Ideology Reiterated
The Uses of Aboriginal Oral Narrative

But as there is no such thing as an innocent reading, we must say what reading we are guilty of.¹

I Structuralism vs Poststructuralism

The structuralist study of narrative makes explicit claims for the universality of the phenomenon. Roland Barthes, for instance, in his famous "Introduction," writes: "Like life itself, it is there, international, transhistorical, transcultural."² And yet, in the same article, he allows for rather less "universalised" grounds for the interpretation of narrative: "Narration can indeed receive its meaning only from the world which makes use of it" (p. 264), and further, "any narrative is contingent upon a 'narrative situation', or body of protocols according to which the narrative is 'consumed'" (265).

The universalism of the structuralist study of narrative derives from the linguistic bases of this type of reading. Linguistic analysis can be described as an activity which rewrites parole as langue; that is, it reorders linguistic data which is recorded, removed from the situation of utterance and ordered as formal systems of signs. In this way, stories are established as having a syntax and their character and plot functions are projected on to the usual syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes. This formalism has tended to reduce, progressively, the number of elements seen as being basic to narrative structure until, in 1978, Tzvetan Todorov decided there were only two. His essay "The Two Principles of the Story" identified succession and transformation as the basic notions in a general description of the nature of stories; stories are made up of "discontinuous elements" strung together causally and temporally, but in the course of stories, certain transformations take place. Even in the simplest story, notes Todorov, the two principles are evident. He quotes the title of a then recent Italian spaghetti western, "I Go, I Shoot, I Return." Here, behind the apparent purity of succession is hidden a relationship of transformation, that which occurs between "to go" and "to return," a transformation of one term into its contrary.³ This reductionism seems to me to represent "the end of the trail" for formal structural analysis of narrative. Similarly Prince's application of Generative Transformational Grammar to narrative stands as a monument of "sterile" formalism, sterile because the meanings of specific narratives surely lie in the particular conventions of certain narrative types as well as in the social institutions and practices which produce and distribute texts across the cultures in which they are formed.⁴ If narrative analysis is to be anything more than a quasi-mathematical exercise, it must take account of the cultural apparatuses which produce speech. In 1970 Julia Kristeva was trying to find a way around this problem by way of a

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modified semiotics. She suggested that one can arrive at a meaningful interpretation of a story only by relating what it is, as a unitary text, to what it does in relation to other texts and to the culture which the texts reproduce in a partial way. This “culture” can be seen as a larger and essentially non-narrative text. Kristeva called a relationship with this larger text an “ideologeme,” thus providing a cultural basis for semiology as a theory of textual and narrative analysis:

One of the problems of semiology is to replace the older rhetorical division into genres by a typology of texts, in other words to define the specificity of different textual organisations by situating them in the general text (the culture) of which they are a part and which is a part of them. The division of a given textual organisation (or of a semiotic practice) into utterances (sequences) which it assimilates into its space or which it relates back to a space of exterior texts (or semiotic practices) will be called an ideologeme. The ideologeme is that textual function one can see materialised at different levels of the structure of each text, and which stretches the whole length of its path giving the text its historical and social co-ordinates. Thus, while admitting the essential ingredient called “culture” to the structuralist equation in a way which obviously owes much to Bakhtin’s notion of “intertextuality” (and to his writings in general), Kristeva curiously attempts to subsume ideology to a kind of morphemics by inventing a word (ideologeme) which would structuralise history and society in relation to the text. This kind of account sets up structural analysis as overarching other readings of texts, and by implication it claims the status of being itself a non-ideological reading. This ignores the extent to which narrative texts, or texts in general, are ideological reworkings of a social experience which is always already represented in some way. It is in this way that one can look on a corpus of modern Aboriginal texts, as the ideological reworkings of new experience in the context of a more traditional culture. The unfamiliar event which has taken on social significance is juggled into the broader system of representations (the culture) by way of the discourse which can perform this function (narrative). Jameson made this point some time ago in broader non-discursive terms:

Art, along with mythic narrative, may thus be seen as a working out in formal terms of what a culture is unable to resolve concretely; or, in our present terminology we may say that for this view art is a sign-system, an articulation on the level of the signifier, of a signified which is essentially felt to be an antinomy or a contradiction.

Having established the text as an active part of ideological reformulations, it remains for a poststructuralist analysis of narrative to examine the apparatuses which make possible the reproduction of specific narrative types. These apparatuses would include specific institutions (for example, departments of Anthropology, English, Linguistics, with their practices of commentary and valorisation of certain texts; the communications media
insofar as they constitute a site for the reproduction of normative aesthetic discourses, working thereby to facilitate or impede the circulation of texts). If narrative texts are seen as items of exchange in the social arena, then their value as “works of art” would not need to be talked about; their principal use would be as a set of discursive techniques for coming to grips with unfamiliar aspects of the world. To attempt to recuperate a body of Aboriginal narratives as “works of art” or as “Literature” is not to discover any intrinsic merit in them. Rather it is to reiterate a discourse of the aesthetic which reads them in a certain way. In a sense it rewrites them as literature in ways that are the familiar, everyday practices of departments of literary studies in various tertiary institutions.7 In part, this involves the repetition of a standard recipe for a higher degree: seek out a marginal, dust-laden or forgotten author, give a reading of his or her texts which establishes them “as Literature,” arguing for their inclusion within the canon of English literature. The book trade, as well as universities, applies readings of Aboriginal narratives which are modulated by what might be termed a “romantic discourse.” Aboriginal narratives become quaint, exotic or primitive, and in the rewrites of the stories, the most appropriate reader position to occupy is that ambiguous one set up by the genre of the children’s story. The same observation would apply to ethnological practices where a researcher travels to the limits of the culture surrounding the university (where this limit just happens to be the centre of another group’s culture), then reads this culture in ways which can only be constructed according to the ratio “Western European”: “Other.”

It is, of course, precisely this ratio which has made the present paper possible, and one could continue to talk about the practices of ethnographic research and analyse the structures of its discourse, but I feel that a more cultural-studies style of analysis of Aboriginal practices of textual production might be able to contribute to a number of progressive ideas being developed within poststructuralist criticism.8 Such cultural analysis does not preclude close reading of texts—which can still be read for a limited range of effects relating to the practice of narration. In addition, semiotic or linguistic readings of texts can provide a basis for their further analysis within the cultural studies paradigm.

II Desire and Linguistic Modality

A structuralist reading of one of the Kimberley texts is a useful starting point. Usually, such a reading proceeds by isolating the text first; that is, features of the practice of story-telling do not become part of the analysis. The story is reduced from its “surface” linguistic form by being rewritten as a summary and this summary is then organised as a series of oppositions.9

One immediate way to subvert such a structuralist reading would be to oppose it with a contextualist analysis; that is, an analysis based on narrator and listener positions. The one wants to give a story and the other wants to receive it. The story-telling contract is initially based on the
The Uses of Aboriginal Oral Narrative

difference between these pleasures, and if mutual satisfaction is reached it will be in an elision of this difference at the end of the story: a *jouissance*. Having received the story, the listener is now in a position to have the pleasure later of being a narrator, provided that other conditions are met. And having told the story, the narrator's desire to tell is expended. Now this social dynamic of desire, a contextual effect of story-telling, can be transposed to the textual level since, as a general feature, stories oppose (individual) desire to (social) constraint, and these categories are realised at the linguistic level as the modalities of the *optative* and the *obligatory*. For instance, in the story of *Little Red Riding Hood*, an optative modality appears at a crucial point in the story:

(the wolf) *would have liked* to eat her, but he feared the presence of woodcutters in the forest. 10

Modalities are unevenly distributed throughout narrative texts and a modality of desire, in opposition to implied social constraint, provides an essential tension at this point of the story since it allows for the deferral of desire and the continuation of the story. The Aboriginal stories from Broome can also be read in terms of this opposition. The following five episodes summarise one of these stories (narrated by Paddy Roe) about Lardi, the shaman (*maban*):

1. Lardi and two young men are living in an outcamp. The young men try to shoot broga as they come to drink at a trough. Lardi tells them not to.
2. Lardi leaves and the young men lie in wait for broga.
3. A broga comes and they shoot it, cook it and eat it all before the old man returns.
4. Lardi returns, tells the young men they will get sick, then leaves again. The men are sick, vomiting and defecating the meal.
5. Lardi returns and cures them, then he reveals that he had transformed himself into the broga and they had eaten him.11

The modalities of desire and constraint are brought sharply into focus in this story, where the two young men act as one character standing for individual desire and the old man stands for collective responsibility. This opposition is further reinforced by other parallel oppositions:

- listener position and speaker position
- presence and absence of the old man
- transformations
- lexical and grammatical alterations

The first point (listener position/speaker position) is relevant as an effect of this kind of didactic narrative. The narrator of this story was also an "old man" and he occupies the same position as Lardi in the sense that when the old man exits from the story, the narrator keeps talking about the young men. When the old man is absent, the listener is not told what he
is doing: the listener is as much in the dark as the young men. As the lesson is finally revealed, the parallel is perfect: Lardi reveals that he had played a trick on the young men, and at the same time, the narrator reveals the “trick” of the story to the listener. Just as the listener must always be present in order to hear the text, so too are the young men always present in the story. It is the old man who modulates the narrative by coming and going through the five episodes. But when he is absent as a man, he is present as a bird, like this:

1 2 3 4 5

YM P P P P
L P(m) A(m) P(b) A(m) P(m)

(where YM = young men, L = Lardi, P = present, A = absent, m = man, b = bird, and the arrows indicate consumption and regurgitation)

The presence of the old man constrains the desire of the young men, until he goes: then this subject of their constraint transforms into the object of their desire. As soon as the object is totally consumed, the constraining subject reappears to tell them they will be transformed into sick people. Absent again, Lardi only reappears when the meal has been totally regurgitated. Then he informs them that they had swallowed their “lesson,” that is, himself, as constraining subject.

The role of transformation in this story is very important, as it is in Aboriginal narrative generally. Both characters transform, but in different ways. The transformation of Lardi into a brolga resembles the kind of transformation that occurs in “dreaming” stories. But this myth-like transformation links with the secular transformation of the young men (getting sick, then getting well) in a way that allows Lardi to be transformed back into a man; he is regurgitated, and this is also a common motif of Aboriginal narratives. Transformation in these stories is always reflexive, never transitive. Lardi transforms himself to teach the young men a lesson, but he doesn’t make them sick, they make themselves sick by eating the brolga. Lardi’s transformation into a brolga establishes a structural link between the two parallel transformations:

Lardi

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{man} \\
\downarrow \\
\text{brolga} \\
\downarrow \\
\text{man}
\end{array}
\]

Young Men

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{well} \\
\downarrow \\
\text{sick} \\
\downarrow \\
\text{well}
\end{array}
\]

The two transformed states are thus related by opposition, and are reinforced by the presence/absence symmetry noted above. The message is abundantly clear to those anti-social individuals who would attempt to oppose the wisdom of their elders. The hegemony of the old men is once
more reinforced by being related to the sacred world of the dreaming by way of the motif of magical self-transformation. Because transformations in Aboriginal narratives are reflexive (people transform themselves rather than magicians turning people into frogs) a distinct world view is presented, one which sees people as being in a permanent relationship with an otherness which is discursively constructed as “the dreaming.” For didactic purposes it can be invoked as a kind of personal power (as in the story of Lardi) which, through transformation, marshals a structural demonstration of “the dreaming” as a justification for the rule of elders (Muecke, ch. ix).

III  Situating the Subject

If a structuralist reading (of the kind just outlined) raises certain questions relating to context and ideology, then this is even more apparent when one moves away from texts altogether and looks to the social conditions for the production of narrative. One important social condition is the set of rules for the positioning of the subject in relation to the production of narrative texts; the notion of the “individual” producer is not unproblematic. As Jameson has recently indicated, a given cultural text is best analysed by a process of foregrounding “the interpretative categories or codes through which we receive the text” since

we never really confront a text immediately, in all its freshness as a thing-in-itself. Rather texts come before us as the always-already-read; we apprehend them through sedimented layers of previous interpretations, or — if the text is brand-new — through the sedimented reading habits and categories developed by those interpretative traditions.¹²

If, for the purposes of argument, I imagine myself as an Aboriginal narrator from Broome, Western Australia, facing once again a typical ceremony — a kahbakabba or corroboree — of familiar function and partly familiar membership (a ceremony quite like a conference in which academics work and celebrate and negotiate), I might be called upon to give an account of myself; not so much myself as an individual as of my “country,” that body of material consisting of texts and objects which I look after with the help of the people I call “close-up countrymen.” I would have to talk about my area without transgressing on anyone else’s, and I would do this by telling a series of stories. My first duty would be to orient myself when I sit down to speak with my friends and relatives. In Aboriginal communities this is done literally by sitting with one’s back towards one’s home country. Then I would have to situate my position further by narrating my journey. Just as, if I were attending a conference in Melbourne, I would tell how I hired a car in Adelaide, what amusing things happened on the drive over and so on. Also, I might have sent word some time back that I was arriving or people might have had the feeling that I was coming. These things are made explicit; for instance, my elder brother would announce that he had a whistling in the ears which signalled
my arrival. Thus, through a series of determinations I make quite explicit my position as subject in relation to Aboriginal social formations.

In story-telling situations there is also an explicit positioning of the listening subject whereby this subject is linked to an (eternal) re-enactment of the story, mythological or mundane. The circumstances of the present telling of a story must be as close as possible to the "original" telling of the story: "what is happening now" is equated with "what happened then." Thus Paddy Roe, a Broome narrator, would not really be able to tell a story about stars if he couldn't point out the constellations. (He also related that his parents had woken him up in the middle of the night to tell him the story of a certain constellation which was only visible at that hour.) Bill Harney describes a similar narrative situation in which the processes of narration and nourishment are articulated in parallel:

'Now that Wungala been make bush-bread just like I make it,' continued Jalna, 'and as she does her little boy went to sleep and when that happen that Wulgaru get real angry and poke his face at Wungala ... but no ... that brave woman just stay quiet and grind that bush tucker and when it all ground up she made it into damper, all-a-same me.'

Demonstrating her story, Jalna spread the wetted meal into a round flat cake and this she put on to the red-hot coals of a fire so that it would be cooked nicely for eating.

'Properly good cook that Wungala,' excitedly said one of the children as she sniffed at the meal damper cooking on the fire. 'Good cook ... all-a-same you old woman.'

'No good humbug with story,' angrily interrupted one of the lads who was standing patiently around. 'You only talk-talk like that to make Jalna good-binji so that she will give you this good fellow tucker.'

'Can't tell finish of story till damper cooked,' retorted Jalna, so we all sat down and waited till the damper was finished and the final part of the story was told.13

IV Guardianship

A normal part of the adult life of the more traditionally-oriented Aborigines in Broome is to accumulate the rights over a body of narrative texts, as well as songs and objects of material culture. It is a serious transgression of Aboriginal "copyright" to speak a text unlawfully which "belongs" to someone else.14 I use "belong" guardedly because individuals are not so much authors as custodians or temporary guardians of certain texts which are often associated with a stretch of country — a site which is of great importance for the stories' repetition. As men or women get older, they publicly announce that they are going to "give" a certain text to the next guardian, and this person is qualified to receive the texts through
adherence to Aboriginal law, by being in an appropriate classificatory kinship relationship to the older guardian, and especially by being associated with the country involved. Notions of authorial originality, on which much of the study of English literature depends, are thus completely absent in Aboriginal practice. When a narrator tells a story he or she recognises that the story is the collective product of a tradition, and that his or her voice is simply one which reiterates that tradition. This is especially clear with narratives which relate to the "dreaming": a parallel reality which is seen as outside of time. Personified, it is the original donor of the narratives belonging to this category, so that people may say about a story: "Bagaregara (= 'dreaming') gave us this one." Similarly, spirits (rai) are figures which mediate the dreaming to "give" songs to individual songmen. For instance, Butcher Joe (Nangan) sketched Figure 1 to explain how the skeleton spirit (balangan) appeared in his dreams to tap him on the shoulder and give him a song about the pelican, presumably also with instructions on dance, head-gear, decorations and body paint, all of which have significance for the song, which becomes part of Butcher Joe's oeuvre (his nulu) and which, eventually, he will pass on to a younger man (Muecke, chs. iii and iv).

Fig. 1 The Muse (balangan) visits Butcher Joe

Thus while in our terms Butcher Joe would be the creator of new and unique texts, he disclaims responsibility by attributing authorship to his "muse" who visits from the dreaming. Personal songs are thus different from songs and narratives which are labelled as "sacred" and of the
dreaming. While the dreaming speaks a "personal" song through an individual, the collective narratives of the dreaming are always already spoken, and come to be reiterated by their guardians at the proper sites and on the proper ceremonial occasions. The more sacred and/or secret a narrative, the more rigorously its exact wording is attended to in its collective production. These traditional narratives are produced collectively because more than one voice can be involved when it is spoken, even if there is only one guardian. What is important is that the guardian at least be present. This polyphony occurred in the following case where a younger woman (G) spoke a story for the custodian (her senior Auntie, A) while constantly deferring to her. Auntie's contribution finally becomes a long drawn-out "li" (durational aspect is coded in vowel-length) which indicates the travelling of the blue-tongue lizard (Nyalaq):

G: now you start— Gibb River
A: start from ah Gibb Riber-he
G: he bin swim, swim across he hit-im dis
A: bin go swim across
G: river
A: hit-im river ( . . )

G: they bin make
A: he bin swim swim swim swim swi: ................................
G: little boat for him, hey! Auntie! they bin make little
A: .......................................................... : eh?
G: boat you know like er (OM: coolamon) what?
A: little boat
G: yeah coolamon — he bin swimming-come along all along-
A: coolamon .............................................
G: that's the story — come to that deadea
A: .......................................................... deadea

(Muecke, 103)

The narratives are also collectively produced in a serial sense; this is especially the case with narratives concerning the travelling of traditional mythological beings. When the figure's movements take him or her out of the territory which is under the jurisdiction and guardianship of one narrator, the listener will be referred to another narrator; for example, "I dunno what he bin do further but I only know far as the story I can tell you," or: "Well, that's all the story I can give you now . . . and you might get another story from . . . Killer . . . "(Muecke, 96). The story's site is an important aspect of its narration. Sometimes Aboriginal narrators feel unable to tell a story, or only able to give a summary version of it, if they can't recount it at the site which is inextricably linked to the narrative: "But if you come back next time I'll show you that place, eh? . . . Alright, an' that's all the story I can give you today . . . short way, alright. . . ." Edgar Allen Poe noted the same phenomenon in his story "A Descent into
The Uses of Aboriginal Oral Narrative

the Maelstrom’:

‘You must get over these fancies’, said the guide, ‘for I have brought you here that you might have the best possible view of the scene of that event I mentioned — and to tell you the story with the spot just under your eye’.

V Time and History

Stories are all true of course, not necessarily because, as Frank Hardy’s Billy Borker says, “I made it up meself,” but because the discourse is correctly produced within the cultural apparatuses which make it possible. Among the Aborigines of Broome there is no metalinguistic category “fiction.” Stories are either true (trutwei) or of the dreaming. And to say they are true means to say that you were there, or you knew someone who was who gave you the story, or its validity as a collective production is amply demonstrable if the listener is referred to someone who is the uncle of the main character in the story, and so on. Just as the Broome Aborigines do not recognise a generic category “fiction,” so they do not recognise a category “history.” There is no specific discourse which produces the truth effects of dominant Western historical discourse with its usual communicative devices of exact chronology, emphasis on the role of important individuals, cross-referencing to “official” sources, ethnocentric selection of detail, and so on. But both “dreaming” stories (which have a metaphysical validity standing outside of time-measurement) and “true stories” (which are validated by being linked to witnesses) can be read as “historical,” even in Western terms. A dreaming story about volcanic eruptions in Northern Queensland points to the possibility of “popular memory” going back as far as 10,000 years:

It is said that two newly initiated men broke a taboo and so angered the rainbow serpent . . . As a result the camping-place began to change, the earth under the camp roaring like thunder. The wind started to blow down as if a cyclone were coming. The camping place began to twist and crack. While this was happening there was in the sky a red cloud, of a hue never seen before. The people tried to run from side to side but were swallowed by a crack which opened in the ground . . .

This is a plausible description of a volcanic eruption. After telling the myth, in 1964, the storyteller remarked that when this happened the country around the lakes was ‘not jungle — just open scrub’. In 1968, a dated pollen diagram from the organic sediments of Lake Euramoo by Peter Kershaw (1970) showed, rather surprisingly that the rain forest in that area is only about 7,600 years old. The formation of the three volcanic lakes took place at least 10,000 years ago.

The linguistic features of the discourses of white history and of Aboriginal oral history, and the practices of distribution and consumption
which rank these discourses in terms of their truth value, have been discussed elsewhere. One feature on which white history depends is the regular indication of chronological spacing by dates, as if Time’s arrow, thus conceived, will always dominate with its ruthless arithmetic the essential discontinuity of events and in this way set up arbitrary unities (such as Australia celebrating 200 years of history, about a half of one per cent of the duration of human occupation of the continent). As Foucault says:

The desire to make historical analysis the discourse of continuity and the desire to make human consciousness the originating subject of all learning and all practice are the two traces of one and the same system of thought. This system conceives time in terms of totalisation and revolution never as anything but a coming to consciousness.

Aboriginal cultures traditionally did not add up the years and did not necessarily see time as progressing in a straight line. Their discourses on the past therefore might not be constructed according to the same rules as white history. To illustrate this point I will adapt a story from Central Australia. An old Pijantjatjarra man is being interrogated by an anthropologist about what times were like in the days before the white man arrived. He says that things were fine, that they used to hunt game in the bush. They used to hunt kangaroo, emu, goanna, rabbit ... The anthropologist is astonished. Surely the old man knows that the rabbit is an introduced species. What would stand as an inaccuracy or a lie in the discourse of white history can be explained quite simply by positing a rule for the elaboration of statements in the oral narrative of Aboriginal history, a rule which would elide the categories of “past” and “present” and which would require that present experience be inscribed in narratives about the past, for the sake of the general expression of continuity — a requirement of Aboriginal ideology as much as it is of Western European ideology. Thus there are at least two ways of constructing continuity effects in discourse. One is through an emphasis on exact chronology, the other is through doing away with time-marking altogether.

VI  Subversive Codes

In linguistics it is habitual to talk of dialects, sociolects, and other registers or varieties as if they were deviant forms of a standard language. Even when the existence of this ethnocentrism is acknowledged, it remains very difficult to describe minority or marginal languages on their own terms since the descriptive apparatuses available (the grammars) are conceived in terms of the standard language. Traditional grammatical analysis tends to ignore the politics of talk, a politics which might attribute a metaphysical and home-grown verity to the dialect while the standard language needs to be attained for the expression of scientific accuracy. Aboriginal English, the language of the Kimberley stories, is often taken to be as politically bankrupt as its speakers. What if, instead of being seen as a
deviant form of English, it were recognised more as the common language of the Aboriginal people of the mainland and the Torres Strait Islands — the language which in fact made possible their political unification to combat the destructive pressures of white society? What if it were seen as a subversive element among the codes of English in Australia (in much the same way as Strine became the expression of a nationalistic euphoria in the late sixties)? Deleuze spoke of Nietzsche and Kafka in this very way:

The only parallel I can find here is with Kafka, in what he does to German, working within the language of Prague jewry: he constructs a battering ram out of German and turns it against itself . . . Similarly Nietzsche maintained or supposed himself to be Polish in his use of German. His masterful siege of the language permits him to transmit something uncodifiable: the notion of style as politics.21

This, then, is the kind of reading I would propose for the Aboriginal narratives, in line with another dictum: “The problem is not to aestheticise the political, but to politicise the aesthetic.”22 It could be argued that the Aboriginal narrators had no intention of subverting a whole language, or even a university department, but their intention is something that we cannot know about with certainty. The important thing is that texts are there, in circulation, and they can be marshalled to any cause within the limits currently imposed by critical protocols. As Tony Bennett says:

We know . . . that the text is totally iterable; that, as a set of material notations, it may be inscribed within different contexts and that no context — including that within which it originated — can enclose it by specifying or fixing its meaning or effects for all time and in all contexts.23

With Bennett’s point in mind I will now read a fragment of Aboriginal narrative dealing with a point of law. Semiotics provides a convenient way of reading discourses of the law. The narratives of the law function to encode the paradigms of events which constitute possible transgressions, punishments and legal strategies in the syntax of legislative procedure. In his analysis of the narratives of the Decameron, Todorov discovered what he called “law sequences,” syntagms of summary events in which an element from the class “transgression” was followed by some sort of modifying action and then eventually followed by an element from the class “punishment.” The possible events which constituted the transgression class in the Decameron were found to coincide roughly with the seven cardinal sins.24 This legal code is not organised at all like Aboriginal legal codes. In terms of syntax, for instance, the Western elaboration of legal procedure into moments of “making a statement,” “pleading,” and so on, is comically reduced to a kind of truth in one narrative when a policeman approaches a character called Mirdinan who has disposed of his wife. The policeman puts chains on his wrists and ankles, and then the following exchange occurs:

‘Alright’, he said, ‘You bin kill your missus?’

‘Yes’, he tell ‘im. (Muecke, Appendix, p. 8.)
This textual fragment can be read as a subversion of the dishonest silence which Western law prescribes in the sequence immediately following transgression. Another story provides a fragment which challenges the Western paradigm of possible transgressions. In the Kimberleys, at the turn of the century, a man called Pigeon and his guerilla gang were doing their best to frustrate the efforts of the pioneering settlers and eventually the police were given discretionary powers to break this Aboriginal resistance. The Aborigines saw the whites as a serious threat to their livelihood, and this fragment describes how Pigeon killed one white settler who was travelling with a cart-load of provisions:

Well him bin come out la (there): 'Oh Gooday boss',
'Gooday' him bin tell-im, 'Gooday',
he never have-im rifle like this, him bin come up (with) nothing,
'Gooday',
Him bin leave-im rifle that way him bin gone out.
'Ah . . . I think you better give me one flour' him bin tell-im.
'No, well, not mine this 'un, he longa (belongs to) white people, you can't cut-im (separate) flour . . . yeah . . . I can give you lil' bit flour, yeah, mine one'.
Alright, him bin give-it-im.
Him bin go back, him bin go right up longa creek, him bin get that rifle, him bin come up belonga that, what name, him jump up longa sharp . . . I dunno, something he bin fix-im . . .
Him bin give-it-im (shoot him) straight here. Finish.

(Muecke, Appendix, p. 60)

Had the settler obeyed the Aboriginal legal code, he would have shared his cart-load of flour equally with Pigeon instead of giving him a derisory amount ("lil' bit"). So Pigeon inflicts the death penalty. Pigeon and his gang were in fact campaigning against the European invasion, but since the concept of invasion was not coded as an infraction of Aboriginal law, the narrative now justifies the killing in terms of not sharing food properly. Greed, or failure to share property, is an element which articulates stories throughout Aboriginal Australia, forming a major element of Aboriginal ideology and standing directly in opposition to English common law which gives priority to the possessor of property.

VII “The Dreaming” as Ideological

Even the earliest commentators saw the dreaming as a logos of total or at least dominant significance. W. H. Stanner, for instance, writes: “It has become the source of the dominant mode of aboriginal thinking”; it is embodied in myth as “the social product of an indefinitely ancient past,” and the Aboriginal “proceeds to live it out ‘in’ life, in part through a ritual and an expressive art, and in part through nonsacred social customs.”

In a sense, the dreaming is the constant supplementary signified of all Aboriginal narratives, that is, whatever each narrative might specifically
The Uses of Aboriginal Oral Narrative

refer to, or function as in social practice, it always evokes the dreaming as well. ("The blacks cite The Dreaming as a character of absolute validity in answer to all questions of why or how," Stanner, 272.) In this sense it corresponds to the *mana* of Levi-Strauss as:

the conscious expression of a semantic function, whose role it is to permit symbolic thought to operate in spite of the contradiction which is proper to it. In this way are explained the apparently insoluble antinomies attached to this notion . . . At one and the same time force and action, quality and state, noun and verb; abstract and concrete, omnipresent and localised — *mana* is in effect all these things. But is it not precisely because it is none of these things that *mana* is a simple form, or more exactly, a symbol in the pure state, and therefore capable of becoming charged with any sort of symbolic content whatever? In the system of symbols constituted by all cosmologies, *mana* would simply be a zero symbolic value, that is to say, a sign marking the necessity of a symbolic content *supplementary* . . . to that with which the signified is already loaded . . .

Thus a definite meaning for the dreaming cannot be grasped, but not because it is too large to come to grips with (as in those accounts of the mystical Aboriginal "Other" which can never be fully known), but rather because it is in the nature of the process of signification in language to exclude totalisation. As Derrida says, language is a field of play in which there is something missing: "a centre which arrests and grounds the play of substitutions." It is this centre which is deferred to at some stage in each narrative; stories are repeated on the basis of its constancy, laws are formulated in its name: "[The tales] also state, by their constant recitation of what was done rightly and wrongly in The Dreaming, the ways in which good men should, and bad men will act now" (Stanner, 272).

Each text is a signifier for this one signified, and these texts (signs) link up in chains as they are distributed in time (from one guardian to the next) or in space (from one narrator to the next). It is this reiterative aspect of Aboriginal ideology which can illustrate the current theoretical emphasis on the institutional apparatuses which manage discursive practices. In the passage quoted earlier Tony Bennett talks about the text as being "totally iterable." Later in the same article he discusses a Melanesian reading of the Bible and a Christian theological reading of James Bond (as one of the seven legendary champions of Christendom) as valid readings. In this context the notion of *radical* iterability appears, which means that there is no way of telling in advance the contexts in which a text may eventually appear. What I have tried to do is distinguish "normal" iterability from Bennett's notion of radical iterability, by showing the *local* discursive practices which govern the production and distribution of Aboriginal oral narratives, before pointing to some of the mechanisms which have made possible their *radical* displacement from speech to writing, from one culture to another; this is an attempt to bring into focus the practices of reading — my own work, that is — which have wrested the stories from
their original contexts. In those contexts they were able to offer listener positions which repeatedly aligned subjects with the ideology of the dreaming. In the present situation they remain open to a number of possible readings, and if an aesthetic reading is pointedly rejected, then perhaps the texts have to be regarded as the traces of the expressive work done by the Broome people as they struggled to incorporate new social experience into their traditional ideological narrative formulae. But Aboriginal ideology remains the dominant signified and in some cases this ideology is openly confrontationist:

alright, they was keep goin' —
these fellas, same now, all this fightin' fightin' —
some tied up in the tree —
police come and took other fellas —
shoot-em and burn-em that bin happen in Australia —
alright they was still fighting —
they was still fighting —
keep fighting —
from police to police —
and the last constable came —
he took over the job —

(Sam Woolagoodja, in Muecke, Appendix, 167)

One cannot assume a unified Aboriginal response to white dominance in Australia, but if modern narratives in the common language of Aboriginal English are reiterating significations of "Aboriginality" in the context of European cultural dominance, then it would seem pointless to read (or rewrite) these texts in aesthetic terms. With the syntax "corrected" to standard English, the texts would continue to be marginalised as exotic, children's books, and the like. A political reading of the texts secures a broader significance for them, a significance which takes the form of a transformation from the traditional ideology of the dreaming to the contemporary context of political calculation and struggle.

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7 See, for example, Ian Hunter, "The Concept of Context and the Problem of Reading," Southern Review, 15 (1975), 90-91; Noel King, "On Literature, Reading and English
The Uses of Aboriginal Oral Narrative

9 Readings of this type are to be found in some anthropological analyses; see, for example, L.R. Hiatt, ed., Australian Aboriginal Mythology (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1975). In my emphasis on modern profane ("public") narratives and their iteration I have not attempted to make structural correlations with stories from traditional mythologies.
11 Adapted from Stephen Muecke, Australian Aboriginal Narratives in English: A Study in Discourse Analysis (Diss. Western Australia, 1981). Further references will appear in the text, designated "Muecke."
20 Thomas Murray, "A Description of Life before the Advent of the White Man": "This story is about the early days. Men and women used to be naked with no clothes. They would only kill and eat meat; rabbit, kangaroo, emu and goanna too." Quoted in Ance Glass and Dorothy Hackett, Piljainjiajarra Texts (Canberra: AIAS, 1969), p. 54.
22 The sentence as quoted here is a recasting by Peter Williams of two statements from Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in Illuminations, ed. H. Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969). "The logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life" (p. 241) and "[w]ar . . . is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic. Communism responds by politifying art" (p. 242).
27 Derrida, p. 289.
28 Bennett, pp. 7-8.