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# BOOKS, ARTS & LIFE

## The Curse of Identity

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PETER PURCELL

*On Identity*

by Stan Grant

Melbourne University Press, 2019, 95 pages,  
\$14.99

At the 2016 Australian census, Stan Grant was confronted by a question-box asking if he was an Aborigine or Torres Strait Islander. Seemingly a simple question. Tick or don't tick. Black or white, one might say. The problem for Grant was that his family history, traceable back across five generations or more, is an Australian tale of love and marriage between men and women on both sides of that box. To tick the box is to deny the white grandmother he loved. Not to tick is to deny his Aboriginal parentage.

That choice or, more precisely, Grant's rejection of the choice, is the mainspring of *On Identity*, the latest in the Melbourne University Press series Little Books on Big Ideas. Grant has had a high profile for some time and I thought his reflections might shed useful light on what constitutes Aboriginal identity—an increasingly controversial issue.

Grant ticked the box in 2016, but now he rejects

the choice, not simply on the census form but in any form and in all places, and he does so because he rejects the concept of identity. He wants to be free of identity, to be neither white nor black nor Aboriginal nor Irish, and his book is a personal essay about his emotional and intellectual life-journey to that decision.

At a first reading, I felt that Grant made too much of the potential impact on an individual of his identity. (I suspect he would say that was because I was white, and identity gives me privilege, not burden.) I also felt he was drawing far too long a bow in making identity the source of all evil in the world. His fierce hatred of identity is clear on many a page: "how easily it morphs into tyranny", he says, creating "a twisted, distorted, mean world", where the identity-charged totalitarian is hell-bent on destroying those who are different. Identity has no place for love and banishes it along with freedom, and out of that dark void will arise the Nazi, the Hutu, ISIS, and all other atrocities where identity precludes love of the humanity in the "other".

Yet, on the first page of the book, he states the simple truth that identity begins with family, and it is clear that he loves his family deeply. Is there a

contradiction here to his declared rejection of identity? Might it be more accurate to say he rejects a collective identity imposed by others? He is certainly angered that "white Australia" has identified him as Aboriginal; indeed, that any identity should be so assigned. "The names I have been given," he says, "have erased whatever it is I could have been"; his fate has been "determined by whatever name fell" on him. This is a victim's lament, and not to be mocked, but it might strike readers as incongruous, given his outstandingly successful professional, political and personal life.

He says his "being born what was termed black is the worst thing that happened" to him. The reasoning is significant: "it meant having always to explain myself because I wasn't black at all. If I'm the sum of my genes, I am as white as I am black." In fairness, he also says that being born black is the best thing that happened to him, because it gave him love and family—though some might say that being born white can do that too.

He is, he says, a Wiradjuri man, a Kamilaroi, an Irishman and an Australian. But he longer wants to be any of these or be identified with them. He wants to come from freedom, an image drawn from Solzhenitsyn. Grant sees himself as an exile, an outsider to those seeking an identity, be they white or black. The anthem he wants to sing is of love. Love and freedom. When identity is abandoned, he says, love and freedom can flower, and the soul can survive any assault and persecution.

In support of this thesis, Grant cites a considerable number of writers and philosophers decrying the bounds of identity and declaring their aspirations and efforts to abandon it. Not surprisingly, many of them are what Colin Wilson called "outsiders" in his seminal 1956 book *The Outsiders*. Fundamental to the outsider, Wilson said, is the question of identity.

Some of these references struck me as ill-suited to Grant's case. The poet John Keats, for example, did not yearn to lose his English identity; he longed to lose the mundanity of his worldly existence. "Ode to a Nightingale" doesn't sing of England; it cries for death in a moment of exquisite spiritual harmony with the nightingale:

Now more than ever seems it rich to die,  
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,  
While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad.

Keats was one of the Romantics, most of whom believed the triviality of ordinary life was beneath them. They longed for another world of ideas and spirit, visible only in momentary glimpses. Their

descendants in the twentieth century were the Existentialists, and included the likes of Camus, Kafka and Sartre. But, again, I would suggest their flight from identity to freedom was very different from what Grant is espousing.

For Camus, freedom came with death, as a release from the unreality of life. Kafka said much the same in *The Fasting Showman*: life is so boring you might as well starve to death. Sartre, like Hemingway, found freedom in times of terror: only facing the extreme dangers of war was a man truly alive, with pure feelings untouched by thought.

These Existentialists' notions of freedom are very different from that of Alexander Solzhenitsyn. For them, God was dead, and man was meaningless, whereas Solzhenitsyn was sustained by his fierce religiosity. Grant seeks to abandon identity and find freedom, while Solzhenitsyn was Russian to the core, before, in and beyond the Gulag; it was fundamental to his identity. The love Solzhenitsyn felt and the freedom he sought were intricately entwined with his identity—and that is contrary to Grant's thesis.

Still, I appreciate the bluntness and clarity with which Grant rejects some aspects of the current revival of Aboriginal identity among Australians who have no connection to anything remotely resembling traditional Aboriginal culture. He is sympathetic to those, such as the novelist Kim Scott, who are compelled to seek out and declare an Aboriginal identity, but he understands that such an identity is "a construction, not entirely a work of fiction but selective in its facts" and inevitably accepting of a narrative of "loss and exile ... rape, pillage and massacre".

Hence, he is sceptical of the value to acculturated urban people of this journeying back into the metaphorical forest seeking "the grail of their inner 'Aboriginal' self". He questions the validity and value of their re-imagining or re-inventing themselves as Aborigines, digging up bits of the past, reclaiming bits of language and memories of place, and filling in the spaces with imagination, as he puts it. He regrets the drive by some part-Aboriginal people "to reconfigure, reconstruct, reimagine more romantic visions of some lost mythical past".

When virtually all memory of traditional life and practice has been lost, then a revivalist movement requires that "traditional" culture must be "recovered" from various sources including old family stories and anthropology reports from earlier times, or otherwise just "invented"—a modern "dreaming", as it were. It is called "traditional" culture and described as such in school lessons and media reports, but it isn't traditional at all—not in the sense of belief systems and practices that pre-

date European settlement. In many instances, it is a modern construct: the ubiquitous Welcome to Country ceremony, for example.

I think it courageous on Grant's part to put into the public domain these comments about the fabrication of Aboriginal identity. He leaves unsaid that this identity brings with it financial benefits not available to Australians generally. To which end, of course, many are more than happy to tick the box.

Intrigued by Grant's ideas, variously agreeing and disagreeing, I then read his autobiography, *Talking to My Country*. In *On Identity*, he and I seemed at times to be singing from the same song sheet, and I read *Talking to My Country* looking for a similar tune. But where *On Identity* was preaching love (even to the extent of annoying his mentor Marcia Langton, judging from her back-cover "endorsement"), *Talking to My Country* is angry, railing at "white" Australia in the vein of his much-admired James Baldwin; a real fire-on-the-wattle diatribe. Love is in the air, but only in his parents' and grandparents' hard-fought lives, and not as a path to freedom.

*Talking to My Country* is a book attuned to the Aboriginal "cause" and borders on the polemic, even down to the ubiquitous Pilgerism about babies buried in sand and heads kicked off. All the shibboleths of the modern Aboriginal nationalist's dreaming are cited:

*terra nullius* means no people; First Peoples here forever; migrated 60,000 years ago; hundreds of nations; 2000 generations of civilisation; living culture; older than the pharaohs; citizenship denied; children stolen; languages banned, lives destroyed.

*Talking to My Country* has a very different mood and tone from *On Identity*, and reads like the work of a younger man, full of anger. *On Identity*, even if you disagree with parts of its promise of love and freedom, seems the work of a man whose life experiences and late-night thinking have brought him to a better place; not free of troubled thoughts perhaps, but more enlightened. So I was surprised to see that *Talking to My Country* was published in 2016, only three years before *On Identity*. It was as if there had been some great revelation in that short time.

Then, while writing this, I read a review in the *Weekend Australian* of *The Australian Dream*, the film about Adam Goodes, for which Grant wrote

the script. Grant sees the film as an opportunity to renew debate about Australia's past, and hopes it won't be wasted. Meaning, I presume, that he hopes it will lead to Reconciliation. Grant's comments seemed to come from the man who wrote *Talking to My Country*, not the writer of *On Identity*—even allowing that when I reread *On Identity* I found in its early pages an angrier man than I had seen at first.

*The Australian Dream* narrative includes an excerpt from Grant's 2015 Ethics Centre speech, saying how Aboriginal people heard in the booing of Adam Goodes "a howl of humiliation that echoes across two centuries of dispossession, injustice, suffering and survival ... the howl of the Australian Dream and it said to us again, you're not welcome". This is echoed in *Talking to My Country*: the Australian dream is not his for the taking, he says; his is a different dreaming, of rape and murder and poisoned waterholes, rotting on government missions and condemned to poverty.

I keep coming back to the contradictions in all this. First, it isn't Grant's personal dreaming; it is a claim to the past injustices available in the present only through a collective identity that lays claim to the past. But Grant now denounces collective identity and cautions against the construction of a personal narrative from selected facts from the past. Finally, there is discomfort at the implication that

ownership of the past and the entitlement to hear the howling are the legitimate birthright of only some of the people of Aboriginal ancestry.

In 2016 Grant said he doesn't feel he is just one of the fathers on the sidelines at the kids' football game. But then he admits, "the fault is likely mine. There is a chasm here and I am not yet ready to cross." I keep asking, Why? "For many years," he says, "the identity of resentment held sway over me." But he also says, quoting Camus, "resentment is always against self"—and it has been for Grant who has, at different times, hated being black and hated being white.

At fifty-five, Grant is a handsome man, highly intelligent and very well educated, still enjoying a brilliant career. He walks and talks with our nation's political leaders and the leaders of the broader Aboriginal community, both those of the moderate voice and those of more revolutionary aspirations. He anchored *Today Tonight* and other

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Australian shows in times past and has travelled the world (seventy countries, at his count) reporting for Australia's Channel 7 and America's CNN. He currently hosts *Matter of Fact* on the ABC and has recently been appointed Professor of Global Affairs at Griffith University. He has been married to two exceptional women, has four children, a lovely home and a good income.

Most Australians would see this as the definitive Australian dream: boy from the bush makes good, big time! Few would dismiss him because he is Aborigine, and most wouldn't even know he had Aboriginal ancestry if it hadn't been publicised. I don't think Grant needs reconciliation with these people; I think he needs reconciliation with himself.

In both these books, Grant is drawn to a lament that he is not black or white. I'd like to think the writing of *On Identity* is a step towards the end of that lament. Whatever the sins of the frontier were, surely in the twenty-first century Grant doesn't have to be one or the other. Can't he be both—at once? Australian, with ancestors that include Irish and Aboriginal men and women, all human and flawed, and none nobler than the other.

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## AUGUSTO ZIMMERMANN

### Women under the Spell

*Satanic Feminism: Lucifer as the Liberator of Women in Nineteenth-Century Culture*

by Per Faxneld

Oxford University Press, 2017, 576 pages, \$62.95

The connections of early feminism with secular ideologies such as liberalism and socialism are well known. I have myself written about these in several of my articles, including a chapter in my book on Western legal theory. However, the spiritual dimensions that underpinned the early feminist movement in the nineteenth century were entirely unknown to me until I discovered this important book on the subject.

Dr Per Faxneld obtained a PhD in History of Religions at Stockholm University in 2014. He is a professor at Stockholm University, was a visiting professor at Cambridge University in 2014, and

is currently a post-doctoral fellow at Mid-Sweden University. He has published numerous peer-reviewed articles and book chapters on the history of Satanism and Western esotericism.

*Satanic Feminism* is based on Faxneld's doctoral dissertation, which was awarded the Donner Institute Prize for Eminent Research on Religion. It discusses how prominent feminists—primarily between 1880 and 1930—used Satan as a symbol of their rejection of the so-called “patriarchal traits of Christianity”. It shows that these women were inspired by the period's most influential new religion, Theosophy, and how the anti-Christian discourses of radical secularism affected feminism.

*Satanic Feminism* sheds a new light on the early feminist movement. It discusses neglected or unknown aspects of the intellectual connections of early feminism with Satanism in a way that nobody before Faxneld has dared to do. In doing so, he richly illustrates how leading figures of the early feminist movement, such as the suffragette Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the actress Sarah Bernhardt and the poet Renée Vivien, viewed God as the precursor of patriarchy and Satan as an ally in the fight against it.

This feminist view of Satan as the liberator of women, according to Faxneld, was “intertwined with prominent anticlerical, left-wing, and esoteric currents of its time”. Examples in his book include feminists employing Lucifer as a symbol of revolution and eulogising him as an anti-patriarchal figure. As Faxneld points out, Satanism and feminist politics were interwoven from the first appearance of the theme of Satan as a benevolent revolutionary figure and the liberator of womankind.

In these anti-biblical narratives, Satan is “seen as an ally in the struggle against patriarchy supported by God the Father and his male priests. Eve's ingestion of the forbidden fruit becomes a heroic act of rebellion against the tyranny of God and Adam.” Thus Satan becomes a powerful ally in the struggle against a tyrannical patriarchy supported by God the Father and his Son.

According to Faxneld, in the Scandinavian folk beliefs recorded by the feminists in the nineteenth century, “Satan could function as a helper of women when it comes to getting rid of an unwanted child.” Faxneld is particularly interested in the process whereby a sinister figure from the Bible, Satan, is elevated into “something positive and specifically with feminist connotations for certain people”. To understand why this would be so, he argues that the elevation of Satan as a feminist hero “constituted an important part of a much broader cultural tendency to dislodge all biblical characters from the position fixed by centuries of tradition, and therefore destabilising the entire [social] order