

## CATHY FREEMAN: "ONE ATHLETE, ONE NATION, TWO FLAGS" BUT A MULTI-DIMENSIONAL MESSAGE

### Cathy Freeman: "un atleta, una nación, dos banderas" pero un mensaje multidimensional

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#### Abstract

On 25 September, 2000, Cathy Freeman won the 400-meter final in her native country. Symbolic on two levels, political (Ory 2000, Nocita 2020) and social (Delporte 1991, White 2012) the image of this victory was on the front pages of the world's newspapers.

Indeed, on 25 September, Freeman decided to do her victory lap holding the two flags of her country - Australian and Aboriginal flags - thus breaking rule number 50 of the Olympic Charter. Symbolically tied together, these two flags then showed to the world her pride at being both Aboriginal and Australian. They also brought to light the Aboriginal people that had been deprived of its rights and lands by the Australian government since this Terra Nullius was conquered in 1788 (Hugues 2003), in a context of reconciliation claims. However, despite some violent reactions (Hugues, 1987), Freeman's gesture, pregnant with political and identity claims (White 2011), was never punished.

What differences can be made in this political gesture and the one, thirty- two years earlier made by Tommie Smith, John Carlos and Peter Norman, who were severely disciplined? What does such a seemingly clemency say about the Olympics?

By replacing this picture in the social and historical context of a country, Australia, and a movement, Olympism, along with a semiotic analysis of the headlines of Australia's national newspapers (corpus), we propose to give a better understanding of what it shows and reveals about the political and community issues at stake, as well as the contradictions it reveals.

**Keywords:** media construction, reconciliation, symbol, Olympism, sport.

#### Resumen

El 25 de septiembre de 2000, Cathy Freeman ganó la final de los 400 metros en su país natal. Simbólica a dos niveles, político (Ory 2000, Nocita 2020) y social (Delporte 1991, White 2012) la imagen de esta victoria ocupó las portadas de los periódicos de todo el mundo.

En efecto, el 25 de septiembre, Cathy Freeman decidió dar la vuelta de la victoria sosteniendo las dos banderas de su país -la australiana y la aborígen-, rompiendo así la regla número 50 de la Carta Olímpica. Estas dos banderas, unidas simbólicamente, mostraban al mundo su orgullo de ser aborígen y australiana. También sacaron a la luz al pueblo aborígen que había sido privado de sus derechos y tierras por el gobierno australiano desde que esta Terra Nullius fue conquistada en 1788 (Hugues 2003), en un contexto de reivindicaciones de reconciliación. Sin embargo, a pesar de algunas

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reacciones violentas (Hugues, 1987), el gesto de Freeman, preñado de reivindicaciones políticas e identitarias (White 2011), nunca fue castigado.

¿Qué diferencias pueden establecerse entre este gesto político y el realizado treinta y dos años antes por Tommie Smith, John Carlos y Peter Norman, que fueron severamente sancionados? ¿Qué dice esta aparente clemencia sobre los Juegos Olímpicos?

Al situar esta imagen en el contexto social e histórico de un país, Australia, y de un movimiento, el olimpismo, junto con un análisis semiótico de los titulares de los periódicos nacionales australianos (corpus), nos proponemos comprender mejor lo que muestra y revela sobre las cuestiones políticas y comunitarias en juego, así como las contradicciones que pone de manifiesto.

**Palabras clave:** construcción mediática, reconciliación, símbolo, olimpismo, deporte.



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## Introduction

While the 2000 Sydney Olympics opened with a ceremony that stated the country's objective of reconciliation between two nations and two peoples - the black Aboriginal and the white Australian peoples - Cathy Freeman's 400-meter final victory seemed to embody its very fulfilment.

The picture of this victory, with Freeman taking a victory lap minutes after she realised the extent of her feat, was a powerful image. It made the front pages of millions of newspapers worldwide, and of all the national papers in Australia. Still clad in her full-length hooded Nike "swift-suit" showing the gold and green colours of Australia, Freeman started her victory lap bare foot, proudly holding the two flags that defined her identity: the Aboriginal flag and the Australian flag. As a consequence, "the photo drama of the running Freeman, with her phantom designer suit dominated visual coverage of athletics and became the most repeated set of images of all sports events at the Olympics" (Gardiner 2016, 237).

Why was this picture so powerful? What did it represent precisely for Australia as a nation? What did it represent for the Olympics?

As we will see, an Aboriginal woman winning in front of not only her country but the whole world sent important messages on several levels: on the national level first and foremost, on the world level, and on the Olympic level, all contributing to tell an important and new story and creating a myth: “the most powerful, performative myths in Australian popular culture center on sport” (Gardiner 2016, 236).

However, her running of the victory lap with two flags added a new dimension to her victory. Indeed, in a context of national tension regarding Indigenous rights in Australia, her holding two flags for one nation could have created unease, all the more so during an Olympic event. And yet, it was the opposite.

In this paper, we will see how Freeman’s 400-meter final victory and, most importantly, her victory lap, has been understood as constituting a defining moment and arrived at a crucial time that allowed the media to turn this act of seemingly rebellion into an act of national assertion both for the country and the Olympics. Analysing this photography, we will see how “the plastic value of the image is reinforced through its symbolic strength and its historical meaning, and what happens outside the image is just as important as what happens inside” (Cleder and Debeaux 2020, 144). Thus, the media construct meaning around texts and images, leading to the production of ideas and values. They produce narratives that involve “political assumptions, ideology, social values, cultural and racial stereotypes and assumptions as well as specific textual strategies” (Parisi, cited in Gardiner 2003, 234). Furthermore, the fact that this picture was taken during the Olympics and implied both sport and flags adds another, very symbolic dimension to it, as “the Olympics are first and foremost an immense playground, market-place, theatre, battlefield and Broadway of cultural images, symbols and meanings. Whatever else they do is because of their capacity to attract and distribute vast symbolic energies” (Laocoon, quoted in Vos Strache 1982, 2).

Analysing this picture and the way it was used by the Australian media will thus help us understand this specific story-telling and how the media re-appropriated this image and used it as a form of framing (Gitlin 1980) to create a new hero for the nation, thus telling a new story and giving a new identity not only to the country, but also to the Olympics. It also served to erase another story, that of the Aboriginal community’s conditions and claims.

### **The study: sources and method**

Basing our study of the picture on a semiological approach, that is to say the analysis of the signs, codes and culture it carries, our work will seek to highlight the multi-layered quality of this particular image and will consider it as a “social production of meaning” (O’Sullivan et al. 1994, 281) that provided a new narrative to the nation. Taking Cathy Freeman’s victory lap picture as the subject of our analysis, we will thus proceed with observing its denotative and connotative meanings, following Barthes’ semiological approach to explain what it meant first in a specific context of Aboriginal claims in Australia, then what it meant to the nation, and to finish, what it meant more generally to the Olympics: “to understand the power of an image, that is to say the effect it produces and the imaginary world it nourishes and relies on, necessitates to make an analysis of it, that is to say to examine its form, to understand what it shows [...] in other words, to make a conscious reading of the discourse carried out by this image and of the socio-political issues it reactivates” (Joly and Martin 2021, 148). Moreover, the headlines that followed her victory in the four main Australian newspapers, *The Australian* (national daily newspaper), *The Sydney Morning Herald* (Sydney’s daily newspaper) and *The Age* and *The Herald-Sun* (both Melbourne’s dailies) will complete our analysis of the image by adding a textual dimension and thus depth to its meaning as regards its media appropriation.

This analysis will also take into account other examples of exhibitions of cultural identity on Olympic venues (O’Bonsawin 2023) to show how Freeman’s flag incident was one among others and to try to explain their similarities and differences in the way they were perceived by the IOC.

## Discussion

### An image used as a symbol of hope in a context of tension

Following the announcement of the attribution of the 27<sup>th</sup> Olympiad to Sydney in September 1993, both the Australian government and the Sydney Organising Committee for the Olympic Games (SOCOG) were aware of the possibility of Aboriginal protests and disruptions. Even though a process of reconciliation had started in Australia in 1991 with the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation Act, there had been divisions within the Australian society ever since then. For the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, this act was supposed to create a “united Australia which represents this land of ours, values the Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander heritage and provides justice and equity for all”. On a more symbolic level, it was to reach full reconciliation by 1 January 2001, the year the country celebrated the centenary of Australian Federation. As a result, the Sydney 2000 Olympics adopted reconciliation as the major theme of the Olympiad: “during the intense process of national introspection that preceded the Olympics, it was an important concept in shaping stories the nation told about itself” (Elder, Pratt and Ellis 2006, 187). The whole Opening ceremony thus revolved around this idea, with young Nikki Webster being led through Australia’s History by an elderly Aboriginal Songman, Djakapurra Munyarryun, symbolically making tradition (embodied by the old and wise Aboriginal man) lead the way to a united future (embodied by the young white girl), thus showing the way to reconciliation.

However, the election of a conservative national government in 1996 and Prime Minister John Howard’s repeated refusals to apologize for the Stolen Generations, the Aboriginal children who were taken from their parents to be placed in white institutions where they were often abused and taught the white culture between the mid-1800s and the 1970s, led to the frustration and anger of many members of the Aboriginal community. Boycott threats challenged this “nationalist story of unity” (White 2012, 155) even before the Olympics started, with calls from Aboriginal activist and sportsman Charles Perkins to “burn, baby, burn” the country. The government’s rhetoric that described protests and protesters as “unAustralian” did not help placate the situation.

Even though Freeman is the direct descendent from the children who were stolen by white government to their parents – her grandmother was one of them – she never used that aspect of her story against the Games in 2000, and remained mainly apolitical all along: “I’m running for sport, not politics” (Elder, Pratt and Ellis 2006, 189). In a biography by Adrian McGregor, she even said: “people don’t understand, it’s the running that I love, not the politics” (2000, 172).

This Aspect probably also led the national papers to choose to use her persona as the epitome of reconciliation. Indeed, “who better than this popular young Aboriginal woman to express, to all Australians, the hopes for reconciliation?” (*The Age* 2000, 10), and Freeman became the perfect, peaceful embodiment of the concept by erasing any negativity that could be attached to it. More than that, because she chose not to take sides in her public declarations, she became the perfect smokescreen that hid an unwanted, darker aspect of the culture and history of the country: the plight of the Aboriginal community that was still forgotten and dispossessed and that wanted recognition of their fundamental rights.

In this context, the picture of Freeman with the two flags provided the national media with a way to avoid violent conflict and to appease and include the Aboriginal community that had felt neglected and mistreated, in that she represented and, so to speak, embodied in herself the notion of unity for the country, even before she won medals: “the nationalist triumphalism and affect aroused among white Australians by the victories of Olympic athletes [...] serve precisely to gloss over the instabilities of national culture and identities” (Neilson 2002, 7). That is also precisely why she was chosen to light the Olympic flame during the defining moment of the opening ceremony, where the imagery used was meant to bridge the gap between the two communities and send a message of reconciliation not only to the nation, but to the world. Thus, Geoff Clark, Chairman of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, could declare : “If she’s running for justice,

she's running for us, I think we're winning".<sup>1</sup> Following their need to produce new myths (C. Pociello 1995), the media used Freeman, who supported the Games and opposition to any form of boycott, as a way to show to the world and the nation a progressive and liberal image of the country in a context of national turmoil, and as a way to create new representations where "individual and collective perception weigh more than reality itself" (Delporte, Mollier and Sirinelly 2010, 586). We posit in this paper that it is precisely Freeman's striking, though smooth image that allowed this photography to become so popular among Australian media, and that more than putting the Aboriginal cause and reconciliation to the front, it was used to erase most of its struggles and claims.

### How the media turned Cathy Freeman's victory lap into a symbol of unity for the nation

In this context, Freeman's win offered a whole discourse to the media on a silver platter, as her success "was celebrated not just as a moment of national sporting glory but also as a moment of profound political significance" (Elder, Pratt and Ellis 2006, 181). Not only did her victory send the message of a strong and performing nation in terms of sporting achievement to the world, but her holding the two flags also served another purpose. Indeed, the symbolic significance of this Aboriginal female athlete, holding equally the two flags during her victory lap showed that she was both Aboriginal and Australian, thus transcending the opposition between the two communities. As an extension to this symbol and on a more connotative level, while her full-body green and gold suit reflected her country's colours and obvious Australian identity, her running barefoot, often unnoticed by both the media and scientific literature, could be interpreted as a more subtle and discreet form of protest. Indeed, in a context of Aboriginal land claim after one century of dispossession by a white government, her running barefoot could be seen as a way to showing her attachment to her land as an Aborigine, a particular significance for Aboriginal culture. This aspect crystallised most tensions at the time, tensions that were echoed by Midnight Oil's song "Beds are Burning" during the Closing ceremony. As a consequence, more than an image, it was the symbols that could be read into it that made it so powerful for the media, as they carried deeper meanings: helped by the medias, the people could see and read the most obvious symbol where Aboriginal and Australian cultures were put on the same level.

Indeed, following Freeman's victory, Kim Beazley, the leader of the Federal opposition, described her win as "400 m of national reconciliation" (*The Australian*, 27 September, 2000, 4), while the *Sydney Morning Herald* headline read: "Pride of the Land" (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 September, 2000).

What is interesting to note is that the same gesture that provoked outrage when she first displayed the two flags during the 1994 Commonwealth Games that were held in Vancouver, Canada, with *The Herald Sun's* headline "Flag uproar: Outrage as Tunstall<sup>2</sup> ban sours Cathy's joy", now provoked the opposite response, with *The Sydney Morning Herald* writing it was "The race of our lives" on 25 September, 2000. The pronoun "our" here tells volumes about the transformation of an act that was judged seditious in 1994, and how it was re-appropriated by the media six years later to become the entire nation's victory: "our" (Australia's) victory. In his book entitled *Heroines of sport: the politics of difference and identity* (2000), Hargreaves explains that Freeman received both criticism and acclaim for this, but that contrary to 1994, her holding the two flags was turned into a "a symbol of unity and reconciliation" by the national media, and was related and relayed as such by the world's media. At that particular moment, Freeman became much more than an athlete who had won a medal, she became a true national heroine and sport icon. As a consequence, editorials in general lauded Freeman as a national heroine and icon who gained a place in national history: "Freeman Runs into History and Our Hearts" (*The Australian*, 26 September, 2000, 32), "Cathy is Our Golden Memory" (*The Australian*, 2 October, 2000, 38) or "Australia Takes a new Hero to Heart" (*The Age*, 27 September, 2000, 10). She was even assimilated to a truly historical, almost royal figure through the

<sup>1</sup> Clark, Geoff. *World News*, SBS Television, 26th September, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Arthur Tunstall was then the Australian Commonwealth representative.

title: “Catherine the Great” (*The Australian*, 26 September, 2000, 1). This led Gardiner to write that “no other Australian sporting figure has been as closely associated with notions and themes of reconciliation as Freeman (Bruce & Hallinan 2001)” (Gardiner 2003, 250).

This impression was even reinforced with her wearing the Nike full-body suit, as it made her look like and pass for a super heroine, hitting the headlines: “Superhero Cathy” (*The Herald Sun*, 26 September, 2000, 2). No wonder that Nike, Cathy Freeman’s main sponsor, used her face with the slogan “Change the world 400 meters at a time” for its national promotion in newspapers (*The Australian*, 28 September, 2000, 20).

Thus, this image helped reinforce a discourse of reconciliation, and eluded and marginalised all the other, more negative aspects of Aboriginal claims. This perfectly illustrates the process of “framing” that E. Goffman identified in 1974, and that T. Gitlin later defined and applied specifically to the media as “persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse, whether verbal or visual” (Gitlin 1980, 6). The media indeed chose to organize their discourse (both verbal and visual) around Freeman’s picture of her victory lap with the two flags as a response to the different demonstrations undertaken by the Aboriginal community during the Olympics, but also as a way to erase them from collective consciousness, so as to create representations to the world. In this photography, for the media she was clearly running for a united nation, and the two flags she was holding equally suggested that she supported reconciliation. More than that, she embodied reconciliation: an Aboriginal woman wearing, even shrouded in the colours of Australia in a tight suit that showed only her head and bare feet as reminders of her Aboriginality. In one picture, Freeman became the epitome of both Australianness and Aboriginality to the world as well as a “splendid sporting ambassador for all Australians” (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 2000). This illustrates how “Indigenous symbols have been appropriated and integrated into Australian nationalist discourse” (Elder, Pratt and Ellis 2006, 186). Freeman, with this photography, also became an ambassador for the Olympic philosophy and values that were amplified by the “theatrical qualities” and “mystical sentiments” it displayed (Hoberman 1984, 6). However, if this vision seemed to work for the world and for white Australia, it did not for the Aboriginal community. Indeed, some of its members did not agree with this consensual interpretation of Freeman’s Aboriginality, and described her as “not one of us” (Bruce and Wensing 2009), feeling betrayed by the fact that she had become – or been made - such a huge symbol that she actually hid the real problems the Aboriginal community was confronted to and wanted to put to the fore with their demonstrations. For them, her apolitical show of Aboriginal pride, or political correctness, betrayed her own community as this photography was the only thing the world would remember. The Australian medias’ use of the flags photography can thus be interpreted as a strategy: their use of framing contributed to sending only a simplified, naive message of reconciliation to the world, further reinforced by Olympic support.

### Cathy Freeman’s victory lap, a symbol that served the Olympics philosophy

If the athletes who compete in the Olympics must respect Rule 50 of the Olympic Charter that states that “no kind of demonstration or political, religious or racial propaganda is permitted in any Olympic sites, venues or other areas”, when Freeman chose to do her victory lap with the two Australian flags, she was performing a political statement, even though she later explained it as a statement about her identity, for her community: “a special message for Indigenous kids – never underestimate what you can achieve” (McGregor 2000, 380). As such, this could have been sanctioned by the International Olympic Committee, as was the case for Tommie Smith, John Carlos when they raised their fists in a context of racial segregation in the United States, during the Mexico Olympic Games of 1968, pushed and supported by fellow Australian Peter Norman (Smith 2000).

Three Olympiads after Sydney, in 2012 during the London Olympics, Australian Aboriginal boxer Damien Hooper was accused of violating Rule 50 because he chose to wear a shirt showing the Aboriginal flag when he entered the ring for his fight (Chagas and Fonseca 2020).

However, this did not happen to Freeman. Freeman's statement was indeed never criticised by the International Olympic Committee. The only reason that could explain such a difference of treatment is that, being held in Australia at the very same time as the country was going through developments and changes on the political, legal and social levels, the Olympic Committee had to adapt and make the most of it: "IOC, time and again, has acted as a puppet for the host nations and it changes or relaxes its rules accordingly without any basic structure" (Chanda, Sahoo and Sahni 2021, 196). It is nevertheless interesting to note that this photography also served its own interests, as it showed the "magic" sport could accomplish: "Cathy Freeman at Sydney 2000: Moments of Magic!" (Olympics.com, updated on 31 March, 2021).

In a way, it also illustrated the very philosophy of the Games as stated in its own 2000 Charter: "Olympism is a philosophy of life, exalting and combining in a balanced whole the qualities of body, will and mind. Blending sport with culture and education, Olympism seeks to create a way of life based on the joy found in effort, the educational value of good example and respect for universal fundamental ethical principles." (Olympic Charter 2000, 8). Indeed, Freeman's victory and two flags did teach Australian children as well as the children of the world to be proud of their culture and identity.

However, what is interesting to note is that, contrary to Tommie Smith, John Carlos and Peter Norman in 1968, or Damien Hooper in 2012, Freeman did not exhibit her Aboriginality with the Aboriginal flag while she was standing on the podium, nor during Australia's national anthem, nor during any particular ceremonial moment. Nor did she show her Aboriginality only. In so doing, she took much less risk than them. Can we go as far as saying that this was a calculated risk? Indeed, Freeman chose to wave the two flags in the minutes that immediately followed a sport feat, during a victory lap which is usually meant to thank and be in communion with the public present, and with the two flags. She did not do it during an official and ceremonious moment where the culture of the country is exhibited to the world. Furthermore, she did not do it as an act of defiance, nor was it performed in any aggressive or dissenting manner either: on this photography, she has a wide, contagious and genuine smile. What is more, she is barefoot, which could be interpreted as a sign of humility. And maybe most importantly, contrary to Tommie Smith, John Carlos, Peter Norman or Damien Hooper, she is a woman. Stigmatising an Aboriginal woman in such a context would have been detrimental to the Olympic philosophy and image, as it would attack the most vulnerable part of the Australian population (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, 2000; Fredericks 2007).

One other example of smooth "expression of indigeneity" (O'Bonsawin 2023) during the, was Mohawk kayaker gold medallist Alwyn Morris, from Canada, during the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics. Indeed, while on the podium, he raised an eagle feather above his head. Yet, no offense was taken by the IOC, nor by the media, as it was understood as a symbol of "friendship, honor, courage and sharing", values that are dear to the Olympic philosophy. It was also "intended to honor his late grandfather as well as his Mohawk identity" (O'Bonsawin 2023, 204). This shows that expressions of cultural identity can be accepted by the IOC, provided they do not reflect any clear political claim or any aggressiveness on the part of the athlete.

Thus, the photography of Freeman holding the two flags can be interpreted as the expression of her indigeneity, which perfectly embodied the Sydney 2000 motto: "Share the Spirit, Dare to Dream". Freeman was indeed sharing the spirit of her win during her victory lap, and she was also daring to dream of a reconciliation between two peoples by brandishing their two flags. That is precisely why she became a national icon and why she was chosen by the AOC to light the flame. To take Neilson's words: "Here, the conjectured possibility of apology, forgiveness, and national reconciliation was melded to the We Are the World values of Olympism. [...] for many, this fantasy became real when Cathy Freeman dashed across the victory line in the 400 metres sprint" (2002, 9).

However, one must not be blinded by this clemency, as the IOC's apparent neutrality to Cathy Freeman's action offered a stark contrast to the Olympic Committee's refusal to give access to the Sydney Media Centre, to the organiser of the Journey of Healing "the official Indigenous response to the breaking of the Stolen Generations story" (Neilson 2002, 10). It only illustrates how the IOC

can also use framing to serve its own interests: “if Olympic organizing agencies were concerned to provide the world with images of Indigenous Australians, it was certainly on their own terms” (Ibid). So powerful was this photograph and the symbols it carried that it stifled any possible criticism.

## Conclusion

The photography of Cathy Freeman doing her victory lap with the two flags has often been interpreted as a symbol showing the world that even though Australia was going through difficult times, it was facing the darkest parts of its history and writing a new, optimistic future for the nation. It was thus the perfect moment to acknowledge her indigeneity. However, it was only what the Australian media and the IOC wanted it to stand for, and it was used to serve the purpose of both. This photography perfectly illustrates how the media and sporting institutions such as the Olympic Games use images to produce or transform political and social discourses – what P. Clastres and C. Méadel call “media construction” (2008) – and frame them to create heroes who will remain in the sporting and national consciousness, while eradicating other, less glamorous aspects or athletes. Australia waited eight more years (13 February, 2008) to apologise to the Stolen Generation through a process instituted by Kevin Rudd’s government (2007-2010) that is still under way, and the Aboriginal community is still very far from being reconciled, particularly over the question of land claims, which is still viewed today as a “national disgrace” (barrister Tony McAvoy, 2021). Yet, twenty-three years after this photography, the forthcoming referendum on a formal recognition of an Indigenous “Voice” in the Australian Parliament due on 14 October 2023 might provide an answer to the question of the recognition of Aboriginality prompted by Freeman’s victory lap with the two flags. This paper also shows how the photography of Freeman running with the two flags represented at the time only a smoke screen that served to reinforce Australia in its image of a happy and “lucky country” (Horne 1964; Lowe 2016).

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