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Who's upsetting who? Memory, nostalgia, morality

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I am billed as one with expertise in race relations — perhaps already an example of naming something that we have difficulty naming. In contemporary multi-cultural Australia we all have direct experience of race relations — many of you will have more intimate and more recent experience in the NT than I do. I look forward to your responses to what I have to say.

I like to think of race relations as a borderland which exists anywhere that there is interaction between Indigenous and settler or immigrant Australians — including in our imaginations. That is, in imagining others to be strange, we imagine ourselves to share a common not-strangeness with those of our own kind, but that category, 'our own kind', can itself be narrow or broad, depending on the circumstances.

Race relations also includes governments' policies, the bureaucracy, state institutions and the law, but today I will concentrate on the micro level, actual encounters between people who see themselves as belonging to two different races. Such encounters are often bizarre or painful, ludicrous or touching. The question I am posing is **"What is it in Australian social life, particularly in the Northern Territory that so often precludes closer interaction and pleasure in difference?"**.

Race relations is also a space of deplored difference, of shameful inequality, ostensibly a source of anxiety and mourning to the nation. The convention of announcing the terrible poverty, injustice and 3rd world conditions of Aboriginal people stands in for a more direct engagement with actual people.¹ (eg. the journalist who bemoans the living conditions of artists in remote communities whose work fetches huge sums, is repeating a cliché rather than thinking through the different desires, priorities, social conditions and histories of these artists).

The term racism has become a cliché but let us admit that, despite it being carefully suppressed among modern, cosmopolitan citizens, racism, intolerance and bigotry are things we all know about, a common, banal aspect of human experience, evident in the tendency to stereotype and in a common wariness or suspicion of 'strange' people. But what is the relationship of these negative sentiments to the actual difficulties of different kinds of people, with different kinds of habits living close by one another. Such difficulties are a space of fear and silence because we are supposed to celebrate difference in all an any of its manifestations. It is this orthodoxy I want to examine first. (Of course difficult differences of life-style are

¹ I use the idea of 'vernacular debate' in the same sense Alan Atkinson (2002) uses 'vernacular history' as that which is spoken and is thus behavioural and ephemeral, obeying the rules of speech rather than those of written language.

experienced within cultural or racial groups, even within families, as those with teenaged children will know).

I am recommending that we (anthropologists) turn the analytical anthropological eye onto the **relationship between** whitefellas and blackfellas. But we need to begin with interaction **among** whitefellas, and even **within** the category of people to which we belong, the mostly urban, educated middle class. Where better to begin than at the dinner party, that quintessential ritual of urban social life, and as good a place as any to observe **the role played by Aborigines in the urban imagination**.

A. URBAN CONVERSATIONS

Dinner parties exhibit a host of rituals with informal, pragmatic rules. While the people who participate are enormously varied in their views, the **dinner party** is dominated by the need to make conversation without too much contention — though some mild disagreement can add spice to the gathering. To ensure that dinner parties are not marred by serious conflict, a form of categorisation is practiced and the **idea** of Aborigines plays an important role in this process by signalling a certain political position in 'vernacular political debate'.²

There is a shared national anxiety about Aborigines, but the **opinion categories** concerning this topic are radically dichotomised in what is known as the left/right divide — creating a moral and political binarism where everyone is forced to participate on one side or another of an arena that is already laid out.³ We are enticed into affirming 'common sense' pieties or remaining silent. The intensity of emotion surrounding these opinions belie a level of personal meaning outside political loyalties. It is instructive to note what happens when dinner party guests do not share an opinion category. (always the ethnographer).

Dinner party 1 was in the private home of an acquaintance. When another guest was told I wrote about Aborigines, she pounced on me to ask "why do they sit around with flies in their eyes; I've seen them on the TV. **We spend all that money; but they want to keep their traditions don't they?**" I began to reply but my voice registers a note of anger, and perhaps contempt, so I was hushed and the subject was changed. I am not discussing how to respond to

² I am suggesting that a conversational analysis equivalent but different from that made famous by Harvey Sacks (REF).

³ The dichotomy makes no sense from the point of view of rural Aboriginal people because both sides seem oblivious of Aboriginal existence. The dichotomy is problematised in a more direct way when Aborigines joke about sympathetic white opinion as hypocritical, or express support for Pauline Hanson's criticisms of government policy. The history wars debates exemplify this field of opinion which I suggest has a structure and dynamic that is identifiable in technical terms. One position is characterised by the expression of sympathy and the other side by criticism of that sympathy. I want to suggest that neither have much sense of the effect of the new history, particularly its popular versions, on Aborigines' own vernacular history, let alone personal memories.

such commonplace comments — although there is a certain pleasure in competing for the most withering response. I am more interested in their ordinariness, and, in a sense, their naturalness, given the social imaginary they are part of. And yet they arouse a kind of fury in people like myself. And they stand in stark contrast to the goodwill, solicitude and careful avoidance of criticism which characterises conversation at the dinner parties I am usually fated to attend.

Dinner party 2 was a large social function in Sydney where lawyers and academics were gathered.⁴ When the conversation touched on Aboriginal disadvantage there was a general expression of sympathy. But a woman of immigrant background insisted on recounting her own triumph over deprivation as an explicit criticism of the company's sympathy for Aborigines' plight. With confused lowering of eyes the subject was changed and the woman was frozen out of the conversation. Here a tentative questioning of the prevailing orthodoxy was met with shocked disapproval, and conversational embarrassment. I tried to respond, not just because I find conflict stimulating, but because I felt some sympathy with this woman's sentiments — not I hasten to add, her implied criticism of Aboriginal people, but her challenge to the orthodox sympathy which was being expressed independently of any experience or knowledge of Indigenous people. This pious orthodoxy seems to me damaging to Aboriginal interests, because it imagines Aboriginal people to be simply victims, objects of our sympathy.

At Dinner party 3 everyone understands that Aborigines are victims of injustice, and wants to demonstrate understanding. I mention to a colleague that Aborigines in Bourke mock and amplify their own stereotypes, and that street disturbances might be a kind of protest and he says 'of course they are', applauding the **idea** of outrageous behaviour and protest. But when I speak of going to the rough pub in Bourke he says 'But is it safe?' and finally, nervously, 'You don't want a bottle in your face'.

In all these cases speaking of Aborigines has a certain familiarity and confidence. These are indeed '**our Aborigines**', part of our responsibility, especially to have opinions about. Thus Aboriginal issues work as an identifier of an opinion category which is an important part of group formation. Seeking of compatible opinions is a 'rule of conversation' and part of a wider process of identifying those we are like, and those we like, within a social geography.

The offensiveness of others' political opinions is palpable, as in your reaction to the woman I quoted above.⁵ **One part of the impulsive response may be to protect Aboriginal people**

⁴ This is an example of the signalling of an 'opinion category'.

⁵ Conversational conventions, both public and intimate, can break down in the face of wrong opinion although the rules are different among strangers from those among intimates. Public issues, such as the Tampa crisis, the war in Iraq, or years ago, support for Mao Tse Tung, and always, opinions about Indigenous issues, has divided families into warring factions.

from this woman's offensive opinion, because we understand only too well the contempt implied by such comments — yet from another perspective, sitting in the dirt is actually sitting on the land, interacting with country, of which flies are a part.

But another part of the impulsive angry reaction to such opinion is to do with protecting ourselves from conflict and from social discomfort. By aligning of ourselves with conventional political or moral positions, we are affirming our own rightness, normality, social safety. Our shared social honour entails being contemptuous of those with wrong opinions, yet the obsession with those who are wrong or racist itself binds us into our cultural comfort zone.

If the very idea of Aborigines, or 'others' in general, is a site of such intense moral feeling, fear and self-definition, then it is not surprising that actual face to face relationships between Aborigines and whitefellas are somewhat difficult.

B. CULTURAL EMBARRASSMENT

In face to face encounters with people who are radically, or noticeably or publically different from prevailing norms, we make impulsive judgements which are, of course, an element of race relations. **Among progressivists it is usual to profess an acceptance of difference and to suppress any judgement, to censor any disapproval of the cultural practices of others.** Yet unadmitted disapproval, bafflement or fear can be a powerful barrier to understanding difference. Impulsive, moralising responses — for instance to public displays of poverty, or of anger, or public disorder — are part of what has produced the complex social reality before us. The censoring and self-censoring of impulsive judgements operates to protect us from thinking about what produces and reproduces conflict over public space.

Let us, then, depart from the dinner party mileau and enter public space, as I did when I arrived in Katherine in 1975. Katherine was to me shockingly racialised. Aborigines appeared quite outside the social life of the dusty little town, yet an essential part of it. The black bodies sitting on the bright green nature strip in family groups seemed like exotic decorations. Once I began field-work among the Rembarrnga people at Bulman (200 Ks east) I avoided whitefellas, because interaction with my own kind became difficult and often embarrassing. The experience of that excruciating embarrassment is, I believe, illuminating.⁶

For instance, one day I was sitting on the nature strip with my Bulman friends, Lorna, Dorothy, Smiler, Michelle and several other kids, a well-dressed, middle aged English couple approached me as if the others were not there and said: "Excuse me, do you mind if we ask. Was that material of your dress made by these native people?" With Michelle dissolving in giggles

⁶ These incidents that are recorded in my 1999 book but typify very common experiences.

behind me, and the older women still and silent, I explained that it was an Indian print, bought in a store across the road.

Similarly, and frequently white people would ask questions as if I was one of them, and my black companions were not sentient beings. eg. 'Do you think there is a solution to the Aboriginal problem?'. We were assumed to have a common interest in Rembarrnga people as objects, as conversational resources, and as problems for the nation. They were 'the white man's burden', but because these burdens had become my friends on whom I was dependent for everyday interaction and support, I became acutely aware that the **virtuous concerns of my fellow whitefellas actively excluded the subjectivities of those who they were supposedly concerned about.**

- The Rembarrnga view of whitefellas was informed by quite different assumptions. An everyday example was 12 year old Michelle's response when I chatted to a young white shop assistant in Katherine. Michelle asked in awe, 'Mula, is he your cousin?', that being the only explanation she could think of for the friendly joking interaction she had observed. And Rembarrnga people often put a question to me which I found hard to answer "If you interact with strangers, how do you know which people you should not marry?" Most of you will understand that, for many Aboriginal people, the all-embracing kinship system identifies those people who one can and cannot marry. The possibility of unknowingly entering incestuous relationships seemed to my Rembarrnga friends a source of alarm. This is one of many ways the whitefella's cultural realm is baffling to Rembarrnga, just as their realm often is to whites. But of course, it is they who are forced to become aware of whitefellas rules rather than vice versa. It is they who learned to use English, and money, and to understand private property.⁷

- Another time I was on my own in the Katherine main street and I nervously noticed a dishevelled drunken black man coming towards me, staggering a bit. He saw me and, just as I recognised him, he shouted, 'Mula, I'm sick Mummy. I bin drink too much' and he flung his arms around me and asked me to take him home. It was one of the men from Bulman who had become my putative son as a consequence of the place I'd been assigned in the kinship system. I was both moved and interested in this man's trust in me. I had not been long in the community and had not had a lot to do with him. But because I was Ngaritjan and he was Gamerang, he knew I would look after him in his distress. Thus I learned something about my own emotional reactions and

⁷ I do not want to reproduce the kind of generalised moralism that often stands in for thinking about how difference is experienced, but perhaps I can comment that Aborigines have had to learn to operate within a culture dominated by an economy and political institutions which were morally repugnant because based on an individualism which precludes the embeddedness which was foundation of social functioning.

something about the ubiquity of kinship and its obligations and that these mutual obligations were assumed to extend across the racial divide.

These incidents are tiny examples of the constant indications in everyday life of the presence of two sets of assumptions about how to live, held by people who are in fact, living side by side and in the same geographical spaces. We all know this familiar situation as colonialism, but such a term sheds no light on the experiences of interaction and does not assist in coping with radical difference. I found it a surprisingly liberating experience to be able to open my arms to the a stereotypical drunken blackfella, who was also a young friend who called me Mummy, and to take him to my car to sleep off the drink. Later he was embarrassed and ashamed, although I tried to explain to him that he'd done me a favour in forcing me to think beyond images of the drunken blackfella to the men and women who are trying to come to grips with their present world, a world where there is nowhere to camp in town. Behind the public images of social problems there are whole communities of people who are invisible.

I should add that the incident evoked a great deal of laughter later out at Bulman, my putative son's stagger and my alarm being replayed repeatedly for the entertainment of the whole camp.

Culturally embarrassing encounters have been happening for ever. Let me just relate one from the past. The scene is the 1960s at Mainoru station in southern Arnhem Land where a familiar visitor, who claimed friendship and goodwill towards the Rembarrnga people, wanted to take photos. He insisted that Larry stand next to his sister, and, as most of you will recognise, this contravenes an avoidance practice. His daughter described the incident many years later:

When that bloke said come close to Florry, my father just bolted like he got electric shock. He never had anything to do with white people after that. If mununga came he'd be gone (Annette Murray pers.com. 1993).

The photographer's action was not just as an innocent, careless lack of information, but an active overriding of Larry and his daughter's wishes, in the name of benign friendship.⁸ To him avoidance practices were meaningless or uncivilised and so he intruded on a highly emotional and intimate arena of interpersonal relations and tried to force them to do things that were

⁸ This does not mean that either Larry or any other of the Rembarrnga people at Mainoru were hostile to the station owners. When I first visited Bulman and ever since I have been hearing stories of the family who were co-residents there, the owners in whitefella terms, the Mackay family. My own convictions and knowledge told me that these people exploited Aboriginal labour, and in a technical sense they did. But if they did, the Rembarrnga people did not see it like that. Cultural embarrassment was only one element of a world of rich experiences which were recounted with relish. The Mackays were close and were missed — they were also part of an accepted arena of human social life.

heretical or obscene. Thus I am suggesting there is a responsibility to **know** those who we want to interact with, or to do good to, or to govern.

Aboriginal people have learned to either avoid, or cope with, cultural embarrassment — for instance in schools where their kinship categories are contradicted by school authorities.

The examples I have given all involve kinship, and Aboriginal people are having to adjust to the eroded significance of kin relatedness which is the mark of modern society. Those who live in towns may feel liberated from the strict rules of kinship, and may choose to get away from the legitimate demands of relatives — from humbug — and such motives are only too well recognised and applauded by whitefellas. Why is this the case? Are we no longer able to take pleasure in extended families. Or is it that an army of kinsfolk are difficult to cope with in suburban homes. I find it interesting how **offended** people are by the extent and significance of the obligations and interpersonal responsibilities which Aborigines accept as part of their relationships.

C PLEASURE IN DIFFERENCE?

In my abstract I promised to talk about the **pleasures in difference**. It surprises me how few documented examples there are, either here or elsewhere. Most commonly difference seems only to be appreciated when it is domesticated and consumable, as in exotic food or music. Why do many differences make us feel uncomfortable, guilty or afraid? I quote a paragraph from my new book:

'While sophisticated citizens take pride in the appreciation of elements of exotic culture, and deference to difference is automatic among cosmopolitan urbanites, it is always understood that some things are beyond the pale. The conventional admiration of exotic and spiritual Indigenous worlds has been disturbed by recent revelations of Indigenous differences that are labelled unhealthy, chaotic, or cruel.' (*Blackfellas Whitefellas and the Hidden Injuries of Race*: Ch. 9)

Common anxieties about present dangers — the fear of others, and of our own shameful impulses or ignorance — themselves suggest the possibility of other ways of proceeding. After all, there are two sides of Australia's blemished history; the past is a burden we can share with Indigenous people. I will finish by quoting Nelly Camfoo, a Rembarrnga woman and I think we can all take pleasure in her sharp sense of difference, and her kind of exasperated acceptance of the conditions of existence in this *mununga*, (whitefella) world. She is talking about the elections and saying 'We don't vote for anyone', in our way.

I will vote but I'll never win. That's white law. We just vote, we don't get anything out of it. I can vote for some bloke, but maybe I'm voting for a bad man who will bring war to Arnhem Land. I vote because I'm in *mununga* country now. If I don't vote, poor old lubra

me, I'll get a summons letter, and I'm fined fifty dollar or whatever it is. And if I don't pay I'll go to gaol. That's your *mununga* rule. So I have to vote while I'm here wearing your clothes and talking your English and smoking your tobacco, eating your sugar and tea, and talking to your tape recorder. It's not the blackfella way!

We just had a letter stick us mob. And for Toyota, we had our foot.

Both whitefellas and blackfellas express the same kinds of nostalgia for a better past and worries about a worse future. By recognising and naming the hypocrisies and horrors of continuing, unnamed, racial inequality we may begin to overcome them. Perhaps we can invert the pervasive moralism through which we affirm our own belonging, and refuse meaning to encounters with others. Difference may then become interesting, productive, elating and a source of expanded possibilities.