

CONTEMPORARY SYMBOL-MAKING IN AUSTRALIA

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On a recent trip to Uluru, I asked a number of people with whom I was attending a conference – a corporate group, within which I had a lowly status as spouse and academic – whether they were going to climb the rock. Most had already just done so, and others were intending to in the next day or two. In as reasoned and dispassionate a voice as I could muster, I asked them how they felt about their decision to climb in the light of the local Anangu¹ people's express desire that people not climb the rock. Some asserted ignorance of such a request, others shrugged and said they 'just had to': the Rock was there, it was natural, it didn't belong to anyone in particular, most tourists climb it. The most ingenious response came from an assertive fellow who condescendingly informed me that he had climbed and had done so with the permission given by Kooris back in his local Victorian town. With this latter person I lost the last shreds of reason and dispassion, and with my own brand of condescension informed him of the fatuousness of his position.

In the *Age* newspaper of January 8, 2001, journalist Kendall Hill begins an article entitled 'Assault on Uluru worries custodians' with these words: 'Uluru, the largest freestanding rock on the planet, is feeling a little overexposed.' In opposition to what is described throughout the article as the Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park's 'cultural values', the journalist describes the activities of various social groups – film companies,

¹ This term is used by the local peoples, to cover a number of different affiliated tribal groups.

photographers, a major multinational company, ‘a big mob of hippies’ called the Rainbow people – who are threatening to ‘turn it into Disneyland.’²

The most interesting aspect of the article was the sentence which reported that ‘The board (of the park) has foreshadowed clamping down on unauthorised use of images of the park’s natural wonders.’³ The phrase ‘unauthorised use of images’ is fascinating, throwing up as it does a range of questions about contemporary cultural representation and who has power over it. Such questions include powers encompassed by legal and cultural institutionality (we are told that the park was accorded World Heritage listing in 1987 for its natural value and listed in 1994 for its cultural value ‘in recognition of the continuing living relationship between the Aboriginal peoples and the natural environment.’). But as the anthropomorphising of the journalist’s first sentence – ‘Uluru...is feeling a little overexposed’ – indicates, a continuing tension exists around just who does and should have authority regarding Uluru and its representations. While the legal parameters have been set, the ongoing tension is evident in the failure of law, both white and Anangu, to make any definitive difference to what is happening symbolically and in terms of respect for the Anangu.

The war is in terms of representation. And I would argue that this war is analogous to the larger questions of reconciliation being struggled with in Australia today. The argument of this paper is that in contemporary Australia it is in the field of representation that the tensions of the State in regard to race relations can be read most powerfully. It does not follow that such tensions will be reconciled only in that field, but that crucial wider lessons can be learned from careful attention to a number of key sites of

² Hill, Kendall, *The Age*, January 8, 2001, p.3.

³ *Ibid.*

representation. These sites include: the debates over the treaty and the vital link between words and social reality which this treaty must embody; national gestures of reconciliation such as the bridge walks and the nature of their symbol-making; and the fictional writings of indigenous Australians which construct new modes of relationship to the past, bringing them into contemporary Australian imagination in ways which will sustain more than mere sanctification of the past as sacred in itself.

One of the most powerful and moving embodiments of symbolic power, caught by the television camera and newspaper photographs, was the standing and turning of backs when John Howard rose to speak at the reconciliation day ceremonies in Sydney. Highly divisive, rude, anti-hierarchical, humorous, belittling, this gesture by some of the audience captured beautifully the major traits of contemporary symbol making in Australia. It is visible and media-appropriate, bodily, individualised and communal at once. It brings into play in a simple form what anthropologist Michael Taussig in a related context describes as 'the dialectic of civilisation-and-savagery installed in contemporary signifying practices themselves.'⁴ The gesture is inventive, bodily, and active. It is a symbolic gesture which, in Taussig's words, 'is predicated upon mimetic modes of perception in which spontaneity, animation of objects, and a language of the body combining thought with action, sensuousness with intellection, is paramount.'⁵ The turned backs of the protestors signify a refusal to listen and accept State authority, claiming another form of authority and signification, one which acknowledges the archaic in the contemporary, the presences of all those not encompassed by the State-as-final-arbiter, the State as the only power. They image those who have been silenced by the State –

⁴ Taussig, Michael, *Mimesis and Alterity: a particular history of the senses*, Routledge: New York, 1993, x.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.20.

most particularly indigenous Australians – but in turn now silence and ignore this chief representative of the State.

But the gesture is also evanescent, not able to be repeated too often, as it loses its punch quickly in a media-driven society. The need to move on, to create symbols which speak but which must, necessarily in a media-saturated world, give way to further symbols. The debates both within indigenous communities and in the wider Australian society concerning the orchestrated campaign to make Howard say ‘sorry’ reveal these larger questions about how symbolic representations have power, and how they need to be wielded. The word ‘sorry’ became the sticking point, and the debate had its effects, but the campaign sagged under the weight of the simplistic dialectic: say ‘sorry’ / ‘won’t’. Perhaps the most poignant and possibly last use of the ‘say sorry’ symbol was the sky-writer’s simple ‘sorry’ written across the Sydney sky during the bridge crossing. Transient, postmodern in its reliance upon contemporary technology and religious notions of repentance, breathtakingly beautiful, spoken by an invisible body of repentant ‘black-armbanders’, this sky-symbol voiced a complex historical and contemporary situation, and one that affects the future – in one word. Of course one word won’t change social realities, but its poetic, representational resonance embodied the emotional and motivational realities of many people who witnessed it.

In discussion with an academic colleague about the Sydney bridge crossing, – a highly orchestrated, media-savvy and emotional event – I described it as sacred. My colleague was taken aback, reading it as ‘merely’ political. For this colleague, questions of the sacred were separate from the body politic, and had to do with the transcendent, the untouchable, perhaps the disembodied. But the reconciliation debate in Australia is so crucial and so future-oriented directly because it draws together, in complexly hybrid forms, the power of the sacred with the

political, the archaic and the contemporary, and demands that they speak in ways not yet devised. It demands that reconciliation into the future is reconciliation with a real and sacred thirst for justice. It must be made, and re-made, constantly, both in the light of fast-moving, hungry media scrutiny, and in deeply-imagined, new forms of representation. Both kinds of symbolic activity – we might loosely call them the popular and the poetic, though they are interwoven – have so far carried with them the powers of the sacred. They must, for the sacred, as Bataille, Levi-Strauss, Benjamin, Irigaray, among many others, have taught us, is inextricably bound up with the everyday and earthed.

This ‘sacred’ is an ambiguous and unsettling category, its tentacles reaching toward both the violent oppositions and blindnesses of contemporary race relations, and the violently creative, deeply-imagined new mythologies being constructed and re-constructed. One indicator of such tentacularity is the vocabulary of reconciliation: sorry, forgiveness, testimonials, witnessing, reconciliation itself. The current moves in indigenous communities away from such vocabulary, and towards treaty and sovereignty, will be an important one to monitor. How will power be manifested in the new debates around treaty? Many indigenous voices calling for treaty claim that their impetus for rejecting the notion of reconciliation is that they seek to move on from the supposed hierarchies of victim/victimiser, primitive/civilised which many have noted circling around the reconciliation debates. If we agree with Michael Taussig’s description of the current moment of post-coloniality, with its postmodern ‘mimetic excess’, then there are implications for the ways in which representations of race relationship can and must happen. Indeed, the war of representation has spun on beyond mere victim and victimised. Taussig’s term ‘mimetic excess’ emerges from his discussion of a particular context, 1980s Columbia. Describing the Dada-esque effects of U.S.

medical journal pictures in a Colombian village hospital in 1981, Taussig describes the walls of the hospital covered in images which drew together in parodic cacophony the powers of both the North and the South, the first and the third, the self and the other. He writes in *Mimesis and Alterity*:

...mimesis and alterity are now spinning faster than the eye can take in or the mind absorb...This spinning is giddy. As opposed to 'first contact', this type of 'second contact' disassembles the very possibility of defining the border as anything more than a shadowy possibility of the once-was. The border has dissolved and expanded to cover the lands it once separated such that all the land is borderland, wherein the image sphere of alterities, no less than the physiognomic aspects of visual worlds, disrupt the speaking body of the northern scribe into words hanging in grotesque automutilation over the postmodern landscape where Self and Other paw at the ghostly imaginings of each other's powers. It is here, where words fail and flux commands, that the power of mimetic excess resides as the decisive turning point in the colonial empowerment of the mimetic faculty itself.⁶

Taussig's words offer some valuable tools for thinking about current and future strategies of representation in the race debates in Australia. Is it acceptable to claim, for example, that 'all the land is borderland', that we are in a postmodern state in which 'Self and Other paw at the ghostly imaginings of each other's powers.' If so, what are the consequences of such an acknowledgement? Is such a claim being acknowledged in Australia's wars of representations over reconciliation?

If we look at the novels of indigenous writer Mudrooroo, the question of mimesis in a colonial context, written from

⁶ Ibid, p.249.

a post-colonial discursive position, are drawn out in several ways. In the opening chapter of Mudrooroo's 1991 novel, *Master of the Ghost Dreaming*, a strange, parodic ceremony takes place in the bush, just as Mada and Fada are trying to sleep. Mada is furious with the loud chanting of the tribe, and of Jangamuttuk 'miming out perfectly words in the very voice of her husband.'⁷ Jangamuttuk and his people are in fact involved in a ritual of serious intent, structured through parody, mimicry, cultural cross-dressing:

...feeling out the possibilities of the play as the rhythm bounced the shaman towards possession and his people into a new kind of dance. The dancers clasped each other and began a European reel. They kept to the repetitive steps and let the strange rhythm move their feet. It became their master. Each generation including the tragically few children jigged as Jangamuttuk began to sing in perfect ghost accents.⁸

Such parodic ritual reminds the George Robinson figure, the Protestant missionary Fada, now watching secretly from the bushes, 'of the mass of the Popish Church in Rome.'⁹ He is momentarily translated into a kind of elfin anthropologist: 'Fascinated... hidden in the darkness behind the illumination of the fires... watching the mysterious ways of the humans.'¹⁰ No doubt readers of the text will have a range of other responses to such a scene, from pity and horror at the aboriginal submission involved, through to amusement at the parodic ironizing of the colonial situation by the aboriginal players.

In a different though connected way, post-colonial critic Bill Ashcroft's 1994 essay 'Interpolation and Post-colonial

⁷ Mudrooroo, *Master of the Ghost Dreaming*, Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1991, 10.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.4.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.12.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

Agency' argues for a model of interaction between post-colonial subjects which moves away from simple Manichaeian conceptions of 'colonised' and 'coloniser', '...their members doomed to mutual incomprehension and the maintenance of differentials of brute force economic control and superior technology.'¹¹ He argues for what he calls 'interpolation', a complex series of processes in which

The (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.¹²

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 post-colonial interpolation...¹³.

The concept of interpolation is very helpful, though Ashcroft's essay still walks a fine and sometimes teetering line, battling to establish its sense of interpolation – transformative, dialogic, regenerative, richly hybrid, rhizomic – against a political 'truth' of post-colonial 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

¹¹ Ashcroft, Bill. 'Interpolation and Post-colonial Agency', *New Literatures Review*, 28/29, winter 1994 – summer 1995, p.176.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.188.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.187.

for oneself and one's society, into a dominant discourse, precisely to prevent the submergence of that society.'¹⁴

This paper has been arguing that, in the context of the changes in representation, symbol-making and remaking, the social discourses of race in Australia have moved a long way in the last decade of Australian post-colonial relations. There is an increased willingness and ability to embrace the fact of the constructability of symbols and even the necessary mutuality of contemporary symbol making. 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 Coroboree 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. At other times symbols need to be ironic, biting and questioning.

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 scepticism 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. Hopefully, change in the balance of power will be registered and embraced by more Australians in the many small, moving, hybrid, symbolic

¹⁴ Ibid., p.178.

actions which are mounting at the moment – the apology handed to Aboriginal representatives of the Warawa peoples by the magistrates of Victoria; images of 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 plane 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, whirling, but much more fluid and potentially mutual process of symbol making. It is perhaps the call for a treaty which presents us all with the biggest challenge – this next symbol which should be jointly constructed, its political, economic and sacred significances yet to be made.