

Hybridity and Transformation: The Art of Lin Onus

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Lin Onus, who died prematurely in 1996, is an Aboriginal painter who focuses some of the most pressing debates affecting contemporary Aboriginal art: hybridity vs. authenticity; Aboriginality vs. Australianness; high vs. popular art and—perhaps most relevantly for Postcolonial Studies—oppositonality vs. transformation. There are few artists, with the exception of Gordon Bennett and Tracy Moffatt, who so acutely identify the cultural task of the contemporary Aboriginal painter. His penchant for blurring boundaries—mixing humour and resistance, confusing ideas of high and low culture, extruding the traditional through the contemporary—characterizes the effectiveness of Onus's political work. For these reasons he has most often been framed by the discourse of postmodernism by critics such as Ian McLean. But I want to suggest that Lin Onus deploys strategies that are fundamental to the postcolonial engagement with dominant discourse, in particular his exposure of the history of colonial representation by which Aboriginal peoples have been marginalized.

The postmodern interpretation of Onus's work is an attractive one since he so manifestly transgresses assumptions, conventions, and—most obviously—received *expectations* of Aboriginal art. Certainly any cultural product is open to a postmodern reading, but I am wary of characterizing Onus's art as a postmodern product *per se*, which might be seen to absorb it into a universalizing and Eurocentric discourse. I want to read the text of Lin Onus's painting to demonstrate its affinity with the transformative energy of postcolonial production. It is this transformative power that might intervene in discussions of reconciliation. I am not underestimating the complexity of Australian postcoloniality by proposing a simple-minded binary of white colonizers and black colonized. The career and art of Lin Onus puts paid to this reductionism. Colonialism positions its subjects: as a discourse of power it operates through them, rather than simply upon them. Lin Onus's work reveals the complexity of postcolonial resistance through the transformative effect of his appropriation of contemporary painting techniques.

Hybridity and Transformation

Hybridity has been a controversial term in contemporary cultural discussion for some time. Popularized by Homi Bhabha, the concept has been criticized for its suggestion that cross-cultural exchange occurs on a level political field rather than one characterised by great inequalities of power. Robert Young argues that hybridity was a popular term in imperialist discourse and accompanied conscious assimilationist strategies, but more often it carried the connotation of impurity and inauthenticity that has carried over into contemporary oppositions to the term. Margot Neale, for instance, assumes that the description "hybrid" devalues Lin Onus's work (18). While the concept can lead to a dangerous leveling out of cultural power, hybridity is

still an important feature of postcolonial attempts to disrupt colonial binaries. Onus positions himself at the porous borders of racial and national identity in order to question and disrupt those very borders. In this sense, hybridity as an act rather than as a condition becomes politically powerful.

Bhabha contends that all cultural statements and systems are constructed in the “Third Space of enunciation” (37). Cultural identity always emerges in this contradictory and ambivalent space, which, for Bhabha, makes the claim to a hierarchical “purity” of cultures untenable. For him, the recognition of this ambivalent space of cultural identity may help us overcome the exoticism of “cultural diversity” in favour of the recognition of an empowering hybridity within which cultural difference may operate:

It is significant that the productive capacities of this Third Space have a colonial or postcolonial provenance. For a willingness to descend into that alien territory...may open the way to conceptualising an *international* culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the *diversity* of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's *hybridity*. (Bhabha 38)

The “in-between” space carries the burden and meaning of culture and this is what makes the notion of hybridity so important. It is a concept that is not so much valuable in itself as it is useful for unsettling *all* static and inflexible notions of identity and authenticity.

The hybrid *process* of Lin Onus's work offers a way of investigating the concept of reconciliation that has dominated discussions of indigenous relations. When reconciliation becomes a verb, to what or with whom are we to reconcile? Should we reconcile ourselves to power relations? When we put it this way we see that reconciliation is not only an incomplete project but an *uncompletable* project. When shall we be finally reconciled? In the Australian context, will reconciliation come with a Treaty? Will it come with the recognition of land rights or will it come when all unalienated land is transferred to its original owners? And what then of those who have no land? Clearly, we need a concept of reconciliation as a process of social and cultural transformation, and this is where Lin Onus's work becomes most significant.

The Paradox of Aboriginality

Lin Onus offers the prospect of a reconciliation that comes about through transculturation, and a transculturation of a particular kind—one that operates intra-textually rather than between two cultures and their textual representations. This intra-textual transculturation disrupts anachronistic and disempowering notions of authenticity. Ideas of authenticity lead to the very frustrating paradox of Aboriginality in which contemporary artists such as Onus, Bennett, and Moffatt find themselves. Are they Aboriginal or Australian, Aboriginal-Australian or Australian-Aboriginal? The stereotypes of authenticity have persistently undermined the work of contemporary Aboriginal artists. For example, Bernard Luthi notes that

Selectors in 1994 and again in 1998 persistently resisted the inclusion of Aboriginal art in the Cologne Contemporary Art Fair. Aboriginal art from urban areas is deemed to be by artists “following a tradition” and therefore not “authentic,” while Aboriginal art from Arnhem Land is too culturally authentic to qualify as contemporary art. (Luthi 53)

In her work, *You don't even look Aboriginal* (1991), Sydney-based Bandjalung artist Bronwyn Bancroft comments: “For years we were punished for being black and now we are punished for

not being black enough” (in Neale *Yiribana* 116). Indeed, as Johnson notes, “[t]his westernized, overtly political art continues to be written off as either Aboriginal kitsch or a sophisticated fabrication—a simulation of Aboriginality” (56).

On the face of it, the artists themselves often seem to contribute to this confusion. Onus’s work is filled with searing images of Aboriginal resistance yet, along with Tracy Moffatt, he railed against the refusal by the art establishment to accept them as Australian artists. “For those of the 1970s”, he wrote, “the only perceived path was the European model...To introduce any element of Aboriginal art into one’s work would have rendered it both unfashionable and unsaleable” (Onus 15). Onus’s strategy was what McLean calls indigenous postmodernism: he became a *bricoleur* (43). But there is a sense in which all art is bricolage, and to call Onus a postmodern *bricoleur* says little in the long run. It names the form without identifying the substance. Onus himself calls his painting habits those of a bowerbird—picking up bits and pieces here and there, appropriating whatever is available for his work. The term “postmodern” identifies techniques without attending to the political and cultural task to which they are put. In so doing, the postmodern label absorbs Onus’s work, as it absorbs the work of all postcolonial artists, into a universalist and globalist paradigm, leaching his art of cultural specificity.

The paradox of the Aboriginal *bricoleur* is resolved by the postcolonial strategy of “interpolation” (Ashcroft *Post-Colonial* 45-55). By interpolating the dominant discourse and, consequently, the dominant market, the aboriginal painter can offer a representation of Aboriginality that becomes widely disseminated. In effect, the market is appropriated for the purposes of cultural resistance. Aboriginality interpolates the discourse of Australia on its own terms. Operating within the Third Space of enunciation—the hybrid, disruptive, appropriating space of the contemporary Aboriginal artist—the dominant discourse is transformed. In the process the boundaries generated by the dominant form are reconfigured. These boundaries between high and popular culture, Aboriginal and Australian art, culture and identity are, in short, the boundaries of definition and authenticity.

One interesting consequence of this boundary breaking is the difficulty it poses for structuring a conversation about the artist himself. No matter what topic we want to discuss, any painting we use will always be applicable to many other topics, this is the legacy of the hybrid artist. But Lin Onus is always, in one way or another, talking about time and space, or specifically, place and history. Within these discourses the issues of representation, dispossession, cultural displacement, marginality, mimicry, and “writing back” to the canon can all be found to traverse individual paintings, and the issues themselves become the subjects of Onus’s particular brand of satiric and irreverent humour.

Place: Representing Representation

One of the most important strategies of postcolonial transformation is the control of self-representation, and this is indeed the key to postcolonial literatures. Underlying all economic, political, and social resistance is the struggle over representation that occurs in language, writing, and other forms of cultural production. Colonized writers, for instance, more or less compelled to learn English, took the language and transformed it in the service of *self*-representation. They needed to do this in order to contest the dominance of colonial depictions of colonized people and cultures. So powerful is the effect of colonial representation that it can become, as Said forcefully demonstrates in *Orientalism*, the way in which the colonized see themselves, and this can affect all social and political interchange. Orientalism remains the classic instance of this discursive

construction, but such a tendency can occur in the representation of Aboriginality through art, where only dot paintings may be considered authentic, despite their use of enamel paints and fine brushes. This is just one aspect of a discourse of exclusion, which nominates only certain forms of social and cultural action and only certain forms of identity as indigenous.

The issue of representation is therefore absolutely central to Onus's work and a prime example of this can be found in the painting *Twice Upon a Time* (1992):



Twice Upon a Time, 1992, 182 x 182 cm.

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The key feature of the painter's particular form of transformative resistance is one I would call the "meta-representational." His representations, and particularly his representations of place, are about the *process* of representation itself. His "seeing" of place is always an investigation of seeing, or at least a disruption of our seeing to uncover that ideology to which it is giving form. This is precisely what makes his hybridity transformative: it is multi-dimensional, operating as a

constant field of interrogation. In order to take control of representation he reveals the extent to which the conventions of seeing have been naturalized.

Onus grew up surrounded by his grandfather's music and fine art, including a much-loved painting by Eugène von Guérard. An early work, *Once Upon a Time*, is subtitled "Homage to Eugène von Guérard" and it converses with von Guérard in an Arcadian view of the Australian bush. But *Twice Upon a Time* actually mimics a painting by H.J. Johnstone called *Evening Shadows, Backwater of the Murray South Australia* (1880).



Twice Upon a Time "writes back" to Johnstone in a mimicry so tranquil that it seems to lack the "menace" Bhabha saw central to colonial mimicry, reproducing too lovingly the conventions of colonial representation. But the meta-representational aspect of the painting provides the "menace" of disruption and subversiveness. It is a critique of colonial inscription and the policies of removal and injustice that accompanied the dominance of representation.

The painting is a palimpsest in which the visual reproduction is laid over another representation of the surface of geometrically carved trees. The painting represents the contest between the power of Western ocularcentrism and the inscription of Aboriginal art upon the surface of the text of place, including the inscription on the body. The single strand of barbed wire signifies the further inscription of colonial occupation, the bounding and fencing of place as property. The fence, being barbed wire, carries the connotation of more than enclosure. It is also a signifier of imprisonment. Unlike Johnstone's painting, *Twice Upon a Time* is uninhabited, dismantling the apparently bucolic appearance of the image with a suggestion of a sinister history. The palimpsest of the painting inscribes not only a spatial history, but also a gradation of modes of representation, modes of seeing and being in place.

The meta-representational function of Onus's art is demonstrated in a different palimpsest in *Jimmy's Billabong* (1988). Over the picturesque visual representation of Jimmy's Billabong is the striped covering of *rarrk* cross-hatching, designs that signify clan affiliation. As Neale suggests, the "*rarrk* overlay can be interpreted as a process of indigenizing the Other, of claiming custodianship of the land, and of subverting the primacy of Western systems of representation" (2000: 16). These *rarrk* patterns were important to Onus who set up a *Book of rarrk* with Michael Eather. As with the former painting, *Twice Upon a Time*, the meta-representational contest is between the visual, ocularcentric history of Western representation and the embodied construction of Aboriginal place. This is a section of the painting showing the *rarrk* overlay.

From 1986 until his death in 1996, Onus made sixteen "spiritual pilgrimages" to Arnhem Land. These journeys enabled him to fill his in-between space, the space of the contemporary Aboriginal painter, with a diverse array of techniques and a diverse array of points of view that underlie his genius for dismantling the processes of seeing.



Barmah Forest, 1994, 183 x 244 cm.

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Introduced to his own ancestral site at the Barmah Forest, Onus engages the place with the full force of his transformative and meta-representational vision. The painting *Barmah Forest* (1994) is a strikingly simple subversion of the landscape techniques on which the painting itself capitalizes. Seeing itself as it is represented in the painting, is a jigsaw puzzle that can be too easily disrupted by the removal of a couple of pieces. Significantly the pieces themselves *do not*

fit, suggesting that the jigsaw of visual representation is a tenuous and provisional one that overlays other forms of seeing.

The jigsaw motif is continued in the painting *Arafura Swamp* (1990).



Arafura Swamp, 1990, 182 x 182 cm.

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The realist western landscape style is punctuated with cutouts through which one can view a traditional bark painting below. The painting represents the reinscription and interpenetration of Aboriginal and Western forms of representation. For Margot Neale “The two systems of representing the land each overlaid the other. Archeologically speaking, the older is below the newer, giving primacy to its more ancient origin” (*Urban* 16). The bricolage technique gives a new dimension to the concept of the hybrid, for the painting is not simply a pattern of different forms but a dialectic of different ways of seeing. Ultimately, the overlay is something more than

bricolage: it is in itself a different way of seeing place—a “third space”—collage, certainly, yet more than the sum of its parts.

The philosophy and practice of colonial enclosure and its capacity to simultaneously enclose an experience of the land is revealed in *Fences, Fences, Fences* (1985).



Fences, Fences Fences, 1985, 120 x 165 cm.

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There is a deep ambivalence here, as if the fence prevents the viewer from truly experiencing “what is there” when “what is there” is represented in the conventions of landscape painting. But the painting describes in simple visual form the imaginative and social effects of the principle of enclosure, so fundamental to Western views of place. The painting provides a very simple but effective interrogation of the cultural bases of Western habitation. What Onus’s painting engages here is a deep-seated Western concept of property seen in John Locke’s *Second Treatise of Government*. For Locke, the defining feature of property is the enclosure: the defining, or bounding, of a place that signals the perceived settling, or cultivation, of that place. Although nobody has an exclusive dominion over nature, says Locke, since the “Fruits” and the “Beasts” of the earth were given for the use of men, there must be a way to appropriate them before they can be of any use to a particular man, and this is the method of enclosure (330). It is man’s labour that removes the products from nature and makes them his property:

As much Land as a Man Tills, Plants, Improves, Cultivates and can use the Product of, so much is his Property. He by his Labour does, as it were, inclose it from the Common...[For God] gave it to the use of the Industrious and Rational (and Labour was to be his Title to it). (333)

The physical enclosure of property has its correlative in the visual enclosure of colonial representation and this is why the meta-representational dimension of Onus's painting has such a profound resonance.

Connected to enclosure and representation is the function of colonial inscription through mapping and naming and this process of inscription is satirized in *Balanda Rock Art* (1989).



Balanda Rock Art, 1989, 180 x 180 cm.

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While apparently a playful variation on the contest between visual representation and *rarrk* inscription in so many of the paintings, it carries a rather grim message. Here the Aboriginal process of painting on the land, of inscribing the surface text of place, is reversed. The inscription is the graffiti of those for whom the bush as a place of belonging is virtually meaningless. Embedded in the dark humour of this unsubtle message is the idea of Aboriginal place as a *tabula rasa* defaced by white occupation or, perhaps more critically, defaced by modernity itself.

Onus is at his most playfully satirical in *Fruit Bats* (1991). One hundred fibreglass Arnhem Land-inspired fruit bats, striped with *rarrk*, are suspended on an Australian symbol—the backyard Hills Hoist. In its own comic way, this is meta-representational as it engages symbolism at various levels. The fruit bats appropriate the Hills Hoist, the epitome of the Australian suburban mundane, in an occupation that speaks volumes about the tenacity and adaptability of Aboriginal art and culture. Above all, despite the grim themes of dispossession and exclusion that populate Onus's work, *Fruit Bats* shows the power of humour to disrupt and surprise, a power that provides one of the most effective vehicles of postcolonial resistance.

Animals as Signs of Aboriginality

On his journeys north, Onus passed Lake Eyre where he encountered the dingo, an animal for which he developed a powerful affinity. For Onus, the animal was not the demeaned dingo of recent history, hunted for its scalp and fenced off from its native hunting grounds. The dingo in the paintings is a survivor, an animal of supreme adaptability: a figure for Aboriginal subjects themselves in their oneness with the land. This is why Onus adopts the dingo as persona in the character X who engages in several satirical adventures with his friend Ray. But in *Wax dogs on Lake Eyre* (1989) he politicizes the figures of the dingoes with what appear to be red, black and yellow football jumpers—the club colours of the marginalised occupants of the country.



Wax Dogs on Lake Eyre, 1989, 60 x 114 cm.

© Lin Onus Estate/Licensed by Viscopy, 2013.

The stripes of the club colours echo the bands of the *rarrk* with which he appropriated his paintings of landscape to an aboriginal world. They may also be seen to suggest the markings of the thylacine, or Tasmanian Tiger, finally hunted to extinction in 1936.

The picture of the dingoes on Lake Eyre is particularly significant because it is this landscape that seemed to several colonial artists to symbolize the dystopian threat of Australian

place. A good example of this attitude to the “horizontal sublime” of Australian place (Ashcroft “Horizontal”) is E.C. Frome’s *First View of Salt Desert, called Lake Torrens* (1843).



In 1990 the dingo joined with a fellow traveler, the stingray, and the adventures of X and Ray have formed an enduring comic myth in Onus’s work. Onus adapted the role of the stingray from Michel Eather, for whom an association with Arnhem Land made the ray a metaphor for Aboriginal subjectivity. As a play on the x-ray style of aboriginal body marking, these two characters engage in an almost picaresque narrative that penetrates many areas of postcolonial interest with humour and verve. One of the best known is *Michael and I are just slipping down to the pub for a minute* (1992). This parodies the eighteenth-century woodcut by the Japanese artist Hokusai, audaciously and comically quoting perhaps the most famous wave in art history. Ray (the female stingray) becomes a kind of surfboard for X (the male dingo) as they ride the crest of the famous wave on the way to the pub. Onus is not above satirizing high seriousness in a very larrikin Australian way. X and Ray are depicted in another grimly humorous painting, *X and Ray witness the sinking of the last ship carrying woodchips from Australian shores* (1992), which comes from a series of paintings that Onus was working on when he died, called “Disasters I would like to see.” In the words of his friend Michael Eather: “The brilliance of Lin Onus was that marvelous anecdotal humour that crosses cultural boundaries—retelling a story with a wry Koori twist,” while at the same time his humour “was very Australian” (58).



Michael and I are just slipping down to the pub for a minute, 1992, 50 x 38 cm
© Lin Onus Estate/Licensed by Viscopy, 2013.

Onus has many other ways of Aboriginalizing the indigenous fauna of Australia with different effect. In *Bunpa near Malwan* (1992) the lyricism of place is celebrated by the landscape occupied by butterflies with Aboriginal markings—cut out from CDs. Like the dingoes, the butterflies wear the Aboriginal team colours. But the engagement with a dominant discourse is seen in their capacity to inhabit not so much the landscape, but its representation. This is the kind of painting that might be accused of being “kitsch” because it is perhaps too realistically pretty

for art purists. But the Aboriginal markings on the butterflies offer just enough ambivalence to disrupt any simple reception of the painting.

There is a category of paintings that extends this Aboriginalizing of the indigenous fauna in terms of displacement. In *Fishes* (1991) the fish are literally “out of water” and travelling across the land in search of waterholes. While the narrative of the painting is a message of displacement, the experience of viewing these paintings is one that is confronted by the transgression of “natural” or conventional conditions of realist representation. The combination of displacement and transgression means that this painting, as well as a similar one called *Hovering till the rains come* (1995), operate in a striking meta-representational way, because they stimulate a doubleness of vision in which the medium in which fishes and rays are swimming/flying is ambivalent. Dispensing with conventional panoramic views, Onus is here attempting the technique of his mentor Jack Wunuwan, a way of seeing “beneath the surface.” The ambivalence of this “seeing” is converted into a compelling picture of aspiration in *Stingrays also dream of flying* (1995), in which the stingrays hover in the sky, displaced from their natural environment but launched into the visionary realm of possibility.



Stingrays also dream of flying, 1995, 91 x 121 cm. © Lin Onus Estate/Licensed by Viscopy, 2013.

History

When we move from space to time, from place to history, we find a much more overtly political discourse emerging. Why this is so could provide some insight into Aboriginal subjectivity in general. The place is still there to be contested while history is not, at least not obviously so. Although it might be a focus of struggle, the area of visual representation is one that provides a

great hope of change because it lends itself more easily to the strategies of postcolonial revision. Place is interpenetrated by history, as the Mabo and Wyk cases demonstrate.¹ The master discourse of Western history is a bit more intransigent and has been critiqued by historians such as Henry Reynolds in *The Other Side of the Frontier* but in former colonies, at least those of the British Empire, the re-writing of history has usually been launched in literary writing. In painting, the engagement with history outside of its embedding in place is perhaps more difficult. As Ashish Nandy says “Historical consciousness now owns the globe”:

Though millions of people continue to stay outside history, millions have, since the days of Marx, dutifully migrated to the empire of history to become its loyal subjects. The historical worldview is now triumphant globally; the ahistorical have become the dissenting minority. (46)

When colonial societies are historicized they are brought into history; brought into the discourse of modernity by means of the narrative of history, but kept at its margins.

The myth of beginnings is a point at which the contestation of history starts for Onus and he engages it with characteristic mixture of humour and rage. In *And on the Eighth Day* (1992) the toilet duck becomes a sacred object held aloft by angels, winging Botticelli-like across the painting.



And on the Eighth Day, 1992, 182 x 145 cm. © Lin Onus Estate/Licensed by Viscopy, 2013.

The picture of these winged female Valkyries on the eighth day of creation is an extremely anti-imperialist painting apparently prompted by Onus’s reaction to the Republican debate and the sight of bumper stickers saying “Keep our flag forever.” It is neither the flag of Aboriginal people nor the flag of most Australians, a point that emphasises the complexity of postcolonial

discourse in a settler colony. The painting is a luminous parody of invasion. The Valkyries are carrying items that ravaged Aboriginal culture: sheep, whose cloven hoofs tore up the land; barbed wire, used to fence pastoral properties land and keep trespassers out; the gun, used to decimate Aboriginal populations; and, with a typically humorous note, a “toilet duck” symbolizing the banality of Australian urbanization.

As we sense from *And on the Eighth Day* an interesting shift occurs in Onus’s work when he moves from space to time. The Musquito series (1979-82) is much earlier than the magnificent meta-representational paintings and marks a more oppositional and more confrontational stage of resistance. Indeed, the series emerges from an attempt to reinstate an Aboriginal history of resistance. One persistent misapprehension about Aboriginal resistance, one generated by the nature of historiography itself, is that while Native and African Americans had their own heroes Aborigines had no heroic figure of resistance. This series is an attempt to interpolate history to reveal and celebrate such a figure. Musquito (c.1780-1825) was an Aboriginal resistance leader and tracker, also known as Mosquito, Musquetta, Bush Muschetta, or Muskito. He was probably an Eora (Gai-Mariagal) man, born on the north shore of Port Jackson, New South Wales. In 1805 he participated in raids on settlers' properties in the Hawkesbury and Georges River districts. After the *Sydney Gazette* reported that, in good English, he had expressed his determination to continue his “rapacities,” General Orders issued on 9 June 1805 authorized his arrest to prevent further mischief.

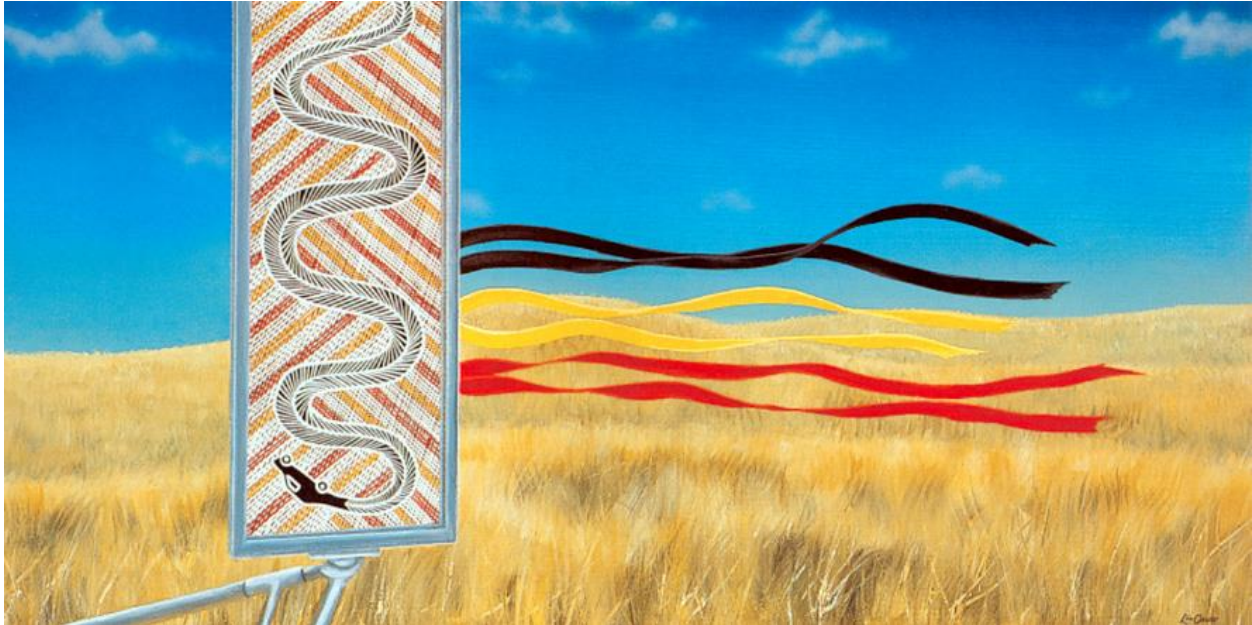
The series is powerful and suggestive, for rather than a one-dimensional figure of resistance we find a subject who reveals issues of marginality and place, of indigeneity and convictism as ambiguously intersecting tropes of otherness and subjection. The most obvious feature of this series is the virtual impossibility of separating history from place. The strength of Musquito as a figure is his embeddedness, his oneness with place. This is most obvious in paintings like *In Hiding* (1979-82). But throughout the series, the intersection of colonial history and Aboriginal place is a powerful feature of the subject as a focus of resistance. Crucially, it is much more than simply oppositional: the series, by taking visual and historical forms of representation and interpolating them, transforms the discourse.

The Future

Time and place continue to be fused in Onus’s painting. Within the overarching discourse of colonial representation he depicts a search for Aboriginal place that has been obscured by the operations of colonial inscription. The concept of Aboriginal people finding out where they have come from and where they are going is a recurring motif in Onus’s work in paintings such as *Where to Now?* (1986). The painting *Mum, when do we get there?* (1989), conflates time and place in a way similar to the artwork on the cover of Sally Morgan’s *My Place*.² The painting depicts a road snaking around like the rainbow serpent, lined with question marks, on which is shown a red truck that immediately raises the question “Where are we going?” At the bottom of the painting a hand holding a map represents the authorized form of mapping, which is the one that remains inimical to the Aboriginal discovery of place. The symbol of colonial inscription and organization of space stands as the constant reminder of the enclosure of colonial discourse. On the other hand the painting prescribes a form of mapping that, by conflating time and space, humorously indicates the way in which Aboriginal place is consciously and culturally embedded in time. But layered on this is the reality of Aboriginal engagements with modernity and a

suggestion of the ways in which a traditional conception of Aboriginal place may be located in the modern world.

The interpenetration of place and history becomes a feature of Onus's *Road to Redfern* (1988). This painting captures a similarly utopian vision that may be seen prominently in all postcolonial literature, one that can be called "remembering the future." Redfern is a Sydney suburb in which there exists a very politically active Aboriginal community. Redfern Park was the location of Prime Minister Paul Keating's historic acceptance of white responsibility for Aboriginal dispossession, an acceptance that was denied by the subsequent conservative government of John Howard.



Road to Redfern, 1988, 60 x 120 cm.

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In the rear vision mirror of the truck on the way to Redfern is the image of the rainbow serpent, demonstrating the ways in which the past infuses the present to produce a hopeful future. *The Road to Redfern* demonstrates what Edouard Glissant calls a "prophetic vision of the past": "The past," he says, "to which we were subjected, which has not yet emerged as history for us, is, however, obsessively present" (64). It is the function of the dialectical image to know time in this way by situating it.

The Road to Redfern is a dialectical image, not because it immobilizes time but because it captures the unity of past and future in a mobile present. The past is apprehended in terms of the future and vice versa. It offers an image that is both a vision of the past and a utopian assurance of the future of Aboriginal identity. The painting is crucially framed by the title: the road to Redfern is the road towards a Sydney suburb that has been the centre of urban Aboriginal resistance, a modern urban sacred site. The rainbow serpent in the rear view mirror is the sustaining metaphor for the continuation of the past in the present. The fact that the head of the serpent is a truck is a cunning metaphor for the persistence of Aboriginal identity in modernity and the importance of mobility and transformation. The image is dialectical because it resists closure.

Onus captures here the key feature of any hopeful vision of the future. For the major theorist of Marxist Utopianism, Ernst Bloch, the future is always a possibility emerging from the past (8).

The valuing of the mythic past in the Aboriginal imagination is not only an attempt to disrupt the dominance of history, but also an attempt to re-conceive a place in the present, a place transformed by the infusion of this past. This is an infusion that lies at the core of the “bricolage” of Onus’s painting. The present is the crucial site of the continual motion by which the new comes into being. In such transformative conceptions of utopian hope the “not-yet” is always a possibility emerging from the past. For those societies contesting the dominance of colonial discourse, the radically new is always embedded in and transformed by the past. This is why the connection between the rainbow serpent in the rear vision mirror and the future of Aboriginal sovereignty symbolized by Redfern are so significant. For Onus the road to the future is powered by hope.

Lin Onus embodies the conflicting and overlapping discourses of tradition and modernity within which contemporary Aboriginal resistance takes place. In this porous transcultural and deeply ambivalent space, Onus reveals the power that lies in that very ambivalence—its “two powered,” ambi-valent potential. In his playful disruption of painting conventions he demonstrates the effectiveness with which Aboriginal artists may appropriate contemporary forms in order to interpolate dominant cultural discourses in the production of an alternative modernity.

Endnotes

1. In 1982 five Torres Strait Islanders, including Eddie (Koiki) Mabo, began legal proceedings to establish title for the Meriam people to Murray (Mer) Island in the Torres Strait. On 3 June 1992 the justices of the Australian High Court handed down a judgment in favour of Eddie Mabo against the Queensland government, confirming that the Meriam people were entitled "as against the whole of the world" to the possession, occupation, use and enjoyment of the Murray Islands in the Torres Strait (Australia 1993: 14).

In 1996 the High Court made another important decision in the Wik case, which relates to a claim of native title on land that included pastoral leases granted by the Queensland Government. The High Court said that native title can only be extinguished by a law or an act of the Government which shows clear and plain intention to extinguish native title. The laws creating pastoral leases in Queensland did not reveal an intention to extinguish title.

2. *My Place* is an autobiography written by Aboriginal writer Sally Morgan in 1987, outlining her journey to find out the story of her family and forebears. The cover of the book depicts a road on which various stages of her journey of discovery are located.

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