Aboriginality and the Northern Territory Intervention

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Abstract
This paper examines constructions of Aboriginality circulating in discourse surrounding the 2007 introduction of the Northern Territory Emergency Response (the intervention). It provides a preliminary analysis of several constructions of Aboriginality that are deployed to justify the intervention, and identifies subject positions, values, logics and power relations that these constructions create, reflect, sustain and foreclose. I argue that discussions of abuse of Aboriginal children in intervention debates operate as a site for contestations about the nature, value and future of Aboriginality, generating, reinforcing and restricting the political legitimacy of a range of subjectivities and speaking positions. Aboriginality is constructed in dominant discourse as primitive, in need of erasure, modification or development in the face of the inevitable and inescapable demands of modernity; it is also understood as inherently savage or threatening, and hence in need of control or discipline. These ideas culminate in understandings of Aboriginal communities as threats to the settler order that must be managed or contained, which are deployed to reinforce the settler state’s assertions of sovereignty and moral authority.

Public debate surrounding the introduction of the Northern Territory Emergency Response (the intervention) in 2007 relied upon a range of ideas about the nature, role, status, value and future of Aboriginal people, and race relations in Australia. A number of important critical works have addressed the politics of the intervention
This paper contributes to this discussion through examining whether the constructions of Aboriginality that circulate in debates about the Northern Territory intervention constitute a problematic formulation.

Prominent Aboriginal academic and activist Mick Dodson argues that representations of Aboriginality have operated as ‘weapons and symptoms of the oppressive relationship that exists between Indigenous people and colonising states,’ directly linked to policies involving ‘management’ and control of Indigenous peoples but potentially also resources of freedom and a key focus for Aboriginal political struggles (1994:6-11). I argue discourse about the intervention reflects a continuing tension in Indigenous - settler relations in Australia about the value and nature of Aboriginality and Aboriginal difference, as well as the settler state’s often violent ambivalence about whether and how Aboriginality can be excluded from or incorporated into the settler order.

This paper provides an overview of my larger project, in which I identify a number of important ways that Aboriginality is constructed and deployed in debates about the intervention through analysis of a wide range of texts from the period surrounding the announcement of intervention from June to the end of August 2007. These texts include media reports, Hansard, Government, Opposition and minor party media releases, speeches, and supporting documentation, as well as public comments, campaign materials, position papers or media statements on the issue from Aboriginal communities and organisations, as well as other community groups, service providers, and relevant bodies. Analysis of the texts was a reflexive process, following methods outlined by Carabine (2001). This involved identification of key themes and objects of discourse, and evaluation of the subject positions, values and logics these constructions generate, reflect, reinforce and foreclose, as well as the effects of interrelationships between discourses (including silences, resistances and counter discourses). I situate these constructions of Aboriginality in their context by emphasising the discursive traditions and legacies they draw on, and the power relations these discourses generate, reflect, reinforce and foreclose.
Central to my approach is the contention that language is productive, and that representations and texts do not just reflect meanings and realities, but rather produce them. Following Foucault (1975;1978), this involves the claim that discourses and discursive practices are important sites of power relations, constituting objects, events, identities, subjects and truths in particular ways, with material political and other consequences. Carabine contends Foucault’s genealogical method can also provide a snapshot of a moment in discourse without resorting to tracing its history, to provide insight into the operation of power/knowledge networks in a particular moment and contribute to an understanding of the way in which discourses and regimes of truth are constituted in that field (2001). My objective is not to evaluate the effectiveness of the policy measures proposed, or to provide a more truthful or accurate account of the sequencing of actions, agents and consequences (cf Luke 1997:359), but to identify the power relations implicit in the way in which particular knowledges operate in their context.

I argue that debates surrounding the 2007 Northern Territory intervention see discussions of abuse of Aboriginal children function as a site for contestations about the nature, value and future of Aboriginality, generating, reinforcing and policing the political legitimacy of a range of subjectivities and speaking positions. Aboriginality is constructed by the dominant discourse as primitive, and essentially in need of erasure or modification in the face of the (inevitable and inescapable) demands of modernity. It is also understood as savage or inherently threatening, and in need of control or discipline. These ideas culminate in understandings of Aboriginal communities as threats to the settler order that must be managed or contained. Constructions of Aboriginality operate and interrelate through intervention discourses to reinforce the settler state’s assertions of sovereignty and moral authority, liberal values and nationalist aspirations.

The figure of the Aboriginal child is mobilised in debates about the intervention as a site for a range of discussions about the nature, value and future of Aboriginality. Ideas about Aboriginal children are deployed to symbolise and legitimise settler aspirations for a future in which the challenge of Aboriginality has been culturally and politically neutralised. Challenges to the intervention program, and to the settler colonial order more broadly, are limited by a dominant discourse about child abuse.
and Aboriginal culture that deploys harmful colonial constructions of Aboriginality to reinforce the moral authority and agency of the settler state.

Architects and supporters of the intervention successfully and consistently argued that the need to save Indigenous children from abuse justified an extensive and broad ranging policy program. However, throughout this commentary the nature of the abuse to be combated flexes and shifts. The intervention fluctuates in intent from an urgent intercession to protect children who are being sexually abused, to a program designed to combat abuse and neglect, to a broader program designed to enhance child welfare and improve social welfare outcomes. While the specific objectives of the program sometimes blur, Aboriginal children remain constant as the imagined beneficiaries of state action.

The policy measures employed to achieve these multiple ends are more concrete in focus. Aboriginal adults and communities are clearly identified as the central target of government action; they are the problem to be resolved (Altman 2007i:8; Manderson 2008:258). Stringer argues that the policy measures adopted through the intervention construct Aboriginal communities as ‘insufficiently colonised zones’ (2007). Essentially, these constructions have a defective Aboriginality as their focus, and the measures proposed prescribe additional state control as the treatment required.

This consistent problematisation of Aboriginality, combined with indeterminacy about the nature of the abuse to be addressed, sees Aboriginality frequently conflated with abuse; children who require saving are being rescued from Aboriginality. Instead of removing children from their families and communities in order to assimilate them into white society, this program operates to achieve similar ends through forcible assimilation of those communities into settler economy and society. Aboriginality and Aboriginal culture are understood as defective, lacking or in need of modification – or, in the language of the intervention, ‘normalisation’ (Marika 2007; Brown & Brown 2007).

The depiction of Aboriginal culture as the cause of abuse – and consequently, what children need rescuing from – is jarring, given that the Little Children are Sacred Report indicated that a significant proportion of perpetrators of abuse of Aboriginal
children are white (cf Behrendt & Watson 2008:47). I contend this ongoing problematisation of Aboriginality can be understood as part of a colonial practice that draws on and promulgates entrenched beliefs about Aboriginal people, as well as an implied reflection/opposition between a problematised Aboriginality and an idealised ‘civilised’ Settler order to reassert the authority and legitimacy of the Australian state.

Prime Minister Howard famously invoked ‘a Hobbesian nightmare of violence, abuse and neglect’ (2007i:1) to describe the situation of children in Aboriginal communities. This description of the realm of Aboriginality in the terms of the European philosophical tradition understands Aboriginal people through references to a state of nature, beset with savagery and lawlessness in an unsettled realm of violence and disorder. Aboriginal communities are understood dialectically, as primitive or savage, and in opposition to settler society which is legitimate, ordered and civilised. What we have got to do is confront the fact that these communities have broken down. The basic elements of a civilised society don't exist. What civilised society would allow children from a tender age to become objects of sexual abuse? (Howard 2007ii)

The Indigenous realm is constructed as either fundamentally without order, or to have lost a pre-existing order through a kind of deterioration. This construction of Aboriginal communities is frequently deployed to justify colonial violence against Indigenous people (Watson 2005; 2007), and recurs persistently throughout intervention debates (cf Watson 2009ii). Aboriginality when referenced through the state of nature is situated firmly as a prior stage of human development, belonging to the imagined European past, and inherently in need of modification or erasure if Aboriginal people are to achieve modernity, legitimacy and the apparently universal destination of assimilation within settler society.

I draw a distinction between two differing but closely related permutations of this theme; characterisation of Aboriginality as primitive and in need of development or assimilation into the settler order, and characterisation of Aboriginality as savage or violent and in need of suppression or externally imposed control. I argue these twin conceptions form a recurring theme throughout debates about the intervention’s goals and purpose. The distinction between understandings of Aboriginality as primitive
and as savage is not complete; interrelating and overlapping they together reflect key aspects of the broader logic of liberalism and colonialism (Hindess 2001; see also Watson, V 2004). However, it is useful to evaluate these strategies separately in the context of the intervention in order to assess the consequences of these constructions, the differing functions, logics and policy consequences of each, as well as the similarities in the political frameworks and colonial power relations these conceptions ultimately both rely on and reinforce.

Constructions of Aboriginality as ‘primitive’ operate in intervention discourse to normalise settler values and entrench colonial dominance. Aboriginality is constructed as a lack of development; as an ancient culture or relic out of step with the inevitable and universal destination of modernity embodied in the settler mainstream; a more natural state requiring development to achieve civilisation. This reinforces a logic of assimilation, situating Aboriginality in the past and in need of modification or erasure:

> I believe that Indigenous culture has been used to throw a cloak over these problems and that, in this day and age, it is time for this cloak to be removed and for the Indigenous people of Australia as a whole to be brought into the world of contemporary Australia.
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> Senator Eggleston (Senate 2007i:106)

The intervention program is an attempt to alter or ‘remedy’ this perceived problem. Altman argues the regime aims to regulate behaviour in prescribed communities ‘with the clear aim of altering people’s values in the longer term to embrace those of mainstream Australia’ (Altman 2007ii:10).

The tension between the imputation of wholesale incapacity to Aboriginality and the government’s explicitly stated goals of building capacity among Aboriginal people in this case also reflects the operation of colonial logics and processes. The assignation of priority needs through welfare quarantining is an explicitly normative process designed to align the spending priorities of Aboriginal welfare recipients with those qualities the state has designated essential or important for current and future market participation as well as successful integration within the settler order. To an extent, the elimination of Aboriginality or Aboriginal difference – understood as the primary
marker of incapacity in this context (cf. Sutton 2008:29) – is posited as the end goal of this process. Capacity is deployed as a developmental goal to be achieved by the primitive on the path to civilisation rather than an inherent attribute of subjectivity, and is associated with assimilation into the settler colonial economic order.

This conception relies on and reinforces a range of settler values and beliefs about modernity, liberalism and capacity, and the nature and importance of progress. Through this discourse the market is naturalised and presupposed, but is understood to be artificially suspended due to ‘passive’ welfare provision:

(T)he provision of welfare has not had the desired outcome. It has become a trap instead of a pathway…. With no work and no hope of getting a job, many Aboriginal people in these communities rely on passive welfare. In an environment where there is no natural social order of production and distribution, grog, pornography and gambling often fill the void.

Mal Brough (House of Representatives 2007:6, 11)

The possibility of Aboriginal cultural or economic structures providing meaning and social order, as alternative development trajectories, or as pre-dating and being affected adversely by settler structures is not canvassed. The relational nature of settler colonial economic arrangements and in particular the relationship between economic structures based on resource exploitation, and environmental damage and the dispossession of Aboriginal people is similarly unquestioned in the dominant discourse. Instead, the mainstream settler economy is posited as the ultimate end goal of an economic development trajectory that reflects and reinforces the teleological conception of human cultural and other development described above.

Settler state discourses about policy towards Aboriginal people often problematise and construct Aboriginality as deviant (Johns & Sanders 2005), legitimising State intervention by focussing on the difference or ‘dysfunction’ of Indigenous people and operating to enforce the cultural and behavioural norms of settler society (Lattas 1993; Goodall 1995; Tonkinson 2007). Constructions of Aboriginality as savage or degraded and in need of externally imposed control or discipline circulate in discourses about the intervention, and Aboriginal communities and people are identified as a threat to the social order requiring constraint in discussions of
violence, ‘grog’, dysfunction, lawlessness and the absence of order. The settler state is required to address this dangerous instability through the imposition of order to ‘stabilise the situation… [and] bring law, order and protection’ (Howard 2007i). The bulk of the policy measures proposed involve the imposition of control, restraint, and mandating behaviours. This construction is also evident in the commentary positing the problem being addressed as fundamentally a law and order issue, arising from a general social instability or collapse, and a failure or absence of legitimate authority; Brough for example, describes the prescribed communities as ‘a failed society, where basic standards of law and order and behaviour have broken down’ (House of Representatives 2007:10).

Throughout discussion of the intervention, violence – especially family or interpersonal violence – is frequently understood as related to and resulting from the nature of Aboriginality, which is either inherently savage or tragically degraded to a state of savagery. The language of stability and crisis establish Aboriginality, and particularly Aboriginal men, as a threat to social order; ‘women and children are petrified of violence and sexual molestation’ and the state must provide protective intervention because ‘(f)reedoms and rights, especially for women and children, are little more than cruel fictions without the rule of law and some semblance of social order enforced by legitimate authority’ (Howard 2007i). Discussions of Aboriginality often centre around violence and dysfunction, the contaminating nature of ‘grog’, the troubling mobility of Aboriginal people, and the need for externally imposed law and order, culminating in a crisis requiring extensive change:

> There is a national emergency confronting the welfare of Aboriginal children, and the well-meaning intentions of the past have become a trap rather than a solution. Values, virtues and societal norms have broken down in a slurry of alcohol, pornography, lawlessness and excuses. The time for self-serving excuses is over. Breaking the cycle requires dramatic action and drastic changes. Senator Bernardi (Senate 2007ii:113)

This construction reinforces a range of settler values and logics; state action to control the violent savage is legitimised and sanctioned, particularly through authoritarian approaches legitimised by crisis rhetoric (Manderson 2008; ‘t Hart 2008), and the
political positions and voices of Indigenous critics are framed as illegitimate, complicit or dangerous.

These processes have significant implications, and reinforce and reinscribe a set of colonial structures and relationships, as depictions of interpersonal violence in Aboriginal communities are deployed to justify or erase the violence of the colonial order. Violence or savagery is understood either as a self evident feature of Indigeneity or through a discourse of Indigenous cultural collapse, constructions which erase the colonial violence perpetrated by the settler state, as well as violence occurring within and throughout the settler order. Sheehan writing on reporting of violence in Aboriginal communities several years prior to the intervention, argues such reports often operate through an imaginary white moral centre, inviting white readers to designate Aboriginal culture as a cause of depraved acts and imagine this reflects “the moral superiority of the dominating group, rather than the depravity of their continuing dominance” (2001:30-31). This process is clearly evident in Howard government arguments in support of the intervention that describe Aboriginal communities as violent dystopias, attribute this to their existence within an Aboriginal realm remote from influence by or comparison with the settler state, and leverage this to justify increased settler dominance. Howard’s ‘To Stabilise and Protect’ Press Club Address (2007i) and Brough’s Second Reading Speech on the intervention’s enabling legislation (House of Representatives 2007:1-17) both rely heavily on this formulation. Institutional and individual settler accountability arising from abuse is deferred and contained through the responsibility to civilise or constrain the savage, and social violence is stripped from its relational context so that settlers and their structures are not implicated. Aboriginality is framed as a cultural marker that must be surrendered through discipline and submission to controls before other claims (as an individual subject or citizen) can legitimately be made.

In order to improve the state of the primitive through normalisation/assimilation, it is apparently necessary to tame the violent and lawless savage – to achieve stability:

The simple truth, however, is that you cannot make lasting change in areas like health, education and housing while ever women and children are petrified of violence and sexual molestation. Without physical security no
amount of extra resources will give these people a genuine future.
(Howard 2007i)

However, Aboriginal poverty and what is understood as underdevelopment are also seen as causing violence and abuse:

In any event, as you would well know, Senator, there is a very clear connection between the abuse and violence in the communities and the level of amenity. If we have 22 people living in a house, then the stress and the tension – as well as the general hygiene and a whole range of other issues – within the house are obviously going to impact on the suite of issues that we are trying to ameliorate.

Senator Scullion (Senate 2007i:62)

Some complexities of the relationship between these twin conceptions of Aboriginality as both primitive and savage are evident here; the savage must be constrained so that the primitive can be developed, but conversely the failure to develop the primitive has the effect of increasing social tensions and releasing the barely suppressed savage. Taken together, these ideas form the discursive foundation of a colonial civilising mission; Aboriginality is intrinsically underdeveloped and thus responsible for poverty in Aboriginal communities, as well as inherently unstable and savage and thus responsible for violence and upheaval, and the solution to this is a combination of imposed constraint and assimilation within the settler order.

The formulations of Aboriginality circulating through the intervention construct remote communities in particular as the location of authentic or unassimilated Aboriginality; primitive, savage, and in dialectic opposition to the civilised settler mainstream. The metaphor of the unsettled frontier – or vulnerable centre – is pervasive, and remote Aboriginal communities are constructed as a particular challenge to the settler state requiring resolution. The communities prescribed for intervention are paradigmatically referred to in media reports as ‘remote Aboriginal societies’ ‘this other Australia’ ‘the remote world’ and as a ‘a distinct domain’ (Rothwell 2007), with a preoccupation with those communities that are ‘most remote’ and areas ‘too far away’ to be easily serviced from settler communities (Kearney 2007). Perera argues that remote Indigenous communities are often represented as
‘set apart from the body of the nation, and as the locus of unspeakable violence and abjection’ (2007:13). In resolving the ‘problem’ of Aboriginality, subduing the savage and developing the primitive in these spaces designated as the location of authentic Aboriginality, the intervention’s advocates are not just engaged in reasserting the moral legitimacy of the settler colonial project. This resolution in many ways also constitutes a performance of sovereignty. The imposition of settler values and structures through the intervention emphasises and (re)enacts the settler state’s claims to universality, legitimacy, and moral authority. It represents a claim to sovereignty over both actual territory and the discursive terrain of nationhood.

To conclude, constructions of Aboriginality deployed to justify the intervention are formulations that operate to contain, discredit and dismiss claims against the state arising from Aboriginality. The settler state’s actions are justified through discursive strategies that effectively operate to renew and reinvigorate the colonial civilising mission through constructions of Aboriginal people as both primitive and savage. Aboriginality is constructed as responsible for abuse of Aboriginal children, Aboriginal communities are presented as dystopic threats to the settler order that must be managed or contained. This functions to obscure the violence of the settler order, provide justification or moral rehabilitation for the colonising project, and to reassert the sovereignty and universality of the settler state.

References


