

“The Frontier Spectrum”: Colonial Australia and Aboriginal Resistance

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You are the New Australians, but we are the Old Australians. We have in our arteries the blood of the original Australians, who have lived in this land for many thousands of years.—Argus as qtd. in Bourke *et al* 43.

...I see Indigenous peoples as having twin projects: at one level, we must understand the motivation behind the historical constructions of Aboriginality, and understand why they have had such a grip over colonizing populations; simultaneously we must continuously subvert the hegemony over our own representations, and allow our visions to create the world of meaning in which we relate to ourselves, to each other and to non-Indigenous peoples.—Dodson 33.

Australian nation is predominantly ‘White’ not only in terms of society and culture, but also when viewed in the perspectives of literature, art and identity in general. There is even a claim of a ‘White Australian Nation’, from the very time when the European explorers said to have ‘discovered’ an island in the southern hemisphere, dismissed as *terra nullius*¹, to the present day first-world capitalist situation. This was primarily achieved through a complete negation of Aboriginal existence, an utter disregard of Aboriginal identity—history, tradition, culture values, customs and mores of living. Epithets such as ‘blood thirsty’, ‘cunning’ ‘primitive’, ‘non-modern’ ‘Australian Nigger’ were often used to label and denote the Aboriginals by the colonizers. This ‘othering’ was evident in certain lopsided observations of the white colonizers:

...degraded as to divine things, almost on a level with a brute... In a state of moral unfitness for heaven...And as incapable of enjoying its pleasures as darkness is incapable of dwelling with light. (John Harper as qtd. in Dodson 26)

Lively, interesting...but excessively idle and vagrant; from the rambling naked state of these poor natives they have generally been supposed as incapable of improvement...but...under the blessing of god they are as capable of instruction as other untutored savages. (Mr Shelley to Rev. G. Burder, 6 October 1814, as qtd. In Dodson 26)

But, there is a chink in the armour and this became manifest when the marginalized Aboriginal groups gave vent to their claims of a different consciousness by resisting hegemony and asserting a claim of their independence and identity. One may assert that the contemporary white Australia has a more profound and hitherto unrecognized colonial history within it—those of many ‘nations’, singularized as Aboriginals or Indigenous Australians. In this paper we will thereby try to project the Aboriginal identity by re-reading its history — that remained marginalized in the unevenly projected white constructs — and bring to fore their resistive attempts.

The Aboriginals have a long and chequered history. It is ancient in the sense that their history dates back to the time beyond their human existence when 'ancestral' beings were believed to have moved across the land creating the society, its rules, regulations, customs and language for them to live and thrive. Their history is chequered in the sense that it was one of eviction, dispossession and plunder after having come in contact with the White Europeans. Asked about the beginning of their existence in the Australian sub-continent, the usual Aboriginal response with a high spiritual faith has been: "We have always been here". It is their belief that they have existed in this soil *ab ovo*:

For the Aborigines the earth has always been there. It required no explanation. Myth interpreted the shape and appearance of the world the Aborigines knew and inhabited. Rocks, trees, water holes, animals, birds: such objects intimately experienced were integrated through myths and ritual into a spiritual universe of extraordinary richness.

They were—are—spirit beings which expressed themselves in creating or actually becoming the physical detail of the Aboriginal world. In doing so they gave meaning to the land and to life. These spirit beings had an independence and unpredictability which were also beyond explanation. So they might appear male or female or draw on the sexuality of both; and human might, at will, become animal; nor was their force diminished if they transformed themselves into the features of the landscape. (Rickard 61)

The Aborigines retaliated less to the initial infringement than to the coldblooded affirmation by Europeans of exclusive proprietary rights (at times from the very first day of occupation):

It was a kind of behaviour probably unheard of in traditional society. Increasingly the newcomers impinged on accustomed patterns of life, occupying the flat open land and monopolizing surface water. Indigenous animals were driven away, plant life eaten or trampled and Aborigines pushed into the marginal country—mountains swamps, waterless neighbourhood. Patterns of seasonal migration broke down; areas remaining free of Europeans were over utilized and eventually depleted of both flora and fauna. Food became scarcer and available in less and less variety and even access to water was often difficult. Attacks on sheep and cattle, made frequently in desperation, provoked violent retaliation: reprisal and revenge spiralled violently. (Reynolds *The Other* 72)

Aboriginal life was happy and easy-going before the European arrival. The Aboriginals lived in groups and followed a simple routine. In all their living and operations they were deeply attached to the streams, lakes, seas, stretches of coastline, the land, bush and the foothills. They understood their surroundings and revered their land. Captain Cook noted: "...but in reality they are far more happier than we Europeans...They lived in a tranquillity which is not disturb'd by the inequality of condition" (as qtd. in Dodson 25). Graham Jenkins in his *Conquest of the Ngarrindjeri* makes no less a eulogization of the Aboriginal egalitarianism:

They were a truly a classless society and had reached the apogee as far as refined egalitarian socialism is concerned. Yet if they have to be placed in any European

class scale, their mode of life could only be compared with that of the old aristocracy. Their dedication to cultural pursuits – the ballet, music, opera and art; their enjoyment of pomp and ceremony; their strong adherence to ancient codes of chivalry and etiquette; the pleasure they derived from sports and hunting; their great personal courage, pride and independence; their insistence on the right of an initiated man to bear arms and for honour to be honourably defended; their epicurean approach to food; their honest acceptance of human passions and lack of hypocrisy regarding them; these and other aspects of Ngarrindjeri life find distinct parallels in the outlook and way of life of the European aristocracy. The great difference lay in the fact that in Ngarrindjeri society everyone was an aristocrat. The Ngarrindjeri showed the world that it was possible for socialism and the aristocratic life-style to be married harmoniously, and for life to be a rich cultural and creative experience – without servants and without masters. (Jenkins as qtd. in Elder 245)

The arrival of Captain Arthur Philip and the ‘First Fleet’ was to alter radically a history that was so long peaceful, happy and contented:

The two cultures were so different. The value systems were so polarised. There was no possibility of compromise.

One side respected the land; one side exploited the land. One side was basically peaceful and benign; the other side was essentially sadistic and autocratic. One sought harmony; the other was driven by aggression and competitiveness. (Elder 2)

The colonizers cleared the forests and fenced the land. They restricted the Aboriginal movements and exploited natural resources. Food shortage emanated when, for their sustenance, the white settlers killed fish and kangaroos and polluted the water. Consequently, starvation killed a considerable size of the Aboriginal population. The colonizers brought with them diseases too, like small pox, syphilis, tuberculosis and influenza.

Now, the Aboriginal spirit seemed broken down. It did not take long for them to come to the realization that all these White people craved nothing short of occupying their entire land. A very significant thing that the colonizers did was that they ignored the Aboriginal concepts of land ownership and the intimate attachment to the entire continent. The colonizers declared the sub-continent as *terra nullius*. Upon this it was legitimized that the land belonged to no one before the British Monarchy taking possession of it. The ultimate fallout was that the Aboriginal people could not sell or assign the land, nor could anyone procure it other than distribution through the Crown.

The Aboriginal people began to retaliate. The Aboriginal rebuttal lacked consistency and hinged between open aggression and opposition on one hand and stealthy assault on the other. It started with harassing the intruders by stealing clothes, tools, food and provisions and burning camps followed by guerrilla techniques to wound and kill them. But, reprisal was brutal. Widespread massacres followed even at the smallest Aboriginal resistance. At times the military was sent to scout out the Aboriginals and kill them. There was gruesome decapitation, shooting

and rape. There were massacres almost at every frontier—at Sydney, Van Diemen’s Land, Tasmania, Myall Creek, Gippsland, Cullin-la-Ringo, Pigeon Creek, Coniston, Hodgson Downs, Simpson Desert, Clifton Hills, Bentinck Island, Kilcoy station and at every place the colonizers did find any trace of the Aboriginals. Macquaire Harbour became synonymous with penal oppression and Port Arthur an epitome for white slavery. George Robertson’s ‘Aborigines—Outrages Against’ entry published in *Australian Dictionary of Dates and Men of the Time* (1879) recounts the most horrid massacres, murder, plunder and destruction of Aboriginal life and property ever recorded.

The best thing that can be done is to shoot all the blacks and manure the ground with their carcasses. That is all the good they are fit for! It is also recommended that all the women and children be shot .That is the most certain way of getting rid of this pestilent race. (William Cox qtd. in Elder 58)

However worse lay in store for the Aboriginals. Worse than killings, the Aboriginal women were subjected to ruthless torture, assault and rape. White rapists also “conveniently believed that native women were merely subject to capture and brutal oppression by their own menfolk.” (Evans 106)

Direct confrontation included open battles between the Aborigines and the white colonisers, prominent being the Kalkadoon assail at Battle Mountain in Queensland in 1884. Alexander Kennedy, who established a station at Buckingham Downs, and later Noarnside and Calton Hills, and his friend Police Inspector Frederic Urquhart terrified the Kalkadoon people of Queensland through stockwhip, pistol and rape. The Kalkadoon leader Mahoni sent a message to Urquhart to confront them. However, Urquhart and his troopers, who took up the challenge, decimated Kalkadoon men, women and children mercilessly. In a poem Urquhart writes his cruel intensions:

Grimly the troopers stood around
That new-made forest grave,
And to their eyes that fresh heap mound
For vengeance seemed to crave.
And one spoke out in deep stern tones,
And raised his hand on high
For every one of these poor bones,
A Kalkadoon shall die. (as qtd. in “The Savage Kalkadoons.” n.pg.)

With the murder of a shepherd in the station of one Mr Hopkins, things aggravated. Urquhart gathered men for a cavalry charge that required scaling a steep mountain. The Kalkadoons, strategically better placed by being at the top of the hill, attacked the inspector’s men by hurling spears and boomerangs. Urquhart himself was hurt and lost his consciousness by a rock-hard anthill thrown at his face. When the Kalkadoons charged the white cavalry running down the hills in their desire to take the whites one to one their spears were no match to the guns. At least two hundred Kalkadoon warriors were shot dead on the slopes of Battle Mountain.

The fear of White made the Aborigines, whatever was their community, to stick to large groups. Such big Aboriginal formations posed problems—local abundance of food had to be

ensured. Added to it, the fear of the whites led the Aborigines to prolong their usual meetings or call for unseasonal gatherings. The groups, for their sustenance (as their land was usurped and resources exploited), turned to stealing of cattle and provisions from the white stations. Conflicts increased and to counter the settlers the Aboriginal groups came together to augment their strength and keep guard for themselves. With the bringing in of guns, the Aborigines had to incorporate new ways and strategies to fight with a superior adversary. Although they were never a match to the might of the barrel and populations of Aborigines were exterminated, resistance came in the form of guerrilla warfare. Ambush fighting, surprise attacks by night, henceforth formed the core of Aboriginal resistance. Henry Reynolds in 'The Other Side of the Frontier' aptly sums this phase of resistance:

The 'stealthy sacrifices' of the Pinya, the Kadaitcha or the Maringo were typically carried out by small groups of men, usually at night and in operations which were well-planned, based on good intelligence and timed to allow for the strike and return before dawn... 'Their whole art of war,' wrote a Tasmanian pioneer was 'a concealed, silent and treacherous attack'...their mode of attack, wrote G. A. Robinson is by surreption...they lay in ambush for sometime before they make their attack, a sudden and unperceived invasion...' The hunter's skills—expert tracking, stealth, self-control and patience—could be turned to effect when attempting to execute individual Europeans. (100)

But nothing was of avail, neither the open aggression nor the guerilla attacks, as the repressive measures of the State were high-handed. It is here that cultural resistance played an important role. Unlike violent/physical resistance that is prone to yield to strong State reprisal, it is consistent and subversive and apparently naïve.

The colonial culture of white Australia, vis-à-vis the Aboriginal people, is etched in the social memory of the nation through the policies of 'Protection' and 'Assimilation'. The colonizers did not merely bring deadly arms but they also established Christian missions and 'Protection Centres' to elevate, educate and modernize the Aboriginal masses in isolation from their own community. They were forcefully segregated, biologically assimilated and vigorously integrated into the mainstream White culture. The Aborigines were dispossessed of their family, culture, language, land and general freedom. They were deprived of their proper status as citizens of the State. The Aborigines, unaware of such Western concepts of civilisation, found themselves completely at a loss with the new found situation.

The government passed 'Protection Acts' in various states of Australia consequent to Victoria's Aboriginal Protection Act passed in 1869. Such policies had in them the apparent benign endeavour to protect the dwindling Aboriginal population from white onslaught and the consequential threat of extinction. However, in reality it was only to keep guarded the Aborigines in missions and stations so that the settlers could be themselves free from ambush attacks, theft of their cattle and harm to their life and property. All policies concerning the Aborigines took place at the state level. Although such policies were individual for each state, in essence they shared the same broad outlines. These draconian laws that grew more restrictive over the years controlled almost every domain of Aboriginal living and were in exercise until the second half of the twentieth century. By 1881, the government had appointed Aboriginal

Protectors in every state such as New South Wales, Victoria and so on. Soon after, a complete board for the Protection of Aborigines was constituted to suit the needs and policies of the government. The 1905 Aborigines Act in Western Australia made the Chief Protector the legal guardian of all Aboriginal people and all half-castes under the age of sixteen. A new law passed in 1915 empowered the Board the freehand to assume care and welfare of Aboriginal children and if need be, their custody segregating them from their families to be reared up in 'congenial white' environments. The Board, when and as required, assumed full custody and control of the child of any Aborigine in the interest of the moral and physical welfare of the child. The year 1937 saw a paradigm shift in state policies concerning the Aborigines when with the Canberra Conference on Aboriginal Welfare, officials of the state endorsed the policy of 'assimilation' over 'protection'. By the year 1951, 'assimilation' was the official policy of every state and province of Australia. The intention was to remould the Aboriginal populace—the children in specific—to become 'part and one' of the white European society. It was as well to eliminate the Aborigines through 'Stolen Generations' (Dr Peter Read of Australian National University coined the term in his book *The Stolen Generations*). Children were forcefully removed without approval from their families and placed in white institutions and at times even with white foster and adoptive families. Such social engineering to control the life of 'racially inferior' people in recent times has been described as an attempt to take away Aboriginality from the Aborigines. The main instruments of these Protection Centres were segregation and institutionalisation of Aboriginal communities. Such centres exercised a complete control over several aspects of Aboriginal life including child care and rearing. For Henry Reynolds the Christian missionaries associated with these Protection Centres were most destructive though most subtle:

Religion moved from the background to the foreground in Aboriginal experience of European culture with the arrival of missionaries in 1820s when the tribes target for conversion were directly challenged by the doctrines and practices of the newcomers. Of all Europeans the missionaries must have seemed the most enigmatic. They didn't seek land; they were often, though not always, disinterested in black women. They were so unlike the majority of frontier settlers; and, while they expressed goodwill and concern for the Aborigines, they were far more intrusive and interfering than other Europeans, often seeking to disrupt ceremonies and beliefs that were at the heart of Aboriginal society. (*Dispossession* 155)

These reserves and Christian missions which housed Aboriginal people as were nothing better than concentration camps. In New South Wales

Nobody knows how many Aboriginal children were officially kidnapped or what happened to most of them. In most cases no records were kept and often the records were no more than names. Many Aboriginal people grew up not knowing who their parents were. Brothers and sisters were always separated and usually lost contact. Parents were actively discouraged from visiting their children, and children were never allowed to go home, because Government policy was designed to break up Aboriginal families. After 1957, when the Government started placing Aboriginal children with white foster parents, many more Aboriginal people grew up totally cut off from their roots. (Parbury 89-91)

These children, as they grew up, were altogether ignorant about their original homes, where they came from and who their parents were. In most instances, however, they were even unaware of their Aboriginal descent. They were taught the Anglican 'virtues' of obedience, punctuality, thriftiness and industriousness. They were to provide the Aboriginal people with opportunities and scope to become 'useful' to civilised society. As Howard Groome notes:

School programs emphasised Christian activities, supplemented with basic literacy and numeracy, and with farming and trade training for the boys and domestic training for the girls. Health and hygiene were strongly emphasised. (172)

They were trained and elevated to be 'white' in all dimensions—though, action, behaviour and speech. The sheer hypocrisy of missionary education became evident in the fact that while they trained the Aboriginal children to enter the white society, these missions served as sanctuaries to keep Aboriginal people from their own people and culture. Aboriginal culture and tradition found no place in these schools. Usage of the mother tongue was a taboo and children were severely punished if found using it. Even for minor offences there was no respite from harsh punitive measures. Family was regarded as a harmful influence and children were often kept in isolation in mission dormitories to overcome their Aboriginality. The Christian missions played a significant role in these attempts to break up traditional way of life and society of the Aborigines by teaching them English and Christ. An 1835 statement by Governor Gawler in Adelaide expresses such intent:

Black men. We wish to make you happy but you cannot be happy unless you imitate white men. Build huts, wear clothes and be useful... You cannot be happy unless you love God...love white men...learn to speak English... (as qtd. in Broome 27)

In the end they were expected to be white, useful in terms of Eurocentric attitudes and values. Here it becomes pertinent to quote Bird who makes an apt estimation of the assimilative policy of child-removal:

The children could be taken away at any age, and many of them were taken from their mothers at birth or in very early infancy. Most of the children so taken were put into institutions where the other children were mostly Indigenous, of mixed race, and where the staff were non-Indigenous. If a child was adopted or fostered out to a family, that family was usually white. The objective of all this activity was to absorb the Indigenous children into white society, to force them to forget and deny their Aboriginal heritage and blood, and to bring about, within a few generations, a form of breeding-out of all Indigenous characteristics. (11)

The Commonwealth government of Australia, at the 1937 'Aboriginal Welfare Conference', officially endorsed Assimilation as the preferred policy to control the lives of the Aboriginal people. Its bearing was two-fold: first, the socio-cultural assimilation of the Aborigines into the dominant white-Australian culture and second, an idea of biological-genetic

assimilation, which in turn depended on the premise of human genetics and bias against the dark skin colour. In 1951 the Federal Minister for Territories of Australia, Paul Hasluck, put up a vociferous support for the policy of assimilation in reference to Aboriginal people as a way of improving their life-style. He, like many others before him, ubiquitously believed that Aboriginal people could be helped and their life and conditions be improved, if they could be encouraged to shed their 'black-ness' to become more 'white'. Assimilation forced the Aboriginal people to move beyond reserves to cities and towns in search of menial jobs. However, there they faced racism and discrimination and were marginalized to the fringes of society amidst poverty and unemployment. Not only were they barred from exclusive white zones viz. cinemas, bars, swimming pools, etc. but also denied rights to citizenship. Post World War II, if at all citizenship was granted to the Aborigines, it was through application of an 'exemption certificate'. This in turn entailed that the applicant had to sever every association with anything Indigenous that included their families, values, beliefs customs and heritage. Such 'exemption certificate'—a passport to the modern 'civilized' white society, was an assimilationist bait. Derided as 'dog-licenses' very few Aboriginal applied for it. This acted as a major factor to change the approach towards government policies of assimilation. Further, with the internal pro-Aboriginal activist groups and international forums (of Human Rights concerns and anti-Holocaust movements) mounting pressures against the Australian government, coupled with the growth in the process of decolonisation and consternation over the status of eugenics, the assimilative policy gave way to Integrationist methods that were primarily socio-cultural.

But, what is of import is the ways in which various methods of Protection and Assimilation were resisted by the Aborigines. The Aborigines made an admixture of their 'values', 'principles', 'morals' and 'spirituality' (Marion Kickett Bartian as qtd. in Oxenham and Bartian 94) in their white learning and thereby created a 'mimic' culture—'white but not quite' (Bhabha 86). This conscious 'hybridity' subtly appropriated the Eurocentric cultural hegemony. These tendencies to create a 'double' also lead to the colonizer's anxiety. This unexpected fortuitous culture ruptured the colonial cultural practices through a programmatic "mimicry"—"almost the same, but not quite" kind of "ambivalence" (Bhabha 86). This 'mimicry' with a purpose is what that has gone to the sustenance of Aboriginal identity.

Two such 'hybrid' resistances to the *watjila* (white man) culture would be the evolvement of Aboriginal English and tourist Corroboree. The effect of teaching English to the Aboriginal masses is creolization of the former and evolvement of 'non-standard' Aboriginal English. Aboriginal languages have been worked out as a tool by the marginalized equally 'mimic' and interpellate the state culture and thereby run an anxiety in its White psyche. To use a term from Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin the monoculture of standard Australian English has been exposed by the Aborigines to a double movement: "abrogation" (i.e. rejecting the hegemony and centrality of a single standard language) and "appropriation" (i.e. reworking on this standard language to make it a matter of daily use for the local populace) (38-77). Corroboree—a quintessentially Aboriginal song-dance ritual, if, earlier delineated the oral story-telling of 'Dreamtime' that gave vent to the tales of totemic icons and their transcendental powers, were in the post-contact period secularized by the white colonisers to make them become more of tourist events entertaining the white populace. However, tourist-Corroboree or not, Australia, dominated by stringent laws of the white colony, still had the scope for Aboriginal performances. But, such tourist-Corroborees, from the Aboriginal vantage point 'mimicked', in a sense most

Bhabhaesque, the colonial presence. The tourist-Corroboree created solidarity and made a politico-cultural resistance against white oppression. There are examples from the journal entries of various colonialists about how the white life-style and culture were mimicked by the Aboriginal people through such tourist-Corroborees. Talking about the Nyoongar people of south-west of Western Australia, Neville Green reminds how they “found the European way of singing very funny” and mimicked the same:

They would laugh at it as a combination of silly and effeminate notes, and for weeks afterwards entertain their distant friends, at their casual meetings, by mimicking the tone and attitude of the white man; an exhibition which never fails to draw shouts of applause. (qtd. in Green n. pg.)

Thus, the Australian frontier has a dual tale to narrate. If the first is of a progressive and disastrous colonial project, the second is of Indigenous resistance and autonomy. It is this entwined history of colonial-Aboriginal relationship of violent aggression, ruthless dispossession, modern nation-building and cultural struggle that we tried to encapsulated within the limited scope of this paper. The relevance of such discourse is its ever looming presence in the contemporary national psyche:

In the final analysis, it is not a conflict about the past...but a conflict over the past in the present. More particularly, it is a conflict regarding the moral relationship of settler peoples to this history—to this relationship between past and present, present and past. (Attwood 191)

Notes:

1. The white settler-colonizers declared Australian continent as *terra nullis* or ‘land inhabited by none’. This facilitated them to unlawfully usurp Aboriginal lands and deterritorialize their Indigenous inhabitants.

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