demeaning. He argues that in white ‘explanations’,

[The past was the basis for all explanation of the present and future. This way of placing time and things in a continuum is called mythology by Europeans and is contrasted with the scientific way of thinking which seeks to explain the past from the present. Scientists and scholars prefer to work backwards from what is now to what was and tend to ignore any accounts found in the mythology of the Aboriginal communities, though this mythology is the oral records of the communities.]
They measure and chart data from which they postulate things about the Aboriginal people. (p. 5; his emphasis)

The condescending approach to which Mudrooroo objects is also apparent in criticism of the plays, such as the introduction to Kullark, in which H.C. Coombs has written that the play ‘presents simply but effectively aspects of contemporary Aboriginal experience.’ The use of a word like ‘simply’ suggests that the play is merely an elementary black version of a white form. The black drama is, in this construction, the weaker of the binary set, trying to demonstrate that it is just as good as the stronger, white element. Such a position is untenable, given the nature of ‘history’ in Davis’s work.

The treatment of history in Davis’s plays suggests a shifting foundation that challenges Western assumptions about the location, permanence, and objectivity of history. The authors of The Empire Writes Back observe that ‘revisions of political critical ‘history’ question the objective categories of historical discourse itself and expose their formations as culture specific rather than universal.’ In response to this culturally specific perception of history, Aboriginal drama, like other genres of Aboriginal literatures, does not merely replace ‘History’ with Aboriginal concepts of the past by reversing the binary oppositions. Instead, Aboriginal drama’s concerns with the past operates outside traditional binary constructions. Davis’s plays present Aboriginal history in an ambivalent manner: all whites, even the colonizers, are not evil; all blacks are not perfect; and there is no assumption in the plays that black history will replace white history, as one of the Bicentennial slogans, ‘1988 – Celebrate – We Survived’ illustrates. The plays detail the sheer persistence of Nyoongah culture – the presence of the oral tradition, the Nyoongah language, and the presence of the past (using ‘presence’ in both senses of the word). Nevertheless, Davis’s plays demonstrate the necessity of foregrounding the long-suppressed Aboriginal past, and, paradoxically, co-existing with but not within white history. In marked contrast to white history, the Aboriginal past exists within the present and the future in Aboriginal cultures. This sense of history remains even as the plays advance, more or less chronologically, through a western time frame. Oodgeroo Noonuccal’s poem, ‘The Past,’ summarizes this perception:

Let no one say the past is dead
The past is all about us and within ...
A thousand thousand camp fires in the forest
Are in my blood
Let none tell me the past is wholly gone.

The ever-present Aboriginal past is more than simply a theme or backdrop: it is grounded in the use of the Nyoongah language, dance, song, and subversions of white history, and particularly in the oral tradition.
European, written language, on the other hand, transfers things to a place in a linear chronology.

*Kullark* juxtaposes the story of Yagan, a young Nyoongah trying to secure his land, with the Yorlah family through various moments in the twentieth century, to demonstrate the shameful legacy of one hundred and fifty years of white domination in Western Australia. *No Sugar* chronicles the forced settlements in the 1930s. *The Dreamers* takes up with the next generation, in the 1970s. *Barungin* incorporates the horrifying story of Aboriginal deaths in custody. In *Our Town* looks at racism in a Western Australian town just after World War II. Yet none of these plays is grounded solely in the present of that time frame. The plays confront three major historical moments, all of which collide with the hitherto authoritative, monolithic white Australian versions. These are, in western chronology, the Dreamtime past, or pre-1829 (Western Australia’s foundation); various moments in the ‘contact’ past which communicate the history of Australia from Aboriginals’ perspectives; and the contemporary history of blacks from the 1960s to the present, the chronic of what black Australians experience today, including the horror of the ongoing Aboriginal deaths in custody, which cannot be consigned to ‘History’, since according to History, such incidents didn’t happen. Also according to History, they continue to ‘not’ occur to the many institutions that do not recognize the existence of the incidents.

The first of the three categories is the most extensive in Davis’s plays. Both *The Dreamers* and *Kullark* include a figure who represents pre-contact Aboriginality and who defies western concepts of naturalism and chronology. This character’s songs, music, and dances identify him with the land before the whites invaded, but which in its continuing representation on stage in the theatrical present defies History’s inscription of it to the past of prehistory. The Dancer’s presence challenges western time and history as well as challenging theatrical representations which inherently privilege the white, ‘official’ version of History, such as naturalism, which often presents an unproblematized view of history. In *The Dreamers*, where the main narrative storyline takes place in the 1970s, the heavily painted dancer periodically appears, dancing to the music of clap sticks and didgeridoo, singing of the land’s wealth. Embodying Worru’s tribal past, the dancer remains unseen by most members of the ‘contemporary’ family, but Worru continually feels his presence. This form of the past lives on, even though white History which ‘began’ after the origins of such Dream-time figures tries to suggest that it is the only possible version of the past. The time scale alone suggests how nebulous black histories can be, illustrating the impossibility of categorizing these perspectives on the past into one neat, all-encompassing term.

The use of Aboriginal music, singing, and dancing, especially when juxtaposed to the styles of today with Peter’s disco dancing in *The Dreamers*, emphasizes the past traditions, but also the ways in which those
traditions were communicated. The most popular form of expressing the past of pre-1788 in Davis’s plays – and plays by other black Australians – is the use of myths and the oral tradition. Frequently, an old character tells several other younger characters a story of the creation of the world, for example, or the transmigration of souls in the moodgah tree in *The Dreamers*. The corroboree in *No Sugar*, in which Jimmy sings of the fish and crabs, suggests a land of plenty before the whites began raping that land, leaving blacks to eat weavilly flour and illegally-trapped rabbits. These styles also take on additional meanings in the contemporary drama: they question the validity of the exclusive western forms of historical truth.

All five play titles recall the pre-1788 world, whether it be the dreaming, home, or the sweet, productive smell of the wind that always led the way to food. These suggestions of the past continue to have meaning in the plays’ collective present, meanings which are widened to accommodate the events that have occurred since contact, increasing the number of possible signifieds for each incident. In the second of the historical categories, the ambivalence of this time is apparent when the history that pervades the present within these plays is both regenerative (the dreamtime past) and destructive (the conquest past), as the plays’ titles suggest: the titles’ signifieds now incorporate winds bearing death, a prison-like home, nightmarish dreams, and the humiliating punishment of previously unnecessary food rations.

The second of the historical categories is clearly expressed in *Kullark*, which charts the black view of the white invasion of Western Australia in 1829, literally giving the blacks a voice, as Yagan and his family speak their thoughts of the intrusion in and into their own language. The presence of the Nyoongah language contrasts with the silencing of the Nyoongah people through invasion, murder, and the dissemination of Christianity and the English language. The ‘Wetjala,’ according to Granny Doll in *Barungin*, ‘killed our language‘ (p. 36), an important aspect of the cultural and literal murders. The imposition of English means that fewer Nyoongah words are spoken as the years of the plays go by, and at the beginning of *The Dreamers*, Shane knows only one: Wetjala.

The use of various forms to communicate ‘history’ is particularly important in *Kullark*: several versions of the slaughter of Yagan and his tribal family are relayed, such as Yagan’s own songs and Alice’s diary, but only Stirling’s version is accepted as the ‘true’ voice of history. The white documentary form, however, is turned back on itself with the addition of the black perspective in the play. When Stirling suddenly, without foundation, constructs the blacks as duplicitous, the alternative forms of recording the past – diary, journal, debate, and oral culture – illustrate that the official white version is full of lies, of misrepresentation, and of manipulations in the name of power. Inaccuracies are overlooked in the fabrication of white history. Ironically, the frequency and similarity in oral accounts of the
treatment blacks suffered suggest that the oral tradition is probably more ‘reliable’ than the ‘written-down’ version of white history.

The postmodern use of diaries, journals, letters, and such media from the white historical version to question the authority of that story are artistically important, but here, they become political imperatives as well. More than Hayden White’s rereading of history to understand its fictive and selective nature, history in the Aboriginal context becomes a matter of denying or not denying a people’s existence, and continued existence, and value in their past. Linda Hutcheon and Abdul JanMohamed have suggested that the significant placement of history and politics within minority literatures questions the established authority in a more political manner than the decentraling of the location of power in postmodernism. The foregrounding of history and politics insists on a relocation of power to empower a specific group of oppressed people. This empowering is derived not from an inversion of binaries, but from a side-stepping of binaries. The individuation of the characters of Yagan, Mitiitjiroo, and Moyarahn, and the various versions of history that are validated by the text suggest that official white History is, as Paul Carter contends, partial. Yet the play does not leave it at that. Kullark works within the existing white framework as well, demonstrating the Yorlah family in the late 1970s, living in contemporary (white) Australia. This working against and alongside white History exploits Bhabha’s concept, ambivalence, to undermine the outdated History book.

The contemporary past is characterized by the resistance to the legacy of silence and death. Mudroorooy comments, ‘White settlement of Australia has been for the Aboriginal people a two hundred year long funeral service,’ and the threatened death of the race is repeatedly represented by funerals and by the silencing force of prison. Barungin concludes with several characters reciting the names of Aborigines who have died in custody, which foregrounds the presence and the continuity of history.

Peegun’s didgeridoo busking routine in Barungin demonstrates the value of traditions in an oral form that marks the presence of change. He explains (to two levels of audience) the history of the instrument, building up to a land rights refrain to his song which gives presence to all aspects of the past. Most importantly, he uses the methods of the Aboriginal past to survive in a white world that by his presence can no longer be just an uncomplicated white world. This post-colonial hybrid form of busking with a didgeridoo signifies not an unchanged Aboriginal prehistory but an Aboriginal present in a state of constant change. Aborigines are thus enabled to participate in history rather than being the object of History. Much anthropology and art discourse treats Aboriginality as only authentically existing in unchanged prehistory forms, that is keeping it out of History by denying it one of the essentials of History: change. In a related but slightly different way, Kullark demonstrates the presence of another form of oral culture in use today. Jamie quotes from Kevin Gilbert’s Living
Black and refers to the Aboriginal narrative forms of biography and autobiography. These forms of writing are becoming increasingly popular in indigenous communities in Australia and Canada as a means of recording the past and saving the history that fragmented communities risk losing. The mention of Living Black foregrounds the use of the oral culture today. Davis’s plays do not just alter the sense of western history: they also challenge the styles of western theatre in the process of questioning History. The use of didgeridoo, song, poetry, dance, painting, and ‘political’ narrative, such as the reference to Gilbert’s book in Kullark, reshape Australian drama.

Disputes between blacks in the plays offer more than just dramatic conflict: they also provide a forum for working out possible solutions to issues currently facing Aborigines and more importantly perhaps, they contest and work against the particular violence of Historical discourse: the reifying inscription of Aborigines as singular subject who can speak only in a single voice. As Bhabha and Parry explain, binaries are limiting and totalizing entities that deny any deviation or individuality. The Nyoongahs in Barungin demonstrate the ridiculousness of such a supposition. Robert is first presented as a ‘coconut’ in Barungin: dark on the outside, white on the inside, especially in his firm Christian beliefs which are maligned by the others. This presentation of Robert as a coconut, in itself, breaks the idea of a binary, where one is either one thing or another. In his speech to the Rotary Club, however, Robert redeems himself from any claims that he has sold out to the whites. He re-presents (for whites) contact history in an oral culture form. This history, a version of the black past, mirrors the entire play, which offers yet another view of Australian history. Punctuated by Western historical reference points, Robert’s speech demonstrates the need for several kinds of revisionism and highlights yet another method of situating oral traditions in a world dominated by literate discourse.

Each play concludes in an ambivalent manner. There is always a character who laments the white blindness to black problems, but the plays also express defiance: in Kullark, Jamie and Alec join in a toast to each other and ‘thousands like us’ (p. 66) while the black actor’s song concludes the play with:

You marred her skin,
But you cannot whiten her mind.
They will remain my children forever,
The black and the beautiful kind.
The black and the beautiful kind. (p. 66)

These endings, mindful of both positive traditions and devastating nightmares of the past, weave together into a phase of history which is in the process of being written: the future, when both the Aboriginal past and white history are celebrated. Once again, the titles are significant of far
more than binary constructions would allow. In the contemporary history phase, each title has a further resonance that echoes in several directions.

Craig Tapping writes in ‘Oral Cultures and the Empire of Literature’ that ‘[f]orm is always a message, part of the content or narrative ... [and] frequently the most significant message any such cultural product conveys’.

By adding Aboriginal senses of the past to the western theatre model, the plays maintain a distinction from western drama, particularly from the western form of naturalism, which Davis is generally lumped into. His plays also satisfy the indigenous pattern of appropriating what Tapping calls, ‘the forms of imperialist culture, and the filling of these forms with indigenous, non-European content’ (p. 93). The plays override any risk of pursuing a single point-of-view in a monolithic culture, a culture which would be homologous with imperialism.

In order to resist comparing indigenous literatures to the majority literature, Mudrooroo terms theatre such as Davis’s ‘Aboriginal reality’. This phrase, intended to distance Davis’s drama from the naturalism it is often called, unfortunately and misleadingly overlaps with the Western dramatic technique of realism and concepts of the real as a privileged term in dominant discourses. It then risks falling in the trap of mere inversion, the very thing that Bhabha and Parry work against. Perhaps a term or phrase like ‘Aboriginal oral-culture theatre’ would distance Aboriginal drama sufficiently from its Western counterparts and still accommodate the all-important oral elements of the continuing past within the plays. No Sugar’s corroboree, for instance, occurring spontaneously and continuing into the trading of stories from both the dreamtime and the contact past, re-positions the Aboriginal past and Davis’s play form quite distinctly beside and against white dramatic genres. While this term may, on first glance, be open to charges of essentialism, it is more useful than the ‘universalist’ alternative of categorizing all plays written in Australia as equally situated Australian drama. Aboriginal oral-culture drama enables the strategic articulation of difference, while also satisfying the philosophical need to avoid essentialism.

Despite the differentiations that Davis’s work invites, the historical presences in his work amalgamate all stages of black history in a context that does not dismiss nor simply add to conventional white history, but reject the exclusions that white history has so often perpetrated. Davis’s plays foreground black histories and their different forms and allow for several possible kinds of the past, including other histories, such as feminist ‘histories’ (represented here in Kullark by Alice’s diaries). The ambivalent constructions of Aboriginal historical traditions simply do not permit the ‘white history/black history’ binary. Working outside the binary with ever-present and ambivalent irony, Davis’s most recent play, In Our Town, concludes with the Millimurras determined to inhabit the predominantly white town, symbolizing the existence of possibilities for white and black histories: both ‘against’ and ‘alongside’ each other. Black
histories must continually work 'against' the official white version to make their presences felt. Simply working 'against', however, would merely re-inscribe the colonial power structures. At the same time, both black and white versions must exist alongside each other. Simply writing 'alongside' would refuse to take up the issues of power that have too long been inscribed in History. Maintaining the Aboriginal tradition, Davis's plays insist upon their forms and situation of history (and show how these may be relatable to white forms). Culturally specific histories combine to create a small 'h' history of Australia that undermines the inscription of power in the universality of the western History tradition.

NOTES

11. According to the glossaries in the texts, *Kullark* translates from the Nyoongah to 'home', and *Barungin* means 'smell the wind'.