

*Dancing with myth, memory and mimesis.*

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**Abstract:** The focus of this paper is on the mythical 'first' national Aboriginal debutante ball, held in Australia in 1968 in celebration of the successful referendum a year earlier. On the fortieth anniversary of the event this paper explores the memories and meanings of that time to those women who debuted in front of the Prime Minister on a balmy evening in July and the significance of that time today.

**Key words:** Indigenous, debutante, mimesis.

The 'first' national Aboriginal debutante ball held in 1968, like a lot of 'firsts' in history had a number of historical precedents. Prior to 1968 when this ball took place there were a number of small-scale local Aboriginal debutante balls held in country towns around Australia (Cole, 2000). While significant locally and to those who participated, these events attracted little wider attention. But in 1968, a year after the 'landslide' referendum of the year before, the Sydney-based Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs, a non-government organisation managed by a young Charles Perkins, held the first large-scale, national Indigenous ball and attracted wide-spread attention. Esther Williams ran the dance classes leading up to the event, Jimmy Little's band played on the night and the young Indigenous debutantes and their partners were presented to the then Prime Minister John Gorton. Photographs and footage of the beautiful debutantes circulated on national television via the Australian Broadcasting Commission. A Japanese film crew turned up to film it and showed images of the ball back in Japan.

At that ball, held on an unseasonably warm evening in July 1968, twenty-five Indigenous women aged between seventeen and twenty-one made their debut at that historical ball. Ruby Langford-Ginibi who attended the dance with her daughter remembers:

'Pearl was twenty-second out of twenty-five debs...I saw a grey-haired man walk up to Pearl and he clicked his heels in salute and took her hand. He led her to the middle of the floor and the band struck up and away they waltzed. I couldn't see very well from my seat so I asked someone, 'who's that man dancing with Pearl?'. Next day it was all in the newspapers. Pearl had made history being the first Aboriginal ever to dance with the Prime Minister. I was so proud and later Gorton wrote me a letter' (Langford-Ginibi, 1989: 141).

Today Aboriginal debutante balls are held regularly around Australia. In Brisbane this year's National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC) day debutante ball attracted so many participants the organisers were considering moving the venue from the smaller cultural center in Musgrave Park to the large Brisbane convention centre.

I originally became interested in debutante balls while researching ideas about gender and the cultural politics of assimilation in Australia (Cole 2000). The image of the Indigenous debutante had smiled graciously out from the social pages of newspapers and the NSW state sponsored magazine *Dawn: A magazine for the Aboriginal people of NSW*, published from the late 1950s to the early 1970s in New South Wales. Perhaps ironically, initially it was Indigenous critiques of white feminism that had made me interested in the Aboriginal debutante balls. Indigenous women writers and activists had challenged the assumptions of white feminists about an easily defined 'shared sisterhood' showing the ways that Aboriginal women and non-Indigenous women's interests differed in significant ways. In particular differences existed around issues of family, sexuality and domestic violence (Williams 1987:66-73; Huggins 1987:77-83). For example, when white women called for abortion rights and liberation from being defined only by their maternal role, Indigenous women were fighting enforced sterilisation in some parts of Australia and the violent denigration and refusal of their maternal role through the wide-spread removal of Indigenous children from their families. When white women fought for the right for sexual freedom, for example, Aboriginal women fought derogatory stereotypes of 'black velvet' (see Goodall & Huggins 1992: 402). What would I learn if I listened to the women and men involved in these balls instead of reacting from my own feminist prejudices?

As I began talking about the ball with those involved in the course of making a short documentary film about the '68 ball for its fortieth anniversary, the photos and film footage triggered stories and associations that belied the stylised image of the assimilated debutante. The stories the women told complicated the image of white middle class respectability that the ball seemed to confer. Alice Hinton-Bateup remembered the tiara she wore and how her father, who was broke at the time, had come by it after placing a bet on the horses that morning. Ruby Langford-Ginibi remembers taking apart a dress she bought from a charity shop and sewing it back together to fit her daughter. Shortly after the ball, Pearl was killed in a hit and run car accident and Ruby remembered how she buried her daughter in her father's grave because she could not afford a plot of her own. Ruby's fourteen year old son, she remembered with both pain and anger, who had been arrested for playing with school cricket equipment and charged with petty theft, was kept handcuffed and supervised throughout Pearl's funeral.

When the women involved in that ball began to talk about it a whole raft of memories and associations came up that were a long way from the image of the smiling and demure debutante. It was immediately obvious that stories of the pandemic of early deaths among Aboriginal communities, the stolen generations, and other painful stories of everyday racism in country towns existed simultaneously for these women along with the white silk and satin dresses, the beehive hairdos and the curtsy to the Prime Minister.

Listening to the women talk we also realised, with enjoyment, how little impact the presence of the Prime Minister had left on them. While in the archival film footage of the night which you see in the film the debs seem excited to be 'coming out' to Prime Minister Gorton, forty years down the track it was not his presence that left a lasting impression. More important was the memory of a cousin who had partnered a deb but since died, or the memory of how one deb's boyfriend, now her husband of forty years, had been too shy and wary that night to come into the ball and had hung out in his car around the corner all evening!

At the time we began to make the film, the Federal government, the former Howard Government, had just passed emergency legislation to send troops into the Northern Territory on the pretext of reports of wide-spread sexual abuse of children in Indigenous communities. For reasons that lay in mining and politics rather than authentic attempts to support Indigenous communities, Indigenous Australians were being stereotyped as degenerate and dangerous - in particular to their own children. Amidst what Noel Pearson describes as 'a crisis in remote Aboriginal communities which the nation has so far failed to deal with' (Pearson 2007) it seemed a sickeningly familiar scenario when the government moved in to remove children 'for their own good' (see Haebich 1988; Link-Up (NSW) & Wilson 1997). This controversial and unresolved territory is part of the wider context in which planning and pre-production for the film took place. This contemporary context contrasts painfully with the words of Ruby Langford-Ginibi who said reflecting on the '68 ball 'there was hope that we could be presented in a better way... and that things would get better for our people' (Langford-Ginibi 2007)

## **Mimesis**

In engaging in the intersubjective dialogue necessary to make the documentary film we were called upon to understand the debutante balls and the women who had participated in them on their own terms rather than as mimicking 'white society' or as an assimilationist success story. We were influenced by a conceptual framework from postcolonial studies which sees how the 'self' and 'other' are always 'solicited' by each other (Derrida 1981). An important stream of postcolonial critique that sees the coloniser/colonised dialectic as a process which changes the identity of both the colonised and the coloniser. One of the features of this kind of post-colonial work is the way it seeks to register the various ways in which colonised groups have subverted oppressive power, not simply through 'stark opposition' but also through what theorist Jane Jacobs has called 'disruptive inhabitations of colonial constructs' (Jacobs 1996:13). Postcolonial studies, as Jacob argues, 'reach into the ambivalent cultural politics of colonial domination so that the necessity of its tenacious and adaptive power can be better understood...[and] it is a revisionary form of imperialist nostalgia that defines the colonised as always engaged in conscious work against the core' (Jacobs 1996: 15).

These ideas work against static notions of identity that say you can only be a 'real' Aborigine if you conform to a stereotypical set of conditions, for example, you come from a remote, traditional community, or you can claim urban Indigenous status if you identify as a black activist in a fairly limited stereotyped way. This model of Aboriginal identity denied the realities and complexities of people's lives and the many paths

walked by Indigenous individuals and communities who keep themselves, their families and culture alive today.

Rather than a parody, or an assimilationist expression of desire to 'be like the whites' the 1968 ball as told through the women's memories and stories was an act of cross-cultural mimetic transformation. Mimesis is the art of describing or copying something closely but in doing so transforming both the original and the copy. The idea of mimesis comes originally from the aesthetic theories of the Frankfurt school and the influential cultural critic Walter Benjamin (1978) and later Adorno (1997). More recently anthropologist Michael Taussig has applied the concept of mimesis to the colonial encounter noting that 'writing itself is a mimetic exchange with the world...it involves the relatively unexplored but everyday capacity to imagine, if not become the other'. In his chapter entitled, 'In some way or another one can protect oneself from the spirits by portraying them', Taussig, wonders about the 'magical possibilities' in the long history of image-making of Europeans by colonised people and refers to images of white sailors carved in the shape of wooden healing figurines noted in the early twentieth century Swedish ethnography of Indians of the Darien Peninsula between the Panama canal and Colombia. (1993: xiii).

The 'mimetic faculty' as Michael Taussig defines it is 'the faculty to copy, imitate, make models, explore difference, yield into and become other' (Taussig 1993: ii). In an 'older language' writes Taussig, this is 'sympathetic magic' and is as necessary to the very process of knowing as it is to 'the construction and subsequent naturalisation of identities' (Taussig 1993: xix). To exercise the mimetic faculty is to practice an 'everyday art of appearance, an art that...cultivates the insoluble paradox of the distinction between essence and appearance' (Taussig 1993: 176).

When the young Indigenous women dressed up in white silk or satin, combed their hair straight and up into a beehive style they did not want literally to 'be' white. They were exercising their mimetic faculty, playing with and transforming the power-relations of whiteness that oppressed them on a daily basis. By dressing up in the costume of the white debutante they took on the power of appearance, the power of image and took back some power over their image-making. As debutantes, for example, they were not the victim from the statistics of the time that said Indigenous women were twice as likely to be the subject of violent sexual abuse as non-Indigenous. By standing up and being counted as *Aboriginal* debutantes they gracefully transformed the reality of the genocidal fantasy dressed up as 'assimilation' that wanted to eliminate the category 'Aboriginal' from white Australia.

Mimesis reminds us that appearance is power and that the 'duplicating power' of image as Taussig calls it is also a self-transforming power and hence a power for healing: '[i]n imitating we will find some distance from the imitated' (Taussig 1993: 126). In their pretty shoes and carefully applied make-up the young women were not pretending to be white debutantes but self-consciously, proudly, if a little nervously, being *Aboriginal* debutantes. The nervousness and the pride came from the same history and context which gives meaning to the symbolism of the ball. Joyce Davison remembers 'I was a bit disappointed that Mum never came, or Dad. But they had their reasons. They never got into politics or anything but she had that much fear in her, they were frightened that

us three youngest kids would be taken...my mother had already lost seven of her kids taken away' (Davison 2007)

While from the 'outside' it might seem bizarre that a very English upper class tradition became part of Indigenous culture in Australia their meaning comes from the historical and political context of the times and the impact of specific policies on Indigenous communities, in particular the gendered policy of child removal. In Britain debutante balls were a way of ensuring 'suitable marriages' among the elite classes. Traditionally debs came out in front of the Queen and once 'out' the debs were publicly sanctioned as sexually ready for marriage and procreation. In Australia a sustained policy of removing Indigenous children, specifically girl children, from families and communities made a public ceremony where Indigenous women publicly announced their 'coming of age' sexually, in the presence of their own community elders a potent ritual of renewal of community and 'right marriages' among Indigenous communities.

Over ten years ago I attended my first Indigenous debutante ball, at Sydney's La Perouse, thanks to my dear friend Maria Nugent, and began listening and talking to those involved in the balls today. A lot has changed in my life since then and I no longer only have an academic interest in the balls and the questions they raise for me about women, performance, mimesis and identity. As I learn to dance and often stumble between the states of motherhood and paid work I experience daily the difficult push and pull of different identities. As I learn slowly about how to keep the dance between my various parts alive, my desire to listen and learn, share with and honour other women who have juggled the demands of many roles and identities takes on a new urgency and meaning.

'Mimesis plays this trick of dancing between the same and the very different. An impossible but necessary, indeed an everyday affair. Mimesis registers both sameness and difference, of being like and being other. Creating stability from this instability is no small task, yet all identity formation is engaged in this habitually bracing activity' (Tausig 1993: 129).

Working on the debutante ball project today calls on me to practice what Sara Halprin calls 'the delicate, difficult art of seeing myself in the other, seeing the other as a unique individual' (Halprin 2001: 15).

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