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Whitefella worship

Biographical note:

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Four old Warlpiri women artists, and their daughter, granddaughter and great-granddaughter, came down to Sydney from Lajamanu on the edge of the Tanami desert, for a workshop to paint their *jukurpa*.

We set them up in a studio on the top floor of the College of Fine Arts, with a deep balcony and a view to the harbour. They had yards of Belgian linen, litre bottles of acrylic paint, brushes and bamboo skewers with which to make dots. They were paid by the hour and the resulting paintings they retain as a collection.

This research project invited them to share some women's business though painting some of their traditional designs for our instruction. This idealism was perhaps honoured more in the breach. My enduring lesson from this intercultural event was how we turned out to be whitefellas, with all the complicated responsibility and shame that should bring home.

How little I got to know them. I know they like chicken and chips, but not the trendy Portuguese type – 'Too spicy, Napaljarri!' – and lemon soft drink, and they did repeatedly ask to go shopping. Not an unnatural request when you're in the Big Smoke and you've just been paid.

I took them shopping to Bondi Junction, but the mall was overwhelming, with its five floors of fashion stores and a tower of moving escalators in the atrium. Myra wouldn't chance them, she remained marooned on the top floor and we had to rescue her via the lifts, which were out the back. Then we spent fifteen minutes, out on the street, waiting for a taxi that would pick up blackfellas.



The studio space of concrete and glass took on a little of the look of a desert camp, with paintings unfinished being walked across on the floor, and tea brewed in a billy, and the quiet intentness of concentration going on in the middle of a parade of people walking in and out – to use the urn or the sink, to have a smoke on the balcony – and the tide of other obligations – to pick up the school-age children or pacify the toddler or move the cars so they wouldn't get booked.

We had plenty of kids, but no dogs, which I gathered was a short-coming. Lily told me about her dogs over lunch of chicken and chips, and she showed me on her tiny spindly calf how they would bite. She and Rosie told me about lots of other things that lunch time, but most of them in Warlpiri, and I repeated, as my contribution, 'I'm sorry I don't speak Warlpiri. I'm afraid I don't really understand'. Lynette said later: 'Them old ladies, they really funny. They been hit over the head too many times'. She said it with a classical Aboriginal dryness that makes me laugh.

We were given skin names to smooth the interaction with the Aboriginal group, names given by the old ladies. They called me Napaljarri, making me a granddaughter to Lynette, an aunty-niece with Myra and Lily, and mother-daughter with Molly and Rosie.

My son was given the Warlpiri name Jupurrurla. His English name was, coincidentally, *kumanjai* – that is, shared by a relative who had recently died and was thereby subject to the Aboriginal mourning practice that the names of the dead not be pronounced. Protocol required he not be called by his 'real' name in the hearing of the Aboriginal people, because it may give offence.

This edict hurt me in an explicit but surprising way. I found myself cut off from a vocalising that expresses my special connection to this child, and which carries the practice of love. The effect was the feeling that my son and I were being separated, and I resented it viscerally. My hurt showed up in my inability to adequately pronounce 'Jupurrurla'. While I learned to say many other Warlpiri words, I could never say Jupurrurla without stumbling over it. This became an embarrassment, as I stumbled and Lynette begged me to use his English name: 'Don't worry!', she cried.

This small experience hurt more than I would have credited. So I feel dreadful when I hear stories of the stolen children, who had their names changed so they would forget their mothers. They didn't. Instead, they cried themselves to sleep in dormitories at missions like the one at Moore River.

My son picked up on my affect, and complained that he didn't like 'that silly name', and didn't want to be called that. I tried hard to persuade him it was a cool thing, and a special honour, to have been given a real Aboriginal name, but he wasn't convinced.

It may have been the right thing nevertheless to insist on customary lore in this exchange, even though it hurt my feelings. Giving offence, or taking it, is a necessary risk when cultures meet.

About many of my responses at the time of the painting workshop, I now feel unsure. We are used to taking our feelings as indicators of some kind of truth. This is an axiom, especially of feminist thinking, that I had previously inhabited comfortably.

But the workshop made me profoundly uneasy. Perhaps I had not expected to recognize all the feelings displayed by the artists, but I had expected to go on using the compass of my own.

In the event, I felt comfortable with the way Lynette and the others occasionally remarked on how they felt. Their affection, generously proffered, was easy to reciprocate.

But I couldn't account for my anxiety at what seemed to be extraneous and peripheral stresses. The heat bothered me, the tasks of amusing children while hanging out in the studio as a 'Chief Investigator'. I was uncomfortable 'in my skin', as they say.

Which is, on reflection, the most expressive I could have been. I felt uneasy in my *white* skin, for the many small ways in which the workshop, and our larger project, as an emblematic whitefella activity (knowledge acquisition) collided with 'the Indigenous Other'. Politely, thoughtlessly, self-servingly, well-meaningly.

And I was squirming in shame for all the ordinary white middle class habits that have made my body a white body in a postcolonial country.



The department store is the Real World. In the department store I come up against what matters.

Those items that appear to me as desirable, even indispensable – the lipsticks, the clothes, the household accessories – define a world in which I am 'truly myself'; hence the urge to buy them and complete myself, express myself, satisfy myself. Not only what I want, but what I can become, if I only will hand over one bit of plastic for

another. Not only can I put on a delicate shade of shell pink or a vibrant scarlet on lips or nails, but in doing so I can become the fashion-conscious urban woman that these practices signify.

I can buy 'my colours' at Bon Marché on Paris's Left Bank, and then go to marvel at other styles of living down the river at the Musée du Quai Branly. This is where 'cultures speak', according to the Musée's slogan.

I can't buy, at the Lancôme counter, shades of ochre for my bare breasts, or white to paint lines on my brow. Make up is the real world, but body-painting is culture.



There is a setting where ochres on bodies can command a reality, and produce a world. In Aboriginal Australia, these things are full of meaning, they are 'being bearing meaning', as philosopher Julia Kristeva defines the sacred. Paradoxically, we don't find this hard to believe – the other *is* the sacred, cultures are *other people's*.

It's harder to perceive the process, of 'being bearing meaning', in ourselves. That's because it is the Real World that is the domain of the sacred, a literal worship of materialism that denies belief in any other world beyond it.

Despite the heat wave, the old women felt the cold, and they wore woollen hats the whole time they were painting. I wanted to give them a present that said a warm informal thank you, in keeping with their own relaxed reserve. I bought them each a beret at the department store where we went shopping that day, a perfectly absurd gesture marked somehow by the Indigenous art museum that had recently opened in Paris, and had made such a feature of Aboriginal work.

The old women wore them and seemed pleased, but I don't know what they thought of this gesture; whether they thought 'Eurocentric' or 'naïve' or 'that girl mad' or 'a handy hat'. I didn't find out whether they wanted hats, or cared about appearance or felt they had ever been given a choice in these matters. I don't know what exigencies govern

their wardrobe as they do mine (nothing that needs ironing, nothing that makes me look fat etc).



At Balgo, a remote Aboriginal community in the Western desert in North Western Australia, a group of young girls showed us their photographic exhibition, portraits of members of their family, mounted on the walls of the Cultural Centre.

Older Aboriginal people resist photographic images being taken of people, because of the way photos keep the dead hanging around. But the kids don't seem to feel like that. The Cultural Co-ordinator, a fashionable young woman fresh from a Melbourne art school, really had these girls engaged with photography and they were keen to photograph us, too.

They live as we all do in a world of magazine photographs and TV pictures, and if they feel part of the world beyond the small and troubled settlement of Balgo, it is because they are connected to it by images.

I arrived on an 'air art tour'. We had a professional photographer with us, too, who had come with the commission to photograph the Art Centre, and those of the painters who would agree, for a magazine article. The girls hung around holding the equipment and making up part of the scene, playing with the photographer's reflector between shots.

The image takes her momentarily out of the remote Indigenous world and into the world of fashion where her face is suddenly not shy but frankly beautiful, highlighted by the reflections of her impromptu hat.



In Selfridges, I meet with philosophy. 'Buy me I'll change your life' says the billboard. 'I shop therefore I am'. I photograph them with my mobile phone, but I am aghast at having my inner life broadcast on signs hanging from the ceiling.

It is where I am least self-conscious that I am where things matter most. Where else can I 'lose myself for hours?' in pleasurable contemplation but when I am shopping? Unless it is when I'm watching the news on television, which scene I am wholly immersed in, believing it to be real.



Cultural tourism is the Real World. The city of Paris is visible through the wavy glass of the Batobus. We are going down the Seine on the way to the Musée du quai Branly. The fatigued tourist, plastic Disney bag on the seat beside him, sleeps as the Tour Eiffel slides into view.

Paris acknowledges its place as a cultural curiosity in its tourism, where it plays the exotic other in a pan-American globalism. It's one commodity among many, but one that sells well.

A 'river' runs through the musée, too; a concrete monstrosity in earth colours. The curation informs us that it refers to the flow of time. 'Vitesse le temps l'autre' flows ... the musée, the Seine, the Batobus, the flood of tourists 'hopping on and hopping off' all the way to Il de la Cité.

The trip ends near to the point of the embarkation of the 'martyrs', the Nazi victims who were crowded onto boats and shipped off to the camps. But they were not sightseers.

The Musée du quai Branly others the others, the third world or the first nations, as they are more politely known (but do we have a definition for the first world, second world and who is in each?)

You are either 'us' or 'them' in this scene. The French themselves feel othered, as their language is covered in an effluvial tide of Franglais from iPod to Barbie®.

Perhaps this explains the remarkable muddle of this museum, its lack of cohesion, located where the imagination fails, where the image falls into – to quote Susan Sontag – sentiment, cliché or shock.

The *musée* advances a weird temporality that seems to miss any distinction between past and present cultures, and has no ear for what it translates. The signage addresses us in English, French and Spanish, although the museum is replete the day I visit with Japanese tourists, and is deaf particularly to the ticklish question of conquest, i.e. which cultures are no longer practiced because of colonisation (invariably Western).

If colonialism were to be imagined as 'The Empire games', then France came second, and the 'rest of the world' probably lost. The museum's booty is the French consolation prize.



If you want a text for this, start at the Yulara resort at Uluru. The whole white worship is laid out with religious conviction, in the plan of accommodation. 'Desert Garden' for the upper middle class, 'the lost camel' for campers and backpackers.

Everyone flocks at sunset, like the devout to a shrine, to see the Rock. All around the country is implacable, and, left to their own devices, the tourists would have no chance against it, given the heat and the scarcity of surface water. The more you learn of how a culture has endured in the harsh exacting conditions there, the more you must admire its rigour and precision.

Repetition is its essence: to make an eye for detail and pattern the basis of survival. Everything is legible to those who know the signs, even though to the untrained eye the country seems monotonous, its forms of life inarticulate and mute.

The desert around Uluru, even if only seen from a minibus, is daunting. It's intimidating to think we could only survive there at \$400 a day ... The people who live there, and their ancestors, have slept on the ground and walked the distances that survival mandates in order to find foods in certain seasons, or water. Their 'dreaming' is rigorous, strenuous; quite literally a *body* of knowledge. And things about getting by in that world are known through memories of treks and songs, imprinted on the body by immersion in the country.

This is a landscape that is quite probably uninhabitable to a body like mine; if I were lost there, and thrown onto my own resources, I could not stay alive. The knowledge is communal, the memory a collective one. It is nowhere written down.



Around the base of the rock, there is a cave that is sacred to women, we are told. It is a birth site, apparently. 'The women love their dogs', says the guide, pointing to the rock that bears an uncanny resemblance to a dog's head, guarding the mouth of the cave.

'But you don't get to hear much about it,' he says. 'Women's business really is secret', he puzzles, as though he has forgotten he is male and white, and that we are not in the vicinity of liberal individualism.

Uluru is a 'family place' he says, with six sacred sites around it, some for men and boys, some for women. The Anangu people respectfully request tourists not to climb the rock, but 65% do anyway.

Watching a movie in the cultural centre, I see an Elder woman dancing a traditional dance with breasts painted up. The audience, of ordinary Aussie blokes, snicker and mumble obscenities to each other. Of course, they have happened upon one of their deepest taboos, one of their sacred sites, sex and the breast.

In the cultural centre they encounter cultural difference and they can't help themselves, they have to jeer and ridicule because this is men's business. Their girlfriends sit watching the film in embarrassed silence, also in keeping with their custom.



The modern urban subject desires to save wilderness, respect other cultures and know something about art, going to galleries, buying 'fairtrade' and voting green. The three belong together in a secular landscape, denuded of other forms of sacrament. Eco-tourism is whitefella worship.

This mob are off to see bush tucker with Gus, the Aboriginal guide. His group, the Bunuba, own the business that steers tourists down the Fitzroy Gorge, in the Kimberleys, past the freshwater crocodiles, to alight on the river beach and struggle up this hill.

It's a warm day and some of the women have worn the wrong shoes. It's not comfortable, but it's required of you when you're a tourist, to submit to this discipline, including the bad mother-in-law jokes peppering the commentary. Gus tries to make Indigenous kinship practices relate to modern suburban life by equating men's business and women's business with the lore of the garage and the kitchen.

Sexual difference is different in every culture, but in Fitzroy Crossing it is epitomised in the dilemma of alcohol. The Aboriginal women there petitioned the government to

restrict the sale of take-away booze. It caused a dramatic decrease in the number of local Aboriginal men incarcerated.



According to anthropologist Jennifer Biddle, the point of Desert women's painting is to 'make a mark' – a physical pressure or imprint on canvas, in the same way that the *kuruwarri* designs were traditionally made on skin. In doing so, the signs evoke the imprint on country of the ancestors' actions; the fires, the dancing, the food, the fighting.

The marks of these paintings are designed to produce the experience of being in that ceremony in that country, keeping the continuity of the Dreaming acting in the present. And this matters now, more than ever, with the exile of the traditional owners of the country, their care confined to canvas where before they would have been 'looking after country' in the flesh.

For the women, there is a specifically 'breasted' way in which to view their attachment to country; the ceremonies that the *kuruwarri* refer to are dances in which breasts are painted up and move in rhythm, conjuring the attachment of all to the land like a suckled child attached to its mother. This is a very different view of culture and place from the Western model of land ownership, but through the painting, there can be a magical extension of the Aboriginal world.

'Country' is evoked for the viewer, even for the uninformed, by the vivacity of the surface itself. The spectator can enter country not so much by viewing, as by *touching with the eye*, its rhythm, colour, texture and contour.

The sacred nature of these canvasses is embedded in the experience of viewing them. This is why Emily Kame Kngwarreye, when pressed by Christopher Hodges to describe what a canvas depicts, replied: '*You know*'. The Dreaming is communicated directly in the feeling for the work.

'A building, a Greek temple, portrays nothing', philosopher Martin Heidegger tells us in *The Origin of the Work of Art*, and yet it 'encloses the figure of the God ...'

Heidegger describes the fabrication of the world as an inherently aesthetic event. He draws on architecture, and not painting, to illustrate the idea:

By means of the temple, the God is present in the temple ... It is the temple-work that first fits together and at the same time gathers around itself the unity of those paths and relations in which birth and death, disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance and decline acquire the shape of destiny for human being.

This truth-making is also a world-making; truth takes place in a meeting of 'earth' and 'world' and turns on the vitality that experience gives to knowledge and understanding. I know something as I know my kin, by intimate acquaintance. Familiarity is a staging – of sensation, their affects, the values rising from them. This is the way that the ordinary repetitive familiarity (of, say, going to Mass or going to work) will take shape by means of a temple, and come to 'acquire the shape of destiny'.



But the artlessness of cultural tourism comes to something of a halt at Dachau. Literally, at the railway station called that, which is just one stop on a suburban Munich line. These days it's known as 'dark tourism', the organized inspection of the sites of atrocities and tragedies, as well as of treasures and marvels.

In the wake of the Jewish holocaust, philosopher Hannah Arendt wrote of the *banality* of evil. The concentration camp at Dachau is a terrible spectacle, not least because of the impermanent look of its buildings, the temporary and undistinguished huts in which hideous suffering was made commonplace. These places can hardly bear the weight of the scrutiny they must now receive from history. The most solid thing about Dachau seems to have been the motto, cast in iron, over the gate: 'Work makes us free'.

Likewise the pious tone in Heidegger's essay, too, disguises the menace latent in his account of the temple-work. In the setting-up of a space in which experience can come to pass, the temple and the concentration camp equally do their work, their temple-work and their concentration-camp-work.

If truth is present in the work, it is in virtue of the values derived from what was felt and known in the experience. Truth is not an antidote of evil. It can only withdraw

into world-withdrawal and world-decay. And: 'World-withdrawal and world-decay can never be undone'.

It is not falsified. But as it came to pass, so it can pass. The concentration camp-work, as the staging of the values knows intimately as Nazism, for example, revealed a truth that was, in Heidegger's prophetic words, lived between 'disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace'. Which did not save him from falling for the myth, and disgracing his philosophy by his ambition in accepting a commission from the Third Reich to become Rector of his university.

Truth, as the production of experiences of knowing through the staging of them, is always coming about, as Heidegger says. In the account given of temple-work, truth (and not necessarily 'the truth of') *works* in the work. But it may also be said to *play* about a figure, as a shadow flickers, or as a trick of the light. *What* is understood thereby cannot be guaranteed.

Dark tourism provokes a perverse understanding. The ancient god may no longer be present for us in the temple, nor the Honey Ant Dreamings in the outback landscape. But we still have an absolute faith in the gods of the laboratory, the television and the bourse.



The best is now.

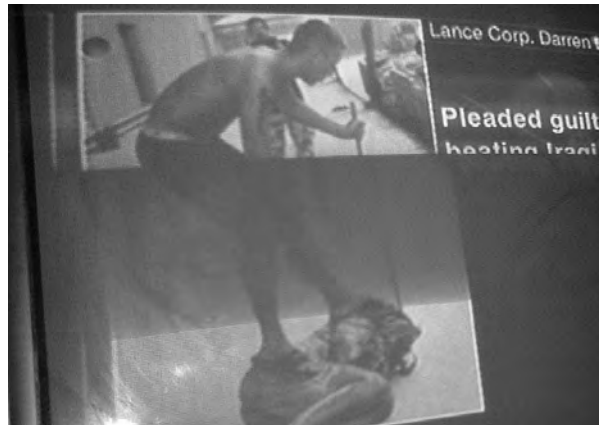
I have two earlier models of these cameras – a Fuji Finepix and a SONY cybershot. They are both perfectly functioning digital cameras, purchased within the last five years, but that was then! Where are they now? At best, they are the 'before' shot in a 'before-and-after' shot.

The point is not so much what these ads sell, but what they market generically. They teach us the consumer way of thinking.

The dollar sign attached to each individual object serves to link them in a series of equivalent commodities. Buy this – or this – or this. Good – Better – Best. On whatever basis the series is constructed – price, features, currency or brand name – it

is grounded in similarity. The series connects terms, not through narrative, historical, causal or logical consequences, but through likeness (and predominantly visual likeness) that can be played on forward or rewind.

What produces the meaning of these objects is their similarity. The sequence protects, supports and promotes their differences into an intelligible whole. The concern is not with causes but with effects, an emphasis of surface over depth. In the overwhelming stream of images, *the really different becomes radically invisible*.



The press photograph proposes an unmediated reality. But of course, however realistic it appears, the photograph remains an image.

'What does the photograph transmit? By definition, the scene itself, the literal reality', in the words of philosopher Roland Barthes.

The press photograph professes to be 'a mechanical analogue of reality', and likewise photojournalism a true presentation of reality. Appearances deceive. We infer from our own general knowledge that the newspaper photograph has been chosen, composed, constructed and treated according to professional, aesthetic, or ideological norms. And it is read, connected more or less consciously by the public that consumes it, to a traditional stock of signs.

The objectivity of the photograph is 'mythical', in the sense that it harbours a belief that gives meaning to other cultural signs. Of course, photojournalism would be regarded in *common sense* as the antithesis of the sacred, but this only shows how deeply held the myth of the photograph as a record of the real is.

The inherent religiosity invested in the famous image of the twin towers burning on September 11 makes the point. With its iconography of crucifixion, and the surrounding rhetoric of the axis of evil and the sanctity of American life, a reality sprung out of the image of apocalyptic change, and: 'the world will never be the same'.

In more ways than many, this 'media event' raises knowingness of the production of the real through images; for example, many have remarked on how this photo (and the

video of the same events) are 'like a disaster movie', its spectacular capture creating an iconic 'photo-opportunity'.

The myth of the separation of reality and image is paradoxically so strong that most viewers have no trouble identifying the press photograph as a *depiction of what happened*. It is as it purports to be. But aliveness to this mythical meaning structuring our view might come from considering the myths of others.

Aboriginal painting of the Central Desert also presents a reality. Anthropologist Eric Michaels has written: '*These paintings make the claim that the landscape does speak and that it speaks directly to the initiated, and explains not only its own occurrence, but the order of the world.*' And the same action is also attributed to the Byzantine icon, bringing the devotee into direct communication with the sacred. These possibilities are dismissed today as mere myth or superstition.

Yet the press photograph makes the same claim; that reality speaks directly to the initiated in the image, explaining its own occurrence and the order of the world.

In the photographs of 9/11, we see not only the burning skyscrapers, which we accept as factual and not simulated in a movie sequence. At the same time, we see the sequence *as apocalyptic*, in the manner of the disaster movie genre. We see sacrilege and historical forces at work, in the transmission of pixels to a screen, of dots to a page.

The belief in the reality of the photograph betrays its religiosity when it claims not only that it is a record of reality, but also that it is *the only (real) one*.

'Modern man is losing his soul,' writes Julia Kristeva, but he does not know it, for 'that darkroom needs repair.'

On this metaphor, the mind is an apparatus like a darkroom, a process by which light (and other sense impressions) are developed into something meaningful. Kristeva writes in several places of the mystery of life and meaning that is joined in the sacred.

But now in our time, on Kristeva's diagnosis, the *body* conquers the invisible territory of the soul.... 'You are overwhelmed with images, they carry you away, they replace you, you are dreaming...' she writes. The body, or at least a particular secular version of it depicted in neuroscience and biology, has called into question the *function* of the mind. 'If drugs do not take over your life, your wounds are 'healed' with images, and before you can speak about your states of the soul, you drown them in the world of mass media.'

The question shifts from 'To be or not to be?' to 'To take a pill or to talk?' What do we get from the idea of a 'darkroom of the soul'? Is it a modern version of the so-called primitive anxiety that the photograph will capture your soul? Is the photograph, in its verisimilitude and its ubiquity, actually producing a new kind of *self*?

The sacred for Kristeva is 'the mystery of the emergence of meaning (and its celebration)' and 'the impossible and nevertheless sustained connection between life and meaning'. Kristeva distinguishes this mystery from the technocratic 'life without questions', the totalitarianism that seeks to destroy life, or leave life in the domain of the purely instrumental.

But even the darkroom is more mysterious than a mere instrument. When she likens the soul to the darkroom, it is picturing a head-space of images that reach back *into childhood*, where the word is first an aural image, and where that image is charged with affect for the child as the voice of its mother. The association of ideas, according to Kristeva, is a corporeal process – this is not a body separate from its ideas, but a body that motivates its ideas, and that strings them together according to the movement of bodily energy.

The way pleasures of the body transfer in Western life onto essential cultural operations like literacy, numeracy and citizenship has been explored through the psychoanalysis of children. This is one way in which meaning and being are imagined as joined in each of us.

The maternal has a special place in the sacred, as generative of meaning and being. Its effects move outward in a double action, into real bodies and into the language used by those bodies. When Kristeva talks of life bearing meaning she conjures this extraordinary matrix of feeling and images.

The Circuit Court was sitting the day we came to Turkey Creek. Warmun artist Mabel Juli is a traditional custodian of the Moon and Stars Dreaming, which could be plainly seen in the sky that evening. But she was in court as a mother with other mothers, supporting their adolescent sons on various charges, trying to keep them out of jail.

We were there in the week after the Federal Government declared there was a 'crisis' of child sexual and other abuse in these remote communities and sent in police and doctors over the heads of the autonomous Indigenous councils. It followed from a disturbing Northern Territory report released in the weeks before, titled 'Little Children Are Sacred', citing alcohol and social breakdown as major causes of the routine neglect and abuse of Aboriginal children.

Children *are* sacred – they are a leading case of the sacred. In Western culture, childhood is invested with all our sentiments, affects and visions that fall outside adult, rational consciousness. This includes, and is exemplified by, the mystery of maternal love that is the miraculous exception to modern economies of exchange.

In the religious icon, communion is offered with the Mother of God; that is, with the *image* of mother and child as the necessary precursor to becoming a rational citizen. When Julie Dowling frames the child's black face in her painting, 'Icon for a Stolen Child', she animates not only the pain of Aboriginal children taken from their mothers, but also of a generation growing up without their culture and language. The

'Stolen Generation' was an attempt at genocide, however unconscious and unacknowledged, since it was an attempt to supplant the body signs of an Aboriginal maternal/matrix with the manufactured seeming of colonial lore.

In Dowling's icon, we are solicited to make direct communication again with this loss, and with this 'sacred' connection between word and flesh. When the stolen children were told to forget their Aboriginal names and use only their White ones, it was from this *chora* that they were cast out. But although imbued with pathos in the Dowling image, this *chora* is not nostalgia. It is mystery, for it joins meaning and being, the inside to the outside of the culture.

Children are sacred, in the technical sense that their conception represents *life bearing meaning*, and is the literal product of social laws that mandate some copulations and forbid others. Reproduction of physical beings is primary to the continuation of a culture, race or species, as evidenced by its murderous contradiction, genocide.

They are sacred in that their physical embodiment, growing up around others of their group, means they acquire the meanings of the group as ways of being, and of being embodied. Growing up as a process of *acquiring bodily meanings* was acknowledged by the removal of children from their families throughout the colonial world, aimed at erasing that sensibility.

Children are sacred in that damage to sensibility – through violence, sexual abuse, racism, nutrition, lack of education – desecrates a culture, weakening its inherent viability.



It's a monumental world for the two year old, even though we diminish it as adults. Mother leaves the room, and panic ensues, the realization that the child cannot command the figure that keeps body and soul together. The child cries inconsolably.

'Woof-woof' says the dog, and all animals become 'woof-woof', Kristeva writes.

In 'woof-woof', an object has been *identified*, separated out from the world. A fragment from the world has become a sign. And then all animals become 'woof-woof' – the sign is generalized, becomes abstracted, the inaugurating of a word, and even of a concept.

A friend of mine related this 'woof-woof' to the comfort the innocence of childhood can offer us in the face of a cruelly ambivalent world. She wrote about a child she knew: 'When I returned to Australia after 9/11 he welcomed me with open arms and with a smile as big as the world. Aged two, as he was then, he was touched enough by others to welcome; not yet self-possessed or defensive enough to fear the response.'

'But, like all welcomes, his was conditional – I had to sit down and join with him in naming the animals in his picture book.' The apocalypse of terror was challenged by the sanctity of a child's language-game.

'While I continued to call a snake a snake, he was open enough to call a zebra a dog and make me laugh, not at his mistake, but at the rigidity of my own force of law and the ordering of meaning it involves.'

How do we dare hope for things to change? The renewal is promised, paradoxically, by the enduring nature of the sacred: the new joining of meaning and being in every new human life.

Each generation will find the world for themselves, and kinds of good and evil will be redistributed, the body re-ordered. 'If he can be open enough to the strangeness of others and to a different order of things, then so can we all.'