

Chapter 1: Wilcannia - Plenty of Aborigines, but no Culture

The construct of the noble savage, the intuitive native, and a religion that integrates all life forms in to one harmonious world, is far more appealing than the historical reality of peoples whose lands have been overrun, whose children have been stolen, whose food sources have been destroyed, and whose beliefs have been under attack since first contact. In the re-imagining of the 'native' as untouched and willing to share wisdom, the real lives, struggles, histories and rights of indigenous peoples can be set aside...Instead, the romantic reconstruction has become the standard against which to measure the authenticity of those claiming to be indigenous (Bell 1988:21).

Oh if God the gift would gie us, to see ourselves as ithers see us ~ Robert Burns.

Part A: A Black for all Seasons

This chapter is concerned with the trajectory of Anglo-Australian meanings attributed to Aboriginal 'culture' and 'art' as they have affected Aboriginal people in Wilcannia. Like the concept of culture, the concept of art is polysemic. The multiple meanings accorded to art and culture, inter and intra-culturally, as both separate and as intertwining categories are complicated. Crehan points out that the importance of concepts, "what they do at particular moments and particular times", can never be divorced from their larger historical contexts (2002:39). This chapter aims to similarly contextualise the concepts art and culture within a particular moment and time by exploring their very real impact on Aboriginal people in Wilcannia. The first half of this chapter concentrates on unpacking the concept of culture and its association with historically fashioned ideas about race and civilisation which, I argue, continue to deny culture for Aboriginal people in Wilcannia. The second half looks at the ways in which art and culture have become conflated for *certain* Aborigines: and explores this discursive cultural *positioning* spatially and ideologically.

When I first asked some of the white townspeople of Wilcannia what they could tell me about Aboriginal culture, I was told that I was "lookin' in the wrong place", and that "they've lost their culture", "unless you call floggin' the missus" or "getting maggots" (very drunk) a culture. There were also more humorous statements such as one by a nurse who said, "I've never heard a didgeridoo played in Wilcannia but I've treated three people hit with one". These statements show that to ask whites about 'Aboriginal culture' in Wilcannia

elicits answers according to particular views of what culture constitutes. All statements suggest a level of cognition at least of what does not (for many whites in Wilcannia) constitute what is imagined to be 'Aboriginal culture'. This is not to say that whitefellas in town do not "flog" their missus or get "maggoty". Indeed, whilst I was in Wilcannia a white policeman was removed from the town and from duty and charged over the assault of his wife. There was much consternation amongst the white population over this event and the whitefella reaction was mainly one of shock; people expressed their surprise as he was seen to be "such a nice fellow". What distinguished this flogging from floggings by and of an Aboriginal person was that it was seen to be an aberration, whereas the flogging of black on black has become normalised by whites: normalised in the sense that it is seen to be par for the course, although it is certainly not viewed as normal.

Aboriginal culture is for the majority of the Wilcannia whitefella population something of a conundrum and a paradox. Whites implicitly recognise some notion of Aboriginal culture (of a kind) in the anthropological sense of 'a people's way of life', but simultaneously assert culture's lack: "'they' don't have any culture". Aboriginal culture here must be differentiated from Aboriginality which *is* accorded, and *is* recognised and correlated by whites in Wilcannia with behaviours which are interpreted as being problematic and uncivilised. Getting uncontrollably drunk, laziness, fighting, lack of self control and the lack of parental responsibility: these are seen to be immediately recognisable aspects of being Aboriginal in Wilcannia. This is contrasted against what "real Aboriginal culture" is for many of the whites in Wilcannia: namely, the 'traditional', 'full blood' living a hunter gatherer lifestyle. These are things that Aboriginal people in Wilcannia are seen to lack, by extrapolation they are seen to lack 'Aboriginal culture'.

These views prompt some very straightforward questions. What do whites in Wilcannia mean when they say that the Aboriginal people of Wilcannia have "no culture", whilst at the same time attributing a culture or more precisely an Aboriginality of a kind? Is this the view of all whites in Wilcannia? Looking outside of Wilcannia, why does the wider Australian public consider it untenable to think that "...there exists in this state [NSW],a group of people who can claim a different identity based on *Aboriginal culture*" (Creamer 1988:45 my emphasis).

As Beckett indicates, there are multiple signifiers, expressions, and ideas about Aboriginality:

The construction of Aboriginality in Australia has been achieved through a variety of processes, in various places and at various levels of society, giving rise to a complex interaction between the loci of construction. At the local level, the most striking line of tension may seem to lie between what Aboriginal people say about themselves and what others say about them. But crosscutting this is another field of tension between the ideas of Aboriginality (and non-Aboriginality) that people of all kinds construct and reproduce for themselves, and the constructions produced at the national level by the state in its various manifestations, the mass media, science, the arts and so on (Beckett 1988:191).

Context, proximity and behaviour often determine the kind of Aboriginality accorded by whites. Importantly, Aboriginality relates to and is distinguished from 'culture' in complex ways.

Why might certain groups in Wilcannia believe that the town possesses no real 'Aboriginal culture' when ninety percent of the town is Aboriginal? That is to say, where, if not in the Aboriginal community, is real Aboriginal culture thought to exist? Why indeed do these questions matter, in what ways do they matter, and to whom do they matter? In responding to these questions, this chapter is concerned with the ways that the concept of 'culture' has become conflated with 'art', given that since the emergence of the 'acrylic art movement' (which came out of Papunya in the Central Desert during the 1970's) there has been a synonymous intertwining of 'Aboriginal art' and 'Aboriginal culture'. The Papunya/Acrylic art phenomenon and associated discourses have arguably created a climate of expectations which suggests that to be Aboriginal you have to have art. Myers considers that in the case of Aborigines, "...both within and outside of Australia, their 'art' – usually along with their spiritual tie to the landscape – came to be the representation of Aboriginal culture itself, of Aboriginal identity" (Myers 2002:10). 'Aboriginal art' has arguably become a sign of Aboriginal culture: 'art' and 'culture' have become synonyms, the one referencing the other. These intersections and fusions have particular resonance in the context of Wilcannia.

When Myers (2002:10) talks about art discourses and the "deployment of the category 'art' and its meanings...as a signifying practice", he touches on the shifting nature of discourses about 'Aboriginality' and 'Aboriginal culture'. Myers says that, "It seems ironic that Aboriginal people [the Pintupi] who were once despised as representing the lowest levels of savagery...and who were considered to demonstrate such limited cultural achievement, became so important for their art" (2002:6). The question remains as to how this came about: what is this art? How can the presence and production of 'art' in Wilcannia and the white denial of 'culture' be considered?

Given Morphy's assertion about the close conceptual relationship between art and culture, in what ways are Aborigines in Wilcannia who are seen to represent an 'absence', a 'lack' of culture, ascribed 'art'? What is it that differentiates the Barkindji Aboriginal people in Wilcannia from the Pintupi, the Warlpiri and the Yolgnu (among others) of the remote areas of the Centre and the North, who are contemporaneously afforded both 'culture and art', indeed, whose artworks arguably perform as tangible examples for dominant society of the presence of Aboriginal culture?

A Working Model of Culture

As a general working model, and in order to demonstrate the complexities and "unyielding ambiguity of the concept of culture", I am going to draw on Zygmunt Bauman's three definitions of culture (1973:1). Bauman offers three concepts which point to the "notorious" ambiguity of the concept of 'culture'. According to Bauman, the term 'culture' has historically been "incorporated into three separate '*univers du discours*'" (1973:5). That is, there are three discursive worlds each drawing on the same term.

- 1) The Western pre-scientific and "hierarchical" concept of culture is known, albeit unreflexively, by everybody from everyday experience (1973:6). Bauman is referring here to what is commonly known as 'High culture'. The *hierarchical* concept of culture accords levels of culture whereby people are graded and marked according to attributes such as degree of education, degree of polish and urbanity, enrichment above the "natural" state and ennoblement (1973:7). It makes a tacit assumption that there exist 'others' who do not possess these attributes, thereby the "cultured" person is an antonym of an 'uncultured' one" (1973:7).
- 2) The "differential" concept of culture is "employed to account for the apparent differences between communities of people" (temporally, ecologically, or socially discriminated) (1973:17). Whereas the *hierarchical* model sees culture as a singular hierarchy against which all people are measured, the *differential* concept reflects the Boasian concept of cultures in the plural. For the purposes of my argument I consider the ways in which culture(s) in a plural and differentiated sense can be hierarchically compared. That is, there is a hierarchy of differentially considered cultures.
- 3). The "generic" concept of culture seeks to "tackle the problem of the essential unity of mankind" (1973:39). This model poses a dichotomy between '*actus hominus*' (what

happens to man) and '*actus humani*' (what man does), thereby invoking a human/nature distinction. Bauman considers that there is no longer the need to seek a "biological pre-cultural unity" because this is "in fact ubiquitous in all discussions of culture – it is a theoretical foundation of the relative autonomy and distinctiveness of the cultural sphere in general, the differential concept in particular" (Bauman 1973:39). However, I would suggest that biological differences remain entrenched within the differential concept of culture – as I go on to discuss.

Drawing on Bauman's concepts of culture (if not his use of these concepts) my purpose and interest at this juncture is to explore what I consider to be 'culture's' conceptual intersection, slippage and, on occasion, fusion with other terms such as 'art', 'civilisation' and 'race'. I want to show how these intersections and their historic underpinnings continue to play out through the wider trope of culture. I explore the denial of culture for certain Aborigines through an exploration of how these intersections operate in the discourses of everyday life in Wilcannia.

Whites in Wilcannia accord culture to "full-bloods" and "real blackfellas" from the "top end", "up north". Culture is flatly denied for some groups of Aborigines but not for others. Saying "no" to Aboriginal culture in Wilcannia cloaks and hides some extraordinarily destructive ideas. Since the concept of 'culture' is a-priori a western one, the meanings of which pre-date 'anthropology', and since I am arguing for a continuation of underlying concepts, I consider Bauman's western definitions useful in demonstrating the work of this thesis. Culture understood as 'a people's way of life' is not divorced from any of Bauman's concepts. Indeed, it is the perception that there are Other ways of living that allows for differentiations to be made and created: it is how these differences are thought about that is the point.

Continuing Intersections

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, with Social Darwinism on the rise, empirical data was produced to support the doomed race theory. Whilst "disease, drink, drugs, and the demoralisation which followed the 'vices of civilization'" (McGregor 1993:17) were seen to render Aborigines a race doomed to extinction, whites who practiced such vices were presumably made of either different or sterner stuff. Whites who succumbed to the vices of civilisation may have been viewed as being in a degenerate state

of civilisation, they remained, however, part (if an undesirable part) of an overall white hierarchy despite *behaving* in an uncivilised way.³²

Conversely, Aborigines who succumbed to these vices were not only seen to be in an arrested state of development, they were seen as biologically, mentally and environmentally incapable of civilisation as this term was being used³³ (Broome 1994; McGregor 1993; Mulvaney 1990). The 'uncivilised' and vice-ridden whites had gone backwards in terms of *high* or *generic* culture, but the uncivilised and vice-ridden blacks lacked the racial (biological, mental and environmental) capacity to go forwards. An overriding maxim saw the degree of civilisation accorded equating with the degree of culture and vice versa. There are clearly complex intersections right from the beginning of contact between the according of culture and civilisation. The *state* or *stage* of civilisation theory³⁴ (Meek 1976) was linked to both the western *hierarchical* and *generic* concepts of culture – and is part of 'culture's' recognition. What was being *transmitted* was 'culture' measured against a *state* or *stage* of civilisation.³⁵ As will be demonstrated later, civilisation in these guises remains entrenched in dominant society conceptions.

32 This is a broad, but nevertheless valid simplification of what is a complex social and scientific history of thinking and writing. The pre-evolutionary nineteenth-century 'science' of craniology which prefigured Darwin also compared and differentiated the cranial capacity of caucasians, for example, English, German, Anglo-American, Celtic and Semitic peoples placing "Teutons and Anglo-Saxons on top, Jews in the middle and Hindus on the bottom" (Gould 1981:54). Despite this caucasian hierarchy, it nevertheless remained the case that the caucasian "races" were seen to rank above the Indian races in the middle, and the black races on the bottom (Gould 1981:53). Whether a monogenecist argument which placed all races as part of one human species who are all in a state of decline from Adam, or a polygenecist argument which saw human races as separate biological species "descendents of different Adams" (Gould 1981:39) whites remained either the top of the tree or the highest and strongest trees.

33 Notably, the first definition of culture by Edward Tylor equated civilisation with culture. "Culture or Civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (Tylor 1871). Franz Boas was one of the first anthropologists to "furnish" some of the initial arguments against Social Darwinism and its racial connection (Wolf 1974:255). Whereas Tylor conceived of "culture" in the singular as a more or less identical heritage which "all societies possessed", Boas talked about a plurality and diversity of cultures which, in their multiple varieties, could not be attributed to any "uniform process of social or cultural evolution" (Barfield 1997:99). The meanings given to culture anthropologically have a long history and are still not agreed upon (Crehan 2002; Williams 1983:87). There is Leach reminds, "no present day consensus about how the term should be used" (1982:38). Whilst the anthropological meanings of culture and the internal debates of the academy are not the focus of this thesis, their effects on popular understandings of culture must be acknowledged. What is clear is that 'culture' in its many guises has become, as Myers notes, "a major political and ideological force" (2002:234).

34 The four stage theory was based on modes of subsistence whereby "hunter gatherers represented the first and most primitive stage of the development of mankind. They appeared exclusively as Ignoble" (Borsboom 1987:423).

35 Rousseau emphasised the difference between the state of nature and the civil state by suggesting that proprietary dominance over nature marked civil society. "The first man who, having enclosed a piece of land, thought of saying 'This is mine' and found people simple enough to believe him, was the true founder of civil society" (in James 1993a:207).

Contemporary reference to evolutionary views, although theoretically denied and scientifically disproved, continues in 'everyday' discourse (although political correctness makes them less explicit). Even as such views are seemingly academically and scientifically discredited, they nevertheless continue to be cited in relation to Aboriginal "problems" such as alcohol abuse, diabetes and impulse control.³⁶

Although the concept of cultures as relative and multiple is argued discursively both anthropologically and at a national level, the *hierarchical* (High culture) concept of culture, conflated with a superior and racialised *generic* concept of 'culture', continues to be the self referencing datum point against which most whites in Wilcannia (and more broadly), discursively and ideologically compare Aboriginal Australians.

Pierre Taguieff writes of a new 'cultural racism' which has superseded the discourses of biological difference (in Kahn 1995). Taguieff states that the "racialization of the lexicons of culture, religion, traditions, and mentalities, even specific imaginaries has produced a surge of a great variety of reformulations of racism that are not expressly biologising" (2001:4). It is worth quoting at length from Taguieff to provide a fuller view of his ideas. He writes,

The racist discourse has, so to speak been 'culturalized' or 'mentalized' by abandoning (in a sometimes ostentatious fashion) the explicit vocabulary of 'race' and 'blood' and therefore leaving behind the ritual biological and zoological metaphors. But, in being substituted for the zoological notion of 'race', the notion of 'culture' implies a shift of problematic and a complete refashioning of the antiuniversalist argument. Cultural anthropology and/or ethnology are thus called on to legitimate the neoracist prescriptions of avoidance of intercultural contact, of separate development...of phobic rejections of any 'crossing of cultures' (2001:4-5).

Assertions of absolute cultural difference have superseded biology. Cultural difference, or what is made to stand for cultural difference, is a new avenue for racist discourse. However, as Cowlshaw notes, from the mid 1970's onwards, "Progressive Australian scholars attempted to replace the concept of race...with the concept of culture...The 'the term 'the Aboriginal race' was replaced with Aboriginal culture, but the category relied on the same markers and 'traditional culture' carried the same symbolic messages of heritability, primitivity and blackness as had the 'Aboriginal race'" (2004b:59-60, cf. 1999). Via this 'culturalising' of difference, perceived racial shortcomings are subsumed under cultural attributes and characteristics.

36 The discourse of the 'thrifty gene' is a residual and ongoing example (Unsworth and Chippendale 2004), as are 'Firewater theories' which presume genetically based racial differences in alcohol metabolism (Hunter 1993).

This might suggest that all who are deemed Other, including all Aborigines, are negatively defined in opposition to whites. However, this is not the case. According to many whites in Wilcannia and more widely, the category of Aborigines is culturally differentiated. Certain Aborigines, those thought to be “traditional”, “full-blood” and “real” are seen as a separate category. Whilst still not qualifying for the epithet of ‘civilised’ per se, these *remote* Aborigines are accorded a *differentiated* culture in some positive sense and are differentiated from those Aborigines who live in Wilcannia.

Kahn states that “the world has become increasingly interconnected – economically, politically but just as importantly culturally – and increasingly culturally differentiated at the same time”(1995:ch6). He postulates a global world characterised by “a consuming and erotic passion for difference”, as well as the “dark side” of this passion, namely the consequences of Taguieff’s assertions of ‘cultural racism’ (Kahn 1995:ch6). A tension exists here, whereby the idea of distinct bounded cultures (if not spatially then ideologically defined) remains at one level valorised as against Other cultures which might be seen to impinge or threaten.³⁷ At the same time, difference is embraced if only parasitically and partially. Kahn’s seemingly contradictory statement is played out in relation to different Aboriginal people in different parts of Australia.

Mainstream white Australia takes on a “consuming and erotic passion” for difference through the trope of the ‘remote’, ‘traditional’, ‘real’, ‘authentic’, ‘full-blood’ Aborigines who are accorded a particular ‘culture’. As Myers (2002) recognises in relation to art, it is precisely the recognition of a ‘traditional’ Aboriginal culture that is valued. Michael Nelson Tjakamarra has observed that whites want to see the art of “traditional” people and paintings from “the Centre” (in Myers 2002:291). Here, Tjakamarra is “contrasting this attention with the lack of interest in the work of urban Aboriginal art” (2002:291). What Tjakamarra says is correct: it has become correct in part through anthropological and art-world interest in ‘traditional’, ‘tradition oriented’ Aboriginal art from the North.

This recognition of and desire for difference is part of the consuming and erotic passion to which Kahn (1995) alludes. Simultaneously, there is a shoring up of an “us” and “them” boundary in the case of the urban/town Aborigine. Langton discusses the ways in which

37 Crehan argues that although the concept of bounded *whole* cultures is theoretically discredited in and by anthropology, nevertheless, it is still implicitly asserted (2002:36-47).

negative connotations are attributed to Aborigines living in many urban/country town areas. She writes,

The failure of writers to understand present-day Aboriginal communities partly results from the salvage approach in Australian anthropology and popular misunderstandings of anthropological concepts. Typically, such authors consider that Aborigines on the white side of the 'rolling frontier' lack culture, have no distinctive culture, have only some truncated version of European culture, or have only a 'culture of poverty',³⁸ (1981:17).

The views of white locals in Wilcannia provide evidence of the validity of Langton's charge. White discourses about urban/peri-urban/country-town/rural Aborigines remain marked by their attribution of what can only be described as a *non-culture* in both the *hierarchical* and *generic* senses.

Bauman's three concepts of 'culture' not only have roots and ongoing resonances which continue to be played out: they also intersect in new and novel ways. Considered together with the tropes of the noble and ignoble savage, they explain why many non-Aboriginal people in Wilcannia and more broadly attribute 'culture' differently to Aborigines. Following the trail of these two tropes may be thought to be going over old ground in view of the degree of discussion these two terms have generated (Borsboom 1987; Broome 1994; Hamilton 1990; James 1993b, 1997; Meek 1976; Rowse 1998; White 1976). However, I would argue that as overarching stereotypes their meanings have become passé and metaphorically applied. In this way they have become normalised: as has the 'work' that they do viz á viz their perceived attributes.

The noble/ignoble savage concepts originally referred to discrepant points of view about entire races of people. That is, although both views existed simultaneously and polemically within societies, Other races, including Australian Aborigines, were cast in their totality in one or the other category. Over time and contact, however, these two groupings came to imaginatively exist side by side. Today, an individual may consider some Aborigines to meet the attributes of the noble savage whilst simultaneously categorising other Aborigines

38 It is worth noting that some anthropologists have argued against the pathologising nature of Lewis' (1996) 'culture of poverty', instead, proposing the notion of an 'oppositional culture' (Cowlshaw 1988b, 2004a). This suggests that certain Aboriginal groups living in more marginalised socio-economic conditions subvert and challenge "dominant systems of meaning" in ways which dominant society find challenging, and which offer some Aboriginal autonomy (Cowlshaw 1988b, 1993; Lattas 1993; Cowlshaw and Morris 1997). Other anthropologists, most notably Rowse, contend that the concept of oppositional culture offers little of value to Aboriginal people and reinforces their powerlessness (1990). Langton claims that the culture of poverty has been widely taken up in "white Australian studies of Aboriginal people" and describes Lewis' theory as both "dangerous" and the epitome of "the racist stereotype par excellence...elevated to the level of scientific observation" (Langton 1981:18).

with ignoble attributes. Through these tropes, a simultaneous Aboriginal cultural hierarchy has been created which judges Aborigines and Aboriginality in relation to positive and negative attributes.³⁹

Annette Hamilton talks of “two circuits of meaning” which were constructed around Aborigines up until the 1930’s and which “have retained a singular power up to the present day” (1990:22). I consider that these two circuits remain useful for thinking about why whites in Wilcannia and indeed more widely will attribute culture to *certain* Aborigines but not to those in Wilcannia. They also serve to show how the concepts of the noble and ignoble savage remain clear and distinct entities as well as being constructed as new, contextually applied amalgams which allow for the presence of ‘Aboriginal art’ sans ‘Aboriginal culture’.

According to Hamilton, in one circuit, “There...was the ‘real’ Aborigine, a good figure whose wisdom could be tapped by whites...This ‘real’ Aborigine was a full-blood...participated in Aboriginal communal rituals and preserved aspects of his culture, especially singing and dancing...” (1990:22). “The Otherness of ‘real’ Aborigines came to be affirmed and re-affirmed by the very continuation of their ritual practices, the custom of ‘walkabout’ when they put off the trappings of European civilization and ‘returned to the wild’” (1990:22).

The other circuit of meaning was not so benevolent and “...constructed an utterly negative picture of Aborigines, derived from their ‘detribalisation’, [and] the loss of their essential cultural attributes...” (1990:22). This image was applied to “‘Mission blacks’...as well as to half-castes and fringe-dwellers, who seemed to embody the worst fantasies of white Australians – drunkenness, vagrancy, despair and disorganisation” Hamilton 1990:22). At the same time as the discourse of the ‘bush black’ was emerging, the image of those on the fringe of society, the ‘fringe dwellers’, was also present (Hamilton 1990:21). These people were viewed with contempt. These fringe dwellers were “...displaced from their traditional territories, clustered around towns and settlements. Their ‘drinking’, ‘gambling’, ‘fighting’, ‘promiscuity’, and ‘laziness’ were, of course, precisely those elements which whites had to

39 To understand why this might be, it is important to realise that the “concept of the Savage has become a key concept in the European social ideology of the Other...” (Borsboom 1987:422-428). These two “seemingly incompatible meanings”, that of primitive ‘noble’ and primitive ‘ignoble’ stand both in relationship to one another and in relationship to how ‘European civilisation’ was and is being conceived (Borsboom 1987). That is, the concepts of the primitive are switched around to either idealise or to criticise European society and its development (Borsboom 1987:422). Currently, both images operate simultaneously within dominant society.

struggle against within themselves” (Hamilton 1990:21 my emphasis). Although these categories are applied against perceived positive or negative attributes and characteristics, they are importantly quite heavily prescribed in relation to certain practices *and* geographic localities.

From these views it can be extrapolated that those Aborigines who live in more urban environments are linked to attributes of violence and drunkenness; they have unhealthy minds and bodies and no longer live in harmony with nature or their fellows. These are the new miserable brutes, the violent, uncivilised, treacherous and primitive savages. And for the majority of the white populace in Wilcannia, this is precisely how local Aborigines are viewed. Conversely, ‘traditional’ Aborigines are seen to be spatially and ideologically distanced and acceptably Other. The good Aborigine lives “up north”, “up the top end”, in “the centre”, “the desert”; the ‘bad’ Aborigine is close by. The question of race does not disappear so much as become less *present* in the case of the ‘good Aborigine’. This is partly due to matters of proximity as opposed to a perceived shift in thinking about racial difference.

When people speak of “traditional”, “remote”, “real” Aborigines they also invoke their inverse: the inauthentic, urban/town pretender and the accompanying baggage that all of these terms bring. As James (1993a:208) has shown, stereotypes fix reality and identity and gain recognition, authority and legitimation through repetition in common discourse and by “privileged people and institutions”. Herzfeld similarly notes that that,

The act of stereotyping is by definition reductive, and as such, it always marks the absence of some presumably desirable property in its object. It is therefore a discursive weapon of power. It does something, and something very insidious: it actively deprives the ‘other’ of a certain property, and the perpetrator pleads moral innocence on the grounds that the property in question is symbolic rather than material, that the act of stereotyping is merely a manner of speech, and that ‘words can never hurt you’⁴⁰ (1995:157).

Through stereotypes, effects and affects are concretised and attributed; ‘lack’ and ‘absence’ are made manifest in more than verbal and symbolic ways.

40 The aetiology of the multiple, shifting and occasionally melding concepts of ‘culture’ and ‘art’ and their ideological, etymological and signifying ‘avatars’ are particularly important. Herzfeld, in talking of the way in which the social world is suffused with the resonance of meanings, quotes J.L. Austen’s description of “trailing clouds of etymology” (Herzfeld 1997:38). What Herzfeld calls the “etymological hunt” refers to an exploration of historic semiotic systems, their derivations and connections which “give to social experience a range of meanings both elusive and allusive (Herzfeld 1997:38). That is, words are ‘signs’ through which we convey “self evident truths [which] have histories of their own” (Herzfeld 1997:28).

Stereotypes and Their Affects – Three Ethnographic Examples

The following three ethnographic examples from Wilcannia demonstrate some of these affects and highlight the close connection between the trope of the ignoble savage and the denial of culture for Aboriginal people in Wilcannia. These examples show how *hierarchical* and *generic* concepts of culture intersect with a biological racism and ideas about civilisation. They also reinforce the role of physical and ideological distance and proximity in the making of meaning about 'types' of Aborigines.

I was having dinner one evening with three white couples in Wilcannia. One woman told me that some time ago she had rolled her car and broken her sternum. She said she "waited five hours to be attended to at the hospital" as the Matron was "attending to a screaming baby and stitching up the throat of a bloke who tried to cut his throat". The husband of another woman asked, "Did he die?" to which the injured woman's husband replied "no, unfortunately". The injured white woman clearly felt it an injustice that she had to wait while a "screaming baby" and badly injured suicidal man were attended to.

Both the baby and the man in this story are Aboriginal. The woman presents screaming Aboriginal babies and suicidal Aboriginal men as less deserving of attention. Screaming Aboriginal babies and Aboriginal suicide attempts are connected with certain behaviours and situations which this group of white people deem to be unacceptable. Screaming Aboriginal babies and suicidal Aboriginal men illicit disdain, not sympathy, and certainly not empathy: they are signs of a negative savagery and incivility. Wilcannia Aborigines, are portrayed in this story as *not* civilised and *not* normal.

The screaming baby and the suicidal man are, according to this woman and the others who were present, 'not like us'. The difference, I suggest, is being measured against both the *hierarchical* and the human/non-human *generic* senses of culture. The behaviour of the baby and the man in terms of High cultural ideals displays neither polish nor urbanity; it is neither refined, enlightened nor educationally developed. This is a culture complete with 'savage' and 'primitive' connotations which is differentiated *from* and differentiated *by* the whites.

The next example is a story told to me by a white resident of Wilcannia who is aged in his early sixties. It serves to show that physical characteristics redolent of evolutionary racial difference between black and white are still considered relevant. This man told me about a

riot in Wilcannia “about fifty years ago” when “they [presumably white townsfolk or police] had to lift the Wilcannia bridge to keep the Aboriginals out of town”.⁴¹ He recalled one of his white mates “breaking a crank handle over one blackfella’s head” and made much of the fact that the blackfella “got up and walked away”. I suggest that this story as told poses certain questions: what kind of man could just get up and walk away from being hit on the head with such force? One with a very thick skull, perhaps? A different kind of man? Certainly not a man with a ‘normal’ skull. That this story is being relayed as a contemporary example of difference and not as an example of the ‘way we used to think’, serves to indicate little conceptual shift in ‘racial’ thinking.

These differences are, however, more often framed as ‘cultural’ than ‘racial’, giving them an apparently more benign form. However, although culture may have superceded race as a trope, this is a superficial overlay. As Cowlshaw (1988:4) states, “...the importance of racial structuring has not been undermined”. It continues through “...a process of exclusion and differentiation rationalised by the emphasis on the importance of certain supposedly defining characteristics”. Given this, ‘uncivilised’ and ‘irrational’ behaviours such as violence and drunkenness are superficially re-named as cultural characteristics, although they remain racially and biologically structured.

The third example occurred during a conversation with an Australian army officer at a town function in Wilcannia. During September 2002, at a locally organised community “fun day” I was standing near a tree in the park where the event was taking place and a man in an Australian army uniform came up to me and asked if I was “doing a thesis on the river”. I said “yes” and he asked if he could talk to me later. At the end of the day he asked me what it was exactly that I was doing. I said that I was looking at the relationship of the Barkindji to the river. He said, “only the blacks?” I said “not only, but mainly”. He asked if I had noticed “the bearded women”⁴² around Wilcannia. I said that I had and he asked if I had heard any stories about this. I relayed a story⁴³ a local Aboriginal man had told me about why some women have beards and others do not. He laughed quite dismissively at this,

41 The centre lift bridge which crosses the Darling River at Wilcannia was built in 1896. Now classified by the National Trust, this bridge is closed to vehicles and is used for foot-traffic only.

42 Many women in Wilcannia are hirsute and have pronounced facial hair on the chin and upper lip. Some shave this off and others wear their beards as a proud indicator of ‘wisdom’. One older woman has a beard and moustache: the beard reaching to her upper chest.

43 This story concerns a native cat myth.

saying “oh well”. He then started talking to me about Lake Victoria⁴⁴, about how it is “covered in skeletons”, and about a massacre that took place at Rufus River. He said that the people of Rufus River were “the missing link”, that “they had long arms” and “stooping shoulders”. During the massacre he said, “when the police came, two [Aborigines] escaped”, and “they ended up here [Wilcannia]”. Aboriginal bearded women are neither mythically relevant nor culturally valued: they are, according to this man, not quite human.

Not only are bearded Barkindji women less than human, the assumption is that their progeny are similarly uncivilised. They are not seen to be refined, educated and enlightened; they remain in a state of savagery.⁴⁵ Interestingly, what is an eminent cultural marker for Barkindji is a sign of negative racial difference for this man. The biological reference indicates the racially based nature of his comments. For this man, Aborigines in Wilcannia are ‘entirely’ Other: they are not civilised – they are marginalised and marginally human.

The army man went on to tell me that he had come with some other army officers to Wilcannia to “drum up interest” in the army. I asked if there had been any interest and he indicated that there was “plenty of interest” but “most of them are a waste of time”, “no education” and that the army were “floggin’ a dead horse” although there were “one or two hopefuls”. The ongoing ‘taken for granted’ normalisation of a racial ideology means that this army man has a veritable treasure trove of ‘information’ to draw on in making these claims.

The Aborigines of Wilcannia, according to the examples given, do not qualify as either hunter gatherers or civil men. They are not seen to live with ‘nature’ as whitefellas understand this. To live with nature is to inhabit all of the cultural attributes and characteristics of Aboriginal people who hunt and gather for food and who, importantly, do not manifest the uncivilised vices associated with excessive drinking and poor economic background. However, despite living in the edifices of civilisation such as towns and cities, neither do Wilcannian Aborigines for the most part (according to many whites) live or qualify as civil men or women. This is part of the point of conflict: Aborigines live in the same ‘communities’ as civil man, they share the same geographic and economic space as civil man, and yet are not seen to be ‘civil’.

44 On August 27, 1841 approximately 20 Aboriginal people from Lake Victoria were killed by a police expedition and some over-landers from Adelaide at Rufus River (the outlet channel for Lake Victoria in Southern NSW). This is known as the Rufus River Massacre.

45 To civilise is to bring out of savagery or barbarism into a state of civilization, 2. to refine, educate or enlighten (Collins English Dictionary 1991:150).

Uncivilised whites are, however, differentiated from uncivilised blacks. It is precisely the potential of the former (uncivilised whites), as against the irredeemable 'nature' of the latter (uncivilised blacks), which continues to distinguish these two categories.

The Wilcannia Aborigines, according to many whites in Wilcannia, have 'snubbed' the benefits of civilisation. In rejecting the white man's way of life, the Wilcannia Aborigines are seen to be rejecting a *superior* way of life. I consider that much of the ambivalence that is present towards Aborigines and the denial of a Wilcannia Aboriginal 'culture' of any value arises out of a white self-referencing *hierarchical* concept of culture and the historic continuity and conflation of a superior *generic* concept of culture. Whilst this may be in part an implicit prompt, it is I propose one which is more so the case when the *space* of the Aborigines in question, in this case, Wilcannia, is not only proximal to whites, but is considered by whites to be ideologically and physically white-controlled civilised space. When Aborigines are seen to reject those ways of life set up as 'civilised' yet hold to those seen to be 'uncivilised' then there is always (for whites) the ever present threat of bleed or contamination – where black and white live in close, proximal physical space.

Aboriginal people in Wilcannia are socially marginalised by many whites in Wilcannia. However, they are not fringe-dwellers, nor do they live in the margins in any spatial sense. They form a physical and bodied majority in the town – they fully inhabit the town. Control and monitoring of the white self requires greater work in these conditions. Many Aboriginal people display all the named vices of white 'civilisation': they are mirrors of a potentiality that must be avoided. Since physical avoidance is not possible, mental avoidance through disdain and rejection serve to bolster the self against possible contamination. There are two aspects operating here: the Aboriginal people of Wilcannia are seen to lack civilisation; however, there is an underlying and ambivalent recognition that the vices of civilisation are not only of white making, but are ever-present white possibilities. There is an unresolved bleed between a perceived a-priori lack of civilisation seen to inhere in blacks, and the anxiety of evidence to the contrary as exemplified through white characteristics which mirror those disdained in 'Others'. In other words, self-loathing and fear of a potential self is turned back onto 'Others'.

Although neither 'traditional' or 'urban/country town' Aborigines are accorded the label of civilisation as I have described it, traditional Aborigines are perceived as having certain desirable characteristics as long as *their* cultural space remains separated from white living, and is not despoiled by external white influence of *either* the civilised or uncivilised variety.

The degree to which white civilisation impinges is in this case related to a reduction of 'culture'. This is not 'High Culture or superior *generic* culture' of the type overtly related to civilisation: the space of the traditional Aborigine must be black space and it must be differentiated from white civilised cultural space to operate as legitimate.

Part B: The Place of Art in Culture

Having demonstrated the continuing resonances of race and civilisation with popular and local white notions of culture, I now look more specifically to 'art' and 'culture' as intersecting tropes and mutually re-inforcing categories. I explore the presence of Aboriginal art in Wilcannia with the white denial of Aboriginal culture and the questions this raises. As the remainder of this chapter and the following chapters demonstrate, on the ground black and white relationships in Wilcannia reveal the ambiguity and 'push and pull' tension which mediate views, images and experiences of Aboriginality and Aboriginal culture. Nevertheless, there is still a desire amongst whites to appropriate aspects of a perceived Aboriginal world whilst retaining distance from its actuality.

Andrew Lattas writes of his interest "in how, through art, the 'colonised Other' comes to be possessed in a new way" (2000:265). He talks of how "traditional Aboriginal painting comes to be recontextualised, that is, removed from its own cultural context, and made to offer a relationship of self-possession to a western self" (2000:265). Lattas cites many journalistic and art media reports of Aboriginal art exhibitions both here and overseas which spiritualise Aborigines and their relationship to land (2000). He claims that "Aboriginal art and its focus on the land is posited as embodying a realm of spirituality which white Australians lack" (Lattas 1990:52). To reconcile with Aboriginal spirituality is to reconcile this alienation (Lattas 1990). The much cited review of the Paris exhibition *Magiciens de la terre* by critic Robert Hughes emphasises this nostalgic embrace of Aborigines where they become no longer savages but primitives embodying a desired spirituality.

Tribal art is never free and does not want to be. The ancestors do not give one drop of goanna spit for 'creativity'. It is not a world, to put it mildly, that has much in common with a contemporary American's – or even a white Australian's. But it raises painful questions about the irreversible drainage from our own culture of spirituality, awe, and connection to nature (1988:80).

This suggestion that Aboriginal paintings vicariously offer a redemptive spirituality is not simply a discourse of new-agers (Marcus and Myers 1995:15); it has become, says Lattas, "closely related to a new form of nationalism" (Lattas 2000:268). It is clear, however, that it

is 'tribal', 'traditional' Aborigines who can help white Australians reclaim the 'spirituality' and 'connection' to land that modernity has disenfranchised. These attributions serve as a nostalgic model for an Edenic past: a simpler, more 'natural' Golden Age of humanity. Despite some criticism of this re-production of the primitive (Fry and Willis 1989; MacClancy 1997) and its association with a way of life no longer available to western society, as Marcus and Myers (1995:17) state, anthropologists themselves are implicated, having "not ceased entirely to portray these cultures as 'on the wane' and that this sense of impending loss is still poignant in ethnographic writing".

The cultural space that the nation has assigned to 'traditional' Aboriginal people and their art, because it is an *ideal* and a *myth*, calls for (indeed may require) proximal distance from physically present Aborigines in order to remain ideologically possible: ideologically uncontaminated as it were. As Lattas notes, discourses which align aspects of Aboriginality with narratives about nationalism operate as myths, not because they are false, but because they inhabit "an imaginary space full of primordial truths about identity and society" (1990:54). However, myths of this type can only be sustained through distance.

Indeed, as Sutton (2005:10) rather sardonically points out, cultural relativism "...works best in its simplest and strongest form when exotic people stay in exotic locations". In the case of Aboriginal Australia, "Indigenous urban migration and the penetration of the media into remote places...have in recent years brought mainstream Australians into new degrees of contact with foreign cultural patterns and behaviours that at times they find unacceptable or even repugnant" (Sutton 2005:10-11). Real contact, real relationships with real Aboriginal people are not conducive to the maintenance of these myths. Indeed, in the case of Wilcannia these myths collide with actual patterns and behaviours. However, the production of art, the purposes of its production, and its reception, sees these myths reconfigured in interesting ways.

Importantly, as Lattas recognises, "it is the incorporation into the commodification-of-culture circuits that renders... [Aborigines] admirable" (2000:270). Aboriginal culture and its spirituality can, through material art-works, become something to be grasped, achieved, and *bought*: the art work is separated from the 'worker' who makes it and becomes commodified. As Andrew Pekarik of the Asia Society Gallery in New York notes, "Ordinary Australians who may have trouble dealing with the poverty, customs, and appearances of Aborigines, have finally been able to respect their artform. For Westerners, beautiful artifacts are the accepted currency of cultural achievement" (Myers 2002:281). The artworks considered as

entities separated from the people can function in specific ways. They are not, however, separated from certain ideas about the people who make them.

Conflating Aboriginal Art and Culture

Hierarchical notions of cultural development were in the early twentieth century attached to art; accordingly, culture came to include “the *products* of intellectual and especially artistic activity” (Crehan 2002:41). These distinctions saw societies ranked in evolutionary terms from the lowest to the highest, with capabilities in *art* and technology bearing a direct relation to their rating⁴⁶ [my emphasis] (Levinson and Ember 1996:291). As will be seen, the attribution of ‘culture’ to *things* as opposed to people is an important distinction which has bearing on the Wilcannia case. Tracking the trajectory of what might now be called the Aboriginal arts and crafts industry provides a sense of the conflation of Aboriginal art and Aboriginal culture and the centrality of art works to contemporary perceptions of Aboriginality.

Following the 1967 referendum when Aboriginal people were granted citizenship, ‘self-determination’ became the direction of government policy – a direction which the Australian Labor Party endorsed on its election in 1972 (Myers 2001:173). The advancement of Aboriginal culture and the arts was part of this foregrounding. In the early 1970’s, the Government “Cultural” policy of the Aboriginal Arts Board (AAB)⁴⁷ had amongst its eight objectives: “to develop programs designed to encourage the teaching and practice of *Aboriginal culture*...to educate the wider community in the value and quality of all aspects of *Aboriginal art and culture*...to encourage a pride in, and knowledge of, *Aboriginal culture* among the wider community both in Australia and overseas” (Department of Aboriginal Affairs 1989:111 my emphasis).

Similarly, the Department of Aboriginal Affairs (DAA) had a “strictly cultural” objective which was, “to provide a better understanding of Aboriginal Australia and respect for all aspects of *Aboriginal cultural expression* through the maintenance, support and promotion of

46 In the case of Aboriginal art the evolutionary paradigm of progress and development presented a problem and resulted in theorising of the kind typified by George Grey, who ‘discovered’ cave paintings in the north west of Australia in 1838. “...I wondered that so fair a land should only be the abode of savage men; and then I thought of the curious paintings we had this day seen...” (Grey 1964:207,[1841]). Grey proposed that Malayan artists had created this work, “and this he thought was evidence that a *superior race* had once dwelt there” (Mulvaney 1990:19). Such theorising was in place for another 100 years and the fact that Aboriginal people were artists “in their own right” was a “development which was to have repercussions on post Darwinian theory (Mulvaney 1990:19).

47 The Aboriginal Arts Board was established in 1973.

Aboriginal arts and culture" [my emphasis] (1989:112). From the mid-eighties there was "...growing recognition that in many parts of Australia, cultural production provides the only means to improve economic status" (DAA 1989:123). This inclusion of an economic emphasis nevertheless retained "...a great deal of cultural significance" (DAA 1989:123). The Community Development Employment Programme (CDEP)⁴⁸ in Wilcannia provides a perfect example of this conflation of art and culture, where Aboriginal people can choose to 'work' at making art with the aim of creating sustainable employment. The very fact that art is offered as a standard work pathway points to the assumption that 'Aborigines make art' and also that 'art is culture'. It is important to realise that through such policies culture becomes something which can, and in many ways must, be specified and made identifiable in order for it to be *taught*, and *practiced* and *sold*.

Gell once said that "culture has no existence independent of its manifestations in social interactions" (1998:4) and that this "is true even if one sits someone down and asks people to 'tell us about your culture'" (Gell 2000:4). It is a taken for granted anthropological maxim that all people *have* culture, for at a basic level culture is everywhere there are people. Yet, as Gell (1998) notes, articulating what constitutes one's culture is much less easy: at least, articulating culture as it is lived as opposed to one's cultural ideals is difficult. However, for Aboriginal people 'culture' has come to be verbally and practically demonstrable; indeed, occasionally culture *must* be demonstrated in various ways and forms in order to be recognised and credited (the requirements of native title as well as cultural tourism are examples of this). The constant 'practice' of articulating 'culture' and culture's forms has seen increasing reflexivity in matters of culture and what this is thought to be. At a more general level, Linnekin has argued that the colonising process, together with a European self-consciousness, has resulted in the increasing externalisation of culture as a symbol (Linnekin 1990:149).

In relation to Aboriginal culture Hamilton (1990:18) argues that whites have appropriated its symbolic forms. She goes on to say that "this is not an appropriation of 'the real'; it is an appropriation of commodified images, which permits the Australian national imaginary to

48 The CDEP is a government initiative which seeks to generate sustainable employment for Aboriginal people. Known colloquially as 'work for the dole', people in Wilcannia work an average of two or three days per week and gain "top ups" to their social security payments. This work includes projects relating to building and town maintenance, art making and a women's sewing group. Austin-Broos (2003:120) describes the CDEP as a "subsidized alternative to the dole that originated in remote communities when elders negotiated with the government for ways to prevent their unemployed young form simply receiving 'sit down money'". During 2004, there were forty two people working for CDEP in Wilcannia.

claim certain critical and valuable aspects of the 'Other' as essentially part of itself, and thereby claim both a mythological and spiritual continuity of identity which is otherwise lacking."

However, according to Hamilton, Aboriginal political, economic and social engagement in contemporary Australian life has made it possible for Aborigines to "intervene in the culturally constructed image process to redefine the terms" (1990:21). Whilst I argue that some Aboriginal people in Wilcannia are able to and do intervene in their own image construction, the dominant images and characteristics of the noble and ignoble savage, the bush black and fringe-dweller as popularly imagined opposites, are not toppled. Thus, although Aboriginal art's new 'high cultural' expression may have been important in refashioning Aboriginality as part of "Australianness" (1990:22), this appears to have reinforced as opposed to reduce the traditional/authentic, urban/town/inauthentic separations – a point that Hamilton herself seems to implicitly recognise. She states:

Aboriginality is on the national agenda as never before. The overseas recognition of the value of Aboriginal art has given the final stamp of approval to this: Aboriginal desert-style paintings (Papunya Tula art style) are now fetching enormous prices...while cultural exchange programmes have 'bush' Aborigines from the far-flung deserts taking planes to Paris to present their art-forms to an admiring audience enchanted with the mystic power of the timeless primitive, now renegotiated as the ultimate in expressive culture (1990:22).

One cannot in theory be savage and civilised, yet it seems one can meet the attributes of the 'noble savage' or 'bush black' and qualify for entry into the 'civilised' canon of western art. Known variously as 'traditional', 'tribal' and 'contemporary', the work of particular Aboriginal artists is selectively admitted into the civilised canon of High art. Despite academic, art critic and art adviser assertions that "contemporary" Aboriginal art stands apart from the trope of the primitive, the characteristics of the noble savage remain implicitly referenced. This is certainly the case for the acrylic paintings [central and western desert] where as Myers tells us "at least part of the appeal...continues to rely on the sense of Aborigines as primitives" (Marcus and Myers 1995:20).

As Hamilton herself notes, it is "bush Aborigines from far flung deserts" who are asked to perform their art (1990:22). Indeed, although the "mystic power of the timeless primitive" may have been "re-negotiated as the ultimate in expressive culture", (Hamilton 1990:22) the expressive *performance* required is precisely that of the 'mystic' and 'timeless' primitive. This is not to deny that forms of (what are imagined to be) 'traditional culture' are not drawn upon by Aboriginal people themselves (Beckett 1988; Gunew and Rizvi 1994; James 1993a, 1997; Myers 2002, 1994). Neither do I deny the agency of the artists who 'perform' culture

at exhibitions and the like; Myers (1994) demonstrates this agency admirably. Nevertheless, this does not negate the *purpose* of Aboriginal people being invited to perform. Gallery invitations for Aboriginal people to perform songs, dances, sand paintings and other aspects of ceremony ‘traditionally’ associated with the designs and forms of the works are not (one would imagine) arranged to accommodate Aboriginal agency (although this is undeniably part of what occurs). The performances are geared to showing displays of certain kinds of Aboriginality and difference.

As Roberta James notes,

the question of ‘authentic’ Aboriginality persists... The stereotypes of ‘contemporary’ and ‘traditional’ Aboriginality, though different and opposed, both operate against the interests of Aboriginal people. Aboriginal people are blamed when the category falls apart, even though greater capacity to manipulate the representation rests elsewhere (1997:62).

Furthermore, in order to be legitimised indigenous peoples have found it almost impossible to communicate in public discourses *without* using the imagery of the noble savage (1997:55).

During my fieldwork, art works from around the western region were being collected for an exhibition titled “What’s going on! Contemporary indigenous art from the Murray Darling Region”. This exhibition sought to provide “vital reference points for contextualising Mildura’s Western [NSW western region] art heritage”⁴⁹ (Mildura Arts Centre 2002). One of the artists I worked with in Broken Hill told me that the curator had selected some of her paintings and rejected others, saying she wanted “only the tribal ones” for the exhibition. I asked her what she thought of this and she said, “it made me feel split”. It is not only art gallery managers, curators, art critics, dealers and the like to who continue to uphold this tribal/traditional line whilst also espousing the contemporary nature of the art work. As Myers notes, anthropology too is “complicit with a production of Aboriginal cultures that continue to stitch culture and traditions into some kind of wearable garb” (Myers 2004:263). In this framework, art, culture and tradition become requisites of one another.

Hamilton claims there is a “third circuit” which, although not displacing the other two, has “challenged and re-ordered their signifiers” (1990:21). This third circuit “attempts to overcome the distinction between ‘bush’ and ‘city’, and neutralize the image of Aborigines as natural and, therefore, non-cultural” (1990:21). It draws “on images of power, of an

49 This exhibition was held at the Mildura Arts Centre in 2002.

intimate, mystic and indissoluble link with the land, and the perpetuity of *Aboriginality as an essential identity irrespective of its location*" (1990:21 my emphasis). The following ethnographic example demonstrates the distance these challenges have yet to travel and the hurdles in their path.

Locating Assumptions: Timeless Mystic or Drunken Bastard

One of the artists that I worked with in Wilcannia spends time as a National Parks and Wildlife Tour Guide at Mutawintji National Park. This is a park with sites rich in Aboriginal stencils, rock paintings and engravings (Image 16 and Image 17). Part of this role requires him to take visitors from around Australia and overseas and explain about the "Aboriginal history" and "Aboriginal culture" of the area. When I was on tour with this man most of the white visitors said things to him like, "I wish we had your culture", "Where can we go to learn about your culture?", "You have such a spiritual culture". They sought his knowledge on "culture", "art", "spirituality", "bush foods" and "the Dreamtime". As a Mutawintji National Park guide he was viewed by the non-Aboriginal visitors as the epitome of the bush black or noble savage – he was a 'real Aborigine'.



Image 16. Rock engraving of a hunter at Mutawintji. Author's photograph reproduced with permission of William Bates, Chairperson Mutawintji Land Council.



Image 17. Stencils at Mutawintji. Author's photograph reproduced with permission of William Bates, Chairperson Mutawintji Land Council.

This same group of white people had talked to me during their lunch break on the tour and asked me about Wilcannia. They said that the white tour operator with whom they were travelling Australia told them when they made their stop in Wilcannia “not to go outside”. They said that this surprised them as the tour operator “is very Aborigine orientated”. The tour operator told them that Wilcannia is “not very safe”, especially on “pay day”. Through the tour guide, the visitors are provided with a particular picture of Aboriginal people in Wilcannia – with all that this entails.

Such second-hand representations are not uncommon. Marcia Langton states that,

For the most part non-Indigenous Australians only come to know Aboriginal Australians second-hand, as it were, in ways that are almost always mediated by the dominant representations, images, signs and discourses about Aboriginality which are produced by and circulate within the hegemonic group or culture (in Nicholls 2000:6).

Certainly, Wilcannia and the Aboriginal people who live there are framed through the tour guide as well as other media. Yet, the irony is that their Aboriginal tour guide was born and has lived in Wilcannia all his life. He is one of the many Aboriginal guides and artists from Wilcannia the tour group would see and meet if they visited the town. This example demonstrates how the noble/ignoble characteristics are extended through the traditional and urban/town differences, and *contextually* applied to persons and situations. It shows the paradox of these tropes: despite ‘real’ situations which, in practice, negate these constructs, that there is no ‘real’ challenge to the ideologies which underpin them. Assumptions and

images regarding the supposed attributes of the 'remote', 'tribal', 'bush black' continue to be played out, particularly as this is connected to spatial proximity and geographical remoteness.

Whether this man is a traditional mystic and tribal Aborigine, a cultural and artistic luminary, a useless drunken black bastard, has or lacks culture, is civilised or uncivilised, depends in part not only on which whites are ascribing the labels, but on context, 'experience' and interpretation of context and experience. Context and location of meeting and the particular and imagined attributes assigned to 'types' of Aborigines all play their part. When in Wilcannia this man is talked about by many whites in terms of his propensity towards heavy drinking and bashing his wife. He is also said by many of the *same* non-Aboriginal people of Wilcannia to be a talented artist – a person who “could be someone”, “make a good living”, “if only he could stay off the grog”, if only he could “keep out of jail”. The art and its production is seen to stand for something of worth: both it and the man are seen to have greater potential – “if only...” These “if only’s”, however, are figured differently in the case of white artists.

Producing Art and Culture

On 15 June 1992, Australian artist Brett Whiteley was found dead in a motel room in Thirroul on the coast of NSW; he had died from a drug overdose. Dickins labels this death as “his [Whiteley’s] inevitable, almost inspired ruin” (2002:7) and others describe it as, “A deliberate course of self destruction [which] seemed the natural corollary for achieving the ultimate freedom in self-expression” (Abstract Art 2005). Although Whiteley’s death is shocking, it is not perceived to be surprising; indeed, it is viewed by some as *natural*, *inevitable* and even *inspired*. Although Whiteley’s death drew various responses including sadness, “mocking, slander and excoriation” (Dickins 2002:8) the point is that there is ‘something’ about not just Whiteley but the ‘artist’ in western society that almost expects and at times sanctions behaviour such as drunkenness and self-abuse. However, this behaviour is not sanctioned, it seems, for black artists. When white artists engage in this behaviour, it is often taken as evidence of a tortured artistic soul. When artists in Wilcannia get drunk or “muck up” this is seen to be negative and uncivilised behaviour which will detract from their art.

In Wilcannia, whites are confronted with ‘the real’ and ‘the proximal’. Aboriginal people are *present* and this *presence* does not tally with the image of the “real”, “traditional” “full-

bloods” who are invoked in the desires of the imagination. What is interesting is that despite the critical discourses that many whites engage in about Wilcannia Aborigines, images of pure, distant, real Aborigines continue to be sustained. The dichotomy between the ‘bush black’ and ‘fringe-dweller’ may indeed be increased by virtue of proximity, making it all the more necessary for ‘imagined’ Aborigines to remain remote.

Art is produced by Aboriginal people in Wilcannia and purchased by whites. There is for whites a general acknowledgement that ‘art is culture’. However, in ways which appear contradictory to Myer’s statement that ‘art’ is a ‘sign’ of Aboriginal culture’s presence, Aboriginal culture in Wilcannia is explicitly denied by whites. This seemingly contradictory state of affairs opens up ‘culture’, specifically ‘Aboriginal culture’, for exploration in new ways. Whites in Wilcannia allow ‘art’ and deny ‘culture’: at least they deny any notion of “real” or “traditional” culture as inhering *in* the lives of Aboriginal *people* of Wilcannia. Yet, they talk of ‘culture’ as being expressed and present in the *art works* produced by the people.

The notion of ‘culture’ as inhering in artifacts is not new. ‘Material culture’ has long been ascribed to pre-contact Aborigines by many Australians. However, unlike pre-contact material culture which is accepted as ‘culture’ by most whites in Australia, the Wilcannia art works are ‘cultural’ works of people living now. Both the archaeological and the contemporary artifacts, however, share something in common. When accepting ‘culture’ in artifacts people do not have to *take on* the person who made the art work as part of it. Culture can be seen to be *present* in the tangible artifact, but can be denied in the person and the group to which the artist is ‘culturally’ affiliated. The art work itself *stands for* culture: it is visible, harmless, acceptable, permissible, symbolic culture. Rowse claims that “Australian multiculturalism of recent years has left us with the innocent illusion that culture can be reduced to artefacts” (Fourmile 1994:74). This allows for a safe commodification of culture where ‘culture’ can inhere in things. In this way both the art works of more ‘remote traditional’ Aboriginal people and the art works of Wilcannia Aborigines share something in common. They can be appreciated apart from contact with Aboriginal people.

The production of an ‘Aboriginal art work’ or art work produced by an Aborigine is considered by some people as a tangible sign of ‘Aboriginal culture’. The art work itself is Aboriginal culture. Yet, my fieldwork demonstrates that depending on context, the Aboriginal artist who creates this work may be seen to be Aboriginal – to have an Aboriginal identity – but to be ‘lacking’ Aboriginal ‘culture’. This can be attributed to constructions of

Aboriginality which link particular attributes and characteristics to particular 'types' of Aboriginality. At times both the work of the artist *and* the artist are accorded 'Aboriginal culture' and 'Aboriginal identity'. Both, however, can be 'removed' in other contexts and at other times. 'Aboriginal art', 'Aboriginal culture' and 'Aboriginality' are linked in ambiguous ways.

An example of this ambiguity occurred at a Community Working Party meeting attended by both blacks and whites. During the meeting, an Aboriginal man (who is an artist) asserted a cultural view which could affect town matters and have economic, political and social consequences for whites as well as blacks. This man was explaining how Aboriginal people felt in relation to a local government proposal. Following the meeting the man's view was denied credibility by some whites because he "has a white father" and therefore is "not a real Aboriginal", "not really Barkindji".⁵⁰ However, these same people draw upon this man's art-work and his wider reputation as a 'cultural' man with 'cultural knowledge' to, for example, advance Wilcannia's touristic reputation.⁵¹ This shifting and 'partial valorisation' can be linked to whites gaining some vicarious positive association with acceptable aspects of what is considered to be recognisably 'real' Aboriginality and 'real' Aboriginal culture'. This is also not to discount the more pragmatic economic benefits that this man's artistic and cultural reputation affords the town.

The according of art or culture to Wilcannia Aboriginal people by whites is complex, shifting, and subject to multiple discourses. Through 'art' and what this is made to mean, whites can *join* an *imagined* Aboriginal 'symbolic community' where connection to 'land', lost nature, 'mysticism' and 'spirituality' is vicariously provided; and where little if any reciprocity is required. Whites can vicariously enter through the art works into this Otherness which can then become part of the self. This is an acceptable part of a mirrored Other. When blacks act negatively according to white mores they are accorded the negative ignoble characteristics. In this instance, the potentiality for self contamination is too close and must be completely Othered to prevent bleed. If blacks act positively according to white mores and in accordance with positive noble savage characteristics they can be both 'Aboriginal' and have 'Aboriginal culture'. This can safely occur through 'art' and 'off the streets' in exhibitions, books and other contingent contexts.

50 This man is recognised by the Aboriginal community as someone of cultural authority and knowledge.

51 Economic considerations such as the town's capacity to gain "black dollars" also relies in part on those in non-Aboriginal bureaucracies asserting 'cultural' need as well as asserting a strong Aboriginal cultural 'presence'.

Although the place where Wilcannia art works have been produced is not physically the place and space of the white desired imaginations in terms of being ‘traditional, “full-blood” and therefore “real” Aboriginal space, nevertheless, the art works of Wilcannia can be argued to provide and embody a ‘sense of place’: they echo a certain rootedness. The Aboriginal people of Wilcannia explicitly call upon a surety of knowing who they are, “we are Barkindji”, and there are both explicit and implicit allusions to knowing one’s home and one’s kin and the land. Some art dealers at the high-end of the fine arts market propose that Aboriginal art is now produced primarily for the market and is “becoming detached from its base in Aboriginal cultural practices” (Myers 2001:199). However, the importance of the art having an ‘Aboriginal story’ – preferably a story from the Dreaming – is not reduced for the purchasers of art in Wilcannia. The purchase of paintings direct from the producers, with an accompanying story and perhaps even a photograph of the artist with the painting, which were originally produced as signs of genuine authenticity by the art market, remain signs of authenticity in Wilcannia.

However, the ways in which these signs of ‘authenticity’ are figured remains complex. Authenticity (or worth) is not in the signed painting for most artists in Wilcannia, indeed, most do not sign their paintings. In the same way, the signature is not seen to be a pre-requisite to purchase for Wilcannia whites; although many want to know the artist’s name and write it on the back of the canvas, the art work signifies the artist’s *Aboriginality* not his or her individual identity.

The importance of art being indexed to place and to people remains an important dimension for the purchasers as well as the producers. Relationships to people, “our country”, animals, fish, “our traditions”, “our dreaming” and to Ngatji (The Rainbow Serpent) comprise much of the content of the Wilcannia art works. The mix of the ‘traditional’ and ‘urban/town’ characteristics do not compete with one another in the art work; there is however a perceived ambiguity for whites between the notion of what the art work appears to *stand for* and *life as lived*.

There is also clearly a certain cache attached to buying art works from Wilcannia because of its known reputation as a “violent” and marginal place. The buyers of ‘art’ are mainly the transient white workforce, those who come to town periodically for business and those who stop for the night at the local motel. Stopping for the night at the motel is in itself often seen to be risky behaviour, something to talk about on the return home. For many of these people

there is variously a sense of 'been there got the T-shirt', 'worked there', 'here is my token', it is both a token of "them" and of "me". The paintings *perform* a certain Aboriginality.

Art for many whites in Wilcannia appears to operate as a *residual*, tangible cultural essence: a physical sign of what (is imagined) 'used to be' in greater measure. In this imagining, 'art' plays itself out in social and racial distinctions which have political substance (Marcus and Myers 1995). In the case of the acrylics of the Central and Western desert, these paintings are seen as tokens which represent the mystery "of what the place/country is prior to or outside its appropriation into the uses of white society. Australians, therefore, can obtain such tokens and display them as representations of some part of themselves on their wall" (Myers 2002:303). Culture of a kind is here accepted in ways which appear *externalised* and *external* to the Aboriginal people. This is contra 'art' being (undeniably) an expression of what is (in the first instance) an internal process. According to Barber art forms are an "important means through which consciousness is articulated and communicated" (Svasek 1997:27). There is, at times, a clear mismatch between what some Aboriginal artists in Wilcannia say they are communicating and articulating and the whites' view that these Aboriginal people have no culture. This disjuncture becomes partially sutured in the white acceptance of the art but not the artist. For whites this can be figured in terms of Sandall's (2001:53) "therapeutic love at a distance".

Complicating and intervening in this imaginary distance is the influence of one-on-one relationships between blacks and whites in Wilcannia. These demonstrably have effects and affects on the perceived presence or absence of Aboriginal 'culture' and 'art', and what these concepts mean and come to mean. It is clear that the views which non-Aboriginal people hold about Aborigines, Aboriginal 'art' and 'culture' are shifting and fluid and relate to contact. The concrete presence of art can create a questioning ambivalence and much ambiguity for people in relation to Aboriginal culture, its perceived constitution, and its presence or absence.

Not only has "white man got no dreaming" (Stanner 1979), many whites feel that Wilcannia Aborigines have lost their Dreaming. Yet, the purchase of art is often premised on whites *seeing* something of the Dreaming in the art. They also locate the Dreaming in country 100 kilometres to the west of Wilcannia at Mutawintji. Somewhat ironically, tour guides from Wilcannia who are denied culture in their town context, when seen at Mutawintji, serve to increase the authenticity of the Dreaming's presence.

'Art' is both present and purchased by whites who come to work in Wilcannia, and who transit through Wilcannia. This appears to challenge the clear conceptual and ideological opposition between remote 'traditional' Aborigines and the urban/town Aborigines as their imagined characteristics pertain to art and culture as synonyms. Yet, even when these constructions appear to be contradicted in practice, and in quite overt ways, there is little challenge to the signifying categories or their concepts as these are applied to *persons*.

In conclusion, the paradox of 'culture' being denied and art being allowed Aboriginal people in Wilcannia does not challenge the myths of the bush black and fringe-dweller characteristics; it shifts *material culture* into a realm at one remove from the people who make it. This is, 'Indigenous culture in disembodied, abstracted, 'pure' artistic form' (Nicholls 2000:5).

Von Sturmer's assertion that "to witness attempts at direct dealings [with Aboriginal people] is almost always to witness something like First Contact" (1995:112), is true of most of the whites who come to work in Wilcannia. Many are confronted, often for the first time, with behaviours that they interpret differently but which most find to be challenging. In the case of those who come to 'help', many of those who complete their stint (and many do not) become disillusioned. There is a disjuncture between concrete reality and their aims and expected outcomes. The presence of 'art' in what are often very challenging social circumstances may act to offer a redemptive concretisation of something of 'value' in Aboriginal culture. The presence of tangible art-works is something whites can more readily recognise, understand and come to grips with.

The following three chapters speak back to the assertion that Aboriginal people in Wilcannia have no 'culture' by focussing on some of the key values and attributes of Aboriginal 'culture' in the community. Through a focus on themes such as work, productivity, identity, success and opportunity these chapters aim to explore what it is to be black in Wilcannia and some of the inter-cultural differences associated with black and white ways of being in the world.

Chapter 2 – Who You Is?

Work consists of whatever a body is obliged to do, and...play consists of whatever a body is not obliged to do ~ Mark Twain.

A history of paid work as 'cultural practice' [emphasis in original] reveals complex inter-relationships between peoples and worlds that neither sharpen nor collapse boundaries between difference but do continually reshape their interconnections according to constraints and opportunities which lie beyond the control or will, and often beyond the ken, of those, black or white, who live out their lives together in local places (MacDonald 2003:6).

This chapter explores the different ways in which Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal forms of social placement are culturally and contextually shaped, played out, interpreted and understood. Ways of knowing relating to values and meanings of work, productivity, and leisure will be some of the optics drawn upon to demonstrate the relational effects and affects of these differing forms as they are multiply expressed and lived out. I endeavour to show how forms of knowledge inferred to be Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal come to be drawn upon (often in self justificatory ways) to define and shore up self and group identity, thereby serving to socially place and locate oneself whilst at the same time socially placing Others and defining their identity. I look closely at the ambiguities, conflicts, constraints and limiting effects that arise between life as lived, life as one may wish it to be lived, and life as it is seen to be lived by Others. Weberian theory in relation to the moral values attached to work, a theme which is a source of much disagreement and judgement between whitefellas and blackfellas, and the forms of knowledge which underpin these values, will be a primary vehicle through which the meanings of 'work', 'productivity' and 'leisure' are read.

In Australian dominant culture, the tendency to conflate a person's social value and worth with their work/occupation/profession and to socially position them accordingly is common. "What do you do?" is often one of the first questions asked in social situations in the way of making small talk (itself arguably a dominant culture predisposition). However, the inferences made from this small talk are not so insignificant. A person is often located, placed, and marked within the social structure by occupation title as well as by the perceived nature of the work undertaken. *What* a person *does* has become increasingly conflated with *who* a person *is*, both for the self and others who operate within a dominant culture Western economy. However, the question "What do you do?" is not part of Aboriginal Wilcannian discourse. People do not ask other Aboriginal people or non-Aboriginal people they meet "What do you do?" Instead they ask, "who you is?" or "who that is?" to someone within

their relational network. I want to explore the tacit and reflexive cultural import of these questions as well as their lived effects for Aboriginal people in Wilcannia.

Occupation and Social Placement

When an Aboriginal person in Wilcannia asks “who you is?” of another Aboriginal person, the response being sought is one which locates a person relationally, for example: “I’m X’s nephew” or “my Mother is A” or “Y is my cousin”. In responding to questions such as this, Aboriginal people in Wilcannia explore kin relationships and social networks across towns and cities where they have affinal and consanguineal as well as more labile relations. This serves to socially and geographically *locate* the person being met, thereby positioning both within these frameworks. This is a relational identity in more than one sense as it seeks not only to identify self in relation to others but to place.⁵² The question “who you is?” performs a function similar to the dominant culture question “what do you do?” in that it operates as a two-way process which serves to locate both participants in the social structure. However, the kind of information fed back and its implications differ in both the Aboriginal and the non-Aboriginal case. The answer to “who you is?” involves the sharing of information that relates or refers to family or social networks in terms of the tenor of relationships, personal and/or familial characteristics and traits as these, in turn, relate to present or past social relationships and events.

Although the question “who you is?” is regularly asked of any new white face in town, this is not something I ever heard a white person ask an Aboriginal person. Whites do not seem to approach blacks to seek out this kind of information. Nor do blacks voluntarily or regularly identify themselves to unfamiliar whites. As this chapter progresses the reasons for this are discussed.

52 Place here refers to a number of towns and cities mostly in NSW, such as Dubbo, Bourke, Dareton, Broken Hill, Lake Cargelico and Murrin-Bridge where Aboriginal people in Wilcannia have family or other networks, where they may have been born, and where they may have also travelled to. This can be aligned with Beckett’s idea of an Aboriginal ‘beat’ (Beckett 1994:131, [1965:9]). People have long since ceased to discuss Country in the terms of a descent of rights relating to ritual. This particular sense of one’s Country which is arguably still held by many groups in the North has been revised for people in Wilcannia. People do however talk about “our country” in reference to where one, one’s parents or earlier ancestors were born and where one may or may not have Traditional Ownership rights. Our country or country is also talked about in the sense of Dreaming sites, ancestral myths and stories, but this does not seem to be the primary connection that is being explored (although this may be tacit) in asking “Who you is?” Although the system of the Dreaming has a quite different connotation for Aboriginal people in Western NSW to pre-contact times, as MacDonald (2004:4) emphasises, “features of its social and spatial organization of life [continue] to inform Aboriginal belief and practice through the twentieth century”. As with the Wiradjuri (with whom MacDonald has worked for over twenty years), Wilcannia Aboriginal peoples “self-making [is] still informed by ontological dimensions of their pre-colonial life” (MacDonald 2004:4).

Although the answers given to “what do you do?” in dominant culture similarly inform a sharing of information which will determine, for example, where you fit within a ‘community’ and the kind of social intercourse that will be entered into, the information being sought and offered in both cases is markedly different. The information being elicited in the Aboriginal case is not related to *what* a person or their family does in terms of a work title, job description or a particular employer. Here my experience with Aboriginal people in Wilcannia reflects that of MacDonald’s (2004:15) work with the Wiradjuri, namely, that their ontology, “to some extent still is – *a relational ontology*” it sees people as defined through *relationships* rather than roles...Not to have kin and country [is] not to have identity. It is *socially* reproductive activities that constitute ‘work’ as valued”.

The information being sought is concerned with establishing an appropriate relational kin framework. Should I have much or anything to do with this person/these people? Are these people friends of my family? What have I heard about this person and the people with whom they are associated? Moreover, as Austin-Broos has pointed out in relation to the Arrente, kin relations are no longer embedded in place as they once were; access to cash, transport and store-bought food have “...led to significant extensions among bilateral kin” (2003: 118-119 & 124). This has led to increasing social and geographic “beats” (Beckett 1965), which are areas defined by kin who will offer hospitality. Schwab (1995:8), in turn, describes the historical creation of more “putative kinship links” whereby people become ‘kin’ by virtue of the provision of forms of care such as food and shelter, thereby increasing and altering ‘kin’ expectations and responsibilities.

This working out of kin or social connections can at times be quite protracted. Invariably, once various connections have been established, and if the working out of connections is positive, someone from within the group will relate a story about one of the connecting kin or social network. This often prompts others to add their remembrance of the person or of some particular event.

An example of making these kinds of connections which also identifies the storytelling matrix as an important part of identifying practice, took place one night in the town golf club where I was drinking with some Aboriginal people. A woman in her mid-twenties came over to our table and said to one of the men, “remember me, Uncle X? You used to nurse me”. Uncle X said “No, what your name?” The woman replied by giving her name and then saying who her mother and father are. These kin connections were then linked to other kin connections and events. Uncle X went on to tell everyone at our table of how when the

woman was a “little girl”, “I used to nurse you on my knee”. The woman was quite large and Uncle X went on to say “I wouldn’t wanna fucken nurse you now”. This produced gales of laughter and the story, building up to the punch line, was re-told again and again to every person who joined the table. At the end of the evening all the people who had sat at our table knew who the woman was (if they did not before), had shared in past events of her life, and the lives of related kin. It is incidents such as these that strengthen, highlight, renew and expand kin and social networks and sociality.

Early in my fieldwork, I was advised by Badger Bates, who was one of my first field contacts and someone who became my main sounding board and friend, to say when asked who I was that “I work with Uncle Badger”. My self-introduction as someone who worked with Uncle Badger seemed to afford a level of automatic acceptance by the majority of people I met, some of whom I came to know quite well; it also worked to distance those who did not care for Badger. However, because of Badger’s high degree of popularity and respect among many Wilcannian Aboriginal people, this introduction saw me taken ‘under the wing’ of particular people and families.

After introducing myself, I was asked questions such as: “is you married?”, “where you come from?”, “how old you is?”, “you got any kids?”, “any photos?” The questions were about me, my family, and my place of birth. The questions were not in the main about my ‘work’ with Uncle Badger, except to occasionally reference that Uncle Badger was who I ‘worked’ with. I had photographs of my two children, and I handed them around. People did not undertake a polite perfunctory scanning of the photographs. Each photograph was commented on. My daughter was “*numpi*” (good looking). Was she married? Would I bring her to Wilcannia? Would she “go with me?” some young fellas asked. My son was said to have the same eyes as me, and I was told I’d better not tell him “we seen photos of him when he was young” or he’d “be shamed”. Where were the photos taken? Did they have real castles in Scotland? Do they wear anything under the kilt? This kind of exchange is an exercise in ‘sociality’ as well as information gathering. I would be located through the information given and this would be processed in relation to, initially, Badger. Thereafter, information sought from me would similarly be filtered through the lens of my ‘alliances’: who I knew in community and who I ‘hung with’. People would continue to gather this information during my time in Wilcannia.

Although in some sense there was an immediate judgment made about me based on my connection to Badger, this was only the beginning of a potential set of relationships which

would develop (or not) through my continuing behaviour as perceived. Although my introduction as working with Uncle Badger meant that my point of entry into certain dialogue was to some degree a less wary one, it was nevertheless one which was not without certain assumptions and proscriptions. Inter-family rivalries which create factions around various political, social and cultural matters meant that I restricted myself from associating closely with certain people. One large family headed by a woman with strong black and white agency links was effectively off limits to me if I wished to gain any level of credibility and acceptance by Badger and his 'followers'. Whilst all ethnographic accounts are by necessity partial, these kinds of proscriptions demonstrate the one-sided nature of the closest insights.

Later in fieldwork other Aboriginal people returning to town or passing through, and who I had not met previously, would ask me who I was. Often, before I could answer, people would respond for me: "she work with Uncle Badger", "she know Uncle Badger". This information was sufficient; it was not information about *what* I was that was being sought, but *who* I was *connected* with that was important. After living in Wilcannia for fifteen months I was never 'the' or 'an' anthropologist, I was always Lorraine or 'Rainy' (my family and friends call me the latter) or, that "*nungu*" (woman) who works with Uncle Badger, or "a friend of X", etc.

When I was a new face in town I used to walk around the streets trying to meet people. I would say "Hi" to groups of people sitting in the park or at the Mobil⁵³ (Image 18) and they would sing out to me and ask "who you is?" Sometimes, before I could get my stock answer of "I work with Uncle Badger" out, someone would ask "Is you a nurse?" "No." "A teacher?" "No." "Is you police?" "No." "Is you with the courts?" "No, I work with Uncle Badger".

To ask a white person "who you is?" and follow this up by asking "is you a nurse?", "teacher?", "police?", or other possible Wilcannia employment option is common. This line of questioning which follows the question of "who you is?" with a form of occupational

53 The site where an old 'Mobil' petrol station and a subsequent arts and craft centre used to be is still referred to as "the Mobil". When I did my fieldwork, this area was a favourite meeting spot, particularly on pay days, when people would sit around and talk about the goings on around town, and where there was much laughter and joking, squabbling, drinking and occasionally fighting. Like Bourke, where Gillian Cowlshaw worked, Aboriginal people in Wilcannia are "...at home in the street, available to their network of kin, participating in a dense community-wide quotidian society" (Cowlshaw 2004a:84). At the time of writing, this site is undergoing a massive clean-up and is being "beautified". The local CDEP is assisting in planting trees and shrubs and creating a seating area for people of the town and to encourage tourists to stop.

enquiry is, as mentioned previously, not one made to new Aboriginal faces in town, but it is fairly standard when addressing a new white face.



Image 18. The Old 'Mobil' site.

The question “who you is?” can be said to have different connotations and expectations of response when directed at either whitefellas or blackfellas. However, it seems to me that the question “who you is?” when asked of a white person may not necessarily have as its *preferred* or even *express* purpose the elicitation of an occupation, but, in the experience of the Aboriginal people of Wilcannia, most non-Aboriginal people respond to this question with a occupational answer. This is to a great extent how the people responding perceive what is in fact being asked. “I’m a teacher at the school” or “I’m a nurse at the hospital” is *who* as well as *what* these white professionals perceive themselves to be. Occupation is often their *purpose* to *being* in Wilcannia (double entendre intended). Occupation is what white people for the most part are *doing with* – *doing for* – Aboriginal people in Wilcannia. This is not to discount the farmers and graziers and their families who live on outlying stations, most of whom have long connections with Wilcannia, or the dwindling number of white people who have lived in Wilcannia for some years. But these people comprise a small percentage of the white minority and are not involved in the majority of jobs which ‘service’ Wilcannia.

Occupation is the main medium through which most whitefellas come into contact with blackfellas. This is a world of whitefellas ostensibly doing things for blackfellas through work. Indeed, blackfella contact with whitefellas ‘at work’ is often blackfellas’ main experience of whitefellas. According to Austin-Broos, blacks and whites “meet ‘only at the point of service delivery’ in a highly bureaucratised welfare economy” (2003:124). These

are primarily work-defined relationships which shape interaction as they also create perception.

Willis considers Western societies' mode of identification with work to result from the fact that "labour power... is the main mode of *active* connection with the world: the way *par excellence* of articulating the innermost self with external reality" (1977:2). As Calagione and Nugent note, "the nexus of economy and class are privileged as the dominant representation of human agency" (in MacDonald 2004:4). The self is expressed through work and working relations as these are understood. As Willis goes on to say, this active connectivity with the world through labour power is "...the dialectic of the self to the self through the concrete world" (1977:2).⁵⁴ For dominant culture, labour in its most common guise of 'work' offers a cogent means through which those in the West come to know themselves and become known to others. Personhood in this model is in part defined through "'badges of ability', achievement, and the symbols of consumption that only success at work can buy" (Crawford 1985:78).

How does work appear to relate to "who you is?" for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people? In the Wilcannian labour context, non-Aboriginal people hold most of the better paid as well as the permanent positions. The majority of these people are not from Wilcannia. The positions they hold are those which dominant culture describes as semi-skilled, skilled or professional, such as school principals, teachers, hospital management and administration, nurses, police officers, and those working as indoor staff⁵⁵ for the Shire in managerial, professional and administrative positions. Therefore, Aboriginal experience of who whitefellas are (that is, job-holders), meets the self perception of the white job holder. In other words, white people are nurses, police, managers and office workers; black people, for the most part, are not – the majority are unemployed. This experience highlights and further ingrains inter-cultural differences which are a source of much ill-feeling as well as misunderstanding between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Wilcannia.

When a white policeman comes to town and his wife is appointed as a Shire clerk, when a bigoted white farmer whose business is not doing so well is appointed as a NPWS Cultural sites supervisor of Aborigines (with a job description requiring "awareness and knowledge of

54 Although Willis is writing of England (specifically Northern England) in the 1970's, where high unemployment was prevalent, I consider his comments resonate today with mainstream Australia, which is also where the majority of whites working in Wilcannia come from.

55 Indoor staff are best described as white collar workers.

Aboriginal culture”), when his wife is appointed as a part-time clerk at the Shire, when a new white Community Development Facilitator appoints his wife as a ‘mentor’ for Aboriginal people paid at consultancy rates, when these things happen Aboriginal people note and remark upon them. Why don’t “our own people” get these jobs? There is little awareness of the training and skills required for certain jobs: the allocation of jobs to whites is not rationalised in these terms, it is seen as preferencing whites, which it undoubtedly sometimes is.

Aboriginal employment (or rather unemployment) is a statistic which needs to be given consideration. This, like the demographic of Wilcannia, is also ambiguous. Depending on who is providing the figures and how these are read between forty-five and ninety percent of Aboriginal people in Wilcannia are unemployed. The 2001 WCWP report stated that forty-five percent of people over the age of sixteen were unemployed. This report also stated that forty-one point three percent of Aboriginal people were under fifteen years of age, that 400 people were on welfare, and that seventy percent of Aboriginal people left school before sixteen (WCWP 2001). However, there are too many variations in the data to provide exact figures. The data on unemployment, like the population data, is circulated across various documents and reports and scavenged from one to the other across time. This builds in distortions which are not checked for accuracy. One feature of employed versus unemployed status for consideration is that those who work for the CDEP are considered employed. Furthermore, the unemployed category does not factor in single mothers on welfare benefits who are not actively seeking work. The point is that Wilcannia is a welfare economy, in this there is no ambiguity.⁵⁶

Aboriginal people who are employed in Wilcannia work largely in Aboriginal-designated positions as Aboriginal teacher’s aides, Aboriginal health workers, police liaison officers, cultural sites officers and trainee sites officers with the NPWS. These positions account for about sixteen jobs. Aboriginal people also currently hold six out of eight jobs on the outdoor staff⁵⁷ for the Shire (CDSC General Manager, September, 2005). There are also two positions administering the CDEP and one position administering the Centrelink Office. There are two full-time positions with the Local Aboriginal Land Council, although one of these (the administration manager) is held by a non-Aboriginal woman. The other position

56 For a detailed movement of Aboriginal people to Wilcannia see the 1958b MA thesis *A Study of Aborigines in the Pastoral West of New South Wales* by Jeremy Beckett, published in 2005b as Oceania Monograph 55.

57 Outdoor staff are those who, as the title suggest, work outdoors in mostly general labouring positions. There are no Aboriginal workers amongst the sixteen ‘indoor staff’ at the Shire.

manages the Aboriginal-owned Weinteriga Station.⁵⁸ During school holidays and busy tourist times there are also a few periodic and casual jobs for tour guides at Mutawintji National Park. There are also a few local Aboriginal people who work in casual positions. For example, whilst I was in Wilcannia the two motels employed a series of Aboriginal women as casual cleaners. The golf club employed two part-time women behind the bar, one woman worked casually at the local food store, and one worked part-time as a life guard/caretaker at the Shire run swimming pool. Two white local builders also periodically employed a few Aboriginal men fairly regularly as general labourers.

Certain jobs are held by an unequal proportion of men or women; for example, there are more women than men in the health sector and more men than women in the Shire positions. However, overall the take up of jobs is pretty evenly spread across gender lines. This lack of gender differentiation is markedly different from the situation in Wilcannia in the 1950s, when Beckett's 1957 survey of occupations for the district of Wilcannia showed forty-four males and four females from the Wilcannia district to be employed⁵⁹ either permanently or temporarily (1958b:111). The total population of Aboriginal people in the Wilcannia district at that time was 210: comprising 103 women and 107 men, with fifty-one women and fifty-eight men over the age of nineteen (Beckett 1958b:81). The available work at that time was in the pastoral industry and was taken up solely by men. Women, on the other hand, were concerned with running the family home. As Beckett (1958b:96) notes, "From early adolescence, women's life centres around the home; after a brief period of comparative irresponsibility, they settle down to having and bringing up large numbers of children and keeping house for whoever lives there".

According to Beckett (1958b:97) children's relationships with their mothers was "more intimate and dependent"; it was the mother who cared for children when they were sick who bought the food and begged and borrowed when they were short, and who spent "relatively little on selfish pleasures". The men were often charged with squandering money on drink and failing to remit money whilst away undertaking pastoral work. Beckett notes that as the principal breadwinners men had "virtual control over the family income" (other than child

58 Weinteriga Station was purchased by the New South Wales Land Council in 1987. A poster commissioned by the Land Council and painted by Karen Donaldson, a non-Aboriginal artist from Wilcannia, and showing Jim (Jimalo) Whyman (now deceased) is overprinted with the now iconic statement, "Always was always will be Aboriginal Land".

59 Beckett (1958b: Table IX) gives a breakdown of these occupations and their uptake.

endowment) (1958b:96). Today, women are still the recipients of child endowment; moreover, they are now recipients of welfare for themselves and their children.

As with mainstream society, women's and men's roles are no longer so strictly delineated. The situation whereby men became permanently unemployed as a result of the pastoral decline, the creation of Aboriginal sector jobs for both genders, and the introduction of welfare payments for both men and women has created a changing social dynamic which bears at least some relation to the way in which "who you is" is figured in Wilcannia. This has seen something of a turning of the tables in terms of access to money between men and women. Because "who you is" is linked to relatedness, which in a more commodified environment is also linked to control of resources, the dimensions of relatedness have the potential to shift. Women's increased ability to respond to social requests for financial assistance and the decisions that they make in this regard can be said to have effects on their relatedness, to "who they is" and to how they are thought of.

Overall, the picture of Aboriginal employment in Wilcannia demonstrates a number of continuities with the picture painted by Beckett for the 1950s, as well as certain changes. The availability of jobs for men and women are not now noticeably different in terms of gender. Although women and men now have more equal access to money through welfare, women with children who are not married (although sometimes co-habiting) have larger welfare incomes. Indeed, in discussing urban Aborigines of central Australia, Collmann (1988:105) claims that not only do women have "more privilege access to welfare resources [and] more secure livelihoods than men", this fact has encouraged the minimisation of women's relationships with men and has created "new types of domestic organization... as people compete for access to the means to support themselves".

Work and Identity

I want to talk about the role that different cultural understandings of employment, or more precisely 'work', have in shaping identity. That is, I wish to explore the different perceptions of what work means and how this relates back to identity, to "who you is" as Aboriginal people in Wilcannia perceive it.

The dominant culture propensity for conflating occupation with identity, being so identified and locating others in society accordingly, is, as mentioned previously, not common amongst Aboriginal people of Wilcannia. It might be argued that this is a consequence of extremely

high unemployment within the Aboriginal population; in other words, if there are few Aboriginal people employed (in what is overall a relatively small pool of available jobs) then identification with an occupation is not possible or is, at best, a limited option.

By looking historically to a time in Wilcannia when unemployment was not the issue it is today and in comparing it with the uptake of contemporary available employment in Wilcannia, a sense of the place accorded work as a form of identity can be more fully expressed.

Prior to the 1960's, many Aboriginal people in Wilcannia were employed within the pastoral industry as shearers, fencers, stockmen and general labourers.⁶⁰ This is a pattern which Macdonald (2004:3) states has been common to Aboriginal people since the end of the nineteenth century. However, from the late 1960's the pastoral industry declined across the far west and indeed the nation (Beckett 1958b). When opportunities in the area decreased, the Department of Main Roads (DMR) based in Wilcannia offered an alternative option within its labouring ranks, until it moved operations to Broken Hill in 1987.

There is evidence from local Aboriginal people aged in their forties and over of some expressive connection between identity and occupations which have been held in the past. Older people said things to me like, "I was a ringer" or "I was a concreter with the DMR" when talking about their past. These kinds of statements were not responses to questions about work, they were an unsolicited part of everyday talk, a great deal of which is concerned with the past. People would walk around town with me pointing out gutters, concrete culverts and tarred roads that they had helped to construct. Many people who used to work in the pastoral industry before these jobs were lost talk about "doing fencing", "mustering", being "a ringer" and "shearin". Those who had worked, for example, as ringers would go on to tell me about the kinds of clothes they used to wear: the "cowboy boot", "real fancy shirts", "the hat".

Brewster says that,

Aboriginal memory preserves the unwritten black history of colonization... This memory proves to us that Aboriginal people were not simply the passive victims or onlookers of

60 Beckett found that there were forty four Aboriginal men and four Aboriginal women employed in the Wilcannia region in 1957. Of these, seventy-seven point two percent of the men were employed in some form of pastoral work with eighteen point one percent of this figure being permanently employed. Of the women, three worked in café/hotel jobs and one worked in the hospital (Beckett 2005b:111).

modernization, but rather the producers and makers of modern Australia through their labour and the knowledge of the country that they shared with white settlers (1996:6).

For these older people who worked (if casually) for much of their lives, a clear association with occupational roles appears to be at least a nominal part of self-identity when relating aspects of their past. People *were* ringers, *were* sheep shearers in terms of verbal identification; some were both at various times because of the nature of pastoral work (availability and seasonality of work being an aspect of this).

I mention this to show that there is not a general reluctance to associate the *title* of a job with aspects of identity per se. Indeed, people speak with pride about their work in the pastoral industry. In discussing the Aboriginal relationship to pastoral work in the 1950s, Beckett writes that,

It is work with which they have a lifetime's experience; they are confident of their ability to do it and, indeed, believe themselves to be peculiarly suited for it. One 13 year old boy expressed, with striking candour, what I believe is a widely held view: 'we're not as brainy as whitefellers, but we're tougher and we get on better in the bush' (1958b:193).

However, more intrinsic than having a job or job title in terms of what is socially valued appears to be relational associations with the activities undertaken and, more importantly, *with whom*, and *where*, and *stories* related to these *events*. The stories that take place at 'work' are primarily kin and social network stories which locate people in relation to other people, their actions, and other places and things, including concrete culverts, bridges and stretches of tar-sealed road. This is the context in which these stories are framed. They are *people* and *place* stories more than achievement or 'success' stories. They involve both a sharing and a re-living of experience which cements and/or reminds the self and others of important aspects of social relations.

Austin-Broos (2003:119) has talked about the changing relationship of Aboriginal people to the meanings of country "as mythically interpreted", and of how "their objectifications of self, or their 'identities,' come not only from engagements with places but also through an engagement with things". In the case of Wilcannia, 'things' such as concrete culverts and the mud bricks made by local Aboriginal people 'cement' a sense of place as they also reinforce relatedness. One man showed me where he and his fellow workers had "hand dug a trench" about one and a half metres deep for water pipes. Part of his telling of the story concentrated on the point that "they wouldn't wanna make us do that now" – "they" being the white bosses. According to this man, the only reason that local Aboriginal workers had been subjected to this arduous form of labour without appropriate machinery was because

they were black. This work related story concerns cultural relatedness as well as speaking to inter-cultural racial aspects in relation to work.

When telling stories such as this people would indicate who was present, who the people were in relation to themselves and significant others, where these people are now, if they have “passed away”, who did what on the job, and some of the laughs and incidents they shared. This form of storytelling, or “yarning” as it is known in Wilcannia, is an intrinsic part of local Aboriginal culture – and many Aboriginal communities, for that matter.⁶¹ For the purposes of this chapter, however, it is important to specify that although the events being discussed occurred at work, this is to a great extent neither here nor there. It is the *who*, *where* and *what* and their relational values to one another which take precedence. As Eades says of the Aboriginal people of southeast Queensland,

Contemporary Aboriginal attitudes to employment need to be understood in the light of the priority on developing, maintaining and strengthening complex and over-lapping social relationships...Few Aboriginal people in southeast Queensland subscribe to a work ethic...work is generally regarded as an economic necessity, rather than part of a life-time plan...Aboriginal families subordinate financial and employment priorities to the important aspects of social relations (1994:99).

MacDonald also asserts that financial considerations are not a priority and “Aboriginal understandings of relatedness often take precedence over working for the sake of work or for the pay packet” (2004:12).

In 1958, Jeremy Beckett asked children in Murrin Bridge, Eubalong and Lake Cargellico in the far west of NSW the question “what job would you like to do when you grow up”? (1958b:Table X). This was a general survey and the numbers of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal respondents is not specified. However, Beckett tells us that “Aboriginal boys from Murrin Bridge had no ambitions outside the pastoral industry, nor did parents have any other ambitions for their children”. Moreover, they regarded pastoral work as ‘best’. These attitudes are in sharp contrast to those of the white children at Eubalong, where the only Aboriginal boy wanted to work on the roads, like his father (Beckett 1958b:193).

Although Wilcannia does not figure in this survey, the situation in terms of available employment was similar. It is therefore not unreasonable to suggest that the preferences of

⁶¹ The “yarn” in Wilcannia can encompass stories of gossip, rumour and innuendo, the relating of actual contemporary and historical events and social happenings including stories of events, and meetings with spiritual and mythical beings including “*gunki*” (ghosts).

Wilcannia boys would be similar to the preferences of the boys surveyed at Murrin Bridge. Aboriginal boys in Beckett's survey were in effect stating a partiality for the jobs undertaken by their male relatives. Children wished to follow in the footsteps of their fathers, doing the 'best' jobs which their fathers and uncles saw themselves as 'best' at. It is worth remembering that children no longer have footsteps to follow in terms of either a pastoral industry or other forms of employment. Moreover, the loss of the pastoral industry has seen the loss of a skill set as well as a partial separation of the ways in terms of a generational passing on of knowledge (MacDonald 2003:17).

However, I contend that even though jobs in the pastoral industry were a source of pride, the extent to which cultural identity proper was dependent upon or related to employment seems limited. Beckett's work in the 1950's and my recent work in Wilcannia suggest that then, as now, employment (or more specifically, regular employment) as a particular way of looking at life is at once peripheral to, irrelevant to, and resistant to the 'business' at hand: that is, the 'business' of being Aboriginal.

Beckett, in writing of the far West in 1958, stated that,

...even when regular jobs are to be found in the locality, many aborigines (sic) – particularly those from Murrin Bridge and Wilcannia – find the regular working week irksome...Aboriginal workers go home for a weekend and fail to return until Tuesday or Wednesday – or not at all! A family illness, the hangover from a drinking spree or some petty distraction has kept them back (1958b:194-195).

This appears to suggest a 'take it or leave it' attitude to employment as well as a prioritisation of other things. Beckett goes on to state that "Men will say '...I don't want to work all the time like some people do'. Leisure is something for which they are ready to forego the money they could otherwise be earning" (1958b:195). The situation that Beckett describes in the 1950s whereby Aboriginal people made little effort to go out and find work and where "some quite literally wait for it to come to them" (2005b:114) is one which resonates in Wilcannia today. This situation contrasts with Castle and Hagan's findings that in relation to the rural industries, "In general, when work was readily available, Aboriginals worked" (cited in MacDonald 2004:3).

Work and Leisure

The ongoing disinterest in finding regular work in Wilcannia today suggests that money and regular employment are not as important as other aspects of life, one aspect of which is interpreted here as 'leisure'. When one is not at work one is considered to be at leisure. Not

only does all activity which does not occur at 'work' become 'leisure' in a dominant culture economy, leisure is something that occurs when one is not working: there is a clearly defined split between the two domains. This is certainly the case for those socialised in dominant culture where work has specific connotations which sit in opposition to leisure – and where work and leisure each has its own set of related social values. Since the Industrial Revolution⁶² work has been allied with production. Work is also the site whereby the Protestant ethic and its key components of “self-control, self discipline, self-denial, and will power...” found expression (Crawford 185:77). Production required that time be structured to an industrial clock (Crawford 1985:90; Thompson 1968) leaving non-working time, or “release” time, to be organized into “leisure and lifestyle” time (Crawford 1985:90). In this way of living, leisure and lifestyle time are seen as a ‘release’ from work time, during which the work ethic may be abandoned.

Both leisure and work time impose their own demands and controls and ask that life and time be split into spheres which affect the workings and movements of the body, as well as the values which inhere within each. One must adopt the work ethic whilst at work, and in leisure abandon this to the release of consumption: both of which oppose one another and entail inherent contradictions. I will talk more of the discipline of the work ethic and its effects and affects as these infiltrate themselves into everyday culturally prejudiced responses and practices and patterns of consumption. However, the point I wish to make for now is that work and leisure as ways of being and the time accorded each are seen, by dominant culture, to have very different values and moral demands attached. Most importantly, this split is not recognised and does not exist for the majority of Aboriginal people in Wilcannia.

In Wilcannia, life and living are viewed more holistically. This is not to say that people in Wilcannia do not engage with a western economy through engagement with the welfare sector or by sometimes working and sometimes consuming; of course they do! However, the mode of engagement in relation to ‘productive work’ can be considered as continuous with all other aspects of life. Many Aboriginal people in Wilcannia have a different subjectivity altogether in relation to work, not harnessed, not self-surveilled, not defined in terms of work

62 Although E.P. Thompson notes that this was hardly a revolution, but the culmination of a much slower process. As Macdonald also points out, “it took centuries of bloodshed and struggle to develop the social relations of production associated with capitalism in Europe” (2004:16). Moreover, there is little consideration given to the speed with which Aboriginal people have been expected to assimilate new ways of working which are not of their making, and which are not of their choosing (cf. MacDonald 2003).

and leisure. Wilcannian subjectivity is connected (if not always in practice, then ideologically) to different terms such as kinship and 'caring and sharing' which have their own economic and moral values, more of which later.⁶³

For those few Aboriginal people currently employed in Wilcannia, many continue to find the regular working week "irksome", whether the regular working week comprises two, three, four or five regular days a week. Cowlshaw cites a Bourke example of CDEP workers who "did the minimum ten hours a week of training or work, had never before had paid work and did not define their lives by work. Indeed, work could be a burdensome interruption to an otherwise busy, though slow-paced, social life" (2004a:104).

Family illness, a hangover from "a big night on the drink", Nana's need to get some shopping, the arrival of family or friends from out of town or an unexpected occurrence of interest, continue to be the cause of much non-attendance at 'work' and meetings. In Wilcannia the white CDEP manager accepted with equanimity that staff would often turn up late to work or not at all and indeed this was a fairly regular occurrence. Several times some of the CDEP workers took off to Dubbo or Broken Hill or the like for days or weeks at a time to visit family, to "look for talent", for "somethin' to do" or for other social occasions.

However, the way that the dominant culture views and interprets this behaviour has not changed. The fact is that hangovers, family illness and the like continue to be seen *altogether* as petty distractions by the dominant culture. For example, a white supervisor complained to me that one of his workers took off when he got a call that his baby grandson was sick. The supervisor said that the baby's mother, grandmother and other family were with him and that it was not as if the infant was "at death's door"; he only "had a sniffle". In this framework, non-attendance at work by virtue of these kinds of reasons is a sign of irresponsibility and laziness. White people, some in a jocular way and some with rancour, offer as a general view that Aboriginal people are "lazy black bastards" who "don't want to work" and who "sit on their black arses all day".

Some older Aboriginal people also criticise what they see to be the "laziness" of younger Aboriginal men and women in particular. One man in his forties who has had a job (availability permitting) for most of his adult life expressed how "we used to go out huntin', walking for miles" and of how "this lot can't even walk into town, they want a fucken lift".

63 See Chapter Three, *Cultural Values: Ambivalences and Ambiguities*.

However, this 'laziness' differs in kind from the 'laziness' as 'irresponsibility' cited by the dominant culture. In the case of whites, the inference is that drinking sprees and family illness are *all* petty distractions from the 'business' of work. For the Aboriginal people critical of laziness, particularly that of the young ones, this is not necessarily a criticism of non-attendance at work by virtue of hangovers and family illness etc., since many of those offering the criticism also do not attend their regular jobs because of similar reasons. It seems that for those Aboriginal people who criticise the 'laziness' of the younger ones, this is not so much a criticism of irregular attendance at work, but a criticism of not wanting to 'work' at all – this difference matters. The difference is one relating to interpretations of 'work' and 'productivity' and by association 'laziness' and 'irresponsibility'.

The fact that older people interpret the lack of hunting amongst the younger generation as an unwillingness to 'work' offers a clue to the different meanings attributed to 'work', and to being a 'productive' and responsible member of society. Hunting was and is considered work. Access to properties leased and owned by white people requires that Aboriginal people request permission to hunt on this land. Some property owners want this request in writing and most require advance notice of when and how many people will be coming onto the property as the gates to properties are locked. There can be little spontaneous hunting; hunting cannot be taken up when the individual may have available time, the energy, the inclination, or the need. Hunting must be planned and is not always guaranteed. Hunting itself is time consuming and can be tiring. If any animals are shot⁶⁴, they need to be skinned, butchered and appropriately shared. Kangaroos and emus do not come glad-wrapped: hunting, although also a social and symbolic activity is nevertheless work. Clearly, however, the apparent 'laziness' of the young must also be considered in terms of intergenerational difference and the loss of pattern and opportunity experienced by the young in relation not only to hunting but to other physical pursuits such as the ability to walk or fish anywhere in a more or less unregulated way.

Work, Productivity and Social Value – Different Interpretations

The reason why *non*-Aboriginal people respond to the question "who you is?" with an occupational answer is not just related to the fact that they monopolise much of the skilled employment in Wilcannia. It is more to do with the dominant culture measure of personal

64 It was my experience that animals are usually hunted with rifles. On one occasion I was with a man who attempted to kill a goanna with a rock but the animal was only slightly stunned and managed to get away.

and social worth, which is laden with markers relating to work which in turn signal status and wealth. According to Anthony Giddens Max Weber's work stressed "...the need to examine economic life within the context of the historical development of a culture as a whole" (in Weber 1976:1). I intend to take a closer contextual look at the different meanings attributed to 'work' and to offer a reinterpretation which could see the majority of the Aboriginal people of Wilcannia as 'hardworking' and 'productive'.

In his introduction to Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* Anthony Giddens argues that the Protestant Reformation notion of the "calling... refers basically to the idea that the highest form of moral obligation of the individual is to fulfil his duty in worldly affairs" (1976:4). This duty was fulfilled through diligence to work. Work, hard work, was the way that the individual fulfilled their moral obligations. The generation of wealth through hard work was in a sense predestined; it was a 'sign' that the individual was "one of the elect" (Giddens in Weber 1976:5).

Whilst recognising the complexity of Weber's argument about the philosophical underpinnings of the Protestant ethic, I am here drawing on Weber in a specific way; that is, I am interested in the continuity of the internalised practices of a more contemporary and generalised work ethos arising out of the Protestant work ethic. I am interested in how this continues to affect work practice and thinking about work. It is not unreasonable to say, echoing Weber, that "...the idea of duty in one's calling prowls about in our lives like the ghost of dead religious beliefs" (Weber 1976:182). For the dominant culture, paid work continues to be a moral obligation and St Paul's dictum that 'He who will not work shall not eat' still resonates (although in less specifically religious terms). Moreover, although rejected by some whites⁶⁵, this is a view of "moral agency [which is] vested in white identity" (Cowlshaw 2004a:100).

More recently the Australian government's approach to those who are unemployed and on welfare (whether this is voluntary or not) is one which emphasises the values of "mutual obligation" and "self-reliance", expecting "reciprocity" in return for assistance (Botsman and Latham 2001). Whether members of dominant culture support welfare or argue that "redistributive policies violate people's rights" (Sandel 1984:4) and that welfare is a form of charity, most tend to abhor the "sponger" or the "dole bludger". Thus, Aboriginal people are

65 The 'counter-culture' of the 1960's – the years of Woodstock, hippies, flower power, acid, dope and free love, when Timothy Leary exhorted people to "tune in, turn on and drop out" – is in part an example of the rejection of the Protestant ethic and its values by many young (and not so young) non-Aboriginal people.

“pejoratively defined by their real or assumed place within, or relationship to, welfare services” (Morris 1997:167). Aboriginal dependency on welfare services “...is asserted to reveal an inherent [and negative] essence of Aboriginality” (Morris 1997:167).

The Protestant ethic as manifest in today’s work ethic is more than an internalised moral ideology that is either met or contested through work practice. It operates as a culturally embraced way of doing, feeling and thinking about things which extend beyond the workplace. “Self-control, self-discipline, self-denial and will-power are concepts that are fundamental to the western system of values” (Crawford 1958:77). The work ethic spawned inculcates not only the mind but the physical body. One is taught to ignore personal social and affective conditions in work. One must work *through* – work *despite* – any affects or effects which are seen to be peripheral to ‘work’ and ‘work time’.

The way in which Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people respond to a death in the family is commonly cited as an example of how work is differently considered inter-culturally. Mainstream workplaces commonly have ‘compassionate leave’ or ‘family responsibility policies’ or agreements whereby upon the death of a family member one is entitled to leave (sometimes on a sliding scale according to the type of relationship held with a deceased member). Depending on the generosity of the workplace, the death of a parent, sibling or child can see the bereaved individual granted varying amounts of compassionate leave (sometimes paid, sometimes not), for the funeral and grieving. When back at work the teary eyed and grieving wife, husband, daughter, etc., is not encouraged to give vent to this grief publicly, but is expected to go somewhere in private, perhaps to sit in the toilet in a closed cubicle, in order to express their feelings of sadness and loss. Work is not the place for this kind of humanity to be demonstrated. At work it is expected that the body will be machine-like, a ‘productive body’, a ‘public body’, a body which manifests itself through the internalization, justification and expression of work values related to the work ethic. Grieving must take place in leisure time, one’s own time. Productive, working bodies are free to express grief at their leisure when they have ‘shut up shop’.

This constraint on venting one’s feelings can be aligned with Foucault’s ‘disciplines of modern society’, where “what was being formed was a policy of coercions that act upon the body, a calculated manipulation of its elements, its gestures, its behaviours” (1979:138). Limitations placed on expressions of grief and the time to grieve are but one manifestation of these controls. Here, according to Crawford, began “an epistemological regime bent on the maximum utilization of bodies by dominant powers” (1985:77). Self control is paramount,

appearing as it does to dominant culture as a mandate of “adaptive necessity” (Crawford 1985:79).

In contrast to the control which work situations expect of grieving relatives, there is much shame for Aboriginal people in Wilcannia who *fail* to publicly show and demonstrate their relationship to and their respect and love for a deceased kin member. Moreover, Aboriginal people read and explain affective states of the body as being of consequence, they signal relationships as they also express them. How one feels in the moment, in relation to the world of people, animals, things, and situations is an explanatory modality. The body corresponds to the world in its totality, not a world divided into work and leisure with neatly prescribed and desired affective states. It is incumbent upon the relatives to show their respect and their relationship to the deceased. This is demonstrated in the first instance by virtue of attendance at the funeral. Spending time talking about, crying about and thinking about the deceased is a social and cultural practice. The relationship to the deceased determines the degree to which this is undertaken.

I have mentioned death and grieving as an example as it is particularly cogent one for demonstrating white and black difference. It is a major bone of contention with white employers who suggest that Aboriginal people are impossible to rely upon as employees, because they have to attend too many funerals (cf. Cowlshaw 1988b:99). White people talk of Aboriginal attendance at funerals as though they are “just a bludge”. Aboriginal people have “too many bloody Aunties and Uncles” (cf. Cowlshaw 1988b:99). Whites make jokes about how many times a particular person’s father or mother has died. That many white people consider going to a funeral to be preferable to going to work tells us something about the white way of thinking about work, death, family *and* Aboriginal people. Racial differences and tensions that sometimes are expressed (apparently superficially) through joking about having too many mothers can harbour deep seated animosity. A jocular thrust can also be thought of as a self-preservation tactic, to dwell too much on what “they get away with”, compared to what “we can get away with” can incite further resentments.

The secularised dominant culture form of work and its relation to capitalism has of course other values and effects. Consumption, according to Baudrillard, is “...another logical step in the development of capitalism. Consumption deepens labour discipline. Consumption forces people into an economizing and controlled labour force if they want to live as proper consumers” (Corrigan 1988:20). Consuming time, leisure time, is “not the site of freedom but the locus of deepened interdependence” (Corrigan 1988:20).

According to Bauman, “The way present day society shapes up its members is dictated first and foremost by the need to play the role of consumer, and the norm our society holds up to its members is that of the ability and willingness to play it” (1973:312). The ability to play the ‘norm’ according to this theory is of course linked to the capacity to earn. Bauman goes on to say that the road to self identity, to a place in society, to life lived in a form recognisable as that of meaningful living, all require daily visits to the market place” (1973:314). By extrapolation then, those with lesser or reduced visits to the market place arising from reduced capacity, will be deemed to have lesser or reduced identities.

Bauman’s consumer society theory understands daily visits to the market place as a requirement for self-identity. This sees the unemployed at a distinct disadvantage in achieving the ‘norm’. Yet, whether Bauman’s consumer society model or Weber’s productivity model is applied, there is a connecting circularity of argument. One must either ‘work’ as that term is determined by dominant culture, and/or meet the criteria for the ‘normal’ consumer to have a degree of identity. Regardless of the model applied, the unemployed and those who do not wish to ‘work’ in this way are in a no-win situation. This does not mean that the unemployed do not express the wish to work or play the role of consumer. However, for many Aboriginal people in Wilcannia the role of consumer and the forms that consumption takes are (in the main) markedly different to those practiced and aspired to in dominant society. As I discuss in the next chapter, meaningful living viz a viz materiality and patterns of consumption are quite differently connoted for many Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.

The conflation of work and identity is evidenced every day. Game shows on television introduce contestants by telling us “here is James, James is an accountant” or “Mary is a policewoman”. People are introduced in terms of occupations. People are also introduced to us in terms of occupations from which they have now retired: “Here is John, John is a retired engineer”. The extent to which people in dominant culture ‘work’ as volunteers speaks to the importance of ‘work’ of a certain kind to who you are, and to social worth. There are of course distinctions made in dominant culture between paid work and unpaid work. As a once full-time mother, I can still recall the glazed expression that would, in social interactions with those in mainstream ‘work’, follow my answer to the question “and what do you do?” A unpaid/paid, unemployed/employed hierarchy of distinction operates. This hierarchy of distinction operates in Wilcannia between whites at an intra-cultural level and between black and whites inter-culturally.

When white people in Wilcannia talk about “lazy black bastards”, this statement is not unconnected to the fact that whites perceive most Aboriginal people to be doing quite well by virtue of unemployment benefits and other perceived government “hand-outs”. They eat, but “they don’t fucken work”. There is a sense of outrage and not a little jealousy. As Morris notes, “It is through work that individuals become independent entities capable of controlling their existence. Furthermore, work is a regular, disciplined and purposeful activity which stands in direct contrast to the undeserving receipt and consequences of receiving ‘big handouts’ considered to be money for ‘doing nothing’” (Morris 1997 161-176).

In a similar vein, Cowlshaw says,

The apoplectic racists I met in the 1980’s commonly alluded to ‘them’, ‘sitting on their fat black arses’ with a venom that attests to personal resentment. One man’s projection of his personal desires was obvious when he described Aborigines who lived on the dole as wealthy because they had few needs and scant obligations (2004a:100).

There is certainly scant consideration and recognition of the fact that welfare in areas such as Wilcannia is an economic necessity borne in part out of the lack of suitable work prospects. It is more often the case that the high degree of welfare dependency is attributed to being a problem with Aborigines (MacDonald 2003:4; Morris 1997).

The personal stresses whites feel in relation to the structural conflicts associated with the leisure work split should not be ignored. Lifestyle advice on how to find a ‘balance’ between the work and leisure spheres (the latter encapsulating the family sphere) abound in books, television shows and through lifestyle ‘coaches’. Advertisements which entreat consumers to “get more weekend in your week” (Crawford 1985:92) speak to the division of time and the tensions felt by many mainstream dominant culture workers. The problem of what to do with the sick child, elderly family member, or a family crisis is a logistical nightmare for many working parents. The moral obligation to put work before family is something that divides not only time, but relationships and the self.

The majority of Aboriginal people in Wilcannia are unemployed and are seen by whites to have no desire to work in the way that the majority of employed whites do. Aboriginal people have a way of living and a perceived attitude to ‘work’ which the majority of whites condemn. The fact that Aboriginal people express that they do not want to work “like those white cunts” is an assault to whitefellas’ way of life and to their moral values. Not only do whitefellas consider that it is “our taxes” paying for the blackfella to “sit on his black arse”,

but welfare payments are seen to support a way of life that encourages what is seen as a lack of self-discipline and social responsibility.⁶⁶ In small towns such as Wilcannia there is a justification of white moral values which finds its power and persuasiveness through discourse which gives force to the “alleged ‘transgressions’ by Aborigines of mainstream social patterns...” (Morris 1997:166).

E. P. Thompson writes of the attitude to ‘work’ during the period of industrialisation in England. He tells the diarised story of a Journeyman cotton spinner who itemised the “grievances felt by working people, [including] the disruption of the traditional family economy; the discipline, monotony, hours and condition of work; loss of leisure and amenities; the reduction of the man to the status of an ‘instrument’” (1968:221-222). Despite practices of disciplinary power whereby the worker has arguably been “turned into his own slave driver” (Fromm 1960; Thompson 1968:393), where people have “become driven to work... by an internal compulsion” (Fromm 1960:80), the discontent of workers in the eighteenth century remains relevant for many whites today.

I am not speaking here of the hostility, resentment and envy of the middle classes for the advantages of the capitalising upper classes, nor I am speaking of the hatred the working classes feel for their exploitation, although these emotions no doubt persist (Fromm 1960:80-81). I am speaking here of a resentment and hostility towards a way of life that demands disciplinary power and which operates in tension with the drives of a consumer society. Weber asserts that the western individual is born into a capitalist economy “which presents itself to him...as an unalterable order of things in which he must live... It forces the individual, in so far as he is involved in the systems of market relationships, to conform to capitalistic rules of action” (1976:54). However, this fact does not remove the discontents which remain below the surface. These are for the most part submerged to the daily drive and the powerlessness to alter one’s conditions, but I contend that these discontents re-surface in certain contexts, one of which is proximity to the racially ascribed situation of so called “lazy black bastards”. Resentment surfaces in response to close proximity with this ‘lazy’ Other and finds expression in targeting the Other. The resentments that one feels towards one’s own trapped way of life are projected onto those who do not seem to have to live this life and, furthermore, do not seem to care.

66 Although not framed in quite the same way, some Aboriginal people (including leader Noel Pearson) also express concern about the detrimental effects of welfare dependency which has killed “the will to work” (Pearson 2000).

In Wilcannia, whites talk about a disparity in work allocation, and about what behaviours are acceptable for blacks but not for whites. Whites also express that they are the ones who have to 'pick up the slack' for their black co-workers in work matters. I recall attending a workshop to hear Isabel Carlos, the director of the Sydney Biennale (an arts festival) in 2003. During this event Isabel quoted the following excerpt from Susan Sontag's *The Volcano Lover* (1993):

Every culture has its southerners – people who work as little as they can, preferring to dance, drink, sing, brawl, kill their unfaithful spouses; who have livelier gestures, more lustrous eyes... unambitious, no, lazy, ignorant, superstitious, inhibited people, never on time, conspicuously poorer (how could it be otherwise say the northerners); who for all their poverty and squalor live enviable lives – envied, that is, by work driven, sensually inhibited, less corruptly governed northerners, clearly superior. We do not shirk our duties or tell lies as a matter of course, we work hard, we are punctual, we keep reliable accounts. But they have more fun than we do. Every country, including southern countries, has its south (Sontag 1993:225-226).

This I feel describes the tension and ambiguity whitefellas feel towards blackfellas of Wilcannia. It is ludicrous to suggest that most Aboriginal people in Wilcannia are constantly having a great time, or that poverty and high rates of violence are desired by either whites or blacks. However, I think the Sontag piece encapsulates a sense of some of the characteristics and behaviours attributed to blackfellas which whitefellas are resentful and jealous of. This kind of resentment, together with no small degree of ambivalence, continues to be expressed today in Wilcannia towards the Other's way of living. These are tensions which are tempered in part and made more ambiguous by some of the more positive and affectionate black/white relationships.

A mutual misunderstanding not only of the nature of 'work' but of 'obligations' sees 'the calling' (particularly as moral obligation) interpreted differently by blacks and whites in Wilcannia. For the dominant culture, "Inactive contemplation is valueless, or even directly reprehensible if it is at the expense of one's daily work" (Weber 1976:158). This view sees the constant meetings and sitting around yarning about various topical issues by Aboriginal people in Wilcannia as valueless inactivity, as Aborigines 'sitting on their fat arses'. Yet an Aboriginal friend who worked for National Parks has a different take on this. He was telling me of how he sees his role as one of "lookin' after country". He said that although he learned to read and write more fluently after working for several years with National Parks, he was reluctant to spend much time in the office environment, in his words, "sittin' around reading and writin' and gettin' nothing done". Getting something done to this man is being

out and about, working is engaging with other Aboriginal people about the issues affecting them.

‘Work’ by white definition has very clear meaning. Work is linked to regular employment and to ‘productivity’ in terms of producing something of economic value as determined by dominant culture. Povinelli reminds that “productivity in the west is tied up with notions of working and particularly fixed notions regarding the nature of work” (1993). It is *not* work by Western definition to “look after country”, “go huntin’ an’ get the old people some wild meat”, to take Nana shopping, to nurse children, look after sick family, or stay with family or friends who have come to visit rather than attend work. For many Wilcannian Aboriginal people, hunting, fishing and spending the day along the riverbank with kin and friends is as, Povinelli states (in the case of the Belyuen mob), “a form of production in the fullest cultural and economic sense of this term, generating a range of sociocultural meanings” (1993:26).

To say that Aboriginal people do not consider regular employment as a social responsibility is to miss the importance and nature of what ‘work’ is. To meet one’s social and moral obligations in Wilcannia one must ‘productively work’ – at attending funerals, taking Auntie shopping, taking Nana to the doctor, staying home to defuse or prevent an argument, staying with mates who need you – being there. This is important ‘social work’ and ‘productive cultural work’. Cowlshaw (2004a:85) quotes Robin Kelly who says that in black American ghetto culture “the pursuit of leisure, pleasure and creative expression is *labor*.” As an Aboriginal friend said to me when I was talking to him about what I saw to be ‘poor’ excuses for non-attendance at work: “Blackfellas are lazy cunts, but they can work when they wanna”. The statement that Aborigines can work hard when they want to suggests that that they are hardworking where the *need* arises (need here is determined by blackfellas rather than whitefellas).

I was talking one day to an Aboriginal woman about my two sisters in Scotland and she was telling me about her two sisters who live in South Australia and Sydney. She went on to say that one of her sisters and her sister’s immediate family visit from South Australia two or three times a year and “stay for two or three weeks”. She said that during this time she does not go to her work as a teacher’s aide at the local school. This woman was highlighting to me the *importance* of family, *not* the unimportance of work.

I asked one young girl of fifteen who had just left school what she was going to do now, and whether there was anything she fancied doing work-wise. She seemed to find the question

puzzling and looked embarrassed, and I felt awkward. She went on to say that her sister was going to have a baby soon, and that she was going to help her sister look after it. I said “that’s nice, but the baby won’t be a baby forever. What will you do then?” It was clear that this question just did not make sense to her. Being in Wilcannia with family and looking after family is what is considered important, this is ‘life’. Life in Wilcannia is not a carefully or closely planned process which encompasses stages or periods of ‘development’ as these pertain to employment in dominant terms.

Adults in the dominant culture often ask children, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” Children respond with answers such as a fireman, a doctor and ballet dancer etc. Class and environment (both economic and familial) will to some extent dictate the aspirations of the child. It is arguably however the Protestant ethic which dictates that this is a standard question of dominant culture. It is also one which desires a ‘positive’ answer: the child who responds to such questions with mumbles of disinterest is not the focus of societal admiration.

I asked quite a few young Aboriginal children and teenagers in Wilcannia, “what do you want to be when you grow up?” and “what do you want to do when you leave school?” Not one child offered a job as an answer. I was met with puzzlement, shrugged shoulders or blank stares. Had I read Beckett’s 1957 fieldwork survey prior to my own fieldwork I would have phrased the question more pointedly, i.e., “what *job* do you want to do when you grow up?” (see Beckett 1958:Table X). This could still be seen as asking the wrong question if what I was after is a sense of how people see their lives. However, the responses I did receive demonstrate most pointedly that life is not considered in terms of becoming something, being something, or doing something specific in relation to a job or a career.

Job and career-related questions can be considered non-questions in a town with high intergenerational unemployment. If the majority of your social relations are not employed regularly or have never been employed, it is likely that employment does not figure prominently among the social possibilities or considerations. However, freedom to engage in ‘life’ as a means of being socially and morally ‘productive’ is, I think, the distinction to be made between this kind of ‘social work’ and work as regular attendance at mainstream employment or career drives.

Aboriginal people, including those few who are employed, nevertheless express the view that increased job availability is the panacea for the “problems” of Wilcannia. They say that if

only they had jobs there would be no violence and drunkenness and a much reduced crime rate. Indeed, many Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal agencies cite jobs as the way forward for Wilcannia. Aboriginal people as well as the non-Aboriginal Manager of the Community Development Employment Project (CDEP), the Wilcannia Community Working Party (CWP) ⁶⁷ and many Aboriginal people in the community talked about one of the last Labor funded programmes (Job Skills) which ran for six months and employed forty-two Aboriginal people in 1998. During this six month period the workers built a shed at TAFE, created a walking trail along the side of the Darling River, built toilets at the cemetery and created a garden around the Mobil site which at that time housed a Community Art Centre. Further, two people undertook a small business course.

Aboriginal people talked of this time and said how great it was, how everyone worked, everyone was happy, of how there was little violence, crime and drunkenness. As I write this in 2005, a similar scheme funded by the Regional CDEP and run by 'Sureway' employment services from Broken Hill has just been completed. This project initially ran for thirteen weeks and was approved for a further thirteen and saw the same Mobil site "revamped". However, the efficacy of these short duration projects, and underlying motivations for creating them, must be questioned – especially given that in both cases gardens were created but with no on-going workers to maintain them.

Although jobs and potential job prospects appear at face value to be available, many factors work against the taking up of these 'opportunities'. For example, people may be offered training and work opportunities under government-funded work programmes for six to eight months, with no prospects of a permanent job when the funding runs out. On one occasion a young boy who worked extremely hard on a traineeship for twelve months was left at the end feeling disillusioned and unwilling to try as hard again, if at all. TAFE courses which seek to 'skill up' people in Wilcannia require a minimum number of enrolments. Although Wilcannia is given special dispensation in this regard, eight can be taken as a minimum requirement. The efficacy of running any course for eight horticulturalists, or eight mechanics, or eight of anything in a town as small as Wilcannia has to be questioned.

67 The CWP draws its membership from the Elders, Aboriginal community, non-Aboriginal community, local businesses, various government and non-government agencies, services and departments, such as Department of Community Services, the police, schools, the hospital and the Central Darling Shire Council. The CWP states its function as providing "leadership for developments in Wilcannia that are designed to ease social dysfunction and achieve social, community and economic developments" (WCWP 2003). The CWP states that it has authority to make decisions on behalf of the Wilcannia community and most government and other agencies liaise through the CWP. However, there is more than a little disagreement with this authority amongst many community members.

Whilst I was in Wilcannia a horticulture course was initiated. Although the minimum number enrolled, only two people attended on the first day, four on the second day which went down to two on the third. I bumped into two of the people enrolled in the course on the first day of class as they were walking down the street and commented that I thought they had enrolled in the course, to which they replied that they had. I asked them “so why are you not there?” They laughed and said, “Oh, we’re going tomorrow”. A few weeks in to the course, there was no-one in attendance. One girl got pregnant and felt that it was too hard to attend; her partner who raved to me about the course for the first week also dropped out, most simply expressed no interest. These people do, however, mention the difficulty of keeping up motivation and momentum when most of their peers are not working. If all of your mates are hanging out at home or around the town, the incentive to attend a course for which no obvious job prospects present themselves mitigates the possibility of attendance.

The point to be made is that the question “who you is?”, although seeking to locate a person or persons socially, has as its basis a set of values which are of a personal nature. That is, this question does not seek to find out “who you is?” in relation to ‘abstract’ factors such as level of education, place of work occupation or income. For Aboriginal people in Wilcannia, you are who you are, not by virtue of what you have ‘become’ in any economic, professional or educational sense. *Who you are*, in a particular sense, is not a *becoming*, it is established at birth. A person does not *become* somebody, a person already has *become*, is *somebody* by virtue of being born into a family. “People enjoy the complete acceptance of belonging by birth and of right” (Keen 1994:13).

The person *is* a Hunter girl or a Bugmy boy, or one of the Bates, Clarks, Johnsons, Kings, Lawsons and Whymans, and in so being is inextricably linked to all other Hunters, Bugmys, Bates, Clarks, Johnsons, Kings, Lawsons and Whymans. Schwab, in talking about Aboriginal people of Adelaide, affirms this belonging when he tells us that a “...sense of self, as well as relation to and identification with other Aborigines... is at root a result of growing up among Aboriginal kin” (1988:79). Although a sense of self and of identification with other Aboriginal people is guaranteed, there is still a great deal of intra-cultural Aboriginal social positioning within families and factions. This has certain ontological connotations and ramifications in relation to the vexed issue of Barkindji identity. One is always related, always accepted, but the political jockeying required of Traditional Owners (TOs), Native Title processes and cultural brokering mean there are tendencies to align

oneself with one of the more powerful families than with one of the minor players who have less in the way of access to resources or political power.

Povinelli, in speaking of the way the various language groups of the 'Belyuen mob' choose to identify themselves to people, says that the "identity a person chooses in a given exchange is based upon the audience, the context of the query, and the motivation of the identification" (Povinelli 1993:23). The Wilcannia Catholic priest who ministered to the community until his retirement in 2003 told me that he had noticed that children being christened no longer seemed to follow the previous pattern of being named after the surname of the mother; they tended to choose the more prestigious surnames. Some people identify and/or associate themselves at different times with both parents' names. Others in the community might prefer to be known by only one of these names. The latter is, according to some Aboriginal people, done purposefully to highlight what is considered to be the pretence of taking on a more prestigious but (to some) incorrect surname. Cowlshaw, drawing on Morris, says that in relation to Aboriginal stories "names are distinctively employed in multivocal, ambiguous and richly nuanced ways" (2004a:219). She goes on to say that in the complex area of personal naming "several names will be claimed, names may be inherited matrilineally, stepparents' names may be taken, and many people have a nickname which is better known and more authentic than their official name"⁶⁸ (2004a:219). Whilst the taking of stepparent, matrilineal and patrilineal names may have been practiced now for some time, it is clear that the choice of surname has gained a more overt political currency.

Who you is is fundamentally relational, however, the changing cultural dynamic which has led to unequal access to social, political and cultural resources and authority has seen who you is become more complex and open to contestation. As the next chapter details, certain patterns of consumption and communication can leave local people open to accusations that they are not 'Aboriginal' enough and there is a great deal of ambivalence and ambiguity connected with what it means to be a black fella in Wilcannia today.

68 Whilst I was in Wilcannia I met people nicknamed Goat, Donkey, Dumbo, Stinky, Cherry-pie, Alley-cat, Smackas and Chuckaway, to name but a few. Some I knew only by their nickname. Alley-cat was a small boy given this name which belonged to his deceased father before him.