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**KENEALLY AND GARE:
BOUNDARY RIDERS
AND FRINGEDWELLERS.**

The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith and *The Fringe Dwellers* both document the failure of halfcaste Aborigines who attempt to realise their White identity, and to find their way into White society. The failures occur because that society does not endorse their perception of themselves. Both novels, and the histories of their protagonists, encode the practices by which White culture has dominated and destroyed Black identity. Keneally's narrative places the White colonists' treatment of the Aborigines against the larger practice of European colonial imperialism. In *Gare* the practice of patriarchal imperialism, which designates women as "other", is added to the racial imperialism of the Whites. In both novels the dominant culture frustrates the attempts of the other — Aboriginal and female — to enter into that culture, despite the part-White inheritance that Jimmie and Trilby share.

The White perception of Black culture in Australia parallels the male perception of the female: Black culture is "other" — different, alien, abnormal, unrecognised. To be White is to be human; to be Black is to be inferior, sub-human. Historically, from the massacres and the manhunts to the West Australian Natives Act of 1944, from the cartoon representations of the cannibal Blacksmiths to the White children who hold their noses as Trilby walks by, this assumption has governed both legislative and private attitudes to Aborigines. White attempts to recognise Aborigines and to reposition them within the culture are "plagued with contradictions", as Kateryna Arthur has observed in a recent article in *Westerly*:

White obliteration of Aboriginal culture in Australia has been as much the work of the pen as of physical violence. Aborigines have been written out of literature, out of the law, out of history. The extent to which they have been erased from White consciousness is becoming clearer with every new positive attempt to reinscribe the Aboriginal presence into Australian cultural and historical awareness White writing has inevitably marginalised aborigines, if not by neglect or disparagement then just as

effectively by paternalistic benevolence, or by the very fact that it is writing.¹

My examination of Keneally's and Gare's narratives will attempt to uncover both the power structures which exclude Aborigines and the plot structures which inscribe their marginal positions. It will do so by suggesting a parallel between the strategies by which men preserve their sense of difference from the "other" — women — and the practices which preserve and maintain White difference and supremacy.

Using a reinterpretation of object-relations theory, Nancy Chodorow describes how gender identity is acquired.² She maintains that for the girl the realisation of gender identity is part of a perceived continuity of identity with the mother and is consequently unproblematic. For the boy, however, the acquisition of gender identity involves a separation from the mother and identification with the father, a reorientation which requires constant reinforcement. As a result, ego boundaries in boys are stronger and more rigid than in girls; and their sense of a separate self is closely bound to their sense of masculinity. It is in relation to women, particularly to the mother, that boys realise their separateness and their difference. Chodorow goes on to argue that the maintenance of this sense of difference also depends on the devaluation of the female and of female values:

Because of early developed, conflictual core gender identity problems and later problems of adequate masculinity, it becomes important to men to have a clear sense of gender difference, of what is masculine and what is feminine, and to maintain rigid boundaries between these.³

This devaluation of the female assumes the complicity of the mother.

Chodorow's primary concern is with female psychological development and how this conditions women to mother, but Hester Eisenstein has recognised that Chodorow's analysis and women-centred perspective contains a critique of masculinity which gives "a plausible psychological basis for the male experience of women as 'other'".⁴ I would argue that the social practices used to maintain gender difference and to fortify male ego-boundaries parallel those used to preserve cultural difference and dominance; that the insistence on rigid separation from, and devaluation of the "other" culture maintains White supremacy and limits Black experience to fringedwelling.

In *Jimmie Blacksmith* the fence is a sign of separation and domination. Jimmie builds the fence which marks the boundaries of Healy's property exactly to specifications, yet Healy refuses to pay, as Newby will also refuse, thus setting in train the terrible retaliation of the

murders. Just as Jimmie builds the fence which designates White man's property, so he observes laws designed to deny his freedom. On the run, he and Mort meticulously close the pastoralists' gates behind them and straddle the fences to elude the trackers. The White concern with private property and its violation also underlies the recurrent discussion of Federation, which centres on the weakening of State boundaries. In *The Fringe Dwellers* a place is made for Blacks on the margins of White society. Trilby Comeaway's family moves from Heartbreak Hill to the Wild Oat Patch, where Blacks and Whites both live. As Mrs Comeaway approvingly says, the houses for Blacks are "all scattered about, too, not in a heap like we was rubbish".⁵ But the Wild Oat Patch with its "small neat gardens" and "neat small houses" with "little white picket fences marking off each quarter acre block" (F 128) gives expression to the White regard for property, and suburban boundaries constrain Mrs Comeaway's expansiveness just as the institutions — the monarch, the department, the government — constrain her freedom. The police who come to quell their domestic noise, and the department which provides appropriate furniture so long as they live at the Patch, exist to protect White society from the encroachment of Blacks. In the transition from bush to suburbs, and with the passage of more than half a century, the boundaries have been internalised and institutionalised, made more subtle and more secure.

Jimmie Blacksmith and Trilby Comeaway are halfcaste Aborigines — Jimmie a "paley bastard", Trilby with dark golden skin and the grey eyes of her White grandfather. To their own people, their White characteristics are evident, but White perception elides these differences, and sees them as Black. In the persons of Jimmie and Trilby, the "other" attempts to identify with the dominant culture. Jimmie's ambition to be *Mr Jimmie Blacksmith* and Trilby's determination to "leave everyone behind her" involves them in a conflict with both Black and White cultures. They repress their Aboriginality in the hope that this will make them acceptable to the Whites. Both narratives are thus failed initiations because the outcome in both is their exclusion by the dominant culture.

Initiation typically involves a ritual or ceremony which marks the entry of the initiate into new experience or new knowledge; but as Diane Bell has pointed out in *Daughters of the Dreaming*, "initiation is . . . a multipurpose ritual which serves to realign relationships, 'to turn people round'".⁶ Both aspects of the concept of initiation are important in *Jimmie Blacksmith* and *The Fringe Dwellers*. There is no ritual available to Jimmie and Trilby which will bring about the realignment of relationships they seek on terms which are acceptable

to them. They want to be on equal terms with Whites; that is they identify with rather than submit to White power. But the dominant culture does not provide rituals which allow this identification; the "other" can only be initiated through submission. In the case of the woman as "other" the available ritual is marriage. No ritual exists to accommodate Blacks because they are invisible, unrecognised. Nevertheless, the initiation narratives considered here display significant resemblances to female initiation narratives. Charlotte Goodman has identified two possible outcomes for the female protagonist who seeks a relationship with male culture: the first, marriage, involves submission; the second, which follows when the woman has sought to identify with male power, and no longer to be "other", ends in madness or suicide.⁷ Trilby resists marriage, I suggest, because she perceives that it means submission; whereas Jimmie mistakenly views it as a means of sharing in White power.

Goodman also argues that the alternatives of submission to or identification with the dominant culture are embodied in a recurrent motif in the female novel of development: the existence of a close male-female sibling tie:

Unusually close, the paired male and female protagonist(s) . . . appear to function as psychological "doubles", for each character is intensely involved in the psychic life of his or her counterpart.⁸

She goes on to associate the female character with conformity to traditional roles (submission) and the male with desire for power, mobility and autonomy. Mort and Jimmie Blacksmith and Noonah and Trilby Comeaway function as pairs in a similar way. Mort and Noonah, passive and accepting, represent that part of themselves which Jimmie and Trilby wish to deny or repress. The schoolteacher McCreadie recognises this in his ploy to separate the Blacksmith brothers. Mort's Aboriginality succumbs to the force of the initiation site:

Mort Blacksmith. . . still had his nearly intact black soul. Surely his brother saw it, McCreadie hoped. In his fever, and head light from lack of breath, he believed the womb a violent place. Like magnet to magnet it snatched up Mort's mind. It left Jimmie unpolarized though uneasy. *And surely Jimmie saw it!* I have separated them, McCreadie thought, staggering, sweating, eager for breath. Or assured their separation. No small thing. No small thing.⁹

Gare represents Trilby's rejection of roles as two-fold: she rejects passivity in the form of Aboriginal resignation and female nurturing. Noonah too wants a place in society, but her choice of nursing

represents both an extension of her view of herself as a nurturer and her belief that it is futile to challenge White boundaries. She backs up her sister in their foray into the milk-bar, but her drowsy response to Trilby's passionate indignation at the insult of being called a nigger is a betrayal:

“Black nigger! Imagine Noonah! Even a poor, dirty, skinny old witch like she is still doesn't want to be called a nigger.” Trilby sat up in bed and her voice was fierce. “If anyone called me that I'd *kill* them.”

Noonah, her thoughts with Bartie and Stella (the nurturer role in ascendancy over the Aboriginal) yawns a reply:

“What's the use?”

Trilby. . . was bathed in humiliation. Again, her own fault. What was the use, as Noonah had just said? Of anything! Especially telling anyone the way you felt. She tried to stiffen herself to resentment, but a forlorn sense of betrayal brought a rush of tears to her eyes. (F 166)

Noonah and Mort remain “other”: Aboriginal, passive, resigned as Trilby and Jimmie seek White power, mobility, autonomy. Mort, throughout his time as a fugitive, invokes tribal law and reverts to tribal practices in painting his face and chanting, “trying to fit their movements into a tribal pattern” (JB 105). Noonah, wounded by her own people's suspicion of her attempts to “better herself” plans to withdraw to the mission with Bartie and Stella.

In Keneally's narrative, the ritual of initiation is an important organisational device. Jimmie's tribal initiation involves the excision of a tooth; that tooth is presented to him by his uncle Tabidgi in an attempt to safeguard him from the consequences of his marriage, and to lay a tribal claim on him; and Jimmie's grotesquely wounded mouth marks the end of his attempt to be reborn as *Mr Jimmie Blacksmith*. McCreadie uses his knowledge of Aboriginal ritual to separate the brothers at the initiation site, but Jimmie's assimilation of White values does not extend to an understanding of White ritual. His ambition to be “a recognisable man, an owner of things” (JB 21) is, he believes, contingent upon having “a white wife and a good reputation for work”. (JB 52) But Jimmie's marriage to Gilda, like his enlistment as a blacktracker, makes him “more deeply, more damagingly black than ever”. (JB 35) If he sees this marriage as an initiation, it is because he sees it in terms of Aboriginal ritual where marriage reinforces alliances between tribal groups. Tabidgi is disturbed by the marriage because it violates the tribal pattern, and Jimmie himself wonders, fleetingly, whether his union with Gilda, another social outcast, will not compound his alienation. But the chant he sang during his initiation could

be seen as providing a precedent to his own action, since it describes an expedition whose object was to steal women from the Widgerra. The outcome of the marriage, however, is not to strengthen ties with his White "tribe", but to bring White ridicule when Gilda's baby is seen not to be his. Jimmie misunderstands the function of White marriage which serves to unite property, rather than people, and women are part of that property. The difference in the White and Aboriginal attitudes to women is reiterated throughout the narrative: it is the Whites who possess women, who come to the camps and violate women like Jimmie's mother. Blacks see themselves as the agents of Emu Wren the tribe totem who is responsible for conception, and consequently neither women nor children are regarded as personal property. When Jimmie seeks his revenge against Newby, his rage is directed at Newby's women — at White property. This ritual initiation is successful because it is linked to new knowledge, new understanding — it is *Mr Jimmie Blacksmith* who wields the axe.

Keneally's narrative of Jimmie Blacksmith's career in White society is embedded in an interpretation of tribal life. Nene Gare's narrative, however, is located in a time when tribal life is in decay and there is no tribal initiation for Trilby. Diane Bell gives an account of the economic and ritual role of tribal women, of their importance in maintaining the land and the Dreaming, and shows how this role ensured a separate authority for women. But with the decay of tribal life, Bell claims, women's position in relation to men has weakened, because of the changing economic base and the removal from tribal land:

For the context within which male-female negotiations now occur is an arena where male control is the norm and the roles made available to women are restricted and predicated on an image of women as sex object, wife and mother.¹⁰

Even though in the present women are excluded and oppressed, Bell maintains that it is oversimplistic to read directly from the present to the past. Instead she claims that women can find in tribal institutions an affirmation of their independence and autonomy. I've quoted Bell's argument at length in order to emphasise that Trilby's desire to be "boss for herself"¹¹ could be seen as an extension of her Aboriginality rather than, as Gare sees it, an expression of her White heritage. As it is, Trilby's struggle for autonomy is located more firmly in the context of her relationship with Phillix as a struggle against biological destiny and against the loss of self in sexuality.

Trilby's initiation into sexual experience does not take place according to tribal practice, a fact *Mr Comeaway* regrets, but as a

result of a physical attraction for Phillix, an attraction which Trilby resists. Gare's Lawrentian description of this sexual encounter seems to dislocate it from the context of the decay of tribal values which preoccupies most of the naturalistic narrative, and thus justifies Trilby's wariness about the power of sexuality. Trilby's attachment to Phillix contrasts with Blanchie's and Audrena's promiscuity; but she rightfully recognises that the relationship threatens her autonomy and independence. Phillix's final proposal to Trilby is an undisguised offer of protection from the drunken advances of George, a sanctuary from the corruption of Perth and from White exploitation.

Throughout the novel, the naturalistic representation of fringed-welling life is subject to the subversive influence of a conventional romance narrative, and it seems from the resolution that romance wins out. Trilby's persistent efforts to relinquish the stigma of being Black are not judged against the claims of tribal life, but against the failure of her relationship with Phillix. The remnants of tribal life exist in Horace's role as law-giver, whose advice to Mr Comeaway is not to move to the Wild Oat Patch, not to take out citizenship; and in Mrs Green the women have an elder too, one who renounces citizenship and returns to her traditional land to die. But in Gare's novel their position is represented in terms of defeat rather than principle, and in the end the novel is a chronicle of defeat.

In *Fringedweller*, an account of Aboriginal life in West Australia, Robert Bropho discusses the naming of halfcastes. His term is "inbetween" and he makes the point that the term "part Aboriginal" is a misnomer, but one which signifies the Whites' denial of responsibility for their Black offspring.¹² The narratives of Jimmie Blacksmith's and Trilby Comeaway's efforts to realise their "part White" identity both scrutinise White responsibility for the destruction of Black identity and the refusal to recognise Black culture. Both Keneally's and Gare's viewpoints are situated in the dominant culture, but their difference of gender influences the ways in which their character's fates are represented.

Jimmie's rebirth as Mr Jimmie Blacksmith comes about through his appropriation of the worst kind of masculine values — violence and aggression. His achievement of manhood and subsequent declaration of war can be compared with the aspirations of Dowie Stead's companions to prove themselves against the Boer. Yet his choice of this option rather than submission appears to be endorsed, not just by the juxtaposition of the two newspaper accounts of his wounding, but also by the implied comparison with the "yielding loose-grained men of Purfleet, Burnt Bridge, Verona, Pilbarra, Brentwood" whose "history of mean death and lust for booze and acquiescence to the white

phallus, gun and sequestration and all the malaise of black squalor" is legible in the fractured tjuringa stones at the initiation site. (JB 150) In these terms, Jimmie's choice appears heroic.

If Keneally offers some endorsement to Jimmie's identification with power, Gare's narrative emphasises the futility of that course. Trilby's violence has consequences only for herself: breaking the glass of the firealarm results in seven days detention during which her frustration and anger makes little impact on its objects — the wardens. The death of her baby, previously wished for, occurs after she has begun to feel it part of herself. The accumulated examples of Mrs Green, the Berings, Horace, Noonah and her own parents, who all retreat from involvement with Whites, suggest that Black survival in White society is not possible. Nene Gare may not overtly suggest separation, but she is certainly not optimistic about the success of identification with White society. Trilby's fate is submission to Phillix, a resolution in which the romance plot takes control of the narrative of Aboriginal initiation.

The outcomes of these two novels then parallel the outcomes for the "doubles" of Charlotte Goodman's theory: Keneally's protagonist identifies with the dominant culture and is heroic in defeat; Gare's protagonist eschews traditional submission, but her futile defiance can have no heroic dimension. While both narratives must be judged as less than successful in transmitting knowledge about Black culture, when they are viewed in terms of Julia Kristeva's statement that "literature [is] something other than knowledge: the very place where the social code is destroyed and renewed"¹³ then they clearly disclose the process whereby White boundary riders have maintained their own territory by encroaching on Black space.

NOTES

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¹Kateryna Arthur, "Fiction and the Rewriting of History: A Reading of Colin Johnson," *Westly*, 30, No.1 (1985), 55.

²Nancy Chodorow, "Feminism and Difference: Gender Relations and Difference in a Psychoanalytic Perspective," *Socialist Review*, 46 (July-Aug 1979), 51-69.

³*ibid*, p.63.

⁴Hester Eisenstein, *Contemporary Feminist Thought* (London: Unwin, 1984), p.98.

⁵Nene Gare, *The Fringe Dwellers* (1961; rpt. Melbourne: Sun Books, 1966), p. 54. Further references included in the text.

- ⁶Diane Bell, *Daughters of the Dreaming* (Sydney: McPhee Gribble/ George Allen and Unwin, 1982), p.271.
- ⁷Charlotte Goodman, "The Lost Brother, The Twin: Women Novelists and the Male-Female Double Bildungsroman," *Novel*, 17, No. 1 (Fall 1983), p.30.
- ⁸*Ibid*, P.31.
- ⁹Thomas Keneally, *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (NY: The Viking Press, 1972), p. 148. Further references included in the text.
- ¹⁰Bell, p.46.
- ¹¹*ibid*, p.7.
- ¹²Robert Bropho, *Fringedweller* (Sydney: Alternative Publishing Co-operative Ltd., 1980), p.51.
- ¹³Julia Kristeva, "The Speaking Subject and Poetical Language", quoted by Steve Burniston and Chris Weedon "Ideology, Subjectivity and the Artistic Text" in *In Ideology*, (London: Hutchinson, 1977), p.220.