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200112730

SOCIAL ANALYSIS
Issue 45(1) April 2001

AUSTRALIAN (ALTER)NATIVES: Cultural Drama and Indigeneity

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Introduction

Indigeneity has rapidly assumed significance for non-Aboriginal Australians. Complex signifiers, native landscapes and peoples are heavily implicated in the contemporary quest for settler legitimacy. This article investigates the deployment of indigeneity in the identity strategies of alternative lifestylers in Australia — drawing upon research conducted on a range of alternative “cultural dramas” (Turner 1982; 1984).¹ Marshalled to perform a validating function, invoked to sacralize experience, implicated in postcolonizing gestures, indigeneity constitutes a conspicuous trope in the public events explored. Events transpiring within the counter-spatial precincts of the alternative gathering ConFest (Conference/Festival) held on the Murray River north of Melbourne; a ‘carnival of protest’ at Olympic Dam uranium mine at Roxby Downs in northern South Australia; and the ‘Coming the Right Way’ passage ritual at Captain Cook’s 230 year old landing site at The Foot in Sydney’s Botany Bay, are meta-performative contexts for the evocation, appeal to and solicitation of Aborigines and ecology. Each facilitates reflexive attention to the interwoven “ultimate concerns” (Tillich in MacAloon 1984:250) of participants — ‘authenticity’ and ‘reconciliation’. And each demonstrates that as indigeneity proliferates, appropriate perspectives towards its analysis are required.

In the nineties, ‘reconciliation’ became something of a local zeitgeist — a national “ultimate concern”. Between 1992 (when the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation was created) and 2001 (the year of the Centenary of Federation), Australia has seen the rise of a mass movement of ‘sorry people’ engaged in the performance of a “proliferation of apologies [made to indigenous Australians] on behalf of themselves and the nation” (Gooder and Jacobs 2000:232).² The postcolonial apology for past wrong-doings is perceived as a passport to legitimate citizenship; that is, to authentic belonging. While the ‘sorry’ movement had enacted ‘dramas’ throughout the late nineties (eg. national ‘Sorry Day’ and the production and delivery of ‘Sorry Books’), 2000 became something like the movement’s ‘peak experience’. The ceremonies of the Sydney Olympic Games were especially memorable for their extravagant (re)presentations of indigenous peoples, rites and iconography. While the Olympics became a venue for ‘reconciliation’ of a vicarious and spectacular kind, the ‘Corroboree 2000 Reconciliation Marches’ had hundreds of thousands of ‘movement for reconciliation’ supporters off their seats.³ What will centre my focus here are unofficial and ‘off-screen’ events transpiring on the margins of Australian culture, public events where non state-sponsored reconciliations have been enacted by nativizing marginal youth milieus — *(alter)natives*. Staging the (re)production of historical and ecological sensitivities, these cultural dramas indicate the wider non-colonialist terrain of reconciliation.⁴

Australian Indigeneity

There has been much discussion recently concerning the resacralization or re-enchantment of first world cultures and the concomitant role ascribed to indigenous landscapes and peoples in such processes. The growth of ecological consciousness, or “ecologism” (Dobson 1995), over the past two decades has triggered desires to conserve, reclaim and defend landscapes. These are desires no longer the preserve of the radical fringe. In Australia, ecological sensibility is implicated in ‘landcare’ and other policy initiatives, the identification with and preservation of ‘natural heritage’ sites, along with the commitment to bio-regions, eco-villages and the “ecological self” (Matthews 1991). At the same time, for the disenchanting of European origin, the world’s aboriginal peoples have become the embodiment of the sacred. Indigenes are mobilised to serve varying purposes in different orbits. They are “fetishized” at the global level (Beckett 1994); discursive mediators for national imaginaries (Hamilton 1990; Lattas 1990; Mackey 1998; Patterson 2000); and models for developing “indigenous selves” (Mulcock 2001).

As reflected in the popular imagination of contemporary Australia, settlers of European origin have invested steady interest in Australian indigeneity. Firstly, indigenous landscapes — variously conceived as wild or humanised — are the object of growing appreciation. In recent times, there has been much engagement with the Australian landscape’s capacity to shape, to *nativize*, to render its settlers chthonic citizens — who, by necessity, adapt, or are assimilated to the conditions of country. Maladapted to the environment, committed to unsustainable resource extraction, the “white Aborigine” (McLean 1998) of the bush pioneer mould depended upon the displacement and dispossession of indigenes. But in the kind of responsible nativization, popularized by Tim Flannery, there exists an attempt to uncover “our ecological history” and nurture an ecological attunement (Flannery 1995:389). The wisdom in assuming custodial obligations towards Australian landscape, towards local place, is constituted in what Matthews (2000:11) calls “reinhabitation”. Appreciation or awareness here, implies a shift in consciousness on the part of Australia’s recent settlers, atonement for social and economic behaviour long signifying our colonial status, foreignness, detachment. Discussing what they call an Australian “eco-nationalism”, Morton and Smith (1999) suggest that as Australians identify — recognize, appropriate and reconcile — with indigenous nature (which has, in the wake of ecological thought, become “sacred and extraordinary” (1999:154), they are participating in a redemptive project, wherein they see themselves becoming “authentic”, that is, postcolonial, Australians.

Similarly, despite the Hansonite ‘backlash’,⁵ appreciation of Aboriginal culture (religion, history, art, politics etc.) abounds. The interest that Aboriginality now arouses is partly the result of a settler Australia “reconciling itself to its colonial history”, recognizing certain unconscionable “truths” about its past (Goeder and Jacobs 2000; Jacobs 1997:206-8). Yet, an Australian identity is frequently stated to be founded upon the realization of an antipodean spirituality, the achievement of re-enchantment — for which Aborigines are routinely invoked as mentors and guides. In promoting settler-Australian reconciliation with landscape (especially the outback), indigenes and the unconscious — processes amounting to “indigenization” (2000:134) — David Tacey has been a prominent proselytizer of re-enchantment (Tacey 1995, 2000). For Tacey, to “learn from the indigenous example” is indispensable in achieving “belonging, connectedness, identity, purpose”

(2000:105,128). In his utopian argot, ultimately “the colonizing project is subverted by the indigenizing project” (2000:137). Summoning the “postcolonial spirit”, he argues, will draw upon the strengths of an “appreciation” rather than the “appropriation” of Aboriginality — processes often confused by those deemed “secular architects of cultural sensitivity” (Tacey 2000:108).

Much contemporary cultural behaviour bearing any resemblance to that proposed by Tacey has been dismissed by critics as both essentialist and appropriational. As such, discourse and practice may be stripped of any claims to postcoloniality. ‘Appreciation’ of indigenous culture is often considered to be little more than “imperialist nostalgia” (Rosaldo 1989) or self-redemptive cannibalism (Lattas 1990). In response to the variegated deployment of an essentialized categorization, cultural critics have launched scorched-earth firemissions upon race romantics and culture thieves. There are valid criticisms here. Aborigines continue to be romanticized as ‘timeless’ or ‘noble environmentalists’, experiencing an elision or distortion of their history — processes begetting disadvantage. Subscription to ‘Aboriginal traditions’ often takes place at a distant remove from Aboriginal people themselves and desiring abstract attributes of Aboriginality is not necessarily matched by an aspiration to alter the course of social injustices faced by Aboriginal communities. Yet, it should be admitted that ‘cultural appropriation’ has become a bulky and troublesome concept. This is the case as the term is applied to a vast range of cultural behaviour and, moreover, is often conflated with ‘expropriation’ (outside of any direct process of commodification).⁶ As a consequence, the concept has been the locus of a spectrum of thought: from Marcus’ Aquarian thieves thesis (1988) and Cuthbert and Grossman’s “new feralism” (1996) with its neo-imperialist connotations, to the non-pejorative and non-dismissive approaches of Taylor (1997) and Morton (1996).

According to Gelder and Jacobs, “Aboriginal sacredness seems to be all over the place” and “its location, its destinations and its outcomes are difficult to predict” (1998:1,25). Contributing to the analysis of an “uncanny” source of transcendence, this article contemplates indigeneity as it surfaces in the alternative cultural milieu — where it may be solicited, appealed to, interiorized and invented for the purpose of shaping identities, legitimating activities, initiating (re)enchantment, building alliances and (re)forming culture. As non-Aboriginal Australians, sometimes under the guidance and authority of Aboriginal people, identify with natural and cultural heritage — and thus court a postcolonizing praxis — a dismissive approach seems far from satisfactory.

Cultural Drama and Indigeneity

In drama resides the blurred juncture of narrative and performance. For Turner, “cultural drama” (eg., rite, festival, spectacle, exhibition, literature, film, theatre, sport), is a meta-communicative device informing participants (actors and audience alike) of society’s most cherished symbols, beliefs and practices. Like a “ritual frame” (Bateson 1958) or “meta-social commentary” (Geertz 1972:26), it is a “privileged moment” where we witness “men and women of a given culture, wholly attending to their own existential situation” (Turner 1984:23). Cultural dramas facilitate reflexivity upon issues of ubiquitous consequence (“social dramas”), their enactment inciting personal and collective inquiry. Group sensitivity towards perennial concerns and issues of moment may be the context for

spontaneous community or "communitas". The process powers the (re)production of meaning — culture's imminence.

Cultural dramas are limin[oid]al occasions. Conventionally this means that "from ritual to theatre" (Turner 1982), they are functionally integrative or generative — (re)productive, thresholds through which society is (re)constructed as the "sacra" (or indeed the "sacriligious") is shown, told or enacted. Public events, especially festivals, exemplify this process. The annual Fire Event at Queensland's Maleny (now Woodford) Folk Festival, perhaps Australia's most popular and renowned incidence of ritual-theatre, is a case in point. According to Lewis and Dowsey-Magog (1993:198-9), the earlier Fire Events at Maleny, when they were held on New Years Eve and before they became spectacles controlled by artists, were "neo-liminal" in that, ideally, they elicited the kind of "totalizing integrative force central to many kinds of ritual practice". Grounded in "transcendental, fundamental or 'ultimate concerns'", they engaged people by embodying their most important concerns (green politics and New Age spirituality).⁷ Such collective reflexology fomented "an experience of egalitarian solidarity and spiritual integration" (Lewis and Dowsey-Magog 1993:201).

A public event is, according to Handelman (1990:9), a "privileged point of penetration" into a socio-cultural universe. In perhaps the most comprehensive heuristic treatment of public events, Handelman suggests that all such events are "closed phenomenal worlds" wherein "people undertake in concert to make more, less, or other of themselves, than they usually do" (1990:16,3). "[L]ittle worlds" which "point beyond" their occurrence, they are "symbolic of something outside of themselves, standing for, evoking or bringing into being something else, something absent" (Handelman 1990:13). In what ways and for what purpose do public events (usually, though not exclusively, organised by and for non-Aboriginal Australians), "evoke and bring into being" the "something else", the 'Otherness' of indigeneity? Is the approbation of indigenous Australians in cultural performance mere essentialist chicanery, or does it signify genuine 'appreciation' and 'respect'? Are events vehicles for the dramatization of Aboriginal health and social and political justice issues or are they concerned with the (re)formation of non-Aboriginal identities?

As a global media-event, the Olympic Games are a powerful nationalist image device. In the Opening and Closing Ceremonies the host nation engages in presentation management. The Opening Ceremony of the Sydney Olympics on September 15th 2000 was a meta-spectacle of state in which indigeneity played a defining role. Spectators (reputed to be nearly 4 billion) gained the perspective of Hero Girl, thirteen year old Nikki Webster who undertook the most elaborate vision quest in history. Hero Girl had early encountered Djakapurra Munyarryun — a senior songman and initiator from Yirrkala in north-east Arnhem Land. Djakapurra introduced Hero Girl (and the global spectator) to the 'secrets' of Australia's cosmogenesis, guiding her (and us) out of Gondwanalandian primordiality, through colonial and industrial eras.⁸ Widely acclaimed as "the biggest corroboree ever held", the Awakening segment of the ceremony (directed by Aboriginal artist and director of Bangarra Dance Theatre, Stephen Page) featured hundreds of Central Desert women performing a segment of the Seven Sisters dance and conducting a purification ceremony (burning eucalyptus leaves) by which Stadium Australia was cleansed.⁹ At one crucial moment the ancestral creation spirit Wandjina was evoked, whose lightning bolt ignited

bush fires and regenerated the land — triggering the Nature segment which incorporated giant flowers and insects, celebrating Australia's unique ecology. In the Closing Ceremony, an oppositional indigenous narrative held a strong thread. Prominent among the pantheon of icons on display were Aboriginal band Yothu Yindi who performed their hit 'Treaty' and earlier, dressed in black outfits featuring the word 'sorry' emblazoned in white, Aboriginal rights advocates Midnight Oil performed their popular land rights anthem 'Beds are Burning'.¹⁰ The ceremony thus staged, on an unparalleled scale, that which John Howard has popularized as 'the black arm band' interpretation of Australian history. Although it cannot be pursued here, a closer study of the Games' Ceremonies will afford insight on how narratives of Australian indigeneity are activated to promote national, regional or oppositional identities.

It has been widely imputed that the Games facilitated a national 'awakening' — that they represented a kind of meta-reconciliatory gesture amplifying to the world that which Howard is said to have been unable to say on behalf of the nation. While not spectacularizing national or global media-events, alternative cultural events initiate 'awakenings' of their own — sites where participants are permitted deep and personal relationships with indigeneity. In her work on the 1983 Nimbin Lifestyle Celebration,¹¹ Newton (1988) found that the event accommodated a "Koori space", a land rights tent and a *bora* ring within its precincts and that "countercultural" participants attempted to recreate Aboriginal or 'tribal' lifestyles on site. Such efforts signified the extent to which Aboriginality is romanticized within the counterculture. According to Newton (1988:62), a "false idealization of a tribal and Aboriginal way of life" transpired as participants, in their very attempts at reproducing "tribal communalism", sought freedoms from the social restrictions (eg., ascribed gender and age hierarchies and body taboos) common to tribal societies.

In more recent times, in recognition of the cultural authority of indigenous peoples, at Woodford/Maleny indigenous performers (from Australia and elsewhere) possess their own staging area, hosting a special performance night on New Years Eve — thus replacing the Fire Event, which in the early 1990s was shifted to the final night of the festival. According to Lewis and Dowsey-Magog (1993), with this shift, the indigenous people's night "stole some fire" from the Fire Event as the largely non-Aboriginal crowd attracted were able to participate as spectators only. In a possible example of Tacey's "cultural apartheid", they claim that, here, indigenous people:

have sometimes constructed themselves as groups with ritual, as opposed to (Euro) others who had lost it. The implicit effect was to disallow or delegitimize the possibility of the popular recreation of ritual and to put indigenous people in the position of 'standing for' the sacred (Lewis and Dowsey-Magog 1993:216).

Yet, in non-Aboriginal aspirations to 'the sacred', it remains the case that indigenes are rarely remote from — though often absent in — the action. This is more than apparent in the contemporary quest of non-Aboriginal Australians towards 'custodianship', which may be variously modelled on, adopted from or even conferred by Aboriginal authorities. For instance, participating in the CERES¹² Kingfisher festival, non-Aboriginal inhabitants of inner Melbourne are collectively "initiated" by Aboriginal performance leaders into a "custodial consciousness" by which it is anticipated a "commitment to homeplace" will be engendered (Matthews 2000:7).

ConFest: Sanctified Land, Authenticated Experience

ConFest is a much larger and popular event north of Melbourne. Since its inception in 1976, the event has been a counter-hegemonic pilgrimage destination where the vast constituency of the Australian alternative culture movement explore diverse responses to the parent culture. Held in bushland over five days at Easter and a week at New Year, ConFest attracts thousands of alternate pilgrims (over 10,000 at New Year 1995/96) who gravitate towards numerous "village" camping and performance zones which are the staging areas for hundreds of workshops over the duration of the event. A public event where the "lived in world" (Handelman 1990) of participants is self-"presented", it offers 'true', 'natural' or 'pure' lifestyle options — *authentica* — to patrons via a dense simultaneity of performance genres and venues (cf. St John 1997). In this demarcated multi- "cultural drama", that which holds transcendent value for patrons is provided legitimate expression. For a great many ConFesters, indigeneity holds such value.¹³

Acknowledging the indigenous inhabitants (to degrees real or imagined) of a place is a desired means of sanctifying space and authenticating experience. For instance, the collective invocation of Yorta-Yorta (the local indigenous peoples) on the night of a fire walk at Tocumwal Easter 1994 sacralized the collective performances. This kind of sacralization is frequently encountered at ConFest. In 1981, Glenlyon (near Daylesford, Victoria) was, for one commentator, an appropriate location for an event as it had been used as "a tribal gathering place" for millennia: "Once an Aboriginal meeting place and spa, more recently a village race track and now a ConFest site" (Robinson 1981:12). Such gestures are common place within alternative culture. The Aquarius Festival was said to have occurred on a Bunjalung initiation ground and organisers invited "one of the old Aborigines from the area to open the festival" (*Byron Express* 1973:4). The 1983 Nimbin Lifestyle Celebration closed with the performance of a "Rainbow Serpent" ritual (Newton 1988:67). Local Aborigines, notably the Gabbi-Gabbi, have 'hosted' the annual Woodford/Maleny Festival, opening the event via a "permission ceremony" and kindling the fire for the Fire Event (Lewis and Dowsey-Magog 1993:203-4). Reminiscent of their assigned function as sacred authority for the Opening (and Closing) Ceremony of the Olympic Games, these examples indicate that Aborigines, approving, opening and consummating events, have become sanctifying signifiers, performing the role of an authenticating 'presence' (physical or spiritual).

I will detail two ConFest moments where indigeneity has been marshalled to perform a validating function: the Cotter River "water corroboree" and the "sacred mound" at Birdlands.

The inaugural ConFest was held on the Cotter River in the Australian Capital Territory in December 1976. There, a palpable sensation of imminent social transformation was inspired through a series of gatherings culminating in what became known as "the water corroboree". According to first hand reports, the event occasioned a sense of communion (between humans and with nature). I want to draw attention to the most detailed recollection of the moment I have found, according to which the presence of 'spirit' seems to have been validated by two authorities. One was an Aborigine, the other an esotericist, both of whom held communication with otherwise unseen forces:

On the second last day of the festival, Dec 13th, some Aborigines, probably from the

Berri area, had been brought to the site. Early the next morning, I saw one of them, a middle aged man hugging a half drunk flagon of wine. For some reason he looked at me penetratingly — not like one who is drunk. And said fiercely: “Don’t you mess with the Spirit of Cotter!” I said nothing, almost forgot the incident. (Rawlins 1982:31)

Rawlins then describes the “water corroboree”, nearly 2000 people in thigh-high water forming circles within circles, ‘Oming’, chanting and finally taking part in a “celibate orgasm” of water thrashing. He continues:

[T]he two hours or so we were all sharing in the water had been and remains today one of the most whole, fully-alive, totally transcendental experiences of my life. And, of course, the half-drunk Aborigine had somehow known that that benign Nature Spirit was giving us the extra energy we all felt during the festival. Far from ‘messing with’ Him, we all received His Benediction (Rawlins 1982:38).

That this was an authentic spiritual experience was corroborated by the Reverend John King, once President of the Theosophical Society and a clairvoyant, numerologist and founder of the Healing Church of St. Raphael. The Reverend, who “stayed in a nearby motel and wore ecclesiastical garb in the midst of his naked ‘parishioners’”, informed Rawlins that in reference to “the Spirit of the Cotter”, “he was manifesting very strongly while you were all thrashing about in the water” (1982:39).

The remark of a “half drunk” Aboriginal man, endorsed in turn by a past President of the Theosophical Society,¹⁴ *indigenized* the site and thereby authenticated the experience. It thus provided the validation scaffold Rawlins required to construct a meaningful interpretation of an avowedly transcendent experience.

The imagined Aboriginality of a raised area (known as “the sacred site”, “the sacred mound” or just “the mound”) which became the community fire circle at the 1995/1996 New Year ConFest near Tocumwal NSW (Birdlands) not only legitimated the events transpiring there but, as a consequence, seemed to accord participants with a chthonic status of their own. Awareness grew a few weeks prior to New Year on a pre-festival trip. I accompanied Gordon, a retired geologist, as he investigated a raised area with a barren, hardened surface and riddled with rabbit boroughs. Quietly excited about the area, Gordon was unsure whether the “NSW authorities” knew about it. They probably didn’t, he mused, since it was private land and the area in question was not fenced-off. Such mounds, he speculated, were used as cooking, ceremonial and/or burial sites and may have been retreated to in times of flood as “an island of survival” which could be occupied for six months of the year. He suggested that, “according to the work we’ve done in Victoria, mounds [known as middens] started to appear 3000 years ago”. Though there was no tell-tale sign of ash — which, he suggested, you would need to locate with a magnifying glass:

there is sign of nodules of fired clay which is the only evidence I found to say it was occupied by human action. And there’s some tiny little white flakes that could be bone. But you’d have to look under a microscope to identify that. There is sand under this clay layer, so the Aborigines have built up this 4 or 5 feet of sand over an area of 200 feet by 50 feet probably — an oval shape, 5 feet high. So there’s a lot of sand there and it’s taken them a long long time to build it up. So it’s quite a significant area, in terms of ceremony. If they were having corroborees they

wouldn't have them on the mound they'd have them back in the trees a bit. So it's quite significant. So I referred to it as a sacred site It's [now] fenced off and we're going to respect it. And treat it properly.

Gordon was of little doubt that the place was "significant" — despite the lack of scientific evidence or corroboration from Aborigines themselves. As a consequence, he announced "we are going to erect a large flag over it declaring that it's a sacred site". "Whose sacred site?" I inquired. He responded:

It could be a white man's sacred site, as well as an Aboriginal one. So we can behave as if it's our sacred site also and have gatherings, workshops on it, sit on it, talk, conference, you can dance on it [But, he cautions] I wouldn't disturb the surface. No camping on it.

Rumours about the area abounded and an embellished folk mythology arose intimating the raised area's primordality. According to one commentator (attributing the find to someone else), Cypress "found some bone sort of implements that he knows to be Aboriginal, of a certain thing and that if you find these on an area you should only use it for pleasure, you should never use it for [commerce] It's only to be used for pleasure, like for dancing".

The place rapidly acquired the characteristics of a sacred site, areas normally "hedged about with interdictions" (Maddock 1991:215). Indeed, restrictions were applied. A line of blue tape 'fenced' the area off from campers,¹⁵ and a large "flag" with the words "Sacred Site" painted across it flew from trees nearby.¹⁶ At the beginning of the festival, campers adjacent the site were instructed of the site's sacrality, a fact relayed by them to new arrivals.

The mound eventually became a safe fire zone (in a fire danger period) for the Fire Circle (a traditional central gathering and performance area). Indeed, the mound's elevation coupled with its perceived primordality (perhaps "3000 years old") made it the ideal gathering place. The recognition/invention of the place's significance set up a context whereby those who came into 'contact' with it, who passed across its perimeter (and who were made aware of its apparent status) would themselves likely become 'significant'. Its sacrality, its putative 'energy', was literally transmitted to those who would gather there. And many sought to become attuned to the place's 'power', its memories, to tap into its chthonic energy,¹⁷ to be immersed in its sacrality.

In both events highlighted here, we have witnessed the sacralizing effect of putative indigeneity. While in the former event, fleeting, "half-drunk" Aboriginality authenticated the moment (for a least one commentator), in the latter, enthusiastic participants became enervated by the unverified Aboriginality of place. In these moments we detect the presence of "a colourful amalgam of spiritual ecologists, modern-day Luddites, anti-rationalists, geomancers, nature-lovers and New Age mystics [who have] re-discovered humanity's spiritual roots through recognition of the sacral aspects of places of nature and a ritualistic approach to them" (Kolig 1996:374). Within this eco-conscious milieu, a new spirituality will derive from country itself — a view consistent with Tacey (2000) for whom land possesses "spiritual authority". Yet, recognizing the sacrality of 'places of nature' is here contingent on an understanding that these were (and are) occupied by 'Others'. In the above episodes, a spiritual relationship to landscape, a (re)enchantment, derives, at least in

part, from an *indigenization* of place. For ConFest (alter)natives, sacred space is that which is known or thought to have been occupied by Aborigines. The "Spirit of Cotter" hermeneutic and the Birdlands folk theory demonstrate that among alternative lifestylers there is a strong desire to both acknowledge prior occupation and to enjoy the spiritual replenishment that may derive from contact with such places.

Rites of Reconciliation

In a place where Aborigines are conspicuous largely by their absence, ConFest hosts performances that are not inconsistent with processes operating in wider Australia where non-indigenes are becoming 'reconciled' to the sobering legacies of colonialism and where civil 'rites of reconciliation' are designed to legitimate the national subjectivity of the non-indigenous population (Gooder and Jacobs 2000: 237).¹⁸ Indigeneity is a complex trope and alternative public events like ConFest are also vehicles for the kind of 'reconciliation' implying the development of new relationships with landscape. The Cotter/Birdlands mythos discussed above is consistent with that which, in a report on the ConFest at Glenlyon in Victoria in 1981, was called "the spirit of Australia":

[T]he spirit of Australia moves within us We are coming together and realizing our common spiritual heritage: this land with its millennia of continuous habitation by spiritually enlightened people. We cannot help but hear the voice of our land when it calls for help, screams for mercy from the devastation wreaked upon it by a vengeful and spiritually bankrupt society. We hear its voice and we awaken to its call. We recognize ourselves as spiritual beings and we realise that our destiny is tied to the spirit of this land, Australia. (Robinson 1981:12)

The theme holds considerable weight in context of the ongoing search for identity in a country where, according to the *Down To Earth QLD Newsletter* (1988:27), "what is most urgently needed is that non-Aboriginal people should also have the opportunity of a spiritual relationship to the land".

In Robinson's comment, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians are considered to possess a "common spiritual heritage" — the land itself. Again, this echoes Tacey whose "indigenizing project" sees non-Aboriginal Australians becoming "more sensitive to place" whereby "psycho-spiritual traffic starts to move from the land towards us" (Tacey 2000:137).¹⁹ Yet, deep awareness of the *history* of place implicated in settler Australian nature-spirituality complicates such a view. While awareness produces *indigenized* place, as Robinson's comment implies, an ecologically 'desecrating' modernity is also likely to figure in this *history*. Thus, in addition to the recognition of humanized place, an awareness of the 'suffering' of indigenous people and place, tends to inspire desires for (re)sacralization. This developing consciousness, then, animates dutiful commitment to place, a process I have observed among feral eco-radicals — a contemporary Australian self-marginal youth milieu celebrating and defending natural (and cultural) heritage, undertaking a realizable quest for *em-place-ment* (St John 1999b; 2000). Commitments in such cases constitute solemn and inspired responses to (neo)colonialist interventions upon Aboriginal peoples and the environment.

'Keep it in the Ground': Reclaiming the Future at Roxby Downs

From May 21-25 2000, a protest event was mounted at the entrance to Western Mining Corporation's (WMC) Olympic Dam copper/uranium mine at Roxby Downs in northern South Australia. Part of the Earthdream2000 nomadic festival,²⁰ this Reclaim the Streets (Jordan 1998) style protest featured attributes traced to anti-nuclear weapons Peace Camps (Harford and Hopkins 1984; Krasniewicz 1994, Roseneil 1995), UK anti-road protest communities sometimes dubbed 'Free States' (McKay 1996) and recent 'carnivals against capitalism' exemplified by the protest against the World Trade Organisation meeting in Seattle in November 1999. Reputed to be working the world's largest copper-uranium deposit, WMC possesses full government approvals to draw up to 42 million litres of water per day from the Great Artesian Basin. The company's growing demands on underground water sources in one of the driest regions on the planet has had a disastrous impact on Arabunna and Kokatha peoples since such sources feed the precious springs around the Lake Eyre region necessary for their cultural survival. According to Arabunna elder Kevin Buzzacott, this activity amounts to "genocide":

WMC and the Federal and State governments need to be charged with theft and genocide. These people have no jurisdiction under Arabunna law. Their way of operating is based on land theft and genocide and is part of the continued war on the indigenous people of this country for the past 212 years Only when sovereignty is recognised can any talk of treaty and full reconciliation and peace begin (15th June 2000).

Known as 'uncle Kev' to his supporters (including his "adopted family"), Buzzacott holds court at the 'Keepers of Lake Eyre' camp 180 kms north of Roxby Downs.²¹ From his desert enclave Buzzacott has issued statements like the above and inspired hundreds of non-Aboriginal activists to participate in his people's struggle — to become 'Keepers of Lake Eyre'. For Buzzacott, "[t]he country got a big power Big energy. Somebody got to go back and say sorry to that country" (unpublished document).

Inspired by Buzzacott's discourse and under his authority (and that of Kokatha elder Rebecca Bear-Wingfield), the Roxby Downs 'action' was host to a diversity of identifiably alternative formations: a growing eco-radical youth milieu committed to the protection of natural and cultural heritage; a mushrooming network of anarchist 'techno-tribes' including 'sound systems' consisting of electronic musicians, engineers and performance artists (St John 2002)²² and; 'Rainbows' (cf. Niman 1997) who had earlier attended the international 'Rainbow Gathering' in northern NSW. Despite variations in approach, these diverse contingents of pro-active and inspired youth united around concerns for Aboriginal sovereignty and ecological sustainability.

As the Labrats sound system van backed up on the main entrance to Olympic Dam on the second day of the event-action — their speakers aimed at the mine complex — solar powered 'speedbass'²³ animated the carnival of protest fanning out ahead. 'Uncle Kev' was at the helm to exhort WMC CEO Hugh Morgan, to cease an operation which according to Buzzacott is a clear sign of "entering the country the wrong way" — "an invasion, robbing us of our right to life". That afternoon saw the inaugural performance of the Half Life Theatre's anti-uranium road show Consider it Dug staged in front of the mine's gates. The show, which was repeated two nights later for miners and Roxby Downs citizens inside

the protest enclave and the day afterwards at the town's primary school, was a 'mutant circus' pantomime dramatizing corporate greed, land dispossession and radiation sickness. While there were a variety of performers, the central character was Miranda Mutanta's 'The Future Eater'. Described as a monstrous 'embodiment of greed and consumerism', the pantomime villainess possessed several huge gaping mouths. Inspired by Tim Flannery's book, Miranda had arrived in Australia seven months before from Europe. Flannery, Miranda explains, describes humans as 'future eaters, the ultimate predator species', an idea inspiring a character representing a likely future for humanity.

The 'action's' ubiquitous icon was an outstretched black hand fore-grounded on a radiation sign. Here, uranium provides a powerful, though ambivalent axiom – for it is concurrently sacred and dangerous. While protestors were outraged over the extraction of a mineral possessing an intractable toxic legacy, it became apparent in discourse and performance that far from malign or *evil*, the heavy metal processed to fuel the world's atomic weapons programs and nuclear reactors, is regarded as *sacred*. This is true so far as uranium remains untouched, 'pure'; its unearthing the violation of an environmental taboo — desecration. Uranium should not be tampered with and according to the not infrequent protest chant, it must "stay in the ground" — its disturbance, removal and milling presaging disaster and ruin. Such sentiments find intriguing parallels with those held by Aboriginal communities opposed to the wholesale disruption caused by bio-developers.²⁴

These sentiments arise in the context of significant numbers of Australian (and international) youth desiring new relationships with the natural world. For participant Mel, the Roxby Downs 'action' (and the broader Earthdream pilgrimage within which it was encompassed) echoes the desire for reconnection. It was about "rejoicing and celebrating the beautiful planet that we are a part of re-inspiring our connection with the land and re-recognising [that] we are not beyond our environment". Acting in solidarity with Aboriginal people — here especially Kevin Buzzacott — enabled participants to express their connection and commitment to wounded country. Held responsible for irreparable damage to the earth through exploitative and environmentally unsustainable operations, WMC represented, for most participants, a visible face of corporate driven despoliation. The mining giant's 'detachment' from the land, was perceived to hold disastrous consequences for all (from local Kokatha and Arabunna communities to the wider global community). In conjunction with theatrical performances, the physical 'action' of 'blockading' the entrance to the mine (even though a symbolic blockade), signified opposition to continued exploitation of the environment and indigenous peoples. As cultural dramas, protests like that performed at Roxby Downs, solidify intercultural alliances through 'actions' staged around a common cause.

Coming The Right Way — The Foot, Sydney

On the 23-24th of September 2000 a ritual performance in two parts called 'The Wrong Way' and 'The Right Way', a 're-enactment of Captain Cook's landing in two episodes', took place in Botany Bay National Park, Sydney, at Captain Cook's April 1770 landing place — The Foot. This "performance and healing action" transpired at the terminus of Kevin Buzzacott's 3000 km 'Walking The Land' journey from Lake Eyre South to Sydney in time for the Olympic Games. The ritual was officiated by Buzzacott himself stating that

"[w]hile the Olympic Games are on and as part of the year 2000 gatherings, part of our message is to bring the boats in the Right Way — for peace and healing".²⁵

The stage for 'The Right Way' rite, on Sunday September 24th, was set the day earlier in re-enactment of Cook's landing ('The Wrong Way') which included about 50 performers and hundreds of spectators. On the Saturday morning, a flotilla of canoes and kayaks assembled out on the water at a large mooring post representing Cook's tall ship HMS Endeavor. In rough period wears, Cook and others performing various roles (such as members of the royal family, military figures, explorer, botanist, priest), came ashore ignoring the Aboriginal presence (Buzzacott and a host of local indigenous activists in 'traditional costume'). There, they raised the Union Jack, taking possession of the land for Britain. Lu White, explained how the newcomers were then 'greeted' by spear-toting warriors. The 'head warrior' stated, in mock slang, that they weren't welcome and had the newly arrived cast into the 'Pen of Spears' — a ring of spears said to be a "disciplinary zone of judgement". With herself playing the role of "a corporate thug", White explained to me how she was thrown bodily into the 'Pen of Spears' and made to state her intentions (in a kind of penitence). With a volley of mock-spear throwing, the encroachers were finally "chased" back out to sea.

In Sunday's re re-enactment, 'The Right Way', Cook and company came ashore again. "Do you speak English", one asked as Cook stepped ashore to address the traditional owners in pompous tones. We've come to "share some ideas and enterprise". Cook introduced the King and Queen of England and, according to Pete Strong:

[t]he Queen then spoke of the proud tradition of colonization before being put in her place by Kevin and then offered the opportunity to come in the right way. This was taken up by the King, Queen and Captain Cook who then totally dropped their egos and surrendered to Aboriginal custom and law regarding the right way entry.

Those performing Cook, the King, Queen and proto-colonists were requested to sit around the 'Peace Fire',²⁶ where they were "stripped of some of their airs and graces bringing them down a peg or two" (Lu White). There, Kevin Buzzacott explained about "sharing country", about "entering country the right way" and that the new arrivals must "come in peace if they wanted to stay and have children".

A ceremony then took place where nearly 150 people, both non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal alike (including many who had been spectating until this point), queued patiently in the water along the beach, to be 'smoked', painted with ochres and individually welcomed. 'Smoking' is a purification rite whereby novices — especially those entering the boundaries of another's land — are 'smoked' with smouldering sticks from a ceremonial fire by the traditional owners of that land. Here, the rite was performed by Buzzacott and it marked the dissolution of "bad spirit". This took many hours. The series of events were reported to be "quite an emotional experience that overcame some participants", possessing "life changing repercussions for all" (Strong 2000). For Lu White, this was "by no means an easy experience". Though it was "traumatic", "intense" and "difficult" to assume an identity which, she claimed, was consistent with her own family's history, being introduced "to the spirit of the land" was ultimately an empowering and "healing" experience.

As a postcolonizing rite of passage, this ritual marked an alternative route into Australia. Re-dramatising the actions of an imperial power, at the original place of contact — where,

according to Buzzacott, "the first foot came the wrong way and poisoned the rest of Australia" — seemed to signify transition to an alternative future. Under the authority of Kevin Buzzacott, initiates had new rights and responsibilities — a kind of custodial sensibility — conferred upon them. In the context of a nation seeking to refashion relationships with its indigenous population and of a settler population desiring to correct perceived historical wrong-doings, 'entering the right way' was a privileged moment which seemed to endow initiates with authorised entry — a passport to 'rightful' presence on the continent.

Conclusion

Manifesting undercurrents of that which has of late paraded on the national 'stage', diverse alternative public events — a festival, a protest carnival and a rite of passage — have revealed processes by which they treat and (re)produce the ultimacy of indigeneity for their participants. As indicated by the dramatisations transpiring within these counterscapes, the lifestyle *sacra* of Aboriginality and local ecology are presented, (re)generated and (re)confirmed for participants. In a series of revelatory vignettes, several events were partially reconstructed via readings performed by participants and the researcher, disclosing the significance of indigeneity as a source of authentication and in the complicated quest for reconciliation.

It has been observed that indigeneity owns a major share in the ConFest sacred. At the Cotter and Birdlands ConFests, putative indigeneity was valorised for its sacralizing potential. At these events, folk-theories celebrated Aboriginal 'presence' and local practices indicated non-Aboriginal desires for *em-place-ment*. While participants communed upon an *indigenized* (humanised) landscape, it was further understood that sacralising local place is a process energised by the awareness of suffering indigenes and a beleaguered ecology. ConFest is a cultural drama where alternative lifestylers' aspirations to empathize with, even approximate, 'natives' and 'nature', are enacted.

In two subsequent events detailed, non-state sponsored 'reconciliations' were enacted. The 'action' at Roxby Downs and the initiation at The Foot in Sydney's Botany Bay signified (re)connection to landscape and intercultural partnership. Amid a carnival of protest, the former conveyed outrage over the mining of a sacralized mineral, cementing an alliance between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. Within the framework of an initiation rite, perhaps a postcolonizing rite of passage, 'Coming the Right Way' conferred a sense of legitimate belonging upon re-enactors — marking passage into (alter)native citizenship. These contemporary cultural dramas (intercultural and non-spectatorial) signal an emergent historical and ecological sensibility, demonstrating the broader parameters of 'reconciliation' — insinuating a process of 'attunement' *to* and (re)connection *with*, landscape. Performing on the margins of Australian culture, possessing 'truths' about the nation's past and present, their participants seek a non-colonialist future.

Notes

1. This article derives, firstly, from a research project on the biannual alternative cultural

event, ConFest, conducted between 1994-1999 resulting in my Ph.D. thesis (St John 1999a; see also 2001a). Secondly, it draws on research conducted during 2000 on the 'Earthdream' 'technomadic' pilgrimage through Central Australia (cf. St John 2001b). I thank members of both Down To Earth (DTE) — the Victorian co-operative responsible for ConFest — Kevin Buzzacott, Robin Cooke and participants on Earthdream, for their support and assistance in this project. I also thank *Social Analysis* reviewers for their comments.

2. The 'sorry movement's' emergence was 'fast-tracked' by Prime Minister John Howard's refusal to apologise, on behalf of the current government, for the tragic consequences (as documented in HREOC's 1997 *Bringing Them Home* report) of past assimilationist legislation which facilitated the removal — by compulsion, duress or undue influence — of tens of thousands of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families.

3. Marking the largest public 'demonstrations' in Australian history, these 'marches' (or perhaps more accurately 'walks'), occurred in Sydney on May 28 and then Melbourne and Perth on December 3. On these dates, hundreds of thousands of Australians traversed Sydney Harbour Bridge and choked city thoroughfares.

4. They also signal that the 'legitimizing' pursuits of non-indigenes are not uniform. As Read (2000) conveys, non-Aboriginal Australians pursue differential paths towards 'belonging'. Yet, as Gelder (2000) argues, the "belonging in parallel" to Aborigines pursued by non-Aborigines in Read's historical project is enabled by an apparent shared experience of "dispossession". Effectively, non-Aboriginal "place deprivation" may herald the supplanting of Aboriginal Australians in an "uncanny expression of settler triumph". Perhaps such is clearest in New Zealand, where those claiming Pakeha (non-Maori New Zealander) identity sometimes use the term to designate their indigenous equivalence to Maoris — thus precluding the threat of Maori claims to recognition, funds and land and at the same time denying any historical complicity with colonialism (Bell 1996:155-6, in Barber 1999:38).

5. That is, the kind of aggrieved reactionary racism courted by Pauline Hanson's One Nation party.

6. In addition, the inescapable human trait of 'Othering' is, in the time of Bauman's (1996:32) "postmodern personality", a complicated process whereby selves identify with multiple 'Others' (eg., Oriental, archaic, gendered) which are modified and mutated in self-representations such that the question of 'origin' or 'authenticity' is rendered pointless (St John 1997:179-80).

7. The 1991/92 Fire Event, involved the "victory of natural forces" (symbolized by a huge mobile Earth Mother figure) "over the excesses of civilization" (a twenty metre wooden skyscraper called the "Tower of Babel"), which was eventually consumed in a conflagration of flames, fireworks and mortar rockets.

8. It could be argued that the Opening Ceremony was consummated by Australia's 'other' "Hero Girl", 400m champion Cathy Freeman, who was bestowed the honour of igniting the Olympic Cauldron at Stadium Australia.

9. The media made much of the knowledge that these women were from 'traditional areas' of the 'Central Desert' — indeed reported to represent the Ngaanyatjarra, Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara Women's Council.

10. The Olympics were a significant site/moment around which counter-colonial narratives were pledged by indigenes and their supporters. The paradigm symbol of the Olympics, the torch, was cunningly appropriated by indigenous groups (or perhaps redeployed, as the

historical usage of fire sticks and ceremonial fires in Aboriginal Australia should be acknowledged). Carrying his "Sacred Fire for Peace", Arabunna elder and nuclear industry opponent Kevin Buzzacott and his supporters walked 3000 km for "Our Ancient Right, Peace and Healing", departing Lake Eyre South on June 10th and arriving in Sydney in early September 2000 where they joined elder Isabella Coe and supporters at the Victoria Park Tent Embassy — the site of the "Corroborree for Sovereignty" which transpired over the course of the Olympics. The Embassy, an imitation of the first Aboriginal Tent Embassy established near Canberra's old Parliament House in 1972, is a universal symbol of sovereignty which has itself been seized and strategically deployed.

11. Which marked the tenth anniversary of the watershed Aquarius Festival. In 1973, Aquarius recycled the dairy town of Nimbin which became Australia's alternative capital.

12. The Centre for Education and Research in Environmental Strategies (CERES) is a ten acre environmental park in East Brunswick, Melbourne.

13. ConFest also provides a salient context for the performative communication of other inextricable *ultima*: self growth and eco-consciousness (St John: 2001c).

14. It is not clear whether these 'authorities' were referring to the spirit of the festival or the river. Rawlins did not seek further information from either.

15. There is some confusion over this, since the purpose of restricting access was believed by some to be a matter of safety on account of the rabbit boroughs.

16. The mound became a "sacred site" even though midden sites — traditionally gathering places — were not 'sacred' or religious places. Places may now be 'sacred' due to imputed religious, cultural, historical, even personal significance (cf. Maddock 1991).

17. Though he does not refer to middens, for a discussion of ancient and indigenous sacred sites serving as "energy transmitters" for both Aborigines and Euro-Pagans/New Agers, see Kolig (1996:371).

18. Here, the "reconciliation" pursued involves non-indigenous Australians reconciling themselves *to* the past and to the circumstances of indigenous peoples, a different process than that of reconciling *with* indigenous Australians (Jacobs 1997:205-6).

19. Displaying an essentialist undercurrent, Tacey goes further to argue that "[a]s this process unfolds, settler Australians begin to acquire some of the characteristics of indigenous Australians." And that, as we "relate more fully and organically to the land, we find ourselves aboriginalized since both white and black races are now being fed and nurtured by the same geo-spiritual source" (2000:37).

20. The Earthdream idea was seeded in London in 1988 when Robin Cooke, co-founder of industrial sculpture collective Mutoid Waste Co, envisioned a 'mega tribal gathering' in central Australia. Dubbed Earthdream, it would be an annual pilgrimage for alternative culture adherents, the foundation goal of which was to achieve "reconciliation with Aboriginal people" (from interview).

21. See <<http://www.lakeeyre.green.net.au>>. Buzzacott had spent several years travelling around Australia and inviting concerned people to his desert enclave. In one such instance, he gave talks at the Nuclear Free Village at the New Year 97/98 ConFest near Tocumwal.

22. Two 'sound systems' present were Labrats, who operate a mobile solar and wind powered sound/cinema system (see website: <http://www.envy.nu/labrats>) and Ohms not Bombs, who toured the continent in a custom made bus (see website: [136](http://oms-</p></div><div data-bbox=)

notbombs.cia.com.au).

23. An electronic music genre featuring chaotically juxtaposed audio samples.

24. Opposition to the Jabiluka uranium mine operated by Energy Resources of Australia Ltd in the Northern Territory's Kakadu National Park, a World Heritage listed Area, represents a significant, though troubled, alliance between environmental activists and an Aboriginal community (the Mirrar).

25. <<http://www.lakeeyre.green.net.au/coming-the-right-way.html>>.

26. The "sacred fire for peace" was built from ashes of the 'peace fire' burning at the Aboriginal Tent Embassy in Canberra. Kevin Buzzacott and entourage carried that fire from Lake Eyre South, where a Tent Embassy-derived 'peace fire' burns.

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