

**Theme: Negotiating Difference**

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**Articles:**

*Meaninglessness of Aboriginal Cultures*

**Mitchell ROLLS** – Faculty of Arts, University of Tasmania

In Andreï Makin's poignant semi-autobiographical novel *Le Testament Français*, the hero finds himself "condemn[ed] ... to live painfully between two worlds." There is the world in which he lives – the Soviet Union during the Stalinist era – and there is the world conjured during each summer school holidays at his grandmother's in remote Siberia. His grandmother, born in France though long-time resident of the Soviet Union and who married a Russian, tells stories of France during the long summer evenings spent on the balcony of her small apartment. There is also the old suitcase containing memorabilia, press clippings and the like. The world evoked in the stories and photographs contained therein affirm and nuance the hero's French heritage. French, the language of his grandmother's evocations, was thought of as the "family dialect" and assisted in bringing a remembered and imagined Paris to life. Across the flat expanse of Siberia, shimmering with mirages in the summer heat, the young boy glimpsed a mysterious, Atlantis-like France: a France to which he was intuitively, ancestrally, and emotionally bonded. His very selfhood informed by an hereditary French essence, he began surveying as if from outside the country of his birth. Russia, he saw in French.

As the child matured, his connection with France and his French identity – both bolstered through voracious reading – was at time celebrated, a source of pride; at other times, a source of conflict and ridicule. Rebelling as a teenager against his pre-natal 'Frenchness,' he cloaks himself in a Russian identity, his knowledge of France mined for stories with which to curry school playground favour. Inevitably, however, he comes to accept both his French and Russian identities.

In his grandmother's collection of family and other photographs that the child felt he could 'enter' and thereby come to know his ancestry, there was one that was clearly out of place. It showed a young woman in a dirty grey padded jacket and man's *shapka* holding a baby to her breast. He discovered this photograph as a young boy, but it subsequently disappeared, finally to reappear in a letter from his grandmother delivered to him in Paris after her death. The letter contained the story of a young Russian woman exiled to the marshlands of western Siberia who, following one of the purges, wound up in a labour camp. Conceiving a child through "forced love", the mother was killed in a tractor accident when the child was two and a half. The young Russian woman was the hero's mother, he, the babe in arms. He had no French ancestry.

How is it that we know who we are? Or more to the point, within the context of this paper, how determined is our cultural identity? What, where and how do Aboriginal cultures fit within a deterministic model of identity, or is such an identity fluid and vulnerable to assumption? Is Aboriginality a self-proclamation, not an inherent attribute?

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*The Loopie Traveller: Non-Aborigines and Ambivalence*

David PALMER – Murdoch University

In early 1998 the ABC screened a documentary called “Grey Nomads”. This ethnographic style documentary ‘tracked’ the movements of a small number of retirees who had abandoned or suspended their lives as working, urban dwelling and ‘settled’ Australians in order to take up lives as semi-permanent road travellers. Each subject of the documentary had a different story to tell but all seemed to have reached a similar chapter in their lives. All were reaching their ‘twilight’ years. One reviewer put it in this way: “while the disenchanting explore theories of the New Age, members of this close community, thousands of kilometres apart, are celebrating the Third Age: retirement.” These were people who had decided that, as their children were busy with the care of their own family, it was time to leave the safety of their homes and see the country.

This documentary was of great interest to me for a number of reasons. During my last four or five trips to the north of Australia I have noticed the growth in this cultural phenomenon. The more I travel the more I realise that a great proportion of the domestic tourist population in the north are made up of Australians spending their holidays and retirement doing loops of the continent.

In this article I went to work with ideas about the ambivalence non-Aboriginal Australians have for Aboriginal people and Aboriginality. The article features ethnographic material collected while in the Kimberley region of Western Australia. This will be used to demonstrate that in many ways, the ideas about the Aboriginal Other reflect deep-seated and long-standing patterns of denial and desire of many non-Aboriginal people. On the other hand, those I met often expressed disdain towards Aboriginal people and Aboriginal life.

Using evidence from an ethnographic study in the Kimberley region, I will show that at one and the same time many loopies both spurn and yearn Aboriginality.

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## *Bennett House: Aboriginal Heritage as Real Estate in East Perth*

Vivienne HILLYER – Writer and artist on the South Coast of Western Australia.

In the early hours of Sunday morning, October 25, 1998, Nyungah Elder Robert Bropho received a telephone call from a resident of East Perth informing him that Bennett House, a registered Aboriginal site of particular significance to the Stolen Generations, was being demolished. Bropho immediately alerted the media and made the trip from Eden Hill to Bennett and Royal Streets, East Perth to witness the destruction. On arrival at approximately 8.00 a.m., the dozer driver was knocking off and all that remained of Bennett House was a mound of rubble, the dust still settling. The driver stated that the demolition team had been contracted by the East Perth Redevelopment Authority (EPRA).

At that point in the history of Bennett house, many Aboriginal Elders had not been informed that the controversial proposed exchange of EPRA owned lands for the WA Aboriginal Affairs Department’s land holding body, the Aboriginal Lands Trust (ALT) Bennet House land, had been formally enacted. No definitive consensus amongst the wider Aboriginal community had occurred regarding the land exchange, as will be discussed in more detail later in this paper, nor had demolition of the premises been an agenda item for discussion at meetings. Therefore, the sudden destruction of Bennett House came as a shock even to those who had agreed to an exchange of lands. This sense of shock and dismay continues to reverberate throughout the Aboriginal community today.

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*Dedicated Seats for Indigenous Australians in Federal Parliament*

**Alexander REILLY** – Senior Lecturer, Division of Law, Macquarie University.

This paper discusses a proposal for the allocation of dedicated seats in the Federal Parliament for Indigenous Australians. The article briefly examines the history of Indigenous participation in mainstream politics, tracing the struggle for voting rights and for representation in Federal Parliament. The article explores the bases for Indigenous claims to special representation focussing, in particular, on the importance of ‘identity’ and of ‘group rights’ for effective representation. The article concludes by considering some of the many issues surrounding the implementation of a dedicated seats proposal.

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*Maori Women’s Weavings of Law, Justice and Difference*

**Leah WHIU** – University of Waikato

The central strands in this weaving are the repressed and erased voices of Maori women who, in the contest of discussions with a State agency in Aotearoa/New Zealand – the Law Commission – about access to justice issues. Those issues concerned the oppressive and unjust practices deployed by the legal system to mask and legitimate its establishment, and its self-perpetuating ideologies and myths such as the unitary sovereign, one [English] rule of law for all, and the unified nation-state.

Since the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi and with the subsequent and ongoing process of colonisation in Aotearoa/New Zealand, this genre of concerns has haunted the construction of relationships and the negotiation of differences between the Indigenous people of Aotearoa and the State, and between the Indigenous people and the dominant white people of Aotearoa – the Pakeha. While 160 years have passed since the signing of the treaty and Pakeha colonisation has been highly successful in destroying the Indigenous people’s ideology, spirituality, language, culture, law and social systems, resistance to Pakeha hegemony has not dissipated.

This paper will demonstrate how the origins of the foundation of the western liberal State and its constitutional apparatus in Aotearoa is masked and legitimated by what Nan Seuffert has referred to as the conceptual tactics of colonisation.

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*Troubled Canadian Gazing: Aboriginal Women’s Lifestorytelling, Multicultural Nationalism, and the Australian-Canadian Comparative Model*

**Jennifer KELLY** – completed her Ph.D. at the University of Calgary, Alberta, Canada. Currently she teaches part-time at Red Crow College on the Blood Reserve (Kainai Nation) in southern Alberta, is involved in community anti-racist activism, as well as a project to record stories of survivors of the residential schools on the reserve.

... Almost thirty years ago, Canadian author and critic Margaret Atwood proposed that “survival” has played a central role in Canadian culture, not only as an enduring theme in Canadian Literature (images of near-freezing settlers abound) but as a foundational mythos of nation-building and national identity. Atwood’s suggestion, while generalised and formulaic, was popular in the wave of Canadian nationalism and thematic criticism that legitimated “Can Lit” as a field of study in the 1970s. Canadian economic prosperity and a more secure sense

of national and international location (consistent UN rankings of Canada as the best place in the world to live, and a reputation as a nation of peacekeepers, for example) would appear to have mitigated somewhat the well-documented Canadian sense of inferiority vis-à-vis the United States and any collective preoccupation with physical survival in a hostile northern environment. And yet, the increasing power of multinational capital to override individual nations' control over economic affairs, increased Aboriginal activism in Australia and Canada, shared concerns about the "Americanisation" of Australian and Canadian cultures, even the very existence, and popularity, of something like *Survivor: The Outback* are telling. Those anxieties about national identity, though perhaps transformed, still haunt Canada and Australia.

The focus of this article is not the television phenomenon *Survivor: The Outback* per se, but I would like to suggest that the cross-global gaze that constitutes the Canadian-Australian comparative model is not as comfortably removed from that constructed by *Survivor* (particularly that of the typically anti-American Canadian viewer), as those of us doing such work in Canada might like to think. I am concerned in particular with how the Australian-Canadian comparative model constrains the analysis of the diverse nationalist aspirations of the multiple Aboriginal nations whose territories are overlain by Canada and Australia – aspirations postcolonial theory in particular claims to support.

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### *Fringedweller: A Strategic Intervention at the Interface*

**Sharon DELMEGE** – Murdoch University, Western Australia.

When Robert Bropho's *Fringedweller* was published in 1980, it represented a striking intervention in a European medium of communication *par excellence*. What interests me is how a member of the most disadvantaged, marginalised and powerless class in Australia succeeded in producing a marketable commodity aimed directly at a 'white' audience. Since *Fringedweller* is included, but has not been examined, in the canon of Aboriginal writing, this paper will explore how it communicates the personal and particular experiences of Indigenous 'fringedwelling' to its intended readership.

Drawing on Malcolm Bradbury's assertion that '[a]ll human beings are narrators, seeking to reconcile what they see and what they say, seeking to make whole and credible the world they speak into existence' it is possible to assume that writers and readers are bound by a desire for meaning. Therefore, since narratives are expressed in language that constitutes texts, situating readers and their reading positions, and any meaning is shaped by readers' entire experiences at the point of reading, I shall assume that meaning is negotiated and only realised during this interactive process. Through a close reading of the Introduction and the first chapter of Bropho's book, I will show that although *Fringedweller* must assert the very differences it seeks to interpret, it is able to mediate the experiences of 'fringedwelling' because its marginalised voice is, necessarily, already in dialogue with dominant discourses.

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### *Launch for ATSIC Treaty Documents*

**Geoff CLARK** - Chairman, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission.

Launch of ATSIC Treaty Documents at Queens Hall, Parliament House, Melbourne on 8<sup>th</sup> May 2001. For further information please see [www.treatynow.org](http://www.treatynow.org).