

## **Blankets: The Visible Politics of Indigenous Clothing**

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The 'Corroboree 2000' marches and intensifying debates on reconciliation in Australia mark a useful starting point for a discussion of the issue of indigenous citizenship and the politics of clothing. Although no national body today exists with full authority to speak for all indigenous Australians, the Council for Reconciliation seeks to redress the political, economic, social or cultural imbalances that have existed between the races in Australia for two centuries. The visibility that is increasingly accorded to indigenous issues, partly as a result of the work of the Council and other agencies, has brought the politics of Aboriginality to the centre of the national agenda, although to date indigenous people remain positioned outside the boundaries of full Australian citizenship (Day 1998: 187). Dress and reconciliation might at first seem to have little in common, but it is partly the purpose of this essay to show that the study of indigenous attire and body covering generally can tell us much about the workings of the political and thus about relations between Australia's black cultures, citizenship and the structures of white power.

Wayne Hudson has recently argued against accepting a model of citizenship in Australia that restricts civic identities to a single concept (Hudson 1998). In line with many theorists seeking to move beyond strictly bounded notions of culture and politics, he proposes a differential model of 'sphere' and 'domain' distinctions that can exist quite widely beyond nationality. In this model the exercising of civic capacities can occur outside a single national citizenship, and can differ widely according to specific sites. Bearing in mind such a differential and site-specific notion, it is worth exploring changes in the nature of clothing visibilities in relation to various cultural groups, in particular indigenous peoples. Radical federal policies adopted by the Whitlam government between 1972-5, reversing earlier doctrines of protection and assimilation (the latter aiming in part to encourage indigenous people to adopt white

patterns of consumption including clothing), attempted to rehabilitate Aborigines, but as a marginal people with an independent culture. Thus, over the last two decades or so, Australia has transformed its colonial subjects situated inside the state yet outside the nation into a legitimate yet minority constituency of citizens who lack complete acceptance. Indigenous people are now fully included within the nation and with the right to vote, but are in a sense still disenfranchised: many are economically bereft, lacking the full benefits and rights of other Australians citizens and remain, to a greater or lesser degree, dependent on the prevailing political system (Beckett 1988: 17).

According to customary social procedures in Western society, a fundamental part of the so-called civilizing process is the adoption of acceptable clothing codes and related etiquette and behaviours. Whilst dress is clearly a matter of practical body covering, it is at the same time a public cultural practice that demonstrates social and aesthetic tastes, group membership, acceptable moral standards, status demarcation and appropriate levels of consumption. A significant aspect of past European interventionist policies in relation to the 'indigenous problem' was the dispensing of clothing. This was undertaken in various ways and for a variety of reasons from the time of early settlement, a practice that ultimately obliterated most forms of traditional attire.

By considering Australia's extremely small indigenous minority, both in the light of Hudson's differential model and the wider frame of so-called civilized society, this essay argues that the study of dress, as the private made public, enlarges our understandings of citizenship and racial politics in Australia. It shows that clothing can provide important new ways to read the nature and workings of gendered social relationships between the two cultures. Furthermore it demonstrates that indigenous clothing as a fluctuating sign has functioned in this country in ways that have visibly marked out the struggle for an indigenous identity both in colonial and more recent culture.

### **Dress Systems**

Clothing is a complex and generally gender-specific bodily covering, which may be read in many ways. Its multiple and various meanings differ widely between the wearer's intentions and other people's perceptions about what is worn. It is thus an aspect of material culture that has serious public implications, for it is one of the ways whereby a culture projects ideas, organizes itself or is brought under the control of another society socially, economically and politically. Importantly it is also one

of the ways in which both cultural identity and individual subjectivity is denoted. In the shifts that have taken place for indigenous people from being colonial subjects to part citizens it is useful to analyse how these changes have been visibly expressed through bodily decoration and dress. It is also pertinent to examine the changing tactics or negotiated claims made by indigenous people through dress as they seek to achieve some accommodation to the prevailing status of their citizenship.

Dress and fashion theory has traditionally centred on the role of fashion as the purview of the elite within civilized nations; it is considered part of the modern civilizing process itself. Craik has argued that dress and adornment function as part of a body-clothing complex which is constituted by and operates in ways that are consistent with a particular social milieu or habitus (Craik 1994: 10). The absence of clothing has been regarded dialectically as a lack of, or sign of, that which exists outside of the civilized, that is it inhabits the realm of non-fashion or the 'primitive'. Recently definitions of fashion have increasingly been placed under scrutiny, and the study of fashion and indeed clothing shifted from something that is condemned as superficial to a study central to our understandings of cultures and ethnicity. Traditional clothing systems are no longer considered to be static but can undergo alterations, and form hybrid types of attire that themselves shift and change (Craik 1996: 156). Exposure to Western commodities has not meant unequivocal acceptance of modern garb, but rather an uneven process of commoditization (Comaroff 1996: 37). Because of the active interconnectedness of culture and economics, we need to stop thinking of traditional versus non-traditional clothing, and more about mediated social interaction and exchange systems.

In order to understand something of these interconnected processes, I detail two particular examples of clothing practices of indigenous Australians that occurred a little under one hundred years apart, in vastly different social climates. I deal in particular with practices in New South Wales (NSW) and Queensland. I begin with the symbolic annual blanket ration (a fixed or allotted portion) issued by colonial authorities to blacks. For many reasons Europeans feared black nakedness as an uncomfortably barbaric and primitive state, although this form of exposure had entirely different meanings for indigenous people. Their state of undress was believed to require remedial action by colonial officials and mission officials. This took the form of dispensing blanket coverings (and loose slop clothing - dress of a basic generic kind), at first to conciliate with Aborigines, and later with more visibly charitable and paternalistic intent. Whilst colonial photographers engaged in scientific projects to categorize

indigenous peoples encouraged them to be represented naked, to stress their 'primitive' place in social evolution (Maxwell 1999: 42), the dispensing of blankets was undertaken with different intent. Effectively it was a means of neutralizing the sight of unclothed 'natives', and rendering indigenous men, women and children non-gendered, even non-existent by the covering of their bodies. One could go so far as to suggest that gifted blankets were a gesture of disempowerment; a material equivalent to policies of racial exclusion or protection. This attempt to generally render bodies absent must be seen in relation to quite separate and sharply gender differentiated European clothing practices in Australia, derived in large part from Victorian Britain. The punctilious use of this latter clothing was intended as a key marker of decorum and of the civilized way of life in the distant colony.

Blanket coverings, often used as a form of attire by indigenous people, will be compared to more recent and visibly dramatic appearances of indigenous activists since the 1970s, especially those associated with the Brisbane Commonwealth Games and anti-bicentennial protests of 1982 and 1988. From this time political statements made by indigenous people using T-shirts, headbands and hats, even representations of traditional unclothed appearances, have been a deliberate attempt to communicate political self-empowerment and identity. Self-styled statements, made through dress and adornment, bring a political visibility to the cause, securing a distinctive clothed identity and thus signalling claims to a civic position on indigenous terms. Aboriginal people are re-evaluating their clothing dependency of the past, and performatively using their attire and bodies as a way of asserting their own cultural visibility.

Obviously, I in no way suggest these two vastly different examples cover the entire range of indigenous clothing practices, or that these events explain the complex clothing relationships that have existed historically between white and black. Rather I use them as a way of dramatizing a set of issues in relation to dress, power and the political visibility of indigenous peoples within two specific cultural frames. This has been a radical shift in the nature of dressing, but ironically the latter clothing practices remain largely specular, rendered visible essentially via their media coverage. Paradoxically, this very assertive visibility demonstrates a political position that remains outside the parameters of everyday European citizenship, except to the extent that non-indigenous political sympathizers may on occasion assume some aspects of this attire. In as much as the ragged European style clothes worn today in the Northern Territory, Queensland, Western Australia and in all deprived areas of indigenous habitation (little different from those in the nineteenth century)

are political, the very visibility of overtly political dress further contributes to the nature of being 'outside', as signs of those who are still negotiating acceptance as full citizens.

### **Blanketing**

Official issue to blacks of British-made rough shoddy blankets (an inferior made-up textile) was originally a colonial practice that until recently was believed to have commenced in NSW at Governor Macquarie's first annual Parramatta Feast in December 1816. The giving of blankets was a complex relationship that Europeans entered into with Aborigines in exchange for certain acceptable behaviours and for whom blankets apparently replaced indigenous gift exchanges of traditionally crafted possum rugs and cloaks and, in Queensland, the making of bark blankets. Recent research shows that the annual giving of blankets commenced independently under the Governor of NSW Lieutenant-General Darling in 1826, building on the gift giving precedent of Parramatta. The express purpose was to reduce violence, gain control of and secure the frontier (Smithson 1992: 75). At this point dispensing of blankets, seemingly highly desired by Aborigines, became the major tool of social cohesion and reconciliation for Darling, and was not in any sense a charitable act. The activity was taken up by other States and in 1839 South Australian Governor Gawler began to dispense clothes and food to the Kaurna people of the Spencer region on the coastal plain around Adelaide, also as a technique of frontier governance (Rowse 1998: 17). Issues continued to be maintained, under a variety of different circumstances and institutional bodies, well into the twentieth century. In NSW blanket issue was transferred to the Aborigines Welfare Board (established in 1940) and finally to Child Welfare and Social Welfare in 1962, when it is last mentioned in the records.

In several important texts on the complex issues surrounding rationing and attendant social relationships, Tim Rowse has analysed the problematic and fluctuating nature of Aboriginal/European relations in the politics of the rationing process, although he has not dealt specifically with clothing. To ration is to predetermine that which is supposedly needed but it is also attended by certain expectations on both sides. The work of Rowse and indeed Nicholas Thomas shows that in cross-cultural relationships, gift giving cannot be regarded as an equal transaction, and parties involved do not necessarily have common understandings of the meaning of the goods, or the behaviour that may attend the action (Thomas 1991). The relationship itself may be signified by the goods as they are given,

but there is not necessarily a shared cultural understanding of what the gift might mean (Rowse 1998: 207). To ration goods, argues Rowse, is different from bartering. Bartering, he suggests, is a more transparent, agreed engagement between parties, compared with rationing, which is more complex, less well defined, its attached expectations more diffuse and perhaps open to abuse. He terms rationing a more opaque process, in which acceptance of goods also meant acquiescence to the new, imposed social order (1998: 20). This clearly underpins the nature of blanket rationing to Australia's indigenous peoples.

A blanket is a large, warm multi-purpose textile covering, of variable quality used normally in Western culture as an article of bedding. But the European term 'blanket' or 'to blanket' is worth some analysis. It is a generic one and implies a blank-ness or a blandness that blanks out, shrouds or obliterates the person involved, their age and gender, and in some sense hides or covers them up. Blanketing individuals with government issue, men, women and children, is in a sense to render all these persons undifferentiated. To dispense official rations (be they slops or blankets) that cover up or erase is a symbolic act of great political significance, especially in light of the widespread view held by the end of the 1840s that Aboriginal people were a dying race.

Although they had many other uses beyond clothing, blankets mark the extreme opposite to European civilian dress of the nineteenth century. The latter attire, brought out to Australia or imported from Britain, but sometimes also made locally, stressed the separation of the social spheres of the activities of men and women. Women's dress was bright or strongly coloured, ornamented in various ways and with voluminous skirts, whereas that of urban men consisted normally of dark cloth suits and hats. Bush clothing and informal dress for both men and women had other characteristics of course. But it was the sharp contrast between the dress of the colonizer and that of the colonized that helped to strengthen racial differences and hence to harden social attitudes.

Thus the function of blanket issue was far more than a question of charity and the clothing of indigenous nakedness. There were important additional elements of social control and moral probity embedded in the practice. This is evident in the nature of blanket dispense as it changed with historical circumstances. The eating and drinking that initially accompanied the issue of European goods at the annual Parramatta Feast were abolished in 1835 by Governor Bourke who replaced them with an annual issue from police stations (Maynard 1994: 65). Removing blanket issue to places of petty sessions ensured dispensement remained in the hands of government officials such as magistrates and

the police, and it did not fall to pastoralists under whom the government felt the practice might be abused. So depots from where issues were made became gathering places, but importantly official centres from where government instructions could easily be communicated. Recording the distribution of blankets at Mount Brown in 1854, the South Australian Sub-Protector of Aborigines noted, 'It brought many natives within my reach that continually avoided me, and over whom, by means of a blanket, I was able to gain a little influence, and to caution and advise them as they required' (Foster 1989: 74).

Aborigines used blankets for warmth, for covering their bodies and for carrying offspring, as well as for sleeping but they were also articles easy to adapt to other uses.<sup>1</sup> Aborigines valued them as currency of exchange, as did whites who certainly acquired them illegally if they could. Significantly, blankets, like other rations, were a means whereby whites could reward, encourage, pacify, compensate, keep track of, estimate numbers and influence, manage contact with, control and monitor the behaviour, travel and general population movements of blacks. The proposal by Walter Roth, Northern Protector of Queensland Aborigines and later Chief Protector (1897-1906)<sup>2</sup> to close the issue centre at Cooktown in 1903 was expressly intended to deny blacks any reason to congregate at the outskirts of the town for the weeks beforehand (Annual Report 1902 QPP 1903 2: 4).

Issues took place annually on the Queen's Birthday (1 May) usually in the presence of the Queen's representative, and thus were gifts made on behalf of an absent ruler, supposedly symbolizing her concern for her distant subjects. In 1879 at the blanket issue to Aborigines at Townsville, when the Townsville Reserve was on the point of closure, the recipients were requested to give 'Three regular "British" Cheers' for the Queen's substitute, the Visiting Governor (Evans 1971: 8). In Queensland the annual blanket issue was regularly reported to the Queensland Parliament and often made the pages of daily newspapers. In 1899 Walter Roth carefully noted in his report to Parliament the customary annual blanket issue to indigenous people had taken place; 900 at Cairns, 250 at Atherton and 1250 at Cooktown (Annual Report 1899 QVP 1900 5: 583). In 1902 Roth again noted, with the accuracy of a census gatherer, that blankets were that year dispensed at sixty-two centres, to 2,777 men 2,311 women, 765 children under sixteen and to two unspecified persons (Annual Report 1902 QPP 2 1903: 4).

After the middle of the century, the annual habit of blanket giving was accompanied by the making of an official representation of the event. So the public importance of blanket issue was customarily signalled by

the taking of an official photograph to record the important procedure. The ceremonial handing over of these articles of erasure was a well-documented ritual and intended to reinforce the nature and extent of colonial powers. An official photograph taken at Cedar Creek, Herberton illustrating the Protector's Annual Report to the Queensland Parliament for 1911 unequivocally demonstrates the inequitous power relations implicit in blanket gifting. The image shows a symbolic moment when Richard Howard, Chief Protector of Aborigines, gives a blanket to an Aboriginal man, so-called 'King George VI' of Ravensbourne. The latter wears a demeaning King Plate, a token of brass inscribed with a grandiose European title. Perhaps the intention was to instil in indigenous people the concept of hierarchy absent in their cultures, but this overt 'naming' was inevitably a way of mocking the wearer's lowly social status. The blanket is clearly stamped with a large Q and the broad arrow of Government issue, so that all who used it would constantly be reminded of the presence of white colonial rule (Annual Report 1911 QPP 3 1912: 1002).

The early issues of blankets took the form of an exchange, but the nature of gifting changed in the 1840s. By then, following alterations in attitude toward charity in Britain, blanket issue came to be seen as a



Figure 9.1. 'King George VI' of Ravensbourne, Cedar Creek, receives his government blanket from the Protector, 1912.

significant aspect of official philanthropy, intended to provide bodily covering, modesty and warmth and general 'relief' to needy Aboriginal people, men, women and children of all ages. So, after temporarily ceasing in 1844 due to economic pressures, issues were reinstated as a charitable gesture in 1848 by Sir Charles Fitzroy in the settled areas of NSW and Moreton Bay. It was now believed that the Aboriginal people were dying out and that the need for blanket issue was unlikely to survive all that long as a practice. There is some irony to the fact that the practice did not diminish, but grew increasingly extensive, and in 1880, for instance 8,400 blankets were issued at 86 NSW centres (Smithson: 106). By now blankets were regarded as health preserving, and it was felt weak and infirm Aborigines required them. Thus any attempt to alter the rations became even more morally problematic, for the failure to dispense blankets was believed to cause deterioration in the health of indigenous people.

The offer, or subsequent withdrawal, of blankets was clearly more than a matter of clothing. The political and social implications were far reaching. In 1902, in a cost cutting measure, Roth proposed to reduce the blankets issue by 25 per cent the following year, except on Mission Stations, and to refuse blankets to healthy Aborigines. This proposal did not eventuate. When offered other consumable goods in their place, blacks resisted and refused to accept them. Again in 1905, attempts to reduce the issue were unsuccessful. Roth tried to give out print dresses and fishing lines instead of blankets, but collective pressure from blacks meant blankets had to be reinstated. So blanket issue remained as an accepted practice in Queensland; in the 1920s blankets were still being distributed by the then Sub-Department of Aborigines. Yet substitutes were gradually agreed upon and in 1929, for instance, where found to be more suitable, dresses, trousers, shirts, prints and tobacco were dispensed instead. In an important sense blanket issue had come therefore to be regarded as a right and could be effectively used as a form of bargaining chip with the government.

### Rationing and Monitoring

Clothing was a significant material element of European control of indigenous peoples, and thus a way in which paternalistic relations could be maintained. For the most part Europeans allowed indigenous fringe dwellers access to town, mission or station areas only if they wore clothing of some kind. Insisting on a supposedly civilized appearance was an important way of influencing movement of blacks, for nakedness was not tolerated in urban areas, most particularly if women were present.

By the end of the nineteenth century these attitudes to nakedness were complicated by a counter rhetoric that suggested the indigenous weakness for the 'white man's goods', including clothes, would hasten their social collapse. According to Rowse, by suggesting the receiver was degraded, the power of the giver was enhanced (1990: 144). He uses an example from Robert Croll's book *Wide Horizons. Wanderings in Central Australia* published in 1937 to illustrate his point.

In his text, Croll discusses his experiences with the Luritja people, the neighbours of the Arunta near Hermannsburg Mission. His frontispiece is a photograph of a so-called 'primitive' Aboriginal man, fully naked, holding shield and spear, standing on a rock and with a heroic, distant look on his face. It is captioned 'Uncivilized', and according to Croll's somewhat romantic view of the 'primitive', said to possess a natural and attractive dignity. Later in the text itself, Croll uses a contrasting set of two images entitled 'Civilized'. These show what he believed to be unfortunate Aborigines entirely spoilt by contact with whites, wearing ragged European slops and rags. 'To obey the missionary convention in approaching the station, they must put on clothes. That act transformed them from kings to beggars; the borrowed rags were an ass's head upon the natural man' (Croll 1937: 130). The very activity that was required of indigenous people in order to participate in white civilized existence had now become the very thing that damned them in the eyes of commentators like Croll. The clothes that gave the white man status and access to the benefits of civilized life were believed to be the very things that demoralized blacks, and forced them to forget their own traditions.

Clothes worn by Aborigines engendered mixed feelings among whites. Worn appropriately they were a sign of approximation to the parent culture, but also a sign of weakness for the materials of civilization. Clothes had further uses for Europeans. They were something that could be used as a form of payment instead of currency, although any transaction brought with it certain obligations and meant a further fostering of dependency. Alfie Deakin, an Aboriginal stockman who worked in the East Kimberley region, told Bruce Shaw how when he was a young boy (probably about 1945), 'as soon as I got some of a moustache I started working. In those days we used to work just for shirt and trousers, blanket and calico - no money at all - hat and boots and two sticks of tobacco' (Shaw 1992: 129). Here we see how payment in food and clothing, instead of cash, locks the receiver into a system of dependency that suggests indigenous labour is less valuable than that of white workers.

Thus clothing, and attire generally, bound indigenous people to Europeans in a web of relationships. This was especially the case in

reserves and missions which were, in the latter case, training grounds for citizenship. Movement in and out was controlled and the way clothes were kept and worn carefully monitored. Yarrabah Mission set up in 1892 originally for the Yidinji people was one such place of control, a place that grew increasingly harsh with the years. Proclaimed a reformatory in 1901, inmates could only leave if they received one of the rare exemption tickets, ran away, were removed, or married someone outside the establishment. Mission men worked for board and meagre rations, often having to find other kinds of food off the land. In 1901 a minimum wage for Mission adults was set by amendment, but all wages were held in trust by either the Protector, or his representative the Superintendent, and inmates given pocket money only (Thomson 1989: 66).

The ways in which clothing was monitored at the Yarrabah Mission shows the degree of humiliation to which Aboriginal people were subjected. Writing up his Annual Report on Aborigines for the Queensland Parliament in 1902, the Protector noted with pride how precisely regulations there were being observed. The Mission had a special clothes room where on Sunday mornings clothes were hung on a rail to be fetched by single men and boys. After their 'matutinal' bath they left their dirty clothes at the door. On the Monday clean weekday clothes were hung on the same rail and the Sunday ones left at the door for washing. The supply of women's and children's clothes was the responsibility of the ladies of the Mission but if a married man needed a coat or trousers he must produce the whole wardrobe to satisfy the storekeeper that he needed the clothes. From time to time parades were held and each man had to fall into line with his bundle of clothes, which were examined and requirements noted. Unfit garments were burnt (Annual Report 1902 QPP 2 1903: 469).

For Europeans clothing was imbued with moral and material values and was a symbol of white civilization they believed should be respected. Indigenous people did not necessarily share their views of its significance. When blacks passed garments from a man to his wife and then on to a friend it was possible for Europeans to interpret this as a light regard for property. As Rowse shows some goods had greater value for indigenous people than others (1998: 23) and it is impossible to understand the precise attitude that indigenous people attached to white clothing. What we can say is that whites were able to use dress as a powerful tool of social control, but at times blacks were able to disrupt some convictions about dressing using European clothes in ways that were regarded as inappropriate, and even to show resistance to certain impositions.

Europeans believed that the material products of their culture, including dress, were a crucial aspect of the ways in which relationships with

Aborigines could be mediated. Rationing of clothing was integral to the policies of assimilation that developed from the late 1930s – a process that induced indigenous peoples to take up citizenship. As part of assimilation blanket issue was gradually superseded by cash payments, as recipients were eventually deemed entitled to have them. The entire practice of rationing was finally replaced in the 1960s and 1970s when full social security benefits were granted, a different form of ‘security blanket’ (Rowse 1998: 3).

### **Protest Clothing**

More recent examples of indigenous dress occupy an entirely different social, political and cultural frame of reference from the past. In colonial times blankets and strops imposed on Aborigines enshrouded bodies, but in the last thirty years indigenous people have reclaimed these former practices and are now using attire as a strategic method of telling the story of their own identity. Despite these assertive gestures, one could argue that dress reclamation whilst ‘domain’ specific in Hudson’s terms, has remained at the level of performance or signage only, with little substantive change in indigenous lives and conditions.

The history of the Aboriginal protest movement goes back to the 1960s, but the sense that indigenous people were taking control of their clothed identities within the public arena emerges in association with the Aboriginal Tent Embassy set up on the lawns of Parliament House on Australia Day 1972. Here, flying the Aboriginal flag newly designed by Harold Thomas, was a symbolic and inspirational moment in the quest for land restitution, and the result of ten years of debate over the political goals of indigenous people. Associated with this moment of protest were public expressions and assertions of indigenous identity figured through clothing. Starting initially with red head bands, protest clothes now include printed T-shirts, striped beanies and dramatic, broad-brimmed hats often black and similar to stockmen’s hats worn by women as well as by men.

T-shirts with their textual and other logos are proud statements of indigenous identity and are a key part of indigenous political strategies to counter their past clothing history. These garments are a particularly effective ephemeral cultural news sheet, cheap and easy to produce, and able to display the topical and the contingent through temporary signs and commentary. Gender unspecific, ephemeral and unpretentious, they are nevertheless highly meaningful in their capacity to announce political views and opinions. Richard Martin has shown that T-shirts are the modern equivalent of a calendar because they can act like markers to signify the



Figure 9.2. Vincent Brady leading a protest march to bring attention to Aboriginal opposition to the bicentenary celebrations, Brisbane, 1987.

passing of historical events and changing political viewpoints. Their capacity to display temporary logos and text make them ideally suited to conveying a sense of group solidarity and political resistance and to play a role in communicating rapidly changing ideas and meanings. But as Martin shows, there is more to shirts than simply a time line or message bank. Whilst these clothes are ‘newsworthy’, they are not just documents or journalistic texts, for ‘the articulate T-shirt can also take its place as a principal player in the modern drama’ (Martin 1992: 27–9). In other words

these articles have the capacity to change the ways in which people think and act in the world.

T-shirts have been used by indigenous people at numerous important cultural and political events. In fact it is in the public cultural arena, where subjectivities are performative and unfixed, that shirts, so amenable to change and alteration, can play their most important role. Some of the most significant are those inscribed shirts marking political protest in the 1980s such as Lands Council shirts, shirts worn at events like the handover of title to Uluru in 1985, or shirts printed to protest Aboriginal deaths in Custody in 1986–7 (Dewdney 1994: 128–33). Some of the earliest examples of political T-shirts were North Queensland Lands Council shirts distributed in 1980 by FAIRA (Foundation for Aboriginal and Islander Research Action) and those worn at marches organized by the Black Protest Committee during the 1982 Commonwealth Games in Brisbane. Under their auspices in September an incident-free march of 2000 people took place from Brisbane's Roma Street Forum to Musgrave Park and the following day a march to QEII Stadium. Land Rights T-shirts were worn on both occasions (Watson 1988: 40).

It is useful to compare the 1982 clothing to dress worn at the January 1988 bicentennial protest march in Sydney some six years later, when the world spotlight was again on Aboriginal protest claims. The Australian bicentenary of first settlement celebrated in 1988 was, according to cultural historian Graeme Turner, an uncomfortable and artificially constructed event, but as he strongly argues, its failure to construct a seamless image of national unity was the very basis of its success. It was, he feels, a complex occasion during which Australians were asked to sort through various competing versions and claims on their identity (Turner 1994: 72). Aboriginal people were unable to support the bicentenary festivities because of what they felt to be the failure of the federal government to accord them basic political and civil rights, rights to land, rights of determination, rights of prior ownership and also compensation (Watson 1988: 28). So part of the complexity of the bicentenary, and associated events, was that it was a festive occasion for Anglo-Australians, but an indigenous mourning about white invasion, as well as a strengthening of indigenous political will.

Australia Day 1988, renamed by indigenous people as Invasion Day, was marked by a large and peaceful 10,000 strong anti-bicentenary march in Sydney. This was labelled the 'Justice, Freedom and Hope' march, and took place from Redfern Oval to Belmore Park. It was a conciliatory march, although far smaller than the more recent Corroborree 2000 march over Sydney Harbour Bridge, the latter event calling on the government

to reconcile with Aboriginal people. The 'Justice, Freedom and Hope' march was, at the time, regarded as the biggest and perhaps most unified gathering of indigenous people in their history, and according to Turner was given wide exposure through the media. It became a political event of some moment, turning out to be more a celebration of a coming together of Aboriginal people on their own terms, rather than simply a mourning about the past. The clothing worn was an important aspect of the march, the spirit of the occasion captured in 'The Justice, Freedom and Hope' photographic mural with original photographs by Huw Davies. (Dewdney 1994: 151–8). Memorable photographs by Brenda Croft include a line of men and women in T-shirts carrying a banner inscribed 'Our Land Our Life' and a vivid image of Michael Watson with his face painted, wearing a head band inscribed 'We have survived'. His T-shirt was emblazoned with the Aboriginal flag and inscribed 'Cook Who Coo-oo' (Dewdney 1994: 118–22). Children on the march wore T-shirts inscribed with the words 'I am a little black, yellow and red Aussie', older indigenous people wore headbands inscribed with the words 'our land', and tribal elders from the Northern Territory carrying spears and chanting and clapping sticks walked wearing only loin cloths, their bodies marked in traditional manner with feathers and ochre.

Playing to the media was and is a major ingredient of these protests, although the mainstream media are, of course, not neutral, constantly managing and manipulating notions of citizenship and identity. But indigenous protest clothing, heightened by its visibility in the media, is a sign that the former colonial practice of photographing blanket issue has been resituated and reversed. The work of indigenous photographers like Brenda Croft, Mervyn Bishop, Michael Aird and Ricky Maynard, who have taken some control of the process of representation of indigenous people, also marks a significant reversal of colonial practices. According to Meadows and van Vuuren any formation of indigenous citizenship needs to be linked to their identity as it is created through dialogue with white culture (Meadows and van Vuuren 1998: 98). But so little dialogue has occurred in the past that even admitting the existence of indigenous identity has remained at the edge of citizenship debates especially in recent years. Clearly dress is merely one aspect of a large and contested field relating to questions of citizenship for indigenous peoples whose lives have been so marginalized in our culture. The wearing of politicized clothes that mark out a special place and visibility for their cause is simply one step on a larger journey toward the presence of indigenous peoples as full and equal citizens of Australia.



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### Notes

1. Blankets used for canoe sails were reported by Coen Police in Annual Report of the Northern Protector of Aborigines for 1903, QPP 1904: 853.
2. Roth was empowered under the 1897 Queensland Aboriginal Protection and Restriction of Opium Act that remained the main Act administering Aboriginal affairs until 1939.

## Children's Day: The Fashionable Performance of Modern Citizenship in China

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### Introduction

This essay is concerned with the performance of citizenship in China, an authoritarian collective society in transition to a market economy with socialist characteristics. I argue that the performance of citizenship here refers to the ways in which fashion is used by urban children as an articulation of their relation to the state, its norms and histories, but also to their wider social sphere. Given the high level of adult gatekeeping in children's access to fashion, to public spaces and to material goods in general, I acknowledge that the examples used below refer as much to adult ideas about children's proto-citizenship modes as they speak to the children's own articulated experience. Citizenship is here understood as an ideal state-society relationship model that is differently conceived according to location, class, gender, group identity and education. The model does not prioritize Western and liberal-democratic particularities in definitions of citizenship in political legislation. As David Brown has argued:

'Citizenship' functions as a normative ideal to provide the individual with formulas of identity, virtue and morality that convey visions of the nation in which the individual is ethically embedded as a just society. These resolve the individual's sense of insecurity and uncertainty. Citizenship also establishes a basis for social control by invoking ideas of duty, obligation and conformity. (Brown 2001)<sup>1</sup>

Children's fashion is likely to be a mixture of adult fantasy, role playing, cultural appropriateness and functionality (Higonnet 1997). It is not necessarily tied to individual choices, nor to street wear. Children