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STARABORIGINALITY

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The market for Aboriginal art roars, even if writers assert the incommensurability of Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures.¹ Non-Indigenous Australian responses to the Indigenous art resurgence remain widely credulous and incredulous, garrulous yet dumb. How shall the non-Indigenous speak of it? How might we, in good faith, negotiate its borders? How may we imagine its future and, with it, our own?

This paper attempts to sketch a new cultural condition with art at its core and justice as its guide.

SPEAKING

The Wagnerian spectacle of Cathy Freeman lighting the Olympic cauldron in Sydney 2000 seemed innocent of both holocaustic backdraft and of the shadow of Berlin in 1936.² Yet neither the Australian Olympic Committee (AOC) nor the Sydney Organising Committee for the Olympic Games (SOCOG) included an Indigenous representative, even though Indigenous culture was heavily used to

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1 Eg Jenny Isaacs, *Spirit country: contemporary Australian Aboriginal art*, Hardie Books and the Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco, Melbourne and San Francisco, 1999, p 12: 'Aboriginal contemporary art is clearly in a category of its own ... Aboriginal art does not fit neatly into the mould of art in a Western sense'; or Margot Neale, 'Preface' in Susan McCulloch, *Contemporary Aboriginal art*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1999, pp 8–9: 'the very existence and evolution of Aboriginal art is diametrically opposed to the experience and understanding of even the most avid collector of European art'. Clare Baddeley, the curator of the remarkable touring exhibition *Motif & meaning: Aboriginal influences in Australian art 1930–1970* (Ballarat Fine Art Gallery, 1999), positioned the exhibition and catalogue to emphasise both continuities with the present and the 'unassimilable' character of the work appropriated.

2 Cathy Freeman lit the Olympic Cauldron, Sydney, 15 September 2000, and won the 400m race, her specialist event, five days later. For many she thus became an emblem of reconciliation.

signify Australianness in the preliminary Festival of Dreaming and at the Olympics themselves.³ Freeman's participation in the Olympics seemed to advance the cause of reconciliation significantly, but the acclamation she attracted was inadvertently fuelled precisely by the federal government's continuing recalcitrance over Aboriginal affairs, and its deferral of leadership in this area to independent commentators, the media and cultural institutions.

The Aboriginal art resurgence over the last three decades encouraged conventional art world wisdom that Aboriginal art should be considered part of the contemporary mainstream. Further, one has been able to invert this view plausibly for some years now—to suggest that Aboriginal art *is* now the mainstream, and that the challenge to all Australian artists and art institutions, Indigenous or not, is to come to terms with this fact in their work and thinking.⁴ Endorsing this leads one to imagine that the situation of Australian art could form a model for the world, in terms resolving postcolonial contradictions concerning place, land and even spirituality in a globalising world.

These three claims require qualification, for all that, as Ian Jack has noticed, acknowledging Aboriginal culture has become a reflexive tic in non-Indigenous cultural circles.⁵ In the meantime one might postulate that the new situation represents a cultural condition of sufficient significance, even within the chaotic registers of postcolonialism, that it merits a special name.⁶ This would both honour the ongoing resurgence and embrace a sense of general cultural development subsequent to a widespread and deeply felt acceptance of the inheritance of Aboriginal culture on the part of non-Indigenous Australians. The new condition seems to allow for a plunging intimation of deep time and place within the electronic web of the world as global city. It appears to offer, for the meantime at least, a sense of grounding within and against the febrile, planetary dreaming of capitalism. But what word will work as its sign?

Imants Tillers' initial suggestion of 'postAboriginality', or by extension 'postAboriginalism', resonates with earlier, 'post'-prefixed terms in the discourses

3 Darren Godwell, 'The Olympic branding of Aborigines' in Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith (eds), *The Olympics at the millennium*, Rutgers University Press, Newark, 2000, p 247.

4 Ian North, *Expanse: Aboriginalities, spatialities and the politics of ecstasy*, University of South Australia Art Museum, Adelaide, 1998, p 3. Cf Vivien Johnson, *Earthstrokes*, Fine Arts Press, Sydney, 1997, n.p.

5 As noticed by Ian Jack, editor of *Granta*: cf his 'Introduction', *Granta*, no 70, Summer 2000, p 8. One might add, from being a 'young country' we are now to be 'the oldest': both are simplistic ideas which ignore the intersection of cultural histories and conceptions of nationhood.

6 Cf Ella Shohat, 'Notes on the "post-colonial"', *Social Text*, no 31/32, 1992, pp 99–112.

of art and culture.⁷ Further, it implicitly repudiates the paternalism and essentialist implications of the older term, ‘Aboriginalism’, deployed in literary criticism as a parallel to the idea of Orientalism in order to register a double movement of fascination with Aboriginal culture and a denial of Aborigines’ right to speak on their own behalf.⁸ But ‘postAboriginality’ also bears in its apparent ambiguity—between an implication of historical closure and the contradictory notion of cultural extension—a potential to be negatively politicised, in a climate where identity has become, too often, just another tradable commodity. Not to be coy, it could be seen as either proclaiming that Aboriginal culture is posthumous, the precise opposite of what Tillers proposed, or, more subtly, as meaning that Aboriginal issues are settled, bar a little ‘i’ dotting and ‘t’ crossing.

Other alternatives deploying ‘post’, like ‘postEurocentrism’, or, to adapt Bernard Smith’s term, ‘postEurasianism’,⁹ are too diffuse in their applicability to honour Indigenous people sufficiently. To follow Smith’s ‘Formalesque’ with, say, ‘Indigenesque’ could be to reawaken the Aboriginalist shades of the Jindyworobaks.¹⁰ Terms like ‘postindigenism’ or ‘postaboriginalism’ could constitute possible, if weaker, alternatives, again offering the advantage and disadvantage of removing the exclusive focus on Aborigines—as long as they were not spelt with a capital ‘I’ or ‘A’ respectively.¹¹ A degree of confusion would be inevitable with both, given the impossibility of aurally distinguishing non-capitalised and capitalised usage. At this point it might seem tempting to suggest that different additives to ‘Aboriginal’ might suit different circumstances, while in others none may be necessary. But that would be to deny the fact that the ground has significantly shifted.

The answer, to take Tillers’ cue—if it is to be found in this churning of ‘posts’, ‘isms’ and the like—might lie in the prefix. An array of alternatives to ‘post’

7 In conversation with the author c 10 August 1998 about the implications of my essay for *Expanse*. I developed the term in ‘Imants Tillers: pataphysical man to postAboriginal’ in Ted Gott (ed), *Monaro 1998: Imants Tillers*, Museum of Modern Art at Heide, Melbourne, 1988. Tillers titled an exhibition at the Span Gallery, Melbourne, 1999, *Not yet postAboriginal*.

8 Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra, *Dark side of the dream*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1991, p 27; Bob Hodge, ‘Aboriginal iconographies of home’, *Communal/Plural*, vol 5, 1997, p 47.

9 Bernard Smith, *Modernism’s history*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 1998, p 255. Smith coined ‘Eurasian’ to cover art of the late 1950s and early 1960s from Western Europe and the United States.

10 Smith, *ibid*; see also Peter Beilharz, *Imagining the antipodes*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997, pp 167–168.

11 A further neologism, incidentally, ‘Indigenialism’—again following ‘Orientalism’—might also have its uses as a broader term than Aboriginalism.

suggest itself, from the faintly ludicrous—‘hyper’, ‘ultra’ or ‘ab’¹²—to the misleading but more acceptable ‘neo’. ‘NeoAboriginalism’, indeed, possesses a useful, even excessive, degree of working focus. It obviates the sense of stasis, or looking backwards, implicit in words prefixed by ‘post’ (as in ‘post-historical’). It also squares up firmly against ‘neocolonialism’, that condition still manifested by Australia’s government and some of its unwitting or otherwise agents in schools, courtrooms and police stations across remote areas of Australia.¹³ But ‘neoAboriginalism’ also possesses the fatal disadvantage of suggesting a gulf between the past and present, thus demanding more qualification than the word could bear.

Mention of ‘Aboriginalism’ draws a familiar genus of truth into sight: any such term is, like ‘aboriginal’, incontrovertibly European or Euro-Australian. Indigenous Australians may find and use quite different alternatives, if they perceive the need. It is worth noting that many Indigenous people, including those only weakly enculturated to hold specific affiliations with land and culture, prefer to eschew blanket terms like ‘Aboriginal’ or ‘Indigenous’ in referring to themselves, in favour of words reflecting their nation, language group or country.

We are left with ‘(*)Aboriginalism’ and ‘(*)Aboriginality’, emphasising the ideas involved and the lived reality respectively.¹⁴ The asterisk indicates a yet-to-be written footnote, or a gap suggesting an unwritable, forbidden word, one in thrall to a taboo. Yet one might translate it, for convenience, as ‘starAboriginalism’. So doing is to flesh out the original with a ‘cheeky’ pun (to adopt remote area parlance), but one reflecting the positive character of the cultural condition and mental shift under discussion. Cathy Freeman and Tracey Moffatt, Indigenous athlete and artist respectively, are indisputably stars, stars to steer by, as emblems of a culture which has, in some quarters, gained star status.

Yet ‘starAboriginality’ does not equate with ‘Aborigidolatry’. Both Freeman and Moffatt are prominent in sport and the arts respectively, two of the few fields open to Aboriginal accomplishment.¹⁵ It might be noted, without the least blame accruing to the individuals indicated, that their very commercial elevation could have inimical consequences for a collectivist culture, even as they inspire that same culture in its lamentable condition of severe disadvantage. Talk of stars must not

12 The Latin works with the latter, but the doubled first consonant would lead to misunderstanding.

13 Cf Anne McClintock, ‘The angel of progress’, *Social Text*, no 31/32, 1992, p 97.

14 David McNeill’s distinction between globalism and globalisation was suggestive here. See McNeill, ‘From centre/periphery to globalisation’, paper presented at *Postcolonial + Art* symposium, Artspace, Sydney, 28 October 2000.

15 The great majority of Aboriginal people battle racism and poverty, with little chance of success in non-Indigenous terms, especially if their talents lie in other directions than in the arts, sport or the entertainment industry.

ignore or encourage one to forget the bleak landscape they illuminate, or the void in which they sit. StarAboriginality is about a cultural condition, and is not proposed as a flash term, as it were, for Aboriginal high achievers. Yet, in spite of Freeman's and Moffatt's antecedents (eg Doug Nicholls, Albert Namatjira), the athlete and artist are also a sign of starAboriginality's sway and, like the idea of starAboriginality, they help to break out of the frame of victimology.

The absence of a hyphen in 'starAboriginalism', by minimising the separation of its constituent terms, is intended to emphasise the fluidity and continuity of Aboriginal culture, the ongoing connections with Dreaming stories and the land, which allowed the Aboriginal art resurgence and its growing interchanges with non-Indigenous art. At the same time, in recent decades, words like 'resurgence' or 'renaissance' or even 'revitalisation' seem increasingly inadequate as applied to contemporary Aboriginal culture. None of them sufficiently indicate the new and different elements in the situation, a fact which 'starAboriginalism' might help obviate. In all, 'starAboriginalism' parallels 'postmodernism', which implicitly recognises modernism's attempts to trump itself, in the manner of Jean-François Lyotard,¹⁶ as well as its quasi-demise. It also parallels 'postcolonialism', which acknowledges counter-colonial tendencies occurring before as well as after instances of independence, as has been articulated by Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge.¹⁷ A crucial difference between 'starAboriginalism' and the other two terms will also be apparent: the new word is honorific in a way that the 'post' words are not, with their greater pretence of avoiding value judgements.

While 'starAboriginalism' will be understood as a term principally for the present and future, unlike 'neoAboriginalism' it conveys no sense of a proscribed past. Even though the word will be understood as applying to white, western perceptions, complete, for some, with overtones of divine signage, it is open for use across the spectrum of Australian possibilities and, without the 'A' necessarily being capitalised, across the international arena. In this zone, too, alternative terms could arise, according to a similar logic and the strength of indigenous continuities and cultural revivals.

The asterisk remains behind 'star' to signify a blank, a blind spot, an acknowledgement of a wider unknowing. This not at all to admit a collapse into the comforting stasis of perpetual contradiction. On the contrary, we might allow 'starAboriginality' a hint of exultation, the star points spurring its ever-conditional resolution.

16 Jean-François Lyotard, *The postmodern condition: a report on knowledge*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1984, pp 8, 81.

17 Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge, 'What is post(-)colonialism', *Textual Practice*, vol 5, no 3, 1991, pp 407–408, 413.

NAVIGATING: ART, SPACE AND SHOPPING

We live in starAboriginal times. If this is a way of describing the newly predominant cultural condition in Australia, its principal indicator is also its precondition: the opening of non-Indigenous Australian minds to admit the weight and power of Aboriginal culture, presence and being. What else gives the new situation definitional limits?

The most significant driver of starAboriginality is the phenomenon of Aboriginal art. This may equally refer to ancestral Dreaming sites: for senior artists in remote areas, like Yupinya ('Eubena') Nampitjin, for whom first contact occurred during their lifetime.¹⁸ It may also signal a more oblique but nonetheless central connection with the land, as with younger artists like Judy Watson, or it may overtly seek to encompass two cultures, as in the work of Gordon Bennett. So saying, incidentally, is in no way, *pace* Howard Morphy, to accede to well-intentioned claims of Aboriginal art as a homogenous field: there simply are vast differences between the work of the former and latter artists I have just named, for example. Nomenclature, problematic as it is, should reflect that fact.¹⁹ But be that as it may, all of these Indigenous instances might prompt the most obvious applications of 'starAboriginality', even if they might be the least *necessary*: the word is proposed as an indicator of a paradigm shift, not a marketing tool or a tourist-oriented, Olympic-style 'brand name'.

Significantly, starAboriginality might find purchase in the work of contemporary non-Indigenous artists, which in some way seems to acknowledge Aboriginal values, qualities or imagery, at a significant level of understanding, at a level of deep grammar, as it were, and not just stylistic signs (Tim Johnson's art might qualify). This, generally, is not an obvious phenomenon, raising the unanswerable question as to its actual extent. Some artists regard Aboriginality as beyond their cultural pale, avoiding it out of a kind of courtesy, while drawing deeply on the

18 Yupinya Nampitjin's name was de-Indigenised to 'Eubena' by Catholic missionaries.

19 Howard Morphy has suggested the 'divisions that have been proposed between "tribal" and "urban," "classical" and "modern," "traditional" and "non-traditional," pose more problems than they help solve': Morphy, *Aboriginal art*, Phaidon Press, London, 1998, p 7. Such terms indeed may be misleading, given increasingly fluid trajectories of Aboriginal lives and careers. 'Contemporary traditional' may have a fading usefulness, but 'urban', as its counterpoint, can hardly embrace both artists working at the smart edge of the international gallery scene and those eking out a living from a rural, regional base. But dissolving such terms altogether is arguably to yield to a more deep-seated confusion, given the differences I have indicated. For the same reason, the value of exhibitions such as Brenda L Croft's *Beyond the pale* (Adelaide Biennial, Art Gallery of South Australia, 2000), in their breadth of embrace and with Indigeneity as their linking rationale, may belong to a particular historical moment.

landscape's apparent presence and in some cases its colonised past (Rosalie Gascoigne or Mandy Martin respectively). Others variously acknowledge Aboriginality by virtue of a conceptualised interest in imperialism (Lyndell Brown and Charles Green), as a metaphorical presence in personal, quasi-diasporic narratives (Hossein and Angela Valamanesh), or as a warrant for a sense of place (Imants Tillers).

To understand these contemporary artists we should consider the precedents: Fred Williams, Margaret Preston and Tony Tuckson. Tuckson was an early institutional collector of Aboriginal art. Margaret Preston's wartime 'Aboriginal' paintings are charged with her characteristic energy, but are not as proto-starAboriginal as her less strained, more representational monoprints of 1946. But in doing so one may lose one's grip on the subject altogether, collapsing into a consideration of all art from an indigenous (lower case 'i') perspective.

The work of these artists shows the value of the local, matching a growing awareness of the local both within cultural studies and international political forums. Ien Ang, for example, has noted the power of one's province as a focus for protest from left and right against the spectre of globalisation.²⁰ The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has paralleled Ang's perspective in reporting a world trend towards transnational plutocracies countered by local assertions of identity since the Second World War.²¹

The particularities of the Australian response to this situation give weight to the concept of starAboriginality, and its subtle, significant advances on postmodernity. The western experience of space, now, is one of fluidity and speed rather than 'infinite settled extension'.²² Even so, in a corporeal, sexualised sense of connection with the world and a cyber-induced sense of collapsing time, distance and history, one might dare to find the broadest of comparisons with the *Tjurrpaka* (Dreaming).²³ Such qualities manifest themselves, for example, in Tracey Moffatt's *Up in the sky*, 1997, a photo saga relating black issues through a kaleidoscope of popular culture and film references, co-mingling the Broken Hill landscape in a sublime, seamless intertwining of popular culture and outback iconography. If Moffatt's work seems more like a dream than the Dreaming, it contains, like many Dreaming stories, a telling morality: witness the sly inversion of white mistress-black servant relations in *Laudanum*, 1998.

20 Ien Ang, 'In defence of cosmopolitanism', paper presented as part of 'These anxious moments, these anxious times' project, Nexus Multicultural Arts Centre, Adelaide, 16 October 1999.

21 OECD, Forum on the Future, Hanover, 25–26 March 2000.

22 Edward S Casey, *The fate of place: a philosophical history*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1998, p 338.

23 As spelt in Pintupi and Kukatja orthographies.

The particular nature of the Australian connections in Moffatt's work allows it to fall under the rubric of starAboriginality. The same may be said of Imants Tillers' painting, especially since its grounding in the Monaro area in the countryside south of Canberra in recent years. Tillers is prominent among Australian artists who have over the last several years come to consider an art of directly positive value, in his case dealing *inter alia* with a sense of place. This represents a generalised parallel with traditional contemporary Aboriginal art.

This position seems particularly consonant with the implications of starAboriginalism. The reality of a necessary connection between contemporary Aboriginal art and global contingencies need not blind one to the fact that contemporary, traditionally based Aboriginal art—or Aboriginal art in the 'classical' tradition—offers more particular challenges to the West, in terms of cultural values, environmental information and aesthetics, because of its greater difference to it, than does 'urban' Aboriginal art, which is more of the West.²⁴ The manifest aesthetic qualities of the best Aboriginal art, incidentally, give the lie to those who, in accordance with post-conceptual theory, deny their importance: the irony of Eric Michaels' 'bad Aboriginal art' inverts to negate itself.²⁵ But this is no more to deny the broad range of Tillers' interests than it is to promote Indigenist essentialism in a yearning for pre-contact authenticity, or to deny the successful entry of Aboriginal artists into contemporary art discourses in a plethora of ways. The watchword of starAboriginality's conceptual space must be openness. The work of Moffatt and Tillers, in its edges and distinctions, warns against limning an easy, New Age-style convergence between non-Indigenous art and Aboriginal art, while affirming, in its inclusive reference range, the legitimacy of all cultures.²⁶

David Malouf is a senior writer who has pointed out how much the non-Indigenous may learn from Aboriginal people's possession of the world 'in the imagination'.²⁷ In a similar spirit, Peter Read has asserted the settler culture's right to love the land.²⁸ A younger generation, represented by Kim Mahood or Paul Sinclair, is also realising that 'if Australians' diverse attachments and knowledge of the land are

24 Regarding nomenclature, cf Christopher Anderson and Françoise Dussart, 'Dreamings in acrylic: Western Desert art' in Peter Sutton (ed), *Dreamings: the art of Aboriginal Australia*, Viking, Ringwood, 1988, p 92.

25 Eric Michaels, 'Bad Aboriginal art', *Art & Text*, no 28, March–May 1988, pp 71–73.

26 Cf Imants Tillers, 'Locality fails', *Art & Text*, no 6, 1982, pp 51–55.

27 David Malouf, 'A complex fate', lecture two, *The 1998 Boyer Lectures*, ABC Radio National, 22 November (transcript at <<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/boyers/98boyer2.htm>>)

28 Peter Read, *Belonging: Australians, place and Aboriginal ownership*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000.

not shared and respected, then there is little hope of evolving a culture capable of living with our country'.²⁹

To place contemporary Australian artists (or writers), Indigenous or non-Indigenous, under the sign of starAboriginalism is not necessarily to ascribe quasi-Aboriginal or any other spiritual qualities to their work. Traditional Aboriginal spirituality, as many have pointed out, presents a particular co-mingling of the spiritual and the pragmatic which is quite foreign to westerners: as the linguist Lee Cataldi succinctly observed, traditional Aboriginal people see the land 'like a shop as much as a church', and Aboriginal experiences of land tend to be communal, rather than the paranoid eye of the lone mystic, fleeing supermarkets for vaulting skies and wide horizons.³⁰ We can shop for identities but, at a certain point, legitimate tender must be in the bank.

'WITHOUT WHY'?

Art can (should? must?) strike like lightning.³¹ It can connect humans with their humanity, however defined, taking on a complexion of compassion and, perhaps, the metaphysical. Art, in short, may address beauty, justice and an approach to the unknowable, all seemingly allowable within—without being necessitated by—the concept of starAboriginality.

Justice first. While our communities might now be 'dissensual', the social bond still exceeds individual consciousness and individual histories, as Bill Readings has pointed out.³² We, the non-Indigenous in Australia today, did not create *terra nullius*, nor participate in the stolen children tragedy, but we nonetheless inherit responsibility for them.

The social landscapes in many countries, as much in Australia as in the United States, comprise many ethnicities. This does not necessarily obviate a fundamental need for reconciliation between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous: as Ghassan Hage has asked, what does the gift of citizenship mean for the people receiving it, if the dominant culture is dealing in stolen goods?³³ The gift is real, however equivocally offered: all the more reason for the receiver to be compromised.

29 Paul Sinclair, "'Hard country to love": learning to live with the Mallee', *Meanjin* (forthcoming).

30 Lee Cataldi, conversation with author, Balgo Hills, 23 July 2000.

31 Cf Bruce James, 'The attitude of lightning', public lecture presented by the South Australian School of Art, Nexus Multicultural Arts Centre, Adelaide, 26 October 2000.

32 Bill Readings, *The university in ruins*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1996, p 186.

33 Ghassan Hage, 'The honourable society and its enemies', paper presented at the Re-imagining Multiculturalism conference, Melbourne, 2 October 1999.

Hage, reasonably, seems to assume justice as a quality arising from the idea of society as a system of exchanges and from historically specific circumstances. Before attempting to answer his ‘stolen goods’ question, it is tempting to raise the stakes by approaching the idea of justice on a more abstract level, for example by invoking Derrida’s recent essays and his celebrated ‘return’ to ethics.³⁴ In so doing one might see justice as necessarily, impossibly, existing without qualification. We enter—albeit by Derridean fiat—the zone of the undeconstructible.

By this reckoning, deconstruction equates with justice because ‘decisions of responsibility arise in moments of undecidability prior to both the universal formulations of law and the rational maxims of the “goodwill”’.³⁵ In the mysterious moment of Derrida’s absolute risk, before or beyond received laws and the scheduled formulations of morality, one faces something like the unitary experience of beauty, sharply apprehended, beyond or before the law-like formulations of aesthetics, and of the uncanny oddity of life itself, a slippage beyond the quotidian.³⁶ All three situations can yield a humbling sense of regard for others, thereby inducing a sense of fairness, of justice.

The parallel I am drawing between the existential moments of ethical undecidability, the experience of beauty and an ultimately anagogical universe share a common problem, that of translating such moments into principles, of moving from feelings to abstractions, and from those abstractions to laws of ethics and aesthetics, for example. Propelled as one may be by a sense of purity and a consequent desire for justice, one needs a framework. For this, there seems no alternative but our cultural inheritance, characterised for the West at large by Richard Kearney as *logos* (the word, the guidelines of universal reason as laid down in the Enlightenment), *agape* (sacrificing self for others, the legacy of monotheistic Judeo-Christian-Islamic traditions), and *poiesis*. He uses this word in regard to the deconstructive moment of undecidability itself, noting that it is “‘poetical” to the extent that it is, like the blossoming rose, “without why””.³⁷

This retreat back into discourse from the face of the absolute suggests that our quest for the former may indeed be more poetic than real in its basis: just another effect of the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition in a moment of apparent self-

34 Jacques Derrida, *The spectres of Marx*, Routledge, New York and London, 1994, p 59.

35 Richard Kearney, *Poetics of modernity*, Humanity Books, New York, 1999, p 206.

36 Kearney, *ibid*, pp 206-207. See also James Kirwan, *Beauty*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1999, pp 115–116; and Elaine Scarry, *On beauty and being just*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1999, p 114. Scarry, Platonically inclined, describes it as the consequence of a ‘compact’ between perceiver and object. Kirwan sees beauty psychoanalytically, as the effect of a double movement: psychic projection and its simultaneous denial.

37 Kearney, *ibid*, p 207.

criticism.³⁸ But even on a poetic plane it can be helpful to see justice, or the gift—of hospitality for example—without qualification, in especial consonance with the Christian idea of compassion. The myth of justice gains a powerful warrant for informing a ‘*beau role*’ (loosely, a just cause) back in the realm of discourse and real world struggle. It is the Indigenous possession of this that Bernard Smith cites, at the end of *The spectre of Truganini*, as the reason Aborigines will prevail.³⁹

The problem of multiculturalism and stolen goods remains: if Aboriginal people are no longer to be ‘bred out’, in yesteryear’s brutal terminology, they could be encultured out as just another facet in the ever-morphing structure of multiculturalism. Yet the other extreme, fetishising Aboriginal culture, discounts the cultural spectrum of postwar migrants and their descendents, for whom Aboriginal issues can come to be important without necessarily being foundational.⁴⁰ That recent immigrants might consider them important might reflect a laudable impulse towards justice; more problematically it could stem from a desire for grounding by proxy. If the attendant dangers demand continuous attention, justice must surely remain the paramount consideration. Further, and more pragmatically, even the most recent immigrants must come to terms with a culture’s constructed memories and beliefs, for the sake of social and cultural cohesion. These memories must now impel all Australians towards an unequivocal recognition of Aboriginal culture.

Myths from various cultures can return in a spirit of ludic imagining at the very point one does not take them seriously, animated both by a preserving ideology and, in Paul Ricoeur’s phrase, an utopian ‘glance from nowhere’.⁴¹ A space thereby opens for the evolution of Indigenous or non-Indigenous myths as contributing to the operation of social imagination⁴²—and for art, in various ways, to be their agent.

THE VIEW FROM BALGO

The situation of Indigenous art allows a risky glimpse of starAboriginality’s future.

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- 38 By ‘real’ here I mean, for example, based on evolutionary imperatives and social circumstances. It might be noted that Derrida’s equivocation in the face of ‘truth’, based on his questioning of the alleged primacy of speech over writing in the western tradition, and his assertions that western philosophy demands either truth or falsehood, have both been critiqued, *inter alia*, by Chris Mortensen in ‘Plato’s pharmacy and Derrida’s drugstore’, *Language and Communication* (forthcoming).
- 39 Bernard Smith, *The spectre of Truganini*, Australian Broadcasting Commission, Sydney, 1980, p 52.
- 40 Cf Ihab Hassan, ‘How Australian is it?’ *Australian Book Review*, September 2000, p 32.
- 41 Paul Ricoeur, *Lectures on ideology and utopia*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1986, p266.
- 42 Cf Laurence Coupe, *Myth*, Routledge, London, 1997, pp 96–97.

When one observes an Aboriginal artist at work in one of Australia's forty-plus remote-area, government-supported art centres⁴³—Susie Putja Putja, for example, at Warlayirti Artists, Balgo Hills, magisterially calling for white advisors to bring a new brush or different pots of paint—one might wonder if one is looking at master commanding assistant, or if the advisor is a de facto teacher leading a subordinate pupil.⁴⁴ Both models suggest themselves if one harbours any idea that the situation is exploitative. I am bound to say that it did not *appear* thus, but rather that it seemed to be one of mutually beneficial transactions. Aboriginal artists are neither 'in charge' of the situation (they are servants to it, in terms of their function, even if some of them are masters of their work), but nor are they infantile: on the contrary, they are the toughest and canniest of survivors. Some advisors lead their artists more than many regard as reasonable.⁴⁵ This is not so at Warlayirti Artists, even if canvases and colours are pre-prepared by non-Indigenous hands. In any case, the importance of the centres in generating social as well as economic capital can hardly be overstated. As one of the art coordinators at Balgo, Tim Acker, passionately observed: 'If it wasn't for the arts centre this town would have imploded long ago. Art centres constitute the one sort of place in which Indigenous people can, through the work of their hand and minds, meet Westerners on more or less equal terms.'⁴⁶

As for Susie Putja Putja or her fellow artists Yupinya Nampitjin or Helicopter Tjungurrayi, I am not sure that non-Indigenous culture exists outside the sphere of their camps, except as a blur through the window of a troop carrier, the buzzy haze of a metropolitan gallery opening, or as personified by bureaucrats and politicians dropping in for a few hours by chartered aircraft. These Indigenous elders appear to relate with forbearance and generosity to people who appear before them, but for people of this generation 'Canberra does not exist'.⁴⁷ Or, rather, it hovers in the

43 These are mainly funded through the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC). Thirty-nine of them were the subject of Felicity Wright and Frances Morphy (eds), *The art and craft centre story* (2 vols), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, Canberra, 1999. These centres are at the heart of the so-called 'Aboriginal art industry', which very conservatively generates over A\$100m a year. Cf David Langsam, 'Aboriginal art: Australia's hidden resource', *Art Monthly Australia*, March 1996, p 10. The centres serve around 4500 artists, of whom perhaps 5% currently earn over \$10 000 a year—the latter group 'are the industry' (anecdotal comment to Christine Nicholls and the author in Alice Springs and Balgo, 17 July–2 August 2000).

44 As observed by the author at Balgo Hills between 20 July and 2 August 2000.

45 It is amusing, in this regard, to note the convolutions of commentators 'explaining' Michael Nelson Tjakamarra's 'action painting' style, which (anecdotally) would seem to strike most observers as being artistically inferior to his earlier work.

46 Tim Acker, interview by Christine Nicholls and Ian North, tape recording, Warlayirti Artists, Balgo, 22 July 2000.

47 Father Bernie Cooper, Principal, Luurnpa Catholic School, Balgo, conversation with the author, Balgo, 26 July 2000. This sense of distance is of course a function

distance as a collective abstraction, the ‘boss’. It is the provisionally respected source, that is, of political, social and material benefits that must be received if any respect is to be accorded it.⁴⁸ In the end, Yupinya does not need us to know that she is the custodian of the *Wati Kutjarra Tjukurrpa* (‘two men Dreaming’), an aspect of which she sang for me over a painting, in an archaic tongue that she was movingly insistent on remembering.⁴⁹ The art boom has nonetheless allowed her to give money to her kinship network, thus easing their obvious poverty and the continuing unemployment of younger generations.

The worlds of the Indigenous and non-Indigenous inevitably overlap, even in the remotest parts of Australia. Each may possess elements incommensurable to the other, to use again that Lyotardian term so often deployed for poetic, politically correct and exclusionary effect. Bob Hodge and Ihab Hassan have separately noted that assertions of incommensurability (with respect to language systems) falsely imply the homogeneity of languages and the way they are understood by their speakers, just as it denies the everyday if problematic fact of language translation.⁵⁰ An analogy with the situation of art will be apparent.

Yet, as noted earlier, recent publications on Aboriginal art re-assert the idea of an aural incommensurability all too readily, pushing Aboriginal art to a place of its own in the national and global imagination. Against this, Christine Nicholls has taken an analogy from molecular biology in saying that ‘perhaps Indigenous Australian art and Australian art more generally should be understood as being “loosely coupled”, that is, operating within one and the same forcefield and subject to each other’s vagaries and fortunes, but occupying different parts of that forcefield’.⁵¹ Banduk Marika has similarly noted that both black and white Australians need to acknowledge their shared situation as progenitors of their country’s future.⁵² As such, all Australians need to subscribe to a belief in the

of distance and cultural factors. The author, for example, enjoyed an extended conversation with Herman Malbunka in a ‘men’s business’ cave near the Ipolera outstation, NT, in June 1991, in which a routine (and clearly limited) briefing on secret business extended to political issues like the role of non-Indigenous artists in remote communities, and access to the Strehlow Collection, Alice Springs.

48 Comparable attitudes were noted by Fred Myers at the forum associated with the *Papunya Tula: genesis and genius* exhibition, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 19 August 2000.

49 As recorded by Christine Nicholls and the author, Warlayirti Artists, Balgo, 2 August 2000. See also Christine Nicholls, ‘The shock of the old: the art of Yupinya Nampitjin’, *Australian Art Collector* (forthcoming).

50 Hodge, ‘Aboriginal iconographies’, p 48; and Hassan, ‘How Australian?’, p 8.

51 Christine Nicholls, ‘Bibliofile’, *Art Monthly Australia*, September 2000, p 36.

52 Banduk Marika, conversation with author, Adelaide, 15 December 2000.

necessary fiction of human indivisibility: it is movement in the other direction that leads to genocide.⁵³

The Aboriginal art resurgence has probably peaked, but the dynamic nexus between Aboriginal art production in remote camps and museums and collectors around the world will ensure its continuation for some time to come. If this 'industry' is leading many artists into rote production on the one hand and the demotion of non-Indigenous art on the other, the situation is by no means completely hollowed out by capitalism.⁵⁴ My adventitious observations alone, at Balgo Hills (Western Australia), and Ipolera and Utopia (both Northern Territory), suggest that senior Aboriginal artists' connections with the Dreaming stories is well alive, and that a significant number of young artists are also finding their way to internalise them. If relatively few Aboriginal people now alive grew up on or near ancestral lands and Dreaming sites, many visit them periodically, reaffirming or learning a connection with country.

The art centres, then, seem set to continue for some time, presuming administrative problems occasioned by two cultures grinding against other can continue to be managed.⁵⁵ But endurance does not equal resurgence, and the wider cultural tide, as has been frequently observed over many years, is pulling in another direction, even if no one could now underestimate the persistence of Aboriginal culture. While predictions of Aboriginal cultural atrophy in the 1960s proved wrong indeed, the fate of Indigenous languages (over 250 at the time of European settlement, with only about 20 taught today), is a measure of the fragility of *wangka ngura tjukur* (Antikirinya for language, place and traditions) or the Dreaming.⁵⁶

On balance, in this cross-current, an identifiable art resurgence might last—who knows?—for another one to three generations, even as Aboriginal artists slowly become like other artists in multicultural Australia, with all that that implies. Its legacy will last very much longer, not just in artworks but in the living presence of outstanding Aboriginal Australian artists, just as there will always be outstanding

53 Cf Michael Ignatieff, *A warrior's honor: ethnic war and the modern conscience*, London, Vintage, 1999, esp pp 64–71.

54 As Tony Fry and Anne Marie Willis once felt: 'Aboriginal art: symptom or success' in Rex Butler (ed), *What is appropriation?* Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, 1996, pp 197–210. Nor is the situation any more seen to need defending by the postmodern concept of the bricoleur, as ventured by Roger Benjamin in timely response: 'Aboriginal art: exploitation or empowerment' in Butler, *ibid*, 211–215.

55 Grinding, for example, as occasioned by the introduction of the GST. See Christine Nicholls and Ian North, 'GST blues in the Balgo Hills', *Art Monthly Australia*, September 2000, pp 25–27.

56 Stuart Rintoul, 'Silence as the songs are lost for words', *Australian*, 20 September 2000, pp 39, 41. Antikirinya is one of the most eastern of Central Desert languages.

Latvian-, Chilean- or Anglo-Australian artists, for as long as those identifications have meaning.

This is not an implicit expression of fatalism nor a covert call for complacency: human time frames are the important ones here. But there can never be a perpetual resurgence, either by definition or in reality. The moral imperatives to the contrary are complicit with stereotyping, with the idea that people only have value in terms of their culture of origin.⁵⁷ At the societal rather than the individual level, all identities eventually burn in the bonfires of history, and, if that metaphor suggests holocaust, then let us more gently observe that cultures segue inevitably into others, a fact that school children know but politicised adults frequently choose to forget.

In the meantime, starAboriginality might reach its fullest flowering when the dominant culture truly apologises to the Aboriginal people for dispossessing them and for the blows it has dealt them since, thereby unlocking, for all Australians, a sense of ‘deep time’ and ‘deep future’.⁵⁸ Goodwill demands that we recognise that such barriers are, in everyday fact, there for the crossing. To suggest otherwise is to yield to the idea of incommensurability. Yet there are no horizons in classical Aboriginal art, a fact that offers a convenient metaphor. A conception of reconciliation is implicit in starAboriginality, not as an elusive, ‘false’ horizon—a fictive, fixed boundary which one may decisively cross—but rather as one perpetually charged, changed and eventually eliminated by the shifting perspectives of negotiation in good faith.

CODA: WE WILL NOT NEED A WORD

Appropriately, this is a succinct section.

I will here revert from ‘starAboriginality’ to its more anonymous origin: ‘(*)Aboriginality’. I do this not in obeisance to the idea that no English nor any other term might be adequate to the condition that inspired it. It is impossible to step outside one’s discourse and criticise it, as David Hume observed long ago. Nor do I revert to the previous term to reduce suspicion, withal, that the whole exercise is assimilationist.

Rather, I suggest that the move is a pre-emptive gesture. If a special word for the condition under discussion *is* deployed it is eventually bound to fall from favour as an early symptom of the condition’s decay: ‘postmodernism’ forms a precedent here. Part of what I have said is thoroughly unexceptional: we, the non-Indigenous, should speak about Indigenous people with more respect. When this occurs

57 Cf Rasheed Araeen, ‘The art of benevolent racism’, *Third Text*, no 51, Summer 2000, p 63.

58 Read, *Belonging*, p 183.

readily—when it is widely adopted and unnoticed in society at large—the need for ‘(*)Aboriginality’ will fade. Perhaps—optimistically—this is already happening at a rate sufficient to suggest the word’s irrelevance. In that case the value it now possesses is as a vector of desire, a refraction from the horizon of reconciliation.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The editor of the Hawke Institute Working Paper Series asked me: ‘Why should a (non-Indigenous) professor of art feel compelled to come up with a term like “starAboriginality” at this time?’ Answer: I believe the Aboriginal art revolution of the last three decades to be the singly most significant art movement in recorded Australian art history. It may well assume a place in world art history as a twentieth-century movement of similar significance as cubism or surrealism. It accomplished, in effect, the feat of moving beyond the formalist impasse of late modernism and of constituting a third term beyond the two sides of the early postmodernist coin, pop and minimalism. My essay, based on field trips and interviews, but, more particularly, observation of the art world over the period concerned, is presented as a meditation on the process of coming to terms with the implications of the revolution. This has occasioned a new cultural condition in Australia, which therefore requires a name.

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