

*The end in the beginning:
Re(de)finding Aboriginality*

1994 Wentworth Lecture

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An old man said: 'I don't care how hard it is. You build Aboriginality or you get nothing. There's no choice about it. If our Aboriginal people cannot change how it is among themselves, then the Aboriginal people will never climb back out of hell' (Gilbert 1977, pp. 304–05).

But this takes us too far ahead in the story, towards the end, 'although the end is in the beginning' (Ellison 1952, p. 9). Since first contact with the colonisers of this country, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have been the object of a continual flow of commentary and classification. I would like to begin by taking you through just a sample of what they saw as Aboriginality.

To the early visitors we varied from the 'noble savage' to the 'prehistoric beast'. For example: 'The natives of New Holland ... may appear to some to be the most wretched people of earth, but in reality they are far more happier than we Europeans ... They live in a tranquillity which is not disturb'd by the inequality of condition' (Cook cited in Smith 1960, p. 126); 'The poorest objects on the habitable globe' (Clark 1825, p. 100); 'Blood thirsty, cunning, ferocious, and marked by black ingratitude and base treachery' (Boyd 1882, pp. 218–21); 'The Australian nigger is the lowest type of human creature about ... But having one splendid point in which he is far ahead of the chinkie. He'll die out and the chinkie won't' (Inson & Ward 1887).

In the law we were defined systematically, though variably, according to proportions of black blood. For example: 'An Aboriginal native of Australia or of any of the islands adjacent or belonging thereto'¹; 'Any person of Aboriginal descent whose moral intellectual and physical welfare the board was to promote with a view to their assimilation into the general community' (*Aborigines Act 1957*); And then, depending on the year, variously: 'A half-caste child whose

age does not apparently exceed eighteen years' (*Aboriginal Ordinance Act 1918* [NT]); 'A half-caste male child whose age does not apparently exceed 21 years' (*Native Administration Ordinance 1940*); 'Every half-caste aged 34 habitually associating and living with an Aboriginal' (*Aborigines Protection Act 1886*); Excluding 'A person less than quadroon blood who was born prior to the thirty first day of December, 1936' (*Aborigines Amendment Act 1936*);

Aboriginal 'half-castes', in particular, came under the scrutiny of the ethnologists. They wrote for example: 'There is no biological reason for the rejection of people with a dilute strain of Aboriginal blood. A low percentage will not introduce any aberrant characteristics and there need be no fear of reversions to the dark Aboriginal type' (Tindale 1941, p. 67); classifiable into various hybrid types: 'first crosses of two types, second generation crosses of three types, 1/8, 3/8, F3, FX, 5/8, quadroon, octoroon' (Tindale 1941, pp. 38–86), and so it went on.

Their men of religion were also concerned to define us. They saw us as: 'Degraded as to divine things, almost on a level with a brute ... In a state of moral unfitness for heaven ... and as incapable of enjoying its pleasures as darkness is incapable of dwelling with light' (Harper cited in Woolmington 1973); 'Without god in the world, entirely lost to all oral and spiritual perception' (Dredge 1845, p. 11).

Similarly, their hopeful educators assessed our capacity for learning. Alternatively: '[H]aving perfectly infantile in judgements where compass of thought is required' (Harris 1847, p. 386), or 'Materials, which although extremely crude are nevertheless good, the intellect buried in augean filth, yet we may find gems of the first magnitude and brilliance' (Cartwright cited in Woolmington 1973, p. 17).

Their men of science sought to define us through the study of our brains and blood, concluding that 'their Aboriginal blood is remotely the same as that of the majority of the white inhabitants of Australia, for the Australian Aboriginal is recognised as being the forerunner of the caucasian race' (Tindale 1941, p. 67); and 'showing anatomical characters very rare in the white races of mankind, but at the same time normal in ape types (Duckworth 1907, p. 69).

We have been an ever-popular subject for artists who portrayed us in paintings or films. Initially, they portrayed noble, well-built native, heroic, bearded, loin clothed, one-foot-up, vigilant, with boomerang at the ready. Later, after we had fallen from grace, we appeared bent, distorted, overweight, inebriated, with bottle in hand.

We even found our way into poetry: 'Flat as reptiles huddled in the scrub ... A band of fierce fantastic savages ... Staring like a dream of hell!' (Kendall cited in Elliott & Mitchell 1970, p. 70)

Every one of these statements is drawn directly from the words written about Indigenous peoples in this country. Yes, they have had a lot to say about

us. And if you are overwhelmed by this litany of statements, made with a confidence exceeded only by their ignorance, they are but a fragment of what Indigenous peoples have borne in body and spirit since we first came into the view of the colonisers.

Since their first intrusive gaze, colonising cultures have had a preoccupation with observing, analysing, studying, classifying and labelling 'aborigines' and Aboriginality. Under that gaze, Aboriginality changed from being a daily practice to being 'a problem to be solved'. Nor am talking about ancient history. In 1988, at the national congress of the RSL, Victorian state president, Mr Bruce Ruxton, together with the National president, Brigadier Alf Garland, loyal disciples of the geneticists, called on the federal government to 'amend the definition of aborigine to eliminate the part-whites who are making a racket out of being so-called aborigines at enormous cost to taxpayers' (*The Australian* 9 September 1988), and for some kind of genealogical examination to determine whether the applicant for benefits was a 'full blood or a half-caste or a quartercast or whatever' (Slee 1988).

Just last week we once again heard calls from certain members of the National Party in Queensland for the federal government to insist that only people with more than 50 per cent Aboriginal blood be eligible to identify as Aboriginal.² Clearly such views have not gone away.

Similarly, the theories of the ethnologists expounding the backward stages of evolution of the Aboriginal race were vividly brought to life once again just last year during the public debate over Native Title when we were all told how Aboriginal people had failed to even invent the wheeled cart.³

The obsession with distinctions between the offensively named 'full bloods' and 'hybrids', or 'real' and 'inauthentic' Aborigines continues to be imposed on us today. There would be few urban Aboriginal people who have not been labelled as culturally bereft, 'fake', 'part-aborigines', and then expected to authenticate their Aboriginality in terms of percentages of blood or clichéd 'traditional' experiences.

Constant proclamations that indigenous peoples are remnants of a past doomed to extinction, that 'the old Aboriginal world is now facing its final twilight' (Strehlow 1963, p. 456), and that Aboriginal people are 'powerless to defend themselves against the final onslaught' (Bennett 1978, p. 67), continue to construct us as innately obsolete peoples. In all these representations, all these supposed 'truths' about us, our voices and our visions have been notably absent. There may be an enlightened minority who have been willing to open their eyes and ears to allow the space for Aboriginal people to convey our Aboriginalities. But, as my colleague Marcia Langton so poignantly wrote: the majority of Australians, 'do not know and relate to Aboriginal people. They relate to stories told by former colonists' (Langton 1993, p. 33).

So today, to even begin to speak about Aboriginality is to enter a labyrinth full of obscure passages, ambiguous signs and trap doors. The moment you