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'SOME CALL IT CULTURE': ABORIGINAL IDENTITY AND THE IMAGINARY MORAL CENTRE

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When evaluated as an argument from an imaginary moral centre, racism ceases to be only about the marginalisation of some 'other', based on pseudo-scientific grounds or quasi-academic notions of the incompatibility of groups because of difference. Racism in this context is about concealing the past and its consequences in the present to preserve the imagined morality of the dominant group. As such, the racism by proxy is founded on a denial of history. This purgatorial self-absolution is a neo-colonialist act because it relegates Indigenous others to mere tokens of an imagined moral origin. This racism belongs to a community that is so intent on maintaining its imagined morality that it ignores the fate of its own people.

This article addresses newspaper reports published in *The Weekend Australian*, 14th April 2001. 'Jedda Star Fights Culture of Rape' and 'Sticks and Stones' by Paul Toohey, and 'Noble Rot' by Nicholas Rothwell.

Before I commence my analysis I must state that the incidents of violence and rape reported in these articles have occurred in some communities in the Northern Territory and the perpetration of heinous crimes such as these can never be acceptable in any community. What is problematic however, is the way that these incidents in Aboriginal communities are represented and how their use of language co-opts these terrible incidents

to serve an agenda which sustains the moral righteousness of the white centre.

I use basic discourse analysis techniques to evaluate how factors that cause events are reported.

This involves establishing which causal factors are emphasised and placed in the 'foreground' of the text and which causal factors are minimised and placed in the 'background'. Toohey's articles foreground traditional Aboriginal culture as a significant causal factor in the perpetration of these crimes. He uses phrases such as 'culture of rape', 'some call it culture, others call it rape' and refers to the 'senior' and 'traditional law'. Foregrounding the cultural status of the perpetrators implies that Aboriginal 'culture' foster the conditions where women are 'silenced' and men 'rape with virtual impunity' – where 'traditional culture' habituates Aboriginal men to a 'culture of rape' and affords Aboriginal perpetrators virtual exemption from punishment for their crimes.

The identity of the perpetrators, as Aboriginal, something that cannot be otherwise, is claimed as causal and emphasised through headlining tactics. Other causal factors are recorded, but they are

backgrounded by prefacing informants' explanations of causes with statements of 'fact' which categorises their views as 'misinformation'. The assertion that 'overall rates of sex abuse in the Northern Territory and Queensland tower above all others, probably because of high indigenous populations' appears before the presentation of Aboriginal informants views (Toohey 2001: 24). Coverage is then rounded off with the assertion,

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'nervous Aborigines claim the subject is too confrontational for TV. They have asked that the campaign be confined to literature, which most cannot read'.

An evaluation of the incarceration, population and demographic statistics concerning Aboriginal men in the Northern Territory and Queensland shows that the first assertion is simply false (Cook, David & Grant 2001, Cunneen & Libesman 1995, Yeo 1996). The effect of this statement is to attribute blame for high sexual abuse rates to the category 'indigenous populations'.

The second assertion suggests that Aboriginal people are intent on hiding this problem in their communities by not supporting the free television awareness campaigns. The category 'Aborigines' is deemed 'nervous', seeking to conceal these problems and to derail programs that address violence against women in their communities. It assumes that everyone in these small mobile Indigenous communities has ready access to a television. Low literacy levels are also presented as a 'nervous' intent to subvert awareness of the problem regardless of the fact that English may be a second or third language in these communities.

These assertions bookend testimonies of Aboriginal people who describe:

- the battles some women have won to free themselves from these cycles of abuse,
- the fact that these crimes are part of a long-standing, continuing and extreme social malaise in these communities,
- the abject hopelessness and brevity of Aboriginal men's lives,
- the forced relegation of authentic Aboriginal law to the past by the imposition of Australian common law that is generally inept in these contexts, and
- the efforts of the Aboriginal health organisations to address this and many other problems.

Worthiness and Depravity

This emphasis on the culture of the perpetrators may be seen to be a minor thing by some, however, it is important to recognise that this discourse generates a particular point of view. This point of view attempts to blind the reader to the simple fact that the male perpetrators of any crime, or indeed the male performers of any charitable act, in these

small communities would all have a similar cultural identity.

The focus on culture prompts readers' evaluations based on categorisations rather than causes. It presents us with questions concerning the worthiness of the culture of the perpetrators. These require readers to determine the value of 'their culture' from the standpoint of 'our culture', and background Aboriginal causal claims. Implicit in this evaluation is the knowledge that the cultural identity of a perpetrator cannot be causal unless that culture in some way allows, or perhaps even demands that the perpetrator commits the act. Therefore, if Aboriginal men rape they follow a 'culture of rape'. They are depraved criminals within 'our society';

but because they are following 'traditional law' in 'their society', 'their culture' is depraved. The worthiness of this 'culture' to exist in the presence of 'our' moral society is brought into question.

Such reporting calls for evaluations of 'indigenous' worthiness which make them part of a representational project that is able to culminate in calls for the assimilation of 'indigenous' people into 'modern society' and the

subsequent debates concerning the need for the 'modernisation' of 'indigenous' culture (Rothwell 2001). A categorisation of worthiness requires a benchmark of behaviour from which to operate. In establishing this benchmark a social group most often turns to beliefs held in common concerning what is 'right' and 'wrong'. In self-evaluation, the group states that 'we are right when we do not do this; therefore not doing this is moral and good. So, if we hold in common that one should not behave this way, we are worthy'. These intra-group attributions are a necessary element of socially defined order. However, if applied in inter-group contexts they cease being effective because implicit norms and common views are abstract, and therefore difficult to translate across cultures.

This difficulty is apparent from a position of neutral equivalence between groups, however, because a point of equivalence cannot be reached in contexts where a history of dominance and bias reigns, the perpetuation of this bias also silences authentic understanding (Bhabha 1994, Chow 1994, Gee 1999, Rose 2000, Said 1994). In attributing worthiness we need evidence that some members of another group of people do this, then we must evaluate whether they hold in common that one should not behave in this way to determine if they (as a group) are immoral and unworthy. A manipulative discourse that focuses on culture

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provides clear evidence that matches these damning criteria.

The implicit reasoning behind an attribution of worthiness argument is that a group is deemed unworthy when it does not hold in common what we hold in common. Differences at other significant value levels within another cultural group can easily be employed to support the perception of difference as a signifier of deviance. A historic, cultural, political, social and economic distance existing between groups allows deviance values to be attributed more easily, and, historic value schemas representing the inherent deviance of this 'other' provide an internal confirmation of 'rightness' in deeming another group unworthy (Bhabha 1994, Chow 1994, Gee 1999, Rose 2000, Said 1994). These flawed arguments are an origin and symptom of racial bias; however, they also have a more sinister aspect. They aim to convince the social group operating within a historical

position of dominance to become more actively involved in changing and/or controlling lives of those in a subordinate group (see Rothwell 2001). I propose that to achieve this end, such a project needs only to convince a majority of those in dominance not to implement causal evaluations of events within Aboriginal communities.

This project is possible because of Australia's unexamined past concerning Aboriginal people and the continuing colonial discourse that avoids a critical self-evaluation of Australian society and governance in light of this history. This context of denial sets the scene for a 'centre' argument. An argument is instigated by skilful manipulation of schemas of evaluation that create a situation where decisions based on a categorisation of worthiness concerning Aboriginal people can be made while only looking at what is 'good about us'.

I describe this contemporary Australian discourse as an argument from an imaginary moral centre. It presents depraved acts in a dominated community in such a way that it becomes possible for those in dominance to imagine that they reflect the moral superiority of the dominating group rather than the depravity of their continuing dominance.

An Imaginary Moral Centre

In assessing deviant acts committed in 'our' social group we use causal explanations, what made one of us do this? Explanations of internal causation

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require an evaluation of our moral centre because in attempting to understand deviant behaviour we must address our culpability through affiliation to someone like us who has behaved this way. Therefore, within a social group the causal aspects of deviance from a moral norm focus on the individual deviance and the depravity of the perpetrator who must be condemned. This condemnation of the individual allows more venial conclusions to be made concerning the culpability of the group. The perpetration of child abuse within the dominant culture by a priest, for example, does not lead to general call to ban religion. The priest is condemned for what he did, *because of who he is.*

Readers are prompted to condemn Aboriginal culture because of who the perpetrators are. This is a successful representational tactic because a major and continuing problem in Australian society is that there seems to be very little willingness to understand who Aboriginal people are and what has

made them who they are. Explanations of Aboriginal people are often categorisations of 'otherness' and Aboriginal culture, communities, people and their acts are seldom causally addressed. Instead, we are told there are a lot of problems in Aboriginal communities and a lot of Aboriginal people are subject to violence, alcohol, abuse, drugs, petty crime, poverty, illness, boredom, depression, incarceration and self-harm.

A prominent feature of the ignorance concerning Aboriginal people within Australian society is distance. Spatial distance is apparent but an explanatory distance is also maintained between these communities. There is a subtle convention in Australian politics and the media to attribute all causation in these contexts to the complexity and difficulty of the distant 'Aboriginal Problem'. Ardent supporters of Aboriginal rights in mainstream politics are reluctant to state that the obvious cause of this 'Aboriginal problem' is the dominance maintained over these communities (Bennett 1999). The result is that the dominant group assesses the unworthiness of the Aboriginal 'other' as a category only in relation to its own self-value. This social imagining is made necessary by the simple fact that any causal evaluation of Aboriginal communities will reveal the history of our own culpability. Many people in Australia seem to be unable to face the reality of this critical self-awareness. Australian society is presented with a serious dilemma by the very existence of Aboriginal communities. It has

responded to this dilemma by distancing itself from this 'unattractive' and 'uncomfortable' reality.

The Constructs of an Imaginary Moral Centre.

Identities are constructed in these articles through a way of thinking that demands a 'centre identity' from which to structure attributes of worthiness. A discourse, like any narrative, must have characters. The Australian vernacular addresses Aboriginal people through 'characters' embedded in a history and practice of distancing which makes assessments of 'worthiness' and 'unworthiness'. These images are enduring and appear in many guises and being simple representations, they are greatly removed from actualities or authentic beings. The Aboriginal sportsperson for instance, unquestionably represented as an 'Aboriginal leader' is the most apparent and popular of these constructed identities. In essence they are artefacts of a dominant discourse; are that emerge from, and sustain, the 'ways that these things are spoken about'; *what we all know, and how we all must act in relation to these types of things* (Aboriginal people).

What must never be stated, however, is that these identities are not only constructed to marginalise and control Aboriginal communities, they are also constructed to conceal aspects of the dominant culture that may expose it as unworthy. Arguably, the main reason for the construction of these identities are that they are needed to conceal real culpability and ignite and sustain the imaginary moral centre of the dominant group. These identities represent traditional biases and fears that prompt categorisational distancing and the imaginary morality that sustains them. Actual causal history becomes 'black armband history' in an extreme categorisational irrationality that arguments from the imaginary moral centre promote (McKenna 1997).

In this imaginary moral centre actual information becomes less significant and sometimes even 'taboo'. All information relates to beliefs held in common and must be translated into identities, representations or images that are recognisable in common. Identity then, must shift from an actual identity to a representational artefact that can easily be manipulated through the discourse of difference to signify unworthiness.

Arguments from an imaginary moral centre exhibit certain well-defined traits:

- All identities informing these arguments must be adjusted to suit and therefore reinforce the value system of the moral centre. Kunoth-Monks' identity as the

teenage star of the film 'Jeddah' is foregrounded and her identity as a senior member of her community is pushed into the background.

- Arguments concerning the 'other' group are constructed as categorisational evaluations and all causal explanations are avoided.
- Arguments cease being rational in the sense that discursive leaps become possible between images held in common and the actual events of 'others' lives, actions and beliefs. Common beliefs override and subvert actual causal analysis.
- The construction of identities fuels and directs the process of forming arguments that attribute unworthiness from an unexamined position of 'worthiness' An argument from the imaginary moral centre.
- 'Aboriginal traditional culture' is identified as deviant and 'their 'way of being in the world needs to be 'modernised' (Rothwell 2001, Sandall 2001). The power to exercise cultural purification over this deviant other is deemed good and appropriate in terms of an imaginary dominant morality and the identity 'Indigenous other' is the only justification required for this social 'cleansing'.
- The actual subjects of these centre arguments (Aboriginal people and their communities in this instance) are distanced and therefore need never be directly addressed. The only valid references are those identities constructed in terms appropriate to the beliefs held in common of the dominant group.
- Any 'cure' can be proposed and justified because the unworthy identity of the entire 'other' community is constructed as an identity 'in need' of the dominant group and especially the dominant 'morality' (which remains unexamined). The dominant group is 'morally compelled' to help this 'in need' identity achieve 'worthiness' regardless of their actual context and real needs. A consequence of this is that assimilation policies can be rationally proposed and debated as a 'cure' for Aboriginal communities who are struggling in the process of recovering from assimilation and other imposed policies (Bennett 1999, Rothwell 2001, Sandall 2001).
- Public affirmations and actions concerning all aspects of the 'other' community and its 'in need' status are made, but only within the methodological norms of this centre of

dominance. Implicitly we all know how we must act so that nothing authentic is achieved, because any actual empowerment of these communities poses a threat (Smith 1999).

- Because the threat is that 'indigenous' empowerment would require that 'we' recognise 'them' as worthy, the imaginary moral centre, remains unexamined. It is implicitly based on the attribution of unworthiness to this 'other'. A distanced, unworthy 'other' is crucial to the stability of the neo-colonial social formation.
- Some 'other' must always be maintained as unworthy (this is what is actually needed and the reason why the moral centre in dominance remains unexamined) to support the social self-image of the moral centre.

Conclusion

The view from the imaginary moral centre has no concern for 'others'. Other than the concern that they need to become the same to be worthy. The catch here is that this sameness can never be achieved. This 'new' racism has the potential to destroy 'others' without acknowledging that it does so, because of the standpoint of extreme distancing it adopts from the realities of its own dominating actions. A social formation of this kind must operate under the delusion that it has a unique moral origin that must be courageously defended and maintained. Neo-colonialism seeks to promote this delusion because its proponents do not possess the moral courage to acknowledge their own origins, let alone critically self-evaluate, change and achieve an authentic morality.

This racist discourse underpins the social future that media representations, the editorial project of *The Australian* newspaper and some contemporary political forces promote.

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removal day

lifeless without him
it waits
to be shifted out

under his fingers
it was timeless
alive and in full voice

now the music
is dead
shut under the lid

dawn bruce