
The Politics Of Positionality And The Production Of Meaning:

A READING OF HOU LEONG'S 'AN AUSTRALIAN'.

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On first looking at Hou Leong's photographs, the images brought an immediate smile to my face. Their cheeky tone and playful style appealed to me, and I appreciated their ironic refiguring of both 'white' and 'multicultural' versions of 'Australia' as it is popularly imagined. More than this, the images made me think, particularly about my own viewing position, and the process by which these images are made meaningful to me. This paper is partly a reading of Leong's work and partly a meditation on this process.

TRAINS OF THOUGHT:

I

I have lived in Australia for around five years, having come here from England, and have been a citizen for just over a year. None of the stock images which Leong uses as his source material could be said to 'reflect' or 'speak to' my experience of this country, yet I recognise them all as 'Aussie' images. Where does this recognition come from I wondered? How to explain the fact that in such a short time here, I have somehow 'learnt' the cultural status of such images? How is it that I 'get the joke' which Leong is playing, because I understand what it means to tamper with such images? Thinking about the process of 'learning' this particular version of Australian identity goes some way to impressing upon me the sheer force of hegemonic representations of Australia—their ability to enter my consciousness as 'typically Australian', even as I simultaneously know that

they are anything but.

II

Thinking about the method of Leong's work, I wonder how it is that simply by segueing his own face into these 'typically Australian' images, Leong can achieve such a sense of disjunction. If, as I keep hearing, 'we're all ethnics', 'we're all immigrants', 'we're all Australians', how is it that the mere presence of Leong's face in these images creates a disjunction between race/ethnicity and Australian identity? I consider that I am technically as much an immigrant, a new Australian, a recently 'naturalised alien' as Leong. However, the disingenuous lie of such a statement is revealed when I think about the effect of putting my own head into these images in place of Leong's. Such a move would reinscribe the disjunction as one between gender/sexuality and Australian-ness. The issue of race/ethnicity would (supposedly) disappear.

III

Recently I was buying takeaway food from a market stall. The customer in front of me asked the stall-holder if she was from India. Receiving the simple answer 'no', the woman then asked 'where are you from then?' To this the stall holder replied 'Fiji', only to be asked 'well what are you doing here?'

I refer to this incident, not because it is remarkable—on the contrary, the ubiquitous where are you from? question will be all too familiar to many readers, those for whom something about their looks, the way they speak or their surname suggests to many people that they cannot be from here. This incident is one of several recent moments which have made me think about questions of multiculturalism, race, ethnicity and identity in Australia, specifically in terms of my own position. Hardly anyone ever asks me where I am from, much less demands to know what I am doing here. I rarely feel that the labels 'immigrant' or 'migrant' are intended to include me, and I rarely feel myself to be interpellated by the term 'migrant woman'. In fact I have found myself using these terms to refer to people and groups which I unconsciously imagine to be 'other' to myself, a fact which reflects both the racial/ethnic-specific nature of these supposedly neutral descriptive social categories, and my own complicity in such discourses. Obviously, there is something specific about Anglo immigrants

which somehow 'excuses' us from inclusion in these categories. As a white, Anglo-Celtic migrant from England, my race and ethnicity have a somewhat 'unmarked', unremarkable and taken-for-granted status in Australia. In marking my speaking position here, I want not only to situate myself in relation to Leong's photographs, but to attempt to undermine the taken-for-granted status of my own white, Anglo-Celtic Australian identity/ethnicity, even as I acknowledge the ongoing privileges afforded by this position.

Hou Leong's photographs might be read as an example of that postmodern photographic technique of appropriation, or theft—an approach which refuses to respect the orthodoxies of 'originality', 'authenticity' and ownership, and instead takes existing images and reworks them. However, Leong's work is not simply one more example of this rebellious technique, for the images he works with are neither random nor arbitrary. To read his work purely in terms of 'style', that is as simply a clever, seamless post-modern cut-and-paste-job, fashioned from a free-floating grab-bag of images, would be to evacuate it of its highly political force.

Titled 'An Australian', Leong's photo-essay upsets and destabilises received ideas about that much-mythologised identity that is 'an Australian'. Leong does not just appropriate any old 'familiar images', rather he relentlessly and systematically plunders the very file of images which the Anglo-Australian imagination holds so dear. This is the Australia of Crocodile Dundee—mythical national identity as commodity; caricatured, packaged and marketed to the rest of the world. These images are also widely recognised as the clichés of the advertising industry—the familiar, stock representations reproduced when a petrol company like Ampol wants to assert its own 'Australian-ness'. The wide use of such images by the advertising industry suggests that they operate on the level of fantasy, as ways in which a great many 'Australians' like to think of themselves, images with which they imagine some affiliation. These then, are the graphic symbols of an imagined community, and as such, they have a certain taken-for-granted cultural status, a considerable cultural currency. Circulating as visual representations of a dominant 'Aussie' identity, they function to demarcate a space that is untouchable, undisturbable and essential. If Australia as a nation now defines itself as multicultural and tolerant, even welcoming of diversity, it nevertheless maintains the aforementioned bank of images against which such 'diversity' is defined. It is this sacred image bank which Leong has taken to with irreverence and which his work so strategically reinscribes.

These photographs refuse the demands of official multiculturalism for celebratory representations of 'cultural diversity'. Leong's work does not reproduce this happy multiculturalism, a space where his Chinese body would be tolerated, even celebrated, on the condition that it remained strictly on the margins of the nation, say at some multicultural food festival. Instead, his work situates Leong at the sacred heart of Australian identity by violating its supposedly undisturbable spaces. From the drover in Akubra and Drizabone looking across at a wide landscape with his dog at his side, to the burly tattooed woodchopper at an agricultural show, from blokes in singlets and stubbies having a beer in a country town pub, to a sensitive portrait of humble Aussie mateship, these are the images with which a nation has (supposedly) defined itself. By simply inserting his own image into the space of these Aussie icons, Leong fractures their coherence and denaturalises their claims to represent some Australian 'essence' or 'character'.

Adrian Chan's claim that 'Asia is the defining other of Australian identity' (Chan 1995, is born out by the discord which these photo-pastiches create. Australian identity is implicitly white and Anglo—this is the very reason why my own face in these images would not create any discord in terms of race/ethnicity. Leong's discordant images remind me of pictures found in children's books which ask 'what is wrong with this picture?', and which invite viewers to spot the 'mistake'. If the mere presence of Leong's Chinese face in the space of these hallowed images of the nation seems like a mistake, then the effect of his work is to expose the racist logic upon which ideologies of Australian identity are typically based. It is for this reason that some of these images might induce anxiety in the psyche of the imagined (Anglo) Australian community. For example, it is Paul Hogan, the archetypal 'Aussie' bloke who is supposed to 'get the girl', not some Chinese interloper. And the very possibility of white women's desire for Asian men is transgressive in many contexts. Similarly, the sanctity of ANZAC day as the preserve of the often unashamedly racist RSL is shattered by the presence of Leong in the parade or under the national flag.

I must admit to being less than convinced by Kurt Brereton's suggestion that Leong's work will be successful in Australia because, as he puts it, 'we all love to see Paul Hogan lose his head for a change, or a Chinese Bronco score the winning try' (Brereton 1996: 30). I would agree that this is indeed often the way 'we' like to imagine ourselves, but I wonder if the reaction to the presence of ethnic 'others' in Australia has not been repeatedly demonstrated to be precisely one of ambivalence. This ambivalence is motivated on the one hand by a desire to see such others in 'our' nation—

both for self-interested, or pragmatic economic reasons, and more symbolically, as 'proof' of our own tolerance—a desire which is crucially qualified by the demand that these 'others' remain strictly at the margins of the nation. On the other hand, such desires are bound up with a simultaneous fear that the limits imposed by the dominant culture will not be respected, that these others may not keep to the multicultural margins, and that instead, their presence threatens the very sanctity of 'our' national icons. I wonder then, if the presence of Leong in the space of these national icons is not likely to elicit a response similar to that of the woman in the market who I referred to at the beginning, namely 'what are they doing here?'

Looking at these images, I am thinking about the complicated nature of otherness, for I read Leong's photographs not only as revealing the way in which representations of Australian identity are racially specific, but also as raising questions of gender and sexuality. Leong has entered the hallowed spaces not only of Anglo Australia, but also of Australian masculinity. In many of these images, he is an interloper into a particular world of Australian sport which is not only largely an Anglo preserve (specifically rugby league, surfing, cricket) but also an unmistakably masculine domain. From on-field heroism to locker-room machismo and blazers-and-bow-ties media stunts, somehow the presence of this particular man in these photographs, especially the sporting images, draws extra attention to the masculinity of the 'typical Aussie' and points directly to the homosociality which structures Australian male 'mateship'. Immediately however, I am curious as to how I came to this interpretation of Leong's work. Why is it that the presence of an ethnic 'other' in these images also suggests to me the absence of other others (namely women) in typical images of Australian-ness? Perhaps this again has something to do with my own subject position—an example of my own tendency to read gender and sexuality into everything, while I suspect not 'noticing' or seeing the racial and ethnic specificity of numerous other constructions and representations. As I have suggested, I am not convinced that my own face in these images would signify anything other than a comment on issues of gender and sexuality. It seems rare that marking gendered specificities is also read as drawing attention to absences of other others (namely non-Anglos).

To conclude, I want to look closely at the image from *An Australian* which makes use of David Moore's 1960 photograph of European migrants arriving in Sydney. This photograph is widely recognised in Australia, and signifies the celebrated beginnings of Australian multiculturalism. Or, more accurately, the fact that this photograph now carries such significations is symptomatic of the contemporary, celebratory re-writings of Australian

immigration programs as the beginnings of progressive 'multicultural' Australia. Such re-writings conveniently efface those periods of Australian immigration history organised around strict and discriminatory race-based entrance criteria, and policies of integration and assimilation. While many of Leong's images successfully subvert images of 'white Australia', this one targets popular representations of 'multicultural Australia'. To me, it is perhaps the most powerful for this reason.

A common, supposedly 'liberal' position which is taken up in 1990s Australia holds that the embarrassing (racist) era of white Australia is over, and that this is now a non-racist, tolerant, multicultural nation, one which has generously welcomed 'others' from all over the world. The insertion of an Asian face into this celebratory image of arrival then, fractures the self-congratulatory claims of multiculturalism by drawing attention to its internal racism. Again, Leong's face, because Chinese, does not belong here, or at least not in this space at this time. Australia's immigration program has not been an altruistic, indiscriminate, welcoming gesture, but rather a carefully planned process, one in which the categories of who would be admitted (let alone 'welcomed') and when, have always been deliberately and precisely defined.

As Joseph Pugliese notes (Pugliese 1995: 241-2), the history of Australian immigration policies has drawn upon racial/racist scientific taxonomies and theories of racial types and characteristics, for these very hierarchies of ethnicity and 'race' have been reproduced in immigration policy. Hence Asian immigration to Australia is relatively recent precisely because Australian governments began at the 'top' of the hierarchy by admitting British and Northern European migrants, and only later moved 'down' the list through Southern Europeans and finally to migrants from Asia.

Leong's is a radical intrusion into the contemporary celebratory meanings of Moore's image then, for it draws attention to the specificity of the Australian 'welcome', and to the racist ideologies which determined (and continue to determine) precisely who will be admitted and when. In the light of recent ominous initiatives of the Howard government, one might add that Australian authorities also seek to determine precisely where in Australia new (and existing) immigrants should be permitted to live.¹ By inserting his face into this particular image then, Leong not only exposes the lie of any self-congratulatory celebrations of multiculturalism, he also signifies the migrant who refuses to obediently take his/her place in the racist hierarchies of ethnicity.

REFERENCES:

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NOTES

1 Presumably deciding that the principle of freedom of movement does not apply to particular Australian residents, the Coalition government is reported to be considering a \$30,000 fine for new immigrants who relocate from their 'designated area' to a capital city. See Millett M 'Immigrants face fine for move to cities' *The Sydney Morning Herald* 8 July 1996.