THE HEADLESS STATE

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This article traces the 'changing geographies of the (Australian) mind' and the paradoxical condition of Australia which merge around the figurehead and its presence in Australian currency and culture. The metaphor of decapitation is developed as a means to introduce the issue of the treatment of Indigenous human remains by museums and most recently by biotechnology companies. The metaphor is drawn out through a retelling of the story of efforts to repatriate the skull of Nyoongah warrior Yagan to Western Australia; through the symbolic decapitation of Eddie Mabo in the attack on his headstone in Townsville, and that of David Unaipon in the unauthorised use of his visage to advertise the Olympic Festival of the Dreaming and Citibank; and finally in the attack on a statue of the Queen and Prince Philip in Canberra in 1998.

This paper traces a journey from the past, from the time when Australia was a country-in-waiting in the early 1800s. There are those who argue, as the historian David Day has done, that Australia was still in the year 2000 'a state in search of a nation'. Put another way, the disavowal of a republican future in the referendum of 6 November 1999 reinforced a sense of tentativeness, of ambivalence, of fear of so-called 'radical change'.

But the same year that saw the rejection of a republican model also witnessed the passage of taxation reform legislation which, according to many commentators, was likely to be more 'life-changing' on a daily level than any gradualist republican system which had been proposed. The Australian prime minister, John Howard, described the introduction of a consumption tax as being 'the biggest single piece of economic reform that this country has indulged for the last 20 years'.[1] In fact, speaking at an economics luncheon in New York City in July 1999, Howard went even further and claimed that the GST was 'undoubtedly the biggest change to our taxation system since World War II and arguably the biggest to our taxation system since federation'.[2]

So, on the one hand, radical change — so depicted — was fought over and was ultimately rejected; while on the other hand, radical economic change was contested and was, in the end, approved. What does this say about

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1 Prime Minister John Howard, Address to the Business Class Luncheon, Sheraton on the Park, Sydney, 17 June 1999.

2 Prime Minister John Howard, Address at Economics Luncheon in association with the AAA, BCIU and Downtown Economists Association, Asia Society, New York, 15 July 1999.

Australians' attitudes towards themselves, their country and towards change itself? And how can it be that the 'geographies of the mind' can be perceived as being more threatening than the cold realities of the fiscal system?

This is one of the core questions which I pose in this paper. The answer, I believe, lies not only in the power of persuasion and representation but in the continuing strength of historical imagery. While much was debated throughout 1999, there was also an undeniable sense that an opportunity — a unique opportunity for self-reformation — had been lost.

For the end of the century marked many passings in Australia. One of the least lamented was the demise of the satirical television revue *Hey Hey It's Saturday*, which had become a curiously tired weekend institution, despite its prominence in the nation's television culture over more than two decades. A popular segment in the show was entitled 'Celebrity Heads' and involved a panel of three more-or-less well-known studio guests facing the studio audience while perched on decidedly uncomfortable stools. To add to the discomfiture, all three had the name of a (usually far more famous) celebrity printed on a card, which was then inserted into a head-mounted holder atop each contestant.

The visual effect for the audience was not unlike the appearance of three fully grown members of the Mickey Mouse Club trying to deduce the secret sign that lay between their ears. The point of the exercise, of course, was incongruity and relative disclosure. The viewer of *Hey Hey It's Saturday* could see the name on the card — say, of tennis player Andre Agassi — on the head of a comedian such as the Australian Wilbur Wilde, but Wilde himself could not. Then the whole game centred around questions: every query which received an affirmative answer enabled the panellist to pose another; by asking poignant questions (such as 'Am I alive?') the contestants attempted to narrow down the field and to identify their altar ego in advance of the competition.

While this was classic comedy of the 'sight and verbal gag' variety, it was clearly a bemusing environment to be thrust into for most contestants. I can claim some expert knowledge in this connection because at a conference in late 1999 I was nominated to participate as one of three panellists in a (thankfully non-televised) version of the game. The results were truly appalling because, archly, the organisers had given me the identity of 'The Devil'. One can imagine the questions: 'Am I alive?' 'Yes — and no.' 'Am I a fictional character?' 'Yes — and no.' 'Am I Australian?' 'Yes — and no.' And so it went.

This prompted a line of speculation which, in the end, was far more productive than the event itself, in which I was hopelessly outclassed. It is this: that there is a similar dislocation between understanding and recognising — really *seeing* oneself — which applies on a larger scale to many Australian situations. In fact, I am going to argue that Australia is not really uncertain about its identity — that concept has been an old saw of cultural theorists for years — but that at times it can be *too certain* of itself: too sure that it is a 'tolerant' country; too readily persuaded that it is 'the land of the fair go'; too ready to approve its own progressiveness. As I indicated at the outset, this paper is about changing geographies of the mind, of mental representations of

Australian culture; however, some of those notions are remarkably resistant to change.

In that connection, what fascinates me is the double-sidedness of that culture, not its uncertainty. Australia is paradox-ridden. It is a 'young country', but equally 'an ancient land'; it is the 'world's largest island' and the 'world's smallest continent'; it is the 'driest nation on earth' yet it is surrounded by water; it is an allegedly anti-authoritarian nation which at the same time is very conformist in many respects. And, in the present context, it is not just a 'state in search of a nation' but — at one and the same time — a 'headless state' and a 'double-sided nation'.

There are recurrent echoes, themes, motifs in Australian history, and one of the most important of these is that of the royal figurehead. That figure invokes the crown and crown land, echoes the authority of the magistracy; lends weight to the ritualised opening of parliament; doffs its cap towards the grandeur of degree-granting ceremonies in universities. Yet this is always at a distance: the Australian head of state has never resided in Australia, even though the 'vice-regal' representative has done so.

Perhaps the most potent semiotic symbol of the continuing royal presence is Australia's currency, in which a slowly ageing Queen Elizabeth is on the obverse side of all minted coins. Here, too, the relationship is one which is both absent and present. The monarch is 'officially' there but, in a sociological sense, commands only a fraction of the esteem which she formally received. She may be honoured on the currency but — in the classically pragmatic Australian way — she appeared until recently only on the lowest denomination of polymer banknotes, the $5 note.

According to the Manager, New Currency Design from the Reserve Bank of Australia, this is an eminently sensible approach. When the new series of plastic notes was introduced in 1993, the image of Queen Elizabeth II was purposely relegated to the lowest value (and highest volume) denomination. Why? Precisely because its greater usage means that it wore out more quickly and had the highest turnover rate. Hence, if Australia had voted to become a republic in November of last year, the $5 note would clearly have been the most cost-effective candidate for a redesign featuring the image of a new head of state. In fact, it was this principle of symbolic renovation which led the Reserve Bank to announce, in July 2000 that Queen Elizabeth's visage would be 'phased out' of the $5 note progressively over coming months.

It is ironic, then, that a venerable institution such as the Reserve Bank, which plays such a key role in Australian fiscal policy, had thought itself into a future republican strategy well in advance of any referendum and, arguably, well in front of the federally elected representatives of the people.

So I argue that Australia is, strangely, in representational limbo. It is a 'headless state'; a country without its own indigenous head of state — and by this I signify both senses of that term.

At the same time, the country is a double-sided nation. It is both independent and deferential; feisty and subservient. For, in what can only be termed a brave diplomatic manoeuvre just four months after the divisive republican referendum, in March 2000 Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip

embarked upon their first royal tour for many years. The logic was breathtakingly absent. If it was an attempt to thank the citizens of Australia for the support evinced in the referendum they were sadly misinformed, for the fate of the republic was sealed by an almost incredible alliance between the radical republicans — who voted 'no' defeat the proposal since it did not go far enough — and the confirmed monarchists, who voted against the proposal because, for them, it went too far! These two groups were nowhere in evidence standing side-by-side, flag-waving as the royal couple toured the Australian continent.

In this sense, the image of the queen is strangely unreal, disembodied, tenuous. For example, her profile on the $2 coin is as flat and two-dimensional as the image of the unnamed Aboriginal hunter on the reverse. Both are stereotypes, even if she is individuated and he remains unnamed, purely symbolic. The fact that this icon of Indigeneity is the only human representation in the entire obverse coin series is equally disturbing: in the mind's eye of many overseas visitors to Australia, the Aboriginal man becomes equated with the fauna of the country which adorn other coins: the five kangaroos on the dollar coin, the echidna, the lyrebird. No wonder so many of the more than three million tourists who visit Australia annually believe that all Indigenous people still dress as they did 300 years ago, are purely traditional and could never imagine an Indigenous person piloting the plane in which they are travelling. Has no one who works in design at the Australian Mint ever studied semiotics?

When I use the term 'figurative decapitation', that is precisely what I mean: the bust of the Aboriginal figure on the $2 coin is cut off from the body of his people; he is rootless, alone. And, to add to the effect, the regal bust on the reverse is an echo of the past — a frozen past — rather than signalling a dynamic present and future. One has only to contrast the public symbols of the new South Africa to see just how irrelevant to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people these sanctioned Australian symbols have become. So I posit the idea of incongruity, lack of synchronisation, 'decapitation' in the case of these national icons. Most disturbingly, the figurative beheading which one observes on the currency is an echo of a far more brutal historical reality.

One does not have to delve too deeply into Australia's colonial past to uncover the genesis of this abuse. Whether in the service of anthropology, archaeology or phrenology, to vindicate evolutionary theories or to corroborate concepts of racial primitivism, a wide range of scientists, medical practitioners and others engaged in a significant nineteenth century trade in skeletal remains. This process was worldwide: mummified remains from Peru, skeletons from Central America, Native American bones, Maori skulls — all were collected and found their way into the scientific museums of, primarily, Europe, North America and Australasia. However, according to Professors Gareth Jones and Robyn Harris of the University of Otago, writing in the scientific journal *Nature* in March 1997, this was not simply a matter of grave-robbing, as detestable as that practice might have been. In their words:

> The obsession with fitting people into racial categories led to a huge increase in the collection of skulls, especially those of Australian Aborigines, who were thought to be an evolutionary link between humans and apes. The desecration of graves was commonplace, and Aboriginal people were murdered in this cause. It would perhaps be possible to dismiss these events as a ghastly historical curiosity were it not for the continued existence of this material in many universities and museums.[3]

The phrase 'murdered in this cause' both conceals and reveals so much. It is impossible to ennoble murder even when it is carried out in the name of science; it is even more difficult to justify the retention of the skeletal remains — many of which have never been used for experimentation and have never been displayed — by scientific institutions around the globe. And, despite the repatriation of many skeletons over the past decade, Indigenous activists estimate that the remains of up to 2500 Aboriginal people still lie in collections outside Australia, some of which (such as the Royal Institute of Natural Sciences in Brussels and the American Museum of Natural History in New York) have flatly refused to countenance handing over their identified remains.

In the case of Aboriginal history, many stolen skulls have been lost, destroyed or cannot be identified. But, where they have been preserved and their provenance is known, the failure to repatriate is, to my mind, criminal. It is worth reminding ourselves that this is by no means an issue solely of the past, of redressing historical wrongs. Nor is it solely an issue which affects Indigenous people: the skulls of criminals and the insane were equally popular keepsakes in the nineteenth century. Only on 18 January 2000 was it reported in *The Australian* that the theft of the head of the bushranger Ned Kelly had finally been solved. In a typically punning headline, 'Ned's Keeper Admits Skullduggery', the newspaper reported that:

> The hollow eyes stare out in amused defiance. The teeth are set in an easy, outlaw smile. Such is death (for this is the skull of Ned Kelly, according to the man who admits stealing it 22 years ago and now wants to hand it over for burial).[4]

Is this newsworthy? Arguably, yes. Is it treated with any respect? No. This is for the most part congruent with coverage in the popular press of campaigns for the repatriation of Indigenous Australian skeletal remains. The case of Yagan is one of the most striking here. Like Pemulwuy before him, Yagan's exploits as an Indigenous freedom fighter have become better known than ever before over the past 20 years, but — sadly — it took an international incident surrounding the campaign to repatriate his skull to bring him to the attention of the general public. Then the whole episode surrounding Ken Colbung's long-standing efforts to locate Yagan's remains, to exhume the skull and to have it brought back to Western Australia were trivialised by

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3 D Jones and R Harris, 'Contending for the Dead' (1997) 386 *Nature* 16.

4 'Ned's Keeper Admits Skullduggery', *The Australian* 18 January 2000, p 1

many sections of international media, rendered into news of the 'odd spot' variety. For example, filing a story on 1 September 1997 for the authoritative *US News & World Report*, Jay Maeder headlined the piece 'Raiders of the Lost Conk'. Maeder writes:

> Ever since Australia's Aborigines won the vote several decades ago, the British have become accustomed to the public stunts of tribespersons seeking redress for various grievances ... Still, British Home Secretary Jack Straw was startled last May when Aboriginal delegate Ken Colbung landed at Heathrow and straightaway challenged him to a spear fight. At issue: the sacred skull of Colbung's spiritual ancestor Yagan, a mighty chief who was murdered by an Englishman in 1833 and whose severed head was then shipped to Britain to enjoy celebrity status on the university and museum circuits.

Maeder then warms to his task, unashamedly mixing journalistic excess with patronising put-down:

> The pickled curio had been traced to a pauper's grave in Liverpool and the Aborigines wanted it back for a proper burial. No dice, Straw kept saying as months passed — until the growing threat of an unpleasant minority-affairs incident landed on Prime Minister Tony Blair's doorstep. Yagan was swiftly exhumed, and last week was awaiting the long journey back home to be reunited with the rest of himself. Meanwhile, Aboriginal tribal elders broke into quarrelling factions, arguing over who was senior enough or true-bloodedly Aboriginal enough to travel to London for a formal hand-over.[5]

The thinly veiled implication throughout this piece is the actions of Colbung and his compatriots amounted to no more than a publicity stunt; that the remains had no real significance and were just a 'pickled curio'. Interestingly, the same paper elsewhere writes in the most respectful and serious tones about the work of International War Crimes inspectors engaged in seeking out mass grave sites in the former Yugoslavia, in which skeletal remains are pregnant with political and judicial meaning.

And the dismissive tone of Maeder's piece is sadly ahistorical. It is worth reminding ourselves of how Yagan's skeletal remains came to be held in Britain in the first place. As Craig Cormick writes:

> On July 11, 1833, with a group of Nyungar, Yagan approached two young shepherds he knew, James and William Keats, and asked them for flour. Recognising Yagan and keen for the reward [an amount of £330 had been placed on Yagan's head] William, when he saw the chance, levelled his musket at Yagan behind his back and shot him dead ... Yagan's head was cut off and his tribal markings skinned off his back ... James Keats received the £330 reward, but the *Perth Gazette*

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5 J Maeder 'Raiders of the Lost Conk' (1997) 123 *US News and World Report* 8, p 14.

> criticised his actions as 'a wild and treacherous act' ... which it appears to us will annihilate the surest road to perfect amity — mutual confidence ... we are not vindicating the outlaw, but, we maintain, it is revolting to hear this lauded as a meritorious deed.[6]

Despite the sense of journalistic outrage expressed more than 165 years ago, nothing was to prevent the fate of Yagan's head from being an international one. After being placed in the wedge of a smoking tree for some months to preserve it, the head was eventually taken to England where, for many years, it was on display in the Insect Room of the Royal Institution in Liverpool. In 1894 it was transferred to the Liverpool City Museum. Eventually, in 1964, it was buried along with other decaying museum exhibits in Everton Cemetery, using a plot which later was overfilled with the remains of 21 stillborn children. In fact, it was the protests of the parents of those children that their skeletal remains should not be desecrated which, for more than a year, blocked Ken Colbung's application to have the head of Yagan exhumed.

Clearly the politics of death and memory are emotionally charged and highly contentious. But, in the same way that one can fully understand the feeling of bereaved British parents who opposed disturbing the remains of their offspring, one also has to empathise with the fervent wishes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people for the ruptured remains of their ancestors to be brought home. In both cases, it is a question of respect for the dead and of preserving the sanctity of memory. And what is, for many in the West an issue of religious practice and reverence is equally, for Indigenous Australians, one of spiritual beliefs and religious convictions. As Dennis Eggington has put it: 'It is more important to Aboriginal people to bring our people back with respect and ensure that the spirit goes on to the next world.'[7]

In the event, at the request of the British prime minister, an ingenious archaeological technique and sonar equipment were employed to retrieve the remains of Yagan without affecting those of the children buried above him. In this case, ingenuity and perseverance and sensitivity prevailed. All the more reason to denounce the infantile approach of the reporter from *US News & World Report*; all the more reason to keep investigating and searching for the hundreds (if not thousands) of Indigenous skeletal remains which still lie in foreign storerooms and gravesites around the world. For, if the Yagan episode tells us anything, it is that Indigenous people still feel much like American parents whose sons were listed as Missing-in-Action in Vietnam and have never been located, let alone repatriated. The difference is that Aboriginal people have been missing for far longer, and have been banished to many more countries around the world.

If Yagan is symbolic of many others, the fact of what he represents for many non-Aboriginal Australians is equally confronting. Clearly, many refuse

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6 Cited in C Cormick 'Yagan: An Aboriginal Resistance Hero', *Green Left Weekly*, http://jinx.sistm.unsw.edu.au/-greenlft/1997/289/289p12.htm

7 'A Gruesome Tally of Stolen Bones', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 August 1997, p 110.

to accept that confrontation. For, in an echo of the original decapitation in 1833, a Swan River statue erected to the memory of Yagan was itself repeatedly beheaded in Perth in 1997, to the extent that this became, *à la US News*, a standing joke in the Western Australian media. For example, an editorial published in the *West Australian* on 26 September 1997 is shot through with undertones of vaudeville:

> We can't help but feel for the poor plods tied up with the hunt for Yagan's other head. Clay Gwilliam, the affable copper of Argyle fame, was called in to look for the bonce the day it departed Yagan's statuesque body on Heirisson Island ... Police divers then searched the Swan River, raising to the surface every rock that resembled a noggin. Quite an exercise. But then a breakthrough. A caller to a radio station said the head had been dumped at Strickland Bay, Rotto [Rottnest Island].
>
> 'We probably should go out there on the first day of the crayfish season and have a good look around,' Det-Sgt Gwilliam said.
>
> Sounds like a bit of skullduggery to us.[8]

This is the stuff of light humour and comic relief. There is no sense of the decapitation as being an act of vandalism, even less that it could have been motivated by malevolence. And, as an editorial, the piece has a definite authorising function, as both a determinant and a barometer of social (and racial) attitudes in Western Australia. As Stephen Muecke has put it:

> The important thing about editorials such as this is the normalising and consensual function ('we'), and it is clear where their sympathies lie. Aboriginal issues are trivialised (head becomes 'bonce', 'noggin') ... these events (unlike 'Argyle fame', whatever that is) are excluded from knowledge, and from the history-making process.[9]

There is a relevant question to pose here: when is vandalism apolitical — if ever? My response is that, in the Indigenous Australian context, 'never'. And my answer is even more categorical when the defacement concerns an Aboriginal historical shrine or a *memento mori*. The classic instance of this was the desecration of the grave of Eddie Koiki Mabo on 3 June 1995, three years 'to the day' after the landmark High Court judgment which formally recognised the concept of native title for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. As Noel Loos reports:

> On 3 June 1995 .. Mabo's tombstone was unveiled to commemorate his life and achievements. To the Meriam community it also marked 'the end of sorry', the end of the grieving period, and affirmation of life

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8 'Clarrie Takes Yagan Head Probe by Scruff of the Neck', *West Australian*, 26 September 1997, p 12.

9 S Muecke (1999) 'Sovereignty: Money, Government and Aboriginal Heads', unpublished paper, UTS, Sydney, p 2.

> and relationships. This had been preceded by a celebration of Mabo's achievements in the city mall and followed by a huge feast and Islander dancing at night. During that night his grave was desecrated. Eight swastikas had been sprayed in red paint on the black marble tombstone and 'Abo' sprayed twice. Red paint had been sprayed elsewhere around the grave to disfigure it. The bronze image of Mabo's smiling face had been removed without the bolts holding it being cut or the marble damaged. Those responsible have still not been found nor the bronze face of Koiki Mabo recovered.[10]

In other words, the figurative head of Mabo had been stolen; the memorial was quite literally defaced.

I do not wish to imply that the racist vandals who perpetrated this act are representative of all Australians, or a majority of Australians, or even a sizeable minority of Australians. As Loos notes, 'most of Townsville's white community were shocked that this could happen in their city'[11] and there was national condemnation of this vilification. We also know that neo-Nazis have defaced gravesites all over the Western world, from Germany to Quebec to France to Italy. This is not my point. What I am trying to emphasise is that there has been a specific, pointed reaction to public displays of Aboriginal assertion over time, across the Australian continent; in both the past and present. That reaction is and was violent: the treatment of Yagan in 1833, in 1894, in 1997 and in 1999 was deplorable. Even if the antagonism is now evoked through symbols, the significance of the decapitation motif cannot and should not be underestimated.

Past to present, the pattern is one in which Indigenous Australians have suffered effacement as well as defacement. One of the most striking cases was that of the Aboriginal inventor, author and spokesperson David Unaipon, latterly the man on the Australian $50 note. But for a chance encounter and the intervention of the Chief Medical Officer of South Australia, William Ramsay Smith, Unaipon could, as early as 1926, have been the first Indigenous person to publish a full-length book. Ramsay Smith exploited an accidental breakdown in communication between Unaipon and his Sydney-based publishers, Angus & Robertson, to offer to buy the copyright of 28 stories submitted by Unaipon from January to July 1925. The publishers — perhaps relieved, perhaps uncertain, perhaps worried about the cost of their investment of more than £150 on Unaipon's drafts — immediately acceded to Ramsay Smith's request. Even though this was strictly legal, it was highly unethical and a clear betrayal of the supposed 'friendship' between the Scottish-born doctor and the Indigenous storyteller. In a revealing letter between Ramsay Smith and George Robertson dated 5 November 1926, the former confides — tellingly — that:

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10 N Loos, 'Edward Koiki Mabo: The Journey to Native Title' (1997) 54–55 *Journal of Australian Studies* 120.

11 ibid.

> I think I led you to understand that I had known David of old. Though in some, if not most, ways he is a bad egg he is 'good in parts', or rather there is corn among the chaff if one knows how to winnow.[12]

The undertone of patronising condescension is unmistakable, as is the writer's willingness to impugn Unaipon's reputation for his own advantage. Literally within days, that advantage accrued to Ramsay Smith, when Unaipon's former intellectual property — 80 000 words of incredibly distinctive writing — was offered to him. And ten months later, the edited version of Unaipon's legendary tales was sent to the British publisher George G Harrap, retitled *Myths & Legends of the Australian Aboriginals* by William Ramsay Smith. Unaipon's face, his name and his memory had totally disappeared from the text: nowhere was he acknowledged as the author of the work, let alone as a collaborator or an informant. Essentially, the Aboriginal man had been erased; to use the metaphor of this paper, his head of inspiration had been summarily decapitated.

Incredibly, while all of this took place 70 years ago — the first edition of the Harrap publication was released in 1930 — that same text has travelled intact to the present day. As recently as 1998, a new paperback version of the Ramsay Smith travesty was released, again in Britain, by the specialist reprint publisher Tiger Books of Middlesex. To this day, the published stories of Unaipon lie, like the bones of many of his countrymen, in the British Isles. Their repatriation will be every bit as symbolic as the return to their homeland of Indigenous skeletal remains.

And this is more than a loose parallel. William Ramsay Smith, 'physician, naturalist, anthropologist and civil servant'; ultimately 'coroner for the city of Adelaide, inspector of anatomy and chairman of the Central Board of Health' was, in August 1903, 'suspended from his coronial duties following charges of misusing human bodies': code for the misdemeanour of trafficking in human remains.[13] Although he was later cleared following a board of inquiry, after the eloquent defence of the foremost South Australian barrister of his day, Sir Josiah Symon, there were numerous hostile medical witnesses; according to anthropologists such as Prof John Mulvaney, 'question marks' persisted over Ramsay Smith right up until his death in 1937.[14] Given the dismissive and exploitative treatment which Unaipon received at the coroner's hands, this is a pattern of abuse which is far more than accidental.

What is no accident is that David Unaipon has, since his arrival on the Australian $50 note in 1995, increasingly become a focus of study, speculation and curiosity. The fact that he took out ten patent applications for inventions as varied as a prime mover, an anti-gravitational device and a multi-radial wheel is remarkable enough in its own right; the fact that he did so during the first

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12 State Library of New South Wales, Angus & Robertson Papers, 1925–1930.

13 R Elmslie and S Nance (1998) 'Smith, William Ramsay' in G Serle (gen ed), *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol 11, Melbourne University Press, pp 674–75.

14 Interview with John Mulvaney, Canberra, September 1998.

three decades of this century — when Indigenous Australians were thought to be dying out as a race — is even more amazing. However, even today, even with the redoubled recognition afforded by his 'currency' on the Australian money, even with greater knowledge of his many achievements, Unaipon's image is still being defaced. Ironically, for a man who was a pauper for most of his 95 years, his face is being employed in the service of capital.

Take, for example, the jaunty depiction of Unaipon which appeared in the 'Orbit' section of the *Australian* in September of 1999. The pseudo-celebratory artwork is as incongruous as it is asinine. Why has Unaipon been clothed by News Limited with the vestments of a New Years Eve reveller in September? His stern gaze is so out of keeping with the ridiculous head-gear (one is reminded of 'Celebrity Heads') that the effect is embarrassing. His individuality is also, once again, effaced: he becomes simply the personification of money, of a 'good time out'. In total, the impact is ridiculous and his Aboriginality is undermined.

Two years earlier, Unaipon's face had become even more significant in terms of marketing. This occasion was the first of four Olympic Arts Festivals held to celebrate the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games, the 'Festival of the Dreaming'. David Unaipon's literally became 'the face of the Festival' and appeared everywhere: on billboards, in official programs, in television advertisements. There was even a special retrospective on his life and work held in and sponsored by the Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales. So far, so good, especially for a terrific festival which was directed artistically by Rhoda Roberts.

But there were two odd elements: in the advertisements for the festival, computer animators altered Unaipon's face so that in the final few frames of the promotion he was pictured *winking* at the viewer. The question is 'why?' What is it that he knew that the observer did not? In the iconography of facial gestures, this was intriguing, but not nearly as intriguing as the revelation that — despite the fact that this was the largest Indigenous arts festival ever held in the world — no one at SOCOG had thought it necessary to ask Unaipon's descendants if they objected to his winking face being employed in saturation advertising all over Sydney. As it turned out, they were not at all impressed by the campaign and were particularly disappointed that a basic element of Indigenous protocol had not been followed. Once again, Unaipon's image was being employed to make money for others.

But nothing compares with the crassness of Citibank's appropriation of the 'Unaipon Industry' for its own ends. Early in 1999, the Australian arm of the bank — one of the ten largest in the world — developed a new outreach campaign for its premium customers. Asking them pointedly if they were 'satisfied' Citibank sought responses from its account holders in a 'Client Satisfaction Survey'. And what a survey it was. Yet again, an Aboriginal man suffered figurative decapitation of the grossest kind. Not only was the head of Unaipon transfigured and planted on to the body of a clearly Caucasian man, but the figure was clothed in an ersatz 'Aboriginal'-style shirt. On all sorts of levels, this is incredible and quite repugnant. Can one imagine the head of the prime minister (or anyone else) being transplanted on to a body from another

race in the service of a corporate marketing campaign? Then why is the image of Unaipon fair game in this travesty?

This kind of cloning across cultures amounts to desecration in the most overt way. According to Michael Taussig, this is 'defacement' of the worst kind:

> When the human body, a nation's flag, money, or a public statue is *defaced*, a strange surplus of negative energy is likely to be aroused from within the defaced thing itself. It is now in a state of *desecration*, the closest many of us are going to get to the sacred in this modern world.[15]

In Taussig's terms, the representation of David Unaipon has been triply defaced: as a human, as an Indigenous person and as a symbol of the national currency. Unaipon the author, the inventor, the person disappears — is focally erased — and some form of hybrid creature is drawn in his stead. The probably unanswerable question in this case is 'Why did Citibank do it?' There is a pattern: manifestations of Indigenous assertion in Australia become ready targets for vandalism, effacement and symbolic decapitation — even if that process may be a largely unconscious one. Quite simply, one cannot imagine other icons of the national currency suffering the same fate.

By contrast, in his study Taussig quotes the well-known 1995 case of the vandalised sculpture by Gregory Taylor entitled 'Down by the Lake with Liz and Phil'. The sculpture, consisting of *cement fondue* worn with rust, enjoyed a brief but brilliant one-week career on the banks of Canberra's Lake Burley Griffin in April 1995 as part of the National Sculpture Forum. In just seven days, the irreverent depiction of a naked (but crowned) Queen Elizabeth and a paunchy Prince Philip created an incredible range of passionate responses. As Ruth Barcan pointed out in *Meanjin* in 1998, Australians for a Constitutional Monarchy spoke of a 'threat to the stability of our country' and Victorian RSL president Bruce Ruxton 'allegedly called for the artist to be killed' — all this in the International Year of Tolerance.[16] Whether it was the poor likeness, the flabby representation or the prominent outdoor location, the sculpture inflamed opponents to fever pitch. Within days it had been severely vandalised: the sculpture of the Queen was beheaded, her legs were sawn off, Prince Philip's head was left dangling on its internal metal rod, his left arm was severed and his head was smashed. Eventually, the sculpture was so severely damaged that it had to be removed.

In his quite brilliant chapter on this bizarre sequence of events, Taussig explores all of the elements of defacement which they suggest. As he notes, an off-duty police officer from Sydney was even moved to drive to Canberra to 'rescue' the vandalism by placing a bed sheet over the damaged royals, 'bearing the Australian flag and national insignia ... and shouting "Work of art! Work of art! You're a work of art!"; all of this echoes the policeman's

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15 M Taussig (1999) *Defacement*, Stanford University Press, p 1.

16 R. Barcan 'Regal Baring' (1999) 58 *Meanjin* 7.

righteous rage as he readies himself to violate the violation.' In Taussig's words, this over-reaction is ludicrous:

> We feel a corner has been turned and there is little chance of going back, as if, stupidly, violence against a mere representation can be worse than violence against a real person, perhaps because the basis of fiction and of the supension of disbelief have been violated.[17]

However, as perceptive as this point is, there is a further one: in Barcan's words, that 'as a piece of symbolic action, the iconoclasm was incredibly powerful, but utterly ambiguous'.[18] In other words, the decapitation was absolute but the motive was unclear: had a monarchist attacked the statue because of its offensiveness or was a republican transported by so much nationalistic fervour that a hacksaw became irresistible? Were the vandals art-lovers? Were they art-haters? Art critics? Or was the defacement simply a copycat series of pranks?

These questions, and their uncertain answers, mark this as a unique instance of decapitation. The assault on *Down by the Lake with Liz and Phil* is vastly different in nature and order of magnitude from the other symbolic beheadings I have discussed in this paper. The reaction to the Canberra events which rendered the artpiece 'the most controversial sculpture in Australia' are, in the end, less intriguing than its exceptionality. The question I want to ask is this: Why is it that the decapitation of a figurative, artistic representation of the monarch causes far more passion to erupt in mainstream Australia than the repeated beheading of Yagan's statue — let alone the original decapitation which is the grisly analogue of that event? The answer to this penetrates to the core of Australian self-perception and throws into relief — yet again — its cultural double-sidedness.

Possibly the political scientist would say that the outcome of the November 1999 referendum was signalled on the shores of Lake Burley Griffin and on the banks of the Swan River five years ago. It is the image of the desecration of *Down by the Lake with Phil and Liz* that best encapsulates both Australia's dualities and its fear of change. On a number of levels, it also reinforces the fact that the country really is a headless state.

What I would suggest is that, until Australia's national iconography is truly the outcome of negotiation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, until there is widespread acceptance of this process and its outcome, this perverse game of 'Celebrity Heads' will continue to be played out on a national scale. And, by then, the republic will already be a reality.

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17 Taussig (1999) *Defacement,* p 30.

18 Barcan (1999) 'Regal Baring', p 7.