

Tony Birch

It would not be difficult to dismiss Germaine Greer's *Whitefella Jump Up*. Several commentators have already done so, with aggressive relish. Her essay is not only forearmed for ridicule, it predicts it. And in consideration of Greer's feistiness, I am sure that it welcomes it.

The writing in *Whitefella* does highlight some of Greer's faults. Its engagement with contemporary Australian political and cultural life is at times vague and is reliant on highly questionable generalisations, while its reading of Australia's colonial past leads to some poorly considered conclusions. For instance, Greer explains some of the psychological forces that drove early colonial violence and acts of dispossession in Australia as a result of "the British elite" having quite possibly "caught the madness from the Irish". This particular madness turns out to be a pathology that denied both the *legal* and human presence of indigenous peoples in Australia and was born of the effects of the dispossession and subjugation of the Irish themselves by the British in their homeland.

The British didn't need the Irish or any other colonised nation to teach them the art of violent conquest. Nor was their adherence to the preposterous notion of *terra nullius* (reproduced *ad nauseam* through narratives of denial) fed by any madness or ignorance. This interpretation was the invention of melancholic poets and novelists, their inspiration being that peculiar form of imperialist nostalgia present in Western colonial societies from the mid-nineteenth century and arising in the period following the "successful" conquest of the invaded.

When the British aristocrat Granville William Chetwynd Stayplton accompanied the Chief Surveyor of the colony of New South Wales, Major Thomas Mitchell, through what was to become the western district of Victoria in 1836, he wrote that the land was "at present worth sixty millions to the Exchequer of England" and that it would result in a "good fat grant" for the discoverers (i.e. himself and Mitchell). This expedition ended with the murder of several indigenous men and the explorers' mapping of, and consequent claim to, the landscape

that led to the widespread invasion of indigenous country. Greer's view of this period of colonial history, for all its apparent critical tone, in fact romanticises settler violence and ignores the more systematic, orderly and sanctioned processes of colonisation, which were fed more by the imperatives of capitalist/imperialist expansion than by any desire to reconstruct "home" that might spring from loneliness, emotional absence and anxiety.

And it would not be difficult to pick over *Whitefella Jump Up* and highlight other instances where Greer appears to lack a serious engagement with Australia, past and present. But to do so would be to ignore other aspects of the essay that I consider to be of value at a political moment when the status of indigenous communities in Australia has been pushed to the margins once more, led by a federal government determined to recolonise the indigenous body within a nominally post-colonial nation.

While the concluding sentence of Greer's essay consists of the single word "Think" it is clear that she is well aware that her comments will do little more than add to the tendency of some people in Australia to "think" that Germaine Greer is quite mad.

Greer may well be mad. But if we are going to have madness I prefer Greer's to that of those charged with the administration of this country's "commitment" to the rights of indigenous communities. Greer may be suffering from a provocative madness, a political, even a cheeky madness that will win her few friends. But better Greer's "craziness" (as she calls it) than the psychosis that continues to demean indigenous people in Australia and which enforces a proactive discrimination against indigenous people before informing those very people that their suffering and disadvantage is of their own making. The "Aboriginal problem" here is the creation of "the Aborigines" themselves, who have enacted their own dispossession because of their inherent laziness or dysfunctionality.

It could also be argued that Greer's central thesis, that there is a need to "Aboriginalise" the Australian nation, is little more than a shallow appropriation of indigenous culture and identity. If interpreted literally, it is so, without doubt. Of itself, it is not a new idea. Manifestations of the "white Aborigine" have occurred throughout Australian history, sometimes as attempts to appropriate indigenous culture for commercial gain or to conjure into being a spiritual attachment and "belonging" to the land.

But Greer's proposal does more than this. She encourages white Australia to think beyond these merely comfortable constructions because of the explicitness with which she asks people to conceive of their "Aboriginality". It is the very impossibility and unlikelihood of the process of self-examination she suggests

non-Aboriginal Australia undergo that *could* produce a constructive dialogue about identity in Australia and a new understanding of this country's history of colonialism. As an idea, as a utopian ideal (which may represent Greer's frustrated response to the current state of the nation), this central point of the essay may provide a needful stimulation to how we think of the psyche of non-Aboriginal Australia.

Greer directs her commentary to her "white countrymen", those whom she considers to be the problem, the obstacle to any attempt to facilitate Australia's development as a mature and inclusive nation. Therefore as an Aboriginal (and for once, as an "unproblematic" reader) I was most interested (and amused) to wonder how Greer's country folk would respond to her provocation that they take a good hard look at themselves in the mirror and repeat, "I live in an Aboriginal country." Once they get over the initial shock, she suggests that settler-Australians take a second look and convince themselves with this mantra that, "I was born in an Aboriginal country, therefore I must be considered Aboriginal."

It certainly sounds like stealing an indigenous identity. But Greer's challenge is both more astute and more subtle than that. I imagine that many people will want to dismiss Greer because they do not want to look in the mirror. And while a lot of them may not want to be "considered" Aboriginal in the true sense, they will find it discomfiting to consider more closely their own identity and its complicity in the effort to dispossess indigenous people. I don't know if this was Greer's intention, nor do I think it matters whether it was or not.

She is, after all, responsible for the fact that I can let my imagination run with the prospect of how to bear witness to her invitation to the nation and what might be done in response. I would like to accept the role of the voyeur, or perhaps the psychiatrist who is allowed to hide behind the one-way mirror of colonialism and watch as a John Howard or a Pauline Hanson has to chant, "I live in an Aboriginal country ... I live in an Aboriginal country." I wonder how "relaxed and comfortable" the Prime Minister would feel about that?

Not only would white Australia have to look at itself in Greer's mirror, it would have to look more directly at the face of black Australia as well. In the post-war era of the Aboriginal reserves and missions system in Victoria, the residents of the Lake Tyers Aboriginal Reserve in Gippsland were faced with a daily humiliation. The manager's office at the reserve was constructed in such a way that when people visited the manager they could not see his face while they stood at the enquiries desk. Because of an elaborate system of mirrors in the office the manager could see the Aboriginal people but they could not see him, they could not confront his image, and therefore the manager did not have to confront himself either.

Those who are prepared to do as Greer requests will not find their “Aboriginality” in the mirror. The exercise will not be a journey to what Greer imagines as “the shortest way to nationhood”. But if the viewers are prepared to look closely enough they may see something that will at least present questions about what it really is that goes to make up “nationhood” and what sort of nation it is that allows its elected government to treat indigenous people the way that the Australian nation-state does. If the white Australian tries to find his Aboriginal face in the mirror, he may come to see his own face as the face of the oppressor.

In his most recent book, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, the African-American scholar Robin Kelley discusses aspects of the history of the black civil rights struggle in America with particular reference to some of the more utopian and idealistic sections of the movement. Kelley concludes his book with the articulation of his own “freedom dream”; he puts forward the idea that “ground zero”, the site of the World Trade Center towers collapse in New York, should be an “international territory”, that the land should “belong to the world and thus should not be privatized”. The site would also stand as an emblem in recognition of Native American “first nations” people and would symbolically represent them as the people of the New York area. Kelley admits that his dream “will never happen without a struggle” but still he passionately defends his right to own “the space to imagine” and to create this “vision”.

There is so little constructive vision in Australia at the moment. We are asked to provide sanctuary to those refugees who risk death in order to gain freedom for themselves and their families, and we respond with fences to keep them out and to lock them up. That is a seriously mad idea. Another one is the idea that indigenous communities who have had almost everything they possess taken from them should be asked to labour for next to no wages apart from subsistence dole money. That is not a visionary position. That is a new version of the poor-house and it represents the rebirth of one of the most repressive ideas of the past.

So, with such architects of violence in mind, I have to acknowledge that Germaine Greer has provided this “dear reader” with a piece of strategic insanity that can infuriate and stimulate at the same time. Tomorrow morning when I look in the mirror before shaving I am going to repeat to myself, “You are living in a just society ... You are living in a just society.” I know that I will not believe myself. But I hope that the exercise at least makes me wonder what it is we should be doing to create that just society.

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