

Dancing Up Circular Quay: Indigenous Australian Popular Culture, Hybridization and the Local Performance of the Global

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Almost three years ago, in early 2003, I was walking up and down the galleries on level four of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney. The occasion was an exhibition of paintings by Dorothy Napangardi, an Indigenous artist from the central-north of Australia.¹ To be honest, I was quite impressed by her abstract topographies of sand and water; I knew of course about the work of Emily Kngwarreye,² but Napangardi seemed less 'raw' or more 'cooked' as a 'modernist,' Indigenous Australian artist. Her sand and water dreamings were refined, disciplined, almost mathematical, and at the same time, rhythmic, gentle and almost sensational. Contemplating her work, I thought for a moment that this is what one could call 'high culture' or 'true art.'

The same day I visited Napangardi's exhibition an Indigenous dance was being performed at the forecourt of the Museum of Contemporary Art. The organizers had advertised it as *Women in Red – Warlpiri Dancers of the Desert*, but actually it was a *yawulyu* ceremony³ of the *kana-kurlangu jukurrpa* (digging stick dreaming.) The Warlpiri women, painted up in their personal designs, enacted the story of their ancestors. Once again I was impressed; the ochre on black skin, the coordinated movement and the wailing songs conveyed a feeling of an age-long tradition that had reached artistic perfection and therefore exemplified authentic culture. After all, this was the intention of the organizers; to display 'pure' Indigeneity.⁴

Although my aesthetic experience at the Museum of Contemporary Art was a strong one, I left the place wondering why was it that

¹ 'Dancing Up Country: The Art of Dorothy Napangardi': on exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 2003.

² J Green: 'The Enigma of Emily Ngwarray' in M Charlesworth, F Dussart and H Morphy, editors, *Aboriginal Religions in Australia: An Anthology of Recent Writings*, Ashgate, 2005, 185-92.

³ For *yawulyu*, see for example D Bell: *Daughters of the Dreaming*, Sydney, 1993.

⁴ For a debate on the issue of Indigeneity, see *Oceania*, 1992, vol 63, issue 2.

Napangardi's exhibition did not attract a huge crowd of visitors or the Warlpiri women's *yawulyu* an enchanted audience. But then I thought that true art or authentic culture is not to be judged in terms of quantity or audience reception; it is quality that matters and art for art's sake. This way, however, I was caught up in the old problem of quantity versus quality and the vicious circle that it generates.⁵ Even worse, I was caught up in my Western pre-understanding (*Vorverständnis*) of what art is supposed to be. It seemed as if my only option was to answer a simple question: are Napangardi and *yawulyu* really about art?⁶

My reflections were interrupted some two hundred metres away from the museum towards the Circular Quay wharves. Unexpectedly, I was compelled to stand still. An unusually large crowd had gathered in front of the cafés and restaurants and resounding from the midst of it was a *didgeridoo*. I got as close as I could and saw a group of Indigenous Australians getting ready for some kind of performance; a *corroboree*, if you like. There were four, three men and a woman, all in their late twenties, and one could readily see this was not their first appearance as a group. The men were almost naked; wearing only a piece of red cloth around their waist and thighs, while the woman was wearing a plain white T-shirt and a denim skirt.

By applying some sort of white paint, which certainly was not any traditional ochre, the men quickly and almost randomly drew a set of designs on their bodies. Then one of them came forward and stood between his mates and the crowd, while the rest sat down in a row facing their keen audience. In the meanwhile, the woman had arranged the microphones, put some Indigenous music CDs on display and sat a bit further along holding a carton box for the expected revenues. When everything was ready, that is, when the stage was prepared, there was a pause; the performance was about to begin. The performers were relaxed, while the crowd, composed mainly of tourists, was tense with expectancy.

⁵ Here we have in mind the insightful K E Papapetrou: *Peculiarity as A Problem of Ontological Ethics*, Athens, 1973.

⁶ With regard to the problematic application of the category of art in the context of Indigenous Australian life-forms, it has been argued that 'art does not have an *independent* existence in traditional Aboriginal societies, but a vast amount has been written on the *art* of these societies, which include music, poetry, song, and visual art, all of which forms have' a '**religious context...**' (my emphasis) in T Swain: *Aboriginal Religions in Australia: A Bibliographical Survey*, New York, 1991, 32.

The *didgeridoo* man was now playing his instrument forcefully and skillfully. At times the sound was the otherworldly one which is so typical of the *didgeridoo*. At other times it switched surprisingly to a jazz-like or even a rap-like repertoire. In the front was the dancer; expressive and attentive in his movements, awesome and weird in his impact on the crowd. His technique reminded me of some Indigenous dances I had seen on television documentaries and video-recordings, but there was something rather imitative in his performance. The third man was the eldest and, while he seemed to be confined to the role of a clap-stick player, it in fact was he who directed the whole performance through his facial expressions. The young woman in turn was not paying any attention at all to the dance or the music, but instead was preoccupied with the rearrangement of the CDs she had already put on display. Finally, none of the performers was singing in English, Kriol or any Indigenous language, but that simply did not seem to bother either them or their audience.

The crowd was getting bigger and bigger, staring at the Indigenous quartet with interest and surprise, thoughtfulness and respect. Of course there were also those who stopped for a moment, took a look, and went on with their afternoon stroll along the buzzing wharves; perhaps they had already seen the performance. Nevertheless, those who did attend the performance enjoyed the spectacle, took photographs and commented among themselves on the peculiarity of this sightseeing attraction. For them it was part and parcel of their cosmopolitan tourist experience, one of the best things that they could have asked for and taken out of Sydney as a lasting souvenir of Australian Indigeneity.

I had the opportunity to witness the same performance several times on different days and at different hours of the day. I thought that this enactment was a socio-cultural text worth reflecting upon, since it not only attracted my own attention but also the attention of the majority of the people who happened to be at the Circular Quay wharves when the members of the Indigenous group gave their performances. I also thought that this (enacted) text was a *signe* of what living in Australia is all about;⁷ a *signe* which, apart from its specific denotation

⁷ For the structuralist concept of *signe*, see F de Saussure: *Cours de linguistique générale*, Paris, 1955.

to recall Roland Barthes,⁸ made me consider a wide range of connotations in relation to the (post)modern experience of the relationship between the local and the global.⁹ To put it differently, I started asking myself: Who are these Indigenous people? What is this crowd/audience they are addressing? In what ways is their performance a meaningful event? Is there a deeper link between an event like this and the Australian way of life? Why is it so attractive and at the same time so trivial and everyday (*Alltag*)? To be sure, these questions could not be properly addressed without some sort of reference to the intertextuality and the broader contextuality of the Indigenous *corroboree*.¹⁰ So in order to get some answers I had to attempt an analysis of what was at the same time a puzzle and a familiarity to me.

Before the analysis, however, I should note that for me this staged performance at Circular Quay stood in stark contrast to, let us say, Mudrooroo's literary version of Noorak's *corroboree*. While the latter is imagined as an instance of Indigenous alienation, the former emerges as an example of Indigenous self-determination or, at least, self-appreciation. In *Long Live Sandawara*, Noorak:

allows himself to be bought; allows himself with some others to be collected together to stage a makeshift corroboree. In front of a group of chatting foreigners, he slouches waiting to display his culture. He feels totally alienated: an actor, a performer – a monkey pantomiming for bananas. An ape, he postures... Jacky Jacky's got a thirst to satisfy and knows that a few tired jigs'll bring in enough brass for a dozen bottles of sweet wine and that is all he wants... Another like himself drones out a sacred song turned blasphemous; others like himself join in, hands beating the flat earth. Pum, pum, a

⁸ For the denotation/connotation distinction, see R Barthes: *Le degré zéro de l'écriture, suivie des éléments de sémiologie*, Paris, 1965.

⁹ For the global/local dialectics, see U Hannerz: 'Cosmopolitans and locals in world culture' in M Featherstone, editor, *Global Culture: Nationalism, Globalization and Modernity*, London, 1990, 237-51; J Friedman: 'Being in the world: Globalization and localization' in M Featherstone, op cit, 311-28; A Appadurai: 'The production of locality' in *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Minneapolis, 1996, 178-99; A Dirlik: 'The global in the local' in R Wilson and W Dissanayake, editors, *Global/Local: Cultural Production and the Transnational Imaginary*, Durham, 1996, 21-45; A Cvetkovich and D Kellner, editors: *Articulating the Global and the Local: Globalization and Cultural Studies*, Colorado, 1997.

¹⁰ For an introduction to the categories of intertextuality and contextuality, see T Schirato and S Yell: *Communication and Cultural Literacy: An Introduction*, Sydney, 2000, 53-4, 106-24, 173-4.

Dancing up Circular Quay

passive rhythm without life – or hope... The white men sit to one side in the shade watching and smiling at the antics of the blacks. The song becomes captured by laughter and ends. The performers feel their isolation and shame. Even a white woman stares – at the sacred dances hidden and secret from all females. Now, no more! What had they done to separate themselves from their ancestors; what enormous crime had they committed to offend the lawgivers and to bring on such a terrible punishment?¹¹

Now it seems that the Indigenous performance I observed is only one among a number of similar practices that involve Indigenous pragmatics. Let's consider for instance the selling and buying of *boomerangs*, *didgeridoos*, and other Indigenous artifacts at Harbourside; the Indigenous art market that is scattered all over the Rocks; or even an educational or recreational visit to the Yiribana Gallery at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. In other words, the performance I observed reflects and conveys the commodification of Indigeneity in Australia.¹² As such it is not just normal to come across, but also symptomatic of the post/colonial mentality of appropriating Indigenous memories, signs, and cultural capitals in order to construct as comprehensive¹³ a national ideoscape as possible.¹⁴ After all, it is only through such an ideoscape that a particular locality can be accommodated within the frame of a global (imaginary) perspective.

At the same time, however, this ideoscape stands in disjuncture with a **corollary** financescape. More specifically, the Indigenous Australian quartet observed was not some group of professional performers, but a typical example of the socially and economically marginalized population that has to survive, even if that entails the commodification of their heritage or identity. On the other hand, the infatuated crowd/audience consisted of ordinary consumers who

¹¹ Mudrooroo: in C Johnson: *Long Live Sandawara*, Melbourne, 1987, 69-70.

¹² For a pertinent discussion of the wider context of this phenomenon, see for example T Smith: *Transformations in Australian Art: The Twentieth Century – Modernism and Aboriginality*, Vol 2, 2002, Sydney, 144-67.

¹³ For the White appropriation of Indigenous Australian cultural capitals, see S Cramer: editor, *Postmodernism, A Consideration of the Appropriation of Aboriginal Imagery*, Brisbane, 1989; R Butler: editor, *What is Appropriation? An Anthology of Critical Writings on Australian Art in the '80s and '90s*, Brisbane and Sydney, 1996.

¹⁴ For the notion of ideoscape, as well as mediascape, ethnoscape, finanscape, and disjuncture used in my analysis, see A Appadurai, 'Disjuncture and difference in the global cultural economy' in M Featherstone, op cit, 295-310.

execute their choice or freedom to spend money in order to achieve a sense of subjective/ideological expansion. In other words, performing a *corroboree* enables the former to survive and the latter to enjoy a spectacle¹⁵ or a 'good life.'¹⁶ But in this way it seems that the memory of a certain locality (Indigeneity) becomes the locus of an aspired globality (multiculturalism).

If the performance I observed is located or, better, dislocated within an intertextuality of compatible phenomena, we have to bear in mind that it also belongs to a specific contextuality. In particular, the latter is the transactive complexity and idiosyncrasy of what has been dubbed the 'world city.' More than ten years ago, Ulf Hannerz may have had some reservations about counting Sydney among the truly 'world cities' of the global condition,¹⁷ but now days I think that if there is a truly world/global city, it is undoubtedly Sydney. As such, one could say that Sydney has emerged as a field of deterritorialization and dislocation for a significant part of its population. Thousands of inhabitants who have come and are still coming from elsewhere carry with them their spatial and temporal otherness, and strive to reproduce their cultural selves in a new space and time. In this respect, the Indigenous Australians playing music, dancing, and selling their homemade CDs to a group of familiar strangers are, in a sense, completely out of place and time. For what is the otherworldly sound of the didgeridoo, the painted naked bodies, or the dancing steps of the 'ancestors' doing on a wharf next to ferries and yachts, and in the midst of the flashing cameras of tourists?

On the other hand, this group of Indigenous performers fits completely in space and time. If Indigenous Australians are going to be somewhere, where else could that be but in Circular Quay? And if the ethnoscape of Australia is going to claim some kind of distinctiveness, how is this to be justified without an imagined Indigenous referent? I think that the artist who has, in the most poignant and at the same time ambiguous way, addressed the issues that these questions presuppose and entail is Trevor Nickolls. His 'Dreamtime – Machinetime' artistic resolution has achieved the

¹⁵ For the notion of spectacle, see G Debord: *The Society of the Spectacle*, Detroit, 1983.

¹⁶ Here we draw on U Hannerz: 'The cultural role of the world cities' in A Cohen and K Fukui, editors, *Humanising the City?*, Edinburgh, 1993.

¹⁷ Ibid, 128.

unachievable; the discharging of the dreaming from all its 'natural' signifiers and its recharging with all sorts of 'cultured' symbolizations.¹⁸ In other words, he has managed to render the Indigenous Australian Sacred meaningful within an urban condition of experience by embodying the invisibility of the dreaming in (post)modern life-forms. What I want to say is that a group of Indigenous youths performing a *corroboree* in downtown Sydney would be for him a first-class occasion for re-imagining the significance of the dreaming.

Returning now to my questions, I would dare say that the issues of being Indigenous and being a non-Indigenous audience cannot be treated separately. Within the (post)modern global mediascape, to be Indigenous is to be acknowledged as such by an audience of difference; to be mediated as a spectacle. But is this meaningful? To be sure, it did seem to have a meaning for both the Indigenous Australian group and their audience: at least for a moment. Moreover, it could be argued that it is meaningful to the extent that a relative locality and a relative globality are interdependent and intertwined. Perhaps this is not yet a fullness of meaning, but that does not make it meaningless or less of a challenge for the pursuit of a deeper, more pervasive and more persistent meaning. Besides, regardless of the exoticness of an Indigenous performance taking place next to the wharves of Circular Quay, it is not about something that confronts us as a shock. Quite the opposite! It is one with the hybrid culture in which we are gradually learning to live and navigate our lives. Hybridization¹⁹ after all seems a viable alternative when you have to reconcile the universal and the particular, the global and the local and the national and the Indigenous. In other words, we might be witnessing a *fin de siècle*, but then we just have to take the risk and enter a new age; an age where everyone and everything is part of everyone and everything.

¹⁸ See '1990 Venice Biennale Australia, Artists: Rover Thomas – Trevor Nickolls,' Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth, 1990, 30-54.

¹⁹ For the theoretical debate on hybridization, see R C Young: *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, New York, 1995; P Werbner and M Tariq, editors: *Debating Cultural Hybridity*, London, 1997; S Whatmore: *Hybrid Geographies: Natures, Cultures, Spaces*, London, 2002; J Nederveen Pieterse: *Globalization and Culture: Global Mélange*, Lanham, Maryland, 2004. For an interesting discussion of hybridization in relation to the Australian experience, see I Ang: *On Not Speaking Chinese: Living between Asia and the West*, London and New York, 2001, 163-201.

I know, it might seem crude to compare Napangardi's paintings and the artistic quality of the *yawulyu* with the Circular Quay *corroboree*, but if I could not resist such a comparison, I would say that the former suffers from an imposed 'high culture' labeling, while the latter thrives through an exposed 'popular culture' liveliness. If one could detect a problem here, Napangardi and *yawulyu* are not to be blamed; Napangardi performs her dreaming subjectivity creatively in her own country and the *yawulyu* have a fundamental bearing within their Warlpiri context. Rather the problem lies in painting etiquette and art conventions: put simply, in our museum culture. In its popularity, however, the Circular Quay *corroboree* manages to be positioned within the spontaneity, challenge and experimentation of everyday life; it stands or falls in the face of the global/local tension and the dialectical paradoxes of intercultural hybridity. Moreover, it suggests that if we are to experience Indigeneity we will have to look for it in our local bushes and deserts or even allow it to prove itself within our 'world cities.'