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Indigenous Bodies

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From 2005 to 2007 we had the enriching, yet demanding, experience of teaching Indigenous Australian studies together at the Koori Centre, University of Sydney. We each taught a number of different units of study including a large survey course, *Introduction to Indigenous Australia*, to local and international students. In the last few years of the Howard government it was no easy task to convey to young non-Indigenous Australian students the particular history and experience of Indigenous Australians. Most had grown up in a conservative culture which marginalised Indigenous people and silenced Indigenous political voices, and so had little experience in engaging with Indigenous history or the continuing legacy of Australia's colonial past. While the majority of our students were open-minded and possessed a genuine willingness to learn, they were also keenly attuned to any seemingly excessive pro-Indigenous bias on our part. Any readings deemed *too* political or theoretical, were assumed to lack practicality and treated with scepticism – 'A treaty? Australians would never accept that!' Thus we faced the at times stomach-churning and teeth-gritting task of having to *objectively* and *dispassionately* explore the motives and implications of the Howard government's dilution of native title rights, dismantling of the peak Indigenous representative body, and intervention into the lives of Aboriginal Northern Territorians. We also taught Indigenous students, whose frustration with the conservative status quo was often entangled with their visceral identification with the injustices and tragedies of the past, posing challenges of a different kind. Here we had to encourage students to collectively move beyond the personal and anecdotal, and engage with theoretical and scholarly examinations of Indigenous Australian history and culture.

Sharing interconnected offices, we regularly sought each other out for advice on teaching matters, occasionally to vent minor frustrations, and most often to relate amusing stories from the classroom. On reflection it is interesting how many of these teaching anecdotes concerned our own corporeality. Teaching Indigenous Australian

studies requires you to give yourself over to students in a way that is unimaginable in many other tertiary subjects. Students were fascinated by our subjectivity and how it was embodied, assuming that this is what qualified us to speak out on Indigenous topics, more than our research and knowledge. Shino's mixed Aboriginal and Japanese heritage was often met with curiosity, especially by those familiar with northern Australia, for whom she was a quintessential embodiment of Broome's multicultural history. Others wondered how she could identify as Aboriginal when she looked otherwise. After the introductory lecture one student once commented to Shino how it was funny that she *played up* her Aboriginality and *disavowed* her Japanese side, seemingly oblivious to the fact she was teaching an Indigenous studies course. Leah, a Torres Strait mainlander, raised eyebrows and was often asked the question, 'is that an English accent?' Her response was an abbreviated and well practised history of the London Missionary Society's activities in the Pacific and Torres Strait, which would be received with nods and murmurs of understanding tinged with doubt. The way our bodies look and sound challenged our non-Indigenous students' constructions of indigeneity. They might have wondered whether we were imposters, and ask, 'what can they know about *real* Indigenous people?' Lisa's white body, on the other hand, was not an object of curiosity, but instead, for some non-Indigenous students, a sign of her ostensible neutrality, indicating that her classroom was a safe place to speak unreflectively about 'us' and 'them'. At the same time her white body symbolised Australia's history of dispossession and displacement, and incited suspicion amongst some Indigenous students about her motives for researching Indigenous Australia and whether or not she could teach about *culture*.

Such exchanges with students made us patently aware that we were being sized up, that our corporeality was seen to impact on our teaching, and that we had to work hard to transcend the inherent authority (or lack thereof), bias (or objectivity), and colonial culpability it seemingly imbued in us. Our shared interest in indigeneity and embodiment was formalised when we co-taught a unit of study called *Colours of Identity: Indigenous Bodies*, which examined various ways in which Indigenous identity and history is registered on the body: from colonial articulations of its essential difference to expressions of political resistance. *Colours of Identity* wove together our different interests in Indigenous corporeality: colonial constructions and representations of the Aboriginal body, history of body modifications, somatic metaphors in Indigenous literature, labouring bodies, and the body as a tool of activism. It is out of this shared interest that this special issue on Indigenous Bodies was conceived.

The aim of this issue is to explore some of the myriad ways in which diverse conceptions of Australian indigeneity are contingent upon corporeality. The last few decades have seen a profusion of studies on the human body and its various parts by historians (Vila, 1998; Caplan, 2000; Holliday and Hansard, 2001; Ballantyne and Burton, 2005; Forth and Crozier, 2005; Butchart, 1998), feminist philosophers

(Butler, 1993; Grosz, 1994), anthropologists (Lingis, 1994; Thomas and Ahmed, 2004), early modernists (Hillman and Mazzio, 1997), art historians (Stafford, 1993; Mirzoeff, 1995), literary critics (McMaster, 2004), geographers (Kenworthy Teather, 1999) and so on. Consequently the body can no longer be taken for granted as just being there, and simply conceived as 'natural'. Instead, the body is understood as a target and effect of discourses that manipulate, fragment, categorise, spatialise, and discipline. Considerations of how such discourses have impacted on corporeality has resulted in a proliferation of new bodies – social, symbolic, gendered, raced, adorned, normative, deviant, and abject to name just a few.

Informing these conceptions of different archetypal bodies is an influential distinction in Western thought between the body and the mind in the human subject, following Descartes' proposal that 'the mind, by which I am what I am, is entirely distinct from the body' (cited in Holliday and Hansard, 2001: 4). Elizabeth Grosz argued that this dualism of the mind and the body is hierarchical, privileging one and subordinating the other. Consequently, the body is 'what is not mind', and is 'implicitly defined as unruly, disruptive, in need of direction and judgement, merely incidental to the defining characteristics of mind, reason, or personal identity' (1994: 3). According to Holliday and Hansard it is up to the mind to 'overcome the body's potential excesses' (2001: 9). Thus in Western thought this mind/body opposition was easily correlated to other binary dualisms such as man/woman, and white/black, thereby rendering the latter referents more embodied than the former. Charles Johnson, drawing on Eldridge Cleaver, the Black Panther and author of *Soul on Ice* (1968), illustrates the consequences of this distinction, arguing that 'blacks are stripped of a mental life, which leaves them only a bodily existence' (1994: 123). Furthermore, those who are deemed to be inherently embodied are 'denied the space to produce knowledge about the body', because according to Robyn Longhurst, their knowledge is 'too intimately grounded in, and tainted by, their corporeality'. This mind/body dualism means that only those 'who occupy the place of the mind can produce such knowledge' (cited in Holliday and Hansard, 2001: 2). Moreover, this denial of knowledge is essentially a denial of power to those deemed to be more embodied (that is, women, non-Europeans, lower classes, disabled, gay and lesbian, and Indigenous peoples).

In the context of the Australian settler-colony that began in 1788, there was an extremely intensive relationship between colonial knowledge of Indigenous bodies and authority over them. Michel Foucault's insight that the body is an 'object and target of power' is especially applicable to regimes of knowledge produced in colonial situations. Foucault observed that 'in every society, the body was in the grip of very strict powers, which imposed on it constraints, prohibitions or obligations' (our emphasis. 1977: 136). Examples of such corporeal controls and taboos within Aboriginal society were richly evoked in the film *Ten Canoes* (2006) directed by Rolf de Heer and the people of Ramingining. Yet in the eighteenth century Foucault

argues that general techniques and methods of controlling the body were innovative in terms of scale, with 'infinitesimal power [exerted] over the active body', and modality, resulting in 'constant coercion'. These renewed methods became 'disciplines' which, through a 'machinery of power ... explores [the body], breaks it down, and rearranges it' to produce docile bodies (1977: 138). The colonisation of Australia saw such disciplines imposed on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, with various attempts made to render the Indigenous body docile, that is, according to Foucault, 'subjected, used, transformed and improved' (136). Martin Nakata's *Disciplining the Savages, Savaging the Disciplines* (2007) examines this process, arguing that the Torres Strait Islander body was a site of disciplinary control. Nakata argues that:

A new order at the beginning of the twentieth century, discursively drawn through legislation, policies, regulations and official directives was enacted on Islander bodies, setting new limits and boundaries in relation to the way they were to work, organise their domestic lives, determine where they could go, who they could associate with and so forth (129).

These colonial apparatuses exemplify a heteronomous 'art of the human body', as articulated by Foucault. They are intended to enhance and develop the Indigenous/docile body's utility, to 'intensify] ... its subjection', and attempt to make the Indigenous/docile body 'more obedient as it becomes more useful' (1977: 137-8).

Within the colonial context with its racist hierarchies a body deemed docile could never become a normal, that is European, body, so Indigenous people were always seen as possessing deviant bodies with immoral attributes. It is widely recognised that within the West, the normative body is exemplified by the 'robust, European, heterosexual gentleman' who is positioned in contradistinction to a 'potpourri of "deviant types"' (Urla and Terry, 1995: 4). Jacqueline Urla and Jennifer Terry in their analysis of normal and deviant bodies argue that the belief that people who are deemed 'socially deviant' are 'somatically different' from normal people is deeply ingrained in Western scientific and popular thought, thus 'moral character is rooted in the body' (1). They suggest that the importance of distinguishing between normal and deviant bodies was accentuated by debates about 'legal and economic enfranchisement' (1), with some people's ineligibility for these rights being construed as biologically determined. This was certainly the case in Australia when Indigenous people were initially denied the right to vote in the Commonwealth. When the government investigated amending the Electoral Act to extend the franchise to Indigenous people in 1962, the select committee discovered an enduring scepticism amongst the wider population about Indigenous Australians' perceived inability to exercise political judgement (Chesterman and Galligan, 1997). Despite considerable progress in Indigenous rights under the law, as Urla and Terry argue 'the idea that deviance is a matter of somatic essence ... has arrived again', although it is 'facilitated by moral discourses' (1995: 1-2). Their

concern to critique normative discourses about addiction and sexually transmitted diseases, for example, is pertinent to the Federal government's recent intervention into Aboriginal bodies.

In *Black Skin White Masks* (1967) Franz Fanon claimed that 'there are times when the black man is locked into his body' (225). Following the moral outcry generated by Nannette Rogers' exposé on the prevalence of sexual abuse in remote Aboriginal communities on the ABC's *Lateline* in May 2006 (Jones, 2006), and the release of the *Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle: 'Little Children are Sacred'* Report (Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse 2007), Aboriginal people have been further 'locked' into their bodies. Despite the fact that domestic violence and sexual assault are widespread throughout Australia – a 2004 study finding that 48% of Australian women experience violence, and 34% sexual assault in their lifetimes (Sneddon, 2007) – and the *Little Children are Sacred* Report found that 'a large number of perpetrators of abuse of Aboriginal children are not Aboriginal' (Behrendt, 2007: 17), sexual abuse has been pathologised as an exclusively Aboriginal problem.

The Federal Government's 2007 Emergency Response Northern Territory Intervention asserted not only the state's authority over Indigenous people's bodies, but also its assumption that Aboriginal people's moral deviance would be writ large on their bodies. For example, before being advised it was tantamount to assault, the then Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Mal Brough, announced on 21 June 2007 that the government would impose mandatory health checks on Aboriginal children, in order to 'identify ... any effects of abuse' (cited in Dodson, 2007: 85). Further, the intended second phase of the Intervention was to 'normalise' communities. As Desmond Manderson says, 'normalisation clearly does not involve treating Aboriginal communities normally. ... to normalise is to *make* normal' (Manderson, 2008: 261-2). This process of normalisation was also envisioned as working on and through the body. Bans were instituted and incomes were managed so that Aborigines in prescribed areas could not indulge their 'body's potential excesses', to reiterate Holliday and Hansard, with alcohol, drugs, pornography or immoderate quantities of cigarettes. Instead Aboriginal people could only sustain their bodies with sanctioned goods, such as food purchased with vouchers at predetermined shops, irrespective of their easy accessibility (Manderson, 2008: 271; Hinkson, 2007: 5). The fact that the Intervention's architects 'did not consult with leaders or communities in the Northern Territory who were going to be subjected to this punitive action' (Behrendt, 2007: 15) substantiates Longhurst's aforementioned argument that the inherently 'embodied' are denied the space to articulate their self-knowledge. Sadly, this denial has continued under the Labor Government, with the new Minister, Jenny Macklin, deciding on 23 October 2008 that the 'Federal Government will keep compulsory income management in Indigenous Northern Territory communities, contrary to advice given by its own independent review' (Rodgers, 2008).

Even though this special issue of *Borderlands* was initially conceived before the Howard Government declared a 'national emergency' in the Northern Territory, the scale and ramifications of the Intervention inevitably impacted on its concerns. When the Liberal-Party-affiliated Bennelong Society awarded Louis Nowra their annual medal for *Bad Dreaming: Aboriginal men's violence against women and children* (2007), it was celebrating his book as a catalyst for the Intervention. This warranted scholarly investigation so we invited Judy Atkinson and Glenn Woods, researchers into Aboriginal violence and trauma, to respond to Nowra's book. Dismissing *Bad Dreaming* as unworthy of an extended review, in 'Turning Dreams into Nightmares and Nightmares into Dreams' they instead critique what Nowra, and so many other politicians and commentators on Aboriginal 'dysfunction', refuse to engage with – the colonial interface. They tender an 'educaring' solution: a process of learning at a deep level about how one has come to be the person one is and, in so doing, reclaiming power over one's life by creating different personal narratives. Lisa Slater's paper "'Aurukun, we're happy, strong people": Aurukun kids projecting *life* into bad headlines' is also a response to negative representations of Indigenous life. There is, as Slater points out, an unrelenting barrage of 'bad news stories' about 'deviant' Aboriginal communities which create an ongoing 'narrative of dysfunction', which not only shapes how broader Australia engages with Indigenous people and society, but also informs the environment in which Aboriginal people, and notably children, live. Slater explores how the children of Aurukun, West Cape York, portray their own lived experience through film, and how they respond to the now monolithic representations of the Aboriginal child as a vulnerable or volatile body; and the kids instead want to show that the Aboriginal body is also an exuberant and creative body. Their films also testify to knowledges that the 'embodied' Aurukun youth can produce about themselves.

Not all of the papers in this issue, however, were so directly influenced by the Intervention. Aaron Corn's essay 'Ancestral, Corporeal, Corporate: Traditional Yolŋu Understandings of the Body Explored' also proffers a meticulous account of Yolŋu knowledge of their bodies. He draws on his involvement with Yolŋu elders and close collaboration with the Yolŋu elder Neparrŋa Gumbula to explore how in both life and in death, Yolŋu bodies are anchored in place through their ancestral creator or waŋarr. In the performance of ceremony, through naming, dance, song and design practices, Yolŋu articulate and renew their knowledge of themselves. In Yolŋu ceremony, Yolŋu perform their relationships to waŋarr and to each other – Yolŋu way. Yet Indigenous knowledge of the body is less readily accessible to outsiders as Shino Konishi demonstrates in her discussion of early European attempts to unravel the meaning of Aboriginal hair. In "'tied in rolled knots and powdered with ochre": Aboriginal hair and eighteenth-century cross-cultural encounters' Konishi takes up Gananath Obeyesekere's pronouncement that hair is never just 'there' (1998: xii), and closely analyses the explorers' myriad accounts of Aboriginal men's hair, from descriptions of its texture, style and decoration, to the cross-cultural encounters hair facilitated, such as

amicable grooming exchanges and the punitive implications of the British First Fleet's shaving of their Indigenous captives' beards.

While Europeans were curious about hair it was the Indigenous body's skin which truly captured their imagination as a disciplinary site. The emergence of the taxonomic sciences in the eighteenth century meant that colour was read as a sign of racial origins, even though older assumptions that skin symbolised the black body's inherent sinfulness and savagery, in contrast to the supposed purity and civility of the white Christian body, also endured (Wheeler, 2000; Benthien, 2002). In her essay 'Marked Bodies: a corporeal history of colonial Australia', Anna Haebich contrasts Aboriginal scarification practices and their significance with the colonists' attempt to civilise and tame the Indigenous body by smoothing the skin and erasing its scars. However, she reveals that skin was also a surface through which the Indigenous body could be disciplined and punished, illustrating the colonists' burgeoning sense of ownership and authority over the Indigenous body. In some contexts this ownership of the Indigenous body was literal and real, as Michael Pickering illustrates. 'Lost in Translation' examines the fraught endeavour of repatriating Indigenous human remains, highlighting the conflicted value positions that Aboriginal people and museum professionals have with regard to the deceased Indigenous body. Pickering argues that many museum professionals resist the tide of repatriation, and remain prone to treating Aboriginal human remains as objects of scientific enquiry, convinced that the bones of the 'primitive' Other will in time contribute important new knowledge. Such an approach, Pickering observes, privileges the view that the bones are of a greater value than the people they belonged to, and the descendants who await their return.

Finally, Regina Ganter explores the question of 'being Aboriginal' and disrupts commonplace ideas, such as those harboured by our former students, about Indigenous identity which are supposedly inscribed in the body, or more specifically, in the blood. In 'Turning Aboriginal – Historical Bents' she follows the stories of a number of Indigenous individuals from northern Australia whose lives were disrupted by the state's evolving and idiosyncratic definitions of Aboriginality which were applied in an ad hoc fashion, reflecting the discretionary powers of the Protectors and police.

Evidently these essays do not exhaust the innumerable constructions, meanings, and readings of the Indigenous body, and various body types have been left out; for instance, incarcerated bodies, sporting bodies, activist bodies, healthy and unhealthy bodies to name just a few. But this collection is an important starting point for addressing the significance of corporeality to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous understandings of Australian indigeneity. The only other sustained study of the Indigenous body is Barbara Creed and Jeanette Hoorn's *Body Trade: Captivity, Cannibalism and Colonialism in the Pacific* (2001) which narrowly focuses on representations of deviant and illicit bodies. Even though the focus of the essays in this issue spans more

than two centuries, they reveal a disturbing continuity in colonial and neo-colonial attitudes to the Indigenous body: a tendency to exoticise and objectify, a prevailing sense of authority and ownership, and an unwavering confidence in the West's ability to know, domesticate, and improve it. The essays also illuminate Indigenous people's agency and autonomy. Despite Western assumptions that the more embodied are less able to speak about the body, the essays show Aboriginal people's sophisticated somatic knowledge, and different ways of redressing colonial and neo-colonial representations of their bodies.

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