



**VICTORIA UNIVERSITY**  
MELBOURNE AUSTRALIA

*A Forgotten Picture: Race, Photographs and Cathy Freeman at the Northcote Koori Mural*

This is the Accepted version of the following publication

Osmond, Gary and Klugman, Matthew (2019) A Forgotten Picture: Race, Photographs and Cathy Freeman at the Northcote Koori Mural. *Journal of Australian Studies*, 43 (2). pp. 203-217. ISSN 1444-3058

The publisher's official version can be found at  
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14443058.2019.1581247>  
Note that access to this version may require subscription.

Downloaded from VU Research Repository <https://vuir.vu.edu.au/39123/>

## A Forgotten Picture: Race, Photographs, and Cathy Freeman at the Northcote Koori Mural

Visual images have played a key role in the history of Australia's troubled race relations. As Jane Lydon has detailed, images of Aboriginal Australians and Torres Strait Islanders have been not only a key route by which non-Indigenous Australians have come to believe they know Indigenous Australians, but also a powerful site of intervention, protest and resistance by Indigenous Australians.<sup>1</sup> The power of these images as a site of engagement, negotiation and struggle has depended on their circulation and reproduction – images typically need to be seen, often over and over again, in order to have a significant impact. It is a simple point, but one that is often taken for granted in the study of photographs and other visual images. It leads to the question of why certain images have become renowned, celebrated or decried, while others that appear equally (or more) deserving have not. This paper is concerned with one such image – of Australian athlete Cathy Freeman – that seems to have had little impact and was quickly forgotten, despite appearing on the front page of Melbourne's most-read newspaper, the tabloid *Herald Sun*, in 1994, a time of intense debate around Australia's race-relations.

Sport has been another key site through which non-Indigenous Australians have come to believe they know Indigenous Australians. Many Indigenous athletes have been loved and celebrated, while some have been derided.<sup>2</sup> The visual realm has become increasingly central

---

<sup>1</sup> Jane Lydon, *The Flash of Recognition: Photography and the Emergence of Indigenous Rights* (Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2012), 16. See also, Jane Lydon, ed., *Calling the Shots: Aboriginal Photographies* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> And a number have been loved, celebrated, *and* derided, such as Adam Goodes. See Colin Tatz, *Obstacle Race: Aborigines in Sport* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press,

to this. Spectators have gazed at athletes since watching sports began to be a part of popular culture in the late 1800s, but the shift in power from print media to television greatly increased the number of those gazing at the visual spectacle of sport, while the print media that survived increasingly prioritised illustrations and photographs.

As a high-profile Aboriginal athlete, Freeman was part of a group of Indigenous Australians who were continually photographed and filmed. Indeed, her success at two of the marquee events of international track and field competitions – the 200m and 400m races – has led to an array of striking and well-known images of Freeman. In particular, public memories of Freeman are visually framed by iconic photographs taken in 1994 and 2000. Images of the 21-year-old in 1994, draped in the Aboriginal and Australian flags during victory laps following her wins in both the 200m and 400m track events at the Commonwealth Games in Victoria, Canada, are famous, as are pictures of Freeman lighting the cauldron and on the track following her 400m win at the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games.

The moments captured in these photographs have been scrutinised by both journalists and scholars, with both groups focusing largely on their impacts.<sup>3</sup> On how, between 1994 and 2000, Freeman “became an iconic sporting and cultural ambassador for her country”.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, while Freeman’s actions at the Commonwealth Games in 1994 generated some controversy, the 1994 and 2000 images have come to symbolise national

---

1995); and Sean Gorman, *Legends: The AFL Indigenous Team of the Century* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Toni Bruce and Christopher Hallinan, “Cathy Freeman: The quest for Australian identity,” in *Sport Stars: The Cultural Politics of Sporting Celebrity*, ed. D. L. Andrews and S. J. Jackson (London, Routledge, 2001), 257-70.

<sup>4</sup> Leanne White, “One Athlete, One Nation, Two Flags: Cathy Freeman and Australia's Search for Aboriginal Reconciliation,” *Sporting Traditions* 25, no. 2 (2008): 1.

reconciliation. Comments made by the press at the time – “Cathy’s uniting double” in 1994<sup>5</sup> and Freeman “brings the nation together” in 2000<sup>6</sup> – have been echoed in subsequent scholarly analyses that construct Freeman as the “embodiment of reconciliation”.<sup>7</sup> These celebratory accounts of the 1994 Commonwealth Games flag incidents have obscured their political formation.<sup>8</sup> For example, commentators have called the flag laps of honour “spontaneous”, which ignores the question of where Freeman found the flag with which she ran and denies her autonomy and motivations.<sup>9</sup> Others acknowledge Freeman’s previous declarations of pride in her Aboriginal heritage, but the links between this pride and her 1994 actions have not been fully explored.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> *Sun-Herald* (Sydney), 28 August 1994, 1.

<sup>6</sup> *Herald Sun* (Melbourne), 5 October 2000, 4, cited in Mele-Ane Havea, “The Need for Critical Reflection on Media Representations of Aboriginal Women,” *Journal of Australian Indigenous Issues* 5, no. 1 (March 2002): 19.

<sup>7</sup> Bruce and Hallinan, “Cathy Freeman”, 261.

<sup>8</sup> For analyses of the political background of Freeman’s appearance at the 2000 Olympic Games, see: White, “One Athlete, One Nation, Two Flags”; Leanne White, “Cathy Freeman and Australia’s Indigenous Heritage: A New Beginning for an Old Nation at the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games,” *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 19, no. 2 (2013): 153-70; Bruce and Hallinan, “Cathy Freeman”.

<sup>9</sup> George Morgan, “Aboriginal Protest and the Sydney Olympic Games,” *OLYMPIKA: The International Journal of Olympic Studies* XII (2003): 33. Other examples include: *Herald Sun*, 26 August 1994 (City edition), 3 – “[Freeman] show[ed] in a very spontaneous ... way her great pride in being an Australian”; *Sun-Herald*, 28 August 1994, 1 – “In a spontaneous display of racial unity”; *Koori Mail*, 7 September 1994, 20 – “a spontaneous act”. Freeman quite intentionally packed an Aboriginal flag before leaving for Europe in 1994, and her then partner Nick Bideau later said “he knew then that she would win”: Caroline Wilson, *Age*, 11 September 1994, Agenda, 2; see also *Herald Sun*, 25 August 1994 (City edition), 3.

<sup>10</sup> John Camplin, “Our Cathy: The Pride of her Family, her Town and her Nation”, *Sun-Herald*, 28 August 1994, 63.

The images for which Freeman is famous, therefore, contrast with other iconic pictures of sport, race, pride, and protest. The most universally famous of these – the Black Power salute of Tommie Smith, John Carlos and Peter Norman on the medal dais at the Mexico City Olympic Games in 1968 – was carefully coordinated to maximise media exposure.<sup>11</sup> Others were almost accidental, like Australia’s most prominent image of sport and race: the picture of the Aboriginal Australian rules footballer Nicky Winmar lifting his jersey and pointing to his chest in a gesture of racial pride and defiance to a baying crowd in 1993.<sup>12</sup> And there are still other potentially iconic images which have been neglected – either unknown, or yet to be analysed, or yet to be deemed significant. Indeed, Wayne Ludbey, one of the photographers of the Winmar image, has become so aware of the precariousness and luck involved in capturing such a symbolic sporting moment that he is “haunted by the possibility that other such moments may have gotten away”.<sup>13</sup>

This article focuses on a moment which did not get away from Ludbey but which, despite its striking quality and highly symbolic possibilities of pride and protest among other themes, did not generate a substantial reaction and was quickly forgotten. We are interested here in a photograph of Freeman that has so far failed to become iconic. It raises questions of what is forgotten as well as what is remembered, and something of the conditions that enable events and images to be remembered. The image sheds light on iconic photographs

---

<sup>11</sup> Amy Bass, *Not the Triumph but the Struggle: The 1968 Olympics and the Making of the Black Athlete* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); Gary Osmond, “Photographs, Materiality and Sport History: Peter Norman and the 1968 Mexico City Black Power Salute,” *Journal of Sport History* 37, no. 1 (2010): 119-37.

<sup>12</sup> Matthew Klugman and Gary Osmond, *Black and Proud: The Story of an Iconic AFL Photo* (Sydney: NewSouth, 2013).

<sup>13</sup> Wayne Ludbey, interview with authors, 17 November 2008.

as well as those that never became so and, in the process, highlights the politics of the past and its remembrance or elision. It also raises questions about the role of gender both in narratives of Australian reconciliation and in the iconography of race, sport, and protest.

### **Creating the Photograph**

The photograph was taken in late June 1994, shortly before Freeman left Australia for Europe to finalise her preparations for the Commonwealth Games in Canada. Ludbey had met Freeman earlier when her then personal partner and manager Nick Bideau had organised for her to be featured as part of a health and fitness campaign coordinated by the *Herald Sun* in Melbourne.<sup>14</sup> Those seemingly carefree photos were taken by the foreshore at Elwood beach of a young Aboriginal athlete who was becoming a household name.

Freeman's journey to national prominence had begun in 1990 when, as a 16-year-old, she was part of the gold-medal winning 4 x 100m relay team at the Auckland Commonwealth Games, and was subsequently named the Young Australian of the Year.<sup>15</sup> Two years later, Freeman won a silver medal in the 200m at the World Junior Championships in Seoul and represented Australia in the Barcelona Olympic Games, making the second round of the 400m. By 1994 there were high expectations that the now 21-year-old would challenge for gold in the prestigious 200m and 400m races. Public interest, and investment, in Freeman was the highest it had been.

Before leaving for Europe to complete her preparations for the 1994 Commonwealth Games, Freeman filmed three commercials and conducted numerous interviews and

---

<sup>14</sup> Wayne Ludbey, interview with authors, 17 November 2008.

<sup>15</sup> *Sunday Mail* (Brisbane), 27 January 1991, 1.

associated photo shoots.<sup>16</sup> The attention was starting to “wear thin” on Freeman and she looked forward to being overseas where she was “a small fish in a big ocean”.<sup>17</sup> Yet when Ludbey raised the idea of another photo shoot just prior to her departure, Freeman agreed. Freeman was renowned for valuing her privacy and she did not tend to initiate contact with those in the media. But she knew Ludbey had captured the iconic image of Winmar, and Bideau told Ludbey that she also liked and trusted him after the previous photo shoot in Elwood.<sup>18</sup> And it soon became clear that Freeman had in mind a particular image that, unlike last time, would be anything but carefree.

Freeman had Ludbey drive her to the Northcote Koori Mural in Melbourne’s inner north, directing him to take a photograph of her as she ran past a large mural of two male Aboriginal elders in chains.<sup>19</sup> The compelling mural image was based on a photograph taken by German anthropologist Hermann Klaatsch in 1906 in Wyndham, in Western Australia’s Kimberley region, and circulated widely in Europe at the time as evidence of maltreatment of Aboriginal people.<sup>20</sup> This image of the elders was part of a larger mural that had been

---

<sup>16</sup> Some examples include Len Johnson, “Freeman Looks for an Even Bigger Lift,” *Age*, 18 May 1994, 40; a question about Freeman as part of the *Sydney Morning Herald*’s ‘Holiday Trivia Quiz’, 25 April 1995, 7; and an interview of Freeman by Mary Kostakidis on SBS’s ‘The Talk Show’ on April 18.

<sup>17</sup> “An Athlete’s Fighting Spirit Takes Flight,” *Herald Sun*, 24 June 1994, 1.

<sup>18</sup> Wayne Ludbey, interview with authors, 10 September 2012.

<sup>19</sup> Wayne Ludbey, interview with authors, 10 September 2012.

<sup>20</sup> Lydon, *The Flash of Recognition*, 53-54. It was an example of the way the horrific treatment of Indigenous Australians tended to be discussed more overseas than in mainstream Australia. For a personalised account of one Australian’s experience of this, see Henry Reynolds, *Why Weren’t We Told: A Personal Search for the Truth about Our History* (Melbourne: Penguin, 1999), 23.

researched, designed and painted by artist Megan Evans in 1983 in collaboration with members of the locally based Aborigines Advancement League. In its entirety, it “depicts various aspects of Victorian Aboriginal history including white invasion, dispossession and oppression of Victorian Aboriginal people, and the history of the Land Rights movement”.<sup>21</sup> Originally situated opposite the Northcote Town Hall, it was relocated in 1988 to the site of the Aborigines Advancement League in Thornbury.<sup>22</sup>

Lydon calls the mural image of enchained men “a pan-Aboriginal symbol of injustice and identity”.<sup>23</sup> The motif of shackled Aboriginal prisoners has been used repeatedly in various media as a “significant way of remembering the colonial past”, and “as graphic evidence that colonisation’s impact was cruel and unequivocal”.<sup>24</sup> It was no accident that Freeman chose this backdrop for her photograph. It was the largest and best-known Koori image in Melbourne, prominently visible to passing cars and trams along St George’s Road. And it was a powerful testament to a history that even in 1994, as debate grew about Indigenous land rights, was still rarely discussed in Australia.<sup>25</sup> Freeman was aware of its

---

<sup>21</sup> Victorian Heritage Database, “Sir Douglas Nicholls Reserve & Aborigines Advancement League” <http://vhd.heritagecouncil.vic.gov.au/places/26690/download-report> 26 July 2017 (accessed 26 July 2017).

<sup>22</sup> In 2013, the mural was replaced by a digital replica following outcries over its deterioration: Julia Irwin, “Thornbury’s famed Koori mural returns in digital form”, *Northcote Leader*, 17 December 2013, <http://www.heraldsun.com.au/leader/north/thornburys-famed-koori-mural-returns-in-digital-form/news-story/5aaec20272a7aac3b91edca5b33b08ee> (accessed 26 July 2017).

<sup>23</sup> Lydon, *The Flash of Recognition*, 13.

<sup>24</sup> Lydon, *The Flash of Recognition*, 13.

<sup>25</sup> For more on the debates about Indigenous land rights in the early 1990s, see: Bain Attwood, ed., *In the Age of Mabo: History, Aborigines, and Australia* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1996); and Henry Reynolds, *The Law of the Land*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Melbourne: Penguin, 2003), 205-44.



power, and of her own emerging influence, and made clear that she, like all Australians, was still linked to this past.

The result was a compelling, stunning photograph (Figure 1). We were amazed by its symbolic heft when we saw the version posted by Ludbey on Twitter in 2013.<sup>26</sup> But the image was even more striking when it was placed on the front cover of the *Herald Sun* on Friday, 24 June 1994, two days after the Australian team for the 1994 Commonwealth Games had been announced, and two months before Freeman's first victory lap with the Koori flag after winning the 400m at the games in Victoria, Canada.<sup>27</sup>

*Insert Figure 1 here*

Ludbey's photograph depicts Freeman running in front of the mural. She is dwarfed by the two elders in chains, who appear to gaze down upon her with sad expressions. She is running away from them towards a third, large figure, an animated Aboriginal warrior holding a curved wooden club. Various symbolic readings are possible. Most simply, it contrasts past injustices with present potential. More deeply, Freeman's action can be read as symbolising a fleet-footed return of Aboriginal Australians from subservience to strength, from defeat to victory, from humiliation to pride. Alternatively, perhaps, the past overwhelms the present in

---

<sup>26</sup> Wayne Ludbey @WLudbey  
<https://twitter.com/wludbey/status/364742829433569280> posted 6 August 2013 (accessed 23 January 2017).

<sup>27</sup> *Herald Sun*, 26 June 1994, 84. Freeman raced the 400m on 23 August 1994 and the 200m on 27 August 1994. Australian sprinter Melinda Gainsford and Freeman, both draped in the Australian and Aboriginal flags, posed together for a photo after the 200m: Scott Gullan, *Cathy: Her Own Story* (Melbourne: Viking, 2003), 81; *Sun-Herald*, 28 August 1994, 1.

this picture, with Freeman visually diminished by the towering, enslaved men. The image also confronts non-Indigenous readers with a cherished athlete, who was the site of national hopes and dreams of glory, juxtaposed against a vision of a past that had long been repressed, silenced, and elided in the narratives of Australia.

What would the *Herald Sun* do with such an arresting, confronting photograph? In the preceding year, the newspaper had been one of the key disseminators of conservative reactions to the Australian High Court's "Mabo" decision, which had overturned the notion of *terra nullius*, many of which disparaged the culture and history of Indigenous Australians.<sup>28</sup> Yet the *Herald Sun* was also invested deeply in the coverage of sport, and had frequently celebrated Freeman's achievements. The *Sunday Herald-Sun* had also published a large image of Winmar pointing in pride and protest at his black skin in April 1993, although the newspaper subsequently ignored the controversy generated by the image for the next few weeks.<sup>29</sup>

Faced with the dilemma of such a powerful, political photograph of an increasingly treasured sportswoman, the editors chose to publish the picture on the cover of the two morning editions of the paper, with the common headline: "An athlete's fighting spirit takes flight". But the captions worked to try and erase the power of the image. The caption for the Early edition read: "Cathy Freeman runs past a giant mural in Northcote reflecting a social and political image of Aboriginals". The horror of the image – its testimony to acts of brutal cruelty

---

<sup>28</sup> Andrew Markus, "Between Mabo and a Hard Place: Race and the Contradictions of Conservatism," in *In the Age of Mabo: History, Aborigines, and Australia*, ed. Bain Attwood (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1996), 88-99.

<sup>29</sup> Matthew Klugman and Gary Osmond, "That Picture — Nicky Winmar and the History of an Image," *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, no. 2 (2009): 80-91.

– was reduced to the vagueness of the words “social” and “political”. The City edition, which was published later that morning, managed to say even less about the image: “Cathy Freeman, bound for the Commonwealth Games, runs past a giant Aboriginal mural in Thornbury”.<sup>30</sup> A small article accompanied each image, credited in the City edition to Nick Bideau, who was an athletics reporter for the paper as well as Freeman’s manager and personal partner.

Both versions of the article noted that Freeman “gained inspiration” from the mural. The Early edition argued that Freeman “gained inspiration from a giant wall mural reflecting the social and political image of her people today”. While the caption on the image in the City edition avoided any overtly political translation, the text of the accompanying article argued that she gained inspiration as she flashed past a giant mural “reflecting traditional, transitional, and contemporary Aboriginal history”. Citing Freeman directly, it also acknowledged that she would be “representing two things dear to her heart” at the Games – “Australia and her Aboriginal culture”:

While I’m away I’m proud to be able to represent my people as well as my country ...  
I’m often asked questions by foreign athletes who know little about Aboriginal heritage and it is an ideal opportunity to educate people.

Educating people is one of the tasks that activists typically try to undertake. And it is to Freeman’s activism that we now turn.

---

<sup>30</sup> The photograph did not appear in the PM edition.

## Seen but not Heard – Freeman’s Activism

Freeman’s action can be seen within the longer history of Indigenous protest but also as part of the 1990’s moment in the politics of reconciliation and Indigenous performance that culminated in a symbolic “People’s Walk for Reconciliation” in 2000 during which over 300,000 Indigenous and non-Indigenous people walked across the Sydney Harbour Bridge in support of national reconciliation.<sup>31</sup> At a personal level, her consciously political act of choreographing a photo shoot in front of the Northcote mural should not be surprising, especially in hindsight given her flag actions two months later. Yet Freeman’s position as an Aboriginal activist is rarely acknowledged by either the media or scholars.<sup>32</sup> More typical is a press denial of her political interest, engagement and activism surrounding Aboriginal issues, and even a portrayal of Freeman as somebody “needing to be ‘protected’ from a potentially corrupting political discussion”.<sup>33</sup> As Havea has suggested, this is “possibly a reflection of the media’s disinterest or fear of Freeman’s political stance or perhaps a method to silence her”.<sup>34</sup>

Prominent narratives around Freeman often positioned her as innocent or vague or even naïve. Press reports in the 1990s brimmed with such descriptions – she was supposedly

---

<sup>31</sup> Penelope Edmonds, “‘Walking Together’ for Reconciliation: From the Sydney Harbour Bridge Walk to the Myall Creek Massacre Commemorations,” in *Settler Colonialism and (Re)conciliation Frontier Violence, Affective Performances, and Imaginative Refoundings*, P. Edmonds (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 90-125.

<sup>32</sup> Rare exceptions include Bruce and Hallinan, “Cathy Freeman”, 262; Caroline Overington, “Cathy the Great,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 August 1997, 32: Freeman was a “very rare beast: a political activist who, without speaking, brings forth debate on serious issues...”.

<sup>33</sup> Havea, “The Need for Critical Reflection on Media Representations of Aboriginal Women”: 17.

<sup>34</sup> Havea, “The Need for Critical Reflection on Media Representations of Aboriginal Women”: 16.

a “compulsive giggler”<sup>35</sup>; looked “like an abandoned kitten”<sup>36</sup>; and at another time was “skipping ... like an excited and impatient schoolgirl”.<sup>37</sup> Through a gender lens these discourses of trivialisation and infantilisation follow familiar tropes of “symbolic annihilation” of women by mass media, as argued by Tuchman, but a racial lens can also intersect with this gender prism to further contextualise these descriptions.<sup>38</sup> As with tennis champion Evonne Goolagong, who thirty years before was patronised by both “sexist and racist” newspaper descriptions, Freeman’s press treatment was informed by both race and gender.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, John Maynard links Freeman and Goolagong as subjects of unfair criticism and misinterpretation because of their status as successful female Aboriginal athletes.<sup>40</sup>

While press descriptions disempowered Freeman on multiple levels, politically she was neither innocent, vague nor naïve, but acutely aware of gender, race, Aboriginality and her position as a role model for Indigenous Australians. Moreover, Freeman frequently told journalists, she was aware of racism through direct experience, including acts of violence and

---

<sup>35</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 April 1990, 47. For other references to giggling, see: *Sunday Mail*, 27 January 1991, 1; Wayne Smith, “Born Free”, *Courier Mail*, Weekend section, 2 March 1996, 1.

<sup>36</sup> *Australian*, 12 March 1995, n.p.

<sup>37</sup> *Australian*, 31 July 1996, p. 1.

<sup>38</sup> Gaye Tuchman, “The Symbolic Annihilation of Women by the Mass Media,” in *Culture and Politics: A Reader*, eds L. Crothers and C. Lockhart (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 150–74.

<sup>39</sup> Marion K. Stell, *Half the Race: A History of Australian Women in Sport* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1991), 237; Bruce and Hallinan, “Cathy Freeman”, 264.

<sup>40</sup> John Maynard, “Contested Space – the Australian Aboriginal Sporting Arena,” *Sport in Society* 15, no. 7 (2012): 991.

assault. Yet some newspaper profiles contained clear evidence of Freeman's awareness of such matters while still positioning her as a simple-minded, young Aboriginal woman. In 1996 for example, Wayne Smith wrote in the *Courier Mail* that Freeman was "So impressionable" that "she tends to take her lead from the last person she happened to speak to".<sup>41</sup> Yet the same feature story included Freeman discussing specific encounters with racism: how as a child transiting through Melbourne after the Australian primary school championships she was hit while sleeping on a seat at Flinders Street train station by two white women who "weren't prepared to let some layabout black girl deny them"; and how, on another occasion, she was chased away from a flower stall at a Sydney market because "an Aboriginal girl loitering in front of the stalls was deemed bad for business".<sup>42</sup> In other profiles from 1996, Freeman spoke of how, after moving to Melbourne from Mackay in 1991 as an unknown athlete for training, she was "pointedly ignored at shop counters, insulted sotto voce by passers-by".<sup>43</sup> And Freeman also noted that while employed by Australia Post in Melbourne as part of the Olympic Jobs Program, prior to the 1994 Commonwealth Games, she "noticed that some patrons favour white attendants while others have avoided her in lifts".<sup>44</sup> Reflecting on these incidents, Freeman asserted: "I'm not paranoid. I can smell it [racism] a mile away".<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup> Smith, "Born Free", 4.

<sup>42</sup> Smith, "Born Free", 1. See also Adrian McGregor, *Cathy Freeman: A Journey Just Begun* (Sydney: Random House, 2000), 36-37.

<sup>43</sup> Adrian McGregor, *Australian*, Features section, 2-3 November 1996, n.p. ("Cathy Freeman biographical cuttings file", National Library of Australia).

<sup>44</sup> Caroline Wilson, *Age*, 11 September 1994, Agenda, 2.

<sup>45</sup> Adrian McGregor, "Catherine the Great?", *Sydney Morning Herald*, Good Weekend, 6 March 1993, 50.

As a child in Mackay, Freeman “felt bad about being black”, but as she grew she did not let racism stop her from taking pride in her Aboriginality.<sup>46</sup> Her parents were of Aboriginal descent, her mother from Palm Island and father from Woorabinda, both of which were Queensland Aboriginal Settlements controlled under the State’s “protection” acts. Both sides of her family had produced celebrated athletes: her paternal grandfather, Frank Fisher, was an accomplished rugby league player from Cherbourg; her father Norman Freeman was a gifted footballer in Queensland; and her maternal grandfather, George Sibley, was a noted boxer.<sup>47</sup> Her maternal “nana”, Alice Sibley, shared Aboriginal lore with the young Cathy. And Freeman had strong connections with both her Palm Island and Woorabinda families, and in Mackay, where she grew up, gathering regularly with her large extended family.<sup>48</sup>

Freeman’s pride in her heritage and her prowess as an athlete helped make a success of the first sponsorship she received, which was from the Aboriginal clothing company, Balarinji Design Studio in 1990.<sup>49</sup> Founded in 1983 by John Moriarty – a Yanyuwa man who was, among many other things, the first Indigenous Australian to be selected to represent Australia at soccer – and his partner Rose Moriarty, Balarinji was commissioned by Qantas for the “Wunala Dreaming” livery in 1994.<sup>50</sup> The brand later became renowned for the

---

<sup>46</sup> McGregor, *Cathy Freeman*, 41.

<sup>47</sup> McGregor, *Cathy Freeman*, 18 (Sibley); 8-14 (Frank Fisher and Norman Freeman). For Fisher, see also: Paul Connolly, “The forgotten story of...Frank Fisher,” *Guardian*, 19 September 2013 [www.theguardian.com/sport/blog/2013/sep/19/forgotton-story-frank-fisher](http://www.theguardian.com/sport/blog/2013/sep/19/forgotton-story-frank-fisher) (accessed 29 January 2018).

<sup>48</sup> Camplin, “Our Cathy”; Helen Chryssides, *Local Heroes* (Melbourne: Collins Dove, 1993), 78 (“Catherine Freeman – Sprinter”, pp. 55-80); McGregor, *Cathy Freeman*, 8-42.

<sup>49</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 September 1996, 7.

<sup>50</sup> John Moriarty with Evan McHugh, *Saltwater Fella* (Melbourne: Viking, 2000), 239-78.

illuminated Indigenous design on the Sydney Opera House during the Rio de Janeiro 2016 Summer Olympics, but in the early 1990s it was less well known. Photographs of Freeman in Australian newspapers often helped promote the brand, for she was pictured frequently wearing running outfits designed by the company featuring Aboriginal dot-painting motifs.<sup>51</sup>

Moreover, in the early 1990s Freeman also wore wrist- and head-bands in the colours of the Aboriginal flag to athletic meets. Her mother explained that she had been inspired by meeting American running champion Florence Griffith Joyner in California in the 1980s: “Since then Catherine has wanted to be a role model for Aborigines, like Flo Jo [Joyner] is to American blacks. To show that Aborigines can make their mark if they strive”.<sup>52</sup> The gesture was symbolic, designed to be noticed by Aboriginal viewers and often missed by the press. Freeman’s nana, Alice Sibley, noted in 1994 that she “always wears a band in Aboriginal colours on her wrist or in her hair, but no-one seems to have noticed that. That’s her way of saying, ‘I’m Aboriginal and I’m proud of it’”.<sup>53</sup>

Freeman’s willingness to politically engage in public ways deepened by 1994. In 1990, at the Auckland Commonwealth Games, she reportedly wore her Aboriginal band on her wrist rather than around her forehead to avoid provocation.<sup>54</sup> By 1993, however, Freeman was studying Aboriginal culture and reading books like Sally Morgan’s *My Place*, and imagining

---

<sup>51</sup> Examples from 1993 included the pictures associated with Adrian McGregor, “Catherine the Great?”, 46–47; and *Courier-Mail*, 1 February 1993, 29. See also: Gullan, *Cathy*, 60; White, “One Athlete, One Nation, Two Flags”, 13.

<sup>52</sup> Kate Collins, “The Fabulous Freemans,” *Sunday Mail* (Brisbane), 18 February 1990, 8.

<sup>53</sup> Camplin, “Our Cathy”, 63.

<sup>54</sup> Kate Collins, “The Fabulous Freemans”, 8.



making a personal dramatic stand.<sup>55</sup> Interviewed on the ABC-TV program “Black Out” that year, she revealed that she had had a “vision of doing a victory lap at an Olympic Games, wrapped in the Aboriginal flag”.<sup>56</sup>

In early 1994, Freeman directly intervened in matters of race and sport, writing a letter to the *Herald Sun* berating the Australian Football League for not featuring Aboriginal players in their advertisements. “Why is it that the AFL’s new television commercial features overseas black sportstars, Carl Lewis, Ian Wright, Evander Holyfield, yet does not use any Australian blacks, such as [Nicky] Winmar, [Chris] Lewis, [Gilbert] McAdam, [Michael] Long and [Gavin] Wanganeen, who are some of the game’s most exciting players,” she wrote. “Could it be that the AFL is not as proud of its Aboriginal players ...?”.<sup>57</sup> Her intervention coaxed the irritated AFL Chief Executive, Ross Oakley to a written reply in which he attempted to justify the exclusion of Aboriginal players from one version of its TV commercial by claiming that the “best action available – not the color of the participants” dictated the choice of featured players.<sup>58</sup>

Perhaps then, Freeman had been waiting for the right moment in which to make a major statement about Australia’s past racial horrors and the way these continued to shape the present. The Northcote mural provided her with the opportunity, and an ideal backdrop for her statement. She was also working with a photographer whom she trusted, rather than

---

<sup>55</sup> Adrian McGregor, “Catherine the Great?”, 51.

<sup>56</sup> *Australian*, 12 March 1995, n.p.

<sup>57</sup> *Herald Sun*, 21 April 1994, 18.

<sup>58</sup> *Herald Sun*, 23 April 1994, 24.

a journalist likely to try and dumb her down. Still, the stunning image they created was somehow quickly forgotten.

### **Achievements Celebrated, a Confronting Picture Forgotten**

Even without knowledge of Freeman's growing political awareness and activism, the mural image is dramatic and powerful. Yet despite such an extraordinary front page appearance, the photograph virtually disappeared. No letters to the editor about the photograph were published in the *Herald Sun*, and we could find no other mentions of the photo at the time. Why? Not because of the context. And not because racial issues in Australia and Australian sport had been resolved and were no longer pressing.

Along with the continuing public debates about the Mabo decision, incidents of racism continued to grab national headlines. In early June 1994, for example, just before Freeman left Australia for Europe and the Commonwealth Games, a group of central Australian Aboriginal dancers performing in Germany were evicted from their Berlin hotel because they were "too dark".<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, in Australian sport, racist incidents continued to flare. In the AFL, despite the attention brought to the issue by Winmar's highly publicised on-field stance in 1993, problems persisted. In April 1994, a year after his action, Winmar noted: "You still hear it [racist comments] in the crowd".<sup>60</sup> And in May 1994, Essendon's Che Cockatoo-Collins complained that he had been the victim of racist taunts on-field several times that season.<sup>61</sup>

---

<sup>59</sup> *Herald Sun*, 13 June 1994, 2.

<sup>60</sup> *Sunday Age*, 10 April 1994, 5.

<sup>61</sup> *Age*, 17 May 1994, 7.

The image of Winmar pointing to his skin with pride continued to be reprinted as instances of racism occurred in Australian rules football and other parts of Australian society and culture.<sup>62</sup> In stark contrast, the image of Freeman running underneath a mural of Aboriginal men in chains seems never to have been reprinted by an Australian newspaper.<sup>63</sup> Although extraordinary and compelling in its own right, the Winmar image spoke directly to racism in the present rather than to the horrors of the past. Both were images of protest and pride, and the Winmar photograph played a vital discursive role because it was still very hard for non-Indigenous Australians to discuss contemporary moments of racism. But the Freeman image pointed to a deeply painful past whose horror remained too great (and perhaps too foundational) for most non-Indigenous Australians to deal with.

Even after Freeman won gold medals in Canada and wore the Koori flag with pride, the Northcote image was neither republished nor discussed by the *Herald Sun* or other media outlets. And as the Northcote image disappeared, widespread consciousness of Freeman's political activism failed to materialise. Instead, another narrative developed around Freeman. After she left for Europe, Freeman became, for the first time as an adult, an elite runner. Over three months, she equalled the Australian 200m record in Oslo; set a 400m national record in Monte Carlo, won gold in the 200m and 400m in Victoria; and achieved other milestones, becoming the second-fastest woman in the world over 400m in 1994 and fourth-fastest in the 200m that year.<sup>64</sup> In those few short months, Freeman the up-and-coming athlete became

---

<sup>62</sup> Klugman and Osmond, *Black and Proud*, 215-16.

<sup>63</sup> The only other printed reproduction that we have been able to find is: McGregor, *Cathy Freeman*, facing p. 238.

<sup>64</sup> Ian Cockerill, "Cathy Freeman's Dream Run", *Inside Sport*, February 1995, 20.

Freeman the national superstar. And in that transformation, racial activism was eclipsed by the more palatable discourse of nationalism. This sporting positioning of nationalism over race was not unique to Freeman. Since the assimilation era of Government Aboriginal policy that began after the Second World War, Indigenous athletic success was frequently harnessed to citizenship rather than to Indigeneity.<sup>65</sup>

Freeman's decision to wear the Koori flag upon winning gold in Canada was represented by the media as part of the spontaneous joy of victory, as we noted in our introduction, rather than as a political act, despite a split in public opinion. Of respondents to a national phone-in poll conducted by News Limited, 50.4% felt she had done the wrong thing while 49.6% supported her.<sup>66</sup> *Herald Sun* readers were also divided, yet the editors of the conservative tabloid supported Freeman's actions, framing her victory laps draped in the two flags within the spirit of victory and reconciliation by describing them as paying "tribute to her nationality (Australian flag) and to her heritage (Aboriginal flag)".<sup>67</sup>

The contemporary Australian media denied that Freeman's action was political not only because this ran counter to its apolitical representations of the athlete but also because it conflated political activism with angry demonstrations. Aboriginal protest actions were prominent at the time, including a proposed boycott of the Sydney 2000 Summer Olympic Games, which was discussed on the cover of the *Koori Mail* at the very moment that Freeman

---

<sup>65</sup> Anna Haebich, *Spinning the Dream: Assimilation in Australia 1950-1970* (Freemantle: Freemantle Press, 2006); Murray G. Phillips and Gary Osmond, "Marching for Assimilation: Indigenous Identity, Sport, and Politics," *Australian Journal of Politics & History*, in press (accepted 9 October 2017).

<sup>66</sup> Smith, "Born Free", 1.

<sup>67</sup> *Herald Sun*, 3 September 1994, PM ed., 20.

was running with the flag following the 400m in Canada.<sup>68</sup> Freeman's actions with the flag were not an angry protest, and thus could not be presented easily as political activism.

Freeman's specific actions with the flags also helped deflate perceptions of political protest. After initial criticism for picking up the Aboriginal flag seconds before also taking the Australian standard for her 400m victory lap, Freeman was careful to raise both flags simultaneously following her 200m win.<sup>69</sup> That decision was crucial to readings of the event. The Aboriginal flag was laden with different meanings in 1994, when it was represented as both as a symbol of Aboriginal Australia and as a "protest or land rights flag", than it is today.<sup>70</sup> More significantly, it was not associated with victory. As Jock Given has argued, the flag was most commonly seen "at sites of defiance, conflict or physical squalor".<sup>71</sup> Through her actions in Canada, and via their representation by the media, Freeman helped give new meaning to that "complex cloth" by emphasising its unifying symbolism.<sup>72</sup>

Freeman and her family also downplayed the political intent of her flag actions while simultaneously emphasising what today most readers would understand as a deep political motivation to assert identity, bolster racial pride and develop national awareness. Cecelia Barber, Freeman's mother, for example, claimed that "It was not a political statement" yet, in the same interview, said: "But as I watched her [run with the flag in 1994], it dawned on

---

<sup>68</sup> *Koori Mail*, 24 August 1994, 1.

<sup>69</sup> *Sunday Telegraph* (Sydney), 28 August 1994, 1, 57.

<sup>70</sup> Herb Wharton, "Symbolic Gestures", *Brisbane Review*, 29 September 1994, n.p.

<sup>71</sup> Jock Given, "Red, Black, Gold to Australia: Cathy Freeman & the Flags," *Media Information Australia*, no. 75 (February 1995): 50.

<sup>72</sup> Given, "Red, Black, Gold to Australia," 50.

me that she really feels what I feel ... I mean, she had feelings for what being Aboriginal meant. ... She just knew that Aboriginal people needed someone to give them some sort of incentive to do better".<sup>73</sup> Freeman herself expressed similar thoughts. In 1994 she was quoted on her flag-bearing victory laps in Canada: "I haven't made any political statement. I have made a statement of my heritage".<sup>74</sup> In 1996, she wrote that "I don't feel running around with our flag [Aboriginal] would be making a political statement", but in the same year reflected that "I did it [1994 flag] because I knew how proud it would make a whole race of people".<sup>75</sup>

This self-expressed ambiguity about the constitution of political acts reflects the conflation of racial activism with angry demonstrations common at the time, but also reveals Freeman's tactful stance in negotiating her own public image and the politics of international sport. Faced with controversy over her 1994 flag statement, on the cusp of her athletic fame, it had been made clear that she was not supposed to antagonise non-Indigenous Australians. And while the strident rebuke issued to Freeman by Australia's *chef de mission*, Arthur Tunstall, in 1994 for running with the flag after the 400m and then again in direct contravention of his orders following the 200m was widely criticised by Australians, it highlighted the potential pitfalls of political demonstrations on the sporting field.<sup>76</sup> The International Olympic Committee, for example, banned political actions during the Olympics

---

<sup>73</sup> *Sunday Mail* (Brisbane), 5 May 1996, 7.

<sup>74</sup> *Daily Telegraph Mirror* (Sydney), 25 August 1994, 9 (cited in Given, "Red, Black, Gold to Australia," 51.

<sup>75</sup> Smith, "Born Free", 1.

<sup>76</sup> For newspaper articles on Tunstall's rebuke of Freeman, see, for example: *Newcastle Herald*, 26 August 1994, 1; *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 26 August 1994, 13; *Telegraph Mirror* (Sydney), 25 August 1994, 1, 4-5; *SMH*, 26 August 1994, 4; *Herald Sun*, 25 August 1994 (PM ed.), 1-2.

following the actions of Smith, Carlos and Norman in 1968, and at the Atlanta Summer Olympic Games in 1996 Freeman abstained from flying the Aboriginal flag for fear of similar repercussions.

At the Atlanta Games, Freeman instead wore a pair of Nike running shoes painted in the colours of the Aboriginal flag, but did not wear them after the semi-finals.<sup>77</sup> This was a careful, measured political statement, made in full awareness that running with the flag would be too risky. In her games diary, she wrote: "I'd brought a flag with me, but I knew that the Olympic charter stated that no athlete could participate in anything that could be viewed as a political demonstration or he or she would risk being disqualified. ... I don't feel running around with our flag [Aboriginal] would be making a political statement, but I didn't want to risk anyone else complaining about it (as we know all the fuss it caused back in 1994)".<sup>78</sup> It was not a decision that pleased everyone. The celebrated Aboriginal elder and activist Charles Perkins argued that she should have taken the risk.<sup>79</sup> In the lead-up to the 2000 Sydney Summer Olympic Games, Aboriginal activists also criticised Freeman for her refusal to join a boycott of those Games.<sup>80</sup> Freeman's stance in these moments in Atlanta and in Sydney contributed to existing discourses about her apolitical nature, despite her full record of political awareness and action.

---

<sup>77</sup> Lee-Anne Hall, "Gesture, Symbol, Identity," in *The Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture*, ed. Sylvia Kleinert and Margo Neale (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 440.

<sup>78</sup> *Age*, 10 August 1996, A19.

<sup>79</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 August 1996.

<sup>80</sup> Morgan, "Aboriginal Protest and the Sydney Olympic Games", 27

The refusal overall to ascribe political motivations to Freeman helped facilitate the dominant reconciliation reading of her 1994 flag gesture. That reading, which began immediately following her flag runs in Canada – an “Act of reconciliation”, wrote one newspaper reader – was entrenched by support from political leaders, sportswriters and other commentators.<sup>81</sup> In the years that followed, Freeman would continue to be positioned as a unifying champion, as someone whose achievements brought the nation together – everyone could be proud of her. In 2000, Kim Beazley – the leader of the Federal Opposition – would famously state that Freeman’s gold medal run was “400 metres of reconciliation”.<sup>82</sup> Indeed, from a cynical viewpoint, Freeman could be used as evidence that everything was now ok: anyone, black or white, now had the opportunity to represent Australia on the international stage. Indeed, Larissa Behrendt argues that John Howard did precisely this in the aftermath of Freeman’s victory.<sup>83</sup>

In a telling testament to the Australian wish to position Freeman as a champion of reconciliation, rather than resistance, Howard was able to make this claim despite Freeman having strongly criticised his Government’s denial of the “Stolen Generation” in the lead up to the Sydney Olympics.<sup>84</sup> Although Freeman’s comments caused controversy at the time,

---

<sup>81</sup> Ian McDougall, letter to *Courier-Mail*, 26 August 1994, n.p.

<sup>82</sup> Nina Burridge, “Meanings and Perspectives of Reconciliation in the Australian Socio-political Context,” *The International Journal of Diversity in Organisations, Communities and Nations* 6, no. 5 (2007): 71. In 2000, too, reconciliation discourses were strengthened by an easing of the Olympic movement’s rules to allow the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags to be flown at the Sydney Olympic Games; they also flew at the 2018 Gold Coast Commonwealth Games.

<sup>83</sup> Larissa Behrendt, “Cathy Freeman and the Politics of Sport,” *Journal of Australian Indigenous Issues* 4, no. 1 (2001): 27-29.

<sup>84</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, “Cathy’s Lament for the Stolen”, 17 July 2000, 1.



they seem to have been forgotten quickly in light of an Olympic victory that many wanted to see as healing.<sup>85</sup> Likewise the image of Freeman running in front of the Northcote mural of Aboriginal elders in chains does not fit into these narratives of reconciliation. It points instead to a past that is unresolved and unreconciled, to injustices that have not been redressed.

Freeman was deeply aware of this past, and in 2003 she drew attention to both it and the picture she had arranged for Ludbey to take of her in 1994:

Somewhere deep inside, I'd absorbed all the pain and suffering my people had endured and turned it into a source of strength. Before I left for the Commonwealth Games, I had my picture taken by the *Herald Sun* in front of an Aboriginal mural on St George's Road, Thornbury in Melbourne. The mural depicts Aboriginal slavery with two black men chained together around their necks. The images made me sick but they were a graphic illustration of the atrocities committed against my people... All this pain inspires me.<sup>86</sup>

Cathy Freeman did champion reconciliation, but she did more than that – like Sir Douglas Nicholls before her, and Adam Goodes after, she sought to have white Australia engage with a horrific past that continues to shape the present. Like Nicholls, Goodes and Nicky Winmar, Freeman deserves to be thought of as an activist who sought to intervene in current discussions around Australia's race relations rather than as a naïve athlete who helped to bring Australians together. As part of this, the striking Northcote image that Freeman created – and the extraordinary front page on which it appeared – deserves a place

---

<sup>85</sup> Letters written to the Fairfax press in the days after Freeman's statement indicate that her comment caused considerable debate. See, for example, letters to the editor and a Ron Tandberg cartoon in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 July 2000, 16.

<sup>86</sup> Cited in Gullan, *Cathy*, 78-9.

in Freeman's vital compelling iconography, and broader discussions of images of sport, race, and protest in Australia.

## Conclusion

In our study of the Nicky Winmar image we noted that the aspect that struck us the most was "just how frequently key moments in the struggle for Indigenous rights featured on the front pages and then disappeared from public memory".<sup>87</sup> In examining the image of Cathy Freeman running in front of the Northcote mural of shackled Aboriginal men, we feel that we can add something in answer to the question of why some photographs have been remembered while many others have been forgotten. Indeed, we would suggest that the 1994 Northcote picture was too unpalatable, too disruptive, and too iconic of a past that is aggressively repressed – especially for the *Herald Sun*. Perhaps if it had been published by Ludbey's former newspaper, the *Age*, it might have been different.<sup>88</sup> And surely if it was published now as a front page picture it would be taken up far and wide through social media, among other means. But in 1994 the *Herald Sun* printed it and then left it to disappear in favour of narratives of reconciliation. And rather than being seen as an activist – and indeed a proud warrior – protesting against racism, Freeman was both celebrated and demeaned as a simple, young Aboriginal woman whose success brought together all Australians. The result was that the image became part of the broader history about which Freeman was seeking to educate non-Indigenous Australians – a history of forgetting, a history of eliding the horrific abuse and discrimination meted out to Australia's Indigenous peoples. And we would venture

---

<sup>87</sup> Klugman and Osmond, *Black and Proud*, 221-22.

<sup>88</sup> We argue that it was the publication of the Winmar image in the *Age*, along with a caption noting Winmar's words that he was "black and proud", that sparked a national conversation: Klugman and Osmond, *Black and Proud*, Chapter 6.

to suggest that this act of forgetting is part of the violence that continues to mark Australia's race relations.

The final quote belongs to Freeman. We approached her to be interviewed for this paper but she declined. She did offer her support, however, writing to us via her management that:

This image drives home to me a representation of what life was once like for my Indigenous ancestors. It hits a nerve and stirs up my emotions and makes me act in accordance with the strength of its impact on me. This image moves me to create strength, power and determination from my ancestral link of a life of pain, struggle and loss.<sup>89</sup>

It is with this history of pain, struggle, loss and also strength and power that non-Indigenous Australians still, as a matter of urgency, need to grapple if the nation is to truly begin the process of redressing the past that still haunts and shapes the present.

---

<sup>89</sup> James Murch, email to authors, 30 June 2015.