

Am I Black Enough For You

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Not Everything is Black and White

Identity is formed through our interactions and experiences and is constituted through the relationships that we have with one another. Identity is a vague concept; sometimes too abstract to conceptualize and even define. This is because identity does not only lie in an individual or even collective understanding of who we are; it also rests in a public often politicized conception of the self in relation to those around us.

It is difficult not to discuss identity on a personal level because it is just that—a personal exercise. This is why many texts that try to get at the heart of identity are written from the very private and often times intimate perspective of the writer. And *Am I Black Enough For You* is no exception. Written by Anita Heiss, this memoir explores her identity by focusing on her personal experiences, relationships, and a high-profile court case that calls into question Heiss’s identity as a mixed-blood Wiradjuri woman, writer, and teacher living in Australia. *Am I Black Enough For You* revolves around issues of personal vs. collective identity, race relations and indigenous authenticity for Heiss, an author of indigenous literature. She is also an adjunct professor and visiting lecturer on literature, affiliated with various indigenous organizations, an advocate for indigenous rights, and the recipient of numerous awards and honors for her work. Heiss grew up in Australia with her Aboriginal mother and Austrian father. Through her memories of her families and friends and stories that she has been told about her parents and grandparents, she describes her wonderful childhood living with her mother’s community and occasionally travelling to her father’s hometown of Salzburg.

For many indigenous peoples, identity is an issue of great contention. But for Heiss, identity was not a problem growing up. She knew who she was, and those around her including her father never questioned and often reaffirmed her identity as a member of the Wiradjuri nation. Heiss was a Blackfella. Questions of identity raised by Heiss in her memoir, however, include: How do we define ourselves? Does identity created through histories accurately define who we are? Is an identity that privileges one part of the self over others problematic? Is an indigenous person living in a contemporary society less authentic than one who is strongly rooted in a traditional society? And more importantly, why do indigenous peoples struggle with identity?

Different indigenous groups understand identity in different ways, but for many indigenous peoples, identity, as it is understood by them as well as by others, has been determined by outside factors. And indigenous people have only been partly the authors of their identities. But without the force of external influence, defining or re-defining identity would remain a largely personal activity and discussions about discrimination and authenticity would be framed differently, if at all. This is because identity emerges as a response to the external force and then becomes a means for both survival and resistance. Heiss highlights this dynamic as she recounts her experiences. The encounter with difference, for Heiss, becomes an inevitable part of

defining her identity, and the way that she understood this identity is indicative of the way that we read the environment around us.

Am I Black Enough For You, first published in 2012 in Australia, was Heiss's attempt at explaining that identity and how she came to this understanding of her self. Although writing a memoir was always one of her goals, Heiss's motivation for writing this memoir when she did was "The Trial." Heiss begins by explaining her encounter with Andrew Bolt, a newspaper columnist and political commentator. Bolt, in an article, accused Heiss of privileging her Aboriginal heritage in order to achieve personal and professional advancement. She is one of nine Aboriginal people who were named in the article. This group eventually sued Bolt for breach of Australia's Racial Discrimination Act of 1975. In his article, Bolt claims that light-skinned people chose to identify with their Aboriginal heritage rather than their other ethnic identities because it placed them at an advantage since they were able to move in and out of both white and black communities. But Heiss points out that Bolt's claim glosses over Australia's "stolen generation" history, ignores a history of racial tension and masks the complexity of indigenous identity as well as paints Aboriginal peoples in a negative light.

The court ruled in 2011 that Bolt and the affiliated newspapers violated the Racial Discrimination Act which prohibits racial and ethnic discrimination in public speech or acts that aim to offend or humiliate another person(s). Although the case was specific to the individuals involved, it highlighted a larger problem of oppression by ignorance that is often given credibility through mainstream media and is difficult to undo despite these types of victories. At times, "The Trial" overshadows the importance of Heiss's larger narrative. Heiss, however, uses it strategically to illustrate this ongoing struggle between the powerless and the powerful by disrupting her narrative with updates of "The Trial" so that we can begin to understand both. Even though "The Trial" is a minor part of Heiss's story, the fact that it was the driving force behind the writing of her memoir highlights the larger issue of race relations and discrimination not only in Australia, but, as Heiss notes, among all communities of oppressed peoples. Aboriginal peoples are defined by their blood connections to their ancestors. In the context of Australia's race relations with Aboriginal peoples, Heiss explains that discrimination has been and continues to be a struggle for her people despite all the laws and the lawsuits.

Heiss's story explains her beginnings as a way of describing where she has gone. Heiss uses intimate details of her life to illustrate an Aboriginal woman's struggle with identity that was personal until she reached adulthood. It is at the point when Heiss attends University and eventually finds a career that she also begins a more public life. As a child, Heiss never confronted issues of identity. Identity for Heiss remained a personal, maybe even private, thought. She recounts the childhood experiences and memories that gave strength to her sense of self and reaffirmed the values that were taught to her as a child. Heiss uses witty chapter titles and humorous stories and references to make sense of the many assumptions and misconceptions that she has experienced throughout her life, especially in her career, between Whitefellas and Blackfellas and Blackfellas and other Blackfellas. Heiss problematizes her place within her community and as an established writer and academic who happens to come from mixed ancestry. Because of Heiss's life experience, she is often seen as the expert on all things Aboriginal but also stands apart from others because of this very privileged background. Nonetheless, Heiss's Aboriginal identity is a significant part of her and has informed many of the experiences in her memoir.

Indigenous writers constantly have to establish credibility within their indigenous communities and as professionals in contemporary societies. Heiss does this throughout the text;

sometimes excessively. Heiss, like many other indigenous writers, struggles with her place in the literary world constantly having to define credibility through authenticity. Throughout the narrative, Heiss appears to be making excuses for who she is by continually justifying her Aboriginal-ness to the reader while still illustrating for the non-Aboriginal reader that she is just like them. At times, Heiss appears to have a sense of guilt because of the privileges that she had growing up that other Aboriginal children may not have had. It is not until the end of her journey (in the text not in life) that Heiss makes it clear for the reader that her journey is her identity. And although Heiss straddles these two worlds, she does not need to explain her identity or make excuses for who she is and what she does. She does not need to defend her actions as not “selling out.” She does not need to justify her authenticity as an Aboriginal Australian living in contemporary Australia because she just IS despite all the criticism that argues otherwise. And by dispelling some of the common misconceptions about Aboriginal peoples, Heiss exemplifies the fact that Aboriginal peoples can belong to the contemporary world and successfully at that.

Am I Black Enough For You is an essential primary source for readers of indigenous literature and identity theory. Heiss’s ability to weave the constant struggle that indigenous people face trying to reconcile the different worlds that they belong to throughout her memoir is indicative of her talent as a literary writer. Heiss’s memoir also addresses themes important to Australia’s history such as that of the forgotten generation that expose issues of discrimination, displacement, oppression, and the eventual politicization of these indigenous identities. Many of these same issues are still relevant in the 21st century in Australia – and elsewhere. Heiss accomplishes what she sets out to do. And that is to challenge others “to think about their role in the world and how their behaviour impacts on other people, particularly Aboriginal people” (199). Her professional and personal work has made her memoir an important contribution to our understanding of identity discourse in Australia as well as for indigenous issues more generally. Her victory in court is a testament to the work that Heiss has done and continues to do.

References

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