Public Symbol-making in Australia

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The focus of this paper is small and sharp, rather than sweeping. Within the complex context of 'white Australia' and its responses to 'Aboriginality', I concentrate on reading the changing role, from the nineteenth century to the twentieth, of public symbol-making in Australian life. I do this in order to question the role of current events and symbolic happenings surrounding reconciliation, with particular reference to the 'sacredness' of symbols, whether they be events, words, or artifacts.

Homi Bhabha's highly influential work on hybridity and colonial discursivity has been influential for postcolonial scholars thinking about how discourses are formed and reformed. In his essay 'Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a tree outside Delhi, May 1817', from *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha writes:

> What is irremediably estranging in the presence of the hybrid – in the revaluation of the symbol of national authority as the sign of colonial difference – is that the difference of cultures can no longer be identified or evaluated as objects of epistemological or moral contemplation: cultural differences are not simply there to be seen or appropriated. (114)

Bhabha's concern in this essay is to question the flaw at the heart of colonial discourse, subject as it is to displacement and dislocation as it operates in diasporised conditions. Bhabha extends poststructural methodologies as he investigates the ways hybridity and the postcolonial 'terrorise(s) authority with the ruse of recognition, its mimicry, its mockery' (115). My major assertion, and the basis for the argument of this paper, is that Australia is at present undergoing a major cultural shift in its discursive patterns. At points this shift does involve terror and mockery by those seeking to reconstruct social discourses, but I argue that there is a new openness –

not merely passive, but involving agency, and no longer in the mode of terrorising – in the ways these discourses are being constructed. Extending Bhabha's argument, I examine how the public discourses of race in Australia are now moving into a phase of increased fluidity, with potential for mutual construction and joint symbol-making.

Added to this context, many non-indigenous Australians are at present demonstrating a new level of need for and openness to 'spirituality', with indigenous Australians, for better and for worse, being placed as major symbolic bearers of spiritual significance and direction. The events surrounding Corroboree 2000, and particularly the walk across Sydney Harbour bridge, are symbolic signifiers here. I analyse this proposition concerning spirituality through a discussion of a range of symbolic productions in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, asking how the processes and purposes of public symbol-making are changing. My further proposition, connected to the first, is that there is now a manifest need being expressed in Australia for mutually conceived symbols, as indigenous and non-indigenous Australians seek to negotiate racial relations. By mutual here, I mean to include the questions of pan-Aboriginality, as well as indigenous and non-indigenous in dialogue. In order to substantiate such assertions, it is necessary briefly to examine the processes of symbol-making and the relative power of both the symbols and those who make them.

Mircea Eliade's (1907-86) important work on symbol and religious belief dates from the 1930s in Rumania, and underwent something of a revival in the 80s through new editions published in America. His collection of essays, *Symbolism, the Sacred and the Arts* (1986), makes fascinating reading in the context of late twentieth-century Australian racial politics. In the essay 'The Symbolism of Shadows in Archaic Religions' he argues that the function of symbols is 'in disclosing the structures of the real inaccessible to empirical experience. The words expressing the concepts of transcendence and freedom were witnessed to relatively late in the history of philosophy' (4). These are fighting words, are they not, in what I would describe as Australia's current materialist and empiricism-obsessed political and intellectual contemporary climate?

Eliade goes further, claiming that

> the roots of freedom must be sought in the depths of the psyche and not in the conditions created by certain historical moments; in other words that the desire for absolute freedom ranks among the essential nostalgias of man, whatever his cultural period and his form of social organization. (4)

These universalising words will not sit comfortably in their supra-materialist and gender anachronicities. But isn't it very close to the position actualised by many sections of Aboriginal Australia and in the symbols deployed by both indigenous and non-indigenous, during the Corroboree 2000 events? Political leaders were being asked to lay there political and economic power – at least symbolically – at the feet

of some greater reality, something which involved the emotions, a sense of memory and history, an assertion that something new needed to be constructed socially.

Keeping in mind the actions of Prime Minister John Howard and most of his government, in relation to the Reconciliation debate and Corroboree 2000, Eliade's words are again relevant:

> Symbols will maintain contact with the deep sources of life; they Express
> ... the 'lived' spiritual. This is the reason why symbols have a numinous
> aura: they disclose that the modalities of the Spirit are at the same time
> manifestations of Life, and, by consequence, directly engage human
> existence. Symbols not only disclose a structure of the real or even a
> dimension of existence, at the same time they carry a significance for
> human existence. This is why even symbols bearing on ultimate reality
> conjointly constitute some existential revelations for the man who
> deciphers their message. Here we measure the entire distance which
> separates conceptual language from symbolic language. (5)

John Howard's refusal to say sorry in any symbolic way, as the Prime Minister of the Government of Australia, has been interpreted in merely economic and political terms, as a fear of compensation. Other commentators see a mixture of economic and small 'l' liberal ideology in this refusal, as Howard refuses the black armband, and reiterates the many wonderful achievements of all Australians. Yet others see Howard's refusal as exactly what Eliade's description suggests, a failure to 'measure the entire distance which separates conceptual language from symbolic language.' But in the current climate of racial negotiations, the symbolic is accruing a larger power than even Howard is able to control. His refusal has taken on a life of its own. Becoming the negative pivot for Aboriginal as well as non-indigenous sympathisers' political anger, his continuing refusal has on several occasions raised people to their feet, prompting them to turn their backs as he speaks – a powerful and rallying symbol which is political and spiritual simultaneously, having a 'numinous aura' as Eliade puts it.

Although Eliade is writing in the 1930s, and still fairly much within the modernist desire for a unity, an organic understanding of symbols – 'everything hold(ing) together in a closed system of correspondences and assimilations' (6) – his work on symbols is also alive to what postmodernity would claim as its own, the multivalency of symbolism, the 'multiplicity of meanings which it expresses simultaneously ... (operating in) a plurality of contexts ... on a number of levels' (5).

Symbolism, multivalency and hybridity

At present in Australian public and scholarly discourses there is a tension between a simplistic identifying of aboriginality and spirituality, and a more postmodern, multivalent and processual understanding of sacredness as something necessarily constructed and reconstructed through the inevitable interplay of cultures.

Symbolism, and the place of sacredness in a postcolonial context, are not exactly the focus of critic Robert Young, in his helpful 1995 volume *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in theory, culture and race*. But from his wide-ranging discussion of the etymology and function of the notion of hybridity, I am claiming Young's insights for my project. As Eliade suggests, symbolism functions to propose a deep and unifying structure of meanings, even as they are multivalent. Of course, card-carrying postmodernists might want to crack wide open any organising of such multivalence, and stress the 'sea of difference' upon which any symbolic bark has to sail. What Young does in his history of hybridity, as theory and as practice, is to demonstrate the simultaneity of claims towards homogeneity and towards multiplicity in colonialist discourse. He takes as one of his examples the notion of Englishness, today 'often represented in terms of fixity, of certainty, centredness, homogeneity as something unproblematically identical with itself' (2). In other words, as flat as supposedly fixed symbol. For many, believer and sceptic alike, religious symbolism has operated in this way, as a fulcrum for personal or communal dogmatisms. But as Young argues, '[p]erhaps the fixity of identity for which Englishness developed such a reputation arose because it was in fact continually being contested, and was rather designed to mask its uncertainty, its sense of being estranged from itself, sick with desire for the other' (2).

> So, hybridity, according to Young's history and deployment of it, works simultaneously in two ways: 'organically', hegemonizing, creating new spaces, structures, scenes and 'intentionally', diasporizing, intervening as a form of subversion, translation, transformation … this doubleness is important both politically and theoretically: without the emphasis on the active, disjunctive moments or movements of homogenization and diasporization, it can easily be objected that hybridization assumes as was often the case with the nineteenth century theorists of race, the prior existence of pure, fixed and separate antecedents. But its dialectical structure shows that such hybridity is still repeating its own cultural origins, that it has not slipped out of the mantle of the past … [so] hybridity has been deployed against the very culture that invented it in order to justify its divisive practices of slavery and colonial oppression. (25)

Young here proceeds to discuss the double understanding of hybridization, indebted to the linguistic work of Bakhtin and the postcoloniality of Homi Bhaba, both of whom recognise, from different contexts and disciplines, the subversive potential of hybridity, even as the simple, conservative actions of some hybridities – a forcing together into a crass sameness or oneness – is acknowledged.

Hybridity as iconic and coercive

The photography of Aboriginal Australians as subjects in the late nineteenth century provides one way of focussing on the ways Aborigines were hybridised, fetishised and

symbolised, for multifarious colonising purposes. It's simplistic to say that there was one mode of photography – a new art for most of its practitioners in the mid-century – but we can ask what kinds of symbolic purpose were different photos put to, and how can we in the early twenty-first century read such photographs? The following discussion of nineteenth-century photography refers to a range of photographs accessible at the photo archive <http://firstclass.deakin.edu.au/~frang/hybridity>.[1]

In the studio photographs of mid nineteenth-century photographer J.W. Lindt, who worked in and around Grafton, NSW, we can without much difficulty read what I would call a quality of abject hybridity. Lindt was drawn to reproduce various stereotypes of the period: the exotic other; they're just like us; the biddable citizen; the primitive sexual; the dying race; the children of pre-civilisation. This is not to say that all of his subjects were unwilling. We can't really know how much sense of status, or, conversely, how much reluctance, each subject projected onto the process of being photographed, sometimes in full Western garb, sometimes in a half-way outfit, with little bits of Western and indigenous clothing and decoration. However, hybridity here needs to be examined centrally as a mode of coercion, conscious and unconscious, of Aboriginality into the purposes and needs of the colonisers. Anne Maxwell, in her recent scholarly volume, *Colonial Photography and Exhibitions: Representations of the 'Native' People and the Making of European Identities* writes:

> [a]s a mode of representation designed to support and strengthen imperialism, the 'ethnographic present tense' was profoundly and over-whelmingly successful. Not only did it deny the colonized the historical and cultural specificity that was needed to deliver them from the univer-salisms imposed by European myths and stereotypes, but it enabled audiences to ignore their attempts at resistance. (162)

Maxwell goes on in further chapters to trace the growing use of photographs and exhibitions by indigenous subjects to 'exploit the ethnographic present', analysing the historical changes revealed in later photography that 'recorded the transforma-tions brought about by colonialism' and which could then act as 'a resource in their struggle for equality and recognition' (163).

In the early and mid-twentieth century photography of Christian missions, images are most often formal, hierarchical, espousing a religious symbolism of order, cleanliness, civility, pointing to the orderly and proper processes of assimilation, citizenship and governmentality, reflecting the prevailing ideology of assimilation. In one photo taken from a 1950s *Pix* magazine, we have described in the journalese of the time: 'A group of Groote Eylandt natives in the mission chapel. The service is being conducted by missionary Taylor with Sister Taylor at the organ. Four girls seated at right of organ are all half-caste aborigines.' Another *Pix* photo, recorded as taken in 1947, depicts an unnamed mission in Northern Australia. The boys are flanked, hemmed in, by the blackboards covered in numbers. It is an icon of order, education, assimilation we witness in this image.

And from the 1970s increasingly, during what has come to be called the Aboriginal Renaissance, events such as the Parliament House tent embassy begin to construct different kinds of symbols of Aboriginality, as the first forms of global indigeneity – at first American in influence principally – give rise to the urban and defiant Aborigine. This of course went hand in hand – and contradictorily – with that other icon of the 60s and 70s media, the drunk, unemployed and wasted urban Aboriginal. Hand-in-hand, because both were seen as threatening, contradictorily, as the political and social organising of the first belied the supposed hopelessness and laziness of the latter.

Contemporary symbol-making

I have been arguing that in the past twenty years, through critical developments in debates about the ideology of representation, and – arguably – through the sophistications and multiplications of media practices of representation, readers and makers of symbols – visual, verbal and enacted – have moved on significantly in regard to the practice of symbol-making. While hybridity is still an issue for racial essentialists, and understandably for some Aboriginal political strategists, debate about hybridity has also moved on, becoming a much more self-consciously deployed issue. Take for example the symbols of Corroboree 2000: the very use of the word 'corroboree'; the word 'reconciliation'; the hand-prints on the mural at the Opera House ceremony; the arrival by boat of the documents at Bennelong Point, with their inclusion of a request for a treaty; turned backs as Howard spoke; the walk across the bridge, the sky-writer tracing 'sorry' across Sydney skies. None of these symbolic gestures will be sufficient, and some will claim that mere symbols won't practically achieve anything – a Howardesque position, I'd suggest. Their transience is achingly poignant. But my argument is that the processes of symbol-making are what is important here, and what we now need to focus on. What kinds of symbols and symbol-making can now operate in Australian public life? Who is generating them and are they enabling of fuller social and political changes?

Robert Young's critique of Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* is pertinent here. Helpful as their notions of the desiring machine of global capitalism, of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation, and nomadism are in the postcolonial debate, Young steps back from their counter-strategies of 'dissolution of cultural and territorial boundaries', arguing that

> the processes of decoding, recoding and overcoding imply a form of historical appropriation that does not do justice to the complexities of the way in which cultures interact, degenerate and develop over time in relation to each other. Decoding and recoding implies too simplistic a grafting of one culture on to another. We need to modify the model to a form of palimpsestual inscripiton and reinscription, an historical paradigm that will acknowledge the extent to which cultures were not simply destroyed but rather layered on top of each other, giving rise to

struggles that themselves only increased the imbrication of each with
the other and their translation into increasingly uncertain patchwork
identities. (173)

I agree here with Young's modification of Deleuze and Guattari's gargantuan
theories of geopolitics, suggestive as many of their ideas are, and agree with his call
for a recognition of more historically specific and interactive processes of inscription
and reinscription. But, arguing, as this paper does, for what I see as a growing
openness and fluidity in public and aesthetic symbol-making, in this specific moment
and context of postcolonial Australia, I would resile from Young's fairly feeble vision
of 'increasingly uncertain patchwork identities'. By openness I don't wish merely to
infer looseness or meaninglessness – a plethora of images and symbols – though
these are always potential dangers in this contemporary, media-impelled culture.

The recent debate in the media over the Nike 'sorry' ad is indicative of the
volatility and specifics of the situation, but also of its fluidity and potential. The
advertisement features 20 athletes, mostly Nike-contracted stars, who say sorry for
things including being late, not having a nickname, eating all the eggs, or for not
being the girl-next-door because they are in training. Co-chairwoman of the National
Sorry Day Committee, Audrey Kinnear, was quoted in the media saying: 'You would
think the company would be more sensitive to Cathy (Freeman) (one of the athletes
featured in the ad) at this stage leading up to the Olympics.' Co-patron of the
Journey of Healing, Lowitja O'Donoghue, said the advertisement offends a large
section of the Australian community. 'It is an ad in bad taste and, whether Nike
denies it or not, it does relate to the sorry expectations the stolen generation has.'
Nike officials in response said they would not change the advertisement or take it off
air, but welcomed debate with Aboriginal groups on the issue. Nike corporate
communications manager Megan Ryan said the advertisement had nothing to do
with reconciliation (Magnay and Hormery).

Can we read such debates, frustrating and step-by-step as they are, to be a sign of
the current fluidity at a national level – as hemmed about by PR procedures as this
is – to negotiate the construction of symbols? Of course we must ask in the public
arena who has ownership of such processes? And of course the multinational has the
upper-hand here. It's a done deal, the ads are out there – but so is the debate from
the Aboriginal community, in its diversity, and from the media. I would argue that
such fluidity is an indicator of change, of movement which allows progressive debate
around the processes of symbol-making, a context which is vastly different from even
ten years ago.

Bill Ashcroft, in his 1994 essay 'Interpolation and Postcolonial Agency' argued for
a model of interaction between postcolonial subjects which moves away from simple
Manichean conceptions of 'colonised' and 'coloniser', 'their members doomed to
mutual incomprehension and the maintenance of differentials of brute force
economic control and superior technology' (176). He seeks to describe and to argue
for what he calls 'interpolation', a complex series of processes in which '[t]he (post-
colonial) subject actively engages the dominant discourse within those fractures

through which its tactics, operating at the level of everyday usage, may transform the discursive field. This frictional process of interpolation is the subject's ubiquitous, dialogic and transformative agency in its engagement with imperial power' (188). Ashcroft moves a long way towards a more rhizomic conception of discourse, 'both imperial and contestatory ... taking the dominant culture, consuming it, intervening in its operations, changing it to suit local circumstances ... [in] the processual, discontinuous and disjointed nature of postcolonial interpolation' (187).

The concept of interpolation is very helpful, though Ashcroft's essay still walks a fine and sometimes precarious line, battling to establish its sense of interpolation – transformative, dialogic, regenerative, richly hybrid, rhizomic – against a political, Saidian and Bhabha-esque 'truth' of postcolonial criticism, that it is only against the antagonistic field of imperial discourse, by resistance, by counter-discursivity, that the colonised subject must shoulder a way into 'a space for oneself and one's society into a dominant discourse precisely to prevent the submergence of that society' (178).

This paper has been arguing that, in the context of the changes in visual representation, symbol-making and remaking, the social discourses of race in Australia have moved a long way in the last decade of Australian postcolonial relations. There is, I have been arguing, an increased willingness and ability to embrace the fact of the constructability of symbol-making, and even the mutuality of the process. In some situations this means that the symbols might be jointly and consciously constructed by Aboriginal and non-indigenous together, not only in terms of interpolation, or accidental hybridity, or at worse a stereotyping image-making. This might mean ATSIC and PR companies, the Corroboree 2000 committee, SBS and Aboriginal tribal members coming to joint agreements concerning specific symbols. At other times it might mean that symbols seem inevitable, dropping into our laps – for example, from the negative stance taken by recalcitrant Prime Ministers – and grow through media and popular attentions. What can we say regarding the lyricism and rhetorical power of the Aboriginal speakers at Corroboree 2000 – E, Pat Dodson, and of the standing ovation offered the final speaker at the Opera House ceremony, William Deane? Is it too much to claim that there is a new poetic generation of Australians, alive to the symbolisms of history, to lyricism, to resonant language, and not just to economic and political rationalism?

Of course we need to go on asking who is generating such symbolism? Aboriginal Australia, yes, in consultation with PR agencies, white administrators, journalists? What might our measures for acceptance or skepticism of such symbols and such symbol-making processes be? Who is this 'our' – is it mainstream Australia? Or only a small minority – most of Aboriginal Australia and a small group of non-indigenous sympathisers? After all, a quarter of a million people crossing a bridge converts into only small numbers at a ballot box.

Perhaps change in the balance of social and cultural power will be registered in the many small, moving, hybrid, symbolic actions which are mounting at the moment – the apology handed to Aboriginal representatives of the Warawa peoples by the magistrates of Victoria; Nova Peris Kneebone running barefooted with the Olympic torch to show respect for the people of the land across which she was

moving; the Qantas jumbo decorated with traditional Yanyuwa markings. Of course these symbols will not meet with universal approval, but they lodge in people's minds as spurs for ongoing debate. They are part of a clumsy, partial, but much more fluid and potentially mutual process of symbol-making. It is perhaps the call for a treaty which presents to us all the biggest challenge – this next symbol which must be mutually constructed, its political, economic and sacred significances yet to be made.

Note

[1]   <http://firstclass.deakin.edu.au/~frang/hybridity>
      This website is available to all those who have firstclass conferencing rights. If this access is not available please apply for access to the archive by contacting the author on lynmcr@deakin.edu.au. Other useful websites are <wysiwyg://3http://ww.archivenet.gov.au/Resources/indigenous_auts.htm> and <http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/>

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