Section Three: Decentering the 'Race' Issue — Case Studies in 'Aboriginality'

Culture, gender and desire

The intersection of 'race' and gender (as markers of difference) helps to unravel meanings in representations of 'Aboriginality'. An analysis of the work of three different artists—Tracey Moffatt, Destiny Deacon and Brian Syron—reveals different deconstructions of 'Aboriginality'.

In all three works, the stance of the artist is decisive. The field of tension between the individual artist and the social audience (funding bodies, critics etc.) is where the issues are indecisive and indeterminate because the act of interpreting these works requires theorising gender and 'race'.

It is how the audience responds that creates the debate, as much as what the artist said. This is why strategies of intervention are so important. Theory must be one strategy. Without theories of 'race' and gender which are historically and culturally relevant to Aboriginal people and white Australia, we cannot interpret our artists.

The return of Jedda

Chauvel's *Jedda* (1955) expresses all those ambiguous emotions, fears and false theories which revolve in Western thought around the spectre of the 'primitive'. It rewrites Australian history so that the black rebel against white colonial rule is a rebel against the laws of his own society. Marbuk, a 'wild' Aboriginal man, is condemned to death, not by the white coloniser, but by his own

elders. It is Chauvel's inversion of truth on the black/white frontier, as if none of the brutality, murder and land clearances occurred.

The witchcraft or sorcery of Marbuk lures away Jedda, the young Aboriginal woman, from the civilising influence of the homestead couple who have adopted her and provided her with decent clothes, food and education (symbolized by Humphrey McQueen's piano) As Jedda plays the piano, 'tribal chants' rise up and take control of her Aboriginal mind buried deep within her new, constructed, made over, civilised one. She follows Marbuk into the bush where he performs a magical rite, to which she has no resistance. She pays for her 'instinctive, native weakness' with her life when she is dragged over a cliff by Marbuk who is fleeing from Joe, the good 'half-caste boy'.

In *Night Cries, A Rural Tragedy* (1990), Moffatt brings Jedda (played by myself) back to life as if forty years have passed. Jedda is now caring for her adoptive mother who is ancient and waiting to die. None of the male characters have survived and the homestead is a ruin.

Moffatt's 'feminine gaze' reconstructs the relationship between Jedda and her adoptive mother as one between women as independent beings, but perhaps they are not whole. The characters are imagined beings, ghostlike, merely guides to what the audience might invent, just as Chauvel's *Jedda* was. *Night Cries* can be read as an autobiographical exploration of Moffatt's relationship with her own foster mother. The film asks questions about the role of 'mother' in adoptive mother/daughter relationships.

The lives and experiences of Jedda and her adoptive mother in Moffatt's reconstruction of them are not mediated by men, not by Jedda's adoptive white father nor by Marbuk, the handsome black outlaw/seducer, nor by Joe, the sensible, civilised half-caste ringer to whom Jedda should have been *attracted* and become married.

All the men are disappeared.

What Moffatt was trying to *correct* in the text of *Jedda* is the Western fascination with the 'primitive'.

Moffatt's inversion of colonial history is to play out the worst fantasies of those who took Aboriginal children from their natural parents to assimilate and 'civilise' them. Perhaps the worst nightmare of the adoptive parents is to end life with the black adoptive child as the only family, the only one who cares. Moffatt's construction of that nightmare is subversive because the style and materiality of the homestead set is so reminiscent of Aboriginal poverty.

Chauvel's once privileged homestead now resembles the inside of a humpy. Moffatt takes us from the homestead—an exhibition of the wealth extracted from the slave labour of the Aboriginal men and women on the Australian pastoral station—to the poverty represented in her sets. The middle-aged Aboriginal woman on the now deserted station feeds the dying white mother canned food, and all the excesses of the historical/economic moment of the Australian cattle station are collapsed.

But what about the black men disposed of by Moffatt? Their absence deserves some attention because of what they signify some forty years after the making of *Jedda*. Moffatt's inversion forces the audience to look not at the desire of Chauvel's *Jedda* but at death, and at the consequences of Western imagination of the 'primitive', as we wait in the deteriorating homestead with a middle-aged Aboriginal woman and her dying mother.

Today, *Jedda* is sickening and, at the same time, laughable in its racism. (Indeed, some people might have seen it then as racist.) It was a big, although not very successful feature movie, and has become since an icon of Australian film.

What response did the audience of the 1950s have to this film? Our speculations might begin with the possible colonial/gender reactions. There is the implicit impossibility of white men being

threatened by Marbuk, precisely because he inevitably dies as a result of his breach of Aboriginal law. He is eliminated. So inexorably will his 'race' die out because of the asserted inherent Darwinian weakness of Aborigines, morally and genetically, according to Australian eugenicist theory.

Could there have been a secret identification with Jedda among the white women in the cinema audience? Might they have been captivated and fascinated by the story of Marbuk's sorcery and seduction, (silently subverting in the heat of the dark cinema the repressive patriarchy which they had to endure); a seduction so much more exciting and dangerous than the Rock Hudson type of seduction in the Hollywood romance?

Tarzan of the Apes, also known as the Earl of Greystokes, may have had a similar attraction. But Marbuk is 'genuinely' 'wild' and so much more mysterious and *unknowable*. Chauvel really did exceed, however subtly for the times, the pinnacle of primitive sexual licentiousness as Tarzan represented it then. (Cf. Malone, 1987:141)

Marianna Torgovnick, Professor of English at Duke University, deconstructs the mystification of colonialism in Tarzan in these terms:

> ...Tarzan funds himself (after losing the Greystoke inheritance in business scams) exclusively by raiding gold and jewels from the lost city of Opar. Tarzan thus replicates the actions of colonialism without ever approving of colonialism itself. In this, Tarzan resembles many of his readers in the West, even when their beliefs and politics are humane or anti-imperialist. His prosperity, our prosperity depends—seemingly inevitably—on the poverty of others.
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> What are we to make of the book's contradictory and conflicting views on 'race', colonialism and imperialism? I believe we must perceive and stress the conflicts themselves. The Tarzan materials have often been dismissed as 'racist', as the product of a colonialist era; within current critical trends, readings of the Tarzan novels as imperialist fantasies are sure to come. But the words 'racist' and 'imperialist' do not tell us clearly enough how the stories work. Tarzan recognizes the blacks' humanity and resents any violation of it. Yet he feels himself distinctively different from blacks and enforces superiority in his relations with African tribes. The books condemn slavery and yet represents it as a constant in human cultures. The books loathe colonialism and imperialism and yet they valorize ideas that made (and make) Euro-American colonialism and imperialism possible. With regard to 'race' and related issues, the books are as contradictory and double as our culture is, as confused as Tarzan himself is: Are nonwhites so very different from whites? And if they are not so different, why have whites exploited them? Enslaved them? Killed them? The books do not, finally, find it necessary to decide. Tarzan can take blacks, or leave them. They help him define his manliness, but do not really threaten it. Women on the other hand, Tarzan cannot do without. (1990:62)

Tarzan can go on for hundreds of episodes because he is the coloniser, if somewhat mystified in his pseudo-primitive costume. Indeed, Tarzan and Jane marry, presumably in a High Church of England ceremony, and social relations are normalised even if the monkeys are still living in the bedroom in the trees.

But Marbuk and his paramour, the poor seduced Jedda, must die. It is precisely because of Marbuk's lust that Chauvel destroys him. His is the lust of a 'real primitive'. He is an outlaw. He refuses to submit to civilization.

As fictive male characters, Tarzan, Marbuk and Joe are imagined models of 'race' and gender. The difference between them as models of men is their place in colonial mythology and in the power relations which they represent. They have their equivalents in the anthropomorphised models of colonialism.

Tarzan's equivalent is Babar the Elephant orphaned by a white hunter. On finding civilisation after a short walk from the jungle, he is clothed in a delightful green suit and is educated in Paris, all at the expense of the rich old woman who finds him wandering the streets of the city.

Joe is the emasculated native and black buffoon of a thousand movies. Marbuk's equivalent is King Kong.

Black Like Mi

Each representation of Aboriginal people is a reconstruction, an imagined experience, a tale told with signifiers, grammatical and morphological elements, mythologies.

The *Black Like Mi* series (1992) is a photographic essay by Destiny Deacon on representations of black women using images of black dolls and covers from books such as *Venus Half Caste.* It was shown at the Boomalli Co-operative. Deacon, a tutor in English Literature at Melbourne University, identifies the resonances of early melodramatic representations of native women in films and literature of the 1940s and 1950s through the medium of photography. Previously, Moffatt had reinvented the half-caste siren in the photographic essay, *Something More* (1989).

Deacon explains to us in the two photographs, *Dark times with Otis and Alias 1* and *2*, that the 'black velvet' perception of the lascivious white male gaze on Aboriginal woman is a mediated sexual experience. These two photographs in particular, but also the series as a whole, reverse the pornographic experience—the signification of the 'black velvet' image.

There is a song about 'black velvet' from the Australian pastoral frontier which expresses the colonial lust of drovers demanding a fuck after a hard day's work. The term has passed into 'redneckspeak', and the subliminal power of the concept also ricochets around most of the sexual images of Aboriginal women.

Deacon has a black female doll, dressed in red, black and yellow, who lies in bed next to a black male doll. She is reading to him from the novel, *Venus Half Caste.* In the next scene, she has rolled over on her side and is reading to herself from the book, doubtless, having a little black doll fantasy about 'inter-racial sex'.

'Ha, ha ha, I wonder how little black dolls do it?' she forces us to ask. We black girls have a special experience with little black dolls

because they are a very recent, modern artefact in Australia. When we were growing up there were only golliwogs. Then Black Americans demanded in the 1970s that the toy market produce beautiful, well-dressed black dolls, formed in plastic to appear life-like, just like the white dolls. So we came to them late in life.

I remember my first experience in my thirties, standing gazing at a black doll. Everywhere around were these white dolls, loaded with cultural meaning: Barbie, with her gorgeous wardrobe, an appendaged boyfriend, the ultimate toy boy, with a lot of style; Cindy, with a pretty pink gingham check dress and white shoes and socks, who walked and talked. But only little white girls could look into the eyes of these post-oedipal mirrors and find that wonderland of self-imagination.

Imagine the power we black girls derived from, at last, having that experience with a black doll. Deacon gazes through the mirror of the little black doll. Hers is also the feminine gaze. As she looks at the black dolls, boy and girl, in bed, she erases the possibility of white men seeing this sexual scene that she has created. She denies white male voyeurism. She denies the aural, sexual and colonialist conquest. At the same time, in a sideways glance, she places the white male within her view, the white male who imagined the 'black velvet' and who, as a subject/object of Deacon's representation, is denied a peep at the doll.

She makes impotent the white male fantasy of 'black velvet'.

Black man, black woman, ...

What could these labels possibly mean? *Jindalee Lady* (1992), directed by Brian Syron, and sometimes hailed as the first Aboriginal feature film, challenges us to find the meaning conveyed in these terms. It demonstrates that it is hard to figure out what is precisely meant by 'a black man' or 'a black woman': they are fictions, acts

of imagining. You have to know who is doing the imagining, and why.

In *Jindalee Lady*, Lauren, a young Aboriginal woman, (played by Lydia Miller), is a fashion designer married to a white man. She falls in love with a handsome Aboriginal man, a photographer (played by Michael Leslie), who recognises her 'Aboriginal spirituality', hence the title *Jindalee Lady*. (Jindalee in real life, is a suburb of Brisbane consisting of hectares of franchise-designed brick houses with landscaped gardens full of imported palms, swimming pools and tennis courts. It might be where Queensland Premier, Wayne Goss, would like to live. Of course, there are many other places in Australia named Jindalee, and perhaps they are not all suburban horrors like the one in Brisbane.)

Lauren finds out that she is pregnant but is lured away from her success and wealth to be with her Aboriginal soul mate. The child, however, is cinematically killed off in a cot death scenario. The self-blaming of the successful careerist mother, whose eyes were not on the crib, tells us a great deal about the view of black women being portrayed here.

In a strange way, *Jindalee Lady* can be read as a post-modern remake of *Jedda*. The first hint at such a reading is the use of 'ducks on the wall' symbolism: the wild geese which fly across the screen to haunting music in *Jedda* make a second appearance in *Jindalee Lady*. Moreover, the handsome young black seducer is reminiscent of Marbuk in the portrayal of his sensuality and in his use of 'Aboriginal sorcery' to weaken Lauren. She says to him on the phone: 'All that superstitious tribal stuff doesn't frighten me.' 'Primitivism' is dressed up with New Age style as perfectly reasonable behaviour among black yuppies who really appreciate Aboriginal culture. Thancoupi ceramic pots look so right in Japanese-inspired interior design.

There is a moment of the film when, at a party to celebrate Lauren's commercial success as a fashion designer, her close friend, a white woman, comes up and taps her on the shoulder and says in high class soap style, 'You, Lauren, have made it'. What does this statement reveal?

Is it what every striving Aboriginal person is supposed to want to hear: approval and blessing from the white capitalist world? Why does a woman, not a man, give this blessing, as would be expected? Could it be that this film is a black male parody of the *haute couture* fashion industry?

Perhaps Syron, with his previous experience in the fashion industry in New York as well as in theatre direction and acting, has taken vogue-ing to its maximum, far beyond that shown in *Paris Is Burning*. This US documentary explored the practice among black men in New York of parading as famous, successful women such as Elizabeth Taylor, Joan Collins and Lisa Minelli. There are some clues, for instance, when Lauren, Lydia Miller's character, says to the Mother character, 'Sometimes, I wish I was a man'.

It was Madonna who made vogue-ing famous in her world hit pop song and video clip. *Haute couture*, or as Madonna reinterprets it—vogue-ing—is a safe haven for androgyny, for reshaping images and notions of gender, including male gender expressions.

Paris is Burning, Madonna's video clip, and even *Jindalee Lady* are difficult to place. They do not fit easily into the emerging film genre where gay filmmakers have reclaimed their right to represent themselves. In re-presenting images of women, and men as women (transvestites) or vice versa, they often reveal fear and parody of women, as well as misogyny.

In *Jindalee Lady*, when Lauren's friend walks up and says, 'You, Lauren, have made it', she is the agent for resolving the racial tensions within the self as constructed by 'race' and gender, which

have been identified by analysts of the Algerian revolution, Albert Memmi and Frantz Fanon. The white man's child is killed off cinematically, and the black man gets his black woman. Importantly, neither of them runs off with the rich white to be saved from hopeless poverty and fringedwelling.

Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, written in the 1960s during the Algerian civil war, introduced to the world for the first time an analysis of the intersection of gender and 'race'. Syron has recast the masks and fleshed them out as imaginary Aboriginal Australian yuppies. They have come a long way, baby, from Fanon's 'wretched of the earth'.

The intersection of 'race' and gender continues to require deconstruction to allow us to decolonise our consciousness. The powerful effect of racism in relation to gender is in stunting the growth of the self—as man or woman. Self is a subjective colony.

In the soap formula and low budget filmmaking, one often has to use the same cost cutting production techniques so that the script does not have to stand up to the same rigorous internal logic which is demanded of a high budget thriller. *Jindalee Lady* was made with a very small budget. Therefore we don't ask of the script that it explain: how much money has the white husband invested in Lauren's clothes design company; how much of the art on her office walls does he own; how can she afford to walk out on him; and, will she still be a successful clothes designer?

The economic and social problems are not resolved in the film. But that's alright because 'really spiritual Aboriginal love from the Dreamtime' is what wins out in the end.

One of the arguments used to gather support for the funding of *Jindalee Lady* was that it was claimed to be the first Aboriginal feature film. (Bruce McGuiness made a 16mm film, *Black Fire*, in the early 1970s.) The other selling point was that the style of the film would present a 'positive image' of Aboriginal people.

There is an annoying tendency in the expression of the Australian paternalistic relationship with Aborigines: 'the first Aborigine to graduate', to play cricket, to box—and even to make a film.

> ...Film has an enormous potential...The first truly great Aboriginal film will not cause a revolutionary change in the Aboriginal situation, but it will make a lot of black backs stand up straighter, and a lot of people, white or black, feel prouder—not least because everybody from the second grip to the director will be Aboriginal. (Pitts, 1984: 15)

Syron, like Pitts, was caught in the in the grip of a paternalistic impulse: the trap of attributing to the medium of film itself some magical power to correct racism.

But why do whites and blacks get so worked up about the 'first Aborigine to...'? It is a kind of declaration of having achieved some kind of equity, as if there were really something to celebrate in finally having overcome all the racism and other obstacles which Aborigines face in gathering the resources to do anything. Indeed, it is actually a denial of the racism against Aborigines. It is a way of saying that we are too backward to do it, not that we are denied the means to do it.

The dangers of the positive image/negative image concept become clear in *Jindalee Lady* as we find that gender issues are just as powerful as 'race' issues in construction of the self. The concept oppresses others, particularly women, because they can be cast as less than whole in idealisations of the good black woman, or in attacks on irresponsible careerist women.

Much of the 'feminist' criticism of *The Good Woman of Bangkok* (1991) which accused producer and director, Dennis O'Rourke, of exploiting a Thai prostitute, Aoi, falls into the trap of prescribing positive/negative images in cultural construction of 'race' and gender. Similarly, the resentment and anger from Aborigi-

nal women and some white liberals against Moffatt's *Nice Coloured Girls* were responses to its apparent failure to 'salvage the denigrated image' of black women. Wallace writes:

> It seems to me particularly instructive that cultural production by black women, particularly black women who identify their views as 'feminist' or 'womanist', has often been denounced for promulgating 'negative images'. Perhaps the most notable cases have been the controversies over Ntozake Shange's play, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide*, my own *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*, Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and *Sula*, and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. Although it is possible to be critical of the failure of such work to challenge fundamentally mainstream or racist conceptions of black humanity or agency, it is important to observe that so-called 'negative images' will probably be necessary to any kind of reformulation or restructuring of prevailing conceptions of "race" and 'ethnicity'. They seem particularly necessary to the inauguration of a public black female subjectivity. (1990: 4)

Both white feminists and white men had problems with the 'negative' they perceived in *The Good Woman of Bangkok*. For the female audience, this film exposed sensitivities to images of women as sexual beings. We would like to imagine ourselves and, if we are feminists, all our sisters, as elegant, autonomous sexual creatures with the power of allure, but an allure which does not degrade. Images of prostitution are a visceral attack on this ideal, as well as on the difficult struggle to overcome the insidious sexual power struggle between men and women which we lose every time rape or assault against women occurs.

The 'ideologically correct' *feminist* line on O'Rourke's film is that it should not have been made, it should not be shown, it exploits women etc. It is not so ironic that the men who have seen the film are also very edgy although they state different reasons.

As Michele Wallace has asked:

> What makes a critical portrayal of a black person a 'negative image' if films like *Blue Velvet* and *Taxi Driver* don't count as 'negative images' of white men but rather as effective cultural expressions of the reification of desire, or even as compelling critiques of dominant ideologies of family and sexuality? (1990:4)

The debate about this film was taken up largely by women, yet the filmic style addresses itself to a discussion of the male gaze as consciously represented by O'Rourke. Could the image of white Australian men portrayed in the film—ugly, drunk, lurching from one Thai woman to the next, or buying a child—be too 'negative'? It is diametrically opposed to the image which so many Australian males, who would have seen the film, have of themselves.

Because O'Rourke's film does not resolve the problem of the 'male' (for O'Rourke himself as well as the sex tourists), the male audience is left the task of trying to say something—and that, at this stage, is just too difficult. To be forced to identify with those lecherous yobbos and declare some similarity with them is to be forced to recognize and state—in public—some of the really ugly things about being an Australian male.

The appeals for such films as Syron's and O'Rourke's to be refused funding, or to be boycotted, presents a serious difficulty for a critique of representation. As John von Sturmer has written:

> Every act of representation involves a positioning of the self; each act of representation is an act of self-representation. Control of representation is more or less nothing other than censorship. Claims of the right to represent are more or less nothing other than claims of the right to censor... (1989: 128)

Censorship and censorial debate are denials of our right and our capacity to explore and change our alienated and/or colonised selves and the discourse which continues to mystify our conditions.