

Palmer and Groves

A DIALOGUE ON IDENTITY, INTERSUBJECTIVITY AND AMBIVALENCE

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Denise:

What is a whitefella doing talking about Aboriginality? Don't you think it is time white men learnt how to sit down, shut up and listen for a change?

Dave:

Denise, what are you doing collaborating with whitefellas then?

Preface

This paper was first presented at a conference called "*Refiguring Postcoloniality Beyond Literature*." We would like to thank Len Collard for the welcome he offered at the beginning of the seminar. We start by acknowledging, "*nidja Nyungar boodjar noonook nyinniny, Nyungar boodier nidja boodjar*." The seminar occurred in Nyungar boodjar or Nyungar country. Our view is that Nyungar are 'boodier' or legitimate custodians of this place. We believe it is also worth remembering that Nyungar have contributed much to cultural and economic life in the south-west and that Nyungar knowledge and systems have and continue to have much influence in this part of the world.

Introduction

A body of literature and commentary encouraging people to think about the multitude of ways Aboriginalities are, to use Trinh T Minh-ha's notion, "born over and over again,"¹ and are negotiated by a range of players in complex and dynamic ways now exists. A solid tradition of calling into question the employment of old binary oppositions and encouraging people to take up a multitude of speaking positions also exists. On the other hand, there is clearly a strong view (often expressed by Indigenous people) that old essentialisms are helpful and sometimes of

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¹Trinh T Minh-ha, *Women, Native, Other* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1989) 159.

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strategic value.² It is not unusual in our experience to hear the argument that Indigenous Australians are the only people who can legitimately speak about matters pertaining to indigeneity.

In her essay, *Well I heard it on the Radio and I saw it on the television...*, Marcia Langton wrote that we ought to think about Aboriginality as "a field of intersubjectivity in that it is remade over and over again in a process of dialogue, of imagination, of representation and interpretation."³ In this paper, a reproduction of a dialogue we had at the *Refiguring Postcoloniality Beyond Literature* colloquium, we contribute, in some small way, to this field of intersubjectivity.

We have privately talked about some of the 'no-go' zones within the domain of discussions about Aboriginalities. Talking about Aboriginality has regularly been a sensitive and poorly handled topic, particularly by those who sit on the colonial side of the frontier. Both of us believe that there are good strategic reasons why some of these 'no-go' zones ought to be maintained. However, we also believe that it is important to move onto some of the risky questions, suspend our silence and engage in open dialogue about tensions, which exist when talking and 'doing' Aboriginalities. One way to do this is to throw up a few of the curly questions that we have been asked by different people who have questioned our right to take up a speaking position on such issues.

Of course, like any dialogue, it has a history. This is not a new conversation. There are long traditions in this country of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people engaging in these kinds of discussions. We have had many such conversations before and, we hope, these will continue. We ask that you see our comments as a brief window into a much longer and extended conversation.

Ambivalence about Aboriginality, at a number of levels, prompted our desire to participate in this seminar. On the one hand, both of us have a keen interest in thinking about Aboriginalities, non-Aboriginalities and engagements between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians. However, we have both experienced difficulties in finding appropriate language for writing, talking and thinking about such things. We come to the task of preparing for this discussion during a time when there is considerable discomfort and dis-ease about how we speak about and with

² See N. Sturgeon, *Ecofeminist Natures: Race, Gender, Feminist Theory and Political Action* (New York: Routledge, 1997) 10-11, for a discussion of the advantages of strategic essentialisms.

³ Marcia Langton, *Well I Heard it on the Radio and I Saw it on the Television ...* (North Sydney: Australian Film Commission, 1993) 33.

each other. This is not something new. As writers such as Fesl⁴ and Langton have pointed out, talking about colonial identity in this country has a long and unsettled history. This is because the language we use is symbolic of the ambivalence we feel and exercise. We thus come to writing this paper with no easy established conventions for talking about identity. Terms such as 'Aboriginal,' 'non-Aboriginal,' 'white,' 'black,' 'European' and 'Indigenous' all have their limitations. Settling on any fixed set of terms such as 'Aboriginal' and 'non-Aboriginal' may serve to imply an acceptance of binaries or implicate us in problematic essentialisms. However, like all speakers we begin with the terms available to us and recognise that dualisms, although limited in application, are real in the sense that they have an extended history and use in people's language. For the purposes of moving on, we have decided to go with something of a mix of identifiers. Throughout the discussion we will interchange descriptors, partly because this is what people do and partly because we want to demonstrate the discomfort, shifting language and diversity in identity making.

A Dialogue on Aboriginality

Denise: *Dave, can I begin the dialogue by posing the question I put to you before our introductions?*

Postcolonial theorists have long argued that the history of colonial discourse is the history of negotiation between the colonised and the coloniser who are constantly in a state of being "born over and over again" through each other. This means that Aboriginalities are always going to involve complex sets of engagements between what we often describe as Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. However, some of my Indigenous colleagues and indeed some of my non-Indigenous colleagues might well question your right to speak about things to do with Aboriginalities. As a non-Aboriginal male academic surely you must acknowledge that you are a member of a group that has largely taken control of debates about such things, including colonising intellectual spaces that are not legitimately yours. What would you say to those who might ask, "hat are you doing 'inhabiting' a space that involves discussion of Aboriginalities?"

Dave: Thanks Denise, I agree that these sorts of questions are crucial ones. You are right to call me to account for wanting to talk about such things. I

⁴ Eve Fesl, *Conned!* (St Lucia: University of Queensland, 1993)

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suspect that others who attended the seminar might have wondered the same thing. I have certainly had it said to me before that, as a non-Aboriginal man, I have no place being involved in talking about Aboriginal matters.

I find Marcia Langton very helpful here. She suggests that we might make sense of the infinite array of intercultural experiences by thinking about three broad categories of cultural and textual construction; one might say three broad domains or cultural spaces in which we negotiate Aboriginality. She claims that the first domain involves Aboriginal people interacting with other Aboriginal people, negotiating largely within Aboriginal cultural spaces. In other words, out of the discussions, debates, storytelling and myth-making that occur between Aboriginal people come these sets of Aboriginalities. She notes that this is never a cultural domain totally closed to non-Aboriginal influences. In the second domain non-Aboriginal people, with little direct contact with Aboriginal people, stereotype, iconise and mythologise Aboriginality. This involves an engagement between non-Aboriginal people and popular myths about Aboriginal people. The final domain Langton speaks about is where Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people actually engage in direct dialogue. In this domain cultural exchange is negotiated, imagined ideas are tested out, and new sets of ideas about Aboriginality are formed. She claims that it is in this third space that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people find satisfactory ways of comprehending each other.

Denise: This is interesting to me. I have often suspected that we too easily accept that cultural exchange in this country has been straightforward. I have also long thought that we make a mistake if we think that Aboriginality, as a set of ideas, experiences and identities, is the province of Indigenous people only. What I like about Langton's work is that she reminds us that Aboriginality is no single or fixed set of ideas and experiences. Nor is it something that individuals carve out for themselves. She suggests that it is just as much about non-Aboriginal people's lives, discourse, experiences, identities and social processes as it is about Aboriginal people's lives and identities. She also reminds us that it is important to recognise that the making of Aboriginal identity involves negotiations in a multitude of zones of cultural interaction. Citing Hamilton, Langton reminds us that "colonial representation has shaped and mis-shaped reality for the coloniser and the colonised alike."⁵ This is a point that other postcolonial theorists have made elsewhere. For example, I

⁵ Langton 5.

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*think that Langton's ideas resonate with Bhabha's notion of the third space, a space where identity is in a process of negotiation.*⁶

Dave: If I am interpreting Langton fairly, she is suggesting that non-Aboriginal people ought to pretty much stay out of the first domain. In her view, Indigenous people have every right to use separatist strategies and create zones for carrying out debates about Aboriginality. She suggests that Indigenous people have every right to tell non-Aboriginal people to 'butt out' of their business.

Denise: *So are you saying that there is no place for non-Aboriginal people in this first domain?*

Dave: I think this is what Langton is suggesting. However, this is not the only place where we created and negotiate Aboriginalities. As Langton reminds us, non-Aboriginal people often do not know and relate to Aboriginal people. They relate to stories told by former colonists. To put it another way, non-Aboriginal people imagine Aboriginalities in conversation with themselves. In my view non-Aboriginal Australians have an obligation to engage within this domain. I think that I have a part to play here. I need to engage critically by interrogating and calling into question my own desire and the violence done by colonial discourse. In fact, I go so far as to suggest that non-Aboriginal public intellectuals and activists should take the lead in this domain. God knows that Indigenous leaders often have enough on their plate dealing with struggles over native title, establishing local economies and trying to negotiate a reasonable life for their families, without having to constantly show non-Aboriginal people how to tidy up our minds and processes.

Denise: *Yes I agree with you here. It is often very difficult for Indigenous leaders who non-Aboriginal people constantly ask to fulfil a redemptive function by answering their questions about how to resolve non-Aboriginal racism.*

Dave: I think that Langton's third domain is something we need to come to terms with a little more. As I said earlier, Langton suggests that in this third place Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people need to engage in dialogue, in

⁶ Hommi Bhabha, "The Other Question: Difference, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism" *Literature, Politics and Theory*, eds. F. Barker, P. Hulme and M. Iversen (London: Methuen, 1986) 148-73.

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negotiated exchange, in conversation. This of course is where we are confronted with the greatest challenge. How do we foster relationships that are grounded in reciprocal conversation?

I do not have too many answers about how we do this. However, I am convinced that we ought to encourage these kinds of relationships and I do believe that non-Aboriginal people have a legitimate place in dialogue about new Aboriginalities and new non-Aboriginalities. Indeed, I suspect that we have more moments in our history, which involve conversation than we often think to be the case.

However, I might be wrong. I have heard people suggest that Indigenous people are the only ones who should be allowed to discuss Aboriginalities. Some non-Indigenous commentators have even suggested that there ought to be a 'racial division of intellectual labour,'⁷ which involves Indigenous people speaking and working on questions concerned with Indigenous identity and non-Indigenous people speaking and working on questions concerned with non-Indigenous identity. What do you think about this?

*Denise: As you know Dave, I am interested in issues surrounding identity. Some of these issues are embedded in a range of complicated and sensitive socio, cultural and political discussions. These issues emerge when we as Aboriginal people enter into dialogue with each other. As many Indigenous theorists, including Len Collard, Eve Fesl and Michael Dodson have long reminded us, we are not one homogenous group. Thus it is only fair to acknowledge that we will not always have the same view as each other. When we, as Indigenous people do come together and enter into dialogue with each other we not only "share our ideas" but we also share "our vulnerabilities, doubts, confusions and contradiction." "*⁸

Afraid that some of these discussions will be "used against us,"⁹ some Aboriginal people have argued that we need to contain these sorts of discussions to a separate Aboriginal intellectual sphere. There is an example of this view in a recently published set of dialogues which occurred between academics at Curtin University's Indigenous Research Centre. In the preface to the publication, A Dialogue on Indigenous Identity 'Warts n All,' Darlene Oxenham states:

⁷ Bain Attwood, "Images and Realities: Episode 1," *Aboriginal Studies: Windows on Indigenous Australia. Open Learning Series* (Australian Broadcasting Commission: University of South Australia, 1993).

⁸ Darlene Oxenham, *A Dialogue on Indigenous Identity 'Warts n All'* (Bentley: Curtin U, 1999) xiv.

⁹ Oxenham xiv.

In demanding [that we] be exclusively 'allowed' to discuss our identity we are not seeking 'permission' from non-Indigenous people to engage in this debate, rather we want non-Indigenous people to see that this debate is our debate - we 'experience' it every day and therefore Indigenous people must hold the position of authority in the discussion.¹⁰

I think there is much wisdom in the argument that Indigenous people need spaces to talk, debate, write and create Aboriginalities. Strategically it is critical that we find places to do this without being steamrollered or bullied by those who have illegitimately controlled debates about our identities.

Dave: I have heard these sentiments regularly echoed by a range of Indigenous people who express the need to take back control of public debates about Aboriginality and the experiences of Indigenous people. I have also heard similar arguments put by people like Bain Attwood who has had things to say about the writing of Aboriginal history. Attwood claims that Aboriginal people need the scope to write Aboriginal history in their own way and in a way that allows them to be the focus of that history.

Denise: *These discussions have been influenced by the impressive works which emerged during the nineteen nineties by Indigenous cultural critics Mick Dodson¹¹ and Marcia Langton, who have both written extensively on the colonial fascination with naming and classifying Aboriginality.*

It is also important to give Indigenous perspectives more primacy because many of the ideas and wisdom of Indigenous people are critical, penetrating and perceptive. Clearly Indigenous people have, since the earliest days of colonial contact, been active players in critiquing Aboriginality. As those forced to endure the effects of the making of Aboriginality, we are uniquely placed to see much that others are not able to.

I also think that Indigenous people have many helpful insights they can offer others because of the unique, diverse and rich traditions we bring with us and the range of genres and styles of communication we use. I personally believe that through their work Indigenous visual artists, such as

¹⁰ Oxenham xiv.

¹¹ Michael Dodson, "The Wentworth Lecture: The End in the Beginning: Re(de)fining Aboriginality," *Australian Aboriginal Studies* 1 (1994): 2-13.

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Tracey Moffatt, Gordon Bennett and Julie Dowling, have much to say about Aboriginality. I am attracted to the works of these artists who have explored their own issues of identity through visual art, a medium not as contained and constrained by colonialist language or constructs such as 'binary opposition.'

However, Langton also cautions that those arguing that only Aboriginal people should write/speak on issues of Aboriginal identity, are in danger of implying that "there is a 'right way' to be Aboriginal"¹² as well as raising the serious issue of censorship. I too believe that non-Aboriginal people have things to say about Australian identity; things that are worth taking into account. Like Attwood, I believe that suggesting credit be given to the integrity of Indigenous voices does not mean that non-Aboriginal commentators are let off the hook. Nor is it to say that there is no place for non-Aboriginal people in thinking about Aboriginality. As Attwood writes,

Where Europeans write Aboriginal history they should make themselves the subject of the study rather than the Aborigines. I think if they do that they will bring into question how their forebears have acted. I think there is an enormous need for Europeans in this country to come to terms with the way in which they have acted towards Aborigines. This will come about if we make ourselves the focus of Aboriginal history.¹³

What I hear Attwood saying is that it is imperative non-Aboriginal people critically examine Aboriginality for this will bring their own histories, ideas and cultural positions into sharper focus. I think he is suggesting that non-Aboriginal writers and commentators have much work to do to critique their own identities and otherwise taken for granted ideas about being 'white.' It seems to me he is building on the work of 'black' cultural critics like bell hooks who argue that the experiences of 'whites', indeed the whole set of ideas about being 'white', needs to be examined.¹⁴ I believe that much is being done to deconstruct the term 'Aborigine.' Much also needs to be done to interrogate concepts like 'white,' 'non-Aboriginal' and 'European'.¹⁵

¹² Langton 27.

¹³ Attwood.

¹⁴ bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End, 1992).

¹⁵ See R. Dyer, "White," *Screen* 29.4 (1988) 44-65; R. Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997); R. Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*

Dave: Yes, I agree. As Rabinow writes, one of the marks of colonial inquiry is that "the group in the colonies who have received the least attention in historical and sociological studies are the colonists themselves."¹⁶ While topics such as 'race,' 'oriental studies,' 'Aboriginality' and the lives of a range of Indigenous and colonised people have received enormous official and academic attention, the same cannot be said about studies of whites, the Occidentals and non-Aboriginal people. Generally 'whiteness', the 'West', and the lives of non-Aboriginal people have been invisible, seen as inconsequential, not extraordinary enough to warrant social inquiry and often shielded from official scrutiny.

Denise: *Dave, I know that you and Len Collard have been interested in the history of productive engagements between Nyungars and early 'settler' Western Australians. I have heard you draw on the stories of early colonial engagements that involved so called 'settlers' relying heavily on the leadership and direction of Nyungars who acted as guides, cultural attaches, workers, navigators, linguistic experts and political negotiators. I have heard you argue that we are mistaken if we believe that the subaltern have not been instrumental in shaping cultural life in this part of the world.*

I really enjoy hearing about this and think it is important for students to recognise that Nyungar and other Indigenous people have been active players in the shaping of language, culture and the economy. However, I know that it has been suggested to you that people need to be hit with the history of 'sorry' stories, to read the histories of frontier violence, to be made to feel guilty about the past, before they go on to introduce themselves to complex stories of negotiation. The danger, according to some, is that we will retreat into a form of cultural and historical relativism at just the moment when Indigenous interests are under renewed attack. Don't you think people should be made to serve an apprenticeship under the master/slave dialectic before progressing on to more postcolonial readings of cultural negotiation?

Dave: Another difficult question! I think this is a particularly important question for those of us keen to talk about Aboriginalities during the 'sorry' era.

(New York: Routledge, 1993); R. Frankenberg, *Displacing Whiteness: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism* (Durham: Duke University, 1997); bell hooks.

¹⁶ Paul Rabinow, "Representations of Social Facts: Modernity and Post-Modernity in Anthropology," *Writing Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, eds. J. Clifford and G.E. Marcus (Berkeley: U of California, 1986) 259.

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The first thing I would say is that it is important that histories of colonial violence are told and allowed to be told over and over (particularly by Indigenous people who have been forced to repress and be silent about such things for generations). We need to be careful about taking away Indigenous people's right to speak about violence just at the moment when they have begun to tell their stories.

Denise: Yes but I often find that non-Aboriginal people only want to hear the harrowing stories in relation to Aboriginality. They want to hear about deaths in custody, the stolen generations, about the killing times and so on. I can understand that these are very important issues for Aboriginal people, and issues that many non-Aboriginal people need to hear much more about. On the other hand, it often seems to be implied that if one hasn't experienced all these things personally, or isn't constantly talking about misery, then one's Aboriginality is called into question.

Dave: Yes, I accept what you are saying. It is important to remind ourselves that there have also been long-standing sets of narratives on Indigenous resistance and resilience. Many Nyungars I have met and talked with include in their history-making stories of how members of their family have influenced the lives of non-Aboriginal people, contemporary culture and economic life. As Henry Reynolds reminds us in *With the White People*, "collaboration was as common as confrontation" during the early years of colonial contact in this country and many Aboriginal people were "in a very real sense Australia's black pioneers."¹⁷ This discussion is important because it sets the scene for the study of people's contemporary lives and demonstrates that Aboriginal people have long featured as central figures in the lives of other Australians.

It is also worth making the point that much academic work concerned with social and cultural processes in Australia focuses on the ways in which the lives of Aboriginal Australians have been changed and impacted on by colonisation. However, rarely has scholarship attempted to uncover the ways Aboriginality and Aboriginal people have become integral in the shaping of the lives of non-Aboriginal Australians.

Denise: There are some interesting sub-texts underpinning much of our thinking on Aboriginalities aren't there? It is as though we regularly find ourselves slipping into a necessary master-slave dialectic that sees

¹⁷ Henry Reynolds, *With the White People: The Crucial Role of Aborigines in the Exploration and Development of Australia* (Victoria: Penguin, 1990) 1.

Aboriginal people always and only on the bottom in a tussle between themselves and colonial interests. I agree that this is not always a helpful way to understand people's lives.

Likewise, we seem to regularly start from the position that somehow our history and our current relationships are simple and uncomplicated. Of course, just as Aboriginal culture is dynamic, so too relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people are by no means simple or characterised by unitary responses. This is not to try and deny the history of colonial brutality, rather it is to recognise its complexity.

Dave: Yes, one of the dangers is that our reading of history becomes fixed in ideas about Indigenous people as victims. This can immobilise us. It can inhibit our analysis, stopping us from thinking about complex histories. I'm not sure that we need to take an either/or position, or argue that one history is more important than the other.

It is also important to take some of our cues from Indigenous commentators. Many, including Langton, Peter Yu, Mum Shirl, Jack Davis and Jimmy Chi, are strong advocates for the telling of stories of Indigenous agency, stories about Nyungar as 'boordier' or leaders. From my experience there is a strong tradition from within Indigenous communities of people celebrating their successes, talking about their contributions to Australian life, and pointing out that others have often been highly reliant on them.

I also think it wise to think strategically about how we respond to the diversity of values and experiences in contemporary Australia. For example, like Noel Pearson, I'm not convinced that constantly relying on guilt has been a productive strategy. If the Hanson phenomenon has taught us one thing it is that guilt does not work to motivate all people. If anything, Hanson used old guilt-ridden rhetoric as ammunition to attack what she called 'the politically correct.' I suspect that guilt fueled Hanson's popularity, serving to confirm what 'battlers' have long believed about the 'the chattering classes' or the 'intellectual elites.' It fueled the idea that we are a bunch of self-righteous, irrelevant hypocrites. It might be true that guilt and 'sorry' discourses may serve to motivate some middle-class Australians. However, I worry that it is unreliable and inadequate as a single strategic platform. I also have doubts about the depth of its effect even on the middle-classes, and wonder if it merely serves to encourage the self-righteous indignation and self-flagellation of some of us.

Denise: *But where does this leave us? If we are right and there are difficulties associated with an over-reliance on stories of Aboriginal people as victims, then what else can be done to further dialogue about*

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Aboriginalities? If ours is a politics of furthering the interests of Aboriginal people, then what can we do?

Dave: As we have already said, Indigenous communities have a long-standing history of exerting considerable influence on others. I think they also have a long-standing history of celebrating this. There are a number of advantages to making these histories more visible.

Denise: *Yes, I can immediately see the value of focusing on the contributions of Indigenous people. You start doing this more and you encourage Indigenous communities, particularly the young, to take pride in the achievements of their families. It is also important that we not forget all the hard work and successes of our Indigenous forebears. I want my son to grow up feeling proud of his Aboriginality and that he comes from a long tradition of Aboriginal activism.*

Dave: Another outcome is that you are more likely to establish what conditions produce (or encourage) cultural exchange (or movements towards cultural exchange) that are 'fair' and result in outcomes that serve the interests of both non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal Australians. If you focus attention on histories of Indigenous agency then you are more likely to encourage a politics that seeks to maximise and open up possibilities for shared and mutually beneficial ways to move in the future. As Curthoys suggests, you confront the past in a way that is energising rather than merely threatening.¹⁸ This is a politics that seeks to build rather than only critique. Pettman makes the point that "recognising difference without recognising affinity or connections across category boundaries can undermine opportunities for alliances and for inclusive claims which may be necessary to effect significant change."¹⁹

Denise: *I wonder if there are not other strategic advantages to putting more energy into the history of Indigenous influence? I wonder if those who have traditionally been hostile to Aboriginal people and Aboriginal interests are more likely to engage in dialogue about the history of productive engagements between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal Australians?*

¹⁸ A. Curthoys, "Entangled Histories: Conflict and Ambivalence in Non-Aboriginal Australia," *The Resurgence of Racism: Howard, Hanson and the Race Debate*, eds. G. Gray and C. Winter (Clayton: Monash Publications in History 24, 1997) 122-23.

¹⁹ Jan Pettman, *Living in the Margins: Racism, Sexism and Feminism in Australia* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1992) 126.

Dave: Yes, good point. I suspect that some people respond more generously to a reading that acknowledges shared and productive histories and points of convergence rather than polemic arguments grounded in attacks on people's ethics.

I also think there is much room for looking to strategies that exploit non-Aboriginal people's ambivalence towards Aboriginal people and Aboriginality. It has never been the case that the 'West's' construction of the colonial Other is a unified or unidirectional one.²⁰ Nor are stories about the 'Orient' always and only available to the West and used against the colonised. Colonial discourse, according to Bhabha, does not only involve the making of negative images which allow the coloniser to legitimise discrimination and marginalisation.²¹ Colonial stereotypes have also become available for radical and counter-colonial use, regularly being drawn upon in affirmative ways by the colonised to define a cultural identity in opposition to the West. In other words, colonial discourse is available to and used by its antagonists in the colonised world. Using examples from Gandhian cultural resistance, Fox writes that Indian anticolonials often "depended upon an Orientalist image of India as inherently spiritual, consensual, and corporate."²² Indeed Said argues that Orientalist discourse is not always negative or derogatory. He writes:

never was it the case that the imperial encounter pitted an active Western intruder against a supine or inert non-Western native; there was always some form of active resistance and, in the overwhelming majority of cases, the resistance finally won out.²³

A number of Australian writers have drawn on these ideas, arguing that non-Aboriginal treatment of Aboriginal people and Aboriginality has always been less straightforward and more ambivalent than we have accounted for. This ambivalence, according to writers like Curthoys and Chandra-Shekeran, helps explain how our present social circumstances are full of competing and rapidly changing dynamics. This ambivalence also accounts for the range of different responses non-Aboriginal people seem to have to Aboriginality* responses which have people simultaneously taking on what seem to be contradictory significations and practices. According to

²⁰ L. Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1998) 17.

²¹ Bhabha 169

²² M. Fox, *Creation Spirituality and the Dreaming* (Newtown: Millennium, 1991) 151.

²³ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993) xii.

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Curthoys, this is because the discursive practices of non-Aboriginal Australians have often been divided between traditions of fear, hate and disdain, and desire and yearning for Aboriginal people and Aboriginal culture.²⁴ Such double-edged treatment of Aboriginality produces slippages and discursive gaps that can be and are capitalised upon by Aboriginal people and those committed to a politics of liberation.²⁵

According to Gelder and Jacobs this ambivalence, unsettling as it is, is a productive feature of the postcolonial Australian landscape.²⁶ It incites doubt and uncertainty and gives rise to discourse and counter-discourse that reminds non-Aboriginal people of their tenuous identities. Such theorising opens the way to understanding how the discourses of non-Aboriginal people contain the possibility of their own undoing. This contribution is valuable because it offers us the potential to understand what might best produce conditions which undermine racism and the certainty of non-Aboriginal authority over Aboriginal Australians.

Denise: *Interesting Dave. So you are saying that nothing subverts the authority of the discourse of the master more than the ambivalence produced in response to Aboriginal people's continued presence. So this ambivalence can and does have a profoundly unsettling effect on the lives of non-Aboriginal people. It can offer possibilities for the transformation of people's lives.*

Dave: I think so. There are many contradictions and tensions that exist in people's minds about questions to do with Aboriginality. I think there is ample scope for employing tactics which tease out and make more evident some of these contradictions. I often see Indigenous people very cleverly use such tactics to trouble otherwise taken-for-granted ideas about Aboriginality. In fact, I can think of a number of times when I have seen you do it.

Last year you invited me to come and give a talk to students in the unit, *Aboriginal Women* that you teach. You later told me that in the tutorials after the lecture, many of the women in the unit talked about their first impressions and what went through their mind when you first introduced me. I remember you telling me that many of the women were

²⁴ Curthoys 123

²⁵ S. Chandra-Shekeran, "Challenging the Fiction of the Nation in the 'Reconciliation' Texts of Mabo and Bringing Them Home," *Australian Feminist Law Journal* 11 (1998): 109.

²⁶ Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs, *Uncanny Australia: Sacredness and Identity in a Postcolonial Nation* (Melbourne: Melbourne U, 1998) xvi.

very surprised and shocked at seeing a white man giving a lecture in a unit concerned with Indigenous women. You told me some women initially felt disappointed, perhaps even a little angry with you for inviting me to talk to them. Some initially thought things like: "what can a white man, a symbol of the great oppressor of Aboriginal women, tell us about Aboriginal women?" It seemed, you said, that some initially questioned the integrity of an Aboriginal women doing such a thing. They were thinking, "where does this woman stand in relation to the history of racism and sexism that she could do such a thing?"

My experience of you is that you are a person who is deeply committed to positioning yourself as an anti-colonial writer and activist. You are also very keen to call into question the authority of male dominance. I also know that you like to unsettle binary oppositional ideas. Can I get you to tell me how you answered the criticism of those students who were perplexed by your decision to invite a non-Aboriginal man to deliver a lecture in a unit about Aboriginal Women?

Denise: Dave, I am very interested in the power of disruption. I think that there is much to be gained by the person who recognises that their social world is laden with disruptions and competing interests. I think there is enormous advantage in embracing a little disruption. As Derrida says, the self and the other always solicit each other and "produce decidedly disruptive effects."²⁷ Disruptions ensure that technologies of power and domination are always vulnerable; indeed can never be fully realised.

Dave: Yes, as ethnomethodologists such as Garfinkel argue, disruption can be seized upon by those involved in the social and political and used in productive ways.²⁸

Were you asking your students to acknowledge that one of the characteristics of the world they are seeking to study is that it is not altogether simple; on the contrary it is brimming with complexities, inconsistencies and irregularities?

Denise: Yes, when you are talking about Aboriginality it is worth seeing a bit of disruption as a useful thing. I guess I am someone that sees uncertainty, ambivalence and disruption as representing a tremendous analytical advantage for those wanting to understand Aboriginalities.

²⁷ Jane Jacobs, *Edge of Empire: Postcolonialism and the City* (London: Routledge, 1996) 14.

²⁸ H. Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1967).

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Aboriginalities constantly disrupt the coloniser's gaze. When our identities do not match the stereotyped images of the way the coloniser has constructed us, our identities are often seen as being inauthentic. Sometimes non-Aboriginal people are unaware of the creative strategies we have employed to disrupt or unsettle the constructed Indigenous Other. Tracey Moffatt's films for example, constantly disrupt notions of racism and gender through the interweaving of Aboriginality and gender. I particularly liked the way she demonstrated something about how this works in her film piece "Nice Coloured Girls."

Dave: Can you elaborate a little?

Denise: Well, I find Moffatt is quite cheeky in "Nice Coloured Girls." She employs a story that had Aboriginal young women 'taking the mickey' out of white men who were intent on the exploitation of black women. In the short film, the Aboriginal women mimic 'nice girls'; they play the part as they are expected to. Ultimately however, the film has the 'coloured girls' rolling the white men.

When I read Bhabha's work on mimicry, I think of the characters in this film. Throughout this country's history Aboriginal people have been encouraged to mimic the coloniser by taking on 'European' cultural habits, educational content, language, values and work practices. However, the result has never been that Aboriginal people simply reproduced non-Aboriginal ways. I suspect that our copying of whitefella culture and behaviour is often done in a way that is full of mockery and menace.

Dave: Can you give me an example?

Denise: Well I have a colleague who is very good at 'sucking in non-Aboriginal people' by playing up to their expectations and then disrupting them. He, as an Aboriginal academic, represents everything that the architects of the assimilation and integration policy regimes would have wanted. He is articulate, formally educated and is the head of a university programme. Having talked to his students I know that when they first meet him many have their ideas confirmed. One might say that he provides substance to the idea that Indigenous people who live in urban settings have lost their culture and become modernists. However, sometimes when he is presenting a lecture he will begin by talking Nyungar. He may continue for ten minutes and it is always interesting to watch students respond. This immediately flips on its head people's idea that Nyungar culture is dead and that his Aboriginality is somehow lost.

He is quite sly in the way that he does this. I suspect that Bhabha might say he is mimicking the coloniser, lulling people into the false sense that he is a successful colonised subject who has simply adopted the habits and values of non-Aboriginal people. Of course, part of what he is doing is mocking colonial discourse. He is being mischievous and a menace.

Dave: This sounds a little like what Bhabha is describing when he talks about "sly civility"? He might say your colleague's clever mimicry "locates a crack in the certainty of colonial dominance, an uncertainty in its control of the behaviour of the colonised."²⁹ Would you say that by his presenting himself in this way, the colonial subject who is "almost the same but not white," he is revealing the limitations in the authority of colonial discourse?³⁰

Denise: *Yes this is exactly what I think goes on. I think that Indigenous people do this often.*

I also think that our mere presence in institutional contexts like universities has a disruptive effect. Universities are largely white spaces and white places. Any time you have a black person in this environment you are going to disrupt the taken-for-granted. Often when I am lecturing non-Aboriginal students I can feel they are 'bedevilled' (to borrow a term from Tracey Moffat) by my presence. You can almost see people's minds ticking over as they think to themselves, "who is this woman?" I suspect this is partly because I do not always fit the stereotypical image of what an Aboriginal woman is supposed to look like and partly because non-Aboriginal people are not used to seeing Aboriginal women in positions of authority. I know that many non-Aboriginal students are being confronted by all manner of questions and thoughts when they are in this situation. Some are asking, "Are her experiences and is her knowledge Aboriginal?" Others are often too easily prepared to put me up on a pedestal and worship my Aboriginality. I think it is helpful to have these people's ideas thrown into question.

I employed this strategy, asking you to do the lecture on "Aboriginal Women," to further disrupt people's thinking. Sometimes I get the feeling that people are slipping into a comfort zone and creating simple theories to understand relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. This is when I like to employ strategies like this.

²⁹ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies* (London: Routledge, 1998) 139.

³⁰ Qtd. in Ashcroft *et al.*, 140-41.

Dialogue

As I said before, I am very interested in the power of disruption. Aboriginal people constantly interact and disrupt colonial notions of Aboriginalities. On a daily basis our identities are questioned because they disrupt the coloniser's ideas about the Other. This happens every time our behaviour and actions do not match the stereotyped images that the coloniser has constructed about us.

I am interested in exploring various sophisticated anti-colonial strategies that we as Indigenous peoples have used to our advantage. Another creative strategy we have been able to employ to unsettle and refute the imagined Indigenous Other has been to remain silent.

Aboriginal people have long demanded that spaces be made available for our experiences and "truths" to be articulated. Our voices have been silenced for far too long. However, as Valerie Hazel suggests, it is "too easy to equate silence with the absence of voice, such that if one has not spoken, it is always and inevitably interpreted as a matter of repression."³¹ I am interested in the ways that Aboriginal women, for example, were able to use instances of being 'silenced' to function as an operation of power."³²

Dave: Can you give me another example?

Denise: *Glenys Ward in her book *Wandering Girl* discusses her experience as a domestic and outlines several rules in relation to the 'domestic/employer' ('slave/Master') relationship. She describes how she used silence to offer subtle resistance to her cruel employers. She describes how she would breach rules such as not looking directly in her boss's eyes and only talking when she was granted permission to do so. Many might assume that by her silence Ward was simply giving in to the power of her non-Aboriginal bosses. I suspect that she, and many like her, were not 'giving in' but using a form of resistance that was strategically very clever. For it was while many Aboriginal women were working in the homes of the colonisers that they were able to glean valuable information about the colonisers.*

In a way I employed similar strategies when I asked you to come and give a lecture on Aboriginal women. I did it as a way of disrupting the power relationships between you as a white academic male and me as an Indigenous woman. I can assure you that I was not simply yielding to you as the expert white man.

Too often non-Aboriginal people have been excused from doing their own work in relation to the histories of this country. In asking you to do the

³¹ Qtd. in J. Holder, *Photofile* (Sydney: Wedsdale, 1993) 40.

³² Qtd. in Holder, 40.

lecture on Aboriginal women, it was not just the student's expectations which were confronted, it also asked you as a white, Australian, academic male to consider your own position in relation to issues concerning colonialism, Aboriginality and gender.

I think some of your ideas about ambivalence are really interesting. One of the important things about the way non-Aboriginal people's identities are constructed is that being constructed as white you are both positioned as everything and nothing. This also has some interesting disruptive effects. When I have been asked to deliver what people are calling cross-cultural awareness training, I have found some fascinating things emerging. When I ask non-Aboriginal people to write down things they associate with Aboriginal culture and identity they come up with all sorts of things. However, when I ask them to write down their ideas on their own identity and culture they become confused and a little dumbfounded.

Dave: Well, you at least partly succeeded when you invited me to talk to your group. I was both confused and very nervous about doing it. However, was there a risk that on this occasion I would not feel uncomfortable about my position? Was there a risk that I would just approach the task as if it were straightforward? Was there also a risk that the women in your group would not see my involvement as full of contradictions?

Denise: *Oh, of course! Non-Aboriginal Australians are constantly missing the point that Indigenous people are subtly making. I suspect that some in my class did not get what I was trying to do.*

However, this means that we just have to keep on with the disruptions, the tactics to make evident people's ambivalence and contradictions. Don't forget Dave that I was there at the lecture in the same way as Indigenous people are always here. I was there and able to throw in my challenges, ask questions and find ways to make you and the group uncomfortable. I would not have let you off the hook. We must never forget that Indigenous people are active players who have a long and extended history of being sly and calling the coloniser to account. Aboriginal activism is not something new and Aboriginal activists have an amazing ability to remind people of our interests.

Dave: Yes, despite what we often might assume about the death of Aboriginal culture, the total powerlessness of Aboriginal people and the supposed dependency of Aboriginal people on non-Aboriginal economies, there is good evidence that Aboriginal Australians have had, and continue to have, a significant impact on the way non-Aboriginal people live.

Dialogue

Langton certainly believes the role played by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in the cultural life of Australia "has heightened the ability of Australians to perceive the world differently."³³ Likewise Aboriginal imagery, knowledge and the economic contributions of Aboriginal people have laid the foundations for the kind of cultural forms that are being presented in the international arena as we enter the new millennium. Debates about whose interests are being served aside for a moment, one thing is clear, "we are enlisting Aboriginal culture to brand, sell and to define ourselves."³⁴

Denise: Yes, I am convinced that Aboriginal people have a profound ability to impact on the minds and practices of non-Aboriginal people. This means that I have huge confidence that we will be able to continue to shake up ideas about Aboriginality and play a central role in influencing how our lives are understood and experienced.

³³ Langton 44

³⁴ N. Rothwell, "Whose Culture is it Anyway?" *The Weekend Review*, 30 March 1996: 1-2.