

**MAPPING THE OTHER, MAPPING THE SELF:
B. WONGAR'S NOVEL *RAKI* (1994)**

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Abstract. *This paper was presented at the sixth conference of the European Society for the Study of English, held in Strasbourg, France, from August 30 to September 3, 2002. It was contributed to the seminar on Mapping the other, mapping the self - discourses of travel from the 18th century to the present. The seminar topic corresponded perfectly with the remarkable life, and unique literary opus, of the Australian writer B. Wongar, pseudonym of the Yugoslav émigré Sreten Bozic (b. 1932). Wongar's travels through Europe and Australia, and the circumstances which lead to his witnessing (and sharing) the suffering of the dispossessed Aboriginal peoples, provided insights which he deepened through study of Aboriginal mythology and history, and dramatized in poems, plays, short stories and, most extensively, the four novels which comprise his Nuclear Cycle. Raki, the last novel in that series, is a study of two locations (the Serbian Balkans, and the Aboriginal Australia) where 'civilizing' invaders (the Ottoman Turks, the European settlers, the Nazi Germans, the NATO and UN 'peacekeepers') mapped the conquered, primitive 'others' in ways that justified their extinction. Wongar studies the ways in which overt or covert genocides are legalized, and rationalized as inevitable and desirable march of progress. He exposes the horrible nature of post-civilized barbarism, and the strategies through which it continues to spread and plague us. The paper sets his concerns in the context of similar undertakings by such authors as J. M. Coetzee, Wendy Lill, Christopher Hampton, John Pilger, etc., and points out how archetypal criticism and new historicism can shed additional light on the works of this remarkable artist.*

In a video recording of Harold Pinter's guest-appearance at the ICA, set up to mark the opening of his play *One for the Road*, we can see him losing patience with the interviewer's repeated efforts to force him to "classify, or categorize himself", and retorting that he is simply a "critical independent mind". The explicitness with which he was forced to defend himself was unnecessary, since everything he said on that occasion represented a demonstration of that independence: his criticism of the US global take-over, and of England's shameful satellite position; his reasons for being a 'conscientious

objector'; his views on his role as a playwright. His responsibility, he said, was to determine, independently, what is going on, and offer the audience a chance to enlarge their views. Encouraged and enabled to be independent, critical, and self-reliant, people would not, Pinter insisted, willingly give power to politicians and bureaucrats, whose actions in an increasingly grotesque fashion betray democracy and degrade humanity. The Australian writer Sreten Bozic (b. 1932), better known as B. Wongar, with whom this paper is concerned, possesses an equally critical and independent mind. Throughout his life he has battled against the seductions and coercions of bureaucrats and politicians, both in Europe and Australia, and has celebrated in his works values and attitudes that Western civilization continues shamelessly to defile and destroy.

Those who love classifications and theories can find several established strategies useful in approaching Wongar's art. Certain qualities of his work can be assessed more deeply through the archetypal criticism of Leslie Fiedler and Northrop Frye, others (his incorporation of previously overlooked historical documents into his fiction) through new historicism, or post-colonial criticism. Moreover, since he lives in Australia and writes in English, yet comes from Yugoslavia, from the cultural background of the 'other', he is, in that respect, as 'hybrid' as Salman Rushdie, Kazuo Ishiguro, Hanif Kureishi or Arundhati Roy.

Certainly, Wongar's attitude to the Australian Aborigine can be seen as the resurfacing of the archetypal relationship of racially mixed couples that Leslie Fiedler found in Cooper (Natty Bampopo/Chingachook), Melville (Ishmael/Queequeg), Twain (Huck/Jim), and others, and treated, in *Love and Death in the American Novel*, as the key to the proper understanding of American literature.¹ As in Cooper's novels about the vanishing Indian, in Wongar's works about the vanishing Aborigine, a resurfacing of what in the Australian psyche has been repressed, stifled, and "starved to death" occurs. In Wongar's stories, poems, plays and novels about Australia, as in the work of the great American classics analysed by Fiedler, "guilt speaks", identification with the injured and vanishing 'other' is attempted, dissociation from the ideology of exploitation, and from exploiters, dramatized.²

One divergence from Fiedler's paradigm, however, is significant. If Australia's Patrick White felt that the hidden wound of the Catholic/Calvinist soul of the West could be healed through contact with the spirituality of the Orthodox Christianity of the East (experienced in his private life in his relationship with his faithful Greek lover Manoly), Australia's Wongar, who is of Eastern Orthodox background, recognized his soul's fulfillment not in the lifestyle of his antagonized Western brother, but in what became accessible to him in life through his contact with his beloved, lost, Aboriginal wife Djumala³. This heterosexual, transcultural love was the most important event in his life. His

¹ Leslie A. Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960, 66, 82), Penguin 1984.

² *Ibid.*, Part One: Prototypes and early adaptations, section 7, James Fenimore Cooper and the Historical Romance, pp. 195-6.

³ See Patrick White, *Flaws in the Glass: A self-portrait* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1981), dedicated to Manoly, and B. Wongar's autobiography *Dingoes Den* (ETT Imprint Book, Australia, 1999), dedicated to Peter Handke and his son Stefan. Wongar's novel *Walg* (1983) is dedicated to Djumala. In his dedication Wongar writes to her: "You shall be born again as a bird, a tree, or a star, as the tribal elders taught us." In the review of the novel printed on the back cover, Simone de Beauvoir says "Djumala reminds me much of a Polynesian face painted by Gauguin, as she endeavors to regain the magic of life stolen by the invaders. I will harbor her in my heart for a long time to come. When the nuclear madness spread over the world strangles us too, I will know: the fallout will be the ashes of her soul and country."

astounding works grew out of the understanding and appreciation of Aboriginal life and spirituality that Djumala made possible, and real. Thus, for him writing became, as Leslie Fiedler defines it, a record of "elusive moments at which life is alone fully itself, fulfilled in consciousness and form". It also became, simultaneously, "an act of total moral engagement".⁴ This paper will try to set in a wider context the nature of this moral engagement, and trace some steps in its development that eventually led to *Raki* (1994).⁵

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Maps satisfy the human need for better orientation. Geographical maps direct physical journeys towards desired destinations. Spiritual journeys, on the other hand, require maps that chart the moral heights and depths of human experience, and provide ethical orientation that can save individuals, as well as whole cultures, from getting 'lost'.⁶ Several quotations from recent sources can serve as reminders of the quality of moral maps that keep our modern civilized world in order, and of the true nature of laws that protect and perpetrate the desired ethical orientation of western citizens.

On March 22, 2002, TLS published a photograph of Gandhi breaking the law by picking up a grain of salt from the Indian Ocean. The photograph, taken in 1930, is a reminder that only several decades ago the long development of Western civilization culminated in the legal act which denied the citizens of India the right to use the salt from the Indian Ocean because the Law proclaimed it the rightful property of an authorized British firm. On the photograph we see Gandhi becoming a 'criminal'.

On October 4, 2001, London Review of Books published another 'reminder' of what the situation was like thirty years later, in the sixties. The review of the book *The Assassination of Lumumba*, by Ludo De Witte, contains a detailed description of the independence ceremony in the Congo, 'derailed' by the intervention of the young Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba. Like Gandhi, Lumumba, was killed, among other things, because on that occasion (where he was not scheduled to make a speech at all), he refused to allow the farcical pretentiousness of the 'civilizers' and the 'liberators' to go unchallenged.

To the claim made by the Belgian king Baudouin that "the independence of the Congo is the result of the undertaking conceived by the genius of King Leopold II" (the monster, the reviewer reminds us, who ran the Congo basin as his private estate, used forced labour, mutilation and massacre to extort its ivory and rubber, and reduced its population by many millions, until the world's outrage obliged Belgium to take the colony away

⁴ Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, Preface to the First Edition, p. 16.

⁵ B. Wongar, *Raki* (1994, 1997), London and New York: Marion Boyars 1997.

Raki is the fourth and last novel of Wongar's Nuclear Cycle, the other three being *Walg* (New York: George Braziller, 1983); *Karan* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1985), and *Gabo Jara* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1987). He has also written a book on *Aboriginal Myths*, with Alan Marshall, as well as several plays and poems. His two collections of stories *The Track to Bralgu* (1978) and *Bararu* were first published by Jean Paul Sartre and Simon de Beauvoir in their magazine *Les Temps Modernes*. Stories collected in *The Last Pack of Dingoes* were published in Australia by Angus & Robertson in 1993.

⁶ Michael Ondaatje's novel *The English Patient* (1992) is a brilliant meditation of the two types of maps, and two types of orientation human beings need. Ondaatje is a 'hybrid' writer as well, and his study of love and war, human nature and history, is a very independent, critical account of the development of Western civilization, traced from its roots in Antiquity to the moment in the twentieth century when ending one world war it announced itself fully prepared for the next. It is a pity that the filmed version was purged from the most provocative political questions the novel had the courage to ask.

from him) Lumumba replied that independence was not a "**generous gift from Brussels**", but had been won by the people's struggle for freedom against the colonialists.

Leopold's 'Congo Free State' was no more than "humiliating slavery imposed on us by force", said Patrice: "We have known sarcasm and insults, endured blows morning, noon and night, because we were 'niggers'...We have seen our lands despoiled under the terms of what was supposedly the law of the land but which only recognized the rights of the strongest. We have seen that this law was quite different for a white than for a black: accommodating for the former, cruel and inhuman for the latter. ...We will make sure that our country's land truly benefits its children. We will review all previous laws and make new ones which will be just and noble."⁷

In the Introduction to his book *Learning To Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture*, Stephen Greenblatt states that "If there is any value to what has become known as 'new historicism' it must be in an intensified willingness to read all of the textual traces of the past with the attention traditionally conferred only on literary texts". His essays are full of examples similar to those quoted above, 'early modern', and several centuries younger than the Gandhi and Lumumba incidents of our 'late modern' times. However, Greenblatt is careful to draw the distinction between "the post-structuralist confounding of fiction and non-fiction" (which he finds important but inadequate) and his own efforts to read all the textual traces of the past in order to study better the difference between the past's fictional and non fictional records of itself, in order, as he says, to "speak to this difference."⁸

Not all critics, or authors, wish to do that. Many pursue and celebrate, in their fiction, the fun and fashion of their time, without wishing to examine, in detail, the non fictional 'text' which the fun and fashion disguise or distort. The nature of the total moral engagement of B. Wongar has a great deal in common with Greenblatt's desire to achieve a reading of all the textual traces of the past. In fact, it is possible to claim that Wongar was driven to become a writer precisely by the desire to examine, most fully, the appalling differences between historical facts, and fictional texts fabricated to reinterpret, distort and disguise them.

For example, in chapter four of his autobiographical *Dingoes Den*, Wongar provides a very detailed account of how he, accidentally, came to attend a court hearing, held in 1969 in the city of Darwin, involving a case brought up by some tribal Aborigines against the Australian government. Until 1967 the Aboriginal population of Australia had been deprived of citizenship rights and excluded from national statistics. The court case was the first of its kind, and eventually brought about some changes in the Australian law. Wongar's account, however, is a shocking revelation of the 'ethics' which the Law protected in 1969, and used to justify the exploitation and dispossession of native Australians. The Australian judge, quoted by Wongar in his autobiography, sounds very much like the Belgian King Baudouin addressing the dispossessed of the Congo, or the authors of the law enforced in India, which made the salt in the Indian Ocean the property of a British firm: "The native claim is made on the basis that the law of this land recognizes Aboriginal ownership of the land, but there is no such recognition under the law... The land of Gove Peninsula is Crown Land and **it was only due to our generosity** that the

⁷ See London Review of Books, 4 October 2001, pp. 17-18.
Ludo De Witte, *The Assassination of Lumumba* (London: Verso, 2001)

⁸ Stephen J. Greenblatt, *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 14-15.

natives used that land until we needed it for other purposes."⁹ This is the logic of the 'justice' on which Western democracies are built, applied in Australia in the second half of the twentieth century.

As Greenblatt notes (in respect to an even grimmer seventeenth century account of British colonial conquest in Java), documentary evidence of this kind was being republished, **without** any critical comment, as late as 1943. Today, documentary accounts of Australia **with** critical comments, can be found, for instance, in Robert Hughes' study *The Fatal Shore: A History of the Transportation of Convicts to Australia 1787-1868*, published in 1987, or in John Pilger's *A Secret Country*, published in 1989.¹⁰ Both of these non-fictional accounts from the late eighties, support the 'fictional' texts on Aboriginal history that Wongar started producing in the seventies, just over ten years after he first set foot on the Australian soil, with little formal education, and no prior knowledge of English.

These seeming drawbacks may have been blessings in disguise. What schools do to human beings is a very controversial issue. Books as diverse as Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind: How higher education has failed democracy and impoverished the souls of today's students* (1987), Ivan Illich's *Deschooling Society*, Alice Miller's *Thou Shalt Not Be Aware: Society's Betrayal of the Child* (1981), Donaldo Macedo's *Chomsky on Mis/Education* (2000), or David Mamet's *Oleanna* (1993), etc., testify with what great alarm and concern is education viewed by academics and artists alike. The critical view of Western education, incorporated by Howard Barker into the closing scene of his brilliant play *Scenes from an Execution* (1986)¹¹, is perhaps most relevant for Wongar's case.

A painting, commissioned by the Venetian government to celebrate the victory at Lepanto, is painted by a very critical and independent woman artist Galactia. She does *not* depict war as triumph of civilization, and is duly imprisoned. She is released (and her painting publicly exhibited) when a critic, another woman, Rivera, produces an acceptable, politically correct interpretation of her work. The review is printed and officially distributed to the literate and educated public.

Through what follows, in the play, Barker makes the point that while education obviously appears to 'give' to its beneficiaries, it is certainly also conceived to 'take away' - spontaneity, individuality, self-reliance. The literate, who parade in front of Galactia's painting, see the world in the way they have been trained to see- not with their own eyes, but through the eyes and mind of the mediators (teachers, political and religious leaders, 'authorities'), whose version of reality they have been forced to assimilate. Only the approved view of the world is tolerated. They read the instructions they have been given, and check Galactia's canvas for what they have been alerted to see: not the ideological meaning of her whole composition, but her formal skill, displayed in the execution of small details they are advised to find admirable.

Fortunately for the artist (and, Pinter would add, the survival of our common humanity) some of the Venetian public have remained illiterate - unprocessed and 'uncivilized'. They understand immediately what Galactia thinks of militarism and war. A common

⁹ B. Wongar, *Dingoes Den* (Australia, ETT Imprint, 1999), Chapter 4, p. 65.

¹⁰ Robert Hughes, *Fatal Shore: A History of the Transportation of Convicts to Australia 1787-1868* (London: Collins Pan Books, 1987);

John Pilger, *A Secret Country* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1989, Vintage 1990)

¹¹ Howard Barker, *Scenes from an Execution* (London: Jonathan Calder, 1985)

man, in the last scene of the play, returns five times to look at her canvas. The Doge observes him kneeling before it, not cheering but crying over what Galactia has given him a chance to comprehend and contemplate. He sees what the educated have become blind to: the waste and destruction of human life that civilization has schooled itself to perpetrate, rationalize, normalize, and glorify.

Wongar had little formal education ("The year I was sent barefoot to our village school, World War Two broke out" is the first sentence in his Foreword to *Raki*) but, instead, grew up on the living oral tradition of his native Serbia. His father knew by heart the ancient epic poems preserved since the fourteenth century, and often recited them to his family, not only during their evening rest at home but often while they were working together in the fields. Love for the land the family tilled, and admiration for the living world of nature that supported them, was instilled into Wongar mostly by his mother, to whose soul his novel *Raki* is dedicated. Love for the creative word was passed on to him by his father. These powerful childhood experiences enabled him to understand and love Aboriginal Australia. In *Raki*, the two strands of Wongar's life - the stories of Serbia and Aboriginal Australia - come together and, in a unique literary fashion, become one.

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To understand better what cherishing such forbidden loves (for Aboriginal Australia in the sixties, or for Serbia today) entailed, several 'reminders' will be cited. The first comes from chapter two of Pilger's book *A Secret Country*, entitled "A Whispering in Our Hearts". The entire chapter is important because it records Pilger's academic discovery of what, for Wongar, represented lived experience and first hand knowledge of Aboriginal life. In his account Pilger writes:

"From 1952, when I entered high school, a standard history textbook was *Man Makes History: World History from the Earliest Times to the Renaissance* by Russel Ward. It sold more than 200,000 copies. This is an extract: *Boys and girls often ask, 'What is the use of history? Answer: There are still living in Arnhem Land people who know almost no history. They are Aboriginal tribesmen who live in practically the same way as their forefathers and ours did, tens of thousands of years ago. ...We are civilized today and they are not. History helps us to understand why this is so.* (p. 25)

A 1970 reprint of *The Squatting Age in Australia* by professor Stephen Roberts concludes that: *It was quite useless to treat the Aborigines fairly, since they were completely amoral and usually incapable of sincere and prolonged gratitude.* This was a departure for Roberts, whose *History of Australian Land Settlement*, regarded as a classic account, included not a single reference to Aborigines. When a chair of anthropology was endowed by the Australian Government at Sydney University, it was for research into the origins of the indigenous people of New Guinea, not the indigenous people of Australia who had been banished into a silent absence. (p. 27)"

It is only after some significant archeological discoveries in the late sixties (for instance the Obiri paintings along the escarpment of Arnhemland, where Wongar lived with his Aboriginal wife and family) that the attitude began to change. In a wonderfully appreciative passage Pilger writes: "Aborigines lived lives whose intrinsic value, whose 'Aboriginality' took for granted qualities of generosity and reciprocity and could not conceive of extremes of wealth and poverty. The wellspring of this was Aboriginal reverence

for the land of Australia, which they equated with life itself. They were the guardians of the land, and the land was critical to the sustenance of all human identity. 'The land is *us*; it is our mother,' a Walpiri man of northern Australia told me, 'To know the land, to know and love where you come from, and never to go out and destroy it, is being right...is being civilised.'¹²

After quoting a poem by the Aboriginal author Hyllus Maris, in which the continuity of such views is beautifully expressed, Pilger writes: "'The Australian story, centered upon the original Australians, remains white Australia's secret. With the Aborigines written out, the Australian story seems apolitical, a faintly heroic tale of white man against Nature, of 'national achievement' devoid of blacks, women and other complicating factors. With the Aborigines in it, the story is completely different: It is a story of theft, dispossession and warfare, of massacre and resistance, It is a story every bit as rapacious as that of the United States, Spanish America, and colonial Africa and Asia. It is, above all, a political story." (p. 31)

The resistance to change of this 'political story' was demonstrated in the first week of September, 2001, during the anti-racism conference held in Durban, South Africa. On September 10, 2001 (only one day before the 9/11 event) two articles in the *New Statesmen* reported on the conference, which "collapsed in recriminations against Israel, against calls for an apology from Europeans for the Atlantic slave trade, against calls for reparations for one of the most horrible, barbaric, evil, vicious, corrupt moment in the history of humanity" (Darcus Howe, p. 22). The other text, entitled "Slavery was theft: we should play" (p. 4-5), explained more fully the use of the term 'reparation', which had sent the white civilizers packing. After eloquently pointing out that slavery involved the theft of people's labour, and that it represented a clear cut case of criminality legally backed by American property law and licensed by the British government, the article claimed that, in view of such evidence "Justice demands debt relief for Africa and opportunities for African countries to sell their goods to the developed world. The word reparation is merely a recognition that these are obligations, not acts of charity. ...Africa is ravaged by war, disease and starvation, and the US inner cities, populated overwhelmingly by blacks, are scarred by drug dependency, gang warfare and poverty. They need help, and they need it now. People who talk about reparations may seem to be off with the fairies, but they are more realistic than those who babble about reconciliation. There will be no reconciliation until white governments and white public opinion unreservedly accepts the need for justice".

While white governments and white public opinion continue to have reservations about justice (one of the *New Statesmen* articles mentions F. M. Conford's book *Micro-cosmographica Academica* from which it quotes the frequent conservative objection that "one should not act justly now, for fear of raising expectations that one will act still more justly in the future"), numerous artists are fleshing out the 'political story' with facts-inspired works which, like Wongar's, disclose and condemn unabandoned colonial practices. Canadian playwright Wendy Lill (b. 1950) worked as a community health worker in Indian reservations in Nova Scotia. She started writing in order to come to terms with the unexpected discoveries she made there. Her play *Sisters* (1991) is an account of a

¹² In one of his epigraphs to *Walg* (the word means the sacred uterus) Wongar reminds his readers that "According to the fertility cult of the Australian aborigines, the land is an extension of man's body and soul. This unity with nature ensures the regeneration cycle, and if the same be disturbed, life would consequently cease."

Catholic school set up for Indian children, for the purpose of civilizing them and bringing them closer to the white man's God. The children are taken away from their families, forbidden to speak Indian ("You could wash their mouths with soap. They'll never amount to anything speaking their native tongue"¹³ the young music teacher Mary is instructed by her Mother Superior), and not allowed even to attend their parent's funerals for fear of "reverting to type". The play is set in North America in the fifties and the sixties, but it is an account of the state of thing in the 'hidden Canada' Lill discovered much later.

Perhaps the most unbearably shocking work inspired by continued colonial practices is Christopher Hampton's play *Savages* (1974)¹⁴ The continent in this play is different (South America), the story the same. In his Introduction Hampton (b. 1946) writes: "On 23rd February 1969, the *Sunday Times Colour Magazine* published an article by Norman Lewis called 'Genocide', which dealt with the destruction of the Brazilian Indians. Among the many appalling examples of systematic extermination discussed by Mr. Lewis and ranging from the sixteenth century to the present day was one which involved the slaughter of large number of the Cinas Largas tribe, supervised by the Francisco de Britto, 'general overseer of the rubber extraction firm on the river Juruena' in the early sixties. 'It was seen as essential', Mr. Lewis writes, 'to produce the maximum number of casualties in one single devastating attack, at a time when as many Indians as possible would be present in the village, and an expert was found to advise that this could best be done at the annual feast of the "Quarup". ...A Cessna light plane used for ordinary commercial services was hired for the attack and its normal pilot replaced by an adventurer of mixed Italian-Japanese birth. ...On the first run packets of sugar were dropped. They had opened the packets and were tasting the sugar ten minutes later when the plane returned to carry out the attack." (p. 9-10)

The genocide, in the play, is explained by the Minister of Indian Affairs (the head of the Fundacao Nacional do Indio) as the removal of ethnic cysts from the face of Brazil. The sale of Indian land ("in more enlightened times ceded in perpetuity to various Indian tribes") could proceed unhindered after the ethnic cleansing 'solved' the problem of infringement of property rights. Yet, as Hampton points out in his play, ethnic cysts were removed through integration just as successfully as through extermination. "Exterminate, integrate...its the same thing, only slower. Integrate them, give them the benefit of civilization, the government says. What they don't say is that the first two benefits of civilisation the Indians are going to be given are disease and alcohol. All they mean when they say the Indians have got to be integrated is that the Indians have got to give up their land and a totally self-sufficient and harmonious way of life to become the slaves of slaves." (p. 38)

As in Barker's play, and in Wendy Lill, in this business the church and the state proceed together. One of the most powerful moments in Hampton's play is the account of the activities carried out by the missionaries, given in Scene 11: "Alongside of preaching the Gospel, which is of course our primary task, there are other ways in which we have to change the lives of these savages. For instance, we have to instill in them a work ethic tied to a reward system, which is something quite new to them. Now if you do that, naturally they are going to have to look at a whole lot of things in a new way, things like

¹³ Wendy Lill, *Sisters* (Vancouver, Talonbooks, 1991), Act I, p. 29.

¹⁴ Christopher Hampton, *Savages* (London: Faber, 1989)

property and personal possessions, and they're going to want to preserve and protect them". The Reverend ends the account of his mission in Brazil by saying. "This government may have some terrible problems as of now, but it's working very closely with the United States government, and I think together we're going to be able to lick most of them." (pp. 54-61)

The activities of the American government are well known, but a reference to the play *Miss Evers' Boys*, written by David Feldshuh in the eighties and presented by the Goodman Theatre in Chicago in the 1991/92 season, may remind the public how far it dares to go in 'treating' (or licking) even its own citizens. The play is based on the 1972 Senate investigation into the "Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Negro Male", the most notorious episode in American medical history. The play rises above its factual foundation and becomes a study of 'informed consent', but it does not fail to question the ethics of a government sponsored program that singled out an exclusively black study group, and withheld treatment and continued the experiment long after penicillin, the cure for syphilis, was discovered and made readily available.

Lill, Hampton and Feldshuh spent years thinking about the factual processes and events they had encountered before they shaped them into works of art. To Wongar inspiration and creation came in much the same way. In a note to *Karan* (1985) he wrote: "This book is fiction. However, in 1950s and 1960s the British carried out nuclear testing on tribal areas of South Australia. It was revealed to the Royal Commission, set up in 1984 by the Australian government to inquire into this activity, that the testing, which lasted for about a decade, had a lethal effect on Aboriginal tribal man and his culture. The testing preceded a severe drought."

The Author's note to *Raki* is similar: "The Serbian section of this book is historically factual. The Australian section is imaginary but inspired by evidence of the rounding up and forceful separation of Aboriginal children from their tribal families, purportedly to protect them from the evil spell of campfires. You are free to view this as you please; the choice is yours."

His autobiography shows in a much more detailed way how things seen or heard matured into art. Chapter six, for instance, contains a most memorable account of his meeting with Carol, a well educated elegant girl on her way to France, whom he suspected of being half Aboriginal, and one of the 'stolen' generation. In his very discrete efforts to test his suspicion Wongar told her of his encounter with a dispossessed Aboriginal mother whose tragedy inspired him to write a play. Carol offered to correct the spelling. When he eventually went to see her off at the airport, he noticed that she had changed her plans and was going to Perth, not Paris. "Perhaps to search for her Aboriginal mother", mused Wongar, and added: "But she still pretended she was white, for being even part-Aborigine in the 1960s meant you were deprived of citizenship; in some cases, of even the right to live."

When Carol's story, and the story Wongar tells to Carol, begin to coalesce with a similar story, remembered from the Serbian past, the structure of what was to become *Raki* begins to emerge. Wongar's own account of how facts encountered in the sixties, through his total moral engagement became fictions in the nineties, is worth citing at length: "We came across a band of Aborigines who kept aloof from the whites and though these people knew Jo well, at our approach, the children fled the camp into the bush and only the elderly stayed behind. Among these was a woman, almost blind from trachoma, busy grinding acacia seeds between two stones. I doubted that she was able to

tell the colour of my skin but she may well have recognised the smell of a white man. She rushed to me, thrusting her face just a few inches from my own, repeatedly asking me to bring her children back until her voice cracked and became incoherent. She constantly repeated the same two words, *gulwiri* and *bogo*, while tears streamed from her milky-white, bulging eyes and down her grief stricken face. At last the woman sagged forward and slid to the ground, grasping me around my ankles, and then I, too, broke down with the shame of being the same colour as those who had stolen her children away. I heard her name was Gorogil and she had no other relatives but those two children, Gulwiri and Bogo. Every day she would harvest seeds from the bush, grind them on stones and make damper in the hot ashes for the children to eat. Every evening the damper was made ready but the children never came back. ...I stayed with her and the others for a few weeks and I wrote a stage play which I called after her children. ...Something irresistible forced me to write my play *Gulwiri and Bogo* and having seen poor, blind Gorogil, I had no option but to complete it. For years I had heard stories of the sadness and horror when Aboriginal children in remote tribal communities were snatched away by the whites. This policy, begun in 1920, of 'assimilation', was disguised as a humanitarian drive to 'save Aboriginal children from the evil spell of the camp fire'. The practice lasted until the 1970s, depriving Aboriginal communities of new generations and destroyed their culture. The practice was akin to the seize of Serbian children by invading Ottomans, during their occupation of Serbia. The practice, which lasted four centuries, was to raid Serbian villages once every seven years and take *Danak*, a Tribute in Blood. The stolen children were taken to Istanbul to be indoctrinated into the Islamic faith and eventually became *janissary*, the brutal foot soldiers of the Ottoman Empire. In Australia the stolen tribal children were not destined to become warriors. Many of them were sent to the Kahlin Compound and similar centres near Darwin and from there were passed to white families throughout the country, or even abroad, for adoption. Many ended as domestic servants, receiving scant education and alienated from their tribal culture and relatives. The few who did receive proper parental care by their new white families may well have grown up without being told of their original background. I could guess that the couple who adopted Carol had given her the love and education needed to succeed in the whiteman's world. She was probably one of the few lucky ones to find a caring family and despite my revulsion at the idea of children being forcefully taken away from their natural parents, I felt it would be a tragedy in reverse if Carol rejected their love and expectations now. ...Conquerors, whether in my old Balkan country or in Australia, differ little in their tyranny, though in Australia it was often disguised under a certain parliamentary ordinance. In 1953, while politicians frequently mouthed words such as 'freedom' and 'democracy', the Australian government brought about the notorious Welfare Ordinance, giving tyrannical powers to the Chief Protector of Aborigines. It became policy to segregate Aboriginal people, isolate them in compounds or reserves, refuse marriages between couples and take children away from their parents - never to be seen again." (p. 98-103) In Pilger's chapter "A Whispering in Our Hears" many additional facts and anecdotes related to these civilizing measures can be found, but in Wongar's case, the loss these documents describe is personal: he himself is a white parent who never found his aboriginal children again.

* * *

Wongar did not persist in writing his books in order to make an unpopular subject (the Aborigines and the Serbs) popular. What he had to say in *Raki* about the Nazi occupation of Yugoslavia, and the role some prominent historical figures played in it (Kurt Waldheim, Father Draganovic, Bishop Stepinac, Curzio Malaparte¹⁵), may have been an additional reason why the book was confiscated by the Australian State Police. Since the manuscript was not returned, in spite of the efforts PEN International made to retrieve it, the published novel represents the second version Wongar had to write. He may have had some satisfaction when, soon after *Raki's* publication in 1994, long withheld war-crime records of Kurt Waldheim were released. Waldheim was condemned for his activities in the war and barred from entering the USA. The fact that, prior to the disclosure, he served as the General Secretary of the United Nations, makes Wongar's documented disappointment in the UN, and mistrust of its 'humanitarian' interventions (especially explicit in Chapter 15, the closing chapter in *Raki*), doubly justified. Wongar, "he who comes from the spirit world of dreams, or, loosely translated, the outsider", writes not to gain popularity or fame but because he desires, like Lumumba, to make a juster and a nobler world possible for all.

Through Wongar's mapping of the cruelty, exploitation and destruction that mark the history of the white West, the seed of the juster and nobler world becomes more visible. Cruelty could not be named without the kindness that shames it and reveals it. His map contains a record of an Australian 'other' who came to help and love suffering Serbia just as simply and directly as he loved suffering Aboriginal Australia. During the First World War there was in Serbia a Scottish Women's Hospital Unit, with a large number of Australian/New Zealand volunteers. Two women, Miles Franklin and Evelina Haverfield, achieved legendary status in the minds of the people they cared for. They were referred to as *vilas* (good fairies) and had monuments built to them in gratitude for the commitment they showed to the people of Serbia. In the seventh chapter of his autobiography Wongar notes: "Miles Franklin returned to Australia with immense experience as a witness to human tragedy and the horror of war. The experience forever influenced her way of thinking and her creative work. Though she wrote a considerable body of literature about her experience in those Balkan wars, very little of it was published. The world preferred to forget about the war and the unpublished manuscripts were left in the Mitchell Library, to gather dust". (119-120)

Later on in the same chapter he tells the story of Evelina Haverfield. He was taken to the local cemetery in Bajina Basta and shown an old gravestone with her name engraved on it. She, whom the people called *vila* Evelina, was a friend of Miles Franklin and a very prominent member of the Scottish Women's Hospital Unit in Serbia. "After World War I ended," continues Wongar, "Evelina Haverfield stayed in Serbia and opened an orphanage at Bajina Basta - a remote and barely accessible little town nestled in the steep Drina Gorge. The place had retained a medieval way of life and seemed centuries away from the rest of Europe. Upstream, at Visegrad, stood one of the finest monuments man has ever made - a stone bridge built by Mehmed Pasha Sokolovic, who had been abducted as a village child by the Turks and taken to Istanbul to be enslaved. He later

¹⁵ It would be useful to have at hand a copy of *Ratlines*, or Curzio Malaparte's novel *The Skin*, to have the documentary evidence on which the closing section of chapter eight, for instance, is based illuminated from additional sources. See *Raki* (London, New York: Marion Boyars, 1997), pp. 118-120.

rose through the janissary ranks to become one of the Ottoman Empire's most liberal rulers (portrayed by Ivo Andric in his epic novel *Bridge on the River Drina*). Andric, Yugoslavia's only Nobel Prize winner, remained Wongar's inspiration throughout life and his *Raki* can be read as a literary homage to the great precursor.

Wongar has won many prizes, and although not the Nobel, he has been praised and supported by some of the most refined literary minds in the twentieth century: Samuel Beckett, Jean Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Alan Paton (who wrote a Foreword to *The Track to Bralgu*), Thomas Keneally, Thomas Shapcott, and most recently by Imamu Amiri Baraka, whose praise is printed on the cover of the latest edition of *Raki*: "Wongar's is a world that is magical and beautiful yet grim and unrelenting. We see the world many times through the eyes of animal totems, the brothers and sisters of the narrator's people. ...There is a tone to this work that is absolutely unlike anything you have ever read before". Although this is very true, and the magic of Wongar's magic realism inimitable, impossible to categorize and classify, one last background link is certainly to J. Coetzee and his brilliant opus from *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), to *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983), even finally to *Disgrace* (1999), and his most recent interest in dogs which feeds into Wongar's old-standing rapport with the dingoes. But, ultimately, what is important in both Wongar and Coetzee, is how the mapping of the other is done, and what it accomplishes. What one discovers, reading their novels, is freedom, even in the midst of concentration and detention camps which so frequently figure in their works as metaphors for the corner we have driven ourselves in. Characters may come from Serbia or Australia, be black or white, but such things are transcended without being devalued or denied. The space where they meet in our experience of the novels is a space unfamiliar, as Eliot would say, because nowadays we so rarely seek it¹⁶. Harold Pinter would call it our common humanity, for which even Francis Fukuyama is now nostalgically yearning in his latest book *The Posthuman Future*. The road we travel with Wongar in his works is very hard and, as Baraka says, unrelenting, but we always arrive, recognize, in the images of war and injustice that surround us, our own other face, the face of justice and love.

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¹⁶ See T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, the ending of "Little Gidding" (We shall not cease from exploration/And the end of all our exploring/Will be to arrive where we started/And know the place for the first time./Through the unknown, remembered gate/When the last of earth left to discover/Is that which was the beginning;/At the source of the longest river/The voice of the hidden waterfall/And the children in the apple-tree/Not known, because not looked for/But heard, half-heard, in the stillness/Between two waves of the sea./Quick now, here, now, always/A condition of complete simplicity/(Costing not less than everything)/And all shall be well and/All manner of things shall be well/When the tongues of flame are in-folded/Into the crowned knot of fire/And the fire and rose are one.

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OTKRIVANJE SEBE KROZ ISTRAŽIVANJE DRUGOG: ROMAN RAKI AUSTRALIJSKOG PISCA B. VONGARA

Ljiljana Bogoeva Sedlar

Rad je izložen na šestoj ESSE konferenciji održanoj u Strazburu avgusta/septembra 2002. godine, u okviru seminara koji se bavio mapiranjem 'drugog' u putopisnoj literaturi od osamnaestog veka do danas. Rad se bavi životom i stvaralaštvom australijskog pisca B. Wongara (t.j. Sretena Božića, rođenog 1932. u Jugoslaviji, iz koje je emigrirao šezdesetih, i u Australiji, pod novim aboridžinskim imenom, na engleskom jeziku počeo da piše sedamdesetih). Iz njegovih putovanja po Evropi i Australiji, i nomadskog života sa Aboridžinima prema čijoj je civilizaciji (razumevanju prirode, harmoničnom i miroljubivom načinu života, mitologiji, umetnosti) osećao duboko divljenje, proizišla su brojna dela: pesme, drame, kratke priče, i Nuklearni ciklus koji sačinjavaju četiri romana, od kojih je Raki (1994, 1997) poslednji. Boreći se protiv surovog uništavanja aboridžinskog načina života (kulturne i duhovne tradicije tako oprečne eksploatorskoj kolonijalnoj 'etici' anglosaksonske civilizacije) Vongar je shvatio i povezao stradanje australijskih starosedelaca sa stradanjima i svih ostalih osvajanih naroda, čije se istrebljenje tokom istorije tumačilo kao progres i napredak. Roman Raki je duboko doživljena epifanija o vezi koja postoji između stradanja koje je u svojoj istoriji doživljavao narod na Balkanu, i stradanja kojima su izloženi Aboridžini u Australiji. U radu je Vongarova osuda genocidnosti i varvarizma takozvane civilizacije stavljena u kontekst stvaralaštva autora kao što su J.M. Kuci, Vendi Lil, Kristofer Hampton, Džon Pildžer, Robert Hjuž, i drugi, koji, slično Vongaru, ne opraštaju genocide koji prate progres Zapada kroz Kanadu, Juznu Ameriku, Juznu Afriku, i drugde. Rad ističe načine na koji arhetipska kritika (posebno pristup Lesli Fidlera) i novi historicizam (posebno načela Stivena Grinblata) mogu upotpuniti razumevanje Vongarovih izvanrednih ostvarenja.