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Luhmann's Australia:
upholding a racist Australian tradition

Frying Pan's Theology
Scene: On Monaro.
Dramatis Personae:
Shock headed blackfellow.
Boy (on a pony).
Snowflakes are falling.
So gentle and slow.
Youngster says: Frying Pan
What makes it snow?
Frying Pan, confident.
Makes the reply--
Shake 'em big flour bag
Up in the sky!
What when there's miles of it!
Surely that's brag.
Who is there strong enough
Shake such a bag?
What poison tellin' you,
Ole Mister Dodd,
Tell you in Sunday School?
Big feller God!
He drive his bullock dray.
Then thunder go.
He shake His flour bag--
Tumble down snow! (AB Paterson, 1893)

In 2009, when I visited the remote Northern NSW town of Bourke to research the trek made by Henry Lawson in 1892, I discovered an unacceptable level of racism toward Aborigines. Here are my first impressions:

It's a scary kind of place, this. Where I'm staying is like a little oasis at the back of the old London Bank Building, which incidentally was built in the late 1800s. The rooms surround a courtyard with green grass, tropical plants, hanging pots from the veranda, a fishpond in the middle (complete with lily pads) and a barbeque. I can see my self setting up my own garden this way, one day. It's rather practical and lovely at the same time, except there's a big tree that overhangs the roof, and every once in a while it drops a bunch of hard berries on the iron roof of the rooms. Maybe that's what woke me.

About 100kms out of town, as I was driving in, I had sense of foreboding. It was so strange, like I wanted to turn around and go back right now! I stopped at least three times feeling like, 'What the hell am I doing here?'

The whole area seemed to be pushing me back, and when I got here, that feeling was like the ocean roaring in my ears. All of the shops along this street on one side are locked up with roller doors so that, as you walk along the street you can't see inside. The buildings are all coated in red dust, and many are crooked and wonky. Lots of broken windows, or boarded up, and roofs sagging. It's as if the land is trying to suck the whole place into itself. There's a kind of contempt in the atmosphere which I don't know if I trust or the least, the rules concerning alcohol. You can buy it from across the street, as long as you drive there and back...

The following day I visited the supermarket across the street. The section selling alcohol was glassed in so that shoppers could see in at the rows of bottles and cans, but had to stand at a ticket-type counter to be served through a window. I asked the cashier about the rules concerning alcohol, why did I need a car to be able to make a purchase? It's to keep them from drinking on the streets, she told me. At the tourist information centre, I asked the assistant for directions to a historic pub, The Carriers Arms, where Henry Lawson is reputed to have spent many a thruppence on a long beer. The clerk gave me the directions and then
told me that there was not much of it left to see, the ferals had done it over. 'Ferals?' I asked. 'Between the ages of about ten and seventeen,' he said. He may not have been referring specifically to Aborigines, but, the only children I saw in the town had very dark skin.

Popular media reminds us of the Third World poverty of indigenous Australian people in isolated parts of Australia. I set out to investigate why and how racist attitudes and associated derogatory words survive within the Australian vernacular in an atmosphere of persistent debate over indigenous rights spanning many decades. Firstly, I want to discuss what I believe to be the origins of this Australian racist tradition in the context of the literature of Paterson and Lawson. Secondly, I will relate this tradition to popular culture of today in an attempt to understand why, in some centres, our attitudes have not progressed beyond those of Australia's iconic storytellers of the late 1800s.

As in Paterson's poem, 'Praying Paris Theology' (1893), the Oriental and the blackfellow Others are reduced to simple-minded and cartoon-like caricatures, films such as Australia contribute little to Australians' understanding of real indigenous culture, the complexity of indigenous identity and the associated problems between the indigenous and European Australians. Stereotypes and binary oppositions that the film upholds, support a Manichaean allegory that ensures a white supremacy is maintained outside the imagined world of film. The subtext of the film is the story of a national identity that is a white male hero. This identity is represented by traditional icons such as the drover and his wife as Aussie battlers, and by the heroic finale of the film in which the battlers succeed against all odds. In the film's reinstatement of a national identity, Aborigines are at best simplistic bystanders, and at worst, marketing merchandise for the promotion of an Australian national hero.

Changes are being implemented in many sectors of Australian life to include and acknowledge indigenous heritage, but there is still an element of racism that I believe needs investigating. This is still clearly evident in the mysterious and mythical outback, the very setting of the film Australia, and the setting for most of the writings of Paterson and Lawson.

Australians celebrate the writings of Lawson and Paterson in ways that reflect national pride. It is therefore difficult to discuss racism associated with their writings when they play such a significant role in the way in which Australians perceive their own identity. In 1977, Paterson's 'Waltzing Matilda' was amongst four songs put to the Australian public in a vote for a new national anthem. Australians continue to sing Waltzing Matilda with enthusiasm, and it is considered by popular culture as Australia's 'unofficial national anthem'. It is often used as the backdrop for popular Australian films such as The Man From Snowy River. In 2009, the Penguin Henry Lawson Classic was published to celebrate the writings of Henry Lawson. Although the purpose of the editor, John Kinsella, was to promote the writings of Henry Lawson, in his introduction to the Penguin Henry Lawson Classic, he brings Lawson's racism to the attention of readers:

I really struggle with Lawson's racism, for which there is no excuse. There are occasions when his very brief portraits of non-whites show some empathy, sympathy, or recognition of something outside subalternity, but largely this is not the case. I don't really know how in the end one can respect even the most astute writing of place as any more than a surface gesture where racism is part of the picture. Especially given that he's writing about an Australia constructed out of the destruction and dispossession of the traditional owners of the land.

With this assertion, Kinsella invites further debate on racism in those iconic texts, but the texts reflect the social attitude of the day. On the one hand, Kinsella is right. There is indeed no excuse for the racism in Henry Lawson's texts. Considering that Australia was colonised by the British, it is surprising to find that in 1911 the American civil rights activist, William Du Bois, wrote of a multicultural empire, proclaiming that 'London is polite and considerate to her darker brothers.' However, when the British migrated to Australia they were not polite or considerate to indigenous Australians; the treatment of Aborigines has been an issue of conflict and debate since before first settlement. The critic John Pilger has related that in 1837 a select committee of the House of Commons condemned the atrocities against Aborigines. An unbiased report by Quaker missionaries, discussing the 'immorality of colonialism' and
the inappropriate 'treatment of the rightful owners,' was circulated in 1843 and this report was ignored by powerful figures in both colonial and imperial spheres of influence. This attitude of abuse can be seen throughout commonwealth literatures, journals and newspapers, and, like his contemporaries, Henry Lawson shrugged it off and dismissed racism as somebody else's burden. Although, in 1965, Norman Lindsay was of the opinion that Lawson, who had visited Bourke in 1892, was deeply interested in the indigenous Australian people, a patronising and patriarchal stance is clearly evident.

I have one last visual memory of Lawson to record, and it is a pleasing one. I came on it in George Street, and it presented him in the company of a very old Abo and his lbuta. Henry was indulging an extravagant display of affection for them, shaking hands with them, patting them, giving them largesse from his pocket, and standing off to admire them, only to dart back and repeat the performance. He was also trying to talk with them, bending his ear to catch what words they may have uttered. I doubt he got much of those, the Abos would not know that only loud sounds could penetrate Henry's defective eardrums. They appeared to be rather bewildered by his ardent benevolence. He could not have enough of them. When he left them, it was only to turn in his tracks and dart back for another performance of handshaking and patting. It was easy to divine the motif of this outburst of nostalgic lyricism in Henry. The Abos were Australia absolute.

It was not until 1967 that Aborigines were considered citizens in their own country and were consequently counted in the census. Previously, it appears to have been generally accepted that Aborigines were considered to be Taana, as documented in 1893 by Herbert Gibson's Ironbark chips and stockwhip cracks. The repeated use of the word 'Abo' in the above passage is not surprising as it represents a patronising colloquialism that is disrespectful to indigenous pride. Whilst Lawson's postulations of enmity might be considered affectionate, his concern is dispassionate. According to Jim Graham's 1931 reflection, Henry Lawson merely observes a dying race' from an objective distance.

... we reached the Waaaring-Bourke road, and camped for a couple of days at a small wayside pub, called Gumbale. It was there, I think, that Lawson saw the first time aboriginals in a semi-wild state. That is to say, a big camp of them together - depending mostly on game and fish for an existence. A few of them came to our camp, expecting, I suppose, tucker and tobacco. They got a little of both. Before they were with us long, Lawson showed signs of great excitement, and said: 'They're a dying race, Jim, and they know it. I can read it in their eyes - I can read it in their eyes.'

Aborigines were commonly regarded as a dying race, and so Henry Lawson's observation was not unusual for the time. In Bain Attwood's theory of Aboriginalism, Aborigines were constructed as the 'primitive other,' this attitude allowing the colonizers to see themselves as modern. Lawson's desire to be modern and connected with the civilized world, might explain the oscillation between Lawson's affection for, and dispassion toward Aborigines, but his writings often favour an attitude of mistrust of the other. Although he was overtly affectionate, Lawson's language and insinuations are not far removed from those of Paterson who reported on the condition of a white Australia for his pamphlet Australia for the Australians (1899).

Paterson was an early proponent of the concept of one Australia with the unsupported notion that a nation must consist of a single dominating race. This form of racism is perpetuated by Australians who, with the help of recent misinformed politicians such as Pauline Hanson, cling to an illogical misconception of a One Nation meaning a white nation with one language. This attitude is reminiscent of a tradition of imperial supremacy that invades our consciousness through cultural images in films such as Australia that reproduce traditional fictions based on the works of Paterson and of Lawson.

It is the responsibility of contemporary historical creative writers, be it of film or of narrative fiction, to avoid re-affirming the attitudes of our past. Unfortunately, racism will continue to be supported and reiterated as long as a certain form of historic writing and civilization of racist writers is supported by films that glorify us against them.
Luhrmann’s film, *Australia*, is a restatement of the way in which white settlers possessed the land and marginalised Aborigines. In terms of imperial domination over any colonized Other, the Palestinian critic Edward Said pointed out that to tell a simple national story therefore is to repeat, extend, and also to engender new forms of imperialism. *Australia* revisits a traditional proud view of Australians that has emerged from images depicting of a bronzed and galloping drover derived from Paterson’s romantic poetry and the struggling determined bushwoman depicted in Lawson’s short story, ‘The Drover’s Wife’. Australia assaults viewers with stereotypes and overused scenes reminiscent of those we have come to recognise in Australian traditional fiction, and of cartoon-like images that reflect the pages of the *Bulletin* of the era of the late 1800s to early 1900s.

Images that draw us back to the imagined romanticism of the late 1800s abound in *Australia*. King George is a caricature replicating Lawsons image of the ‘stray blackfellow … the last of his tribe and a King’ in the image of King Billy of the *Bulletin* cartoons from the 1890s, standing almost naked, except for loincloth and headband, on top of a hill tending a bonfire. Likewise, the episode relating Lady Sarah Ashley’s night of terror, when she spends the night cowering inside a leaky bush hut while a young boy sings, and the ominous appearance of Fletchers crocodile skin boots, visible only through the crack under the door, all remind us of ‘The Drover’s Wife’. At Faraway Downs, the station Chinese cook conveniently named Sing Song sits obscurely in the dark, looking pensive and wise as he sucks on an opium pipe, reminding us of Paterson’s prophetic tale, ‘Frying Pan’. And when Lady Ashley is at the peak of her troubles the drover gallops up on his trusty steed like a character from ‘The Man from Snowy River’, wheeling a mob of wild mountain brumbies. But as pointed out by Germaine Greer, the caricatures we see in the film are never developed and remain so throughout the film as stereotypes. Such filmic stereotypes were once described by Graeme Turner as ‘single-dimensional but colourfull characters that were metonyms for a particular aspect of Australian life’, and are nothing like today’s multi-cultural Australian, reinforcing an image of Australia represented only from the perspective of the invaders who had created the Other to support current white supremacy.

Clearly, *Australia* is an example of how Aboriginalism works within a national narrative to re-establish a form of national identity and this construct is used as a means by which white-controlled industry can continue to rule over Aborigines. When stereotypes are used as a means of construction of the Other identity to define our own identity as separate, the real person is never articulated and a relationship between a race that has been artificially constructed and the race who constructed that identity cannot be properly formulated. The relationship, as Macia Langton has stated, is then not between actual people, but between white Australians and the symbols created in the stories told by their predecessors. As pointed out by JanMohamed, when the Other is de-identified as a human individual, the European writer, or in this case, the Australian writer, is then able to reduce the subject to an exchangeable entity, or a commodity which is ‘fed into the Manichean allegory; which functions as the currency, the medium of exchange, for the entire colonialist discursive system’. The colonialist discursive system prevails in certain Australian fictions because Australian national pride depends on a Manichean allegory that not only supports the actions of our ancestors, but protects the interests of the present and into the future.

The film makers could not simply re-write the historiography of the film *Australia* from the perspective of the Other because many Australians continue to identify with a racist past that supports current Australian politics and industry. Henry Reynolds realized in 1990 that although the history of the Australian Indigenous peoples was already being re-examined, a completely ‘new historiography’ would be difficult to attain since the ramifications would significantly alter our view of Australia’s past and present. National pride is contingent on the historically recognised voice of the heroic settler over riding the voice of the Indigenous Other. If the voice of that Other is asserted, the hierarchy is threatened, which has further implications on the ownership of land, and on the control and use of knowledge pertaining to Aborigines. Both the producers of the film, and the Australian Tourism industry benefited substantially from the perceived ownership of the Australian
outback territory and from the controlled use of the knowledge about Aboriginal heritage.

Germaine Greer referred to the film as a ‘fantasy’, and indeed the film depicts an idealized alternative to the painful era of the Stolen Generations, an alternative in which the Aborigines in the film appear to be complicit by virtue of their silence and their apparent adhesion and mateship with the Drover. Unlike The Rabbit Proof Fence, in which Aborigines write, narrate and act out the pain associated with losing a child removed from their family, the Aborigines in Australia are almost voiceless, and for the most part during the film, they appear contented and happy. Even though Australia is narrated by the child, Nulla, the words are written for him by white writers, and he is depicted as being clearly excited about having been adopted by a European family. Despite the availability of his grandfather and extended family to care for him, whilst Australia purports to somehow expose and unflinch the barbarity of the Aboriginal Protection Agency, Nulla is given agency and escapes the clutches of the Aboriginal Protection Board. It is only temporarily, and in the process of doing so his mother is drowned in a water tank and Nulla is then forced back into the arms of waiting European mother, as played by Nicole Kidman. Even in this sense, Australia simply confirms and maintains Australia’s racist past because it tells the story from the perspective of white Australian history.

Australia confirms a strong adherence to a binary code that concedes the triumph of white colonization. It is clear that Baz Luhrmann drew his inspiration from such films as Jeddah, whose white protagonist, is also named Sarah, and The Overlanders, and claims to have been influenced by other epic films such as Gone with the Wind. Lady Sarah Ashley mirrors this connection, and even The African Queen, and all these films depict of strong colonial bonds that pit white skin against black skin in either a patriarchal and patronising manner such as in The African Queen, or a violent manner as in Jeddah, or with a backdrop of war such as in Gone with the Wind.

From the outset, Australia sets up oppositional forces that demonstrate the superiority of the motherland. This story began in a land far away.

That land called England says Nulla, emphasising the syllables in the word ‘England’ in a whispering voice that romanticises that mysterious country as somewhere magical and faraway. The England in Australia is the good England, the part of England that was apparently not responsible for the evils inflicted on the indigenous peoples. This is the England that will fix all the wrongs and make up for the pain that is now embodied in the phrase ‘the stolen generations’. We know this because the opening credits tell us that this is the intention of the film. There were no such magical healers in 1939 in which the film is set and if there were, today’s Australian Aborigines would not be suffering Treponema disease and poverty in contrast to the majority of healthy white Australians. As Greer has acutely observed that there would have been no Stolen Generations if white man had kept his hands off women (2008). The film, however, exonerates the general population of decent white males by portraying the father of a half-caste child as the stereotyped villain. A film that glorifies a racist past, and that draws on historically racist stories that simplify oppositional forces to comic book proportions, cannot be expected to heal the current uncertain relationship between white and black Australians.

To its credit, all effort is made within the film to re-create a historically accurate picture of Australia’s attempt at assimilation, but it does nothing toward negating the affects of that invasion of privacy, in fact it supports further discrimination. Whilst we now know that a white version of history has been scrutinized by critics such as Atwood to reveal that ‘The moral legitimacy of British possession of the land’ has long been brought into question by highlighting the means by which this was achieved... that a ‘New Australian history’ needs to be changed beyond recognition, has not been achieved, a notion also articulated by the historian Henry Reynolds. Australia does not change history beyond our recognition, it glorifies white settlement and the main white actors and characters emerge as the heroes of the production. The drover and the drover’s wife are icons of Australian history and one that present Australians recognise very well, but it is a history that has always denied indigenous agency.

As previously mentioned, the historical bush hero does not exist
in a vacuum, but constitutes the Self in relation to the subordinate silent Other. Provided the Other remains visible as a stereotype, and yet silent, white culture is able to capitalize on the subject Other as a useful commodity. The stereotype derives from a perceived indigenous heritage, based only on facets of their culture, such as artefacts like spears and boomerangs, and on oversimplified notions of their heritage such as Dreamtime and walkabout. Bain Attwood points out that Tourism Australia has long been aware that the promotion of indigenous art and heritage not only served the interests of nationalism, but also some forms of capital as well. The images of Aborigines in Australia served as a catalyst for Australian industry promotion when Tourism Australia produced a special edition magazine in order to promote tourism to Australia. Drawing directly from the film, Tourism Australia uses these stereotypical images to promote Aboriginal people as cartoon-like images, ignoring the complexities of a race of people.

Australian Government agencies of today continue to support the underlying racism in the film Australia. Racism in Australia comes in the form of representations that are created outside of indigenous agency, and are used not only as a form of control but as a means of income for Australian industry. As Geoff Buckley, the Managing Director for Tourism Australia claimed:

Australian indigenous people have an ancient living culture that spans over 50,000 years. Aboriginal knowledge is spiritual. It connects people with their land through art, dance, music, secret stories and ritual journeys into the mysteries known as the Dreamtime. When ancestral spirits came to Earth and created all things. In those wondrous outback landscapes you will see visual reminders of the Dreamtime spirits’ journeys everywhere.

At first glance, the passage appears to be benign, and conscientious of indigenous heritage, but Aborigines are combined with a notion of landscape constructed from a Western perspective that serves the purposes of Australian capitalism. Even though areas such as Kakadu and Uluru are listed as heritage sites to ostensibly protect Aboriginal heritage, as Attwood has discerned, the tourist industry has recognized the financial potential of places that could be presented as both natural and old. Thornton has demonstrated how indigenous motifs are glossed and packaged for tidy consumerism that ignores the reality of Australia’s abuse and neglect of the indigenous peoples, such as the promotion of the town of Alice Springs that is ‘sold as five hundred billion dollar tourism town’ while it hides reality behind rocks and under Spinifex. Tourism restricts access to truth and displaces indigenous experience with a saleable product that is manufactured from the raw material of basic knowledge.

The phrase ‘Aboriginal knowledge is spiritual’ is deceptive. It alludes to the spirituality for which Aborigines are known, but the knowledge is white Australia’s construction of that spirituality. The construction of a certain framework for Aboriginality is built on this knowledge of, but not on experience of, indigenous spirituality. These intentions of power are clear in Buckley’s promotion because he classifies Aborigines as Australia’s Indigenous people. This implies ownership and control that undermines Aboriginal experience and agency. Using a condensed Aboriginality that is directly derived from tropes used in the film Australia. Buckley’s promotion for Tourism Australia contains evocative and romantic words such as ‘spiritual’, ‘secret stories’ ‘mysteries and Dreamtime’. By linking the film’s construction of Australia with a naturalized public image of Australia the country, the tourism industry is able to seduce overseas visitors into visiting the ‘outback’ to study and scrutinize that which belongs to Australia’s indigenous people. The Aboriginal within the landscape is promoted as something spectacular to see in which Aboriginal people are reduced to mere tourist attractions. Like Lawson’s Abos and Paterson’s rabbits, Aborigines are constructed as a form of unique wildlife.

Tourism is an industry from which Aborigines rarely benefit, since many Aborigines, including some of the actors in the film, continue to live in poverty. The indigenous Australian actors from the film are diminished and segregated to the background of the promotion. While Jackman’s image appears nine times in the brochure and Kilmor’s image appears ten times, Aboriginal actor, Brandon Walter’s image appears twice, including the cover picture and in the film poster with
his face obscured by Jackman, and David Gulpilil's image appears
thrice, though diminished, in the background to the left of the image.
Within the brochure, there is no representation of the
Aboriginals who still live in the Kimberley and outback of Australia,
and to this day continue to suffer debilitating diseases and third-world
poverty.

It is strange to imagine that Australia was produced in the same
year that reconciliation was foremost on the minds of Australians. Even
after Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's apology in 2008, Australia seems to
have made little progress toward reconciliation. The 2008 apology by the
newly appointed Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, did not appease some
commentators such as Gary Foley who argues that the emotion of the
apology will ensure that it becomes inherent in Australian mythology
as another untruth about 'how wonderfully they have always treated
the Aboriginal people'. Amongst others, Foley is offended by the
language within the speech, stating that the apology refers only to the
Stolen Generations and does not identify the actions of repressive
administrations, protection boards or other hardships that Aboriginal
people have had to live through.

It is important that narratives attempt to avoid reversing the
dynamics of Them and Us, thus becoming complicit in a binary code
that antagonises conflict rather than conciliation. There are some
instances in Australia when an attempt is made to give agency to the
Aborigines against oppressive Australian laws and racist restrictions.
Magarr, the drovers' Aboriginal companion, played by the indigenous
Australian actor David Ngoombujarra, is continually denied access to
the public bar. The drover eventually demands that Magarr be allowed
to drink in the bar, and demands that he be allowed to use a glass instead
of the tin pannikin reserved for Aborigines. The fact remains, however,
that the overarching thematic of the film is a position of authority and
subordination that always concludes in the return of authority to the
quintessential white Australian. Like Rudd's apology, the film consists
of a face value that disguises an undercurrent of a much deeper sense
of adherence to a past of unrestrained patriotism that also restricts
and binds Aborigines within an ideology that supports control over
them. Like Lawson's affection for Aborigines, the film and the speech
might both be perceived as having a patronising effect. Foley may well
be justified in his claims that the apology is 'yet another fraud in the
long line of historically fraudulent acts and dishonest gestures' by the
Australian Government as a means of 'deception, duplicity, deceit'.

Due to the ubiquitous nature of European imperialism, a Manichaean
ideology is upheld by the auspices of the good Australian, which
seeps through humanity and purports to contain the laws that support
the basic principles of civilization. Films like Australia uphold this
ideology by supporting the concept of good over evil, which equates
to white over black, which equates to life over death, and therefore
ultimately ends in the legitimised subjugation and backgrounding
of anything that isn't good and purely white. While in Australia, young
Nulla is eventually released back into the wild, dispensed with, the
white heroes ride off into the sunset, cleansed of their sins exonerating
the Us of Australian nation. In real life, the indigenous Australian
actors are used as promotional tools, movie merchandise, and are
ridiculed as they have always been by the likes of Lawson and Paterson
and then they are forgotten.

Meanwhile, towns like Bourke are underpinned by a Manichaean
battle for supremacy, and none more vivid and obvious than in a place
where the skin colour of the local descendants is darker than any in the
cities or more southern towns where they blend in more readily,
and where they have been more thoroughly assimilated. Whites board
themselves up with high fences and gates like the one around the oasis
in which I stayed. Our cultural representations that are supposed to
help facilitate conciliation in fact support racial antagonism. It is a racist
past and instead of being re-told, ought to be closely examined
so that our contemporary writers do not simply re-state the past and
make the same mistakes as those made by our historical writers which
support past, present and future discrimination and atrocities.