Povinelli conceives of *Geontologies* as returning to themes pursued in her 1994 *Labor’s lot*, that rich account of embodied action and how country responds to sweat and smell. But *Geontologies* also follows up on theorising pursued in other works: this book makes even clearer how a particular ‘mode of analyzing the historicity of existence [was] transformed into a cultural repetition machine’ (p.173), deserving of recognition by virtue of it indexing ‘Indigenous difference’. While Povinelli’s 2002 *Cunning of recognition* closely analysed the process and costs of that transformation, *Geontologies* elaborates the mode of analysing existence, highlighting problems that recognition cannot solve. Further, ordinary forms of human enduring, of persisting in being ‘otherwise’, were key to the 2011 monograph *Economies of abandonment*; in *Geontologies*, Povinelli extends this argument in a new direction by considering how other forms of nonhuman existences might endure, flourish or wither.

Finally, as a reviewer I have been asked to comment on the audience for this book. And this bears some careful consideration. Reading it, I developed a heightened awareness of this book as a thing. This object — with its words that exerted a force, demanding my close attention and setting off reactions — was also brought into being by dense entanglements: felled trees; the conglomerate of additives that make ink stick; the fossil fuels consumed as Povinelli maintains close relations with her Karrabing family on the other side of the planet; the possibility that parts of the proofreading process were outsourced to precarious, racialised workers in another part of the world. Given the conditions that bring books into being, then why write a book using a highly specialised language that only a very specific public will be able to understand? I found it dense and overly theoretical in parts, and I am someone who reads and writes for a wage. If one’s labour is absorbed in the hard work of caring for kin and in keeping everyday life going, then this is not the kind of book I could easily imagine one reading. I don’t actually have a preformed reactionary Aussie ‘theory is for wankers’ kind of answer to this question but it seems especially pertinent to pose it because Karrabing analytics drive the inquiry. All this is a long-winded way of saying: my undergraduate students would struggle with this material but it is no exaggeration to say that for some advanced undergraduate students, postgraduate readers and scholars, *Geontologies* may well inspire new possibilities for thinking, relating and being.

**REFERENCE**


—— 2011 *Economies of abandonment: social belonging and endurance in late liberalism*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC.

The abiding image of lawyer and veteran Aboriginal rights campaigner Michael Mansell for a young man growing up on a mission in the 1980s is of Mansell challenging a live television talk show audience, ‘Cut me open, I’m full of blood’, in response to questions about his Aboriginality. Unable to dent his arguments, the audience resorted to weak personal attacks and they booed him. Mansell’s response and the way that he represented Aboriginal people in that spotlight moment were important. He countered their thoughtlessness and offensive beliefs with thoughtfulness and reason. Beyond the ‘Cut me open’ comment, he showed the audience, me included, that there was something substantial behind his ideas.

My ten-year-old son recently told me about a classmate who told him how lucky Aborigines

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**Treaty and statehood: Aboriginal self-determination**

Michael Mansell

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are to have been colonised. All Aborigines take a turn in that spotlight, not usually as publicly as Mansell did on the popular television program, where we face and respond to the questions and comments and inevitable accusations, hostility, well-meaning paternalism, the prejudices and sometimes insensitivity and stupidity. When in that spotlight we can all curse, we can all muster a physical response. Leaders such as Paul and Isobel Coe, Gary Foley, Billy Craigie and Michael Mansell gave us the words, ideas and perspectives to respond with something more substantial. Their words and ideas matched our attitudes so it was always important that Mansell’s and his peers’ ideas and words were sound. That is equally true of this book.

Treaty and statehood: Aboriginal self-determination is about the best way to deal with the problem of colonialism. Mansell uses the book to push for another discussion about creating statehood for Aboriginal people as a way to pull back some of the damage caused by colonialism. He revives and rethinks the decades-old ‘young man’s dreams’ of a ‘Black Israel’, a separate Aboriginal state (Gilbert 1973:190).

Mansell challenges the socially held belief that Aborigines are somehow better off because of Australian colonialism — a big ask given the Australian investment in the idea of our inferiority and the formidable ability of the many to ignore negative feedback about their beliefs (Schulz 2010). Still, Mansell continues to speak in the hope of reaching those readers who are prepared to maybe not release themselves from their belief but to at least hear why the things they believe about Australian colonialism and Aborigines may be wrong. Mansell offers readers something else to replace the belief of Aboriginal inferiority, that foundational myth that we are better off because of colonialism. Or that we could be better off if we chose to integrate or assimilate. He challenges readers who think that symbolic gestures are enough.

The book tells what might be possible if the majority accepts a shift in the way it views us and a minor shift in power towards the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander minority. ‘The partnership of sharing must begin with a sharing of political power’ (p.5) because, ‘without real power, little will change’ (p.9). Both statements represent another call by an Aboriginal leader for the majority to share power, control, authority and responsibility with the tiny Aboriginal minority. Mansell sets out to show that the principle of self-determination will meet the needs of black and white Australians. On the issue of sovereignty, he argues that the essence of the dispute today is that Australians have the numbers and power but not the legitimacy. Aboriginal sovereignty should lead to self-determination where positive changes will happen. ‘Aboriginals have had to survive under the weight of Australian sovereignty without agreeing to it. Now it is Australia’s turn to wind back its domination where domination is neither necessary or justified’ (p.84).

Mansell gives his thoughts on treaties, assimilation, Aborigines and democracy, disempowerments of Aborigines in the electoral system, the place of customary law, Aboriginal rights and the Constitution. His approach is to speak from decades of experience, thought and reflection. Readers might ask what else backs up Mansell’s ideas. They might question whether his ideas are grounded only in his own experiences and reflections or are representative of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s views? Mansell frequently cites Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal leaders, politicians and academics as he builds his case.

A small criticism is that he might have brought more voices from within communities into his conversation. Where he does so, readers get to hear the diversity of thought within the many Aboriginal communities on the issues that are important to us without weakening his own arguments. On the 1967 referendum, he writes, ‘All the 1967 referendum really did was transfer power over Aboriginal people from one form of government to another’ (p.49). On constitutional recognition he quotes Gary Foley, who said, ‘Who gives a damn about whether we’re mentioned in the Australian Constitution. What real difference will it make? It’s a grand token gesture and will mean nothing in the long run, so it’s a waste of time for people to be even talking about it’ (p.48). Readers may not be aware that Aborigines question such gestures, let alone begin to understand where such questions come from. This section of the book would also be enhanced by a more thorough engagement with the ideas of people who advocate for such gestures.
One more important criticism of the book is that it does not seek a way to move beyond the base assumption of Aboriginal victimhood. Mansell’s argument concedes that Aborigines are the victims of, and not the problems of, colonialism. This can be a problem because we know that the words that label Aborigines will affect the ways that we and other people see us, as well as how we and they feel and behave. I hoped that Mansell might consider more of the ways that an audience might read claims of victimhood. Although this is more a criticism aimed at those who refuse to concede any ground in the battle over blame, I had hoped that Mansell might find ways to put his argument without conceding victimhood on our behalf. The things that he says are important to the public discourse and they are effective, even constructive on a personal level.

A talented student recently commented to me that he judged ideas by the degree to which they rearranged his mental furniture. This book suits an undergraduate audience and I hope that it finds one in the Indigenous studies programs here in Australia and internationally. It will certainly rearrange the mental furniture of those who engage with Mansell’s critique of commonly held beliefs about Aboriginal issues. Mansell takes the reader beyond the commonplace attitudes informed by government sloganising and advertising, by big business, political rhetoric and other reassuring and relieving lies.

This book makes a significant contribution to Australian Aboriginal studies and to the ongoing public debate about Aboriginal issues. It is a thoughtful examination of the problems of colonialism by a man who has long spoken back to the narrative that attempts to draw Aborigines as a noisy minority and just another one of the special interest groups that have little regard for the good of the nation (Macintyre 2016:281). In this book Mansell writes for the good of the nation as he warns, ‘To maintain its distinct existence in a modern world, Aboriginal society cannot prosper without extensive land holdings, and greater access to political and economic clout’ (p.225). What Mansell reveals in his revival of the idea of Aboriginal statehood are the benefits to the nation of taking the reader back to the familiar call for land rights.

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