

# The Importance of Being 'un-Australian'

**Author:**

McNeill, David

**Publication details:**

Artlink: Australian contemporary art quarterly

v. 24

Chapter No. 4

0727-1239 (ISSN)

**Publication Date:**

2004

**License:**

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/au/>

Link to license to see what you are allowed to do with this resource.

Downloaded from <http://hdl.handle.net/1959.4/44805> in <https://unsworks.unsw.edu.au> on 2024-04-20



200501071

Copyright of Full Text rests with the original copyright owner and, except as permitted under the Copyright Act 1968, copying this copyright material is prohibited without the permission of the owner or its exclusive licensee or agent or by way of a licence from Copyright Agency Limited. For information about such licences contact Copyright Agency Limited on (02) 93947600 (ph) or (02) 93947601 (fax)

# the importance of being 'un-Australian'

David McNeill

Melbourne's first *Moomba* festival was held in 1956. This was an important year for the city, not only because of the introduction of television, but also because we were hosting the Olympic games, and it was expected that the city would become, if only for a brief moment, the focus of world attention. The Suez Crisis and the Hungarian Uprising put paid to that particular ambition. However, the Olympics left in their wake a general sense that the city had come of age, and that the 'Venice of the South' could now take its rightful place as one of the great cities of the post-war era. *Moomba* was founded by the city fathers on the presumption that every great metropolis needs an annual carnival that is ecumenical in spirit and spectacular in its staging. It is an event that has given rise to a couple of stories that have a popular currency in Melbourne, but are not generally familiar to those who live in the rest of the country. One of them is possibly apocryphal, and the other is a matter of historical record.

The *Moomba* festival replaced the annual celebration of the winning of the eight-hour day. Thus an occasion that had originally been devised to commemorate an important victory of the Australian labour movement was transformed into a bipartisan celebration of civic pride and family values. In search of an appropriate title, the instigators approached a respected indigenous leader who suggested the new name. When asked what it meant, he is supposed to have replied, '*Moomba* means, 'Let's get together and have fun!' By the middle 1960s the focus of the festival, a parade of floats through the centre of the city, had been transformed into a celebration of urban retail capital. The most impressive floats were produced by and for large department stores such as Myers and Foys.

The King and Queen of *Moomba* led the procession in an open car. The former was, typically, a media personality or a sporting hero and the Queen was, not surprisingly, a beauty pageant winner. The Kings of *Moomba* were all local or national celebrities until the somewhat surprising nomination of Mickey Mouse in 1977.

For a younger generation of Melbournians, whose recollections of the struggles against conscription and of our shameful involvement in the Vietnam War were still fresh, this unabashed embracing of American cultural imperialism was a little hard to take. The Australian Independence Movement, a small organisation of cultural workers loosely aligned with the Maoist Communist Party of Australia (Marxist-Leninist), started a counter campaign under the rubric 'send the rat back home'. They nominated the Australian fictional koala, Blinky Bill, as their rival candidate for the crown and Blinky arrived outside the Hilton hotel where Mickey was staying, and challenged him to fight for the right to lead the procession. The bear was arrested, bundled into a police van, and booked for disturbing the peace.

The A.I.M. was a small organisation, and its politics were somewhat radical by the standards of the day, and yet their campaign struck a chord with the public. Newspapers, television, and the new medium of talkback radio, all registered strong support. Nevertheless, Mickey chose not to abdicate, and to depose him would have involved loss of face and possible legal difficulties. Consequently he did lead the procession, although he was pelted with fruit along the way and Blinky managed to join the procession at its tail and was cheered through the city.

Thus a blow was struck for an independent Australia, freed from subservience to the cultural, economic and political priorities of the United States. Indeed the people who decide such matters have never again proposed a non-resident King of *Moomba*.

The second of our *Moomba* stories takes place some five years later. The elderly Aboriginal leader, wishing to clear the air before he passed away, confessed that he had misled the city fathers about the meaning of *Moomba*. In fact, it translated most accurately as 'arsehole'!

I don't know if this story is true. Like many readers, I suspect, I would like it to be, if only because it may help counsel us to treat anyone's presentation of an essential national identity with a certain healthy scepticism. The pro-Blinky campaigners may have felt that they had peeled away the outer leaves of American influence and uncovered an authentic kernel of 'Australianness', but as the second of our anecdotes reveals, national identity, like an onion, has no kernel. Beneath an Australia construed in terms of a democratic respect for labour there reside further layers of prior indigenous history and culture. Finally there is no Australian 'essence' construed in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions.

YOUR COMMITMENT TO GLOBAL  
JUSTICE IS  
MOST  
UNAUSTRALIAN



These musings are, I feel, relevant to our present circumstances. At the time of writing (September 2004) our government, and in particular our current Prime Minister, are partial to playing the patriot card. They seem confident in the knowledge of what constitutes a true and proper Australian and, more importantly, what doesn't constitute one. Indeed it could be argued that the Australian political landscape in the wake of the events of September 11 has been marked by a kind of 'hysterical' neo-nationalism that defines itself by a series of exclusions, both domestic and external. It is perhaps ironic that at a moment in history when so many commentators are predicting the decline of the nation-state in a world of increasing transnational economic, political and cultural exchange, nationalistic rhetoric is so rampant. After all, John Howard has sutured our foreign policy firmly to that of the United States, and he is about to sign off on a rather controversial bi-lateral free trade agreement. It is this fundamental contradiction that I try to capture with the prefix 'hysterical'. Some European commentators have attempted to capture similar forms of neo-nationalism with the far less flattering sobriquet 'post-fascism'.

Nationalism has always been, at best, an ambiguous means of invoking or enforcing social coherence, precisely because it is always premised on exclusion. This is nowhere more true than in a semi-peripheral settler culture such as ours. The putative 'progressive' nationalism of the Whitlam government, or the republican nationalism of Paul Keating, have their mirror images in the conservative nationalism associated with the tenure of Malcolm Fraser, or nationalism of the current 'hysterical' kind. As Marxists of a Trotskyite persuasion never tired of reminding their Maoist colleagues in the seventies,

nationalism should only be invoked cautiously and judiciously and then only as an antidote to direct colonial occupation or threat. European Australians can hardly lay claim to living in such circumstances.

However, I believe that nationalism in the form that we currently experience it differs in a number of important ways from earlier avatars. If we accept Benedict Anderson's well-known formulation that the national subject is one who feels her/himself to be part of an 'imagined community' then it is increasingly the case that this imagining is being done *for* us, rather than by us. There has never been a time in our history when the print and mainstream electronic media has been so unified in their support of a conservative and nationalistic political agenda. Right-wing columnists and talkback hosts have established a near monopoly on what is misleadingly called 'public opinion', and persistent government attacks on the independence of the ABC have further marginalised public debate and dissent. Where once conservative politicians might have fretted over the possibility that News Limited, for example, might have offered qualified support for the ALP, hegemony is now assured and assumed. Where once the 'core values' that underwrite our particular species of 'imagined community' bore some relationship to the lived experience of everyday life they are now manufactured and disseminated from the top down as if their consensual origins were uncontroversial. This managed, top down, nationalism is not necessarily more detestable than the populist nationalism of One Nation, but it is more insidious in the ways in which it naturalises perverse and brutal behaviour in the name of national consensus. It depends, I believe, in a kind of progressive alienation of lateral, or everyday, dialogue and exchange, in favour of the centralisation of the process of national imagining. Thus the War on Terror transforms civic responsibility into the ability to treat neighbours and strangers with suspicion. In the arena of tertiary education, web-based delivery, attacks on student unionism and the prioritising of vocational programs all serve to isolate students and to anaesthetise them against localised peer debate and criticism. (I recently heard an education lecturer say, *the time in which a student is speaking in class is time in which they are not learning*). As our social relationships ossify, and as we become more and more monadic, as dialogue and exchange progressively mutate into media genres like talkback radio, reality TV audience participation, and current affairs vox populi slots, it becomes ever easier for others to represent our interests and our opinions to us and for us.

These processes are well-illustrated in the recent struggles over the interpretation of our frontier history. Keith Windshuttle's denigration of oral history and his insistence on the veracity of official archives enact precisely this elision of lateral peer exchange in favour of the centrally administered arbitration of truth claims. The national press covered the ensuing debate in some detail, in order to establish their credentials as fit arbiters of what was presented as a compelling argument amongst intellectuals about the nature of our national history and identity. Meanwhile the protagonists argued about the precise numbers of indigenous Australians that had been massacred in the 19th Century, claiming all the while that their primary concern was in the disinterested recovery of historical 'truth'. The real 'truth', as so many observers noted, was that the government needed an 'intellectual' and 'empirical' basis for their denigration of the so-called 'black armband' view of Australian history and, had the national press not embraced its role in the process of manufacturing hegemony, it is inconceivable that the debate would have attracted any coverage at all.

All cartoons by Bart.



Readers will not need to be reminded that the subsequent inquiry into the presentation of frontier history in the National Museum of Australia produced as blatant a case of Government interference and censorship as one could hope to find anywhere at any time. At the time of writing it remains to be seen whether the Museum's quotation of the zigzag ground plan from Daniel Liebeskind's Berlin Jewish Museum will survive the stern gaze of those whose desire for control of the social imaginary appears so absolutely rapacious. After all, the association of the treatment of indigenous Australians with the Holocaust is hardly a palatable one for those who insist on arguing for the benign and civilising influence of European settlement.

The kind of implosion that has seen the national press transformed into a de facto arm of government may seem ironic given the neo-liberal commitment to divestment and privatisation. As government investment in services declines, its control over what we might call the 'production and maintenance of national consciousness' has become more and more firm. In an obvious sense, the conformity between media coverage and conservative government is underwritten by class interest, and hence the paradox that a state instrumentality such as the ABC has proved more unruly and less easily tamed than private organizations such as PBL, Fairfax or News Limited. However I believe that the adroit nurturing of fear has also facilitated this top-down-nationalism. Imagine, if you can, a

government that goes out of its way to offer itself as a target of terrorism (by coat-tailing the foreign policy of the most belligerent nation in history, by promulgating imaginary threats posed by distant states and then assisting in their invasion and so on) and then uses this threat as a justification for abrogating to itself the role of sole arbiter of what it is to be a proper Australian citizen.

The commodification of fear was the greatest single economic by-product of 9/11. The fear industry, understood as the manufacture and marketing of everything from home security devices to military armaments, has profited enormously in the last four years, and indeed, these profits have more than offset the losses incurred by the travel and tourist industries in all but a few 'developed' countries. More importantly fear offers itself as a compelling political tool, and our coalition government has proven particularly adroit in the manner in which it has created, mobilised and exploited it. Populations are more willing to cede responsibilities that might normally devolve on them if they believe they are living in a climate of unusual threat. They are also more likely to view their neighbours with suspicion.

The artist and writer Suzann Victor has experienced 'top down' nationalism in more than one country. Now resident in Australia, she has represented Singapore in the *Venice Biennale*. She is an archetypal cosmopolitan or transnational subject, and in a paper delivered recently at the *Asian Traffic* conference in Sydney she eloquently expressed her reservations about being presented as a 'state' artist. Racial, cultural or national identities can only be maintained, she argued, by a process of abjection or expulsion that necessarily marginalises or vilifies a community *within*, as well as *beyond*, the imagined boundaries of state or culture.

In the late nineties the Indigenous football player, Anthony Mundine, resigned from his team in order to follow a career in boxing. Returning from a trip to the US, he gave a press conference in which he scathingly condemned the racism that he saw as endemic to Australian society. He spoke in a kind of hybrid Austral-Ebonics, and proudly referred to his recent conversion to Islam. Shortly after the conference, a respected sports commentator announced that he would probably agree with much that Mundine had said but he wished he would say it 'in an Australian way'. For Mundine, of course, the language of black struggle in the US was empowering, it enabled him to say things in a manner, and with an authority, that he might not otherwise have been able to muster. He refused to allow his identity as an Indigenous Australian to be bounded by geography or by the constraints of local language. Instead he had adopted a quite precise and strategic global or transcultural persona, the better to articulate the issues confronting his people.



Such are the possibilities opened up in a globalised world. Mundine is particularly outspoken and articulate but, by and large, the Australian media has not accorded him the respect he deserves. Shortly after 9/11 he gave a television interview in which he said, simply, that the event could only be understood in the context of the history of American foreign policy in the Middle East. Although he in no way endorsed the attack he was vilified in the Australian press and a number of boxing organisations threatened to ban him from competition. Mundine's 'sin' was to situate Australian problems in a global context. He had, at least implicitly, shown what might happen if local issues were taken 'off the field'.

It seems to me that the kinds of refusal of boundaries implicit in Victor's analysis of nationalism, and in Mundine's strategic use of gangsta rap, suggest to us how important it is to pay very close attention to hysterical nationalism; not simply to disavow its particular portrait of responsible citizenship, in the name of some prior myth of fairplay and egalitarianism, but more radically, to acknowledge the very impossibility of any concept of 'Australia' that is consistent with humanist principles and a commitment to global justice. ☞

---

David McNeill lectures in contemporary and postcolonial art at the College of Fine Arts in Sydney. He is a Deputy Director of the Centre for Contemporary Art and Politics at the University of New South Wales.