

Marcia Langton

Germaine Greer's *Whitefella Jump Up* proposes a whimsical solution to the immaturity and rawness of Australian nationhood and national identity. In her extended lament for "white" Australia's lack of a sense of belonging to its expropriated homeland, she contends that if white Australians could accept their "ineradicable and inherent Aboriginality" (this "characteristic of the continent itself"), they will be "truly self-governing and independent". Greer is embarrassed by persistent genuflections towards the British and the Americans, exasperated with the specious British ethnicity to which many "white" Australians cling, and disappointed by their failure to forge a full-blown identity that would anchor them in this continent. She wants Australians to acknowledge formally, in a nation-remaking gesture, that they have inherited an assortment of Aboriginal characteristics absorbed by their frontier forefathers in close and friendly contact with Aboriginal people.

I do not subscribe to the view that expatriates have no right to enunciate their views about the state of the homeland, but the niggling doubt about Greer's depth of engagement with matters at home frays my commitment to the right to free speech in this case. Essentialist ideas about identity – for instance that a person's or a nation's identity is shaped by "race" – have permeated Australian life since the idea of an Australian nation was invented in the late nineteenth century. Simply to flip the foundation of the nation from a fundamentally White identity to a Black one is to remain trapped by the racism on which the nation was founded in 1901. Alfred Deakin judged that the strongest motive for federation was "the desire that we should be one people, and remain one people, without the admixture of other races". Race was a key constitutional issue in 1900 when the drafters of the Australian Constitution excluded Aborigines from the ambit of this founding document in order to prevent surviving post-frontier Aboriginal populations from affecting the parliamentary representation of the states and financial distributions by the Commonwealth

to the states. In a recent case the High Court of Australia has found that one of its provisions can be read in such a way as to permit government actions that work to the detriment of Aboriginal people. Admitted neither as nations nor as citizens, Aboriginal peoples have been the subjects of an extraordinary history of policy experimentation, much of it predicated on the belief that the first Australians would disappear.

What is astonishing about Dr Greer's essay is the absence of any substantial reference to the "big picture" ideas for a postcolonial Australia during the last decade and their defeat at the polls by neo-conservatives who lured the electorate into voting against an Australian head of state and abhorred the idea of reconciliation with Aborigines together with Keating-style engagement with Asia and the Pacific. The history of removing Aboriginal children from their families is briefly mentioned, but this is incidental to a curiously over-emphasised sexual history of the Australian nation. One might read Greer's main contention as a way of bypassing just how ugly the rejection of the "big picture" was – this was the period marked by Pauline Hanson's rise to fame – and of holding instead to a brighter vision in order to beguile readers with nice arguments that draw on evidence from Australian literature, that speculate on the influence of Aboriginal languages on the Australian way of talking and on the origin in Aboriginal culture of the supposed Australian preference for egalitarianism.

Were the arguments and the vision itself more persuasive, the essay might be a serious challenge to the severely diminished idea of the nation presently proposed by contenders from both the Right and the Left. But Greer seems to be ignorant of an enormous body of fictional and non-fictional writing, cinema and art that has tackled this topic in a variety of regions and periods. For instance, she seems to have failed to notice that the last three decades have produced a body of historical literature which has made possible a much more robust idea of the past from which Australians need not shrink in denial, but which, if wrestled with honestly, lays the foundations for a new story of the nation. But there are also some particularly vicious ideas circulating at present which reinforce the old myth of a nation forged, so the assertion goes, by God-fearing men of restraint. As a consequence, this profoundly important new literature is presently under heavy attack by Keith Windschuttle and other patriotic warriors from the *Quadrant* fold who claim to be concerned with the craft of history, but these matters appear not to concern Dr Greer.

While Greer's idea is a far more pleasant one than that proposed by the present prime minister in his 1996 Menzies Lecture, it is just as tendentious. Where Howard's view of the nation's history is expedient, with its forelock-tugging to

Brave Pioneers and Little Aussie Battlers traduced and silenced by the brigade of wicked, black armband-wearing thought police, Greer's idea is a weak tonic for this shallowness of identity, treating the infirmity with symbolic medicine rather than efficacious antidote. Where Howard was concerned "to ensure that our history as a nation is not written definitively by those who take the view that Australians should apologise for most of it", Greer has drafted an idea of the nation that equally circumvents the horrible fate of Aboriginal people during that history, and for which some act of restitution from the settler state, such as an apology, is still required, if only to state an intention to refuse to allow such acts to happen again. This, I believe, is the secret at the heart of all the sneakily coded references to the idea of the nation expressed by opponents of Patrick Dodson's vision: their motives are dubious. Or, at least, that is the threat that hovers before those of us who embrace our Aboriginality with pride.

The greatest weakness of Germaine Greer's essay is its zany disconnectedness. Aboriginal societies were pushed to the brink of extinction, and yet the evidence for the Aboriginal influence on Australia culture is valorised in Greer's essay with no mention of the disappearance of Aboriginal languages and the loss of cultural knowledge with the passing of the last generations who were brought up in the bush. For instance, her argument that the Australian accent derives from Aboriginal nannies teaching white children to speak and Aboriginal people influencing their white mates' nasalised vowels as they yarned around the campfire is an example of simple inductivism, fitting a few scraps of literary evidence to feminist psychological theory. The comments about the influence of "corroborees" on Australian history are fascinating but not sufficiently supported by the evidence presented (though there is evidence, some of which is discussed in Henry Reynolds' *With the White People*).

While Greer's literary training allows her to sustain such romantic, if eccentric notions, linguistic research tells us that the 250 Aboriginal languages that existed at the time of British settlement have been reduced to less than fifty. All but a handful of Aboriginal languages will be extinct within fifty years. This is largely because Aboriginal people were forced to speak English instead of their own languages. With the exception of a few missionaries and linguists, few Australians have learnt to speak an Aboriginal language. Aboriginal children were not allowed to speak their native tongues at school and were punished for doing so. Aboriginal languages are the truly Australian languages, and constitute a precious heritage. Conserving Aboriginal languages by teaching them in schools in the vicinity of the relevant linguistic communities would be a splendid Australian gesture in the right direction. If *Whitefella Jump Up* has a lasting value

it might lie in the power of Greer's appeal to Australians to embrace Aboriginal culture as their own. There has been plenty of cultural diffusion in Australian history as in any other. The impetus for Australians to value Aboriginal culture might arise from a sense of this culture as being a part of their own heritage and their own historical legacy, not just that of exoticised and demonised others.

In the search for a sense of gravitas to underpin their "national identity", Australians seem doomed to suffer one caricature after another, one more "prawn on the barbie", one more cry from the heart and yet another diagnosis of the imagined crisis. All the while, of course, there have been some appealing and singular expositions of common themes, some of them textured and nuanced in the articulation, in the ideas about what it means to belong to a nation.

As Hugh Mackay and other students of the "national mood" attest, there is a far greater variegation and complexity to the construction of the "Nation" than newspaper columnists, politicians and ideologues ever dream of. And there is a dizzying range of differences – generational, regional, economic, educational, ethnic, cultural – to contend with. Greer's vision of Australians somehow coming to adopt "their" Aboriginality is simply at odds with the facts of life in our country today. It's a vision that expresses the needy idealism of the baby boomer generation, one of waning relevance to the younger generations of Australian intellectuals who lack the sentimentalism of Greer and her cohort and who are assuming ascendancy in public life.

With their access to a global market that empowers them as more than mere consumers, younger urban Australians are cyber-citizens, at once cosmopolitan and networked. They are able to relate to the Aboriginal world in a less troubled way than their parents and they are almost oblivious to Australia's blinding colonial legacy of white supremacy and race hatred. Their images of the Aboriginal world are not the images of monochromatic misery that their parents see, but a heady mix of politics, sport and culture. They are familiar with a pageant of Aboriginal people who are talented, capable and attractive and who function as filmmakers, musicians, dancers, artists, writers, sports stars, intellectuals and actors. The reality and variety of the Aboriginal world is available to them as it never was to their parents. And for that reason they do not need to invent an Australia wrapped up in Aboriginal symbolism. But I do not want to overstate the case. They are less tolerant of the welfare approach to Aboriginal disadvantage, though they are also, to be fair, less niggardly than their parents' generation. They are arguably the true advocates of the "fair go", because their sense of fairness tells them that everyone should take responsibility for their

own fate to the extent that they can. To this extent, Noel Pearson represents the views of a younger Australia as much as he represents those of young Aboriginal people.

The national literature of the '60s lecture hall

Greer's heavy reliance on "classical" Australian literary fiction is redolent of the late 1960s and the sense of protest at the colonial legacy of Australian literature. She critiques the references to Aboriginal people in Henry Lawson, Tom Collins and Mary Durack, and finds fair deeds and foul. Like Toni Morrison on Mark Twain, she does a good job of exposing one-eyed racism and of exalting the humanity of people who come alive on the pages of literature without the ideological drag of "race". But it's a limited sense of Australian literary history Greer exhibits. True, she cites Frank Moorhouse, Thomas Keneally, Sally Morgan, Mudrooroo, Tim Flannery and other modern writers, but we are left with the distinct impression that Australian literary life shrivelled after she left Sydney for London. What about David Malouf (*The Conversations at Curlow Creek*), Richard Flanagan (*Death of a River Guide*), Tim Winton (*Dirt Music*), Rodney Hall (*The Island in the Mind* trilogy), Murray Bail (*Eucalyptus*)? Apparently, Greer has not noticed that a distinctive Australian settler voice that speaks of a deepening attachment to place and locality as the core of identity has emerged in Australian literature. While Greer boasts of her adoption by people of the Kulin nation, other Australians are trying hard to adopt their own backyards and take responsibility for their history, their environment and the inheritance of their own racism. Books such as Nicholas Rothwell's *Wings of the Kite-Hawk*, Peter Read's *Belonging: Australians, Place and Aboriginal Ownership*, Eric Rolls' *A Million Wild Acres* and George Seddon's *Landprints: Reflections on Place and Landscape* attest to the various degrees of success Australians have had in explaining their intimate and variegated relationships with place, locality and history. The point is that the Aboriginal attachment to places inherited from many generations of ancestors and shaped by kinship, descent, culture and religion, does not preclude settlers from engaging with the land they love. Is it really necessary to claim a few threads of Aboriginality in order to affirm that experience? Might it not be more honourable to acknowledge frankly the frontier history that gave the white Australians their ascendancy, their control of the land and resources that have made them so wealthy. In this respect James Boyce's essay in Robert Manne's recent collection *Whitewash* is crucially important. Boyce tackles Keith Windschuttle's nasty tome, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History: Volume One*. His conclusion suggests the sheer difficulty involved in the debate about the character of the Australian

nation and the complexity of the responsibility involved, towards whites as well as Aborigines:

Many will understandably want to ignore Windschuttle's book dismissing it as either very bad academic history or a poisonous political tract, both of which are true. But in the end, the Tasmanian community will need to find a language and a framework – as other groups have been forced to do – to deal with the material in the text that is not concerned with academic debate but constitutes a slander on the custodians and creators of our land. This is not just up to Aborigines or activists: some respect for those almost-timeless generations who lived and developed this island before us is surely beyond race or politics; it simply flows from a love of the place.

While Dr Greer's essay proposes a way for Australians to engage with Australia as a homeland, however ludicrous her central idea may seem, it is at least a vision that does not spring from hate. But it does skim lightly over the surface of the troubling issues Boyce contends with, and while it would be churlish to say that her essay is insulting, it nevertheless is necessary to say that the ease of her solution is exasperating in its triviality.

If Australians are concerned about national identity, then it seems to me that the history of Aboriginal-settler relations is as good a place as any to search for something worth constructing. But what can we make of what our intellectuals find in their quest for a history? Greer finds such commonality between Aborigines and "whites" that she recommends that "white" people declare their nation Aboriginal. Windschuttle finds only the most primitive people on earth, incapable of owning land, who seem to have asked for it so that it was the most natural thing in the world that they should die out. The challenge is there in these two facile conclusions. It is the challenge for settler Australians of recognising that Aboriginal people are fully human beings and the further challenge of recognising the value in the differences between our cultures and societies in such a way that everyone can own the civil society we share and, if you like, the "national identity" we yearn for with an equal cause and an equal commitment. This challenge goes under the label of "Reconciliation".

But we should be fair to Germaine Greer. Even if her essential idea is flawed with a romantic notion of race, Dr Greer's contribution throws into stark relief some of the myths that underpin the difficulty of overcoming the inherited frontier hatred that continues to drive racist discourse in Australian public life.

Her essay leaves me pondering the question, of whether, in the end, a post-colonial patriotism is even possible. Is it possible that Australians will one day recognise the nations enclosed within their Commonwealth, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations from whose homelands a recreant and uncomprehending nation has been carved?

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