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*edited by Sebastian Job, Linda Connor***

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Contents

Introduction	1
Panel 1: Wanting and Denying the End (Fri 26/03/2010; 9.30-11.00am)	
‘Crisis is Coming’ Visions of material and immaterial ends <i>Erin Taylor</i>	3
Climate Change and the Challenge of Immortality: Faith, denial and intimations of eternity. <i>Linda Connor</i>	16
Panel 2: Prophecy and Eschatology (Fri 26/03/2010; 9.30-11.00am)	
Spiritual Imagination and Societal Change in Indonesia: The Prophecies of King Jayabaya <i>Thomas Reuter</i>	34
The End of the World at the End of the Earth: Retrospective eschatology on Rapanui (Easter Island) <i>Grant MacCall</i>	45
Panel 3: Accepting Death (Fri 26/03/2010; 11.30-1.00pm)	
Death and the City: Mortuary Rituals and Urban Renewal in Surabaya. <i>Robbie Peters</i>	54
Panel 4: The Future of Myth (Fri 26/03/2010; 11.30-1.00pm)	
Technology, Disorder and the Ends of Work <i>Jon Marshall</i>	68
Without Ends Facing the End: of Aztec Revivalists and Anthropologists <i>Sebastian Job</i>	85

Panel 5:

Aboriginal Ends (Fri 26/03/2010; 2.30-3.00pm)

Perpetual Ends and Perpetual Beginnings: Temporalities of Indigeneity in Australia 96
Emma Kowal

Death as the end of a future 110
Gaynor Macdonald

Panel 6:

Perilous Indigeneity in South America (Fri 26/03/2010; 2.30-3.00pm)

'Anthropokaluptein': The End as Anthropological Revelation 124
Carla Stang

Appendix:

Symposium Welcome Message

Contributor biographies

Time Schedule

132

Panel 5

Aboriginal Ends

(Fri 26/03/2010; 2.30-3.00am)

Perpetual Ends and Perpetual Beginnings: Temporalities of Indigeneity in Australia

Emma Kowal
University of Melbourne

Abstract

The beginning of colonisation was the beginning of the end of Indigenous cultures. They have been in a perpetual state of ending ever since. From the nineteenth century to the present, every generation, in some part of the country has been proclaimed the last holders of classical Indigenous culture. Theories of the end of culture have ranged from social evolution to assimilation, while a counter-discourse of continuity and self-determination contests the notion that culture is ending. But there is complete agreement over what is ending or will never end: the 'oldest living culture' in the world. This paper will explore the strange temporality of Indigeneity within the settler-colonial imaginary. Fabian and others have demonstrated the ways that 'anthropological time' produced a secularised, naturalised and spatialised temporality of the 'primitive' who by definition has no future. Through the anthropomorphising of culture and the culturalisation of individuals, the Indigenous person/culture becomes the 40,000 year history of human occupation of the continent. The paper explores the manifestations of this thinking among white anti-racists concerned with why Indigenous lives end too soon. Drawing on an ethnography of non-Indigenous people working in Indigenous health in the Northern Territory, I show how there is a kind of cultural Lamarckianism in operation. Western individuals are seen to inherit the cumulative cultural knowledge, acquired over centuries, of germ theory and responsible alcohol consumption. By contrast, Indigenous people are seen to struggle with banking and infectious diseases because they have not had sufficient time to develop the appropriate cultural knowledge. Practices common to Indigenous communities over three generations, such as petrol sniffing, are seen as eternally new. The melding of culture, time and Aboriginal personhood produces both the perpetual ending of Indigeneity and the perpetual newness of modernity.

Keywords: Time, Indigenous, health, culture, Australia, anti-racist, white Introduction

Introduction

The beginning of colonisation was the beginning of the end of Indigenous cultures. They have been in a perpetual state of ending ever since. From the nineteenth century to the present, every generation has been proclaimed as the last holders of classical Indigenous culture. Theories of the end of culture have ranged from social evolution to assimilation, while a counter-discourse of continuity and self-determination contests the notion that culture is ending. But there is complete agreement over what is ending or will never end: the oldest living culture in the world.

This paper will explore the strange temporality of Indigeneity within the settler-colonial imaginary. Fabian and others have demonstrated the ways that ‘anthropological time’ produced a secularised, naturalised and spatialised temporality of the ‘primitive’ who by definition has no future. Drawing on ethnography of non-Indigenous people working in Indigenous health in the Northern Territory, I explore the manifestations of this thinking among white anti-racists concerned with why Indigenous lives end too soon. The white people in question were employees at the pseudonymous Darwin Institute of Indigenous Health, a research institute that aims to improve the appalling state of Indigenous health through high-quality public health research in a range of areas including cardiovascular disease, infectious diseases, alcohol and drug use and mental health. The group I call ‘white anti-racists’ consists of men and women who largely identified as white, grew up and received university degrees in the health professions in southern capitals of Australia, and moved to Darwin with the intention of using their education and skills to improve the lot of the nation’s most disadvantaged group¹.

While the individual viewpoints of each white anti-racist varied, most converged around a set of beliefs I call ‘postcolonial logic’. As I have explained elsewhere, “[f]undamental aspects of postcolonial logic include the belief that “Indigenous culture” has been maintained for thousands of years and is perhaps the “oldest” culture in the world; that Indigenous people have a unique relationship to the land and a complex social system; that their culture is in some ways superior to Western culture and has been severely decimated by colonization; that their current problems stem from dispossession, displacement, racism, and intergenerational trauma; and that the Australian people and their government must accept responsibility for the injuries inflicted on Indigenous peoples and cultures and invest more resources in Indigenous programs. A commitment to Aboriginal self-determination is a key part of postcolonial logic: a belief that Indigenous people must be in control of efforts to improve their lives, with non-Indigenous people and the state providing adequate support.” (Kowal 2008:341). In that article, I go on to analyse the tension at the heart of postcolonial logic between ‘remedialism’, impulse to ‘close the gap’ and strive towards statistical equality

¹ This ethnography was conducted in 2004-5 and received ethical approval from Northern Territory Department of Health and Community Services Human Research Ethics Committee (Reference 03/28). Note that I also identify with the group studied, as a medical doctor who worked in Indigenous clinical medicine and health research in the Northern Territory prior to beginning the ethnography discussed here. In this way I am a ‘native ethnographer’, studying my own social group.

for Indigenous people, and 'orientalism', the need to maintain an opposition between indigeneity and the west. Much discourse in indigenous affairs can be understood as attempts to manage the tension between equality and difference: between effecting improvement and maintaining distinctiveness.

In this paper, I explore some temporal mechanisms at work within postcolonial logic. I show how a temporal iteration of orientalism characterised by Fabian as 'anthropological time' both complicates and sustains white anti-racist discourses of indigenous improvement. In effect, there is a kind of cultural Lamarckianism in operation. Western individuals are seen to inherit the cumulative cultural knowledge, acquired over centuries, of germ theory and responsible alcohol consumption. By contrast, Indigenous people are seen to struggle with banking and infectious diseases because they have not had sufficient time to develop the appropriate cultural knowledge. Practices common to Indigenous communities over three generations, such as petrol sniffing, are seen as eternally new. Through the anthropomorphising of culture and the culturalisation of individuals, the Indigenous person/culture becomes the 40,000 year history of human occupation of the continent. The melding of culture, time and Aboriginal personhood produces both the perpetual ending of Indigeneity and the perpetual newness of modernity. I argue that this temporal construction of indigeneity finds its resolution in the fantasy that the white anti-racist has witnessed the ending of 'indigenous culture', and indigenous people are then permitted to accrue the time of modernity.

Evolutionary time, anthropological time

From the moment Australia was first colonised, Europeans have considered Indigenous culture to be on the verge of death. The inevitable extinction of 'primitive races' had been a European trope since the late 1700s, but was consolidated with the rise of 'social Darwinism' in the late nineteenth century (Brantlinger 2003, Douglas and Ballard 2008, McGregor 1997). Before Darwin, 'primitive' races were thought to be at risk of extinction through any combination of (tribal or colonial) warfare, introduced diseases, and 'self-extinction' via the destructive effects of 'savage' customs. This third cause of death removed the coloniser from picture completely, locating the beginning of death before European contact (Brantlinger 2003).

The work of Alfred Russell Wallace and EB Tylor in the 1860s and 70s gave the theory of 'self-extinction' new life. They and other scholars drew on theories of evolution to argue that at some time in the evolutionary past, physical evolution due to natural selection ceased to operate on man because he had enough mental capacity to outwit evolutionary forces through clothes, tools and dwellings (Wallace 1864:clxv). From that distant point in history, the mental evolution of the races differed, as each tackled the demands of mastering their environments. Those in the cold climates of Europe had greater environmental demands to meet, and thus were more intellectually developed. Race extinction was seen as the natural consequence. If races differed in their mental development, it followed for Wallace that those "low and mentally undeveloped populations with which Europeans come into contact" were destined for "inevitable extinction" (Wallace 1864:clxv).

2 James Frazer wrote to Spencer that "The anthropological work still to be done in Australia is...of more importance to the history of early man than anything that can now be done in the world". (cited in KUPER, A. (1998) *The Invention of Primitive Society: Transformations of an Illusion*, London, Routledge.).

The anthropology of the Australians was seen as an urgent task critical to understanding man's past.²

In the twentieth century social evolutionism was widely critiqued, not least for naturalising the devastating effects of colonialism. But as I explore in this paper, the notion of the primitive in mortal danger from the moment that the coloniser sets eyes on him has proven remarkably durable through to contemporary times.

As one of the disciplines most closely associated with colonialism's 'others', anthropology has reflected and produced global discourses of difference. Historians of anthropology have argued that since its inception, anthropology constructed the savage "antithetically", " 'caught in a network of negations' as 'peoples without history, without writing, without religion, without morals, without police' " (Duchet 1971:11 cited in Fabian 1991:195).³ The savage other is the object and civilised man is the subject. This is, of course, a common story across the "Great Divides" of modernity, be they male and female, culture and nature, straight and queer, or ableness and disability (Latour 1987). But there are two aspects of the 'indigenous' Other that are perhaps distinctive among modernity's Others. The first is that "almost as soon as travel accounts appear and congeal into a literary genre, savage societies are depicted as 'past', that is, as no longer existing in their original, undisturbed condition." (Fabian 1991:195). This reflects and produces the western obsession with the authenticity of the Other which is always slipping from one's grasp.

The twentieth century repudiation of evolutionism bequeathed a second distinctive aspect of this kind of Otherness. This is the concept that stands for what savage has, and what begins to die as soon as it is observed by white people: their culture.⁴ The concept of culture was the great triumph of twentieth century anthropology. It continues to be a central trope in the management of human difference. Culture has arguably been the discursive cornerstone of both indigenous policy and indigenous identity across the developed world since the late 1960s.

Johannes Fabian's book *Time and the Other* (1983) outlines the temporal effects of the anthropological concept of culture. He argues that creating knowledge about anthropology's subjects involves creating temporal distance. The other is grounded in the past and seen as relatively unchanging.⁵ Statements such as "Group X are matrilineal" are grounded in an "anthropological present" that produces objects that are homogenous and static in time. He coins the term allochronism to describe this placement of the other in a

³ Fabian himself puts it like this: "Culture, inasmuch as it served as anthropology's guiding concept, has always been an idea post factum, a notion orientated toward the past (to 'custom' and 'tradition'), descriptive of a state of affairs (and often of a status quo), a nostalgic idea at best (when it mixed the study of exotic societies with regret) and a reactionary ideologeme at worst (when it was used optimistically to explain away as 'variation' what in many cases was the result of discrimination and violence)." FABIAN, J. (1991) *Time and the Work of Anthropology, Critical Essays 1971-1991*, Chur, Switzerland, Harwood Academic Publishers., page 193.

⁴ Culture is "ontologized, i.e., given an existence apart." FABIAN, J. (1983) *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object*, New York, Columbia University Press. p157.

⁵ Munn notes in her review of the anthropology of time that the "anthropological present" is focused on "long-term historical-myth time", on long cycles of repetition or with the concept of eternity, while "the problem of the future has typically been displaced by the past-present relation" MUNN, N. D. (1992) *The Cultural Anthropology of Time: A Critical Essay*. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 21, 93-123. page 115.

different time to ourselves, a move which denies the coevalness of the anthropologist and her subject, the empirical fact of their shared space-time in the act of ethnography. As Fabian puts it: “Coevalness is anthropology’s problem with time” (Fabian 1983:37).

Why do anthropologists do this? It may be the legacy of social evolutionism or it may be inherent to objectification itself. Fabian argues that while the influence of social evolutionary thought in anthropology was largely expunged in the early twentieth century and displaced by structural functionalism, allochronism was not discarded but became even more entrenched, moving from an empirical question to be debated (addressing the question, are ‘primitive’ societies ‘civilisation’s’ past?) to an implicit assumption.⁶ He argues that the denial of coevalness through American cultural relativism and French structuralism also served political functions in the era of decolonisation.⁷

This paper is concerned not with anthropologists, but with contemporary settler Australians who support Indigenous rights. This broad group is likely to be white⁸, educated, middle-class, and by definition are politically progressive. I use the term ‘white anti-racist’ as shorthand for all these features. People who self-identify with these attributes support the principles of the self-determination era dominant in indigenous policy since the late 1960s. My particular ethnographic work has been with settler Australians who work in Indigenous health, although white anti-racists that work with Indigenous people in other arenas (including justice, the environment, education or the arts) employ and produce similar discourses (Kowal 2008)⁹. I will illustrate here how contemporary white anti-racists share an understanding of Indigenous culture that draws on twentieth century anthropology and the temporal idiosyncrasies it inherited from earlier evolutionary ideas about race. I show that in the hands of twenty-first century white anti-racists, these epistemological building blocks lead to a melding of time, culture and personhood.

The first example of white anti-racist discourse is a comment from the internet activist group GetUp’s blog site for their recent campaign to support remote ‘outstations’. Outstations are hundreds of tiny remote communities in the Northern Territory, most with less than twenty people, that are under threat from government efforts to improve infrastructure in larger remote communities and effectively force them to move there. One contributor to the blog, identified only as ‘Mark’, says:

6 This is similar to the way that the concept of ‘race’ operates in Australia. It is widely rejected, yet the notion of fixed cultural differences in hierarchical relationship to each other survive quite well in the use of terms like ‘culture’ and ‘ethnicity’.

7 Allochronic distancing acts to counter genuine recognition at the colonial frontier and rationalise injustices against colonized people, an effect he calls “chronopolitics” and others have called “temporal imperialism” FITZPATRICK, T. (2004) *Social Policy and Time*. *Time and Society*, 13, 197-219. See also ADAM, R. (2004) *Time*, Cambridge, Polity Press. A related strand of literature argues that time was (is) a crucial tool of colonization. For example, the imposition of clock time was necessary for harnessing the colonized population as a labour force. See COOPER, F. (1992) *Colonizing Time: Work Rhythms and Labor Conflict in Colonial Mombasa*. IN DIRKS, N. B. (Ed.) *Colonialism and Culture*. Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, NANNI, G. (2006) *The Colonization of Time: Ritual, routine and resistance in the 19th-century Cape Colony and Victoria*. History. Melbourne University of Melbourne.

8 Particularity if one draws on a broader notion of white as not a skin colour but a dominant culture, see FRANKENBERG, R. (1993) *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.

9 The perspectives of the group of white anti-racists who participated in my ethnography were, of course, far more diverse and complex that comes across in this brief account of dominant forms of anti-racist discourse. For accounts of these white anti-racists that better explore this diversity and complexity, see KOWAL, E. (forthcoming) *The stigma of White privilege: Australian anti-racists and Indigenous improvement*. *Cultural Studies*, KOWAL, E. (2008) *The politics of the gap: Indigenous Australians, liberal multiculturalism and the end of the self-determination era*. *American Anthropologist*, 11, 338-348.

“Indigenous culture has, especially in the North, an unending life to this day of up to and over 40,000 years. Living through mini ice ages, the death of the megafauna and many other amazing changes we can not conceive upon. That amount of cultural knowledge of the world and human nature is beyond comprehension to us, and has value we can not conceive of.”¹⁰

Here, Indigenous culture is anthropomorphised, discussed here as if it were an actual person that has lived through mini ice ages and the death of the megafauna. Whatever the cultural background of the author (identified only as ‘Mark’), their presumably European ancestors lived through ice ages and alongside megafauna no less than the humans who populated Sahul some 50,000 years ago. Yet Mark strongly feels, as most white anti-racists do, that Europeans do not have the capacity to comprehend this “unending life” of Indigenous culture. When anthropology’s culture, past-directed and static, is applied to Indigenous people, it is personified, immortalised, and made radically alterior. This implies a complementary process by which Indigenous people are seen to inhabit ancestral time such that they are the same as their personified Culture. People who identify as Indigenous contain an essence, or inhabit time, in such a way that they embody the history of human occupation of the continent.

White anti-racists at the medical research Institute in Darwin where I conducted ethnographic research in 2004-5 routinely talked about contemporary Indigenous people in terms of the estimated time of occupancy of humans on the Australian land mass. In an email discussion of how Indigenous people have differing views one colleague argued that

“In my experience, individual (Aboriginal) people all have different ideas of what things should be tried, or how things should be done. It is similar in our society. How could you get all of Europe to agree on ways to do things? Look how long it has taken for the European Union to form! And Europe has only had a couple of thousand years to develop their differences. Aboriginal groups have had 40,000 years to develop theirs!!”¹¹

In this example, ‘European culture’ has a 2,000 year history and ‘Aboriginal culture’ has a 40,000 year history with no consideration for historical continuities and ruptures that belie those timelines, let alone variation internal to those monolithic categories. The author appeals to historical time to date ‘European culture’, and to anthropological (or more literally archaeological) time for ‘Indigenous culture’. This disciplinary division of labour stretches the temporal horizon of Europeans to the Roman Empire, and that of Indigenous people to the limit of radiocarbon dating.

The time of improvement

In the year 2000, the Arnhem Land-based Christian development organisation Aboriginal Resource and Development Services published a book called *Why Warriors Lie Down and Die* (Trudgen 2000). It was writ

¹⁰ <http://www.getup.org.au/blogs/view.php?id=1874>

¹¹ [Fieldnotes 24/3/5]

ten by the cross-cultural educator Richard Trudgen, a mechanic-turned-linguist-turned-cross-cultural education guru. The book was a huge success. When I moved to Darwin from Melbourne at the end of 2000 to work as a doctor, several people told me to read it, and I duly bought a copy, read it, and was deeply moved by its message – basically, that indigenous good health was a matter of restoring traditional authority and tapping into Indigenous ‘high’ culture to develop a “cultural knowledge base” for modern diseases. Time is central to Trudgen’s conception of two cultures out of sync:

“When we come from our cultural knowledge base to talk to a group of people who have a different cultural knowledge base, our communication doesn’t work. The people end up only getting the top, surface story because what we say to them in English doesn’t make any sense. They just don’t get it because they don’t have the supportive cultural information to make sense out of what is being talked about. It took Westerners some 400 years to assimilate the knowledge about what these little things that cause disease and sickness are [i.e. germs]. Nobody has run any extensive programs to get the knowledge of bacteria into Aboriginal society. Nobody has done it.” (Trudgen 2000:63-4)¹²

Here we have another side of the personified Indigenous culture discussed above. Indigenous people possess a time-sense that links them back to their distant ancestors, so they lack the “supportive cultural information” needed to understand germs. Westerners have had 400 years for germs to diffuse into their culture¹³, Trudgen is arguing here, but for Indigenous people, it is all brand new. The model of cultural knowledge operating here is a kind of cultural Lamarckianism. According to this model, both ‘Indigenous people’ and ‘Westerners’ are born with the cumulative sum of their ancestors’ knowledge pre-programmed into their neurons. Western children are born with the cultural knowledge that lets them believe in germs and thus conform to hand washing and antibiotics. While most people today would agree that one’s social environment is an important determinant of one’s beliefs, there is a sense here that there is no way that Yolngu can learn about germs. It requires a major intervention at the root of Indigenous culture in order to allow it to assimilate germ theory, fast-tracking the slow diffusion of new knowledge through the cultural body. Of course, the rapid assimilation of many modern technologies like mobile phones and electric guitars into ‘Aboriginal society’ without any help from cross-cultural consultants confounds Trudgen’s model (although I’m sure he has a good explanation for why ‘lack of cultural knowledge’ of electricity and satellites has not been a barrier to their use in these cases).

So how long is long enough to assimilate a new object into Indigenous culture? At the Institute where I conducted my research, the answer is ‘a very long time’. Institute researchers frequently bemoaned the short funding periods of 5 years at the most, when “we’re talking here about processes that are not just generational but they’re, they’re **centuries**.”¹⁴

¹² A similar argument is made in Peter Sutton, “Crowded House.” Invited speaker address for the annual conference of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects, Alice Springs, 26-27 October 2007. Conference theme: ‘Which Way? Directions in Indigenous Housing’, p5

¹³ Presumably taking 17th century Dutch scientist Anton van Leeuwenhoek as the starting point.

¹⁴ [Transcript 2:13]

Another colleague at the research institute wrote a draft chapter on petrol sniffing that she asked me to read and provide feedback on. The chapter argued that as Aboriginal Australians did not use drugs comparable to petrol “as part of their traditional cultural practices”, “there is no reference point in the society against which the pharmacological, behavioural, cognitive, neurological and social consequences of petrol can be compared or understood”. Aboriginal people are thus confused about petrol sniffing and its effects. She tells us that “The first recorded report of petrol sniffing was in the 1930s and, by the 1960s, the practice was prevalent amongst adolescents”. But as “[p]etrol has only been used in Aboriginal populations for less than 40 years”, there has not been sufficient time to develop “ceremonial behaviours and taboos surrounding its use”, a process that may take thousands of years. These ceremonial behaviours can turn dangerous drugs into substances that can promote well-being, such as *yagé* among Cofán Indians in the Amazon and kava in the Pacific.

When we sat down to discuss her chapter, I brought up her argument that indigenous people have not been exposed to petrol sniffing for long (between 40 and 70 years) and therefore they don’t have a cultural framework for it. “I’m not sure about that argument”, I say. “Oh, I know what you mean”, she replies, “other people have said that there were psychoactive substances that were used [in the past]”, meaning that Indigenous culture may indeed have a cultural framework for the wider category of psychoactive substances. “No, that’s not what I was getting at.”, I replied. “More like, is 70 years enough time to develop cultural knowledge about a drug? If your parents or grandparents used the drug, is that enough cultural knowledge?”¹⁵

In retrospect, what I was doing here is refusing the anthropomorphising of culture and demanding that Indigenous people become coeval with the western observer. Both of us then gave examples of what could be called “contemporary cultural knowledge” among indigenous people, like a story told to me by a remote community teacher of students using their multiple names to draw three lots of Abstudy (government student support) payments, and a story she had heard that Indigenous people living in Darwin know that once a week at 2am there is computer maintenance on ANZ machines and it is possible to withdraw more money than is in your account. These stories allow actual Indigenous persons to accumulate knowledge of their environment, to enter the time of modernity, rather than requiring them to wait for an anthropomorphized culture to develop knowledge over centuries or millennia.

An important aspect of these stories of coeval Indigenous people is that they generally have a negative moral valence – ripping off the government (that is, the taxpayer) and the bank are not nice things to do. This points to the moral function that is served when white anti-racists draw on allochronic, anthropological time. It helps to rationalise behaviour they would otherwise view as immoral: Indigenous youth may sniff petrol and murder each other, but only because it is all so new to their culture.

15 [Fieldnotes 5/11/04 2:49]

In these examples, if allochronism were to end, it would both lessen alterity and heighten it. It would allow indigenous people to accumulate lived time rather than being tied to the protracted timescales of anthropomorphised culture. But it would also remove the sanitising effect of anthropological culture in explaining indigenous peoples' 'immoral' behaviours. White anti-racists engaged in indigenous improvement could no longer understand indigenous behaviours as a 'lack of cultural knowledge base', perhaps leading to their greater pathologisation.

Many argue that this is exactly what we have seen with the NT Intervention, and more generally with the paradigm shift in Indigenous affairs (Cowlshaw et al. 2006). With the apparent end of the self-determination era, the reign of anthropology's culture concept in indigenous policy (where it has been influential since the late 1960s (Rowse 2000) may be ending. We may be seeing the inherent limitations of this culture concept, including its allochronism, imploding within indigenous policy and within remote indigenous communities.

My final example shows how the temporality of indigeneity is incredibly flexible. It is from a seminar presented by Brian McCoy, a medical anthropologist who writes about men's health at Balgo, where he was a Jesuit priest for many years. He is telling the audience here about the effect of missions on the local population:

These people have had contact only since 1939, a very small period of time in relation to their occupation of the area..... He shows us a photo he took when he got to Balgo Mission in 1973 when the mission was about to be closed.... When the kids were sent back to their parents in 1973, it had been 20 years since they had been taken from their parents.... he explains how this was a long time, a whole generation without parenting skills, an experience that explains the serious social problems in Balgo today.¹⁶

Note that I do not wish to deny the impact of institutionalisation on the Balgo community (see McCoy 2007). What I am interested in is the contrast between 70-odd years of contact being a short time, while 20 years of the mission being a long time. We can explain this as the slippage between the time of anthropological culture and the time of lived experience, in this case, lived trauma. Although 70 years of contact is but a moment in relation to the time of anthropomorphised culture, 20 human years of lost cultural transmission is enough to end it.

This depiction of an ancient, vast culture crumbling on contact with the colonising culture is a common trope in contemporary anti-racist discourse.¹⁷ While it may or may not be an accurate description of Indigenous experiences of the postcolony, its mimicry of social evolutionary logic illustrates the strong imprint of social evolutionism on contemporary conceptions of postcolonial time. This imprint is illustrated not least in the unconscious desire within white anti-racist discourse to witness the passing of indigenous culture.

¹⁶ [Fieldnotes 2/6/05 4:47]

¹⁷ There is of course a strong counter-discourse that sees Indigenous cultures as thriving and rejects any suggestion that they are in danger.

The wave of death

In a central and persisting trajectory of modern thought, colonisation is seen as a wave of civilising progress and a wave of death. The wave breaks at the point of first contact with the dramatic violence of the colonial frontier. In the decades or centuries that followed, the undertow of the receding wave slowly erodes culture until the point of disappearance, an often imperceptible moment after which there is silence. This is why Fabian calls anthropology the science of disappearance.¹⁸

Numerous scholars have noted the strong desire among whites to access the authentic, undisturbed indigene, to be the first of our kind ever to puncture the radically different world of the other. There exists an equally strong desire to be the witness to the passing of that world, the final end to the wave of death that began with the audacity of European colonial expansion. Brantlinger (2003:4) discusses the numerous nineteenth century texts that lament the “dying, often last Aboriginal”. This desire to witness that world’s end explains why Indigenous culture has been ending for so long, but can never end: keeping Indigenous culture in a state of imminent ending preserves our opportunity to witness the moment of its passing. Consider this contemporary example of a world’s end from writer and artist Kim Mahood who travels to Mulan every year to visit people she has known since her childhood on a remote station in the Tanami desert. Here she watches a woman, a dear friend, as they visit a lake:

“Short and square and purposeful, dressed in matching skirt and blouse of aquamarine and pink, Bessie stalks towards the shoreline, calling out in the tone appropriate for addressing ancestral beings, alerting them to our presence and reassuring them that we are of the country. When the invocation is finished she says, ‘When I’m dead there’ll be nobody left to talk to the lake in its own language.’”

“It’s one of those moments when a number of half-apprehended intuitions fall into place, the shudder of realignments travelling through the body like an electric current, raising goose bumps that herald the imaginative grasp of a truth.”

“The words hang in the air. ‘When I’m gone there’ll be nobody left to talk to the lake in its own language.’”

“And so it must have happened by increments across the continent, that slow withdrawal of voices, the silence falling as the conversation between people and country lost the languages in which it could be spoken.” (Mahood 2007:5)

The silence falls. The silence that follows after culture is finally extinguished is tragic, but in some ways a relief. The slow wave of death at last recedes. The voices of the ancestors, under threat for so long, finally still. At one level, their death ensures our survival, the satisfying projection of the death drive onto an Other. And these Others are not indigenous persons, who will by default become contemporaneous with us, and finally be allowed to accumulate the time of modernity. Instead, the Other that will have ended is our anthropological notion of Culture. It is the death of allochronism itself, the negation of a negation¹⁹, the end of ending.

¹⁸ Brantlinger refers to anthropology as a “science of mourning”. For other similar formulations see CLIFFORD, J. (1988) *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press. ROSALDO, R. (1989) Imperialist Nostalgia. *Representations*, 26, 107-122.

¹⁹ following Fabian (1991).

This moving account illustrates the natural end of a culture at once melded to Indigenous personhood and divorced from social life. While in the past, this fearful conclusion would have been the extinction of the Aboriginal 'race', in its contemporary form it is Aboriginal culture that is passing. It is a scenario that some believe holds dire metaphysical consequences for both Indigenous people and white settlers.²⁰ I want to suggest, however, other reasons why this ending must be resisted by white anti-racists.

Discussion: The end of culture without end

As I have argued, in the settler-colonial imaginary, indigenous culture is defined in relation to the time of colonization, frozen at the moment of first contact, the moment that unleashed an unceasing wave of death. Within this imaginary, that conflates persons and culture and invests them with metaphysical essence, Indigenous adoption or mimicry of Western culture, including western time, is highly problematic. As Fabian, Kuper and others have noted, following Said, the construction of the other is an orientalist mirror in which we project the opposite of our self-image. Beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century, the rise of the 'primitive' (a concept interchangeable with the 'ancient') provided a magical, communistic, nomadic, and promiscuous subject against which rational, capitalist, liberal democratic nations could be implicitly measured (Kuper 1998). The perpetual death of the primitive attested to the perpetual life of civilisation.

But among white anti-racists, who recognise that the demise of indigenous culture is the work of colonisation and not nature, there is another layer of affect and desire. If the adoption of Western practices and intermarriage into the wider society implies that Indigenous culture is ending, settler Australians are interpellated as assimilationists, as perpetrators of cultural genocide. Indigenous culture cannot ever be seen as ending, as this will imply that we have ended it. This denial of the possibility of cultural death is of course shared by Indigenous people and organisations who are themselves heavily invested in the survival of Aboriginal cultural distinctiveness, not least in order to attract the limited spoils offered by liberal multicultural states.²¹

The temporal implications of this are that white anti-racists are reluctant to let go of allochronism as the alternative can only be incorporation and assimilation, a problem Kevin Birth refers to as homochronism (Birth 2008). While allochronism is the placement of the other outside the dominant flow of time, homochronism places them within it, displacing them from their own distinctive temporalities.²² In this way, the

20 For example see BIRD ROSE, D. (forthcoming) *Wild Dog Dreaming: love and extinction*, Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press.

21 See POVINELLI, E. A. (2002) *The Cunning of Recognition: Indigenous Alterities and the Making of Australian Multiculturalism*, Durham and London, Duke University Press. Critics readily see this adoption of essentialised indigeneity by indigenous people themselves as strategic essentialism or false consciousness. For Achille Mbembe it is the "imprisoning model of history" MBEMBE, A. (2002) African Modes of Self-Writing. *Public Culture*, 14, 239-273.

22 Even if white anti-racists were not invested in the maintenance of anthropological culture and its associated allochronism, it may not be so easy to cast away time distancing and plunge into coevalness. Birth distinguishes between the "intersection of

tension between allochronism and homochronism mirrors the tension between orientalism and remedialism (Kowal 2008). Striving for statistical (or in this case, temporal) equality is necessary to ‘closing the gap’ of Indigenous disadvantage, but this quest presents the unending danger that the process of improvement will lessen the cultural distinctiveness of Indigenous people, further colonising them. Encouraging or admitting the end of Indigenous temporal alterity may be necessary for participating in Western institutions but can also be seen to threaten Indigenous family functioning (see for example Burbank, 2006).²³

Finally, if allochronism is allowed to end, or indeed, is already ending, what is beginning? For white anti-racists, indigenous people will be allowed to accumulate the time of modernity. Indigenous children would be seen as having as much capacity as white children to believe in germs and to learn to habitually wash their hands. Forty years would be seen as long enough for Indigenous people to develop social or cultural beliefs and practices about petrol sniffing. Indigenous culture would no longer be thought of as ‘the longest living culture on earth’, and instead would be seen as constantly changing over both the pre- and post-colonial periods while retaining elements of the past. Western culture would not be thought of as perpetually new, and Indigenous people would not be thought of as non-Western.

This vision would be aligned with the views of Noel Pearson, Marcia Langton and Peter Sutton, and with scholars outside Australia such as Achille Mbembe, who argue broadly that liberal conceptions and self-conceptions of Indigenous Australians, Africans and other subalterns that are embedded in victimhood and essential difference are responsible for much contemporary misery.²⁴ However, the ending of temporal orientalism would not be without cost, as we have seen with the re-assignment in the last five years of many remote communities from ‘culturally unique’ to ‘socially dysfunctional’. Difference is increasingly read as disadvantage. Whether this is welcome recognition or a tragic misrecognition is a question that remains highly contested.

different temporal subjectivities” and coevalness, arguing that a communicative exchange he shared with an informant was the former and not the latter (genuine coevalness). Shared time, or even shared understanding of temporality, is not sufficient to produce coevalness, and the use of history in anthropology produces merely an “illusory coevalness” as the Western historical clock is the reference point BIRTH, K. (2008) The creation of coevalness and the danger of homochronism. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 14, 3-20.

23 The voluntary adoption of Western time by Indigenous people is equally problematic for white anti-racists. One solution to this is to read assimilation as covert resistance. A PhD thesis on the use of time in the colonisation of Kooris in Victoria describes how in 1882, Aborigines from the Coranderrk mission accused the Board of being “unpunctual” and “irregular” in distributing wages and rations. This implied a radical shift from the type of resistance that characterized earlier confrontations, wherein the struggle was carried out in the name of pre-colonial traditions, rather than in the discourse of the capitalist order. But this in itself was part and parcel of the compromises and negotiations that allowed indigenous peoples to resist assimilation successfully.” What looks like assimilation is in fact resistance NANNI, G. (2006) The Colonization of Time: Ritual, routine and resistance in the 19th-century Cape Colony and Victoria. *History*. Melbourne University of Melbourne., page 175.

24 See MBEMBE, A. (2002) African Modes of Self-Writing. *Public Culture*, 14, 239-273, MOSES, D. (2010) Time, indigeneity, and peoplehood: the postcolony in Australia. *Postcolonial Studies*, 13, 9-32, MBEMBE, A. (2006) On the Postcolony: a brief response to critics. *African Identities*, 4, 143-178, LANGTON, M. (2008) Trapped in the Aboriginal reality show. *Griffith Review*, 19, 1-17, PEARSON, N. (2007) White guilt, victimhood and the quest for a radical centre. *Griffith Review*, 16, 1-39, SUTTON, P. (2009) *The Politics of Suffering: Indigenous Australians and the End of the Liberal Consensus*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press.

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