



Ayers Rock (Uluru) – Australia

Aboriginals in Confrontation: History, Racism and the Australian State

ARAM A. YENGOYAN
University of California, Davis

ABSTRACT: The paper draws together the various threads of a debate over the place, identity and rights of aboriginal citizens in Australia. It accounts for the shifts in the debate from issues of humanity, primitivism and later equal citizenship, to current preoccupation with the symbolic, political and material aspects of race relations. The racialization and essentialization of the debate have taken place both in the Australian general public, and among the aborigines. The latter have increasingly drawn on powerful images of blood, fate and place as constituting aboriginality. The debate has come to a head recently over land rights struggles which now embed virtually all of Australian society.

The Debate

The debate in Australia regarding the status of Aboriginal Australians within the national polity brings forth a number of issues which are far from resolution. Within the contemporary context, this debate invokes a vast range of historical, cultural and economic forces as well as political ones, which not only make the issues all the more complex, but also project the past and recent past into the present with more force than they originally possessed. My aim is to draw together, through different perspectives, the various threads which the debate takes on. The playing out of history and initial cultural contact in the present invokes a lively and vitriolic debate especially on contemporary land rights issues which now embed virtually all of Australian society.

First, it goes without saying that Aboriginals and the idea of Aboriginality is such that they do not and will not define themselves as a minority. The fact that the Aboriginal societies have inhabited Australia for nearly 40,000 years means that they were the first and sole occupants of Australia and that the land is theirs, a circumstance interrupted by Captain James Cook in 1788 at which time the forces of British colonialism and imperialism dispossessed the Aboriginals of that which is truly their own.

Secondly, the history of black/white contact is replete with numerous accounts of population and cultural carnage which persisted throughout the nineteenth century and in some remote areas until the 1930s (Elder, 1988). While most Aboriginal cultures still occupy their traditional lands, it is especially in those areas where they have been dispossessed through massacres, population decline due to disease, and forced relocation that Aboriginal peoples feel they must contest the State (national and local) as a means of re-acquiring the heritage the past endowed to them.

Last is the issue of the symbolic value of land. For Aboriginal cultures, land is the source of all being and existence. Virtually all facets of the religious pantheon from ritual to myth to cultural ontology are explicable only through an understanding of the role which land and place play in establishing the spiritual force as it emanates throughout local cultures and provides emotional sustenance. The return to ancestral lands and tracks is vital for all Aboriginal peoples, for it is the land/place and the tracks which unite living groups with their ancestors and their past deeds. From the Euro-Australian perspective, space/place/land itself means little, if anything, for the issue to white Australians is not land per se but the production and the commoditization of production. Captain Cook took the Australian land mass on behalf of the British Empire, but it was mainly because of what land promises economically, namely production, which is so central to the European vision of conquest. Even to this day, our tax laws on land reflect this difference. Unutilized lands are normally taxed much less than land under production.

The history of European and Aboriginal contact has been written in many ways, but there is also a strong sense of silence on the issue. Until the 1950s, most scholars writing the history of Australia were silent on the role of Aboriginal populations. In part this silence was related to the notion that the Aboriginal past would die out, and by the 1930s, it was assumed that assimilation policies toward Aboriginal peoples meant that these cultures and peoples were in radical decline and would eventually pass away. However, this did not occur. Furthermore, historians left the Aboriginal discussion to anthropologists who still saw Aboriginal cultures through the faulty concept of "the ethnographic present," which stressed a timeless, unchanging perspective of Aboriginals; effectively divorcing them from history and cultural transformations. By the 1950s and 1960s, anthropologists finally moved toward a historical perspective, especially as it was invoked through the illuminating writings of C.D. Rowley (1970, 1971a, 1971b, 1986).

The silence is now vocal. Not only have historians and anthropologists turned to Aboriginal history, but Aboriginal writers themselves are writing local histories as well as collecting oral histories and biographical case histories and shedding light on local variants of contact.

The Roots of Primitivism in History

The European expansion and colonization throughout the world after 1500 brought forth a whole set of new experiences and interpretations which signaled that the western -world was approaching the pinnacle of evolutionary growth. If Hegel felt that the modern nation/state of his day was the culmination of political and social development, it is not by accident that such an interpretation was created, perpetuated and verified by what western exploration had encountered by 1750 or even earlier. A few historical encounters, such as China, might prove equal to the western accomplishments, but overall, most historical moments in the exploration and expansion indicated that many of the encountered "others" were only marginally human and some of the "others" might not be human at all. This historical trajectory not only enhanced the west, but it also created a vast spectrum of potentially unbridgeable differences.

One of the dominant issues in the depiction of Aborigines in the early contact period is the extent to which Europeans thought of the Australian Aboriginal as falling within the realm of Humanity. In the dichotomy of nature/culture, it was evident to early pre-Cook navigators that these ancient inhabitants of continental Australia were either an extension of nature or somewhere in between nature and culture. Vignettes from early maps, mostly before Cook but also in some cases after Cook, portray the Aboriginal in two ways. One is a depiction of a thick tropical or temperate forest which has trees, vines, ferns, and a range of animals from kangaroos, wallabies, emus and dingoes. Embedded within this "thick" natural conception are individual natives forming a portrait that all men and beasts are part of nature. Another theme semi-isolates humans from "thick" nature but adds tails on Aborigines, thus forming a composite that while Aborigines are really not nature they are also not like our western sense of cultured humanity. These vignettes dominate our conceptions, especially when they portray the Tasmanians.

Throughout the nineteenth century, the Aboriginal is portrayed as fully human although as the lowest and most base conception of humanity. This form of primitiveness is manifest in their limited technological development, the absence of any form of government, the lack of agriculture, and in the total picture of social life as a gross extension of nature. Here, the totalizing image is that Aboriginal social life is geared only towards survival. Again, nature sets the parameters of this survival, and the Aboriginal cannot go beyond the natural limits of their environment (see Donaldson and Donaldson, 1985 for a more complete account of this cultural description).

The primitivism of the Aboriginal gains a greater contrast when early voyagers and explorers portrayed the Polynesians as being almost like the early Greek States. Polynesians are dressed in togas and wear olive branches as head-gear, which are the early markings of a civil society. In this contrast, it is clear that the idea of government is essential in bringing forth the contrast between

British notions of the state of nature manifested by Aboriginals as opposed to the state-like systems of rule by law expressed in Polynesia. (Smith, 1985).

By the nineteenth century, this primitivism was also endowed with special attributes which the early explorers felt to be critical in the exploration of the interior of Australia. Carter (1992) notes that European explorers in central Australia seldom used photography, although it was well known by the nineteenth century, both in Australia and elsewhere. These explorers attributed special visual keenness to Aboriginal trackers, namely the ability to operate in the desert with a highly developed sense of mnemonics which functioned as mapping and tracking devices in a way which could not be captured through photography. All of these special attributes were primarily an extension of desert and environmental adaptations which made the Aboriginal unique.

In another way, the British encounter with Aboriginals in Australia is unique. Historically, British common law declared Australia *terra nullius*. Although the continent was inhabited by indigenous societies, the British presence operated on the presupposition that the land was empty, although in many areas local peoples actively resisted British military ventures and colonial expansion. The declaration of *terra nullius* also meant that the land was not conquered but simply settled. One of the most drastic results of this policy was that treaties were never made with Aborigines, consequently land interests by the Whites were never reconciled with indigenous claims regarding land use and land tenure (Tonkinson, 1990: 216).¹

Within the British empire and its resulting colonial structure, the declaration of *terra nullius* in Australia was unique. It never was experienced in any other British colonial context.

Thus, the British colonization of New Zealand and the conflict between the British and Maoris resulted in the defense of Maori lands by warriors in a series of pitched battles culminating in the Treaty of Waitangi (1840) which acknowledged the existence of the Maoris as owners of the land (Rowley, 1970: 15). In Australia, no treaties were ever signed, thus land was annexed by the British government as Crown land. Furthermore, all land remained Crown land since 'native' claims were non-existent. In New Zealand, the Treaty of Waitangi was eventually violated by the Crown in the following decades, but it provided the foundation on which contemporary Maori populations could make a valid, and at times effective, claim for restoring their rights to their land.

¹ As noted by Pagden (1995: 76), the wastefulness and wanton disregard for resources among the native populations of the New World became part of the English and French colonial thinking of *res nullius* (empty things). Thus, true ownership of landlord property was linked to improvements through the use of agriculture. But since "primitive peoples" such as those in Australia were nomadic hunters with no corporate ownership of things and commodities, the argument of *terra nullius* to its extreme by deeming the whole continent of Australia as empty.

History: Race and Blood

Contemporary writers on race and the foundations of racism towards aboriginal peoples are divided regarding their interpretations. One interpretation is that race as a biological issue is an expression of structured class inequality and an ideology justifying the colonial situation. In such explanations, racial ideology must be assumed to be a dependent variable, since it would vary on how local class relations articulate whites, full blooded Aboriginals, and those whose ancestry would be labeled as "half/caste." Cowlshaw (1986, 1987, 1988) argues that race and the ensuing racism is primarily created from differential class relations, but over time, the ideology of inequality embeds and surfaces itself in a racial ideology. Through a sociological and anthropological analysis of a rural New South Wales town, Cowlshaw contends that race *per se* is not an essentialism. What is missing in this analysis, however, is the extent to which skin color is linked to personal and group identity. Skin color, like gender, cannot be turned on and off, and thus its existence is all the more embedding and embracing in comparison to certain cultural and behavioral traits which might be individually variable or at least not as binding on the individual as color and gender.

Other writers on the subject place more emphasis on how skin color and race might underlie social class and patterns of inequality. In an excellent summary on the issue of race, blood, and aboriginal identity, Tonkinson (1990: 207) notes that "Skin color is not irrelevant for Aborigines, although they do not accord it the same prominence as whites do. As noted in the foregoing discussion of local identity, Aborigines apply color labels but do not attribute any necessary behavioral concomitants to color, though there are individual exceptions." However, Trigger's (1989) analysis is more open to the idea that skin color and black ancestry have a greater impact on the attribution of psychological, cultural and class factors as they relate to the formation of ideological divisions of superiority and inferiority.

Throughout these varied opinions, a few generalizations can be made. One is that European ideas on race, racial differences and the allocation of socio-economic attributes have had an impact on aboriginal peoples' thoughts on these issues. This does not mean that pre-contact Aboriginal groups had no social cleavages or ideas of difference. Such forms of difference existed, but the underlying logic which created a sense of difference was culturally specific. More importantly, all the writers note that the use of the category "blood" is central to understanding how difference is created and what it includes. The use of terms like white-fella, black-fella, yella-fella is based on the idea that they differ in blood, and, consequently, peoples of different blood have different physical features, different habits and thought, and interact differently with one another. But blood is not simply a matter of exclusion or a matter of drawing boundaries between individuals and groups. Blood itself is what holds and binds

individuals who share a common biological, cultural and social experience. Thus matters of inheritance, be it biological or social, combine all the attributes which form a collective expression as a binding tie in which groups are constituted and define how they relate to others who are different.

In the historical context, race is the great dividing issue. Although the Aboriginal population was and is a very small fraction of the total population (now less than two per cent), the racial gap of White and Black, or what the Aboriginals call white-fella/black-fella, is a divide which cannot be breached. On top of this biological dichotomy, cultural and social attributes are added to make the contrast all the more apparent and glaring. Racial difference, then, becomes the idiom that captures and magnifies all other differences.

By the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, however, Christian missionaries and later welfare policies took another twist on this dichotomy. Full-blooded Aboriginals were converted to Christianity, especially in those areas where the local cultures were greatly decimated. Thus, throughout Victoria, New South Wales, and parts of South Australia and Queensland, local missions were the only institutions which embraced Aboriginal peoples. While some actual conversion occurred, it is evident that these people were dying off, and the task was to "smooth the dying pillow".

If race created the great divide, blood ties and links created a middle arena in which the civilizing force of Euro-Australian life might bring benefits. The working assumption was that if an individual Aboriginal had some fraction of "white" blood he/she might be saved and directed towards the benefits of western civilization. Unions and/or marriages between blacks and whites fostered "half caste" offspring, and any fraction of white blood then became the key ingredient for personal enhancement. Thus, blood becomes the barometer for cultural salvation or semi-salvation. This attitude was translated into the arena of missionization, welfare institutions, adoption, homes for parentless children, etc. Up until the 1950s, children were removed from mixed unions or marriages and sent to welfare and other social institutions in various parts of southeast and eastern Australia, mostly in urban areas or large towns. Even if parents were residing together as a family, the removal of children served as a means of redirecting infants to a different social climate by which they could be "saved". But the potential to "save" a child depended directly on the fraction of white blood in one's veins. Blood became the essentialism through which all the benefits of white society, as well as the enhancement of personal progress, would unfold.

Aboriginal Self Consciousness: The Importance of Blood

Throughout the history of White Australia, the history of the Aboriginal people has been one of cultural trauma and degradation which reached a pinnacle by the 1930s. However, in the past thirty years, a growing sense of self-

awareness combined with the regeneration of their own cultural and historical destiny has gradually assumed new and creative proportions.

The various threads, which created a common yet unique experience, come from a broad range of historical and contemporary events, from a common shared experience, and from an evolving sense of identity which has its roots in urban areas as well as more tribal contexts of the interior. In the pre-contact period, Aboriginal peoples were loosely understood within a "tribal" context, in which a tribe was primarily a language or a dialect group. At least two or three generations of anthropologists enhanced this kind of "tribal" thinking in the literature by providing tribes with discrete boundaries, and by stressing internal social and cultural differences, thus creating a reality of small groups/societies which fit well within the social anthropological dogma of tribal structures. At the same time, certain features of Aboriginal cultures were understood as pan-Australian with regional differences. Some of these differences were produced by external influences such as the Macassan contacts with Arnhem Land, the Melanesian intrusion into northern Queensland, and the dominant changes brought forth by colonial Australian regimes and missionary activity in the southeast part of the continent.

The discourses and voices on the creation, maintenance and reproduction of the idea on Aboriginality come from various quarters of Aboriginal society and from the academics who have written on the subject. A national consciousness on Aboriginality started in the 1930s through the efforts of William Cooper who was the Honorary Secretary of the Australian Aborigines' League. Up to the 1930s and even beyond, each of the states created laws restricting Aboriginal involvement in the labor pool, partly by dividing the "half-castes" from tribal peoples, but also by limiting any form of social and spatial mobility (Bourke, 1994: 40). The logic of these restrictions was always expressed under the rubric of protectionism of the Aboriginal population, but in reality it left them isolated, divided and without any mechanisms for a national voice regarding their plight and their future. The first national census which enumerated the aboriginal population was as late as 1966/67 and that was conducted by the Commonwealth government long after it was recognized that policy and practice towards Aboriginal groups could no longer be left solely at the state level.

Since the 1960s, the debate on Aboriginality has increased with no closure, and the literature is not only voluminous but also highly variable in regard to how the subject is approached (see: Allen, 1988; Attwood, 1989; Beckett, 1988a, 1988b; Bourke, Bourke and Edwards, 1994; Cassidy, 1988; Hollinsworth, 1992; Keefe, 1988; Keen, 1988; Peterson, 1989; Rowley, 1986 and Tatz, 1979). Most writers on the Aboriginality theme stress a common set of features which constitute what it means to be an Aboriginal. The centrality of a common heritage which goes back to about 40,000 years ago is critical as a

historical claim. At the same time, this historical dimension also has a biological component. Aboriginality is something which is in one's blood as well as in one's behavior. As Keffe (1988: 68-69) notes citing an interview, Aboriginals have only one blood gene because they have always been in Australia by themselves. This is contrasted to Europeans and Asians who have three or four blood genes due to historical mixture. Biological distinctiveness makes Aboriginals different, but also creates a canopy which embraces various local populations which administrators and anthropologists have claimed are not Aboriginal. The best case for this process is Tasmania. Anthropologists and archaeologists have claimed that the "Tasmanians are extinct," but when these views were aired on the national and international media, Tasmanians who were part-Tasmanians took quick offense by claiming that they are all Aboriginals. The old policy of fragmentation by blood and culture no longer holds, and thus the category Aboriginal has re-shaped the dubious distinctions which were carried over from the nineteenth century.

If blood means something which is inherited, its social and cultural ramifications are also far reaching. Identity is based on a commonality of spiritualism with the land and a strong moral and ethical commitment to the value of caring and sharing, which becomes the basis of consensus decision-making. The idea of giving is vital to all Aboriginal social networks, be it urban, rural or tribal. In this context, giving is a classic example of what Marcel Mauss (1954) meant by *totales prestations* in which the exchange is initiated by the giver who perceives a need on the part of a potential receiver. Giving, sharing and caring embraces goods, services, child care and a whole range of needs, most of which are normally unspoken.

If these features are the essentialisms of being Aboriginal, the movement within Australia has also projected itself into the contemporary context by the creation of cultural symbols as meaningful emblems of Aboriginality. Keffe (1988: 71) notes that the colors of the Aboriginal flag are black, for their race, yellow, for the sun which sustains all life, and red, for the blood which has been shed by past generations. The flag itself is not only an emblem, but also an expression of resistance as is the Aboriginal tent embassy in Canberra. Furthermore, aboriginal consciousness was not limited to political actions and resistance within Australia. An Aboriginal passport was issued in 1988 and while the Federal government rejected it, it was used by a delegation of Aboriginals as entrance to Libya (Tonkinson, 1990: 217), but it could not be used on their return to Australia. Disputes over *Uluru* (Ayers Rock) in central Australia are also pivotal since *Uluru*, as a sacred site, has been converted to a national park by the Commonwealth government in conjunction with the Northern Territory Administration. Tourists come from various parts of the world, but the local Pitjantjatjara who own *Uluru* can no longer camp next to it. Many of these

symbols which emerge from primordial ties of speech, blood and custom are in a state of contestation with national, state and local aims.

The Essentialism of Land as Heritage

Of all the cultural, economic and political issues which are debated and contested within the context of Aboriginality, the most volatile issue is the land rights movement. For Aboriginals, land is the spiritual and symbolic basis of existence with the ideas of being and emotional sustenance as expressed from birth through death all fused with the land. In these traditional societies, land and what is below the surface of the land is the critical referent to which all myth and cosmology are expressed as a living, ongoing existence. Even in urban contexts, Aboriginal societies and their members commonly possess a strong feeling and affinity of what land they belong to. Given a kinship framework in which both paternal and maternal ties are vital to express existence, it is evident that these ties to land can range over vast territories. Even if individuals have never experienced the land, they are fully aware of historical and mythic connections through oral histories. Over the past two decades throughout the continent, Aboriginal peoples have petitioned to get traditionally held lands returned to them. The Land Rights issue started with the Gurindji in Arnhem Land in 1966. What was a local matter gradually evolved into a national concern, and it is far from being resolved. The Land Rights movement has had some limited success; Aboriginals have taken possession of their lands in certain localities in central Australia, the western desert and also in Arnhem Land. However, one of the major arguments raised by Anglo-Australians regarding this shift in ownership questions what the Aboriginals are doing with land, namely how it is, or is not, utilized for production and commoditization. Throughout the Northern Territory, the major enduring complaint by Anglo-Australians is that nothing is being produced. Once again, land is simply a matter of use value. For Aboriginals, space/place/land per se is what life is all about, for it is only the land and locality which can provide emotional sustenance, an essential factor not realized in the production from the land.

The Land Rights movement, coupled with demands for the return of traditional lands and sacred sites, has become a partial impediment to the extent that capital ventures are now cautious in regard to large-scale investment which might be curtailed by local level Aboriginal protest. Aboriginality has had a critical and dynamic role in redirecting national aims towards particular groups and problems which would have been all the more vulnerable if pan-national Aboriginal organizations and movements were absent.

Aboriginals and the State

Any understanding of Aboriginality in the past and present within the Australian context requires a detailed analysis of the role of the nation-state. The

policies of the nation-state, in this case the Australian State, have had critical and long reaching effects on Aborigines and Aboriginality. Beckett (1988b: 3) notes that the situation of Aboriginals within the history of Australia has consistently been a problem, and the solution must come from the state. But one can go further by arguing that the State itself is the problem, and the solution must come from re- thinking the role of the State.

By creating bureaucracies which deal with Aboriginal problems and concerns such as poverty, malnutrition and high death rates, the State has created and fostered the perpetuation of a state of dependency which becomes enduring with no end. The creation of the welfare state, which has reduced many Aboriginal peoples to wards of the State, has had dire and negative consequences which have re-cycled back upon themselves. This welfare state is the logical growth of a form of internal colonialism which has isolated Aboriginal peoples from one another and buttressed the barriers between black and white. If the White Australia policy was a matter of national defense in relationship to what was conceived of as an external threat, the creation of the White Australia policy also had an impact on Australia's first inhabitants. Not only did Aboriginals become wards of the State under this policy, but it promulgated and enhanced all of the attitudes of racism and ethnocentrism which have firm foundations throughout all of Australian history.

Aboriginals live in Australia as a State, but they are outside of Australia as a Nation. As Beckett (1988b: 6-12) notes, the fact that citizenship has always been denied to them not only made them wards, but it also created the Aboriginal with no rights or privileges in the context of civil society. While they could not be deported, it was felt that they would go the way of all "extinct races". By the 1950s and 1960s, however, it was clear that they were not going into extinction, thus the role of national and state policies became more of a policing nature. Given the fact that Aboriginal peoples could not be proletarianized as a labor force, the State charged itself with the responsibility to guarantee that local Aboriginal communities would not be a hindrance to capitalistic ventures in the form of mining and oil exploration.

Aboriginality as an Essentialistic Ideology

Many writers on Aboriginality claim that it is an ideology, and like most ideologies it has a role of persistence and also of resistance (Keeffe, 1988: 67-80). But all ideologies, if they are to have a lasting impact, must resonate certain cultural values and symbols which are meaningful and productive to the individuals and groups who adhere to any such movement. Ideologies are a reasoned set of notions concerning the path of politics. In one sense this is a kind of culture, since over historical time and even in the short run, ideologies, like culture, are a product of shared thought. However, the major difference between culture and ideology is, while culture is a set of conscious and unconscious

givens or ontological axioms unquestioned by participants, ideologies are willfully developed paths of explanation that, in theory, are consciously developed through reasoned and rational action. It is the ideological domain that emerges through group or class interests as a means of contesting State power structures. The created ideologies, as rational and willful as they might be, are not created out of a vacuum. The symbols of ideas, meanings, and actions that comprise the ideological structuring of any interest group, part of the class structure, or group defined by race and blood, are always mediated by cultural forms and expressions that are part of the historical/cultural basis of small societies.

In stating that Aboriginality is an ideology or expression of an ideology, it must be stressed that this ideology is not simply one of a misplaced or false consciousness. Aboriginality as an essentialism rests and resonates on certain cultural features which have a vital meaning for Aboriginal societies and their participants, but, as an ideology, Aboriginality is also part of a political process. The cultural foundations of being Aboriginal, be it rural or urban, are based on ideas of land, the right to self-determination and a strong commitment to foster what it means to be an Aboriginal. Again, it is the idea of blood which combines the past (be it cultural, biological or linguistic) into the present as a means of expressing and displaying the idea that the assimilation policies of the 1930s and 1940s are no longer viable and that Aboriginal peoples must no longer be pawns and wards of State bureaucratic structures which control their destiny. Politically, the move towards self-determination is expressed in the desire for land, an education system which is bi-cultural as well as bi-lingual, the interest in political participation at various levels of government with a dominant concern to resurrect what is culturally vital as an emergent reality.

Yet, some social scientists maintain that this position is a falsehood. Von Sturmer emphatically argues that “ ‘Aboriginality’ is a fiction which takes on meaning only in terms of white ethnocentrism. This identity can be nothing more than an expression of faith. It represents an ideological position far removed from the concrete situations from which it is presumed to have drawn its substance” (1973: 16-17). In response to this statement, Eleanor Bourke states that “To some Aboriginal people, this would parallel a claim that European Jewish identity is a result of its reaction to Nazi Germany” (1994: 45).

Furthermore, the illusion that Aboriginals possess little or no power persists among social scientists. Writing in the early 1980s, Howard states that “Aborigines lack both the ideological and economic bases of power in contemporary Australian society; for the most part, they control neither things nor ideas” (1982: 1). However, within the past ten years it is apparent that Aboriginal ideology has been skillfully crafted on a cultural foundation which has clear and vocal meaning for both blacks and whites in Australia. During the summer of 1993 and 1994, the mention of the word “Marbo” (the court case which entitled

Aboriginals to land) brought forth fright, tension and racial antagonism which is always close to the surface. Australian newspapers ran vicious cartoons on how disruptive the Marbo act had become, and a resolution of this issue is far from sight.

Minority Status

It is clear that Aboriginals do not define themselves as a minority, nor do they desire to be placed in that category by others. Though they are a minute fraction of the total Australian population, Aboriginals feel that their constitution is based on their own cultural parameters which cannot be usurped by the dominant society. These persisting cultural features are reflected in many ways. For instance, conversion to Christianity has always been a moot issue, and the history of Christian missionary activity indicates that such conversions are highly problematic. Furthermore, the role which Aboriginals have played in the Australian wage economy is also marginalized by the fact that they have few cultural or social underpinnings which support and enhance a proletarian type wage economy.

Nevertheless, White Australia continues to define Aboriginals as a minority based on the idea that they are few in numbers, have little or no power; and normally do not partake in national political and cultural life. But now there is a highly vocal cadre who will not retreat to the "bush" or to urban ghettos. Aboriginal claims on traditional land holdings will continue as the first step in correcting a historical disgrace. What the future holds is hard to say, but it is clear that the forces of Aboriginality are such that the younger generations realize that there is no backing down from their challenge to the national hegemony. To the dominant white society, Aboriginals will always be a minority which will be difficult to incorporate and/or assimilate into White Australian society. Again the fundamental barrier is race and blood.

In 1988, the Australian government held a series of celebrations and enactments to commemorate the 200-year anniversary of Cook's "discovery" of Australia. Aboriginal protests occurred throughout many parts of the country, claiming that the start of White Australia in 1788 was the beginning of the demise of Black Australia. Although the national media attempted to minimize the demonstrations and highly vocal rallies, Aboriginality as a form of minority persistence and resistance conveyed to the world community that there is another type of Australian in Australia. The parallels between the 1988 protests in Australia and the 500-year anniversary of Columbus in the New World are striking. But the fact remains that Australia, as one country contested by basically one minority, proved to be effective in focusing the issues and debate in regard to equality under law as well as a direct attack on state hegemony.

The great curtain of silence of British colonialism and imperialism in Australia has been partly lifted, and the invisible minority is no longer invisible.

Yet, a historical legacy intertwined with racism and ethnocentrism persists, but small cracks are appearing in the reality and mirror of state hegemony towards its only minority.

Discussion

Throughout the various writings on the Australian Aboriginal, both by Whites as well as Aboriginal writers, one notices that portraits of Aboriginal culture(s) stress a particularistic quality as opposed to any expression of universalism or universalistic thinking. This aspect of particularism is rooted in blood and tradition, in the way that life is connected to land/space/place. In many ways the dilemma of particularism is that on one side the cultural existence of local societies is viable and creative as an emergent reality. On the other side, is the concern for transforming social/cultural existence to meet challenges as they emerge from the national polity, be it new policies or practices in and through which Aboriginal peoples must respond. The political activism and the focus on land rights by Aboriginal leaders, either regional or national, have taken on a universalistic mode of argumentation. Most Aboriginal leaders or spokespersons realize that the claims they argue for also exist in other parts of the world under national regimes which are more politically repressive than those in Australia.

This universalistic depiction at the national and global level has had an impact on Australian policy towards its only indigenous minority. Yet, the depiction of what Aboriginals are cannot be framed only by what White Australia thinks they should be. Whereas other minorities (south Europeans, Asians) entered Australia and soon became hyphenated Australians, the hyphen model will not work for Aboriginals. In part, this is due to policies regarding race, racial differences and the inheritance from the White Australian policy of the late nineteenth century. The other side of the issue is that Aboriginals are the original inhabitants and thus an expression of inclusion is made (correctly) on the assumption that inclusion can only mean a loss of identity and blood. Cultural and historical narratives of their past simply cannot be negotiated away in a national polity based on one language, one flag, and one race.

The perceptions of Anglo Australians towards Aboriginals are difficult to determine, especially if the question is one of national guilt and shame which Whites have towards Blacks. The colonial experience has been a succession of carnage and tragedy, and probably most Anglos feel a sense of shame about the past which must be rectified. Over the past thirty years, the federal and state governments have responded to this historical shame by increasing expenditures on Aboriginal needs and causes, be it for health, education, or assistance in re-acquiring land, and, to a limited extent, greater political involvement on the national level.

However, over the past three years, the various debates and the fear resulting from "Marbo" decisions have hardened the ill-feeling and hatred which

Whites have towards Blacks. Now the White narrative is such that Blacks are characterized as lazy, wasteful, and never satisfied with what “we” have done for them. This, plus the fear that “all the land” will go back to the Blacks, has sent negative shock waves from Canberra to the deepest reaches of the interior desert and pastoral lands. Of course, this portrait varies throughout Australia for in most cases religious and academic interests have and still continue to support Aboriginal claims and needs.

And last is the issue of essentialism, anti-essentialism, and anti-anti essentialism. My interpretation of the importance of race (or blood), land, and the spirituality which Aboriginal peoples endow to place and space has been framed in a highly essentialistic perspective. What is critical in this analysis is to describe and express the evolving concept of Aboriginality as based on a series of cultural features which are not only real in and of themselves, but which also elicit the major foundations that provide the cultural basis of Aboriginality as an ideology and as part of a highly visible political culture.

Blood, based on transmitted biological and cultural factors, is a pivotal and essential factor in what constitutes Aboriginality, and thus it cannot be dissolved into something else. This idea is difficult to express to western audiences and the reasons are numerous. One is that the writings on race and how race is constructed have stopped over the past thirty years. Within anthropology, common thought takes various directions. One is that if we do not talk or write about race, the problem will evaporate. Second is that race is no longer a scientific concept, thus it should be dropped. Third is the denial that anyone accepts or acts in terms of race or racial categories, thus it is a non-issue. Apart from the science of the above, it is also clear that many, or most, societies throughout the world think and act in terms or categories which are grounded in race. In many cases, it is part of primordial sentiments along with other sentiments which are the cultural and social bases of group identity both as a local concern and on how societies project themselves within the national and international polity. Essentialisms and/or primordial sentiments, which have been noted by anthropologists, have also been critical to the development of many contemporary nation-states, and they must and should be accepted as realities which cannot be dissolved away or re-interpreted within academic and intellectual debates. Over thirty years ago, Geertz (1963) dealt with the comparative problem of how primordial sentiments are expressed in a variety of structures and institutions and how “New States” and civil polities must accommodate and/or incorporate such essentialisms. What has been learned now is that the problem of local level sentiment is still an issue for “Old States.”

Our general concern is to signify the existence of these local level essentialisms as realities and identities which cement and bind societies to their past and probably their future. For anthropologists, it is ethnography which attempts to establish what these essentialisms are and how they operate to

provide emotional sustenance to actors. But above all, ethnographic descriptions must be understood and accepted as an approximation or even a portrait of an emerging and evolving reality, a reality which cannot be dissolved in the trafficking of theory and theorists. Recently, Sahlins is even more explicit on this point:

No good ethnography is self-contained. Implicitly or explicitly ethnography is an act of comparison. By virtue of comparison ethnographic description becomes objective. Not in the naive positivist sense of an unmediated perception just the opposite: it becomes a universal understanding to the extent it brings to bear on the perception of any society the conceptions of all the others. Some Cultural Studies types seem to think that anthropology is nothing but ethnography. Better the other way around: ethnography is anthropology, or it is nothing. (1993: 21)

If one reads with a sense of openness the anti-essentialism tracts throughout the social sciences and the humanities, be it in theory, critical theory, cultural studies, forms of comparison, and all approaches to description, it is clear that the attack is on the idea of essence(s). Furthermore, we must always be cautious and intellectually vigilant by realizing that traveling theories travel at the expense of other traditions whose voices and sounds are muted. But as Said (1983: 226-247) and the various authors in the volume edited by Clifford and Dhareshwar (1989) critically emphasize, the movement of theory, intellectual trends and scholarly fads to other contexts without a hiatus or even a change in *venue* can only be understood as traveling theory combined with and supported by western intellectual imperialism. Local essence(s), local and cultural essentialisms, and primordialism in all its expressions become grist for heavy global theories which in the long run re-write the local into the global.

Anti-essentialism as a framework which challenges our own theories and modes of interpretation is one thing; however, one of the dangers of taking this position to its logical end is to argue that nothing exists - there is no there, there. The backlash to anti-essentialism ranging from studies in feminism to structural and post-structuralist accounts of Afro-American literary theory is superbly set forth in Diana Fuss's *Essentially Speaking*. Yet, on both sides of the argument between essentialism and anti-essentialism, we must be on guard against all forms of intellectual terrorism which always operate against the voiceless and the unsaid, such as Australian Aborigines.

References

- Allen, H. (1988) History Matters - a commentary on divergent interpretations of Australian history. *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, Number 2: 79-89.
- Attwood, B. (1989) *The Making of Aborigines*. Allen and Unwin: Sydney.
- Beckett, J. R. (ed.) (1988a) *Past and Present: The Construction of Aboriginality*. Aboriginal Studies Press: Canberra.
- (1988b) Aboriginality, Citizenship and Nation State. In *Aborigines and the State in Australia. Special issue of Social Analysis*, 24: 3-18.
- Bourke, C., E. Bourke and B. Edwards (eds.) (1994) *Aboriginal Australia: An Introductory Reader in Aboriginal Studies*. University of Queensland Press: St. Lucia.
- Bourke, E. (1994) Australia's First People: Identity and Population In C. Bourke, E. Bourke, and B. Edwards (eds.) *Aboriginal Studies*, University of Queensland Press: St. Lucia. pp. 35-48.
- Carter, P. (1992) *Living in a New Country: History, Traveling and Language*. Faber and Faber: London.
- Cassidy, J. (1988) The significance of the classification of a colonial acquisition: the conquered/settled distinction. *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, 1: 2-17.
- Clifford, J. and V. Dhareshwar (eds.) (1989) *Traveling Theories, Traveling Theorists. Inscriptions, Group for the Critical Study of Colonial Discourse and The Center for Cultural Studies*, University of California: Santa Cruz.
- Cowlshaw, G. (1986) Race for Exclusion. *The Australian and New Zealand Journal of Sociology*, 22: 3-24.
- (1987) Colour, Culture and the Aboriginalists. *In Man*, 22: 221-237.
- (1988) *Black, White or Brindle: Race in Rural Australia*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.
- Donaldson, I. and T. Donaldson (eds.) (1985) *Seeing the First Australians*. George Allen & Unwin: Sydney.
- Elder, B. (1988) *Blood on the Wattle: Massacres and Maltreatment of Australian Aborigines since 1788*. Child and Associates: French's Forest (N.S.W.).
- Fuss, D. (1989) *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference*. Routledge: New York.
- Geertz, C. (1963) The Integrative Revolution: Primordial Sentiments and Civil Politics in the New States. In Geertz, C. (ed.) *Old Societies and New States: The quest for modernity in Asia and Africa*. The Free Press: New York.
- Hollinsworth, D. (1992) Discourses on Aboriginality and the politics of Identity in urban Australia. *Oceania*, 63: 137-155.
- Howard, M. C. (1982) Introduction. In M. C. Howard (ed.) *Aboriginal Power in Australian Society*, University of Brisbane Press: St. Lucia. pp. 1-13.
- Keeffe, K. (1988) Aboriginality: Resistance and Persistence, *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, 1: 67-81.
- Keen, I. (ed.) (1988) *Being Black: Aboriginal Cultures in 'Settled' Australia*. Aboriginal Studies Press: Canberra.
- Mauss, M. (1954) *The Gift*, The Free Press: Glencoe.
- Pagden, A. (1995) *Lords of All the World: Ideologies of Empire in Spain, Britain and France c. 1500-c. 1800*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press.
- Peterson, N. (1989) A colonial image: penetrating the reality of the message. *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, 2: 59-62.
- Rowley, C.D. (1970) *The Destruction of Aboriginal Society*. Australian National University Press: Canberra.
- (1971 a) *Outcasts in White Australia*. Australian National University Press: Canberra.
- (1971b) *The Remote Aborigines*. Australian National University Press: Canberra.
- (1986) *Recovery: The Politics of Aboriginal Reform*. Penguin Books: Ringwood (Vic.).

- Sahlins, M. (1993) *Waiting for Foucault*. Prickly Pear Press: Cambridge.
- Said, E. W. (1983) Traveling Theory. In Said E.W. (ed.) *The World, the Text and the Critic*. Harvard University Press: Cambridge.
- Smith, B. (1985) *European Vision and the South Pacific*. Second Edition, Yale University Press: New Haven.
- Tatz, C. (1979) *Race Politics in Australia: Aborigines, Politics and Law*. University of New England Publishing Unit: Armidale.
- Tonkinson, M. E. (1990) Is it in the Blood? Australian Aboriginal Identity. In J. Linnekin and L. Poyer (eds.) *Cultural Identity and Ethnicity in the Pacific*, University of Hawaii Press: Honolulu.
- Trigger, D. S. (1989) Racial Ideologies in Australia's Gulf Country. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 12: 209-232
- von Sturmer, J. (1973) Changing Aboriginal Identity in Cape York. In D. Tugby (ed.) *Aboriginal Identity in Contemporary Australian Society*. The Jacaranda Press: Milton (Qld.).

