Re-Thinking Multiculturalism: Performing the Cronulla Beach Riot

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Abstract: Since 11 September 2001, Australia’s race relations have been an issue of significant cultural concern, particularly relations between Anglo-Celtic and Middle-Eastern Australians. Riots on Cronulla Beach, Sydney, in December 2005 heightened this concern. This paper looks at the events at Cronulla and the debates they catalysed about race relations in Australia, and examines how these discourses have been shaped by arguments from both the Right and the Left. Informed by the discourse of critical multiculturalism, we examine several performance-based arts activities that made the riots their subject matter and argue that these arts practices reflect a larger cultural concern about the currency of traditional forms of multiculturalism, and promote instead an emphasis on understanding racial conflict as a critical negotiation over shared territories and values.

Keywords: Race/Racism, Australian Multiculturalism, Critical Multiculturalism, Cronulla Riots, Political Arts

Introduction

In 2005 an estimated crowd of some 5,000 mainly young white Australian men gathered at Cronulla on Sydney’s southern pacific shore, in the Sutherland shire of New South Wales, to ‘reclaim’ the beach. A violent riot ensued with men attacking a group of ethnic Lebanese – an event which prompted on-going questions about the factors that encourage racial hatred in Australia. This paper looks at the background to the Cronulla riot and addresses the political environment in which it took place. It traces the development of the discourses of Australian multiculturalism since it was enshrined as government policy in the 1970s, and examines critiques of it from the Right and Left. In addition to these critiques, there have been discursive shifts in the discussion of multiculturalism from within the academy and the arts – changes in thinking which signal the need to acknowledge the reality of conflicting values in culturally diverse societies. Finally, the paper looks at a number of art works which represent stories of Cronulla and the riot, and argues that these artistic endeavours reflect a critical multiculturalist perspective on the subject through their emphasis on the struggle over shared territory.

‘No more Lebs’

The weekend before the Cronulla riot took place, a fight had broken out between three surf lifesavers and four young Lebanese-background men. The fight, catalysed by racial taunts, ended with two of the lifeguards being brutally bashed (Jackson 2006). This occasioned a frenzy of commentary in tabloid newspapers and on talk back radio, as well as anonymous calls urging action to ‘reclaim our beach’ spread via SMS text messaging (McIlveen & Jones 2005). One such text read: ‘Come to Cronulla this weekend to take revenge. This Sunday every Aussie in the Shire get down to North Cronulla to support Leb and wog bashing day’ (Teo 2006). The so-called reclamation took place on 11 December 2005 when thousands of white Australians, fuelled by alcohol, gathered at Cronulla. Chanting ‘No More Lebs’ and waving Australian flags the rioters chased, punched and threw beer bottles at a group of Lebanese people. Some people were assaulted on the basis that they were simply of Middle Eastern appearance. A total of 25 people were later reported injured, including two ambulance officers, and twelve arrests were made (Vincent & Iggulden 2005). Later that evening and on subsequent days both ‘sides’ in the conflict committed various retaliatory attacks involving assaults, and smashed car and shop windows. The media reported that mobile telephone text messages, calling for further revenge attacks, continued to be circulated among Australians of both white and Middle Eastern backgrounds (McIlveen & Jones 2005).

One interesting feature of the riot was the identification of place with cultural values. As Barclay and West (2006) describe, Cronulla is a suburban beach that is perceived and used quite differently to Sydney’s more famous beaches, such as Bondi. While the latter is often visited by backpackers and other tourists, Cronulla is more commonly patronised by locals from the suburb and other Sydney-siders. It is perhaps more likely to be perceived as an object of possession by local Sydney people of all ethnic backgrounds. Barclay and West also quote a wit-
ness’s description of how the riot was incited by a few speakers who, ‘armed with a megaphone, began to complain of the unacceptable behaviour of young Lebanese males, including the bashings of people enjoying the beach, the use of knives and weapons to intimidate people, and the sexually explicit and racial comments made to females at the beach’ (2006: 80). If this is the case, the riot can be seen partly as a battle to shape the values that dominate this particular shared space.

Following the Cronulla riot, Prime Minister John Howard denied that it was an example of tribalism or underlying racism and instead cited the combination of large numbers of people and the excessive consumption of alcohol as the main reasons for the unprecedented violence (Vincent & Iggulden 2005). Howard commented that racism ‘is a word that’s flung around carelessly and I’m simply not going to do it’ (Kerin & Leys 2005). One report noted that Howard’s interpretation of the events was likely to have been shaped by his own political interests, given that ‘Cronulla lies at the centre of a suburban belt where [he] has built a formidable political base that has kept him in power for almost ten years’ (Editorial 2005). Other political spokesmen and analysts, including the New South Wales Premier Morris Iemma and Keysar Trad, an Islamic community leader, argued that racial conflict was the product of years of hatred and unresolved tension between the two groups (Editorial 2005).

The riot may be seen as part of a growing national trend. Since the attacks of September 11, 2001 Muslims in Australia have reported a growing fear of racial tension between them and non-Muslim Australians (Delaney & Barnham 2004). Commentators point out that after September 11, ‘terrorism became the defining threat facing the western world’ (Marr & Wilkinson 2003: 143). Since the start of the new decade asylum seekers, many from Iraq and Afghanistan, began arriving in Australia by boat. Many were refugees fleeing persecution but they were often seen by Australians as a terrorist threat, as ‘illegals’ and ‘queue jumpers’ (Marr & Wilkinson 2003: 30). Poynting argues that in Australia since the mid-to-late 1990s the Middle eastern/Muslim ‘other’ has been constructed, through the media’s portrayal of desperate asylum seekers, as ‘backward, uncivilised, irrational, violent, criminally inclined, misogynistic…a whole litany of evil attributes’ (Poynting 2006:89). This targeting of the Muslim ‘other’ has emerged in confluence with the US-led war on terror and appears to provide support for the argument for on-going involvement in the war in Iraq. Ben Cubby quotes writer Taghred Chandab after the riot: ‘When we were growing up, we were just dealing with people calling us wogs … Now young Muslims have to deal with getting called terrorists and rapists’ (2006: 81).

Poynting argues that the state effectively models social behaviours and attitudes: in Australia since September 11, he argues, the state has practised racial discrimination, and thereby sanctioned or provided permission for racially motivated hate crimes:

...if the state assaults, harasses and vilifies Muslims as the enemy in the war on terror and thereby terrorises whole communities, then perhaps white-thinking citizens feel justified in personally attacking this enemy wherever they might encounter it... (Poynting 2006:88).

Yet it is not only conservative governments that fuel racial conflict. David Burchell argues that both sides of politics play the race card, and for the same reason: ‘It provides a gratifying sense of crisis and supports both sides’ view that something is rotten at the heart of the national culture’ (Burchell 2006). For the Left, the rotten heart is the ‘bunch of racist red-necks’ – emblematic of the potential explosion of incipient racism in Australia. For the Right, the rotten heart is a product of multiculturalism and the so-called tribalism that has flourished within and between ethnic minorities.

Both perspectives raise the question of whether government played a role in provoking or giving legitimacy to the sentiments behind the Cronulla riot. Poynting sees the riots as a disturbing symptom of the mainstreaming of Pauline Hanson’s anti-immigration One Nation policies by the Howard government. Manne might agree, describing the gradual capitulation of both the Left and the Right to the ‘Hansonite political mood’ which has overseen the growth of the system of mandatory detention for asylum seekers (Manne 2003:168). It is in this political ‘mood’ that there has been a winding back of Australian multiculturalism – a situation, according to Poynting, which has created a climate of permission for racial violence to be an increasingly acceptable feature of Australian life (Poynting 2006:88). As suggested below, others have argued that a sense of racial demarcation such as that which provoked the riot is, if not encouraged by, then certainly not successfully ameliorated by multiculturalism as a policy-shaping ideology.

The Development of Australian Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism was launched as a policy of the Commonwealth Whitlam Labor Government in 1973, contrasting with the earlier immigration policies of assimilation and integration. For the Whitlam government, multiculturalism involved recognising how the different needs of immigrant groups might influ-
ence policies, particularly in welfare and education, to make them more appropriate to an ethnically diverse constituency. Over the next twenty-five years, governments approached the demands of balancing cultural cohesion with cultural difference in different ways, but they all emphasised a set of common values or obligations, coupled with respect for different cultural traditions and practices.

Multiculturalism has always, however, received sustained public attention, much of it negative. Mark Lopez points out that, at least in the 1980s and 1990s, there was a sense of anxiety about the public popularity of multiculturalism and therefore about the security of its status as a policy (Lopez 2000: 25). This anxiety appeared to be confirmed by the rise of Pauline Hanson’s One Nation Party in 1996. In her now-famous maiden speech as Independent federal parliamentarian, prior to forming the One Nation Party, Hanson criticised the level of Asian immigration and the policy of multiculturalism, and argued that taxpayer funded ‘industries’ were redistributing revenue and resources to ethnic minority groups (including indigenous people) to an inequitable extent. Overwhelmingly favourable opinion polls appeared to support her position.

The Coalition parties, led by John Howard, also appeared antipathetic to multiculturalism, and after four years of the Howard government (in 1999), Stephen Castles argued that the ‘cultural revolution’ multiculturalism had initially appeared to offer had stalled (Castles 1999: 32). In government, the Coalition dissolved the Office of Multicultural Affairs and the Bureau of Immigration, Multicultural and Population Research. In 2007, it took ‘multicultural’ out of the title of the Department of Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs.

Outside government, critiques of multiculturalism have existed since it was first adopted by the Whitlam Labor Government in 1973. Such critiques have emanated from conservatives longing for a ‘more nostalgic, Mythically homogenous British Australia’ (Teo 2003: 142). But they have also come from critics on the Left, who argue that multiculturalism ‘does not accept, confront and challenge the discourse of race, but rather represses it’ (Stratton 1998: 206) and that, as a policy approach, it has made little impact in changing the ethnic basis of power relations. Castles, for instance, argued that in 1999 immigrants remained ‘under-represented in key positions, such as in parliament, in high level public service posts, on the judiciary and in executive business management’ (1999: 36). McKnight criticises the ‘new cultural Left’ for its tendency to celebrate cultural diversity, romanticise other cultures and see them as ‘laudably “oppositional” to the dominant culture’ (2006: 3). This has led, he argues, to a politically limiting cultivation of marginality, as a result of which the cultural Left finds it difficult to talk about the political national interest (McKnight 2006: 3).

**Critical Multiculturalism**

Several critics have suggested that the concept of multiculturalism needs to be redefined to be of value to policy-making. Critical multiculturalism, based on the work of scholars such as Stephen Castles (1999) and Mary Kalantzis (1990), has continued to develop through the contributions of writers such as Ghasan Hage (1998; 2003), Tom O’Regan (1994), Jon Stratton (1998) and Sneja Gunew (2004). These writers have argued that the form of multiculturalism reflected in government policy reproduces an essentialist view of cultural difference and constructs ethnic diversity as culture for commodification and consumption.

Others have argued that, with the best intentions, multiculturalism has been quiet on the more difficult questions of how to reconcile conflicting cultural values. Stanley Fish distinguishes between the ‘boutique multiculturalist’ and the ‘strong multiculturalist’. The former is of the kind that Australian critics identify in Australia’s multicultural policies: the boutique multiculturalist enjoys the superficial cultural benefits of life amidst a range of ethnic groups, including explorations into cuisine, music and fashion. But, because they believe there exist core humanist values, ‘boutique multiculturalists’ cannot accept differences in such core values. As a result, the ‘boutique multiculturalist will withhold approval of a particular culture’s practices at the point at which they matter most to its strongly committed members: a deeply religious person is precisely that, deeply religious, and the survival and propagation of his faith is not for him an incidental (and bracketable) matter, but an essential matter’ (Fish 1997: 380). Difference – for the boutique multiculturalist – is therefore ‘icing on a basically homogeneous cake’ (Fish 1997: 382). ‘Strong multiculturalism’ is only a somewhat stronger variation of this: it values difference itself, but the ‘trouble with stipulating tolerance as your first principle is that you cannot possibly be faithful to it because sooner or later the culture whose core values you are tolerating will reveal itself to be intolerant at that same core’, and the strong multiculturalist cannot tolerate intolerance because it conflicts with the value of difference (and tolerance) (Fish 1997: 383). So, ironically, what might be at the core of both ‘boutique’ and ‘strong’ forms of multiculturalism is actually intolerance.

The question of what is different about the cultures we live alongside and what is shared is the crux of the problem for multiculturalism. McKnight points
out that in Australia, cultural differences in values around ‘families, marriage and the treatment of women and children’ have been unpalatable to Anglo-Celtic Australians, and therefore the most difficult values for multiculturalism to adequately address, as the cultures of ethnic minorities often seem to hold more conservative and restrictive values (McKnight 2006: 3). This is pertinent to the Cronulla riot: Barclay and West argue that Anglo-Celtic Australian rioters were motivated partly by a desire to protect women against violent and sexual threats, and slurs on their reputation by Middle Eastern Australians (2006: 84).

Several critics suggest that it is time to review and reshape multiculturalism into a form which emphasises complexity and in which values are debated rather than uncomfortably accommodated. Fish advocates the benefits of debating points of difference, asking ‘do you really show respect for a view by tolerating it, as you might tolerate the buzzing of a fly? Or do you show respect when you take it seriously enough to oppose it, root and branch?’ (1997: 388).

Others emphasise the need to identify those values that are shared. Henderson and McEwen found that in the United Kingdom and Canada, as multinational states, political actors ‘expended much energy’ in appealing to and promoting shared values (2005: 187). They argue:

*The idea that a community shares a set of common values is unlikely to be the only element of commonality, but in societies that are becoming increasingly multicultural, badges of identity, such as language, ethnicity or religion, risk excluding new members of the nation. Defining a nation according to its commitment to shared values can serve as a means of inclusion. Even if they may not share the same ethnic, linguistic or cultural heritage of other members of the nation, newer arrivals may adopt the values that characterize the nation, and thereby reinforce their sense of belonging. (Henderson & McEwen 2005: 188).*

In his analysis of the Cronulla riots in early 2006, David Burchell argued that territory was the shared factor. It is a mistake, he said, to view the Cronulla riots as a clash between the core culture and the cultures on the margins. Such a conceptualisation perpetuates the idea that ‘ethnic minorities are still guests in our midst’ (Burchell 2006). Rather, the riots need to be seen as ‘local communities in conflict over shared public space where ethnicity is the fuel for the conflict rather than its all-purpose explanation’ (Burchell 2006).

The notion of ‘shared’ space and values is sometimes proposed as a key to finding an alternative to traditional multiculturalism. McKnight argues that rather than focusing on and celebrating what is different about the various cultures within one nation, it may be better to emphasise a ‘common humanity’ (2006: 4). Drawing on Martha Nussbaum’s work on child development, which emphasises that a child’s first attachment is to those most local to them, McKnight suggests that to focus on those values and experiences that are shared encourages compassion across cultures. ‘If the people within one nation can sympathise with other, anonymous, members of the nation, only an “artificial barrier” is preventing the expansion of those sympathies to the people of all nations and races’ (McKnight 2006: 5).

So what are Australians’ shared values? It is rare for official versions of national values to include those that are restrictive or destructive. In fact, official versions of our national values are often extremely selective. As Henderson and McEwen (2005: 177) point out, they are also rarely unique to the nation (consider, for instance, ‘a commitment to representative democracy’, ‘mateship’ or ‘egalitarianism’). That they are promoted as such can in fact thwart attempts to encourage compassion to transcend national and ethnic boundaries, because they reinforce such boundaries. For instance, George W. Bush’s idea of justice as an American value against which to judge ‘terrorists’ is ‘presented as a value intrinsic to American national identity. The concept of “otherness” … is implicit here’ (Henderson & McEwen 2005: 177-8).

It is surely irresponsible to reify shared progressive values while neglecting to acknowledge shared destructive values, just as it is irresponsible to reify certain values of cultural ‘others’ while neglecting to recognise the values that are less palatable to our own culture. For instance, building on the work of Hage (2003) and Beilharz (2004), the experience common to all generations of Australian immigrants might simply be a recognition of fear and anxiety in response to the local symptoms of globalisation: Hage describes how such feelings have become ‘paranoid nationalism’, while Beilharz identifies *Unsicherheit* (which he translates as uncertainty, insecurity and unsafety) in Australia’s response to globalisation. Both Hage and Beilharz call for a focus on collective hope as a means of generating inclusive or compassionate race relations.

Hage and Beilharz both point to the fact that what is shared might not necessarily be confined to the resoundingly positive attributes we would like them to be. Fear and insecurity in the face of change might be a common feeling. Violence might be a repressed but common value; indeed Cubby reported two of the participants in the Cronulla riot as planning indiscriminate attacks against innocent people because, they perceived: ‘*For both sides*, it was the Australian...
way’ (2006: 87, italics added). Perhaps racism is a shared but repressed value, as Sebastian De Brennan (2006) argues. What status do shared attributes, values and experiences have when they might broadly be considered restrictive or destructive to a nation’s potential?

Critical multiculturalism involves recognising, examining and debating values that conflict, in order to find a path through such conflict. The examples of artistic responses to the Cronulla riot discussed below identify and examine those shared experiences and values that may be in conflict.

**Arts and Critical Multiculturalism**

There have been a number of responses to the Cronulla riots, and the attendant social and political issues, from artists. The novelist and screenwriter Christos Tsiolkas has written extensively on the issue of racism and the responsibility of artists to tackle this subject matter. Echoing Poynting, Tsiolkas argues that over the past decade the principles of multiculturalism have been repudiated and that as a result ‘intolerance is mandated and acceptable’ (Tsiolkas 2006:13). The Cronulla riots are, for Tsiolkas, a critical turning point:

*In the early eighties there was racism but it was not sanctioned by our government, it was not argued for seriously in our press and on our television screens. There was a bipartisan acceptance of...multiculturalism. Back then I would have said that multiculturalism was a shared Australian value. Shakespeare wrote, Cry Havoc, and unleash the dogs of war. [Right-wing broadcaster] Alan Jones cried havoc on the Sydney airwaves and the dogs of war ran riot on the suburban sands of Cronulla Beach (Tsiolkas 2006:13).*

Tsiolkas’ most recent novel, *Dead Europe* (2005), is a study of the nature of endemic racism (particularly anti-Semitism), seeing it as a product of inherited beliefs and prejudices. He sees the task of teasing-out the social and political nature of racism as a critical part of the artist’s role – particularly in Australia where there is a ‘deafening silence’ which annihilates oppositional voices:

*This is my hope; that it will be the writers and artists and filmmakers who will dare ask the difficult, complex, frightening questions about racism and contemporary culture (Tsiolkas 2006:14).*

A number of other artists have recently responded to the events at Cronulla. Playwright Noelle Janaczewska, in collaboration with the Australian Theatre for Young People, has created a theatre piece entitled *This Territory* – a fictional rendering of the race riot. Described as a ‘dramatic documentary’ and performed at the Sydney Opera House, it is designed for Year 9-12 secondary students, and is based on interview material gathered from those who participated in, or were directly affected by, the riots (Sydney Opera House 2007). One of the young characters addresses the audience boldly explaining the trajectory and focus of Australian racism:

*We hate Lebs, well, all Arabs really but we call them all Lebos. Makes it easier. Wasn’t always this way, of course. Time was we were too busy hating Asians. Waves of them swamping us with their yellow culture. Now we’ve moved on...Further back, before Asians we hated wogs. Wogs were greasy and stank of garlic...Now we love wogs. Pretty soon, we’ll love Asians. But we still hate Lebos. Although – hang on a sec, eventually we’ll stop hating Lebs because we’ll get someone new to hate...how about those Sudanese refugees, eh? (quoted in Dunne 2007)*

Janaczewska insists on the importance of accurately representing the nature of the material she unearthed in the research process as a means of understanding the tensions that underpinned the Cronulla riots. She argues that it was important that the play did not merely paper over the complexities of racism: ‘We didn’t want to end up like a kind of community harmony day, saying, “If only we could all learn to be a bit more tolerant!”’ (Dunne 2007). Rather, her purpose in creating the piece was two-fold: first to allow young people to voice their views and fears in an uncensored way, and second to raise the notion of Australia as ‘shared territory’ involving a discussion of ‘issues of nationalism, patriotism, belonging, exclusion and space. Particularly public space – who owns the beach? (Dunne 2007). Janaczewska’s view reflects a desire to move away from received ideas about multiculturalism as celebration (‘community harmony day’) towards a more critical and dialectical understanding of multiculturalism as involving a negotiation over shared public space. Rather than portray the riots as a product of a black/white dichotomy (Christian vs Muslim, Australian vs Lebanese), this theatre piece used the voices of young people representing all sides of the dispute to emphasise their generational commonalities as they negotiate the sharing of the public space of Cronulla beach.

This theme of shared territory is a common feature of the creative work, discussed here, that has been produced in response to the Cronulla riots. As a part of the 2007 Sydney Festival, the community-based arts organisation Big hART designed a community project about and for the residents of the Sutherland...
Shire where the Cronulla riots took place. The creative director of Big hART was Scott Rankin who previously created large-scale community arts projects designed to encourage community participation and address topical political issues such as homelessness youth (kNOT@Home in 2002) and public housing (Northcott Narratives in 2003). Rankin’s work is underpinned by a commitment to performing in non-traditional spaces and collaborating with community participants. The Sydney Festival show, Junk Theory, saw a series of changing photographic portraits of Sutherland Shire residents projected onto the sails of a Chinese junk which sailed around Sydney Harbour during the festival. The Big hART production involved young people from the shire taking photographs and collecting stories from local residents. This material, accompanied by a soundtrack, helped to produce a floating art installation which projected a portrait of a community coming to terms with the recent violence that had taken place on its beaches (Morgan 2007).

Rankin, the director of Big hART, noted that the project intended to demonstrate that the community is a diverse one with a broad range of ages and cultural backgrounds. Rankin wanted to create a work of art that looked beautiful and, at the same time, raised the level and complexity of community debate. To that end, he says, it was important not to create ‘worthy’ community theatre on the positive aspects of cultural diversity, but to allow young people to articulate their perspective and in so doing to ‘open people up to something unusual’ (Morgan 2007). Both the Junk Theory production and This Territory share a concern to hear the voices of young people in relation to attitudes to race and racism, but neither are intended to spurn multiculturalism. Rankin notes: ‘There’s a misplaced desire for the arts and cultural activity to be some kind of salvation for social problems. But they’re not. All they do is provide a very rich maverick unattached voice in the community’s discussion of ideas’ (Morgan 2007). Rankin’s take on Cronulla, like Janaczewska’s, reflects a critical approach to the issue. This means that, for example, the work reflects an understanding of the relationship between cultural conflict and the social and economic status of the people who live there. Rather than celebrate multiculturalism, this work takes a critical approach by giving voice to a diversity of views in order to provoke deliberation and discussion.

A third take on the Cronulla riots comes from filmmaker Jayce White whose short film, Between the Flags, was shortlisted as a finalist for the 2007 short film festival, Tropfest. White was director and writer of the film which took a comic look at the riots by asking the question: how many rioters does it take to start a riot? (Tropfest 2007). Two men, one of Middle Eastern background and one white Australian, are the first to arrive for a beach riot, and neither is sure how to proceed in the absence of a mob. The film is striking for its comedic approach to the subject matter, but like the other creative works discussed here, is concerned to understand the ways in which individuals understand and negotiate race and racism. In Between the Flags the two men find that they are similar in many respects, they share a cultural interest in certain kinds of music and cars, and as they get to know each other, it becomes apparent that what they have in common is more important than their differences. The film suggests that the two characters, paradigmatic ‘blokes’, share a quality of masculinity that overrides their cultural differences. As with the other creative works, the film also emphasises place – in between the flags – and suggests that the beach can be a shared territory. The two characters in Between the Flag have shared values (music, cars and cricket), albeit not the idealistic values of nationhood.

Conclusion

The three artistic works discussed are informed by a critique of multiculturalism with its emphasis on celebration and the commodification of cultural diversity and its elision of the realities of cultural conflict. This artistic work reflects a new effort to rethink multiculturalism in the light of the racial conflict exemplified by the Cronulla riots. Rankin’s view of the arts as providing a ‘rich maverick unattached voice’ is important here. It is ‘rich’ because it offers an analysis of the Cronulla riots which is informed by a multiplicity of views: the world cannot simply be understood as a struggle between Australians and Arabs. Indeed such a worldview reinforces the notion of core and marginal cultures. Rather, this work suggests, the events of Cronulla need to be understood in terms of a community’s struggle to negotiate shared territory. Such an analysis represents a ‘maverick’ and ‘unattached’ voice because it cuts against the views of the anti-multiculturalist Right and the Left with its belief that Australia has a racist ‘rotten heart’. The relative independence of the arts to construct a critical and dialectical take on race and culture in Australia suggests that its role in the public domain has never been more important.
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