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## THE MEANINGLESSNESS OF ABORIGINAL CULTURES

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In Andreï Makine's poignant semi-autobiographical novel *Le Testament Français*, the hero finds himself "condemn[ed] ... to live painfully between two worlds."<sup>1</sup> There is the world in which he lives - the Soviet Union during the Stalinist era—and there is the world conjured during each summer school holidays at his grandmother's in remote Siberia. His grandmother, born in France though long-time resident of the Soviet Union and who married a Russian, tells stories of France during the long summer evenings spent on the balcony of her small apartment. There is also the old suitcase containing memorabilia, press clippings and the like. The world evoked in the stories and photographs contained therein affirm and nuance the hero's French heritage. French, the language of his grandmother's evocations, was thought of as the "family dialect" and assisted in bringing a remembered and imagined Paris to life.<sup>2</sup> Across the flat expanse of Siberia, shimmering with mirages in the summer heat, the young boy glimpsed a mysterious, Atlantis-like France: a France to which he was intuitively, ancestrally, and emotionally bonded. His very selfhood informed by an hereditary French essence, he began surveying as if from outside the country of his birth. Russia, he saw in French.<sup>3</sup>

As the child matured, his connection with France and his French identity - both bolstered through voracious reading - was at times celebrated, a source of pride; at other times, a source of conflict and ridicule. Rebelling as a teenager against his pre-natal 'Frenchness,' he cloaks himself in a Russian identity, his knowledge of France mined for stories with which to curry school playground favour.<sup>4</sup> Inevitably, however, he comes to accept both his French and Russian identities.

In his grandmother's collection of family and other photographs which the child felt he could 'enter' and thereby come to know his ancestry, there was one that was clearly out of place. It showed a young woman in a dirty grey padded

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<sup>1</sup> Andreï Makine, *Le Testament Français* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1997 [1995]) 196.

<sup>2</sup> Makine 24.

<sup>3</sup> Makine 37.

<sup>4</sup> Makine 175.

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jacket and man's *shapka* holding a baby to her breast. He discovered this photograph as a young boy, but it subsequently disappeared, finally to reappear in a letter from his grandmother delivered to him in Paris after her death. The letter contained the story of a young Russian woman exiled to the marshlands of western Siberia who, following one of the purges, wound up in a labour camp. Conceiving a child through "forced love," the mother was killed in a tractor accident when the child was two and a half. The young Russian woman was the hero's mother, he, the babe in arms<sup>5</sup> He had no French ancestry.

How is it that we know who we are? Or more to the point, within the context of this paper, how determined is our cultural identity? What, where and how do Aboriginal cultures fit within a deterministic model of identity, or is such an identity fluid and vulnerable to assumption? Is Aboriginality a self-proclamation, not an inherent attribute?

Australian government regulations declare that an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander is someone who:

- is of Australian Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent; and
- identifies as an Australian Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander; and
- is accepted as such by the community in which s/he lives or has lived.<sup>6</sup>

Under this regulation, Aboriginality is both determined and assumed. It considers that one's biological heritage alone is insufficient a basis upon which to claim an Aboriginal identity. But neither does it allow for the mere assumption of Aboriginality. The regulation still requires one's cultural heritage to be written in blood. Although most now reject categorically the notion of degrees of Aboriginality based on the various contributors to one's biological heritage, there remains popular support for the idea that the 'essence' of Aboriginality is to be found within this heritage. This is evidenced by the continuous community demands for those high-profile 'Aborigines' around whom some doubt exists as to their 'Aboriginality' to prove their claims genealogically. It is also evidenced by the outcry when the family tree does not flush an autochthonous ancestor from cover but rather some other ancestry.

Furthermore, Aborigines claim that a certain uniqueness arises from this biological heritage and demand this 'uniqueness' be recognised in several ways. Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (CAR) documents spell this out. Throughout all the CAR literature and in addresses by the former Council Chairperson, Pat Dodson, the claim is made that Aborigines and Torres Strait

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<sup>5</sup> Makine 270-71.

<sup>6</sup> See Marcia Langton, "Aboriginality," *The Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia*, Volume 1, A - L, ed. David Horton (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1994) 3-4.

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Islanders are 'unique' in Australia and that they are entitled to be recognised as distinct and separate peoples who possess the right to protect their cultural identity. Non-Aborigines must accept this and make the necessary provisions for it. One of the foundation stones of this 'uniqueness' is the 'unique' relationship that Aborigines are said to enjoy with the land and sea.<sup>7</sup>

A great deal has been written demonstrating the qualities of this relationship. And there is no doubting the political efficacy of these claims in terms of contesting dispossession, and in the restoration of land through various mechanisms to a handful of those who have been dispossessed, notwithstanding the fact that land returned remains the subject of a number of constraints. Yet the terms upon which claims of 'uniqueness' and rights deriving from this are articulated raise an issue that has been the subject of little scrutiny. One can speculate that a reason for this lack of scrutiny is sensitivity to the extent of Aboriginal disadvantage and sympathy for the cause of land rights. This sensitivity and support for specific Aboriginal interests manifests in a reluctance to discuss the broader repercussions of shackling cultures to affirmations of uniqueness. There is a fear of undermining the very rationale - Aboriginal uniqueness - upon which so many Indigenous rights and gains are articulated. Whilst not discounting the basis of such a fear, nor wanting to discount assertions of cultural identity which have proved (and are proving) useful, it would seem there are consequences of having cultures defined and contained by readings of what will best serve the necessary struggle.

One of these is that it keeps the colonial subject alive. It does this by bolstering rather than contesting former colonial binaries, but now it is Aborigines asserting that they are different (uniquely so) and other, that their difference is produced autochthonically, and as a consequence they possess an essence upon which their identity is founded.<sup>8</sup> Besides the problematic conflation of identity and culture, overlooked is the critical point that there is no Aboriginal culture without the cultures of the colonisers and subsequent settler-Australians. This is not to invoke the reductionist argument that 'we' made 'the Aborigines,' nor is it to deny Aboriginal agency in their own cultural productions. It is to state that there is no originary Aborigine, and that all expressions of identity and the Indigenous cultures in which those identities move, challenged or otherwise, are bound

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, *Walking Together: The First Steps. Report of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation to Federal Parliament 1991-1994* (Canberra: AGPS, 1994) 85.

<sup>8</sup> See Radhika Mohanram, "The Postcolonial Critic: Third-World (Con)Texts/First-World Contexts," *Justice and Identity: Antipodean Practices*, eds M. Wilson and A. Yeatman (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1995) 182-83. Mohanram is addressing an issue relating to India in this discussion, but it has relevance here.

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inextricably to the colonial and other historical processes that they have had to negotiate.

Yet in a recent address broadcast on ABC radio, Professor Marcia Langton, speaking on 'race' relations in Australia, declared, "It's a cultural war."<sup>9</sup> This language befits the sort of anthropological models explaining the meeting of cultures that were current in Australia when Langton was a student. The acculturation model, informed by evolutionary remnants, pre-supposed that Aboriginal cultures would progress from an original and pure form to that of their colonisers. By the time Langton was a student of anthropology, acculturation was giving way to syncretism, which postulated the overlaying of discrete cultures. It is from the notion of syncretism that Langton draws her martial diction. The respective bounded and discrete cultures are brought together and remain in conflict.

Anthropology, however, has moved on. The acculturation and syncretic models are no longer employed. Replacing them is the more fluid and ephemeral idea of contact. James Clifford explains, "contact approaches presuppose not sociocultural wholes subsequently brought into relationship, but rather systems already constituted relationally, entering new relations through historical processes of displacement".<sup>10</sup>

The contact approach rejects notions of 'original' and 'pure' earlier cultural forms. Cultures, forever dynamic, are always changing, responsive to internal and external pressures and influences. That colonialism exaggerated the magnitude of these pressures, and severely constrained the range of possible responses, is a matter of fact. But so too is intercultural connection. Langton's war analogy alludes to the continued existence of some imaginary discrete cultural difference based on a pure, original form. The refusal to countenance the relational aspect of sociocultural contact not only further suppresses Aboriginal agency in Australia's colonial history, it maintains the colonial binary that has long been the target of trenchant Aboriginal criticism.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Marcia Langton, "The 'R' Word Reconciliation: Address to the National Diversity Conference, University of Technology, Sydney," *Awaye*, Producer Nancia Guivarra (ABC Radio National 2000, 8 December).

<sup>10</sup> James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1997) 7.

<sup>11</sup> Langton appears to have moved away from the notion of 'Aboriginality' arising "from the intersubjectivity of black and white in dialogue" that she explores in Marcia Langton, *Well, I Heard it on the Radio and I saw it on the Television ...* (North Sydney: Australian Film Commission, 1993) 31-43.

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In a considered essay Ian Anderson provides reasons for keeping the old colonial binaries alive.<sup>12</sup> His concern is with how descendants of miscegenation have been categorised in the past, and how this practice was used to secure Aborigines within the colonial order. It was (is) a powerful administrative tool, one that impacted upon many lives. The categorisation was based upon the extent to which an individual varied from biological and then later cultural characteristics that were held to be markers of Aboriginal authenticity. Those Aborigines considered to be at variance to whatever were the templates of authenticity at different times, found themselves subject to the further humiliation of having their cultural identity denied. Neither Indigenous nor Australian colonial, they were said to be betwixt cultures. In the history of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relations, the 'hybrid' did not exist in their own complex right. They were a body upon whom things needed to be done in order for them to have culture and an identity. According to Anderson:

Unlike those connotations associated with the word hybrid that allude to the creative and constructive potential of the fusion of distinctive beings, the 'hybrid' in the context of Australian colonial discourse is both (self-) destructive and sterile. As a being without history or culture, the 'hybrid' can only resolve the paradox of its own existence by transforming itself (or being transformed).<sup>13</sup>

The even more peculiar position of Tasmanian descendants of miscegenation is well known. Until comparatively recently their existence was officially denied. Tasmania had no Aborigines.

It is to contest this legacy that Anderson, of Palawa<sup>14</sup> descent, reads sympathetically the essentialist utterances of many Aborigines. In order to overcome the long history of denial, Aborigines need to "re-present themselves as coherent people with a sustainable historicised subjectivity."<sup>15</sup> This results in Aborigines paying careful attention to genealogies in order to demonstrate their biological links to a cultural heritage. Blood and 'race,' the cause of so much trouble for Aborigines in the colonial context, re-emerge as the hallmarks of authenticity, with Aborigines themselves articulating a discourse of racial essentialism. It is argued by many that a number of hereditary and intuitive

<sup>12</sup> Ian Anderson, "I, the 'Hybrid' Aborigine: Film and Representation," *Australian Aboriginal Studies* 1 (1997): 4-14.

<sup>13</sup> Anderson 8.

<sup>14</sup> Tasmanian Aborigine.

<sup>15</sup> Anderson 12.

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qualities and traits derive from this racial identity. One cannot become an Aborigine, one simply is one.<sup>16</sup> In rejecting Aboriginality as a social construct, the colonial binary of 'us' and the 'other' is maintained. Whilst Aborigines might construct themselves as non-Aborigines - or be placed into this category - only 'real' Aborigines can ever be a real Aborigine.

Cultures, however, and the identities mobilised within them, are not an already "accomplished fact."<sup>17</sup> The claim of Aboriginality - even (or despite) when substantiated through ancestry, community acceptance and self-proclamation - cannot reveal to the claimant (or to anyone else, no matter how heart-felt) an accomplished "'true self,' hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves'."<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, it is commonplace for this mystic 'true' Aboriginal self to be invoked as *a*, if not *the*, bulwark of authenticity. The articulation of a self that has resisted the constructing and deconstructing forces of colonialism and western cultural hegemony has had (and does have) its uses.<sup>19</sup> Essentialist articulations of cultural identities are a characteristic of struggles against colonialism and its aftermath.<sup>20</sup> But as noted earlier, subscribing to notions of the 'real' self creates problems that may ultimately outweigh the political and/or socio-cultural efficacy of continuing to found a cultural identity on essences.

If we understand cultures and the identities produced within them as an ongoing and contingent process instead of a hitherto formed accomplished fact, we come closer to allowing for the cultural dynamism apparent within pre-colonial Aboriginal societies. We are also able to allow for the full range of responses - both cultural and individual - to the forces of colonisation and post-colonialism. Understood in these terms, cultural identities are:

<sup>16</sup> This does not hold fast in all circumstances. Those Aborigines who fail to meet certain 'community' expectations, irrespective of their biology, might have their Aboriginality denied.

<sup>17</sup> Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathon Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990) 222.

<sup>18</sup> Hall 223.

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Hall 224-25.

<sup>20</sup> See Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967); Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of The Earth* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1971); Albert Memmi, *The Coloniser and the Colonised* (London: Earthscan Publications, 1967). Diana Fuss too notes how an essentialised "politics of identity has operated as a vital political stratagem" in most twentieth-century liberationist struggles. This notwithstanding, Fuss is also concerned (amongst other matters) with how the "mutually exclusive nature" of essentialised identities can foreclose against useful collaborations. She also distinguishes between deployment of essentialising notions of identity for politically strategic purposes and the assertion of inherent essences as markers of cultural identity. Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* (London: Routledge, 1990) 96, 73-112, 1-21, and *in toto*.

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the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence but a *positioning*. Hence, there is always a politics of identity, a politics of position, which has no absolute guarantee in an unproblematic, transcendental "law of origin."<sup>21</sup>

This does not rupture the claims of difference. Whereas one understanding of cultural identities is based on an essentialised difference (often through the device of mystic essences), notions of an unstable cultural identification in which cultures and identities are always in the situation of becoming accepts difference as contingent and necessarily heterogeneous. Continually changing and "different points of reference" will produce any number of "boundaries of difference,"<sup>22</sup> not all of which will be congruent.<sup>23</sup>

The unshackling of cultural identity from some imagined pure originary form to seeing it instead as something unstable, in continuous production and a constituent element of all its histories (rather than insulated from selected historical trajectories) means that 'white' Australia and western cultural forms are not altogether separable from Aboriginal cultural identity. Yet even black scholars such as Wendy Brady, who champion and celebrate the many different selves that Aborigines can mobilise in contemporary Australia, reserve their strongest criticism for western cultural impositions and the west's continuing construction of the other. There is no admission that it is the changes wrought to Aboriginal societies that have enabled the celebratory black individual and opened the body as canvas for individual self-expression and an identity based thereon. This is not to deny the prescriptive, delimiting and often pernicious constructions of Aborigines that have dominated and continue to exercise influence. Rather, it is to note that many of the self-constructions and identities assumed by Aborigines today are in part a product of - and responsive and resistant to - certain

<sup>21</sup> Hall 226 (his emphasis).

<sup>22</sup> Hall 227.

<sup>23</sup> See Diana Fuss for a discussion on how "[t]he deconstruction of identity ... is not necessarily a *disavowal* of identity" (her emphasis) 104. Deconstructing identity does not threaten assertions of difference. For example, many urban-based Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists also 'deconstruct' expected cultural identities. They exploit a range of different - and sometimes contradictory - identities in their work, thereby challenging deterministic notions of Aboriginality. Such challenges serve to destabilise both non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal expectations of Aboriginal cultural identities. See in particular the review of Brook Andrew's work in Alex Gawronski, "Brook Andrew: Seeing Black," *Globe* 10 (1999); and the discussion on Brook Andrew's work in Clare Williamson and Hetti Perkins, "Blakness: Blak City Culture!," *Blakness: Blak City Culture*, curators Clare Williamson and Hetti Perkins (South Yarra: Australian Centre for Contemporary Art in conjunction with Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-operative, 1994) 27, and 20-32.

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categorisations, as well as being enabled by the same cultural hegemony that is the subject of Brady's critique. Brady acknowledges that her identity as an Aborigine, a woman, and a lesbian, does in fusion challenge some of those Aborigines policing the boundaries of authenticity. Yet she argues that it is an undifferentiated west that most constrains her ability to meld her "many and multiple layers of identity."<sup>24</sup> The question has to be asked, what gave rise to these "many and multiple layers"? The west of her criticism is responsible for the derivation of some. Whilst it is significant that Brady is refusing the dated but still circulating essentialising discourses of what it is to be an Aborigine, a certain essentialism is retained. The cultural boundaries have simply been moved further afield so as to encompass a greater array of lifestyles, personalities, and cultural expressions. Although not defined, fixed boundaries between black and white are implicit. One is either/or. My argument here is that these boundaries are not impervious but permeable, and black and white do not so much cross them as exist through them.

This means that it might be possible - much to the abhorrence of some - for Colin Johnson to be the Indigenous Mudrooroo he still appears to want to believe he is.<sup>25</sup> Whilst his claims to Indigeneity on biological grounds cannot be substantiated - indeed, the family tree shows no Aboriginal heritage, rather African-American - the anomalies and dangers of rooting one's cultural identity in biology are well known. This situation is exacerbated where there are many gaps in genealogical and other records that can be used to trace ancestry. Mudrooroo acknowledges that his Indigenous identity is a social construction, "a textualisation of identity."<sup>26</sup> He also points out how for many 'Aboriginal' people such a construction is not exceptional. This inevitability arises from the forms the colonial process within Australia took and its legacy. And what of Archie Weller? If his painful search for his biological family reveals conclusively that he has no biological Aboriginal heritage, is he suddenly no longer an Aborigine?<sup>27</sup> Are his books no longer the work of an Indigenous author? Gordon Matthews' experience,

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<sup>24</sup> Wendy Brady, "How Many Selves? True to One Self, Which Self?" *Blak Babe(z) and Kweer Kat(z)*, Brook Andrew and Rea (Chippendale: Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Co-operative, 1998).

<sup>25</sup> For a sensitive, though what for many would still be a challenging, discussion on Mudrooroo's assumed identity, see Gerhard Fischer, "Mis-taken Identity: Mudrooroo and Gordon Matthews," *Race, Colour and Identity in Australia and New Zealand*, eds John Docker and Gerhard Fischer (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2000) 95-112.

<sup>26</sup> Mudrooroo, " 'Tell Them You're Indian' ," *Race Matters: Indigenous Australians and 'Our' Society*, eds Gillian Cowlishaw and Barry Morris (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1997) 263.

<sup>27</sup> Australian Broadcasting Corporation, "In Search of Archie," (ABC TV, 2000) 13 January, 2030hrs.



as told in his *An Australian Son*,<sup>28</sup> suggests that some Aborigines are prepared to accept the notion of Indigeneity as a social construction. After some years of identifying - and being identified by others - as an Aborigine, Matthews, an adoptee, discovered he was of Sri Lankan descent. The painful process of advising friends and colleagues that he was not an Aborigine began. Despite Matthews' admission, a senior Aboriginal leader continued to insist that he was still an Aborigine. To Matthews' protest that he was not he responded "Yes you are ... If that's what you've always thought you were then that's what you are. Your identity doesn't suddenly change."<sup>29</sup> To some extent Matthews agrees with this. Whilst no longer claiming to be an Aborigine, he writes in response to the Aboriginal leader's above comment: "That much was true. I had lived and been shaped by my assumption that I was Aboriginal. That identity was irrevocably a part of me."<sup>30</sup> Just as, one can add here, the hero's 'Frenchness' in Makine's *Le Testament Français* was irrevocably a part of him. Mudrooroo too, despite many voluble detractors has Indigenous supporters, some of whom still proclaim him to be an "Aborigine."

The above argument may be seen by some as contradicting my strong stance against the practice of non-material cultural appropriation.<sup>31</sup> My concern has been with those non-Indigenous Australians and others who appropriate Aboriginal religions, spirituality, beliefs, selected cultural traits and/or identity for the purposes of addressing any of a number of desires and alleged needs. My criticism of this practice, however, is not so much premised on how its advocates assume the permeability of the borders between black and white, nor even that such a permeability is a bad thing,<sup>32</sup> but on the potential consequences for Aborigines of this practice. Aborigines are making a number of demands predicated on the grounds of their uniqueness. Some of these demands have been partially met, with

<sup>28</sup> Gordon Matthews, *An Australian Son* (Port Melbourne: William Heinemann, 1996).

<sup>29</sup> Matthews 210.

<sup>30</sup> Matthews 210.

<sup>31</sup> See Mitchell Rolls, "James Cowan and the White Quest for the Black Self," *Australian Aboriginal Studies* (2001) forthcoming; Mitchell Rolls, "Robert Lawlor Tells a White Lie," *Journal of Australian Studies* 66 (2000): 211-18, 284-86; Mitchell Rolls, "Black Spice for White Lives: A Review Essay," *Balayi* 1.1 (2000): 149-61; Mitchell Rolls, "The Making of Our Place: Settler Australians, Cultural Appropriation, and the Quest for Home," *Antithesis* 10 (1999): 117-33; Mitchell Rolls, Monica Furlong and the Quest for Fulfilment," *Australian Feminist Law Journal* 11 (1998): 46-64; Mitchell Rolls, "The Jungian Quest for the Aborigine Within: A Close Reading of David Tacey's *Edge of the Sacred: Transformation in Australia*," *Melbourne Journal of Politics* 25 (1998): 171-87; Mitchell Rolls, "The Black Path to Jesus: The Christian Appropriation of Aboriginal Culture," *Australian Studies* 13.2 (1998): 23-40.

<sup>32</sup> I am not suggesting here, by inference or otherwise, that 'border' permeability is a 'good' thing. That is an issue for another discussion.

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Land Rights legislation and Native Title being the best known, even if still poorly understood by the broader community. If the cultural specificities upon which the Aboriginal struggle to regain control over resources and ownership of lands are understood to be available to anyone, then the consequences for Aborigines are clear. It is on these grounds, amongst others, that my trenchant criticism of non-material cultural appropriation is based. However, acceptance of a degree of permeability of the 'borders' (for want of a better word) between black and white, does not as corollary turn Aboriginality into an attribute that non-Aborigines can, on something as flimsy as whim (or desire), share. Cultural identity will always be contingent upon a number of factors, not glib assumption alone.

Furthermore, questioning the impermeable boundaries alleged by some to exist between Indigenous Australians and others, and reading critically the invocation of an Aboriginal essence and/or articulation of some 'true' inner self based on an imaginary though heart-felt originary form, is not simply a continuation of non-Indigenous experts theorising or administering what it is to be an Aborigine.<sup>33</sup> Aborigines, in their claims and counter-claims over who is and is not an Aborigine, are engaged in this process themselves. As too are those mostly younger Aborigines who reject the range of possible autochthonous selves the Aboriginal community and spokespeople offer them; who do not see their Aboriginality in essence, or as being rooted in the land, or in their birthplace, or arising from their mother's or father's 'country.' Yet these people, amongst whom are many Indigenous students who have spoken to me over the years, identify as Aborigines and are clearly proud of their heritage. They appear to be seeking ways to articulate their Aboriginality (and to have it recognised) in their diasporic drift towards a universal cosmopolitanism. This is not a new phenomena. The peculiarities the advent of universal cosmopolitanism raises for Indigenous (and diasporic) peoples has been (and is still being) considered by a number of theorists from various disciplines and backgrounds.<sup>34</sup> There has been very little analysis addressing this situation with respect to Aborigines that does not at some point take refuge in an essentialism of one sort or another. In an informal discussion with an Indigenous group visiting from a mainland university, a participant

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, Anderson.

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, Clifford; Hall, "Cultural Identity"; Stuart Hall, "Introduction: Who Needs Identity?," *Questions of Cultural Identity*, eds Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (London: Sage Publications, 1996) 1-17; Ross Posnock, "How it Feels to be a Problem: Du Bois, Fanon, and the 'Impossible Life' of the Black Intellectual," *Critical Inquiry* 23.2 (1997): 323-50; Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993); Lisa Malkki, "National Geographic: The Rooting of Peoples and the Territorialisation of National Identity Among Scholars and Refugees," *Cultural Anthropology* 7.1 (1992): 24-44; Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1992).

commented that "Aborigines will always return home." My query of "Where's home?" drew the response "It's where we are born." I then asked "But what of the Aboriginal person born in Ireland, or London, Paris, New York and so on? Where do they go 'home'?"<sup>35</sup> Conceptualising the cultural identity of a child born overseas to Aboriginal parents was something that had not been considered. And it was taken for granted that in the first instance Aboriginality was dependent upon one's biological heritage.

Away from the peculiarities of individual circumstances - say the Aboriginal child born overseas - we can still talk of an Aboriginal diaspora, even, perhaps only, within Australia. The very fact of dispossession means, in a literal sense, the creation of a diaspora. Most Aborigines are not on their land, in their country, or whatever term you prefer. They are elsewhere, and they are elsewhere (urban populations for example) in large numbers.<sup>36</sup> And children's children's children are born in that elsewhere. Aborigines *do* constitute a diaspora, and many expressions of Aboriginal cultural identity that form around some variant of "living here and remembering/desiring" *there* is a reflection of this.<sup>37</sup> But to use James Clifford's terms, the constituency of this diaspora privilege their roots over the routes they have travelled.<sup>38</sup>

Whilst political considerations may be one reason for this privileging, Aborigines have travelled very interesting routes, and to some extent these show up in the kin networks that develop along these routes as relationships form and/or children are born. But in asserting a cultural identity, many Aborigines living in towns and other urban environments choose to overlook the routes they have personally travelled and the longer routes travelled by their cultures both pre and post colonisation. They gaze instead towards an imaginary 'homeland.' Theirs is not a cultural identity formed from the routes they have travelled, but one based on the roots they imagine they once had, or so they would have us believe. The extent of this denial or refusal to acknowledge cultural formations that might stand independent of 'the land' - where land is a specific place and an allusion to the abode of some mystical originary form - is demonstrated by the subtle move by some Palawa people from the Furneaux group to increasingly portray themselves as native to the islands where they were born and not the island state of Tasmania. And they are doing this in such a way that it is their roots that are emphasised, not the islands as part of a travelled culture. There is even some indication that

<sup>35</sup> Personal comment, 12 October 2000.

<sup>36</sup> The 1996 Australian Bureau of Statistics Census revealed 72.6% of Indigenous people lived in urban areas. The Bureau defines 'urban' as a population centre of 1,000 or more people.

<sup>37</sup> Clifford 255.

<sup>38</sup> Clifford 244-77.

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archaeological evidence is being salted on the islands in order to demonstrate pre-colonial habitation, to establish that one's roots to the islands reach back thousands of years before 'white fellas'.<sup>39</sup>

What appears to be happening is this. Cultural portraits mobilised because of their political efficacy, and because of their value in helping to restore dignity and promote social and economic opportunities that have been otherwise denied or not realised, harden into essences of what it is to be an Aborigine. These portraits - which include such things as the idea that Aborigines enjoy a 'unique' relationship with the land; live at one with 'mother nature'; are communitarian; spiritually instead of materially focussed, and so on; and that Aboriginality is determined by some mystical essence - become markers of identity that serve to repress cultural dynamism. They also can function to forestall the shift to other portraits that might not only more accurately reflect the range of Aboriginal selves and intersecting identities apparent today, but in their mobilisation be more effective in terms of activism and the realisation of dignity.<sup>40</sup>

Responding to the fetish for racial authenticity on the part of both colonisers and colonised, Frantz Fanon remarks in the concluding pages of *Black Skin White Masks* how his "black skin is not the wrapping of specific values"<sup>41</sup> and the "[t]he Negro is not, Any more than the white man."<sup>42</sup> Albert Memmi, in the *Coloniser and the Colonised*, demonstrates the constricting nature of traditions when slavishly upheld,<sup>43</sup> how they suppress the development of new cultural structures necessary for colonised cultures to flourish. Colonisers and those following exercise complicity in this process. They urge the colonised to articulate an essentialised identity from which certain traditions and attributes are held to spring, leading to the continual deployment of an image arrested in time: the very image that Aborigines on the one hand contest but on the other - in invocations of a cultural identity springing from an originary form - reinforce.

And this leads me to the provocative title (or so say some) of this paper. Responses to conditions and circumstances can of course be interpreted as

<sup>39</sup> At the recent Bass Strait Forum, Aboriginal speakers spoke of these archaeological 'discoveries' and left a mostly sympathetic audience in no doubt that what they were demonstrating were their cultural roots in the Furneaux group (Launceston, Tasmania, 30 Nov. - 2 Dec. 2000). See also Andrew Rule, "Black Mischief," *The Sunday Age*, Late Edition, Agenda Section (26 Nov. 2000): 1.

<sup>40</sup> See Bailey and Hall in Lawrence Grossberg, "Identity and Cultural Studies: Is That All There Is?" *Questions of Cultural Identity*, eds Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (London: Sage Publications, 1996): 87-88.

<sup>41</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin* 227.

<sup>42</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin* 231.

<sup>43</sup> Memmi 99.

'cultural,' as too can a group's or people's attempts to define their culture and constrain its cultural meaningfulness to those attributes and traits that are said to be in accord with the definition. In this respect, political posturing in the service of one's interests is in part cultural, or at least it can be construed as such. But so too can the range of beliefs, behaviours, attributes and traits that fall outside any such posturing, and/or that irrupt through the cultural borders stated or implied in constraining definitions that declare Aborigines 'are' whatever. As mentioned above, some of the markers of cultural identity I have critiqued continue to serve a useful purpose. But away from essentialist notions of racial authenticity and appeals to mystic essences we also witness vibrant and dynamic cultures that continue ceaselessly to manifest new forms, and which continue to provide "those ideas, beliefs and practices through which people negotiate their conditions of existence."<sup>44</sup> Many of these "ideas, beliefs and practices" are at odds with those postulated in claims of and for a racially-based cultural authenticity. Consequently, those who are perceived to be living outside the varying notions of authenticity often find their cultural identity challenged. The meaningfulness of their Indigenous cultural experience is deemed illegitimate.

The assertion that some claimed expressions of Aboriginality are culturally illegitimate leads back to the aforementioned issue of boundaries or borders between cultures. If we accept manifesting new cultural forms and their attendant identities - and I argue we must - and allow that gossamer borders between cultures are lived through, one must also allow for Aboriginal cultures, and an identity wrought through them, to be available for assumption (not consumption).

This is not to say that cultural identity is arbitrary, another item on the shelves of the postmodern supermarket. Identities are not isolable from the historical, social and political exigencies that enable certain expressions and refuse others, that make some claims for one's cultural identity useful, expedient, even attractive, and not others. The range of possible identities that a people or an individual may choose remain circumscribed. Class, understandings of 'race,' and gender too bear upon one's freedom to choose and/or refuse a particular identity. These characteristics ultimately if not immediately vent any universalist utterance that "we are this." The Aboriginal 'we' in Australia today may be comprised of many intersecting 'selves'; religious, racial and sexual identities just some of these. "How many selves? 'True to one's self, which self?'" Wendy Brady asks in her review of Brook Andrew's and Rea's exhibition *Blak Babe(z) & Kweer Kat(z)* held at Sydney's Gitte Wiese Gallery for the 1997 Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras. Adding to this array of possible selves are new reproductive technologies. This

<sup>44</sup> Gill Bottomley, "Identification: Ethnicity, Gender and Culture," *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 18.1 (1997): 41.

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technology opens another and ever-expanding set of possible cultural and other identities that an individual could conceivably assume.

I began this discussion with a precis of the plot of Makine's semi-autobiographical novel. The hero of the story was in his thirties, living in France having fled Russia, before he discovered his biological ancestry did not include any French blood. At the moment of opening the letter from his dead grandmother which revealed this information to him, did his life-long felt 'Frenchness,' mediated as it was through a simultaneously experienced Russian cultural identity, dissipate immediately? Those accepting the notion that racial and/or ethnic cultural identities are constituted from some form of prior essence, who in their fetish for racial authenticity negate the routes people travel for the family tree of biological ancestry, would have us believe that this is so, and that the hero would at that moment have to begin another journey to find out who he really, truly was.

In Australia, fallacies about who is and/or what constitutes a real Aborigine continue to circulate. Those who differ from popular perceptions of the 'real' find their Aboriginality questioned. For these reasons anthropology, amongst other disciplines, discourses, and the entire colonial apparatus, has attracted much criticism for producing and circulating stereotypes of authenticity. Aborigines have been at the forefront of much of this criticism. Now, however, Aborigines are appealing to notions of authenticity, albeit using different criteria. It is an irony that students within the tertiary sector constantly point out to those of us teaching in the field of Aboriginal Studies. And many of those students daring to raise this are Indigenous. They articulate clearly and strongly the point of view that they do not see their identities as bestowing upon them "the wrapping of specific values,"<sup>45</sup> nor as being founded upon an originary form, a prior essence. Rather, whilst understanding that the routes they have travelled are in part a consequence of their Aboriginal heritage (whatever they understand this to be), the cultural identities they articulate privilege the routes they and their family have travelled, not the roots 'found' in an imaginary homeland in an imaginary time.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Fanon, *Black Skin* 227

<sup>46</sup> See Rea in Williamson and Perkins, 22; Croft in Williamson and Perkins, 24; Williamson and Perkins 24, 20-32.