

Identity Anxiety

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In academic circles, identity has become the New Black: basic but sophisticated, essence yet also artifice. The Humanities' central question -- what it means to be human -- is refracted through the prism of postmodernism into questions about what it means to be any particular kind of human, in any particular time and place. In history, sociology, anthropology, linguistics, politics, literature, media or cultural studies, our students go home each semester with assignments asking them to look at how identity is defined, inherited, shaped, nurtured, cherished, celebrated, colonized, contested, denied, suppressed, lost, forgotten, damaged, destroyed, reclaimed, reinvented, sought or bought, branded, marketed, imagined, remembered, realized, enacted or expressed. But bound up with the urge to examine who we are, how we know, and why it matters, is a sense of the fragility of identity. Just when globalization suggests the possibility of living as a citizen of the world, we shrink back, like the silkworms in Douglas Stewart's poem, which have lived "all their lives in a box!" -- and, even when the lid is taken off, will not climb out.¹

Once agents in the export of identity from the cultural West, Australians now fear colonization by American popular -- and unpopular -- culture. The seas which have always washed in and out of the tide pool of Australian culture seem likely to submerge it under a wrack of American television formats, fast foods, and fashions. "Free" trade, we worry, will replace our home-grown imagination with alien cultural products. Political alliances will mean compliance with a world-view in which imposition, rather than exchange, is the norm. In a country whose great strength is its fluidity, its ability to absorb colour and grace from wave after wave of immigrants and still remain grounded, there has emerged a countervailing need to define and defend what is Australian.

For this exercise in self-identification, the Olympic Games were bound to be a proving-ground. Every four years the Australian brand is launched again on the world stage, the narratives of hardship and mateship rewritten, the hopes reinvested, the medals recounted, and the nation reassured. Each athlete, while striving for individual success, is invested with

a collective national identity. Globalisation has complicated this ideal in interesting ways, as the global imbalance of opportunity has brought about an athletic diaspora and athletes born in one “homeland” win gold for another. And, if identity is fluid across national borders, it is also contested within them. Cathy Freeman caused much soul-searching when she found the courage to carry the Aboriginal as well as the Australian flag, and made it clear what Australians had to mean if they were to go on calling her “Our Cathy”. Less significant, perhaps, was the furore this year when the Olympic ritual of bonding came unstuck in the rowing final as Sally Robbins collapsed and her teammates socially, if not literally, threw her overboard. For me, however, this drama and the ensuing flood of letters and opinion pieces in the media crystallized a sense of what Australian culture has to lose – and what, perhaps, I am aware of because I am one of the thousands of immigrants who washed up here for economic reasons but found a cultural home in ways I least expected. There is, I think, some cause for anxiety about Australian identity; but the risk is not so much from the seductions of globalization as from the tensions within itself.

When I came to Australia a quarter of a century ago, as a young mother I was naturalized through my children’s attendance at playgroups, then kinder and school. It was not the rhetoric of a chance for all, but the habits of inclusion that impressed me then. At children's birthday parties, there were no elimination games. Nobody played musical chairs; nobody was Out. The candles on the birthday cake were lit over and over until every child had blown them out. To Australians, this must have seemed normal, but to a foreigner who grew up standing back in small ways every day, it was remarkable. As the children went to primary school, the same sane sense of perspective ensured that, on the oval, nobody could get out until they had scored. Conversely, nobody could stay in forever: each child got a turn to play. And when the Olympics rolled around and every school was mounting its own version of the Games, I was charmed by the lack of self-importance with which my children’s principal lit the Olympic wastebasket.

I never was persuaded that these habits made Australia an equal or all-inclusive society. For one thing, I could see that nobody lived in my suburb whose presence at a birthday party would have posed a challenge to the hostess’ hospitality. For another, my children encountered the usual snakes and ladders of social life as they grew older. There were organized sports, with the netball mums baying on the sidelines; the hierarchies of the

¹ D. Stewart, “The Silkworms”, in *The Penguin Book of Australian Verse*, eds. J. Thompson, K. Slessor and R.G.

playground; the ranking of schools (there was “our school” and “the sluts’ school”). There were the usual divisions between haves and have-nots. And yet, the expectation of civility had not been a mirage. People grew up civil, if – as everywhere – a little scarred. Mateship might conceal all sorts of struggles, but it *did* conceal them. Whether or not that is a good thing is certainly open to question. Still, I knew that there were worse ways to grow up.

I was uneasy, therefore, when Australian television took up elimination games. First there was Big Brother, with its ugly spectacle of bonding around the exclusion of a member of the community each week. I felt that this was unAustralian, though it echoed the milieu my children had encountered as puberty set in. I could not say that it was foreign to the culture, but it made the peculiarly disturbing world of adolescent girls into an acceptable norm for people of every age. Australians were transfixed, and I was worried. And yet, the worst that could happen didn’t. The contestants became, in their own bizarre way, Australian mates. It happened again on Australian Idol, when those with the most at stake developed a generous affection for one another as the climax approached. These “games” are proliferating as fast as anybody can come up with an angle; is it possible that Australians can continue to naturalise these rituals of exclusion?

What is needed is a robust sense of proportion, and that is not easy to come by in a country where the have-nots are mercifully few by world standards, and small stakes can therefore seem unnaturally large. It was such a distortion of proportion that we saw in the Olympic Games in Athens. Where the Idol contestants manage to accept that they are good enough, by the balance and interplay of a whole complex set of criteria, our athletes have got to be best, by a single criterion. The rhetoric has been overwhelmingly of winning, or if not winning, putting every ounce of effort into trying. The children who waited until each batter scored have grown up to place so little value on any score except the highest, that silver medal winners are prone to mental illness following their achievement. It is actually safer to come third than second. Athletes are applauded, moreover, for taking serious risks, as we saw when Grant Hackett swam, despite asthma and a chest infection, Natalie Cook battled on with a broken shoulder, and Jana Pitmann returned to the hurdle track although racing again, so soon after her injury, might have done her lasting damage.

Grant Hackett committed himself to do “whatever it takes”. The phrase found enormous resonance among Australian spectators. Andrew Stevenson of the *Age* traced this to the Anzac spirit, the expectation that Australians will “place the unit before the individual”, and never retreat.² If our youth cannot hope to match their grandfathers’ courage under fire, they can at least battle through in the pool or on the track. It may be equally illuminating to remember Phar Lap, the horse that became an icon for Australians during the Depression. Phar Lap was not just a racehorse, but a metaphor; he was a hero, in a nation of punters, for the size of his “heart” – both the outsized muscle in his chest and its connotations of courage, effort, and dependability. Hackett, too, has shown heart, and Cook, and Pitman. But only Sally Robbins seems to have recalled that the heart is not just a metaphor but a physical organ, and that if one has to choose between metaphorically breaking other people’s hearts and actually breaking one’s own, the choice is not necessarily obvious. Her body refused to do more, and her team mates turned on her in very visible disgust – disgust that was shared by many at home, including Our Cathy, who suggested that quitting was “unAustralian”. For the next several days, accusations and defenses flew back and forth in the media, couched in the idiom of identity: was it unAustralian to give up, or unAustralian to let down your mates? And if the latter (for mateship is perhaps the most iconic of Australian values), did the failure of mateship consist in Robbins’ inability to go on rowing, or in her team mates’ rejection of her, which was not mended in anyone’s estimation by the statement of solidarity they were later compelled to make?

This question gave rise to another question of values: how does it come about that Olympic success or failure is a matter for heartbreak? The situation that developed in the rowing final could turn so ugly only because Australia has developed a culture in which it is possible -- indeed, almost mandatory -- for athletes to make sport their only priority. A few years ago, a young friend who was training with the Australian Institute of Sport withdrew when it became clear that she was expected to put her training ahead of everything else: not just the small routines of sociability that make a teenager’s life supportable, but family crises as well. This was a brave decision, however, in the face of the high expectations -- and the money -- that the Institute had "invested" in her. Winning, as Stevenson says, has become “a national obsession. We buy the best coaches in the world, build the best facilities, send massive teams -- ... and then marvel at our success (‘it must be Aussie spirit!’ we say triumphantly) against

² A. Stevenson, “The Odd Australian Out”, *Age* 28 August 2004, Insight 3.

Third World countries with no money to spend on sport.”³ By investing so much in Olympic success, however, Australia invites harm to the most cherished component of its own imagined identity, the value of mateship.

Our inability to cope with being only good enough brought out the contradictions in a global gathering which is touted as a celebration of cooperation but soon becomes a theatre of domination, where participation is the ideal but ranking is the goal, and the story is all about winners and losers. Australian identity is vulnerable, not because it fails to resist the seductions of other, flashier cultural products, but because, like other nations, we invest our cultural confidence in national performances. Whether games or battles, these are always going to be about ranking, splitting and winning. If this undermines the things we most like about ourselves, we would do better to climb over the edge of our box and look at what makes us the same as everybody else, in every other time and place. It is perhaps five thousand years since Gilgamesh, the hero of the epic of Sumer (now Iraq), was advised to accept that he would never find the secret of immortality and should, instead, “cherish the little child that holds your hand, and make your wife happy in your embrace; for this ... is the lot of man”.⁴ It is the lot of people everywhere; and if we devoted ourselves to safeguarding this modest ideal, not just for ourselves but for our neighbours, we would have less cause to be anxious about our own identity.

³ Stevenson, Insight 3.

⁴ N.K. Sandars, ed. and trans., *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, 2nd Edition (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 102.