A sustained and devastating critique has been aimed in recent years at a metaphysics of truth which understands truth and authenticity as essence, as fixed, self-identical and persistent over time. So successful has this critique been that it is now possible to speak of authenticity only in terms of a certain 'strategic' or politically necessary engagement, on the part of subaltern groups, with an essentialist metaphysics. While the critique is a necessary one, taken on its own it has resulted in a reductionist presumption that we are only ever going to encounter versions of truth that we have already understood, for purposes of critique, as so many versions of 'essentialism'. By contrast, in the ceremonial performances of dance described in this issue of TAAJ, across a broad spectrum of cultures, we witness the striking persistence and centrality of references to virtually, appropriate 'feeling' and to the experience of a kind of integrity, coherence and 'truth' in a good performance. The commentary argues that these distinctions rest on traditions that move us quite far from an essentialism both of the spirit and of the body, requiring instead a fresh effort of understanding on our part. Utilising other traditions to develop a better, less reified understanding of truth criteria can help arrest a certain hyper-expansion of 'the political' that threatens to leave no other terms alive with which to inform its own vision of the relation between past, present and future.

In this commentary I wish to indicate and develop the potential, which this issue has, to spur us into re-thinking a certain orthodoxy that has grown up around notions of authenticity and truth. An understanding forged at the highly politicised intersection of feminist theory, postcolonial theory and queer theory during the 1980s and 1990s circulates in a condensed form in phrases like 'strategic essentialism' and—a lesser known, but related phrase—'the necessary error of identity' (Spivak, cited by Butler 1993:229). The critique of a dominant metaphysics in Western philosophical traditions has exercised effects well beyond philosophy, and now extends to wherever there is an invocation of an integral whole. As such, anthropological invocations of 'culture' have necessarily been destabilised, and an issue like this one on the 'politics of dance' necessarily bears the marks of the critique. Nevertheless, there is also present in this issue, a certain persistent counter-understanding, one which is in some tension with the exclusivity of the orthodoxy.

Perhaps it is the call of dance that provides the tension. As a sensuous and embodied practice it sends a mute plea to theory. Its 'muteness' is not because it is outside of linguistic and discursive signification—evidently the pleasures of dance are inseparable from its cultural meanings—but because there is always a certain gap between bodily practices and discourses. For academics, in particular, a consideration of dance sends a call, easily ignored, for theory to shed its intellectualist pre-dispositions and its profound discomfort with the flesh. Writing on dance can therefore set in motion fresh desires, such as the desire (see Introduction to this Special Issue) to move away from or at least to muddy a dichotomous understanding of poetics and politics. Or perhaps the source of the tension is the continued force of anthropology and ethnomusicology's 'old recipe', its turning to marginalised and 'silent' times and spaces for the secrets with which to correct the limits of Western rationalism (de Certeau 1984:50,62ff).

Whatever the sources, I find this tension promising and well worth exploring, since the orthodoxy has reigned supreme for some time now and leads, it seems to me, into untenable impasses unless it is simultaneously opened up to other traditions and their divergent constrictions of 'truth'. What I am describing as the 'orthodoxy' is a view that virtually finds inconceivable any version of authenticity and truth that does not presume static essences, an ontology of fixed and unchanging meanings. As variants of a discredited metaphysics, the only way that this view is able to understand the apparent persistence with which some kind of criteria for authenticity keep appearing in people's judgements and orientations, is to view them as effects of power. The argument goes something like this. A metaphysics of truth which understands truth as essence, as fixed, self-identical, and persistent over time, is untenable. However, there is a certain 'necessity' about engaging with this tradition. What kind of necessity is this? Drawing on Derrida, we may understand this necessity as the fact that there is no simple 'outside' of the traditions we are shaped by. Such traditions form some aspect of the very social ground we stand on and wish to 'deconstruct'. We may note, however, that the Heideggerian genealogy in Derrida allows tradition to be conceived in quite overwhelming terms, as a single dominant metaphysics (of presence), even if movement is introduced by Derrida in the form of internal instability as an equally central feature of tradition. For theorists such as Butler, there is necessity of another kind as well. Drawing on Foucault, she argues that such a dominant metaphysics of identity as essence is also supported, authorised and elaborated by our dominant political institutions (see for example Butler 1992). Therefore, the argument for a 'strategic essentialism' goes, it is necessary for subaltern groups (women, the colonised) to strategically and instrumentally engage with a discredited metaphysics.

Let me make it clear that I am not disputing the pertinence or force of such a critique, only its reductionism if taken on its own. The force of the critique of a dominant understanding of authenticity needs to be fully acknowledged, retained and explored in its ramifications. As a metaphysics that has informed and guided the perspectives adopted by colonial governmentality, it has travelled way beyond the confines of Western philosophy. What is more, in its colonising avatar, a metaphysics that understands all change as a movement away from truth acquires new and peculiarly devastating capacities, since it is enforced by the very colonial regimes that are simultaneously inflicting unprecedented changes on the cultures. 'Authenticity' becomes impossible to obtain under such conditions.
yet, at the same time, impossible to avoid since it is a state-imposed criteria for group identity. One of the tasks anthropology shares with other forms of enquiry in such a situation is therefore that of testifying and memorialising the violence of having to live under such impossible discursive conditions. Recent anthropological contributions have taken up this task in various ways, drawing particular attention to the presumptions of intellectuals who, by abstracting from the context of colonisation, either utilise criteria of authenticity in order to find certain subaltern constructions of the past too self-conscious (Jolly 1992), or else utilise a postmodern critique of authenticity in order to find such constructions too 'essentialist' (Lattas 1993). Many of the writers in this issue also take up the task of detailing the utterly contradictory demands imposed on subordinated cultures, to simultaneously produce their culture as commodities for the changing 'tastes' of the market and as a fixed essence of display (cf. Nowak, Magowan, Murray).

I am not, therefore, disputing the occurrence or importance of a 'strategic' essentialism in the face of such impossible contradictory shifts and contradictions in relations of power and dominance (see Introduction). It is important to clarify that it need not be taken as an absolute fall from purity to find subaltern groups quite consciously shaping their practices to the contexts of tourist audiences or state occasions. As Murray (this issue:353-53) elaborates, judgements as to the 'plastic' nature of a particular cultural practice are often conducted from a cultural or social distance and presume an absolute loss, whereas if the people involved are actually asked about their understandings, we find quite conscious and complex adjudications about the requirements of the particular context. In this sense, 'essentialist' statements are called forth by certain contexts, where people who know nothing about a culture demand an instant access to its meanings. The further assumption here is that 'natives' have access to a fullness of meanings about their own culture and can therefore fully represent their difference to others (see Ram 1999).

But is this all that can be said about authenticity? Having shown that a certain version of authenticity is pernicious, should we then proceed to do altogether without the term, except where it can be demonstrated to be a politically necessary response? Such an operation is unnecessary—and, indeed, it cannot be fulfilled. For in practice, all people make distinctions that call on some kind of implicit reference to authenticity. Let me initially just register, quite impressionistically, the kinds of distinctions and practices that are referred to in this issue. It is quite typical of the nature of the phenomenon we are discussing that these criteria are only implicit in the distinctions—that is, they do not appear in the form of discursive statements or theorisations about truth. In part, this is because we are dealing with dance, an embodied form of knowing rather than knowledge that can be extracted in the form of discursive statements. To turn this knowledge into explicit and discursively elaborated understandings, as theory does, is already to operate at a considerable remove from the way cultural understanding works in practice. But I will persevere, since the translation into theory is pre-empted altogether by an orthodoxy which seems to assume that we are only ever going to encounter versions of truth that we have already understood, for purposes of critique, as so many versions of 'essentialism'.

In this issue, we certainly find people making a 'strategic' use of essentialism. But this is not all they do. They also make distinctions between performances that carry with them a certain force and a capacity to make present the truth, and performances that lack that capacity. People not only manoeuvre and manipulate criteria imposed on them, they also reject the instruction to 'change the dances taught to them by their elders to make them more theatrically pleasing to a Western audience', and they reject such pressures in the name of something Henry (this issue:328) is moved to describe as a certain 'integrity of being'. But how are we to understand the term 'integrity' in this context? To take another example, immigrants from ex-colonies experience in a good performance of dance or music, the coming to presence of all kinds of patterns of existence, physiologicals of affect that have been violently interrupted and which lead an underground existence for the most part (Ram, this issue). Henry describes a similar experience. Despite the violent interruptions of colonisation, younger Aboriginal people learn the dances, even if for the first time, they described the experience not as learning something entirely foreign, but as 'a matter of just bringing it out of ourselves...' (Henry, this issue:330).

These are specifically postcolonial experiences, but they draw on a quality formally recognised by the dance traditions themselves. The 'truth' of an artistic performance of the ceremonial varieties described in this issue has been the capacity of dance—never understood just as 'dance' in its naked form, but always clothed by music, narrative, poetry, drama, rhythm—to bring ancestor spirits and deities to presence. When socialised by such cultures, people may experience inauthenticity not as an aesthetic judgement by an individual consciousness at all. Rather—as with Hamlet whose apprehension that time was, 'out of joint' was signalled by the appearance of his father's ghost—it is the restless and disapproving appearance of ancestor spirits and sickness among the dancers that announces the violation of a certain order and balance in practice (Henry, this issue). Implicitly, then, the experience of such disorder points to the priority of an experience of order, or at least of coherence, and of a patterning of interlocking experiences, a quality that Rose's paper in this issue brings out well.

Are expressions of a certain patterned coherence, of the already-therefulness of cultural meanings, all so many instances of the pernicious effects of essentialism, either strategically used or less consciously imposed from Western colonial discourses? Lattas (1993) suggests more profound reasons why essentialism might be part of any political struggle. But do we need to concede that all such experiences and distinctions are to be understood as so many examples of an essentialist metaphysics at work?

Contexts where representatives of a dominant group demand instant access to the meanings of a subordinate culture are bound to impose as well as elicit a certain 'levelling off' in responses? However, let us alter the context. We have all had some experience of this in field work, but let me confine myself to the examples provided in this issue. When members of the dominant culture (see Tamisari and Rose, this volume) place themselves in positions of somewhat increased vulnerability, when they are no longer entirely secured within the apparatus of their own culture but submit themselves as apprentices and students to the subaltern culture, then we see a dramatic shift in responses. Now the student is no longer offered easily digestible discursive statements about what the 'meaning of the culture' might be. If seen to be serious, the student is not given any easy short cut. Instead, teachers and audiences of cherished traditions submit the student to the most arduous processes of criticism, even ridicule, as well as encouragement, in an effort to convey subtle distinctions and criteria for excellence that must be learned by the student (see Tamisari, this issue). In the kinds of dances described in this issue, most of which have enjoyed great cultural centrality and elaboration, teachers and audiences leave one in no doubt that there are criteria for virtuosity, appropriate 'feeling' and for the experience of a kind of 'integrity'.

These criteria require of us a fresh effort of understanding. In fact, they move us quite far from essentialist notions of 'authenticity'. By essentialism is meant the emanation of an 'essence' that has been understood (at least in the nineteenth century tradition of European aesthetics) to reside in the spirit of the artist ("genius"). If we are responsive to the
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...certain relationship with stillness, as dance helps to make apparent through its rhythmic patterning of intervals between the two (cf. Rose, this issue).

I suggest that the interpretations of dance in this issue locate for us a sense of 'truth' in the capacity of performance to invoke certain primary experiences of the world. These are experiences of relationality, coherence, intersubjectivity, embodiment, temporality and a certain 'givenness' to the world. At the same time, the relationship of performance to such primary experiences is not that of an attempted (or failed) copy of an original. Rather, the power of performance comes from its capacity to elaborate, draw on and interpret these dimensions of experience. Indeed, they often have specific terms for this power—such as maarr among the Yolngu, as noted by Tamisari—while the power of an effective performance is understood as a 'call' among two cultures as different from one another as the Victoria River Aboriginal people Rose writes about, and the Tamil culture that I write about where the term for call is kuru with its related term kural for voice or giving voice. All of the traditions described in this special issue attribute a central importance to the power of play and transformation. In Indian aesthetic theory, this understanding is formalised and elaborated as the capacity of performance to transform the flux of everyday experience in a way that alters the latter precisely in order to distill, extract, and render savourable, the synaesthetic 'taste/emotion of everyday experiences (Ram, this issue).

The measure of success in a Cook Island 'drag' dance is the skill with which the performers can invoke, but simultaneously play with, invert, exaggerate the ordinary and everyday forms of gendered motility (Alexeyeff, this issue:300-1).

Have we reintroduced a binarism between 'West' and 'non-West' in order to revise and come up with a better understanding of authenticity? Not necessarily so. Experiences of relationality and coherence are not exclusive attributes of 'traditional' or 'fourth world' cultures. While such experiences may certainly be better recognised, better named, more highly elaborated and more consciously sought after in performances in certain cultures, the world that the dances described in this issue open on to is not that of an exotic otherness. There is an 'opening on to the world which is so fundamental to experience that it moved Merleau-Ponty in his extraordinary last writings, to evoke the 'flesh of the world', a certain reversibility and 'cooling over of the visible upon the seeing body, of the tangible upon the touching body' (1987:146), which gives the world a texture and truth, in the sense that we do not experience it as chaotic and illusory.

How would a revised notion of authenticity relate to politics, the chosen theme of this issue? The editors write of a desire to re-address the relation between the political and the poetic (see Introduction). To accomplish this is no easy task. Unless one is vigilant and attentive to the power relations between the two terms one ends up revising the term 'politics' only to further expand its territory at the expense of the subordinate term, making the 'poetic' even more secondary and derivative. The very break that Foucault made with the duality of base and superstructure in Marx has also enabled the category of micropolitics to absorb or encompass more and more. The scope of 'politics' is immeasurably enlarged once ideology is no longer to be contrasted with knowledge, but instead, truth itself becomes an effect of power. To understand politics as 'embodied' can contribute to a further extension of territory. In the new micropolitics, every joint and sinus of the body becomes a site of power and/or resistance to power. The hitjero 'wild reserve' of the body provides, precisely through its extra-linguistic aspects of movement and motility, a further territory for the polis to conquer. A classic instance of those uni-directional revisory moves occurs in Butler's latest attempt at re-examining her own earlier reliance on a Foucault 'notoriously taciturn on the topic of the psyche' (1997:18) in
order to ‘refuse the ontological dualism that posits the separation of the political and the psychic’. (1997:19) But the dualism is refused only to offer an account of the psyche in terms of the political: ‘... it seems crucial to offer a critical account of psychic subjection in terms of the regulatory and productive effects of power’ (1997:19). Even these newer trends, however, draw their strength from a lengthy genealogy. Traditions are far more constitutive than modernity’s self-understanding permits us to believe. With its roots, as Hannah Arendt points out, in ancient Greek understandings of the ‘polis’ (1969:49), the power of such a lengthy genealogy is experienced every time that we invoke ‘politics’ and find ourselves immediately enabled to take over, annex and subordinate other meanings.

This hyper-expansion of the political ultimately impoverishes its vision. It threatens to leave no other terms alive that might help to reveal what this strategising and manoeuvring is for, other than a sheer micropolitics of survival and resistance. A more adequate account of authenticity does not simply help to revise notions of ‘ceremonial’ and ‘ritual’ contexts, rescuing ‘tradition’ and ‘culture’ from the iron cage of fixed and unchanging essences, or mentalistic transmission of ‘rules’. It also allows a more genuine revision of the antinomy between ‘tradition’ (a poetics based on essences) and ‘politics’ (an instrumentalist practice based on criteria of power). There never has been a ‘tradition’ that did not entail a certain skilful way in which cultural subjects respond to the novel and unprecedented demands of the present. But neither is the ‘present’ a series of self-contained units with no gap or fissure that allows the past or future to enter into it. Strategising therefore responds to the exigencies of the present—thus the Yolngu’s performances of the 1960s were a response to the domination of the terms set not only by the Elizabethan Trust Theatre but by the entire political climate of the time. However, the mistake that is often made is to take any one political response as exhausting the horizons of the past in the present. When political circumstances shifted and became more favourable to the Yolngu as a result of gains for the Aboriginal people in a number of different areas of social practice, the ritual force of the dance not only became available again, but became relevant as a political force (Magowan, this issue). In order to appreciate the very complexity of politics, let alone as a way of informing strategising, we need to let other terms stay alive.

References


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Book Reviews


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In October 1997, the Federal Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, Senator John Herron, appointed John Reeves QC to conduct a review of the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976. Reeves' brief was broad; he was to look into the 'effectiveness of the legislation', the 'social, cultural and economic costs and benefits' of Land Rights, 'exploration and mining provisions', 'royalty' matters, the issue of 'compulsory acquisition', the abutment of the (Federal) Act and Northern Territory laws, the future role and structure of Land Councils, and 'any other matters relevant to the operation of the Act'.

Reeve's response was, according to the editors of Land Rights at Risk?, 'expansive (and expensive)' (p. v). After some nine months of the research and hearings, Reeves (and his team) produced Building on Land Rights for the Next Generation. The bottom line of this document is the pronouncement that while the Aboriginal Land Rights Act has resulted in the transfer of much land to Aboriginal people, this has led to little in the way of social or economic development for Aboriginal landholders. Not only this, the land transfers have been at the expense of Aboriginal-Northern Territory Government relations. To 'rectify' the situation, Reeves recommends extensive changes to the Act. For example, he says Land Councils should be regionalised (so that the current two large and two small bodies become 18 small bodies), that the residents of the regions (not the Traditional Owners of the lands) be given the power to address land related issues of their areas, that royalty monies not go to individuals, families or the like, but rather towards improving the general education level, health status, housing situation, etc of Aboriginal people, and that the so-called 'permit system' (by which Aboriginal Landowners control access to their lands) be abolished.

Land Rights at Risk? brings together a number of papers delivered at a conference (Evaluating the Reeves Report: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives) held in March 1999 at the Australian National University, and jointly sponsored by that institution's Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research and the Department of Archaeology and Anthropology. In addition to those whose papers are published in the collection, the conference was attended by Reeves and two of his advisers, Dr John Avery (anthropology) and Emeritus Professor Richard Blandy (economics), representatives from the Central, Northern and Tiwi Land Councils and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, and other interested parties.

While the authors who contributed to Land Rights at Risk? come at the Reeves Review from a number of different disciplines, including anthropology, economics, law and public policy, without exception they are highly critical of the findings and proposals contained in