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John Thieme

Seeing the World Anew: Thanks to Veronica Brady

I'm not sure how many times I met Sr. Veronica (née Patricia Mary) Brady of the Order of Loreto. Certainly not many. Perhaps only three or four, but a particular moment on a day spent with her, a particular conversation, a particular inspiration made me see the world anew.

We were first introduced at a conference. I already knew her reputation as a distinguished academic and fearless campaigner for Aboriginal Rights. Later we met at a few similar gatherings. Just a few, and it was only on that one particular day that I spent a significant amount of time with her. In 1986, with my wife Barbara, I visited Australia for the first time. Perth, where Veronica worked at the University of Western Australia, was our point of arrival. Veronica was one of a number of people who were kind towards us. She was a perfect host, particularly when she took us for a day-long drive out of the city – to York and Beverley. Without this we would have seen nothing of Western Australia apart from Perth and Fremantle. Thanks to her we saw more and spent a very pleasant day with a very special person. But it was a memorable day for more than just this, because something else happened that day. That was the particular day when that particular conversation that had such an influence on me occurred, though it wasn't until a few days later that I appreciated its import.

Veronica talked to us about our impending flights across the continent and she told us something which, to be honest, coming from almost anyone else, would have filled me with deep scepticism. She said that, observed from the air, the central Australian landscape bears an uncanny resemblance to that depicted in much traditional Aboriginal art. Viewed from a Western perspective – and it may be mistaken to try to apply such vocabulary in this context – such art might, I suppose, be described as 'abstract' or 'expressionist', labels usually attached to art forms that void pictorial representation of any direct, referential significance, whether social, spiritual or geopolitical. If such art claims a relationship with an observed physical environment, it seldom, if ever, does so by presenting itself as a mirror-like reflection of an observed landscape. Yet here was the suggestion that the apparent 'expressionism' of Aboriginal painting, invested as it is with complex spiritual layers, was in fact a mimetic response to an actual landscape – as seen from the air!

So, as I say, I was sceptical and only my personal and academic respect for Veronica and my knowledge that she was not only an expert on Aboriginal affairs, but also one of the most frequent of 'frequent flyers' – nicknamed the 'flying nun' because of her regular trips to Canberra for committee service – made me consider lending any credence to what would otherwise have seemed an extraordinary remark. I appreciated her sincerity, but took what she said as an assertion of belief, an act of faith, which I doubted I could share, however much I might wish to. Ready though I was to believe in assertions of Aboriginal spiritual

wisdom, it was hard to entertain the possibility that traditional Aboriginal artists had been able to paint their environment from the skies and how else could they have achieved an aerial view of their landscapes?

During our subsequent flights there was ample opportunity to put the claim to the test. The evidence from the first section of landscape viewed from the air was far from compelling and then there was a long segment flying over water, the Great Australian Bight, but a second flight, travelling north from Adelaide towards the 'red centre' over more undulating country, confirmed what Veronica had said beyond the shadow of a doubt. Sweeping layers of bright primary colours took us into a landscape that, quite simply, shatters Western preconceptions about the separateness of the 'realistic' and the 'abstract', the 'civilized' and the 'primitive', the 'secular' and the 'spiritual'; and it seemed clear that traditional Aboriginal art had managed to depict the unique interior landscape of Australia with representational accuracy, albeit presumably from a terrestrial vantage point.

Such oppositions as 'civilized' and 'primitive' are, of course, part and parcel of the binary thought-systems of many kinds of Western discourse, among them colonial constructions that locate colonized peoples as inferior partners in asymmetrical power relationships and structural anthropology of the kind practised by Claude Lévi-Strauss. So the challenge afforded by an artistic practice that appeared to collapse such dualities made me all too aware that in this instance *my* mind had been implicated in imagining such divisions and had misunderstood the aesthetics of traditional Aboriginal art. At best I could claim that I was an 'innocent' product of forms of Western socialization that define identity through contradistinction with alterity. Equally, this experience prompted me to ask what values are inscribed in an art that appears to see itself, completely unself-consciously, as an outcrop of the landscape. My rudimentary knowledge of the Aboriginal Creation myth of the Dreamtime provided the beginnings of an answer. Unlike Western Creation myths, the Dreamtime is considered to be immanent in the present, not just an account of human origins, since the creating spirits live on in the landscape's sacred sites. As Mudrooroo once put it, the Dreamtime is "the time of Creation that symbolizes that all life to the *Aboriginal* peoples is part of one interconnected system, one vast network of relationships which came into existence with the stirring of the great eternal archetypes, the spirit ancestors who emerged during the Dreamtime"¹. Particular Aboriginal ceremonies function as rites that reaffirm the connection with the ancestral spirits and the Dreamtime, enabling Aboriginal peoples to preserve and renew the spiritual energy of the period of Creation, so that analogous processes of cosmogony and transformation can take place in the present.

"One interconnected system, one vast network of relationships": the terms echo the rhetoric of contemporary globalization – and in particular the Internet – where chaos theory seems to abound: a feather falls in the Australian desert and Washington shudders. Yet the Australian Aboriginal world-view and that of many other Native peoples, such as the descendants of the pre-Columbian inhabitants of the Americas and the tribals of South Asia, could hardly be more removed in outlook from the 'one-world' vision of global consumer

¹ Mudrooroo. 1994. *Aboriginal Mythology*. London: Aquarian, 52 (italics in original).

capitalism. It is a world-view that in its ancestral iterations does not need to argue for a holistic vision of landscape and the social and cultural formations that this gives rise to, because it simply takes such a view for granted. I learnt that on that flight into the centre – thanks to Veronica Brady’s tutelage and her rare capacity for reading across cultures. I cannot claim to have known Veronica well, but I owe the personal epiphany I experienced on that day to her and remembering it has provided a legacy that has served me well on those occasions when I have been able to distance myself from the invariably shallower world-view of contemporary global cosmopolitanism. And it seems appropriate to be writing these words of thanks to Veronica here – for a journal whose involvement with the Partnership Studies project is playing a similar part in challenging the divisive ‘norms’ of consumer society.

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