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978-0-521-36816-2 - Women and the Bush: Forces of Desire in the Australian Cultural Tradition

Kay Schaffer

Excerpt

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CHAPTER 1

CULTURE, LANGUAGE AND THE SELF

Australia is a country of contradictions. The earliest historical records attest that this has been so since the first narratives of exploration reached the eyes and ears of an eager European audience. At least two opposing views prevailed. One held that this phantom continent, known only as *Terra Australis Incognita*, was a land of teeming richness abounding with ‘Gold, Silver, Pearls, Nutmegs, Mace, Ginger, and Sugar-canes of an extraordinary Size’. Another described the place as an arid, fly-blown, barren land, unlikely to sustain or nourish human habitation. The first view, reported by de Quirós for the Spanish early in the sixteenth century, referred in fact to an island in the New Hebrides, mistakenly thought to be the southern continent which he called *Australia del Espiritu Santo*. The second and more familiar description was penned by Dampier for the Dutch in his report of his 1688 explorations, *New Voyage around the World*, which described the north-west coast of the continent in depressingly flat tones. The early writings and the varied experiences of European explorers and settlers in the antipodes gave rise to a Western European conception (which survives today) of Australia as a land of fantastic hopes and harsh realities; a land of ancient secrets and modern discoveries; a land of crude, closed settlements and complex, expanding freedoms. But more than this, the idea of Australia has a long history as a land of desire, traversed in the imaginations of explorers, settlers and visitors alike. The idea of the land as a place of desire against which Australians, at least white, male, European Australians, measure their identity is one of the themes I will trace in this book.

TO FIND A NATIONAL IDENTITY

In 1988 as Australians celebrate 200 years of white European settlement the country is more conscious than ever of the contradictory images and myths which have emerged to define the land. There is, as well, a common awareness of another strange historical juxtaposition—that the youngest Western industrial democracy sits on the remains of what may be the most ancient of all human cultures. The knowledge and significance of what

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anthropologists call Aboriginal prehistory jostle uncomfortably with the historical demands and desires of contemporary white inhabitants. At a time when the Bicentennial Authority has contributed handsomely to historical research, events and activities to commemorate the Australian Bicentennial, Aborigines still battle in a grossly unequal struggle for land rights. In addition, significant archaeological work which challenges the whole conception of the history and evolution of the human race lies dormant for lack of funding. Recent discoveries include the oldest known examples of completely modern men and women, who lived some 35 000 to 40 000 years ago, as well as evidence of what may be the oldest surviving cave paintings and burial rites. These discoveries demand a thorough revision of what was previously known about human evolution on earth. Textual evidence for what is already known may not emerge for another fifty years, however, while a spate of books will surface to fill in the gaps and spaces of a narrow band of history known as white Australian culture. Clearly, in a bicentennial decade, the more dominant historical interests take precedence over and remain separated from the Australian Aboriginal concerns as well as Anglo academic desires to investigate the origins and evolution of the human race. Critics of culture, witnessing these consolidations of the dominant culture, have begun to ask: who decides what the dominant images of Australia are, whose interests are served by the various representations and how do these meanings function in everyday life?

The impulse to record and know the nation's history, whether it be directed toward Aboriginal prehistory or to the European presence, must be acknowledged as a white, Western and predominantly male activity. The desire to detail and document historical origins, to determine stages of progress and name the features of human development are the preoccupations of a Western historical consciousness. The detailing of evolutionary firsts will hardly excite the imagination of an Aboriginal population. Aborigines may welcome and utilize the knowledge that their ancestors date back far into the past as some small element in their struggle to claim land rights. Nonetheless, anthropological diggings and displacement of ancient burial remains violate the spiritual affinity of the self to the earth and sever the connections between the ancestral spirit life of the people. Western studies of Aboriginal culture, whether for anthropological or historical purposes, are seen now as an intellectual appropriation of black tribal culture and traditions. The anthropological search for origins, the historical sense of human evolution, of white settlement and of Australian history all emerge through Western modes of knowledge and forms of representation.

Nonetheless, questions of who and what Australians think they are absorb

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the national interest and attract world-wide attention. The Bicentenary encourages an international impulse to know and celebrate the historical past. In 1980, when the Australian Bicentennial Authority was established, its first director announced that in his view the aim of the celebration was 'to find a national identity'. Even in these words we are confronted with paradox: to find, rather than to celebrate, a national identity. The phrase suggests two things at once. On the one hand, the words signal to a desire to come to some understanding of what it means to be an Australian, to posit an identity. On the other hand, the phrase suggests that this is a time to attend to the process of discovery, to live with questions about an unsettled entity in process. The bicentennial celebrations come at a time of epistemological crisis, a time when a growing number of historians and cultural commentators acknowledge that all perspectives are partial. It is a time to begin to explore the ways in which modes of representation, once thought to be objective and factual, are actually tied to assumptions about race and class, ethnicity and gender.

Some of the questions I want to address in regard to the Australian tradition in a bicentennial decade are: How has the imaginative place which has come to be called Australia functioned as a site of desire for those who arrived on her shores from other lands, other places? By what textual processes has the landscape taken form, definition and texture, giving the continent a Western structure, shape and meaning? What dominant and muted images of the Australian character have emerged? Whose interests do they serve? How do these dominant images affect everyday life, consciousness and culture in Australia today? How has an Australian tradition been formulated and why is it so resolutely blind to women? And, finally, what does it mean 'to find a national identity'?

I do not expect to find, nor am I looking for, the answer to these queries. There is a plethora of possible responses and perspectives. My intention is not to rewrite history, but to follow the traces of ideas and representations which appear in the guise of history. I want to register the various ways in which the history of Australia, its land and its people, have been constructed—to play with the ideas, discover the codes of meaning through which we understand the histories and begin to question them. Further, I want to analyse the constant calls for 'national identity' and their relationship to the masculinization of a national culture.

A few weeks ago my mother wrote to say that she was pleased to know that I was working on a book for publication. Then she asked: 'Will ordinary people be able to read it, or will it be like your thesis?' I hope the answer to her query is 'yes . . . and yes'. The study grows out of work for a doctoral thesis which I completed in 1983. At that time few people within Australia

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were working as I was within cultural studies at the intersection between feminism, post-structuralism and semiotics. The theoretical positions were reputed to be unnecessarily complex and exceedingly dense. Since that time, however, a growing number of commentators have taken up one or several of these perspectives and demonstrated the rewards and pleasures to be gained from reading culture differently. This investigation partakes of that more general critical impulse.

It begins with and foregrounds questions of national identity, questions which have occurred to me and occupied my attention since my arrival as an outsider. It virtually goes without saying that national identity and the Australian character are masculine constructions. But this is not to say that women, or ideas about the feminine aspects of culture, are absent. The myth of the typical Australian exudes a style of masculinity which excludes but also defines the Australian woman who stands in relation to him. In addition, the relationship of man to the land, central to the legend of the 1890s, for example, pits the native son against the bush. The bush is typically imagined as a *feminine* landscape—one that is imagined as particularly harsh and unforgiving. ‘Woman’ carries the burden of this metaphor. Ideas about masculinity and femininity circulate in the culture and contribute to its specificity as ‘Australian’. I hope that this study will extend awareness of the processes through which national identity is produced and reproduced. It may, in addition, broaden the analysis of the connections between ideas about masculinity and femininity as they are represented in language, and how these assumptions about gender affect the attitudes and beliefs of actual men and women in society.

THE AUSTRALIAN TRADITION

There is now a fairly well-established set of ideas about national identity, a code of meanings which are recognized as ‘typically Australian’. After 200 years on the track, a few writers and critics occasionally have the nerve to refer to it as an Australian Tradition. There is also a lot of resistance to this development, perhaps because in a post-modernist world we know that meanings are suspect. The Australian tradition is a kind of ghost tradition . . . one that is easily recognized, sometimes seriously and with a sense of pride, but more often with a gamut of emotions which run from amusement, to embarrassment, to hostile rejection. Still, a nationalist code exists, echoed in the catch-cry phrases of mateship and the bush and egalitarian democracy, even if the evidence is slim, even if it does not speak for ‘us’. The representations of nationalist tradition in Australia are tangible entities, even if they are, as Richard White has suggested, inventions artificially imposed on

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a diverse landscape and its people.¹ Traces which inform the tradition can be found in the narratives of early explorers and settlers, in the texts of historians, fiction writers, cultural critics and commentators on the critics. The outlines are visible in the speeches of civic leaders and politicians, embedded in the celluloid of the Australian film industry and in the pages of the press. They are crudely transparent in the most successful of television commercials and visible in the reactions of local audiences. The representations of national identity may be constructions which disguise more dimensions of cultural life than they bring to light, but they are constantly reproduced. And at least some of us, both within and outside Australia, have begun to take them seriously.

WOMEN IN THE NATIONAL TRADITION

Taking seriously representations of national identity can be a very difficult enterprise. This is especially true if one is a woman. When I first came to Australia in 1974 from the United States, I came to an imagined place, a site of desire. The country had a reputation, yes—for sports, open spaces, heat, drought, male chauvinism and misogyny. It also had a new gloss during the heady days of the Whitlam era as the last place in the Western world where it might be possible to establish an effective Western socialist democracy. It was the test of socialism which pulled me toward the shores of Sydney. Upon arrival I set about trying to come to terms with this new environment. I talked with new friends and acquaintances, absorbing attitudes and beliefs with my daily dose of sunshine. I sat in on a course in Australian literature, surprised to find it less popular and less well regarded than the English or even American literature courses on offer at the local College of Advanced Education. And I began scouring the shelves of the library for texts on Australian history, literature, politics, sociology and the like. I was interested to find out how white Australians, both men and women, defined themselves and their culture. There were not as many texts as I had expected. I devoured them all within a month, keeping an annotated bibliography on a stack of guide cards. A number of new sociological studies on Australian culture emerged at the time. It surprised me to find how many of them addressed the culture negatively in hostile, defensive or self-mocking tones. I found it curious that few made mention of women. The only text I came across which specifically addressed the question of women was Norman MacKenzie's pioneering study *Women in Australia* (1962). MacKenzie makes the comment in the Introduction that 'Australia is more a "man's country" than other industrial democracies'.² His argument was borne out by a host of other social critics at the time. Discussions about the notion of a national character may

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have differed, but they all agreed that (whatever else it might or might not be) it was decidedly, if somewhat defensively, masculine.

That was over ten years ago. The Whitlam era put many Australians in touch with the knowledge of partial perspectives and fired them with a desire to be more inclusive in their definitions of Australia and Australians—women, migrants, workers, Aborigines and other deviants from the white, male, Western European and largely middle-class norm were permitted entrance on the great stage of history. In the last decade more serious attention has been paid to questions of Australian identity and to the marginal status and position of those ‘others’ listed above. Despite this, one gets the feeling that not much has changed. There is a dominant tradition, which remains strong. One possible difference is that it now occasionally knows and acknowledges its boundaries which are marked by texts which address the tradition from perspectives of dissidence. But the radical texts have not yet altered nor eclipsed the tradition.

In the 1980s it was still possible for G. A. Wilkes, Professor of English Literature at the University of Sydney, to have written a book studying the ‘literary evidence for Australia’s cultural development’, which includes a chapter on ‘alternative traditions’ beyond the narrowly defined stereotypes of republican nationalism, and not mention women in or outside the tradition, nor allude to the fact of this omission, nor cite even one text which studies women in literature, or women in history, or treats Australian culture from a feminist perspective.³ His text has a familiar blind spot, which is the place of woman and sexual difference and the relevance this absence has in the posing of questions of literary or cultural traditions. It is not my intention to contest Wilkes’ perspective. He attempts to challenge and move beyond an Australian tradition founded on ‘the antithesis of the genteel and the robust, the refined and the crude, the old world and the new, and the contest between them for mastery’.⁴ It is a challenge with which on another level I engage as well. His text, however, attempts to posit a new truth. Mine assumes the impossibility of such a project.

In 1986 it was still possible for Marian Aveling, feminist historian, to present a paper to the Australian Historical Association conference entitled ‘Taking Women’s History out of the Ghetto’, in which she called attention to the extensive work in the area of women’s history and feminist history which has had ‘very little impact on the writing of a general Australian history’.⁵ The same could be said of the apparent impact of feminist research in other fields, including philosophy, literary studies, politics, psychology, sociology, art history and the like.

When I shifted my attention from texts on Australian culture to empirical

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data on the social, political, economic and cultural position of women in Australia I confronted a similar dilemma. In 1975, the beginning of the United Nations' International Decade of Women, preliminary research detailed women's diminished social and economic status. Historians, sociologists, political scientists, economists, literary historians and cultural commentators had acknowledged the masculine bias in Australian culture as one causal factor.⁶ Countless conferences and research projects produced reports and recommendations about women's health, economic position, political rights, educational standards, as well as problems related to racial, class and ethnic differences between women. Anti-discrimination laws and affirmative action legislation have been introduced. Still, despite the changes in laws, attitudes, rights and opportunities—all of which have broadened the horizons for women—masculine bias has maintained its stranglehold. I found this strange in a 'fair go' country which supports other radical social legislation designed to improve the situation of those less advantaged.

Since International Women's Year a great deal of feminist research has emerged. Empirical measures and diverse political theories have been used to define, explain and interpret women's inferior social and economic status. Feminist writers have explored the marginalization of women's lives and experiences in Australian cultural studies and the muting of women's voices and writings within the national tradition. Feminist texts have examined women's position from a variety of perspectives, including Marxist, socialist and psychoanalytic theories and methods of analysis. In addition, a great deal of feminist historical research has occurred which brings the lives and experiences of Australian women to light and makes possible the reconstruction of the writing of Australian history, politics, art history, literary and cultural studies. Unlike the situation in Canada, the United States and Great Britain, this valuable and challenging work has had little noticeable impact on the general outlines of mainstream writing in Australia.

Miriam Dixon introduced the discussion of the position of women in Australian culture in her 1975 study, *The Real Matilda*. She wrote of 'a profound unconscious contempt for women that pervades the Australian ethos.'⁷ She traced this cultural contempt for women through historical studies, which exclude any consideration of women; in a literary tradition, which produces no love stories or poems, but, rather, a profound sense of sexual loneliness and an awkwardness or fear about the flesh of women; in social life, where women have little power or status, low self-esteem, and virtually no representation in the unions, professional life or politics. Dixon concluded that the Australian woman's only acceptable domain is that of the family—one from which men are curiously absent.⁸ Anne Summers, in

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Damned Whores and God's Police, analysed woman's position in Australian society as a colonized sex.⁹ The androcentric bias which appears to be rigidly resistant to women and the widespread denial of value to that which is designated 'feminine' in Australian culture has led Delys Bird recently to conclude that the whole idea 'Australian woman', as a cultural construct, is 'a national joke'.¹⁰

The masculine bias which we encounter in the texts on Australia and see reproduced in films and the media and hear on the television and in the criticisms of overseas visitors about Australian attitudes to masculinity and femininity, bears little resemblance to the diverse and rich experiences of strong and colourful women encountered daily in interaction with friends, neighbours, workmates and students. There is a sense of a country struggling with contradictory impulses: a desire to accept and deny the diverse nature of Australian culture; to ignore and uphold its masculine bias; to come to terms with and reinvent a national identity.

The fact that nothing could satisfy my curiosity as to why attitudes toward women were so slow to change led me to this study and the desire to approach questions of national identity from another perspective. I decided to re-read the mainstream literature which takes 'Australia' as its theme, looking again at the processes of its production and attending to its masculine bias.

CULTURE, LANGUAGE AND THE SELF

National identity is a cultural construction. What we think we know about men and women, or the Australian character and the woman who stands in relation to him, comes to us through codes of meaning embedded in language and other forms of representation. Codes of meaning are ideas which operate together within a particular culture. There is an agreement that certain meanings go together—like man, mateship and the bush as aspects of an Australian nationalist tradition in literature and history, or 'football, meatpies, kangaroos and Holden cars' as icons for Australia within popular culture. These meanings are reproduced together so often that they become taken for granted. The notion of national identity projects a set of ideas which coalesce into an ideal self—the 'real' Australian. The 'real' Australian is a national type. He does not exist. Nonetheless, the idea of his existence is given status and value within culture. According to Australian cultural codes which have become common-sense knowledge, if he did exist he would come from and preferably live in the bush, of poor but honest Anglo-Irish stock. He would be unpretentious, shy of women, a good mate and a battler. He is what advertisers seem to believe all of 'us' who live in Australia want to be and the way we define ourselves and 'Australia' to the rest of the world. The

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Australian character and the attributes which are ascribed to him exist within a symbolic system of cultural meanings which are both Western and specifically Australian. As a type he represents the self and the nation in a way which is imaginary. Yet, his existence is made to seem real through its representation in films, advertisements, political speeches, news reports, historical reconstructions and the like. The imaginary construction which is taken to be real is given social meaning through the symbolic order of language.

The terms real, imaginary and symbolic (used as nouns) may be unfamiliar to some readers. Since they are terms which I will refer in this study, a brief explanation is necessary. They are derived from the work of Jacques Lacan, a French psychoanalyst whose investigations into the interrelationship between the self, subjectivity and language have been employed in various ways by feminists, semioticians and post-modernist writers. These writers would agree on a few propositions which defy 'common-sense' notions concerning the nature of reality, consciousness, culture and the self. Put simply, the concepts offer new ways of investigating who and what we are as individuals with sexed identities living within specific cultures. They insist that identity is not immanent in oneself, one's consciousness or personality but is constituted through language and the social order. Initially, the concepts may seem difficult but they should become clearer and their relevance more obvious as I apply them to aspects of Australian cultural identity and the place of woman within it as this study proceeds.

Within a Lacanian schema, there is no real world. The Real does not exist. It is what might be if existence were not mediated by language. It is what lies beyond language and cannot be grasped within it. The Imaginary refers to two phases in the formation of the self within culture. It refers to a state of being which is imagined as real but actually arises through fantasies, memories, illusory images of the self and the like. The first phase is connected with early infancy before the child enters language when it imagines itself as an undifferentiated being with no sense of separation or boundaries between itself, its mother and the world. The second imaginary phase is connected with the child's sense of itself as autonomous from the mother as a distinct social being. The Symbolic is the order of language and network of meanings through which the social self and social values are constructed, communicated and maintained.

The child's entrance into culture and the symbolic order occurs in what Lacan calls the mirror phase.¹¹ At this time, between six and eighteen months of age, the child sees a reflection of itself in the mirror and attaches its sense of identity to the image. The image is not the self but a social or external reflection of the self. This image, nonetheless, is associated with the 'I' which

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begins to take on social meaning. Further, the image is reflected back to the child and mediated through the gaze of the mother. The Imaginary (or fantasies, memories, images of the self arising out of illusion but thought to be real) coexists with and is given meaning within the symbolic order of language. Language paradoxically divides the child from itself while it places the child in a symbolic order which promises us the illusion of coherent identity. What the child recognizes as the 'I' or self or ego in the mirror or in the mirror of another's eyes is an illusion of a unified body, a unified ego. It sees an other (the image in the mirror) as the self. The image is perceived and understood as both different from 'me' and the same as 'me'. The mirror image is reflection of difference imagined as the same. The self is already at one remove from the image. The child paradoxically recognizes itself as what it is not but what it also wishes to be.

At the same time the child takes on a cultural identity as a male or female and a proper name, a patronym—what Lacan calls the name of the Father. This places the child at a second remove from the self. It also places the child in a network of social and symbolic meanings through which sexual differences and subjectivity are organized. The pre-linguistic imaginary unity with the mother must be repressed. It is replaced by an identity formed through language which takes the masculine as the norm for the self. In a phallogocentric culture the masculine is valued, the feminine exists in an inferior relation to the masculine. The ideal self to which the subject (whether male or female) in culture attaches desire is an impossible masculine subject. As soon as the child speaks it assumes a subjective place in language as either male or not-male.

This means that you and I are constituted through a linguistic system of meanings. We are not the makers of that meaning. Within language, women exist in the category 'not-men' and then are produced as wives, mothers, lovers, daughters and sisters rather than subjects in their own right. The self as a cultural category is imagined as a masculine self. Women as subjects in culture can be subsumed into this category, but as not-men. They lack the wholeness imagined as belonging to men. Man and the self are overlapping categories. Woman exists in the space of the other, what man is not. Thus, the position of women as a subject in culture is always problematic. But subjectivity and social meaning is never fixed once and for all. It is negotiated as individuals experience themselves through relations of similarity with and difference from others. The mirror phase of identification and the acquisition of language together inscribe the self, whether male or female, as a split-subject, a subject in process, within a phallogocentric symbolic cultural order.

National identity can be understood within the terms of the imaginary and