

The politics of identity: We are trapped in the imaginations of white Australians



[Stan Grant](#)

In every corner of the planet people are questioning who they are. How do we strive for unity while struggling to identify our place in the world?



‘Our struggle is too conveniently positioned as peculiar to this country. But the politics of identity are an international phenomenon’. Photograph: Ezra Shaw/Getty Images

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Last week a young Indigenous man told me about his struggle to maintain his sense of identity surrounded by the distractions and allure of his life in the big city. He is from the Arrernte people of central Australia and his roots are planted deep in the red dirt west of Alice Springs.

He connects to his people and his culture through language and lore; it is a living and lived link through his grandmother. He told me how he visits her whenever he goes home, joining his life to the songlines of this old woman for whom English is a third or fourth language.

He eats bush food, fishes with his uncles and sits by ancient waterholes. Through these rituals he is renewed. He belongs here.

But he also seeks to belong nearly 3000km away in Sydney. He swaps his boots for brogues, he has sharp clothes and a trendy angular haircut; the very image of the television professional he is. Here the waterhole is a coffee shop; the languages of the desert substituted for the babble of the city street.

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He listens to recordings of Arrernte language lest he forgets his mother tongue, and to remind him who he is and where he is from.

His eyes were wide open as he described this dissonance. He shook his head; puzzled at how he has made a home in both places yet he can't help feeling only one of them – the red centre – is truly authentic.

His is a common dilemma amongst Indigenous people situated between 60 thousand years of tradition, the impact and legacy of colonisation, and the modern globalised world.

I spoke to him as part of a bigger discussion with other young Indigenous journalists about their identities. Some stories were heartbreaking. One told of how her white mother – a school teacher – encouraged her to play down her black heritage, not out of shame but because she didn't want her daughter to endure the pain of racism and rejection.

Aboriginality has been fiercely politicised. Families have been divided and separated on the basis of the definitions of the day. The Australian Law Reform Commission records 67 different versions of Aboriginality since European settlement. Indigenous academic Professor Marcia Langton has said: "For Aboriginal people, resolving who is Aboriginal and who is not, is an uneasy issue, located somewhere between the individual and the state".

Australians – many whom have never met an Indigenous person – often find our identities baffling. We are judged according to skin colour, placing us on a spectrum at which we ultimately cease to be "black". It is understandable. To discuss being black without referring to colour appears counterintuitive, but that's because you don't know who we are.

Our "blackness" does not derive purely from physical appearance but a constellation of factors: family, kinship, traditions, history and country among them. In any Indigenous family there will be the full range of complexions but we are all united in a deep sense of belonging.

We aren't just defined according to subjective judgments of colour, we are often measured against our level of poverty and suffering. It is as if we are means tested – beyond a certain income level we transcend our heritage. Put simply, it seems many non-Indigenous people find it easier to identify us if we are poor.

According to this test, I have often wondered if my parents would be pleased their son has grown up to be not-Aboriginal.

We are trapped in the imaginations of white Australians. These are attitudes shaped and hardened by history, racism and discrimination; to many we remain remote if not invisible. Like everything this is changing as our voices are heard and the rest of Australia becomes more familiar with us, but the process is slow.

Given how fragile our identities are it isn't surprising that we – Indigenous people – can struggle with expressing ourselves to a wary, skeptical, sometimes ignorant or even hostile Australia. Some of us are bound in our own paradox; our sense of ourselves rooted in traditions or history or suffering may sit awkwardly with the realities of our increasingly cosmopolitan, middle class, suburban lives.

As Australia is working us out, we too are working out ourselves, finding a new language and greater flexibility to express who we are.

Our struggle is too conveniently positioned as peculiar to this country. But the politics of identity are an international phenomenon – confusing and contradictory – heightened by the rush of post cold-war globalisation, the advance of new technology and the changing currents of geo-politics.

Patriotism, xenophobia, ethnic nationalism, sectarianism are among the many reactions to an increasingly homogenised and globalised world.

Look around us.

Islamic State has surpassed al-Qaida's deadly ambitions, appealing to a brutal, radicalised, and selectively distorted Sunni Muslim identity.

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Vladimir Putin has ridden new waves of popularity in Russia by crafting a comforting narrative of Soviet nostalgia coupled with military adventurism and intervention.

This has spilled over into the civil war in Ukraine, where the country is split between those who identify with greater Europe and others with allegiance to Moscow.

North Koreans are still defined by an unfinished half-century old war with the United States. As they construct a nuclear arsenal, and march in goose-step, they look dismissively at their cousins in the south and proclaim themselves as the true Koreans.

The Chinese speak of a 100 years of humiliation, the nation's resurgence countering a history of foreign domination and exploitation.

The European Union – designed as a reaction to the continent's bloody 20th century – is mired in mistrust and suspicion fuelling the rise of identity-infused extreme politics of the left and right.

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In her 2004 book *Globalization and Belonging: The Politics Of Identity In A Changing World*, political scientist Sheila Croucher used Al Qaeda's 9/11 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States as a lens through which to examine how we define ourselves in this new global order.

The brutality of that event appeared out of step with a world supposedly connected like never before – a world of the internet, air travel, fast food, shopping malls, Cineplex and CNN. Yet, there was a growing and lethal sense of dislocation and disillusion.

It doesn't excuse the brutality of Muslim fundamentalists – or any other brand of terrorism – to try to understand the forces at work in the world. Globalisation, Croucher argues, is “bringing the world closer while varied forms of sociocultural and political differentiation threaten to tear it apart”.

She says many may aspire to a global village, but identity is also formed by the battle for recognition of culture, autonomy or separateness.

[Indigenous Australians](#) are shaped by these tensions. We are seeking to find our place in the world, just like Chinese or Koreans or Russians or Greeks or Muslims.

We face critical questions about the viability of remote communities; protecting and preserving our heritage against the prevalence of mass-produced culture; and how to integrate the best of the world with our own traditions.

We grapple with this while burdened with disadvantage and poverty and the legacy of injustice and discrimination that still leaves us imprisoned in disproportionate numbers, locked out of employment and education and suffering diseases that rarely if ever afflict the rest of the country.

Thankfully our fight for justice, recognition and identity has not exploded with the ferocity and violence we see elsewhere in the world. But that doesn't make it any less urgent.

It may well be that in this country we can synthesise the histories of old and new Australia to form a truly inclusive identity. At the moment we are far from that.

But what we have is a chance to connect with each other in a way that still eludes much of the world. We are living in your world now, perhaps you can seek to understand ours; to imagine what it is to be a man from the desert living in the city, still calling himself an Arrernte man.