
Aboriginal Protest and the Sydney Olympic Games

George Morgan*

Introduction - Pleasure or Principled Indifference?

In the lead up to the 2000 Olympics many of my friends, residents of Sydney like me, took a position of principled indifference or hostility. They held the view that the Games were a diabolical farrago best avoided. The IOC was corrupt, the athletes steroid charged egotists, the whole circus was designed to glorify American imperial might and boost the sales of evil transnational corporations like Nike. Many who believed these things left town. A small minority of Sydneysiders promised or practised active dissent: residents rallied against the beach volleyball stadium constructed on Bondi beach. Aboriginal organizations threatened protest action as did groups representing the homeless. There were others whose disgruntlement was more individualized.

My own feelings were ambivalent. I experienced those complex dialectical pulls between pleasure and politics that have frequently been raked over in the fields of media studies and psychoanalysis. I was tempted to join the conscientious objectors and heed the ethical misgivings I have about sport – its commercial hoopla, sickly chauvinism, and obscene levels of monetary reward – but ultimately the spectacle of competition and the mounting public excitement, proved irresistible.

Come September many erstwhile hardened-objectors became converts. They rang talk back radio to repent. They had seen the light. They were happy to queue for hours to buy tickets to obscure sporting spectacles like synchronised swimming or Greco Roman wrestling. A madness gripped them. People desperately sought refunds for air tickets out of Sydney purchased during the apathy months. On the balmy evening before the opening ceremony hundreds of thousands crowded the city streets

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eager and spirited. Strangers talked openly to each other. Those who were caught in crowds expressed no rancour. There was an atmosphere of benign, cheerful tolerance of any inconvenience brought on by the Olympics. In this context it seemed churlish to voice antagonism to sport and what it was doing to the city. Indeed to have expressed indifference towards the Games at this time would have been akin to owning up to some severe moral deviation. I doubt that wartime draft dodgers would have been more vilified.

This article will look at Aboriginal political action (or rather lack of such action) around the Olympic Games. Indigenous leaders had threatened and planned to organize protests aimed at drawing international attention to Australia's failure to address indigenous social problems, but in the event there was very little unrest. This is partly because Olympic organizers gave prominence to the symbols of national reconciliation in the various ceremonies and rituals of the Games, and involved Aboriginal people in the process of organising. It is also partly because indigenous sportspeople were involved in competition, notably Cathy Freeman whose victory in the 400 metres race was widely interpreted as a victory for the process of reconciliation and atonement. There is also, however, a deeper explanation as to why the indigenous dissent was so muted. This relates to the ideological role that sport plays both within the indigenous community and to the broader Australian public. Sport is central to the populist sense of national identity in Australia. It is also a field in which Aboriginal people can mount a symbolic, non-violent challenge to colonialism. To protest against the Olympics is a very different thing from staging demonstrations against politicians or ceremonies of state. It is to risk alienation from the imagined community.



Making People Angry - Protest and Politics at the Games

In Australia those who have organized protests around, or called for boycotts of, sporting events are often publicly vilified for allowing politics to intrude into the field of sport. They are accused of hijacking and adulterating activities that are completely concerned with leisure and should have nothing to do with the mundane business of politics. However, sociologists and historians have argued that where politics is defined broadly sport has always had a political dimension.¹ Sport has long been associated with the efforts of dominant groups to establish social control, with the diversion of those who could potentially threaten social order into the harmless and rule-bound discipline of organized competition. From a bourgeois or colonial point of view aggressive, disorderly and revolutionary impulses are best sublimated and redi-

rected into the healthy contests that occur on the sporting field.

The goal of promoting international political harmony was a central motivation behind the formation of the modern Olympic movement. The founder of the movement Pierre de Coubertin, believed international amateur sporting competition would ameliorate the conflict between nations.² This ideal has continued to influence Olympic sport. Games competition today retains vestiges of an earlier era when all Olympic sport was amateur. The ritual presentation of medals to the three leading competitors (not just the winner); the appearance of egalitarianism with athletes from small and poor countries competing alongside those from dominant powers; the tradition of lodging athletes on equal terms in the Olympic village. These are all practices that work against the cut-throat individualism of professional sport and serve to foster an atmosphere of internationalism. While Olympic competition mobilizes national loyalties and enthusiasms of competitors and supporters, it does so in highly controlled and formalized ways.

However, the Olympics have also provided a platform for the expression of racist colonial dominance. The Nazi regime sought to use the Berlin Olympics in 1936 to parade the dominance of the white race over those they deemed inferior.³ The achievements of African American athletes, particularly Jesse Owens, frustrated this quest. Later in the twentieth century the Olympics provided the opportunity for symbolic engagement between Cold War enemies. United States, China and the former Soviet Union and its satellite states directed vast sums of public money into promoting Olympic success.

Even before the bid to stage the Games in Sydney was successful, Aboriginal leaders were declaring their intention to use the event to raise international awareness of the plight of indigenous people. In October 1991 the NSW Aboriginal Legal Service called on the IOC to reject the Sydney bid for the Olympics on the grounds of Australia's appalling treatment of its Aboriginal citizens.⁴ In response Jean-Claude Ganga the president of the Association of Olympic Committees of Africa said that Africa would not support moves to exclude Australia unless there was evidence of discrimination in sport.⁵

Official boycotts had undermined the Olympics during the seventies and eighties. In 1976 African nations did not send athletes to the Montreal Olympic Games in protest against the participation of New Zealand, a country which had refused to observe a sporting boycott against the Apartheid regime in South Africa. The United States led a boycott involving sixty-two nations against the Moscow Olympics in 1980 to protest against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Eastern Bloc countries retaliated four years later and declined to take part in the Games in Los Angeles.

The nineties, however, saw the end of the Cold War with the fall of the Soviet Union, and the introduction of majority rule in South Africa. These developments meant that governments were not so enthusiastic about engaging in protest action around international sporting events. In addition, this period saw a growth in commercialism around international sport such that participation in the Olympics could lead to elite athletes receiving large financial rewards through sponsorship and merchandising. Such incentives were particularly important for athletes from poor nations, including the African nations whose support Aboriginal leaders were seeking.

There was no consensus within the indigenous movement around what strategy to adopt relative to the Games. In October 1992 Aboriginal leader Paul Coe called for

the Sydney Games bid to be rejected on the grounds of the failure of the government to implement the recommendations of the Royal Commission concerning Aboriginal Deaths in Custody⁶ but he did not enjoy the full support of the Aboriginal movement.⁷ The moderate NSW Aboriginal Land Council, for example, announced that it backed the effort to stage the Olympics in Sydney as did respected activist Burnum Burnum.⁸ In August 1993, however, a gathering of seven hundred Australian Aboriginal leaders in Eva Valley to discuss the Federal Government's legislative response to the High Court's decision to recognise native title in the Mabo case,⁹ signalled their preparedness to organize protests during the Games.¹⁰

After the announcement that Sydney's bid was successful many Aboriginal activists changed tack. Rather than calling on other countries to boycott, they planned to stage protests during the Games in order to highlight the discrimination and social problems their people suffered.¹¹ In Australia there had been precedents for popular protests to take place around sporting events involving competitors from repressive regimes. The seventies and eighties saw a number of actions against those representing South Africa in sports as diverse as golf and rugby union, and against those who agreed to compete against them. Internationally there had been precedents for limited indigenous protests associated with Olympic Games. The Chief of the Lubicon Cree Indians Bernard Ominayak called for a boycott of the Calgary Olympic Winter Games in 1988 to protest against their treatment by the Canadian government and against the destruction of traplines on their traditional lands.¹² The Cree led actions such as the protests alongside the torch relay and at the staging of an exhibition of Native artefacts that was associated with the Games.¹³ Aboriginal leaders gave warnings that similar actions might take place in Sydney.¹⁴

This raised the prospect of violent confrontations with the state as had happened in the past. Those, for example, who protested against the tour of the South African rugby union team in the seventies were publicly vilified and experienced the full force of police and judicial punishment. Prominent Aboriginal leader Charles Perkins warned of the prospect of violent conflict in Sydney. Prior to the Commonwealth Games in Brisbane in 1982, he had stated that "The Brisbane Games will be Australia's Battle of Wounded Knee."¹⁵ There were indeed violent clashes in Brisbane as the right-wing administration of Joh Bjelke-Petersen gave the police considerable powers to stamp out dissent. In April 2000, Perkins said in a radio interview with the British Broadcasting Commission:

We are telling all the British people, please, don't come over. If you want to see burning cars and burning buildings, then come over. Enjoy yourself.¹⁶

Others like politician Aden Ridgeway and Cape York Lands Council leader Noel Pearson used more moderate language and stated their intention to accompany important international visitors on exposure tours of depressed indigenous communities.

Pressure was placed on individual Aboriginal sportspeople to boycott the Olympics or at least to express support for the protests. These were generally resisted. Hurdler Tim Ewen said:

I do care [about Aboriginal issues] but the best way to show that is to do my best. I didn't get into hurdling to make any political statements but because I

enjoy running. I want to see how fast I can run not how many people I can make angry.¹⁷

In November 1997 a circle of Nyungah elders called on athletes, particularly Cathy Freeman, who was expected to do well in the 400 metres race, to boycott the Games as a protest against the Commonwealth government's position on Native Title.¹⁸ Moderate Aboriginal representative, Terry O' Shane responded by saying that these were not the elders from Cathy's country and therefore had no authority to make such a call. American athlete Carl Lewis, visiting Australia at the time, called on Cathy to ignore the politics and compete.¹⁹ Freeman offered no public response to these calls until early 2000 when she wrote in a daily newspaper:

Calls for an Aboriginal boycott of the Olympics really frustrate me – there is no point to it. Politics should be left out of the sporting arena and everyone should support the Olympics in Australia – no matter what.²⁰

She affirmed her commitment to Aboriginal people and declared her intention to carry the Aboriginal flag in the aftermath of her 400 metre final as she had controversially after winning a Commonwealth Gold medal in Victoria, Canada in 1994:

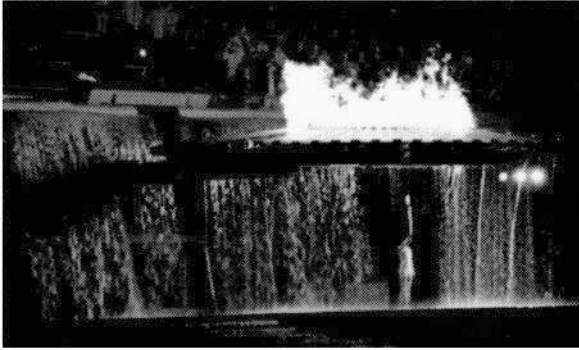
Every race throughout the world has been through hardships and terrible injustices, but now is a time to work together for a better future...Australia has progressed in terms of understanding the black community and the Olympics is a time when no-one is different. When you're competing you don't see colour or background, it is just another athlete.

Aboriginal protests at the Sydney Olympics were more muted than promised or expected. A Tent Embassy was erected in a city park for the duration. However, some planned demonstrations were cancelled and there was little evidence of the strength of feeling of Aboriginal people, even though there was clearly international media interest in their causes. The dire warnings of media and academic observers of widespread state repression proved to have little foundation. Legal academic Stuart Russell, for example, incorrectly predicted that the heavy-handed policing of Brisbane Games, in which hundreds were arrested, would be matched in Sydney.²¹

The Olympic organizing bodies skilfully defused indigenous resistance by paying homage to the original owners in the major ceremonies, negotiating the involvement of some prominent Aboriginal people, and incorporating the imagery of reconciliation in the rituals of the Games. The Sydney Organizing Committee of the Olympic Games employed an indigenous liaison officer Gary Ella, a former international Rugby Union player, and made great efforts to appease the radical elements in the Sydney Aboriginal community. The Metropolitan Lands Council was given the right to establish an exhibition centre on the Games site in which details of the shameful history of colonialism were narrated. A major indigenous cultural festival, the Festival of the Dreaming in which numerous indigenous cultural groups participated, formed part of the lead up to the Games in 1997. The coordinator of this festival Rhoda Roberts was employed as indigenous cultural advisor to the director of the Opening and Closing Ceremonies.

The Olympic Torch Relay carried the symbolism of reconciliation, from its

beginning at Uluru/Ayers Rock to Freeman's lighting of the cauldron during the Opening Ceremony. Nova Peris-Kneebone, Atlanta hockey gold medallist and sprinter in Sydney, was the first to carry the flame. She ran barefoot from Uluru conventionally described as the heart of Australia. Other early participants included Aboriginal tennis player Evonne Cawley (nee Goolagong) and Australian Rules footballer Nicky Winmar ('I couldn't stop crying'). The relay proved to be enormously popular with vast numbers of people lining the routes in its hundred day meandering path around the nation.



The Opening Ceremony was filled with the imagery of reconciliation. A traditional Aboriginal man, 'noble savage' in lap-lap and body paint, held the hand of a curly haired, freckled faced, all-Australian girl and walked confidently into a united future. When Freeman lit the Olympic flame it is widely interpreted as a symbol of reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. Geoff Clark, head of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission and erstwhile firebrand radical leader, stated that:²²

The Sydney 2000 Olympic Games have been a powerful healing statement for Aboriginal Australia. This was evident from the very beginning. The recognition of our culture in the creation scenes at the opening ceremony, the smoking ceremony, acknowledgment of our flag and symbols demonstrated true and proper respect for our people.

He also remarked that the actions of rock band Midnight Oil at the closing ceremony in singing their land rights song *The Beds are Burning* and in wearing 'Sorry' T shirts "were better than any protest we could have organized."²³ It was as if dissent had become incorporated in the Games themselves. For the remainder of this article I will consider how the compliance of indigenous people was achieved.

Sport and Colonialism

It is important to look beyond these political/ cultural machinations in order to understand why the protests of indigenous people and their supporters around the Games were less vociferous than expected. In what follows I will suggest that most Aboriginal people were extremely uneasy about the prospect of protest, particularly violent protest, because sporting achievement is for many of them a source of collective pride.

In the aftermath of violent conquest and seizure of lands the British sought to civilize indigenous people.²⁴ Missionaries and administrators tried to introduce Aboriginal people to sport in order to inculcate notions of fair play, rule bound discipline and to channel competitive and aggressive inclinations into non-violent forms. The same strategies described by various historians and sociologists as characteristic of a bourgeois quest to nullify the rebellious tendencies of the lumpenproletariat and the 'undeserving poor,' were also used to manage native people.²⁵ In summarising the ideas of Elias, Abrams describes sport as involving the "redefinition of normal and proper behaviour, the building of powerful psychological and institutional barriers to the old indiscriminate enactment of feeling (both enthusiasm and aggression)."²⁶

Sport involves the struggle over meaning as with any other cultural field. Subaltern social groups can disrupt and subvert the efforts of those who seek to control them, fashioning their own sporting subcultures, resisting external regulation.²⁷ It is important to recognise that vernacular meanings form an undercurrent to the formal conduct of sporting events and associated public representations. When ruling social groups through the state endeavour to recruit sport to their hegemonic project, they deal with social and cultural materials that are shifting and unstable. So that while organized sport might help to pacify social groups in some circumstances, it may also give rise to movements that disrupt public order. Soccer hooliganism is an example of social upheaval emerging alongside sporting events.²⁸

Aboriginal people were selective and discriminating in their response to sporting colonialism. Some activities were adopted, others rejected. Men embraced forms of competition amenable to displays of aggression and agility like boxing and rugby league. These provided professional opportunities, ways out of lives of poverty and marginalization. They also offered the possibility for symbolic engagements with colonialism. Indigenous women have achieved success in activities as diverse as vigoro, hockey, tennis, softball, and athletics. The sporting field allowed indigenous people to display their physical skills in competition with non-indigenous adversaries on the egalitarian terms that were denied them in other spheres of life.²⁹ In addition to their participation in open competition, Aboriginal people organize their own separatist sporting events – for example the Rugby League Knockouts staged annually in NSW. Yuendumu, a township in the central desert with barely two hundred permanent residents increases its population tenfold each year with the staging of the Aboriginal Olympics.³⁰

Radical Nationalism

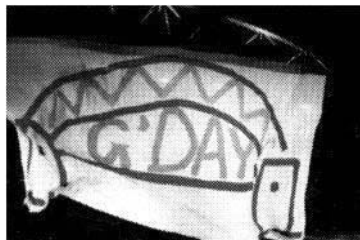
Yet, sport is also associated with symbolic anti-colonialism in another sense. In the late nineteenth century, those born in the Australian colonies – (ironically) known as the Native Born came to outnumber those who had emigrated from the Motherland. At around this time Radical Nationalist ideas gained popularity amongst artists, writers, and thinkers. These people sought to define a culture and politics not based simply on deference to European ways of life but on local conditions. Russell Ward argued in the 1950s that this represented a defining moment in Australian history when the popularization of the bush legend with its archetypal figure of the bushman - knockabout, laconic, practical, hardworking and irreverent – captivated large numbers of Australians, particularly men.³¹ Ward described the popular imaginings of

nationhood, and the fantasies of frustrated frontiersmen. Most of the population lived in coastal cities, but many romanticised the outback. Creative people and intellectuals began to describe the particularities of Australian social and physical landscapes; to see people and places as different from the motherland, not just pale imitations of it.

These cultural and political antipathies were played out on the sporting field. When England's cricket manager Douglas Jardine directed his bowlers to aim their deliveries towards the bodies of the Australian batters in cricket's infamous Bodyline series in the 1930s the resultant outcry led to diplomatic protests.³² To Australians at the time, this demonstrated the dastardly face of Englishness. The visitors would bend any rule to secure victory. Raw, honest antipodean endeavour was pitted against imperial chicanery.

Such mythology continues to have popular purchase today. It shapes both sporting narratives, and the broader popular conceptions of nationhood. There is a conventional belief that we Australians are part of a community that is small, powerless and marginal. National ideology is largely populist. Most Australians see their nation as being defined through the actions, cultures, and achievements of ordinary people rather than through its formal public rituals, political institutions or National Heritage in the English sense. The practices of everyday life – having a barbeque by the beach for example – can be elevated to little rituals of national belonging. These can include playing, watching, organizing or officiating sporting contests.

Yet the Aboriginal challenge to the cosy progressivist national myths have undermined this sense of being the underdog. Revelations of massacres, of dispossession of traditional lands, of the removal of children from their parents and so on have moved large numbers of people, particularly middle class people to recognize the need for some sort of atonement. Many support the Reconciliation movement in the face of the intransigence of a conservative government that refuses to offer a public apology to the Stolen Generation.³³ May 2000 saw the largest political rally in Sydney since WWII. Three hundred thousand people marched across the Harbour Bridge to demonstrate their support for Reconciliation.³⁴ In recent times many Australians have come to the unsettling realization that the same dynamic applying to engagements with England, also characterized the frontier relationship. There is the disturbing awareness that we as white Australians have benefited from years of internal colonialism. How can we masquerade as the underdogs when we have so patently oppressed the indigenous minority as the British oppressed our convict forebears?



Sydney's Opening Ceremony was part of a broader ideological campaign to salvage something from the wreck of radical nationalism. It was a complex cultural text that I suspect signified in different ways to domestic and overseas audiences. It opened with stockmen on horseback cracking stockwhips, wearing Akubra hats and Drizabone raincoats– the archetypal Australian symbol of heroic settlement. Yet it

progressed almost immediately to present a homage to traditional indigenous culture and spirituality. The performance included numerous Aboriginal people in the cast of thousands.

In addressing the Australian audience, the Ceremony represented an attempt to reconcile the founding myths of settler nationhood with the challenges posed from within Aboriginal Australia to those myths. The challenge for the organizers was to structure a performance that could accommodate the idea of settlement but which also genuflected to the primordial traditions of the original inhabitants. If the Indians are not savages are the cowboys still allowed to be heroes? Can they coexist on the same iconic landscape? The attempt at hegemonic salvage involves juxtaposing parallel and incommensurable historical narratives in a perplexing syncretism. The national archetypes - small settlers and convicts - are, by implication, absolved of any sense of involvement in the genocide and dispossession. In this new national historical narrative colonization appears only as an abstract force, something that happens off stage and directly involves none of us, nor any of our forebears. The standard conservative cry in the history wars that have taken place in recent years in Australia is "I should not be made to feel guilty about the past." But if the indigenous challenge to conventional Australian historiography means anything, it means personally confronting the consequences of the past, both material and psychological. When this is achieved we can begin to alienate the advantages we enjoy *vis a vis* indigenous people.

Patriots or Protestors?

There is good evidence that, unlike some of their representatives, the majority of Aboriginal people were not keen to see the Games become the focus for the obstreperous demonstration of political feeling. We can surmise that many shared the view of former Australian rugby captain Mark Ella. He responded to the early call for boycotts by saying "By linking [the Mabo issue] to something that every Australian want, it immediately puts the Aboriginal cause in opposition to every Australian."³⁵

In the months leading up to the Games I administered a questionnaire which was completed by ninety (of 120 distributed) Aboriginal people from around New South Wales. They were asked questions about their involvement in organized sport, their spectatorship of media coverage of sport and their attitudes towards the Sydney Olympics. Fewer than ten percent of respondents were implacably opposed to the Games. The remainder expressed at least some interest. The great majority who supported the proposals for protest action also expressed a desire that this action be peaceful, dignified, and not based on undermining the spectacle or diminishing the occasion. The respondents almost unanimously said they were proud of the achievements of indigenous athletes.

Surprisingly one third wrote of their national pride as well as their pride in Aboriginal sporting accomplishment. But this was by no means the same stuff as the jingoism expressed by politicians in other contexts. It relates to sport as a field of popular endeavour and is a sentiment not transferable to other national causes. Sporting pride is not of the same order of things as bellicose nationalism expressed in relation to other forms of international engagement. In Australia it is not easy for politicians to bathe in reflected sporting glory because sport is the province of the people not their rulers. In spite of their efforts, most politicians find it difficult to slough the image of

formality and aloofness that is associated with their office. One exception was Prime Minister Bob Hawke who successfully cultivated the image of the 'ordinary bloke' and harnessed popular euphoria around sporting triumph, most significantly in the aftermath of Australia's victory over the USA in the 1983 Americas Cup. It is notable that there was a more concerted and emphatic indigenous protest against the national Bicentennial celebrations, the last large-scale public celebration staged in Australia.³⁶ There appeared to be a sense of popular custodianship over the Olympics that did not exist in 1988.³⁷

The questionnaire responses indicate that Aboriginal people were ambivalent about their collective public image and the way they were likely to be depicted in the mass media during the Games. On the one hand they wished to convey the sense that they are an oppressed minority, to shatter the image of a peacefully-settled, young nation, a consensual imagined community striving to build a bright shining future. They suffer incarceration, suicide, and unemployment rates many times higher than apply in the general Australian community. They have life expectancy at Third World levels. Aboriginal men, for example, can expect to die some years before their fiftieth birthdays. The Federal government has legislated to circumscribe the native title rights that were granted to them by the High Court. This same government is highly sensitive to international perceptions that it is oppressing the indigenous minority.

However, the questionnaires indicate that the radical desire to shame the government by highlighting Aboriginal social deprivation was tempered by the wish for indigenous achievements to be recognized, particularly in the field of sport. "Don't just focus on the negative" was a frequently heard cry, and "Don't just show us as victims show us as striving for and achieving success." This is the classic tension between collectivism and individualism. Is it possible to project these two messages simultaneously? Can Aboriginal people say: "we are both people of action and people who are oppressed. Our society both frustrates our ambitions and allows us to live out our dreams. We are international athletes and we have had our lives wrecked by alcohol, broken homes, violence and persecution?"

In a letter published in *Sydney Morning Herald* Western Australian Aboriginal Rodney Rivers wrote:

These protests are very disappointing because they do not promote the genuine Australian Aborigines and their achievements nor their contribution to mainstream society. Also the true tribal full blood Aboriginal leaders are here in outback Australia, but they have been marginalised and ignored by the activists. These same true Aboriginal leaders do not support a treaty proposal nor do they support the activists' marches in Sydney. It can only be hoped that the whole of Australia and the world, as they focus on Sydney at this time, do not generalise and that they realise that Aboriginal protests during the Olympics are not representative of all Aboriginal people in Australia. The Olympic games is all about sport and celebrating together. Protest marches during the Games are counter-productive and a loser's game. Australia is for both black and white – we are all Australians.³⁸

These words reflect the longstanding tensions between indigenous rural dwellers and urban based activists that have existed within Aboriginal politics since the emergence

of Black Power politics in the early 1970s.

Cathy Freeman

In many ways the tensions between Aboriginal radicals and moderates were symbolically resolved through the figure of Cathy Freeman, the woman chosen to light the Olympic cauldron at the Opening Ceremony. As John Hargreaves argues:

When media sport routinely shows blacks ... successfully achieving in sport and becoming celebrities, what is being signalled is racial harmony and progress. Quite inadvertently inequality and conflict occurring elsewhere is written off the agenda.³⁹

As part of the Nike stable, Freeman is a highly-paid, international athlete. She left her ancestral land to join the global athletics circuit. Media images depict her as lycra-clad, lithe, and muscled. Her intense concentrating face adorns Qantas airline advertisements with the slogan "The Spirit of Australia," a play on indigenous spirituality which has been harnessed to promote tourism in recent times. After the Games these were replaced with images of her smiling and the slogan "That's the Spirit."

Yet for all of this in many ways Freeman does not fit the mould of the brash, ambitious athlete. Rather she is shy, self deprecating, apparently bewildered in the limelight, and obviously uncomfortable when the focus of excessive praise and adoration. She has none of the swaggering confidence of many (particularly male) track and field athletes. She seems vulnerable; an innocent amidst the sharks of international sports marketing. Inept in financial affairs, she seems to have been exploited by those around her. The biographical narrative fits the pattern of bourgeois individualism.⁴⁰ Small town girl. Precocious athletic ability. Giant stride. Cheekily tells teachers she will become an Olympic athlete and does. Dedication, singularity of purpose. Raw talent, coached into competitive ability.

Undoubtedly, for many Australians, Freeman provokes feelings of paternalism. This is not the same as the form of paternalism that characterized the Assimilation era. This was the period in the middle third of the twentieth century, in which a sense of cultural superiority blinded us to the traditions, culture and community of indigenous people and in which the state sought to guide indigenous Australians towards 'normal' 'civilized' habits of life. The public feelings towards Freeman are slightly more tolerant and permissive, but they are paternalistic nevertheless. Were she belligerent or stridently radical, she would probably attract far less sympathy. But her construction as child-like, as governed by those around her, connects her with the registers of amateurism, and reminds us of a time when athletes were placed in the care of coaches (*locus parentis*), and gently guided in the right direction.

When she protested by carrying the Aboriginal flag on a lap of honour after a gold medal winning performance at the Commonwealth Games in Victoria, Canada she was castigated by officialdom for shunning the protocols.⁴¹ Yet the protest did not come across as arrogant or belligerent. It was apparently spontaneous and understated. In contrast with the African-American sprinters who gave the Black Power salute when receiving their medals in Mexico City in 1968,⁴² Freeman enjoyed great sympathy amongst the Australian public who generally look on such displays of mild

larrikinism with some warmth. When she won in Sydney it was widely heralded as a victory for Reconciliation, a heartening symbol of future unity. After the Games she undertook a widely publicized homecoming to Mackay in North Queensland.

The volume of international media coverage of Freeman's exploits indicates that interest in the process of reconciliation went beyond the boundaries of Australia. In its review of sporting events in 2000 the *Financial Times* of London stated:

Cathy Freeman... [t]he 27 year old Aboriginal runner dominated the Sydney Olympics from the moment she lit the torch at the opening ceremony to the time she crossed the finishing line to win the women's 400m. She also gave the world the lasting image of the Games and of this sporting year, collapsing after finishing the race – sitting with her hand clasped across her mouth in shock at what she had just done – as the crowd rose to salute her.

It was not the fastest 400m ever run but rarely can a single home athlete have carried as much expectation as Freeman. In the 12 months before the Games she became a symbol, for white Australia, of reconciliation with the Aboriginal population.

There was the hope that modern Australia was finally going to address the racism and neglect it has heaped upon its indigenous people. Nobody could have been fooled that an event lasting less than 50 seconds would reverse centuries of abuse but arguably the wider importance of Freeman, and her triumph made the women's 400m final the most significant sporting event of the year.⁴³

Conclusion

Much past sociological analysis of international sporting contests has focussed on the ways in which they provide wealthy imperial powers with the opportunity symbolically to demonstrate their might and racial superiority. What has preoccupied me here, by contrast, is the way in which the Olympic Games in Sydney were used to address an internal national tension, that between black and white. My analysis has shown that it is important to differentiate forms of nationalism, to recognise the statist and populist variants and to acknowledge that in Australia sporting achievements form part of a populist mythology of nation. Sport provides the Aboriginal community with a source of collective pride and way of connecting to the broader public sphere. When indigenous leaders threatened to organize protests during the Olympics they did not enjoy the unqualified support of their people. Many believed that belligerent action would detract from the individual achievements of competitors such as Cathy Freeman. To the broader Australian public, the indigenous symbolism which was central to the Games served as an ideological balm to troubled consciences. In recent times, the old celebratory narratives of nation have been severely dented by the post-colonial challenges. This posed enormous ideological and political challenges to those in charge of organizing the Games. These Games were being staged on Aboriginal land.

We can see the Opening Ceremony as part of a broader ideological realignment in Australia. The concept of hegemony is useful for understanding the way national

history and culture are reworked in situations of social conflict to construct a reconciled imagined community. Gramsci explored the ways in which nation-states secure the support of the citizens and preserve the interests of dominant groups, through non-coercive means.⁴⁴ This involves developing a national-popular ideology to defuse social conflict. In unequal societies the climate of social order is fragile. The hegemonic project (hegemony is something pursued but rarely achieved) involves the incorporation of elements of lived culture and some political demands of subaltern groups into the national-popular whole without compromising the primary interests of dominant groups. Where a hegemonic crisis occurs in a situation of conflict between dominant and oppressed social groups the pre-existing, "hegemonic discourse is abandoned as scorched earth [and] a different discourse forged in a process of disobedience and combat...is enunciated."⁴⁵ By deploying the repertoire of symbolic Reconciliation, as expressed through the pageantry and symbolism of the Sydney Olympics, the state seeks to evade the responsibility to address the deeper questions of colonial power. The test for Reconciliation lies not in the field of national public representations. It lies in the ability of governments to address the enormous social problems that continue to be experienced by indigenous people in Australia today.

Endnotes

1. E. Dunning (ed.) *The Sociology of Sport* (London: Frank Cass, 1971); and J. Harreaves *Sport, Culture and Power* (Cambridge: Polity, 1986).
2. A. Kruger, "De Coubertin and the Olympic Games as Symbols of Peace" in G. Redmond, ed., *Sport and Politics* (Champaign: Human Kinetics Publishers, 1986).
3. D. Bennett, "The Olympic Games of Los Angeles 1932, as seen by the Nationalist and Racial Ideology" in G. Redmond, ed., *Sport and Politics*, (Champaign: Human Kinetics Publishers, 1986).
4. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 October 1991, p. 4.
5. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 October 1991, p. 11.
6. This extensive inquiry had found that State penal systems in Australia were not sufficiently sensitive or responsive to the indigenous culture and society. It recommended reforms designed to reduce Aboriginal deaths in custody.
7. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 October 1992, p. 24.
8. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 31 October 1992, p. 11.
9. In May 1989 the High Court overturned two centuries of legal precedent to acknowledge that the land of Australia, far from being terra nullius, was subject to native title.
10. S. Russell, "and the winner is ..." *Alternative Law Journal* vol. 19, no.3 (1994), p. 118.

11. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 September 1996, p. 1.
12. 'Land Protest Olympic Boycott,' *New Internationalist*, no. 171, May 1987 (<http://www.newint.org/issue171/update.htm>).
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 34. *The Australian*, 29 May 2000, p. 1.
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 37. Aboriginal athletes received less media coverage in the lead up to the 1982 Commonwealth Games in Brisbane than their counterparts did in Sydney. As a consequence indigenous people had less invested in that event. The Land Rights protests that took place at the time of the Games also received little media coverage and public sympathy.
 38. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 September 2000, p. 11.
 39. J. Hargreaves, "The Body, Sport and Power Relations" in J. Home, D. Jary, and A. Tomlinson, eds., *Sport, Leisure and Social Relations* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987), p. 156.
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