Beyond Black and White
Essentialism, hybridity and Indigeneity

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Introduction

Constructions of Indigenous identity have been a preoccupation of both the Australian popular imagination and the Australian nation-state from the earliest days of colonization (McCorquodale 1997; Chesterman and Galligan 1998; Gardiner-Garden 2003). Historically, non-Indigenous approaches to defining and understanding Indigeneity have focused on the need to surveil and control the socialization, mobility and biological reproduction of those with some descent from pre-colonial people of Australia (Dodson 1994). In an analysis of over 700 pieces of legislation McCorquodale (1986) found 67 different definitions of Indigeneity. Much more recently Indigenous people have begun to mark out our own discursive space in which to debate the meaning of Indigeneity in contemporary Australia (Taylor 2001).

Although some have expressed understandable distaste at the thought of non-Indigenous people defining their Indigeneity (Huggins 2003, 60), such defining (whether official or popular) unavoidably involves both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in ‘a process of dialogue, of imagination, of representation and interpretation’ (Langton 1993, 33). It is also clear that the fluid and contextual nature of identity over time and place is not particular to either Australia or the Indigenous context (Merlan 2009). There are innumerable types of human identity which vary across many aspects of experience, including race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, class, physicality, language, religion and profession to name only a few. All these identities are complex, multi-faceted socio-historical constructs which are established through public acts of self-representation, private accountings of oneself and the experience of being named by others (Jenkins 1994), including by prevailing discourses. Although I will focus here on racial identities and Indigenous identities more specifically, it must be noted that ‘we do not experience the world only as Indigenous or non-Indigenous’ (Cowlishaw 2004b, 70–71) but also through many other facets of our identity which we adopt and/or are ascribed to us by others.

Over the past few decades Indigenous people in Australia have been engaged in debates about Indigenous identity (Piper 1992; Langton 1993; Anderson 1997; Oxenham et al. 1999; Foley 2000; Anderson and Grossman 2003; Gorringe et al. 2011). One element of these debates has been the implicit or explicit goal of creating a distinct, coherent and relatively homogeneous pan-Indigenous social and political community. It has been suggested that only within this
haven of pan-Indigeneity can Indigenous people ‘resist the seduction of assimilation and confidently work at rebuilding a unique identity’ (Aris 1988, 136). If so, such a pan-Indigenous community may be a necessary element in surviving ongoing colonial imperatives by the Australian nation-state (Dodson 1994; Webner and Modood 1997, 249; Russell 2001, 76). Also, instrumentality aside, such a communal shared identity is a pleasurable and empowering experience for many (Ang 2001, 11).

However, despite assertions to the contrary (Dodson 1994, 9), Indigenous constructions of (pan-)Indigeneity also involve elements of boundary construction and ‘policing’ which seek to construct Indigenous and non-Indigenous identities in relation to specific modes of recognition (Povinelli 2002) that are ‘mutually impermeable and incommensurable’ (Gilroy 1993, 65). Such policing serves to alienate past and potential future Indigenous people (O’Regan 1999, 194–195) or force those who inhabit Indigeneity into a ‘prison-house’ of identity (Ang 2001, 11; Scott 1992, 18; Oxenham et al. 1999, 70) that may isolate them ‘from contemporary life and full citizenship’ (Brydon 1995, 141) and so reduce the social and political power of the Indigenous community over the long term (Moore 2008, 2011).

The ambivalence and alienation resulting from constructions of Indigeneity are especially acute for many urban Indigenous people who live in increasingly anonymous communities (Yamanouchi 2010). Not only are such constructions entangled in imprimaturs (or ‘certificates’) of Indigeneity as a source of conflict (Cowlishaw 2004a; Grieves 2008; Yamanouchi 2010), but many urban Indigenous people are ‘being called upon to represent and produce [c]ulture in iconic forms such as painting, dancing and other performances and representations [that] … disturb cultural adjustments and established social relations’ (Cowlishaw 2011, 170). The powerful tropes of Indigeneity mobilized during this boundary construction interpellate every Indigenous person, without regard to their individual characteristics, through a plethora of stereotyped images (Morrissey 2003b, 191) and broader tropes of authenticity (Gorringe et al. 2011) that coalesce around specific fantasies of exclusivity, cultural alterity, marginality, physicality and morality.

**Exclusivity and cultural alterity**

In order to challenge prevailing stereotypes, Indigenous people are often required publicly to confess our intimate subjectivities (Anderson 1997, 5; Nakata 2003, 134–135). Although this requirement may be a manifestation of the colonial gaze, such confessions can serve to remind us of the situated and partial nature of knowledge (Russell 2001, 73). As such, I will utilize autobiography as a rhetorical construction (Ang 2001, 24), along with contemporary scholarship on identity both in Australia and abroad, to explore the aforementioned fantasies of Indigeneity.

In declaring the particularity of my Indigeneity, I recognize that I will inevitably be interpellated by readers in ways which either establish or undermine my authority to speak on the fraught issue of Indigenous identity.

I identify racially as an Aboriginal-Anglo-Asian Australian. Along with scholars such as Ang (2001, viii) and Russell (2001, 98), my personal history compels me to identify as more than just Indigenous and as other than exclusively White, while moving beyond this dichotomy in also recognizing my Asian heritage. Like Russell (2001, 98), I refuse to ‘surrender my other identities’ in order to be Indigenous and, as such, I also identify as ‘and/or’ as well as ‘not/nor’ Aboriginal-Anglo-Asian. Descended from both Indigenous and Euro-Australian ancestors, I am both colonizer and colonized, both Black and consummately White (Lehman 2004).

Many Indigenous Australians also share my diverse racial background, with, for instance, 23% of Indigenous people reporting ‘North-West European’ ancestry in the 2006 Census (Australian
Bureau of Statistics 2010). Furthermore, in 2006 over half of all Indigenous people in a marriage or de facto relationship had a non-Indigenous partner (Heard et al. 2009), with over 80% of children from ‘mixed’ parentage adopting an Indigenous identity (Ross 1999). Yet, despite this heterogeneity in the Indigenous community, asserting a multi-racial Indigenous identity is neither common nor straightforward because racial loyalty demands that individuals choose to be either exclusively Indigenous or exclusively non-Indigenous (Boladeras 2002, 131; Cowlishaw 2004a, 114). Those, like me, who refuse this compulsion in the hope of creating a hybrid space of multiplicity (Russell 2002, 141–142), instead find ourselves inhabiting ‘a strange in-between space’ (Russell 2002, 139), where we are frequently not accepted as Black (Cowlishaw 2004a, 116) and where we are subject to the opprobrium directed at ‘the half-different and the partially familiar’ (Gilroy 2000, 106). The prospect of such derision combined with the demands of racial loyalty are evident even in otherwise excellent scholarship on Indigenous identity, which seamlessly reinforces exclusive Indigeneity by emphasizing Indigenous heritage in the contributor biographies, to the exclusion of non-Indigenous heritage (Oxenham et al. 1999, 32–50).

Due, in large part, to my grandmother being a member of the Stolen Generations, I do not speak an Aboriginal language, I do not have a connection with my ancestral lands or a unique spirituality inherited through my Indigeneity, I have little contact with my extended family and the majority of my friends are non-Indigenous. Also due to this same history, I am a middle-class, highly educated professional working in the field of Indigenous health. As such I am frequently interpellated as Indigenous and called upon to deploy my Indigeneity in a professional context, while at the same time I am labelled by some as an inauthentic ‘nine-to-five black’ or a ‘coconut’ who has stolen the place of a ‘real Aborigine’ (Paradies 2005). Despite assertions by some Indigenous scholars that a unique spirituality (Foley 2000) or relationship to land (Moreton-Robinson 2003) epitomizes Indigeneity, the available statistics suggest that many Indigenous Australians fail to conform to the fantasy of cultural alterity. For Indigenous Australians aged 15 years or over in 2008, 60% of us did not speak any words of an Aboriginal language and 38% of us did not identify with a particular clan, tribal or language group. Only 6.7% of Indigenous households included extended families (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2011).

Moreover, there is a growing Indigenous middle class as demonstrated by the fact that the proportion of Indigenous people with a Bachelor degree increased two-fold from 3% to 6.5% between 2002 and 2008, with 18% of Indigenous people in 2008 reporting their occupation as either managers or professionals (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2002; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2011). Yet, despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that, in absolute terms, our lot as Indigenous people is improving, there is a prevailing misconception that ‘if you’re middle-class you can’t be Aboriginal’ (Boladeras 2002, 135; McKee 1997). Being educated, well remunerated or simply enjoying material assets ‘can expose one to suspicion of wanting to be white’ (Cowlishaw 2004a, 113; Purdie et al. 2000; Grant 2002). Although many Indigenous people rightly desire the privileges that, until recently, have been synonymous with Whiteness, such desire is associated with being less Indigenous (Dudgeon and Oxenham 1989; Cowlishaw 2004a, 116).

Marginality

There is no doubt that Indigenous people have suffered a deplorable history of marginalization, discrimination and exclusion that continues to this day (Paradies et al. 2008) or that such a history has led to a ‘solidarity grounded in a common experience of subordination’ (Portes 1998, 9). However, it is also evident, from international contexts, that, when group subordination is premised on the impossibility of transcending such subordination, the achievement of individual
success is discouraged. Social norms are formed which seek ‘to keep members of a downtrodden group in place and force the more ambitious to escape from it’ (Portes 1998, 9). This emphasis on marginality risks reinforcing the danger of fatalism which pervades the minds of many Australians (Brough 1999) who, faced with the myth of worsening Indigenous disadvantage, believe that there is no solution to this intractable problem and hence no point trying to address it. Furthermore, in our individualistic Western culture it is far too easy to blame such ‘intractable’ disadvantage on Indigenous people themselves (Brough 1999; Aldrich et al. 2007).

Physicality

Arguably even more prevalent than the fantasy of marginality is the pernicious fantasy of the ‘Indigenous look’. Along with many other Indigenous Australians I fail to match the stereotyped physicality of an Indigene: that is, I have white skin and European features. Despite assertions to the contrary (Perkins 2004, fn 3), it is clear that skin colour and physicality are ‘exceptionally important in the recognition and validation of Aboriginal identity’ (Boladeras 2002, 147; Schwab 1994, 94; Oxenham et al. 1999, 79–82), as they are in related international contexts (Cunningham 1997). Fair-skinned Indigenous people experience denial, scorn and disbelief from other Indigenous and non-Indigenous people alike (Piper 1992; Dudgeon et al. 2000; Lumby and McGloin 2009). This perennial interrogation of their identity leads to acute anxiety (Foley 2000; Purdie et al. 2000) as well as ‘ambivalence, and doubts about themselves as “real” [Indigenous] people’ (Boladeras 2002, 147; Holt and McKay 2004). This intense questioning of authenticity is due to the profound disruption that white-skinned Indigenous people represent for the Black–White racial dichotomy, so fervently embraced in Australia. As one person put it, ‘sometimes … it would be just a lot easier to say I’m not Aboriginal’ (Boladeras 2002, 116). Yet many people choose publicly to identify as Indigenous, exposing themselves to ‘an uneasy pathway through life … strewn with doubt, disbelief and confrontation’ (Boladeras 2002, 153).

For me, as for many other descendants of the Stolen Generations (both fair-skinned and dark), it ‘was the choice of others that I be denied the shared experiences … that contribute to an Aboriginal identity’ (Russell 2002, 137–138). However, unlike Russell (2002, 137–138), I do not accept such an essentialized view of Indigeneity and I refuse to recognize that, among individuals who have Indigenous ancestry, there is a group of people who ‘qualify’ as Indigenous and a group who don’t. Indeed, it is disturbing that Russell is reluctant to identify as Indigenous, in part from fear of ‘other people’s reactions, especially those of Aboriginal people’ (2002, 141–142). Similarly, Kathryn Hay (Tasmanian parliamentarian and former Miss Australia) is ambivalent about identifying as Aboriginal ‘because of what people would expect if I said I was Aboriginal’ (Purcell 2002, 234–235). Clearly, such trepidation at being ‘caught out’ as inauthentic arises from the deleterious notion that ‘there are protocols and ethics to adhere to when “becoming Aborigines”’, which require ‘years of hard work, sensitivity and effort’ to master (Huggins 2003, 63). Such purported ‘protocols’ lead to the questioning, challenging and doubting of Indigeneity and lead to academics like Russell (2001, 98) stating that, as someone ‘raised to be part of the mainstream white community I feel incapable of stating that I am Aboriginal’.

Morality

A particularly troubling fantasy of Indigeneity is the positioning of Indigenous people as inherently morally and epistemologically superior to non-Indigenous people (Kowal and Paradies 2005a). Although this phenomenon is driven by non-Indigenous attempts to mitigate their privileged position (Land and Vincent 2005) and assuage the guilt of continuing colonization,
such a positioning is often misused by Indigenous people (see Paradies 2006a for an example). As noted by others (Langton 1993, 27; Stanley and Wise 1993, 227; Cowlishaw 2004b, 64; Langton 2011), the idea that Indigeneity is synonymous with suffering (see Russell 2002, 141–142) and marginality, together with the misconception that such ‘victimhood’ bestows privileged access to social truths (see Palmer and Groves 2000; critiqued by Warren and Sue 2011), leads to uncritical acceptance of the views, opinions and scholarship of Indigenous people about Indigenous issues. This phenomenon is sometimes also accompanied by a corresponding rejection of non-Indigenous (read: White) views that are portrayed as ‘tainted with racism’ (Cowlishaw 2004b, 65) and a more general labelling of White people as racist (Kowal 2012). Such moralistic positioning is untenable given the various and contradictory views that Indigenous people hold. More importantly, such an approach fails to recognize that engaging in genuine debate and disagreement with Indigenous people is a sign of intellectual respect (Land and Vincent 2005).

This instinctive urge to foist moral rectitude onto those who are oppressed and marginal (Hage 2003, 116) also leads far too many to conclude that repugnant acts such as racism cannot, by definition, be perpetrated by Indigenous people. Of course, this reasoning is fallacious, there being ‘no reason why those subjected to racism of the worst kind cannot be racist themselves’ (Hage 2003, 116–117). Similarly, as noted by Cowlishaw (1988, 243) and Russell (2001), the view that being Indigenous requires one to resist White hegemony or strive to alleviate the disadvantage of Indigenous people (see Huggins 2003, 64) also inappropriately portrays Indigenous people as intrinsically virtuous. These moral qualifications, that some would have us espouse as prerequisites of Indigeneity, evince a profound failure to recognize that ‘wisdom and virtue are as unevenly distributed among Indigenous people as elsewhere’ (Cowlishaw 2004b, 71).

Summary

Taken as a whole, these fantasies of Indigeneity raise the question of ‘who is a “real indigenous” person’ (Smith 1999, 72) and, through processes of forced inclusion, which are never completely successful (Ang 2001, 83), protocols of cultural survival end up replacing ‘one form of tyranny with another’ (Appiah 1994, 163). The ‘border patrol is kept busy erasing and denying whatever does not or will not fit’ (Ferguson 1993, 165), repudiating the variety and complexity of contemporary Indigenous Australia (Muecke 1992) by prescribing ‘what behavior, work, interests, endeavours, writing, art, poetry, ambitions, dreams, aspirations—are essentially Aboriginal and those that are not’ (Pearson 2000, 63). This leaves Indigenous communities fragmented into those who can authentically perform Indigeneity and those who are silenced and/or rendered outside the space of Indigeneity because they cannot, or will not, perform (Griffiths 1995, 238; Smith 1999, 72).

To make matters worse, this community fragmentation cleaves to fault lines of power; with some Indigenous elites, in seeking to preserve the status quo, colluding with neo-colonial governments to coerce Indigenous people into performing an essentialized Indigeneity which compromises their ‘capacity to be individually—and differently—Aboriginal’ (Moore 2005, 188). Such fantasies allow the neo-liberal state to make an ‘impossible demand for authenticity’ in native title law, recognizing prior sovereignty only for those Indigenous people who can prove that they have ‘been relatively untouched by history’ (Schaap 2005, 19; Johnson 2009). In doing so, the state denies the existence of actual Indigenous people who, by adapting and changing, have survived colonialism while unavoidably shedding their pristine primeval identity.
Towards Indigeneity as an open signifier

Imperialism[‘s] … worst and most paradoxical gift was to allow people to believe that they were only, mainly, exclusively, white, or black.

(Said 1993, 408)

Internationally, it has been recognized that Indigeneity cannot be reduced to ‘oppositional relations between native peoples and their others’ (Merlan 2009, 319). To move beyond the binary dualism of Indigenous vs. non-Indigenous we need to recognize a ‘thoroughly hybridized world where boundaries have become utterly porous, even though they are artificially maintained’ (Ang 2001, 87–88). The collective history of Indigenous people in Australia should leave us with grave misgivings about disenfranchising others of their chosen identities (Morrissey 2003a, 59). We need to move beyond continued claims that ‘intangible cultural values, not racism or essentialism, inform Aboriginal people about who is Aboriginal and who is not’ (Grieves 2008, 301) and stop reinscribing the ‘presence of something precious and mysterious … into local Aboriginal people [while] assiduously avoid[ing] their actual circumstances and subjectivities’ (Cowlishaw 2010, 208).

It is therefore imperative that we adopt an approach to Indigeneity requiring the bare minimum of essentializing (Morrissey 2003a, 59) which avoids imprisoning Indigeneity into a fixed, frozen category of being (Dodson 1994; Johnson 1993; Gilroy 2000, 13). The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples states in Article 33 that ‘Indigenous peoples have the right to determine their own identity or membership in accordance with their customs and traditions’. In Australia, the Commonwealth working definition states that an ‘Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander is a person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent who identifies as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and is accepted as such by the community in which he (she) lives’ (Gardiner-Garden 2003, 4).

This Commonwealth definition, formulated in the 1980s, has since been widely accepted by various Australian governments, utilized by the High and Federal Courts (Gardiner-Garden 2003) andpredominantly accepted by the Indigenous community (Langton 1993, 29; Taylor 2001). Australian case law has made it clear that confusion or ambivalence about one’s own identity or debate between communities does preclude recognition as an Indigenous person. Moreover, the possibility of descent or simply a belief in such descent is sufficient (de Plevitz and Croft 2003; Federal Court of Australia 2011).

Embracing the Commonwealth working definition in its most inclusive form would mean accepting as Indigenous anyone with Indigenous ancestry who wishes to identify as such. The more inclusive United Nations definition would recognize the adoption of people into the Indigenous community who have no Indigenous ancestry (Fischer 2000; Oxenham et al. 1999, 85). For example this would include anthropologists who are sometimes ‘viliﬁed and ignored because they were not racially “Aboriginal”, even though on all the important tests they were considered by their host communities as kin and family’ (Langton 2011). Such an inclusive approach would also silence the acrimonious debate that has plagued famous ‘Black’ Australians such as Narrogin Mudrooroo (Colin Johnson) and Roberta Sykes—both of whom embrace notions of hybridity (Grifﬁths 1995, 240; Mudrooroo 1997; Kurtzer 2001), alongside others in Australia (Groves 1998, 79; Cowlishaw 2000, 8; Grant 2002; Lehman 2004; Selby 2004, 148) and abroad (Hall 2001).

I want to make clear that, unlike Hage (2003, 5) and Greer (2003), I am not proposing that all Australians become Indigenous. Rather, I recognize that reconciliation depends ‘on founding and sustaining a space for politics within which the emergence of a common identity is an ever
present possibility’ (Schaap 2005, 21). No approach to Indigenous identity can reverse the centuries of colonialism experienced by Indigenous people in Australia; nor is such an outcome desirable. Our ‘autonomy, individuality and creativity … should not be stifled by nonsense concepts of “true identity”’ (Pearson 2000, 63). Rather, an inclusive approach to Indigeneity allows us to celebrate the ‘extraordinary diversity of subjective positions, social experiences and cultural identities’ (Hall 1995, 225) that comprise Indigenous Australia (Groves 1998), while acknowledging that we have survived as Indigenous people only as a result of our ability, and that of our ancestors, to adapt and endure (Gilroy 2000, 13).

Such an approach transcends the compulsion to patrol identity borders which have been constructed around primitivist, romantic and colonial discourses (and which are being co-opted for neo-colonial and oppressive purposes) (Moore 2011) and starts us on the long and difficult journey of freeing ourselves from ‘myth-making’ and the internalized racism of identity politics (Oxenham et al. 1999, 59–64).

On this journey we may increase our political power by unreservedly allowing the more privileged and less marginal (amongst others) to join our ranks. On the other hand, there is a danger that inclusivity may ‘dilute’ the meaning of Indigeneity in popular and official discourse and undermine some of the gains made since the advent of pan-Indigeneity. As with any social change, such a journey would be a gamble with no assured consequences (Moses 2010). What is clear, however, is that we do not want such an inclusive approach to provide a ‘biological ticket … to enter the world of “primitivism”’ (Langton 1993, 30) nor allow the appropriation of Indigenous cultures or the specific benefits (e.g. land rights) associated with some of these cultures (Greer 2003, 17–20). To avoid this we, as Indigenous people and as a nation, must decouple Indigeneity from disadvantage and marginality (Gorringe et al. 2011), from cultural and physical alterity and from callow moral dichotomies. We must recognize the complexity of ‘a self-determining “changing-same”’ Indigeneity (Moore 2011, 434), in which people do not have to look a certain way, be radically different, live by particular moral beliefs/actions or inhabit social disadvantage to be Indigenous.

Such a decoupling would necessitate a more nuanced approach to affirmative action, positive discrimination and attempts to ‘Close the Gap’ in Indigenous disadvantage. It may require us to ‘consider the degree of disadvantage as the primary factor, and consider one’s [Indigenous] identity as a secondary factor’ (Dillon 2011) when allocating effort and resources in addressing Indigenous disadvantage. More generally, we must recognize Indigenous people as ‘individuals with multiple personal and professional identities, including [but not limited to] Indigeneity’ (Paradies 2005, 270). Because ‘it is ludicrous to suggest that [Indigenous] people are best placed to make decisions on how to reduce the gap simply because they are [Indigenous]’ (Dillon 2011) it will be necessary to consider ‘whether, and to what degree, affirmative action is aimed at helping an individual become more successful, at increasing diversity, or at aiding recipients who will then contribute to the goals of affirmative action themselves’ (Paradies 2005, 270).

Although, like Gilroy (2000, 6), I do not ‘see contact with cultural difference solely as a form of loss’, I am not suggesting that we refrain from reviving/preserving the diverse cultures associated with various Indigenous communities in Australia or that we cease to engage in judicious affirmative action designed to assist those Indigenous Australians who are disadvantaged (Paradies 2005). Rather, I am suggesting that we free Indigeneity from ‘identity straitjackets’ and recognize that, although the poor and the rich Indigene, the cultural reviver and the quintessential cosmopolitan, the fair, the dark, the good, the bad and the disinterested may have little in common, they are nonetheless all equally but variously Indigenous.
This chapter is a revised and updated version of Paradies 2006b, ‘Beyond Black and White: Essentialism, hybridity and indigeneity’.

The term Indigenous is used here to refer to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people. Although discourses of identity do vary between and within these two broad groups of people, a discussion of such variations is beyond the scope of this paper. Furthermore the terms Aboriginal and Black (as well as White) will also be used as appropriate, especially where quoted from other sources.

Myths of exclusivity, cultural alterity and essentialism are also being explored in international scholarship concerning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and their health.

However, it should be noted that four relatively essentialist principles are utilized by the United Nations Working Group in defining Indigenous peoples: priority in time in occupation of a specific territory; perpetuation of cultural distinctiveness; self-identification and recognition as a collectivity by others, including the state; and an experience of marginalization and dispossession either now or in the past (Kerrick and Lewis 2004, 5).

As noted by Anderson (1997), I recognize that the term ‘hybrid’ has historically represented transgression, sterility and lowness in the Australian Indigenous context. However, shunning this term because of such colonial connotations, as Anderson (1997) does, only serves to reinforce these connotations. Rather, my intention here is to co-opt and reclaim this term as constitutive of Indigenous people and hence destabilize the trope of the ‘authentic Indigene’ (see also Oxenham et al. 1999, 102–103).

References


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Foley, D., 2000. ‘Too white to be black, too black to be white’, *Social Alternatives* 19: 44–49.


Essentialism and Indigeneity


