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BRINGING KNOWLEDGE to TRUTH: the JOKE and AUSTRALIAN (IN)HUMANITIES

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■ Abstract

In the formulation of new humanities – knowledge, truth and social action brought together in the defence of what makes us human in this place and time – there is also the need to identify the obstacles to honouring our humanity. This paper continues the task of critically examining contemporary forms of inhumanity, in this instance as perpetuated by a liberal Australian government against its citizens and others. Liberalism, by nature, enables the co-existence of contradictory practices that both protect and deny human rights and dignities. In psychoanalytic terms, the defence of liberties and its repressed other, the denial of them, are both present in such states. Because of their links with both the conscious and the unconscious, an analysis of jokes provides insights into these contradictory processes. The paper explores how both the humanities and the inhumanities are manifest variously in the joking behaviours of social groups.

Australia has a proud human rights record. We enjoy a strong democratic tradition, a transparent and independent judicial system and a free press. Our society is characterised by egalitarianism (Howard, 2005, p. iv).

Two 17 year old Indigenous girls with no previous criminal convictions were both sentenced to 14 days in prison for theft of clothes from other girls who were staying in the same room (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2000).

■ Australian ambivalence to truth

Australia has an ambivalent history in relation to human rights and human rights abuses. Indeed, it could be argued that Australia is quintessentially liberal in its preferred style of humanity. What characterises Australian liberalism is an ability to live within fundamental human rights contradictions; that is, to be able to espouse the rhetorics of equality whilst at the same time enshrining the social structures and sanctions to ensure its impossibility (McConaghy, 1998). Nowhere is this ambivalence more apparent than in relation to the experiences of Indigenous Australians. In the contemporary era, developing an appropriate response to knowledge of the ongoing abuses of Indigenous Australian human rights remains among the most urgent of Australia's political and ethical challenges. What is an appropriate response to our collective disgrace? As J. M. Coetzee (2000, p. 172) wrote in his novel, *Disgrace*, "we are all sorry when we are found out: then we are very sorry. The question is not, are we sorry? The question is, what lesson have we learned? The question is, what are we going to do now that we are sorry?" In Australia, although we have all been disgraced, we are not all sorry. In a Lacanian sense, knowledge has not yet come to the place of truth.

In a context in which claims are being made for the incorporation of Indigenous humanities as a basis for political and ethical responsibility in education, the fact that Australians have a long history of awkwardness in the face of truth about our inhumanities is an obstacle to this "voyage in" (Said 1993, p. 288). What have we learned and what are we to do remain as our most significant dilemmas. What is at the heart of the ambivalence that inhibits ethical witnessing

and radical social acts in Australian society? Joking behaviour provides a clue to these social processes and the ideologies that underpin them. Indeed, joking is a phenomenon that requires the double gesture of ambivalence, one that manifests at the intersection of the internal (psychic) and the external (social) conflicts. Jokes are imperfect eruptions of what lies beneath the surface. They reveal a great deal about our capacity for both humanities and inhumanities – and the economies that regulate our preferences for each. In this paper the use of jokes as an aspect of Australian government inhumanities is contrasted with the use of jokes in other ethical realms, for example, within Indigenous ceremonies where they form the basis of social behaviour linked to truths and the production of Indigenous humanities.

Rather than seeing the contradictoriness of Australian social and political life as a problem, Žižek (2004, p. 49) suggests that contradictions are an “open chance for political acts”. If the social antagonisms that are peculiar to liberal democracies can be understood in part through their jokes, an analysis of jokes contains the possibility for radical social action. Many years ago, Martin Nakata (1993) told the story of how as a boy in the Torres Strait Islands he wanted to gain the skills to understand how it was that the Queensland government had robbed his grandfather of his fishing vessels and livelihood. What we can become aware of in an analysis of the polite forms of contemporary joking behaviour is the extent to which the Australian government continues to engage in strategies of stealth.

■ The violence of the polite forms

In recent years Australia has established bilateral dialogues with China, Vietnam and Iran in order to convey our interest in and concerns about their human rights abuses. However, as a curious form of international diplomacy, when the Australian government is made aware of its own abuses, it tends to resort to joking and mockery. For example, in 1998 when the United Nation's (UN) Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination handed down its report on the litany of Australian human rights abuses (Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, 1998), the government denounced the report, mocked its ideological overtones, derided the linking of Australian activities with those of Bosnia, Uganda and Ecuador and declared it “an insult to Australia and all Australians” (Williams, 1999). Disgraced, they reacted with ridicule. The designated UN Special Rapporteur for Australia, Gay McDougall, was reported to have said in response, “We expect states to be diplomatic, polite, understanding and willing to explain. They do not show the level of annoyance and seeming insult that we got back from the Australians. We were all taken aback” (Marr, 2005, p. 14).

In order to head off the committee in its subsequent deliberations in 2000, the Australian Minister for Multicultural Affairs and Reconciliation went to Geneva in an attempt to woo the Committee's members. To the embarrassment of those in the public gallery, including senior Indigenous Australian observers, Minister Ruddock was reported to have “draped over the table, bantering with the committee, joking, giving patronising responses to complex questions ... [to] ‘audible groans’ from the public gallery” (Marr, 2005, p. 13). If the performance was designed to charm the Committee, it was to no avail. The Committee reported it had found evidence of numerous serious abuses by the Australian government towards Indigenous Australians, migrants and refugees (Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, 2000). In response, the Australian Foreign Minister, Alexander Downer, was reported to have stated, “We won't cop it any longer. We are a democratically elected government in one of the most liberal and democratic countries you will find on Earth. And if a United Nations committee wants to play domestic politics here in Australia, then it will end up with a bloody nose” (Marr, 2005, p. 13). Various government ministers were reported to have called the Committee's work “insulting, tendentious, ill prepared, poorly argued, blatantly political and partisan” (Marr, 2005, p. 13).

Undeterred by the UN's censorship of its oppressive activities in successive reports, and despite Australian troops occupying the Solomon Islands, East Timor, Iraq and Afghanistan, in April 2005 the Australian Prime Minister presented his heroic vision of Australia within global politics as “an honest broker” (Metherell, 2005, p. 1). Australia was, as Howard impressed, “an anchor of stability” working to manage conflict and superpower tensions.

If Australia's international relations are the stuff of contradiction, illusion and fantasy, so too are its domestic policies. In 1998 in response to the report of the National Inquiry into the Removal of Indigenous Children from their Families (Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission, 1997) Prime Minister Howard stated that the removal of Indigenous children by the state had in most cases been to their advantage. Many Australians were deeply offended by the claim: the thought that child abuse could be to their benefit so unthinkable. Was Howard joking? On another occasion Howard referred to Australian history as, on balance, a benign one (Howard, 1996, p. 4). In the face of irrefutable evidence of gross injustices, slavery and incarcerations, linguistic and cultural genocides and the testimonies of abuse contained in the National Inquiry and numerous other publications and government inquiries, was this another joke?

The joking behaviour – both intentional and unintentional – of the Australian government and its mockery and ridicule in the face of international censures and irrefutable evidence of domestic

human rights violations is puzzling. Among its serious consequences, the behaviour raises questions about the structural relationship between jokes and contemporary forms of oppression. The unthinkable aspect of this relationship is that jokes are ostensibly about pleasure. In their links to human rights abuses, jokes are curious forms of fun.

In critiques of the forms of violence (both covert and overt) preferred by colonial and neo-colonial regimes including Australia, the use of the joke, particularly in its polite forms, tends to have been overlooked. Here the more obvious forms of racial and other vilification are not at issue. Indeed, Australian states have anti-discrimination laws to protect against open vilification. What remains unaccounted for, what slides beneath the censors, are the polite forms of joke. Following Žižek (1999a, p. 254), “violence is heightened by the contrast between the aggressive content and the polite surface form”. In its polite surface forms, how do we understand the use of the joke in oppressive regimes? In what ways is bourgeois liberal joking behaviour central to contemporary Australian inhumanities?

In order to understand the power of jokes as oppressive, it is useful to recall that analysts of colonial regimes have long recognised the power of the covert forms of dominance. Indeed, in his analysis of the colonial history of Central Australia, Tim Rowse (2000) was able to provide evidence that administrative rule by bits of paper was arguably more effective than overt physical force in the dispossession of Indigenous Australians. The curious thing about jokes is that they are a form of violence perpetrated not within the dark confines of the prison cell or boarding home, nor are they buried deep within legislation. Rather jokes take place out in the open, usually in full view or hearing of an audience. Indeed, a joke requires an audience. Joking is a social performance. What is troubling about such performances is that we are never sure how we are positioned in relation to them. As the butt of a joke, our position as offended is often, but not always, clear. Less clear still is our presence in the telling of an offensive joke about another. In being present we may feel implicated within this offensive behaviour: drawn to take an ethical stand. But jokes are slippery things – they so often let us get away. What is beneath our desire to get away with, or from, an offensive joke? While an analysis of the structures of jokes and our varied locations within them provides a place for rethinking what it means to perpetrate inhumanities in contemporary times, our response in the face of the polite joke that nonetheless mocks, ridicules or refutes, reveals something of our struggle to find an ethical place within contemporary humanities. What are we to do?

■ Joke-work: Beating the censor

In August 1998 the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (1998) issued an “urgent

action” notice to the Australian government, the first issued to a Western nation. It found that there was risk of an “acute impairment” to Native Title rights (an impairment since realised). Australia was declared in breach of its obligations under the convention, again the first breach finding against a Western nation. The UN was censoring Australia. In joking about the UN findings, Australia was trying to beat its censor.

The 28 July 2000 hearing of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (2000) concluded that the following areas were of principal concern: Indigenous self-determination; Native Title and heritage legislation; the Stolen Generations; effective implementation of the covenant; mandatory sentencing; deportation of people risking torture or summary execution; and mandatory detention of unauthorised arrivals (including children). The Committee concluded, “There are still areas in which the domestic legal system does not provide an effective remedy to persons whose rights under the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights] have been violated ... [Australia] should take measures to give effect to all Covenant rights and freedoms”.

In March 2005 the Committee considered the 13th and 14th periodic reports of Australia and noted 28 areas of concern, including: the absence of any entrenched guarantee against racial discrimination in its domestic law; the abolition of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), the elected Indigenous policy-making body; the growing prejudice towards Arabs and Muslims and the possible incitement to hatred of current anti-terrorist legislation; the winding back of Indigenous people’s rights in the Wik amendments to Native Title; the wide gaps that still exist between Indigenous people and others; the striking over-representation of Indigenous people in prisons; the mandatory detention of illegal migrants; and the absence of public dissemination of UN reports (Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, 2005).

Amnesty International has published numerous reports on Australia’s human rights abuses in recent years. In a report on abuses of children’s rights titled, *Jailed for being hungry* (Amnesty International, 1998), they report on the experiences of Edith, a 13 year old Indigenous Australian girl facing court – “If I can look white they’ll let me go”, she was reported to have said, asking to borrow a youth worker’s make-up. Another of their reports documented how the Administrative Decisions (Effects of International Instruments) Bill prevents Australians from taking violations of their rights to court (Amnesty International, 2000a). They also report that in Australia human rights are not enshrined in law; thousands of asylum seekers are held in arbitrary detention; and the Ombudsman and national Human Rights Commission are prohibited from initiating contact with alleged victims of human rights abuses and others held in immigration detention.

Their lengthy report (Amnesty International, 2002) *Australia-Pacific: Offending human dignity – The “Pacific solution”* detailed the losses of life of hundreds of asylum seekers including children in various boating incidents and linked them to “Australia’s punitive measures to deter unwanted asylum seekers”. The Amnesty International 2003 report on Australia documented that new legislation was introduced to reduce the powers of the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission to seek leave to intervene in legal proceedings on international human rights concerns; that in a 20 year study one in four Australian women aged between 18 and 23 reported some experience of domestic violence; and that for Indigenous women, life expectancy was declining while their imprisonment rates had increased by 262% during the 1990s (Amnesty International, 2003).

The Indigenous Australian research organisation, Foundation for Aboriginal and Islander Research Action (FAIRA), made a submission to UN Human Rights Committee on 24 March 2005 in which they detailed, “denial of self-determination, ineffective treaties, multinational exploitation of Indigenous peoples, refusal to accept traditional authority, exclusion from political and economic power, and discriminatory social order” as among Australia’s human rights abuses (FAIRA, 2005). The Special Rapporteur of the Commission on Human Rights on the Human Rights of Migrants’ *Report to the UNHRC* (2005) identified that in Australia there were 703 asylum-seeking children held in detention in the years 2002-2003 on average for one year and eight months.

These are among the numerous organisations including the UN that have attempted to censor or shame the Australian government in relation to its ongoing abuse of human rights. Australia’s response to these allegations usually takes the form of denial, mockery, or silence. Indeed various UN committees have commented on the lack of appropriate action of the Australian government to its numerous and often repeated determinations. Indeed, the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (2000) report states, “Concern is expressed at the unsatisfactory response to decisions 2 (54) (March 1999) and 2 (55) (August 1999) of the Committee and at the continuing risk of further impairment of the rights of Australia’s Indigenous communities”. In its submission to the Inquiry by the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade into Australia’s Relations with the UN in the Post Cold War Environment, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission (2000) stated that “Australia’s willingness to engage with UN Treaty Committees is an important element in our ability to advocate for human rights internationally ... If we are to scrutinise other countries according to the standards in UN Conventions, then we must be prepared to have those same standards debated and discussed in relation to ourselves”. Further,

“Australia’s reports to the UN should be seen as an aspect of its accountabilities to its own citizens – not just to the UN”. Philip Alston was quoted in the submission as saying: “the level of awareness within Australia of the state reports to the UN is quite low. Neither does there appear to have been any concerted effort on the part of the Government to disseminate this material”.

■ Australian human rights abuses: A spectral presence

Kay Schaffer (2001, p. iv) refers to the “white shame, and the consequent desire to hide from evidence” that characterises Australian government responses to knowledge of the awkward truth of its human rights abuses as being what Derrida (1994) might call a “spectral presence”; “an approbation before the imagined gaze of the other”, including the international community. The following excerpts are taken from the meeting of the Australian delegation and the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination in 2000:

Mr Luck, representing Australia “stated that Australia had a high level of acceptance, protection and observation of human rights”. Further, he claimed, “most discrete Indigenous communities owned their own land and many managed local government functions with wide ranging powers and responsibilities ... (his government) acknowledged that land was of enormous significance for Indigenous Australians. They made up 2.1% of the population but owned and controlled some 15% of the Australian continent”.

Mr Van Beurden (Australia) was minuted to have stated “on the participation of the Aboriginal population in political life ... Aboriginal persons have the same opportunities for participation as all other Australians”, and that “Australian laws applied to everyone regardless of race”.

Mr Scheinin (Finland for the UN Committee) said that “it was tragic that, in a country of such great human and natural resources, the Indigenous population should have suffered such levels of dispossession, exclusion and marginalisation. The state party needed to do a great deal more to compensate the individuals and communities who had suffered”.

The Australian delegation stated that Australia could not turn back the clock. The UN Covenants were not specifically incorporated into Australian law and therefore Australia could justify non-compliance on the basis that it was contrary to Australian law.

The UN Committee suggested that the Wik Amendments to Native Title preferred non-indigenous title to land over Indigenous in numerous ways. The Australian delegation responded that “native title was a new and emerging concept”.

Mr Scheinen (Finland) said that the way in which Native Title was discussed by Australia was misleading. The Native Title Amendments of 1998 denied the rights of indigenous persons.

Mr Lallah (Mauritius for the UN Committee) said that Australia had missed the point of article 27 in relation to Indigenous heritage and that in relation to Boobera Lagoon it had protected the rights of water skiers over cultural heritage.

The Australian delegation said that the Covenant right must be suspended while water skiing proceeds. Mr Lallah responded “I would have thought the reverse situation would be the case”.

The Australian delegation said that in relation to the Stolen Generations the laws were not genocidal and there had been no gross violations of rights. They rejected the notion of reparations. Compensation could be claimed through the courts.

Mr Quiroga (Chile for the UN Committee) referred to terrifying wrongs and that due to the magnitude of the harm done the measures to rectify them needed to be extraordinary.

The Australian delegation said there were genuine constitutional constraints and that in Australia UN treaties are not self-executing.

Mr Bhagawati (India for the UN Committee) said that the principle of equality appeared to be violated in the case of indigenous people.

The Australian delegation replied that “if Australia does not agree with the committee’s views it won’t implement them” (Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, 2000).

It is unclear from the documentation whether these discussions occurred before or after Minister Ruddock was reported to have draped himself over the table and bantered and joked with Committee members.

■ The joke and inhibitions

The joke plays a crucial role in seeking to evade the censors or witnesses to our oppressions. Sigmund

Freud, Primo Levi, Adam Phillips and Slavoj Žižek have each had interesting things to say about joking that is of relevance to an understanding of contemporary forms of Australian (in)humanities. If the joke is among the contemporary forms of colonial oppression, what is the joke trying to do or say? What does it take to greet the news of acts of your own inhumanity with a joke? What’s so funny about the abuse of others? Freud referred to the productive capacity of joking as “joke-work”. Joke-work is both a psychological and social phenomenon. In essence, joke-work is an aspect of seeking to beat the censor, of being aware of the forms of behaviour and thinking that are socially acceptable and yet at the same time attempting to allow some reign for our innermost anti-social or extra-social desires. That is, jokes provide temporary relief from the taboos and inhibitions on our thoughts and actions. It is the joke’s wish, Freud argued, to evade the censors – to say and do things that normally cannot be said or done.

If, as Freud (1976 [1905]) argues, jokes release us from our inhibitions, what are we trying to say when we make a joke or laugh at reports of our human rights violations? Following Phillips (2002), if a joke gives some clues as to what we want to be released from, how do we give ourselves away, and what do we give away, when we joke? In sum, is a joke made in the face of allegations of our oppressions simply a clue to our desire to oppress? The psychoanalytic theories of jokes and joking would suggest that something more complex is taking place.

■ The joke and unspeakable cruelty

In one of his memoirs, *If this is a man*, Primo Levi (1999) argues that the holocaust must have been some type of joke; for it to be anything but a joke is unthinkable. For Levi, the joke stands in place of the preposterous, the outrageous and the unimaginable. An idea (or action or belief) is so terrible it must be a joke. This was Levi’s response in the waiting room in Auschwitz where with hundreds of others, exhausted, fearful and parched from four days without water, he realised that the sign above the only thing in the room, a tap, was that it contained undrinkable water. The sign must have been a joke: for it not to have been was unthinkable. In the degrading conditions of the camp, the frequent signs about the need for hygiene also appeared to Levi as a form of joke. In the camp, he begins to realise that he is part of a joke. He begins to understand that his structural position within the joke was in being laughed at, mocked and ridiculed. If jokes are about pleasure, someone was getting pleasure out of his destitution. In mockery “My pleasure is as much in your suffering as in my lack of it” (Phillips, 2002, p. 42). Through his suffering he was giving someone pleasure. The thought was unthinkable.

Following Levi’s account, Adam Phillips (2002, p. 35) observes that there are a number of preconditions

for the concentration camp type of joke – there is no equality between the jokers and their victims; the victims must be kept in a state of ignorance about what is going on; the victims should feel sufficiently intimidated to submit to the joke; and they must be unsure of whether it is a joke they are in and whether they are being laughed at. Writes Phillips, “So there is being laughed at and wondering what else might be going on if one is not, in fact, being ridiculed” (2002, p. 35). For Levi, to be the brunt of a Nazi joke was terrible; for it not to have been some sort of joke was unbearable. Here, the joke substitutes for the in-humane.

■ Mockery, ridicule and the fear of democracy

Developing both Freud’s and Levi’s ideas about jokes, Phillips (2002, p. 35) observes some interesting features about mockery and ridicule and their structural forms. The structure of mocking reveals something important about difference. The joke in mockery requires the success of difference, argues Phillips. There is an illusion of superiority in being able to mock or ridicule another, a fantasy that the mocker has nothing in common with the mocked: “What’s so funny is that we are both the same kind of creature and yet I can make you worlds apart from me” (Phillips, 2002, p. 42). But the sense of in-commonness, the possibility of it, has already been felt in the structure of the mock – it precedes the mock. In mocking the UN finding that linked Australian human rights abuses to those in Bosnia, Uganda and Ecuador, the thought that we have things in common with those nations had already preceded the mock. “Ridicule, in other words, is a terror of sociability. We laugh at to sabotage our feeling of being at one with; but the feeling of at-oneness has already happened” (Phillips, 2002, p. 43). The purpose of mockery and ridicule is to maintain the “proper distance” (Žižek, 1999a, p. 267) towards its object.

Mockery and ridicule seek to forestall an imagined catastrophe, the catastrophe of what might happen when we get together. Within Australian domestic relations, the mockery of Muslims (“terrorists”), Indigenous leaders (“rabble-rousers”), feminists (“radicals”) and homosexuals (“poofers”) has been long considered to reveal something of our fears of difference. But, as Phillips (2002, p. 44) suggests, something more surprising may be at work, “What mockery reveals ... is the emotional terror of democracy. That what is always being ridiculed is our wish to be together, our secret affinity for each other”. If mockery is a tactic that we resort to when we have already imagined what it could be like to get together, it is possible that mockery says something about our inhibitions in allowing this to happen. Mockery says something of fears and taboos in relation to social intimacies. The White Australia ideology is a response to the terrifying idea that has preceded it – that we

may desire to be together. It symbolises the victory of the censor, the supremacy of terror. Vilification in the form of jokes and mockery are forms of consolation for our refusals to be together in both the domestic and international spheres. “Muslims”, “queers”, “terrorists” and other symbolic markers are the substitute victims providing a momentary escape from the struggles within the self between desiring to be together and refusing the possibility.

But what takes place as a private struggle emerges through the joke as a public one. Further, this process by which the struggles between desires and fears within the self are transposed to the social realm, are made possible by the presence of structures of differential power and privilege and symbols of authority. “The investigation of humour raises the whole question of what authority is, how it is constituted, and how it relates to the ... process by which we categorise our *private* sensory experience in a *public* manner” (Wright, 2000, p. 296, original emphasis). The structures of jokes are linked to the structures of authority, economies of power and forces of social stratification. Joke economies require a pretext of mutuality and reciprocity of understanding – in order that we each get the joke – and lead to a post-text of social disparity – in order that someone pays. What distinguishes feminist jokes from others is that the joke seeks to restore balance to the symbolic structures of a patriarchal economy. Racist jokes seek to have a racial other pay. Fundamental to such economies is a deep ambivalence towards the idea that we are interconnected – and vulnerable to each other. If, as Judith Butler (2004, p. xiv) argues, being human requires an acknowledgement of our primary vulnerability to others, what are we refusing in our rejection of this idea? What is it that the joker wants?

■ Not stolen, borrowed

If jokes are about someone having to pay, jokes have an important economic as well as symbolic function. For mockery to work, argues Phillips, something is stolen from someone. In Levi’s story of the tap joke in Auschwitz what was being exposed was people’s absolute vulnerability to each other (Phillips, 2002, p. 37); what was being stolen was their trust in fellow humans. Mockery is thus a type of stealth: the person being mocked is being stolen from. This relationship between jokes, mockery and stealth is central to an analysis of Australian social policy. The White Australia Policy and its various contemporary and historical manifestations has been recognised by many analysts as central to the justification of acts of inhumanity towards Indigenous children and families over many generations. At the heart of the policy and its underlying ideology is a terrible joke, one that attempts to take openly from its victims while simultaneously attempting to beat the censor. The White Australia

Policy and its contemporary ideologies are forms of daylight robbery.

Freud (1900) found parallels between dreams and jokes in that both seek to evade. While jokes evade the censorship of our social selves, dreams evade the censorship of our conscious selves. In dreams,

It is precisely and only in dreams that we encounter the real of our desire ... Our commonest and everyday reality, the reality of the universe in which we play our usual roles as decent ordinary people, turns out to be an illusion resting on a specific "repression": on ignorance of the real of our desire (Žižek, 1999b, p. 21).

To illustrate this point, Žižek writes of Lacan's insight about the professor who dreams of his dead son, "what we have is not a quiet, kind, decent, bourgeois professor dreaming that he is a murderer, but a murderer dreaming, in his everyday life, that he is a quiet, kind, decent, bourgeois professor" (1999b, p. 21). What we are awake is nothing but the consciousness of our dreams. This other life, the dream life, can intrude at any time through a displacement of the real, through a joke, a slip of the tongue, for example. "This social reality then becomes nothing more than a fragile symbolic tissue which can be torn at any moment ... the most routine everyday conversation, the most familiar event, can suddenly take a dangerous turn, damage can be caused that cannot be undone, things can be said after which the tissue can never be repaired" (Žižek, 1999b, p. 21). One wonders what Minister Ruddock was doing and saying as he lay draped and joking over the UN committee table in Geneva, what fragile symbolic tissues were being torn.

Freud (1905) observed that there were two key aspects to the source of pleasure in jokes: a type of saving in expenditure or economising (for example, through a hostile joke we are able to satisfy our aggressive instincts in economical ways); and a sort of truancy (we can escape true feelings, for example, by making a joke of death we can escape feelings of bereavement). Jokes are important components of psychic economies. Further, "true" jokes, as opposed to spurious jokes, are involuntary. For Freud, the joke emerges as a result of a type of absence, "a sudden letting-go of intellectual tension" (1900, p. 164). This letting-go occurs involuntarily: "all at once the joke is there, for the most part simultaneously clad in words". Jokes are a type of disinhibition; they give us access to otherwise forbidden desires. Indeed, "we scarcely even know what we are laughing at in a joke" (Phillips, 2002, p. 40).

In his analysis of the logic of dreams Freud (1900) told a joke about a borrowed kettle. It goes like this: 1) I never borrowed a kettle from you; 2) I returned it to you intact; and 3) the kettle was already broken

when I got it from you. In justifying its attack on Iraq, Žižek (2004) argues that the United States government employed the logic of Freud's joke about the broken kettle: 1) Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction that posed a clear and present danger; 2) even if we can't find them he was involved in the 11 September attack; 3) even if he wasn't involved in that attack and there is no evidence to link him to al-Qaeda, his ruthless regime poses a threat. "What conferred a semblance of consistency on this multitude of reasons was, of course, ideology" (Žižek, 2004, p. 2). Ideology is central to the structure of the kettle joke; it justifies the stealth.

The Australian government and its supporters have employed the structure of the broken kettle joke in response to the National Inquiry into the Removal of Indigenous Children from their Families (Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission, 1997) which recommended an apology, compensation and reparation for the victims and survivors. Support for the recommendations and condemnation for the Australian government's failure to honour them was given on numerous occasions by the UN:

Concern is expressed that the Commonwealth Government does not support a formal national apology and that it considers inappropriate the provision of monetary compensation for those forcibly and unjustifiably separated from their families, on the grounds that such practices were sanctioned by law at the time and were intended to assist the people whom they affected. The Committee recommends that the State party consider the need to address appropriately the extraordinary harm inflicted by these racially discriminatory practices (Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, 2000).

However, in the face of the condemnations, the Australian government's joke goes like this – 1) we didn't steal Indigenous children; 2) they were returned clothed, fed and educated; and 3) the children were already disadvantaged and at risk when we got them. Further, the children were not stolen, merely borrowed. Nor were the children stolen from, argues the Australian Prime Minister (Howard, n. d.). Indeed government lawyers fighting compensation claims by Indigenous Australians following the recommendations of the National Inquiry were instructed to argue that they were enriched by the experience. Australian government lawyers argued that Indigenous children had benefited from their experiences of being removed from their families. After four years of legal proceedings and 106 days of hearings that involved 60 witnesses and cost some \$12 million, Justice O'Loughlin found that Lorna Cubillo and Peter Gunner had failed to prove that the Commonwealth authorities had ignored their best

interests by removing them from their families (High Court of Australia, 2000).

There are links here also with the concentration camp joke. Despite UN determinations about the severe disadvantages of Indigenous Australians and irrefutable evidence of this contained within various publications and the government's own reports, the government is unable to accept any culpability. As the UN stated,

Serious concern remains at the extent of the continuing discrimination faced by indigenous Australians in the enjoyment of their economic, social and cultural rights. The Committee remains seriously concerned about the extent of the dramatic inequality still experienced by an indigenous population that represents only 2.1 per cent of the total population of a highly developed industrialized State. The Committee recommends that the State party ensure, within the shortest time possible, that sufficient resources are allocated to eradicate these disparities (Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, 2000).

Kay Schaffer (2001, p. iii) observes,

there is now at least a thirty year archive of published Aboriginal life narratives and a considerable accumulation of damning historical evidence of a frontier history of violence and resistance, sometimes by non-Indigenous protesters, as well as the more recent testimonies of victims contained within the Stolen generations accounts.

In light of such an archive, the Australian Prime Minister's statements that the Stolen Generations benefited from their experience and that on balance Australian governments have been benevolent towards Indigenous Australians are so preposterous, so outrageous and unimaginable that they must be some kind of joke. The thought that someone was, and still is, getting pleasure out of the incarceration and abuse of Indigenous children in Australia is unthinkable. The ideology that confers both the arguments about the invasion of Iraq and the theft of Indigenous children as reasonable and rational is, of course, White supremacy. It is the same ideology that today scoffs at the impossibility that Australian human rights abuses could associate it with Third World (non-White) nations. We want equality, more accurately the fantasy of equality, but only with some. But is it ideology or economic gain that is at the heart of the matter: is a sense of superiority, economic power or sovereign control the ultimate desire?

■ The island continent: The fantasy of sovereignty

In its refutation of the findings of various committees and its refusal to sign or ratify certain treaties, the

Australian government has argued that it recognises only its own sovereignty. An Amnesty International (2000b) press release entitled *Australia: Prime Minister's disregard of human rights obligations shocks Amnesty International* they comment that the Australian Prime Minister rejected criticism of its juvenile justice laws by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in 1997, of its mandatory detention of asylum seekers by the UN Human Rights Committee in 1997 and of its racially discriminatory Aboriginal land use laws by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination in 1999 and in doing so has revealed a "shocking disregard of his country's obligations". Further, "his government has persistently refused to act on laws and practices which the UN bodies found inconsistent with Australia's human rights obligations". Another Amnesty International report (2000c) was entitled, *Australia Shies Away from UN Scrutiny*, and a 2001 Amnesty International report stated, "Australia ignored four UN reports on its human rights record last year". In support of these claims Marr quoted Howard as saying, "Australian laws are made by Australian parliaments elected by the Australian people, not by UN committees" (Marr, 2005, p. 14). The government claims that Australians are to live by Australian laws, despite the fact that it is a signatory to many UN covenants. Howard is claiming that we have our own internal censors. However, contrary to this fantasy, Australia is not an island in and other ethical terms. Judith Butler writes in response to this fantasy of nation state independence and control which is characteristic also of the United States of America:

Both our political and ethical responsibilities are rooted in the recognition that radical forms of self-sufficiency and unbridled sovereignty are, by definition, disrupted by the larger global processes of which they are a part, that no final control can be secured, and that final control is not, cannot be, an ultimate value (Butler, 2004, p. xiii).

Here Butler alludes to the fantasy of sovereignty in the new global order – the fantasy that we can be our own censors, in final control. Globalisation has imposed a type of community on "fortress Australia", one in which it feels for the most part awkwardly and incongruently placed, situated as it is on the rim of Asia and the Pacific and far from the democratic (White) nations with which it seeks to be aligned.

■ Ambivalent humanity

Rather than a desire to oppress or to have permission to oppress, a joke that oppresses may point to a more fundamental ambivalence. Edmond Wright elaborates Freud's incongruity theory about jokes. A joke requires an incongruity "in which two rival 'scripts' are unexpectedly brought together by some ambiguous

trigger” (Wright, 2000, p. 294). If we take the joking behaviour of the Australian government in relation to the UN report as an example, the two scripts would be the censorship of oppression and the desire to oppress, and the ambiguous trigger the government’s awkwardness about the UN being a legitimate censor. A joke requires a mismatch triggered by some ambivalence or tension. We are good and ethical and your portrayal of us as an oppressive people does not fit with our own image of ourselves – the two images are incongruous. In aligning Australia (White and civilised) with Uganda (non-White and un-civilised) there is a mis-match; the tensions which arise at this point provide the basis of a joke. You are saying we are like them? What a joke!

In its manifestation within an ambivalence, the joke also has a productive potential in relation to this ambivalence. That is, the joke provides an opportunity for the redesign of categories and concepts. We can take on or reject certain scripts and we can flirt with the idea of taking sides – or even changing sides. We have not been oppressive, we will be oppressive if we wish, and who are you to tell us we are misbehaving? That is, in mocking the UN findings we flirt with the possibility of redefining the bounds of civilised behaviour (as able to accommodate acts of oppression) and locating ourselves outside the UN judgements. The joke seeks to evade the censors, to enjoy a temporary challenge to authority and in so doing establish a momentary collusion with another (Wright, 2000, p. 295). Reason and the suppression of destructive or anti-social impulses have little to do with it. As Freud wrote, “Reason, critical judgement, suppression – these are the forces against which [the joke] fights in succession” (Freud, 1976 [1905], p. 189). In seeking to evade the UN we seek to collude with others. In mocking censorship of its human rights abuses and throwing reason, critical judgement and suppression to the wind, if not the UN with whom is Australia seeking to cast its lot?

■ Appointing a new censor

During the March 2005 hearings in Geneva, the Australian delegation was led by its ambassador to the UN, Mike Smith. Absent from the hearing were the major human rights groups and NGOs in Australia, the government having curtailed their funding or taken steps towards their abolition. ATSIC was two months from being dissolved. The Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission had had its international brief slashed by legislation. David Marr (2005, p. 13), writes the following account of the meeting between Smith and the Committee:

After an upbeat recital of initiatives to combat racism in Australia, he turned on the 18 committee members, describing their work last

time as “cursory” and “unreasonable”. He accused them of largely ignoring the progress being made in Australia while displaying “an unquestioning acceptance” of the Government’s critics. Perhaps anticipating another unhappy outcome, Australia had decided to put in the boot. It was not a good omen. The room was tense. Regis de Gouttes of France, headphones clamped to his ears, declared the ambassador “exceptionally rude” and Jose Lindgren Alves of Brazil told Smith: “As a veteran diplomat, this statement, with its language describing programs and attacks on NGOs, reminds me of the sort of statement from communist bloc countries and Latin American dictatorships that Australia used to condemn”.

The 2005 report of the UN Committee confirmed the rising incidence of Australian human rights abuses (Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, 2005). Nineteen areas of abuse were documented, including many concerns raised in previous years, such as the dismantling of the elected Indigenous body, ATSIC, the erosion of Native Title, the ongoing traumas of the Stolen Generations, failures to advance reconciliation, inadequate constitutional safeguards from racial discrimination, mandatory sentencing of first time Indigenous offenders, the over-representation of Indigenous people in jails and their high rates of death in custody. New abuses included the inhumanity of temporary protection visas for refugee claimants, the plight of stateless long-term detainees, the treatment of asylum seekers in the media, the shortcomings of the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* (Cth), and anti-Muslim counter-terrorism legislation (Marr, 2005, p. 14).

Eight months after the release of the 2005 report the response of the Australian government has been to maintain silence. No press releases, no comments, no apologies or reparations. Curiously, unlike in 2000, there has also been no refutation and no mockery. Observes Marr (2005, p. 14), “silence effectively killed the story”. If the Australian government holds little store in the opinions of the UN, it has been clear about where its respect lies. In his speech on 31 March 2005 on “Australia in the World” (Metherell, 2005), Howard states that his government has “rebalanced Australia’s foreign policy” by drawing closer to the United States of America. In pitting itself against the UN and for the US, Australia is choosing a new censor for its acts of oppression: a new audience for its jokes. In the transition, the authority of the censor passes like a baton from the UN to the US, rendering the old tensions and the old joking structures obsolete. In the process its citizens are robbed of their participation within the structures of global ethical humanity and the protection that the UN and its committees provide. As with Martin Nakata’s grandfather’s fishing vessels, this has happened not in the back rooms, but through

open stealth – daylight robbery – perhaps this too is a joke.

■ The joke and Indigenous humanities (a punch-line)

What could it mean to use joking behaviour ethically, as an aspect not of inhumanity, but of humanity? Joking, music and dance are integral to the ceremonies of the people of the Victoria River District: “Ceremony thus works with two interwoven event types: the music and dance is dreaming law, and is internally and complexly patterned; the joking is spontaneous. Each joking interval is a qualitative and purposeful withdrawal from the song. Each song is a qualitative and purposeful re-entry into Law” (Rose, 2005, p. 3). Further, “One joke is topped by another joke, which will be topped by another one, so that the jokes run concurrently through the intervals, carrying themes of gender, sexuality, authority, and spontaneous inventive delight” (Rose, 2005, p. 3). Joking in this part of Indigenous Australia provides patterned connectivity to the erotic and the sacred. Perhaps here knowledge has come to a place of truth.

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