

(RE)DISCOVERING OUR INDIGENOUS SELVES: THE NOSTALGIC APPEAL OF NATIVE AMERICANS AND OTHER GENERIC INDIGENES

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Indigenous spiritual traditions, especially those of North America, are a popular source of inspiration for people involved in the Australian alternative health and spirituality movement. Some of these individuals explain their interest in Indigenous spirituality by invoking past life experiences or recurrent dreams of being Indigenous; by referring to the influence of Indigenous spirit guides; or by claiming inexplicable feelings of connectedness and familiarity with the cultures to which they are 'drawn'. Such accounts contribute to 'New Age' discourses which support the notion of a deep spiritual kinship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. These esoteric connections are often associated with individual settler desires to rediscover the eco-spiritual wisdom of their own indigenous, pre-Christian ancestors. This paper considers some of the ways in which idealised representations of Native American cultures become points of reference for non-Indigenous people attempting to 'remember' or 'rediscover' what they believe to be indigenous qualities within themselves.

In April 1997 a Powwow came to Perth. This one day event was described in advertising brochures as an 'American and Canadian Indian *Wacipi*'.¹ The dance was attended by approximately four hundred people, many of whom had learned about it through the alternative health and spirituality network where it was most extensively promoted. It was held in an outdoor amphitheatre and consisted of on-stage performances by Aboriginal, Maori, and Zimbabwean groups and by a visiting group of Native American² dancers and musicians. Towards the end of the day audience members who had attended 'Native American' dancing, drumming and singing workshops over the previous weeks were invited to join the Indigenous³ performers in a large circle dance. The floor of the amphitheatre became a kaleidoscope of colour as over two hundred dancers moved around it in three concentric circles. Indigenous Americans in their Powwow regalia merged with non-Indigenous

Australians, some wearing the shawls and moccasins they had made at workshops over the preceding weeks, some adorned in 'Indian' face paint, headresses and fringed clothing of their own design. Most of the dancers, including the other Indigenous performers, wore 'Western'⁴ clothes, tee shirts, jeans, skirts or shorts. This resulting blend of hybrid styles and identities offered powerful insights into the poetics and politics of cultural borrowing in the 'New Age'⁵ domain. Some of the most interesting of these relate to the ways in which non-Indigenous Australians express feelings of spiritual kinship with Indigenous North Americans.

During the *Wacipi* myself and another researcher traversed the venue interviewing audience members about their interest in Indigenous cultures, their reasons for attending the *Wacipi* and their overall expectations of the day.⁶ Almost all of the fifty people interviewed reported that they had come primarily to see the 'American Indians'. Their responses to our questions provide the basis for this paper.

Imagining Indigenous others

Before reflecting on the reasons given by *Wacipi* participants for their interest in Native American cultures, it is useful to consider the cultural milieu out of which these comments emerged. Indigenous cultures have long held a romantic appeal in 'Western' discourse. Writers such as Torgovnick (1990; 1997), Root (1996), Kehoe (1990), Francis (1992), Deloria (1998)⁷ and many others have reflected at length on 'Western' representations of Native American people and other Indigenous groups as holders of 'original' ecological and spiritual wisdom.⁸ The contemporary alternative health and spirituality movement is heir to these images and beliefs, and continues to promote them in very visible and commercial ways. Gift books on 'Indigenous wisdom' abound, from Running Press's Miniature Edition entitled *Native American Wisdom* to Random House's, *Native Wisdom for White Minds* (Wilson Schaeff, 1995).⁹ A plethora of posters, cards, calendars and magazines, available in most Australian 'New Age' shops, display images of spiritualised and ecologised 'Indians'. An extensive 'New Age' literature, produced by Indigenous and non-Indigenous writers, provides tales of spiritual healing and personal transformation accessible to all who wish to 'rediscover their true selves' by delving into the belief systems of Indigenous others.¹⁰ Workshops and seminars on Native American spirituality, the vast majority of which are run, in the Australian context, by non-Indigenous people, reinforce such representations by focussing on particular beliefs and practices that emphasise connectedness with 'Nature' and the supernatural.

Most Australians have been exposed to images of Native American people through the medium of film. Several *Wacipi* participants, aged in their forties and fifties, reflected on the fact that they had always identified with the 'Indians' in the Cowboy and Indian movies they watched as children, for example. Others described how more recent films such as *Dances with Wolves* (Orion, 1990) and *The Last of the Mohicans* (Twentieth Century Fox, 1992) had influenced their interest in Native

American cultures. Torgovnick (1996: 139) explains how the latter two productions exemplify Western 'nostalgia for traditional ways'. She observes that '[o]ceanic harmony with nature is a crucial theme positioning Indians as spiritual teachers and guides' (139) and also draws attention to the ways in which both films construct 'good whites' as the natural inheritors '...not only of the Indian's land, but [of] their spiritual values as well' (150; see also Rollins and O'Connor, 1998). 'New Age' notions of Native Americans and their role as sharers of ancient wisdom are another component of the cultural complex out of which these films arise.

For some Australians, the choice to explore Native American rather than Aboriginal spirituality is linked to the ready availability of 'New Age' publications and other material incorporating 'Indian' imagery. For many it is also about the comfort of distance. Bowman (1995a: 142) argues for example, that '[a] Noble Savage becomes more noble and less... savage with distance, be that distance geographic, temporal or imaginary'. While there is certainly some interest in Aboriginal spirituality in the Australian alternative health and spirituality movement,¹¹ it is not as visible as the interest in Native American traditions. In keeping with Bowman's argument, this seems to be linked, at least partly, to the negative representations of Aboriginal people that most Australians encounter as a result of inhabiting the same nation-state.¹² One of the women whom I met during the Four Winds American Indian Encounter told me, for example, that she deliberately avoided anything to do with Aboriginal people because in her opinion 'they don't express themselves clearly, they don't make eye-contact and they still have a lot of anger to work through'. She believed Native Americans, on the hand, were articulate and had a special relationship with the Earth. Others expressed a desire to learn about Aboriginal spirituality but felt that Aboriginal people didn't want to share their cultures. Some also acknowledged the role of racial discrimination in this perceived unwillingness of Aboriginal people to share cultural knowledge with non-Aboriginal Australians.

Francis (1992) argues that romanticised representations of Native American people as eco-spiritual (Jacob, 1994) role models are part of a cultural tradition that can be traced back to the eighteenth century paintings of artists like Benjamin West and Paul Kane; and even earlier, to seventeenth century European characterisations of the 'Noble Savage' as evidence of 'the innate goodness of man (sic) in a perceived "state of nature"' (7). Marshall (1992) also points out that seventeenth and eighteenth century writers such as Gabriel de Foigny, Jonathon Swift, Denis Diderot and Jean-Jacques Rousseau used primitivist and utopian notions of 'natural man', based on the evidence of travellers who described 'pagan societies living close to the earth and following nature' (235), as a means of critiquing the perceived artificiality of 'Western' civilisation. Such Romantic critiques have maintained a place in Western discourse and have a strong presence in contemporary popular culture, in glossy travel brochures, and in films such as *Jungle 2 Jungle* (Disney, 1997) or *The Emerald Forest* (Embassy, 1985) which ardently juxtapose idyllic 'tribal' settings with the apparent degradation and superficiality of 'Western' civilisation, for example.

The following table summarises some of the characteristics attributed to ‘Western’ and Indigenous cultures, by the individuals interviewed at the Perth *Wacipi*. Both are clearly based on a well established set of stereotypes which provide the cultural foundations for ‘New Age’ interests in Indigenous spirituality.

‘Western’ Culture ¹³	Indigenous Cultures
No respect for anything	Respectful of Nature and Spirit
Greedy	Not greedy /sustainable needs
Destructive/ urge to conquer nature	In touch with nature/ strong connection with the Earth
Materialist	Spiritual/mystical
Selfish	Peaceful/relaxing/healing
Lies/politics/deceit	Truth/Real
Machine-like	Natural
Lost touch with selves/spiritual loss	Happier than ‘us’

Of the recorded responses to our questions about the appeal of Native American culture, forty seven percent of respondents listed the ecological and/or spiritual wisdom of Indigenous people as the reason for their interest. Many of these people also linked this perception with a negative assessment of ‘Western’ culture. When we asked if there was anything that ‘Westerners’ could learn from Indigenous people, a number of interviewees pointed to the importance of developing respect for the natural environment, something which they felt people of European descent had lost. One woman pointed out in a disgusted tone that she didn’t think ‘Western’ society had “ever respected the earth”.¹⁴ She said that greed had always been the driving force for ‘Westerners’ and proceeded to explain that Indigenous people only take what they need from the land and that they always ask for permission from the spirit world for what they do take. Another female respondent made similar observations. After admitting that she was attracted to the “mystic” or “spiritual side” of Native American people,¹⁵ she said she also liked them because

...they love nature and the land, it’s not for destroying, they are not greedy...they are in touch with nature, they are not there to conquer and destroy. They only take what they need, not like us, [laughs] we have got to have ten of everything. They are [telling us] not to take more than we need, not to be destructive, because we are too destructive, we haven’t got much of a planet left...

Other respondents made similar critiques of ‘Western’ culture, claiming that it places too much emphasis on materialism and selfishness¹⁶ and not enough on “earthy” values.¹⁷ One woman summed this up with the following statement; “[t]here’s just something about all Indigenous people, they’ve got this down to earth approach that

we've lost in our way of life, [that] just brings it all back home. It feels right in the heart".¹⁸

Even more significant than the perception of Native American people as 'paragons of ecological virtue'¹⁹ was the notion that they are essentially spiritual in nature. Of the people we spoke with, thirty percent identified religious beliefs and/or spiritual healing traditions as highly appealing aspects of Indigenous cultures, although no one identified specific examples. One woman, when asked about her interest in Native Americans, said "I like the way they see things, they are so mystic and romantic... They have got a great [connection] with the earth and the spirits".²⁰ While the theme of Indigenous 'mysticism' was common to a number of the interviews, some people focussed on the healing qualities of Native American cultures. Another young woman reflected as follows; "[Native American people] just seem so peaceful. So peaceful and relaxing.... Everything that I have heard about them seems like such a healing process".²¹ Another older woman articulated the 'Western' need for Indigenous healing in a more direct way.

I just feel as though we in the Western world have got a lot of things to learn from the Aborigines and the American Indians, because they are very spiritual people, and if we are going to get in touch with our inner selves we need to look at where they are coming from...²²

This desire to 'get in touch with our inner selves' by understanding Indigenous others leads the way into intricate labyrinths of cultural meaning constructed around essentialised notions of self and other. In this Daedalian enterprise 'Western' selves long to achieve the difference that they attribute to Indigenous others, long to *be* 'other', to be closer to nature and spirit, less materialistic, less destructive, less selfish, less lost. Often linked with notions of 'coming home' and inner healing, these themes appear frequently in the alternative health and spirituality movement. Jacobs (1994:307) describes such desires as part of a 'search for eco-spiritual rebirth', a quest which typically involves the individual in a global process of 'spiritual evolution'.²³ A man belonging to a group we spoke with at the *Wacipi* identifying themselves as members of the Spirit of the Earth Medicine Society, described the value of Indigenous cultures as role models for social and spiritual revitalisation in Australia.

Experiencing the culture of Indigenous people makes our culture richer. We have lost track with our culture in many ways, or it has become fragmented. Things like this [i.e. the *Wacipi*], the richness of the dress, the music, it replaces something that is missing in our modern day lives. While man is becoming more and more machine-like and moving away from spirituality, this is a wonderful, rich journey back into that spirituality. [I]t is like saving the world [laughs], and, at the moment, that is about creating a contemporary spirituality that takes us back to the land, to natural things, and away from the conditioning of everyday life, away from the machine. We hold spirituality very high, we

have looked at the rich cultures of the Native American, we have looked at the cultures of the world, African, Aboriginal, the Celtic cultures. We are moving now to create a spirituality that speaks to people in this age. We are not Indians, we are not Aboriginals, we are not Celts, OK. Our ancestors may have been but the direction we are looking to is to strengthen a contemporary spirituality, learning from these cultures but developing our own Australian thing...²⁴

In many cases the specificity of individual cultural traditions is lost in this process of 'honouring' or 'learning from' Indigenous cultures, hence the tendency of people to refer loosely to 'Native Americans' or 'Australian Aboriginals'.²⁵ Bowman (1995a) discusses this propensity in the alternative health and spirituality movement in Britain. She refers to a pervasive 'New Age' perception that Indigenous peoples are "all the same really", pointing to the emergence of '[a] pan-native American mix and match belief system' that blithely combines images from diverse Native American cultures 'in new configurations, in new places, for new purposes' (145).

But, Bowman quips, such eclecticism hardly matters 'if all Native American spirituality is the same really' (1995: 145). Emerging from this discourse is a kind of universal or generic Indigene,²⁶ essentially shamanic, powerfully mystical, intimately connected to the Earth; a framework begins to form in which all Indigenous cultures, from North America and elsewhere, serve as vestibules for ancient spiritual and ecological knowledge containing the solutions to contemporary social and environmental crises.²⁷ As bearers of this primal wisdom Indigenous people become role models for those 'Westerners' who believe that they can change the world and themselves by 'getting in touch' with their 'inner indigene' and thus reconnecting with the salvatory wisdom that some even feel is inscribed 'in their bones', encoded into their bodies at the cellular level (see for example Arden, 1999). Here there is no need for cultural specifics because this indigene is present in all of us, is universal, is original,²⁸ is simply lost²⁹ or misplaced and waiting to be recovered.

(Re)discovering indigenous selves

Somehow the idea of the vision quest deeply appealed to me, almost as if it was resonating with an ancient part of my psyche... I believe we need to honour these spiritual 'preferences' as much as we honour our musical preferences, or any other significant choice we make for our happiness and wellbeing. The journey of the soul, I believe, spans many lifetimes, and during these lifetimes we may have lived in different parts of the globe... To my way of thinking, many of us have experienced being part of another religion in different lifetimes. We learn something from each of these lifetimes and from each of our experiences... (Herbert, 1996: 55).

While Indigenous cultures are perceived, on the one hand, to be essentially different from 'Western' culture, on the other hand they are constructed as essentially the same. One *Wacipi* participant articulated this paradoxical perspective as follows;

We are all really the same, all the Indigenous races and all the cultures, it's just that a lot of us, and mainly the Western society, has lost touch with the other part of themselves. ... it's only logical, seeing as we all have a spirit, we are all the same, that we are going to try to find it whichever way we can, and I think this is why we are all looking for it in alternative cultures at this point in time. We want to know what is it that [Indigenous people] have got that we haven't got...because they are so much happier than we are, you know...³⁰

This perspective is strengthened by belief in past life experiences as shown in the above quote from Marie Herbert's autobiographical account of undertaking a 'Healing Quest' with Native American medicine people. Herbert suggests that experiencing other religious traditions in previous lifetimes provides both explanation and justification for the pursuit of current preferences; afterall, we have probably *belonged* to one or more of these traditions in other incarnations.

Several of the individuals I met during the course of my fieldwork felt that dividing people into Indigenous and non-Indigenous categories was counter-productive, that such a dichotomy was unnecessarily political and actively obstructive to the emergence of the 'universal consciousness' necessary for 'planetary transformation'.³¹ One man, who runs a workshop entitled 'Rediscovering your Indigenous Heart', repeatedly corrected my use of these terms by pointing out that 'we are all indigenous to somewhere', regardless of the origins of our ancestors. The quest for the universal indigenous (or original) self is neatly incorporated into mainstream 'New Age' philosophy in the following statement drawn from a magazine advertisement.

Today millions of people share the conviction of an inner spiritual unity within humanity which transcends any outer differences of race, nation and creed... A new civilisation is emerging which embraces all peoples and is founded upon the spirit of brotherhood and right human relations (Sydney Goodwill Unit of Service,1997).

In promoting the belief that 'we are all the same really', such perspectives deny the difference of particular groups in favour of the transformation of the entire species. At the same time, however, it is the very difference of 'Native ways' that those in search of indigenous selves seek to emulate. The goal, it seems, is to embody that difference, to 'own' it or to reveal it as part of one's true identity. The following accounts from *Wacipi* participants offer some insight into the strategies used to achieve this.

Forty two per cent of those interviewed claimed that they had some kind of personal connection with Native American people.³² For some this took the form of past life experiences. For others this connection was attributed to Native American spirit guides. A number of people described a strong, but inexplicable, sense of being 'drawn' to Native American culture during their childhood, or spoke of having recurrent dreams about Native American people. When asked why she attended the

Wacipi, one woman replied self consciously, “I shouldn’t use this word... [but] I have an ‘affinity’ with North and South American Indians. Don’t ask me why, but I have”.³³ Another woman in her early forties explained a similar kind of feeling.

I’ve always been interested in the Native American way of life because I’ve always lived my life that way and I wasn’t able to label it until I read more about them. I just love that culture, the love and respect that they have for the earth. For some reason I’m very drawn to the type [of] spirituality that they’ve got... I can remember back to when I was a kid and we would play Cowboys and Indians and I always wanted to be an Indian... Whenever I watch[ed] Westerns I used to feel sorry for the Indians, because they were always the ones who got slaughtered, you know. I don’t know where it comes from, it has always been there. I just have a lot of respect for them.³⁴

When I asked this woman if she was also interested in other Indigenous cultures she acknowledged that any culture that “respects the earth and animals” was worth looking into but firmly reiterated her particular commitment to Native American cultures.

References to the sensation of being ‘drawn’ by some irresistible force to ‘look’ at Native American cultures can relieve the individual of responsibility or personal agency and protects them, in their own minds perhaps, from accusations of voyeurism or cultural appropriation. By appealing to childhood memories and dreams, and thus highlighting the role of the subconscious, participants in the alternative health and spirituality movement can naturalise and/or legitimise their attraction to Native American culture. By substituting personal agency for the influence of higher beings and greater causes, the individual search for an indigenous, spiritualised self becomes a righteous journey of revelation.

Two young women³⁵ entered into a passionate conversation on this topic when asked to reflect on their interest in Native American cultures. One of the women responded to the question by pointing out that she had recently been reading about “Native American Indians”. The other claimed that she had “loved them all [her] life”. Both women fantasised about living in tipis, free from the concerns of money and the material things of ‘Western’ culture, which one of them characterised as “all lies and politics and deceit”. They agreed that, given the opportunity, they would happily discard their ‘white lives’ for ‘indigenous’ lifestyles. They explained the “deep” feelings they had for Indigenous cultures by referring to childhood memories, recurring dreams and past lives. At one point in the interview the following exchange occurred;

Respondent 39: When you are in the bush you know it³⁶ is there... I’ve got white skin but...

Interviewer: ...but you feel indigenous?

Respondent 39: yeah...

Respondent 38: It's not just something you make up...

Respondent 39: Shit, I've gone through that, 'you're neurotic', you know, 'what's going on here?', I've had lots of battles with it - then I've thought, 'oh well, OK, I'm just interested in them, and that's all ... just stop getting into this past life thing that keeps coming up all the time, just forget it'. But it doesn't seem to go away. Then something else will happen, in a dream, or meeting someone, or something, and it flares up again. It takes a lot to understand the truth sometimes...

Belief in past lives and other spiritual connections to Indigenous cultures brings a whole new perspective to the idea of cultural borrowing. After all, is it possible to borrow or appropriate something that you believe is, or was, already yours? The notion of reincarnation is commonly utilised, within alternative health and spirituality discourses, as a tool for explaining otherwise inexplicable fears, desires or sensations, by locating their origins in the experiences of a previous lifetime.³⁷ Many people learn about their past lives from encounters with clairvoyants, through past-life regressions,³⁸ or during private meditation or visualisation sessions. Twenty percent of those interviewed at the *Wacipi* reported being Native American in a past life. For a number of people this provided a convincing explanation for their current interest in Native American culture and beliefs.

A woman in her late forties³⁹ described a therapeutic drumming session that she had done saying that it produced intense feelings of having experienced a past life in a Native American setting. A young couple⁴⁰ explained that they had recently uncovered memories from previous Native American incarnations whilst taking part in a series of sweatlodges run by a local female shaman. Another woman who believed that she was "an Indian in [her] last life"⁴¹ said that she had always loved "Indians" and could remember dreaming about them when she was very young. A couple in their forties⁴² who have had extensive involvement with the spiritualist church explained the mystical nature of their connection with Native American people, again in terms of childhood experience and spiritual insight. These people claimed that they had Native American spirit guides as well as having past lives as Native American people themselves.

Spirit guides also have a common presence in the alternative health and spirituality domain. In a book entitled *How to Meet and Work with Spirit Guides*, Andrews (1996) explains that these spiritual entities take many different forms and have many different functions. He states that "[g]uides, in whatever manner they appear, use an appearance that will be comfortable for [the recipient and] ...will provide clues as to their function in [that person's] life" (22). Ten per cent of people interviewed at the *Wacipi* said that they had Native American spirit guides. Almost

all of these guides were described as male warriors and/or elders who appeared in traditional attire.

One woman explained that she decided to attend the *Wacipi* after a friend told her that she had Native American spirit guides. She said "I thought ... oh wow, I've got this connection here, and I really should go".⁴³ Another woman who had come to the *Wacipi* alone explained that she had been involved in a shamanic group and had discovered that one of her spirit guides was a "Canadian Indian". She said "[I]t is a natural part of me, it is very strong and I can't stop it." Laughing, she continued, "and I don't want to stop it, it's great...".⁴⁴ The woman quoted earlier who recovered memories of her past life through a drumming session, was more *blasé* about her spirit guides. When I asked her why she had attended the *Wacipi*, she said "Oh, the same old story about having Indian Guides and all that kind of stuff".⁴⁵

Many of the people we interviewed at the *Wacipi* claimed to have a special resonance with Native American culture which they felt was intrinsic to their sense of self. As one participant sat listening to the Indigenous musicians, for example, she commented tearfully, "I'm home, it feels right, I just feel as though I am home, it's just part of me, it heals me".⁴⁶ In a similar vein, a man who believed that he had a past life as a Sioux warrior⁴⁷ described how he felt when he first saw the Native American dancers performing. He said "[it] was the most fabulous thing I have ever seen... I felt like, 'hey that was me'." He laughed, saying "I hope you don't think this sounds silly, but, you know, I did think it was me, I really did, I could relate to it all...". The interviewer also laughed and commented that the respondent was "almost like an Indigenous person walking around in another skin". The man replied, but in a serious tone, "yeah, I probably think I am."

Such attempts to claim aspects of indigenous identity are rarely met with positive responses from Indigenous people themselves, as some of the participants discovered during the seminars and workshops in the weeks preceding the *Wacipi*. One young Caucasoid woman⁴⁸ provided the following account of the seminar that she attended.

I would love to sit down and talk to an elder,⁴⁹ someone who has gone past all the pain, well not *past* it, it never goes, but someone who can just answer your questions. Most of the people who were talking at the seminar were great, there was just one lady there who was still really angry. I can understand that anger at the whites... but then she started sort of saying to us 'you whites took the land... you will never have what we have'... and it was hitting me, it really hurt you know. I thought this is racism coming around the other way again, it's just happening again, you know, 'what are you saying this for? You're telling me and I feel it really deeply, exactly like you have been doing, and yet you are turning around and calling me a white', well the whole room actually... I was very upset - I learned a lot from that though. You don't have to be *born* into it to understand...

This woman's comments reveal some of the tensions that can arise when Indigenous selves refuse to embrace the aspirations of 'Western' others, thus firmly

maintaining cultural and social boundaries by reasserting and redefining their own difference.

Finding a new self and losing the other

Simard (1990: 333) states that '*Indians and Whites do not exist*'. He argues, like Francis (1992), that both '...represent fabled creatures, born as one in the minds of seventeenth and eighteenth century European thinkers trying to make sense of the modern experience' (333). Simard claims, as do many other writers, that such representations bear little resemblance to real people or real experiences. He suggests that 'Indians' have been created to embody 'the absolute opposite of what is thought of as "Western" culture', that both 'are *false faces* peering into a mirror' (333), reflections of each other, monolithic, archetypal and 'logically obverse' (353).⁵⁰ If we accept this position the notion of discovering a new (ancient) 'Self' by taking idealised representations of Indigenous 'Others' as role models, begins to assume a rather narcissistic quality. While I do not seek to deny or undermine the benefits that individuals experience in their lives as a result of developing their spiritual identities in particular ways, I do question the valorisation of images that turn Indigenous Americans and their cultural traditions into metonyms for idealised (i.e. spiritualised) relationships with the natural world. Such representations are based, for the most part, on utopian critiques of 'Western' society, and although there are a number of Indigenous people who also choose to embrace and promote them, these images will always tell 'us' more about our settler selves than about the original others whom some believe we should try to emulate in the quest for a better self and a better world. By focussing on 'imaginary' others we risk losing sight of the *real* otherness that Indigenous peoples claim for themselves.

As Deloria (1998) illustrates in his book entitled *Playing Indian*, Europeans and Americans have been appropriating Native American identities for centuries,⁵¹ the point being that this 'New Age' phenomenon is neither new nor unique. Nonetheless, it is necessary to acknowledge that the act of claiming an indigenous identity is, undeniably and regardless of intention, political. As Root (1996: 105) explains, such acts '...do not float in space but are underlain by very precise systems of authority', systems which allow the appropriation of Indigenous land and the persistence of social inequality and cultural exploitation. Such acts can result in direct and indirect disadvantages to Indigenous people themselves.

The messy negotiation of identity, however, is something that continues to happen beyond and in spite of critical academic discourses. If a person describes some kind of transcendental 'feeling' of *being* indigenous, if they claim to have made contact with the numinous by allowing themselves to imagine their indigenous pasts, if they report a sense of emotional healing as a result of meditating on romanticised images of Indigenous cultures, at what level should they be challenged? Bowman (1995b) reflects on the desire of some people in the alternative health and

spirituality movement to claim Celtic identities unrelated to their personal genealogies. She refers to these people as “cardiac Celts” and points out that Celtic identity “...is coming to be seen as a quality or a matter of choice rather than an issue of history, geography, language or ethnicity; it has become ‘a thing of spirit not of heritage’” (245). Similarly, Sunderland (1997) writes about European Americans who ‘feel’ African American and points out that ‘narratives of self are as much acts of the creation, maintenance and negotiation of identity as they are acts of the reflection of identity’ (40). The responses we gathered at the Western Australian *Wacipi* are part of the same pattern. A number of the people we spoke to reported, agreed or implied that they ‘felt’ indigenous regardless of their European Australian heritage. As one woman argued;

I don’t think you can generalise and say that whites are this or blacks are that, I think it is very mixed now.. some people seem to have it in their heart, even if they are white skinned, they seem to know about it, so I don’t make any more judgements like that.⁵²

The accounts presented here suggest, as Nash (2000: 1) argues ‘...that genealogy, for all its apparent promise of certainty, offers no guaranteed solutions to puzzles of belonging and identity’. Nostalgia for a generic indigenous essence, a lost, but universal component of human nature, and the belief that this elusive aspect of ‘self’ can be recaptured, remembered, rediscovered by exploring the traditions of contemporary Indigenous people has a powerful presence in the international alternative health and spirituality movement. Implied in this search for an indigenous identity is the assumption that the self is a malleable entity, constantly under negotiation, and not limited to the coarse categorisation of racial heritage. As many of the people we interviewed have discovered, personal identity has become an increasingly mutable quality. The political, social and cultural implications of this phenomenon promise to provide ongoing conundrums for those who claim the identities of others, for those whose identities are claimed by others and for those researchers who try to unravel such processes for the purpose of better understanding contemporary cultural life.

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Notes

1. *Wacipi* means ‘dance’ in the language of the Dakota people of North America (Twin Cities Public Television, 1995) and is often used in conjunction with the term ‘Powwow’. The latter is thought to be the English derivation of ‘*pauau*’, an Algonquian word used to refer to ‘a

gathering of people' (Zimmerman, 1996: 90). To my knowledge 'wacipi' was not formally defined at any point in the advertising campaign or during the event itself, although in one brochure it was accompanied by the word 'powwow' in brackets. The people interviewed tended to use the more familiar 'powwow'.

2. The group of twelve Native American performers represented several Indigenous nations including Apache, Navaho, Nez Perce and Cree. These people came to Western Australia at the invitation of two local women who had set up a small business called Four Winds Encounters for the purpose of organising an 'American Indian Encounter' for the people of Perth. The three week event, which included a series of workshops and seminars on Native American culture, was initially planned in consultation with a group of Dakota and Lakota Sioux, Chippewa, Hidatsa and Ojibwa people who, according to one of the organisers, had pulled out three weeks before they were scheduled to arrive. She explained publicly that these 'New Age Native Americans' had demanded an extra four thousand dollars payment per person at the last minute and that a group of 'real Native American people' had been organised to replace them at very short notice. An informal conversation with one of the Native American women who made the trip to Perth suggested that the group had not been aware that the event they had agreed to participate in was primarily targeted at the 'New Age' community. This woman indicated that several members of the group were very angry at the situation in which they found themselves. This feeling was clearly exacerbated by several instances in which the Native American visitors were persistently and inappropriately questioned by 'New Age' participants eager for information about 'traditional' spiritual practices.

3. Smith and Ward (2000: 190) observe that 'the convention of using upper case for Indigenous is being used increasingly by Indigenous peoples to emphasise their existence as nation-states'. I have followed this convention where I am referring to Indigenous groups and their cultures. When I discuss the feelings of indigeneity described by non-Indigenous people I have used the lower case form.

4. Torgovnick (1990: 20) suggests that flagging the problematic nature of terms like 'Western' by enclosing them in quotation marks 'relieves writers of the responsibility for the words they use'. While I tend to agree with this statement, I continue to use the term, partly because it has a specific currency amongst the people I am writing about, and partly because of its ability to code for a set of European intellectual traditions that have had a significant and identifiable influence on cultures throughout the world.

5. I use 'New Age', as shorthand for the alternative health and spirituality movement and the ideas informing it, in a similar way to which I use 'Western' (see endnote 4). This phrase has acquired negative connotations for many of the people involved in the movement due to its associations with commercialism, therefore I use it with qualification and in conjunction with the more neutral and descriptive 'alternative health and spirituality movement'.

6. Interviewees were chosen randomly. We approached groups and individuals throughout the amphitheatre as they sat on the grass waiting for the performance to resume. Short informal

interviews were conducted with fifty people of varying ages. Approximately 70 per cent of the respondents were female, a figure roughly representative of the gender composition of the overall audience. As my research focussed on non-Indigenous perceptions of Indigenous people we did not interview the Indigenous performers themselves.

7. These writers also reflect on the negative stereotypes associated with representations of Indigenous people. I do not address these here.

8. For discussions of such representations in the context of the international environmental movement, see Ellen (1986), Sackett (1991), Jacobs (1994), Rothenberg (1996), Gaard (1993) and Taylor (1997). For more general discussion see Trouillot (1991). Bowman (1995a) offers an interesting analysis of the role of the 'noble savage' in New Age and Neo-pagan discourse and Miskimmin (1996), Donaldson (1999) and Berendt (1997) reflect on the implications of these romantic representations from Indigenous perspectives. For further critiques of this form of 'cultural borrowing', see Ziff and Rao (1997). Povinelli (1999) also offers a powerful analysis of the implications for Indigenous people of being 'created' within a framework of traditionalism.

9. Other recent titles include *Native Wisdom* (Bruchac, 1995), *Tribal Wisdom* (Dunn, 1998), *The Mammoth Book of Ancient Wisdom* (Eason, 1997) and another *Native American Wisdom* (Cleary, 1996). The kind of books to which I refer to are artistically presented, often (but not always) unreferenced, and generally focussed around quotes attributed to Indigenous groups or individuals. Most have a strong visual component.

10. See for example, Linn (1997), Herbert (1996), Foster and Little (1988) and Tunnesshede (1997). The majority of publications relate to Native American spirituality, but other Indigenous cultures are also represented. Wessleman (1996) writes about Hawaiian culture, Arden (1999) about black South African traditions, Kharitidi (1996) about Siberian shamans, and Morgan (1994) about Australian Aboriginal people. With the exception of Linn, and Foster and Little, the texts listed are all presented as autobiographical accounts wherein non-Indigenous people stumble upon and are transformed by Indigenous spiritual wisdom. The two exceptions also include testimonials but are structured like guides or source books rather than extended narratives. The reader should note that this list constitutes a very small selection of the material available in Australia. Other well known authors in this area include Lynn Andrews, Paula Gunn Allen, Brooke Medicine Eagle, Ed McGaa and Mary Summer Rain, some of whom identify as Native American.

11. Rolls (1998) has conducted a detailed literature-based study of Australian interests in Aboriginal spirituality. He includes analyses of several well-known 'New Age' texts.

12. 'New Age' interest in Australian Aboriginal culture is greater outside of Australia, as evidenced, for example, by the incredible success of Marlo Morgan's book *Mutant Message Down Under* (1994), which was translated into several different languages, sold well over half a million copies and provided the basis for an extensive international lecture series, a film contract and other merchandising spin-offs (see Rolls, 1998: 285-7). This overseas interest

further supports Bowman's assertion.

13. Most respondents tended to refer to Western culture in the singular, suggesting that they perceived it as being somewhat monolithic in nature. The multiplicity, if not the particularity, of Indigenous cultures was usually acknowledged by use of the plural.

14. Respondent 4

15. Respondent 37

16. Respondent 38

17. Respondent 30

18. Respondent 11

19. A phrase used by Ellen (1986:10)

20. Respondent 15

21. Respondent 25

22. Respondent 36

23. James Redfield's 'New Age' best seller, *The Celestine Prophecy* (1994), and its sequels, *The Tenth Insight* (1997) and *The Secret of Shambhala* (1999), are good examples of 'New Age' narratives based on the notion of spiritual evolution.

24. Respondent 49

25. Native American peoples have, at different times, promoted pan-Indian identities for the purposes of political influence and social unity (Torgovnick, 1997: 137-8), as have Australian Aboriginal peoples.

26. In making this observation, it is also worth noting that many Indigenous groups themselves are increasingly willing to acknowledge similarities between their cultural beliefs and values and those of other Indigenous peoples around the world. This recognition, however, does not deny the commitment within these groups to maintaining and/or reclaiming their own particular cultural identities. The development of the international Indigenous movement (Jul 2000,

Synott 2000) as a means of furthering the social, economic and environmental interests of Indigenous people, has facilitated this sense of shared values.

27. David Suzuki has also promoted this belief from an ecological perspective. See *The Wisdom of the Elders* (Kundtson and Suzuki, 1992) and *The Sacred Balance* (Suzuki and McConnell, 1997).

28. Ingold (1989: 210) argues that the majority of popular interest in Indigenous cultures (Hunter-gatherers) is due 'to the (wholly mistaken) notion that they are living exemplars of prototypical humanity, a childhood of man from which the rest of us have grown up'.

29. See Mies (1993) for a strongly feminist discussion of what 'white man' has lost.

30. Respondents 33

31. Both of these phrases are commonly used in 'New Age' discourse and refer to the belief that the human species is currently undergoing a spiritual evolution, as mentioned earlier. The terms 'New Age' or 'Age of Aquarius' reflect this theme of change.

32. Only fifteen percent of respondents said that they had met Indigenous people in the past, and only two of those individuals had met Native American people.

33. Respondent 1

34. Respondent 7

35. Respondents 38 and 39

36. Several respondents used 'it' in seemingly similar ways but without definition. The conversational context suggested that 'it' was being used to refer to a feeling of some kind, or a sense of connection, in this instance to the 'bush'.

37. It is not necessary to interrogate the theology of this concept for the purposes of this paper. However, Williston and Johnstone (1995:12) provide the following introductory statement; "The exploration of past lives is... based upon the concept of reincarnation, where the Soul is born into a succession of lives in the physical world in order to encounter growth opportunities in the progression towards total maturity".

38. Williston and Johnstone (1995) provide a detailed account of the development of this hypnotic therapy and its use as a treatment for repressed/subconscious trauma.

39. Respondent 4

40. Respondents 45 and 46

41. Respondent 31

42. Respondents 33 and 34

43. Respondent 3

44. Respondent 44

45. Respondent 4

46. Respondent 44

47. Respondent 47

48. Respondent 39

49. A recurrent criticism of the Four Winds American Indian Encounter was that there were no Indigenous 'elders' involved.

50. See Paine (2000) for a discussion of the ways in which the concept of 'aboriginal' was constructed in opposition to 'settler'. As Paine (2000: 106) points out, Edward Said's notion of 'Orientalism' works on similar premises.

51. One the most well-known of these was Archie Belaney, an Englishman living in Canada who constructed an Indigenous identity for himself, assumed the name of Grey Owl, and proceeded to enjoy enormous popularity as a writer and public speaker in North America and the United Kingdom in the 1930's. See Root (1996: 102-106) and Francis (1992: 131-143). See also Feest (1990).

52. Respondent 39

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