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Olympic Dreams: Representations of Aborigines in the Australian Media

Abstract

The paper discusses the manner in which indigenous Australians are represented in the Australian media. It queries whether the seemingly positive representations in the Opening Ceremony of the 2000 Sydney Olympics are representative of more general media representations of Australia's indigenous peoples. It reads the indigenous presence in the Opening Ceremony as an engagement with politically charged debates in Australia on whether and how to promote reconciliation between indigenous and settler communities. It concludes by arguing that, while the Opening Ceremony can be read as a significant improvement on mainstream media representations, it fell significantly short of constituting a progressive rearticulation of the central place of Aborigines in Australia's colonial history and contemporary society.

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Olympic Dreams: Representations of Aborigines in the Australian Media

If you watched the Opening Ceremony of the Sydney Olympic Games, you would be excused for thinking that Australians are well reconciled to their Aboriginal heritage. Here was a performance that aimed to depict Australian history—a hi/story in which Aboriginal people feature prominently. It goes something like this...

Once upon a time there were rich and vibrant Aboriginal cultures whose dreamings emerged from the vastness of the landscape and the mysteries of the seas. To this came settlers who brought new dreamings of new beginnings, achieved through toil and ingenuity. Migrants too brought their labour, but also their cultures, resulting in an explosion of cultural diversity and the creation of a richly cosmopolitan society that nonetheless remained inflected by its relationship with the environment, particularly the vast, hot centre and its encircling seas.

Our Aboriginal peoples, the story goes, have travelled the path with us. Their on-going presence continues to enrich our lives. They give meaning to our existence in this land through their culture and the welcome that they bestow upon us. Without them non-Aboriginal Australia would not be what it is today.

They are themselves a diverse people. Some are traditional and some are contemporary; the latter personified in Cathy Freeman, Australia's gold winning 400-metre sprinter. Cathy

Freeman is here the exemplar of Aboriginal achievement and her pivotal ceremonial role of torch lighter the indication of how central Aboriginality is to Australian identity.

This was the hi/story of our history that the Olympic Opening Ceremony committee wished to present. A nation 'reborn in unity so that we can all be as one mob', a nation where 'acceptance without questioning' prevails, where judgement is reserved (TWI Production 2000, Ernie Dingo commentary). These characteristics are enabled by the Aboriginal songmen who, through their traditional smoking ceremony, call us into unity and rid us all of our demons. Thus it is, according to this hi/story, that core aspects of the Australian national character are linked symbolically to Aboriginal tradition.

Those watching the Ceremony may have been confused by the extent to which these representations contradict so much of what is heard in the international media of indigenous and non-indigenous relations in Australia. One has only to depart Australian shores to be reminded of our poor reputation in this regard. Was the situation changing, or was the Olympic Opening Ceremony simply an obscenely indulgent exercise in global PR? I argue that, while both readings are at some level incontrovertible, neither is sufficiently nuanced to fully ascertain the hi/story's ideological effects.

The Context

The Olympics took place at a very difficult moment in indigenous politics in Australia. The conservative-led Federal Government had repeatedly made known its reluctance and resistance towards attempts to improve relations between non-indigenous and indigenous Australians. Most of these attempts occurred under the banner of 'reconciliation'. In 1991, the previous Prime Minister Paul Keating had instigated official attempts to promote reconciliation through the creation of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation. The Council's mandate was not only to promote reconciliation in the community, but also to ascertain whether the community would support a formal commitment of Commonwealth and State Governments to the reconciliation process (Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, 2000b: viii). By 1997, the Council had determined that this formal commitment would take the form of a Document of reconciliation (Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, 2000b: 72-76). The Document would commit governments to strategies aimed at substantially improving the circumstances and life chances of indigenous people. The Council was required by legislation to present the Document (what later became Documents) of Reconciliation to the Government by May 2000.

The conservative Government led by Prime Minister John Howard was therefore presented with Documents of Reconciliation that it had not commissioned and was not at all inclined to support. The central document is called the Australian Declaration Towards Reconciliation (Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, 2000a). This one-page Declaration touches on highly sensitive issues that have been central to Aboriginal political demands since the beginning of colonialism—the moment they call invasion: An acknowledgement of prior Aboriginal ownership of the land; an acknowledgement that the land was taken from the Aboriginal people without consent; and an acknowledgement of the spiritual relationship between the Aboriginal peoples and their land. The Declaration concludes

with the pledge 'to stop injustice, overcome disadvantage, and respect that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have the right to self-determination within the life of the nation'. Its 'hope is for a united Australia that respects this land of ours; values the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage; and provides justice and equity for all'.¹

Throughout its period in office, the Government had felt buoyed in its uncompromisingly tough stance on reconciliation by the rising level of support for ultra-conservative political parties—some might say neo-fascist—that shunned reconciliation. Foremost among these was the One Nation Party led by Pauline Hanson whose highly racist statements, not only regarding Aborigines, received considerable media coverage and apparently resonated with a sizeable section of the electorate. A central argument put forward by Pauline Hanson and others was that Aboriginal people were not at all discriminated against; rather they were relatively privileged when compared to white Australia because they received special benefits on the grounds of their race. This theme was raised in her first speech in Parliament which received blanket media coverage:

We now have a situation where a type of reverse racism is applied to mainstream Australians by those who promote political correctness and those who control the various taxpayer funded 'industries' that flourish in our society servicing Aborigines, multiculturalists and a host of other minority groups' (Commonwealth of Australia Parliamentary Debates, 10 September 1996).

This discourse of privilege took on another inflection when articulated by Prime Minister John Howard. For Howard, the aim of Government policy was equality—ensuring that each person in Australia had equal rights and opportunities. The corollary of this notion of equality was that no group should get 'special treatment'.

Howard's idea of equality is one that shuns the notion of difference. It is an equality of process—equality before the law, employment equality, equality of access to Government

¹ Australian Declaration Towards Reconciliation: We, the peoples of Australia, of many origins as we are, make a commitment to go on together in a spirit of reconciliation. We value the unique status of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the original owners and custodians of lands and waters. We recognise this land and its waters were settled as colonies without treaty or consent. Reaffirming the human rights of all Australians, we respect and recognise continuing customary laws, beliefs and traditions. Through understanding the spiritual relationship between the land and its first peoples, we share our future and live in harmony. Our nation must have the courage to own the truth, to heal the wounds of its past so that we can move on together at peace with ourselves. Reconciliation must live in the hearts and minds of all Australians. Many steps have been taken, many steps remain as we learn our shared histories. As we walk the journey of healing, one part of the nation apologises and expresses its sorrow and sincere regret for the injustices of the past, so the other part accepts the apologies and forgives. We desire a future where all Australians enjoy their rights, accept their responsibilities, and have the opportunity to achieve their full potential. And so, we pledge ourselves to stop injustice, overcome disadvantage, and respect that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have the right to self-determination within the life of the nation.

Our hope is for a united Australia that respects this land of ours; values the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage; and provides justice and equity for all.

services. The argument goes that if these procedural aspects of equality are in place and equality is not the outcome, then the blame falls on the individuals who fail to take advantage of these opportunities. The idea that people do not start with the same power to access these opportunities is outside this discursive frame of reference. In particular, the idea that people's difference results in their being subjected to stigmatising practices that impair their ability to exploit opportunities is not acknowledged. Aboriginal people in Australia have been worn down by over two centuries of ethnocide, dispossession, chronic subordination and manifest disadvantage. A popular song written and sung by the Australian musician Paul Kelly plays on this idea that Aboriginal people today receive 'special treatment', saying that such destructive practices towards Aborigines are indeed special in the sense that no other ethnic group in Australia's colonial history has been subjected to them (Kelly, 1999: 66-67).

Howard's argument on equality evokes the assimilationist policies that officially guided Government practices towards Aborigines from the 1930s to the 1960s. As Meaghan Morris argues, assimilation may have been a generic colonial policy across various societies during this period, but it was more than a mere generalised ideology: It was enacted in very specific ways through plans put in place by the Australian Government, each of which could have been formulated and enacted otherwise. They were, in other words, specific to Australian colonialism and had dire practical consequences for their recipients that were also specific to the Australian circumstance. The most chilling practice was that of taking away Aboriginal babies and children from their mothers in an attempt to force an extermination of Aboriginality. This practice has received considerable notoriety in recent years as a result of a 1997 inquiry into the practice by the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission which described those removed from their families as 'the stolen generations'. As a result of

this inquiry, as Morris writes, "We cannot not know now that the extermination of Aboriginality-culture, identity, kinship-was the aim of assimilation. 'Assimilation' in this context was understood in the bodily sense of the term: It did not mean (as it could have) working for social and economic equality and mutual enrichment between Aboriginal and European peoples, but the swallowing up, the absorption, of the former by the latter" (13).

This political context, in particular the hostility of the Government towards progressing Aboriginal rights, helps explain how the Opening Ceremony could be interpreted as a progressive rendition of Australian history. The mere fact that Aboriginal people were made to be such a prominent part of the hi/story was itself subversive in the context. Moreover, the Ceremony picked up on key themes in the Australian Declaration Towards Reconciliation, in particular the idea that black and white Australians should symbolically walk hand in hand towards the future. The symbiosis was affirmed by the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation when it used an image from the Opening Ceremony of the Aboriginal songman and the young white girl walking hand in hand to adorn the cover of its final report to Government (December 2000). Indeed, in the report, the Chairman of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission Geoff Clarke described the 2000 Olympics as "A powerful healing statement for Aboriginal Australia" adding: "This was evident from the very beginning. The recognition of our culture in the creation scenes at the opening ceremony, the smoking ceremony, acknowledgement of our flag and symbols demonstrated true and proper respect for our people. It was a celebration of our survival. I am sure many will see the ceremony as a unifying point in our history, a milestone on the road to reconciliation from which there should be no turning back" (Geoff Clark, 2000).

Clark's comment suggests the extent to which the Opening Ceremony departed from the ways that Aboriginal people have

been represented in public discourse. While the Opening Ceremony's representations were, as I will argue, not representative, they did tap into the desires of an increasing number of Australians to support the reconciliation process. On the weekend when the Documents of Reconciliation were presented to the Federal Government at a ceremony at the Sydney Opera House, over 250,000 people walked across the Sydney Harbour Bridge in support of reconciliation. Other marches took place in other capital cities and were well attended. It is tempting to think that the euphoric faces of the spectators at the Olympic Opening Ceremony in part derived from this emerging spirit. We can only hope.

Media Representations Otherwise

Media reporting of Aboriginal issues has been considered by several Government agencies and is discussed in an emerging body of academic research. Aboriginal groups have long registered complaints with Government bodies concerning racist media coverage. The Australian Community Relations Office which was in existence from 1975-1981 received around 4,000 complaints of racial discrimination, a significant proportion of which were against the media (Meadows, 2001: 42). Meadows writes that the Community Relations Commissioner Al Grasby commented at the end of his tenure that the media's function appeared to be "chiefly that of defending the invasion and subsequent dispossession" (42). In 1991, two reports by Government agencies-The Report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody and the Human Rights Commission National Inquiry into Racist Violence-commented in some detail on the nature of media representations of Aborigines. In particular, the report on Aboriginal deaths in custody found that the media tended to exhibit 'a number of habitual and widespread detrimental practices' that resulted in persistent negative stereotyping (Mickler, 1998: 58). These stereotypes fall mainly into two

categories (Hartley, 1996). One is mobilised through a discourse of protection. This discourse contends that real, authentic Aborigines-the image here is of full-blooded Aborigines that live in remote areas and are relatively untouched by Western influence-need protection from the state to guard them from modernising forces that they are culturally and intellectually ill equipped to negotiate. This is, in effect, a discourse of infantilisation. The second is a discourse of correction-the idea of Aboriginal people, particularly youth, as deviant and a threat to white society resulting in their being a legitimate target of control and correction. According to Stephen Mickler in his analysis of media reporting in Western Australia, the discourse of correction acquired considerable prominence in the media in the early 1970s and has since become almost routine. Indeed, he writes, "there has been a particularly virulent news discourse about Aboriginal youth in the press and electronic media in Perth since 1990, a dramatically increased visualisation of them as criminals, as major instigators of disorder" (19).

The media's ready lapse into a discourse of deviancy when discussing Aboriginal issues is one of the 'detrimental practices' referred to in the 1991 report. The Report noted that this emphasis was often the practical consequence of journalists basing their stories on police briefings. To illustrate this point it discussed a 60 Minutes story about Aboriginal people living in a Sydney inner-city suburb that was considered particularly offensive by Aboriginal witnesses who appeared before the Inquiry. It was not so much a matter of overtly racist comments from the journalist but rather the fact that the story was filmed while on tour with the police and that the journalist was clearly in sympathy with the views being expressed by the police (Mickler, 1998: 58-59). The tendency to accept and promote police interpretations of events involving Aborigines is a feature of a great deal of past and present reporting. Stories on Aboriginal drunkenness in rural towns have become almost emblematic, particularly on commercial television, and often focus on police attempts to remove drunks from the town

streets. In such news stories, another of the 'detrimental practices' is apparent—that of an inadequate socio-political contextualisation of the events reported on. Generally little attempt is made to consider why substance abuse is such a problem in certain Aboriginal communities. Such consideration would surely necessitate a discussion of the effects over several generations of dislocation, subordination and denial of identity and culture. This contextualisation would challenge the triumphalist colonial mythology that still frames indigenous and non-indigenous race relations in Australia. The fact that it so rarely happens must surely support Grasby's observation on the media's role in legitimising colonialism.

However it is not always possible for the media to mobilise a discourse of deviancy. During the 1990s, some of Australia's most exalted public institutions lent their weight to Aboriginal political demands, among them Australia's supreme legal authority The High Court. In the Court's 1992 Mabo decision (Mabo v State of Queensland 2, 1992), and later in its 1996 Wik decision (Wik Peoples and Thayorre People v Queensland 1996), prior Aboriginal ownership of the land was recognised for the first time resulting in Aboriginal communities being accorded the right to access and use their traditional lands. These decisions generated enormous political controversy, spurred on by conservative politics and farming and mining lobby groups that opposed native title to land. Their rhetorical catch cry was that these decisions created uncertainty for regional land owners; that the pendulum had swung too far in favour of Aboriginal political demands and that a political counter-response was required (John Howard, 7:30 Report, Australian Broadcasting Commission, September 4 1997). In April 1997, this response came in the form of the Howard Government's 10 Point Plan (Commonwealth Government, Native Title Amendment Bill, 1997). The 10 Point Plan was the Government's proposal to curtail the impact of the High Court's decisions by legislative means. Indeed, in some senses it denied Aborigines rights that they had held even prior to the landmark

High Court rulings. It generated considerable public controversy with pastoralists and the mining industry joining once again with the Government in supporting the proposed legislation. The argument that was pushed was that the land of every Australian was under threat of claim, even private backyards. Even though this argument was demonstrably false (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, 1997), it received considerable prominence in the commercial media. Michael Meadows writes of a large front page photo in a Queensland newspaper of Aboriginal writer and filmmaker Sam Watson with the Brisbane cityscape behind him and the headline 'City Ours, Mall, Bridge and All-Black Leader' (Courier Mail, 13 December 1992, cited in Meadows, 2001: 123). Meadows writes that the prominence given this photo was highly questionable, particularly considering that an adjacent but much less prominent article quoted a High Court judge saying that this was not legally possible. Meadows questions why the paper gave the Aboriginal elder's clearly ambit claim such prominence, if it wasn't to stir up non-indigenous passions (124)?

In another analysis of the media reporting at the time in two major and respected newspapers, *The Sydney Morning Herald* and the national newspaper *The Australian*, Kim Bullimore (1999) discusses the relative paucity of Aboriginal voices in these papers and how Eurocentric notions of Aboriginality appeared to determine which Aboriginal voices did appear. She found that every article concerning native title that contained an Aboriginal voice was counterbalanced by two to three that contained no Aboriginal voices. Where Aboriginal comment did appear, it was most frequently accompanied by three to five non-Aboriginal commentators who either refuted Aboriginal claims or spoke on behalf of Aboriginal demands. Moreover, those Aboriginal representatives that did appear in the media were those that were 'culturally approved' within a dominant Eurocentric discourse of Aboriginality. Bullimore argues that cultural approval requires that the Aboriginal

person look Aboriginal and have demonstrable contact with traditional Aboriginal people, these being the dominant signifiers of 'real' Aborigines within this discourse. Moreover, it is precisely these signifiers that imprison 'acceptable' Aboriginal representatives in the trope of the 'noble savage'. Moderation is a key to this possibility, and it is these moderate Aboriginal leaders that the media called on in the debate over the 10 Point Plan. Bullimore concludes that while representations of Aborigines may appear more positive than they did 10 or 20 years ago, 'their portrayal is still determined by the dominant elite's concept of Aboriginality. This concept fails to portray Aborigines in a manner that reflects the kaleidoscope of Aboriginal identity'. Thus, Eurocentric notions of Aboriginality preclude as legitimate, media representation of Aborigines who do not comply with non-indigenous standards of authenticity (79).

The notion that only a circumscribed group of Aborigines can be accorded the status of authenticity relates strongly to the emergence of the discourse of Aboriginal privilege. In his book, *The Myth of Privilege*, Stephen Mickler analyses media reporting from the 1930s onwards to uncover a genealogy of the discourse. His aim is to uncover how it is that in contemporary discourse, Aboriginal people "can be spoken of as a desperate social underclass in one breath, and akin to a neo-aristocracy in the next?" (13).

Mickler notes how the segregation and incarceration of Aborigines on reserves in the early part of the twentieth century resulted in a limited contact with non-indigenous populations. This context was reflected in the tendency of newspapers to rely on official voices-administrators, politicians, missionaries, social welfare authorities-to comment on Aboriginal issues. With the abolition of the reserves and the official introduction of assimilation policy, Aboriginal people were more prevalent in rural towns and communities. Newspapers began to incorporate the opinion of so-called 'ordinary Australians'

whose prognostications on the failure of assimilation policy increasingly blamed the Government for an inadequate provision of services to Aborigines. Mickler writes that:

...it is really at this point that we can speak of a distinct change in the way relations between the state, the public and Aborigines were configured in news reporting ... 'the problem', and Aboriginality itself, was no longer strictly the province of native administrators, missionaries and other experts. This expert knowledge was now seen to be challenged by local experience, commonsense and practical wisdom of good down-on-the-farm Australians. The state had lost its monopoly over the production of public meaning about Aboriginal affairs and in the process of this loss can be seen the re-emergence of a body of public opinion that is sceptical, incredulous and hostile to state Aboriginal policy. None of this would have been possible, of course, for metropolitan readerships at least [who had little contact with Aborigines], without news visualising Aboriginal affairs (120).

Once this new space for popular sentiment was opened up, it was a matter of inflection rather than redefinition to argue that the state was doing too much for Aborigines rather than not enough. Those for whom too much was being done were the more visible residents of rural communities or cities, as opposed to the 'real' traditional Aborigines who remained out of sight. In this manner, the discourse of Aboriginal privilege intersected with that of Aboriginal authenticity, placing a double burden of illegitimacy on rural and urban Aboriginies. By the 1970s, the inflection was manifest in the argument of conservative West Australian politician Reg Withers "that the Commonwealth is discriminating against whites with grants and subsidies it pays for the secondary education of children of Aboriginal descent" (West Australian, May 1972 cited in Mickler, 1998: 10). Thus, the idea and myth of Aboriginal privilege is born, to be subsequently nurtured by conservatives and influential media commentators, notably the talkback radio 'shock jocks' discussed by Mickler (1998)² The media's frequent articulation of this discourse of privilege meant that, by 1995, Pauline Hanson's views on Aborigines could be considered 'populist'.

² We're also sick to death of the privileges available to Aborigines that aren't available to other Australians'. Caller to The Sattler File, Perth talkback radio show, August 1991 (Mickler, 1998: 10).

Olympic Dreams - Who's Dreaming Now?

The earlier discussion on the manner in which indigenous politics is bound up with contestation over representations of Aboriginality is, of course, pertinent to the Opening Ceremony's reconciliatory dreaming. Cathy Freeman who, the suggestion is, personifies contemporary Aboriginality, lit the torch. In keeping with the reading of the Ceremony as politically subversive, it was an apt choice. On several occasions, Cathy Freeman had made known her support for Aboriginal self-determination and her abhorrence of the Howard Government's policies. Preceding Cathy Freeman were the indigenous singers and dancers who wore traditional adornment and enacted several traditional acts of welcome. In the colonial space between these two symbols of Aboriginality there was silence concerning Australia's indigenous peoples. Captain Cook arrived, the Australian bush ranger Ned Kelly burst on the scene, and the boot-scootin, toe-tappin', thigh-slappin' future of Australia began. From then on, we could have been almost anywhere in the Anglo-Celtic world, except for the display of popular national iconography, such as the Australian clothes line and the corrugated iron. Following the arrival of Captain Cook, there was one ambiguous moment that might have explained the silence of Aboriginal colonial history. Unexplained gun shots rang out over the stadium, but rather than signifying the Aboriginal experience of dispossession they instead symbolised the subversive activities of nineteenth century bush rangers.

Without the truth of Aboriginal dispossession, this was indeed a sanitised version of Australian history. The refusal to link together the Aboriginal past with its present and future left the spectators and viewers with only two representations of Aboriginal identity-Aboriginality as tradition and Aboriginality as assimilation. The emphasis on tradition reproduces the infantilising trope of the primitive, giving weight to what Robert Ariss describes as, "popular European folk models which cling to more conservative constructions-the corroborree,

the boomerang, the naked savage eking out an existence in the harsh desert environment" (1988: 133, cited in Jennings, 1993: 13). This symbolic conservatism undermines the notion of contemporary Aboriginality as diverse and creative. On the other hand, Cathy Freeman as representative of contemporary, urban Aboriginality, attests to the on-going possibility of the successful fruition of assimilation. In this highly individualistic sport, she has well and truly made it in a white man's world. Cathy Freeman as symbol is thus antithetical to the more radical articulation of contemporary Aboriginality as difference.

My argument therefore is that the indigenous presence at the Opening Ceremony enabled simultaneously both progressive and regressive readings of the Aboriginal place in Australian history. The progressive element was the audacity of intertwining Aboriginal symbolism so intimately with Australian history, particularly in the current political context. However, to do so with such reified notions of identity only gives substance to regressive readings of contemporary Aboriginality. Safe Aboriginality, for white Australia it seems, is the distant past of Aboriginal tradition and the present of individualistic sporting prowess. Could the emphasis on the traditional in the Opening Ceremony be an instance of what Marcia Langton describes as the increasing desire of non-Aboriginal people "to make personal rehabilitative statements about the Aboriginal 'problem' and to consume and reconsume the 'primitive'" (10)? Could the Ceremony be read as a grandiose exercise in public rehabilitation; something orchestrated to make we colonisers feel safe and better about our place in the world? To ask this question evokes one of the constant criticisms of the reconciliation movement by more radical Aborigines, this being that it is an exercise in non-indigenous self-righteousness, not in justice. The Opening Ceremony might well have made many non-indigenous Australians feel better, but what did it do for those Aboriginal people who have long sought recognition of gross injustice and some meagre form of compensation? Not much, I expect.

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Media and the Representation of the European Union

An Analysis of Press Coverage of Turkey's European Union Candidacy

Abstract

This article aims to analyse how the mainstream Turkish press constructed European identity and the meaning of being a part of Europe in the news during the period in which Turkey's candidacy was accepted at the EU Helsinki Summit in December 1999. The article begins by summarising the history of Turkey-EU relations. The findings of a qualitative analysis of the news in three dailies is then discussed by focusing on the actors, their dispositions, the themes-which are discussed under the headings: the meaning of Europe and the EU, expectations from the EU; economic elements, conditions of and obstacles to the EU; political elements-and the ways these themes are expressed. Finally, the article argues that the newspapers analysed make up sensationalist news when rendering the EU newsworthy. Furthermore, headlines of the stories analysed and some extracts from these stories are provided in the article.

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