Exploring ambiguity: Aboriginal identity negotiation in southwestern Sydney

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Abstract. There has been little discussion on urban Indigenous identity in post-settler societies. However, in the scarce works which exist on this issue there are some remarkably common traits. For most Indigenous people, identity has primarily involved kinship ties associated with their perceived place of origin. In the city, Indigenous people encounter other Indigenous people who cannot be identified through kinship ties; in this situation, organizations dealing with Indigenous issues provide ways of connecting nonrelated Indigenous people, in line with a notion of ‘pan-Indigeneity’. This pan-Indigeneity is not only based on their experience in the city, but also is influenced by the ‘antique’ image of Indigenous people created through contact with European settlers as well as the common cultural mores and traits which Indigenous people share. With these different kinds of identities, urban Indigenous identity has been described as ‘fluid’ or ‘ambiguous’. The relationship between these identities has not been much examined. This paper explores the ambiguous and dynamic nature of Aboriginal identity in southwestern Sydney. Even though they are not related, Aboriginal people can usually recognize each other as ‘Aboriginal’ through certain cultural mores and traits. However, there are some who, although claiming to be Aboriginal, who do not share these cultural mores and traits. Their presence gives rise to tension and conflict revolving around the concept of Aboriginality. Through an ethnographical examination of the process of accommodating nonrelated Aboriginal people, this paper reveals how different kinds of identities are related to each other in urban situations.

Introduction
In post-settler societies the majority of Indigenous people live in urban settings, although there are international and regional differences (ABS, 2006; Statistics Canada, 2006; Statistics New Zealand, 2006; US Department of Commerce, 2000). However, there has been less discussion on their identity. In the scarce works on Indigenous people in urban contexts, there are common traits. Most of the Indigenous people in the city have their origins in rural areas, even though they may be the second, third, or later generation born in the city. A few claim that their ancestors were the original inhabitants of the place which is now the city. For Indigenous people in the city, identity has been primarily a matter of social organization based on kinship ties associated with their perceived place of origin. Although Indigenous people's primary social relations after they move to the city are largely shaped by such kinship tie-oriented groups, they also encounter Indigenous people whom they cannot identify through kinship ties. In these circumstances, organizations dealing with Indigenous issues provide ways of connecting nonrelated Indigenous people, in line with a notion of pan-Indigeneity. With these different kinds of identities, urban Indigenous identity is often described as ‘fluid’ or ‘ambiguous’. However, the relationship between these identities has not been much explored.

In this paper I explore the ambiguous and dynamic nature of Aboriginal identity in southwestern Sydney. Although kinship ties are the basis of social relations and identity for many Aboriginal people, organizations dealing with Aboriginal issues provide them opportunities to meet nonrelated Aboriginal people. Aboriginal people can usually recognize each other as ‘Aboriginal’ by sharing and recognizing certain ‘Aboriginal’...
cultural mores and traits. However, there are some who, for various reasons, although claiming to be Aboriginal, do not share these cultural mores and traits. Their presence gives rise to tension and conflict revolving around the concept of Aboriginality, ethnographic examination of which reveals how different kinds of identities overlap with each other. Although most of the focused research described in this paper was carried out between the years 2004 and 2007 in the southwestern part of Sydney, and the principal examples are specific to this region, Aboriginal people’s situation in this area shares traits common among urban Indigenous people in post-settler societies described above. The discussion in this paper is applicable on a general level to other urban Indigenous situations and aims to stimulate further research on urban Indigenous issues.

The analysis draws on fieldwork conducted in an area in outer suburbia located some 27–51 km southwest of Sydney, comprising Bankstown, Fairfield, Liverpool, and Campbelltown Local Government Areas (LGAs). In 2006 the 7658 Aboriginal people living there accounted for approximately 1% of the total population (ABS, 2006). In 2004 I lived in Green Valley, a suburb of Liverpool, for a period of six months. After this I commuted to southwestern Sydney from the central city area four to six days a week for three years. The research was mainly done by participant observation: I attended Aboriginal groups and events held by organizations dealing with Aboriginal issues and visited Aboriginal families. As well as participant observation, I conducted twenty in-depth open-ended interviews. The focus in the interviews was on interviewees’ views of Aboriginality, sense of community, and social diversity in southwestern Sydney. Aboriginal people in southwestern Sydney are not clustered into particular discrete neighbourhoods: the informants who participated in this research were people I met through attending Aboriginal meetings, events, and groups, and their family members, who were spread all over southwestern Sydney. This research is not comprehensive: the data analyzed are representative only of the people who participated in the study. Nevertheless, despite their partiality and their particular situations, their information provides significant insights into the dynamics of the Aboriginal people’s experience.

The structure of this paper is as follows. First, I provide a brief overview of arguments on Indigenous identity in the city: Australia is the focus, but other post-settler society cases are briefly viewed. Second, an overview of southwestern Sydney is provided, that is, a brief history, its socioeconomic features, and a history of the original inhabitants in the early colonial period and of relatively recent Aboriginal migration. Third, I explore Aboriginal people’s social relations in southwestern Sydney. No previous ethnographic study of this area has been undertaken, so all data are based on my own field research. Identity issues that Aboriginal people encounter are explored, based on the field data: each case is analyzed to show the degree to which different kinds of identities negotiate with each other. Finally, I draw some conclusions vis-à-vis the relevance of ethnographically examining and analyzing Aboriginal identity, and contemplate the possibility of further research on urban Indigenous identity in post-settler societies.

The proposal for this research was approved by the University of Sydney’s Ethics Committee and the research was conducted according to their guidance. Brochures with my self-introduction and research outline were distributed to the people in Aboriginal groups and meetings before I started participant observation. All interviews were conducted with the interviewees’ consent. Before an interview, interviewees signed forms consenting to the interview and agreeing to the use of the content of interview forms. The conversations and interviews presented in this paper thus have the interviewee’s approval or consent for its usage.
Arguments on Aboriginal identity in the city

In Australia, currently, over 60% Aboriginal people live in urban areas (ABS, 2006). As in other post-settler societies, most urban Aboriginal residents originally came from rural, closely knit communities where Aboriginal people developed a strong sense of identity as ‘Aborigines’ based on kinship ties and a shared history of painful and oppressive contact with the dominant non-Aboriginal society (eg Fink, 1957; Morris, 1988a; Schwab, 1988). The situational differences between one region and the next resulted in “many localised groups of Aborigines, each with its own regional focus, and consequently, in many different identities” (Berndt, 1977, page 8). Studies undertaken in Melbourne (Barwick, 1964; 1988 [1971]), Adelaide (Gale, 1972; 1981; Gale and Wundersitz, 1982; Inglis, 1961; 1964; Schwab, 1988), and Brisbane (Smith and Biddle, 1975) reveal that localized kinship ties continue to be a primary base of identity and social relations after Aboriginal people move to the city. Although there are no detailed ethnographic studies focusing specifically on Aboriginal social relations other than kinship ties, according to Staveley (1993), a similar trend has been observed in inner-city Sydney.

Few urban studies have noted the presence of pan-Aboriginality in the city (Morgan, 2000; 2006; Schwab, 1988). Pan-Aboriginality, as a concept, treats Aboriginal people as one homogenous group: that is, it emphasizes the commonality of Aboriginal people. The arguments that surround pan-Aboriginality in the city stem from different reasoning; although they are often interwoven, they need to be examined separately.

The first of these arguments presents pan-Aboriginality as an historical construction, created through the European colonization of Australia (Reece, 1987). Although an image of the ‘antiquity’ of Australian Aboriginal culture is present in most cases, this image does not carry a fixed notion of ‘what Aboriginal people should be’. Pan-Aboriginality has provided the “cultural context in which Europeans (especially the state) have acted” (Beckett, 1988, page 192) and, as such, it has been blindly accepted. According to some studies, in rural areas this notion of pan-Aboriginality, often carried by government agencies and enacted in their bureaucratic procedures, is in conflict with the local Aboriginal people’s views (Jordan, 1988; Morris, 1988b). Conversely, it has provided a way for Aboriginal people to respond to non-Aboriginal people: for example, it has been strategically deployed in court cases determining land rights (Jacobs, 1988) and Aboriginal artists’ work (Ariss, 1988).

Another argument supporting pan-Aboriginality insists that certain cultural styles or values are shared by Aboriginal people continent wide (Crick, 1981; Sansom, 1982; Schwab, 1988). This commonality is simply considered to be ‘indigenous’ and is observed as being maintained by people raised in the ‘Aboriginal world’. Schwab (1988) noted that in Adelaide certain cultural styles shared by Aboriginal people, although not always adopted, are open to inclusion of non-related Aboriginal people in the kinship-based Aboriginal community.

A third view, presented by Morgan (2000; 2006), suggests that the development of pan-Aboriginality in the city occurs through organizations. Although Morgan does not write in detail about social relations in the city, Pierson (1977; 1982) and Plater (1993; 1995) have examined the role of organizations dealing with Aboriginal issues in urban contexts in Adelaide and inner-city Sydney, respectively. Through involvement with organizations such as Aboriginal health-care programs, sports clubs, school programs, and dance schools, Aboriginal people who are not connected through kinship ties develop relationships even though they do not see the relation of these social ties to identity issues.

Although these different kinds of Aboriginal identity that prevail in the city have been documented, the relationship between them has rarely been examined. Schwab (1988)
noted the cooperation between localized kinship-based identity and continent-wide Aboriginal style, and its limits, in Adelaide. Although social relations among Aboriginal people in Adelaide are based predominantly on kinship ties, the influx of nonrelated Aboriginal people has made Aboriginal identity ambiguous. This can be seen in the case of one boy, whose claim of Aboriginality is rejected by other Aboriginal boys primarily because he is not related to them. The fact that this boy was seemingly accepted as ‘Aboriginal’ at an official level does not seem to affect his rejection. Although Schwab’s argument does not include the issue of organisations, similar ambiguity is suggested by Anderson (1998), Staveley (1993), and Morgan (2000; 2006) about Sydney.

In other post-settler societies, pictures are similar. Although kinship ties or kinship-oriented groups continue to be significant, pan-Indigenous identity has developed through involvement with organizations. In these places, more research has been done on the pan-Indigeneity based on the organizations although Indigenous ‘commonality’ is observed but not examined or analyzed (Proulx 2003). Pan-Indigeneity created through the history of contact with European settlers, particularly the image of antiquity, has often influenced the cultural performance and practice of pan-Indigenous organizations although there is a gap with Indigenous people’s lived reality in the city.

In case of the United States, over 60% of Indigenous people live in urban settings (US Department of Commerce, 2000). Kinship ties are a significant principle of their social relations, and many have kept strong linkage with their tribal homelands. However, in the face of alienation from their Indigenous families and homelands, as well as the tribal heterogeneity in the city, urban pan-Indigenous organizations have developed (see, for example, Danziger, 1991; Fenelon, 1998; Guillemin, 1975; Liebow, 1991; Lobo, 2001; Shoemaker, 1988; Waddell and Watson, 1971; Weibel-Orlando, 1991). Although this pan-Indigeneity is based primarily on experience through involvement with the organizations’ activities, cultural performance and activities are also influenced by the antique and romantic image of ‘Indigenous people’ created through contact with European settlers. Pan-Indigenous organizations work as the nodes of networks of urban Indigenous people’s social relations, which allow them to develop a sense of community. Although there have been tensions between urban pan-Indigenous organizations and tribal groups, as well as between urban and rural reservation Indigenous residents, kinship is also considered to be one of the criteria of being ‘Indigenous’. For example, Weibel-Orlando (1991) observed that in Los Angeles, observable or verifiable Indigenous kin is one of the criteria for Indigenous-community incorporation. However, Lobo (2001) wrote that urban Indigenous organizations also attract those who are, for various reasons, alienated from their kinship roots and wish to reidentify as Indigenous (see also Jackson, 1998). Lobo (2001, page 81) described urban Indigenous identity as ‘fluid’, and argued that it is defined through the combination of four elements—ancestry, appearance, cultural knowledge, and Indigenous-community participation; however, the federal government ‘blood quantum’ model is not considered to be a definite criterion. The weight and combination given to these elements vary between situations. For example, someone who does not look Indigenous and does not have verifiable Indigenous kin can be accepted “through a long history of actively participating in and contributing to the community well-being, as well as demonstrating a thorough understanding of Indigenous values and protocols” (Lobo, 2001, pages 80–81) until a conflict arises and the combination of the criteria is critically assessed (see also Gonzales, 2001).

Similar diversity and ambiguity are seen in Canada. Over 60% of Indigenous people in Canada live in a city (Statistics Canada, 2006). Many urban Indigenous people retain kinship ties with their original communities, and kinship ties are the most important source of their identity. On the other hand, as in the USA, in some cities, urban
pan-Indigenous organizations develop to give them sense of ‘community’ against the alienation from their Indigenous kin and tribal heterogeneity (see, for example, Brody, 1971; Cooke and Belanger, 2006; Kishigami, 2002; Lambert, 1986; Nagler, 1970; Newhouse and Peters, 2003; Peters, 2005; Reid, 2002). Urban Indigenous identity is also ambiguous in Canada: the government definition of Indigeneity through the Indian Act (R.S., 1985, c.1-5) is not considered to be critical in urban areas. Proulx (2003) describes the process of people who have been alienated from their tribal roots gaining ‘Indigenous identity’ through participation in a pan-Indigenous organization in Toronto. This ‘pan-Indigeneity’ is based on Indigenous people’s experience in the city, but is also influenced by the romantic image of pan-Indigeneity created through contact with European settlers as well as the feeling of Indigenous commonality. Proulx (2003) states that self-identification and pan-Indigeneity are central tools for the definition of Indigeneity, along with the incorporative Indigenous culture and the understanding of the presence of those who have been alienated from their kinship ties by discrimination. However, these criteria are also continuously criticized: some Indigenous people are concerned about ‘wannabes’ who pretend to be Indigenous; and some fear their tribal tradition may fade away.

In case of New Zealand, over 80% of Indigenous people live in the city. Here too, kinship ties have been the source of their tribal identity. Although kinship ties remain important, approximately 16% of Indigenous descendants do not know their tribes (Statistics New Zealand, 2006). However, in urban contexts, pantribal urban Indigenous organizations have developed as a response to urban alienation (see, for example, Gover, 2002; Kawharu, 1968; Maaka, 1994; Metge, 1964; Tapsell, 2002). Although the pan-Indigenous image created through contact with European settlers affects these organizations’ cultural activities, there is a gap between this image and urban-Indigenous people’s lived reality (Van Meijl, 2006; see also Sissons, 2004). Relationships between groups oriented toward kinship ties and urban-Indigenous organizations are volatile, and tensions exist over issues such as the treaty status of urban Indigenous people. In this context, while the government criteria of being Indigenous is left to self-identification, there has been argument about what makes a person Indigenous, especially concerning the necessity of kinship ties.

Although there are regional and international differences, for example, the different degrees of development of the urban pan-Indigenous organizations, ambiguity of urban Indigenous identity seems to be common in post-settler societies. Kinship ties used to be the base of identity for Indigenous people, but the urban situation is more complex. To a certain degree, urban pan-Indigenous organizations provide a sense of belonging to people who are alienated from their Indigenous kinship ties. Commitment to urban pan-Indigenous organizations, the historically constructed image of pan-Indigeneity, and the Indigenous sense of ‘commonality’ have been documented, but none of them is comprehensive. The relationship between these different identities and with that based on kinship ties have not been much examined. My focus in this paper is primarily on Aboriginal people’s experience in southwestern Sydney, where different kinds of identities are interwoven and in conflict with each other. Although kinship ties are the bases of identity for many Aboriginal people, they would also feel a certain commonality with anyone raised in the Aboriginal world. However, there are those who were not raised in the Aboriginal world but who still claim to be Aboriginal. Tensions, conflicts, and arguments about Aboriginality revolving around the claims of such people reveal how different concepts of Aboriginality overlap and relate to each other.
Aboriginal people in southwestern Sydney

Within thirty years of the British arrival on the Australian coast in 1788, the area now called southwestern Sydney had become the ‘first white frontier’, with agriculture as its main activity. By the end of the 19th century, the railway line had been introduced and the area changed from rural to urban. In 1945, after World War II, suburban development started. In addition to private housing estates, large public housing estates were established in suburbs. Cheap land and housing attracted people with relatively low incomes, including ex-servicemen and migrants. By 2006 the total population in this area was 658 061, and expected to grow further (ABS, 2006). Since the start of its suburban development, this part of Sydney has been considered a low socioeconomic area (Keating, 1995): the cost of living is cheaper compared with the eastern or inner-city suburbs of Sydney; the population is generally less well educated, suffers relatively high unemployment rates, and tends to have low income levels (ABS, 2006). Crime and safety are issues of some concern, although the crime rate in southwestern Sydney is not particularly excessive compared with other parts of New South Wales (Bankstown City Council, 2004; Campbelltown City Council, 2004a; 2004b; Fairfield City Council, 1999; 2003; Liverpool City Council, 2003; 2005; New South Wales Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, 2008). The area is often described as ‘Dodge City’ by newspapers and the media in general, and the residents of this area have been stereotyped as ‘unsophisticated’ (Delbridge et al, 2001). However, it is also argued that, with the recent move of young families to Sydney’s outer suburbs, this stereotype no longer fits the reality of the residents of southwestern Sydney. Currently, southwestern Sydney should be described as a ‘mixed’ area with diverse residents (Collins and Poynting, 2000).

The original Aboriginal population was decimated after the European occupation of this area. Disease and physical and social violence took their toll; few records or studies have survived. The original language groups of this region are conventionally held to have included the Eora(2) (Bankstown LGA), Daruk(3) (Fairfield and Liverpool LGA), and Tharawa(4) (Campbelltown LGA), although the boundaries of the groups present at the time of colonization of the Sydney region are not actually clear (see, for example, Capell, 1970–71; Eades, 1976; Mathews, 1901; Tindale, 1974). Currently, except for a handful of families claiming to be descendants of the Tharawal people in Campbelltown (Campbelltown City Council, 2004a), there has been no record kept or study made indicating the presence of descendants of the original inhabitants living in southwestern Sydney (see also Everett, 2006).

According to the 2006 Census of the Australian Bureau of Statistics, there were 7658 Aboriginal people living in southwestern Sydney. Campbelltown LGA, with 3831 Aboriginal residents, had the second-largest concentration of Aboriginal people in Australia. Most of them originally came from many different areas of southeastern and southwestern parts of Australia, and were not descendants of the original inhabitants of southwestern Sydney (Beasley, 1970). The Aboriginal population of southwestern Sydney is younger, less well educated, and experiences higher unemployment rates and lower income levels than the non-Aboriginal population. They have higher rates of one-parent families, and are more likely to live in cheaper houses rented from public authorities.

(2) Alternative spellings of this word encountered in the literature are: Eo-ra, Ea-ora, Iora, Yo-ra.
(3) Alternative spellings of this word encountered in the literature are: Dhurruk, Dharrook, Dhar’rook, Darook, Dharug.
(4) Alternative spellings of this word encountered in the literature are: Dharawal, Tarawal, Darawa:l, Carawal, Turawal, Tharawal, Thurrawal, Thurrrawall, Turuwal, Turuwlul, Turrubul, Ta-gary.
On coming to Sydney, Aboriginal people mostly first took up residence in inner-city suburbs such as Redfern. Migration to this area started as early as the 1880s, with a railway workshop offering jobs for them (Taksa, 1999). In time, their overcrowded housing situation caused public concern which, from the end of the 1960s, led to the government setting up major public housing projects, including a special program later to become known as the Housing for Aborigines program in Sydney’s outer suburbia, including the southwestern part (Morgan, 2006). In 1970, Beasley (page 138) estimated that there were about 6000 Aboriginal people in Sydney, approximately one quarter of whom were in outer suburbia. From 1971 to 2006 the Aboriginal population of this area rose from 491 to 7658 (ABS, 1971; 2006). Morgan (2000; 2006) noted that in this area, what was called the ‘salt and pepper’ housing-allocation policy was designed to ensure Aboriginal people lived dispersed among non-Aboriginal people. Morgan explored the mid-20th-century situation of Aboriginal people and the role of government housing but did not include any ethnographic study of contemporary social relations. My field data, discussed in the next section, extend this research.

Aboriginal social relations in southwestern Sydney

In the ethnographic field, identity is related to the arrangement of social relations. Aboriginal people's social relations are established through two nexuses: relationships formed through kin; and those formed through activities of organizations dealing with Aboriginal issues. Neither of these is comprehensive. Kin relationships were formed amongst Aboriginal people before they migrated to southwestern Sydney. Relationships based on the activities of organizations are more recent.

Although they are not necessarily connected, family is important for most Aboriginal people in social, economic, emotional, and cultural terms. Most of the Aboriginal people in Sydney, as mentioned before, migrated from rural areas of the southeastern and southwestern parts of Australia. They usually keep contact with their family members who have stayed in their hometown or mission, or have moved to other parts of Australia. Some Aboriginal people migrated to southwestern Sydney to join their kin. There seems to be no predominant pattern to their migration. As a result, in southwestern Sydney, Aboriginal family structures are diverse. Some families have local kin networks large enough to warrant sixty people attending a birthday party. In this kind of case, many of the family members have migrated to southwestern Sydney so that they can see each other as frequently as once a week. Some people's kin live predominantly in rural areas, either in a hometown or dispersed among the towns, cities, or even states they have migrated to. Many have kin elsewhere in Sydney: in the inner city, or in the outer suburbs. In these cases, their family gatherings tend to be less frequent with smaller numbers of people. Instead, they often have kin visiting from outside southwestern Sydney and, conversely, they regularly visit their family members living outside southwestern Sydney. Except for those who live very far apart, kin visiting occurs regularly. For some people, these family relationships are sufficient social life: they do not bother looking for opportunities to see other Aboriginal people.

It is important to note that the kin relationship among Aboriginal people does not operate only through blood. Macdonald (1986) emphasized ‘doing the right thing by kin’. What is important for Aboriginal people is actual doing and engaging. For example, in cases where a woman does not take care of a child she gave birth to and the child is raised by her sister, the birth mother will not be treated as the child's mother: it will be her sister who is treated as the ‘mother’. Kin relationships need to be ‘activated’ in order to be meaningful.

Yet, a characteristic of urban Aboriginal life, particularly in southwestern Sydney, is the significant number of Aboriginal people without kin—either locally or elsewhere.
Some are members of the perceived ‘Stolen Generations’, a term which refers to the Indigenous people who were forcibly removed by government officials from their parents during childhood, and subsequently raised in institutions or non-Aboriginal homes. Many, who were infants or small children when they were taken, have spent years fruitlessly and painfully searching for their families (Read, 1982). And even though they may eventually establish contact with their Aboriginal families, they often find it difficult to establish close ties with them. Another group comprises those referred to as ‘newly identified’. There are various reasons for their histories. Some say that they knew about their Aboriginal descent (referred to as having ‘Aboriginal blood’) but had kept it hidden for a long time. Others say that their parents only recently told them that they had Aboriginal blood. As a result of recent changes in attitudes towards Aboriginal people in the wider society (and the new advantages which Aboriginality may accrue, such as access to identified forms of government assistance), these people have decided to reidentify as Aboriginal. Although some newly identified Aboriginals went in search for their Aboriginal families (Morgan, 1987), others opted not to explore family connections. One man told me that he did not think he needed to find his family because he knew he was Aboriginal.

Relationships based on the activities of organizations are more recent. Aboriginal organizations have mushroomed since the late 1960s and particularly since 1972 when, supported by the Whitlam Labour government, federal funding became accessible to Aboriginal people. Although the dynamics are different between remote rural and urban areas today, it is not possible to understand the urban Aboriginal experience without understanding the centrality of these organizations (Rowse, 2002).

In Sydney many Aboriginal organizations were established in the inner city—in and around Redfern in the 1960s. Concomitant with Aboriginal people’s migration to outer suburbia, new Aboriginal organizations were established. In southwestern Sydney, Aboriginal people’s involvement with organization-oriented socialities were established in the 1980s. In 1983 the Gandangara Local Aboriginal Land Council and the Tharawal Local Aboriginal Land Council were established under the Aboriginal Land Rights Act (New South Wales) 1983. Other Aboriginal as well as mainstream projects addressing Aboriginal issues mushroomed. Currently, there are two Aboriginal organizations in Liverpool LGA and eleven in Campbelltown LGA which run projects, monthly meetings, and annual events for Aboriginal people. In Liverpool and Campbelltown, the councils employ Aboriginal project officers and hold monthly meetings. The South Western Sydney Area Health Service (SWSAHS)(5) has employed many Aboriginal health-care workers and run Aboriginal elders’ groups, Aboriginal men’s and women’s clinics in Liverpool LGA and Campbelltown LGA, and an Aboriginal women’s group in Bankstown LGA. SWSAHS also funds projects for another nongovernment organization which runs an Aboriginal playgroup in Fairfield. Some local schools employ Aboriginal Educational Assistants or Aboriginal Liaison Officers and have programs for Aboriginal students and parents. These projects are run by Aboriginal workers, who are connected through loose networks.

Some of these groups meet two or three times a week, some meet monthly. Most attract between ten and thirty people to their activities. Even those organizations which hold activities frequently do so for only one to three hours at a time. And because there are no central organizations or places that attract everyone, the building of strong social relations is limited. However, in this area, because many Aboriginal people do not have large family clusters around them, organizations are places where they can get

(5) The SWSAHS was amalgamated into the Sydney South West Area Health Service in 2005. However, the function at the local grassroots level remained the same.
to know other Aboriginal people and keep contact with them. Many have come to southwestern Sydney not knowing anyone; some Aboriginal people have come to know others through their children’s schools, the Land Council, or Aboriginal Health Care Services. Organizations offer opportunities to those who do not have any effective kinship connections with Aboriginal people, such as the members of Stolen Generations or ‘newly identified’ background people, to become involved with Aboriginal people. Even for Aboriginal people with kin close by, the regular meeting places provided by such organizations can still be important venues in which to catch up with others. Aboriginal people with large extended families who live in this area often attend the organizations’ activities together. In some cases, for these people, the demands of kin and those of the organizations can result in conflict and entanglement. However, not everyone participates in both kind of relationships: while some participate only in kin relationships, others may have only organizational links. The vast majority is involved at some level at some time during the year.

Ambiguous Aboriginal identity
Aboriginal people in southwestern Sydney come from different places and backgrounds. With localized kinship connections, they frequently talk about differences such as language use, or certain kinds of behavior, which distinguish them from Aboriginal people coming from other areas. For example, people from the northwestern area of New South Wales are called ‘rough’ by people from other areas. However, this has not resulted in their forming groups according to the places from which they came: Aboriginal groups or meetings are attended by nonrelated Aboriginal people from many different areas. On these occasions, it is observed that they share certain cultural traits, such as a particular way of talking or child rearing. For those raised in an Aboriginal family, these distinctive cultural styles and traits are ‘handed down’. Many cannot articulate these Aboriginal cultural mores. However, they can still sense a difference between those who affect an Aboriginal cultural style and those who do not. For example, Aboriginal people tend to use somewhat derogatory words frequently when addressing each other (Carter, 1988): Aboriginal women often call each other ‘bitch’. Carter argues that this practice prepares the children to face a hostile outside world. She discussed this practice from the perspective of a rural community, where Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people’s daily lived reality is geographically much more clearly distinguished. In the context of southwestern Sydney, where the Aboriginal community might be said to be continually immersed in the ‘hostile outside world’, women continue to call each other ‘bitch’ in everyday conversation. The conversation reproduced below shows that this practice is shared and taken for granted by Aboriginal women, for it works as an indicator of ‘being Aboriginal’.

During one Aboriginal women’s gathering, I asked:

“Why do you call each other bitch?”

They all burst out laughing and eventually said:

“We just say this. There’s actually no meaning.”

However, they also commented that while it is all right for Aboriginal women to say it to each other, that is not the case for Anglo-Australian women.

This is one of the cultural practices that Aboriginal people raised as Aboriginal share as ‘Aboriginal’. Even though they can identify localized differences and they are not connected through kinship ties, they share certain cultural styles and feel comfortable with each other.

The most important of these is a practice I call ‘family identification’, which establishes not only who a person is and where he/she is from but, more subtly, whether the person understands what ‘being Aboriginal’ is about. This practice is
enacted at the time when people meet, when they work to place each other within a social and geosocial space that will form the basis of their relationship. When people meet for the first time, they will ask each other where they are from and who they are related to. If one person says “I'm from Nowra”, the other says “Oh, then, do you know so and so?” Then they try to find someone they both know. It may not be easy to find a mutual link without some digging but, with Aboriginal people's large kinship networks, one can usually find someone who knows the family in question after verbal exchanges with a certain number of people. This indicates not only their kin relations but also that they are in a meaningful relationship with their kin. By following this trend, very old Aboriginal traditions are perpetuated—albeit in distinctively transformed ways (Barwick, 1964; Macdonald, 1986; von Sturmer, 1981). Aboriginal people raised in the ‘Aboriginal world’ are expected to be able to conduct this practice. Even though they are not connected through kinship ties, this practice shows that they are ‘Aboriginal’. On the other hand, just showing genealogical relationship is not considered to be the same as having meaningful kinship ties: one Aboriginal woman contended that finding Aboriginal ancestry by genealogical research is “what whites do”. In a situation such as southwestern Sydney, it could also be a cultural code which serves to identify those who do not know how to or cannot identify themselves in this culturally recognizable way. Many Aboriginal people explained to me that family identification is the first thing they do when they meet other Aboriginal people. When that person cannot identify, others become suspicious. However, a number of people who identify as Aboriginal in southwestern Sydney cannot comply with the practice of ‘family identification’. They might be members of the Stolen Generation who have not found their Aboriginal families, or ‘newly identified’ people who have not yet connected with their Aboriginal family. Although there is great understanding of and tolerance for members of the Stolen Generation who may not be able to engage in cultural practices such as language use and specific methods of child rearing, kinship ties are ‘what makes you Aboriginal’ (Peters-Little, 2000). Even though it may be difficult to fit into the ‘Aboriginal world’, locating and meeting their Aboriginal family at least once is expected of them. The presence of people who do not seem to bother about finding their Aboriginal families can make Aboriginality ambiguous. Aboriginal people from Aboriginal family backgrounds have to work out ways to deal with this situation.

Another concept of Aboriginality, the traditional image of ‘Aboriginal person’, plays a role in this situation. In southeastern and southwestern parts of Australia, where most of the Aboriginal families are originally from, most of the Aboriginal people are of mixed Aboriginal and Anglo-Australian descent. As long as they are connected with their Aboriginal families in a meaningful way, appearance, such as skin color, does not make someone’s Aboriginality ambiguous. However, in the context of southwestern Sydney, it becomes important. Aboriginal people told me that, if the person who claims to be Aboriginal has Aboriginal physical features such as dark skin, they became more sympathetic, even though that person does not share any Aboriginal cultural mores and traits (Schwab, 1988). For example, a member of the Stolen Generation, S, found her Aboriginal birth mother in her forties. By then she could not conduct family identification. When she was asked her birth place and family name, she had to reply that she did not know. However, Aboriginal people who asked usually said “sorry” and did not question her Aboriginality. In this case, the fact that S has dark skin counted for something.

Not all of those who claim to be Aboriginal but do not share Aboriginal cultural mores and traits have dark skin. The conversation below indicates one of the ways of dealing with them.
One day, I was talking with an Aboriginal friend, A, who I had met before commencing my fieldwork. She asked me who I had been talking to about my research since I started living out in the southwest (at that time, for only about one month). Among others, I named one particular woman, R. A’s reaction was dramatic.

A: You know, she’s terrible! She’s not Koori!

I was puzzled. What could A mean? After all, R seemed to be relatively important and relatively well known. As far as I could see, she was treated as being Aboriginal by other Aboriginal people. I responded:

Q: But she said she is from ...

A didn’t wait for me to finish the sentence.

A: That’s all lies, you know! Her certificate is false. We all know that. She’s not Aboriginal, she’s from the Wannabe tribe.

At that time, I did not understand what she meant or what a Wannabe tribe was. A explained:

A: Wannabe, it means ‘want to be’. They’re white people who pretend to be Aboriginal. They have no Aboriginal blood. They do it [say they are Aboriginal] to get their job.

Q: But I’ve seen Aboriginal people talking about their families with each other when you first meet. How is it possible to pretend to be Aboriginal?

A: Yeah, but we all know if it’s true or not! We all know each other. Her certificate was wrong. We knew it. These people are found more in the city, ’cos if they tried in a country town, there the Aboriginal people all know each other. But they can do it in the city.

At Aboriginal meetings, groups, or other kinds of social gatherings, it was quite common to hear people talking about someone who is ‘supposed to be Aboriginal but actually is not’. R is not a rare case. Many Aboriginal people seem to feel at odds with those who have not been raised within Aboriginal environments and according to the Aboriginal way. Accusing these people of being ‘wannabes’ is one of the ways of dealing with the ambiguity surrounding them. In this case, A even claimed that R’s Aboriginal certificate was false. At the official level, Aboriginal certificates are required in order to receive services specifically for Aboriginal people as well as in getting designated Aboriginal jobs. These certificates are issued by designated Aboriginal organizations, which are supposed to assure the holder’s Aboriginality. However, there seem to be subtle ways of using political and financial influence to acquire the certificates. Many Aboriginal people talked about organizations known to issue certificates indiscriminately to ‘anyone’. This gives them a reason to refuse the claim of Aboriginality based solely on the government certificate. By rejecting any claim to be Aboriginal, Aboriginal people from Aboriginal family backgrounds redraw the boundary between ‘Aboriginal’ and ‘non-Aboriginal’, which has become blurred by those who claim to be Aboriginal but ‘do not seem to be Aboriginal’. A similar situation was observed by Schwab (1988) in Adelaide, where Aboriginal boys rejected one boy’s claim to be Aboriginal not only because he was not related to them but also because he did not understand the subtle essence of Aboriginal cultural mores.

However, the social relations developed through participation in activities of organizations support another kind of Aboriginality, as was evident in a conversation I held with an Aboriginal woman, whom I refer to as N, about how she dealt with people who claim to be Aboriginal but cannot demonstrate their Aboriginality by kinship ties:

N: But also there is an acceptance for those who cannot do it [family identification]. For example, there are some Stolen Generation people who do not know their families but still are accepted. It is important to be involved in the community.
Q: Does it mean being involved in annual NAIDOC [The National Aboriginal Islander Day Observance Committee] week celebration and other activities?
N: It is not only that but also like being part of the committee, part of the school Aboriginal programs, like ASSPA [Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness], and so on, being more actively involved in these things.
N suggested that, through being involved in the various organizations’ activities, persons who do not manifest the characteristics associated with being Aboriginal can nevertheless be accepted as such. This attitude stems in large part from long-standing cultural values which emphasize that rights and recognition are extended to people on the basis of committed practice. As in the case of kin relationships (Macdonald, 1986), what is important for Aboriginal people is actual doing and engaging. What N suggests, although predicated on similar cultural values, is based on the specific way in which Aboriginal social relations develop in southwestern Sydney, where organizations play crucial roles. Being involved in the activities run by organizations is what ‘Aboriginal people do’. Thus, through the collaboration of Aboriginal cultural logics and organizations, opportunities for those who do not share any of the characteristics associated with Aboriginality to be accepted as ‘Aboriginal’ is provided. This can be called ‘pan-Aboriginality’ in southwestern Sydney. As frequent wannabe accusation suggests, this is not a comprehensive identity. However, it can connect people from different cultural backgrounds.

Conclusion
In southwestern Sydney, Aboriginal identity is ambiguous and constantly under negotiation. Morgan (2006, page 139) states that aboriginality is “constructed and reconstructed in the shifting social and political conditions of post-war Australia.” In this area of suburban Sydney, Aboriginality is constructed and reconstructed according to the arrangement of social relations. Although Aboriginal people from Aboriginal family backgrounds feel at odds with those who claim to be Aboriginal but do not evince characteristics associated with ‘being Aboriginal’, particularly family identification, the image of ‘Aboriginal people’ as people with dark skin works to a certain degree in aiding their acceptance. Even for those who do not fit this image, the Aboriginal cultural value of emphasizing actual doing, albeit in part, provides a way of overcoming the cultural gap and developing a ‘pan-Aboriginality’ specific to the situation through involvement with Indigenous organizations’ activities.

Discussion and argument on the complications of urban Indigenous identities should not be confined to Australia, because these sorts of questions concern other post-settler societies. In New Zealand, those who do not know their Indigenous kinship ties have their Indigeneity questioned by some Indigenous people (Gover, 2002; Tapsell, 2002). On the other hand, some urban Indigenous leaders claim that their organizations are ‘tribes’, arguing that the nature of tribes is flexible and subject to change (Aoyagi, 1999; Webster, 2002). Both in the United States and in Canada, the presence of wannabes is reported. Some argue that those without effective Indigenous kinship ties can be incorporated in urban-based pan-Indigenous organizations through ‘commitment’ (eg Lobo, 2001; Proulx, 2003; Weibel-Orlando, 1991). However, how this pan-Indigeneity accommodates those with kinship ties and those without has not been ethnographically explored. I would not argue that this ‘commitment’ can stem from the same cultural logic as their kinship system, nor that urban Indigenous identity in New Zealand based on the organizations shares the same cultural logic with their tribal system. However, the data and discussion in this paper should highlight the need for further ethnographic research in this area.
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