

THE REDFERN RIOTS: PERFORMING THE POLITICS OF SPACE

RENÉE NEWMAN-STOREN
MURDOCH UNIVERSITY

IN THE LATE HOURS OF FEBRUARY 15, 2004, residents of the Sydney inner-city suburb of Redfern took to the streets and staged an act of resistance against a ‘thin blue line’ of hostility, the New South Wales (N.S.W.) Police force, that lasted approximately nine hours (Gargett 2005, 10). By the early hours of the following morning some 40 police were injured, many ‘insurgents’ arrested, but the streets of ‘The Block’ were once again silent. The unrest was subsequently referred to as the ‘Redfern riots’ and led to three independent inquiries; the internal N.S.W. police inquiry, the N.S.W. parliamentary inquiry and the Coronial Inquest into the death of Thomas ‘T.J.’ Hickey, whose tragic death was the initial catalyst for the ‘riot.’ This paper is concerned with the analysis of what became known as ‘the Redfern riots’ as a performance event, indicative of, and constituted through, specific socio-historical formations. I read the Redfern riots as both performative and a performance event; to read the ‘riots’ as performative is to reveal the performance-like qualities and the discursive formations revealed in the event. These performative utterances equally enable and disable subjective agency, and thus result in the speakable and the unspeakable subject, or as Judith Butler would argue a “zone of uninhabitability” (Butler 1993, 3). Who is empowered to act and who is acted upon?

I will first explore notions of space and performance in regards to the construction of the ‘criminal’ subject by paying particular attention to certain responses to the Redfern riots. Second, I examine the discourse of the ‘other’ and the enactment of agency in the performative statement. The former section contains an analysis of spectacle and the ‘criminal’ body and the latter section is concerned with the performative act illuminated in a photograph of street graffiti which I suggest is a site of territorial marking and memorialisation that foregrounds a discursive undercurrent of both power and the search for agency. Finally, I will pose a question regarding the liminality of the Redfern riots. Ultimately this paper suggests that an exploration of public resistance can contribute to a discussion of the nature of a moral/social anxiety.¹

I use the term the ‘performance of space’ to refer to an embodied practice in the ‘real’ experience of the fight for agency and the ambiguous nature of the underlying ‘discursive’ experience that limits this pursuit. The performance exists in the battle for the ownership of ‘space’ and in the reiterative capacity of this ownership. Or in other words, the subject continually ‘performs’ his/her search for power and this is both a lived embodied experience and a discursive exchange in the territorial inscription of space. The performance surrounding this negotiation of space is most obviously mapped

out in the days and weeks following the riot. The varied responses distinguished alternative spaces of public opinion including the distinct opinionated spaces of the N.S.W. and Federal governments, the conservative slant of sensationalist media, the outright racist views of some members of the public, and the empathetic reactions of critical commentators desiring debate. I now turn to these multiple interpretations by paying particular attention to how these responses have contributed to the creation of a space in which the 'criminal' body is created, maintained and performed.

My own bias impacts this analysis in so far as I am instinctively more sympathetic to the voice of those who suffer from inequity than the powerful. But I attempt to resist romanticism and conceptualise an ambivalence in the position of the rioters who are suspended somewhere between profound resistance and futile insurgency.

The Performance space of the Criminal 'Other'

'The Block' consists of the intersection of Louis, Vine, Eveleigh and Caroline Streets in the inner Sydney suburb of Redfern. Andy Gargett in *The Indigenous Law Bulletin* writes:

Redfern is arguably the 'black heart' of Australia with a strong political, spiritual and cultural significance to Indigenous peoples from all over N.S.W. and across Australia (2005, 8).

The Gadigal people are the traditional owners of the land, and according to Elizabeth Rice, also in *The Indigenous Law Bulletin*, throughout the twentieth century Redfern and the Block was a meeting point for Aboriginal people and a place for employment opportunities (Rice 2005, 19). The Labor Government of Gough Whitlam was committed to a policy of 'self determination' for Indigenous Australians, and thus, in 1973 gave the Block to the Aboriginal Housing Commission to operate home ownership. This event reflected a distinct policy shift for the Australian government from the colonial operative of 'protection'² and the subsequent policy of assimilation which directly led to the forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families, 'the stolen generation'.³

The Redfern 'riots' and 'the Block' are symbolic of the negotiation involved in the performance of space, between the embodied lived experience and the discursive operations that exist in marking out territory. Thus, an exploration of space requires an analysis of how a subject might perform the often contradictory negotiations of empowerment and dispossession. The performance that was the 'Redfern riots' is the space of agency and self-empowerment existing in an uncomfortable dance with discursive and institutionalised racism and abject poverty. The highly publicised nature of this intensely localised space, 'The Block', has meant that this contradictory tug-of-war between agency and disempowerment has often been played out under the microscopic lens of the media. I argue that through examining the Redfern 'riots' as performance, conflict can be understood as both an engagement between physical bodies and a collision of bodies of knowledge, intersecting in a simultaneous quest for acknowledgment.

The performance space of the Redfern riots is the site within which a spectacle of the 'other' occurs. I argue that the public perception of the Redfern riots, via various media forums, produces the perception of the 'criminal' body, and thus, the space of the 'criminal' in the spectacle of the Redfern riots' is forever in a rotation of construction, repetition and reinforcement.

The automatic labelling of the unrest as a 'riot', within and outside of the media, suggests an underlying discursive imperative situated within the linguistic choice. The use of the word 'riot' supports Michel Foucault's point in which discourse is "transformed in, through and on the basis of relations of power" (Foucault 1980, 70) Those involved in the 'riot' are positioned as irrational and violent,

behaving in opposition to the rational and logical space of law and order. In the construction of a binary distinction the varied reasons for the unrest goes unchecked and is instead replaced with a simplistic summation that renders the unrest as illegitimate; to riot is to be considered irrational and unintelligible.⁴ Thus, even in the linguistic choice of the word 'riot' there is a performative statement that demarcates a space in which a discourse of criminality is performed that leads to a marginalised representation of the Indigenous subject. As Andy Gargett argues: "[t]he media produce the Indigenous body as criminal. Indigeneity itself becomes crime" (2005, 9).

The exploration of the space of the criminal 'other' raises questions as to what it means to identify as an Indigenous subject seeking agency and what the status and subjectivity of the non-Indigenous and the non-rioter might be. An exploration of how space was performed in the Redfern 'riots' is not only an exploration of the participants within the uprising but also the spectators who are formed and constituted in the witnessing of it.

Piers Akerman in *The Daily Telegraph* refers to the suburb and community of Redfern as "a petri dish for rafts of self-indulgent social engineers wishing to experiment with the lives of a chronically dysfunctional group of people" (2004, 18). Akerman establishes the riots as the manifestation of dysfunction supported by the 'pandering' of liberalist policy resulting in criminal desperation and, and therefore, he delineates a space of the 'self' and the 'other' in diametrically opposed positions that are considered inherently naturalised. He later wonders whether Hickey "was a victim of anything more than his own tragic stupidity and a cycling mishap" (Akerman 2004, 18). Akerman renders the argument of the community illegitimate by laying the blame entirely on the victim himself. Regardless of whether Hickey was or was not pursued, Akerman systematically denies that the alarming rate of incarceration of Indigenous people and the continual police presence in Redfern may have contributed to Hickey's sense of fear, and thus, "inadvertently" led to his accident. For Akerman the sight of an Aboriginal youth fleeing the police is an event unworthy of investigation. This is indicative of the very reason why a youth might flee and is certainly a substantial circumstance necessary of exploration. Akerman rejects the investigation of the multiplicity of discursive formations that can be at the core of violent unrest by instead, I argue, opting for an argument that is the very product of such systemic instances of power. Akerman enacts the constitution and performance of the 'self' in opposition to his chosen 'other' when he acrimoniously represents the 'rioters', and it seems all Aboriginal people, as 'dysfunctional' and criminal. He systematically enables his own construction when faced with his construction and encounter with the 'other.'

In the aftermath of the riots key figures were urged to take some 'moral' position. The former N.S.W. opposition leader John Brogden declared the Block should be bulldozed, whilst former Federal opposition leader Mark Latham queried where the parents of rioting children were during the 'riots' and Prime Minister John Howard declared the riots were the result of the 'total breakdown of family authority' and quite openly formed an alliance with the police when he stated: "I defend very much the police in a situation like that" (Shaw 2004, 6). Former N.S.W. Premier Bob Carr stated: "I've always said about Redfern that the riot we saw was criminality, plain and simple" (A.A.P. 2004).

These statements illustrate the construction of a territorial positioning in relation to the 'riots' from the highest levels of government authority. It highlights the performative element to each statement; there is an action of something being 'done' in each statement. The performative enactments of legality, criminality and civic responsibility are enforced and acted upon in the very negotiations and references to the space and spectacle of the 'riots.' In "A Critical Media Analysis of the Redfern Riots" Andy Gargett argues that

[t]he police are constructed as neutral characters in the lead up to the riot: simply doing their job. During the riots this neutrality is replaced with victimization—police sacrifice their well-being to return order to the streets (2005, 10).

This polarisation of the criminality of the ‘rioters’ in opposition to the victimisation of the police is reinforced in the media with reports of the ‘brave’ police further compounded by the N.S.W. Police Commissioner Ken Moroney suggesting that bravery medals be awarded to all police involved, describing their conduct as ‘absolute heroism’ (A.B.C. 2004). Subsequently, Redfern Police Station was moved from a small street-level office into two adjacent six storey high office buildings looking down over Redfern Station and towards the Block. Police Minister John Watkins implied the benefits of a panopticon surveillance of Redfern when he stated that the new police station would be “right where the police want it, with a bird’s eye view over the Block” (Jackson 2004). Such a statement reinforces the notion that a state sanctioned police presence in Redfern is primarily concerned with performing the status of the panopticon warden disciplining the criminal mass. Such a statement is a revealing response; a response that represents the ‘rioters’ as the embodiment of criminal and illegitimate violence and not as an instance of the performance of dispossession, an embodied inscription of a literal dis-location. Judith Butler suggests that

[t]he abject designates here precisely those “unliveable” and “uninhabitable” zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the “unlivable” is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject (1993, 3).

The territory of the ‘unliveable’ and the ‘uninhabitable’ is further exemplified by the irresponsible behaviour of certain media participants such as Bob Francis on his Adelaide radio show, Radio 5AA, when he suggested with regard to the ‘riots’: “How dare you call it a display of grief? You dirty, rotten bastards” (A.B.C. 2004). This comment provoked a response from ‘Gary’, a member of the public, saying that if he had been a policeman present at the ‘riots’ he would have “emptied his gun into the crowd and would have made sure he did not miss” (A.B.C. 2004). Shortly after this broadcast 5AA had the highest ratings for radio in Adelaide and although the Australian Broadcasting Authority (A.B.A.) declared the Bob Francis show was guilty of inciting racial hatred, the A.B.A. are yet to pursue any formal punishment (A.B.C. 2004). A discourse of racial distinction and explicit discrimination revealed in such statements is compounded by the inactivity of the governing bodies that are meant to discipline such reprehensible behaviour. Thus, in the absence of such an action these governing bodies (such as the A.B.A.) are also implicated in reiterating an implicit discourse of racial distinction and discrimination. In *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* Butler argues that

[t]he power attributed to hate speech is a power of absolute and efficacious agency, performativity and transitivity at once (it does what it says and it does what it says it will do to the one addressed by the speech) (1997, 77).

In the absence of punishment the A.B.A. maintains the continual reiteration of the framing of the Indigenous subject as the abject ‘other.’ Such performative statements produce and sustain a notion of criminality that is then compounded by the statements of the wider community. In abstaining from an appropriate punishment for the radio station the ‘state’ is thus sanctioning the use of hate speech and instead of following a premise of zero-tolerance of racist incitement the institution of the law and its government are effectively complicit in the condoning of such behaviour; they are equally as complicit in the production, performance and reiteration of hate speech as Gary and his bullets are.

In *Critical and Cultural Theory* Dani Cavallaro argues that “[i]n order to assert the status of a nation as

The ‘R.I.P.’ message and the special notes of memory delineate and perform the space of a memorial site and the tags, the names of the urban radical, inscribe the space with the identity of its authors. The space is the map of an urban memorial, a space of mourning, which is constructed through the performance of this street art. This site is forever marked and territorialised, a space for grieving, remembering and ‘belonging.’ Or, as Michael Keith suggests, “what is at stake in these forms of urban graphology is an emergent struggle over inclusion, citizenship, entitlement and belonging” (2005, 137).

The absence of a commemorative plaque on this site is in itself a confirmation of this struggle. The N.S.W. Department of Housing and the Sydney City Council refused to accept the plaque chosen by Hickey’s family on the grounds that it implicated the police in T. J. Hickey’s death. The refusal of the plaque is a performative gesture on behalf of the state which speaks and acts an utterance of censorship. The absence enacts the denial. Butler, discussing the performative of hate speech argues that

. . . the mechanism of censorship is not only actively engaged in the production of subjects, but also in circumscribing the social parameters of speakable discourse, of what will and will not be admissible in public discourse (1997, 131-132).

Therefore, in the absence of the plaque, the act of censorship—on the part of the N.S.W. government and through its absence, the Sydney City Council—is emblematic of the normative practice that is an insidious silencing of individual and collective grief. The absence of the plaque is in fact a presence of censorship and therefore reinforces what is considered “speakable discourse” and what “. . . will not be admissible in public discourse” (Butler 1997, 131-132). In the prohibition of the plaque the grief and dispossession of T. J. Hickey’s community is also denied and, thus, in some way this abject dislocation is brought into a sense of presence. Butler suggests that

[i]f censoring a text is always in some sense incomplete, that may be partly because the text in question takes on new life as part of the very discourse produced by the mechanism of censorship (1997, 130).

By rejecting the plaque the censorship takes on a ‘new life’ by exposing the ‘mechanism’ by which the censorship is performed, and, through its absence, the act of censorship is exposed. In the place of the plaque the space of the memorial fence is instead fervently rendered present by the inscription of graffiti. Michael Keith argues that

[a]lthough graffiti writers might be placed in an antagonistic relationship, they constitute a linguistic community united in its opposition to a wider normative community . . . graffiti is not merely the sign or the effect of an underlying ethological community; rather it is the embodied social landscape (2005, 150-151).

In fact, Keith suggests that “[g]raffiti is perhaps the exemplary mode of outlaw communication. By definition it is intrusive, emblematic and opportunistic” (2005, 136) The very act of graffiti implicates a radical re-writing, a transgression of sorts. If the voice of the oppressed—a subject disempowered to act or be heard in life—is silenced by death then this is the most tragic silencing of all. However, if graffiti is the search for empowerment through deliberate transgression then the performer of this statement of memorialisation enacts the very thing that they are seeking, agency. This search for agency manifests a sense of transformation, a liminal transgression that continues beyond the closure of the ‘riots’ and by its very nature is “intrusive, emblematic and opportunistic”.

Victor Turner, in his seminal work in ritual theory, described the life of any given society in terms of what he called a ‘social drama’, consisting of four phases: the breach of a social code, a subsequent

crisis, redressive action, and resolution (1987, 34) On one level the breach of a social code in reference to the Redfern 'riots' is the generations of abuse, dislocation and oppression experienced by Indigenous Australians which led to the belief that the death of T. J. Hickey was due to police victimisation. The crisis is the 'riots' that followed and the redressive action is the action of the police and riot squad in retaliation. Finally, the resolution was the restoration of 'order' with the ceasing of the uprising, and the subsequent inquiries and arrests that followed. In another reading the breach of regulation came from the action of the 'riot' and the crisis was the face-to-face encounter with the 'other' between the 'rioter' and the police. The redressive action takes the form of the construction of the new police station in the old T.N.T. building overshadowing the Block in Redfern, the subsequent inquiries (coronial, police and parliamentary) and the implementation of the Redfern Waterloo Authority. Thus, in effect the redressive action was the reinforcement of the hegemonic institutions that were challenged by the 'riot' in the first place. In fact the final stage of the social drama is incomplete; there is no finite return to social normativity. The inequity, grief and dispossession felt by the 'rioters' were essentially denied after the 'riots' and although the status quo is returned the transformation via the transgression of the 'riot' continues. The 'riot' continues to be 'felt' because the 'riots' happened at all a liminal transgression where the participants were irreversibly affected. "Liminal rituals permanently change who people are. These are transformations" (Schechner 2002, 63) The Redfern 'riots' were liminal in that the transgression provoked a social anxiety, a media and popular response that revealed powerful social conditions that construct the 'other', which were inevitably reinforced. However, the presence of a memorialisation of T. J. Hickey's death suggests that the transgression caused by the riots continues beyond the closure of the unrest, and therefore, the pursuit of agency is inscribed onto the landscape.

Conclusion

The 'riots' themselves did little for the advancement of Indigenous Australians living in Redfern in the short term, particularly due to the incarceration of participants and the implicit discrimination in the larger community that was inflated in the aftermath. However, the riots did deliver a force that demanded the audience declare their position. The police station in Redfern is armed and ready for further unrest and the community has mourned the anniversaries of T. J. Hickey's death since 2004 with peaceful rallies. The 'riots' were the outpouring of grief and anger, of abuse and violence, the articulation of oppression and neglect, and, the absolute determination to draw attention to this experience.

The transgression of social order resulting in the 'riots' led to a space where the 'other' and the 'self' were dialogically constituted and performed, and although the social crisis of the riots inevitably led to the restoration of normative order, this 'ordered' space is the platform for continual response and comment, a liminal transgression. This transgression is observable via the examples of graffiti wherein the 'other' is able to be heard and seen and the battle for agency far from over.

To explore the riots as performance, and the presence of the performative utterance, is to question the very nature of resistance; who speaks, why and how? These questions cannot be easily answered but in the very act of asking them the potential for transformative outcomes becomes possible. As a result, we are able to learn more about the conditions of peace, the emergence of alternative spaces to oppression and the performance of our 'belongings'. Can there be a space for hope, healing and empowerment? The 'Redfern riots' were a social drama from which one can learn possible endings and, in so doing, the possibility of new spaces of resistance and active empowerment emerge as new beginnings in the necessary pursuit of agency.

Endnotes

1. Chas Critcher offers a useful definition for 'social anxiety': "[a] central issue for moral panic analysis is why the public apparently exhibits a predisposition to panic. The answer given is social anxiety" (Critcher 2003, 147).

I am using the notion of a social anxiety in relation to moral panic theory. Some of the responses to the riots that I take note of in the paper are indicative of a community in 'moral panic.' However, in some respects the responses to the riots do not fit ideally within the criteria of moral panic theory, principally that the moral panic tends to lead to significant changes in society, the notion of a social anxiety is more useful. A social anxiety suggests that there are undercurrent issues that a social event with significant media interest and a popular response reveals. The riots are emblematic of deeper issues regarding race and that these issues both inspired the conflict, the subsequent representation of the riot in the media and a polarised response.

2. At the time of Federation in 1901, the six states of Australia were bound by a constitution that made two references to Aboriginal persons. First, section 127 stated that all Aboriginal persons were excluded from the census; and, second, part 26 of section 51 gave the power of 'protection' of Aboriginal persons to each state. In effect, this determined that all people of Aboriginal ancestry were considered wards of the state, until the legislated policies were amended in the 1967 referendum.

3. The 1997 Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission's report *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families* brought particular attention to the term, the 'stolen generation', although the facts and argument were not themselves 'new'. The report explores the impact of the Australian Federal, State and Territory Governments law of assimilation which saw the removal of thousands of Aboriginal children from their biological families and asked for a Federal government apology on behalf of non-Aboriginal Australia. *Inter alia*, the report found that:

[t]he Australian practice of Indigenous child removal involved both systematic racial discrimination and genocide as defined by international law. Yet it continued to be practised as official policy long after being clearly prohibited by treaties to which Australia had voluntarily subscribed (N.I.S.A.T.S.C.F. 1997, 266).

4. It is important that I note that the Indigenous 'rioter' of the 'Redfern riots' is positioned as 'illegitimate' and 'criminal' in opposition to the 'legitimate' civilian protest of such resistance as the protests in Tiananmen Square or Paris in 1968. I suggest that the experience of the 'rioters' is undermined and disqualified as unrepentant criminal behaviour and not, as I argue, the outpouring of grief and volatile dispossession., or the 'legitimate' argument of a political protest like that of the afore mentioned demonstrations.

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Renée Newman-Storen is an actor, writer and director who has worked in the theatre for companies including Perth Theatre Company, Black Swan and Barking Gecko and in film and television for S.B.S. and A.B.C.. She is in the final stage of her doctoral candidature at Murdoch University, during which she presented at two A.D.S.A. conferences and at the ‘Storytelling in Contemporary Performance’ conference in Krakow, Poland. Her research interests in the politics and theory of performance are fuelled by a life long passion for the embodied experience of performance.