

EMERGING ETHNICITIES AND INSTRUMENTAL IDENTITIES  
IN AUSTRALIA AND BRAZIL

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Emerging ethnicities are about the personal and the political dimensions of people's lives. This is what makes them so rich for consideration in post-colonial and post-imperial spaces, where the conditions of their formation and maintenance have been profoundly affected by historical events. As identities have undergone episodes of shift and reformulation amidst changing social and political conditions, working with emerging ethnicities sets us on the path to better understanding the considerable variations that are found in individual life experiences within deeply political spaces. This chapter documents ethnicity as an emergent process in the contexts of Australia and Brazil, focusing on ethnic citizenries that are found at the heart of debates concerning equity and social justice. Focusing specifically on the discrete histories and experiences of ethnicity in these contexts, I begin the process of defining emerging ethnicities, seeking a more comprehensive methodology for working with ethnic citizenry in post-contact and often wounded spaces.<sup>1</sup> In both cases what is examinable are the cross generational qualities of emerging ethnicity; namely the manner in which different generations come to embody and enact their ethnic citizenry. As a comparative study, I focus on three dimensions of ethnicity: the history and nature of ethnic citizenry, cross generational shifts in expressions of ethnic

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<sup>1</sup> Wounded and interrupted spaces represent instances where ethnic identity is a political project prefaced on collective and social memory that attests to difficult or traumatic histories and contemporary inequities. The inspiration for this terminology comes from Rose (2004).

identity, and the strengths and vulnerabilities of those identities which are in a state of emergence. Through a focus on emergence, I challenge the myth of ethnic identity as singular, primordial, and immutable, and move towards a model of ethnicity as a making of identity, marked by qualities of fluidity and flexibility relative to contemporary socio-political situations and an aspirational future marked by the accordance of certain freedoms and rights.

Dominance of certain ethnic states and prevailing views on citizenry, enforced through nationalism and normalising judgements on what certain ethnic identities “look like,”<sup>2</sup> where they belong and how they might behave is at the core of what confronts emerging ethnicities. Emergence, with all of its associations with rising, genesis, newness, and manufacturing, is a powerful concept for engaging in the dialogic nature of ethnic citizenry. By harnessing the framework of emergence we find a space in which to recognise new expressions of old loyalties or new expressions of rethought, even new, loyalties. Emerging ethnicities are neither compromised, nor weak in their intrinsic value or for those who claim them. Their emergence is due to complex forces that have acted upon or been engaged by a cultural group, and strategic choices that are made in the reconfiguration of an ethnic identity around loyalties and ancestry. This could be a shift in the terms of membership, a move towards flexible notions of identifying, or a breakdown in earlier models of self-identification. Or, it could be a gradual dissolution in connections with ancestry and knowledge held to be distinct to a particular ethnic group. What causes these shifts to take place is multi-faceted. Reconfiguring ethnic identity and ethnic group boundaries goes beyond the legacy of cultural “assimilation” and cultural breakdown (Marks et al. 2007),

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<sup>2</sup> A distinction which is made in terms of physical appearance, but also in terms of cultural expressions such as proficiency in a particular language, bodily aesthetics, politics, and beliefs.

establishing the conditions to create something meaningful in the world right now.

The discipline of ethnic studies has generated several approaches to the study of ethnicity and therefore the unpacking of processes essential to identity politics. According to Levine, “the primordial approach situates ethnicity in the psyche, so deeply that society and culture are bent to its will. Ethnic identities and hatreds naturally draw people into persistent identities and antagonisms” (1999, 166). This approach has formulated an “understanding of ethnicity as rooted in deep-seated or ‘primordial’ attachments and sentiment” (Brubaker 2004, 49). Primordialism differs from instrumental adaptations to ethnic identity because it suggests an inability to shift according to circumstances. Whether manifest as deep-seated passions, or limited scope for a social existence beyond that which is circumscribed unto the individual and collective, memory and very particular styles of remembrance can work to create psychological essentialism around ethnic identity (Levine 1999, 166). Treating ethnic identity as primordial requires the particular relationship between the past and present to be enshrined in the sense of one’s self as an individual and member of a collective. A primordialist approach to ethnicity allows us to consider how deeply held and subjective loyalties come to be mandated and often powerfully defended, frequently at the expense of new forms of ethnic expression or reformulations of loyalty and belonging. Whilst the ethnic arrival point may be claimed as primordial (in that it allegedly replicates what has always been), the journey taken to this destination is open to change as a result of historical particularities and contemporary conditions affecting the way things are remembered.

Today, the prevailing view of ethnicity is that it is socially constructed (Yang 2000). In this vision of ethnicity, the process is

linked to existing socio-political structures and human agency. Ethnic identity becomes the product of actions undertaken by groups as they shape and reshape their self-identification—actions often set against a background of external social, economic, and political processes (Nagel 1994). In sum, the process of ethnicity is highly relational and rarely fixed. Taken further however, viewing ethnicity as an instrument positions it in relation to choice, and consideration of the costs and benefits associated with ethnic group membership (Yang 2000). According to an instrumentalist position, when an ethnic choice becomes available, the costs and benefits of this identity play a pivotal role in determining the options. Alternative assertions of ethnic identity become possible only when an ethnic status quo is challenged and superseded. From this, something distinct is born: not altogether new, but distinct from an earlier form. Some people choose an ethnic affiliation not for material gains, rewards, or access to resources and services, but for emotional, intellectual, and political satisfaction, which includes states of wellbeing, self-fulfilment, social attachment or recreational pleasure (Yang 2000, 47). For human groups that occupy marginal spaces, and for those groups whose cultural specificity is born of a political project based upon wounding and reclamation, the capacity to create and emerge in ethnic form is an essential component of survival.

### **Sociopolitical Contexts for Emerging Ethnicities and Instrumentalist Identities**

In Australia and Brazil, ethnic identities are realised or denied within frameworks of contested racial pluralism. In Australia, this escalated with the arrival of British colonisers, and a subsequent denial of citizenry and rights to indigenous people on the grounds of cultural difference and perceived racial inferiority. What followed were episodes of official and unofficial directives through policy and

socialisation to establish differences, and create forms of sameness. Well documented directives which affected the realisation and denial of certain ethnic identities in Australia include the White Australia policy and waves of targeted migration, the forced removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families by government agencies and church missions, policies of assimilation, and the propagation of a national identity built on the politicisation of multiculturalism (Carey and McLisky 2009, Hage 2000, Short 2008)<sup>3</sup>.

In Australia today, Indigenous families and communities define their ethnic citizenries in a manner of ways along various lines of ancestry, language specificity, urban, remote and rural experiences, and political viewpoints—all with varying emphases on their Indigenous heritage. This is far from the early depictions of indigenous cultures as exotic and unchanging, and in other words, primordial and essentialist (Cowlshaw 1987, 225). Such imaginaries diminished “the active part Aborigines were taking in adjusting (or adapting) to the situation they found themselves in” (Cowlshaw 1987, 225). The perceived imminent loss of culture, upon which this view was predicated, fed primordial visions of Aboriginality as an ethnic identity. The impact of this cannot be underestimated. Primordialist notions have supported marginalisation, and the construction of an imagined ‘authentic’ indigeneity versus a diminished or non-traditional form of indigeneity (see Cowlshaw 1987). Today, it is the Indigenous youth, those living

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<sup>3</sup> The ‘White Australia’ policy describes Australia’s approach to immigration from federation until the latter part of the 20th century, which favoured applicants from certain countries. The origins of the ‘White Australia’ policy can be traced to the 1850’s. In 1966 the Policy was abolished, and non-European migration began to cease. Forced child removals occurred in Australia from approximately 1869 until 1969, although in some places children were still being taken in the 1970s. State and missionary justifications for this removal included alleged child protection, belief in a ‘dying race’ and fear of miscegenation (see Manne 2001).

in rural and urban centres, individuals and families of inter-ethnic descent, and those who differentially activate their indigeneity over their life course, that have become fringe dwellers in a climate of cultural tropes surrounding ethnic citizenry. Recent statements in the Australian media pertaining to indigeneity, such as “It’s Hip to be Black” and “White is the New Black”(Bolt 2009) reveal a tension within public discourses of indigeneity, particularly within corners occupied by the White hegemonic ethnic norm, as to who is Indigenous, when is someone Indigenous enough, and what indigeneity mean in the context of contemporary Australia.

In Brazil, many similar social and structural conditions have functioned as catalysts for ethnic consciousness. Kinship, self-interest, and larger economic, political and social structures all underlie the social construction of Afro-descendant identity in northeastern Brazil. Discussions of ethnicity in these contexts are inflected by the historical particularity of a population with ancestral connections to a cross-Atlantic slave trade that forcefully brought generations of people from Africa to Brazil. Today, many Brazilians identify as Afro-descendant, yet the manner in which they do so is highly dependent on a range of complex variables including individual choice (self-declaration), family history, socio-economic status, location of residence, and imposed categories used in demographic data collection by national bodies. African heritage is traced through a history of slavery in Brazil set to the rhythm of imperialism and nation building. Beginning in the mid 1500s, the Portuguese traded enslaved Africans—a practice which would continue until its official abolishment in 1888 with the passing of the *Lei Áurea* (Golden Law) and for some time after that through illegal channels of human enslavement (Klein and Luna 2009). The history of African slavery in Brazil sits prominently, if not uncomfortably, in contemporary narratives of nationhood. This is due, in part, to the nation’s failure to

reconcile its difficult and traumatic past, and the historical tendency for Brazilian nationalism to be prefaced on the notion of 'sameness' and the blurring of ethnic distinctions. The beating heart of Brazilian nationalism was based on the myth of social homogeneity (sameness despite difference) (Schwartzman 2007). What masks as harmonious ethnic encounters or 'social memory' of accommodation and assimilation in the annals of Imperial history is, for Ramos, best understood as a process of creating "a recipe for homogenous nationality... an amalgam of whitened races with a unique and uniform national flavour" (2001, 3). The singularity of Brazil has been a point of national reflection since the Declaration of Independence in 1822 and the founding of the Republic in 1889 (Lauerhass 2006, 1). These conditions have borne emerging ethnicities and have become spaces of power that challenge primordial notions of belonging.

Resistance to claims of homogeneity have manifest in powerful enactments of distinct ethnic identities. Afro-descent has emerged as a politicised identity that calls for the recognition of racial plurality: "difference amidst claims to sameness". The Brazilian Census of 2009 provided five options for self-declared 'race', along colour lines. These include, 'preto' (black), 'branco' (white), 'pardo' (brown), 'amarelo' (yellow) and 'indígena' (indigenous) (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística). Leaving aside the obvious deconstruction demanded of how colour relates to race and in turn to ethnicity, these colour declarations and that of 'indígena' can be seen to represent five more generalist ethnic identities. In 2009, 6.9 percent of the Brazilian population, self-identified as preto (black) (ibid.). For many who identify as such, life is framed by "deep disparities in income, education and employment between lighter and darker-skinned Brazilians", and these "have prompted civil rights movements advocating equal treatment" (Wideangle 2007). The declaration of one's self as 'black' sits in relation to declarations of ethnic identity

such as Afro-descendant and Afro-Brazilian. This may or may not have reference to biological ancestry and involves varied associations with cultural ancestry. The emerging state of being, along lines of cultural specificity, and denial of ethnic homogeneity, is a condition of cultural strength rather than weakness. Wolf (1982, 387, in Cowlishaw 1987, 227) paints a picture of emergence as instrumentalist, in the following terms:

In the rough and tumble of social interaction, groups are known to exploit the ambiguities of inherited forms, to impart new evaluations or valences to them, to borrow forms more expressive of their interests, or to create wholly new forms to answer to changed circumstances... 'A culture' is thus better seen as a series of processes that construct, reconstruct, and dismantle cultural materials, in response to identifiable determinants.

### **Moments of Emergence: Examples from Australia and Brazil**

Throughout the course of ethnographic fieldwork in Borroloola, northern Australia, and northeastern Brazil, I have come to witness distinctions across generations and within self-declared collectives, according to ethnicity. In the first instance, I have observed the ways in which younger generation Indigenous people, as members of Yanyuwa families, shape their way of being Yanyuwa on new and creative terms. Secondly, in working with Brazilian educational bodies and affirmative action groups built up around an Afro-descendant ethnic identity, I have come to witness some of the ways in which younger people shape their Africanness into a political and social project of belonging.

The dynamic quality of Yanyuwa culture is embodied by cross-generational distinctions in what people choose to remember and forget, and what triggers exist in daily life to affect these moments of consciousness around a particular ethnic identity. Yamanouchi (2010)



has recently explored Indigenous identity politics in contemporary urban contexts of Australia. Her work, sophisticated in its articulation of flexible notions of identification, moves beyond essentialist and fixed notions of identity. Yamanouchi (2010) highlights the internal and external politics of urban indigeneity and the terms of identification and affiliative kinship. In Australia, narratives of young Indigenous people's lives are most often contained in the literature of social inquiry under the categories of education reform, mental and physical health, and inter-generational relations. There remains a tone of imminent loss in the representations of their lives, due in part, I argue, to the perceived "lack" of "primordialist" indicators detectable in their expression of an ethnic identity; namely the capacity to enact "traditional" cultural expressions, mastery of Indigenous language, unbroken attachments to the places of their ancestors, and apprehension of distinct bodies of knowledge. The ethnography of childhood deeply ruptures many of these assumptions, revealing that the nature of childhood is sensitive to "population-specific contexts," and understanding the terms of childhood can only be achieved with "detailed knowledge of the socially and culturally organized contexts which give them meaning" (LeVine 2007, 247).

Working with Yanyuwa families on a series of cultural maintenance projects over the years has afforded me the opportunity to work across age groups. Faced with degrees of social and cultural change, families have responded to their experiences of a long-running colonial frontier, on self-determined terms, modifying their lives in a mode of cultural survival and dynamism. To date, a range of memory projects in formats including text, film, imagery and sound projects have been undertaken. One particular project that has directly involved the interests and feedback of young people has been the Yanyuwa Animation Project. Production commenced in 2007 as a result of a community-based discussion around a crisis in cross-generational

knowledge exchange. To date, it has seen the production of a 20-minute bilingual DVD of ancestral narratives, and two additional DVD productions of kujika (songlines) (Yanyuwa Families 2009, 2010a, 2010b). A third and fourth production are currently underway. Confronted with a difficulty in offsetting the dominance of non-indigenous education programs within the community, and the passing away of elders armed with ancestral knowledge to share with younger generations, members of the community sought the means to produce representations of law and culture in formats appealing to young people.

Identifying the world in which young people occupy their imaginations was pivotal in the early phases of the project. In discussion with Yanyuwa elders, and from mid-generation to young people, we were able to ascertain the formats most appealing to young people in the re-presentation of their ancestral knowledge. A resounding theme in these discussions was the appeal of television, cartoons, and animation for young people, as these forms of media capture the imaginations of younger generations who are highly visually literate. What is clear in the midst of Yanyuwa youth identity politics and cultural maintenance projects is that a process is underway, in which ancestral identities re-emerge or re-present themselves through contemporary events and expressions (Le, 2009) and from this comes a range of new understandings and enactments of ethnicity. This process takes on speed in contexts of cultural affirmation and is internalised by young people in ways that makes sense to their world today. An emerging Yanyuwa ethnicity is about reconfigured identity politics that reflect human agency and the choices that are activated in the construction of ethnic states. Da Costa (2010) documents similar processes amongst Afro-descendant groups in northern Brazil. He articulates the process of emerging ethnicity as one that draws upon ancestralidade (ancestry) in a particular manner

in crafting and shaping a present sense of ethnic self and ethnic membership (2010, 665). This is about creativity, agency and choice, not disconnection and loss.

Ethnographic fieldwork in Brazil has placed me in contexts of working with individuals (both friends and associates through the research) who identify as Afro-descendant and collectives articulated around an Afro-Brazilian identity and activism kinship through the black rights movements. My ethnography involved working in friendship, activist, and academic contexts with the Instituto Cultural Steve Biko, Centro de Estudos Afro-Orientais (Federal University of Bahia), and Ilê Aiyê<sup>4</sup>. Working with Afro-descendant collectives I have observed the emergence of ethnic states that involve processes of remembering, and commemoration of a loyalty built around what is remembered and channelled into a politico-creative project.

In 2010, the Statute of Racial Equality was ratified by the Brazilian government. Received by some as a historical achievement, for others it failed to redress the long history of inequity experienced by Afro-descendants within Brazil. The document simultaneously reaffirms the black population's right to health, housing, and cultural expression, as guaranteed by federal and municipal authorities by means of social and economic policies, and highlights the affirmation of compulsory teaching of African history (Federal Law 10.639). Yet, it

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<sup>4</sup> The Instituto Cultural Steve Biko is an organisation working to assist Afro-descendant students transition through educational phases into university. The Institute's objective is to "arm and equip students to use education as a weapon against oppression" (Instituto Cultural Steve Biko).

Ilê Aiyê was founded in 1974, as a Carnival group in the neighbourhood of Liberdade in Salvador, Bahia. Members work to raise consciousness around the Bahian black community and strives to reinvent "the meanings of Africa and Africanness as a basis for constructing new cultural and aesthetic symbols" (Pinho 2010, 2).

references no need to make reparations for slavery and for the description of the slave trade as a crime against humanity, with no period of limitation (Frayssinet 2010). Black Rights collectives committed to programs of tackling residual inequity and racist public policy find cold comfort in the fact that the Statute fails to endorse affirmative action through policy initiatives. Reference to racial quotas as a mode of redress of inequitable access to education and employment for Afro-descendants was eliminated from the Statute (Frayssinet 2010). Today, Brazil has 98 public universities and many of them use racial quotas in some manner, with variations found in the percentage of required positions made available to both Afro-descendant and indigenous students. In recent years there have been questions as to the constitutionality of racial quotas, and pressure to have them ruled unconstitutional under current Federal law. In April 2012, the Brazilian Supreme Court, however, moved to approve racial quotas in universities (Hayman 2012).

The issue of affirmative action through racial quotas is a deeply controversial one, which cuts to the core of the myth of racial democracy in Brazil and lifts the veil on perceived and real difference, and equality and social justice concerning an equal share in the benefits of a good life for all Brazilians (dos Santos 2006; Ekey 2010). It also generates an interesting context to observe the emerging state of an ethnic identity articulated around blackness and African descent. According to Bailey and Peria (2010), the quota system aims to increase representation of the formally excluded population, and achieves this by reserving a share of available positions for members of the targeted group. I ask then, how racial quotas in universities throughout Brazil may work to reveal the emergent nature of ethnicity, and how, through emergence, collectives can mobilise ethnicity as an instrument. How might these efforts at redressing inequity along ethnic lines support an emerging ethnicity in its rising

up with vigour and strength along lines that are not merely about physiology, but also about new cultural expression and reclamation of a social and political ancestry? “[T]hese developments reveal a context where black movements find themselves” moving within the realities that “emerge from the relational and diasporic history of slavery and capitalism” (Da Costa 2010, 660). It is such that claiming the space to be Afro-descendent is articulating the process of ethnicity as an alternative to social class, as a subjective loyalty of another kind, and as a way of mobilising a communal affiliation in the face of marginalisation. However, for those who make that claim, there are challenges to the legitimacy of this position. Contentious public debate around racial quotas has drummed up individual and group negotiations as to who “rightfully” qualifies as Afro-descendant and who does not. Similarly, the questions are asked: who is black, when are you black enough, how is blackness defined, and what constitutes black culture? (see Zabaki and Camargo 2007). It is within the framework of a deeply political and creative project that the terms of an Afro-descendant ethnicity are born. It is a creative negotiation of the present reality lived by many Brazilians who identify as “black” or “brown” that leads to the shaping of this emerging identity. It is this that informs an individual’s choice to declare their ethnic status (in applying through racial quota programs), and it is also this that is scrutinised and judged by hegemonic ethnic norms. Prandi explains the emergence in the following terms:

Retrieving the ancestral past, which no longer has much meaning today, makes us elaborate a memory patched together with the mythical signs that emerge into the present. From today’s Brazil we remake the Africa of the past. A symbolic Africa, the possible memory and identity of the Afro-Brazilian people. (2004, 42-43).

I argue that states of emergence in identity politics do not diminish the value and importance of certain ethnic identities however much they might challenge the status quo, appear to be “born over-night,” or opportunistically engaged. Critiques of affirmative action and identity politics around new forms of expressing an indigenous identity or one’s Afro-descent often cites its emergent quality as argument against the rise and vigour of an emerging ethnicity. Viewing political or social action around ethnic identity as illegitimate, “trouble making” (as often witnessed in the media and political debate around certain ethnic identities and their “privileges”), or as threatening the stability of national identity, is flawed, not only because it is racist, but simply because it disregards the current state of play in any given country or region. The state of play is what is “present” and this is what remains after certain political histories; people negotiate these realities in their daily lives.

### **Overview: Strengths and Vulnerabilities in States of Emergence**

For emerging ethnicities, strengths and vulnerabilities are both identifiable. The vulnerabilities faced by young people concern wider acceptance of their emerging ethnicity as valid and legitimate. The ongoing reality of state intervention into the lives of the Indigenous in Australia, and Afro-descendants in Brazil is such that notions of ethnicity are not entirely self-defined. The marginalised—irrespective of population size—can remain marginal through institutionalised racism and hegemonic ethnic norms, as well as embedded ideologies passed down through certain logics that pervade governments. Both in Australia and Brazil, the experiences of those who claim emerging ethnicities are not isolated. In fact, the processes they undergo are common to all wounded and interrupted spaces. It is such that for many populations, their emergence along ethnic lines is not simply about recovering or mimicking a tradition or static memory of the

past. Instead, whilst the past is valuable, it is just one part of how individuals might see themselves and their community in the present and how they envision possibilities for the future. With the support of kin (biological or affiliative), young people in northeastern Brazil and Indigenous Australia can increasingly find spaces for affirmation of their identity and for the performance of an emerging ethnicity that is a definitive site of power and strength for themselves, and also for their wider communities. At the same time,, they have distance and closeness to the colonial and imperial frontiers that interrupted the lives of their ancestors, and this comes to inform their identity politics in creative and often deeply political ways. Their emerging ethnicities are often about the pursuit of an identity in order to move forward. Hence, they are much more about vigour, genesis, and flourishing than they are about loss, assimilation, or rupture.

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