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Beyond celebration: Australian Indigenous festivals, politics and ethics

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Abstract

In contemporary Australia public discourse about Indigeneity in general and remote Indigenous communities in particular has been circumscribed by a climate of crisis. This has awakened mainstream Australia to vast inequalities, but the discursive frame continues to disable, or severely limit, an engagement with Indigenous lived experience and values. It also protects non-Indigenous, primarily I speak of, white, settler, Australians from comprehending and taking responsibility for their/our role in re-producing Indigenous marginality. The very sovereignty of the good, white, liberal subject-citizen rests upon being the universal image of good and healthy. I argue that the resistance by white, settler Australians to relinquishing or questioning the ideal of the healthy citizen has negative material affects upon Indigenous lives. This paper is a part of a larger research project that examines the immediate and longer-term impacts of selected Australian Indigenous cultural festivals on community wellbeing.

Cultural festivals are public spaces where Indigenous people re-assert that they belong to a different and the same socio-political body. To ethically engage with one another we are responsible for our own flourishing whilst not depleting another's life force. They are cultural-political spaces that challenge us to create a new ethics of cross-cultural engagement. I argue that they are public spaces in which Indigeneity cannot be assimilated or appropriated but rather where 'we' work toward new forms of relationality. An anti-colonial Australia in which we must proceed with uncertainty, feeling the pain and gain of history, the entanglements, threats, complexity and exclusions, the desire to be 'them' and 'us', to lose the self and never succeed sovereignty: to be enchanted and disenchanted by one another.

Key Words: Australia, cultural festival, ethics, indigeneity, inter-cultural, postcolonial.

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1. Introduction

In 2007 I began working on a research project which explores the impact of Indigenous cultural festivals on the health and wellbeing of the children, young people and community who participate in them.1 What has become very clear to me is that responding to Indigenous wellbeing requires creating social spaces in which the lived reality of Indigenous lives can assert itself over and against the social construction of that reality by the mainstream.2 Indigenous cultural festivals are managed and run by Indigenous or non-Indigenous organizations, or individuals, to celebrate, share and, most importantly, maintain Indigenous culture. In so doing, Indigenous people demand not only the recognition of cultural difference but also are creating a public space for the negotiation of distinct and conflicting wills and sovereignty. These cultural spaces are not (necessarily), as good, white Australians aspire, where historical conflicts are resolved and we all live in reconciled harmony.

2. Disenchanted Knowledge

In contemporary Australia public discourse about Indigeneity in general, and remote Indigenous communities in particular, has been circumscribed by a climate of crisis. The Indigenous population is almost always characterised as disadvantaged or deficient compared to the non-Indigenous. Indigeneity is structured through comparison with non- Indigenous population data across a range of socio-economic indicators like health status, education and employment levels, income and housing. These comparisons have awakened mainstream Australia to vast inequalities, but the discursive frame continues to disable, or severely limit, an engagement with Indigenous lived experience and values. Imaginatively relocating Indigenous people from the margins to the centre has material effects on lives that cannot be overlooked in the charge for equality. Recognition of gross social inequalities can prompt urgent action by the state and community. It also implicitly, if not deceptively, foregrounds the kind of social ideals state and community organisations should aim for: social norms based on non-

Indigenous, national ideals of experience and wellbeing. These assimilationist ideals play out in the kinds of policies, strategies, community groups and welfare services formulate and document at regional and local levels. This framing limits thinking - there are only negatives to be addressed

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- rather than thinking more broadly and creatively, as Lenore Manderson advocates, "about social and economic difference, cultural and political values, philosophies of government, the state and interpersonal relationship."[3] Furthermore, as John Taylor writes, the "notion that Indigenous people may have their own life projects is obscured by the pressing moral and political objective of achieving statistical equality that comes with the policies of practical reconciliation and mainstreaming."[4]

There are considerable social, economic and health challenges in many Indigenous communities and individual lives, and I in no way think these should be avoided or minimised. However, the dominant discourse – of crisis and dysfunction – creates the impression that Indigenous communities are terminal places outside of rational, modern Australia. What has become a narrative of dysfunction suggests that the social body of Indigenous communities is moribund; no dialogue is required. In turn, the new arrangements in Indigenous affairs, instigated by the former federal government, are being deployed as if they are neutral when in fact they are not. They are reinforcing mainstream values. Mainstreaming, Kerry Arabena writes, reinforces new structures of belonging, away from cultural issues to work, sport and education, which purposefully downplays culture.[5] To make the strongest case for mainstreaming it becomes necessary to ignore positive aspects of Indigenous people's lives, but in so doing the very basis for sustainable community development is disregarded.[6] This destructive (and dysfunctional) impulse within contemporary Indigenous affairs needs to be identified as an element contributing to the problems Aboriginal communities face. David Martin claims that Indigenous people are treated as if they are "essentially empty vessels, if rather chipped and cracked ones, into which the new array of more socially functional values is to be poured."[7] What is observable over the history of Australian Indigenous affairs is that the state sees its role as not only intervening to supplement social disadvantage with more resources, but more specifically, that it must create, from scratch, a new social body for embedding these resources, maintaining and replicating them.

I would argue that is it because the 'inheritors' of modernity, and thus political sovereignty, perform a particular citizenship, and it is this subject-citizen who is invoked in the race for statistical equality and practical reconciliation. The modern is secular, disembodied and separate from the non-human world. As Dipesh Chakrabarty contends, the modern is ontologically singular – gods and spirits must be understood as social facts.[8] To be otherwise is a demonstration of not being modern yet. The 'political' sphere might need to tolerate Indigenous spirituality or cultural heritage as a lingering anachronism or accommodate it, as is done so often in Australia, as an ancient and worthy culture, but it is not understood as a contemporary force or power that must be negotiated, indeed harnessed, as a vital life force. The social/public is the space for a particular performance of subject-citizen and by embodying this position one is "taking their rightful place in the social realm."[9] In Australia the image, ideals and narratives of the modern, sovereign citizen continue to disable the 'unfinished business' of decolonisation. Indeed, I would argue it greatly contributes to making Indigenous Australian's sick.

The liberal white Australian - the upholders of cosmopolitan citizenship - can and do accommodate aspects of Indigeneity and the history of colonial violence into their self and socio-historical reality. The ability to be educated and 'improve' is the performance par excellence of the good and healthy modern subject-citizen. What, I suggest, cannot be incorporated is a contested understanding of the good and healthy subject-citizen - that is an alertness to 'my'/'our' sovereignty is not (necessarily) derived from the same place and thus the forces that nourish life do not arise from the same power. The very sovereignty of the good, white, liberal subject-citizen rests upon being the universal image of good and healthy - what provides sovereignty is that 'we' are not of the past but the present-future. I would argue that the resistance by white, settler Australians to relinquishing or questioning the ideal of the healthy citizen has negative material affects upon Indigenous lives. Both Indigenous affairs and many Australians who want for social justice are (unknowingly) trapped in both a desire for a finished western colonial project and decolonisation. I would argue that this is an aspect of our western political heritage that we turn away from.

In mainstream Australia I think we witness an 'ethical' engagement with Indigenous people in a way that does two out of three necessary moves (and in so doing undoes the work). The good, white citizen recognises a violent colonial history, which in turn causes pain or rupture to the white, settler colonial -

the world, or more specifically Australia is not what I thought it was and it is through violence that I have inherited the world. The good, white citizen deals with this pain and uncertainty by reinforcing their own goodness - reasserting innocent racial consciousness - and embracing Indigenous culture (albeit from a distance) and causes. In so doing, the good, white citizen forecloses pain, and refuses to tend the empty centre. The self is 'healed' and one can return to being a good individual in a flawed or blemished nation and world. For the good, white citizen the other and otherness is not a threat to one's being, but (knowingly) a site from which one's identity is generated. Those who cannot or will not 'regenerate' are imagined as fixed in the past. Yet I would argue it is irresponsible and unethical to be a good, white, individual subject who through their own 'good will' or 'good deeds' somehow stands outside history and in so doing disavows their personal sovereignty as connected to a political sovereignty. In so doing, one reinstates the universality of the western citizen-subject. As necessary as it is to understand the self as generated from alterity it is equally necessary to feel this source of trouble or pain and not know the answer. To be unsettled by it, wonder - experience it as a creative force - to resist the coloniser's desire for mastery and all knowingness. Uncertainty - albeit a robust uncertainty, not collapsing and disappearing into despair - provides a space for meaningful dialogue about what it means (for every*body*) to live well in a contested country.

3. Indigenous Cultural Festivals

There is a deep concern in Australia about the socio-economic plight of too many Indigenous lives and so there should be, but scattered throughout the country are many words, images, performances and ideas from which a new future might grow. I now will turn to examine a particular Indigenous cultural festival - the Dreaming - which I argue is a site in which Indigenous people are not only knowingly disrupting the disenchanted knowledge that circulates about contemporary Indigeneity - with all its bad statistics, which ignore colonialism and neo-colonialism - but also have produced a public space in which non-Indigenous guests share in and feel a flourishing, contemporary Indigeneity. We need to create anti-colonial public spaces to produce anti-colonial civic life.

The Dreaming festival, held in June near Woodford in southeast Queensland, has been running since 2005. The festival showcases local, national and international Indigenous artists in a contemporary celebration of culture and Indigenous excellence. Held over three days and four nights, the program features film and literature components, performing arts, new media and digital technologies, comedy, ceremony, exhibitions, performance artists, physical theatre, visual arts, craft workshops, music program, street performers, musicals and a youth program and forums.

The festival does not privilege a particular representation of Indigeneity. It gathers a diverse range of performers and forum participants from vastly different places. The festival director, Rhoda Roberts, considers the Dreaming is about understanding, learning and listening, and recognizing that culture comes in many different forms.[10] The Dreaming strives to present rich, diverse and distinctive Indigenous cultural histories, and affirm Indigenous people as historical agents. The festival aims to avow cultural identity and difference, whilst the immersion and intimacy of the space enables, as Roberts posits, new ways to engage broader Australia and international audiences.[11] The range of performances and the diverse and divergent identities presented at the Dreaming defies anyone's ability to define and categorise Indigenous identity.

The Dreaming festival provides a space for multiple and contradictory performances of Indigeneity, importantly destabilising the persistent image of the 'real', 'authentic', Indigenous person. In so doing, it creates a space for the many who are rendered voiceless by the cult of authenticity.[12] Too often, minority peoples are made unrepresentable if they don't partake in the authentic images provided and accepted by the dominant culture.[13] The liberal, democratic, multicultural state, demands that a discernable cultural difference be presented to it in a pre-packaged form, which conforms generally to textually mediated imaginary of Indigenous traditions and legal definitions of ownership.[14] To be unable to self-represent and represent oneself as Indigenous, further alienates one from being a full member of the social body. The festival provides a cultural space whereby the processes of translation and recognition might begin and the contradictory performances of Indigeneity might work to reveal and delegitimise governing representations.

Importantly, festivals work in an in-between space, which facilitates face-to-face encounters. Arguably, the potential for self and social transformation lies in, what Victor Turner refers to as, liminal space: between belonging and not, home and anxiety.[15] The festival audience is not at home in their ordinary world, however, although not at home, nor is one completely displaced. The white, settler subject loses

sight of oneself and the imagined, unified nation yet is also provided with a temporary space where social interrelations occur. Following Turner, Sylvia Kleinert observes cultural performances are not simply expressions of social systems, but rather they are also reflective: implicitly or explicitly commenting on social life and the way society deals with its own history.[16] The liminal zone of the Dreaming might allow white, settler Australians to be both at home and out of place, which in turn might make them available to these critiques without becoming self-alienated or too defensive. The Dreaming marginalises and accommodates the dominant culture enough to permit *me* to understand that *I* am being addressed: asked to reflect upon what role I play in assigning Indigenous people bit parts on the stage of *white Australia.*

The cultural-political experiment, the Dreaming festival, is designed not only to challenge the limited perceptions of Indigeneity, but also perhaps to confound. The cultural space privileges competing identities, histories, perspectives and desires. To challenge and change the stranglehold of dominant representations of Indigenous people requires that the permutations of inhabiting a contested land, and encountering and living with multiple and conflicting interpretations, infuse social space.

Significantly, the festival not only bears witness to the ongoing political struggles, but also locates non-Indigenous people in an Indigenous political arena. Arguably, the Dreaming situates non-Indigenous Australians in proximity to, or even a part of, the socio-political struggle. Unlike the alienating images privileged by the media and politicians, which confirm the problems faced by Indigenous people as both overwhelming and remote – out there somewhere, beyond the civic body, and by extension unAustralian – at the Dreaming, entrenched social issues coexist alongside celebration. Thus, the socio-political struggle is not strange, or estranging, but an aspect of contemporary Australia. The Dreaming attempts to establish *within* mainstream Australia an understanding of Indigenous custodianship of the country, and emphasise Indigeneity as dynamic, living cultures. Events such as the Dreaming, ask us to not only see but also to think, feel and partake in creatively re-imagining the country and Australianess.

At the Dreaming, the comic and celebratory co-exist alongside the tragic and examinations of seemingly intractable social issues. This place of celebration and serious reflection not only challenges mainstream representations of Indigeneity, but also the country. Colonialism codified southeast Queensland as the space of private property, a rural, white Australian place, where the white subjects of History recognise themselves. Importantly, it is the Indigenous body, and the body of performances, to which the audience responds. At the Dreaming festival bodies, performances and desires connect and reconnect, disrupting the predominant idea(l) that there are white or black only spaces within Australia. In so doing, it challenges mainstream understandings of Indigeneity as located in remote Australia by affirming heterogeneous Indigenous identity and connections to place. With the Dreaming festival, the space becomes an Aboriginal place of strength and joy, refuting the degraded representations of Aboriginal life that circulate in the media, which maintain the idea that Indigenous people are fringe dwellers on the civic body. This home away from home is a creative space that invites contestation, incommensurability and understanding, holding out the possibility of forging new connections and re-imagining Australia.

Notes
[1] The project is an Australian Research Council Linkage (industry partner Telstra Foundation), P James, M Steger and P Phipps, 'Globalizing Indigeneity: Indigenous Cultural Festivals and Wellbeing in Australia and the Asia Pacific', RMIT University, 2007-2010.

[2] M Morrissey, R PePua, A Brown and A Latif, 'Culture as a Determinant of Aboriginal Health', in Ian Anderson, Fran Baum and Michael Bentley (eds), *Beyond Bandaides: Exploring the Underlying Social Determinants of Aboriginal Health*, Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health, Darwin, 2007, p. 245.

[3] L Manderson, 'Introduction: The Social Context of Wellbeing', in L Manderson (ed.), *Rethinking Wellbeing*, Curtin University Publishing, Perth, 2005, p. 12.

[4] J Taylor, 'Indigenous people and indictors of well-being', in Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research Working paper, Australian National University, Canberra, 2006, p.8.

5 K Arabena, 'Not fit for modern Australian society: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People and the new administration for Indigenous affairs', AIATSIS Research Discussion Paper, no. 16, Canberra, 2006, p. 14.

6 D Martin, 'Why the 'new direction' in Federal Indigenous affairs policy is as likely to 'fail' as the old directions', Topical Issues in Indigenous Affairs, vol. 5, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University, Canberra, 2006, p. 13.

7 Martin, p. 2.

8 D Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2000, p.15.

9 Ibid., p.131.

10 R Roberts, 'The Dreaming Festival', paper presented at the Garma festival, Gulkala, Northern Territory, August, 2005.

11 Op. cit.

12 D Panagia, *Poetics of Political Thinking*, Duke UP, Durham, 2006, p. 122.

13 Ibid., p. 123.

14 E Povinelli, The Cunning of Recognition: Indigenous Alterities and the Making of Australian Multiculturalism, Duke UP, Durham, 2002, p. 182.

15 V Turner, *Anthropology of Performance*, PAJ Publications, NY, 1986.

16 S Kleinert, 'An Aboriginal Moomba: Remaking History', *Continuum* (Perth)*, 1999,* vol. 13, no. 3, pp. 347.

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