

## CHAPTER 11

# COMMUNITY DISCOURSE ON THE CONFIRMATION OF ABORIGINALITY AND ABORIGINAL IDENTITY: A CASE STUDY

The *Koori Mail* is a fortnightly Indigenous newspaper that is distributed nationally. ‘Your Say’ is a forum in this publication where people can write in and raise areas of concern or interest, publish poetry, search for lost relations, as well as voice opinions over issues which are generally of interest to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers. In 2006, a series of contributions to this column focused specifically on issues surrounding Aboriginality and the Confirmation of Aboriginality process. Here I present an analysis of some of these contributions to evidence the tensions and problems as expressed in public community discourse, many of which resonate with the range of positions described within the scholarly conversations in previous chapters. These contributions speak to the meaning of both Aboriginality and community and the legitimacy of the Confirmation of Aboriginality process.

### THE CONVERSATION

Welsh, a contributor to the column, opened this conversation, suggesting that he wrote in to ‘Your Say’ to ‘generate discussion about Confirmation of Aboriginality, as it appears to be in some cases a booming industry’ (2006, p. 26). He then moved to name and authorise himself through announcements of his membership of a number of community-based organisations. As an ‘active’ community member he was favourably positioned to speak as someone well-informed on the issues. He raised the

rhetorical question of who can or cannot be Aboriginal to highlight the issues that are, according to him, ‘constantly discussed by community-oriented Aboriginal people’ who are particularly concerned about ‘Uncle Toms, Johnny come lately’s [sic], and, last but not least, the “nine-to-fivers”’, (2006, p. 26).

The use of the ‘Uncle Tom’ label describes Aboriginal people who are deemed assimilated in their thinking and their actions and are assumed to not share Aboriginal community values. The ‘Johnny come lately’ tag applies to Aboriginal people who have just ‘found out’ about their Aboriginality. This term is also used for those who are accepted as Aboriginal but have never actively participated in community activities, utilised community organisations, or been vocal or active in regards to issues which concern the community. The reference to ‘nine-to-fivers’ is used for people who occupy identified Aboriginal positions but do not work for the community beyond those hours. He suggests there is concern about people who ‘turn up in a community, claim some relation for five minutes, ascertain a Confirmation of Aboriginality, and suddenly they become ghosts’ (Welsh 2006, p. 26).

Welsh’s concern expressed a wider perception of, and a resentment towards, Aboriginal individuals who do not participate in Aboriginal community organisations and events. These people are often assumed to have not grown up as community-oriented Aboriginal people, nor faced hardship, nor participated in identified historical struggles. This locates a particular space for the identity discourse where Aboriginality implies a particular narrative of low socio-economic status, restricted access to skills and education, or disadvantage (see for example, Eckermann 1977a, pp. 12–13). Conversely, the absence of such a narrative calls into question an individual’s claim to be Aboriginal.

Welsh raised the following questions to other readers, noted here in detail because they generate a significant level of response over ensuing weeks:

Should there be a cut-off point — e.g., Aboriginal person marries non-Aboriginal — they have children — then the same circumstance happens for the next three or so generations. Should they be able to claim Aboriginality?

Is being Aboriginal claiming a parent or some other kin, or is it about self-identification?

When someone is accepted as a member of an Aboriginal corporation, does that entitle them to a Confirmation of Aboriginality form, or should they be made to attend general meetings for 12 months prior to giving them a Confirmation of Aboriginality form?

What is the legal process and how much would it cost for people to challenge a confirmation of Aboriginality, for those that have been provided under the table and /or under false pretences. (Welsh 2006, p. 26)

The responses to this initial contribution point to the unresolved questions about what counts as the evidence of being Aboriginal as well as to the concern about fraudulent processes. The first response gave a view from the other side. Under the heading, 'Lost...and accused of supplying fake documents', a contributor claimed to have been refused treatment from an Aboriginal health service as his documentation was deemed 'fake' (Melohn 2006, p. 26). This respondent thought the situation could have been resolved easily if the local aboriginal health service looked up his uncle's details, as his uncle was previously the chairperson of a local Aboriginal organisation. The writer asked what should he do? 'It's just like discrimination to me. I'm lost. What should I do, forget about my heritage? I've never asked for anything' (2006, p. 22). To establish his credentials as an Aboriginal person he aligned himself to the three-pronged definition: familial links to his Uncle perhaps because he was the more identifiable authority in the community, his links to the community by claiming to know some Aboriginal Elders, and conveying that he identified with the community.

In a subsequent article a contributor 'admit[s] that I am not a pure-bred Aboriginal person. I am of mixed race' (Brown 2006, p. 22) and then offers a list of Aboriginal attributes:

Love and respect all other Aboriginal community members,  
 Crimes of any kind will always be met with punishment,  
 Shamelessness and any other depraved act is prohibited, treat  
 others how you would like to be treated yourself,  
 Forsake all other gods, excepting Biامي,