Expressions of Aboriginal Nationalism in the 1970s

Caitlin Mahar

Mimicry is, thus, the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which 'appropriates' the Other as it visualises power. Mimicry is also the sign of the inappropriate, however, a difference or recalcitrance which coheres the dominant strategic function of colonial power, intensifies surveillance, and poses an immanent threat to both 'normalized' knowledges and disciplinary powers.1

Discussions of 'the colonial mirror', the 'mimesis' between the state and indigenous people, tend to focus on how the 'power of the former has been used to bring the latter into at least external conformity with its constructions'.2 It is further possible to look the other way and trace the mimesis between the colonised and dominant discourses of modernity in which the appropriative power of the former offers an historically specific response to, and critique of, the latter.

Despite critiques and prophesies of its demise, nationalism remains, if somewhat precariously, the most legitimate polity in contemporary life. In terms of the history of colonised minorities living within nation-states, this situation has often been complicated as both the state and minority seek to define and legitimate themselves with a discourse of nationalism. In Australia this process has involved a struggle to control a discourse of Aboriginality. Here I propose to gesture towards this struggle by looking at the way indigenous people have appropriated modern symbols and discourses with which to frame a resistance in the context of attempts by the nation-state to appropriate and subsume Aboriginality. The nation is by no means the only space in which the state flexes colonial muscle, nor has it provided the only framework through which the colonised have mounted resistance. Yet the concept of nation does point to a number of tensions and contradictions specific to a discussion of a colonial relationship embedded in a postcolonial context.

In the spirit of Edward Said's groundbreaking study, Orientalism, there has been much analysis of the ways in which Aborigines and Aboriginality have been constructed and appropriated by Europeans.3 This approach to the colonial

relationship involves, as Bain Attwood suggests, a new object of knowledge: ‘Ourselves, European Australians rather than Them, the Aborigines’. In this vein a number of critics have examined the ways in which the nation-state, in its various manifestations, has tended to ‘construct Aboriginal people in their absence’. These include discussions as varied as the idea of Aboriginal religion being made to ‘speak for’ Christianity, to counter culture’s appropriation of the concept of Aborigines’ commune with nature as part of an alternative lifestyle. Jeremy Beckett, among others, has looked at how Aboriginality has been used in nationalist discourse—preserved with flora and fauna as our past to be put to work in tourism, as examples of Australiana.

Andrew Lattas has examined the ways in which Aboriginality has been employed in constructions of Australian nationalism— as part of a project to reclaim the nation’s lost spirituality, where, ‘Aborigines represent a primordial timeless unconscious subjectivity which whites have lost’.

In the context of a postcolonial questioning of the authority invested in the West and discourses of modernity, such discussions offer important critiques of the workings of colonial power and knowledge. Specifically they reveal a repressive appropriation of Aboriginality, where the heterogeneous experience and historicity of indigenous people have been abstracted by an Aboriginality that can be incorporated into various ‘other’ dominant narratives: often the rhetoric of the Australian nation or national identity. These are studies of the way in which the colonised have been ‘policing’, where, in Jacques Rancière’s terms, the police is:

... an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying, and see that those bodies are assigned by name to a particular place and task; it is an order of the visible and the sayable that sees that a particular activity is visible and another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and another as noise.


These discussions deal with the policing of indigenes in the sense that they reveal the ways that they have been controlled, not simply by colonial structures, but by forms of knowledge that control their 'ways of being' by defining the very way they are understood. More specifically, such studies examine the manner in which ideas of 'the Aborigines' and 'Aboriginality' have been produced by the settler culture. These are histories of European-Australians' control over what Sally Weaver has termed a 'public ethnicity'.9 This is a construction that strains towards unity and uniformity, underwritten by the conception of an essential Aboriginality whose touchstone is usually the remote, 'traditional' Aborigine.

What I propose to gesture towards here is not a history of policing, but its correspondent; a history of what Rancière terms 'politics'. Politics is a practice he defines as antagonistic to policing and one defined solely by its form: it is whatever breaks with the 'tangible configuration' of the police; the intervention of whatever once had no place in that configuration. Politics is whatever shifts a 'body' from its assigned place or change's a places destination; it reconfigures the space of the police and 'makes visible what has no business being seen, and makes heard a discourse where once there was only noise'.10

In this context I propose to look at the way in which indigenous people, who had had no proper place in the colonial configuration, demanded a part by casting themselves as members of a colonised nation. These are articulations of Aboriginality authorised by non-tribal, urban indigenes in the 1970s. These are moments when people who were not deemed 'properly' Aboriginal staked their own control over what has been described as a public ethnicity: a process involving the use of European discourses and referents (including a modern sense of a 'traditional' native tradition); a construction that strains towards unity and uniformity and is epitomised in a discourse of Aboriginal nationalism.

***

The history of Australia's colonial policies is marked by various attempts to subsume Aboriginality. These include efforts to exterminate, 'breed out' and assimilate people of Aboriginal descent. In the 1960s, assimilationist policies began to be tempered with an emerging tolerance of, even respect for, indigenous culture in the context of acceptance of social and cultural diversity. In January 1972 the Liberal government announced its Aboriginal policy and attitude to land rights. In line with the Northern Territory Supreme Court's decision not to recognize a doctrine of communal

---

9 Sally Weaver, 'Struggles of the Nation-State to Define Aboriginal Ethnicity', in G.L. Gold (ed.), *Minorities and Mother Country Imagery*, Memorial University, Newfoundland, 1984, pp. 184-85.

native title in the Yirrkala Land case, the McMahon Government refused to grant Aborigines land rights based on 'traditional association'.\(^{11}\) The policy reiterated was that: 'Aborigines should be assisted as individuals and if they wish as groups, at the local community level, to hold effective and respected places within one Australian society'. At the same time there was to be a certain recognition of cultural difference; McMahon stated that Aborigines 'should be encouraged and assisted to preserve and develop their own culture ...in the diverse culture of the Australian society'.\(^{12}\) Something of a precursor to a later policy of multiculturalism, McMahon's statement hailed an acceptance (if not celebration) of Aboriginality in the context of a recognition of cultural diversity, rather than a recognition of the specifics of colonial dispossession and domination.

While official policy's 'emphasis on Aboriginal identity', as the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs described it, was seen as 'most relevant to those remote areas where tribal infra-structure still exists', it unexpectedly fed into a growing assertion of Aboriginality by people living in urban areas.\(^{13}\) Those from areas such as Redfern, Fitzroy, Port Adelaide and South Brisbane began to make themselves into a substantial and visible proposition. Many indigenous people living in non-tribal situations became involved in a search for knowledge of 'traditional' Aboriginal customs, languages and legends. The 'Black Power' of the Panther Party included a compulsory re-education program which focused on the Aboriginal history and condition. Recruits saw films, attended lectures and were given books to read and discuss. In some city areas 'Tribal Councils' were established and corroborees performed.\(^{14}\) In 1969 the Fitzroy-based Koorier asked any Koories interested in helping with a Koorie-operated 'Aboriginal artefacts business, which concentrated on returning boomerangs', to contact it.\(^{15}\)

In their own celebrations of what Charles Rowley has called the 'remote Aborigines', urban indigenes began to shift emphasis away from the particularities of 'tribe' by couching their 'black pride' in the language of race and nation. It was an authorisation of Aboriginality tied to a concept of cultural survival. When they spoke out it was often to articulate a common culture and condition, namely an Aboriginality which strained towards unity and uniformity, which abstracted the particularities of

---

\(^{11}\) The Yirrkala bid for title of their land, initiated in 1963 in an effort to halt their land's proposed excision from the Aboriginal Reserve in Arnhem Land for mining purposes, culminated in the case of Milirrpum and Others v. Nabalco and the Commonwealth of Australia (1971) 17 FLR 141.


\(^{15}\) The Koorier, Vol. 1, No. 6, 1969, p. 1.
different groups or tribes in favour of a common ground constructed in opposition to the white colonisers. One writer in the Koorier accused 'gubs' of:

killing the blackman's individuality as a race, dignity, national pride and unity, but bear me out and recognise the fact that, as has been proved throughout white man's history, with the return of dignity and national pride comes the burning desire to be free and this spells trouble.16

Observers found it difficult to accept this assertion of cultural difference that refused to be contained by an image of the colonised as either 'original' tribalized Aborigines or Aborigines striving to be white (assimilated). The Aboriginality being invoked by these de-tribalized people was a phenomenon that even expert and sympathetic observers seemed to have difficulty recognizing.

In 1971, W.C. Wentworth, Federal Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, noted that these 'fringe-dwellers ... now assert their Aboriginality in quite a new degree'.17 He went on to comment on what he described as the often 'synthetic' nature of this urban Aboriginality and concluded by objecting to what he saw as a disturbing and inappropriate assertion of this 'new' identity: 'Unscrupulous people may endeavour to use this feeling for the 'old ways' as a means of organizing Aboriginals against other Australians.'18 Wentworth implied that he believed such a threat to Australians would not be an initiative of Aborigines (but rather other 'unscrupulous people'), dismissing the idea that indigenous people might themselves authorise such an image of Aboriginality. He also criticised an image of a common, collective Aboriginality as distinctly 'un-Aboriginal':

Originally the Aborigine did not see himself as Aboriginal, because...he was not conscious of any non-Aboriginal people. Rather he saw himself as a member of a tribe ... in a sense the creation of an 'Aboriginal identity' is in itself a very un-Aboriginal process, for which there is no historical substructure.19

As Tim Rowse has pointed out, even sympathetic observers such as Robert Berndt, professor of anthropology at the University of Western Australia, found this assertion of a common Aboriginality by non-tribal people perplexing. In 1969 Berndt was disturbed by '...people who are for all intents and purposes European-Australians but who, partly because of their physical appearance, insist on being regarded as

17 Wentworth, 'Aboriginal Identity', p. 411.
18 ibid., p. 412.
19 ibid., p. 410.
Aboriginal Nationalism

Aborigines. Some of them have...become virtually "professional Aborigines".\textsuperscript{20} Berndt's statement reveals the flawed nature of the colonial assimilation policy; those who are for 'all intents and purposes European-Australian' in some way, however, 'betray' their difference. In Homi Bhabha's words, the product is a 'mimic man' who is 'almost the same but not white'.\textsuperscript{21} What disturbed Wentworth and Berndt, however, was the manner in which this difference was being articulated and authorised. Anglicised-Australianised indigenous people, who seemingly were closest to being able to make their way in, and obtain the rewards of, 'one Australian society' (to be the same), were instead strongly asserting their difference, insisting on being regarded as 'Aborigines', and not simply 'Australians'.

Perhaps the most sensational display of this disturbing Aboriginality occurred on 26 January 1972, when an Aboriginal Embassy was erected on the lawns of Parliament. Often viewed as a response to the Prime Minister's refusal to grant land rights (based on traditional affinity) to Aborigines on reserves, the demonstration actually involved much wider claims. The activists were not merely mounting demands on behalf of Aboriginal people living in a traditional manner, but spoke in the name of indigenous people all over Australia, from those living in 'the creekbed of Alice Springs' to the increasing number of 'urban blacks'.\textsuperscript{22} The Embassy's plan for land rights included legal title and mining rights to all reserve lands, but also: control of the Northern Territory as a State within the Commonwealth of Australia; the preservation of all sacred sites; legal title and mining rights to areas in and around all Australian capital cities; and compensation monies for lands not returnable to take the form of a down-payment of six billion dollars and an annual percentage of the gross national product.

These were the demands of a people imagining themselves, in relation to the nation state, as a unified, dispossessed, colonised minority. As Michael Anderson, designated the High Commissioner, said: '...the Aboriginal Embassy was erected, followed by tent consulates in Perth and Adelaide, symbolising our claim to this land as the prior owners.'\textsuperscript{23} 'Grafting a militant rhetoric of a unified, common Aboriginality onto a demand for communal and inalienable land rights, these people dramatically enacted their own distinctly colonised cultural difference on the lawns opposite Parliament House in Canberra.

When Aborigines established the Tent Embassy they declared a colonised difference using modern terms of reference. The tents stood as a reminder of the miserable living conditions of many Aborigines. But the demonstration was not simply

\textsuperscript{20} Berndt quoted in Tim Rowse, 'Assimilation and After', in Ann Curthoys et al. (eds), \textit{Australians from 1939}, Fairfax, Sydney, 1987, p. 143.
\textsuperscript{21} Homi Bhabha, 'The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse', p. 322.
a demand for the rights of citizenship or even special minority status, which were the rewards and values of ‘one’ Australian society. By calling their tent an Embassy and flying the (national) Aboriginal flag, designed in 1970 by Aboriginal artist Harold Thomas, activists appropriated the modern world’s most legitimate form of political autonomy, nationalism, to frame their demands for (land and monetary) compensation.

Land claims, as the Gurindji and Yirrkala cases had revealed, were becoming increasingly important to various tribal groups attempting to retain their traditional association with the land in specific parts of the country. But here, a dispossessed Aboriginal nation declared itself to all non-Aboriginal Australians. Activists refused the ‘universal’ embrace of Australian citizenship, establishing their presence in uneasy opposition to, rather than within, the national boundary. Claiming membership of a dispossessed nation, the demonstrators revealed the nation-state as a colonial authority. Asserting their identity in warring, or black power, terms, they rejected the idea of a benevolent nation-state; whilst forced to submit to its power (to mount demands to it), they challenged its legitimacy to administer them. As John Newfong, opposed to the McMahon government, and ever wary of the promises of Labor in opposition, stated: ‘There is one thing of which we are all sure and that is that nobody is going to look after us as well as we can ourselves - and the only problem is finding somewhere to do it.’

Accordingly, as an unexpected product of Europeans’ colonial assimilationist policies, some indigenous people had begun to authorise their own image of ‘...a flawed colonial mimesis, in which to be ‘Australianised’ is emphatically not to be ‘Australian’.

Appropriating the settler culture’s interest in a fetishized ‘Aboriginal Culture’ and a modern European discourse of nationalism, they had begun to subvert a project of assimilation. An image of a common Aboriginality, an Aboriginal nationalism, had begun to disturb notions of the colonial subject(s) and the homogeneity of the Australian nation, or, as Homi Bhabha puts it, ‘...those ideological manoeuvres through which “imagined communities” are given essentialist identities’.

A less spectacular but more sustained focus for the articulation of pan-Aboriginality in the 1970s was the journal *Identity*. Published from 1971 to 1982, it was a project where the politics of struggle and the culture of identity were inextricably bound together in the imagining of a political community; a political community imagined in relation to colonial ‘others’. Enabled and sustained in the public realm by the nation-state, via government funding (under the auspices of the Aboriginal Arts Board), the English language, and a European discourse of liberation, *Identity* is also an example of

---

25 Bhabha, ‘The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse’, p. 322; originally the phrase was ‘...a flawed colonial mimesis in which to be Anglicized, is emphatically not to be English.’
indigenous people establishing greater control over constructions of Aboriginality. It provided a focus for indigenous peoples' own (counter) constructions of themselves within the public arena.

Mudrooroo Narogin has noted that, particularly under the editorship of Jack Davis, *Identity* became extremely popular amongst Aborigines, but he has been critical of the journal's use of standard English, the 'dominant discourse of the Anglo-Celtic majority', suggesting that it '...was denying any Aboriginality of language and fostering an assimilationist policy'.

Davis, who edited the journal from 1975 to 1979, in an interview in 1985, was explicit about his editorial policy of standardization:

I had to have the skills to be able to turn stuff in - so it would be saleable and understandable to a buying public... so anything that came to me that was not written clear enough for an English speaking audience, I had to use my skills to make the stuff readable.

While, as Mudrooroo suggests, the standardization of language does reflect a notion of the assimilation of cultural difference, it also reflects the idea that any construction of public ethnicity by a colonised minority necessarily exists in relation to a dominant white society as both a product of, and a response to, dominant discourses. An examination of *Identity* reveals that the diversity of Aboriginal languages and dialects was not extensively represented. Although the pages are predominantly standard English, nevertheless I would suggest this was as much a result of conscious appropriation of modern referents, used to authoritatively assert a specific form of Aboriginality, as an instance of the passive subsumption or dilution of an 'authentic' Aboriginality.

Many of the contributors who appear frequently, such as Jack Davis, Kath Walker, R. Chee (Archie Weller), Kevin Gilbert, had themselves been affected by assimilationist policies that had attempted to dispossess them of language, culture and land. Kath Walker has discussed the experience, common to many of her generation, of having the English language violently imposed on her in the name of a 'civilised' education. For those such as Walker, Davis and Gilbert, indeed for all *Identity*'s contributors, the use of the English language certainly did not reflect a complacent attitude towards assimilation policies, (a desire to be the 'same'). Indeed, English became the medium through which most contributors stressed the concept of a collective Aboriginality as an incommensurable cultural difference, articulated in terms of a modern struggle and a sense of timeless being.


28 Marlene Chesson, quoted in Narogin, *Writing from the Fringe*, p. 91.
Land has been and is clearly important to Aborigines in a pragmatic way in terms of specific territorial claims, but it is also the ‘traditional’ relationship of Aborigines with the land which has been used to construct a common Aboriginality and through this a discourse of resistance. Throughout the pages of Identity, land was a practical point of unity in the present but also evoked a timeless essence and sense of collectivity. As Djumbi (Reg Saunders) said in 1978; ‘The Aboriginal speaks in many languages and like all people will disagree on many things material. Today when we speak of Land Rights we do so with one voice, because Land Rights is both spiritual and material’.29

At times commentators recognized the specificity of different indigenous histories and experiences, the relative impact of colonialism and modernity (the difference between an English speaking, urban, Mary Duroux and a mission dwelling, ‘traditional’, Utemorrhah). But more often these distinctions were abstracted through appeals to a shared past: what was emphasised was a sense commonality. Typically a conflation of the singular and the plural, the past and the present, evoked the sense of a communal identity reflected in a poem by Ruthie Marrwulpul:

I am far away from my country
and my family's living in a different way.
In my memories I hear the song of my tribes
in the darkness of the night.
I see the past of my tribes.30

Identity was tied to a sense of a contemporary Aboriginal community and, importantly, of communal Aboriginality. The community drawn on was the network of indigenous people in all parts of Australia struggling for land rights as well as an absent community, like that imagined above, and which, on other occasions, was referred to more pointedly in terms of its absence or loss:

Where are you
my people
I am lost;
I've lost everything: my culture
That should be my own31

I use the word imagined here because the Aboriginality espoused in Identity is akin to Benedict Anderson’s conception of the nation as an ‘imagined community’.

Anderson suggests that, rather than classifying it as a political ideology, it is productive to view nationalism in terms of notions of kinship and religion. It is 'imagined' because members of even the smallest nation 'will never know most of their fellow members...yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion'. Imagined here should not be equated with fabrication or unauthenticity, for 'all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined'. Thus communities ought to be distinguished, not by their authenticity/unauthenticity, but by 'the style' in which they are imagined. The unitary Aboriginality claimed by Identity was relational and oppositional, imagined both in relation and opposition to a history of colonialism.

The problem of an Aboriginal identity was explicitly grappled with within the pages of the journal. There were frequent criticisms of what was considered a white government's 'divide and rule principle', dividing indigenous people in general, and particularly tribal from urban and city-dwelling indigenes. Jack Davis expressed common frustration with an unproductive 'in-between' identity, which he attributed to the continuing impact of colonialism: 'Too many of our educated ones want to be recognised as being neither black nor white...[and] are gravitating round an in-betweenness which first stemmed from us being fragmented as a tribal group, by being killed off by whites.' What emanates from comments such as this is a deeply felt violent severance from an Aboriginal (their) past as a result of white invasion. In Identity, the articulation of an essential Aboriginality, a timeless being expressed in terms of a commune with nature (land) and/or immemorial community, was fused with a sense of opposition to the presence of the white man. The Aboriginality claimed by Identity was imagined in both relation and opposition to an awareness of a history of colonialism.

Keith Chesson, writing in Identity in 1978, commented that the adoption of English might be necessary to help construct Aborigines as a unified people in the context of surviving in a dominant white society; paradoxically, it was necessary as a national Aboriginal language: 'As a community, the Aboriginal people will need to use and understand an (inter) national language if they are to exploit, or withstand, an increasingly complex contact with a wider world'.

The standardization that was an imposition of the public political culture, the abstraction of the specificities of language, location and history to cater for a wider audience, also evidenced the Aboriginal authorisation of a public Aboriginality; that is, a collective cultural difference constructed in oppositional relation to the 'wider world'. Aborigines writing prefaces for various issues of Identity stressed its aims as the locus of

33 Ibid.
an Aboriginality that transcended specific kinship ties and localities to encompass all those who identified themselves as Aboriginal. While Davis' comments above indicate the conscious conformity to dominant structures that shaped the journal's style, namely its image of 'sameness', *Identity* also articulated a distinct 'difference'. The language of the Anglo-Celtic majority was appropriated in recognition of its cultural dominance, but also as a strategy for another culture's survival, to 'withstand' and 'exploit' cultural interaction in the public sphere; paradoxically 'mimicking' white culture to consolidate a black one. When Faith Bandler wrote, in celebration of *Identity*’s first birthday, ‘...the barriers between us are breaking down’, she addressed her words specifically to a fellow black, not white, audience: 'What is happening to a black person in the slums of Redfern is also happening to those black people who are living in the barren center of our country... *Identity* you have helped us to identify. You help make us one.'

Paradoxically, those people in some ways most disenfranchised by colonial policy, which has tried so strenuously to dispossess them of land, language and culture, are those whose Aboriginality is most likely to be questioned. Aboriginality is often not accepted as an historical entity, as a product of colonialism and modernity. Instead, those people who are thought of as ‘most’ Aboriginal are those who are appear the most unaffected or influenced by a history of colonialism and modern discourses. We see this historically in the reactions of observers such as Wentworth and Berndt, but it is also evident in the work of some theorists who tend to interpret indigenous articulations of identity that exploit aspects of European (or rather modern) discourses, such as those I have outlined, as somehow unauthentic or unaboriginal.

Stephen Muecke, discussing Aboriginal texts from the early 1970s and the late 1980s, critiques an Aboriginal conflation of ‘my’ and ‘our’, which collapses distinctions between the singular and the plural, the particular and the general:

> [W]hen Aborigines speak of their own liberation they are using discourses invented a long time ago by Europeans (the Enlightenment)...in spite of all claims to authenticity Aboriginal uses of this theory of the relation of subjectivity to political formations are neither Aboriginal nor new. The Aboriginal speakers are stuck in a bind where theoretical protocols have been inscribed in advance.

---

The tension in this formulation is that 'Aboriginal speakers' appear to exist (in some more 'authentic,' private way) only outside the discursive field of the dominant political culture of, indeed, history and modernity. Once they enter its pre-inscribed protocols, they effectively lose their voice, becoming 'neither Aboriginal nor new'. But people are historical beings. The identity of the colonised, no less than the colonisers, is necessarily forged in relation to modern (or what are often, perhaps misleading, referred to as 'European') discourses. As Homi Bhabha suggests, people constitute their lives in a struggle between indigenous practices and imposed structures and forms of knowledge and this '... is a negotiation that cannot be reduced to the polarity between a preconstituted western tradition and an authentic native tradition [my emphasis]' 38 To do so is not history.

As Wentworth and Berndts' reactions suggest, when indigenous people began to speak 'like' Europeans, it in fact sounded startlingly 'new' and disconcertingly 'Aboriginal'. Indeed, indigenous people living in a non-traditional manner used the dominant political culture and European discourses precisely in order to be heard, and counted, as Aboriginal, that is, as members of a colonised nation. They set up a community that constituted politics in Rancière's sense of the term:

Politics does not exist because men, through the privilege of speech, place their interests in common. Politics exists because those who have no right to be counted as speaking beings make themselves of some account, setting up a community by the fact of placing in common a wrong that is nothing more than this very confrontation, the contradiction of two worlds in a single world: the world where they are and the world where they are not, the world where there is something 'between' them and those who do not acknowledge them as speaking beings who count and the world where there is nothing.39

At the tent embassy and in the pages of Identity we see those who had not been counted as 'speaking beings' (because they were considered neither white nor properly Aboriginal) making themselves of some account through the imagining of a political community. This was not politics because these people articulated their interests together (because before this they had no form in which to articulate common interests), but because they defined common interests by the very fact of identifying as Aboriginal and, in the process, imagining a national community.

Again, 'imagined' here should not be equated with fabrication; the smallest community is imagined. Nations are denaturalized through a process of historicisation,

39 Rancière, Disagreement, p. 27.
not denouncement. Thus, an Australian nationalism, or indeed an ‘Australian’, is no more or less authentic than Aboriginal nationalism (or an ‘Aboriginal’). Both are historical entities and thus should be distinguished, not by their authenticity/unauthenticity, but by their form or ‘style’.

As Wentworth pointed out in 1971, the idea of identifying as Aboriginal – as part of a unitary group distinct from non-Aborigines – is a concept obviously foreign to pre-contact consciousness. But all this highlights is the phenomenon’s historicity. Indigenous people have imagined an Aboriginal nation in relation and opposition to a history of colonial oppression and control. Alongside diverse and unique experiences of private ethnicity, a sense of a common, and public, Aboriginality has been formed in oppositional relation to the colonial ‘others’. An historical experience of dispossession and racism has been forged with a modern concept of nationalism. In this sense we can see the emergence of an Aboriginal nationalism as a project involved in the ‘...construction of a counter-modernity on the basis of the intervention of the colonial moment.’

A sense of pan-Aboriginality constitutes a counter, or ‘contra’, nationalism, one which, in relation to the nation-state, has formed ‘a difference which is almost the same, but not quite.’

An assertion of sameness by a colonised Other who has been used to define the Same, epitomised in an articulation of Aboriginal nationalism by those who have been used to define an Australian nation, can call the very concept into question. The concept of an Aboriginal nation has worked within the nation-state to fracture its homogeneity. A collective Aboriginal identity has been imagined, not in defence of territorial boundaries, as in the sense that it is the absence of land (as a result of colonialism) that is a precondition of its imagining, but in opposition to the apparently definitive boundaries of the Australian nation. Aboriginal nationalism has demanded internal redistribution of land as well as reappraisal of what constitutes Australian (and ‘Aboriginal’) identity and Australian History; its presence marks a confusion of boundaries where historical, geographical, and national frontiers fail to coincide.

Within the context of the nation-state, Aboriginal articulations of nationhood have waged a war of positionality that has been an efficient means of articulating political demands to the state, but has also worked to subvert the state’s discourse of nationalism, de-naturalizing and historicizing it, by challenging its claims to represent all Australians and the point at which it seeks to be most originary. The contra-Aboriginal nation evoked in 1988, deemed the Bi-centennial Australia Day ‘Invasion Day’, again refused the ‘universal’ embrace of Australian citizenship. In asserting a collective identity and collective rights, based on their status as an indigenous colonised minority, Aborigines have challenged modern nationalism’s fundamental premises of

---

40 Bhabha, ‘Interview’, p. 52.
individualism, bounded political sovereignty and singular national identity. By appropriating a western discourse of liberation, of nationalism, Aborigines have subverted a dominant discourse of nation, revealing an-Other history, revealing a story of nation as a history of colonialism. Rather than simply derivations of the dominant political culture, indigenous constructions of public Aboriginality and nation have intervened in the public sphere articulating a difference that is 'almost the same but not quite'.

_School of Historical Studies_
_Monash University_