2000

Making the Sign of the Cross: Interdisciplinary Intersections in Theology, Australian Studies and Postcolonial Studies

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Recommended Citation
Available at:https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol22/iss2/11

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Abstract
This paper posits that there is a meeting place between Theology, Australian Studies and Postcolonial studies and that it lies in the intersections of culture, the crossroads which determine spaces of otherness, identity politics and hybridity. These notions of hybridity and transformation can be found in the symbol of the cross which is constantly being transformed, mutated, corrupted and resurrected in not only visual art, but also in performance texts. These texts reflect diverse responses to organised religion(s) in Australia and its (their) association across a range of interests, from the public arena, such as government policy and social welfare, to the personal, where sexuality is regulated, exploited, and often punished. Australia, like many countries that may be considered 'Postcolonial', has particular stories to tell with regard to the history of 'the cross' as coloniser, not the least of which are those discussed in the performance texts mentioned below. These texts raise issues regarding racial, sexual, and gender persecution, as well as notions of hypocrisy, taboos and otherness. Religion has always had a dual personality in Australia. Linked with authority through connections between the judiciary and the Church of England, the Church has often been equated with the Law; the flipside of this tag being the anti-authoritarian Irish-Catholic streak that was transported with the majority of convicts. But there is also the Paradisaical notion of Australia, a place where dissenters (from Europe, especially, Germany), could find not only safe haven, but a place to 'do God's work'.
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Jimmy Chi’s Bran Nue Dae in particular stresses the ambiguity and hypocrisy associated with the idea of these Christian ‘good works’. The history of the Christian missions in Western Australia is an often violent and sullied one, especially post-federation. The areas of mission that are incorporated in Bran Nue Dae stretch from the top end of Australia to the mid-west coastline, and throughout white history they have fallen under the religious jurisdiction of several different bodies. Reflected in this history is the ambiguous relationship between the missionaries and the Indigenous nations. The missions were for many Indigenous people the equivalent to hell, while for others they were points of
security and sustenance. Colleen McCulloch’s *The Thorn Birds*, as well as John Alsop and Sue Smith’s *Brides of Christ*, expresses the English/Irish divide in Australia as well as issues of gender and sexuality prevalent within the Roman Catholic tradition. Jane Campion’s *Holy Smoke!* illustrates the nominally Australian-Christian assumption that eastern religions are ‘inauthentic’ expressions of spirituality while Peter Kenna’s *A Hard God* explores the homosexual taboo which lies just the other side of the Australian institution of ‘mateship’, where an ever present and interventionist God will find a way to punish and shame those who cross the boundary. These ambiguities and dualisms can be seen in the way the cross itself can be viewed and defined.

The cross, according to Jungian theories of archetypes, is a symbol of transformation, a mandala, or ‘magic circle’ that signifies change and focuses attention on the *union* of the four-sided figure (Fischer 30–31). The sign/ing of the cross in Christian liturgy and practice incorporates penance, redemption, sin, and most importantly, memory. The crucifix, which depicts Jesus’ body, holds a special place within Roman Catholicism, but in performance texts is often used to indicate an unhealthy or superficial piety, as seen in Peter Kenna’s *A Hard God*. Or it is used as a constant reminder that God, ‘who sacrificed his only begotten son’, is watching, a kind of ‘big brother’ feeling, as noted in the scenes set in the dormitories in *Brides of Christ*. The cross is also a symbol of colonisation in New Testament times evidenced through one significant crucifixion that took place 2000 years ago. But more portentously, it is the metonymic symbol for Christianity and its missionary (colonising) work via the Bible. In Australia the cross could be seen to represent the symbolic ‘crucifixion’ or genocide of the Indigenous peoples through the intercession/interference of missionaries and other Christian groups in the status and wellbeing of Indigenous families and communities during the twentieth century in particular. These are the generations that have come to be known as ‘The Stolen Generations’. In theory, as Patrice Pavis suggests, the cross represents the intersecting of these differing territories and sites of otherness, or the ‘crossroads of culture’ that both intersect and diverge (Pavis 6).

This intersection is clearly depicted in Chi’s *Bran Nue Dae* through the character of Fada Benedictus, a German missionary representative of both the German Pallotine Order who worked along the western coast of Australia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the mainly French Cistercians who had established missions as early as the 1890s, but who were forced to abandon the missions for various reasons. One of the reasons cited for the Cistercian withdrawal was that the ‘Aborigines were a race of people such as it seems impossible to convert to the true faith’ (Wyart in Harris, 437). Broome itself, where some of *Bran Nue Dae* is set, has a history of racial mixing, largely between the Filipinos and the Indigenous Australians, mainly due to the highly active pearling industry. The Filipinos, however, unlike the Aborigines, were already used to the Catholic regime due to their Spanish connections. Benedictus is a
character of such dualisms and contradictions who illustrates the good and the bad, the past and the present European characteristics for the community in Bran Nue Dae. This spatial and cultural crossing is highlighted when Benedictus makes a cross from Cherry Ripe bars in order to carry out the blessing for the Aboriginal community that he ‘serves’ and services in both the biblical and the ministering sense, all too truly reflecting an aspect of the history of ‘the Cross’ under the Southern Cross. This echoes Thomas Merton’s concerns that the Cross can no longer be authoritatively claimed as a symbol of mercy throughout the colonised world but, rather, as Merton acknowledges, the Cross is encountered as

a sign of contradiction — destroying the seriousness of the Law, of the Empire, of the armies.... But the magicians keep turning the Cross to their own purposes. Yes, it is for them too a sign of contradiction: the awful blasphemy of the religious magician who makes the Cross contradict Mercy! This, of course is the ultimate temptation of Christianity! (Merton 32–33)

It is very clear that for the community in Bran Nue Dae there are times when Merton’s ‘Mercy’ has been overtaken by its antithesis, cruelty. For Chi, the cross is a symbol of prosperity and poverty, gluttony and starvation, the corporate church versus the individual soul, and black versus white. These binaries are not the Indigenous way and Chi illustrates this through consistently challenging the actions and falsity of the established Church which clearly dictates one rule for whites and another for blacks. His characters parody and mock the church (both Protestant and Roman Catholic) through the very symbol which is said to uphold and guide it. The Church’s memory symbol has been converted to a re-memory symbol that forces the Church to re-member what that symbol originally encapsulated.

The cross, of course, is not the only sign that serves as a symbol of colonisation and contradiction. Vestments, in particular, collars — be they priestly or otherwise — represent the march of colonisation, as well as the separation of the cloistered from the world, or from reality. This is clearly outlined in Joseph Conrad’s turn of the century European text Heart of Darkness, in which the collar serves to represent both the devastation of the Indigenous peoples of the Congo and their acculturation, as well as the vain attempts of the colonisers (in this case, the company accountant) to cling to what they believe are the vestiges of ‘civilisation’. The starched white collar and accompanying white vestments are the accountant’s link to the world of light, they separate him from the dark ‘savages’ of the Congo. The irony, of course, is the suggestion that he has had to resort to savagery in order to achieve the ‘civilising’ of the ‘native’ washer-woman he has chosen as the valet for his garments.

In Bran Nue Dae Father Benedictus’ collar and robes serve to heap both power and respect upon him, they are a symbol of mission within the wilderness, of civilisation and of learning. The reality of course, is far removed: just as the accountant’s collar is more ridiculous for the reader than respectable, Benedictus’ clothes serve as symbols of oppression and highlight the level of hypocrisy he
has achieved. In short, they serve to remind the reader/audience that just as the cross for Merton has become the opposite of Mercy, so too have the priestly vestments become the antithesis of Christian values. This is cleverly depicted through the use, yet again, of Mars Bar wrappers and Cherry Ripe wrappers as patterns on the clerical stoles in Bran Nue Dae.

Through Bran Nue Dae we can see that there is a possible union point, a meeting place for theology and Australian studies, and that it lies in these trans-symbolic figures, in ‘these crossroads’ of ‘culture’ — but, in the tradition of the cross’s history, this meeting is not necessarily a ‘happy or holy occasion’.

**CRUX: INTERSECTIONS AND DUALISMS**

As illustrated, this meeting place can be found not only in canonical texts such as Conrad’s, but in popular performance texts, namely film (Holy Smoke, Sirens), the mini series (The Thorn Birds, Brides of Christ), and theatre in the forms of vaudeville (Shepherd on the Rocks), drama (A Hard God), and, as already demonstrated, musical parody (Bran Nue Dae). The religious content of these forms, however, is often neglected in favour of the explicit/implicit sexual content — what Peter Malone refers to as ‘The Thorn Birds’ Syndrome’ (Malone 64). This attention, in my view, is not misplaced, in fact, it is often prophetic and accurate, as in the case of Schepsis’ 1976 film The Devil’s Playground. Indeed, even in the seemingly improbable relationship between Meggie Cleary and the Roman Catholic priest, Ralph de Bricassart, in Colleen McCulloch’s The Thorn Birds, there is a form of truth.

Jane Campion’s recent film Holy Smoke highlights this association of sex with religion through use of publicity materials framed as tabloid articles and slander, which promote the titillating and sexual side of the film, the eroticism of Ruth, and the humiliation and kinkiness of PJ, while totally ignoring the emotional and spiritual growth these characters achieve. The work, however, whether we like the film or not, is much deeper than Kate Winslet discarding her clothes or urinating in the desert.

While I am not arguing for the brilliance of this film, well-rounded character definition or theological soundness, I would advocate that all self-respecting Australian theologians and religious practitioners view it — it is a window into the debate about spirituality and the search for meaning taking place in the twenty-first century from an Australian context. For example, the film raises questions about the spiritual barrenness of Australian men in particular and the search for meaning that Australian women are supposedly engaging in, or are at least open to — is this a true reflection of the Australian spiritual condition? If it is, should Australian theologians be asking why the questers in this film both confuse or seek to discover, whichever it is, sexual and spiritual transcendence concomitantly, and why Ruth returns to India? Do they need to engage in theories about ‘the body’ in order to discover the cause of the failure of mainstream Christianity to
capture, (for want of a better phrase), the youth market? We know from Kristevan and Barthesian notions of intertextuality and Bakhtin's dialogism, that a text:

is ... never finished, written once and for all; it exists in the continuing time of its intertextual production, which includes the texts of its future (those that are brought to its reading). (Heath 259)

I would suggest that *Holy Smoke* is one such text that should have a life beyond the screen in the reading practices of theology, where classic philosophical, hermeneutic and theological texts are brought to the reading of the film, along with that great example of intertextuality — the Bible. This reading partnership is one way that we can validate contemporary popular texts as theological or spiritual partners, and not only in the Western Christian arena, but as Campion's film shows, within the Eastern traditions (and, possibly, Indigenous ones as well).

**Colonising 'Othered' Bodies**

Just as clothes have functioned as signifiers of difference in the aforementioned texts, so too does sexuality delineate the 'othered' in society, especially in accordance with Christian morals and notions of dualism. Ruth in *Holy Smoke!* represents the uncontrollable and messy female body unable to stay ensconced in her cocoon-like sari, but what of other marginalised sexualities? For example, Joe, the homosexual son in *A Hard God*, who declares to his friend and potential lover Jack:

*Joe:* Listen, I want to tell you something. If you do go away without me I'm finished with the Church.

*Jack:* You wouldn't do such a thing.

*Joe:* I swear I would. Because it was the Church that said we shouldn't see each other again.

[...]

And I'll tell you what else I'll do if you leave me here. I'll go with other men. You'll be responsible for that too.

*Jack:* It's your soul, Joe. (Kenna 70–71)

This is certainly not the picture of complete indoctrination hoped for, especially from and Australian/Irish Catholic playwright, but rather a healthy questioning and dissection of Church logic and dogma. Kenna's *A Hard God* was only one of several plays and films to appear in the 1970s, post Vatican II, post Vietnam, and during the great worldwide trend away from the church, that began to search for answers in regard to emerging teenage sexualities in dialogue in particular with the Roman Catholic Church in Australia and projecting backwards, to Ireland. These plays are not merely spurious accounts told by the disenchanted, they are criticisms and explorations crafted by the disenfranchised who have found a voice. They are, I would argue, documents relevant to a cultural theology for Australia.
The interest for us, as Malone has elucidated, is what happens in the stories when the coloniser and the colonised desire each other, and that desire breaches the ‘purity’ of ‘man’s’ relationship to God as in The Thorn Birds? When Ralph is asked to choose between God and Meggie — surely there is the opposite of good in this situation? Ah, say the theologians, what God has done is still ‘good’. They would be right, and that is the point — it is not God but the Church and Ralph himself who have created the situation. Meggie is quite aware that the blame lies squarely in the human arena. Ralph belongs to the colonising church, but has himself been colonised by it and by the church’s ambitions for him, so, is therefore colonised and coloniser. Meggie unable to cope with the hypocrisy pleads (in the mini-series) ‘I thought you loved me Ralph’ and Ralph asserts ‘I do Meggie … but I love God more’ — a wonderful plundering of Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar by McCulloch, who has transformed Brutus’ line, ‘Not that I loved Caesar less, but that I loved Rome more’ — and there lies the rub (III.ii, my emphasis). What ensues incorporates guilt, repression, suffering, conflict, substitution, escape, and multiple deaths. What does this say about a god who is supposed to be loving? If the God of the 1970s and 1980s in Australian writing and performance is still what was once termed an ‘Old Testament God’, one of wrath, plague and famine, where are we now? How can this vision of God be reconciled with the imago dei evolving in postmodern culture, as Ntozake Shange, the black Aermican poet famously declared, ‘i found god in myself, and i loved her, i loved her fiercely’ (Shange 63). How does the church respond to this feminist or pantheistic image of god?

These few texts alone indicate that there is a dialogue in Australian popular culture about God and spirituality, and much of it is centred around the limitations of the institutionalised churches with their history of oppression and interference, clearly introducing the language of post-colonial theory with its lexicon of representation, hybridity, otherness, subjectivity, desire, dislocation, and also, aspects of its hermeneutics — feminism and queer theory — in short, liberation. Chi’s Bran Nue Dae picks up this lexicon. Through using a very middle class, Western performance form, the stage musical, he and Kuckles parody the churches, the government, and even the audience who ‘patronise’ the show. While there is still debate about whether or not these textual forms are truly subversive, a post-colonial approach is still worth persevering with because of the illumination and possibilities about the text that surface (for instance, see D’Cruz 1–14).

**Bran Nue Dae: Transgressing Desires and Playing with the Lord**

In Bran Nue Dae Chi captures the sexual ambiguity of spiritual language that would see itself as separate from notions of sex and eroticism. Love for Jesus, the Lord, is expressed in language reminiscent of love poems and fantasy, it is not supposed to be taken literally but spiritually in a pure and chaste manner as in Song of Songs. Act One ends with a mood steeped in sexuality and sensuality,
where the sexual act is likened to 'sucking ripe bush bananas' (46). Later, in Act Two, the community is by the mangroves collecting kuckles which becomes a form of courting or even foreplay. This natural and realistic attitude towards sexuality is disturbed by the Pentecostals who barge in, inappropriately dressed for the mangroves wearing robes of Transfiguration white (symbolising their difference from the rest of the community), singing lyrics that are probably more sexually explicit than the community's. This is especially true of Theresa who enters in a state of rapture or bliss, not unlike the condition she disturbs in Slippery and Marijuana Annie as she sings:
All the way Jesus, just all the way Lord
Bend me and shape me, give you your reward.
Let me lie in your body, when I’m wracked in my pain
And just light up the loving, that always remains

Perhaps not quite as crudely suggestive as the lyrics that preceded them:

Ooh ooh ooh! Ooh ooh ooh
Everybody lookin’ for kuckle
Everybody lookin’ all day
Everybody lookin’ for kuckle
Blackman, whiteman, and grey,

Poppa he lookin’ for kuckle
Poppa he lookin’ all day
Mumma bin say he got kuckle
Poppa bin sing out hooray
[...]
Just gip me while you rip me
Rip me while you gip me
Gip me while you rip me
Oh yeah – OOH OOH-OOH! (58)

The juxtaposition of the spiritual sense of the Pentecostal’s lyrics about Jesus to the sexual scene (set to the Kuckle lyrics) that the Pentecostals have disturbed, highlight’s the spiritual lyric’s other sense: the sense of desire and taboo so suppressed by the very nature of Pentecostalism. This is very much a site of rupture, of play, that opens the audience to several truths and interpretations. Chi’s humour ensures that we are not offended, but are rather, enlightened. For theologians and religious sociologists, Bran Nue Dae’s treatment of sex is important because it indicates through the symbols of costumes, sets and props, as well as through the language of the pastors and disciples within the play, that all denominations have been conflated into a hybrid of Roman Catholic Pentecostalism that speaks with a Lutheran accent, saying one thing and performing another. This indicates that all the churches are culpable with regard to crimes — both sexual and emotional, towards the Indigenous population and beyond. These crimes include not just the secret participation in the sexual act, but also the suppression of sexual urges that we have seen surfacing in the other works. It also illustrates quite clearly through this juxtaposing of scenes that it is not the sexual act which is the crime, it is the hypocrisy and the cover-up that inflicts the damage: damage not only to those immediately involved, including and especially the offspring, but also, to the reputation of Christianity as a whole, and therefore to the Christian God. In a sense, intercourse has also become a metonymic symbol for Christianity. Chi has managed, through parody and satire, to plant the notion that it is now the discrete colonising groups, namely, the churches, that are being viewed as one dangerous
and homogenised mass that needs to be saved, rather than those they have come to colonise. The irony of the patronising tone should not be lost on the Australian churches.

_Bran Nue Dae_ also raises issues of dualism. Fada Benedictus is constantly preaching fire and brimstone dualism, his world is one which is black and white, in which we are creatures, or fallen angels, that must crawl from the darkness towards the light, or in terms of the Indigenous population, they will become *Lux in tenebris* — light in spite of their own darkness (10). Dualism incorporates clear cut kinship rules and a linear timeline — there is something very definite to be achieved — the release of the soul from this flesh prison on a journey to God. Ironically it is Benedictus himself who controverts that timeline and enters into a
complex pattern of kinship when he fathers Slippery to Theresa. He not only becomes father to Slippery, he becomes father to Willie, cousin/brother to Tadpole and uncle to countless other offspring within the kinship group. His view of the world is now simply inadequate: the missionary who had come to border country to convert the ‘other’ has now become ‘othered’. His life must leave behind notions of dualism and incorporate hybridity and compromise. His forbidden desires have gone towards making the ‘whole world aboriginal’ thus contravening the intentions of the mission.

_Bran Nue Dae_ does offer the Churches hope, however, in the form of hybridity. Towards the end Benedictus claims:

Ve are all angels und devils  
Creatures of darkness and bodies of light ...  
Lux in tenebris  
[...]  
Dere is no beginning and dere is no end  
In our long journey through life...

Tadpole responds with alacrity:

That’s what I bin trying to tell you mob  
From the beginning, I bin drovin’ and  
Drinkin’ and drovin’ and anyway ... (Chi 84)

Benedictus’ statement about journey is quite radical in terms of his theology, for he would be the first to recite that ‘in the beginning was the word ...’. For Benedictus and the community it seems that there is no _beginning_, only _journey_, no linear narrative, but a cyclical one, and a future walked together. So, here we have popular culture quite accurately reflecting the dis/ruption of contemporary theology, and the cross being transformed yet again. An aspect of this transformation and disruption can be clearly seen in the logo designed by Aboriginal artist Bronwyn Bancroft for Anne Pattel-Gray’s collection of essays _Aboriginal Spirituality_ in which the ‘Serpent, a symbol of Aboriginal Spirituality, is juxtaposed against the cross which is the symbol of White spirituality in Christianity’ — quite a remarkable partnership considering the serpent’s history within the Christian story (Patel-Gray, frontispiece). The above mentioned texts are a challenge to all who contemplate a life lived in Christ, or a life lived without, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. They question the relevance of a relationship with a transcendent being, and how to either reconcile or separate the Church from/to God, because they are cultural artefacts about people who have tried to do just that, or who are in the process of still wrestling that particular angel.
WORKS CITED


Kristeva, Julia, quoted in Heath, 258.


