Identity Negotiation among Indigenous Youth in Adelaide: Towards the Use of Both Essentialising and Hybridising Strategies

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1. Introduction

Since the late 1980s, Indigenous culture has been celebrated as a distinct Australian cultural heritage in the process of nation building, and positive discourses on Indigenous people were created by non-Indigenous artists, writers and historians, in which Indigenous people were represented as sacred spiritual beings (Lattas 1990). Consequently, Indigenous culture, which had long been excluded from school curricula, began to be taught in schools, and a number of Aboriginal personnel were newly employed at governmental institutions and schools.

However, with the simultaneous rise of neoliberalism in Australia, the federal government emphasised the value of self-help or self-reliance and the importance of citizens sharing obligations, rather than claiming differences between groups. The government’s aspiration to such values led to the deterioration of multiculturalism and demobilisation of the collective identity of ethnic minorities (Shiobara 2005; Moran 2011). Furthermore, it had an adverse effect on the Indigenous policy. The reluctance to grant special rights to certain groups of people ultimately led to a reduction in the governmental budget for Indigenous affairs. Social welfare services intended for Indigenous people since the 1970s have increasingly been questioned over the last few decades (Sutton 2009: 57-58).

In response to this trend towards the ‘mainstreaming’ of Indigenous people, the type of identity negotiation adopted by urban Indigenous people has gradually changed both at the political and daily level. Pan-Aboriginal identity constructed in Aboriginal rights movement during the 1960s and 1970s is no longer a powerful means to unite urban Indigenous people from various sociocultural backgrounds, although it has not lost its significance. Today, urban Indigenous people are more likely to assert their Indigenous rights, including land rights either at a family or an individual level, rather than a group level. This lack of solidarity in the Aboriginal community has occasionally caused a debate over the definition of an Aboriginal person, specifically, who should be regarded as Aboriginal for the purpose of social welfare and land rights, both within Aboriginal communities and in the mainstream society.

Today, Aboriginality is prescribed by the federal government in terms of descent, self-identification and community recognition, of which community recognition is considered the most important in determining eligibility for social services prepared for Indigenous people. Meanwhile, views over who should actually be accepted as a member of a local Aboriginal community vary among urban Indigenous people. In addition, there remains a stereotypical image of Indigenous people in the mainstream society, where ‘real’ Aboriginal people are equated with those who have dark skin and still maintain traditional Aboriginal culture, such as dreaming stories, sacred ceremonies and rituals, in remote parts of Australia. Therefore, various interpretations of Aboriginality exist among the government, mainstream society and local Aboriginal communities.

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Considering this political attitude related to Indigenous affairs and the resulting ambiguity of Aboriginal identity as described above, it is assumed that the sense of self of 'mixed-blood' urban Indigenous youth is likely to vacillate between the criteria of Aboriginality set by the government and the local Aboriginal community, in addition to their own sense of self. Therefore, this study examines the identity negotiation of urban Indigenous youth who have grown up in an individualised environment during the 1990s, through the analysis of their life experiences. In addition, it explores the manner in which Indigenous youth utilise as well as cope with their complex and multilayered identities in their everyday lives, drawing on ethnographic data mainly obtained from fieldwork that I conducted in Adelaide from 2007 to 2011.

2. Previous Studies of the Identity of Urban Indigenous People

The classic studies on urban Aboriginal identity mainly focused on pan-Aboriginal ethnicity or Aboriginality and regional group identity constructed in Aboriginal political movements in the 1970s and 1980s. These studies examined components of Aboriginality (Coombs, Brandl and Snowdon 1983; Keeffe 1988) and the process by which the identities are constructed and strategically utilised by Aboriginal political leaders and elders in political contexts (Jones and Hill-Burnett 1972). They argued that Aboriginality is no longer an ethnicity possessed only by Aboriginal people in remote Australia who maintain 'traditional' culture. For instance, Keeffe (1988) interpreted Aboriginality as an ideology manifested by persistence in traditional cultural practices and resistance to white hegemony. The perspective of resistance is crucial because it incorporates more dynamic understandings of culture and identity than that of persistence and enables the inclusion of all those who identify themselves as Aborigines in urban settings (Hollinsworth 1992: 149).

While Aboriginality played a positive role in the political context in uniting Aboriginal people throughout Australia and achieving self-determination, as Jones and Hill-Burnett (1972) indicated, it was an ethnicity forged in conflict and factionalism, and it retained the characteristic of essentialism by neglecting cultural diversity within Aboriginal communities under a group-wide identity claimed by politically motivated ethnic elites. Furthermore, studies that highlighted the reconstruction of the Aboriginal cultural style by urban Aboriginal people in the same period also indicated the problem of essentialism underlying the objectified cultural style. For instance, Schwab (1991), who analysed the distinct cultural style of Aboriginal people in Adelaide, as represented by the cultural value of caring and sharing among kin members, indicated the existence of those who opposed this value and thus chose not to comply with the related practices (pp.223–226). Also, Cowlishaw (1988), while examining the construction of 'oppositional culture' which includes defiant cultural practices, such as public drunkenness and imprisonment, by some Aboriginal people in New South Wales country towns, declared a conflict between those who positively define these differences and those 'who do not want to be oppositional' (p. 243).

As postcolonial studies began criticising the essential nature of a collective identity and the role of ethnicity was diminished under neoliberalism, the research focus shifted to more fluid and dynamic aspects of Aboriginal identity at an individual level. The studies on individual Aboriginal identity highlighted how urban Aboriginal people manipulate their multi-faced and complex identity forged through daily interaction with non-Aboriginal people depending on situations and purposes. For instance, based on the life experiences of Aboriginal people in Adelaide, Matsuyama (2006: 96–114) indicated that they
selected their identity flexibly as Aboriginal or Australian depending on the government policy in each period of time. Moreover, there was diversity in the sense of self as Aboriginal even within a family, with some members identifying themselves as Aboriginals and being actively involved in the Aboriginal community, and others choosing to live as Australians, distancing themselves from other Aboriginals. Moreover, Greenop and Memmott (2013: 274-275) indicated that young Aboriginal people in an outer suburb of Brisbane developed a type of oppositional identity which embraces non-Aboriginal residents based on shared experiences of poverty and shame. This case, they argued, shows that contemporary Aboriginal identities do not exclusively rely on kinship or shared experience of Indigenous people but can be more intercultural in nature.

In these studies, hybrid identity was seen as something positive as opposed to essentialism because it fosters creativity and empowerment by allowing particular individuals to live between two worlds and reconstruct their identities. However, given the ambivalences hybridity entails and the various difficulties (e.g. low retention rate at school and low labour force participation rate\(^2\)) faced by Indigenous youth in Australian society, who are thought to have the most dynamic and hybrid identity, it cannot be said that the hybrid identity possibly held by most of the ‘mixed-blood’ Indigenous youth have earned them positive social and cultural experiences.

For instance, Morgan’s (2013) recent study on the identity of Indigenous youth in Sydney regarding employment revealed the complexities of their identity. He indicated that Aboriginal youth, for whom Aboriginality is not particularly central to their sense of self, were reluctant to take advantage of employment opportunities based on Aboriginality under urban renewal programs. He argued that the resistant identities and cultural inclinations these youths developed in the local area as a centre of Indigenous protest culture are incompatible with professional ethics, thus discouraging them from forming vocational aspirations and entering the labour market.

Given that most of the Indigenous youth today are still marginalised in mainstream society and struggle between two worlds, it is not practical for Indigenous youth to abandon their collective identity or Aboriginality prescribed by the government, if it is an essentialised identity (cf. Beckett 1988), since this identity may help them overcome disadvantages by stabilising their sense of self and providing them employment or educational opportunities based on Aboriginality. Therefore, one of the strategies they could adopt in their identity negotiation may include manipulating their plural and hybrid identity while deploying essentialised identity in a particular context.

In this regard, Hall’s theory of identity politics is useful. Based on the case of Black cultural politics in Britain, he identified two forms of identity politics. He called the collective ‘Black’ identity created by the Caribbean, East African and the Asian diaspora in anti-racist struggles of the 1970s ‘Identity Politics One’. This refers to the classic use of homogeneous identity, which assumes essentialism by silencing the diverse experiences of people from different places of origin within a category or group (Hall 1991: 52-56).

On the other hand, he referred to a new form of identity politics as ‘the politics of living identity through difference’. This type of identity engages rather than suppresses differences, recognising that each individual holds multiple social identities. Hall (1991: 57-59) maintained that since multiple identities do not remain the same, and tend to locate people socially in multiple positions, it is the only political game that the subordinates can engage at their disposal.

Furthermore, Hall argued that while these two types of identities constantly overlap and interweave, it is important for the colonised to struggle on not one but two fronts to counter hegemony. The
characteristic of Hall’s argument is that the colonised should utilise both essentialising and hybridising strategies in their identity politics, without obliterating identity based on essentialism altogether. Despite differences in the historical and social situations of diaspora and Indigenous people, this strategy of identity negotiation may be applied to urban Indigenous people in Australia, who are forced to live under the law of others with overwhelming power.

3. The Present Adelaide Aboriginal Community

According to the 2011 census, the population of Aboriginal people in Adelaide is approximately 15,000, which accounts for 1.3 percent of the total Adelaide population (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2011c). The majority of the Aboriginal people in Adelaide are originally from two former southern reserves located within a few kilometres of the city, Point Pearce and Point McLeay (Raukkan). This group of people generally maintain relatively strong family and social ties and constitute a central group in the Adelaide Aboriginal community. There is also an additional Aboriginal group that does not have kinship with those from the former southern reserves, and is marginalised in the community. This group consists mainly of Aboriginal people from interstate, members of the Stolen Generation, Aboriginal people reared in institutions or white foster families and those who once chose to sever their connection with Aboriginal people, yet began to identify themselves as Aboriginals recently.

While interaction between a central group and marginal group can be seen in organisational activities and events, their association on a daily basis is limited, unless kinship ties are established between the groups. Furthermore, the high rate of intermarriage between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Adelaide (75.8 percent for Aboriginal males, 77.7 percent for Aboriginal females) (Biddle 2013: 4) and expanding socioeconomic disparities among Aboriginal people have diversified their sociocultural situation, complicating their social relationships.

Although the Aboriginal population is dispersed throughout the city, it is relatively concentrated in the city’s northern and north-western suburbs, where less expensive government housing is available (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2008: 18). For instance, in Port Adelaide, which is one of the oldest residential industrial districts in Adelaide, the Aboriginal population, as of 2011, represents approximately 17 percent of Adelaide’s Aboriginal population. Overall, the area is characterised by significantly lower household income, a higher proportion of persons working in manufacturing and higher unemployment rate compared with metropolitan Adelaide. In addition, there are higher proportions of people who speak a language other than English at home, with Vietnamese and Italian being the most spoken languages (Community Profile: City of Port Adelaide Enfield based on 2011 Australian Bureau of Statistics).

Owing to the dispersion of their residential areas, there are limited opportunities for the entire Aboriginal population to congregate. The social relationship of most Aboriginal people is primarily based on kinship, and people associate with other Aboriginal kin members through ceremonial occasions and family events, such as birthday parties. As classic studies on Aboriginal people in Adelaide showed, kinship and social relationship with people with a common origin, usually a particular mission or reserve, constitute the primary basis of Aboriginal identity in urban settings (Inglis 1961: 203; Gale and Wundersitz 1982: 44).

Socialisation among Aboriginal people is also observed at an organisational level, and as Yamanouchi (2010) showed with the case of Aboriginal people in Sydney, participation in the events or activities of local Aboriginal organisations provides Aboriginal people from various socio-cultural backgrounds with
opportunities to forge an Aboriginal identity in addition to the one based on kinship. Similar to other capital cities, there are a variety of Aboriginal organisations to support the everyday living of Aboriginal people in Adelaide. During the 1960s and 1970s, all-Aboriginal voluntary associations were established with the aim of dealing with problems faced by Aboriginal people who have just arrived in the city, such as poor housing, limited employment opportunities and discrimination in the wider society, by providing them with economic, social and political resources. There were instances when these associations became political by presenting a unified voice to influence their own affairs and acting as a pressure group for causes such as Aboriginal land rights (Pierson 1977: 52-54).

Today, however, such voluntary associations or self-help organisations have been replaced by governmental or non-governmental Aboriginal organisations, where Aboriginal people work under the administration of Anglo-Australian officials. Some of the Aboriginal organisations provide recreational activities for local Aboriginal people to participate in and associate with other Aboriginal people. Other contexts of socialisation are annual events held on National Sorry Day or during National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC) Week. Moreover, as Macdonald pointed out with the case of Aboriginal community in New South Wales, the introduction of social security payments, including unemployment benefits, single parent benefits and pensions, in the 1970s led to an increasing lack of sociality and caused individualisation among Aboriginal people in Adelaide (cf. Macdonald 2000: 107).

The present situation of the Adelaide Aboriginal community was described by an elder in her seventies who had lived in Adelaide for more than forty years and lamented the loss of solidarity among Aboriginal people as it was in old days:

In the 1970s and 1980s, there was a Kaurna community. In those days, Aboriginal people were united and tried to resist the social system by receiving better education. But today, Kaurna elders who played the central role in the Aboriginal rights movement passed away... And the younger generation didn't take over the movement. The younger generation can now get more funding from the government than in the past. The young generation today depends on government money and doesn't appreciate the importance of education.

Given this circumstance, solidarity among Aboriginal people in the political context has weakened compared with the 1970s, and the Adelaide Aboriginal community today can be characterised as a social network of people loosely connected to one another. This lack of solidarity has occasionally caused disputes over who are the legitimate members of the Adelaide Aboriginal community. In addition to the criteria of Aboriginality prescribed by the government, it is essential for one to be able to identify a common relative with the existing members of the local Aboriginal community to gain full acceptance. Moreover, although Aboriginal people publicly emphasise the irrelevance of skin colour to their Aboriginality, fair-skinned Aboriginal people are more likely to be doubted of their Aboriginality than those with darker skin, especially when they are originally from outside the state (Kurita 2011: 21-23). As Schwab cited, to be accepted as an Aboriginal and to be accepted as a member of the Adelaide Aboriginal community are completely different matters, and the latter process takes significantly longer than the former (Schwab 1988: 93).
4. Life Experiences of Indigenous Youth

In what follows, the life experiences of three Indigenous youth ranged between their late teens and the late twenties will be presented. I met these Indigenous youth through state educational institutions for Indigenous people in northern and north-western suburbs of Adelaide. It should be noted that the educational level of Indigenous people in the area is significantly lower than that of non-Indigenous people. For instance, only 22 percent of Indigenous people aged over 15 years in Port Adelaide have completed Year 12 schooling, compared with 44 percent of total persons aged over 15 years (Community Profile of Port Adelaide and Enfield based on 2011 Australian Bureau of Statistics). In addition to the cases of the three individuals, the experiences of other Indigenous youth gained from an interview conducted at an Aboriginal community college will also be referred to supplement the information.

1) The Case of Jack

Jack is fair-skinned and in his twenties. He grew up in a northern suburb of Adelaide, the son of an Aboriginal mother (of Nurranga and Kaurna descent) and a non-Aboriginal father. After his parents separated in his early childhood, he was raised by his maternal family. His Aboriginal family has a local kin network comprising approximately 200 people, and some of his relatives visit his house daily. Thus, he spent a lot of time with his aunts in his childhood and learned Aboriginal English words from them. He attended a local public school where his mother worked as an Aboriginal Education Worker (AEW). There were students from various ethnic backgrounds at the school, and he helped international students as a part of peer group activities. Although he experienced racism at school, his mother and his Aboriginal cousins always protected him. At secondary school, he capitalized on a tutor program for Aboriginal students, which helped him gain high academic achievement.

Aboriginal Studies was taught at school during Reconciliation Week, but he was less interested, since ‘It wasn’t really in-depth Aboriginal studies’. Although he had opportunities to learn Aboriginal history from his uncle who worked at an Aboriginal family history unit of a South Australian museum, he paid less attention to it. After graduating from high school, he worked at a golf course. It was after his sister passed away that he reflected on his lifestyle. At his sister’s funeral, his uncle, who was an Aboriginal performer, encouraged him to learn the Aboriginal dance:

I and the sister who passed away were much closer [than my other sister]⋯ She was very culturally aware, so always with members of our family. ⋯ Like me growing up as a kid⋯ two older sisters to look after me, culture wasn’t very important to me. I wanted to be an AFL footy player, and I played at a high level footy until she passed away. So I never thought about it. That wasn’t important at all. Then, when she passed away in 2006, I just totally stopped playing footy. I couldn’t play footy much anymore. I didn’t really enjoy it. When she passed away⋯ it’s really wired, I got sick every time, just like, lost all of my energy⋯ It’s just when I started getting dancing and teaching with uncle. It built my strength and my identity again. Now I’m twice as strong as what I was before.

Later, he entered a university to study Aboriginal history and Aboriginal land rights legislation with ABSTUDY. In addition, he began learning the Kaurna language at an Aboriginal cultural centre. Since he mastered the language quickly, a non-Aboriginal linguist engaged in the reconstruction of the
language encouraged him to be his successor. At the time of the fieldwork, he was teaching Kaurna at several schools and was also a member of a local Aboriginal dance group. Moreover, he was nominated as the Young Australian of the Year 2011 for contributing to the Australian community by teaching Kaurna.

Despite his light skin, he always felt a sense of difference:

I've always felt different. The way we talk and live are just a little bit different from other people. We grew up speaking Aboriginal words, and a lot of other people didn't know what we were speaking.

Today, he feels most Aboriginal when he performs the Aboriginal dance and speaks Kaurna:

I always feel Aboriginal... But it's just that I want more because we have had more, like with the dancing, culture, corroborees all that kind of stuff, you know, where you get taken to bush and that... We haven't even had the opportunity to be taken in if we don't want to be because it's just been banned from us.

This remark illustrates Jack's underlying sense of himself as a victim who has been deprived of opportunities to acquire 'traditional' Aboriginal culture. However, at the same time, he regarded himself as 'multicultural' because the multicultural environment he experienced in his school days facilitated his association with people from difference ethnic backgrounds: 'I'm really multicultural because I went to a multicultural school. I don't have any problems with any race or culture... During primary school, my best mate was from Thailand'. In his private life, he associated with a Vietnamese-Australian partner whom he met at high school. She also grew up in the northern suburb and has interacted with Aboriginal people since her school days. She was incorporated into the everyday practice of reciprocity among Jack's family members, which included sharing food, cash and shelter, and she occasionally participated in Aboriginal cultural events and activities with Jack.

Although Jack had a sense of difference as an Aboriginal person, he did not consider the meaning of being Aboriginal, nor did he explicitly assert it to the wider society in the early period of his life. Because he chose to enhance his sense of self as Aboriginal, however, he had to explore the ways to 'become' an Aboriginal and present his Aboriginality to the wider society. It can be said that the presence of his uncle, who was familiar with certain cultural elements, facilitated the reconstruction of his Aboriginality.

It should be noted that a handful of Indigenous youth who held jobs related to Indigenous culture, like Jack, had relatives who were familiar with 'traditional' Aboriginal culture, and they obtained their degree or certificate in Aboriginal cultural studies at universities. For instance, a teacher of Aboriginal culture at an Aboriginal school, who is in his twenties and is of Adnyamathanha descent, learned how to play didgeridoo from his father who owns an Aboriginal performing company and completed his degree in anthropology. It can be said that cultural elements, such as dance and language, provide these Indigenous youth with tangible evidence of their identities that can be easily acknowledged in mainstream society as identity based on 'authentic' Aboriginal culture.
2) The Case of Tasha

Tasha is fair-skinned and in her twenties, the daughter of an Aboriginal mother and a non-Aboriginal father. Her maternal grandmother was of Ngarrindjeri and Kaurna descent, and was a prominent Aboriginal activist in Adelaide. Her mother, who was raised in a local Aboriginal community, also strongly asserted her Aboriginality by participating in political activities within the community.

Following her parents separation soon after her birth, and until the age of eight, she was raised mostly by her maternal grandmother, and learned Aboriginal English and stories from her. She was then placed with her Aboriginal aunt who lived with her non-Aboriginal partner in a country town in the Yorke Peninsula. While she maintained her Aboriginal kinship relations by regularly visiting her relatives in Adelaide, her aunt’s partner rejected the Aboriginal cultural values she learned from her grandmother, such as the importance of reciprocity among family members, and attempted to inculcate into her Western cultural values, such as individualism and self-help. At the local primary school, she was a target of racism. However, she gradually learned how to associate with Anglo-Australian students and befriended them.

At high school, she chose to take a class on Aboriginal Studies 'because it was an easy subject', and learned the culture of different ‘tribes’ in South Australia, such as their traditional life styles and eating habits, which she enjoyed. After completing high school, she enrolled in a hair dressing course at mainstream TAFE in Adelaide by using ABSTUDY, and worked as a hairdresser for a few years.

At the time of the fieldwork, she lived with her white partner, Adam, whom she met at school, and their children. While all of her family members resided in public housing for Aboriginal people, she lived at a privately rented housing in a north-western suburb, few kilometres away from where her mother and other relatives lived. Although her house was favourable compared with houses of average white families in the area, she viewed herself as a ‘poor Australian’ because of the lack of property or assets in her own family. She was also working as a waitress at a restaurant managed by Adam’s parents while caring for their children.

Having rejected Aboriginal cultural values in the predominantly white environment, Tasha could hardly find any positive meanings in being Aboriginal. Thus, she did not actively claim her Aboriginality in the wider society or speak Aboriginal English, even though she understood it. She seldom visited local Aboriginal organisations or participated in any local Aboriginal-related events because she felt she was not fully accepted by other Aboriginal people from the local community. She explained her experience as follows:

If I walk into an Aboriginal organisation, I usually wear makeup, do my hair, and I wear jewellery. So they usually think I’m better than them. That’s how it comes across. I feel out of place, whereas [if] I walk into a shopping centre, full of white people, I feel fine. So I probably feel more comfortable in multicultural or white environment than I do just walking into Aboriginals. I get more judgment from Aboriginal people. They can be… They hate racism, but they forget they can be very racist too.

She further commented on her feelings when she communicated with dark-skinned Aboriginal people:

Unless they know who I am, and my family, they usually don’t like me because I’m fair-skinned.
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So being a half-caste, you are not fully accepted by white people because you are Aboriginal, and you are not accepted by darker people because they think we wanna be white. So it’s worst to be a half-caste. ...Because we are in the middle, we are not really accepted either way unless people know us.

However, in her private sphere of life, she was deeply embedded in an Aboriginal kin network and was involved in the everyday practice of reciprocity, including lending and borrowing cash among her immediate Aboriginal family members. Although Tasha frequently complained about her family members who depended heavily on this practice of reciprocity, she did not refuse demands from her relatives to lend them money, saying 'I cannot turn it down. If I did, I would feel very bad'. There were also times when the practice of reciprocity extended beyond her Aboriginal kin network. Tasha's partner, Adam, who worked as a repairperson, was also involved in the practice, for instance, when Tasha's family member urgently needed a huge sum of money for their relative's funeral. Tasha incorporated Adam into her kin network and everyday practice of reciprocity for her own convenience, and she utilised the family network by asking her relatives to become an emotional pillar when she had problems with Adam's family, some of whom do not accept her as an appropriate partner for him. She was well aware that she could not survive in mainstream society without her kin network.

Although Tasha was more familiar with Western cultural values and behavioural style than the rest of her family, she made the most of her Aboriginality, for instance, by utilising ABSTUDY to receive professional education in mainstream society. Moreover, the reason she was involved in the practice of reciprocity, despite knowing that such a practice may hinder her upward social mobility, is because reciprocity or the practice of 'demand sharing' serves as a survival strategy and assumes the role of performing relationships with family members, and the refusal to share may lead to damaging the relationship (Peterson and Taylor 2003; Badidge 2010). At the same time, however, the feeling of alienation from the local Aboriginal community occasionally made her sense of Aboriginality ambiguous, which in turn strengthened her sense of being a 'marginalised Australian'. She maintained a double consciousness of being Aboriginal and Australian, though it involved occasional conflict and inconsistency.

This double consciousness was shared by other fair-skinned Indigenous youth who had been fostered out to white families. For example, an Aboriginal woman in her twenties, the daughter of an Aboriginal father and a non-Aboriginal mother, was fostered out to a white family at the age of ten. Since she is fair-skinned, she concealed her Aboriginality at school to avoid prejudice. However, after she left high school in Year 11, she entered an Aboriginal community college to become a social worker in an Aboriginal community. Having spent an early stage of her childhood with her Aboriginal family, she characterised Aboriginal culture as family-orientated and valuing reciprocity in comparison with Western culture. Studying Aboriginal history and culture at the college provided her with pride in her Aboriginality; however, there were occasions in which her Aboriginality was rejected by dark-skinned Aboriginal people from the remote area, leading her to experience a sense of alienation. This is another example where a hybrid identity held by an Indigenous youth did not necessarily create something new or positive but caused confusion regarding the sense of self.

3) The Case of Rose

Rose is in her late teens and the daughter of the same Aboriginal mother as Tasha and Aboriginal
father. Although she is relatively fair-skinned, she is physically recognisable as Aboriginal. Since her father was imprisoned for many years, she was mainly raised by her mother and relatives in a north-western suburb. She attended a local primary school, where the proportion of Indigenous students was relatively high. Although she experienced racism in primary school, in secondary school, she met and befriended non-Indigenous students who had been raised in the same suburb. Rose was expelled from school in Year 10 because of a problem she caused with other students that involved physical violence. At the time of the fieldwork, she was studying at an Aboriginal community college using ABSTUDY. However, since she was frequently absent from class, she was suspended from the college several times. Not being able to find a goal in life, she spent much of her time babysitting her younger cousins or hanging around with her local friends who were in similar situations.

Because Rose had actively participated in the activities and events hosted by local Aboriginal organisations since her childhood, she was well known in the community. She did not overtly claim her Aboriginality to the mainstream society except under certain circumstances, such as when she gave a welcome speech as a Kaurna descendant to visitors at an Aboriginal heritage site. Nevertheless, there were times when she attempted to convey to her younger relatives Aboriginality as a pride and victim, as she had learned from her deceased grandmother, by telling them, ‘We are white outside, but black inside’. Also, she frequently posted the message ‘I’m Nunga® and proud of it’ on her Facebook page. In her daily life, she was deeply involved in the practice of reciprocity with her close kin. She regularly assumed the responsibility of babysitting her sister or cousins’ children. In turn, she borrowed money for her living expenses from them. While her sister, Tasha, frequently blamed Rose for being financially dependent on relatives, Rose took it for granted, insisting that she was taught in her childhood that ‘Nunga should share everything with each other’.

Meanwhile, she also associated with local non-Aboriginal youth, as mentioned earlier. For instance, Rose and her friend from high school, K, who was raised in a single-parent household, visited each other on a regular basis. Growing up in a poor area with a relatively high crime rate®, K and Rose protected each other from young local gangsters, involved in stealing and drug trade. While Rose was occasionally offended by non-Aboriginal people using Aboriginal English, she allowed her non-Aboriginal friends, including K, to use some Aboriginal words since she shared an identity as a ‘poor Australian’ with them. In return, complying with Aboriginal custom, K addressed Rose’s older relatives as ‘auntie’ or ‘uncle’ to show her respect for them. When asked if there were any cultural differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal families in her neighbourhood, Rose answered.

There is not much difference. Many of the youth in this community have alcohol and drug problems no matter if they are Aboriginals or white because their parents also have alcohol and drug problems, and they don’t look after their children.

(from field notes, 21 November 2009)

She also emphasised that ‘There are some Aboriginals being racist to whites. I used to be like that. But now we live in the same country, so we should get along’. However, no matter how close Rose was to K, Rose seldom asked K to lend her money for daily living expenses, although she asked K to buy her a drink or food when they went out for dinner. This offers a glimpse into her life strategy of uniting with her local non-Aboriginal friends in her social life, while utilising the network of mutual help among Aboriginal kin in everyday life.
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Growing up in an Aboriginal environment, Rose was deeply embedded in Aboriginal social and kin networks and acquired Aboriginal cultural values, including the notion of caring and sharing in her everyday life. At the same time, however, her daily interaction with local Anglo-Australian youth and shared identity with lower-class Australians occasionally blurred the ethnic boundary. Her occasional manifestation of Aboriginality as well as the intentional exclusion of her non-Aboriginal friends from the daily practice of reciprocity can be interpreted as her attempt to redraw a boundary between the two cultural domains.

Phrases such as 'I'm Nunga and proud of it' and 'We have lost a lot of our culture' were often heard in the narratives of Aboriginality among other Indigenous youth in Adelaide. Rose's younger brother, Joseph, for instance, who is relatively dark-skinned, was frequently subjected to racism both at school and in the mainstream society when befriending some non-Aboriginal youths, yet he had a strong sense of pride as an Aboriginal. After completing high school, he also entered the Aboriginal community college. One day, at a cross-cultural event held at the college, a group of Muslim migrants were invited to share their culture with Aboriginal students. When one member stated that Muslim culture is the oldest culture in the world, Joseph challenged his claim, arguing that it is the Aboriginal culture that is the oldest, which he learned from his deceased grandmother as well as at school. His assertion of Aboriginal culture as the oldest living culture in the world may be interpreted as his attempt to protect his special status as an original inhabitant whose culture should be differentiated from others in multicultural Australia.

Despite their differing perspectives on being Aboriginal, it is important to highlight that Tasha and Rose both identified themselves as 'underprivileged Australians'. This perception surfaced most prominently in their hostile attitudes towards immigrants and refugees, especially African refugees in the nearby suburb. As most African refugees are settled in lower socioeconomic suburbs, they share the public space with local Aboriginal people. Some of the Aboriginal people that I interviewed opposed the government's humanitarian programme which provides refugees with basic resources to help them resettle in Australia.

Rose complained that African refugees were given priority access to resources such as public housing, claiming that 'The government should help its people before helping people from other countries'. Tasha expressed a similar attitude towards African refugees. She commented, 'Spending our tax on building new shelters for refugees is wasteful'. When the sisters said 'its people' or 'our tax', they positioned themselves as Australian citizens, and their sense of self as Aboriginal individuals receded into the background. These remarks resemble those few Australians who criticise the government's 'excessive' welfare policy towards Indigenous people and other ethnic minorities. There is an underlying sense of fear in such remarks that they may be further spatially disempowered by the recent arrival of the refugees, which resembles white Australian's desire to manage a space or nation (Hage 2000: 42).

5. Analysis: The Manner of Identity Negotiation

The Indigenous youths' identity as Aboriginal was shaped by several factors, including the maintenance of kin and social networks, the degree of acceptance from the local Aboriginal community, cultural practice of reciprocity and the use of Aboriginal English. While the Aboriginality of Jack and Rose, who mainly grew up in an Aboriginal environment, was seldom questioned by other Aboriginal
people, Tasha's sense of self as Aboriginal was more ambiguous because of her feeling of alienation from the local Aboriginal community.

Meanwhile, the three youth had a sense of self as Australian citizens to some extent through everyday interaction with non-Aboriginal youth and the development of friendships with them. Through daily associations with non-Aboriginal people, there were situations in which their ethnic boundary blurred. In engaging in the everyday practice of reciprocity among Aboriginal kin, Jack and Tasha actively incorporated their non-Aboriginal partners into this practice as well. Furthermore, Rose emphasised class commonality over racial difference by allowing her non-Aboriginal friends to use Aboriginal English.

Nevertheless, such a blurring of ethnic boundary did not lead the youth to completely abandon their consistent identity as Aboriginal. The youth utilised their difference as Aboriginal in certain situations and attempted to redraw the cultural boundary when necessary. The use of Aboriginal identification was most prominent in the field of education. For example, Jack and Tasha succeeded in obtaining job opportunities by studying at mainstream educational institutions with a scholarship based on Indigenous identification. They did not appear to have any hesitations to utilise ABSTUDY since they shared a sense of victimisation to some extent and thus believed they deserved such a privilege.

This attitude was shared by many other young Indigenous students at the Aboriginal community college. Especially, there was a tendency among the students who had not been told of their Aboriginal descent until recently or those who were not taught any Aboriginal culture either at home or school to blame the government for 'losing' their culture, which reflects their internalisation of a national discourse on Indigenous people as a victim of colonisation. This discourse, which was constructed acknowledging the injustice of past Indigenous policies, prevailed among Aboriginal people through Aboriginal Studies taught at schools.

Therefore, it can be said that these youth positioned themselves flexibly between both societies depending on the purpose and situation. One can observe the type of identity negotiation that involves inconsistency and dynamics, which Hall called 'the politics of living identity through difference'. This type of identity politics has the possibility to challenge the static and exclusive Aboriginal identity claimed under identity politics by transcending the conventional binary opposition between the Aboriginal and Western cultural domains.

However, given that Tasha and Rose remain marginalised in Australian society despite their capacity to manipulate their hybrid identities, while Jack succeeded in finding an employment based on Aboriginality in mainstream society, it can be said that that the difference in the nature of the Aboriginal cultural knowledge held by these youth separates them from mainstream society in terms of socioeconomic success. By capitalizing on an educational support system for Indigenous students, Jack succeeded in establishing a career in Australian society without abandoning his Aboriginality. It is important to note that the 'Aboriginal culture' Jack learned at the university is the culture, which is regarded by the government as 'authentic' Aboriginal culture, and thus functions as certifiable cultural capital. On the other hand, Tasha and Rose did not have access to such certified cultural capital nor had means to perform their Aboriginality. As Tasha stated, 'I haven't achieved much in my life yet'. The lack of sense of having been distributed hope and opportunities by the nation for self-fulfilment may have led to their hostile attitude towards the recently arrived, highly visible refugees (Hage 2003).

The manner of identity negotiation Jack adopted in his public sphere of life can be characterised as what Hall called 'Identity Politics One': Jack mobilised an essentialised form of identity and officially
acknowledged cultural difference in order to pursue his career in mainstream society. At the same time, by positioning himself flexibly in both the Aboriginal and multicultural environments in his private sphere of life, he adopted ‘the politics of living identity through difference’. It is important to indicate that the manipulation of his hybrid identity was possible because he had already acquired a primary identity as Aboriginal through kinship and had the privilege to access authorised Aboriginal culture. In this sense, essentialised and hybrid identities are not dichotomous, but the former serves as a base of the latter. Jack’s identity negotiation does not imply a return to ‘Identity Politics One’. Rather, he lives in the tension of two forms of identity politics, the politics ‘which requires the holding of the tension between that which is both placed and not stitched in place’ and ‘living in the tension of identity and difference’ (Hall 1991: 50).

It is also indicated that this strategy of identity negotiation is similar to that deployed by the second generation of the Arabic diaspora in Australia. According to Noble and Tabar (2002), Arabic-speaking youth adopted essentialising and hybridising strategies in their identity negotiation depending on the situation, for example, by exhibiting essentialised Lebanese-ness to counter racism at school, while emphasising their hybrid identity as ‘Australian-Lebanese’ when opposing to their parents’ control at home. The authors argued that essentialising and hybridising strategies employed by these youths are not distinct but imbricated, emphasising that their ‘hybridity rests on a “strategic essentialism” which stabilises identity in the face of racism and marginalisation’ (Tabar 2002: 144).

Acquisition of Aboriginality derived from authorised cultural knowledge by some Indigenous youth may be considered as obeying the logic of the dominant society. However, given the power relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Australia, it is a compromising but practical way for the Indigenous youth still faced with racism and marginalisation to establish their position in mainstream society, which only accepts either Indigenous elites who enjoy Western lifestyles and values or Indigenous people who maintain and perform a certain type of Aboriginality prescribed and authorised by the nation as fellow citizens.

6. Conclusion

Having a sense of belonging as both Aboriginals and Australians, the Indigenous youth in this study articulated their plural and hybrid identities depending on their situations and purposes, which can be characterised as what Hall called ‘the politics of living identity through difference’. Their identity negotiation through the continuous positioning between Indigenous and Australian has the potential to transcend the binary dualism between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal worlds by locating themselves socially in multiple positions.

However, considering that the acquisition of authorised Aboriginal cultural knowledge opens up job opportunities for Indigenous youth in the mainstream society, while lack of access to such a cultural capital can keep them at the bottom of society; it can be said that the manipulation of hybrid identity paradoxically requires a primary or essentialised identity. As Hall suggested in his theory of identity politics, the use of both essentialising and hybridising strategies may be effective for the colonised, including Indigenous youth, to counter the hegemony of mainstream society. However, this does not imply a simple return to ‘Identity Politics One’. Living in tension between two forms of identity politics may have the potential to allow individuals to transcend the dualism between Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultural worlds while still maintaining a difference as Indigenous. This strategy of
identity negotiation is similar to the one deployed by the members of some diaspora in Australia who are also included in the nation as Australian citizens yet excluded from mainstream society due to poverty and racism.

Endnotes

(1) Neoliberalism in Australia can be characterised by economic rationalism, such as an emphasis on free market, aspiration to small government and individualism. Economic and social reforms implemented under neoliberalism promoted the liberalisation of finance, trade and the labour market and tightened the eligibility criteria of social welfare services. With the advent of the Howard government in 1996, the trend toward neoliberalism was further accelerated, resulting in widening the economic gap among Australian citizens (Shiobara 2005: 12).

(2) According to 2011 census, 25 percent of Indigenous people aged 15 years and over completed Year 12, compared with about half (52 percent) of non-Indigenous people. Also, the unemployment rate for Indigenous people aged 15 to 64 was 13 percent compared with 5 percent of non-Indigenous people in major cities (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2011a; 2011b).

(3) This college is largely funded by the government but totally managed and controlled by Aboriginal people. It was established in 1973 to improve the employment rate of Aboriginal people by providing them with vocational education. It is one of the major places for the Aboriginal people in Adelaide to congregate and socialise with one another.

(4) ABSTUDY is the Aboriginal Study Assistance Scheme, administered and delivered by Centrelink for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at school or doing further studies. The primary eligibility criteria are that one is of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander decent, is an Australian citizen and is enrolled in and studying full-time in an approved course. The rates to be paid differ depending on one’s own income or assets and income or assets of one’s family.

(5) Nunga is a collective term for Aboriginal people originally from various regional groups in Adelaide. The term was created by Aboriginal people themselves in the 1970s as a substitute for ‘Aborigines’. Nunga identity assumes resistance to hegemony of the mainstream society (Matsuyama 2006: 65; Amery 2000: 224).

(6) According to Office of Crime Statistics and Research, in 2009, Port Adelaide/Enfield had the second highest crime rate per 1,000 population (193.06) in Adelaide, with Playford, the northern suburb of Adelaide having the highest crime rate (222.23) (http://www.oscar.sa.gov.au/maps.html).

(7) The Australian government started to intake African refugees escaping civil wars and ‘ethnic cleansing’ in their home countries such as Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia and Sierra Leone through humanitarian program in the early 1990s. The African refugee intake reached a peak during the period 2003 to 2005, accounting for 70 percent of refugees resettled in Australia (Department of Immigration and Citizenship 2009: 24).

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Identity Negotiation among Indigenous Youth in Adelaide

*the Conditions of History, Ashgate Pub.Company.*


Data Source
SUMMARY

Identity Negotiation among Indigenous Youth in Adelaide: Towards the Use of Both Essentialising and Hybridising Strategies

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In response to the weakening of ethnic identity under neoliberalism in addition to criticism of the essentialism underlying notions of ethnicity in the social sciences, recent studies focusing on urban Indigenous people have highlighted hybrid and dynamic aspects of the identity of 'mixed-blood' Indigenous people. However, hybrid identity has not necessarily produced positive social and cultural experiences for Indigenous youth.

Given this, the present study drew on Hall’s theory of identity politics in order to examine identity negotiation among Indigenous youth in Adelaide. While ‘mixed-blood’ Indigenous youth articulated plural and hybrid identities in response to specific situations and for specific purposes, it was the difference represented by their Aboriginal cultural knowledge or their strategic deployment of an essentialised collective identity based on such knowledge that separated them from mainstream Australian society in terms of socioeconomic success.

This study has suggested that the manipulation of hybrid identity paradoxically requires a primary or essentialised identity derived from ‘authentic’ cultural knowledge. In this sense, the use of both essentialising and hybridising strategies in identity negotiation may potentially enable Indigenous youth to counter racism and marginalisation and establish their own position in mainstream society.