

The Politics of Identity: Who Counts as Aboriginal Today?

By Bronwyn Carlson

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Carlson's book, based on a manuscript which won the 2013 Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies' Stanner Award, explores what it means to be Aboriginal today. Weaving together personal, political and sociological inquiries, she focuses especially on the formal Confirmation of Aboriginality process and on divergent conceptions of Aboriginality among Aboriginal people themselves. Fundamentally, it is a critique of the gatekeeper role some Aboriginal organisations and individuals have arrogated to themselves.

Carlson is frank about her personal investment in the issues she investigates. The book's very first sentence acknowledges her childhood bewilderment at the family tensions provoked by having been 'touched by the tar brush'. She goes on to recount a youth filled with restless movement, around Australia and across to New Zealand, giving her no anchorage in a geographically defined Aboriginal community. She acknowledges her lack of the 'classic' outward markers of Aboriginality such as skin colour and physiognomy. She tells of instances where other Aboriginal people have flatly denied her Aboriginality. Yet in recounting these experiences, Carlson never relapses into complaint or self-indulgence. Rather, she uses the personal to illuminate the political, the experiential to elucidate her argument.

The book's historical chapters (roughly, the first third of the text) are the weakest. In charting the changing definitions and conceptions of the 'Aboriginal' from the early twentieth century to the 1970s, Carlson relies on far too narrow a selection of secondary sources. Numerous studies relevant to this topic have

been published by historians, anthropologists, sociologists and other scholars over the past 20 years, but these chapters show scant awareness of them, giving an unfortunate impression of thin scholarship.

The calibre of the scholarship, and of the argument, improves markedly once Carlson gets to grips with the complexities of Aboriginal identity today, a topic with which she is evidently much more comfortable than with probing the past. Without condemning them out of hand, she expresses serious misgivings about essentialist and fixed conceptions of Aboriginality. She expresses stronger reservations about the reification of 'the Aboriginal community'; and stronger still about the power vested in 'the community' to determine who is and is not 'Aboriginal', particularly via the official process of Confirmation of Aboriginality determinations. Through this process, she argues, the 'community' has been given powers analogous to those once wielded by settler bureaucracies to determine a person's Aboriginality – and 'communities' have proved as ardent and as arbitrary as bureaucracies in exercising those powers. Indeed, she goes so far as to claim that Aboriginal 'communities', in assessing people's Aboriginality, have applied 'the same criteria as hostile non-Aboriginal commentators such as Andrew Bolt' (pp. 151–52).

On such matters, Carlson backs her claims with solid evidence, but the book suffers from one notable absence: the international context. Carlson writes of the politics of identity as if it were an exclusively Aboriginal preserve (apart from a few nods toward New Zealand and the Maori). It is, of course, perfectly reasonable to focus on the identity concerns of Aboriginal Australians, but to fully elucidate those concerns it is essential to put them into global perspective. The politics of identity has been high on the international agenda since the 1970s; the same issues about which Carlson writes in relation to Aboriginal people have been at the forefront of minority and Indigenous political movements throughout the world for the past half-century. 'Who counts as Aboriginal?' is merely the local, Australian, variant of a question that resonates around the globe; and our answers to that question are inevitably diminished by inattention to the bigger picture.

Yet while the study has some notable gaps, it remains a brave and innovative foray into important issues that demand greater attention than they have hitherto received. 'Who counts as Aboriginal?' will always be a contested question; answers will never be singular or stable or command universal agreement. But in an age of identity politics, it is vital that we grapple with the question and, like Bronwyn Carlson, eschew simplistic answers.

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