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The Necessary Refinement of Aboriginal Identity Politics

Terry Moore

Abstract: Today, once distinct ethno-religious societies and cultures routinely intersect and change each other. As they become less actually distinct, their members often discursively re-create cultural and identity distinctiveness, and so in multicultural nations can drift to intolerance of the other and resistance to inclusion, and contribute to wider social division. In this article I argue that the public policy settings that have prevailed in the human rights era have influenced this eventuality in the Aboriginal case, by over-emphasising socio-cultural particularity. In the Aboriginal case, policies, programs and practices have begun to fetishise particularity and difference from others, and to neglect what is shared with them, and in the process fostered essentialist ideal types and performative difference. This article works to conceive an approach that retains respect for cultural difference but manages the tensions of superdiversity without inciting radicalism. Key to this balancing act is to maintain an eye to Aborigines’ difference from other Australians alongside an eye to their coexistent sameness to them. The aim of the paper is to indicate potential directions of policy reforms that acknowledge difference but undermine the grounds of fundamentalist difference, in part by focusing on the nuances of individuals’ multiple, dialogical and fluid distinctions. The intent is to improve Aborigines’ capacity to retain cultural difference and to at the same time engage as equals.

Keywords: Australian Aborigines, identity politics, public policy, interculturality, superdiversity

Introduction

Explanations for Aboriginal Australians’ marginality in health, education, employment, socio-economic status and social function centre on colonisation and removals from ancestral country, remoteness, and institutional racism and ethnocentrism. They have begun to include the retention of older cultural attitudes and habits. In this article I present another, thus far virtually unacknowledged additional factor to those explanations, and the lessons that flow from it in finding a more productive approach to Aboriginal affairs.

In my view, a powerful element within Aboriginal politics is taking on a polarising character insofar as, in prosecuting its political ends, it asserts an essentialised, bounded and whole culture, binary difference from others, and externally imposed marginality. In doing so, it
denies Aborigines’ everyday socio-cultural integration and subjective complexity, and their actual capabilities of negotiating both. It also exaggerates their alienation from the wider society in ways that are detrimental to their own equality and capacity to sustain distinctiveness. It may also be divisive for the nation. This politics appears to realise difference at the expense of equality. I argue that the dynamics of this are rooted in the attempts made by progressive public policy over forty years to ameliorate the colonial legacy by establishing—via cultural rights and structural adjustment—a positive conception of Aboriginality, and with it an Aboriginal confidence to engage in the wider society as equals. The politics has taken advantage of the opportunities opened up by that approach, but become trapped in its reliance on difference, inequality and victimhood.

In response to the threat of change and everyday interculturality, the politics becomes oppositional, and presses individuals to perform cultural difference and reject the empowering and inclusive possibilities provided by the raft of government reforms that have been implemented in education, health, welfare and employment. I propose that public policy can use the levers at its disposal to invite a moderation of the drift in this direction. I take as guides the many who in their everyday lives successfully negotiate their intercultural complexities to realise the end of cultural distinctiveness and citizen equality. This number includes some leading spokespersons who expose the shortcomings of this politics and propose refinements to it. They offer clues as to how public policy may nudge the politics in more productive directions.

The reader should be aware that this critique of progressive policy and partisan identity politics sets out the logic of a developing argument, and the available space makes a detailed discussion of several issues impossible. Perhaps the principal of these is the precarious balance of power between Aboriginal political leverage based on cultural difference, and the state preparedness to support Aboriginal interests where that difference becomes ambiguous. The lack of detail on this and other issues should not be taken to imply uncritical acceptance of mainstream expectations nor of Indigenous Australians’ sole responsibility for their disadvantage. The claim is the opposite: that Aborigines are as capable as others, and that public policy can find better ways to assist them to become equal while retaining cultural distinctiveness. The argument moves beyond progressive and conservative partisanship. It takes guidance from the voice of an emerging section of the Indigenous population that stresses work, education and health as central to the very possibility of contemporary cultural distinctiveness. It is a plea for the politics to be more clever in negotiating the tensions of the intersection with the wider world, rather than to persist in discursive opposition.

The categoric Aboriginal subject
At present, Aboriginal policy, program and practice are dominated by conceptions of, and directed at, an idealised categoric Aboriginal subject. In policy imagination and implementation, Aborigines share a distinctive, singular, primordial culture that is an internally highly integrated and bounded whole, radically different from that of other Australians (often seen in equally monolithic ways). Each individual is a unitary self, a cipher of the category, and all have been and are victim to debilitating racist oppression at the hands of colonial, state and national governments. They live a marginality that is structurally imposed by White Australia, and so their recovery is the responsibility of White Australia.

This categoric subject is at the core of policy frameworks shaping Aboriginal lives and the behaviours of others in relationships with them, around the country. It is at the core for instance, of the Indigenous Child Placement Principle, which stipulates that all efforts must
be exhausted in attempting to place Indigenous children in out-of-home care with Indigenous carers, in order to maintain the child’s cultural connection (Tilbury; Overington). It is at the heart of the provision of schooling that is “appropriate” to notionally specific learning styles, and health care that is similarly appropriate to specific conceptions of health (Commonwealth of Australia), and so to the operations of the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation. It is evident in the pedagogical expectations of national Professional Standards for Teachers (AITSL). It determines the National Health and Medical Research Council’s protocols for ethical Indigenous research (NHMRC). It frames the analysis of the Behrendt Review into higher education (Behrendt), the proposals for Indigenous cultural competency by Universities Australia (UA Guiding Principles; Best Practice), and the curriculum suggestions of the Committee of Deans of Australian Medical Schools (Phillips) and the Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority (ACARA). In the latter instance for example, three of the Organising Ideas of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies curriculum are:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities maintain a special connection to and responsibility for Country/Place throughout all of Australia;
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples have unique belief systems and are spiritually connected to the land, sea, sky and waterways;
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples’ ways of life are uniquely expressed through ways of being, knowing, thinking and doing.

The unique and forever Otherness, monolithic oneness, landedness and spirituality represented in these ideas are also critical to the marketing of Indigenous tourism ventures and of tertiary courses in Indigenous Australian Studies. And this subject is institutionalised as the basis of nation-wide practical and symbolic affirmative action measures like identified positions, “Aboriginalisation” of staffing, “welcome to country” ceremonies (O’Brien and Hall), and the enrolment of “Elders” in policy development, pastoral care, service delivery and training.

Public policy and identity political roots
The categoric subject in/of the policy frameworks above is the product of a dialogic relationship between public policy and Aboriginal identity politics. It is difficult to assign responsibility for its inception because both sets of interests have been invested in the subject for many years, though for slightly different ends: the former for governing control and the latter for political leverage. Aboriginal political leaders have agitated for special rights, and progressive policymakers have sought to atone for the dispossession, denigration, violence and marginalisation of earlier times. Both ends have required acknowledgement of cultural difference, adjustment of structures to accommodate it, and inclusion of Aborigines in the nation as different equals. Ultimately, both have rested on the discursive imagining into being of a reified culture and fixed difference (Cowlishaw “Culture and the Absurd”), and unitary subject.

Aboriginal political activity in the self-determination era (from the 1970s to around 2000) has been led by members of Community Councils, regional Land Councils, non-government organisations, the office of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, the now disbanded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, peak bodies developing national policy frameworks like those on health (National Aboriginal Health Plan 2013-2023) and education (National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Strategy 2015), national and state
parliaments, and the universities. Such advocates have contributed to the development of policy frameworks that assume the subject, and taken advantage of the opportunities provided by the subject to secure access to special rights and concessions. In the process, they have mythicised Aboriginal cultural particularity, exaggerated its boundedness and singular Otherness, manipulated white guilt (Pearson “White Guilt”), and promoted the highly cultured subject as core to recovery (e.g. Calma and Dudgeon). Those in the southern states have used the credentials of the more “authentic” others—those closest to the imagined original—in the north and centre (Moore “The Exhaustion”). To exaggerate the extent of their immiseration they have also, as Langton (“Community”) and others suggest, adopted the statistics of marginalisation of those of the remote north as inclusive of themselves. Those in more remote areas use their more traditional-looking members to win land claims (Jacobs). And as other indigenes in the developed world, Indigenous Australians have asserted their oneness with landed and oppressed others in the third world (Merlan “Indigeneity”).

**Intercultural everyday lived reality**

Initially focused on equity in rights and service delivery, Aboriginal political activity has latterly come to also be about nation-building and “strategic minoritisation” vis-à-vis the state (Cowan 154). It has successfully built a national imagined community and gained significant discursive power and political leverage. The Aboriginality that has been imagined into being is now a taken for granted perceptual reality for many Aborigines (as Australians is for Australians, for instance), and it has provided significant benefits. It is however, in part as an outcome of that success, increasingly at odds with Aborigines’ everyday lived realities, which are generally, and particularly in urban areas, of postethnic interculturality and subjective multiplicity (Moore “Interculturality”). Aborigines’ lived realities are of greatly more ambiguous, complex and nuanced difference than the neatly opposed difference of the categoric Aboriginal subject. In urban areas up to 80-90% of Indigenous marriages are now mixed (Biddle; Karvelas “Black and White”). Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people live as intimates and neighbours in the suburbs and participate in mixed sporting teams and popular culture. There are now a great many Aborigines who, as Peter Sutton (“Indigenous Policy” 131, 157) writes:

> are not normally based in Aboriginal communities among kin...enjoy the lifestyle of their...professional class...for whom kinship has become a mostly private matter that does not in general determine which town they live in, or for whom they work, or with whom they decide to share resources...live... engage in cooperation or competition, or...have a drink.

Many enjoy sexually-diverse lifestyles (as suggested by an episode of the television drama *Redfern Now*; see Perkins and McKenzie), and appreciate cultural references shared with compatriots (for example, Cowlishaw *City’s Outback* 29). Deep cultural intersection of the sort is not confined to urban Australia, but is increasingly the case in remote communities, where ancestral linguistic and socio-cultural structures survive to a greater extent. Tiwi art such as Debbie Coombes’s “Off to the Footy” and Yolngu dance and music (Rothwell “Rhythm Sticks”) for instance (both in the Northern Territory), reflect daily engagement in mediated and face-to-face national and global popular culture. The “dreams of children [in the Cape York community of Hope Vale, Qld] are made in Singapore” (Pearson “Our Right” 63), many youth are “wired in” (Carlson) and behave in ways imitative of American movies (Goldenberg), and a recent documentary (“Sistagirls”, see McCrum and Canny; Taylor) shows the intersection of older Aboriginal cultural forms and those of modern Western gender/sexuality in the Tiwi Islands. In central Australia, country and western music is
inextricably entangled with Aboriginal notions of masculinity (Ottosan) and Christianity is similarly entangled with the Dreaming (Kolig; Pybus).

The recognition of contemporary cultural and identity intersection has led to the shedding of some light on earlier parallels. Sutton has written of the strong cross-cultural attachments between some early anthropologists and their key informants (“End of Consensus” 163-193), Nakata of the 200 years of cultural interface in the Torres Strait (“Disciplining” 195-212), Merlan (“Caging”) of the intersection of older and modern worlds in the town of Katherine, Sullivan (“Searching”) of Broome, and Morris (“Borderwork”) of south-eastern Australia.

These lived realities indicate long-term everyday interculturality and intersectionality. The individuals involved participated then and participate now in social networks within and beyond the Aboriginal, and have come to be natives of intersected ancestral and modern cultural worlds. They sustain the social capital that bonds them within their local lived and the national imagined Aboriginal communities, and so maintain a changing cultural distinction. As citizens they also sustain the outward-looking social capital that bridges their differences with non-Aboriginal Australians (see Blackshaw and Long; Putnam). They share abounding loyalties with their Indigenous fellows and settler compatriots, and routinely live across the many ethnic and other differences (of for instance, gender, class, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, age and generation) that complicate their relations with both. Recognising their diversity as individuals, they negotiate the inevitable disjunctures with Aboriginal strangers, as they do with non-Indigenous strangers (see Lloyd and Robinson). For example, the camaraderie of soldiering can prevail over distinctions of race (McGregor 55).

These individuals are subjectively multiplex, simultaneously the same as and different from other Aborigines, as they are the same as and different from all other Australians. Most importantly for the issue addressed in this essay, they live as and beyond the categoric subject imagined into being by policy and politics. They live interculturally competent lives, integrating the multiple knowledges and ways of knowing of wider worlds, and growing far beyond the categoric subject. The categoric subject is a gross and badly inadequate model for policy in respect of this complexity.

Aboriginal politics: in thrall to the categoric subject
Aboriginal political activity spans a spectrum from radical resistance at one extreme through to acceptance of undifferentiated citizenship at the other. Most advocacy comes from a progressive, rights-based position of “resistance as an emancipatory imperative” (Lester Rigney, in Maddison xxvii). It is based on categoric difference, collectivism, victimhood and autonomy. This advocacy, well-represented in Maddison’s 2009 book, is the currently dominant element in Aboriginal politics, and has been central to the policy positions noted above. A minority voice at the other, more conservative, political extreme accepts individualism and the changes needed for inclusion. A third position has emerged over the past fifteen-odd years, adopting a centrist stance that embraces collective rights as well as individual responsibilities, and cultural difference as well as citizen inclusion.

In the face of the mundane social intersection and subjective growth of their constituencies noted above, many of the leaders at the more radical end of the spectrum retain their investment in the colonialist notions that comprise the categoric subject. These leaders are in such thrall to those notions that the evidence of lived interculturality and individuality can present as a serious political threat. The threat leads them in turn to a more extreme politics
aimed at securing the perceptual reality of the categoric subject. This dominant politics, and the emergent centrist politics adopted by some, are the central concerns of this essay.

In the first instance, the dominant politics. With the aim of retaining their constituents’ loyalty to the strategically critical categoric subject, these leaders energise social pressures that press individuals to obfuscate their growth beyond it. They pose a stark choice between the apparently dichotomous poles of that subject and modern individuality. This approach is evident in the approach of the Tasmanian leader, Michael Mansell. In an unpublished paper, Mansell (“Sorting Our Future”) asked of his fellow Aboriginal Tasmanians, “Are we Aborigines or Australians?” and represented the latter as “our enemy”. In a message sent to members of the community organisation the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre (TAC), he equated the problem that modern individuality poses for his community with the problem it notionally poses for the Catholic church (“Supremacy”). The problem is he said, the emergence of individuals whose personal preferences override their loyalty to the community and so are contrary to “the moral absolute needed to maintain the distinct identity of Aboriginal people”. In responding to similar pressures, he said that for the church “the answer was to impose on its flock a moral absolute: whatever else you do you must maintain your religion according to the rules that have been there for thousands of years”.

Disregarding the accuracy or otherwise of this claim, he called for a similar absolute communal obligation on the part of his constituents to override the individuality that equates to employment, education and socio-economic success in the wider world. Thus, for him at least politically, Aborigines can have either Aboriginality or individuality. Success and equality come with the latter. Aborigines can be full members of the Aboriginal community or not members. Though the existential fear of dissolving cultural distinction has to be acknowledged (and on this see Pearson A Rightful Place), the counter-productivity of the opposition of communal/cultural solidarity and individual equality must also be recognised. That opposition seeks to bolster internal bonding and undermine the external bridging that actually exists, and to buttress the boundaries between Aborigines and others.

Discursive pressure from this source and of this type is widespread, of long standing and continuing (for example, see Gibson and Pearson; Nakata “Australian Indigenous Studies” 266; Pholi “Silencing Dissent”; Eagleson, Kaldor and Malcolm 240-243). It deeply associates Aboriginality with illiteracy, ill-health and disadvantage, and establishes educational success, good health and material comfort—ostensibly the inclusion and equality sought by the state and Aboriginal elites—as signs of Whiteness, assimilation and non-Aboriginality. Thus, as the Aboriginal woman Kerryn Pholi (“Silencing Dissent”) says, for an Aborigine

    to pursue opportunities to move away from disadvantage is to reject one’s Aboriginal identity and one’s own family and community...the benefits of education, employment and a middle class lifestyle [are] anathema to those who treasure their disadvantaged “Aboriginal” identity.

For those who persist in their intercultural individuality, their mixed loyalties and bridging of differences invite social sanction. Epithets such as “coconut”, “blackfella for nothing”, “flash black” etc make growth beyond the categoric subject a one-way exit. Pholi says that dissenters are silenced by challenges to their “legitimacy” and “authenticity”, by pointing “to [their] unsavoury character, which is evident through the offensive nature of [their] ideas, as well as through [their] apparent pandering to a ‘racist’ enemy force” (“Silencing Dissent”). Following her own critique of the politics, she was told ‘you should not be proud of your
disloyalty to your people’ (“Silencing Dissent”). The other leaders considered below have suffered similar social sanction.

**Anti-Whiteness**

As suggested by Mansell’s comments, the investment in difference extends to a demonisation of White Australia and Australians. Pearson (“White Guilt” 21) writes that in the US, “White guilt … functions in the same way as racism—as a stigma. White Americans and American institutions are stigmatised as racist until they prove otherwise”. White Australians are positioned similarly. And though in education and other spheres a “stereotype threat” (Steele & Aronson; Steele; Roberson & Kulik) works against minority groups like African Americans and Aboriginal Australians, there is another stereotype threat at work against White teachers in fields like Indigenous Australian Studies. Though it is mandated that they teach Indigenous Studies, many feel vulnerable and afraid because of the politics considered here, and do it poorly, in part as a result (Clarke; Hollinsworth “Inventing Aborigines”; “No-Go Zone”). In my own experience, trainee teachers approach the prospect (and the expectation that they will work with the local Indigenous community) with some trepidation.

The issue is the oppositional response to feared loss of cultural distinction. The investment in difference and disadvantage enhances a sense of exceptionalism, intolerance and “strangerhood” vis-à-vis the White Other. It exaggerates, as Ignatieff (35-40) said of the Yugoslav war, differences that are minor, contingent and negotiable, and presses people to repress and/or obfuscate their lived intercultural relationships and multiple selves. To the extent that this strategy animates resistance to schooling, it is highly unlikely that it can work to sustain cultural distinctiveness, and certain that it cannot realise the goal of difference and equality. It cannot realise recognition and egalitarian redistribution (Fraser Justice; “Recognition”).

**White “anti-racist” affirmation**

Many settler-Australian teachers, nurses and community workers are caught in the same fascination with the categoric subject, and apply it formulaically in their dealings with Aboriginal people. They accept the romantic Otherness and White guilt and responsibility. Despite its demonisation, they accept as justified the resentment directed at White Australia. They accept the logic of cultural appropriateness in respect of that subject and feel they should neither intervene in the Aboriginal pursuit of self-determination nor assume that wider social norms apply. As a result, they can act in ways that complement the Aboriginal in constituting the discursive reality. They may for instance, intervene reluctantly in health (Kowal), neglect literacy and numeracy in teaching (Nakata “Some Thoughts” 9-11), excuse truancy as legitimate agency (Petray), and/or privilege dangerous Aboriginal fostering arrangements over protective White equivalents (Robinson “Children Shifted” 1, 3; see Bath).

**The routine enactment of the categoric subject**

The combination of public policy, Aboriginal political discourse, Aboriginal social pressure and White ascription creates a hyperreal Aboriginality that departs from the everyday reality of agency, interculturality and simultaneous bothness. Many individuals accede to the myriad pressures and enact a masquerade of what becomes a normative Aboriginality. They may “recount their own and their extended families’ experiences of deprivation, unpleasantness and racism, ongoing disadvantage and feelings of ‘grief’ over the suffering of their people” (Pholi “Silencing Dissent” 2-3). They may performatively stress their cultural particularity (sometimes as explanation for failure) and sameness to other Aborigines. At other times the
masquerade may take the form of resistance to inclusionary efforts, as in student disengagement from schooling (Folds). It may produce an ambivalence about public health messages and the kind of house cleaning or parenting needed to improve child health (Senior, cited in Mowbray and Senior 223). In general, the combination of pressures can compromise Aborigines’ engagement in wider social affairs and their desire to succeed in that engagement, and/or lead those who do succeed, like NSW MP Linda Burney, to be suspicious at the suggestion of an Aboriginal middle class (Millikan). Where each enactment is taken as evidence of authentic, non-assimilated Aboriginality, myriad such enactments aggregate to create a reality (see Thomas and Thomas; Berger and Luckmann) that parallels and infiltrates the lived.

Ultimately, these dynamics have come to secure Aborigines’ place in a neo-colonialist trap partly of their own making. There have been benefits in terms of collective pride and individual self-esteem (as witnessed by the famous gesture of Aboriginal footballer Nicky Winmar to proudly display his black skin in response to crowd taunts), but the number who benefit in more substantial ways is limited. The dynamics have spawned an urban middle class who Yolngu leader Galarrwuy Yunupingu says live “off the back of…[remote] peoples’ disadvantage” (“Opportunity Squandered”) by winning identified positions and gaining preference by comporting themselves as the categoric Aborigine (Pholi “Why I Burned”). The dynamics have also empowered a class of “big men” (Langton “The End”) in the remote communities who, on the basis of their control of the interface with government, can establish cultures of cronyism that marginalise women, children and the elderly. The dynamics retard the closing of gaps in Aboriginal outcomes. They produce attitudes and behaviours that secure many Aborigines in a stubborn marginality. The enactment of the categoric subject exaggerates the impact of the structural determination of inequality. Some of the collapse of literacy and numeracy is explained by ethnocentric curriculum and inappropriate teaching and the like, but the element of politically-incited choice adds to that collapse. Some of the Indigenous burden of ill-health and early death too, is explained by culturally and historically-produced reluctance to present for care and the like, but smoking in pregnancy or eating poorly as a way of signalling one’s defiance of the bourgeois Whiteness of good health contributes. And as Aboriginal academic Anthony Dillon has said, demonising government with words such as “genocide”, “assimilation” and the like simply makes it less likely that those Aboriginal people most in need will embrace any opportunity or service provided by government (“Aboriginal Industry”).

The issue here is that the normalising defence of the categoric subject opposes Aboriginal individuals’ other subject positions, and so confronts them with significant barriers to being anything other than a cipher-like Aborigine. That defence prioritises their internally bonding social capital and denigrates its externally bridging equivalent. The upshot is a dynamic towards exceptionalism and separatism that is evident in the notions of a nation-wide distinct Indigenous worldview, epistemology, learning style and research methodology (see National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Higher Education Consortium; National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Advisory Council; National Indigenous Research and Knowledges Network). Some Indigenous people (for instance Martin Nakata, see “Some Thoughts”; Trounson) recognise a problematic lack of balance here, and some (for instance Marcia Langton, see Robinson “Indigenous Exceptionalism”) argue that the exceptionalism is associated with a sense of entitlement to special treatment that stifles individual effort. As is
being suggested of the UK, there is potential in this to contribute to a “withering of the kind of fellow-feeling needed to sustain welfare states” (Goodhart) like the Australian.

**Individuals transcending the thrall**

In addition to the sectors of the Aboriginal population considered above, there are some prominent individuals who resist the attractions of the hyperreality and the exhortations of Aboriginal politics, and so refuse the categoric Aboriginality. Kerryn Pholi, Bess Price, Dallas Scott, Anthony Dillon, Wesley Aird, Warren Mundine, Martin Nakata, Marcia Langton, Galarwuy Yunupingu and Noel Pearson, among others, self-consciously do interculturality and simultaneous bothness. In their everyday lives, they transcend—or manage with good success—the fascination with neat difference and oppressed disadvantage, and provide clues to its possible structural transcendence. Here I sketch what I see as the contribution made by some of these individuals.

Price is a remote central Australian woman married to a non-Aboriginal man. She has contributed to the undoing of the categoric subject and routine privileging of cultural rights over coexistent and sometimes competing individual rights. With Langton, she recognises that the current discourse of cultural rights favours men, particularly those from stronger clans, and diminishes the rights of women, children and the elderly. It was on this basis that she supported the Northern Territory Intervention and was heavily criticised by the urban Aboriginal woman Larissa Behrendt. Price replied that Behrendt and other urban Aborigines “don’t know anything about our people in the bush. Who are they to stand up and talk on behalf of our people. My background is totally different to hers, we are culturally different” (Karvelas “More Offensive”). For her, policy must distinguish between remote and urban Aboriginal people and appreciate the intersection of cultural and individual rights.

Wesley Aird lives with his non-Aboriginal partner on the Gold Coast. Their three children are he says, members of their Aboriginal and mainstream communities. They will not “pick one over the other” (Karvelas “Black and White” 6). They will be “proud of their Aboriginal heritage without it defining or constraining them and at the same time … will be able to get on with their lives and hopefully be successful in their own special way”. Citing the Hindmarsh Island case as an instance, he is critical of the cultural fraud and misrepresentation of history that he sees being used to gain access to government funding. He refuses the logic of White responsibility for Aboriginal progress, and instead, while recognising cultural difference, sees that Aborigines have to also “live by the usual obligations and social contract”. That is, as he says, he rejects the “separatist double standard” (“Aborigines Ill-Served”).

While proud of her Aboriginal ancestry, Pholi renounced the advantages to be had on the basis of a letter from an organisation proclaiming her to be Aboriginal. On that basis alone, she says, she could:

harangue a room full of people with real qualifications and decades of experience with whatever self-serving, uninformed drivel that happened to pop into my head. For this nonsense, I would be rapturously applauded, never questioned, and paid well above my qualifications and experience. I worked in excellent organisations that devoted resources to recruiting, elevating and generally indulging people like me, simply because other people like me told these organisations that’s what they needed to do to “overcome Indigenous disadvantage”. In these organisations I worked alongside dedicated, talented and highly skilled people—and there may
have been room for one more [such] person if I hadn’t been there occupying a position designated for one of my “race”. In my years of working as a professional Aborigine, I don’t think I did anything that really helped anybody much at all, and I know that I was party to unfairness, abuses of power, wastefulness and plain silliness in the name of “reconciliation” and “cultural sensitivity” (“Why I Burned”).

This is a renunciation of the racist quality of the categoric Aborigine as one who has knowledge that is innately available to Aborigines and unavailable to non-Aborigines. It is a renunciation of the power it affords.

Pearson, from the community of Hope Vale (Cape York, Queensland), brings this thought together in the most powerful and productive way. He has said that he has multiple, overlapping identities, one an identification with non-Aboriginal Lutherans in the Barossa, and that they are simultaneously bonding and bridging identities (“Layered Identities”). He relinquishes none of his Aboriginality and works tirelessly for the realisation of Aboriginal collective rights to land and cultural autonomy. With Langton and Pholi, he says that race is not in itself a cause of need, and that “we should…do everything we can to assist disadvantaged people…on the basis of individual need—not race” (“Invaluable Lessons”; Perpitch). True to this, he has refused an offered place on the Prime Minister’s Indigenous advisory board, telling the PM that “my preference [is] to work on school reforms for the benefit of disadvantaged children generally, rather than Indigenous people alone” (Karvelas “Black and White” 1,6).

Pearson rejects the oppositions that dominate Aboriginal politics, including those of Aboriginality and humanity, and communal culture and individual success (“Individualism”). He says that he has learned from the Jewish community in Melbourne:

how a people and community live as striving individuals and families and yet maintain the important structures of their communal religion, heritage, language and identity. I learned how a liberal ethic in the private sphere can coexist with a communal ethic in the cultural sphere. I learned how you can be victimised by discrimination but never succumb to victimhood. I learned how you can never forget history but you must engage the future. (“Invaluable Lessons”)

This statement proposes that it is possible for Aborigines, as much as Jews, to negotiate cultural difference and a traumatic history. Contra the dominant politics, obligation to one’s cultural community can coexist with individuality beyond it. And ditto economic striving, which is necessary to cultural survival. This understanding is held by Pearson, Mundine, Langton, Yunupingu (Aikman), and Charlie Perkins, who Pearson argues (“Individualism”) was “clear [that] … individual endeavour and the pursuit of wealth … was not inconsistent with his Aboriginal identity”.

These individuals are enormously important. As others, they belong to several cultural worlds, minimally the notionally distinct Aboriginal and mainstream Australian, and they negotiate the inducements and pressures to shrink back from engagement with those other worlds. They blur and cross the boundaries between them. They actively sustain their bonds with the imagined Aboriginal community and their own locally-lived community, even as those bonds come under structured pressure. And, lik’ Pearson the worker for the disadvantaged and public intellectual, they identify as Australian and sustain their bonds with
other Australians, even as they too come under structured pressure. They celebrate their intertwined Aboriginality, Australianness and humanity. Pholi for example, says that after leaving her identified position, ‘it feels great to simply identify as a human being, and to work alongside colleagues that only know me as an ordinary wage-slave, and not as a pampered mascot’ (‘Why I Burned’). Their “difference” is ambiguous, since each subject position they adopt is necessarily contingent on social context and temporary. Moreover, they successfully and productively negotiate the ambiguity, partiality, fluidity and nuance that inevitably arise with their Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal interlocutors.

These individuals demonstrate that the shibboleths that have sustained policy and politics for so long—bounded uniqueness, monolithic oneness, binary difference, innocent victimhood—are not so, and they bring the evidence to Aboriginal and wider notice. Most importantly, they advocate for nuance rather than shibboleth. They argue for governmental action to support cultural distinction, and the need for cultural adaptation. They agitate for collective cultural rights, and the individual human rights that balance and sometimes contradict them. They demand the removal of structural impediments to Indigenous material equality, and they press Indigenous people to take responsibility for their own lives in order to realise the same.

Pearson has given practical expression to simultaneous bothness and nuanced difference. He has operationalised his “radical centrist” political stance in the “orbiting” of students between home and boarding schools and the provision of schooling that reduces the focus on culturally appropriate teaching and places more emphasis on core skill development. Mundine has written (“Four Giant Steps”) of the four principles guiding his work as the Prime Minister’s key adviser on Indigenous affairs. He aims to standardise governance regulations for Aboriginal organisations in order to make them more accountable, to increase private land ownership in order that it may generate an economic base, to develop greater social stability, and to enhance openness to wider interaction with the mainstream community.

These individuals’ advocacy is available in national media, and appears to be influencing journalistic commentary, political discourse and public policy. Indeed it may be contributing to the dawning popular realisation that Aborigines are much more than clones of the category, that their Aboriginality does not alone define them. A hint of this realisation is evident on the cover of a recently published book on Australian artists. The book (Payes) features the face of renowned Aboriginal artist John Mawurndjul over the title *Australian Artists*. Neither Mawurndjul’s gender nor his Aboriginality is mentioned; he is simply an Australian artist. Another hint of the development of less restrictive popular understandings of Aboriginality was evident in a 2013 newspaper story on the actor Debra Mailman, in which it is made clear that her Aboriginality is at times of zero relevance. Mailman identifies strongly with her Aboriginality and plays Aboriginal characters, but she is also “cast [in all manner of roles beyond those] because she’s bloody brilliant, not because she’s indigenous” (Lehmann 13). In such roles, she transcends her Aboriginality. These are the new Aboriginal subjects of contemporary times, holding onto and escaping the institutionalised master subject position.

**Policy nudges to a more productive politics**

The bulk of this essay is an analysis of some of the ways in which a socially just policy framework has come to have counter-productive consequences for its intended beneficiaries. The analysis proposes that a problematic tendency in Aboriginal politics is its assertion of
implacable difference and utterly imposed disadvantage, and its rejection of adaptation that may permit equality. The analysis also proposes that it is the governmental emphasis on rights accrued on the basis of essentialist difference and victimhood that is fuelling the drift to counter-productive essentialism. Certainly, difference and disadvantage continue, and the emphasis on rights is necessary. But the political utility of difference and disadvantage has seduced many Aboriginal political actors into their strategic manipulation, and to persisting in that manipulation despite its growing negative consequences.

Having nudged identity politics in this direction surely it is reasonable to ask then, what public policy can do to nurture Aboriginalities like those above, since they apparently escape, or at least successfully negotiate, the negative consequences. Some careful corrections to policy may build on structural adjustments already made, while nudging Aboriginal political leaders to direct their energies towards the continuing (if changing) distinction, bothness, simultaneous rights as Aborigines and obligations as citizens, and inclusion in the wider society of those Aboriginalities. Any correction would need to account for the everyday realities of cultural and subjective intersection and multiplicity, and the perceptual reality of the imagined Aboriginality that infiltrates and complicates the former. Any correction would aim to weaken the current invitation to authenticity, binaries and victimhood, and invite engagement with bothness, ambiguous difference and healthy change. The latter is to adopt Langton’s (“The End” 14, original emphasis) conception of realising “healthy cultural continuity” by adapting some cultural practices.

Such corrections are necessary if the outcomes on which public policy and Aboriginal politics agree—cultural particularity alongside the safety and security of social equality (see Langton “The End” 15)—are to be realised. Here, I flag three approaches that may contribute to the aim of enhancing the attractiveness (in the first instance to the elites) of a refined identity politics. In effect, they continue to support recognition while giving a touch more weight to redistribution in the recognition/redistribution pair, and continue to support particularity while giving a touch more weight to the universal in the particularity/universality pair.

**Attendence to locality, internal margins and individuality**

The categoric Aboriginal subject is clearly necessary for policy attention, program design, practitioner training and the like. It must though, be refined by taking account of the many factors that qualify it. The Aboriginalities of remote and urban contexts are not the same, and can be differentiated. The valorisation of an undifferentiated ancestral culture as the hallmark of authentic Aboriginality drives those in the remote north to hold onto aspects of that culture that are problematic in terms of social equality. And the lack of authenticity against the same yardstick drives those in the long settled south-east to postethnic mimicry. Some winding back of those drives can be achieved by institutionalising the recognition that the Aboriginal community and culture of each region—Arnhem Land, the western desert, Cape York, Redfern or Tasmania—is a locally-specific mix of, at the minimum, continuing substantive elements of ancestral culture (like language or classificatory kinship), elements of culture generated in colonial and early national times (like cattle culture or country music), and those emerging from the contemporary relationship with settler-Australia and the world. Each therefore also includes the imagined categoric culture and community, with the imagined/performative difference often highly significant in southern urban locales.

Two other complicating factors need to be considered. One, the current over-emphasis on what is a masculinist version of ancestral culture secures the double marginalisation of
women and children, and their rights (as well as those of the elderly and members of weaker clans and families). Two, the current reliance on the categoric subject, which ignores the increasingly “expansive” individualities that extend beyond it. Though the borderlines are not neatly defined, this is more the case in urban areas where cultural intersection is the everyday reality. Urban people are more integrated in mixed neighbourhoods, schools and workplaces, have greater opportunity for work and access to services, and are less shaped by substantive ethnic difference (though influenced by its perceptual palimpsest). To the extent that the categoric subject (always already less than the full person) and its assumed character and needs prevails, it fails individuals.

Recognition of these factors can be institutionalised in policy frameworks, programs, funding arrangements, organisational structures and the like. Recognition of place-based Aboriginality may mean that more of the dedicated Indigenous affairs budget is directed to remote regions where socio-economic disadvantage due to remoteness, lack of opportunity and substantive cultural difference is greatest (see Rothwell “Place, Not Race”; Scott; Hunter). This may mean that in urban areas, general budget can fund more standard needs for employment, aged care, family stability and English literacy, and so reduce the extent to which urban people can ‘profiteer from the suffering of’ remote people by performing the subject (Scott). However, the task is not so simple. If the key to reform is that policy better matches the various Aboriginalities, the approach in urban settings must attend to the variability and fluidity of intercultural individuality, as well as the subtle but insistent attitudinal and behavioural impact of the perceptual Aboriginal reality. This implies careful, unsentimental discrimination between the confusingly intertwined Aboriginalities, unswayed by the widespread faith in the latter, but cognisant of its importance. Similar careful assessment of the possible impacts of policies and programs on women and children, perhaps making funding conditional on their interests being met, may lead to greater accountability and reduce their internal marginalisation.

Examples from mental health, aged care and child welfare may illustrate. If, as appears to be happening, Aborigines begin to see themselves as “proud of [their] Aboriginal heritage but … fundamentally no different from [their] fellow Australians” (Scott; and see Dillon “Culture”), employment may be as basic to their social status as it is for others. Accordingly, their mental ill-health may be seen as not only a product of the categoric subject’s traumatised cultural difference (real and imagined), but also about having a job (Dillon “Culture”). Coming to this conclusion, and deciding the weight of each factor, will be more likely (though not presumptively so, given individuality) in urban locales. Similarly, where person-centredness refers to the provision of health care on the basis of the individual and the specific condition (see Moore “Interculturality”), it may be that an Aboriginal person’s aged care needs are determined primarily by say, his/her dementia and less by Aboriginality, though the imagined component of that Aboriginality may be a significant factor to take into account in providing individually-sensitive care. In the provision of out-of-home child care, the Indigenous Child Placement Principle may sensibly accord more importance to the child’s full individuality and human need for nurturance by more readily accepting caring non-Indigenous families. This is especially the case where a child has multiple heritages (see Kennedy “Orphans”, “White Parents”; Shanahan). In each of these cases, Aboriginality may not be the prime factor in determining need and care (and the categoric Aboriginality is certainly not that factor).

Fostering of structured dialogue across difference
Refinements that institutionally respect local Aboriginalities, multiple identities and full individualities may nudge the political elites to moderate their focus on capital C Culture. The intent is to de-incentivise investment in the categoric Aboriginality’s difference and disadvantage, and incentivise investment in bothness. Bothness implies the retention of socio-cultural distinction alongside openness to wider interaction, and maintenance of both internally bonding and externally bridging identifications and behaviours. Though cities provide opportunities for contact and interaction, circumstances may still not lead people to engage in negotiation across their compound differences. They may choose to live for instance, in ethnically-crowded suburbs (as Latinos in Los Angeles, see McConnell), or adopt an indifference to difference (van Leeuwen). Moreover, contact does not necessarily lead to better relationships (Fozdar; Lloyd and Robinson). Governments can though, facilitate conditions that may “lure people” (Trappenburg) into interaction and disturb segregation by instituting contexts like sports, schools, neighbourhoods and civic deliberation that require dialogue across difference (McCoy and Scully; Van Leeuwen 637; Vermeulen and Verweel).

Pearson’s notion of orbiting between home and schools and home and workplaces (and Mundine’s fourth pillar), can provide such contexts for ethnic mixing. As in the case of African Americans, interaction, particularly in adolescence, can result in more flexible conceptions of self (Steinbugler). In this light, the current focus on staffing Aboriginal organisations exclusively with Aboriginal people may be better directed at fostering simultaneous mixing. Incentives may be provided to interest remote community schools and medical centres in hiring a mix of local Aboriginal, urban Aboriginal, and non-Aboriginal staff. Participants’ structured dialogue across difference can contribute to and rely on critical intercultural literacy becoming a self-conscious part of life, as in the following.

**Provision of critical intercultural education**

It has been suggested that the acknowledgement of complexity demands that the categoric subject be retained, like a Bourdieuan field, as a rough guide that is to be refined according to locale, sub-group and individual. This suggestion comes with the demand that local managers and deliverers of service have a highly developed capacity for informed discretion in implementation (see Moore “Interculturality”). Only they can know the local and individual context and so only they can make sensitive decisions. To make the decisions, each case requires appreciation of the nuances of the local Aboriginality and individuality. This in turn requires a highly developed critical intercultural capability. The universal competence in negotiating interculturality—as member of minority or majority—and the professional capability to make informed discretionary decisions in respect of a subjectively intersected clientele, are increasingly matters of citizenship, and so imply a national intercultural education. A well-designed Indigenous Australian Studies can make an important contribution to such an education. It can for instance, usefully promote as positive role models those whose Aboriginality is expansive and inclusive, insofar as they are demonstrably both Aboriginal and citizen. It can teach the critical cultural literacy needed to understand and negotiate the contemporary world (e.g. Nakata “Cutting a Better Deal”; Twine), and the personal resilience needed to do so (e.g. Rayburn and Guittar). This is, in effect, a long-term approach to peace-building.

**Conclusion**

Though successfully governing complex circumstances such as those of the contemporary Aboriginal is certainly difficult, and the suggestions here need much development, their aim should be clear. It is to open up the concept of Aboriginality, to conceive of it as capable of retaining distinctiveness, though not an authorised distinctiveness exclusive of either others
or fluidity of identity. Ultimately, the corrections here will depend on such a conception of expansive Aboriginalities being institutionalised. It is to be hoped for instance, that as Aborigines’ subjective complexity and intersecting mix of cultural, individual and citizen needs gain acceptance, the “cultural fraud” (Aird) that occurs in enacting “authentic” difference may come under public scrutiny and hence begin to diminish. It may be that such scrutiny and challenge to the hegemony of the imagined Aboriginality is emerging, with decisions like that of the Full Family Court of Australia to recognise the claims of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous parents where they clash (Overington; Family Court of Australia). Another sign of scrutiny and perhaps challenge was apparent in a Hobart (Tasmania) Magistrates Court’s decision in the case of a number of Aborigines who had been arrested for trespass while protesting against the construction of a new road. They had defended their action by claiming that the construction affronted their spiritual connection with the land in question, but the magistrate ordered them to provide written substantiation of the claim (Arndt). Such scrutiny may dissuade the political elites from their investment in authenticity.

With other approaches intent on similar cautionary effect, these approaches may reduce the extent to which particularly urban Aborigines perform the categoric subject. They may help other Australians (who have an interest as citizens and participants in the welfare state) develop more sophisticated understandings of Aboriginality and so reduce the stereotype threat against Aborigines. None of the approaches undermine Aboriginal culture or self, but they do undermine the imagined categoric culture and the political reliance on it. They do so to escape the thrall of the authenticity that drives the retention of unhealthy aspects of culture, the performance of a stereotypical Aboriginality, the division that attends it, and to “closing of the gap”.

Works cited


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