Problematising Identity: Governance, Politics and the ‘Making of the Aborigines’

Terry Moore

A politics of authenticity or hybridity?

This article is in two parts. In the first part I use two case studies to illustrate the identity politics in which Aboriginal Tasmanians are routinely immersed. In these cases, several authoritative discourses — primarily those of liberal governance and state, non-Aboriginal popular opinion, and the counter-discourse of hegemonic Aboriginality — compete to position Aboriginal Tasmanians as Aborigines and as citizens. All the discourses refer in some way to an essentialist, traditionalist authentic Aboriginality. None acknowledge the lived reality and legitimacy of being multiple, complex, modern selves in which forms of Aboriginality exist alongside other identities. Yet this is what Aboriginal Tasmanians are. In order to maintain and assert their identities in all their complexity, individuals must strategically manipulate the various competing discourses and negotiate any discrepancies between them and their own lived realities.

This Aboriginal politics can be described as a politics of authenticity, as proximity to the mythologised Aboriginality confers credibility and power. It could just as well though, be described as a politics of hybridity, in which people seek to meet the demands of living multiplicity and ambiguity by strategically mobilising the discourse of authenticity. Either way, it is dedicated to the management of lived hybridity. This appears to require the assertion of proximity to a unitary authentic Aboriginality and the corollary of hiding or denying various other component identities associated with also being, for instance, a Tasmanian or an educated critical thinker.

In the second part of the article I go on to explain how and why this politics has developed, in which the colonial governmental construction of an ambiguous Tasmanian Aboriginality and the later conditional inclusion of Aboriginal people through liberal governance are pivotal. This politics is also an outcome of the Aboriginal adoption of the same notion of Aboriginality against which they are unfavourably compared in the popular and government discourses, and of a tacit compact between the Aboriginal elite and state government.

I conclude with the suggestion that Aboriginal politics no longer present a productively subversive challenge to liberal government, and may also be counter-productive for many Aboriginal individuals.

The politics of authenticity in two case studies

The Tribunal case

The notion of a single ‘Aboriginal community’ in Tasmania is a construction of, and for, political and administrative convenience. Leaving aside discussion of the
relevance of the notion of ‘community’ to each, there are several distinct ‘communities’. The core community is that group descended from sealers, their often-abducted Aboriginal partners and children. They lived originally in the Bass Strait Islands and their descendants now live in all main cities, especially Launceston. They are known also as Islanders or, less often, as Straitsmen, and include self-identifying sub-groups such as the ‘grass-roots people’. The core community dominates the key political organisation, the Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre (TAC). The two groups known as the Northwestern and Southern communities are descended from two Aboriginal women who left the Flinders Island and Oyster Cove settlements, respectively, to marry white settlers. Their descendants retain some connection with the northwest coast and Huon Valley areas, but are now largely dispersed. These three form what I call the foundational communities.

During 2002 several hundred individuals in Tasmania claimed to be Aboriginal and, therefore, to be eligible to vote in coming elections for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), the main federal agency developing Aboriginal policy. As prescribed by commonwealth legislation, they claimed to self-identify as Aboriginal, to be accepted by the community in which they live as being Aboriginal and to have evidence of biological descent from Aboriginal people.

The claims by the majority of these people were rejected by an official committee, the Independent Indigenous Advisory Committee (IIAC), specifically formed to determine their status. The Committee was composed exclusively of Aboriginal Tasmanians, representing the three foundational communities. Their rejection of the Aboriginality of the claimants was based primarily on the veracity and official authority of the recorded family trees in the state archives combined with doubts regarding the veracity and authority of oral history. They also doubted most claims of communal recognition on the grounds that the individuals were not known to the communities represented by the Committee. The federal Administrative Appeals Tribunal was asked to make a final determination in the cases subsequently appealed.

The focus here is on the claims in that Tribunal of the Lia Pootah community, a newly-emergent and contested group in the south of the state. These people sought to establish their claim to Aboriginality firstly on the basis of the recognition of the Lia Pootah community; that is, self-referential recognition. They also argued that their hitherto unchallenged access to ATSIC funds and services constituted formal communal recognition: many had been granted housing by, and some had been directors of, an ATSIC-funded community organisation. Some individuals also had confirmatory statements from respected older members of the Southern community.

In respect of the defining criterion of Aboriginal ancestry, their claim rested on descent from Aboriginal women who did not appear in official records. They argued that the official records are incomplete and inaccurate. They also presented some comprehensively researched oral histories, old photographs of dark-looking relatives, letters and evidence of discrimination on the basis of rumours about their ancestry. Additionally, they sought to establish a cultural claim to Aboriginality: they appealed to innate capacities such as being able to smell snakes in the bush;
they referred to participation in traditional activities such as collecting berries, and in cultural activities, which amounted to a consciously researched and reconstituted ceremony conferring the status of Elder on one man.

In the event, the Tribunal accepted that all the Lia Pootah applicants are Aboriginal within the terms of the legislation. This includes those whose claim rested on participation in school-based activities funded by a commonwealth educational program, even those whose participation ceased completely on leaving school, and who did not appear at the Tribunal. This decision does not automatically apply in respect of Tasmanian state services. It is certainly not accepted in the already-established Aboriginal communities, as a letter to the local paper reveals:

On Friday October 18, 2002, 130 non-Aborigines invaded the Tasmanian Aboriginal community. Two hundred years ago the whites invaded Aboriginal land by using force and the notion that they knew best. In the 21st century they now use the legal system to invade the Aboriginal community … Mrs Brown [one of the newly accepted Aborigines] sits on the steps and cries for her children. They will need to continue to fight to be Aborigines accepted by the TAC. Don’t worry, my children will be there fighting too. To keep them out. One hundred and thirty invaders of the 21st Century.3

The history debate

In March 2003 Tasmania hosted a writers festival, during which four historians were invited to discuss their approach to the writing of Tasmanian colonial history, in the context of a debate over the genocidal or other violence of the colonial encounter. One of the panellists was an Aboriginal man from the northwest community who has written a version of the Risdon Cove incident.4 Another of the panellists was a senior academic who has described that incident as a massacre of Aboriginal people by English soldiers. The fourth panellist strongly disputed this description.

In the audience were several Aboriginal Tasmanians, each seated with his/her own companions in different parts of the theatre. One was a man in his early sixties from the core community who has had a long and high-profile career as activist and spokesperson for the core community and Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre (TAC). He is also a professional fisherman, public servant, film-maker and poet. Another was a slightly younger man with dark skin, who wore a knitted skull cap in the distinctive Aboriginal colours of red, black and yellow, announcing his political militancy. He is from the group of people who call themselves ‘grassroots’ people. The most prominent member of the Lia Pootah community was present too. There were two young Aboriginal women: one is an artist and junior academic, the other a postgraduate student. Another was a red-haired young man who says that he is ‘theoretically’ Aboriginal, theoretical in that he is unable to sustain a claim to descent. Like the Lia Pootah people, he is able to access commonwealth but not state programs. Apart from these people, the audience was largely white.

When the Aboriginal panellist spoke, he began by thanking the owners of the land, in an Aboriginal language, presumably an original but lost language now
being reconstructed by a TAC program. He referred to his account of the Risdon Cove incident, which he said was written for a community newsletter, though he says it is a private account as ‘I don’t speak for the Aboriginal community’. At the same time, he said that he has used the story with undergraduate students and stressed that ‘we call it [Risdon Cove] a massacre’. In relating this to the forum topic, he said that he has changed his wording to account for the doubt about the actual numbers of deaths and now refers to the deaths of many families.

During question time the other non-Aboriginal panellist suggested that another Aboriginal community perspective might be useful. At this the older Aboriginal man bemoaned the absence of Aboriginal participation in the wider debate, particularly in the light of their being central subjects. He said that although his community had no historians of its own as yet, he nevertheless recognised the importance and appropriateness of the debate. He acknowledged the Aboriginal panellist’s contribution as one of the new generation of Aboriginal historians.

During the discussion the Aboriginal panellist alluded several times to the nature of Aboriginality, saying that, on the one hand, it is not an essentialist identity, that ‘there are several Aboriginalities, we are all different’ and that ‘we are a diverse community’. On the other hand, he also made some strongly political statements that implied his membership of a distinct, oppressed community: ‘This is our history, not yours’ and ‘Our demand for justice will continue for as long as injustice continues’.

As he spoke, the grass-roots man sat muttering and eventually called out angrily, ‘Shame job, shame … white man up there pretending to be an Aborigine’. He continued to the effect that the panellist had no right to speak for Aboriginal people. He suggested to the senior panellist that he considered him to be part of a conspiracy, possibly referring to his (the panellist’s) contribution to the domination of the core Aboriginal community by those like the Aboriginal panellist and the Lia Pootah mob, whom he regards as pretenders. Finally, he also said that the Aboriginal community man’s comments about the panellist ‘did not represent all of us’. During this passionate confrontation there was some shuffling and nervous laughter among the audience. Perhaps prematurely, the moderator ended the session.

The politics of authenticity at the collective level

In these situations we see the key elements in Indigenous politics at collective and individual levels. At the collective level we see the dominant discourse of liberal governance in respect of Aboriginality (acknowledging contestation between commonwealth and Tasmanian government interpretations of that discourse). We see the Aboriginal counter-discourse, which is dominated by the cultural/political elite of the Aboriginal community but is itself the site of intense internal (intra-community) contestation. We see the utter centrality of the relationship with state/government to Aboriginal people, in terms of access to funds and services but also identity. We see how the official discourse is legitimating claims to Aboriginality by previously unknown groups, and that people from those groups are now subject to informal exclusion on the basis of counter-definition by an Aboriginal discourse. Furthermore, we see the possibility of an alliance between the state and Aboriginal political elite.
Aboriginal political discourse

The several distinct groups within the Aboriginal population compete for the right to share the dominant discourse of Aboriginality, and the legitimacy and access to funds that accompanies it. That political discourse is dominated by the core community and the TAC, which constitutes the elite of the movement. This discourse stresses their continuous identity with traditional pre-colonial Aboriginality, their separate and distinct identity and their history of struggle against denial and discrimination. It is a nationalist, separatist and essentialist discourse focused on liberation from oppression. The dominance of this Aboriginalist discourse is evident in the IIAC’s consideration of communal identification, whereby acceptance of Aboriginality by the core community legitimates cultural connection, while that by other self-referential communities does not.

Other Aboriginal groups such as the Lia Pootah seek to further justify their claim to Aboriginality by proximity to this dominant version of Aboriginality. This was indicated by the considerable effort put into proving cultural Aboriginality in the Tribunal case, despite the direction from the president that this was not necessary. This Aboriginality is evident in everyday talk: people commonly claim, for example, that Aboriginality equates with a flat social structure and a lack of pretension associated with socio-economic status.

The three foundational communities resist the diminution of the concept of Aboriginality implied by the fact that these new Aborigines can now legitimately claim the same status and funding opportunities. In the words of the older Aboriginal man in the history debate, it ‘opens the door to a lot of people who aren’t Aboriginal’,\(^5\) compromising those communities’ status as authentically Aboriginal. Members of the core community certainly feel that their distinct identity and their power-base is compromised. Many fear a conspiracy of liminal Aborigines taking control of ATSIC and its purse-strings.

Popular discourse

Another influential factor in the debate is a popular discourse that doubts the authenticity of Aboriginality in Tasmania, whereby contemporary socio-cultural practice or language, for example, is measured against the hegemonic Aboriginality and found wanting. This is combined with a cynicism based on a perception that Aboriginality is concocted and used instrumentally to make claims for special treatment from the state. The sudden appearance of a Lia Pootah tribe,\(^6\) the nature of some of their claims and the Tribunal decision itself stretched credulity to the limit and became the butt of popular jokes at the expense of Aboriginality \textit{per se}, and so all others who claim to be Aboriginal.

The discourse of liberal governance

The discourse of liberal governance shares the hegemonic view of Aboriginality, though coloured by the popular discourse of Tasmanian Aboriginality. This discourse values equality, individual autonomy and human and Indigenous rights, and seeks to be inclusive. These understandings are embedded in commonwealth
Write/up

and Tasmanian administrative definitions, policies and programs. The former renders equal, for administrative purposes, the Aboriginality of all groups without recognition of internal differences of status or kind. The latter emphasises strict evidence of descent and has the effect of acknowledging the ascendancy of the three foundational communities. Both interpretations, though, overlay some pre-existing self-identifying groups and help to constitute others.

In these contexts, Aboriginal politics responds to the agenda set by the state, though not visibly so. The legal debate in the Tribunal and the history debate was apparently between different Aboriginal groups, with government the disinterested arbiter, though government is entirely central in each. There is also a hint in the common response of state government and TAC to the Lia Pootah that this centrality extends to the co-option of Aboriginal counter-politics. There we see the TAC siding with government, which favours it as the single most effective and representative Aboriginal body, despite its partisan nature.

The politics of authenticity at the interpersonal level

In these two highly contested discursive fields, we have also glimpsed the kind of contexts that Aboriginal individuals confront in their everyday social interactions. They have multiple identities of varying salience, of which Aboriginality is but one. They come from a range of Aboriginal backgrounds, all living lives integrated within the mainstream community, with varying levels of education and income, occupations and places of living, let alone genders, sexualities and ages, among other sources of identity. These are complex (post)modern human beings, living in what is, to greater or lesser extent, a shared diverse social environment. Yet they must position themselves vis-à-vis the multiple competing and often contradictory discourses and audiences simultaneously as they seek to represent their own perceptions of themselves, to have them accepted and to achieve their own goals. To do so they must know intimately the different discourses, power relativities and perceptions held by different sectors of the wider and Aboriginal populations, and the potential threat or opportunity of each for their own position. They have to be skilled social actors, for this is a delicate game to play.

The Aboriginal panellist was surely confronted by an exquisitely demanding instance of this, made more so by the breadth of his personal goals. By reference to the liberal discourse of Aboriginality, he does not look, behave or live as an Aborigine and so must struggle to overcome the popular scepticism towards claims of Aboriginality yet also appear to be credibly Aboriginal. As an active member of the TAC since its inception, but from the northwest community, he has had to overcome the doubts, jealousies and antipathy of many of the core community and particularly of its splinter, the grass-roots people. To succeed in the history debate, he had to open up a space for himself, for his own right to speak with these key audiences, in the knowledge that the grass roots man was sure to be very critical and vocal.

In the event, he managed to establish his Aboriginal credentials with the white audience at the same time as his member-as-advocate credentials with the core community/TAC. He had to be seen by the whites as Aboriginal, which means by association with the latter, without claiming, in the eyes of the latter, to be of them. He did this firmly with his introductory comments in language: it suited the white
audience, which he judged to be in favour of reconciliation and romantic about lost Aboriginal heritage. This was safe in respect of the TAC, which is funding the reconstruction, but risky too, because there is grass-roots resentment at that language being used, as they see it disrespectfully, for political purposes.

He also represented himself as a passionate advocate for the Aboriginal cause, but a thinking and reasonable one. He said ‘we’ regard Risdon Cove as a massacre, but that he took a conciliatory approach to it. He talked of Aboriginality as not being an essentialist thing, of there being several Aboriginalities and of it being a ‘diverse community’ while constantly referencing himself against, and confirming his membership of, the authentic Aboriginal community by the use of ‘our’ and ‘we’. What is more, in his behaviour he also clearly conformed to the commonsense norms of social interaction in the face of provocation. In all of this he also indicated his solidarity with the TAC as political advocate, while not claiming to be an Islander. In this display there are many basic inconsistencies and contradictions between discourses and significant shifts of subject position. He overtly disavowed, then mobilised, images of primordial Aboriginality. He claimed that he could not represent Aboriginal people yet did exactly that by saying that this is ‘our history, not yours’.

The social skill is to reconcile such contradictions to avoid them appearing glaringly obvious, to move fluidly between subject positions, in order that he present a credible, believable story and a natural and coherent self. This balancing act was achieved on the basis of intimate knowledge, enrolment and manipulation of the nuances of commonalities and differences within and between the discourses. He avoided clumsy claims such as to traditional activities or innate abilities, which would have cost him credibility with some of the audience. He built a story of a complex personality, in which even potentially unpalatable elements could be made acceptable. Though generally avoiding outright oppositions, his blunt statements of activism were rendered acceptable because he mobilised discourses of oppression, liberation and justice that are common to both liberal and Aboriginal nationalist discourses.

This is the kind of social skill needed to manage Aboriginality in Tasmania. This man is clearly adept, but he paid the price for taking some unavoidable risks. He failed to convince the more demanding, informed and threatened grass-roots man, with the resultant outburst. That social disruption, which evoked the nervousness in the wider audience, represents a failure to reconcile the contradictions in his subjective representation, if obvious and upsetting only to that man.

Other Aboriginal individuals face different pressures negotiating the same discourses from different positions. Those from the core community, empowered in respect of public, government and other Aboriginal people by their appearance and membership of this community, nonetheless face public scepticism on the basis of what is perceived to be a culturally compromised Aboriginality. They must present themselves as reasonable, not unruly, Aboriginal people. And they face another threat: those who fit the administrative category but whom they regard as fakes may gain official authority (through ATSIC positions for example) to grant or refuse funding on cultural grounds. This is a particularly galling tension to negotiate.
The Lia Pootah may be excluded by the Aboriginal power elite, though they still find room to negotiate with a wider liberal public susceptible to claims relating to Aboriginality. Their main spokeswoman, for example, has claimed to come from an oral culture and to therefore have a right to special consideration in university assessment. Such claims can be successfully made by mobilising liberal rights and romantic elements of Aboriginalist discourse and assuming peoples’ desire to avoid the potential for social disruption or embarrassment which might be involved in disputing them. Finally, many individuals (like the red-haired young man) may not have the desire or wherewithal to successfully publicly assert an Aboriginal identity and may retain it as a secondary identity.

The foundations of this politics

This politics is directed at reconciling the myth of authenticity with the reality of complexity in order to make the latter possible. It is indicative of the politics in which Aboriginal people are perforce engaged in their everyday lives. It is the outcome of a particular relationship between the liberal state and Aboriginal people, dominated to such an extent by the former that the resistance of the latter has recently come to be complicit. Four significant factors shape this politics:

- the nineteenth-century governmental discursive and material constitution of an ambiguous Aboriginality in Tasmania;
- the (re)emergence and (re)assertion of Aboriginality by the Bass Strait Islanders, on the basis of their proximity to a dominant discourse of Aboriginality and their conditional and somewhat temporary inclusion of some people from other communities of descent;
- liberal governing attempts to shape a self-regulating Aboriginality for administrative and governing purposes and the consequent emergence of others who have thus been able to constitute themselves as Aboriginal people; and
- current collusion between the state and Aboriginal political elite to maintain a hierarchy of Aboriginalities.

The historical constitution of ambiguity

Nineteenth-century government constructed a contested and ambiguous Aboriginality in Tasmania and the popular ambivalence towards Aboriginal issues that persists today. In the colonial period, Aboriginal people were effectively removed from their lands, their capacity for agency denigrated and communal integrity destroyed. The Aboriginality of the Islanders was denied by government on the basis of racial categorisation. The death of Truganini and her representation as the last full-blooded Aboriginal Tasmanian, in constructing a new Australia free of the taint of colonialist English genocide, contributed to the perception of an ambiguous Aboriginality, which has been firmly lodged in the popular imaginary and repeated in school curricula until very recently. Government policies contributed to the dispersal of the population and its integration within the wider Tasmanian community.

In these actions, the government initiated social pressure such that many who may have identified as Aboriginal did not do so, passing as Islander or white while
continuing to be known locally as ‘black’ in many rural areas. This forms the basis of later public scepticism and cynicism, in particular where claims to Aboriginality come to imply claims to state resources as of right.

The (re)assertion of Aboriginality

During the 1970s the Bass Strait Islanders, through their political organisation, the TAC, reasserted their Aboriginal identity, resisting the notion of mixed blood and its connotations of watered-down racial Aboriginality, establishing a more cultural notion of Aboriginality, and their documented descent from original Tasmanians. Ryan details the political/discursive struggle of the next two decades, in which they emphasised their separateness from the wider population, the continuity of their cultural connection to pre-colonial Aboriginality and the land, and their shared experience of discrimination. They mobilised global and national discourses of liberation and justice, and civil, Indigenous and human rights. They succeeded in recreating a collective Aboriginal Tasmanian identity, gaining official recognition and access to state resources, as well as their own state-wide political pre-eminence. As well, though, the strategies adopted and the fact of their success contributed to the constitution of the hegemonic Aboriginality which natural and social science had initiated.

In this period, too, numbers were critical; people from the Northwestern and Southern communities were accepted as allies. While the question of their Aboriginality was moot, many may have gained acceptance as Aborigines on the basis of their political activism. Increasing numbers from those two communities publicly asserted their Aboriginality, primarily on the basis of documented descent but also their acceptance by the dominant core community.

Liberal governmental normalisation

This establishment of identity and rights was possible in the conditions provided by liberal governmentality, which — unlike earlier rationalities of government — is broadly celebratory and inclusive of difference, though on the proviso that that difference be somewhat normalised; that is, that it not dramatically confront the normal or upset the status quo. In Australia, liberal governance has sought to manage Aboriginal difference by constituting a certain form of Aboriginality that is both consistent and amenable to inclusion. This implies a self-regulating, self-normalising, domesticated Aboriginality that accepts the priority of normal.

For programmatic intervention, liberal governance abhors the ambiguity, ambivalence, disparateness and uncertainty that previous governance constructed. For this reason, it has consistently sought to define Aboriginality. On the basis of the hegemonic model of Aboriginality of popular and Aboriginal discourse, and responding to liberal rights discourse, the ATSIC Act of 1984 promulgated the cultural definition of Aboriginality, which has been applied on an increasingly inclusive basis. Programs based on this definition, including funding for local community organisations, have facilitated, encouraged and legitimated the emergence of many people as Aboriginal in the period since. Many individuals who lived as part of the wider white community for several generations now
publicly identify as Aboriginal. Similarly, much of Lia Pootah’s successful claim relied on their receipt of ATSIC funding in previous years.

The combination of inclusive administrative definition and hegemonic notions of Aboriginality has ensured that people of all differing Aboriginalities come to be subject to the normalising pressures embedded in mainstream and/or dedicated Indigenous programs. These routinely (at a level below consciousness), constantly and authoritatively propose the normal as a priority, and the Aboriginal person (particularly the ambiguous Aboriginal Tasmanian) as untenable, inauthentic, odd and/or abnormal. They propose that one’s Aboriginality is something to be managed, to be resolved in an ethical way, for which it provides the models. The models are the innumerable everyday instances of normal attitudes, capacities and behaviours.

Interventions of this kind, institutionalised in the agencies of state such as schooling, policing, and welfare services, establish the conditions of a supposedly free choice to the individual: one cannot be both Aboriginal and a ‘normal’ Tasmanian (though this is exactly what all contemporary Aboriginal people in fact must be). Although in practice framed more subtly, the choice lies between a monolithic ‘real’ Aboriginality on the one hand, and a similarly implacable, unnamed, assumed-to-be universal normalcy on the other.

The adoption of the administrative definition of Aboriginality has heightened the tensions of Aboriginal politics by forcing a more radical expression of this binary opposition between a mythical Aboriginality and normality. What is more, it has pushed the TAC and the core community into becoming instruments of government.

The partnership

Despite being so consequential materially, socially and subjectively, becoming Aboriginal via administrative definition has become somewhat meaningless. Each community that emerges with its imprimatur must also represent itself in terms of the hegemonic Aboriginality ‘owned’ by the core group, which is then driven to ever-more strongly distinguish itself from the rest. The core community and TAC take an increasingly fundamentalist stand, asserting their particularity in respect of the non-Aboriginal community and other Aboriginal communities. This has led to the adoption by the TAC of a fourth criterion of Aboriginality, that of continuous cultural connection, and consequent refusal to supply services to, and exclude socially, many people, including some who were tolerated in easier times.

This fundamentalism produces social pressure to conform entirely to the hegemonic group identity, which requires individuals to deny mixed loyalties, belongings and identities. Because this discourse and the core group are so powerful, individuals can come to believe that Aboriginality is innate and that being Aboriginal equips them with, for example, a special relationship to the Dreaming, or a unique relationship with the land. Conversely, if they do not intuit such a relationship or understanding they subjectively feel that they cannot be truly Aboriginal.

Thus state and Aboriginal governance find a common interest in a more restrictive interpretation of the commonwealth legislative definition. State government is confounded by the uncertainty created by that definition; it is also
locked into the hegemonic understanding of Aboriginality and an ambivalence about Tasmanian Aboriginality by being immersed in historical narrative and local affairs. It interprets the legislative definition with a stress on the strict evidence of descent by which the three earlier groups gained recognition. That common interest produces a partnership in which the Aboriginal political elite are acknowledged as the dominant group and in that way protect their sense of cultural integrity and political pre-eminence. In return, they provide the certainty government needs — an Aboriginality and a politics that government can trust to be consistent. However, in doing so they must assume the self-regulating, domesticated difference required by liberal government and become an instrument of government, regularising the rest of the differently Aboriginal Aboriginal population. This represents the final ascendency of liberal government, as it has effectively, and apparently freely, co-opted a previously creatively confrontational Aboriginal politics, having it collude with government, on terms set by government, in defence of the status quo.

On all fronts — in relationship with government and its discourse, with the most powerful Aboriginal group and its discourse, and as they collude — Aboriginal Tasmanians are subject to authoritative discursive pressures that make it extremely difficult to be ‘normally’ complex citizens. The contestation and collusion puts pressure on each individual to attempt to be a ‘real’ Aborigine (despite its impossibility, as that is a myth) and at the same time to adopt a regularised Aboriginality and thus a complex and ‘hybrid’ contemporary selfhood. This is in the face of abiding popular and Aboriginal ambivalence toward that form of selfhood as well as the binary opposition with hegemonic Aboriginality.

Conclusion: Problematics of partnership between the state and Aboriginal political leadership

While the Aboriginal politics of essential identity and difference has, as we have seen, had its successes in establishing Aboriginal existence, rights and access to state resources, it is no longer productive. Indeed, it now participates in a partnership built on a politics that produces political stability at the cost of individual Aboriginal futures. Because that political approach is based on the denial of complexity and hybridity combined with an exoticisation of the past and of difference, it powerfully reinforces the binary logic of liberal governance, which positions Aboriginal people in the often constraining and disabling ways we have seen. This political approach actively rejects any semblance of an alternative politics of cosmopolitan universalism that might celebrate the creative potential of complexity/hybridity and destabilise the polarities of the politics of identity and difference. Such an alternative politics need not diminish origins or particularity, as current Aboriginal politics represents it. Rather, it ideally stresses what Fanon calls a ‘two-fold emerging’, an inventive dialectic between the particular and the global in which individuals seek to position themselves outside restrictive categories.21 This is what national Aboriginal leader Lowitja O’Donohue has sought to do in asking to be considered as human first and Aboriginal second.22

Yet the Aboriginal Tasmanian political leadership rejects outright this liberatory politics, and as a result Aboriginal politics contributes to the difficulties of each Aboriginal person’s lived reality. In this reality every Aboriginal
Tasmanian is agentic, though within the conditions of possibility provided by the unitary identity categories that state and Aboriginal governance make available. Many individuals also actively and self-consciously struggle to exceed those categories, to expand the margins they are pressed to inhabit in being Aboriginal. They seek to celebrate their multiplicity, to escape being trapped by the restrictions of what Aboriginal author Natasha McNamara calls ‘an identity built on the past of Utopian culture destroyed, dispossession and disadvantage … which we carry as a shroud … because Aboriginal activist politicians believe it is politic to do so’.23

Key leaders in the political movement, among others, are themselves cosmopolitan. They are tertiary educated, work in or closely with government and bureaucracy, have private material assets, and are internationalist in political and cultural outlook. As such, they are superbly equipped and able to negotiate the Aboriginal, local and global worlds. They transcend the Aboriginal particular as they desire and need. Yet they are not ‘assimilated’, as if there were some essence to lose. They are comfortably Aboriginal, and not traditionally so. They celebrate their origins as an identity resource along with modern freedoms, and in so doing they enact the hybridism that is central to the notion of cosmopolitan universalism. They have the same freedom of choice regarding the manner of living their complexity/hybridity as most other citizens. That is, they have the same freedom to simply be citizens, as they choose. Yet the politics dominated by these leaders acts to limit young people’s futures, despite the rhetorical commitment to ‘Our Children Our Future’ of the 2003 National Aboriginal Islander Day Observance Week. In bluntly declaring education to be ‘part of the problem’ (that is, of assimilation), this politics denies Aboriginal youth the opportunity — via formal education, for instance — to develop the same capacities to exercise choice that the leadership enjoy.

This reading of the relationship between state governance and Aboriginal politics portrays a deeply paradoxical relationship. In it the larger political concerns for control and apparent stability take precedence over, and produce, problematic outcomes for most individuals. The dominant sector of the Aboriginal community is popularly renowned in the Aboriginal and wider communities alike as being the most ‘hard-line’ critic of government and effective advocate for Aboriginal interests. Yet it is more a junior partner with state government in sustaining a status quo that progresses the normalising goals of governance and advantages a small minority. Those cosmopolitans who are skilled in negotiating the politics of Aboriginal authenticity are advantaged. For them, the dividend is discursive dominance and control of both Aboriginal heritage and the relationship with state government.24 However, that relationship disadvantages a majority of individuals in terms of their capacity to be individually — and differently — Aboriginal.
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In this article the terms ‘Aboriginal’, ‘Aborigines’ and ‘Aboriginality’ are used to articulate the subject position which is at the centre of identity politics in contemporary Tasmania. The term ‘Indigenous’ is used to refer to a wider national and/or global subject position.


2 There are several other groups located in regional areas and many other individuals in urban areas who have varying forms of connection, descent and identification. Additionally there are many mainland Aboriginal people resident in Tasmania.


4 This was a violent incident between Aborigines and soldiers at what was the original site of colonial occupation in Tasmania, now at the centre of a debate regarding the accuracy and interpretation of accounts of colonial/Aboriginal interaction.

5 Four Corners, ABC TV, 26 August 2002.


7 This section is informed by Erving Goffman’s analyses of interpersonal interaction. See his The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life [1959], Allen Lane, Penguin Press, London, 1969; and Strategic Interaction, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1969.


12 ibid., pp 222–37.


17 Ryan, op. cit., pp 263–89.

18 ibid., pp 277–82.


24 See the symbolic use of palawa kani, the reconstructed Aboriginal language, to establish a sense of primordiality in *Eddystone Point at larapuna in lumaranatana*, Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre Inc, Hobart, 2001, p 2.