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## **Presence, Meaning, and the Other in Katharine Susannah Prichard's *Coonardoo: The Well in the Shadow***

Barnabás Baranyi

**Abstract:** This article reflects on the discursive strategies deployed by Katharine Susannah Prichard's *Coonardoo* to undermine the then-dominant way of referring to Aboriginal-white relations, especially those involving sexuality. The novel does this through establishing Aboriginal culture as resembling a "presence culture" in Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's terminology, while white-Australian culture is representative of a "meaning culture." Thus *Coonardoo* sets up a relationship between the two cultures that is reminiscent of the poststructuralist self/Other dichotomy. However, in contrast to most authors reflecting on the novel's representation of Aboriginal Otherness, this paper contends that Prichard's use of this dualism positions the two cultures in a way that allows for meaningful cultural exchange between them, rather than presenting these worldviews as incompatible with one another.

**Keywords:** *Coonardoo*, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, land, presence, Other, sexuality, Aboriginal-white relations, discourse of miscegenation

Most of the critical discussion surrounding Katharine Susannah Prichard's *Coonardoo* (1929) has revolved around the duality of sexuality and nature: physicality in both senses constitutes a fundamental role in the narrative. As Amanda Harris claims, "[m]uch of the literary analysis of this novel focused on the equation of Coonardoo with the land," and goes on to verify this established reading with the opening passage of the novel in which "Coonardoo's singing not only emerges from the sounds of the environment, but is described through evocations of pebbles, creek beds and shadows" (82). Similarly, Drusilla Modjeska in her introduction to the 1990 edition of the book published by Angus and Robertson talks about "Coonardoo's symbolic significance as the land itself" (3) and "the dark brooding presence of the land itself, of nature, and therefore of desire" (4). Sue Kossew also relates Coonardoo's character to nature, suggesting that Phyllis' unconditional sympathy towards Coonardoo is a result of her sensing "the link between Coonardoo and the land" (40). However, some critics, such as Susan Sheridan and Claire Corbould, interpret Coonardoo as being "defined from the white phallogocentric viewpoint" (Corbould 421), in which Coonardoo appears as a "mediator between the white man on the one hand and nature, as it is constructed by Aboriginal culture, on the other" (Sheridan 144). This formulation of the relationship between Coonardoo as land or nature and the white perspective, while complicating the oversimplified equation between Coonardoo and the land, illuminates a significant cultural difference between white and black social groups. The cultural difference between the white and Aboriginal cultures as represented in the novel, while invariably touched upon by critics, has not been explored in detail.

This paper, therefore, examines the way the epistemological and ontological assumptions underlying the white and Aboriginal Australian worldviews are represented in the novel. For this investigation, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's distinction between "presence cultures" and "meaning cultures" is utilized, which highlights where exactly the representations of white and Aboriginal cultures diverge in the novel. It is my contention that conflicts between the Indigenous and white characters are indirect consequences of the way *Coonardoo* represents white culture as approximating a meaning culture, and Aboriginal culture as being reminiscent of a presence culture. While this manner of representation unwittingly, yet inevitably, construes a dichotomic relationship between incompatible white and black cultural heritages, the novel still manages to reinterpret the figure of the Aboriginal Other as a human being who is neither threatening nor horrifying. The novel thus establishes a view of Aboriginal culture that enables meaningful cultural exchange between Aborigines and whites, which was made impossible by the then-dominant readings of the interactions between white and black Australian social groups.

Besides Sheridan and Corbould, Hannah Robert also investigates how the novel represents Aboriginal culture as the Other from a white Australian perspective. Robert traces the genealogy of a discourse of miscegenation in white Australian culture, and in doing so makes a compelling case for reading the figure of the Aboriginal woman in *Coonardoo* and other novels as "a 'looking glass' in which white men's sexual and racial anxieties were reflected" (73). This mechanism reflects how "European relations with 'Others' were primarily concerned with defining their own identity" (73), creating discourses such as that of miscegenation to set up an inescapably dichotomous relationship between them and cultures with often radically different customs.

However, according to Sue Thomas, Prichard's novel presents an "'emic' view of aboriginal [sic] culture," that "seeks to minimize the influence of cultural imperialism, seeks to decentre the observing self and her/his internalized cultural baggage (potentially including the colonialist Manichean allegory) in the presence of the cultural Other" (235). While the novel does strive to recontextualize Aboriginal culture in a new perspective, as Corbould, Sheridan and Robert's accounts also highlight, it is doomed to fail to maintain an "emic" view insofar as Prichard's colonial "cultural baggage" permeates her novel and makes it impossible for it to be detached in any way from Western discursive mechanisms. This makes the novel's representation of black-white relations all the more complex: eagerly it places the Indigenous perspective in a context that is perhaps more accessible, although still unavoidably Western, for a white Australian worldview. Presenting a relationship between the two cultures that is reminiscent of that between presence and meaning cultures contributes to the novel's construction of Aboriginal cultures as the Other of white culture, while placing Aboriginal culture in a perspective where it does not appear as unknowable, and threatening, makes the novel unique among those white accounts that construct the discourse of miscegenation.

In his *The Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey*, Gumbrecht develops the idea of "presence" as the "effect of tangibility that comes from the materialities of communication" (17). Gumbrecht observes that "any form of communication, through its material elements, will 'touch' the bodies of the persons who are communicating in specific and varying ways" (17). Moreover, "all cultures and cultural objects can be analyzed as configurations of both meaning effects and presence effects, although their different semantics of self-description often accentuate exclusively one or the other side" (19, original emphasis). The concept of "presence" is established via Heidegger's concept of Being, defined by Gumbrecht as "tangible things, seen independently of their culturally specific

situations” (76). The connection between Heidegger’s and Gumbrecht’s concepts lies in the fact that both “Being and presence, imply substance; both are related to space; both can be associated with movement” (77). Substance, space, and movement are all possible only within the physical, and it is in this aspect where Gumbrecht locates the theoretical divergence between presence cultures and meaning cultures. As a result, all the differences Gumbrecht offers between presence culture and meaning culture boil down to the fact that worldviews in presence culture are constituted around the physical and the bodily, whereas in a meaning culture worldviews are organized around the mental, the abstract, and the interpretive. One of Gumbrecht’s ten divergences between cultures of presence and meaning relates to the knowledge that the given culture produces:

knowledge, in a meaning culture, can only be legitimate knowledge if it has been produced by a subject in an act of world-interpretation .... For a presence, legitimate knowledge is typically revealed knowledge. It is knowledge revealed by (the) god(s) or by different varieties of what one might describe as events of self-unconcealment of the world. (81)

Because the worldview of a presence culture revolves around something supposedly “stable,” something that is material, and thus, “present,” knowledge in a presence culture is an integral part of the “things” in the world, and so any act of acquiring knowledge will constitute a revelation. However, meaning, according to Gumbrecht, is brought about through an act of interpretation; therefore knowledge in a meaning culture is a result of “penetrating the ‘purely material’ surface of the world in order to find spiritual truth beneath or behind it” (80).

However, it is also apparent that Gumbrecht positions the modern Western mindset as being based in the concept of meaning, while setting up presence cultures as being in opposition to this mindset, whereby he also very consciously creates a relationship reminiscent of the poststructuralist self/Other dichotomy. He emphasizes time and again how “meaning culture ... is ... close to modern culture and presence culture ... is ... close to medieval culture” (79), the modern worldview being “a new configuration of self-reference in which men began to see themselves as eccentric to the world,” which “was very different from the dominant self-reference of the Christian Middle Ages” (24). Modernity thus “redefine[s] the relation between humankind and the world as the intersection” in a way that, as opposed to medieval culture, now the “subject as an eccentric, disembodies observer ... penetrates the surface of the world in order to extract knowledge and truth” (27). Gumbrecht bases his distinction between “meaning culture” and “presence culture” in these insights, while pointing out how “all discourses of collective self-reference contain both meaning- and presence-culture elements” (79), making these two concepts interrelated and fundamentally non-separable. However, this lack of a clear dividing line between presence and meaning makes these two concepts inseparable the same way as the modern self and the Other are inseparable from one another: the self bases its own identity in the Other, and the Other is brought to existence through this very process of identification (Foucault 356).

Having thus established my reading of Gumbrecht’s terminology, let me now turn to the novel’s representation of Aboriginal–white relationships. The most palpable representations of cultural differences arise when the opposing points of view are described coming from a white Australian character on one side, and an Aboriginal character on the other. In fact, what is at stake throughout the novel is the ability, or lack thereof, of white characters with a Western mindset to understand and accommodate Aboriginal culture. For instance, Mrs. Bessie’s “fits of loathing the blacks” for some of their customs which she regards immoral (Prichard 22), particularly her infamous disgust over Coonardoo’s rite of maturity (26), indicates her inability to fathom the cultural significance of these rites to Aboriginal people.

However, she seems to have an elaborate understanding of the importance of kinship in Aboriginal culture: “[h]er people did not want to lose Coonardoo either. She was theirs by blood and bone, and they were weaving her to the earth and to themselves, through all her senses, appetites and instincts” (26). Apparently, Mrs Bessie defines Coonardoo’s belonging to her people in terms of bodily ties and relations to the earth. This mode of definition combines two of Gumbrecht’s aspects relating to presence and meaning cultures: the dominant mode of self-reference in a presence culture is the body (Gumbrecht 80), while this self-reference takes place in the context of a greater cosmology into which people in a presence culture inscribe themselves (82). Mrs Bessie’s opinion suggests that Coonardoo is an Aborigine because of her bodily ties to her people, who are weaving her to the earth, inscribing her and her body into the cosmology they are a part of.

The description of Warieda’s death underscores this reading: “One of the Nuniewarra boys warned Warieda that the moppin had pointed a bone at him. Warieda went sick almost immediately, would not eat, said he had guts-ache, moped disconsolately, and felt he was going to die. [...] He was dying slowly on his feet; dying of the idea that he was to die” (154). What is especially illuminating about this incident is how Hugh relates to it:

It was a shock too, that this trick of the moppin-garra could have got Warieda. Hugh thought Warieda had absorbed white men’s ideas and ways too much for a boning stunt to affect him. Yet his superstitious fear went so deep, it had annihilated him. Hugh knew, of course, that a black ordinarily would succumb to a ‘boning.’ But Warieda – it seemed unbelievable he could be done to death by a crazy loon pointing a bone at him. (156)

This example is illustrative of the difference between the epistemological foundations of the two cultures. Whereas there was no sign for Hugh of a disease that might bring about Warieda’s death, for Warieda, the fact that the moppin-garra pointed a bone at him brings about a revelation for him that he must die, or, more precisely, that he must already have died. Whereas in Mrs. Bessie’s case death is represented as a consequence of a malfunction in her body that has been forming for years, Warieda’s death appears as a result of a revelation by an authoritative source of truth, without any actual signs as understood from a Western perspective. The epistemological difference lies in the fact that the knowledge about Mrs Bessie’s death is produced through a long process of interpreting and reinterpreting signs, whereas knowledge about Warieda’s death is produced at the moment he receives the final verdict from the moppin-garra. In a sense this knowledge “presents itself to [them] (even with its inherent meaning), without requiring interpretation as its transformation into meaning” (Gumbrecht 81). This knowledge cannot be reinterpreted or refuted by virtue of the fact that it is a divine knowledge revealed by an authoritative source that is in an immediate contact with the forces controlling the divine cosmology.

According to Cath Ellis, the main aspect of the difference between the two cultures *Coonardoo* presents is the incompatibility of two different notions of parentage belonging to each culture. The white Australian understanding implies a biological connection between the parents and the children, whereas the Aboriginal understanding only requires a familial connection (that is, the parents of the child are the two partners in the marriage, irrespective of the actual biological father of the child) (67). Ellis claims that “the tragedy of Coonardoo ... lies in the convergence of two traditions which are essentially incompatible” (71). However, this convergence can be brought to reflect the difference between presence and meaning cultures. In a meaning culture, the process of determining biological ancestry involves an elaborate process of interpretation, whereas in a presence culture, kinship relations are determined by the family and the social group in which the person is born. In

other words, Aboriginal culture does not subject defining familial bonds to any elucidation other than the identification of the partners as parents to whom the child gets born, as if being born to a family indisputably determines one's bonds, as if, in other words, through a revelation in Gumbrecht's understanding.

It is already apparent that this mode of representing the Aboriginal culture, while still positioning it as Other, does not postulate this Otherness as ultimately unknowable for the Western mind. Although Foucault defines Otherness as an unknowability the modern mind wants to distance itself from, which ultimately results in the modern subject's self-definition in relation to the Other, this fundamental lack of understandability does not get expressed in *Coonardoo*. To the contrary, a legitimate understanding of the Aboriginal mindset seems to be expressed in the novel:

Warieda objected when [Coonardoo] declared that someone must go into Nuniewarra and tell Saul Hardy that Hugh was ill. Saul and Cock-Eyed Bob had come into the homestead a few days after Hugh went back to the mustering camp, Joey Koonarra said. They had gone on to Nuniewarra. Saul would know what was the matter and what to do for Hugh, better than she did, Coonardoo explained. Warieda guessed Sam Geary would return with Saul and Bob, and did not want him on Wytaliba. (72)

This passage presents a conversation between the Aborigines narrated from an Aboriginal point of view. Importantly, this description is devoid of the prejudices that inform pre-WWII discourses on Aborigines. In fact, this conversation is presented as if it were a conversation between any of the white characters, except for the fact that it is narrated in the third person. Based on this passage, it can be argued that the narrator of the novel seeks to introduce the Aboriginal mindset in a more familiarized way for the Western worldview. Further, Prichard's mode of representation varies from the discourse of miscegenation as analysed by Robert. The difference between the two ways of reflecting on Aboriginal culture lies in the fact that while the latter effectively widens the gap between the white Australian self and the Aboriginal Other, making communication between the two cultures impossible, the former strives to establish an understanding from a white perspective of the exchange of ideas and opinions amongst Aborigines.

An analogy can be established here with Clifford Geertz's distinction, after Gilbert Ryle, between "thin" and "thick" description, where *Coonardoo's* representation acts as a thick description and the dominant discursive strategies approximate thin descriptions. Geertz exemplifies the difference between the two concepts by the sudden contraction of eyelids, which can be interpreted as both a twitch and a wink. The first description reflects on the phenomenon on a purely physical level, whereas the latter takes into account the communicative and cultural relevance of the phenomenon as well (Geertz 7). In the context of Aboriginal-white relations, arguably, there is a similar difference between the discourse of miscegenation and *Coonardoo's* representation as between Geertz's "thinness" and "thickness." In this context, however, the discourse of miscegenation does not stop at the level of thin description, for it strives to inscribe Aboriginal-white relations with Western ideals. This inscription makes it impossible for white Australians to appreciate the cultural significance of Aboriginal customs which are also expressed in interactions between Aborigines and white Australians. As Robert puts it, "[t]his characterization of Aboriginal women as innately sexual and natural is predicated on a pretence of separation—it ignores the conditions on which Aboriginal women offered their bodies, whether it was survival, bargaining, or partnership" (73).

In other words, it is exactly the culturally specific aspect, “the structures of signification” (Geertz 9), of sexual relations between Aborigines and white Australians that get lost with the contemporary normative colonizing mode of describing black and white Australian relations. Prichard’s *Coonardoo* works to undermine this discourse through presenting interracial sexual relations as amoral: “Hugh took [Coonardoo] in his arms, and gave himself to the spirit which drew him, from a great distance it seemed, to the common source which was his life and Coonardoo’s” (Prichard 71). The transcendental (“spirit”) and the natural (“life”) get associated in this description that metaphorizes a sexual intercourse via figures that have been used in the discourse of miscegenation to categorize Aborigines as Others and, consequently, interracial sexual intercourses as immoral and horrifying (Robert 71). The novel’s presentation of this intercourse, while abundant with symbolism and metaphors, achieves to defamiliarize this element, thus putting it into a context that dissociates Aboriginal–white intercourse from the dominant trope of miscegenation.

All in all, the novel’s representation can be described as Gumbrechtian insofar as it associates Aboriginal culture with presence, thus categorizing it as Other, while still avoiding to appeal to the dominant discursive strategies that are based on the premise that Indigenous culture is unknowable. Aborigines described in *Coonardoo* as operating on the premises of a presence culture makes them knowable to the white Australian worldview, for this kind of categorization puts Aboriginal culture into a context in which it is intelligible from a modern Western perspective. The fact that, as Courbould put it, “Coonardoo is the ‘Other,’ whose constantly humming voice sings and is heard at a predetermined pitch,” while “the narrative is ethnographically centred as a white text” (421) does little to refute the novel’s statement against categorizing Aboriginal–white relations as horror, vice, immorality, et cetera (Robert 72). Importantly enough, Coonardoo’s demise, and Wyaliba’s for that matter, is caused precisely by the fact that Hugh does not have the means to describe his intercourse with Coonardoo in terms other than those established within the discourse of miscegenation.

Furthermore, I could not agree more with Courbould when she emphasizes that *Coonardoo* associates Aborigines with animals, which is indicative of the author’s predispositions about the inferiority of Indigenous people (421). My contention is, however, that the novel recontextualizes Aboriginal cultural exchanges through constructing a relationship between black and white cultures that approximates the relationship between presence and meaning cultures. This is not to claim, of course, that Prichard had a clear idea about Gumbrecht’s concepts almost 80 years prior to the appearance of his work. Gumbrecht’s ideas, however, are helpful in explicating what exactly it is that Prichard’s book does in relation to the dominant way of referring to Aboriginal culture: written from a Western perspective, it provides a way of relating to Indigenous–white relations other than the means provided by dominant discursive strategies that describe these relations as horrifying, threatening, and immoral vices. With this, the novel puts Aboriginal culture into a context where it still functions as the Other for the white worldview, while positing intelligible cultural exchange between the two cultures as possible, desirable, and, indeed, necessary.

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**Barnabás Baranyi** is a postgraduate student in the American Studies program at the University of Debrecen. His research fields include film studies, game studies, and Australian studies, with his main research interest being the differences between Indigenous and Australian worldviews, and their representations in cultural products.  
E-mail: barnabasbaranyi@gmail.com