

“ADVANCE AUSTRALIA FAIR”: AUSTRALIA’S NATION- MAKING ETHIC AND ITS MANNER OF PERSISTENCE

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Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity: wherefore lookest thou upon them that deal treacherously, and holdest thy tongue when the wicked devoureth *the man that is more righteous than he?* (Habakkuk 1:13)

This paper examines the rhetorical and ethical investments of Australia’s national anthem as these have evolved since the song’s origin in the 1880s. Various continuities and discontinuities are implied in the journey of “Advance Australia Fair” from popular to official status. In particular, attention is drawn to the revision of the song prior to its taking on unambiguous and permanent anthem status under the Hawke government in 1984. Through a comparison of the original with the now official version of the lyrics, the question of implied racist investment of Australian nationhood and self-symbolisation is canvassed.

“Advance Australia Fair” was politically corrected (not a phrase in use at the time) when re-instated as Australia’s national anthem in 1984. It had had national anthem status in the previous decade during the latter part of the Whitlam government. The 1984 re-write was largely undertaken with a view to giving the fairer sex a fairer go. The revision of the lyrics was done by the National Australia Day Committee, in consultation with two of the Boards (Music and Literature) of the Australia Council. The original opening line of Peter Dodds McCormick’s nineteenth century song was: “Australian sons let us rejoice/for we are young and free.” The complete “official” anthem (published in the Commonwealth of Australia Gazette of 19 April 1984) is now officially as follows:

Australians all let us rejoice
For we are young and free.
We’ve golden soil and wealth for toil
Our home is girt by sea.

Our land abounds in nature’s gifts

Of beauty rich and rare.
 In history's page, let every stage
 Advance Australia Fair.

In joyful strains then let us sing
 Advance Australia Fair.

Beneath our radiant Southern Cross
 We'll toil with hearts and hands
 To make this Commonwealth of ours
 Renowned of all the lands

For those who've come across the seas
 We've boundless plains to share.
 With courage let us all combine
 To Advance Australia Fair.

In joyful strains then let us sing
 Advance Australia Fair.

The "correction" is noteworthy given the emphasis the song places on a self-conscious effort at nationhood. These lyrics situate a collective effort at being a nation in the "act" of being seen to be one, being worthy of the name. The claim is justified on two grounds: possession and intention. We have golden soil, wealth, youth, the ability to toil, freedom, a beautiful country possessed of nature's gifts, boundless plains and so on. We make no particular claim to have done anything as yet but we have good intentions, specifically to toil with hearts and hands to make our nation famous as such. The setting of the song then is temporally ambiguous, one might say vaguely forward looking: we have *x* and we are about to *y*.

The big questions one might ask this far into the song are naturally, "Who are we?" and "How did we get to be in a place that needs to be sung about by us in this way?" "What effect does it have on us or on others, that we sing this particular song about ourselves?"

The "we," I hope to show in this paper, is the white nation, under construction in Australia at the time of writing (1878), and still in progress today. The ongoing construction of an identity, as revealed in the revision of this song, demonstrates instructive continuities and discontinuities in the evolution of Australia's self-image. It should lead us to ask to what extent the present national identity of Australians is a Victorian construction.

Invisible Spectacle

The original version of “Advance Australia Fair” (mildly suppressed by Australian governments since 1984¹) places emphasis on Australia’s nation making as world spectacle.

While other nations of the globe
Behold us from afar,
We’ll rise to high renown and shine
Like our glorious southern star;
From England, Scotia, Erin’s Isle,
Who come our lot to share,
Let all combine with heart and hand
To advance and etc. (McCormick 1-4)

The national identity to which the song is dedicated is British. In this stanza it is shown that British nationality (or imperialism) is the common investment of the English, the Scots, the Irish; the latter two sub-national identities invoked – in the time honoured manner Benedict Anderson has associated with nation – through names with ancient authority.

The song’s author, Peter Dodds McCormick, was a Glasgow-born joiner who had emigrated to Australia in 1855, where he became active in the Sydney Presbyterian Church. His lesser known musical works include “The Bonnie Banks of Clyde.” It seems fitting that a man born into a British sub-nationality (now well established since the 1707 and 1801 Acts of Union) should work at adding a new British identity to the world. It is interesting to note strong similarities in theme and diction between McCormick’s effort in “Advance Australia Fair” and those of fellow Scot, Presbyterian and Sydney-sider, John Dunmore Lang, the man responsible for one of the earliest serious efforts to produce an “Australian Anthem” in his 1826 composition of that title.

A paradoxical investment is entailed in the symbolic means of Australia’s construction as white nation. The white man is a spectacle embodying human progress. To be white is to aspire, to be beheld aspiring. Whiteness, on the other hand, is invisible. It functions as norm only to the extent that it is overlooked as a quality of those who possess it. It is able to be overlooked by and large because it is white people who do the looking. Or at least an unmarked point of view and

¹ Government documents rarely acknowledge any alteration from the original lyrics. Where they do, the original lyrics are not shown.

narrative style in Australia has systematically pre-supposed and privileged a white man's view of the world. Unquestionably the white man's was the key point-of-view in the *fin de siècle* Australia of looming – if shaky – Federation. How nuanced an understanding of that viewpoint do we need? Douglas Cole's "The Crimson Thread of Kinship: ethnic ideas in Australia 1870-1914" considers the range of views in Australia at this time. While it is uncontroversial and incontestable to suggest that "Advance Australia Fair" promoted a white supremacist rhetoric, importantly that rhetoric was of a different order from the rustic racism of *The Bulletin's* turn of the century Australian nationalism. The mainstream whiteness of Australia in the decades before and after Federation was the British imperial kind, that which was characterised by "the crimson thread of kinship."

The most strongly Australian aspect of Federation was the collective determination to define who, in terms of race, would or could be Australian. Australia in its post-colonial moment of becoming sought to define itself by means of particular racist exclusions. It was by this means that Australians stridently asserted the meaning in their circumstances of British nationality.

Such is the subject of Ward and Inson's 1971 coffee table production *The Glorious Years: Of Australia Fair from the Birth of the Bulletin to Versailles* and especially of their key chapter "Australia for the White Man." The Chinese would not be Australians and neither for certain key purposes would the Aborigines. The passage of the Commonwealth Franchise Act of 1902 more or less traded indigenous for women's voting rights (Hirst 288). Aboriginal voting rights would begin to return gradually half a century later, for ex-servicemen in 1949, for the adult Aboriginal population as a whole in 1962. It would not be until 1983 that voting was compulsory for Aboriginal, as for other, Australians.

At the birth of the Sydney *Bulletin* in 1880 a golden age of racism had been inaugurated. But the idea of a racially exclusive Australian was only one part of a comprehensive dream of a working man's paradise. The *Bulletin's* radical republican manifesto, published in its first issue, would place it left (and right) of the entire political spectrum today. Along with the abolition of titles of the so-called nobility, the *Bulletin* advocated "the entire abolition of the private ownership of land." A united Australia was necessary for "protection against the world." "Australia for the Australians" meant the exclusion of "the cheap Chinaman, the cheap Nigger, the cheap European pauper."

McCormick's was a Protestant and genteel rhetoric, a rhetoric for an upwardly mobile nation in the making. It expressed a polite and well-heeled triumphalism. McCormick's was a sentiment with plenty of company. A year earlier another Scottish migrant, James Brunton Stephens, had written in his poem "The Dominion of Australia: A Forecast":

She is not yet; but he whose ear
 Thrills to that finer atmosphere
 Where footfalls of appointed things,
 Reverberent of days to be,
 Are heard in forecast echoings
 Like wave-beats from a viewless sea
 Hears in the voiceful tremors of the sky
 Auroral heralds whispering, "she is nigh." (in Inglis 323)

Here in a reversible motion – characteristic of the prospective nostalgia of the Republic push a century and more later – the nation is conceived of teleologically as an entity advancing towards itself. Exploited here for the purposes of nation is poetry's classical affinity for nemesis, or as John Hirst began his Federation centennial work *Sentimental Nation*, the notion that "God wanted Australia to be a nation" (4). Ken Inglis in *Australian Colonists* speculates that these verses of Stephens's were "the most widely known poetic statements about Australian nationality between 1870 and 1900" (323). Stephens's and McCormick's Australia is a divinely inspired spectacle the reader is advised to watch for.

The re-writing of "Advance Australia Fair" foregrounds the paradox of the spectacular and the invisible in the investments of whiteness and of nation. The emptying of the country of its former cultural content has been accomplished by those who have progressively made themselves more invisible in the process. There was no "Australia" in this continent to conquer prior to the coming of white people. Nevertheless the continent was invaded, and is still occupied, by forces which absolve themselves for responsibility in the process by absenting themselves from the action.

Who can be blamed for what no one did to the nobodies who were here before things naturally became as they were always meant to be? One is reminded of Homer's Polyphemos, whose calls for help were ignored by the other Cyclopes when, under the spell of the wily Odysseus, he acknowledged that Nobody had attacked him.

Absolution or no, it may be that the *terra nullius* epoch² is over now only because it is no longer necessary. Despite various fears of white decline (cf Hage 179-232) there is no convincing threat – Aboriginal or otherwise – to white sovereignty in Australia. Or at least, there is less threat now than there has ever been.

² The High Court of Australia's 1992 "Mabo decision" rejected the validity of the *terra nullius* doctrine for Australian common law. In other words Australia was recognized by this decision as having been subject to the antecedent rights of indigenous peoples prior to white settlement. *Terra nullius* has since this time been popularly referred to as a "legal fiction."

Advance Australia

According to the *Oxford Companion to Australian Music*, “Advance Australia Fair” was first performed at a Loyal Orange Lodge ceremony in Sydney on the 12th of July, 1878 (15). This was seven years after the founding of the Australian Natives’ Association. The “Advance Australia” motto is much older, pre-Victorian in fact, dating back to the 1820s and having been displayed as the banner on *Sydney Gazette* from 1824 (Inglis 51). We can say that the idea of “Advancing Australia” is roughly contemporary with Matthew Flinders’s popularising of the idea of Australia³ itself.

It is interesting – given the persistence of the motto in what is now the national anthem – to trace the “Advance Australia” story forward from Federation as well. The original 1906 grant of an Australian coat of arms showed kangaroo and emu holding just the southern cross as a banner on a shield. Although it was superseded in 1912 by a coat of arms replacing the southern cross with a shield bearing the emblems of the six states, the old emblem remained on the silver coinage into the 1930s (and on the sixpence through till 1966). The “Advance Australia” motto circulated widely, over half a century, in this very official capacity, despite the official superseding of the coat of arms with which it was associated. What kind of meaning did and does the motto carry?

The most obvious meaning of “Advance Australia” today is as a commendation of progress for the collectivity, “Australia.” Whereas it is easy for us today to see that as the aspiration of an existing national entity, there are in fact good reasons to read it in its original context, as a sub-national aspiration. Or rather, “Advance Australia” had a mainstream reading which was sub-national, but allowed a subversive reading, which over time came to promote the idea of Australia as independent and national entity (i.e. the function of the motto is to encourage Australia *rather than* Britannia). Hirst, in *Sentimental Nation*, divides late Victorian sentiment on Australian Federation into three camps: imperial federationists, nationalists and independent nationalists. The first group wanted to see the Empire itself as a Federation, the second wanted an Australian Federation within the British Empire, the third wanted Federation outside of empire (67).

³ Though the coining of the word (or at least the donation of the name) “Australia” is traditionally credited to Matthew Flinders (Manning Clark 182), the term is in fact much older. In a recent paper on this subject, John Healey, writing in the *Newsletter of the Historical Society of South Australia* contends that the honour of naming Australia as such belongs to an English naturalist named George Shaw, a man who never came to Australia. A 1794 work by Shaw *The Zoology of New Holland* refers to the whole of the continent as Australia. The adjective Australian is somewhat older, having been applied to the fictitious (aboriginal) inhabitants of Australia in a 1676 novel by a Frenchman, Gabriel de Foigny: *La Terre Australe Connue* (translated in 1693 as *A New Discovery of Terra Incognita Australis, of the Southern World*). That novel had described a place and inhabitants bearing no resemblance to anything we know, historically or today, as Australia (*History SA*, November 2002).

Whether one reads from the sub-national/imperial or the Australian nationalist/republican position, the “Advance Australia” slogan is better historicised as commending forward progress towards the entity *prospectively* known as Australia. “Advance Australia” was, in other words, a nation building slogan, a slogan for a campaign to bring about a clearly political objective. It had been the motto of the ANA since its inception in 1871. It was the ANA’s use of the slogan that centred the aspiration of advancing Australia. The ANA had a broad membership in terms of political conviction but it was by no means a disloyal organisation.

The words “Advance Australia” were meant to help Australia to become a reality. Conflation, in this motto, of the idea that Australia was an entity already owed loyalty, and on the other hand yet to be achieved, was itself a source of continuity, a kind of tradition.

With all Her Faults We Love Her Still

It is the depth of contradiction in the present and official version of “Advance Australia Fair” (its “look at me, I’m not here” quality) that leaves some of those who sing it a little uneasy after as to the question of what they have meant. But I think that depth of contradiction well expresses the Australian condition.

Nor need one dig far to unearth contradictions in the song. In terms of form, the song begins as if it were a hymn or a prayer, with the formula “Let us (pray/sing?),” but without the locutionary force of an appeal to God (cf “God Save the King/Queen.”). It is a pseudo-hymn. Who is addressed? *We* are. The temporal setting of the hymn is substituted with the imminence of an imperative: “Let us rejoice.” Rejoicing is something we should all do for a long list of reasons. That being the case, “let us sing.” In “Advance Australia Fair” it is the imminent future to which voices attend in their act of unison.

Who is this “we” we cannot see because we are so busy singing when we are not toiling, when we are not rejoicing? The invisibility of those singing is assured by their identity with themselves. Who in Australia in 1878 can sing a song in English praising Captain Cook for his nation-making role? In the second stanza of the original song:

When gallant Cook from Albion sail’d,
To trace wide oceans o’er,
True British courage bore him on
Till he landed on our shore.
Then here he raised old England’s flag,
The standard of the brave;
With all her faults we love her still,
“Britannia rules the wave”

In joyful, etc (McCormick 1-4)

It is British people who sing such praises. By doing so they participate in that story as establishing their rights and identity.

Notice the elision of the performativity of Cook's act in relation to those singing the original song. Chrono-*logically* it was not *our* shore when he landed on it. His act in landing – along with the right annexing phrases (on Possession Island and elsewhere) – dutifully recorded in a journal, transmitted down to us, as the historical record – made it *our* shore⁴. The clause “he landed on our shore” appears to make timeless the possession Cook effected. Notice the elision of Captain Cook from *our* song today. In the re-writing of “Advance Australia Fair” – a key Victorian continuity in Australian identity today – we attend to a vanishing spectacle, a spectacle into which we vanish in becoming ourselves. Today, more than ever, we are the spectacle vanishing in the text we sing. It is through that act of vanishing that our authority comes to be unassailable.

Events since as well as before Federation reveal that Australian-ness emerges not fully blown as national aspiration, but in stages from British nationality. The best example of this is in the fact that there was no passport distinctively issued as “Australian,” rather than “British,” before 1949. Under Menzies's leadership the House of Representatives was able to laugh off the suggestion that Australia needed a song “expressing Australian feeling” for the purposes of the Melbourne Olympics. A Mr Greenup's suggestion that there was a “wide-spread public desire for the recognition of Australia as a separate unit within the British Commonwealth” led Menzies to deride “Advance Australia Fair” as a jingle (*House of Representatives Hansard*, 25 May 1955, 1049-50).

Yet the only distance from a more British Britishness in the original version of “Advance Australia Fair” is established rather unconvincingly in the lines,

With all her faults we love her still,
 “Britannia rules the wave.” (McCormick 1-4)

⁴ In Cook's entry for Wednesday 22 August 1770: “the Eastern Coast from the Latitude of 38° South down to this place I am confident was never seen or visited (sic) by any European before us [. . .] and Notwithstanding I had in the Name of His Majesty taken possession of several places upon this coast, I now once more hoisted the English Couleurs (sic) and in the Name of His Majesty King George the Third took possession of the whole Eastern Coast from the above Latitude down to this place by the name of *New South Wales* [. . .]” (171).

The song is not really about Britannia's faults. It is about the value of being invisibly British everywhere we go. The difference that is asserted is about placing the British soul under the southern cross.

Some nations are whiter than others. In the case of Australia, "Advance Australia Fair" in its original rendition was an effort to assert the whiteness of a new British possession. You could claim that this emphasis is gone from the song today because in the era of multiculturalism and reconciliation, the issues of race and nation have been (or at least are being) disentangled. Or you could say that it is no longer necessary to sing the whiteness of Australia, for the simple reason that Australia's whiteness is now an accomplished fact. That these statements may both be true at once demonstrates that the song "works" to the extent that it keeps multiple audiences from asking the kinds of questions I am asking here. An anthem should surely confirm those who sing it in a common identity. Its function is not to pose a question along those lines or to cast doubt.

A key difference between the original and the official anthem is that in the words we sing today we do not even want to acknowledge our coming. In the original version it is as if "we" were here before Cook. In the present official version, with Cook written out of the story altogether, it is as if there were – paradoxically – a timelessness to our presence still always under construction. Is there rhetorical precedent for this *déjà vu* sense of identity?

British imperialism had self-consciously chosen classical and especially Roman models for its authority. If, as Martin Bernal argues in *Black Athena*, that modelling has entailed a homeostatic reversal such that antiquity had to be whitened in order that it be fitting precedent for, for instance, Britishness, then what is conjured up in that teleological reading of the classical world, is the epic inevitability of Rome as pre-destined in Virgil's *Aeneid*. The British Empire needed an authorising myth to outstrip. Camoens in the *Lusiads* had already made such a claim for the Portuguese: their empire was truly worldwide compared with Rome's. Britain was bent on morally outstripping the great Iberian empires of the New World. Like the Emperor Augustus, the British found a world brick but planned to leave it marble.

Today in Australia the bark hut and the wattle and daub are behind us. The frontier morality of those days was a flimsy habitation for the great spirit filling the land. The frontier hut was easily erased, bettered, but it is remembered as the scene of contact and of the mundane cataclysm of first conflict between races. It was a scene

of destiny we no longer need to acknowledge for the simple reason that that destiny is now accomplished. We no longer wish to acknowledge our coming.

The fifth and last stanza of the original "Advance Australia Fair" was concerned with preventing others from coming. It describes what Australia would be defending itself from in the case of war:

Should foreign foe e'er sight our coast,
Or dare a foot to land,
We'll rise to arms like sires of yore
To guard our native strand;
Britannia then shall surely know,
Beyond wide ocean's roll,
Her son's in fair Australia's land
Still keep a British soul,
In joyful strains and etc. (McCormick 1-4)

British soul was the salient feature of Australian identity in McCormick's song. In the old version we were ambiguously from somewhere and yet autochthonous, we were people with something to be afraid of, our courage though yet to be proven as "ours" could be relied on because of our British souls. Similar sentiment was widely expressed in the lyrics of many now obscure Australian anthem attempts of the Boer War/Federation period. A nice example is in (eighteen year old) Sidney Askin's words for C.A. Osgood's (1900) song "Britannia's Soldiers":

So fight on, ye valiant soldiers, till the victory is won,
All uniting in a bond of perfect love;
And when peace has crowned your efforts,
We will swell the cheerful song,
And request for you rich blessing from above;
But should ever Russia meddle with Britannia's rightful gains,
And be aided by both Germany and France,
All the colonies of Britain shall arise and fight as one
And united with Britannia spoil their chance. (2-3)

While the One Nation roller coaster of recent years and the Tampa events prior to the last election might persuade some that things were otherwise, the fact that we no longer sing of defending the country becoming ours from anyone else who might like it to be theirs, indicates that we are in general more comfortable today with the facts of possession.

Unexamined Ethics

The ethical basis for Australia-as-becoming-British nation, established in "Advance Australia Fair," is simply this: having stolen something very big (big enough to physically contain us) we now wish to aggressively claim this place as ours by rights, and to rattle our sabres at anyone else who thinks they are entitled to a share of the action.

The corporeal and the geographic are only physical aspects of identity, which globally is better rendered in terms of large abstractions like nation and soul and joy. But such abstractions are conceived spatially where territories and their possession are concerned. The British soul is big enough to contain Australia and many other slabs of world. An empire is a world. Rhetorically all this is made possible by making ourselves invisible on the basis of having always been here, or having at least – like the gospel or Kant's categorical imperative or Virgil's Trojans cum Romans – always been destined to be here. Having always been here was the rhetorical wish behind the creation of the Australian Natives' Association, a friendly association of native-born white men, bent on the unification of Australia. In the case of the ANA, part of the white man's burden in Australia (having taken the places that belonged to the native) was to take the native's place. Calling oneself a native was a rhetorical means of writing the real natives out of the picture. As "natives," white Australians could be as invisible as they were permanent in Australia.

It is not the case that the ANA was disinterested in the plight of the Aborigines. By 1926 they had published in their journal a manifesto and petition proposing an Aboriginal State. If the proposal and its justification were vague, the self-interested (conscience clearing) motives behind the proposal were clear. Like Sidney Askin's words to "Britannia's Soldiers" they were religiously framed:

If we regard the native races as our spiritual equals, if we recognise their rights and do not treat them merely as chattels, if we assist them to accommodate their methods to new conditions, if we return to them areas of country on which they work out their own salvation safeguarded from the envious eyes of encroaching white population, we shall at least have the satisfaction of knowing that even at the eleventh hour we have endeavoured to redeem any neglect, indifference or maladministration in the past and to do substantial justice. And the aboriginal will pay us back. We shall assuredly find that we have races of people who will be of immense help in developing our empty Northern Estate particularly in the more torrid zones. And we shall find that relieved of so much attention to material affairs, the self-

sacrificing spiritual work of missionaries will be greatly accelerated. (130)

Spiritual equality for them, economic benefit for us, the growth of our national capital (as opposed to the economic kind) will be conveniently effected by placing a buffer of “others” (our own) between us and the other others, those whose envious eyes are on Australia at large. Note that the notional “Northern Estate” gets capital letters, the aboriginal does not. The paternalism of the proposal for an Aboriginal State was justified on racist grounds:

The opinion so generally held that the Australian native is the lowest type of humanity in the world is now found to be quite erroneous. On the contrary he does not belong to any negro race and has been proved to possess great mental powers, ability to quickly learn and can be taught agriculture, engineering, carpentering &c., while there are already a number of native Christian clergy. (130)

National pride in our natives is to be acknowledged on the basis of their utility and their being somewhat assimilable to our standards rather than their being in any measure emblematic of the white Australian national autochthony.

The apparent hypocrisy (of a theft after which a right is asserted) – and the doublethink of the displacement of black by white “natives” – is founded on a powerful conviction of racial superiority, of what the Americans called “manifest destiny” (the phrase coined by John L. Sullivan in 1845 to indicate the duty of the United States to occupy the territory we now think of as the United States). Through the ANA, the borrowing of a name effects the merging of dispossessors and dispossessed. What is created is a new man, here by rights (by right of birth) and so not responsible for the actions of the others who enable him to be here. Spectacular creation of this blatant racism is the Australian: the new man, who renders both colonist and indigene surplus, anachronistic.

What does it mean in these circumstances for Australians to retain a song like “Advance Australia Fair”? Is it the case that these rhetorical investments can be maintained for nostalgic purposes because they are no longer spectacular? We cannot remember what we are singing.

Terra Nullius Revisited

In the new rendition of “Advance Australia Fair,” fear has evaporated with history. We are here and we welcome others here.

For those who’ve come across the seas

We've boundless plains to share.
 With courage let us all combine
 To Advance Australia Fair.

Note that it is the boundless plains we are prepared to share. Apparently the ocean views are already spoken for. The new version of the song is strategically inoffensive in the multicultural sense. Who can be offended by these words? We are singing about Australians, about anybody: anybody could be Australian. Investigating the re-writing of the song shows what was there then and is missing now. But in removing the elements which might have offended Australians of other than British descent, is not the problem now solved? Then again, if anybody can belong to any nation, what are nations for?

The transformation of "Advance Australia Fair" neatly expresses the evolution of the race ethic; it is a song from which the signs of whiteness have been expurgated. Along with them has gone a particular myth which had expressed a sentiment of racial superiority our ancestors had been too coy to name as such.

Through the nineteenth century it became increasingly difficult to sell an overt doctrine of racial superiority in the British world. The Evangelical faction of the Church of England had been responsible for the abolition of slave transportation (1807) and finally slave ownership (1833) throughout the British Empire. The sable brethren were worth saving because they too were all God's children. But we would mislead ourselves to think that British conviction of moral superiority on these grounds placed British colonial practices above those of Catholic Spaniards in South America only to have the rescuers of mankind on a level with benighted heathens like the Australian Aborigines. It is Martin Bernal's thesis that nineteenth century empires, such as the British, rewrote the ancient world so as to whiten their antecedents and so bolster the race-based authority on which those empires ran.⁵ If that thesis is correct then it is not difficult to see Peter Dodds McCormick's lyrics as part of the same project. The difficulty today in seeing that project or acknowledging its effects is, simply, a measure of its success.

The present generation – more coy than its forebears – distances itself from veiled racialist sentiment. But it has celebrated the primal events. The Bicentenary of the coming of the First Fleet on 26 January 1988 marks the most impressive imaginable achievement of a central goal of the ANA: to have "Australia Day" (also known as "Invasion Day") instituted as a holiday in the calendar. The present generation occupies exactly the territory the ANA intended by "Australia," if somewhat more thoroughly (being more numerous). The present generation, in

⁵ Cf the description of the position of the white European in relation to the rest of humanity in Charles White's famous 1799 treatise on race: "Ascending the line of gradation, we come at last to the white European; who being the most removed from the brute creation, may, on that account, be considered the most beautiful of the human race" (in Dyer 71). White's account accords with Kant's equation of the beautiful and the good, both qualities "removed from the brute creation."

singing the same refrain, asserts continuity over the *longue durée* of Australian history. The present generation goes on unconsciously giving voice to the identity commenced as Australian by the ANA and by Peter Dodds McCormick.

Why were our ancestors coy about the racist rhetoric that placed them where they were? They were coy because their racism conflicted with certain key doctrinal principles of their Christian faith and because they were on the way to being us. We – like them – claim, in singing this song, to be the recipients of “nature’s gifts.” What the land “abounds in” serves as a convenient synecdoche for Australia as a whole. We have been given – and bountifully – what is in Australia. Think of it as magic pudding, the cut-and-come-again kind.

Those who sing “Advance Australia Fair” want to have always been here, but in an ahistoric way. The past should be irrelevant to the way we are now. This consciousness of an identity of pretended eternal rights is only achieved by multiple erasure: of time before the historic, of our historic consciousness of time. It is achieved by means of the *terra nullius* myth, the myth of an empty land prior to our coming. The anthem as it is, is the perfect representative of that myth: the explanation of “the historic facts” which were in the original version have been removed as an embarrassment. Australia is thus returned to the sleeping beauty condition in which Dunmore Lang had imagined her in his 1826 “Australian Hymn”:

Fair on Creation’s splendid page
 Thy pencil sketched its wondrous plan.
 Thine hand adorned it, many an age
 Ere it was known or trod by man –
 When nought but Ocean’s ceaseless roar
 Was heard along its voiceless shore. (18)

The poetry of Federation will celebrate her awakening, foreshadow the baptism of fire to come, as Lawson had in his 1888 “star of Australasia.” But the denizens of lotus land slip back in their old slumber. Again they dream of primal rights, of time made eternal.

Ethics of Examination

Ross Chamber’s essay “The Unexamined” posits “blank whiteness” as “the category of the unexamined.”

It is as if the system encompassed two mythic (or incomparable) categories, blank whiteness and absolute blackness, each of which is held to lie outside the sphere of examinability. One is unexamined “norm,” and the other is unknowable “other” (or

extreme of otherness), and between them lies the pluralized area of the multiple categories that come under scrutiny, constituting the knowable others of whiteness as the domain of the examinable. (in Hill 193).

“Blank whiteness” is – in the Socratic sense – the unexamined category we’ve witnessed (in the act of disappearing) in the evolution of Australia’s national anthem. The original song had spectacularised the making of a white nation where there had merely before been another dark continent, a continent dark in the senses of unknowable and pagan and inhabited by sable savage creatures yet to be (if they ever could be) brethren. This is the kind of unknowable other that doesn’t bear examination, but rather needs to be displaced.

The right kind of displacement in a nineteenth century British imperial sense would be in advancing an idea like “Australia” where there had been nothing before: no law, no land tenure, no history, no material signs of civilization. In fact there are two kinds of displacement at work here: one is the literal displacement of the indigenous inhabitants, the other – its rhetorical corollary – is the making savage of others, that process entailed in Walter Benjamin’s dictum that documents of civilisation are always at once documents of barbarism. These tandem displacements depend for their efficacy on subjects foregoing those forms of examination which would entail self scrutiny, which would for instance measure the moral action of a player against that player’s proclaimed morality.

Blank whiteness, which veils not the view but the gaze, leaves us the spectacle of golden soil and southern cross. This is Tom Griffiths’ *white noise* (*Australian Humanities Review*). What “we” see is land abounding – our possession – spectacular plenitude, yet empty in that we are entitled a view. The panorama is of nature’s gifts (of no one’s theft). It reveals (but in prospect) “wealth for toil.” What effect does this spectacularising of the originary moment have on the possessor of the gaze? Who do we become in seeing our world this way? To make oneself spectacular is by no means to examine oneself or the material conditions in which show goes on.

The emptiness posited by “Advance Australia Fair” is deeply ironic. It represents a refusal of the ethical question which must lie under European presence in Australia. The land is empty because we emptied it. We have land to share because we took land. We only get to look generous (sharing the boundless plains) because of a theft for which we do not wish to acknowledge responsibility. We sing from an emptiness wrought on ourselves in the act of emptying; the emptying of the land and at once the popular consciousness: emptying it of the fact of the emptying. Emptying ourselves of truth is the reflective act of nation: the basis of the collectivity on which a polity is claimed.

If the gender problem – the problem of other than masculine identities being subsumed in a male unisonance – is fixed, and if it appears now that no one is excluded by virtue of ethnicity from the possibility of an Australian identity, the official 1984 update leaves untouched two serious problems with the song. The first of these concerns the ways in which it might be unsatisfactory from the point of view of indigenous Australians (i.e. their ongoing erasure through the shedding of the story that conspicuously had not included them to begin with). Linked with this is the serious ambiguity of the title and the chorus: specifically, the problem with the word “fair.”

The word-order inversion in the title/chorus is a kind of pseudo-archaism which tilts the song in the direction of the unintelligible. The title and the refrain are in this sense themselves unexamined. The core sentiment of the song defies reading for the simple reason that it is not the way that anyone actually speaks. “Advance Australia Fair” is something we should all sing and it is something we should all combine to do. It is something history should do, too.

The refrain presents in a chronological reversal, the stages of a reification: to Advance Australia Fair is what history should be continuously allowed to do, it is also what we should all do (who could argue?), and it is what we should sing, no doubt for the purposes of self-inspiration, so as to advance Australia, so as to allow history’s every page to advance Australia.

This rhetorical loop proves nothing more than that anthem is a circular genre par excellence. What else could singing oneself be? In this case the progression entails a reversible synecdoche: history’s page reveals the stage on which we are singing. How much courage could it take to combine for this purpose? The emptiness is catching. The “we” of the song – recipients of nature’s “gifts” – have disappeared into the act of possession. Performing nation itself thus becomes quintessentially empty act. The irony is that we sing that we are collectively “somebody” now (come of age), but the act of singing is the act of possession that keeps us from actually appearing in any role other than singing ourselves; it keeps us from actually doing anything or being anybody. We remain in the circular genre of becoming ourselves.

Advance Australia Fair? Exhortation, serving suggestion, statement of fact? The inscrutable sign of identity becomes a kind of rite of passage, something which needs to be explained to children and migrants alike.

The “fair” of this song alludes to the now little known last stanza of James Thomson’s eighteenth-century poem and song, “Rule Britannia”:

The Muses, still with freedom found,
Shall to thy happy coast repair:
Blest isle! with matchless beauty crowned,
And manly hearts to guard the fair.

The second stanza of the "Advance Australia Fair" has already pointed us towards the British imperial hymn, by quoting from it directly: "Britannia rules the waves."

Perfect form of mystification to express as collective sentiment the sentiment of collectivity; no one can definitively know what these words mean. The unknowable privileges a teacher's grasp of the archaic as originary lore: the teacher says it means "Let's all work together to make Australia a beautiful country, a great country" or "We should all be proud of Australia because it is such a great country, so we should pull together to make it even better." Fair enough. Who could object?

Learning the song that makes you Australian means learning not to ask certain awkward questions. It is an induction into an ambivalence. Australians are embarrassed by their facts of presence, by the unresolved ethics of their presence. And so they sing this embarrassing song. It is not merely a matter of substituting tradition for intention. Tradition is, in this tune, emptied of intending. "Look at me, now! How good of me just to happen to be here."

The Beautiful is the Symbol of the Morally Good

The central ambiguity in the title and refrain of "Advance Australia Fair" is such that when we sing the song we do not know whether we are describing how things are or how they should be. Are we singing to keep things the way they are or to make things the way they ought to be? Advance Australia because it is fair or so that it will be fair or for both reasons: to keep the fair fair? This speculation begs the question about the meaning of the word "fair." Of all the various dictionary entries for the word *fair* the three which seem to coalesce in this usage are: fair as in beautiful, fair as in just and fair as in white.⁶ I would argue that these three uses coalesce likewise in the use of *fair* in that typically Australian rejoinder, *fair enough*: this is the characteristic expression of a country seriously worried for most of its European history about the risk of racial impurity – even from "other" Europeans. In the expression *fair enough* the issue of justness is foregrounded. In "Advance Australia Fair" the strangeness of the diction makes it more difficult to decide how the word "fair" should be read. In the song the line is emphatic because of repetition, because it resituates the context of the slogan.

Is it rather that the song asks a question as to how should Australia be advanced? Should it be advanced for instance by consumer confidence, by helping silver coins to circulate? But this form of the question implies an adverbial construction. An adverb in this position would imply process and therefore a future

⁶ The currency of this last reading is borne out in a 1999 kit (produced by the Ethnic Communities Council of N.S.W.) aimed at curtailing racial hatred and promoting the benefits of ethnic diversity. It was titled *Advance Australia fair, dark or any shade in between*.

orientation toward the quality of that process: how (by what means or in what manner) Australia ought to be advanced. But if the “fair” of the chorus is really an adjective then the implication is that Australia is already a “fair” entity; in advancing Australia one advances its already attained quality of fairness.

Continuity from the imperial to the national is fuelled in Australia’s case by the slipperiness of this word “fair.” It is through that slipperiness that a tradition of racism is able to be neither directly lauded nor completely discarded, rather distanced and indulged for set purposes and as occasion demands. How far back may we trace the rhetoric of a self-concealing genteel racism? It is instructive to consider, both when that kind of thinking became possible or necessary, and what it has to do with the making of Australia, then and now.

In the third critique (published when the British settlement at Sydney was in its infancy), Kant writes “the beautiful is the symbol of the morally good” (547). The beautiful inhabit a just polity. A just polity is a white polity. This is the advance, in the song, that is happening, or has happened, in Australia. In fact this is the advance which the European word (Latin made English down here) constitutes for the continent formerly known to Europe as New Holland: *Australia* is becoming a white man’s country. In terms of Kant’s categorical imperative, this particular people have become universal and normative (have transcended their particularity) just to the extent that they are invisible.

It is easy to see why governments have seen fit to suppress McCormick’s original lyrics, preserved for the public (for instance at various websites) by those anxious to keep tradition or racial sentiment or historical consciousness alive. The comparison of the two versions draws attention to the reification of Australia as (naturally, unmentionably) white nation, which both versions – appropriately for their times – work to conceal.

The song nevertheless remains an embarrassment because of the manner in which it draws attention to the contradiction between the spectacularising of, and the invisibility of, whiteness as performing the becoming of nation. In this way “Advance Australia Fair” can be read as the clumsy move that shows the world what should be kept hidden.

Nor is it by any means the clumsiest expression of the contradiction between the altruism of national devotions and the self-interest which is best served when concealed therein. Take a stanza of “The Song of Australia” for example:

There is a land where treasures shine
 Deep in the dark, unfathomed mine
 For worshippers at mammon’s shrine, at mammon’s shrine:
 Where gold lies hid and rubies gleam,
 And fable wealth no more doth seem

The idle fancy of a dream
Australia! Australia! Australia! (in Radic 84)

Written by Caroline Carleton in 1859, "The Song of Australia" was a serious contender for national anthem status, having been offered as one of four choices to the public at the 1976 referendum on the issue. It received more than half a million votes, as against almost three million for the winner, "Advance Australia Fair."

The less serious the contender, the clumsier the sentiment. Remaining close by Mammon's shrine, in Alfred Verall's now obscure 1901 "National Song of Federated Australia and of the Pacific Islands," the unwieldy title foreshadows the sentiment best expressed in the second stanza:

Thy hills and mountains are set,
And like gems, in glory shine;
Thy valleys fair, in nature's beauty,
Are strewn with many a gold and silver mine. (1-2)

Apart from problems of a poetic or musical nature, these songs survive less well because they are less open to shifts in interpretation such as might suit an alteration in popular sentiment.

How Fair is Fair?

What has been achieved in the de-racialising, de-historicising clean-up of "Advance Australia Fair" is to take the whiteness further than it had been from a condition of examinability. Ambiguity in the refrain has been a key to this process. It is being able to be read in (epochally appropriate) different ways that keeps the anthem alive. The association of beauty with justice today outweighs the association of either of these with race. And yet the connotation of racial purity, as desirable national good, remains available to the song's reader where the genderedness (and the historicity) of the original has been dispensed with.

"Advance Australia Fair" sings the great singular plurality "we." That identity-in-common is made spectacular, in the original, through a specific history, through the story of an exemplary individual. In the new version of the song the only individual – gallant Cook – has been omitted. The spectacle admits of no point-of-view. It is a case of: "Look at us! You can't see me!"

The original song is about historical consciousness. It may not be our consciousness of history, but it tells a story about how it is we are here. Rhetorically, the key is in the synecdoche expressed in the line "In history's page, let every stage." History is a book consisting of pages. One of these pages stands for the book. On each page a scene is presented, in which stage in the spectacular sense coincides with the notion of a phase or of epoch. Word and image, action and depiction, are

parts of the ongoing cycle invoked by the turning of the pages of a book, the reading of which conjures images, the writing of which is nation-making.

McCormick's song is specifically about the civilising process, about the white man's burden, as it applied to this particular far-flung reach of empire. The advance of the title concerns the progress of civilisation; it assigns to this process a very specific metaphor, that of a military movement. The progress of the white race over the continent is an advance. What appears to be an external motion (promote Australia abroad) belies an internal one: the still ongoing process of conquest and nation making. That Aborigines are given no specific role in this song becomes less mysterious in this light: it is not their country or nationality which is being described here; rather the advance of *fair* Australia, an advance which takes place at the expense of an unmentionable non-polity. The non-inclusion of Aboriginal people in the Australian citizenry prior to the 1967 referendum shocks many today (Attwood *passim*). And it shocks as unjust, unfair, unreasonable. That it did not seem so for long stretches of white Australia's memory indicates that a different logic was then in force. In the anthem today:

Our land abounds in nature's gifts
Of beauty rich and rare.
In history's page, let every stage
Advance Australia Fair.

History's page ought to advance Australia Fair. But all of the pages up to now have been torn out of the book. And so none of the questions asked above, of the old story, have any reference now. In the bland terms of the Prime Minister's (Bob Hawke's) press release of 19 April 1984, in which the new version of the song was proclaimed the national anthem: "We can all identify [. . .] with our distinctive national anthem, proud of our past history and working together on constructing a great future." The ethic here is proclaimed to be benign and inclusive. Yet anywhere in the world, a deception would be essential to so ambitious a goal as the forging of a common identity through generalised pride in a past-in-common.

The convergence of moral value or integrity with race, with language, with tribal membership, is certainly a widespread human phenomenon and one with plenty of Old Testament backing. That it is a sentiment unacceptable today in a world dominated by human rights consciousness indicates that the ethics of the last couple of decades have evolved radically from those of the years preceding them. There is a discontinuity here of the kind that necessitated or enabled the revision of "Advance Australia Fair." And still there is a powerful motive for keeping a continuity alive. Their song was the song of a people in the process of becoming us.

Advance Australia Fair, its evolution, its status, its popular reading, its taboo readings (e.g. this one), the suppression of its earlier version, the fact that what it says and fails to say is officially accepted by Australians to represent Australians: all these things are living reminders of where Australians come from, of the thinking that brought us, of what we possess and how we come to possess it.

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