

The Wentworth Lecture

The end in the beginning: re(de)finding Aboriginality

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An old man said:

I don't care how hard it is. You build Aboriginality or you get nothing. There's no choice about it. If our Aboriginal people cannot change how it is among themselves, then the Aboriginal people will never climb back out of hell (Gilbert 1978, 304-05).

But this takes us too far ahead in the story, towards the end, 'although the end is in the beginning' (Ellison 1952, 9). Since first contact with the colonisers of this country, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have been the object of a continual flow of commentary and classification. Even a fragment of the representation of and theory about Aboriginality captures the tenor of the visions.

A legacy of definition

To the early visitors, we varied from the noble savage to the prehistoric beast. For example:

[T]he natives of New Holland...[m]ay appear to some to be the most wretched people of earth, but in reality they are far more happier than we Europeans...They live in a tranquillity which is not disturb'd by the inequality of condition...¹

the poorest objects on the habitable globe...²

blood thirsty, cunning, ferocious, and marked by black ingratitude and base treachery...(Boyd 1882, 218-21)

[T]he Australian nigger is the lowest type of human creature about...But having one splendid point in which he is far ahead of the chinkie. He'll die out and the chinkie won't.³

In the law we were defined systematically, though variably, according to proportions of black blood:

an Aboriginal native of Australia or of any of the islands adjacent or belonging thereto⁴

any person of Aboriginal descent whose moral intellectual and physical welfare the board was to promote with a view to their assimilation into the general community.⁵

And then, depending on the year, variously:

a half-caste child whose age does not apparently exceed eighteen years⁶

a half-caste male child whose age does not apparently exceed 21 years⁷

every half-caste aged 34 habitually associating and living with an Aboriginal,⁸ excluding

a person less than quadroon blood who was born prior to the thirty first day of December, 1936.⁹

Aboriginal 'half-castes', in particular, came under the scrutiny of the ethnologists. They wrote, for example:

[T]here is no biological reason for the rejection of people with a dilute strain of Aboriginal blood. A low

percentage will not introduce any aberrant characteristics and there need be no fear of reversions to the dark Aboriginal type (Tindale 1941, 67).

They were classifiable into various hybrid types:

...first crosses of two types, second generation crosses of three types, 1/8, 3/8, f3, fx, 5/8, quadron, octoroon (Tindale 1941, 86).

And so it went on.

Their men of religion were also concerned to define us. According to some of their observations, we were held to be:

degraded as to divine things, almost on a level with a brute...In a state of moral unfitness for heaven...And as incapable of enjoying its pleasures as darkness is incapable of dwelling with light¹⁰

without God in the world, entirely lost to all oral and spiritual perception (Dredge 1845, 11).

Similarly, their hopeful educators assessed our capacity for learning. On the one hand, they were certain of our inherent handicaps and defects:

Having perfectly infantile judgements where compass of thought is required (Harris 1847, 214)

lacking in reflection, judgement and foresight (Field 1825, 224).

On the other, we represented a potential for manipulation:

Lively, interesting and present some hopeful ground to cultivate: but excessively idle and vagrant; from the rambling naked state of these poor natives they have generally been supposed as incapable of improvement but I am persuaded that under the blessing of god they are as capable of instruction as any other untutored savages¹¹

...materials, which although extremely crude are nevertheless good, the intellect buried in augean filth, yet we may find gems of the first magnitude and brilliance.¹²

Their men of science believed they could locate the definitive answers in our brains and blood:

[T]heir Aboriginal blood is remotely the same as that of the majority of the white inhabitants of Australia, for the Australian Aboriginal is recognised as being the forerunner of the caucasian race (Tindale 1941, 67)

showing anatomical characters very rare in the white races of mankind, but at the same time normal in ape types (Duckworth 1904, 69).

And we have been an ever-popular subject for portrayal in paintings or films. Initially, we appeared as the noble, well-built native, heroic, bearded, loin-clothed, one foot up, vigilant, with boomerang at the ready. Later, after we had fallen from grace, we appeared bent, distorted, overweight, inebriated, with bottle in hand. And more recently, we appear

ochred, spiritual, and playing the didjeridu behind the heroic travels of a black Landcruiser.

We even found our way into poetry:

flat as reptiles huddled in the scrub...A band of fierce fantastic savages...Staring like a dream of hell! (Kendall 1970, 70).

Every one of these statements is drawn directly from the words written about Indigenous peoples in this country. Yes, they have had a lot to say about us. And if you are overwhelmed by this litany of statements, made with a confidence only exceeded by their ignorance, they are but a fragment of what Indigenous peoples have born in body and spirit since we came into the view of the colonisers.

The prison knowledge builds

Since their first intrusive gaze, colonising cultures have had a preoccupation with observing, analysing, studying, classifying and labelling Aborigines and Aboriginality. Under that gaze, Aboriginality changed from being a daily practice to being 'a problem to be solved'.

I am not talking about ancient history. In 1988 at the national congress of the Returned Services League, Victorian state president Mr Bruce Ruxton, together with the national president, Brigadier Alf Garland, loyal disciples of the geneticists, called on the federal government to 'amend the definition of Aborigine to eliminate the part-whites who are making a racket out of being so-called Aborigines at enormous cost to taxpayers',¹³ and for some kind of genealogical examination to determine whether the applicant for benefits was a 'full blood or a half-caste or a quarter-cast or whatever'.¹⁴ Just last week, we once again heard calls from certain members of the National Party in Queensland for the federal government to insist that only people with more than 50 per cent Aboriginal blood be eligible to identify as Aboriginal.¹⁵ Clearly, such views have not gone away. The obsession with distinctions between the offensively named 'full bloods' and 'hybrids', or 'real' and 'inauthentic' Aborigines, continues to be imposed on us today. There would be few urban Aboriginal people who have not been labelled as culturally bereft, 'fake' or 'part-Aborigines', and then expected to authenticate their Aboriginality in terms of percentages of blood or clichéd 'traditional' experiences.

Similarly, the theories of the ethnologists, expounding the backward stages of evolution of the Aboriginal race, were vividly brought to life once

again just last year during the public debate over native title, when we were all told how Aboriginal people had failed to even invent the wheeled cart.¹⁶ Constant proclamations that Indigenous peoples are remnants of a past doomed to extinction, that 'the old Aboriginal world is now facing its final twilight' (Strehlow 1963, 456), and that Aboriginal people are 'powerless to defend themselves against the final onslaught' (Bennett 1978, 67) continue to construct us as innately obsolete peoples.

In all these representations, these supposed 'truths' about us, our voices and our visions have been notably absent. There may be an enlightened minority who have been willing to open their eyes and ears to allow the space for Aboriginal people to convey their Aboriginalities. But, as my colleague Marcia Langton so poignantly wrote, the majority of Australians '...do not know and relate to Aboriginal people. They relate to stories told by former colonists' (Langton 1993, 33). So today, to even begin to speak about Aboriginality is to enter a labyrinth full of obscure passages, ambiguous signs and trapdoors. The moment the question is asked, 'Who or what is Aboriginal?', an historical landscape is entered, full of absolute and timeless truths, which have been set in place by self-professed experts and authorities all too ready to tell us, and the world, the meaning of Aboriginality.

Nearly suffocated with imposed labels and structures, Aboriginal peoples have had no other choice than to insist on our right to speak back, to do as the old man said: to build and represent our own world of meaning and significance.

The emergence of Indigenous peoples in the international arena

In the early 1970s, the situation of the world's Indigenous peoples began to come to the attention of the international community. In 1972, the United Nations (UN) Sub-commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities commissioned the Study of the Problem of Discrimination against Indigenous Populations, to examine the situation of Indigenous peoples throughout the world (Cobo 1983). The study explicitly took up the question of definition, detailing all the criteria that governments have used to define Indigenous peoples. The most frequent were the so-called 'objective criteria'. These were, firstly, race or ancestry and, secondly, culture. The latter included religion, living under a tribal system, membership of an Indigenous

community, dress, language, residence in certain parts of the country, and livelihood, the latter often classified in terms of development or backwardness. Also noted were subjective criteria, such as group consciousness or self-identification, and acceptance by the Indigenous community.

Before providing a critique of the so-called objective criteria, I would like to give just a few of the examples reported in the UN study. In Indonesia, criteria for being classified as Indigenous have included 'not matching up to the standards of development required by the government in accordance with the ideals of organisation and development of Indonesian society', or 'having less ability to perform their social functions'.¹⁷ In Paraguay, one of the criteria used was that he/she is 'marginalised', 'backward', or 'outside of the economic realities of the country'.¹⁸ In Guatemala, if self-identification was thought to be dubious, questions of Indigenous dress, use of Indigenous language, and non-use of footwear were used to assist identification.¹⁹ In Bolivia, the national census classified people according to race, with the available categories being: 'white', 'Cholo' (that is, 'half-caste') and 'Indian'. The Cholos would include those persons of an Indian-white mixture and the more or less racially pure Indians who have learned to speak Spanish well, have mastered a skilled trade and have abandoned Indigenous dress. The Indian was identified as usually being dark-skinned, illiterate, speaking only a native tongue and providing the unskilled labour in the economy.²⁰

There is little need to argue the point that these supposedly objective definitions are ideological tools, designed to assist the state in applying its policies of control, domination and assimilation. The UN study itself recognised how value-laden the definitions were. The defining characteristics of 'Indigenous' were frequently described in unambiguously loaded language; Indigenous people were generally identified not in terms of their positive attributes, but in terms of what they lacked: they were 'under-developed', 'primitive', unable to speak the language of the non-Indigenous population, uneducated in the ways of the non-Indigenous population, 'backward'.

Even where the criteria were not so obviously biased, the study rejected any definition that relied exclusively on either descent or cultural characteristics. With respect to classifications based on blood percentages, it stated unambiguously that the scientific theory that there is an objective biological or genetic basis for race had been widely discredited.²¹ In other words, the Returned Services

League's dream of a genetic or blood test that would offer some 'true indication' and distinction was based on a fallacy. With respect to classification on the basis of cultural characteristics, the study recognised that it was inappropriate to define Indigenous peoples entirely in terms of an imagined culture, free from the influence of non-Indigenous societies. The reality was that, in virtually every region of the world, the colonising culture has pervaded the Indigenous cultures, and so cultural borrowings and transformations are always present. Thus, the study concluded that, while cultural considerations were important, they could not be considered absolute.

The study assessed the evidence it had gathered, in terms of internationally recognised human rights, and found that many of the processes currently supported or perpetuated by the world's governments contravened those rights. It concluded that:

the fundamental assertion [concerning any definition] must be that Indigenous populations must be recognised according to *their own perception and conception of themselves* in relation to other groups. There must be *no attempt* to define them according to the perception of others through the values of foreign societies or of the dominant sectors in such societies...[And] artificial, arbitrary or manipulatory definitions must, in any event, be rejected (author's emphasis).²²

Such a conclusion would be more than warranted by the international history of description, ascription, prescription, which the study revealed. What is especially powerful about the UN study is that it goes still further, referring not merely to a just response to oppression, but to fundamental human rights:

The [Indigenous] community has the *sovereign right* and power to decide who belongs to it, without external interference (author's emphasis).²³ No state must take, by legislation, regulations or other means, measures that interfere with the power of indigenous nations or groups to define who are their members.²⁴

The definition provided by the study remains the major reference point for the international community. It states that:

Indigenous communities, peoples and nations are those which, having historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing on those territories, or parts of them. They form at present non-dominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories, and their ethnic identity, as the basis

of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions and legal systems.²⁵

Continuity was defined to include a number of options, including ancestry, or aspects of culture, which were common to the Indigenous peoples

Asserting the right to self-identification

These findings have extremely important implications in terms of the recognition of Indigenous rights, not because the definition captures the truth of our identity, but rather because it recognises that identity must be self-identity and rejects all forms of imposed definition. While it provides characteristics which may be present, it does not seek to establish an exhaustive or closed definition, but rather to establish the process whereby definitions must be reached.

This right to control one's own identity is part of the broader right to self-determination; that is, the right of a people to determine its political status and to pursue its own economic, social and cultural development. It is a right guaranteed to all peoples in international law, by the first articles of both the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* and the *International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights*. It is also the right at the forefront of international Indigenous struggles. Indigenous peoples throughout the world recognise that, at the core of the violation of our rights as peoples, lies the desecration of our sovereign right to control our lives, to live according to our own laws and determine our futures. And at the heart of the violation has been the denial of our control over our identity, and the symbols through which we make and remake our cultures and ourselves.²⁶

Recognition of a people's fundamental right to self-determination must include the right to self-definition, and to be free from the control and manipulation of an alien people. It must include the right to inherit the collective identity of one's people, and to transform that identity creatively according to the self-defined aspirations of one's people and one's own generation. It must include the freedom to live outside the cage created by other peoples' images and projections.

The question of identity has been taken up explicitly by the UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations, where, despite significant opposition from certain of the world's governments, Indigenous representatives have consistently asserted that there can be no closed definition of 'Indigenous peoples'. The relevant provision in the current Draft

Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples does not provide any objective criteria whatsoever. It simply provides that:

Indigenous peoples have the collective and individual right to maintain and develop their distinct identities and characteristics, including the right to identify themselves as Indigenous and be recognised as such.²⁷

Similarly, *International Labour Organisation Convention 169*, the only UN human rights instrument explicitly dealing with the rights of Indigenous peoples, provides by way of definition:

Self identification as Indigenous or tribal shall be regarded as a fundamental criterion for determining the groups to which the provisions of the Convention apply.²⁸

Contemporary definitions in Australia

As I outlined earlier, historically we, the Indigenous peoples of this country, have been legally defined in terms of proportions of blood. Luckily, in the last thirty years, virtually all such definitions have been removed from the legislation. In the early 1980s, largely thanks to the work of WC Wentworth, the federal government adopted the following working definition:

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 or she lives.²⁹

This is now the working definition used for establishing eligibility for specific Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programs, and is used in Commonwealth legislation. It has also been accepted by the High Court as the interpretation of the expression 'Aboriginal race' in the constitution.³⁰

For Indigenous peoples, there is no doubt that self-determination and self-identification are their inherent and inalienable rights. In both this country and internationally, the principle of self-identification has been enshrined in the law. I think we need to acknowledge the significant work of all those who have brought us this far; it has been a significant achievement, when you reflect on the starting position, and even where we were just thirty years ago. However, in the world of Realpolitik, neither the existence, nor even the legal recognition, of a right is sufficient to guarantee its enjoyment.

This does not mean that we should not vigorously assert the right, nor that we cannot use all

available means to exercise it right now. However, there is ample evidence that Aboriginality will continue to be defined and constructed for Aboriginal peoples, regardless of the declarations of international human rights instruments or the Australian law. Neither moral righteousness nor legal guarantee is sufficient to prevent the actions and expressions of a system of bigotry and oppression, which continues to serve the agendas of the world's power brokers. Representations of Aboriginality are not simply isolated phenomena which can be eliminated. They are both weapons and symptoms of the oppressive relationship that exists between Indigenous peoples and colonising states.

In addition, we Aboriginal people must acknowledge for ourselves that today the 'enemy' cannot be neatly placed on the outside, nor simply eliminated by censoring those representations clearly imposed onto Indigenous peoples. As my colleague Marcia Langton wrote, 'both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people create Aboriginalities' (1993, 34). These constructions, however much we may wish to reject them, are the context in which we live. They inform not only the way others think about and react to us, but also the lived experience that we have of ourselves and of each other. They have also become the enemy within.

Thus, I see Indigenous peoples as having twin projects: at one level, we must understand the motivation behind the historical constructions of Aboriginality, and understand why they have had such a grip over colonising populations; simultaneously, we must continuously subvert the hegemony over our own representations, and allow our visions to create the world of meaning in which we relate to ourselves, to each other, and to non-Indigenous peoples.

The politics of definition

Turning to the first project, the question we ask is: If Aboriginality is neither a type of blood, nor a set of cultural characteristics, why have these definitions been so internationally pervasive? How is it that, in one instance, 'Aboriginal' includes 'a half-caste child whose age does not apparently exceed eighteen years', in another, 'a half-caste male child whose age does not apparently exceed 21 years', and in yet another, 'every half-caste aged 34 habitually associating and living with an Aboriginal'? How is it that 'Aboriginal' is, in one historical period, noble and

worthy, and in another, ignoble and corrupt? Without an understanding of the basis of the pervasive desire to define Aboriginality and control representations of Indigenous identity, the tenacity of such definitions makes little sense.

Clearly, no one could contend that the definitions are objective. The most definitive statement that one could make about them is that they are infinitely elastic. One could ask why particular types of definitions are created, reproduced and embraced by states and non-Indigenous peoples at particular times? If the images of Aboriginality do not actually reflect us, are not actually about us, what purpose have they served for those who constructed and adopted them?

The short answer to these questions is that the definitions have served to meet the various and changing interests and aspirations of those who constructed them, the colonising or 'modern' state. Where there was a need to create a boundary between 'primitive' and 'modern man', to legitimise 'progress', to justify particular economic and political developments, to promote a national identity for the colonial nation, or more specifically to control, manage or assimilate Indigenous cultures, Aboriginality has been made to fit the bill. In other words, Aboriginality became part of the ideology that legitimised and supported the policies and practices of the state.

At the most immediate level, constructions of Aboriginality are directly linked to the policies of 'management' and control of Indigenous peoples. They form part of the ideology that creates the framework in which the state can act upon and justify its treatment of Indigenous peoples, however disrespectful or abusive of our rights it may be.

Many of the popular images I referred to earlier served as tools in the overall policy of 'de-Aboriginalising' Australia, to establish a new nation with a European base. Take, for example, the image of Aboriginality as a timeless and unchanging culture: pristine, exotic, a relic of an ancient past. This true, pure-blooded, traditional Aborigine is at once posited as the arbiter of authentic Aboriginality, and as a member of a doomed race. Hence, all of us whose mothers were raped by white men, or who were forced or chose to incorporate other elements into our Aboriginality are 'not real Aborigines'. By defining Aboriginality in terms of purity of blood or purity of culture, the assimilation of those who did not fall within the narrow ambit of the definition could not even be considered cultural genocide, because the individuals concerned were seen as not actually being Aboriginal.

Where descendants of the original inhabitants could not be made to disappear, and remained as a continual threat to the purity of white Australia, ethnologists provided reassurance to society with scientific evidence and elaborate theories about the 'half-caste' and the 'hybrid', theories proving that such people had a genetic leaning towards their white parentage, and thus that their assimilation even had a biological basis. For example, one social scientist observed that:

the aborigines (sic) not of the full blood have been all along associates of the white man rather than the black, the patrilineal affinity superseding the matrilineal, even though fatherhood has so frequently been unacknowledged. Regarding his white associates as following a superior way of life to that of his Aboriginal kin, the coloured man has clung to the outskirts of the white community, while the Aboriginal has ostracised him... (Neville 1951, 275).

Similarly, if the accepted view was that Indigenous peoples were a backward remnant, the prehistory of European man, frozen in a distant continent while progress transformed and refined humanity elsewhere, then accepting that Aboriginality would naturally die out was simply a matter of acknowledging the inevitable. Thus, extermination was not a criminal act, but the expediting of nature. Policies designed to destroy or phase out Indigenous cultures were not cultural genocide, but the generous endowment of improvement. By extension, by representing Indigenous peoples as peoples without a social order, without a law, with no system of ownership, the doctrine of terra nullius became a logical conclusion. A people incapable of ownership cannot be party to a contractual transfer or negotiation; to take possession of the country was not theft, but acquisition of available goods.

A particularly poignant example of the manipulation of authentic Aboriginality is the mythology of Trucanini as the 'last Tasmanian Aborigine'. Having declared the very last Aboriginal person in Tasmania dead, her descendants could not, by definition, be Aboriginal. Aboriginality was extinct, the past, a closed book. To all those who experienced themselves as Aboriginal peoples of Tasmania, the official word was that they simply could not exist.

Yet another example of the ideological power of the definition is the exemption certificate.³¹ The Aborigines Protection Acts 1909-1943 placed all Aboriginal peoples under the protection

of the Welfare Board, in effect, depriving them of the basic civil, political and economic rights which were the birthright of all other Australians. Aboriginal people could not enter public places, such as government institutions or pubs, could not marry or move freely without permission, and in many cases could not vote. There was, however, an opportunity for Aboriginal people to enjoy the general rights. To do so, they were required to apply for an exemption certificate. Such certificates would be issued if, in the opinion of the board, they ought no longer be subject to the provisions of the Act.³² This action required that the individual concerned satisfied certain undefined criteria of the board, and that they declared that:

(a) they had not been convicted of drunkenness in the last two years; nor,

(b) committed any offence against the Aborigines Protection Act, the Police Offences Act, or the Crimes Act in the last two years.³³

In other words, the basic assumption was that Aboriginal people were incompetent to look after their own affairs, and were degenerates, drunkards and criminals unable to fulfil their status as social subjects. To be otherwise was to be an exception, and in effect to have moved away from Aboriginality. By loading the definitions with fixed and value-laden characteristics, and then attaching certain privileges or penalties to being Indigenous or non-Indigenous, any Indigenous person wishing to go outside the limited bounds of the definition, and not be classified as a degenerate drunkard and not be deprived of their basic economic, social, civil, and political rights, had to effectively give up their public Aboriginality.

The UN study similarly observed how, in various countries, basic policies of assimilation have been facilitated by systems of classification. For example, in Indonesia, a person considered a member of an Indigenous community could come to be considered a member of mainstream Indonesian society by conversion to Christianity or Islam, attainment of minimal literacy, or by the extent to which a person's economic activities were capable of producing acceptable levels of cash surplus.³⁴

Always looking for an image of themselves...

Looking more broadly, the definitions and constructions have not simply been for the control and management of Indigenous peoples. Our constructed identities have served a broader purpose of reflecting

back to the colonising culture what it wanted or needed to see in itself. The constructions of Aboriginality, in all their variations, have marked the boundaries which define and evaluate the so-called modern world. Whether Indigenous peoples have been portrayed as 'noble' or 'ignoble', heroic or wretched has depended on what the colonising culture wanted to say or think about itself.

At times, Indigenous people have been used to affirm the superiority of the colonisers, and to provide confirmation of the value of progress. By extension, the destruction or assimilation of the Indigenous cultures has become a necessary, and even morally correct, part of the battle to overcome 'the primitive', and thereby to save both Indigenous peoples and colonisers from a life that is 'nasty, brutish and short'. By our lack, we provided proof of their abundance and the achievements of 'progress'; by our inferiority, we proved their superiority; by our moral and intellectual poverty, we proved that they were indeed the paragons of humanity, products of millennia of development.

At other times, Indigenous people are used to create a counterpoint against which the dominant society can critique itself, becoming living embodiments of the romantic ideal, which offers a desolate society the hope of redemption and of recapturing what it feels it has lost in its march forward. Those who wish to present a critique of individualism point out that Aboriginality is about community; those who wish to highlight the detrimental effects of industrialisation on the environment point to Indigenous people as the original conservationists. We present a remaining, though strategically distant, image of what has been lost, and what could be regained.

Again my point is not about whether the content of these images is true or false. In fact, they may well contain elements of accurate representation. The critical point is that they have not been selected because they were true, but rather because the colonising culture needed to think they were true. In the construction of 'Aboriginality', we have been objects to be manipulated and used to further the aspirations of other peoples.

We are constantly defined as 'other', but we are never permitted to be genuinely independent, genuinely different. In fact, far from being recognised in our difference, in our own terms, we are always defined in terms of the colonising or defining culture. One could well ask, what is it about genuine difference which is so threatening that it must always be translated and sanitised into more of the same? One answer may be that to allow our difference and our independence would threaten the boundaries of

identity, knowledge and absolute truth, which give the subject a sense of power and control. If we are reclassified into the established categories, we are brought back into check. We may be seen as the opposite, the under-developed version, or even the unspoiled version. But, in all cases, Aboriginality is defined in terms of how it compares with the dominant culture.

Because Aboriginality has been defined as a relation, Indigenous peoples have rarely come into a genuine *relationship* with non-Indigenous peoples, because a relationship requires two, not just one and its mirror. Our subjectivities, our aspirations, our ways of seeing and our languages have largely been excluded from the equation, as the colonising culture 'plays with itself'. It is as if we have been ushered onto a stage to play in a drama where the parts have already been written. Choose from the part of the ancient noble spirit, the lost soul estranged from her true nature, or the aggressive drunkard, alternately bucking and living off the system. No other parts are available for 'real Aborigines'.

I would like to quote some words of other peoples, describing their experience of the processes I have described. Vine Deloria, a Native American Indian, wrote:

In 1969, non-Indians began to rediscover Indians. Everyone hailed us as their natural allies in the ancient struggle they were waging against the "bad guys". Conservatives embraced us because we didn't act uppity, refused to move into their neighbourhoods, and didn't march in their streets. Liberals loved us because we were the most oppressed of all peoples who had been oppressed...Blacks love us because we objected to the policies of the department of the interior...Which indicated that we were another group they could count on in coming to the revolution...Conservationists sought out Indians for their mystical knowledge of the land...It has been an exciting year (1970, 14-15).

And somewhat more tragically, Ralph Ellison, an African American, wrote:

I am an invisible man...I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me...It is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed everything and anything except me. Nor is my invisibility exactly a matter of bio-chemical accident to my epidermis. That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their inner eyes...(1952, 7).

Ellison's excruciating discovery of his invisibility is the tragedy of all who have been deprived of the right to be seen as full, independent human beings.

However, at the end of his novel, he has a crucial realisation which provides his, and our, way out of 'hell'. He says quite simply: 'I'm invisible, not blind' (1952, 464).

Throwing away the mirror

None of us has escaped the effect of false representation and invisibility. We feel it every day when we come into contact with the dominant society. We even feel it when we look into the mirror. Our experiences of ourselves, and of our Aboriginality, have been transformed by the representations.

It may be the case that the dominant representations of Aboriginality have reduced it to a relational concept. It may also be the case that Indigenous peoples constantly feel the gaze of the other and have internalised that gaze. However, this does not mean that we experience our Aboriginality only as a relation to non-Aboriginality, or as imposed representations. We have never totally lost ourselves within the other's reality. We have never fallen into the hypnosis of believing that those representations were our essence. We have never forgotten that we have an identity that cannot be reduced to a relation, and cannot be destroyed by misconception. Recalling Ellison, we may be invisible, but we are not blind. As a woman of the Quiche people of Guatemala said:

[I]n our communities, we never sat down to study or discuss issues like "look, this is our tradition, this is our language". We have maintained our culture not so much due to conscious effort as to daily practice...However, there is a moment in our personal lives, in our community...[w]hen we find it necessary to become conscious about who we are.³⁵

In the sanitised history of European settlement, it was always written that the Indigenous peoples of Australia did not resist. Similarly, to say that Aboriginality is nothing more than a relation to non-Aboriginality is to create another representation of us as peoples who accepted and submitted to the imposed structures.

Alongside the colonial discourses in Australia, we have always had our own Aboriginal discourses in which we have continued to create our own representations, and to re-create identities which escaped the policing of the authorised versions. They are Aboriginalities that arise from our experience of ourselves and our communities. They draw creatively from the past, including the experience of colonisation and false representation. But they are embedded in our entire history, a history which goes back a long time before colonisation was even an issue.

Those Aboriginalities have been, and continue to be, a private source of spiritual sustenance in the face of others' attempts to control us. They are also a political project designed to challenge and subvert the authorised versions on who and what we are. Self-representations of Aboriginality are always also acts of freedom. Aboriginal writer Mudrooroo Narogin wrote of the power of our Aboriginalities:

[to] heal the rape of the Aboriginal soul and the wound of being removed from one's mother tongue. Aboriginality would become the emergence of an Aboriginal voice to 'sing of the sad wounds of the whole people, hundreds of mouths forced into shaping the harsh sounds of an alien speech' (in Johnson 1990, 51).

In making our self-representations public, we are aware that our different voices may be heard once again only in the language of the alien tongue. We are aware that we risk their appropriation and abuse, and the danger that a selection of our representations will be used to once again fix Aboriginality in absolute and inflexible terms, that one character or one painting will be picked out as the authoritative archetype of Aboriginality, now the 'real Aboriginality' because it came from an Aboriginal person. However, without our own voices, Aboriginality will continue to be a creation for and about us. This is all the more reason to insist that we have control over both the form and content of representations of our Aboriginalities. All the more reason that the voices speak our languages.

In fact, the insistence on speaking back and retaining control are highly political acts. They are assertions of our right to be different and to practise our difference. They refuse the reduction of Aboriginality to an object, they resist translation into the languages and categories of the dominant culture. They are at times ancient, at times subversive, at times oppositional, at times secret, at times essentialist, at times shifting. It is for this very reason that I cannot stand here, even as an Aboriginal person, and say what Aboriginality is. To do so would be a violation of the right to self-determination and the right of peoples to establish their own identity. It would also be to fall into the trap of allowing Aboriginality to be another fixed category. And more than enough 'fixing' has already occurred.

However, this does not mean that Aboriginalities are without content. Nor does it mean that we are not intimately connected with our past. What we need to resist is an essentialism which confines us to fixed, unchangeable and necessary characteristics, and refuses to allow for transformation or variation.³⁶ But resistance to imposed categories is very different

from forbidding us to represent our cultures and peoples in terms of our past, or our distinct ways of being and seeing the world. The recent trend to charge self-representations by Indigenous peoples with the politically incorrect crime of 'essentialism' is little more than a modern extension of the politics of control over knowledge that has been going on since colonisation—black people being told what they can say, and how they can say it. Redfern come to academia. It is just another form of overpolicing.

The right to self-representation includes our right to draw on all aspects of our sense of our Aboriginality, be that our blood, our descent, our history, our ways of living and relating, or any element of our cultures. Certainly, the practice of fixing us to our blood or our romanticised traditions has been a cornerstone of racist practices. But depriving us of our experienced connection with the past is another racist practice. The relationship we draw with our past is not to be confused with the relationships with the past that have been imposed on us. One is an act of resistance, the other is a tool in the politics of domination and oppression.³⁷

When we talk about an Aboriginality based on the past of our peoples, we are not talking about fabricating an identity based on a past we have rediscovered or dug up; rather, we, the Aboriginal peoples, are already the retelling of the past.³⁸ Our memories are not chemicals in our heads, but our flesh and our voices and our ways of seeing. The past and the present and the future do not fall into distinct linear categories. The past cannot be limiting, because we are always transforming it. In all expressions of our Aboriginality, we repossess our past, and ourselves.

And the past cannot be dead, because it is built into the beings and bodies of the living. We do not need to re-find the past, because our subjectivities, our being in the world are inseparable from the past. Aboriginalities of today are regenerations and transformations of the spirit of the past, not literal duplications of the past; we re-create Aboriginality in the context of all our experiences, including our pre-colonial practices, our oppression and our political struggles. It is only a narrowness of vision, or a misconception of culture as a frozen state, which leads people to limit expressions of essential Aboriginality to the stereotyped pristine. The same Guatemalan woman quoted above said of her people's identity:

One can still be a Quiche although one lives in a better house or has a video, or even goes to university...I get very disturbed when we ourselves promote an image of the Indigenous peoples as something very poetic, very

thing real...There is a part which is folkloric...But it is not the base of the culture...It's an element of our lives. It's an element which has determined moments...Rather, it's the daily life which you can't see here, the daily life which isn't represented here, which makes us Indigenous...

Many things are changing in this time. But we remain Indigenous...Although certain things have changed in our thoughts, in our statements, in our traditions...We did not quit being what we are. There are always these roots that make you who you are. That make you different from the others.³⁹

The roots make us what we are, the connections between the past and present.

Far from being dead, passive or conservative, the past is dynamic, active and potentially revolutionary. It has been, and continues to be, a powerful reality in which we can root our autonomy, our sense of ownership of ourselves, and our resistance against assimilation. To paraphrase the philosopher Marcuse, there is a liberating power in remembrance.⁴⁰ And, in fact, what we are rediscovering is that our past, far from being a source of constriction, can be a source of freedom.

In this sense, the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies is a resource of freedom. It holds many of the memories and stories from which the contemporary and future voices of Aboriginality will emerge. It has also itself been a site at which the politics and power of knowledge have been challenged and revolutionised. There was a time when the collection of information about Aboriginal peoples was clearly part of the politics of colonial control, when it served to fix Aboriginality as a pristine culture, rooted in a distant time and place inaccessible to and disconnected from the majority of living Aboriginal peoples. Collecting material on Aboriginal peoples was a project designed to preserve the dead past and to provide future generations with the opportunity to look back at prehistory, safely bound in books and sealed behind glass. We could be pacified by being transformed from living peoples into blocks of intellectual real estate, reams of classifications and ethnographic curiosities. This knowledge contributed to a feeling of ownership and allayed the fears that we could not actually be controlled. It ensured that the past was something that was over, and that with it had gone authentic Aboriginality. This 'past Aboriginality' was never more than a memory or a story for living people, but separate from their lived reality.

As the past was once used as a trap for Aboriginality, we have seen a transformation, whereby Aboriginal peoples have reclaimed the key to the trap and have found the 'liberating power of remembrance' [sic]. The control that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples now have over the Institute is both a symbol and an expression of the shift in the politics of knowledge which we have achieved over the last thirty years.

In 1971, WC Wentworth gave a speech entitled 'Aboriginal Identity, Government and the Law'. In it, he looked at the relationship that Aboriginal peoples had with their own identity, and the pride or shame that was associated with being an Indigenous person in a historically racist society. He looked forward optimistically to a time when all Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians would value and respect Aboriginality. He noted that a significant factor in our attitude to our Aboriginality was our relationship with the past, and that pride in our past was a key to pride in ourselves.

The repossession of our past is the repossession of ourselves.

WC Wentworth himself is a man who has both possessed and transformed his past. He is of the stock of a people which colonised this country and our people, and in fact a direct descendant of one of the founders of the Australian constitution, a document in which Aboriginal peoples were invisible. It was his capacity to transform the past which allowed him to become a source of liberation for the future. And what we have achieved today owes much to his courage and willingness to challenge and transcend the stereotypes that dominated his generation.

The past and present work of the likes of WC Wentworth, and many others, has built a ground concentrated with the resources that will allow Indigenous peoples of the future to exercise our right to define and create ourselves and our lives, to write and sing and paint and tell ourselves, from the past into the future.

Our peoples have left us deep roots, which empowered us to endure the violence of oppression. They are the roots of survival, but not of constriction. They are roots from which all growth is possible.

They are the roots that protected our end from the beginning.

NOTES

1. James Cook's Journal, 1770, quoted in Smith (1960, 126).
2. George Clark, 1823, reported in the Church Missionary Society's *Missionary Registrar*, London, 1825, 100.

3. G. Inson and R. Ward, *The Glorious Years, Boomerang*, 17 December 1887.
4. This definition appeared in various Acts of the states and territories, from early legislation through to the 1960s, for example, the *Aboriginals Ordinance Act 1918* (NT).
5. *Aborigines Act 1957*.
6. *Aboriginals Ordinance Act 1918* (NT).
7. *Native Administration Ordinance* (1940).
8. *Aborigines Protection Act 1886*.
9. *Aborigines Amendment Act 1936*.
10. John Harper, investigating the establishment of a mission station at Batemans Bay, in Woolmington (1973, 18).
11. Mr Shelley to the Rev G. Burder, 6 October 1814, Bonwick Transcripts, in Woolmington (1973, 23).
12. The Rev Robert Cartwright to Macquarie, 6 December 1819, in Woolmington (1973, 17).
13. Reported in *The Australian*, 9 September 1988.
14. J. Slee, Definition of an Aboriginal, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 September 1988.
15. A resolution was put up by the National Party council in the electorate of Maryborough, Queensland, stating that 'a claim to be Aboriginal cannot be made unless the claimant has 50% Aboriginal blood'.
16. Comment made by Tim Fischer, leader of the National Party, 1993.
17. Cobo, chap 5, para 168, E/CN.4/Sub.2/1982/2/Add.6.
18. Cobo, chap 5, para 170, E/CN.4/Sub.2/1982/2/Add.6.
19. Cobo, chap 5, para 220, E/CN.4/Sub.2/1982/2/Add.6. (These criteria were used in the 1964 census.)
20. Cobo, chap 5, para 57, E/CN.4/Sub.2/1982/2/Add.6. (These criteria were used in the 1950 census.)
21. Cobo, chap 5, paras 30–36, E/CN.4/Sub.2/1982/2/Add.6.
22. Cobo, paras 368 and 372, E/CN.4/Sub.2/1983/21/Add.8.
23. Cobo, para 382, E/CN.4/Sub.2/1983/21/Add.8.
24. Cobo, para 371, E/CN.4/Sub.2/1983/21/Add.8.
25. Cobo, chap 5, para 379, E/CN.4/Sub.2/1982/2/Add.6.
26. 'The most sacred right of humanity is to be ourselves and be in control of the making of ourselves. Our group identity and control over our lives is symbolised by the name we associate with ourselves' (Broome 1991, 45).
27. Article 8 of the Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, as at the eleventh session of the UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations, 1993.
28. *International Labour Organisation Convention 169*, article 1(2).
29. First proposed in the constitutional section of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs report on the review of the administration of the working definition for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, Canberra, 1981.
30. Australian constitution, section 51(xxvi).
31. This section is largely drawn from a fuller analysis of the use of the application of the exemption certificate, in Johnson (1993).
32. *Aborigines Protection Act 1943*, section 18.
33. See Johnson (1993) for an expanded analysis of these sections.
34. Cobo, chap 5, para 328, E/CN.4/Sub.2/1982/2/Add.6.
35. Maria del Rosario, a Quiche of Guatemala, speaking to Heidi Moksnes, Culture Is How We Survive, IWGIA [International Working Group on Indigenous Affairs] Newsletter 3, July–September 1992.
36. Cowlshaw (1993, 187) defines essentialism as 'the error of imputing essences, fixed and necessary characteristics to a category of people'.
37. Lattas (1993) makes this point: 'The essentialising by Aborigines is not the same as the biological racism of the white group—the latter is part of the structure of domination, the former part of the structure of resistance'.
38. Hall (1990, 224) makes this point when he says: 'Not an identity grounded in archaeology, but in the re-telling of the past'.
39. Maria del Rosario, a Quiche of Guatemala, speaking to Heidi Moksnes, Culture Is How We Survive, IWGIA [International Working Group on Indigenous Affairs] Newsletter 3, July–September 1992.
40. Marcuse's actual phrase was 'the liberating power of remembrance' [sic], quoted in Jay (1988)

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