

# TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

## **Diane Austin-Broos, *A Different Inequality: The Politics of Debate about Remote Aboriginal Australia* (Allen and Unwin, 2011)**

I was drawn to read Diane Austin-Broos' *A Different Inequality* because of its promise to elucidate debates about remote Aboriginal communities. Austin-Broos is a professor emerita at the University of Sydney and her book is based on her lengthy experiences as an ethnographer and anthropologist with the Western Arrente people in Ntaria community in central Australia. I have never been to a remote community so everything I now comes from what I have read which has left me increasingly confused about the causes and solutions to the range of problems confronting such communities. Thus, a book that had found a way to both acknowledge cultural difference as well as address urgent questions of inequality promised to be an important contribution to current debates.

Austin-Broos mostly considers these debates through the lens of anthropology and for her the key tension is between equality and difference. According to Austin-Broos, there are two opposing views: on the one hand, there are those who believe Indigenous policy should be directed towards 'closing the gap', or addressing the very unequal status of remote Indigenous Australians in the Australian polity. On the other, are those who believe that Indigenous difference, in terms of both culture and knowledge, needs to be recognised, maintained and encouraged. As Austin-Broos outlines, these differences can produce quite different policy perspectives, and Austin-Broos is critical of them both. She refers to those who consider inequality the key priority as 'anti-separatists' (without adequately explaining what this term means) who tend to pathologise Indigenous people and culture and ignore the demands and reality of cultural difference. She critiques the 'difference' model for ignoring and naturalising disadvantage in the interests of maintaining and even reifying a romanticised difference.

Austin-Broos's book is thus an attempt to strike a balance between these two positions and offer a new perspective on current critical and policy debates both within and outside the academy. It also provides an important history of ideas about culture, equality and indigenous Australia. The first five chapters of the book offer an account of how these debates emerged and outline the current state of the debate both inside and outside the academy. Such overviews are necessarily generalising and simplifying and this one is no exception. As an account, it is limited by its reduction, almost to the point of caricature, of the debates she is attempting to describe.

Chapter two considers the strengths and weaknesses of classical ethnography, and outlines the postcolonial critique from within anthropology. For all its faults and elisions, Austin-Broos asserts, ethnography confirms the reality and value of cultural difference and continuity. This chapter argues for the importance of viewing culture in the context of the historical legacies of colonisation and the reality of encapsulation of remote Indigenous Australians in the state and capital. This context, according to Austin-Broos, explains how difference has become inequality. Chapter three describes the postcolonial critique of anthropology from history and Indigenous studies, but she really only concerns herself with the work of Patrick Wolfe and Russell McGregor, and there is no reason to see them as representatives of their disciplines as a whole. In addressing the accusation that anthropology

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is and has been a racist discipline, Austin-Broos's answer seems to be, necessarily, both yes and no.

These historical chapters set the stage for the discussion of contemporary perspectives that follow. Chapter four describes the work of those who oppose separate development, the so-called 'anti-separatists', but I could not help feeling that a disservice was being done to the range of thinkers being lumped together here. There is considerable ideological diversity within this group, which includes Helen Hughes, Gary Johns, Noel Pearson, Marcia Langton and Peter Sutton, as well as varying degrees of intellectual perspicacity. This group includes influential leaders who have felt that academics have turned a blind eye to remote distress as well as those who see no problem with total assimilation. According to Austin-Broos, they all share a view that cultural difference, which is pathologised, can be dispensed with in the interests of equality.

Chapter five describes the position of anthropologists who defend cultural difference, the homeland movement and land rights and who have generally been highly critical of the Intervention. This chapter focuses on those associated with the Centre for Aboriginal and Economic Policy and Research. Again, the complexity of the CAEPR position is not acknowledged with many of its members being characterised as being unable to see beyond their own romanticised view of Indigenous culture and lacking compassion in the face of Indigenous despair. This chapter also has little to say about what Indigenous scholars, legal scholars, postcolonial theorists and human rights activists who have also entered the debate might have to say about the politics, economics and ethics of recognizing difference.

The final chapter, 'The politics of difference and inequality', is an attempt to move beyond this either/or debate, although the book seems to be contributing to and perpetuating the very dichotomies it claimed to be analysing and breaking down. Austin-Broos's answer to the dilemma she has set out, which is not at all as new as she suggests, is the urgent provision of mainstream primary education in remote communities as a transition to employment. Yet this chapter, the most disappointing in the book, provides no explanation of *how* such education could be offered and accepted in a way that was able to take cultural difference into account. Yet surely the question of 'how' is the one that has dominated policy debates and perspectives, including from people like Noel Pearson and the scholars associated with CAEPR. That remote Indigenous Australians are both tied to the local and are participants in the Australian state with multifaceted and conflicted identities is obvious to all; what to do about it is the question, and Austin-Broos's book does not provide the answers it promises.

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