
NEW RELEASES

A Certain Disservice

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Elizabeth A. Povinelli. (2002) *The Cunning of Recognition: Indigenous Alterities and the Making of Australian Multiculturalism*. Durham: Duke University Press.

I'm not an anthropologist, though I've played one in the minds of the AAA bureaucracy. A couple of years ago, I received a letter noting that I had done ethnographic-style work, and inviting me to pay money to the AAA. I thought I'd better comply. The book under review is thus being done a certain disservice (hence, the title given to this review), in that I cannot comment professionally on its ethnography of Aboriginal social and territorial relations. But I also read it as a book about cultural policy and the management of populations in Australia, a topic with which I have been involved for many years, along with many other expatriate and local Australian scholars and activists. In addition, the book is being privileged, in that a major journal is featuring it via a lengthy article when the book is just appearing in print—a remarkable event for an academic text, really. And perhaps the reason why I can write a lengthy review is that Elizabeth Povinelli's monograph says it is about the heart murmurs of liberal subjectivity, another topic with which I am familiar. For Povinelli, these murmurs are to be understood via dilemmas over multiculturalism, as interpreted through speeches by politicians about tribal Aborigines, court cases over their land claims (the celebrated Mabo and Wik judgments plus the claim to Kempli, in which she has played a distinguished part as both participant and chronicler¹), and fieldwork

she has conducted with the Belyuen people. These studies enable her to encounter multiculturalism as a “social ethics and social technology for distributing the rights and goods, harms and failures, of liberal capitalist democracies” (7). In other words, the book derives general propositions about the intersection of white Australians, multiculturalism, and liberalism from research into relations between the Australian state and tribal Aborigines. My concern is not with her work on the land claims and Aboriginal culture, which form the empirical heart of this book and seem well-put together and thought out. Rather, I am exercised by *The Cunning of Recognition*’s general claims in the context of Australian multiculturalism and the book’s position within a particular intellectual field—the use of black Australia as a trope to renew Northern social and cultural theory.

I am struck that Povinelli does not engage very much with the literature on either liberalism or multiculturalism produced from and about Australia by key local intellectuals. This may be because she is most concerned with where multiculturalism “emerges in the neighborhood of indigenous subjects and societies.” But at the same time she says she is investigating what she calls “the liberal diaspora,” which appears to be a set of beliefs that “society should be organized on the basis of rational mutual understanding” (6). One of the things I wish to do here is provide readers with access to different views on the topics this book says it is about. These topics include liberalism (Hancock, 1931; Rowse, 1978; Kukathas, 1989; Davidson and Spegele, 1991); governmentality (Dean and Hindess, 1998; Bennett and Carter, 2001); multiculturalism (Jupp, 1989, 1998; Zubryczki, 1995; Jakubowicz, 1981, 1989; Castles *et al.*, 1992; Connell and Irving, 1992; Jayasuriya, 1997); citizenship (Kukathas, 1993; Davidson, 1997; Castles and Davidson, 2000); and the impact of Aboriginality on white folks (Hodge and Mishra, 1991).

Why does this matter? After all, it’s only one book. It matters because it is part of an old trend that is undergoing renewal. Aborigines have provided raw material for social theory and cultural production to the North since the nineteenth century. *The Cunning of Recognition* is the latest example, albeit with a twist. For me to write about the book, two moves have therefore been necessary. First, to locate it within this intellectual history; and second, to address its ostensible topic.

I

Aboriginal Australia gave nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Western Europe a clue to its own realities, as Povinelli acknowledges (128). The truth of the North, secreted by the billowing engines and disputatious parliaments of the

modern, could be disclosed by examining an Antipodean primordial. So key European and Yanqui [Yankee/American] intellectuals between the 1820s and the 1960s felt obliged and able to write about Aborigines. My arbitrarily selected sample includes Georg Hegel (1988), Frederick Engels (1978), Sigmund Freud (1946), Émile Durkheim (1961), Marcel Mauss (1993), Gaetano Mosca (1939), A. R. Radcliffe-Brown (1976), Ruth Benedict (1959), Talcott Parsons (1966), Claude Lévi-Strauss (1983), and Clifford Geertz (1973). They took Aboriginal notions of human classification, duty, and social organization as keys to their own humanness, which had been submerged through the sweeping changes of industrialization, urbanism, representative democracy, and production-line culture. In Durkheim's words, "portions of our past become present again" (1961: 22) by thinking about these "First Australians." So Hegel regarded Aborigines as "culturally inferior" and "immature," but useful as markers of European development (1988: 163, 162). Engels used Aboriginal society to theorize the development of capitalism, and greatly admired black legal systems (1978: 15-16, 46-51). And Freud found a means of understanding "the psychology of the neurotic" back on the Northern couch in tales from the field of "savage and semi-savage races" across the "youngest continent, namely Australia" (1946: 3-5, 40).

According to Durkheim and Mauss, Europe's modernity had weakened the affective bonds of the social, in favor of intense individuation. But ancient classificatory mechanisms of coordination and hierarchization still applied "at home." To uncover these systems, one needed to investigate the Aboriginal "ensemble of mental habits" (Durkheim and Mauss, 1970: 88). Durkheim and Mauss established long-lasting agendas for theorization and fieldwork in the developing area of social anthropology in Britain, France, and the Netherlands, which interrogated symbolic classifications from China to Greece in accordance with Aboriginal standards (Needham, 1970: xxxi-ii). Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* was based on Aboriginal material, specifically the Arunta people. His account of how the social world imposes obligations via the management of venerated objects remained the standard version of religious order for years. This proved fundamental to theorizing the strange relationship of Christians to Sundays, and then on to understanding intersubjectivity in general terms (Radcliffe Brown, 1976: 123, 130). *Elementary Forms* examines "the most primitive and simple religion which is actually known"—simple in terms of straightforward social organization, and simple because it was sealed off from other forms of sacred life for a long time, unlike the leaky ecumenicism and conflict of European, Asian, and Middle Eastern faiths. For all its "primitive

and simple” ways, Durkheim perceived Aboriginal life as an “actual reality which is near to us, and which consequently is capable of affecting our ideas and our acts.” This “reality is man, and more precisely the man of today.” Aboriginal society was “better adapted than any other to lead to an understanding of the religious nature of man” and “convenient for experiments” (Durkheim 1961: 13, 17-18). The Aborigines’ “primitive” worldview provided these (mostly armchair) funsters with an ideal site for Benedict’s desired “laboratory within which we may study the diversity of human institutions” (1959: 17, 26, 33). Durkheim’s choice was determined by the promise that the pre-modern would enable him to “find the common foundation of the religious life underneath the luxuriant vegetation” that overlay it in industrial societies’ heterogeneity and individualism (Durkheim 1961: 21).

This unspoiled terrain of humanness also stimulated the *fin de siècle* Italian elite theorist Mosca. His belief in the inevitability of oligarchy drew on reports of Aboriginal life to stress not so much the supposed evolutionary superiority of the West, as the power of imported knowledges, technologies, diseases, and warfare to displace prior social organization (1939: 21-23). For Parsons’ functionalist sociological model, on the other hand, there was a clear heuristic pleasure in equating Aboriginal Australia with primitive life—a simple economy, and a society animated by kinship. Such qualities made what he called “Australian society” undifferentiated and hence premodern (1966: 35-36, 41). Conversely, Lévi-Strauss decreed “the Australians ... backward on the economic level ... [but] far ahead of the rest of ‘humanity’ in terms of harmonious social relationships” (1983: 343). For his part, Geertz (1973: 43) wondered whether “those fantastic Australian marriage rituals” may reveal “what it is to be generically human.” In short, the Aboriginal “laboratory” was part of anthropology’s mission. After all, “[e]very man has a right to create his own savage for his own purposes” (Geertz 1973: 347). In other words, “civilized man” couldn’t understand himself. The North’s division of labor and governance were too multifaceted to see the truth, which could only be discovered through others.

But Australia ceased to be interesting when it became modern. On gaining independence in 1901, it was merely one more placed filled with whitefellas. “Australians” were transformed in Northern Hemisphere theory from dashing blacks living out of time into dullard Anglo-Celts living out of place—a reserve army of ideal types. “Australia” had been of interest insofar as it signified “Aboriginal.” The country’s status as a white-settler colony promised little if anything for Euro-Yanqui social theory. Once “Australians” became white, they were truly uninteresting.

Now there is a comeback. Jean Baudrillard has nominated Australia, “where only the melancholy light of origin shines,” as “a kind of spaceship” that ties “the telepathic ecosystem of Aborigines” to the “hypermodern, hyperreal future” (1990: 161, 164). And a mass-market mid-western self-help guru to whom Povinelli refers on several occasions—Marlo Morgan—has engaged with this telepathy. Her *Mutant Message Downunder* (which is troped in the title to the first chapter of *The Cunning of Recognition* and which Povinelli rather alarmingly says is part of “national consciousness” in Australia [50]) was on the *New York Times*’ best-seller list for over six months in 1993-94. “[I]nspired by actual experience” with Australian desert life, it was “sold as a novel to protect the small tribe of Aborigines from legal involvement” (Morgan, 1994: xiii). Morgan is a redemptive Yanqui soul, reaching into the rich lode of Protestant desires to mock her own secularity and pomp, leaven it with primitivist spiritualism, then peddle it. As part of her initiation into tribal Aboriginal ways, she says she was made to go beyond learnt behavior as a preliminary to participating in a walk-about across Australia. She put up with bleeding, blisters, and intense heat, to wander 1400 miles in four months, making do with folk medication and unfamiliar food. Morgan found tribal Aborigines non-judgmental and non-hierarchical because their disputes were resolved by putting a person physically in the place of her adversary (*Gestalt* psychology meets ideal communicative rationality). Morgan’s guides called her “mutant” because white people do not eat naturally occurring food, have allergies to nature, and suffer mental illness and senility, unlike “her tribe,” whose members live to the age of 110 because they have avoided the Australian government.

This virtual reinstatement to Eden is, ironically, integral to the contemporary longing to know oneself through a differentiation from the “primitive.” Put another way, Morgan’s use of Aboriginal life shows that the teleological endorsement of advanced industrial societies is paradoxically nostalgic for simplicity, a personal, environmental, and collective harmony that can only come with subsistence social organization and everyday spirituality. This is not uncontested terrain, however. When Morgan went to Japan in 1997 for a series of talks, her address in Kobe was interrupted by Paul Sampi and Robert Eggington, Aboriginal men in tribal attire who rose from their seats to “condemn your book as a fabricated New Age fantasy, and your journey into Aboriginal culture as nothing more than a hoax.” She called on her accusers to realize that: “We are all together on this planet, but you are full of anger and hate, it is time to join the rest of the world” (quoted in Skelton, 1997). Possibly. This, then, is the

context in which I read a book founded in Aboriginality in order to comprehend white people.

II

The Cunning of Recognition is distinct from its forebears, in that it is an ethnography—but not of the people it theorizes. Povinelli says she is writing about white Australians and multiculturalism, mostly as illustrated by fieldwork in the Northern Territory with black Australians. This region has a tiny proportion of the country's 19 million people. It is about as far-distant as you can get from centers of population, policy, capital, intellection, and the media—hardly the principal site from which to pronounce ethnographically about what goes on inside white Australians' heads when they talk about multiculturalism. For that, you'd also need the coffee shops, delicatessens, sports stadia, offices, and political, educational, and media centers of the nation.

In thinking through the issues addressed by the book, it is advisable to historicize and spatialize multiculturalism, beginning with "ethnicity" and "race." In the U.S., ethnicity was created as a means of distinguishing amongst white immigrants, and race as a means of distinguishing them from African Americans, Asian Americans, and Native Americans—people of color were regarded as non-ethnic. In Britain, ethnicity refers instead to Afro-Caribbean and Asian residents—white people are regarded as non-ethnic (Parekh, 2001). Somewhere between these systems of differentiation lies the Australian version, where white, Anglo-Celtic people are understood to have a culture but no ethnicity, and other Australians, be they Aboriginal or Greek, have a culture and an ethnicity.

The term multiculturalism was coined in the United States half a century ago in opposition to notions of nationalism (Inglis 1988:18) and picked up in Canada as a means of dealing with Francophone and Anglophone differences. In the early 1970s, it was adopted by the Australian government, following the Ottawa model, and with the participation of the conservative Polish *émigré* sociologist, Jerzy Zubryczki. As Mary Kalantzis (1988: 90) notes, multiculturalism was, and remains, a policy response to the fact that "[t]he nation state of advanced industrial society can no longer draw its identity from a single homogeneous ethnic group. It does, as its rhetoric says, have to create cohesion out of diversity, but to do that it has to make the diverse groups appear equal."

In the case of Australia, the homogeneity was Anglo-Celtic from 1788 to 1945. The many immigrants who broke it apart came from the Mediterranean, Eastern and Central Europe, and the Middle East. They were the objects of gov-

ernment policy, which needed to bolster population numbers and develop the country's manufacturing capacity in the light of the threat indicated by the Pacific theatre in the Second War, so that the economy could grow and be turned onto a war footing more easily than had been the case after the fall of Singapore. These migrants were emergent signs of difference, but it was their potential class restiveness that led successive governments to enact multicultural policies and programs. By the early 1970s, they were agitating for a wider role in public life, beginning to demonstrate industrial muscle, and were seen as a valuable electoral prize. When Vietnamese refugees started arriving from Hong Kong in 1979, they added to the mix. But multiculturalism was essentially always about settling in and controlling a large non-English-speaking white minority through a mixture of assimilation and retention of cultural heritage. Aborigines were never at its center, and frequently protested against it. In short, multiculturalism must be read in the context of the history of Australian immigration. It was designed to manage immigration, which remains its animating problematic—something you would not know from reading the book under review. Issues about land claims concern other factors—successful mobilization by black Australians, the international indigenous rights movement, and periods of social-democratic state control. But if you read Povinelli, multiculturalism in Australia derives from “the historical impasse of public and moral reason [that] has generated a new metaethics of national life” and is knowable via the relationship of black to white Australia via the state (32). To say, as *The Cunning of Recognition* does, that “Australian state officials” represent multiculturalism “as the externalized political testament to the nation’s aversion to its past misdeeds, and to its recovered good intentions” with reference to Aboriginal people (18) is misleading.

Multicultural policies have basically imagined melding together different features to form an alchemic Australian (Foster and Stockley, 1988). The fully achieved Australian subject is to be a kind of world citizen, forged from a white-heat application of Mediterraneanism to Anglo-Celtism. Asians, too, are now incorporated. This fantasy has its underside, as sociologist Andrew Jakubowicz points out:

“The public representation of ‘the Australian public’ has in part been fashioned by images of the immigrant. She has been in turn a new settler, a new citizen, a new Australian, a refugee, a migrant: the obverse image has also shadowed this formal public representation—refo, Balt, wog, dago, slope ... an unresolved dichotomy, signalling at once threat,

challenge, competition and a lesser form of life: deviant, underprivileged, bizaare, unnatural. Throughout there has been the fear of the enclave, so that every element of the public discourse of settlement has sought to fragment, isolate and scatter the immigrants" (1989: 106).

Australian leftist critics allege that there is a necessary tension between republican notions of *e pluribus unum*, whereby former affiliations are abandoned by migrants in the interest of political loyalty to their adopted nation, and the multicultural notion of retaining difference as a keynote. They criticize multiculturalism as a cipher brought in to disenfranchise an immigrant proletariat and return it to an apolitical identification with its diverse cultures of origin. Questions around the division of labor, for example, may not be discernible because they are posed ethnically. From a Marxist-feminist perspective, it is argued that ethnic minorities need special assistance in the areas of the economy and the polity that are left unsatisfied when attention is focused on culturalist, privatized "lifestyles" (Bullivant 1982: 131), an off-shoot of which has been a concentration on celebrating the family as a site of unity, equity, and equanimity (de Lepervanche 1988: 84). In this sense, cultural rights are seen as peripheral to economic ones, a superstructural blur in the real world of inequality. For instance, it has been argued that the conservative 1975-83 Liberal-National Party government in Australia developed and institutionalized multiculturalism as a means of forestalling social violence (Jakubowicz 1989: 107). This suited an ethnic labor aristocracy and *petite-bourgeoisie* keen to co-opt migrant labor in the service of capital via an allegiance to the state prized from promises of cultural maintenance (Jakubowicz 1981: 8). It has also led, as in other parts of the world, to "corporate multiculturalism," whereby capital profits from difference (Hall 2001: 210). This has little to do with black Australians—it is a means of managing difference at the level of those with political and economic power, both of which are denied to Aborigines.

Leftist critiques of multiculturalism have homologies on the right, because the policy is said to threaten democracy by encouraging disunity through fractured loyalty (Blainey, 1985-6: 16) and denying the supposedly rich British heritage that writes history as a striving for market relations (Baker, 1985). This critique discerns a "multicultural industry" of unrepresentative people who garner public funds in the name of the oppressed (Rimmer, 1988: 33). It identifies multiculturalism as a segment of "The Guilt Industry," alongside—but not part of, because they have largely not been the same—support for land rights to indigenous peoples (Baker, 1988: 35).

Immigration has been the key tool for unscrupulous right-wingers to oppose multiculturalism in Australia over the past twenty years. It was a conservative government that allowed Vietnamese refugee migration from Hong Kong in 1979. But since then, that side of politics has exploited the issue to its advantage. So, just a year after losing power in 1983, the Liberal-National parties began an offensive against multiculturalism and immigration, and mounted another in 1989. In May of that year, their spokesperson on immigration, Philip Ruddock, appeared on the current affairs program *Vox Populi*, broadcast by the multicultural, government-funded TV network SBS (dedicated essentially to non-English European and Asian language programming, in keeping with what Australian multiculturalism is about. Aboriginal people did not wish to be ghettoized into it, and successfully lobbied across the 1980s for space on the national public broadcaster, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. Now, they have programming on both networks). Ruddock announced that “mainstream Australia” viewed multiculturalism as ill-defined, confused, and irrelevant. This mythic mainstream subject’s needs were to be appeased, should Ruddock’s party come to power, under the sign of “one Australia,” where “the term multiculturalism will not be used.” Presenter Vladimir Lusic closed the segment by suggesting that this held two clear implications: the abolition of SBS, and a consequent change in the title of the program from *Vox Populi* to *Wogs Out of Work*, the intertext being a popular stage entertainment put on by “ethnics” that engaged in self-parody. The new policy became a major partisan issue in Federal politics. All of this was about immigration of people from non-English-speaking backgrounds, most of whom would be categorized as white ethnics within US racial discourse. They were at the heart of what Australian multiculturalism was constructed to deal with.

When Ruddock’s party was returned to office in 1996, it redoubled the efforts of the previous social-democratic government to minimize the refugee hopes of “boat people” while continuing with an overtly humanitarian policy. The expression “boat people” now referred not only to travelers from Vietnam, but to any other Third World residents who braved voyages to the north-west coast of Australia. Once caught, the refugees were rapidly forced by the military into privately-run detention centers and denied all basic human rights for years at a time, despite the efforts of activist lawyers. When the conservative forces ran into major electoral trouble in 2000 and 2001, they responded by selecting this issue for special treatment. The refugees in question were from Afghanistan, and when the terrible events of September 11, 2001 unfolded, the government

proceeded to claim that the boat people were terrorists, and to call an election on spurious “security” grounds—which they won.

As is the case in other sovereign-states, there is not always a fit between Australian public policy and public opinion. Povinelli addresses the latter as a problem of interiority, an emotional and intellectual dilemma for citizens. But in fact it is, quite straightforwardly, a matter of technocratic policymaking being ahead of chauvinistic populism—something that applies in every society with large-scale programs of migration. Governments must juggle complex imperatives: economic development, which calls for high skill levels in the population and openness to the transportation of money and people; human rights, which call for programs of family reunification and refugee support; psephological reality, which calls for populist xenophobia; and international reputation, which is derived from a contradictory mix of the other categories. The policy bureaucracy and its political masters/servants are frequently quite a distance from the population on this as on many other matters (Runnymede Trust Commission 2000: 213). This is not to do with a Manichean moment of liberal self-doubt versus selfishness. It is about the quiet work of governmentality being altered by the noisy work of electioneering.

So *The Cunning of Recognition* is on shaky terrain, and more so when it becomes empirical on the topic of white people and multiculturalism. For example, the ex-Treasurer and Prime Minister Paul Keating is described as “an economist ... by training,” but he did not study beyond high school. The book says that Keating proclaimed himself “Asian,” (18) but does not note the complete rejection of this by both Asians (through the summary dismissal of Australian attempts to join ASEAN) and Australians (through the summary dismissal of Keating at the next election). Instead, Keating’s remark is supposed to stand, somehow, for a tendency across the nation. Profesor Povinelli says that the Australian economy declined in the 1970s because Britain joined the European Economic Community (20), something that a few people predicted in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but that has never been proven. Oil shocks, the world recession, issues with Japanese investment, work practices, and above all, falling commodity prices were the problem. Using a very familiar racial binary from the United States (perhaps the real home of this book), Anglo-Celts are juxtaposed again and again with Aborigines, but never with the key subjects of multiculturalism (Continental Europeans) and rarely with its secondary subjects, Asians. Povinelli says that the Labor Party lost power Federally in 1994 (39), which is not true. She says that the 1996 election was the conservatives’ first success for “nearly a quarter century” (40)—but the last one happened in 1980. She

says that the right-wing populist Pauline Hanson became a minister in the government (40), which is not true.²

III

This has been a difficult paper to write, because it is so critical. It is important that a distinguished member of the U.S. academic elite is restoring Australia to the lists as a means of self-understanding by the North. And yet how disturbing that this could be done by ignoring or misreading key strands of Australian cultural, academic, and political life and the actual history of a vital and contested social polity. How did this come to pass?

It frequently appears as though Povinelli is really addressing certain white U.S. intellectuals' preoccupations with sex. A book with a subtitle that says it is concerned with liberal subjectivity in "the making of Australian multiculturalism" seems to be about something else when it has chapters with titles such as "The Vulva Thieves" or "Sex Rites," and takes certain sex rituals as key, even though these are not shown to be either widespread or well-known elsewhere in the country. Povinelli peppers her chapters with words like "vulva" and "clitoridectomy." I have published about sexual imagery and practice so I am not averse to these words; I think they can refer to very important symbolic politics. But do they perform useful work in this context? In my opinion, they stand in for, in fact they displace and obfuscate, an analysis of the politics and cultural products of Australia and liberal subjectivity.

The long list of this book's bibliographic, theoretical, and personal acknowledgements seems to be more to do with a particular brand of Yanqui humanities speech and what the author describes as "vigorous conversations—inside and outside Haskell Hall, by door jambs and in cars, over food and the phone" (x) than it is an engagement with Australian political and intellectual life (which shares several preoccupations with Yanqui humanities speech, but has plenty of others as well). Like the many Euro-Yanqui theorists I have already named, what Povinelli reads and hears in the North tells her how to theorize the South. Unlike the earlier theorists, she does actually conduct research in the South, and writes about what she sees (Aboriginal Australia and land claims), but ultimately the *Cunning of Recognition* is another moment in the lengthy history of Euros and Yanquis writing about tribal Aboriginal forms of life, extrapolating from these to discuss white society, and sending their analysis back home. Despite the author's important contributions to both understanding and furthering land rights claims and the place of the Belyuen people, and her significant insights into how

the Australian state deals with Aboriginal issues, she has collapsed the multi-farious management of difference by the state into one trajectory. This is a significant category mistake. I fear that the overall outcome is misleading in its mission, and old-fashioned in its drives.

END NOTES

¹See the volume under review here and Povinelli (1993).

²Those who wish to learn about this period could turn to Jon Stratton's (1998) work.

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