

# SEMIOTICS AND HISTORY

*Entering a no-go zone with Patrick Wolfe*

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This piece of writing was set off by Patrick Wolfe's review of *Dark Side of the Dream* (*Meanjin* 2/1992), but we hasten to insist that we don't propose to defend ourselves or the book from Wolfe's review. Whether or not he was right about the worth of the book is neither here nor there, beyond the bruises inflicted on two sensitive authorial egos who ought to have known what they were in for when they published their book. But the issues that Wolfe raises deserve wider debate.

First, he constructs the difference he sees between himself and us as an instance of the irreconcilable gulf between semiotics and history. Secondly, he proposes what he calls an 'epistemological no-go zone' around all Aboriginal meanings, which no 'invader' should cross, and especially no semiotician. We worry that the war he wants to declare between history and semiotics may be a distraction from the difficult issues of the larger struggle in which he and we and many others are engaged, as academics against a racist Australia. In this war we are not sure that a strict epistemological no-go zone is the only (or the best) tactic that non-Aboriginal academics can come up with to support the efforts of our Aboriginal brothers and sisters.

Wolfe is generous about the semiotic competence of our book, praising its 'interpretive vignettes' (333), but he is severe on its incompetence as history: 'At one level, this book contains a number of empirical errors of a type that historians, for all their possible semiotic shortcomings, simply do not make' (334). He then illustrates this heavy charge:

for instance, Hodge and Mishra date Australia's 'shift from Britain to the US as its guarantor' from Holt's 'All the Way with LBJ' (6), in apparent ignorance of Curtin's declaration a quarter of a century earlier that Australia's primary interests lay with MacArthur in the Pacific. (334).

We can take a just rebuke, so we turned dutifully to see what we had written in order to properly regret it. It came in a paragraph that took Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War as a focal point. It went:

As we survey the four decades of Australian history since the second world war this seems to us a symptomatic and decisive event. Initially the Australian government enthusiastically supported the US: 'All the Way with LBJ' was the catch-cry of Australian Prime Minister Harold Holt, a cringe so fulsome that it returned to haunt the pro-war movement. (6)

As we look at this statement again, it doesn't seem very empirical, but then it's not trying to be. We go on to call Holt's speech 'one extreme development', not the first, and we're not attempting to 'date' Australia's shift to the American alliance. 'Dates' are nice empirical things, about which you can be right or wrong, depending on whether you're a historian or not. Ironically, a real empirical error would have been to *include* Curtin (1885–1945) in a discussion of postwar Australia, as Wolfe the historian castigates us for not doing.

At the risk of seeming pedantically censorious, we want to suggest that Wolfe's criticism here stems from a specific kind of error that is sadly common among professional historians. He doesn't read well. Or to be more precise, he has been trained in a technology of reading that is good at producing 'history' (text that is acceptable to professional historians) but doesn't produce 'good readings' by other standards of accuracy and precision. Perhaps he is simply unable to comprehend relatively simple pieces of prose like this when he reads them the first time, but it is more likely that behind his 'error' is his method of reading, one that abstracts key phrases from a larger text and incorporates them into another text, his notes, which are then recycled into the continuous prose of his review. In this new text the fragments from the prior text have no constraining context, so that Wolfe can shuffle them around and produce a new text, of which he is the unsuspecting author, but which he attributes to the original author and text. In this way the historian's reading method produces an 'empirical error', which the historian then exposes and castigates, while we semioticians look on in awe and amazement at our irrelevance to the whole performance.

In case we seem to be scoring easy points at the expense of history, we should add that the second 'empirical error' that Wolfe detects is a different matter. He criticizes us (334) for 'get[ting] the current official definition of Aboriginality wrong' by leaving out the

crucial final part of the quotation. What is ironic about this is that our description (though not offered as a definition or quotation) is incomplete, as he says – precisely the fault that we have just said was the product of historical methods of reading. We could try to be smart here, and claim that we were only aspiring to be historians, but it's not our aim to continue a polemic between history and semiotics. The part not quoted was not relevant to our argument at that point, and we did not claim to be recording the official definition of Aboriginality. Even so, we could and should have completed the quotation. It wasn't an 'empirical error', but it was an offense against semiotic protocols, and Wolfe the semiotic historian was on solid ground in rebuking us.

As this shows, Wolfe is really a semiotician in historian's clothing. The giveaway is the key phrase 'epistemological no-go zone', which no self-respecting proper historian would use (combining the polysyllabic 'epistemological' with 'no-go', which has a monosyllabic populism that historians would not touch). His assault on our historical credentials, it turns out, was a feint. The real attack is mounted by Wolfe the crypto-semiotician against the conditions of our semiotic enterprise, exposing the contradictions that we struggled with throughout our text, but failed to resolve, according to this harsh but entirely competent judge.

But Wolfe is not kind about the semiotic enterprise. He is worth quoting extensively on this theme (for those who haven't read the issue of *Meanjin* in which it appears):

Semiotics insatiably aspires to a thoroughgoing penetration. Semiotics' invasive nature resides in its panoptic scope: nothing can escape being turned into communication for the analyst to appropriate, interrogate and reconstruct. The result is a compulsory dialogue in which the analyst arrogates a power that not even the police dare (openly, at any rate) to claim. In this dialogic frogmarch, invaded subjects are refused the option of not speaking. Worse, they are even made to speak unawares, in contexts where they could reasonably believe that they were doing something else entirely. For semiotics, a cigar is never just a cigar. (337–8)

In this horrific vision, semiotics is both insatiable rapist and oppressive thought police. No person and no place is safe from its surveillance and, unlike the police verbal, semiotics never fails to get a confession. The climactic indignity, it seems, is that a person can't even have a smoke in peace without semiotics telling you what it is that you're really doing. Moreover this is an insider's parody, as shown by the allusions to Foucault ('panoptic[on]') and Eco ('cigar' for 'pipe'). Wolfe knows whereof he speaks.

Such is the passion and desperation of this passage that we fear that Wolfe really feels this irrational terror in the company of semioticians. To give the technical psychological term, he is a semiophobe, which is quite compatible with being a latent semiotician. He is personally defending himself from his own semiotic dark self, as well as defending history from an invasion by aliens: semioticians as body-snatchers. Sadly, in his sickness he will doubtless read the present caring and compassionate diagnosis as further proof that semioticians take innocent denunciations and turn them into signs and symptoms. In the next scene in this nightmare he will be taken away and incarcerated in a Home for Historians, inhabited by sane historians who have been certified by crazed but all-powerful semioticians who confiscate their cigars.

So once again we hasten to reassure him that this whole opposition is misconceived. A good case can be made that semiotics and history have complementary blind spots in their reading strategies: semioticians tend to get too much from reading too few texts, where historians get too little from reading too many. Ways of reading are not mere techniques that can be easily learnt or unlearnt. They are bound up with the ideology of a discipline, part of the construction of an individual identity as historian or semiotician. But the boundaries around two adjacent areas such as history and semiotics can be transgressed, as many interdisciplinary forays have shown, without jeopardizing the integrity and permanence of the two established disciplines. Semioticians and historians must be able to work together on topics of common interest, to their mutual benefit. In the 1990s this is surely a benign and uncontroversial proposal, if still a Utopian one.

But Wolfe's concern is with one specific enterprise: where Aborigines become the objects of the academic gaze. Where his caricature of semiotics would not matter too much (except to historians) if the only people threatened by its imperialist gaze were historians, it is different if this supremely invasive discipline is let loose on Aboriginal people. That is the burden of his concern, and it is by no means an unimportant issue.

Wolfe uses two strong words for our approach: 'invade' and 'assimilationist'. These words refer to two disgraceful phases in European-Aboriginal relationships in Australian history. Wolfe takes these metaphors seriously, as accurate labels for the politics of our approach, to connect our work with practices that we deplore as much as he does, as he acknowledges. As historians we have one problem with this tactic. 'Assimilation' in this context refers to a historically specific phase in Australian government policies towards

Aboriginal people. The word was a euphemism for various genocidal practices, including the abduction of children and large-scale deprivation of rights. The word is highly emotive. Its strong connotations include blatant hypocrisy and fundamental hostility to Aboriginal people. We don't feel it is useful to use it indiscriminately to condemn *all* projects that envisage some kind of co-existence or co-operation between Aborigines and non-Aboriginal Australia. Used in this broad-brush way it applies also to Wolfe's most valuable work. His own labours to set up Aboriginal Studies at Melbourne University could equally be labelled 'assimilationist' if we wanted to score points, but we believe too much in the value and difficulty of what he is doing to use this tactic against him.

As semioticians we have a different response. Semiotics isn't in fact a monolithic enterprise devoted to getting illicit confessions from innocent texts. This may have been half true of an early phase of semiotics, which we would call euphoric semiotics, typified especially by the early Barthes and to a lesser extent by Lévi-Strauss in the 1950s and 1960s. The dominant form of semiotics now is post-structuralist. In different ways the work of such figures as Derrida, Kristeva, Foucault and Said has exposed the politics of textuality to the analytic gaze, problematizing the acts of reading and writing so thoroughly that there is no longer a place outside textuality and outside politics that can guarantee the innocence of any act of writing. From this point of view we may query the terms Wolfe has used, but we cannot claim to be unaware or innocent of the basic charge. Our book struggles with a contradiction so intrinsic that we could not have hoped to transcend it. Thus far, Wolfe is right. But our choice was not between innocence or guilt. It was between the guilt of writing or the guilt of silence. Guilt is not optional: it comes with the territory.

As we survey the field of academic production on 'Aboriginal studies', we do not note an excess of works by semioticians. The short list of significant books would include work by Muecke and Clunies Ross, and Mudrooroo's important book. The investment by historians is far more substantial, starting with the monumental work of Rowley, including fine books by Broome, Reynolds, Haebich and Evans. There is a journal called *Aboriginal History*, but no equivalent journal in Aboriginal semiotics. Where Wolfe worries about the invasion of the semioticians, we worry about their indifference to this topic.

Wolfe proposes an 'epistemological no-go zone'. There is a trace of asymmetry about this injunction: it's apparently aimed at semioticians and their like, but has an addition in small print: '(but

historians are OK). Even so, we respect its intent. 'Speak when you're spoken to', Wolfe commands, with a brutal authority he has acquired from some unstated source. But there are still some problems with implementing this directive. How big is this no-go zone? Where are its boundaries? What are the rules for admission (given that some non-Aborigines, i.e. some historians, are to be admitted) and who is to administer them? It might seem obvious that Aborigines alone should do so, but in this case we see that Wolfe, a historian but not an Aborigine, can take it upon himself to tell us to clear off and not come back. Perhaps he's right, and we should depart without waiting to ask the views of any Aborigines. If this no-go zone is absolute, it can be policed by enthusiastic non-Aborigines without further input from Aboriginal people. That is precisely the danger of such an absolute proposal.

As an instance of the value of a more co-operative attitude between semiotics and history, we'll take the example of the fine article 'Nothing has Changed' by Koori historian Tony Birch in the same issue of *Meanjin*. This article was an intervention in a contested history, focused on a disputed act of naming in the Gariwerd/Grampians mountains. As such it drew on historians (Bruce Scates and Rae Frances, Manning Clark, Chilla Bulbeck, M. Christie) and semioticians (Graeme Turner, Paul Carter, Steve Mickler, James Clifford, J. B. Hartley) to support a Koori argument about the significance of places, and Koori rights to interpret their own landscape, their own culture and history. Some of these academics may be unwilling allies (Carter in his article in the same issue could be read as hostile to the Koori campaign in this instance), but they have been used nevertheless. In Birch's article, Koori voices are not silenced by these supportive non-Aboriginal voices, and other voices – bigoted whites from the district – are also allowed or made to speak, so that the living reality of prejudice is entered on the record. This polyphony, managed by Birch, does not negate Kooris' speaking rights. On the contrary, it is an essential condition for them to be effective.

This brings out the biggest problem with Wolfe's 'no-go zone' proposal: only academics sympathetic to Aboriginal interests will respect it. As a gesture of purity it is impeccable, but as a tactic it's suspiciously like an own goal. If it were really possible to create a total silence among all others, in which only Aboriginal voices could speak, then the struggle would be over and there would be no need for the ban. Outside academia if not within it, Birch shows that the dominant construction of Aborigines and history is still racist, perpetuating into the present the consequences of the inva-

sion and the subsequent discriminatory policies. Koori people need allies. But Birch goes on to make a point that reinforces Wolfe's argument. The original proposal to rename the district did not call on local Kooris for their knowledge and views. The motives for the name change included a wish to package Aboriginality as touristic commodity, and the government's apparently pro-Aboriginal stance did not involve respect for the views or involvement of Aboriginal people whose history and country this was. Wolfe's criticism of the omnipresent pseudo-dialogue of Aboriginalism is still very pertinent: we make the same point ourselves many times (see for example pp. 37, 40-1, 78-9).

Our 'reply' should perhaps close on this note of almost total agreement with Wolfe. We are acutely aware of the contradiction at the core of our enterprise. This contradiction is not just a lapse of attention on our part, a gross example of academic bad faith. Nor is Wolfe's injunction irrelevant to us as a guideline for our practice. His criticism raises issues that need to be debated again and again, in case anyone supposes that there is an easy solution to the dilemma. In our book we tried to be as scrupulous as we could, while still taking the risk of speech.

No doubt we have sometimes lapsed, though Wolfe doesn't point out any individual instances (perhaps held back by a sudden attack of courtesy or compassion). But academics in Australia (like Wolfe and ourselves) have a role as public intellectuals. Given White Australia's record, past and present, in its treatment of Aboriginal people, too many still remain silent, leaving the majority view uncontested. We hope that our book, for all its contradictions, will help to make space on one part of the curriculum, the 'English' syllabus, for more Aboriginal texts and Aboriginal voices in schools and universities. That is not at all to discount the need to make the same kinds of space elsewhere in the curriculum, including history and social studies. If Aboriginal people tell us that it is having the opposite effect, we would agree that Wolfe is right, and that our book should never have been written.