Chapter 13

‘Race Portraits’ and Vernacular Possibilities: Heritage and Culture

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Even people’s confidence in their nation’s past came under attack as the professional purveyors of guilt attacked Australia’s heritage and people were told they should apologise for pride in their culture, traditions, institutions and history. (Howard 1988, p. 7)

The spectre of heritage

‘Heritage’ is a term both broad and slippery. Beyond the literal meaning of property passed between generations, its contemporary evocations include ‘inherited customs, beliefs and institutions held in common by a nation or community ... [and] natural and “built” landscapes, buildings and environments held in trust for future generations’ (Davison et. al. 1998, p. 308). Even this elemental definition strongly associates cultural institutions and heritage. Most cultural institutions articulate inherited customs and beliefs through a sense of heritage which, in turn, certifies their authenticity and legitimacy. Parliamentary conventions, halls of fame and honour boards, much judicial ritual, the use of uniforms, anniversary commemorations of all sorts and university degree-conferring ceremonies are strong examples of such practices. At the same time the more material and codified notion of heritage as things held in trust explicitly organises the work of many cultural institutions. Museums, the Australia Heritage Commission, sites registered on the National Estate, libraries, archives, some aspects of education, academic research, urban planning and large parts of
tourism all partake in ‘the heritage industry’ (Hewison 1987). Already the conjoining of ‘heritage and cultural institutions’ seems to gesture toward a sheep-run of territory and a king-tide of question.

Nevertheless, at the risk of drowning in generalities, here I want to consider heritage even more broadly as a constitutive and organising rhetoric across the field of cultural institutions and practices. In this chapter heritage refers to the mobilisation of historical understanding or social memory in institutional and citizenly forms. This sense of heritage encompasses how the nation relies on heritage – emerging ideally, in Anderson’s evocative phrase, from deep roots in an ‘immemorial past’ (Anderson 1991, p. 11) – and the ways in which heritage is evoked in media, political and commemorative spaces. It includes, but is not reducible to, ‘preserved things’ or ‘the things we want to keep’ as the Hope inquiry into the Australian National Estate defined the term (Hope 1974). Yet I also want to use the term to suggest an older ethical and evaluative meaning along the lines of Ernest Scott’s praise of ‘the splendour of our heritage and the greatness of our possibilities’ (cited in Davison et. al. 1988, p. 308) without lapsing into the not-yet-archaic racial-nationalism expressed in Henry Parkes’ celebration of heritage in the form of a ‘crimson thread of kinship’. There are advantages in thinking broadly about heritage as one of the key modes in which ‘the past’ is put to use in cultural institutions. Heritage can be regarded as a crucial element of the institutional and citizenly collective commonsense that underpins public culture (Morris and McCalman 1998, p. 7). Understood in this way heritage directs us to institutions and utterances in and through which historical understandings or habits of memory are deployed in relation to governance. However, it is not just any conjuring of ‘the past’ or evocation of history which falls within the territory of heritage but specifically the deployment of history in imagining and defining citizenship and governance.

My starting point in this chapter is a proposition – Australia is in the midst of a mundane heritage crisis or, at the very least, a moment of significant instability in the taken-for-grantedness which heritage can offer. Three reference points organise and orient my remarks here. First, I consider the legacy of the 1988 Australian Bicentennial celebrations. I draw attention to the pluralist and inclusive versions of national heritage which predominated during those celebrations. These tropes were built on a tradition of cultural criticism which confidently uncovered and disavowed pre-existing ‘myths’ of Australian heritage but was vague as to the images, narratives and evocations which could replace these myths in civic culture. Thus 1988 as a ‘race portrait’ seems, from this distance, not only anxiously white but genuinely insecure and inaffective. Second, I turn to consider the consequences of the Aboriginal boycott of the Bicentenary. My argument in this section is that, post-1988, Aboriginal people and their supporters have built a new and powerful place for Aboriginality and heritage in public culture (Thomas 1999). These transformations of Aboriginality and heritage are elaborated in relation to the Royal Commission into Aboriginal
Deaths in Custody and *Bringing them Home* and include the decisions of the High Court in the Mabo and Wik cases. My argument is that, like native title itself, the new civic role for Aboriginality and heritage exists productively between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal heritage (conceived as relatively distinct spheres). Third, I turn to formal political disputations around heritage in the so-called ‘Battle for History’ and the rise of the One Nation Party as further evidence of a (mundane) heritage crisis. One Nation (like the opposition to Mabo, Wik and reconciliation from within the federal government) was shaped by paranoid heritage myths and relied heavily on a singular and exclusionary notion of national heritage. The success of this political assemblage derived, in part, from the absence of credible political alternatives affectively rooted in national heritage. But the phenomenon of One Nation was built on the unsustainability of the pluralist, non-nationalist heritage proffered in 1988. In this sense One Nation is, like John Howard’s sense of ‘future directions’, a protest against the perceived ‘theft’ or degradation of Australian heritage.

Having suggested some of the dimensions of a heritage crisis I conclude by offering some suggestions about how heritage in the vernacular might be one way of thinking about a post-pluralist heritage. Vernacular heritage is a loose way of describing historical meaning which is shared by relatively small groups of people; it might be locally specific in terms of idiom and themes or it might be familiar principally to those who share a common language or set of experiences, but it is certainly particular and lived rather than general and abstract. My suggestion is that thinking about heritage in the vernacular may offer productive possibilities for cultural institutions. This is important because heritage will remain a key point of insecurity and longing as globalisation, market challenges to public culture, new information and media economies and so on are reshaping the institutions of culture. Heritage matters today not because there is too much of it, not because an earlier model needs to be reconditioned, not because it’s impossible, but because the desires stoking its production address an urgent problem: ‘how to combine distinctive national traditions and conditions with a new and disciplined openness to the world’ (Goodman 1992, p. 193).

‘Race’ portrait 1: 1988 as happy postmodernism

Heritage both reached a conclusion of sorts and may have become something new in Australia during 1988. The exhaustion of certain notions of heritage was, in part, the result of the shifting valency of heritage as, first and foremost, national and democratic through the post-war period. Although there is a long history of heritage in Australia (Davison 2000), the coincidence of new kinds of history making and cultural dynamism in the 1960s and 1970s was far from arbitrary. Whitlam’s ‘new nationalism’ described a government for the future which promulgated not only preservationism in the shape of the Australian Heritage
Commission but, more broadly, conceived of history as available, in the form of heritage, to articulate and affirm a *barn nue dae* for Australia. The national past held all the magical and tragic powers of myth and was supplemented by a faith that the future could be built on a new and truer cultural nationalism. This configuration of heritage drew on and elaborated the single most important innovation of twentieth-century historical scholarship: an expansion of history’s purview to include those who had previously been regarded as ephemeral historical subjects – peasants, the working classes, women, the colonised and (so-called) minority identities. Democratised history gave to heritage a relentless positivity at the end of the last century; its representations should be communal, they should include everyone’s story, the next one, and then some ... In the post-war period these histories were put to work in an ever-expanding array of citizenly and governmental forms to substantiate and celebrate a national history all our own. Despite the efforts of a generation of conservative rule attached to the mother-country which obscured ‘collective remembrances’ rooted in Australian soil, the heritage culture of the 1960s and 1970s began to re-discover and re-invent the signs and sounds of a nation – in preservation, collections policies and stamps; in popular ceremonies, anthems and civic rituals; in film, in song and in story. By the 1980s this cultural work had modernised and revivified Australian heritage as constitutive of a new bedrock for the Australia nation.

In what ways then did the many forms of this nationalised, modern and democratic heritage come to a terminus in 1988? My suggestion is that 1988 made apparent some of the tensions and limits in this inclusive, pluralist and demonstrative configuration of Australian heritage. Amongst people who have written on historical representation and the Bicentenary there is a remarkable unanimity of opinion that inclusiveness and pluralism were the key organising principles (Janson and Macintyre 1988; Bennett *et al.* 1992). The bicentennial ‘heritage portrait’ was a grand hug-in of spatial togetherness in the form of symbolic journeys, collective spectacles and hi-tech panoramas. Whether in analyses of the Australian Bicentennial Authority, the New South Wales ‘First State 88’ exhibition, stamps, *Images of Australia*, ephemeral material, *Australia Live* or the Bicentennial Exhibition, analysts have concurred as to the centrality of ‘cultural diversity and racial reconciliation’ (Burchell 1987, p. 22). David Goodman and Peter Cochrane called this strategy ‘tactical pluralism’, referring to the Australian Bicentennial Authority’s attempt to include ‘all the groups clamouring for recognition within the scope of the celebrations’ (Cochrane and Goodman 1988, p. 33). However, this unanimity of analytical opinion did not guarantee any common set of judgements as to the significance of these Bicentennial phenomena. One conservative writer complained that Australia appeared as a ‘land of incoherent diversity’ (quoted in Cochrane and Goodman 1988, p. 33), while other commentators bemoaned the lack of a critical edge or wondered why ‘many began to feel that in their empty, undiscriminating openness, there
were few possibilities of liberation' (Goodman 1992, p. 198). Still others
despaired that 1988 represented a 'pallid official amnesia' (Murphy 1988, p. 54)
or pondered the ramifications of such happy postmodernism representing
Australia as a 'space wide open' for tourism and foreign capital (Morris 1988). It
is possible to identify three features that may help us to make sense of 1988 as
both disappointing and ineffectual. First, the absence of any strong nationalism.
Second, the exhaustion of a particular (nationalist) mode of cultural criticism.
And third, not so much the pallidness of 1988 but the fact that it was downright
white. I'll briefly discuss each of these propositions.

If the heritage products of 1988 lacked a strong nationalism, this is explicable
in terms of forces both intrinsic and extrinsic to the field of heritage. The
impact, reach and pace of the (ongoing) internationalisation of economic and
cultural life in Australia since 1983 has been profound. While this has produced
new moments for nationalist outpouring (we might think of Bob Hawke's
rapture at the 'national triumph' of winning the America's Cup, or the globalis-
sation of sport in general), the balance between articulating the nation as the
first among many and understanding the nation as an occasionally significant
moment in a global field has shifted decisively to the latter. For many people,
the disappointment of a globalised nation was made symbolic in 1988 in the
Coca-Cola signage that adorned the spinnaker of one of the First Fleet re-e-
nenactment vessels that sailed into Sydney Harbour in January of that year –
a new Australia sailing under a new flag. Powerful though that sign might have
been, more broadly there were serious narrative difficulties in founding
nationalism in a replay of (somebody else's) imperial adventure, and precious
little nationalist meat in the immediate 'beginning' which supposedly grounded
the celebration.

These very real problems were exacerbated by the seeming inability of 1988 to
generate affective images and narratives of the national. The problem was not in
the volume of either mediatised or popular articulations of history or heritage.
Nor was the problem one of excluding critical or argumentative engagements
with history. On the contrary, the Bicentenary 'fostered a wide interest in
"history" in every sense of that term ... [It] pluralised, or rather multiplied,
historical consciousness in Australian cultural life' (Morris 1998, p. 12). But this
inclusiveness was shadowed during the Bicentenary by a particular model of
cultural criticism. Meaghan Morris has suggestively identified some of the
problems of coupling banal pluralism with ritual unmasking in her discussion of
Russell Braddon's 1988 series, Images of Australia, broadcast on ABC television.
This series was a quest for national identity which took the form of 'a journey
through disillusion' (Morris 1988, p. 181). Thus the series revisited relatively
clichéd stories and stereotypes of Australian history, proceeded to debunk and,
regrettfully, disavow these mythic foundations until the critique of heritage left
nothing but the future as the space of (prospective) inheritance. Morris notes
that in this 'critical quest',
Criticism's job is to banish the phantom by demonstrating its lack of reality. Thus Braddon's first program revealed that most Australians are not and never have been hardy bush pioneers, that we aren't all white or male, and that Ned Kelly was a criminal ...

The logical conclusion of the adventure is not the capturing of an identity but the projection of a big picture - a vision of a future Australia in which 'true' identity may at last be seized. Braddon's picture had familiar features: a pluri-racial, double-gendered, multi-cultural society with Japanese as a second language, the three R's re-imposed in schools, a healthy debate about republicanism, and hi-tech economic outlook ... The quest for identity is a metaphor of a polemic about the present.

(Morris 1988, p. 181)

This model of cultural criticism has a long history but for our purposes we can identify a reference point closer to home - Australia, in the title of Richard White's influential book, has been 'invented' (White 1981). White pursued the proposition that 'Australia' was an idea that was made - geographically, politically, culturally - rather than essential. It was a proposition which was widely misunderstood. One critic of the book took White to be a vacuous nihilist (White 1997, p. 15). Elsewhere White's insights were first truncated and then adopted as a means of breaking the shackles perceived as holding Australia back from a multicultural, republican and postcolonial future. To achieve this end, the nation and the outdated essences of heritage on which it relied were to be unmasked, denaturalised and denied their mystical power. In general this mode of criticism has few of the virtues of empirical historical scholarship (it is actually possible to write or make film about some people who understood themselves as bush pioneers), an extremely poor sense of the historiography of popular historical imagination (by whom, how and to what effects was history seen as male and white territory?), no grasp of the affective dimension of history (why might I feel that Ned Kelly was much more than a criminal?) and no self-reflexive sense of what is at stake in cultural criticism (how is it possible to engage in gestural demystification and with what results?).

When conjoined with the Bicentenary this model of cultural criticism produced some very peculiar results (Bennett et al. 1992; Carter 1994). The multiplication and inclusion of historical identities (or perhaps more accurately back-projected identity politics) demanded by this state-sponsored affair and the truncated model of cultural criticism obsessed with demythologising, became both hypercritical of 'the past' and locked in a nostalgic embrace with a past which, sadly for them, never was - hence the resort to the future. The past seemed a fearful place for two reasons. The criticism-riddled 'invented-ness' of the national past meant, in this framework, that heritage could not offer any ground from which to speak. And, to make matters worse, the Aboriginal boycott kept the focus on the Bicentenary's historical 'big lie' (not 200 but 40,000 years) and the
evasion of the question of the meaning of those 200 years when 'White Australia has a Black History'. Heritage, in other words, could not carry the burden of the past in the present during the Bicentenary. In some senses then, the Liberal Party was right, if for the wrong reasons, to claim that: 'Even people's confidence in their nation's past came under attack as the [critics] attacked Australia's heritage.' This cleverly reverses the logic of 1988 as it articulates the mismatch between a comfort of heritage and fear of the future. For the Liberal Party (and others) heritage was something to be reclaimed from the cultural critics who found it damaged and wanting, and from an Aboriginal boycott that found it broken and irreparable. They wanted to renovate and reinstall an older unitary heritage which was precisely that excluded by the pluralism of 1988 – a proud race-portrait both antiquated and radically minoritarian in its rigorous exclusions. The model of cultural criticism which informed much of 1988, on the other hand, could find no viable heritage model and hence projected a race portrait of multicultural happy families on fast forward, ghosted nevertheless by the spectre of Trugannini.

'Race' portrait (2): 1991–1997 – from the dead to the stolen

To the Aborigines who are proud of their heritage it is indeed a day of mourning; we mourn the death of the many thousands of Aborigines who were brutally murdered; we mourn the loss of our land and the rape of our women by the white invaders.

(An Aboriginal Petition to the King 1937)

The Aboriginal boycott of 1988 was not an absence but a massive presence in national culture. Like the gesture of delegates to the Reconciliation Convention turning their backs on Howard, the boycott was a 'labour of the negative' (Taussig 1999), a strategy of refusal which generated new conditions of possibility. It was and remains an extraordinarily productive cultural and political intervention. Not only did the boycott radically undermine the authority of the Bicentenary to represent all Australians, but it placed unresolved questions around colonialism at the very centre of attempts to articulate the nation. In a moment I will discuss the explicitly political reverberations of this new centrality for Aboriginality in relation to the so-called 'Battle for History' and One Nation. However I want to begin by pursuing the hypothesis that an Aboriginal boycott of a heritage celebration (1988) contributed significantly to Aboriginality and heritage becoming newly foundational for cultural institutions in Australia. Of course, if this has occurred, it could not have happened without the long history of Aboriginal organising and the post-1988 work of Aboriginal people and their supporters in myriad organisations and forms. Nevertheless, I do want to suggest that the decade of the 1990s saw Aboriginality and heritage assume animating and transformative roles in unexpected places. In asserting this I am not referring to Aboriginal heritage, which I understand as being those institutions, practices and representations which can be said to
belong to Aboriginal people in definite and relatively autonomous ways relating to Aboriginal nationhood. Rather I'm adapting Marcia Langton's conception of Aboriginality as referring to an intercultural zone (Langton 1993, p. 31). *Heritage and Aboriginality* then refers to those spaces constituted by 'Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people who engage in ... dialogue' about the intercultural zones of (differentially and unequally) shared heritage.

The 1991 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody was charged with inquiring into the deaths in custody of 99 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and women between 1 January 1980 and 30 April 1989. Its final report runs to eleven volumes and contains sweeping recommendations encompassing police and custodian practices, health, drug use, education, post-mortem practices, self-determination, reconciliation and much else besides. Yet on page seven of the National Report Overview is a section headed 'The Importance of History' in which Commissioner Elliot Johnston draws the readers' attention to the 'legacies of the history of two centuries of European domination of Aboriginal people' and goes on:

I include in this report a chapter on that history. I make no apology for doing so. I do so not because the chapter adds to what is known but because what is known is known to historians and Aboriginal people; it is little known to non-Aboriginal people and it is a principal thesis of this report that it must become more known.

(Royal Commission 1991, p. 7)

The proposition is that a significant question of public policy bearing on a range of governmental institutions cannot be comprehended without public culture 'knowing' a history which has been forgotten or repressed.

That the Royal Commissioners felt 'history' to be of such central importance is, I think, remarkable enough, despite the fact that historicist understandings of public policy questions (or the historicist role of precedent in judicial proceedings) are not uncommon. Nevertheless, the passion with which the Royal Commission argues its historical case is strikingly similar to the judgments of Justices Deane and Gaudron delivered in the Mabo case a year later:

We have used language and expressed conclusions which some may think to be unusually emotive for a judgment in a court ... [T]he reason which has led us to describe, and express conclusions about, the dispossession of the Australian Aborigines in unrestrained language is that the full facts of the dispossession are of critical importance to the assessment of the legitimacy of the propositions that the continent was unoccupied for legal purposes and that the unqualified legal and beneficial ownership of all the lands of the continent were vested in the Crown.

(Bartlett 1993, p. 42)
These comments not only reinforce the ‘importance of history’ but add a second element which is new in relation to the status of Aboriginality and heritage within public culture. It is not just that ‘a distortion in the history of Australia’ (Council 1993, p. 7) has been corrected. A ‘new’ history is required, a new history which is not only a different history in relation to Aboriginal people but also different in relation to non-Aboriginal people. In Mabo this is implicit in the question of whether ‘the continent was unoccupied for legal purposes’. In the Deaths in Custody Royal Commission Report, the problem is posed more explicitly:

There is the other side of the coin, the effects of history upon the non-Aboriginal people. ... [F]or a complex of reasons the non-Aboriginal population has, in the mass, been nurtured on active and passive ideas of racial superiority in relation to Aboriginal people ... which sits well with the policies of domination and control that have been applied.

(Royal Commission 1991, pp. 9–10)

In other words it is not just a question of ‘adding’ a black component to Australian history but of Aboriginal history transforming the category of Australian history.

However for Aboriginality to assume a new and distinctive role in public culture required a shift from history to heritage. In other words, telling a new historical story is one thing and a significant gain at the level of representation. But putting a new historical understanding into effect, making it play a role in governance, shifts the matter to the terrain of what I’m calling heritage. It was almost there in the Royal Commission but the emphasis was not so much on the past in the present as on the ‘legacy of history [explaining] the over-representation of Aboriginal people in custody’ (Royal Commission 1991, p. 11). It was almost there too in Mabo, in which the High Court found that although the Crown gained radical title over the territory ‘it did not become the beneficial owner of the land, which remained in the possession of the indigenous people [and] that the Crown extinguished native title in a piecemeal fashion over many years as the wave of settlement washed over the continent, but native title survived on the Murray Islands’ (Reynolds 1996). The emphasis on the piecemeal extinguishment of native title effectively meant that native title survived on the Murray Islands as an historical anachronism or because of the incompleteness of colonisation. This logic enabled a judge in a subsequent native title claim to assert that ‘the tide of history’ had washed away the rights to land of the Yorta Yorta people in south-eastern Australia – that is, to valorise only one side of history in the present (Alford 1999). The decisive steps necessary to install Aboriginality and heritage at the centre of public culture came in the Wik case and Bringing Them Home.

In the judgment in the Wik case, brought down in December 1996, the High Court extended the Mabo ruling by holding that native title rights could co-exist (subject to certain important restrictions) with rights held under a pastoral lease. The Court found that the inheritance of two different kinds of legal rights–
native title rights and rights in relation to land under Crown law, each with
different historical legitimation – continued to co-exist in the here-and-now.
Finally Bringing Them Home, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity
Commission report into the history and consequences of the removal of Aborigi-
nal children from their families, made fully explicit a new governmental sense
of heritage. Even as they wrote the report Ronald Wilson and Mick Dodson were,
I think, responding to pre-emptive attacks which had already circulated. Subse-
quently these attacks have attempted to both undermine the historical veracity
of the Report (Quadrant was prominent in these efforts and they continued in
2000 with John Herron, the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, denying the existence
of a stolen generation) and to place the events, policies and responsibilities
around the stolen generations firmly in a past radically disconnected from the
present; this second disposition underpins the Prime Minister’s refusal to offer
an apology. Somehow Wilson and Dodson seem to have already heard these
protestations when they wrote:

The actions of the past resonate in the present and will continue to do so in the
future. ... In no sense has the Inquiry been ‘raking over the past’ for its own
sake. The truth is that the past is very much with us today, in the continuing
devastation of the lives of Indigenous Australians. That devastation cannot be
addressed unless the whole community listens with an open heart and mind to
the stories of what has happened in the past and, having listened and under-
stood, commits itself to reconciliation.

( Bringing Them Home 1997, p. 3)

This is the new and distinctive configuration of heritage and Aboriginality which
will challenge Australian cultural institutions for many years to come. After the
‘silence’ is broken, after the Other side is acknowledged, after historical memory
and ‘the consequences’ are admitted, after the double-ness of colonialism’s impact
on black and white is recognised, comes the moment when Aboriginality becomes
part of heritage, a material and potent component of history in the present. A
transformed notion of heritage decisively underpins not only reconciliation but all
attempts to fashion just relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal
peoples in at least two ways. First the inheritance of colonisation, for both indige-
nous and non-indigenous people, is refigured. The ‘old’ Australian heritage is
simply no longer tenable. Second, this ‘new’ Australian heritage is placed at the
centre of national governance, potentially affecting notions of territory and
cultural identity, political representation and authority at the most basic levels.

There is every reason to expect that these processes are ongoing. This expec-
tation has been reinforced, as I’ve been completing this essay, by Corroboree
2000, the march across the Harbour Bridge and the conference which was the
culmination of ten years of work by the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation.
None of these issues have been fully worked through in public culture; questions
of reparation, reconciliation and a treaty remain unresolved. Paul Patton has
noted that Mabo (and my argument would add the decision in Wik, the Royal Commission and Bringing Them Home) ‘draws attention to the differences of cultural historical situation which separates indigenous and non-indigenous citizens’ (Patton 1997, p. 88). These cultural historical differences reside, for both Patton and Henry Reynolds, in a ‘recognition’ which is unfinished: [because] Aboriginal law is not fully recognised as a body of law grounded in the sovereign authority of Aboriginal peoples the issue of sovereignty will remain with us for some time to come’ (Reynolds 1996). A similar, although far from welcoming, assessment has been made by Geoffrey Blainey who objected to the decision in Mabo because it posed a threat to ‘the sovereignty and unity of the Australian people’ (cited in Patton 1997, p. 84). Blainey is both right and wrong. He is right because this constellation of reports and judgments actually destabilises two of the central underpinnings of the nation: the ‘historicity of a territory and the territorialisation of a history’ (Poulantzas 1980, p. 114). However, it does not necessarily follow, as Richard Mulgan asserts, ‘That the undermining of non-Aboriginal legitimacy is a potent obstacle to reconciliation’ (Mulgan 1998, p. 185). In fact only some versions of ‘non-Aboriginal legitimacy’ are undermined by the cultural transformations I’ve discussed here. Equally the new status of Aboriginality and heritage actually creates the conditions of possibility for thinking and constructing different kinds of nationhood based on different models of sovereignty and collectivity. The beginnings of such processes are already evident in regional land-management agreements, in AFL football, in some ventures in Aboriginal tourism, in music and elsewhere. But these are not cultural and political configurations waiting to be discovered, they are ‘reconstructive practices towards nationhood’ (Curthoys and Muecke 1993, p. 190). Before turning to these questions in the final section of the chapter, I want to examine some of the impediments to beginning this process in another ‘race portrait’ – a new assertion of whiteness.


One regime values permanence and accumulation, the other transience and turnover. One fears invasion, the other metaphorically solicits it. Threatened by the ‘foreign’, the ‘primitive’ and by ‘ghosts’, imperialist discourse tends towards closure: it paranocially defends the borders it creates. A touristic space must be liberal, and open: the foreign and the primitive are commodified and promoted, ghosts are special-effects: the only ‘barrier’ officially admitted is strictly economic.

(Morris 1998, p. 182)

After the boycott of 1988, Aboriginal organisations and their supporters continued the long march of ‘pragmatic and dogmatic gradualism’ (Watson 1993)
through governmental, judicial and cultural institutions. By contrast, and in response to the heritage conundrums posed by the Bicentenary, a very different ideological and rhetorical battle took place in the sphere of formal national politics. In February of 1992 (the year in which the Mabo judgment was delivered) the then Prime Minister, Paul Keating, was alleged to have ‘handled’ or touched the Queen in a manner which breached archaic protocols in relation to the body of the monarch. This provoked a minor outcry in the UK. In response John Hewson, leader of the Opposition, attempted to use this incident to mark Keating’s disrespect for Australia’s cultural and political heritage and to articulate this disdain with support for an Australian republic. The Prime Minister struck back: ‘The Opposition’, Keating claimed, ‘were relics of the past, “xenophobes” who remained British to their bootstraps despite that nation’s decision not to help Australia defend itself against the Japanese advance in 1942’ (Brawley 1997). This was not the first time that Keating had mobilised historical rhetorics as Prime Minister, and his heritage speech at Redfern is perhaps the greatest historical speech given by an Australian Prime Minister. For an array of reasons including his personal predilections, the importance of social memory in the political culture of the NSW Right and the skills and inclinations of his staff (particularly those of Don Watson, one of his speech writers), Keating had ‘a readiness uncommon in recent prime ministers to take note of recent trends in historiography and to use them in the service of promoting a particular myth of nationalism’ (Bolton 1994, p. 149). More broadly, he had remarkable talents in mobilising history in the service of his ‘big picture’ politics.

Keating was more than happy to engage in a ‘battle of history’ (as it’s been called) in heritage disputation about Menzies and Whitlam, White Australia, Kokoda and Singapore, republics and monarchies, Asia, immigration, modernity and so on. But by the end of his period as Prime Minister he had lost this battle, not in relation to these specific issues but on the key heritage terrain identified by Howard in the expression ‘black armband history’, and elaborated by One Nation in terms of Aboriginal privilege. The gigantic differences between Keating and Howard in style and political persona often obscured the fact that they both depended significantly on occupying particular heritage positions. As Meaghan Morris argues:

Howard’s triumph … was to provide a historical framework that made this new, future-oriented and violently divisive rhetoric seem to be a way of returning to a more secure and socially cohesive past … when so many rural and working-class people were economically ravaged and feeling culturally despised … his aura of drabness and littleness gave Howard a formidable power to be historically ‘shifty’.

(Morris 1998, p. 222)

At least as early as 1988, in shaping the Future Directions document, Howard was laying claim to his ‘antiquarian’ version of heritage. But it was not until he
articulated his objections to a ‘black armband’ view of history that Howard proudly hung his own race-portrait:

This black armband view of our past reflects the belief that most Australian history since 1788 has been little more than a disgraceful story of imperialism, exploitation, racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination.

I take a different view. I believe that the balance sheet of our history is one of heroic achievement and that we have achieved much more as a nation of which we can be proud than of which we should be ashamed.

(Howard 1996)

This is a classic example of the divisive logic at the heart of Howard’s historically shifty vision of both politics and heritage, either heroic or disgraceful, certainly not both and other things besides.

The continuities between this kind of heritage rhetoric and that adopted by the freight train that was One Nation during 1996–98 have been widely discussed (Birch 1997; Gray and Winter 1997). Here I want to examine the efforts of one cultural critic to think historically about the use of heritage within formal politics. Just before the 1998 Queensland election Janet McCalman, a celebrated Melbourne historian, wrote about One Nation on the op-ed page of the Age under the title, ‘Two nations rise to threaten a peaceful land’ (McCalman 1998a). McCalman’s sermon (I don’t say this disrespectfully; it’s just an attribution of style) began with a description of the last day of teaching a course in Australian history at the University of Melbourne. The ‘moment of truth’ in the classroom came when an American student, after enumerating some of the lessons grasped during the semester, said, ‘But you have a good country here. It’s safe and peaceful. It’s a very good place to live. You are very lucky.’ McCalman concurs with the judgement and then writes: ‘This makes the rise of One Nation ... all the more heartbreaking ... One Nation ... wants to create two nations, one of insiders and another of outsiders. And yet this is to fly in the face of our history’ (my emphasis). While it might not be defensible, this is a clear and definite position. The new party is historically aberrant. One Nation is either not in Australian history (perhaps it travelled from the US on one of the neo-conservative rafts which have provided flotsam for some right-wing Australian beach scavengers since the 1970s) or it is not of Australian history and hence is unsustainable in the historical conditions of Australia.

A fortnight later in another column piece, this time analysing the results of the Queensland election, McCalman wrote about the work of two scholars who had conducted detailed qualitative studies of the electoral base of One Nation (McCalman 1998b). The lesson to be learned from this work was that ‘the poor’, ‘the dispossessed’, ‘the unemployed’, ‘the working poor’ and ‘the truly forgotten people’ are not Hanson supporters. On the contrary, One Nation drew its support from, in McCalman’s words, ‘the classic Australian whingers – aggrieved souls
who imagine they are forgotten because they have not done quite as well as they had hoped'. Yet, after taking considerable succour from the fact that nearly three-quarters of Queensland voters did not vote One Nation, she argued that in 'One Nation’s heartland of the Atherton Tablelands and in the sugar-growing country that was built on indentured labour ... racism has deep historical roots' (McCalman 1998b).

Herein lies the problem. For McCalman, One Nation is an historical aberration yet One Nation’s supporters live in regions where racism is deeply historical. This is a contradictory yet illuminating position. McCalman’s ‘safe and peaceful’ present (much like Howard’s ‘relaxed and comfortable’ Australia) cannot admit a heritage which is rooted in colonial racism (along with many other ‘traditions’ more palatable to contemporary cultural critics). This contrasts sharply with the way Justice Brennan grounded his judgment in Mabo: ‘the dispossession of Aboriginal people underwrote the development of the nation’ (Bartlett 1993, p. 50) – and which, as I’ve suggested, goes some way toward developing a different idiom for heritage. Paradoxically, McCalman’s pluralist and inclusive heritage (very bicentennial) simply cannot admit One Nation as a product of actual historical processes. Thus the only heritage mechanism for understanding One Nation is as an anachronism, a cultural formation belonging to another time. This was precisely the strategy used in the Bulletin front page image of Hanson tucking into a plate of pie and chips with a beer on standby and the same tactic used when Sixty Minutes sought to position Hanson in the 1950s. Even more damming for urban political elites is the fact that One Nation is an autochthonous anachronism belonging to those places (like the Atherton Tablelands or certain whingeing suburbs) that should have no role or status in defining Australia or Australian heritage in a globalised world. In other words, both One Nation and McCalman (along with many other critics) share a common understanding of the role of heritage – to unite and underpin a singular nation polity. For One Nation the problem is with ‘minority’ attempts to threaten this unity of past and place by foreigners, Aboriginal people and metropolitan citizens of the globe. For many critics, One Nation is a ‘minority’ attempt by ideologues, whingers and outdated yokels to undermine the ‘good country’ which history has delivered. Back and forth in simple inversions. Is it possible to think of a model of heritage which does not rely on a solid unitary nor, its flip side, the disreputable minority?

**Vernacular heritage perhaps?**

My argument thus far has been that discourses around 1988, Aboriginality and One Nation index some of the tensions that have recently bedevilled national heritage. These very ordinary crises in the efficacy and legitimacy of representation are a conundrum for a pluralist national heritage. 1988’s inclusiveness set a benchmark. On the one hand the admission of everybody’s stories left older
notions of heritage substantially (if nostalgically) intact while, at the same time, it produced such diverse and incoherent heritage gestures that their meaning and significance seemed ineffective. On the other hand the Aboriginal boycott of 1988 exposed both the positivity of 1988 and the absolute limits of its pluralism; Aboriginal heritage simply would not be one more positive addition to an affirming story of Australian civilisation. The elaboration of Aboriginality and heritage in various governmental institutions since 1988 has made it clear that white Australian heritage has depended on the exclusion of Aboriginality. It is not a case of just adding some black stories but, I believe, of exploring how those exclusions claimed the space of heritage which now remains to be reinvented on the ruins of that project. One Nation, Hanson's fellow-travellers and some cultural critics have taken a different route, preferring to stake out true heritage as guaranteed by history's gifts to those seated at the table: the rest are mere servants, beggars or rubblishers. Together these heritage discourses seem to open up the question of a post-pluralist heritage. Is it possible to think about the deployment of history in relation to citizenship and governance in ways which might avoid some of the limitations exemplified in the mundane crisis of heritage? I want to suggest that thinking about heritage in this vernacular offers some real utility.

For a long time it has been recognised that one of the central problems of history as a general category has been its claim to universality. Rather than history being an aggregation of all the routes from events in the past to events in the present, universal history has been understood as a grid on which any of those events might be traced (Mink 1987). So, for example, histories of nations, while particular in their timing, pace and leading players, are usually thought of as histories of development and achievement or of that destiny remaining to be accomplished. For this reason specific or micro-histories tend to suffer one of two fates at the hand of history-in-general. Either they are incorporated into the grid of a larger historical narrative – Ballarat as contributing to Australian history – or they are absences, mere traces, like so many other gold towns. This does not mean that the micro-histories disappear, only that most have no place in grand historical narratives. When it comes to heritage, that is, the use of historical understanding in citizenly and governmental registers, these processes are usually even more exclusionary because heritage, and particularly national heritage, is necessarily more formal and often codified. A national register of historic houses, for instance, contains only those houses which possess heritage as assessed in terms of architectural taxonomy or broad historical significance. The idea of such a register including all houses possessing heritage significance – your heritage significance and mine and the next person's – makes no sense because the role of democratic heritage is to exemplify by selection those objects and narratives which can represent a general collective historical understanding. Nevertheless specific or micro-heritages can be enduring and significant and it's these kinds of understandings that I want to identify as vernacular heritage. Vernacular heritage can describe those understandings of heritage which are
marginal to, or silenced by, the authority of 'official' heritage; vernacularity might reside in language or idiom; shared but particular historical experience, say of displacement (Read 1996) or political affiliation or suppressed cultural or sexual identities and rituals, say the pre-respectable Mardi Gras. I'm not wanting to give the vernacular a nativist gloss. Vernacular heritage is not necessarily geographically specific; it could include a quirky local museum and equally the rituals of remembering shared by a dispersed immigrant community.

Ranajit Guha has provided a stimulating discussion of vernacular histories in the context of postcolonial India (Guha 1992). He argues that vernacularity exists (and existed) in 'accents, idioms and imaginaries' foreign to the lexicon of post-enlightenment reason and, in this sense, is 'unspeakable' in the language and rationality of colonisation. This does not mean, however, that vernacular pasts disappear, only that once they are articulated in relation to history they must 'speak' the grammar of power; in his particular argument, they must find a place in a terrain mapped by nationalist historiography. Guha argues that vernacular histories have taken two forms in India, each of which preserves the force of the Latin root of vernacular: verna meaning 'home-born slave'. There is the discourse of the happy slave - Indian history as the story of England's work in which the slave speaks his master's voice, parroting the place which colonising history has reserved for his story. There is also the idiomatic story of the slave which, though in her master's language, is not in her master's voice. This second story is not an authentic or nativist voice, but it is a historical document to the extent that it preserves traces of the violence that enables the story to be told in the language of domination. So, the transposition which enables speech in the master's language still resonates with the memory of slavery. How does this understanding of vernacular heritage as a 'third term' between formal history and 'unspeakable' micro-histories help illuminate the notion of vernacular heritage in Australia? First, it is important to recognise that the term is not evaluative; that is, vernacular histories are not necessarily good or bad, accurate or inaccurate. Second, while vernacular histories are not authentically subaltern, they do preserve elements of experience which have been marginalised or excluded from general historical discourse. Third, vernacular histories exist in tension with official history; they are not reducible to elements of a historical narrative but seem to have a capacity to disrupt or reorganise historical understanding.

This sense of history may sound esoteric, however it seems less so if we return to the questions of Aboriginality and heritage which we have already discussed. The Royal Commission, the judicial proceedings and Bringing Them Home were all governmental instances in which Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people produced spaces in which otherness (including vernacular histories) and difference were recognised. The practical import of this recognition necessitated translation which, as Patton reminds us, Derrida describes as 'an always possible but always imperfect compromise between two idioms' (cited in Patton 1997, p. 95). In other words, royal commissions and courts had to recognise and acknowledge
the particularity and partiality of their idiom in order to listen to another idiom being translated for them, a dialogue which was then, paradoxically, 'returned' in another form (Frow 1998). Thus Aboriginality and heritage actually includes and extends Noel Pearson's understanding of native title itself as a concept which belongs to the space between two bodies of law and by means of which one recognises the other under certain conditions: 'Native title is therefore a space between two systems, where there is recognition' (Pearson 1996). Metaphorically these encounters produced new cultural spaces which I've described as spaces of Aboriginality and heritage – reports, rulings, commentary, organisations and agreements – which exist between indigenous and non-indigenous people but belong exclusively to neither. It is in this sense that this new space of Aboriginality and heritage is vernacular.

Conversely, 1988 and One Nation can be seen as examples of heritage discourse which failed to take up the virtues of vernacular heritage. 1988 depended on an irredeemably white and narrowly national history, yet it simultaneously critiqued and mourned such heritage and indulged in gestural pluralism by celebrating heritage as an inclusive patchwork. In contrast we might think of another bicentennial example. On 25 January 1988, after marching through Sydney, Aboriginal people and their supporters gathered at Kurnell to perform vernacular ceremonies at a place where Cook had come ashore. This articulation of vernacular heritage as a shared commitment to reconciliation in place has since been elaborated across the country as indigenous and non-indigenous people have come together to hold meetings, share stories, produce inscriptions and make commitments to a future they share (Read 2000). Some of the building blocks which made One Nation came from the kind of vernacular heritage given voice in Les Murray's poetry, heard when loggers take on conservationists and celebrated in the primitive socialism of the National Party. However One Nation transformed this 'raw' material. First, Hanson was adept at fuelling a sense of the vernacular as besieged and damaged (as many people's lives had literally been damaged by a decade of economic reforms). Second, One Nation generalised these reactions in the form of a political program which called for national defence against a host of enemies. In this second move the vernacularity of its roots were undone. But there are other models. The Stockman's Hall of Fame in Longreach, like much pioneering history before it has, in large part, been concerned to articulate a vernacular heritage as locally and historically significant which, in this case, doesn't necessarily evoke a return of the Australian legend (Trotter 1992; Thomas 1996). Similarly, Landcare organisations throughout the country and ventures like the Bookmark Biosphere Reserve in the South Australian Mallee are seeking to articulate a vernacular heritage and a culture of sustainable land and water use practices.

Learning from these examples might involve being far more circumspect about when and how we speak of national heritage as singular and unified. There are some moments when it is important to invoke national heritage, for example,
to prohibit the export of cultural property. But generally, rather than thinking in terms of heritage and civilisation, race or nation, rather than stitching many plural historical experiences into one national heritage comforter, we could be content with a more disaggregated sense of heritage. To think of vernacular heritage means to understand the embeddedness of the past in the present as various and shifting. Most of us do not spend most of our time expressing or enacting national heritage. On the contrary, our everyday senses of heritage are inherently vernacular – different but shared idioms connect us with friends and workmates, neighbours and family, correspondents and acquaintances and strangers. To understand heritage as vernacular recognises diversity as a practice which defines our cultural lives. It also holds out the virtue of thinking about heritage as articulating different temporalities, idioms and feelings in a space of translation and exchange. Vernacular heritage may also be an effective antidote to the paranoid and defensive hollowness of ‘the story of our people ... for all our people ... broadly constituting a scale of heroic and unique achievement against the odds’ (Howard cited in Birch 1997, p. 9).

Guide to further reading

This essay has taken an idiosyncratic route through particular questions which conjoin heritage and cultural institutions. This approach is indebted to Meaghan Morris (1988), a book which overflows with innovative provocations as to how to rethink history (and heritage) in popular culture, and to Tony Bennett’s distinctive and original configuration of cultural history, Culture: A Reformer’s Science (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1998).


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