

# Aboriginal Languages Reclamation: Countering the neo-colonial onslaught



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## **Abstract**

The level of Aboriginal community responses to the ongoing issue of language loss can be considered an indication of Aboriginal people's growing assertion of their right to maintain their unique linguistic and cultural identities and heritage. Governments have long been accused of paying lip service to Aboriginal aspirations for languages reclamation; while they have sought to justify the establishment of such programs in order to continue the longer term colonial project of cultural and linguistic assimilation. However, while many language workers are tied by grants to the very agencies that hold such views, their work is clearly drawn from a different space. Through their agency, work on the reclamation of these languages has had a significant impact on the wider Aboriginal community's aspirations for the reclamation and use of their languages. This effort has had the impact of critically repositioning the legitimacy of these aspirations, and places this activity in a political and moral space in which Aboriginal language advocates and communities challenge the view that they and their languages are linguistic and cultural artefacts that have little use or purpose in a postcolonial environment. This paper argues that community agency in this matter is a part of a larger project of Aboriginal resistance to the postcolonial environment in which they have been positioned as an ethnic minority within their own Country.

## **Introduction**

The aspirations of Aboriginal people and their communities to take on the task of the reclamation of their languages is driven by range of complex, interlinked but sometimes contradictory and competing issues that mirror the lived experiences of Indigenous peoples. Engagement,

however tentative, in language learning is based on an assertion of an unbroken cultural connectedness to ancestral knowledge, of a desire to avow an authentic Aboriginal identity in the face of mounting cultural atomisation, of giving voice to the uniqueness of Aboriginal languages, the knowledge embedded within it, and to honour the keepers of language whose efforts to keep this knowledge alive are a testament to the resilience and struggle against the continued onslaught of colonisation. Within these multiple and complex contexts, the efforts of language reclamation programs is more than just second language learning, it is one of colonial resistance.

At a point along the Darling River a small town sits alongside a low-lying outcrop of stones that, on closer inspection, reveals the remnants of a once sophisticated series of stone fish traps constructed and reconstructed over many thousands of years by the ancestors of those still residing along its banks. The town has been increasingly left to its own devices, as government and private enterprise have deserted the town and surrounding region – the dual outcome of a debilitating decade-old drought, the 'rationalisation' of government services and a generational drift to larger rural or urban centres. However, while the town has been increasingly deserted by its non-Aboriginal population, paradoxically, the quickening pace of 'white flight' (*Daily Telegraph*, 1 May 2008) from this town, has provided a unique opportunity for the school and the Aboriginal community to work towards establishing an Aboriginal language program within the school's 'mainstream curriculum'. An acute understanding of its importance to both the students and the wider Aboriginal community has motivated the establishment of the program, the value of which:

... is for the children to have the opportunity, which I never had, to learn language in their own community, in their own school, where they are going to be spending most of their days, simply to have that opportunity and to learn the language of their ancestors, which I never had, and to do it in an environment where it is encouraged, actively participated in by as many people as possible and reinforced in a way that makes it relevant. Not only relevant but a whole action of a person through their own language expressing their identity, coming to understand their identity. [School Language teacher]

(Lowe, 2008, p. 44)

While the language teacher spoke of its extended purpose, there is also a legitimacy that resides in the private space – a fundamentally deep personal yearning within individuals for reconnecting across generations to meet the needs of community and individual well-being. Anderson (2010) identified the journey of connecting to language as a powerful force in his re-birth:

*Wiradjuri language in some areas has not been spoken for two generations but in some areas has just been hidden. I feel I am now trying to bridge the gap and fill in a void – a void within myself and also other people. I have been trying to bring back unspoken words and I have met people who will want nothing to do with it, but also people like me, wanting more and more of filling the black hole within the soul.*

(G. Anderson, 2010, p. 73)

The aspirations centred on the reclamation of tradition languages are acute for Indigenous communities worldwide, as ancestral languages of the land struggle to survive the onslaught of colonial cultures that have now become

truly globalised, while local programs that endlessly struggle to be established are treated with indifference, discouragement or administrative obstruction by government agencies (Henderson, 2000). Both the purpose for establishing these languages projects, and the efforts required to maintain them is a study of Aboriginal people's efforts to forge a legitimate and sovereign place for themselves and their communities within the colonised state in which they are forcibly situated by the historical circumstances of colonisation.

This paper looks to explore these aspirations through the voices of Aboriginal people working to reclaim their languages and to make this unique knowledge available to the schools and their wider communities. The voices of these language advocates are but a sample of the voices of Aboriginal people who want their views heard by those who have the capacity to support their difficult journeys. These narratives will explore the views of these Aboriginal language teachers and advocates using a framework developed out of the post and neo-colonial literature. A recent collaborative project (Hobson, Lowe, Poetsch, & Walsh, 2010) to capture these voices has been unashamedly influenced by the text Hinton and Hale (2001) edited, 'The Green Book of Language Revitalization', and has sought to contextualise the work of community language workers, teachers, academics and linguists who are actively engaged on a small number of the many hundreds of unique Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages within Australia.

The language projects explored within this text are underpinned by a belief that the reclamation of Australia's unique languages provides a platform to express the uniqueness of Aboriginal identity, to reconnect language to Country in traditional and contemporary forms, and to establish

programs that re-establish positive self-esteem and identity through the self-assurance of being unique and sovereign peoples. As Brown (2004) explained, the power of connection to both her past and present are focused on her multiple activities as a learner, speaker, teacher and language advocate.

*The strength of this is knowing that I'll be able to sit down with my grandchildren and children, speak language, not just stuff that I've been talking, but stuff that we've reclaimed through this program. I think it's a sense of pride. I think that can only be one of the biggest points of reconciliation, to go through the schools; and I'm just glad to be part of the team.'*

(Brown, 2004)

The corollary of this connection is an increase in the level of community resilience, which has enabled sustainable and purposeful resistance to dominant language and cultural ways. Learning and using traditional languages, and developing a keener understanding of the similarities of the colonial experiences of other Indigenous communities have proven, in so many cases, to be restorative for the community's soul (Reyhner, 2001). These issues challenge the certainties that the modern 'postcolonial' state has erected for itself, and opens the door for Aboriginal people to question the colonial morality that is based on of the cultural subjugation of others.

### **Post or neo-colonialism**

The construct of 'Postcolonialism', originating in the writings of Gramsci (2006; Gramsci & Buttigieg, 2002), was later picked up by historians and political theorists from within Asia and Africa (Spivak, 1993) who had sought to understand and combat the impact of the colonial cultural oppression on the lives of the colonised peoples. It had been argued that while the

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decolonisation process had essentially brought the first phase of imperialism to a close, many of the assumptions that underpinned the initial colonisation period were deeply embedded within the constructed relationships and structures between the old empires and the newly free nations. Postcolonial theorists, many of whom came from the colonised elites, understood that as they looked to understand the development of their contemporary postcolonial identity, they were ironically using the language, and studying and working within the colonial institutions left as their legacy to the empire (Gilbert & Tompkins, 1996).

While acknowledging that it is contentious to attempt to define a social theory that seeks to explain the colonial experiences of so many in such diverse spaces, postcolonial theory has sought to address diverse matters such as identity, cultural affiliations, social structures, gender and racial affiliations, and the means by which the colonisers used their knowledge of these to subjugate and divide the colonised against themselves (Gandhi, 1998). By their nature, these relationships are cast as binary oppositional structures between the centre and the empire, and are used to justify the use of power and control to de-legitimize the aspirations of the oppressed. In particular, this binary became a three-way discourse between the centre and coloniser immigrants and the Indigenous peoples. In both cases, the relationship moved beyond the establishment of imperial hierarchies based on a connection between the centre and the empire, to a deadly discourse based on de-humanising the native to justify the stripping away of prior ownership or sovereign rights in favour of the invader/coloniser.

While it is possible to find a generally adopted understanding of post-colonialism, the fact that it has emerged from the two critically antagonistic

theories of Marxism and post-structuralism has seriously confounded the establishment of a similarly agreed-to articulation of the theory's underpinning premise. Postcolonial studies had a history that was born from the work of Spivek (1988, 1993), and Said (Said, 1988) and others who had commenced investigating the processes of the decolonisation of the 19th century European empires in Africa and Asia. Much of the initial theoretical framework, developed from earlier Marxist theoreticians like Gramsci (2002), argued that it was both possible and necessary for the colonial subalterns (the colonial under-class and oppressed majority) to expose the consequences of the imperial project on their lives. Gandhi (1998) has posited that though the initial intention of this exposure of the vagaries of the subaltern experience was to legitimate their voice, the debate became a substitute for a wider discussion on the postcolonial theory across and within the newly created states. Gandhi (1998) claims that this analysis has become mired in non-productive debates on which group suffered the most under the colonial regimes, or which resistance movements were the most significant in challenging colonial rule. I would suggest that in part, these contortions are based on internal theoretical tensions as exemplified in the confusion of its name, as well as its actual nature, form and focus. On one level, this has centred on the uncertainty of its nomenclature – whether in its hyphenated form it represents a temporal point of a state's decolonisation, with an implied chronological separation between the act of colonialism and a postcolonial aftermath; or as others have argued a 'postcolonial' timeframe that doesn't begin with the finalisation of the decolonisation process, but instead begins at the very point of the colonial occupation (Gandhi, 1998). Bell's (2010) foreword to the text on

re-awakening languages clearly identifies the commonalities of wider struggles of Indigenous people as they look to restore their sleeping and fragmented languages.

*What each language or family group does is critical to the bigger picture of what we all are trying to achieve in terms of cultural maintenance and survival as the first people of the land. Each contribution, big or small, is part of an ongoing struggle facing all indigenous people around the world. In the midst of globalisation we strive to maintain and strengthen our identity and connection to country through our language, cultural practices and values for present and future generations ... The contribution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia to linguistic and cultural diversity worldwide is essential and is happening through the important work we are all involved in.*

(Bell, in Hobson, Lowe, Poetsch & Walsh, 2010)

In opening postcolonial studies to the possibility of an earlier temporal allows an interrogation of the experiences of the Indigenous populations of the 'New World' as they confronted invasion and colonisation. Goldberg and Quasyson (2002) have suggested that postcolonial theory provides a theoretical vehicle to explore these experiences by providing a framework to challenge the powerful orientation of colonial studies that have constructed their histories in the image of their colonial masters (Henderson, 2000; Yazzie, 2000). As Battiste (2000) noted, postcolonial studies must become a simultaneous study of both the temporal and philosophic spaces of European imperialism, and the contemporary neo-colonial state so that Indigenous peoples are enabled to critique their own unique experiences in the light

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of a comparative understanding of the methods of the colonial invader.

Gandhi (1998) has argued that the actual moment of arrival of true independence of once colonised states is predicated upon those state's capacity to at first imagine and then successfully execute a decisive departure from its colonial past. She suggests that where this rupturing of the state's past history does not occur, there is a fundamental moral disjuncture where the move from colony to statehood is not accompanied by a legal, constitutional and moral acknowledgement of its Indigenous peoples sovereign rights. Gandhi (1998) argues that not achieving this accord with Indigenous peoples has left the colonisers as pyrrhic victors in an ongoing colonial conflict that constrains its capacity to claim freedom from its previous colonial masters when its very foundation is built on the 'concealed persistence of its own and Indigenous peoples "unfreedom"'. Memmi (2003) supports this contention by arguing that the perversely symbiotic relationship of indifference between the coloniser and the colonised demonstrates the false temporal space of postcolonial independence for those nations which grew into statehood on the back on denying authentic freedom to its Indigenous citizens. The choice of the policies of subjugation and assimilation instead of an authentic accommodation of the rights of Indigenous people which has created an illusiary independence in the minds of the coloniser, but in reality is based on a 'dreadful secondariness of the Indigenous (Gandhi, 1998) and a eternalised disjuncture between the structures of the state and Aboriginal social and cultural structures (C. Fletcher, 1999). It could be argued that while these states are chained to this history of Indigenous peoples' dispossession, they remain unable to change either the nature or the dynamic of their

relationship with Indigenous peoples. The test for postcolonial inquiry is whether it has the capacity to explore this fraught interrelationship between the colonisers, their now independent scions and the state's Indigenous peoples. A central consequence of the complexity of this neocolonial environment has been the significant, ongoing impact on Indigenous peoples' identity construction.

### **Aboriginal identity**

*Our languages are the backbone of Australian languages, to confirm peoples' place, their culture and their nation. To have a more friendly society that have better relationships and understanding, it is important that everybody learns our languages, so that there is a greater appreciation of who we really are and what holds us together.*

(Ashby, 2004)

This terrain is characterised by both the centripetal forces of globalisation and the centrifugal forces of localisation. On the one hand, theorists (Castells, 1996) have argued that the traditional cultural resources deployed in the work of identity construction are shifting. Ethnicity and nationality, once historically the solid grounding point of identity, is changing as the nation state transforms and the information age emerges. Hirst (2007) counters by suggesting that increased uncertainty and change has heightened the importance of traditional ways of grounding identity in new discourses as people seek meaning in traditional cultural and social connections.

Levi and Dean (2002) have also noted the profoundly paradoxical nature of indigenous identity – cultural authenticity that sits in the human rights discourse. They suggest that the enunciation of Indigenous rights has the potential be politically hazardous as it axiomatically signals a willingness to

concede the possibility of autonomy for the subaltern groups within the newly created (or liberated) postcolonial state. However, Ashcroft (2001) has posited that in those locations colonised by mass migration, two concurrent developments occurred – first the newly established state emerged, taking a form and nature that was remarkably like that of the coloniser, and second the new state's cultural authority and legal legitimacy was almost exclusively delivered into the hands of the established hybrid elites. The moral right to occupy this new alien space was forever linked to a denial of prior occupation and the sovereign rights of its Indigenous peoples – a right they would now assert for themselves as the new masters of this once 'uninhabited' land. While Bhabha (1994) has suggested that the European colonisers demanded nothing less than cultural emulation from their colonial outposts, Hall (2003) has argued that there was a level ambivalence to direct mimicry and that this was in itself a part measure of colonial resistance. However, while the settler colonists were able to choose the level of tension between their mimicry/and resistance to the centre, this was not a choice that they afforded Indigenous peoples. Their 'right' to maintain an independent cultural identity was inimical to the interests of the decolonised state, which eagerly sought to create a new national identity by minimising the Indigenous presence (Grande, 2009). Conversely, an insistence in maintaining their own cultural identity puts Aboriginal people on a collision course with the stated interests of the neocolonial state and remains at the centre of their cultural resistance.

The ability to negotiate one's own identity has long played a fundamental role in the resolution of a critical issue of modernity: how individuals, families and groups and larger social networks reconcile their place within

a hierarchy and equality between fellow citizens (B. Anderson, 2007). This is of particular importance for those whose identity is problematised within the national discourse on nation building. The struggle to affirm that identity which is central to Aboriginal peoples' efforts to maintain a separate identity separates them from the cultural locations in which governments have attempted to position them (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008).

*I get really pissed off with token inclusivity. You look at the language that's utilized around it and this town has internalized that language you know, people don't talk about tools anymore people talk about 'artifacts'. This is Aboriginal people. Call our own tools artifacts. What's an artifact? It's a fossil of a dead culture, it's something that's left behind after that culture's gone.*

*"... I come here and I get shocked because I see this living part of my culture being called an artifact by my own countrymen who basically don't have the critical faculties to be able to stand within their own ethnic standpoint, ethnic viewpoint and say "hey, this language is killing me, all these words in this foreign language English that I'm using are killing me, they're placing me as a stone age person who's culture's finished who's going to be wiped out".*

(Aboriginal consultant, NSW Department of Education. Personal correspondence, 2007)

Central to Aboriginal and other Indigenous communities' endeavour to create a legitimate and sovereign space within the neocolonial state, has been an increased sense of the need to act to support their language's reclamation from the moribund state that they have often fallen to. In their recent chapter on Indigenous students language rights, Aguilera and LeCompte (2009) have argued

that language preservation is critically important to the present and future lives of Indigenous communities. Dehyle and Swisher (1997) have shown that Indigenous student achievement and school completion rates are linked to their positive cultural identity, while Aguilera and LeCompte (2009) reported that students accessing language immersion programs outperformed their grade-level peers in English instruction programs in most subjects. This they attribute to students being grounded in cultural knowledge, which was embedded in a culturally rich and responsive pedagogy. Yet not withstanding this research that clearly highlighted the value for student immersion in their traditional tongue, communities are increasingly being affected by a reduction in the number of Indigenous languages being spoken. This reduction of speakers has sharpened the urgency for Aboriginal communities to deal directly with language loss, its impacts on community strength and resilience.

### **Challenging dominant cultural views through language**

*The value of the program is for the children to have the opportunity which I never had to learn language in their own community, in their own school, where they are going to be spending most of their days, simply to have that opportunity and to learn the language of their ancestors which I never had and to do it in an environment where it is encouraged, actively participated in by as many people as possible and reinforced in a way that makes it relevant. Not only relevant but a whole action of a person through their own language expressing their identity, coming to understand their identity.*

(Language mentor and teacher, NSW Western Region)

The dominant approach to the contemporary challenges of multiplicity and difference is to think of 'culture' and 'identity' within the crisis language of imaginary unity, singular origins, a singular ancestry and bounded nationality. This culture reaches back neither to its indigenous past, nor to the multiple cultural ancestries of its population, but to their western eurocentric cultures (Henderson, 2000). This idealised notion of a national eurocentric culture places it on a collision course with the cultures of those who draw their epistemological and ontological standpoint from their own sense and space (McCarthy, Giardina, Harewood, & Park, 2005). The dominant socio-cultural group views of national cultural indivisibility is played out within the educational enterprise of schooling. While schools variously pay attention to the cultural diversity of the students in their classrooms, the underpinning priority of schools has been to disappear authentic narratives of Indigenous people, their stories and connectedness, and replace it with caricatures and epistemological artifacts, which they have struggled to maintain their culture against the meta-national narratives so popular in post-industrial nations (Grande, 2000). These new narratives deny Indigenous intellectual legitimacy and their status has been attacked as being subjective, having little relevance and being just one view or constructed of reality.

### **Education**

*Well if I look at all these issues, I think it's all coloured by one thing, which is colonization, and the colonial discourses that run through curriculum, community, everything. It's kind of like a virus. Where I see change being necessary is the need for de-colonizing, real de-colonization, in the curriculum but also in the community. I mean we look at talking about Aboriginal knowledge*

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here, I mean people's definitions of Aboriginal knowledge make me really angry sometimes because they're real colonized versions. We tend to focus on the exotic. We tend to focus on these token elements which promote a colonial agenda, like painting us as primitive and bloody you know, primitive, exotic, interesting, spiritual, all these sort of little things. And we're always relegated to softer areas of the curriculum, you know, the softer areas of Aboriginal knowledge.

(Western Region language consultant 2008–2010)

Mass education has been developed in the 20th century as a reflection of the aspirations of the aspiring middle-class who saw education as a way of ensuring upward mobility, economic security, and the legitimacy of their values and worldviews, language and culture. However, for those children whose languages and cultures were significantly divergent from the mainstream, this instructional system has been critical to the state's cognitive imperialism. Battiste (2000) argues that schools have been a central location for the ongoing social, cultural, linguistic and economic subjugation of Indigenous people. As such, education is far from a benign process, as it is used to perpetuate myths about Aboriginal people in both schools and across the wider community (Battiste, 2000).

The place and role of education is debatable and highly contested within Aboriginal communities, for while parents have often articulated their high educational aspirations for their children (NSW AECG & NSW Department of Education & Training, 2004), below average educational outcomes has had the effect of questioning its significance to the lives of Aboriginal students. While the modern 'postcolonial' state has moved past practices of denying access to education, it still holds a

similar place in the minds of Aboriginal parents, with its failure to develop effective strategies to address the particular learning needs and aspirations of students (J.J. Fletcher, 1989). Harris (2004) has noted that while physical barriers were once used to deny Indigenous people a presence and legitimacy within the schooling system, contemporarily these methods enforce their acculturation to cultures and identities that support the hegemonic controls set by the colonial state. The pervasiveness of these processes have been driven from a destructive neo-colonial paradigm that Battiste (2000) and Smith (1999) have both termed 'cultural imperialism' or what others have commonly understood as cultural and linguistic assimilation.

Postcolonial writers such as Edward Said (1993, 2007), Battiste (2000) and Kelsey-Wilkinson (2010) have suggested that there is a complex and dynamic relational treatment of culture and identity that can be located in current curriculum and pedagogic practices. Pinar (1993) and McCarthy and colleagues (2005) have identified the absence of any substantial examination in how the curriculum has essentialised dominant epistemology, ontology, while other policy arms of governments continue to claim that they are supportive of cultural inclusivity (Yunkaporta, 2009). McCarthy and colleagues (2005) have argued that state curriculum is a central tool of racial and cultural oppression and a primary vehicle for privileging and maintaining authority, by authoring and regulating that knowledge which is legitimated for students to be taught and assessed against. As such it is argued that this must be confronted so that the marginalised can be properly reflected within the social, ethical and economic domain of education. McCarthy and colleagues (2005), Battiste (2000) and Kelsey-Wilkinson (2010) have all argued

that curriculum change is paramount to addressing the new challenges of cultural identity, and in establishing a new and inclusive social authenticity. McCarthy, Giadina, Harewood and Park (2005) and Young (2010) suggest that education authorities need to support the development of inclusive pedagogic practices that are both inclusive and relevant, and that facilitate student critical inquiry .

I would contend that if educational content and practices are not decolonised, then Aboriginal students will continue to suffer the debilitating impacts of cognitive imperialism which underpins the unwillingness of curriculum and educational authorities to engage students by developing a high quality and contextually appropriate curriculum (Battiste, 2000). The validation of the dominant worldview comes through their tight control of the education system and its privileged curriculum which avoids critical scrutiny of its essential tenets of government, its institutions, its national identities and cultural mores.

## Conclusion

*If Aboriginal students were taught using appropriate pedagogic practices, you'd see a community that had the ability to engage in its own ethnic viewpoint and to state clearly who they are in the world and state clearly what their values are and debate that within family groups. But then also who are able to critique the dominant culture and who are able to understand the ways in which the government organisations in their community are operating on those people and therefore able to have more say, therefore able to have more autonomy and therefore able to recover land, language, culture and recover identity.*

(Western Region language consultant 2008–10)

The capacity to authentically use language has become a central endeavour for those educators who wish to see Aboriginal students access their histories and stories. It is posited that the act of language reclamation goes to the heart of Indigenous resistance to their cultural assimilation and is an act of intellectual agency. Indigenous scholars (Grande, 2008, 2009; Henderson, 2000; Rigney, 1997; Smith, 1999) have recognised the centrality of the need to resist those efforts of the state to reframe them so that their voices and their traditions are lost in the constant welter of colonial noise. The once distant sounds of 'subaltern' voices (Spivak, 1988, 1991, 1993), are to be represented by the hundreds of Indigenous language speakers communicating through song, storytelling, dance, poetry and rituals, the knowledge and stories of their communities. The policies of colonial 'linguicide', which have proven in the past to be such a powerful force of imperialist power, has become the central battleground in the cultural war between indigenous peoples and the colonial state (Swadener & Mutua, 2008). The reclamation of the Indigenous Language of the Country is a monumental task, but one that holds out the potential for cultural salvation.

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