The Politics of the Sacred in Cyber Country: Deconstructing the “Primitive”

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In his latest work, published in 2000, the Slovenian thinker and postmodern icon Slavoj Zizek offers a spirited defense of Christianity that insists on the need to embrace not only what is deemed “authentic” but also its spectral, distorted other. He distinguishes between “the explicit features that define its social and ideological edifices” and “the disavowed ghosts that haunt it, dwelling in a mysterious region of nonexistent entities which none the less persist, continue to exert their efficacy” (3). Until the Refugees issue displaced them late in 2001, just before the federal election, Aboriginal issues had insistently appeared in the pages of our dailies and out of all proportion to indigenous numbers in the community. Australia’s poor record in colonialist race relations can be seen to be evidence of and constitutive of Australia’s spectral history. Some of what is published in the dailies is liberal in tenor, seeking to address that spectral history, but some of it serves to entrench already deep antagonisms rather than open up a genuine dialogue. The regressive forces that would oppose bringing this spectral history into consciousness take many forms.

Roger Sandall’s The Culture Cult: Designer Tribalism and Other Essays appears to be one such piece of armory in what Robert Manne terms a “ladder culture war”—over the meaning of Aboriginal dispossession” (Manne 102). In his columns in The Age and in his book, In Denial: The Stolen Generations and the Right, Manne discusses the highly charged debate in Australia over the removal of mixed-race children from Aboriginal mothers. Manne’s powerful essay interrogates how the debate is being resignified: the preferred terminology/polemics of the Right for the children removed under assimilationist policies (from the early twentieth century until the mid-1970s) is “rescued” or “removed” in opposition to the Left-liberal signifier “stolen.” The essay mounts a nuanced argument that child-removal policies changed from having a biological basis in the 1930s to a form of cultural genocide in the 1940s and thereafter. He sees Right-wing and populist resistance in parliament and in the quality and popular press to the Bringing them Home report as being linked to similar “campaigns” opposing land rights, Aboriginal funding and welfare. In addition, he examines the Right’s response to post-colonially inflected contact history: a new thrust to deny or minimize the extent of European massacres of Aborigines.

The Right has, according to Manne and Matthew Ryan, reconstrued Aboriginal welfare and rights lobbyists as a “sorry industry” which, it claims, “lives off Indigenous suffering, exploits guilt and deprives the bulk of non-elite white Australia of their own national history”(Ryan 2). It is this intellectual middle-class and, in particular, left-leaning anthropology that are Sandall’s main targets, but insofar as anthropology and postcolonial literary criticism are imbricated with Aboriginal Studies in increasingly productive ways, the concern is that Sandall’s analysis offers a simplistic version of indigeneity that is focused on the past.

Sandall’s The Culture Cult can be seen as a new campaign on a different front in the culture war, taking the Reconciliation debate backwards and constituting a neo-assimilationist agenda. The book was unavailable in Australia during the period that it received generous excerpting and coverage in the respectable mainstream dailies (The Weekend Australian and The Age, “Saturday Extra”). It is provocative to say the least, serving apparently a neo-assimilationist political agenda of the Right wing. The publicity and dust cover imply that Sandall is a retired anthropologist from the University of Sydney; however, Sandall makes clear elsewhere that he was an anthropological filmmaker whose award-winning films on Arnhem Land were withdrawn from circulation because of the culturally sensitive and secret-sacred nature of their content (Sandall, Quadrant). The Culture Cult may not attract the scrutiny of anthropology because the evidence on which its claims are made draw from social theory rather than anthropology. The book constitutes a selective history of what he refers to as “Academic Primitivism,” which he aligns, insultingly, with New Ageism and with individual
thinkers' (including Eliot and Raymond Williams) disillusion with postindustrial society. He aligns postmodern anthropology even more aggressively with the "Disneyfication" of the "defeated" (180-1). The work offers some ad hominem and broad, brush-stroke analyses of the work of Karl Polanyi and Isaiah Berlin, whose ideas he sees as misguidedly implicated in that kind of romantic anthropology that is involved in idealizing and promoting indigenous cultures. Karl Popper is his hero because of his support of "open" societies and Rousseau, "the founder of anthropology," is his whipping boy:

Before Rousseau savagery was obviously and unarguably ignoble, and tribal life was regarded in most places with horror. It was where you found despotism, tribal life, revolting cruelty, appalling poverty, horrifying diseases, and homicidal religious fanaticism. After Rousseau, among progressive thinkers, all this had gone. No Big Ditch separated the civilized from the primitive. Savagery was noble, the tribal world was morally transfigured, and the savage himself had been redeemed. (Sandall, Culture Cult 39)

What Sandall aims to do is to recuperate a lost term, "civilization," which he sees as separated by a "Big Ditch" from small-case "culture." "Cultural Studies," predictably, is another term he demonizes. Keith Windschuttle, who has evolved into a conservative historian and author of The Killing of History: How a Discipline Is Being Murdered by Literary Critics and Social Theorists, and has also conducted an Irving-like campaign against "frontier massacre myths," is on the same side in the campaign. While Sandall is alert to the dark practices of closed, primitive societies (evidencing their cruelty, cannibalism and gerontocratic tyranny), he is blind to the extent to which his much vaunted open and civilized societies have acted outside their own legal and moral systems in the Australian colonial enterprise (Reynolds, Law; Indelible Stain).

Many of Sandall's propositions seem questionable when tested against the evidence I have at my disposal, based on several years' collaboration with Yanyuwa people of the Northern Territory on a website showcasing their culture. A principal claim of Sandall's book is that Australian Aborigines have been "locked into economic and social disadvantage and excluded from the benefits of 21st-century white culture by a fixation with romantic primitivism" (Sandall, The Age, 1, 6). He speaks as if culture contact involves a one-way trajectory (from civilized to primitive): the anthropologist projects his own cultural discontents on the indigenes and tells them who they are. I intend to argue in this paper that, far from eschewing modernity or being maladaptive to cultural innovation and change, a general charge Sandall levels against primitive societies (Sandall, Culture Cult, 131-50), Yanyuwa people have used technologies that come from contact. They have made Macassan artefacts their own in the pre-contact period and are using European technology, and especially the media, strategically and in transformative (in Ashcroft's utopic sense), hybrid ways. Yanyuwa people have a long history of employing film, television and radio in ways that are precisely designed to bring to the attention of people beyond their community their own culture, history and the ways in which they have been badly served by colonialism. Currently, they have chosen to use cyber culture to establish what matters to them, to control their representation and define it for themselves, and to teach others about their culture. Furthermore, they take pride in advising government about the biological diversity and ecological health of their environment.

A brief introduction: Yanyuwa country is south of and outside the protected areas of Arnhem Land on the southern shores of the Gulf of Carpentaria and is the second most remote place in Australia, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics. A seasonally fluctuating population of between 600 and 1000 people live in or around Borroloola and its composition is almost 90% Aboriginal people. It has been an open town since 1886, which means that Yanyuwa, Garrwa, Mara and Gudanji cultures have had no experience of "protection" offered by the reservations, or even a long history of cultural preservation. The process of recording Yanyuwa culture in detail did not begin until John Bradley's advent as a young, three-year-trained teacher in the town in 1979. He built on the work of Jean Kirtin, of the Summer Institute of Linguistics, who had begun translating Bible stories into Yanyuwa in the '60s and completed, in 1992, an unpublished 600-page encyclopedic dictionary. He was subsequently employed by the Sacred Sites Authority and most recently has worked as an anthropologist to defend the latest round of land claims to the Grass Sea beds under the Northern Territory Land Acts of 1976. Yanyuwa people were among the first in the Northern Territory to mount such a claim in the late 70s. Although they have prosecuted many successful claims to their traditional homelands, much land remains to be handed over, including rights won in the 1980s. Despite generations of education, there are only a handful of tertiary-educated people and only two Yanyuwa people who could be described as "successful" in European terms. One of these is "Stolen Generation," the other a person who has
grown up truly bicultural. Few tertiary-educated Yanyuwa people are able to find employment in the town.

Sandall’s view of the Aboriginal condition is a deeply binarized one:

The division is deep—there is a Big Ditch between the tribal world and modernity. Until around 1970, governments in the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand accepted this fact, and saw their duty as helping indigenes to cross the divide. For that reason they concentrated on better health, education, and housing. (Culture Cult 3)

If they did there is little evidence of it in Borroloola, where the housing is thirty years old, only ever intended to be temporary shelter after a cyclone. It is unsanitary in the wet and totally inadequate for the numbers of people living in the houses. Health, as the highly political page on the website makes clear, is grotesquely under-resourced and has always been. Mabunji, the Outstations movement, which postdates the Whitlamite land-rights era (of the late 1970s and onwards), and the school are the only bright spots on an otherwise dark horizon. Moreover, the children are culturally disadvantaged by having to go to Darwin for a secondary schooling, which inevitably robs them of their language and the cultural knowledge and nuances implicit in it. It’s a cruel pincer: the education makes possible the ability to mediate their culture in and for a global economy, to begin to be agents in the recording and dissemination of their culture. But to be active in culture means to be attached to place, a place in which economic rationalist agendas cannot find meaningful work for culture workers, and this despite the increasing commodity value of indigenous cultures in the mainstream. And further, it is a country that, although constituting an absolute for Yanyuwa people, is changing rapidly (in response to mining, fishing, tourism, conservation and cultural tourism imperatives).

Endlessly, new negotiations and new cultural formations on the part of Yanyuwa people are required and elders are continually involved in meetings—about language, policing, conservation matters, schooling, health, and drug and alcohol issues. It is more common these days for such meetings to confer real power on these Aboriginal negotiators, especially in relation to conservation and tourism.

If authentic cultural tourism mattered as much as the tourist dollar, the value of Yanyuwa culture would be more self-evident. Zizek and Noel Pearson of the Cape York Land Council are right to warn about the regressive strategy by which more powerful cultures perversely take care to ensure that victims remain victims. They do so by the processes of apparent benevolence, state-engineered victimhood (Zizek 59-60), bailing out victims continually by handouts that are never enough and that lock communities into what Zizek would call the “real” of capitalism and what Pearson calls “passive welfare.” The choice is not traditional lifestyle versus CDEP (or the dole), or an archaic primitivism versus modernity; it has much more to do with a range of hybrid lifestyles and even more to do with genuine respect for indigenous culture, which would make available a myriad of more viable arrangements than currently exist.

If the Australian government saw as its duty, as Sandall claims, “helping indigenes to cross the divide,” there is little evidence of it in Yanyuwa Country. Pastoralism, which collapsed after Wave Hill when proper wages had to be paid to Aboriginal stockmen, rendered both land and lagoons unusable (Baker). It is only in 2002 that the Queensland state government, in a move considered radical, is legislating to pay compensation for the labor exacted under conditions of near slavery. The welfare system, whether operated by police or subsequently the government, colluded in removing men from their country for six months of the dry season each year, disrupted access to sites and traditional pathways. Furthermore, it generated a highly asymmetrical gender balance in sacred knowledge, which is dangerous in such a gender-balanced culture. And illness and cyclones forced people by a series of stages into the township (Baker). There housing continues to be a low priority. The traditional homelands on the Edward Pellew islands are now almost depopulated, except for some thinly populated outstations, but they are visited in school vacations and for important festivals and land-rights hearings. The post-’70s “primitivist revolution” neither happened in Yanyuwa country, nor did so-called progressivist European modernizing projects like education, health and housing ever materialize for them before that.

What exists, though, in Yanyuwa country is something much richer, more hybrid and more nuanced than Sandall could imagine. On the evidence of his book and journalism, he is innocent of a postcolonial or deconstructive idea and indeed lightly dismisses cultural difference as just so much New Age mysticism and postmodern anthropological pluralism as fiction, even “window dressing,” and about as significant as a shopfront. He rightly castigates Marlo Morgan, but treats the Hindmarsh Island affair entirely on the basis of two dissident sources and without reference to Diane Bell’s superb postcolonial and postmodern anthropological treatise on the subject, which was in print a full two years before his book. He confidently dichotomizes civilization/culture, modernity/primitivism, and if there are Big Ditches anywhere, they are clear in his methodology and thinking.

The websites that I am currently building, in collaboration with Yanyuwa elders and John Bradley, Liz MacKinlay and Richard Baker, have a long consultative and pedagogical history. Yanyuwa people have colonized the web for
several reasons: education, repatriation and critique of research, as well as for political reasons and to take control of the teaching agendas in university courses in a range of disciplines. Although it began as an attempt to contextualize, localize and historicize indigenous dreaming narratives and to explain the workings of traditional and contemporary mythmaking and the Yanyuwa sacred to white Australians, Yanyuwa people quickly commandeered the web for a wider range of community-centered cultural uses. Academic uses of the site have been relegated to small satellite sites engineered for different cohorts of institutional users. The main site exists in its current form at their request and under their watchful eye. The processes of site building raise many ongoing postcolonial dilemmas, some of which I now intend to rehearse.

In 1999, John Hobson asked a perfectly legitimate question: Where are all the Aboriginal home pages? His survey of 145 sites yielded 49 responses; and although it indicated an increasing trend during the period between 1993 and 1997 of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander owners and builders of sites, the proportion that were authored or owned by these groups was only 14% in the best and most recent year (1997) and fewer were involved in design and maintenance of sites. My guess is that a high proportion of these would have been urban-Aboriginal sites. Educational disadvantage is such in Borroloola that the process of training web authors and server keepers on Yanyuwa country is several years off. The conclusion that Hobson draws:

Perhaps what the survey does support most strongly is the assertion that there is an opportunity, if not a need, to increase access for Indigenous Australians to the technology and skills necessary to permit much broader participation in the new medium. Just as there are not yet enough Aboriginal doctors, lawyers and teachers to supply the demand for people to work with their own communities, so there are not yet enough Aboriginal computer technicians and programmers to assume wider control over the representation of their peoples on the WWW. While there is evidently no shortfall of helpful supporters, a greater level of self-determination for Indigenous Australians in the field of information technology is a possible development that communities, providers of education and training, and the technologically rich, might all like to consider; especially as information seems poised to become the new currency of the next century. (Hobson 11)

Aboriginal social theorist and activist Noel Pearson sees the new technologies as being potentially “crucial to the survival of [indigenous] traditional knowledge” and as having “real potential to help [Aboriginal] people maintain [their] traditions” (64). There is no doubt that Aboriginal communities throughout Australia have embraced digital technology; a site like Indiginet (www.indiginet.com.au) raises the issue of authenticity and who owns the intellectual capital in a head-on fashion on its links page. It’s a question that will bear much iteration for reasons that Cathryn McConaghy indicates: Is the

WWW a new medium for the promotion of indigenous voices and enabling of new strategies of resistance, or is it an agent of colonialism structured to legitimate web capitalism, colonial commodification and technological determinism, and in the end a disempowering tool of colonialism (“Today’s Colonialism”)? The web is, of course, already and potentially both. There are plenty of sites designed to bypass the middlemen of the galleries and sell indigenous artefacts; there are doubtless some that masquerade as indigenous sites that aren’t, including one that has, thankfully, disappeared from the web, established by a maverick tourist who calls himself Cyberdude.

My task here, though, is to argue that the WWW and some online technologies offer some liberatory potential in that they can allow

- control over representation in a way that is quite new, politically radical and democratizing (provided one has expertise and access to the technology);
- repatriation of research that is often lost to remote communities for re-evaluation, critique and use, if appropriate; and
- a medium for educating their own children and, of course, whitefellas. The benefits of the technology will be most potent, I predict, when IT-savvy Yanyuwa children and young adults gather their own oral history and anthropology and interact cross-generationally on culture projects, of which there is no shortage. The links between the old and the educated young are often strained and even jeopardized by western-style education. However, web-based projects offer a potential meeting point between the generations if mentorship models are used.

The key issue for the site is how to ensure not only control of the cultural capital but actual control of the site and its relocation from Deakin University to Yanyuwa Country. The simple answer to Hobson’s question is that educational disadvantage in a remote community like Borroloola means that generating web-authoring and server-running expertise is a long haul, probably a ten-year project. All parties look forward to the day when the site will relocate to Borroloola; plans are underway to ensure it will happen and undoubtedly when it does, the site will need radical rejigging and a new designer.

One of the chief postcolonial challenges of the site is to teach secular “whitefellas” what Yanyuwa people take for granted: that land is sacred, that every social function and institution in Yanyuwa Country is bound to it. The original prototype of this site made Country the starting point, but as we began to negotiate how best to organize the site for Yanyuwa use, Country sank deeper into it. The multi-functionality of dreaming narratives could not be communicated without making reference to kinship systems, to food sources, to stolen generation, to land claims past, current and projected, but most of all, the historical changes brought about by white contact and crucial to contemporary land use. Nor could the site omit mention of the current collaboration between elders and the Northern
Territory Conservation officers over Baranyi National Park on North Island, or the attempts to conserve Yanyuwa as one of only 20 surviving Aboriginal languages. What is public in this very large site (5000 documents and growing) is only the tip of Yanyuwa culture: a map of Country that focusses on just 20 sites out of a possible 2000+ and looks at each in varying degrees of detail, and a mere 8 dreaming narratives out of thousands. Secrecy and sacredness, of course, have had to be negotiated and there is nothing on site that must not be there; there is more scope than we've currently realized to lay down more material in private CD-Rom form for use by the elders and passing on at their discretion. It seems that the next stage in digitization of cultural material could be a DVD atlas of dreaming narratives to extend the almost completed three-volume atlas.

Although the elders we work with in Li-Wirdiwalangu Li-Yanyuwa, the reference group for the site, are very much traditional men and women, it is interesting to observe how they have shaped the site to reflect their work in the transcultural zone and the strategic nature of Yanyuwa hybridity. The site gives much scope for studying such matters: for understanding Yanyuwa ideals about "two-way" education, "two-way" health and "two-way" conservation; for examining the ranges of ways in which individuals claim identity (from stolen generation views to those who live outside community in order to better implement their Indigenous politics); and for insight into how Yanyuwa people use the Christianity they first encountered as recently as the 1950s. These are a modern people who claim the right to their heritage and have found multidimensional ways of bending the whitefella culture to their needs and aspirations.

Finally, it's easy to pour scorn on such artefacts as websites when the sewerage does not work and when even the young are dying in brawls and of ill health. Many health and social problems in this remote community undoubtedly stem from the fragility of cultural self-esteem in Yanyuwa country. Yanyuwa culture has, however, survived under conditions that are quite astounding and that is worth celebrating, especially if it strengthens culture and language and helps European Australians to understand the impact of colonization on Aboriginal identity and connectedness to land. Why, if I can choose to learn Irish in Australia, could not you choose to learn a language like Yanyuwa, or for that matter an Inuit person learn Yanyuwa in order to talk indigenous political strategies? It is this kind of international and transnational dialogue that the World Wide Web potentially makes possible. Further, in the real as opposed to the fantastic web, the work that may flow from IT competence cannot be dismissed as trivial. Indeed, Pearson's enthusiasm for the WWW undoubtedly has a sound economic basis as much as it constitutes a culturally enriching vision. As Hall pointed out in his inspirational Deakin lecture to celebrate Federation in 2001, the stories we tell about ourselves and our history are partial ones and Yanyuwa stories could usefully enrich the national story. If Australia's fantastic/spectral history is to be progressively brought into mainstream consciousness, then the Yanyuwa story can help us to understand that the violence of the "civilizing" gesture constituted an un-Christian, uncivil and illegal repertoire of deeds in itself and also that the dominant culture engaged in a massive underestimation of the complexity, sophistication and elaboration of Yanyuwa culture. Sandall's neo-assimilationist arguments, were they to be translated into policy, run the risk of completing a cultural genocide that colonialist policies were not able to achieve.

Notes
I need to acknowledge the extraordinary generosity of Yanyuwa people, whose website I refer to and without whose continuing collaboration this paper could not have been written (http://arts.deakin.edu.au/diwurrwurruru).

There are 410,003 people identified as being of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander origin in the 2001 census, 2.2% of the Australian population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, at http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats, accessed on 9 July 2002).

Those who contest the estimates advanced by Sir Ronald Wilson (former High Court Judge and President of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission) and Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commissioner, Aboriginal Mick Dodson, in Bringing Them Home (the report in an inquiry into the treatment of Aboriginal children in the assimilation era (1910-1976), which was tabled in the federal government in May 1997), include a number of prominent right-wing journalists, including P.P. McGuinness (Sydney Morning Herald) and more recently the editor who succeeded Manne at Quadrant), Piers Akerman Sydney Daily Telegraph, Christopher Pearson (Australian Financial Review) and Andrew Bolt (Melbourne Herald-Sun). Manne argues that John Howard's government has acted collusively with these journalists in an attempt to avoid compensation payment and an official national apology, which the report recommended (Manne 3-4, 75-6).

He details his resignation in November 1997 from the editorship of Quadrant and notes its genesis in disagreements about Aboriginal policy directions and its increasing turn to the Right in the subsequent years (Manne 57-66 and passim).

Windschuttle mounted a sustained denial of the extent of frontier massacres on the Australian "frontier," which has been carefully dismantled by Manne ("Myths" 93-101).

A digital version of Bradley, Kernt and Yanyuwa community's 1992 Dictionary is now available on site (see home page). It is hoped that in time it will be remastered as an interactive dictionary, allowing Yanyuwa people to debate with it and contribute to its evolution.

That and the consultative protocols in place are detailed on site in the Online papers on the Resources sub-section of the site (http://arts.deakin.edu.au/diwurrwurruru/yanyuwa/resouces/default.htm).


Yanyuwa people are not alone among Indigenous peoples in embracing IT technology and realizing its political and cultural potential. See Goodall, Richardson,
Buchtmann, McConaghy, Zimmerman. Buchtmann reports the motives of Warlpiri people in adopting the new media (including online) as being the restoration of traditional forms of communication disrupted by colonization: Aboriginal self-determination in the areas of health, education and entertainment, and the practical employment opportunities offered. She argues that they located the new technologies within existing cultural systems and exploited both the new forms of technology and the new funding that was available.

See also McConaghy and McConaghy and Snyder.

The reasons for research being lost to communities are many: the language of some academic research is not accessible to communities; even when papers and books are copied for community use, the conditions of their storage are less than secure or safe from the weather; and communities often do not know the archival destinations of research or how to locate and access them.

Works Cited


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