

# REPRESENTING 'THE GULF'

## Issues of Place, Race and Identity in a Region of Northern Australia

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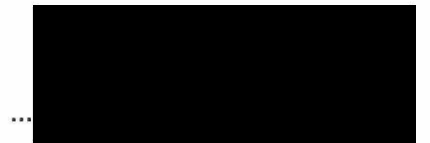
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This thesis represents my own original research. The material in it has not been previously submitted, in whole or in part, for a degree at this or any other University.



Richard J. Martin



## **Abstract**

This thesis examines issues of place, race and identity in the southern Gulf of Carpentaria. Moving beyond typological modes of categorizing 'indigenous' and 'non-indigenous' peoples, it looks to recuperate relational understandings of Aboriginality and Whiteness in Australia. While acknowledging politicised associations of indigeneity with an encapsulated colonial history, I argue against a tendency to conflate indigeneity with an exclusively Aboriginal identity, seeking to account for the myriad ways in which residents of the Gulf understand their own place(s) with respect to each other's presence in the region. At the same time, I analyse the ways in which prevailing modes of representation (including anthropological ones) are involved in the creation of place(s). By adopting a perspective in between the institutionalised disciplines of literary/cultural studies and anthropology I propose alternative ways of thinking about Aboriginality and Whiteness in 'the Gulf'.

In the first section of this thesis, I focus upon historical discourses of exploration and 'discovery', classical ethnography, and early literary and anthropological writing. I discuss the development of representations of Aboriginality and Whiteness, while critiquing the textualism of much discourse analysis performed within post-colonial studies.

In the second section, I bring the analysis up-to-date by looking at post 1970s material, including texts relating to Australian land rights and native title legislation and jurisprudence. This section looks at how creative contemporary writing engages with and critiques historical representations of Aboriginality and Whiteness, while advancing the possibility of a politics more closely attuned to specificity of place and the singularity of 'Aboriginal' and 'non-Aboriginal' identities in the Gulf.

In the final section I develop the unique methodological approach of this thesis through the introduction of ethnographic research completed by the author in the form of interviews and participant observation in the southern Gulf from 2007-2011. This material will be used to demonstrate the great complexity of cultural

identity in the contemporary Gulf, where assertions of connection by Aboriginal people intersect with articulations of an emergent autochthony amongst other Australians with long histories of residence in the region.

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## Acknowledgements

Like every other, work on this thesis was accomplished in the middle of things. My first trip to the southern Gulf was in June 2007, when I travelled with David Trigger to Borroloola and Robinson River to assist in the preparation of a native title claim and to establish a field for my research. Before I even began my research, however, this 'field' had changed. By the time I returned to Borroloola in September 2007 for my first extensive period of fieldwork, the *Little Children are Sacred Report* (Wild & Anderson 2007) had prompted the conservative Howard government to launch what became known as the Northern Territory Intervention. This involved sweeping changes to government policies affecting Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory. However, this thesis is not an ethnographic account of the Intervention.

It was in Borroloola in November of that year (i.e. 2007) that I watched the coverage of the landslide election victory of Kevin Rudd's Labor party, which noted a sizeable swing against the incumbent in the south-east Queensland electorate of Longman, home to the erstwhile Minister for Family and Community Services and Indigenous Affairs Mal Brough. However, despite this swing (which saw Mr. Brough lose his seat) and the ensuing change of government, the Intervention continued: on my next trip to Borroloola after the 2007/2008 wet season, I met many of the bureaucrats and army reservists helping to implement new programmes associated with the Intervention. At first the questions I asked seemed trivial in comparison with these seemingly epochal policy shifts, some of which threatened (and continue to threaten) the long-term viability of many of the communities in this study, particularly at Robinson River. However, as my fieldwork progressed towards completion the broader significance of this study became clearer. Had I spent more time talking to those people directly employed by the Commonwealth in Intervention programmes this thesis would be different; as it presently stands, the issue of the Intervention remains as a mere backdrop, even if a momentous one. The questions of place, race and identity that I outline in Chapter One constitute the foreground of my analysis.

In a world with no shortage of topical writing about everything from the Intervention to the broader policy context of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs in Australia, academic work always seems to arrive too late, too long after the urgent questions of government officials have been answered by others. However, there are lessons to be learned from those prepared to avoid the instant pundits. Political posturing has its place in the theatre of parliament, and perhaps too in writing for policy makers; my project here is more modest and (I hope) more honest. I lay no claim to an authentic Aboriginal or indeed non-Aboriginal Gulf identity from which to speak the truth about the region. All that I write here – am writing – is partial and incomplete, positioned as well in a particular place (Perth, Western Australia) far removed from ‘the Gulf’ that I describe. However, partial and positioned is not to say invalid or untrue. Whether intentional or not, the effect of many of the post-colonial and poststructuralist critiques of the social sciences over the last half-century or so has been a turning away from situated modes of social inquiry towards a concern with the relationship of knowledge and power, often focused on writing and language (Back 2007, pp. 154-155). No doubt much of what once passed for anthropology in Australia went hand-in-hand with the kind of racist administration that has latterly been called ‘colonial’. No doubt there is an inheritance or at least a family resemblance between the work of early or ‘classical’ ethnographers and other researchers who supported now-discredited policies like assimilation and those who have come to succeed them in the modern University. However, resemblance is not a matter of static repetition or reproduction: part of the politics of academic research in Aboriginal Australia and in Australia more generally is a complex, critical engagement with the past, which is not over, indeed not even past (Faulkner 1951). I seek to accomplish this, setting out to be truthful to my conversants in the field, remaining focused upon what I see as a twinned sense of responsibility within identity: both “counting on” and “being accountable for” others, which is in a sense what gives meaning to ‘Aboriginality’ and ‘Whiteness’ herein (Ricoeur 1992, p. 165). The best corrective for conscience, as Dr. Johnson reportedly said, is to imagine the person whom you are discussing reading your work in your presence (cited in Said 2001, p. 35).

And so I would like to acknowledge the enormous generosity and forbearance of those who helped me. I especially thank the Garawa, Ganggalida and Waanyi

people who took me into their lives, as well as all the non-Aboriginal people who assisted me in various ways. In particular, I would like to thank Jack Green, Danny Wollogorang, Gerald Wollogorang, Joe Clarke, John Clarke, Larry Hoosen, Paul Zlotkowski, April Peter, Velma Gilbert, Eva Gilbert, Clarence Walden, Barry Walden, Daisy Smart, Vernon Yanner, Murradoo Yanner, Paul Poole, Amanda Wilkinson, Richie Bee, Francine George, Vivian Butcher, Bev O'Hara, Mellie Butcher, Deborah Butcher, Kelly Martin, Gordon Doomadgee, Andrew Doomadgee, Harry Lansen and Martin Evans.

I could never have completed this project without the unstinting support of my primary supervisors David Trigger and Gareth Griffiths at the University of Western Australia. Their commitment to dialogue between the disciplines of anthropology and literary and cultural studies helped to maintain my faith in this project over a long five years. Debra McDougall at the University of Western Australia also provided valuable feedback. Greg Acciaioli, Katie Glaskin, Richard Davis, James Leach, Mitchell Lowe, Danua Tanu, Cathryne Sanders, Andrew Broertjes and Ryan Cox read and commented on early drafts of chapters. Cameo Dalley at the University of Queensland provided stimulating conversation and a bit of competition towards the end. I am also grateful to Jill Woodman for providing administrative support throughout my candidature, and for Ebony Jones for helping with my maps and with everything else.

This research was made possible by funding received from the Ernest and Evelyn Havill Shacklock Scholarship, the Hackett Scholarship, the Graduate Research School Travel Grant and the Graduate Research School Completion Scholarship. I would also like to acknowledge the assistance provided on various occasions by staff at the Carpentaria Land Council Aboriginal Corporation and the Northern Land Council.

Perhaps more than other writers, academic researchers are prone to intellectual grandstanding; let me confine mine to this preface. Albert Charlie died as I was beginning my research; we worked and travelled together for a few months in 2007. As I was celebrating Christmas in Sydney at the end of that year he suffered a heart attack at Borroloola. Barely into his fifties, he used to describe himself as

an old man. A decade or so earlier someone bashed him with an iron bar and he was never, so they say, quite the same. Too many Aboriginal men and women like him die too soon. If the Intervention achieves anything, let it extend their lives.

As I sit here writing I imagine Albert here beside me. Much of his last months on earth he spent with me. Now, as I write, let me be fair to him. Albert, and all the others, I am in your debt.

## Notes on the Text

References to data from my notebooks are indicated with brackets at the end of sections of quoted or transcribed dialogue with the letters FB [i.e. fieldbook] and the month the data was recorded, e.g. (FB July 2007). I have sought to do this sparingly insofar as much of what I write refers to fieldnotes. Quotations from fieldbooks are presented verbatim with a full reference to the fieldbook from which they are drawn. I have resisted the temptation to standardize my conversants' English, particularly when a recording of the original quotation exists to cross-reference against my notes. Where non-standard English might appear to compromise the intelligibility of words in the text I have utilised square brackets thus [...] to provide a gloss.

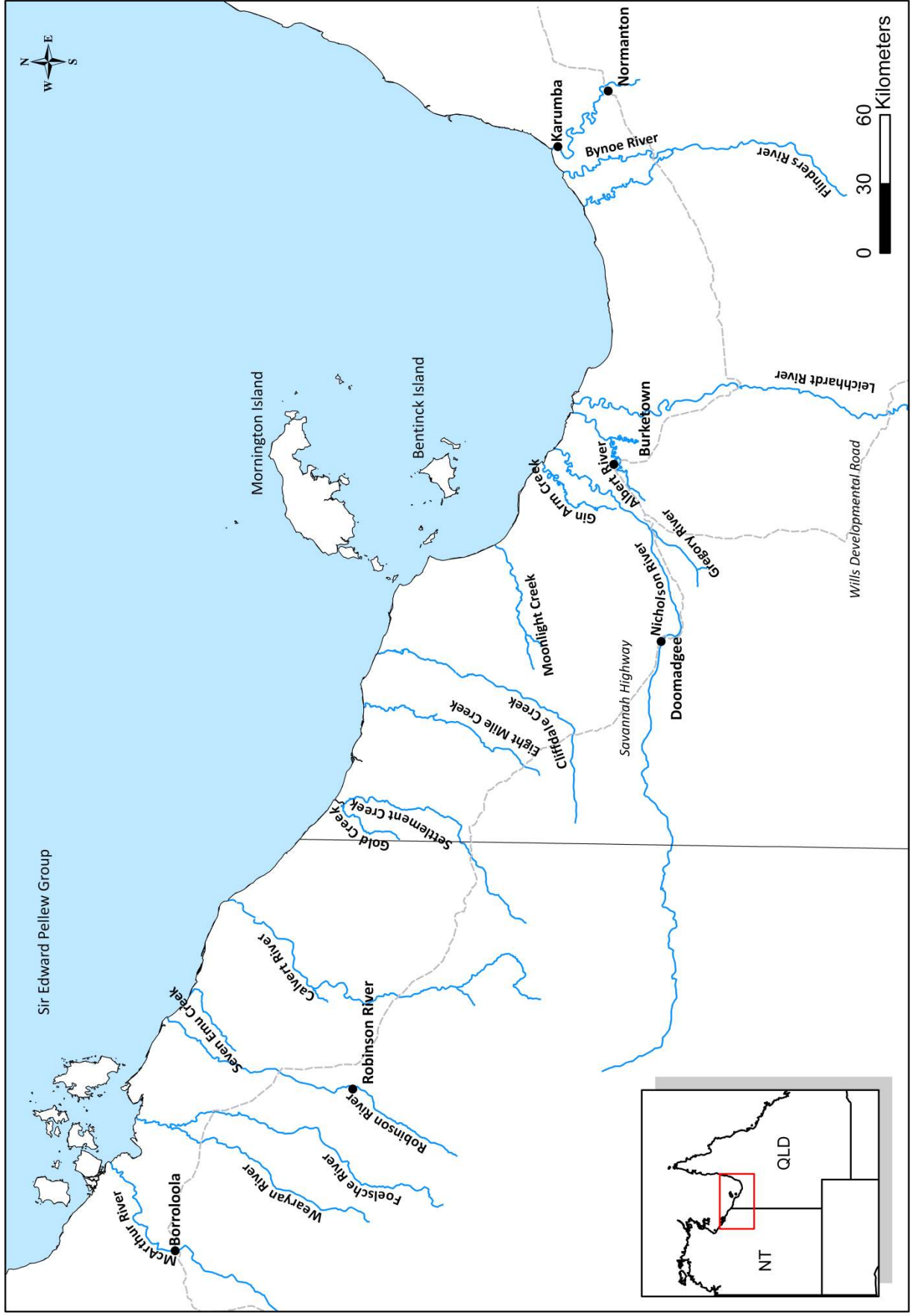
Where possible I have utilised existing orthographies of Aboriginal-language terms. When I have quoted from or cited texts that use different orthographies, such as those of Spencer and Gillen I have let their spellings stand followed by a present-day spelling in square brackets.

The names of people with whom I have worked are withheld in order to protect their privacy. On occasion I have also restricted or otherwise encrypted evidence like place names which might inadvertently compromise individual's privacy. Where I have identified individuals (for example in photographs) permission has been sought and granted.

Aboriginal people are warned that the following document contains images of deceased persons.







Map 1: The Southern Inland Gulf Region, showing major towns and rivers throughout the study area



## CHAPTER ONE

### **Between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal People in ‘the Gulf’**

*1.1 The Journey In; 1.2 The Field; 1.3 Theoretical Issues Involving the Representation of Aboriginality and Whiteness; 1.4 The Methodology of Interdisciplinary Work in Literary/Cultural Studies and Anthropology; 1.5 Outline of Subsequent Sections; 1.6 Conclusion*

This introductory chapter will outline the issues of place, race and identity that this thesis examines. I focus particularly upon debates within the disciplines of literary/cultural studies and anthropology concerning representations of ‘Aboriginality’ and ‘Whiteness’ in Australia. This chapter will frame these debates between the regional and the national, while making reference to academic literature from other post-settler societies. At issue is the way in which the notion of indigeneity impacts upon cultural identity in the southern Gulf and the broader north of Australia. My thesis asks what it means to be indigenous or, for that matter, non-indigenous today? Moving beyond typological modes of categorizing indigenous and non-indigenous peoples, it looks to recuperate relational understandings of Aboriginality and Whiteness in a remote part of northern Australia through the examination of multiple representations and self-representations by those who identify as Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in the Gulf.

I argue against a tendency to conflate indigeneity with an exclusively Aboriginal identity. While acknowledging politicised associations of indigeneity with an encapsulated colonial history, I seek to account for the myriad ways in which residents understanding their own place(s) with respect to each other’s presence.

By focusing on the southern Gulf of Carpentaria, I highlight the subtle but pernicious effects of the common opposition between Aboriginal and other residents as indigenous/non-indigenous, particularly for those of mixed Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal descent.

At the same time, I seek to expand and combine the methodologies of literary/cultural studies and anthropology. I particularly critique the textualism of much discourse analysis. By adopting a perspective in between these institutionalised disciplines I propose alternative ways of writing about place, race, and identity in the southern Gulf of Carpentaria, and indeed within 'the gulf' between Aboriginal people and other Australians more generally. I argue that both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians are involved in *creative* representations that engage with historical discourses like exploration and 'discovery', classical ethnography, early literary and anthropological writing, and land rights and native title in ways that only interdisciplinary research can really examine.

I begin with a brief account of my first experiences in the southern Gulf, in making the journey into 'the field'. I then turn to a discussion of the region in 1.2. In 1.3 I examine some of the theoretical issues that this thesis addresses, before a discussion of my methodology in 1.4. I conclude in 1.5 with a brief outline of this thesis as a whole.

## **1.1 The Journey In**

After a few months of reading for my PhD in Perth, I began my fieldwork in mid-2007 by accompanying a delegation from the Carpentaria Land Council Aboriginal Corporation (CLCAC) on a week's trip from Darwin to Katherine, Borroloola and Robinson River. On that brief trip I was introduced to the politics of research in native title, and met many of the people who would come to play a significant part in my fieldwork. I was engaged by the CLCAC to assist my primary supervisor David Trigger in research for the *Gangalidda* [i.e. Ganggalida] and *Garawa People 2* claim QC053. A few months later, having finalised my preparation, I returned to do fieldwork on my own, consolidating these relationships and beginning a series of new ones, organising interviews with station lessees around the Gulf that I

would continue throughout 2008, 2009, 2010, and 2011, interspersed with bouts of more informal participant observation in a variety of contexts around the Gulf. While largely based at Borroola, Robinson River, Doomadgee, Burketown and Normanton (see Map 1), I also undertook field trips to destinations outside the Gulf including Mount Isa and Dajarra, Mareeba on the Atherton Tablelands, Warwick on the Southern Downs, and Brisbane, Sydney and Canberra. During my fieldwork, I made a total of 12 trips to the Gulf (two in 2007, one in 2008, five in 2009, three in 2010, and one in 2011), which varied in length from three months to as little as one week. If my fieldwork suffered from the generally short length of each trip, it gained from the passage of time between them; by the end of 2011 I had completed almost 11 months of fieldwork in the Gulf country, stretched out over almost five years.

Within a month or two in 'the field', the initial excitement and stress of my arrival gradually abated, as I became more comfortable with the routine, driving through some of the most sparsely populated country in Australia on my way to interviews and meetings of all kinds, learning landmarks and distances, as well as potential hazards. During my first month of fieldwork in October 2007, I travelled some three thousand kilometres around the Gulf, and traversed the so-called 'Savannah Highway' between Burketown and Borrooloola six times. On one of those occasions I only narrowly avoided being stranded on the road for who-knows-how-long with only a box full of tinned meat and fish (and no can opener) when I nearly smashed into a cow at the bottom of a 'Dip' in the road. Yet apart from that brief drama, my experience was at first somewhat monotonous; the landscape on either side of the so-called 'Savannah Highway' dominated by rocky hills with low open woodland full of Gidgee or 'Stinking Gidgee' on account of its distinctive smell (*Acacia cambagei*) and Dwarf Paperbark (*Melaleuca citrolens*), interspersed with River Red Gum (*Eucalyptus camaldulensis*) areas along the Nicholson, Calvert, Robinson, Foelsche, Wearyan, and McArthur rivers between Burketown and Borrooloola where I largely concentrated fieldwork at first. Apart from the rivers and creeks and springs, landmarks were few and far apart along this road, and characteristically marked only by facile signs like the aforementioned 'Dip', which an unknown wit had graffitied (see Photograph 1). Apart from the ever-present livestock (mostly breeds of Brahman crossed with Shorthorn cattle), the most

commonly sighted animals were crows (*Corvus orru*) and grey falcons (*Falco hypoleucos*) clustered around road kill. Within a month I had damaged seven tyres.



*Photograph 1: Sarahs Dip, sign on the Savannah Highway near Borroloola in the Northern Territory. Photograph by author.*

Having learnt to slow down after my near miss with the cow, I began travelling invariably with an Aboriginal guide, who warned me of upcoming hazards like that precipitous 'Dip'. Travelling with a guide my attention to the landscape also gradually changed. On a fieldtrip to survey a remote site in the Northern Territory/Queensland border country for the Ganggalida and Garawa People 2 Claim with a large group of people from across the region I had my first taste of "bushfood" from what one senior person called "our supermarket" (FB October 2007). While I had purchased four boxes of tinned meat and fish and bread and vegetables for two days and nights of survey-work, by the time we reached the campsite on our first night it was mostly eaten. While I went a little hungry that night, the next afternoon someone produced a rifle and tracked a kangaroo, and we all supped well. Experiences like these changed the way I thought of the Gulf.

Travelling with Aboriginal people, I learnt to keep a look out for game, particularly bush turkeys (*Ardeotis australis*) as well as a type of goanna called a Lace Monitor (*Varanus varius*), which always provoked a lively chase. As I heard about the *kujika* or Dreamings embedded in the landscape, my earlier reliance upon facile signs like 'Sarahs Dip' also gave way to a different experience of the Gulf, which was slowly suggestively attuned to Aboriginal beliefs.

As I have already commented, my initial fieldwork experiences were oriented towards providing assistance in research for a native title claim. Throughout my fieldwork, I also frequently assisted Ganggalida and Garawa people in cultural heritage surveys funded by mining companies. On the first of these cultural heritage surveys a senior Garawa man informally adopted me into what he called "the skinship system" (FB October 2007). We were sitting around a campfire at a rock art site near the Northern Territory/Queensland border discussing the next day's work. There were eight survey members assembled, all senior Ganggalida and Garawa men from Borroloola, Robinson River, Doomadgee and Burketown. The atmosphere was relaxed and even jovial as the conversation opened up about all sorts of things besides mining. I was surprised – even a little taken aback – by the solicitude of my companions, who made sure I could understand everything they were seeking to explain. It was a felicitous introduction. I had reproduced a diagram in my notebook from anthropological resources purporting to describe the semimoiety/subsection system, but as my questions that night turned the conversation towards the affiliation of those present I came to see 'skins' or 'skinship' somewhat differently to my diagram. I was questioned: "You got any skin name?" – "No", I said, "I don't know" – "Nothing, hey? We gotta give you a name". But then the conversation turned to other things. I was still a little unclear as to what it meant to have a name. Was it something I could choose? The next morning as we packed up the camp the senior Garawa man who had dominated the previous evening's discussion approached me. There was something roundabout in his demeanour that I interpreted as shyness, but he came straight to the point. "You're Yagamari", he said, and wandered off (FB October 2007).

For many Aboriginal people in the Gulf, the semimoiety/subsection system plays a role in the catenation of the world, linking people and country together in

connected series or succession(s) codified by understandings of the ancestral past within Aboriginal 'business' or law. The system contains rules designating correct ('straight') marriage relationships for those who 'follow the law' (Trigger 1992, p. 127n). Throughout Garawa country and many other parts of the southern Gulf, the landscape is divided according to four semimoiety categories, the 'estates' of which are distributed non-contiguously as Wuyaliya, Wudaliya, Rhumburriya and Mambaliya country. These semimoieties are names for the four different lines of descent that connect people to places (through the father's father, the father's mother's brother, the mother's father and mother's mother's brother). As I learnt, each of these four semimoiety groups is further divided into two subsections, providing a total of eight subsection names for men and eight for women which are used in addition to semimoiety names and other forms of classification in assigning status to people (see Table 1). I had read accounts of the skin system prior to beginning fieldwork and had a theoretical understanding of how it worked (Sharp 1935; Sharp 1939; Reay 1962; Kirton & Timothy 1977; Trigger 1982). Upon being adopted into the system, this understanding deepened and changed.

| <b>Semi-Moieties</b> | <b>Subsection Couples</b>                          |
|----------------------|--|
| Wuyaliya             | Burrurangi (Nurulama)<br>Gamarangi (Nimarama)      |
| Wudaliya             | Gangala (Nangalama)<br>Yagamari (Jaminyanyi)       |
| Mambaliya            | Bulanyi (Nulaynma)<br>Balyarinyi (Nulyarima)       |
| Rhumburriya          | Ngarigbalangi (Niwunama)<br>Bangarinyi (Nungarima) |

*Table 1: The Four Semi-Moieties with corresponding subsection couples in Garawa. Female subsection names are shown in brackets. Adapted from Trigger (1982, p. 9).*

In being named Yagamari (within the Wudaliya semimoeity) I became a nephew (sister's-son) within this system to the senior Garawa man who described me as such (a Bulanyi man from the Mambaliya semimoiety), who thereby adopted



certain responsibilities towards me. Bulanyi is also the ascribed skin of my primary academic supervisor David Trigger, whose professional relationship towards me was glossed in Aboriginal terms as sister's son. As other researchers have similarly remarked (Baker 1999, p. 29; Kearney 2009, p. 148), it was only then that I became a socially meaningful person, at least in the view of many older Aboriginal people. As Yagamari I became a brother to my first guide (also Yagamari), who delighted in introducing me as such to members of the same subsection and other relatives, particularly women of the Nungarima subsection, for whom I had become a favourable potential marriage partner. In some respects, as Austin-Broos argues (2009, p. 5), this involved an "ontological shift" from understanding myself as an individual engaged in a professional activity in the Gulf towards a reckoning of my identity in relation to others, and particularly Aboriginal others. At first, however, this was a shift in register rather than substance. While I learnt to engage with Aboriginal people as putative relatives, I was also expected to work as an anthropologist. More than my fictive kinship relation, this professional status seemed to enlist the support of elderly Aboriginal people in the laborious effort of helping me to learn in order that I may (in the words of my informants) "take over" land and native title business from more established senior anthropologists in the future (FB November 2007). Gradually, however, I was drawn into a different understanding of myself. In being identified as Yagamari by this elderly Garawa man I became associated with particular totems or Dreamings (known in Garawa as *ijan*) of the Wudaliya semimoiety, via a particular quality known in English as 'skin' (*nyinyi* in Garawa) and located in a person's exudate (i.e. smell, sweat, hair, etc). Over time I came to understand this system, learning what was expected of me and what was not. Sociality then began to flow more easily between Aboriginal people and myself, even as some of my early non-Aboriginal acquaintances began to look at me askance, for not "holding up the line" with Aboriginal people (FB July 2008)<sup>1</sup>. While Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal ways of being are commonly counterpoised as mutually incommensurable and even contradictory (as I will discuss), my attempts to keep my own alternative selves apart was never entirely successful in the field. Over

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<sup>1</sup> This comment might easily be misinterpreted as suggesting a kind of colour line. I understood my informants on this occasion to be referring to behavioural standards, just as one might warn a recalcitrant child to 'toe the line'.

time I learnt to operate in between multiple selves, utilising my status as both a professional and a putative relative on several instances in the field.

When I returned to the Gulf country after the 2007-2008 Wet Season I felt considerably more experienced, even comfortable, travelling around. While my first guide had passed away (see Acknowledgements), I began to travel with a middle-aged Aboriginal informant, learning a new set of relationships. On trips across the Gulf, we were frequently accompanied by older (and sometimes much younger) Aboriginal people seeking rides between Borroloola and Robinson River, Robinson River and Doomadgee, Doomadgee and Burketown, and vice versa. As well as these rides, I began to do favours for regular acquaintances, running errands, reading letters and filling in forms, being gradually drawn into relationships of mutual obligation. By this time, I was expected to remember the names of a whole series of putative kin relations. Through painstaking practice, I gradually became more comfortable in the field.

On my second last trip I was taken aback to be described as fluent in Garawa by a man I described as a son – “he speaks proper Garawa” (FB August 2010) – despite my almost total lack of competence in the language. I relished this designation, which seemed to signify my acceptance within this community. I have entitled this section “the journey in” to highlight the geography of distance and difference that I traversed in travelling to the Gulf. Anthropological publications often begin with an account of a journey such as mine, as the fieldworker departs home for “an expedition all on my own” (as the pioneering anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski puts it in his diary, 1989, p. 3). As Hannertz argues, such accounts reflect a rather romantic view of the field:

Anthropologists ... may be proud to announce that they have been adopted into families and kin groups – not only because it suggests something about their skills as fieldworkers, but also because it carries a moral value. They have surrendered to the field, and have been in a way absorbed by it (2007, p. 364).

From Malinowski (1989) to Levi-Strauss (1992), anthropologists have commented on the ups-and-downs of fieldwork, of long days spent waiting for things to happen followed by intensive bouts of activity, excitement, confusion, anxiety, occasional fellowship and confrontation, followed by more long days spent waiting. “I sat withdrawn, not thinking much, but without homesickness; felt a dull pleasure in soullessly letting myself dissolve in the landscape” (Malinowski 1989, pp. 72-73). Like these anthropologists, I felt intensely welcomed on some occasions and uncomfortably out of place on others. As I moved in and out of the Gulf, moments of fieldwork engagement clarified the nature of my own place – of place itself – not as the backdrop of this experience, but as part of it. I describe my journey into the field here to delineate the experiential nature of place.

At the same time, my tendency to move back-and-forth between the Gulf and my home in Perth has led me to problematise the concepts of arrival and departure that the idea of a journey conveys, seeking to resist methodological romanticism and focus instead upon the dynamics of movement that delineated my field. As James Clifford argues (1997, p. 57), romantic accounts of the anthropologist’s journey help to define the field as representable, translating ongoing experiences and entangled relationships into a topic held at some distance from the researcher’s real life. This tends to naturalise the field “as an other place” by ignoring “[t]he socially established routes constitutive of field relations” (emphasis removed, Clifford 1997, p. 68). Throughout his essay, Clifford toys with the homophones roots and routes to trouble the localism of many common assumptions about culture with his representation of a heterogeneous modernity. As Clifford argues, “practices of displacement ... emerge as constitutive of cultural meanings” (emphasis removed, Clifford 1997, p. 3). My experiences in the Gulf were no different. As I continue to narrate my journey in, I will therefore identify the various routes that I followed through many of the towns of the southern Gulf, moving west with the sun along the Savannah Highway from Normanton. I will identify in bold font sites that I refer to in detail in this thesis, using the second person pronoun to position the reader as a fellow traveller in the field (see Maps 3 and 4). Throughout this narrative I seek to emphasise the forms of interconnection and contact that fieldwork as travel involves, while estranging the reader from the first-person narrative with which I began my journey in.

## 1.2 The Field

By some reckonings, **Normanton** is the largest town in the Gulf, with 1,100 people, including some 661 who identified as Aborigines in the 2006 census (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2007a). Arriving from the air, visitors are treated to spectacular views of the Bynoe, Flinders and Norman rivers (See Photograph 2). Visually Normanton is one of the most impressive towns in the Gulf, with wide streets lined with heritage-listed buildings from the early 1880s. The town was established as an important centre for the beef industry, drawing in Kutharn, Kukatj and Kurtjar speaking Aboriginal people from neighbouring cattle stations (or properties), as well as members of other Aboriginal groups.



*Photograph 2: The Bynoe River near Normanton, showing its meandering course towards the Gulf of Carpentaria. Photograph by author.*

Leaving Normanton, you cross an Aboriginal cultural boundary that shaped social organisation and male initiation rites as well as language within the classical system around the **Leichhardt River** (Tindale 1974, p. 122). Moving on, you pass Floraville Station, where the resident pastoral lessees have lived since the 1970s,

having migrated from the Northern Territory side of the Gulf. Near Floraville is Brinawa Station, which the resident lessees have also owned for decades. From Floraville, the road is sealed to **Burketown**, with a population of approximately 173 people, including 53 who identified as Aboriginal people in 2006 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2007b). Burketown is the Gulf's oldest settlement. Ganggalida people subsumed country associated with Min.ginda people around the Burketown area after Min.ginda people largely died out in the 1860s and 70s as a result of the demographic catastrophe of colonisation (Trigger 1992, p. 110). Despite its bloody history, the town is largely known now as a tourist destination. Every year Burketown hosts an annual influx of tourists for the 'World Barramundi Fishing Championships' in April, with \$7500 in prize money up-for-grabs. In previous years, tourists also stopped to see the landmark 'Landsborough Tree' marked by the explorer William Landsborough, who sought the whereabouts of the missing Burke and Wills in 1861-62. In 2002, the tree was destroyed in an act of arson that polarised the town along racial lines, as I will discuss (see Chapter Two).

Leaving Burketown, travelling west, the road passes Tirranna Roadhouse, a truck stop beside the Nicholson River that sells diesel fuel and country music discs and piping-hot meals from a food warmer. The proprietor is an Aboriginal woman of mixed descent from nearby **Doomadgee** who manages it with her sons. With a population of 1052 (with approximately 979 Aboriginal people), Doomadgee is two hours' drive further west along the Nicholson River (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2007c). The Christian Brethren Church established a Mission at Doomadgee in 1936, after a cyclone destroyed the original Old Doomadgee site at the coast. In 1987, a deed of grant in trust was given to the Doomadgee community under the *Community Services (Aborigines) Act 1984*. Doomadgee is currently managed under the *Local Government (Community Government Areas) Act 2004* as part of the Shire of Burke. The town contains a diverse population of Aboriginal groups, but is mostly divided between Ganggalida people oriented towards estates around the coast and Waanyi people from the area around the historical station of Lawn Hill. Senior people like April Peter (see Photograph 3) help to maintain the peace.



*Photograph 3: April Peter pictured outside her home in Doomadgee. Photograph by author, November 2007.*

Leaving Doomadgee, the road passes Eight Mile and Nine Mile outstations, where a number of Aboriginal people have moved to escape the turmoil and violence of life in town. If you keep driving towards the Northern Territory border, the road passes Hells Gate Roadhouse on Cliffdale Creek Station and you enter the country around the Northern Territory/Queensland border. There are many different stories about Hells Gate. The present-day proprietors have held the lease since the 1970s, exploiting the advertising potential of its historical name by painting a series of lurid red signs with images of the Christian devil Satan. The actual Hells Gate refers to a place on the road where two large granite boulders form a natural landmark on either side of the road. There are many local stories about the place: it might be a site of a massacre of Aborigines, or a massacre by Aborigines of non-Aboriginal people. Sometimes the stories coalesce so Aboriginal people are sheltering behind these rocks waiting to waylay travellers. According to the historian Tony Roberts (2005, pp. 230-262), the border country was notorious for frontier violence. At Westmoreland and Wollgorang Stations – on either side of

the Queensland/Northern Territory border – several documented incidents took place. The old Westmoreland homestead (built circa 1882) is still standing beside the present lessees new home (The State of Queensland 2009). It is made out of Ironwood timber and ant-bed walls with the tiniest window slits built into the sides. The old Wollogorang homestead (which burnt down in the 1970s) was similarly fortified: an early owner named Robert ‘Bob’ Shadforth used to while away the evenings on his verandah with a pipe, protected from spears by a dense wire fence designed to deflect their flight (Anning 1953-54). In 1898, before he built this fence, Shadforth was almost killed by an Aboriginal spear (Trigger 1992, pp. 21-22). As such frontier violence gradually abated, both Westmoreland and Wollogorang stations developed large camps of mostly Garawa Aboriginal people, as did Calvert Hills station further west. Adjacent to Calvert Hills, the Garawa Aboriginal Land Trust at **Robinson River** has just 9 non-Aboriginal residents out of a total population of (approximately) 280 mostly Garawa Aboriginal people, many of whom grew up in the camps at Westmoreland, Wollogorang, and Calvert Hills before migrating to Robinson River around the time of the Garawa/Mugularrangu (Robinson River) Land Claim in 1990. As a result of that claim, Garawa people hold 5 196 km<sup>2</sup> in trust. The bulk of the community lives in a hamlet on Robinson River, with seven smaller ‘outstations’ of one or two houses located at sites around the trust (see Photograph 4). As well as Robinson River, Garawa Aboriginal people own other stations at Seven Emu, Greenbank, Manangoora and Spring Creek stations. However, unlike Robinson River, all four leases are owned by families of mixed Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal descent who inherited their properties from non-Aboriginal lessees who married into the Garawa population.



*Photograph 4: Kelly Martin collecting fruit at a registered sacred site adjacent to an abandoned outstation on the Garawa Aboriginal Land Trust at Robinson River. Photograph by author, November 2007.*

If you leave Normanton early enough you can drive to the largest town in the region by sundown: **Borrooloola**. The commercial hub of the Gulf country, Borrooloola is also one of its oldest towns, dating from the mid-1880s (Roberts



2005, p. 69). Subject to the Northern Territory's first Aboriginal land claim in 1978, Borroloola's present population is comprised of approximately 715 Aboriginal people, out of a total population of 903 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2007d). It is located on the McArthur River, about 50 km upstream from the Gulf of Carpentaria. Besides non-Aboriginal people, Borroloola contains an assortment of Aboriginal groups, including many Yanyuwa people, as well as Marra, Garawa, Gudanji and Binbingka people, whose estates surround the town and take in numerous other sites like King Ash Bay Caravan Park, as well as Bing Bong, McArthur River, Lorella Springs, Mallapunyah, and Kiana stations.



*Photograph 5: Borroloola residents preparing to raise the Australian, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags at a National Aboriginals and Islanders Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC) celebration in Borroloola in June 2008. In the background an Aboriginal boy in an American popular music-themed singlet looks away. Photograph by author.*

Abandoning the rather awkward second-person pronoun now, I am led to reflect upon how it is possible to convey the to and fro of fieldwork without merely producing a superficial travelogue? How to do justice to describing such a vast area as the Gulf country? Much anthropology rests on the tautology that a field site is what it is because that is the way it is. While anthropologists now recognize that the boundaries of field-sites are produced in part by the ethnographers themselves (Gupta & Ferguson 1997), relatively-bounded anthropological research sites continue to be produced by researchers even as the discipline formally disavows the study of cultural wholes in favour of multi-sited fieldwork, conceptual movement, emergent “assemblages” of like-minded individuals and so on (Rabinow et al. 2008, pp. 73-92). To what extent is this appropriate? What is the field?

### **1.3 Theoretical Issues Involved in the Analysis of Aboriginality and Whiteness in the Gulf**

For the purposes of this thesis, the Gulf is defined with reference to specific population centres and the networks operating between them rather than according to a geographical entity mapped isomorphically upon a single community or group of communities or cultures within the region. There is no ‘culture’ centred upon some arbitrarily circumscribed place called ‘the Gulf’. Of course this begs the question as to exactly what I mean by a region, and the southern Gulf region in particular, given the lack of any obvious geographical or geopolitical boundary beyond a vague sense of a common rainfall catchment area – an ecological sense of the Gulf which encompasses a staggering 647,000 km<sup>2</sup> in a recent Commonwealth Science and Industrial Research Organisation report (CSIRO 2009). However, beyond this ecological or eco-nationalist sense of the Gulf is a sense of shared identity in the smaller southern or southern-inland Gulf region, which I refer to throughout this thesis as ‘the Gulf country’ or simply ‘the Gulf’. My specifically regional focus upon the southern Gulf may be seen to address what has been described as “patchy” and “often poorly documented” anthropological research on regional “Aboriginal Australians” (Sutton 2003: 92). Ethnographic writing in Australia is characteristically restricted to particular Aboriginal groups of people defined according to linguistic or territorial affiliation, rather than a region. Examples from the southern Gulf include work on Yanyuwa

Aboriginal people or 'peoples' in and around Borroloola in the Northern Territory (Reay 1962; Avery 1985; Avery & McLaughlin 1977; Bradley 1988; Baker 1999). A brief life history from a key Aboriginal informant resident at Burketown illustrates the problem with this type of analysis, highlighting networks that go beyond any particular settlement. Interviewed at Burketown in August 2010, this man described a history of movements about the southern Gulf:

I grew up in Mornington. I went there when I was about 5 or 6 years old. They put me to go to school. My father used to work in the station, and they [i.e. his parents] took me away [i.e. from Doomadgee] 'cause they didn't want me to stay in the Dormitory. My father took me out to the station. There was a lot of Ganggalida people over there, from Gregory [Station], Burketown, Doomadgee, from Robinson River [Station], Borroloola. People from everywhere. Waanyi tribe. They took me away from Doomadgee, went up there station Wernadinga, went from there up to Normanton.... They [i.e. non-Aboriginal missionaries] took us away from there then. [They said] 'you better take these kids to Mornington'. We ended up staying over there then, to make sure we settle down over there then, my sister and brother, in the fifties [i.e. 1950s].

This man stayed at Mornington Island until the late 1960s, after which he worked on a fishing trawler out of Karumba for several years, before moving back to Mornington upon the death of his mother's mother, whom he described as "a Chinese lady, half-case lady, short lady, she come from Lawn Hill". Following her death, he moved to Normanton, then Cairns, then Doomadgee. While in Doomadgee he met an Aboriginal woman from Borroloola whom the missionaries encouraged him to marry. After their marriage, they moved to Borroloola, then Robinson River, then Normanton, then back to Doomadgee (where I encountered him for the first time). "Doomadgee is just like home", he said: "I wanted to stay in Doomadgee because it was so freely country, 'cause you can go hunt and walking, it's so open, and people welcome you with open arms, like my mother's family, and everyone knew about me" (FB August 2010).

However, while my above informant asserts a strong connection to Doomadgee here as his 'home', he also travelled frequently throughout the Gulf and elsewhere: to Borroloola to stay with his wife's family in the predominantly Yanyuwa camp in that town; to Mount Isa to stay with his son; to Normanton to stay with his daughter. While strongly asserting his ownership or affiliation with Ganggalida coastal country through his mother's father (whose father [i.e. my informant's mother's grandfather] was a significant Aboriginal leader from this area at the time of colonisation), this man also identifies with other groups including Kurtjar people (through his father's father). His own father he described as "from out the Territory way really, Garawa people". His mother's mother was, in his formulation, "a Chinese lady, half-caste lady [i.e. of mixed-Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal descent] ... from Lawn Hill". While she may have been Waanyi through her mother [i.e. my informant's mother's mother's mother], she moved to Mornington Island to live with a senior Lardil man, who adopted her children. Hence my informant's mother's adoptive father was Lardil. This man's bewildering array of potential identities from around the southern Gulf region highlights the importance of a regional focus. The southern Gulf is particularly interesting as a region given that it is bifurcated by a political boundary between the Northern Territory (NT) and Queensland (QLD). This thesis approaches 'the Gulf' as a region that crosses this border, encompassing a sense of a shared identity amongst a unique category of 'Gulf people' with similar experiences in the pastoral industry, forestry, tourism, fisheries, environmental management programs, and, increasingly, in the mines (the McArthur River Mine, Century Lead and Zinc Mine, Red Bank Mine, and a number of operations at the exploration stage).

Of course seeking to address a region as a whole poses a number of challenges. Firstly, as Peter Sutton argues (2003, p. 92), it is often unclear whether a region is an emic or etic construction (i.e. meaningful to inhabitants or mainly the product of an outsider's analysis). As Sutton remarks apropos Aboriginal people's own "consciousness of kind", any attempt to distinguish a smaller regional society from a largely one is bound to be "inadequate" (2003, p. 92). He argues:

The most obvious ground for this criticism is that applying the distinction in practice is always likely to be arbitrary, as small populations – defined on whatever grounds – combine in a bewildering range of ways and at many different ‘levels of resolution’ into smaller and bigger entities, depending on context (Sutton 2003, p. 93).

Much debate in anthropology has therefore focused upon the appropriate level of resolution for a land or native title claim (Keen 1999; Palmer 2009). Given the practical constraints of land and native title research, such debate arguably simplifies the extent to which Aboriginal people engage with the broader society in ways that impact upon processes of reproduction. As David Martin points out: “nowhere in Australia do (or indeed can) Aboriginal people live in self-defining and self-reproducing domains of meaning and practices” (2008, p. 51). Instead, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in the Gulf are engaged in relationships with each other, and with other Australians beyond the Gulf that bear upon their identities therein. Indeed, throughout his life history, my above informant stressed lengthy engagements with non-Aboriginal people, including a one-time fiance in Cairns. This man’s daughter was also serially ‘engaged’ to two non-Aboriginal men during the five years of my fieldwork: one of whom my informant forcibly evicted (with the assistance of the police) when the relationship with his daughter soured in late 2008; the other whom the police arrested and imprisoned for car theft in 2009.

Due to the unique challenges of living in such a remote location, residents in the Gulf are invariably enmeshed in relationships of dependency encompassing both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, despite a prevailing ideology of separateness. While the tension between dependency and separateness has been extensively discussed with reference to Aboriginal identity (Myers 1986; Martin 1993) such discussions have tended to neglect non-Aboriginal Australians (Myers 1986), or to see such interdependencies as interactions between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal societies rather than within shared social networks (Smith 2007). As Smith argues apropos Cape York, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal residents are consociates (2007). This has been theorised through the concept of the intercultural, manifesting a critique of the notion of pure traditions and discrete

cultural differences (Merlan 2005; Hinkson & Smith 2005). While the concept of separate Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal 'domains' of life in places like Doomadgee allowed for intimate links between particular Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people (Trigger 1986), it arguably overstressed their particularity, or has at least been seen to do so. In contrast, the intercultural stresses the extent to which who and what Aboriginal people consider themselves to be has been affected by the representations of Aboriginality by others, just as who and what other Australians consider themselves to be has been affected by representations of Aboriginality. Francesca Merlan theorises this complex mirroring process in terms of mimesis (1998, p. 150). However, Merlan's work generally neglects the analysis of Whiteness, focusing on the changing ways in which Aboriginality is understood within what she calls "the national imaginary" (1998, p. 230). The challenge for theorists of the intercultural is to describe what Martha Kaplan calls "the field of plural articulations" – "spaces and areas of practice where the processes of articulation and the contestation of articulations between cultural systems are ongoing" (1989, p. 18). It is within this field that 'Aboriginal' and other Australian identities come into being *in dynamic relation to representations*. It is this field that I focus upon in my analysis of 'the Gulf'.

In framing 'Aboriginal' within intonational quotation marks here I identify Aboriginality and Whiteness as the focus of my analysis rather than Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal identities or cultures. In so doing I seek to emphasise the constructed nature of each. As Ghassan Hage argues:

'Whiteness' is an ever-changing, composite cultural historical construct. It has roots in the history of European colonisation which universalised a cultural form of White identity as a position of cultural power at the same time as the colonised were in the process of being racialised. Whiteness, in opposition to Blackness and Brownness, was born at the same time as the binary oppositions coloniser/colonised, being developed/underdeveloped, and later First World/Third World (1998, p. 57).

In opposition to Whiteness, Hage proposes Blackness and Brownness here, seeming to resile from a thorough discussion of Aboriginality. While this reflects

Hage's focus upon what he calls "the Australian field of national power", my identification of Aboriginality rather than 'Blackness' or 'Brownness' is arguably more salient at the specifically regional level that I propose, where the vernacular opposition between 'Blackfellas' and 'Whitefellas' relates more precisely to Aboriginality and Whiteness than Blackness/Brownness and Whiteness. This is partly because, as Judith Brett notes, Australia's rural population remained largely untouched by post World War II immigration, as relatively few of these migrants settled outside the major cities (2011, p. 39). While there are exceptions to this trend, the impact of the cultural transformations that Hage describes was relatively limited in regions like the Gulf, where representations of Aboriginality and Whiteness endured despite the arrival of migrants from non-European backgrounds. As Myrna Tonkinson recounts (1994), being a black woman of Afro-Caribbean ancestry did not stop her being labelled Whitefella by Aboriginal people at Jigalong in Western Australia. As I recorded during my fieldwork, even people of mixed Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal descent from elsewhere in Australia are sometimes labeled Whitefellas in the southern Gulf by those who identify as Aboriginal and some of those who identify as non-Aboriginal. While post World War II migrants have settled in some of the larger towns in the Gulf, the more significant impact of migration from non-European countries was arguably felt in the nineteenth century. As Henry Reynolds notes, the non-European settler [i.e. non-Aboriginal] population north of Capricorn numbered between 20 and 25 per cent of the total population at Federation in 1901 (2003, p. xv). People from Asia formed a significant proportion of this, making up half the settler population in the Northern Territory (and a sizeable minority in Queensland) prior to the introduction of the Immigration Restriction and Pacific Islands Labourers Acts and other discriminatory legislation associated with Federation (Reynolds 2003)<sup>2</sup>. As I will discuss at various points throughout this thesis, such historical diversity continues to figure into local understanding of difference within the field of plural articulations that I have identified as 'the Gulf', particularly amongst those descended from the unions of Asian (particularly Chinese) men and Aboriginal women. While using Aboriginality and Whiteness as counterpoised

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<sup>2</sup> Relevant legislation includes the *Goldfields Act 1876* (Qld), the *Immigration Restriction Act 1901* (Cth), the *Pacific Islands Labourers Act 1901* (Cth) and the *Franchise Act 1902* (Cth). Such legislation formed the basis of the White Australia policy (Reynolds 2003, p. xi).



representations, I therefore struggle to avoid a tendency to homogenise either as 'Aboriginal' or 'non-Aboriginal' identities.

This definition of the field as one of plural articulations raises broader methodological issues to do with research in anthropology and literary/cultural studies as well as questions about the definition of the region. While the issue of representation is arguably always involved in the design of academic theses like this one, this thesis sets out to explicitly discuss it through the analysis of a broad range of texts about the southern Gulf. In so doing, I seek to avoid the tendency to set up a social and cultural context as the exclusive frame of reference for texts. As Marilyn Strathern argues (1990), the analytical separation of social and cultural contexts from material culture (including things like texts) renders the study of such things somewhat superfluous in that they can only function as illustrative of the systems within which their significance is produced. Significantly, unlike conventional ethnographic resources, much of the textual material that I muster for analysis cannot be explicitly located within time or space, despite an apparent referential connection to the Gulf. At the same time, such material cannot – or at least should not – be neglected or dismissed by anthropologists and other researchers outside literary and cultural studies. I therefore discuss various ways in which anthropologists might engage with literary writing and other more creative sources of information as more than fiction and yet other than fact. I also discuss various ways in which anthropological representations and other representations (including my own) might be understood as representation: as narrative, as allegory, as creative non-fiction and as 'truth'. Anthropological texts are therefore also part of my field. However, just as I seek to avoid the tendency to set up a social and cultural context as the exclusive frame of reference for texts 'about' the Gulf, so too I avoid a tendency to analyse texts as evidence of their social and cultural context. Both approaches fail to express the ways in which texts circulate through society, generating meanings of their own. If we think of meaning in terms of the relations that exist between text and context, indeed language and world, then we might start to think about fieldwork as revelatory rather than reductive; approaching it as offering an opportunity to disclose or make known something unanticipated and even inconceivable within analyses of

textuality alone<sup>3</sup>. As I argue, such an expanded theory of the field facilitates a more complex and nuanced analysis of Aboriginality and Whiteness than either anthropology or literary/cultural studies tends to accomplish on their own.

To progress this analysis I deploy the concept of discourse. Derived from the work of Michel Foucault (1972 [1969]) and Edward W. Said (1985 [1978]; 1993), I use discourse to describe the way in which regimes of knowledge developed about 'the Gulf'. For Said, writing about 'the Orient', Orientalism is a "corporate institution" for dealing with the area. He argues:

My contention is that without examining Orientalism as a discourse one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage – and even produce – the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period (Said 1985 [1978], p. 3).

Said's example has been heavily critiqued by a number of scholars, from Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1984) to Benita Parry (1987), Aijaz Ahmad (1992), Homi K. Bhabha (1994), Anne McClintock (1995), and Robert Young (2001). As Young argues, these critiques can be grouped into a number of related complaints: (1) the problem with the status of claims from the example of a few texts; (2) the problem of historicity; (3) the emphasis on the textual nature of history; (4) the question of representation analysed as representation rather than in terms of what it represents; (5) the complaint that discourse forms a homogeneous totality that overrides the particularity of historical and geographical difference; and (6) the problem of discourse being too homogenous and determining (2001, pp. 389-392). These problems can arguably be grouped under a single heading, which Young also identifies, being a tendency to perform colonial discourse analysis as a

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<sup>3</sup> I do not mean to suggest that anthropological fieldwork is reductive, although some conventional accounts of the naturalistic practice of ethnography describe it as such (Hammersley and Atkinson 1989). As Deeb and Marcus argue, fieldwork produces interpretative knowledge which "go[es] beyond the data-gathering or rapport-promoting interview or conversation", where "what is transacted shapes directly the evolving analytic frames and conceptual apparatus that figure in the results of research" (2011: 51; see also Rabinow, Marcus, Faubion and Rees 2008).

kind of literary criticism (2001, p. 394). In contrast, I seek to perform a kind of discourse analysis that focuses on the exercise of power, discipline and domination through ethnographic enquiry as well as simply literary criticism, working to expand and combine the disciplines of literary/cultural studies and anthropology in order to accomplish this. Thus objections to the textualism and idealism of Said's example in *Orientalism* (1985 [1978]) might be answered through interdisciplinary work upon the field of plural articulations in the Gulf. However, the methodology of interdisciplinary work in this 'field' presents many challenges.



*Photograph 6: Aboriginal people relaxing in the sun at the Carpentaria Land Council Aboriginal Corporation (CLCAC) office in Burketown, from left: Gordon Doomadgee, Muriel Douglas, Timothy Douglas and Ronnie Jupiter. Photograph by author, July 2011.*

#### **1.4 The Methodology of Interdisciplinary Work in Literary/Cultural Studies and Anthropology**

No doubt many different kinds of theses could be written about issues of place, race, and identity in the southern Gulf, as indeed many have been (particularly in

anthropology). It is easy to imagine at least two separate theses oriented towards the questions I have outlined: one in literary/cultural studies focusing upon textual representations of the area framed against the backdrop of the region's ethnography; the other in anthropology involving in-depth ethnography with anecdotal reference to literary and other more creative publications about the region. While distinct, these forms of writing about the Gulf would inevitably dovetail into each other: it is hard to imagine someone in literary and cultural studies neglecting to read the ethnographic archive, just as anthropologists would scarcely neglect the publications of resident informants. All knowledge is interdisciplinary (Clifford 1997, p. 59). However, this truism misrepresents the real challenge of interdisciplinary research. While interdisciplinary, all knowledge in the academy is invariably disciplined by one approach or another. Of the nine nounal definitions of 'discipline' in the third edition of the Oxford English Dictionary (hereafter OED), the most relevant connotes "a system or method for the maintenance of order". Literary/cultural studies and anthropology are both oriented towards order in this sense, particularly at the postgraduate level, where researchers are subjected to each discipline's discipline. But the different disciplines of literary/cultural studies and anthropology do more than just maintain order through subjection: each presents a cluster of practices through which cultural worlds are produced. I will briefly examine the possibilities for work in between them.

While instructive of the difference between literary/cultural studies and anthropology, any typification of the disciplines based upon a broad distinction between textual analysis and ethnography is insufficient. Indeed it is difficult to propose a satisfactory definition of either discipline. As Clifford Geertz argues (1995, p. 97) attempts to identify a single unifying methodology in anthropology amount to little more than special pleading. As Tim Ingold argues (2008), anthropology is not interchangeable with ethnography: ethnography, Ingold argues, is a product of anthropological research, and not its reason for being. Moreover, ethnography is itself understood in diverse ways around Australia – even within the sub-field of Australian Aboriginal studies – meaning that different types of ethnography produced in the field often bear little resemblance to each other. This difficulty of providing a single definition of anthropology's

methodology is mirrored within literary and cultural studies, where a focus upon multiple ways of reading or interpreting everything from comic books to music videos and websites – as well as literature – results in an extremely diverse community of scholars, some of whom claim to be doing ethnography, or something analogous to it, particularly in cultural studies. As anyone who has spent any time engaged in research in northern Australia will attest, many researchers outside anthropology likewise spend time in the field. During the five years that I have worked in the Gulf, I have encountered two historians, two professional writers, one linguist, one ethno-botanist, one archaeologist, one architect, one art gallery curator as well as four solicitors, two barristers, one semi-professional photographer and one journalist – not to mention four anthropologists (not including myself)!

But while it may be impossible to characterize either discipline synoptically, distinctions between them remain. While inevitably reading ethnography, a researcher in literary and cultural studies would likely see little value in visiting the Gulf, even as a tourist. Moreover, even if he or she did visit the area and desire to develop anecdotes from their experience into substantive ethnographic analysis, the kinds of skills that enable anthropologists to do so would likely be lacking: even the best work in literary/cultural studies falls well short of ethnography in terms of focus, complexity, subtlety, sophistication and depth (Griffiths 2003). There is arguably no substitute for ‘being there’ in one capacity or another, although merely organizing a travel booking and getting on a plane scarcely amounts to ethnographic fieldwork. As Geertz attests, there is more to “it” than “a willingness to endure a certain amount of loneliness, invasion of privacy and physical discomfort” (1988, pp. 23-24). While Geertz declines to describe exactly what that something more involves, it is arguably obvious to see when it is missing. Without fieldwork (or at least good fieldwork), researchers in literary and cultural studies struggle to convey the worldliness of the text, let alone the world outside the text, which sometimes disappears (or seems to disappear) within analyses. As Said asks:

The real issue is whether indeed there can be a true representation of anything, or whether any and all representations, because they *are*

representations, are embedded first in the language and then in the culture, institutions, and political ambience of the representer. If the latter alternative is the correct one (as I believe it is), then we must be prepared to accept the fact that a representation is *eo ipso* implicated, intertwined, embedded, interwoven with a great many other things besides the 'truth', which is itself a representation (Said 1985 [1978], p. 272).

This results in a lot of problems, especially with regard to identifying misrepresentations. How then does one represent anything adequately, let alone 'other' cultures (as Said asks at the end of *Orientalism*) (Said 1985 [1978], p. 325)? The damaging impacts of misrepresentations of Aboriginal people are well documented, as the furore relating to Marlo Morgan's purported memoir *Mutant Message Down Under* illustrates (see Dumbartung Aboriginal Corporation n.d.). Without a commitment to some kind of true representation existing outside representation how might such blatant misrepresentations be redressed?

The answer relates to the situation of the writer and their attention to the specificity and singularity of local situations. This involves a focus upon what Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin call the assumption of universalism: "a hegemonic view of existence by which the experiences, values and expectations of a dominant culture are held to be true for all humanity" (1998, p. 235). While such universalism has sustained trenchant critique in the academy, it continually re-emerges as an unreflective stance even amongst those engaged in radical critique. It is manifest in the universalized notion of the 'cultured' reader himself or herself, who arrogates the authority to comment on all sorts of texts, often with very little attention to local situations beyond a feigned obeisance to 'difference'. This has arguably been reinforced by the dedication to theory, with its connotations of a distanced view<sup>4</sup>. Anthropology has at least the potential to reduce that distance, while helpfully focusing attention upon the universalism embodied in the position of the critic and his or her stance towards a subject. The alternative to this theoretical distance is a somewhat more worldly view: historically minded, reflective, contested, and fraught. Insofar as discourse – including academic discourse – provides a method by which 'the real' is determined, worldliness

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<sup>4</sup> In early usage, theory evoked "a sight, a spectacle" or a "mental view" (OED).

provides a methodology for leaving difference unresolved, where the plurality of local cultural responses and effects circulates in the field.

This problem of universalism and the situation of the critic seems to have been dealt with somewhat differently in the fine arts than it has in literary and cultural studies, at least insofar as Aboriginal cultural products are concerned. Many more anthropologists were involved in the 'discovery' of Aboriginal art by a broader audience of Australians around the time of World War II than were later involved in the popularisation of Aboriginal literature in the 1960s, 70s and 80s<sup>5</sup>. Berndt (1964), Cooper, Morphy, Mulvaney and Peterson (1981), Berndt, Berndt and Stanton (1982), and Sutton (1988a) are all important early works on Aboriginal art by anthropologists, as the art critic (and anthropologist) Howard Morphy argues in an introduction to the field (Morphy 1998, p. 434n). Apart from some significant exceptions (Benterrak, Muecke & Roe 1984), it is difficult to think of a significant critical work on Aboriginal literature written by anyone with anthropological training other than work on the transcription of Aboriginal song cycles by Bill Harney and A. P. Elkin (1949; 1968), T. G. H. Strehlow (1971), the Berndts (1988a), and others<sup>6</sup>. Given the obvious similarity of their subject matter, this discrepancy is at the very least noteworthy<sup>7</sup>. While anthropologists'

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<sup>5</sup> While David Unaipon is generally looked upon as the 'first' Aboriginal author for the publication of *Native Legends* (1929), Penny Van Toorn offers a compelling argument that dates "cultures of reading and writing" involving Aboriginal people back to Bennelong's letter of 1796 (Van Toorn 2006, p. 3). In dating the popularisation of Aboriginal writing in the 1960s, 70s and 80s I am referring to what Van Toorn (2000, p. 29) calls "[t]he contemporary phase of Aboriginal writing", which she associates with the publication of Oodgeroo Noonuccal's first collection of poetry, *We Are Going*, and the work of Kevin Gilbert, Jack Davis and Mudrooroo (whose Aboriginal identity has since been disputed).

<sup>6</sup> The case of the Jindyworobak movement of the 1930s and 40s manifests an obvious counter-example. The Jindyworobak poet Roland Robinson reportedly acknowledged his debt to the anthropologists Elkin, Strehlow and R. Berndt, although it is unclear how extensively Robinson and the other Jindyworobak's published work was influenced by these anthropologists (Kociumbas 2003, p. 133).

<sup>7</sup> The literary journals *Meanjin* (1940-) and *Kunapipi* (1979-) provide a fascinating illustration. The name *Meanjin* reportedly derives from a word in an unidentified Aboriginal language around Brisbane. Early issues include articles by Elkin. *Kunapipi*, in contrast, features an Aboriginal word common to languages around the Gulf, where it denotes a men's ceremony whose name is ideally restricted from women, suggesting that few anthropologists familiar with Aboriginal Australia have engaged with this publication.

involvement in the explication of Aboriginal art does not of itself invalidate the charge of universalism it does point to a difference in the way in which complementary cultural products have been framed for consumption by predominantly non-Aboriginal audiences. No doubt there are complex historical reasons for this, relating among other things to an early view of Aboriginal art as a source of information about Aboriginal culture and society rather than an aesthetic product. As A. P. Elkin wrote in 1950:

The painting or the engraving must be the window through which we glimpse, or even the door through which we enter, an abiding world ... the world of spiritual relations, the world of meaning, which increases in depths and fades not away (cited in Morphy 1998, p. 29).

As Morphy notes, it was not until the late 1950s that the Art Gallery of New South Wales began to acquire and exhibit Aboriginal works as *art*, and not until the late 1970s and early 1980s that other state galleries followed suit (1998, p. 31). As something primarily understood as a source of information rather than aesthetic contemplation, it is perhaps unsurprising that anthropologists were heavily involved in bringing Aboriginal art out of the museums and into the galleries. While the work of Nancy Munn on Walbiri iconography (1973) or Howard Morphy on Yolngu art (1991) is not exempt from the charge of ethnocentrism, it has provided the grounds for more informed commentary than is available from non-anthropologists in the field. Anthropologists' lack of involvement in literary criticism has arguably contributed towards some very bad criticism, as well what Graham Huggan calls "peculiar susceptibility of the Australian literary establishment to fraudulence and fakery" (2007, p. 103) (although the Australian art establishment has been similarly hoodwinked, notably by Elizabeth Durack)<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> Literary fakes or 'frauds' like Marlo Morgan, Streten Bozic ('B. Wongar') and Leon Carmen ('Wanda Koolmatrie') have exercised the indignation of critics for decades, alongside others like Mudrooroo (Colin Johnson), Roberta Sykes, and Archie Weller. As Huggan argues (2007, p. 103), such indignation illustrates anxieties about cultural authenticity which may be connected with the popular (mis)conception that Aboriginal people are unduly privileged in Australia. In citing anthropologists' lack of involvement in literary criticism I do not mean to posit anthropologists as authorising the authentic. The issue is of course extremely complex. As Penny van Toorn argues "journalists have variously linked



Lacking or seeming to lack a thorough understanding of Australian ethnography, the literary establishment is all too easily impressed by those who fabricate accounts of Aboriginality (whether those fakes or frauds are 'Aboriginal' or not).

Meanwhile, however, my putative anthropologist researching the Gulf would likely fare no better in the literature section of a library. It would be one thing for him or her to read and even make reference to an informant's memoirs as a source of information (even when those memoirs have been heavily edited and otherwise shaped by generic conventions); it would be quite another thing for him or her to deal with a novel, or indeed with any of the myriad genres in between 'fiction' and 'non-fiction', let alone all the other things that researchers in literary and cultural studies examine as texts. While many anthropologists do read novels and refer to them in publications, they tend to be used as illustrative material rather than ethnographic 'evidence' as such. But while this distinction between literary/cultural studies and anthropology in terms of their subject matter bears up to commonsense scrutiny, the oppositions upon which it relies – involving questions of truth, art and life, etc – fall apart upon closer examination, necessitating a rather more rigorous methodology than is currently available in either discipline. Again, the discrepancy here between writing about Aboriginal literature and writing about Aboriginal art is significant. While I decline to cite examples of especially bad criticism about Aboriginal literature, it is hard to think of any recent publication which approaches the depth and diversity of perspectives conveyed in (for example) *The Heart of Everything: The Art and Artists of Mornington and Bentinck Islands* (Evans, Martin-Chew & Memmot 2008). Informants obviously read and write, take photographs and otherwise strive to represent themselves to others, and to understand how others have represented them. This is especially so with respect to Aboriginal people. Even amongst those described as merely 'functionally literate', people read and otherwise strive to engage with written material and other forms of media, including anthropological

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Mudrooroo, Roberta Sykes, Archie Weller, Leon Carmen ... and Streten Bozic ... together as fakes" (2000, p. 42). Against this, van Toorn argues that the circumstances in which Streten Bozic (in the 1980s) and Leon Carmen (in the 1990s) identified as Aboriginal were different to those involving Mudrooroo, Roberta Sykes and Archie Weller, who (in her view) sincerely believed themselves to be Aboriginal (2000, p. 42). This issue is taken up in more detail in Chapter Seven of this thesis.

texts<sup>9</sup>. Moreover, even those who are ‘functionally illiterate’ discuss things that come from books, from newspapers, and from the radio, television and Internet<sup>10</sup>. This results, time and again, in some confusion. As I will argue throughout this thesis, dominant conceptions about ‘the text’ as the imitation or re-presentation of the real, as a function of human politics and power relations, as an object of historical interest, aesthetic appreciation or even academic scholarship fail to adequately convey the way in which it – i.e. the text – lives in the world. While the concept of ‘the text’ has been expanded with structuralism to encompass anything that can be read or interpreted as a medium of communication – from fashion, as in Roland Barthes’s *Mythologies* (1970 [1957]), to cultural landscapes (Schema 1995) and the design of gardens and parks – it continues to be strongly associated with textual media such as print. In contrast, the work of ‘art’ connotes a thing of sensuous beauty ideally contemplated by an aesthete at some remove – although the boundaries of art as an object of distanced contemplation have also been challenged by contemporary art in film and video, as well as conceptual disputes about what constitutes art outside the gallery or museum. However, neither ‘text’ nor ‘art’ seems really adequate for the discussion here. Something else is occurring which is worth examining. Of course anthropology has come a long way from the literary naïveté of ethnographic realism, and has developed along the way a variety of strategies for dealing with ethnographic writing as text (Clifford & Marcus 1986; Clifford 1988), and with the acts of writing and reading more generally (Silverstein & Urban 1996b)<sup>11</sup>. Nevertheless, vestiges of the old epistemological nonchalance prevail, along with a good dose of disciplinary hubris: while ‘postmodern’ may be admired, real(ist) ethnography is what counts.

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<sup>9</sup> Trigger’s work is well known throughout the Gulf, although arguably due to his land and native title claim work rather than his numerous publications.

<sup>10</sup> Worried commentators like Noel Pearson (2009) have often remarked upon the paucity of written material in many small towns in northern Australia, especially with regard to what are sometimes seen as healthier reading practices in the mission era. This attitude would seem to denigrate where it does not simply ignore the many other forms of media which have come to increasingly saturate Aboriginal lives: from the pay-tv channels Foxtel and Austar to a fascination with file-sharing sites like Youtube.

<sup>11</sup> This critique is not without its own epistemological nonchalance, as conveyed (for example) in *The Predicament of Culture* through the liberal use of oxymoron. In that publication, Clifford argues that ethnography produces “constructed domains of truth, serious fictions” and that “[anthropology is situated] at the experimental boundaries of a realist cultural science” (1988, pp. 10, 24n).

This is particularly pronounced in Australia given the relationship between anthropology and a myriad of institutions (e.g. the law) desiring expert advice about Aboriginal people. If Australian anthropology abdicates its claim to describe 'facts' it arguably risks irrelevance beyond the academy. This is understandable – and partly accounts for the venom frequently targeted against postmodernism and those who have been described as “postmodern anthropologists” by other anthropologists in Australia (Povinelli 2010) – but it is scarcely excusable.

While interdisciplinarity is always at least to some degree inevitable, all research is not always equally interdisciplinary. Despite multiple claims to the contrary, there is arguably little evidence of thoroughgoing inter-disciplinary research involving either literary/cultural studies or anthropology in Australia. This relates in part to prevailing conceptions of interdisciplinarity in the academy, which are in turn derived from the particular institutional context of research in Australia. What does it mean to describe something as interdisciplinary? When and why is this claim made? Is interdisciplinarity a product or a process? Who decides? These questions can be partly answered with recourse to a distinction between two different types of interdisciplinarity: the first imagines a collection of researchers from various disciplines working upon a single topic, combining a variety of perspectives into a cubist portrait of something. This is productive but fails to bring the discipline's disparate methodologies together, tending to produce overlaps rather than syntheses, and often failing to address significant gaps between the contributions to any edited collection. The second approach to interdisciplinarity addresses some of the problems of the first while presenting others. This approach imagines a single researcher primarily associated with one discipline seeking to unite it with another, someone like Stephen Muecke or Meaghan Morris in literary/cultural studies and Michael Jackson or Deborah Bird Rose in anthropology. The problem with this approach is that this work then tends to be read within its originary discipline, as literary/cultural studies work or as anthropology. Even within its originary discipline, such work may be dismissed as marginal and even experimental (Taussig 2010). In practice, this conception of interdisciplinarity tends to result in a skewed perspective upon one or the other discipline as a result of a shallow reading of its archive or a lack of training in its

techniques. This tends to perpetuate anachronisms about literary/cultural studies and anthropology that are, frankly, embarrassing. As Griffiths argues:

It is still possible to hear literary and cultural studies experts refer to the colonial taint of ethnography, as if modern researchers were not fully aware of their historical links with the colonising enterprise and had not been at considerable pains to address these in their recent practice. On the other hand, anthropologists and other social scientists seem equally content blithely to lump together many different approaches, from postcolonial discourse theory to poststructuralist and deconstructive perspectives, under some generic label such as postmodern textualism (2003, pp. 297-298).

As Austin-Broos perceptively comments, such reductionism forms part of a war of position in the academy, which each 'side' has fantasised about somehow winning (2011, p. 52). Such academic posturing makes for entertaining reading but somewhat simplistic analysis of issues like place, race and identity, even amongst those who share a common interest in Aboriginality and Whiteness.

The approach that I am proposing seeks essentially to unite training in literary/cultural studies and anthropology in a single project without seeking to collapse either discipline into the other. I hope that different kinds of readers find something of interest in this thesis (if readers come in different 'kinds'!). My ideal reader is interested in both disciplines, insofar as they have something more to contribute to each other, which I believe they do.

### **1.5 Outline of Subsequent Sections**

It is appropriate here to indicate how subsequent chapters will address issues of place, race and identity in the three main sections of the thesis. These three sections focus, in order, upon: (1) historical representations of the region and the relational identities within it, concentrating particularly upon how these identities came to be represented in the pre-land rights and native title era (in Chapters Two, Three and Four); (2) how contemporary historical, literary and anthropological texts problematise these earlier representations of the area, with

particular regard to more imaginative forms of representation such as memoirs and novels (in Chapters Five and Six), and; (3) how ethnographic material might be introduced into the analysis of representation (in Chapters Seven and Eight).

In the first three chapters, I argue that discourses of exploration and 'discovery' (Chapter Two), classical ethnography (Chapter Three) and early literary and anthropological writing (Chapter Four) manifest interactions between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal history – or, more precisely, between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in history – that are germane to discussions of place, race, and identity in the contemporary Gulf. Chapter Two examines texts by Leichhardt, Landsborough, Burke and Wills and other explorers to assess the historical development of representations of Aboriginality and Whiteness. Alongside classical exploration texts, I discuss alternative accounts of settlement such as those held by Aboriginal residents of the Gulf. I particularly focus upon alternative readings of a Coolibah tree blazed by the explorer William Landsborough during his search for the missing Burke and Wills. Chapter Three discusses the relationship between this discourse of exploration and 'discovery' and the idea of classical ethnography, focusing upon encounters between ethnographers, pastoralists and Aborigines, and their impact upon representations of Aboriginality and Whiteness around the time of Australia's Federation in 1901. While acknowledging the great transformations of anthropology in later writings about the Gulf, this chapter examines representations of authority and ethnographic realism in the work of Baldwin Spencer and Francis Gillen, as well as Walter Roth. Chapter Four deals with a third recognizable historical period involving the analysis of texts like Xavier Herbert's *Capricornia* (1938), William 'Bill' Harney and A. P. Elkin's *Songs of the Songmen* (1949; 1968), as well as the Lardil Aboriginal man Dick Roughsey's collaboration with Percy Trezise (1971; 1973). I argue that these texts occupy an interstice between creative modes of representing Aboriginality and Whiteness and emergent (and recognizably modern and contemporary) anthropological ways of writing about Aborigines. More significantly, alongside their experimental modality, these texts illustrate 'indigenous' identities in a process of becoming in the period immediately prior to the institution of Australian land rights and native title. Notwithstanding the extent to which many Aboriginal people's political aspirations are embedded

within land rights and native title (Merlan 1997), I draw upon my analysis of these three discourses (i.e. exploration and 'discovery', classical ethnography, and early literary and anthropological writing) to critique what Patrick Wolfe (1991) and others (Povinelli 2002) have identified as the "repressive authenticity" of land rights and native title. As I argue, land rights and native title exemplifies the workings of purification as conceptualised by Bruno Latour (1993).

Chapters Five and Six deal mainly with the contemporary period of liberal recognition symbolized by the development of land rights and native title. As such, this section works to problematise the historical accounts of Aboriginality and Whiteness described in Chapters Two, Three and Four. Moving from the analysis of the three recognizable historical periods discussed in the first Section (of exploration and 'discovery', classical ethnography, and early literary and anthropological writing) this section will bring the analysis up-to-date by looking at contemporary (i.e. post 1970s) material. This material will include more creative representations of the area, including memoirs and novels by Hilda Muir, Alexis Wright, Kerry McGinnis and Nicholas Jose, looking at what anthropology might gain from the analysis of such material. Chapter Five: The Creation of Place examines representations of Aboriginality and Whiteness in the literature of the land rights and native title period (1970s-2000s), focusing upon understandings of 'the land' in Australia. Chapter Six: Alexis Wright deals with similar issues of Aboriginality and Whiteness but with a particular focus upon the novels of Alexis Wright, namely *Plains of Promise* (1997) and *Carpentaria* (2006). This chapter looks at how creative contemporary forms of representation engage with and critique historical texts about Aboriginality and Whiteness, while advancing the possibility of a politics more attuned to the specificity of place.

Chapters Seven and Eight form the final section of this thesis. In these chapters I seek to develop the unique methodological approach of this thesis through the introduction of ethnographic research completed by the author in the form of interviews and participant observation in the southern Gulf. This material will be used to demonstrate the great complexity of cultural identity in the contemporary Gulf. Chapter Seven: Discourses of Belonging examines the role of ethnographic fieldwork in writing about identity. I argue that regional debates about

authenticity may be used to shed light on other more formal representations of the area such as those discussed in Chapters Two, Three and Four, and Chapters Five and Six. Following on from this, I examine the multiple ways in which the notion of indigeneity is understood in the southern Gulf in Chapter Eight: The Politics of Indigenism. It discusses the development of historical representations about Aboriginality and Whiteness (described in Chapters Two, Three and Four), the use of creative work to critique these representations (described in Chapters Five and Six) and the way in which these representations may be understood ethnographically within the contested political context of present-day Gulf life (the focus of Chapters Seven). It particularly looks at the way in which different kinds of claims to Wollogorang Station have been managed historically from the moment of first settlement through to the contemporary period, where assertions of connection by Aboriginal people intersect with articulations of an emergent autochthony amongst other Australians with long histories of residence in the region. This chapter will argue for more relational understandings of Aboriginality and Whiteness that recognise the true complexity of these contested terms.

Chapter Nine: Conclusions summarises the arguments of this thesis in the light of an encounter with a drunken Garawa Aboriginal man at Doomadgee in August 2010 during what I had planned as the last fieldtrip for this thesis (I later returned in July 2011). I draw upon this incident to discuss the role of research in 'the Gulf' and the limits of representation.

## **1.6 Conclusion**

My aim in this introduction has been to give a view of the diversity of residents' experiences in the southern Gulf. This has been presented somewhat episodically here in first and second person accounts of my experiences in and movements through the Gulf. I have thereby sought to convey a sense of my developing acquaintance with those who identify as Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people as they interacted with me over the course of twelve fieldtrips. At the same time I have sought to dis-place the field of my research somewhat from classical anthropological norms, suggesting a formulation of plural articulations within 'the Gulf' against understandings of a bounded region. Within this field I have proposed understanding of Aboriginality and Whiteness as counterpoised

representations to which those who identify as Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people variously relate.

I will conclude this introduction with a brief caveat. Throughout this thesis I will have a lot to say about Aboriginality and Whiteness and the multiple ways in which relations between these two identities are understood in the southern Gulf. However, it is important to emphasise here that the vernacular of race and all its minute forms of misrecognition is manifestly unable to convey the complexity of actual historical interactions amongst all the variegated forms of the self, 'Aboriginal' or otherwise. I mean to move beyond the moral vanity that characterises many discussions of identity and alterity in Australia, and avoid wherever possible the scripted distaste of liberal 'correctness'. To do so will involve further discussion of race, and of what might be called the "habitual resort" to race or 'culture' within a host of historical situations (Gilroy 2005). I seek to understand how and why representations of ontologically different human kinds continue their work of commonsense in the face of everyday forms of translation and plain consociation.



## CHAPTER TWO

### **Wild Time: Epochal Violence Remembered**

'Captain Cook story now I am going to give out. That Captain Cook, that Jew, he was travelling in the boat on the ocean. Then he came out to see Australia. A couple of blokes were in the boat and himself. He said: 'We go ashore in Australia' and they did come to shore, and saw these couple of Aboriginal people standing by the beach. They were going to do them over, like shoot them down, and another fellow said 'You had better not do that. They might give a good idea where the other people might be'. And so they did. They pointed out where the Aborigines had their main camping area. So they set off and found the tracks of Aborigines where they were hunting around the area. Then they went back to the boat and set up the people to explore and go down the countryside and shoot the people down, just like animal. They left them there lying for the hawks and the crows. I couldn't see that was very right. Everything what they done, some people shot off into the woods trying to save themselves. So they save themselves by going across creeks with a lot of crocodiles and things. They had to cross to go into the woods to save themselves'.

From a speech by senior Kurtjar man Rolly Gilbert to the International Savanna Symposium, Brisbane Queensland 1984 (Chase 1985, pp. 168-169)

*2.1 Captain Cook in Wild Time; 2.2 A Discourse of Exploration and 'Discovery'; 2.3 Alternative Perspectives Upon the Narrated Past; 2.4 Conclusion.*

In this chapter I focus upon the violence occasioned by the exploration and 'discovery' of the southern inland Gulf country, seeking to understand how present day residents situate themselves with regard to a horrific recent past. Drawing upon ethnographic material collected over 2007-2011, I discuss how Aboriginal people have represented the history of colonisation in the southern Gulf along mythic lines – as in this Captain Cook story – as part of an attempt to narrate and 'emplot' current encounters between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, and convey the ethics of those encounters (Ricoeur 1984, p. 10; Myers 1986, p. 289; Povinelli 1993, p. 240; Ricoeur 1992). At the same time, I discuss how non-Aboriginal accounts of exploration and 'discovery' draw upon mythic elements from Aboriginal traditions as well as other traditions in constructing alternative cosmologies of the Gulf country. I particularly focus upon stories about the explorers Leichhardt, and Burke and Wills, as well as the lesser-known William Landsborough. As I contend, stories about the past create a sense of social and political community that is far more complex than the pro-Aboriginal (e.g. 'black armband') and pro-settler (e.g. 'white blindfold') perspectives on Australian history purveyed by some professional historians, and popularised by events like former Prime Minister Paul Keating's famous Redfern Speech (Keating 1992), or the Rudd government's Apology of 2008 (Rudd 2008). In place of such politicised 'official' histories are surprisingly equivocal Aboriginal accounts that describe violence as part of an epoch in which "the times were wild" or Wild Time (FB November 2007), as well as non-Aboriginal accounts that are also far from univocal in their presentation of this early period of exploration and 'discovery'.

My focus upon multiple interpretations of epochal violence forms part of a broader attempt to understand the meaning of colonial textuality and intertextuality in the Gulf today, which connects Chapters Two, Three and Four of this thesis. As I will illustrate, colonial power was established by violence; such power, however, was productive as well as destructive, being asserted through a discourse of exploration and 'discovery'. Pivotal to this discourse were explorer journals like Leichhardt's *Journal of an Overland Expedition in Australia* (1847). Together with other explorer journals, as well as poems, novels, films, websites, biographies and histories about exploration, Leichhardt's *Journal* illustrates the role of writing in helping to consolidate colonialism by interpellating Aboriginal

and non-Aboriginal people in particular ways. As the explorer-turned-writer Ernest Favenc wrote: “Australia was a silence and sullen blank ... [which] has resisted, step by step, the encroachments on her stronghold, making the invaders pay toll with many a gallant life” (Favenc 1888?, p. 34)<sup>12</sup>. The drama that Favenc describes in this account of exploration as well as in his novel *The Secret of the Australian Desert* (Favenc 189-?) concerns the “indomitable courage and endurance of navigators and explorers like Leichhardt who “opened up” the continent by introducing it into representation and bringing what Favenc described as its ‘recalcitrant’ nature under control (Favenc 1888?, pp. 388, 22)<sup>13</sup>. As Rolly Gilbert’s Captain Cook story illustrates, however, the myth of the explorers purveyed by Favenc and others has been taken up and reshaped in a number of ambiguous and potentially ambivalent ways by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, recalling Bhabha’s account of signs taken for wonders in colonial India (Bhabha 1994, p. 102). This is amply illustrated by Patrick White’s classic mid-twentieth century novel *Voss* (1957), which subtly subverts Christian interpretations of the sacrifice of explorers like Leichhardt, presenting instead a rather more mysterious perspective which in some respects draws upon Aboriginal traditions as well as non-Aboriginal ones to symbolise Australia through its account of exploration and ‘discovery’.

As Bhabha argues, the dissemination of the book in India “installs the sign of appropriate representation”:

[T]he word of God, truth, art creates the conditions for a beginning, a practice of history and narrative. But the institution of the word in the wilds is also a process of displacement, distortion, dislocation, repetition (Bhabha 1994, p. 105).

While *Voss* provides one illustration of such displacement, distortion, dislocation, and repetition, the case study that concludes this chapter takes a broader view of textuality and intertextuality to analyse another, considering varied

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<sup>12</sup> The exact publication date of *The History of Australian Exploration from 1788 to 1888* is unknown. It is usually given as 1888.

<sup>13</sup> The exact publication date of *The Secret of the Australian Desert* is unknown. It is usually given as 1895 or 1896.

interpretations of a recent arson-attack upon a Coolabah tree blazed by William Landsborough during his search for Burke and Wills in 1862, near present-day Burketown in Queensland. Like Gilbert's Captain Cook story, the varied interpretations of this event disclose the complexity of present day responses to the epochal violence of the past, where those who might be counted as victims of colonialism interact with the descendants of those responsible for it: where many 'victims' are themselves descended from the 'perpetrators' of violence.

## **2.1 Captain Cook in Wild Time**

Early on in fieldwork in the Gulf, I visited the Garawa/Mugularrangu Aboriginal Land Trust at Robinson River to ask a few questions about social relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians during the initial phases of colonial settlement in the area. As it happened, one of the first people I met identified himself as an Aboriginal grandson of the first station 'owner' (or lessee) of Robinson River and the neighbouring Calvert Hills Station. Over the course of two or three days we travelled around the station looking at various historical sites associated with this man's grandfather, as well as more recent station owners. Late one afternoon on the second day, after hours spent searching for rusted artifacts in the overgrown grass, he invited me around to his house for "a bit of a yarn and a feed" (FB November 2007).

We had talked that day about many things, from a mutual dislike of the local Chief Executive Officer (CEO) who managed the local corporation administering the small Robinson River community of some few hundred residents like a feudal barony (on this we agreed), to the problems with the Community Development Employment Program (CDEP), which focused the obligatory labour contributions of the local Aboriginal population upon antiquated cottage industries like raising goats and gathering mangoes<sup>14</sup>. With its uniform rows of prefabricated houses, the small township struck me as a profound anachronism: a beautiful, fading dream of communitarian living, of independent groups of Aborigines on their own estates. The reality, it seemed, was far different. On the loudspeaker every morning the

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<sup>14</sup> The ways in which this economic dimension of Aboriginal identities in places like Robinson River articulates with the broader problem of representation is partly addressed in Chapters Five, Seven and Eight.

CEO hectored parents to deliver their children to school. According to some of those with whom I spoke, most resented him, although others expressed qualified support.

Nevertheless, as predominantly Aboriginal settlements go, Robinson River seemed relatively peaceful, even somnolent. I waited until the sun went down and then made my way across the community on foot that night, enjoying the smell of eucalyptus amidst the wood smoke of cooking fires. After weeks of anxious questions I enjoyed the brief solitude. I left my notebook at home. I planned to let my companion lead the conversation that night with whatever he wanted to 'yarn' about. Most of the kids were on the other side of town playing football on a field made of dust and stones. For once, mercifully, there was no music, just the distant thud of bare feet on earth, with the occasional cheer from the sidelines. The growling and squealing of the rutting street dogs kept me swinging a stick, but this time at least they stayed well out of reach, too busy begging scraps to bother with me that day.

Leaving the township behind every morning was liberating. Travelling across the countryside with my companion was like moving in ancient time, back beyond the present political morass into what local Aboriginal people call 'Station Times', 'Wild Times', and '*Wanggala* Time' or 'Dreamtime' (Trigger 1992). A rocky outcrop becomes an ancestor, becomes a snake, becomes an outcrop again as I struggle to understand the history of this place. The melody of a Dreamtime song from my companion contains a living thread of the history of the land Australia from those who were here at the beginning, at least in terms of classical Aboriginal ideology. That hill is the transformed body of a kangaroo. That stone is a crouching frog. Everything that has a place in the Dreamtime has a place on the earth: semen, spit, the magic of love. They left them behind, where they remain, these features of the landscape, whatever *they* are, these Dreamtime gods. The whole of Creation is mapped here. It continues to move as the journeys and events of the Dreamtime move in ceremony. Amidst the incessant chant of song-poems and the plangent drone of didjeridu the land comes alive. My companion knows it all, effortlessly directing me along lines in the sand, tracks that seem as invisible to me as the movements of his ancestors. How to write about this, given all that has

come before me? Even the word Dreamtime seems insufficient. And what of the word 'Creation'? What about violence?

“Round the back of that hill. Whiteman used to shoot [Aboriginal] people from the top of the hill. Captain Cook unloading here first. Prisoners chained together. Walk from here, Robinson River and Wollgorang to Borroloola” (FB November 2007). With stories like these, Aboriginal people reconstruct the history of colonisation, blurring the boundaries between the present and the past while transgressing the putatively ‘scientific’ truth claims of history. Captain James Cook did not even come close to the Gulf in the *Endeavour* in 1770, and it was some eighteen years later that a fleet of eleven ships under the command of Captain Arthur Phillip arrived at Botany Bay to begin the colonisation of Australia. The ‘settlement’ of the Gulf only really began in earnest a hundred years later, in a different kind of world to that of eighteenth century men like Cook and Philip. Nevertheless, the apparently loose but in some respects wider veracity of these claims about Cook conveys the continuing impact of colonisation upon the lives of Aboriginal people at Robinson River, where the hero from the history books becomes a monstrous perpetrator (Rose 1984; Rose 1991; Rose 1992; Kolig 1979). This seems to personalise the history, as single individuals get blamed for the chaos of colonialism and all the problems of the contemporary period. “Our old people got a story about that guy, Captain Cook” (FB November 2007). History has often been used against Aboriginal people as something they lacked, or failed to get right (Muecke 2004). Here it is offered as something else in order to understand colonisation in Aboriginal terms. The similarity between these stories and more traditionally oriented Aboriginal narratives about the world-creative period is unmistakable. There are Aboriginal paintings of European sailing ships on the Waanyi/Garawa Aboriginal Land Trust at Nicholson River alongside classical totemic designs – all this hundreds of kilometres away from the coast. I had been told all this about Captain Cook earlier that day while overlooking a hill-site where a massacre is said to have occurred in the early days of colonial settlement on the station. At the time this story seemed to offer a compelling alternative view of the relationship between truth and representation through the interpolation of a distinctively non-Western – even pre-modern – perspective. At the same time, however, these kinds of stories drastically misconstrue the reality of colonisation,

and the complexities and ambiguities of the current situation. While sympathetic to such history, there are (as ever) other stories on offer. Sitting around the fire that night my companion gave me his.

“I’ll tell you what, man”, he said, leaning in quietly and with a long pause: “It’s hard to be a Yellafella, I’ll tell you what. Being Aboriginal is hard enough....”. In the stock camps and many of the missions of northern Australia, Aboriginal men – young and old – were called ‘boy’ into the 1930s and even beyond, labelled “stockboy, cowboy, killer boy, mule boy, camel boy, stallion boy, drover’s boy, manager’s plant boy, wagon boy, manager’s car boy, garage boy, store boy, blacksmith’s boy, butcher’s boy, labourer, kitchen boy, houseboy, garden boy, mailboy” (McGrath 1987, p. 32). Addressing me as ‘man’, I felt my companion was asking for something, claiming it from me. We had been working together for days, and I liked him and trusted him, but intimacies between men are not so easily won. Calling me ‘man’ was demanding more than either of us had presumed in the past few days. Elsewhere in Australia, terms like ‘Yellafella’ are highly evocative of the racist past, and the lamented period of assimilation (which ended in the 1950s and 60s, and sometimes later in some places). For many Aboriginal people, ‘Yellafella’ is little better than ‘half-caste’, and sometimes worse. Counterpoised like this against ‘Aboriginal’ (as in my companion’s clause), it was easy to imagine how offensive it would be to anyone who has had their integrity questioned as an Aborigine, or indeed to any member of a minority group that is similarly scarred by a history of racism. In reporting its use I have no wish to scandalize or offend. It is important to note that that while terms like Yellafella are not necessarily offensive in the southern Gulf, they are not necessarily inoffensive either. Many Aboriginal people in the southern Gulf refer to members of their own family (including their own mixed-descent children) as Yellafellas without intending or causing offense. Many mixed-descent people also identify themselves as Yellafellas, and attribute positive traits to this identification, as Trigger argues (1989b). Listening to my companion that night I sought to come to an understanding of what he meant in using it. “People say you’re not Aboriginal, you know, but you can’t help it, I mean you can’t change it, it’s like you just don’t belong anywhere. That’s how it feels. But this is my home, through my mother and my father” (FB November 2007). Here words like “belonging” and “home” take on

a great amount of meaning, specificity and singularity. “People say things about my [non-Aboriginal] grandfather but that’s not me (FB November 2007)”. Later I would travel to Dajarra, a few hundred kilometres further inland to meet my conversant’s father, to talk a little more about his father [i.e. my informant’s grandfather], the station manager who was reported to have acted as a policeman in the period of frontier violence in the southern Gulf. “He was sent here from England”, I was told, “to clean all the Blackfellas up [i.e. to kill Aboriginal people]” (FB July 2008). According to several older Aboriginal informants who claim to remember this man, he murdered Aboriginal people at Robinson River and the neighbouring station Calvert Hills in this period. Later he would settle down at Calvert Hills with an Aboriginal woman, or series of Aboriginal women, and be forgiven and even accepted as a “good, decent man” after a brief and violent confrontation with an Aboriginal man whose family he murdered (FB July 2008). But as my conversant repeatedly complained that night: “that’s not me” (FB November 2007).

When I visited Robinson River again the next year (in mid-2008) the Rudd Labor government’s February Apology to members of the Stolen Generations (and other Aboriginal people) was still being widely discussed in the national media. Along with other recent policies affecting Aborigines, it was part of a broadly progressive revisioning of Australia’s colonial past. In 1992, former Prime Minister Paul Keating called Aboriginal welfare “the test of our social goals and national will ... which so far we have always failed” (Keating 1992). In his December 1992 Redfern Speech, Keating called for an “act of recognition” that the problems in Aboriginal Australia began “with us non-Aboriginal Australians”:

[I]t was we who did the dispossessing. We took the traditional lands and smashed the traditional way of life. We brought the diseases. The alcohol. We committed the murders. We took the children from their mothers. We practiced discrimination and exclusion. It was our ignorance and prejudice. And our failure to imagine these things being done to us.... We failed to ask, how would I feel if this were done to me? As a consequence, we failed to see that what we were doing degraded all of us (Keating 1992).



Penned by Don Watson, the speech described contemporary Australians' responsibility for the continuing legacy of these crimes, while expressing hope in what the prime minister called "a new relationship" between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians (Keating 1992). My 'yarn' that night at Robinson River provided a different perspective on this national debate and the growth of this new relationship in the years since then, particularly as it affected those who position themselves in between national representations of Aboriginality and Whiteness. The non-Aboriginal station manager's son by a Garawa Aboriginal woman is esteemed as a senior Garawa man, while his grandson (my conversant that night) is a community leader at Robinson River<sup>15</sup>. While contemporary Aboriginal attitudes towards the early colonial figures who settled down and developed close ties with local Aboriginal people has sometimes been remarked upon by anthropologists (Cowlshaw 1999; McGrath 1987) this issue has rarely been thoroughly examined in Australia, especially with respect to shifting representations of colonial history in the aftermath of the Rudd Labor government's apology, leaving contemporary Aboriginal "openness about this past, and noncensoriousness about it" largely unexplored (Merlan 2001, p. 1). As I became aware that night, such shifting representations have affected understandings of Aboriginality and Whiteness in the southern Gulf in unexpected ways.

While Captain Cook never actually visited the Gulf of Carpentaria on his journey up the east coast of the continent in 1770, 'Captain Cook' stories have been widely disseminated throughout the Gulf country and elsewhere, telling of the arrival of a foreign visitor from across the ocean who brought dramatic social changes in his wake. In the bicentenary of Australia's colonisation in 1988, the anthropologist Kenneth Maddock discussed extant versions of this myth in New South Wales, Queensland, the Northern Territory and Western Australia, each of which varied somewhat in their presentation of Cook and his relations with Aboriginal people (Maddock 1988). In versions from the Kimberley and Victoria River regions of northern Australia (Kolig 1979; Rose 1984; Rose 1991), Cook is presented as a European culture hero. In Paddy Fordham Wainburranga's account from Rembarrnga country in Arnhem Land (Mackinolty & Wainburranga 1988), Cook is

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<sup>15</sup> My informant's father passed away in early 2011.

said to have been a good man who did not interfere with Aboriginal people himself, however others following him are said to have been responsible for killing people and stealing women, following what Hobbles Danayari called Cook's law (Rose 1984; Rose 1991). As Maddock argues, Rolly Gilbert's version from the Gulf (which I have included as an introductory epigraph to this chapter) is unusual for its depiction of the ways in which Cook's men are said to have utilised local people to facilitate the expropriation of Aboriginal land (Maddock 1988, p. 17). The senior Kurtjar man Rolly Gilbert gave this story in a speech to an academic conference in Brisbane on the ecology and management of savanna areas to celebrate Kurtjar peoples' purchase of the pastoral lease of *Delta Downs* over part of their ancestral country in the southeastern Gulf (Chase 1985, p. 169). This context is important, as I will argue.

This version of the Captain Cook myth (like all the other versions) is anachronistic in seeking to associate the explorer with the spread of pastoralism in the Gulf, which occurred more than a century after Cook surveyed the continent aboard H.M.S. Endeavour. As such, it is misleading to simply interpret this myth as history. Any attempt to compare this myth with relevant entries in Cook's journals – or the journals of Leichhardt, Gregory, Burke and Wills, etc. – repudiates the suggestion that this myth amounts to a kind of “oral documentation” analogous to these more official historical sources, as a number of anthropologists argued throughout the 1970s and 80s apropos Aboriginal myth more generally (Hiatt 1975; Tindale 1974). Nevertheless, this myth and others are expressive of Aboriginal attitudes towards settlement, and offer a useful corrective to other representations of Cook as a founding father of Australia, which are often similarly anachronistic, as well as untrue.

As Roberts has documented (2005), the settlement of the southern Gulf was excessively violent, even by Australian standards. In Roberts' recent history, extreme cruelty and brutality towards Aboriginal people is described as “commonplace” during the first few decades of settlement in the Gulf (2005, p. 110). When a member of MacIntyre's exploration party travelled west of the Flinders River into the country of Rolly Gilbert's Kurtjar ancestors in 1865, he

wrote a telling account of this cruelty and brutality which was published in the *Brisbane Courier* on the 17 January:

[T]he Queensland settlers seem to hunt and shoot the blacks whenever they see them, instead of making friends with them, and afterwards making them useful. I believe there are ways of managing them without shooting and exterminating (Roberts 2005, pp. 230-231).

Under these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that local people failed to discriminate between those who sought to make use of them as “friends” and those who planned to exterminate them like animals. Indeed contemporary accounts suggest that Aboriginal people often regarded all non-Aboriginal men as the same, “so the crimes of one guilty white man often resulted in the punishment of many who were innocent” (Linklater & Tapp 1997, p. 48). While many settlers may have been innocent, it is noteworthy that many of the most famous individuals from this period were involved in such violence, including Wentworth Darcy Uhr, Dillon Cox, Frank Shadforth and his sons Ernest and Bob, Frank Hann and Edward Edkins (Roberts 2005). Jack Watson’s infamous collection of “40 p[ai]rs of blacks’ ears” at *Lawn Hill* station has often been remarked upon as expressive of this commonplace inhumanity, although other stories are equally shocking (Monteath 2004; Watson & Martin-Chew 2009, p. 141)<sup>16</sup>. As Rolly Gilbert put it in his understated way: “I couldn’t see that was very right” (Chase 1985, p. 169).

In Aboriginal discourse in the Gulf, events like these are commonly said to have occurred in ‘Wild Time’. While Wild Time is not explicitly periodised, anthropologists have associated it with the years before Aboriginal people were “quietened down” and adopted a semi-sedentary life upon reserves lands, cattle stations and mission settlements in the early decades of the twentieth century. Wild Time is usually said to have begun with overland exploration of the Gulf from 1845 onwards with Frederich Wilhelm Ludwig Leichhardt’s expedition to Port

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<sup>16</sup> This story is widely known in the Gulf and is often raised in land and native title claim meetings in what one non-Aboriginal observer described as an attempt to “fire everyone up” (FB August 2010).

Essington and A. C. Gregory's expedition in 1856 (Trigger 1982, p. 92; Trigger 1992; Baker 1999; Roberts 2005; Dymock 1982). This was followed by the spread of pastoral activity in the region in the 1860s, which precipitated killings of settlers and cattle by Aboriginal people, and killing of Aboriginal people by settlers. As Dymock states (1982, p. 55), Wild Time is said to have had no uniform date of termination, which reflects the way in which violence continued into the twentieth century at certain places. The sporadic violence of many first encounters soon became semi-official policy, with the 1886 creation at old Corinda station on the Nicholson River of a Native Police station (Roberts 2005, p. 235). These Aboriginal policemen operated with virtual impunity in Queensland and the border country throughout the next decade or so, with a similar Native Police force operational in the Northern Territory at around the same time. In both Queensland and the Northern Territory, the violence of the Native Police forces was associated with cattle spearing by Aborigines, as well as conflict over Aboriginal women and girls (Trigger 1992, p. 21). According to Roberts, approximately 600 men, women, children, and babies were murdered in the region between 1881 and 1910, amounting to something like one-sixth of the Aboriginal population of this area (Roberts 2009). Older Aborigines recall this as the time "when everybody bin get shot", although other methods reportedly favoured by the Native Police included poisoning, stabbing, bashing, burning and drowning (Trigger 1982, p. 93). The diary of R. M. Watson – who settled Gregory Downs Station south of Burketown in 1873 with his two brothers Sydney and Harry – contains a chillingly matter-of-fact account of these years. He describes the work of the Native Police force as such:

[They] were kept simply to shoot blacks, not only when called to a Station where the blacks had been killing cattle, but further out where there was no settlement and the blacks were so much easier to get on to as they did not know the danger of rifles, nor what these black police were after (Watson c.1873, p. 13).

Aboriginal people responded by hiding out in the bush and intermittently fighting back with sorcery and some violence. As Trigger argues (1982, p. 94), Aboriginal members of this Police force were known as *yabayiri* [i.e. uncircumcised] in

Waanyi and Garawa country, suggesting that they came from areas that practiced a different form of initiation. In other areas, however, local Aboriginal people were used to murder their own relations, or otherwise mediate the relationship between non-Aboriginal settlers and those Aboriginal people who sought to maintain a semi-sedentary life away from settled areas. A distant relative of Rolly Gilbert murdered members of his own family on Kurtjar country near present-day Delta Downs, reportedly apologising to a relation who was hiding in a tree before shooting and killing him then taking the murdered man's children to resettle elsewhere. When I interviewed a great-grandson of one of his victims at Kowanyama in June 2010, this man's death was attributed to sorcery. But when sorcery failed, as it frequently must have, Aborigines reportedly resorted to some guerrilla tactics, particularly around the rugged Northern Territory/Queensland border country – although never on the same scale as the ravaged Kalkadoon, whose last stand at Battle Mountain near Mount Isa has entered regional lore (Swain 1993, p. 231).

This violence resulted in the creation of what Rose (following Taussig) termed “a death-space in the land of the living” (Rose 1992, p. 24; Taussig 1987, p. 4). Of those who survived, many were dislocated from their traditional territories, with Yanyuwa and Garawa people moving east along the coast towards Queensland, and many Waanyi groups moving west towards stations on the Barkly Tablelands. Other groups like the Min.ginda people from the Leichhardt River near modern-day Burketown disappeared, or seemed to disappear (Tindale 1974; Dymock 1998). With colonisation, surviving groups came to congregate on the fringes of new settlements like Burketown – where Ganggalida people took over country abandoned by the Min.ginda – while others drifted into mission settlements like Old Doomadgee or ration depots like Borroloola, as well as pastoral station-camps at Gregory Downs, Wollogorang, Wentworth, Calvert Hills, and elsewhere. Dislocated from their ancestral countries by violence, the survivors were also drawn in to these settlements by the desire for stimulants like tobacco and tea as well as the intoxicants like alcohol and opium (Trigger 1992, p. 26; Stanner 1979, p. 47). As Roberts notes, the demand for these commodities was rapidly identified by the authorities and readily exploited. Throughout the 1890s, Police Inspectors on routine tours throughout the region reportedly distributed tobacco and

sometimes opium to Aborigines in a conscious attempt to addict them (Roberts 2005, p. 256). While the 1897 *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act* sought to restrict the use of this dangerous substance, its trade to Aborigines appears to have continued well into the twentieth century. As late as 1904, a Normanton Constable observed that Aborigines “will walk ten miles for sixpence worth of opium”– although oral histories suggest that many may have walked a great deal further (cited in Roberts 2005, p. 256). Baker reports a voyage to get tobacco in traditional watercraft from the Borroloola area to and from Burketown in Queensland during Yanyuwa people’s experience of Wild Time (Baker 1999, p. 131).

Significantly, Rolly Gilbert’s understated reflection upon the rights and wrongs of this history in his version of the Captain Cook myth (i.e. “I couldn’t see that was very right”) contrasts markedly with many non-Aboriginal perspectives upon colonisation, especially within the heavily politicised environment of “the history wars” (Macintyre & Clark 2003). As McIntyre and Clark discuss, these ‘wars’ concern the debate between contradictory accounts of the impact of colonisation upon Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. Following Geoffrey Blainey, McIntyre and Clark describe the opposing sides of this debate in terms of a ‘black armband’ view of history that is overly concerned with guilt and shame, and a ‘Three Cheers’ or ‘white blindfold’ view of history that tends to absolve colonial Australia of any injustice whatsoever, preferring to wish away evidence of the kind of violence and duplicity that Rolly Gilbert describes (Macintyre & Clark 2003; Blainey 1993).

In contrast, many Aboriginal people express sympathy for particular settlers involved in conflict with Aboriginal people, as well as many of the Aborigines caught up in this violence as perpetrators, reflecting the personal relationships that Aboriginal people maintained with those responsible for violence after people are said to have gradually “quietened down”, whereupon Wild Time became Station Time in Aboriginal discourse (although it may also reflect the use of an alternative calculus for adjudicating violence). For example, the lessee whose grandson I ‘yarned’ with that night at Robinson River is said to have “quietened down” with a succession of Aboriginal women at the station, whereupon he was reportedly gradually drawn into kinship relations with his Aboriginal workers and

their dependents. When I interviewed the non-Aboriginal lessee's son (my conversant's father), he reported that a Garawa Aboriginal man frequently attacked his father (i.e. the lessee) for his role in the violence of Wild Time:

[The Aboriginal man] and he [i.e. the lessee] hated each other. [The Aboriginal man] used to take his milk, [the lessee] tried to shoot him with a shotgun. He [the Aboriginal man] used to have a lot of women promised to him, Kangaroo marriage you know, blackfella way. He [i.e. the Aboriginal man] hated him [i.e. the lessee] because he [i.e. the lessee] was going to take his [i.e. the Aboriginal man's] head off. [The lessee] went around the tree, put his trouser [i.e. crouched down to defecate] and [the Aboriginal man] chucked a spear. [The White lessee] fell down and the spear went over his head. [The Aboriginal man] got away, went to Redbank mine [on the neighbouring Wollogorang station]. He [i.e. the lessee] was a tough bastard. I don't know why he shoot people. The government of England sent him out to clean up [i.e. kill] all the blackfellas (FB June 2009).

The Aboriginal party to this conflict later returned to reside at Calvert Hills and the pair reportedly resumed amicable relations. Throughout this interview with this senior Garawa man, however, I remained unable to clarify the precise cause of this conflict or the way in which it was resolved. My informant's reference to the Aboriginal man's multiple wives suggests that he was an important man who may have been protecting his promised rights to women or girls that the lessee may have interfered with. Many wives meant many descendants, which was a jealously guarded outcome of classical Aboriginal politics (Roth 1984, p. 5; McKnight 2005, pp. 21-55). While such ambiguity may have been resolved through further enquiries prior to my informant's death in June 2011, it is arguably illustrative of an interpretative openness within this story, which seems to attract meaning rather than effect closure (at least in the transcription I have presented here) (Rose 1992, p. 237). Such interpretative openness illustrates the complex and variegated kinds of relationships that Aboriginal people maintain with this past, as well as the multiple ways in which people position themselves in the present. Juxtaposed with an expressed uncertainty as to "why he [i.e. the lessee] shoot people" (as though there might be an adequate explanation for this perfidity), my

informant's epitaph for his father as 'a tough bastard' is indicative of a somewhat equivocal perspective, insofar as being 'tough' is characteristically understood as a positive virtue within masculinist culture in the Gulf country, and throughout Australia's north more generally. While my informant's reflections upon the lessee's role in this conflict are no doubt shaped by their relationship as father and son, the point could equally well be made about the Aboriginal man involved in this story, who was also a relation (his wife's mother's father). Given that his wife was present throughout this discussion, this relationship may have been uppermost in his mind.

Rolly Gilbert's version of the Captain Cook myth appears to disavow these kinds of kinship connections by promoting a more abstract account of first contact that is explicitly (albeit subtly) moralised in 'black' and 'white' terms, with the curious interpolation of an element of anti-Semitism. This kind of abstraction may have had more utility at the time (i.e. in 1984) when Gilbert gave this speech than earlier, when more personalised accounts of what occurred were still in circulation. In some instances, contemporary accounts from the 1980s and 1990s and into the present time of writing (i.e. in 2011) of this Captain Cook myth actually contradict other accounts of colonisation in a way that suggests a kind of strategic forgetting or selective remembering at work in restructuring the past. In land claim hearings at Robinson River in 1989, for example, a senior Garawa man identified an early pastoralist by name as "the cheeky one" during the "old people time" at Robinson River. "He used to belt people, shooting people.... [W]e been see there all the bone on the hill there [near the site of the old station homestead, at a place called *Waningirri*]. They used to come around here, you know, shoot some people on the flat, you know" (*The Garawa-Mugularrangu (Robinson River) Land Claim Transcript of Proceedings* 1989, p. 282). However, during my fieldwork in 2007 - 2011, however, these more specific stories about certain individuals seemed to be increasingly subsumed within more general accounts of conflict between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, as Trigger has also reported (1992, p. 21). For example, a senior Garawa man interviewed in July 2009 described human remains piled "waist-high" at sites like *Waningirri* on Robinson River and speculated that they "must be shot" - "White people bin killim [i.e. kill them]" - without specifically identifying any perpetrator (FB July 2009). In a



similar way, a middle-aged informant specifically associated remains at *Waningirri* with the story of Captain Cook in a straightforward contradiction of the now-deceased Aboriginal man's account of what happened at Waningirri in the 1989 Land Claim. "Our old people got a story about that guy there, Captain Cook, coming through here shooting people" (FB July 2008).

The identification of indeterminacies within oral accounts of colonisation highlights the role of selective remembering in shaping the past towards the demands of the present. In the foundational Aboriginal stories of Australia there is a clearly a good deal of homology between history and myth, despite the common opposition of these terms in Western thinking since the Greeks, when *mythos* came to signify something fantastical and even absurd (Coupe 1997, p. 9). Drawing upon this opposition, Aboriginal accounts of events like colonisation (as well as Aboriginal accounts of the Dreamtime) appear to many non-Aboriginal Australians as false explanations given the way in which they are easily contradicted by empirical information. As a result of this opposition, however, the allegorical meaning of both 'history' and 'myth' is arguably misunderstood. While the Captain Cook myth that I have described may have weaknesses as an expressive account of the past, it is arguably more significant as a way of reflecting upon the present moment, when the distinction between early explorers and later settlers is less salient than the politics of land and native title claim or mining negotiations for many Aboriginal people<sup>17</sup>. Both historic and mythic stories about the past create a sense of community in the present. This is apparent from an examination of the broader context of Rolly Gilbert's speech to the International Savanna Symposium.

In 1985, contemporary disputes about identity, place and race for Kurtjar people in the Gulf country particularly related their ability to manage the recently acquired lease at Delta Downs station near Normanton, which was after all the subject of the conference session at which Rolly Gilbert gave his speech about Cook. As the anthropologist Athol Chase remarked upon introducing Gilbert:

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<sup>17</sup> The Birri Gubba Aboriginal writer Sam Watson's novel *The Kadaitcha Sung* (1990) provides a mythical perspective upon the present predicament of Aboriginal people around Brisbane in south-east Queensland which suggestively echoes parts of this discussion.

Mr. Gilbert is determined to make [Delta Downs] a success, even in European [i.e. non-Aboriginal] terms of operation.... [W]e cannot help but be impressed with the willingness of modern Aboriginal people such as Mr. Gilbert to work in with Europeans, particularly if they are willing for a change to listen to Aboriginal voices (Chase 1985, p. 167).

Given the opportunity to force non-Aboriginal people to listen, Rolly Gilbert chose to tell the story of Captain Cook rather than give an account of his struggle to establish Delta Downs. A pivotal part of this struggle involved the preparation of a document entitled *About Kurtjar Land*, which was written by Rolly Gilbert in collaboration with the linguist Paul Black, and signed by a representative group of Kurtjar people (Gilbert, Black & The Kurtjar People 1980). Disseminated widely as part of the campaign to fund the purchase of the lease of *Delta Downs* station near Normanton, in *About Kurtjar Land* Gilbert, Black and The Kurtjar People express the wish that “everybody [comes] to know where our traditional land is and how the white man has pushed us off of it” (Gilbert, Black & The Kurtjar People 1980, p. 1). In that document, the signatories argue:

If our land had been put into a reserve, then at least we might have been able to stay on it until today, and bring our children up to know their country and its ways, like the children on the reserves further north do (Gilbert, Black & The Kurtjar People 1980, p. 5).

While Kurtjar people continue to struggle for Native Title rights to traditional counties around Normanton (at the time of writing in late 2011), the purchase of *Delta Downs* in December 1982 went some way towards fulfilling their aim. As *About Kurtjar People* continues:

In the last ten years quite a lot of white people have been coming through Normanton saying that they want to help us in different ways.... [W]e’ve been trying to wait patiently, hoping they could do something. But since nothing has been happening, we thought that we’d better make this paper and sign it so that people might know about us.... Maybe there’s no way we

can get our land back today, we don't know. But in years to come our children and grandchildren will have this paper to fall back on, and maybe by then something can be done. We don't want to give up trying (Gilbert, Black & The Kurtjar People 1980, p. 65).

Alongside this *About Kurtjar People* document, Rolly Gilbert's version of the Captain Cook myth can be seen as an attempt to develop an Aboriginal narrative or 'counter-narrative' to non-Aboriginal accounts of exploration and 'discovery'. This is important insofar as accounts of exploration and 'discovery' played a role not just in the dispossession of Aboriginal people but, critically, in their continuing marginalisation. As Tiffin and Lawson argue, "Imperial relations may have been established by guns ... but they were maintained ... largely by textuality (Tiffin & Lawson 1994, p. 3). By representing Cook as responsible for this violence within the same broadly 'textual' medium – by reading his speech into the conference proceeding via the work of the anthropologist Athol Chase – Gilbert's version of the Captain Cook myth undermines non-Aboriginal accounts of exploration and 'discovery' at the same time as it promoted Kurtjar peoples' claims for historical restitution. Rolly Gilbert's version of the Captain Cook myth might thereby be seen as an attempt to set relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people up upon more equitable grounds as equal partners in an international project towards the ecology and management of the world's savannas, with Aboriginal people the proud new owners of Delta Downs pastoral lease: Australia's largest Aboriginal-owned cattle station. This is one of the ways in which it might be understood in terms of contemporary disputes about place, race, and identity in the southern Gulf.

Of course it is inadequate to analyse Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal myths about colonisation separately. It is surely no coincidence that the work of the 1980s anthropologists I have already cited (Kolig 1979; Mackinolty & Wainburranga 1988; Rose 1984; Rose 1991; Maddock 1988; Sutton 1988b) reflects a different perspective to that of an earlier generation such as Hiatt (1975) and Tindale (1974). Tonkinson, for example, reports that Western Desert Aborigines were disinclined to question colonial dispossession and exploitation during his fieldwork in the 1960s (Tonkinson 1974). The Australian community as a whole –

Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal – went through a period of heightened awareness relating to the impact of colonisation upon Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in the later 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, leading up to the Bicentennial celebrations of 1988. As Erich Kolig argues, it helpful to consider Aboriginal myths about Captain Cook within the context of continental links established in this period between “well-informed southern urban Aborigines” and those in remote Australia, rather than the product of a purely ‘traditional’ people with access to a solely oral tradition (Kolig 1979, p. 275; Maddock 1988, p. 19). In Rolly Gilbert’s case, this may have included the influential Aboriginal leader Charles Perkins, who worked with Gilbert towards the December 1982 purchase by the Aboriginal Development Commission of all the shares in the Delta Downs Pastoral Company. Rather than diminishing its expressive power, however, the ambiguous provenance of Gilbert’s Cook story enriches its significance in interesting ways, extending out from the Gulf to take in the different ways in which Aboriginality is constructed and reconstructed in contemporary Australia in accordance with a new “metaphysic of identity” shaped by current situations, including interactions with non-Aboriginal people (Sutton 1988b, p. 257). As Maddock argues, the mythmakers like Gilbert who created these stories “would have learned from European sources, having been taken over and turned into symbols of what was real or possible in intercultural relations” (1988, p. 26). It is this understanding of myth as a symbol of what is possible rather than simply what is real that Gilbert’s account of Captain Cook in *Wild Time* conveys most powerfully: “[myth] as an opening on to other possible worlds which transcend the established limits of our actual world” (Ricoeur 1991, p. 490). I will turn now to some of these European sources, including the accounts of the explorers themselves to gauge both their ordinary textual power, as well as some of the other ways in which Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people have historically responded to them.

## **2.2. A Discourse of Exploration and ‘Discovery’**

Within what might be called orthodox (now somewhat old-fashioned) accounts of colonisation, the arrival of the Europeans in Australia was often said be the beginning of civilization on the continent, and in some respects the start of Australian history itself. In Manning Clark’s *A History of Australia*, the “culture” of the Aborigines is defined as distinct from “civilisation” along the lines laid out by

Mathew Arnold: “‘civilisation’ in the sense ... of a people brought out of a state of barbarism ... did not begin in Australia until the last quarter of the eighteenth century” (Clark 1962, p. 3n). According to Clark, the inaugural moment in which civilisation did begin involved a violent confrontation with Aborigines. He writes:

On 29 April [1770], just after one of the aborigines threw a stone at the small boat as a mark of their resolution to oppose a landing, Cook replied with light musket shot, while the wives and children of the aborigines on the beaches set up a most horrid howl (Clark 1962, p. 42).

As Clark puts it, the English properly began their “ceremonies” a few days later by inscribing a tree in Botany Bay with the name of their ship and the date of their arrival (Clark 1962, p. 50). In the Gulf, these ‘ceremonies’ took place some decades later, when Flinders first circumnavigated the continent, marking trees along the way (Flinders 2001), and was followed by Stokes (c.1841), Leichhardt (1845-6), Gregory (1856), Burke and Wills (1861), McKinlay (1861), Landsborough (1861-2), Walker (1862), and others. For Clark, publishing in the early 1960s, the “horrid howl” of the Aborigines contained in it “a prophecy of doom” due to the “backwardness” and “material weakness” of Aboriginal culture, which failed to “adapt itself” to the invader as readily as the “land” enabled “man” to “scratch[] his presence” (Clark 1962, p. 110). While marking trees may have been the first way in which the colonisers “scratched [their] presence”, the writing of empire produced a thoroughgoing discourse of exploration and ‘discovery’ shortly thereafter, which was in some respects even more important to the imperial project than the physical occupation of space represented by the blazed trees (Pratt 1992, p. 4)<sup>18</sup>. As Ryan (1996) argues, the explorers or explorer-writers produced a putatively empty space through their writing that was then able to be filled by settlers. While their methods were different to the work of Gilbert’s Captain Cook, the outcome was thus in some respects the same.

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<sup>18</sup> I use the somewhat tautological formulation exploration and ‘discovery’ here to distinguish between the process and the product of this discourse. I understand exploration as a process that produces ‘discovery’, which I have placed within intonational quotation marks throughout to highlight its constructed nature, as well as its dubious claim that Australia was empty (‘undiscovered’) prior to the arrival of the Europeans.

Like Cook, Frederich Wilhelm Ludwig Leichhardt has entered the imagination of many Australians as a culture hero, what fellow explorer Ernest Favenc called the “Prince of Explorers” (Favenc 1888?, p. 154). Described by Taylor and Perkins as the “alpha text” of the tropical north, the influence of Leichhardt’s *Journal of an Overland Expedition in Australia* has been immense (Taylor & Perkins 2007, p. 215). Throughout texts like Favenc’s *A History of Australian Exploration from 1788 to 1888* (1888?) as well as the explorer journals upon which Favenc drew, description is deployed towards the task of representing areas like the Gulf as receptive to settlement, as indeed inviting settlement. As Mitchell puts it, texts like these sought to do “the dreamwork of imperialism”:

[U]nfolding its own movement in time and space from a central point of origin and folding back on itself to disclose both utopian fantasies of the perfected imperial prospect and fractured images of unresolved ambivalence and unsuppressed resistance (Mitchell 2002, p. 10).

In the southern Gulf, this new landscape of imperial textuality resulted in what has been described as one of the fastest land-grabs in Australia’s history, as pastoralists rushed to stock stations in Queensland and the Northern Territory along the track laid out by Leichhardt’s route (McLaren 2000, pp. 21-23). As Ryan (1996) argues, this was facilitated by the creation of a putatively ‘empty’ space through the use of an objective and metaphorically disembodied point-of-view: the cartographic eye or I. In a similar vein, Carter (2010 [1987], pp. xiv-xv) argued that these narratives produced an empty stage upon which the drama of colonisation was taking and literally making place.

Leichhardt’s *Journal* provides an apt illustration of such place-making when Leichhardt explicitly juxtaposes his own perspective upon the landscape with the description of an Aboriginal guide called Charley:

Charley gave a characteristic description of this country, when he returned from a ride in search of game: “It is a miserable country! nothing to shoot at, nothing to look at, but box trees and ant-hills”. The box-forest was,

however, very open and the grass was good; and the squatter would probably form a very different opinion of its merits. When we were preparing to start in the morning some natives came to look at us; but they kept within the scrub, and at a respectable distance (Leichhardt 1847, p. 333).

Rather than utterly silencing Aboriginal people's contribution to the expedition, Leichhardt notes Charley's perspective then denigrates it. While Leichhardt elsewhere praises the "wonderful quickness and accuracy" of his Aboriginal companions, Charley and Brown – and the "naturally more intense ... impressions on their retina" – they are castigated here for "characteristically" failing to perceive the potential of the land (Leichhardt 1847, p. 118). According to colonial logic, Aboriginal people's apparent failure to exploit the land justified its expropriation, insofar as God reportedly gave the land "to the use of the industrious and rational, and labour was to be his title to it" (Locke 1821, p. 214). This anecdote brutally rehearses this colonial 'theatre' by enlisting Charley to play the role of the characteristically ignorant Aboriginal. Silenced by the author, the local 'natives' in the wings merely mime their assent: keeping "within the scrub" like animals, they are said to maintain a "respectable distance" from the explorers, as though they were somehow already aware of their own small role in the great drama. Scenes like these served to justify the expropriation of Aboriginal land, even as they made such expropriation properly conceivable for the first time. As such they are vividly illustrative of the power of representation to literally remake the world. As an extension of the *Logos*, they assert the divine power to create; not *ex nihilo* like a God, but from the richly textured landscapes of Aboriginal people.

While this argument could be extended with any number of examples from this *Journal* and others, the link between representation and colonial expropriation goes far beyond the silencing of Aboriginal voices, suggesting that many of the challenges of making place in the post-colony converge upon the act of storytelling and its forms of narration. One of the most obvious ways in which this occurs in the *Journal* is through Leichhardt's adherence to the established generic conventions of Australian exploration literature. Taylor and Perkins list these in their survey of this literature as follows, citing:

[T]heir clear prose styles; their mimicry of bureaucratic or military reporting; their scientific erudition; their application of Latin nomenclature to species of animals and plants, minerals, soils and geological formations; and the measurements that they derived from a developing technology of chronometers, sextants, barometers and thermometers (Taylor & Perkins 2007, p. 215).

For Taylor and Perkins, adherence to such “stiff generic conventions” manifests the “confidence of an imperial culture”, although this may also arguably be seen as imperial hubris, masking significant anxieties about the extent of colonial control (2007, p. 214). The following extract from Leichardt’s *Journal* about the edge of the study-region (north of modern-day Normanton) provides a good illustration of this, disclosing evidence of the kinds of fractured images of unresolved ambivalence and unsuppressed resistance that Mitchell identified in landscape:

We left the camp where Mr. Gilbert was killed, and travelled in all about fourteen miles south-west, to lat. 16°6'. We passed an extensive box-tree flat, and, at four miles, reached a chain of water-holes; but, during the next ten miles, we did not meet the slightest indication of water. Box-tree flats of various sizes were separated by long tracts of undulating country, covered with broad-leaved tea-trees, *Grevillea ceratophylla*, and *G. mimosoides* (Leichhardt 1847, p. 313).

Taken from the entry for 1 July 1845 – a few days after the party were violently attacked by a group of Aborigines north of present-day Normanton, resulting in the spearing-death of the ornithologist Gilbert – this passage seems to dramatise the Europeans’ inability to safely inhabit the land at the same time as it rigidly observes the conventions outlined by Taylor and Perkins. Rather than manifesting the Europeans’ confidence it seems to serve instead to underline their hubris, calling attention to their inability to escape from such rigid conventions, even at the cost of considerable inconvenience, discomfiture, danger and even death. This inconsistency is particularly striking if David Horton’s unreferenced remarks concerning the likely cause of this attack are to be believed. Horton alleges that



this attack occurred after Leichhardt's party molested Aboriginal (probably Kokoberrin) women and murdered a man (Horton 1994, p. 556). Given that the ornithologist Gilbert is in some respects the namesake of Rolly Gilbert – whose version of the Captain Cook myth conveys this kind of colonial perfidity – the inconsistency between Leichhardt's prose and the reality it sets out to describe appears even more outrageous.

While Horton's allegation is unsupported by other literature, Leichhardt's attention to detail in this passage seems perverse, even slightly insane, although it could also be interpreted as an illustration of military-style discipline or pretention. Despite the pressing need to escape from the "hazardous" vicinity of the attack in case "the natives might return in greater numbers" and repeat the assault that resulted in the death of Gilbert and serious injuries to Calvert and Roper, Leichhardt continues to assess the precise latitudinal position of the party (Leichhardt 1847, p. 311). This demonstrates not only his scientific erudition, but also his inflexibility and even (at least from a modern point-of-view) his unfeeling. This lack of feeling is also illustrated in the tone of this passage, which is largely matter-of-fact: despite the human drama of its subject matter, it remains dominated by a seemingly disinterested scientific curiosity, or 'scientism'. Leichhardt, for example, bothers to describe the broad-leaved tea-trees observed along the way, and even applies the Latin names to these plants ("Grevillea ceratophylla, and G. mimosoides"). The dramatic and no doubt traumatic tragedy of Gilbert's death is dealt with (and literally *disposed of*) in the introductory clause: disregarding personal trauma, the narrative moves on, driven by the inexorable need to make good time. The author or author-function of the text (i.e. 'Leichhardt') deliberately forecloses any emotion of anxiety or suspense, much as Leichhardt presumably foreclosed such emotions himself at the time. The absorbing human drama of these isolated men – vulnerable to further attack, fruitlessly searching for signs of water – is sublimated to the onward thrust of the narrative, which reflects the difficult progress of the party under its obdurate leader. As this passage demonstrates, the narrative conventions that Taylor and Perkins describe are continually broken down by the difficulties of the journey. In this way, significantly, the supposedly coherent and efficient matrix of power/knowledge that Said (1985 [1978]) and others have described as colonial

discourse is disrupted, at least in this instance in Australia. In this passage and many others, Leichhardt's *Journal* is as anxious as it is assured.

This anxiety of colonial discourse has previously been associated with 'ambivalence' at the source of authority. For Bhabha and many other broadly 'post-colonial' critics, colonial representation is always particularly open to the trace of the other or the language of the other, which undermines the structures of domination in the colonial situation (Bhabha 1994). This theoretical focus upon the inherently dialogical situation of colonialism has encouraged critics to identify the development of a hybrid displacing space in the interaction between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Australia, often in the earliest texts of empire. More than a merely textual feature, such ambivalence is manifest in mythmaking about explorers such as Leichhardt, whose disappearance stimulated the growth of a subgenre of romance novels including J. F. Hogan's *The Lost Explorer: An Australian Story* (1890), W. Carlton Dawe's *The Golden Lake, or The marvellous history of a journey through the great lone land of Australia* (1891), as well as Favenc's *The Secret of the Australian Desert* (189-?) (in which three explorers assisted by an Aboriginal guide locate an elderly non-Aboriginal man whom they identify as a member of Leichhardt's lost party, as well as a manuscript that describes the expedition's last days). Robert Dixon (1995, pp. 65-66) argues that the traces of Leichhardt's lost expedition work to reassure anxieties related to colonial settlement as well as racial purity and miscegenation. Among those traces are of course the marked or 'blazed' trees that Clark mentions in his *A History of Australia*, which are represented in *The Secret of the Australian Desert* as something that might outlast Aboriginal inscriptions upon the landscape.

In the most famous fictionalisation of Leichhardt (and other Australian explorers including Edward John Eyre) in Patrick White's *Voss* (1957) this sense of permanence or semi-permanence is also emphasised, albeit in a way that radically departs from Favenc's presentation. At the end of that novel, at the unveiling of a memorial statue to the lost explorer, White offers a cryptic pronouncement on a statue of Voss [i.e. Leichhardt] that seems to draw this non-Aboriginal myth about colonisation closer to the Aboriginal myths with which I began this chapter:

The blacks talk about him to this day. He is still there – that is the honest opinion of many of them. He is there in the country, and always will be. If you live and suffer long enough in a place you do not leave it altogether. Your spirit is still there (White 1957, p. 472).

While this comment is over-loaded with a typically Christian interpretation of the significance of suffering, it also represents an appropriation of Aboriginal beliefs insofar as Voss – like a Dreamtime hero, and indeed like some continental versions of the Captain Cook story – is thought to have lain down and left his mark on the country. As these cryptic pronouncements from *Voss* suggests, the myth of Leichhardt, Burke and Wills and all the explorers continues to haunt the imagination of many Australians, as Australia is created and re-created as ‘empty’ and yet always already haunted or full. This illustrates the continuing ambivalence of colonial discourses like exploration and ‘discovery’, where anxieties relating to settlement continue to be expressed, as I will discuss.

### **2.3 Artefacts of History**

While the explorers’ own publications like Leichhardt’s *Journal* may be rarely read in Australia today (Carter 1992, p. 27), the discourse of exploration and ‘discovery’ continue to shape representations of Aboriginality and Whiteness in significant ways. Beyond the literary means or ‘tropes’ that these kinds of texts deploy towards the task of describing the Gulf, this discourse is evident in non-textual artefacts, notably trees. A brief case study concerning the memorialisation of exploration and ‘discovery’ through the display of trees thought to be blazed by Leichhardt (at Borroloola) and William Landsborough during his search for the missing Burke and Wills (near modern-day Burketown) illustrates this. As already discussed, these kinds of traces of the explorers represent non-Aboriginal presence and belonging in some ways. In the southern Gulf country, however, the signification of text and intertext relates to the metaphysics of present-day Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal identity in a rather more complex way, highlighting the continuing ambivalence of colonial settlement.

In mid-2007, when I first arrived in Borroloola, I visited the town’s small Police Station Museum. Housed in an old colonial-style timber building with a corrugated

tin roof, residents claim it to be the oldest surviving built structure in Borrooloola, and in fact the oldest surviving outpost police station in the whole of the Northern Territory. Built a few months after the town was first gazetted in 1886, it was eventually restored as a Museum, Tourist Information and Community Centre in the early 1980s (Cotton 2005). In a pamphlet about the town entitled *Borrooloola: Isolated and Interesting*, local historian Judy Cotton describes the “years of neglect” which affected this “attractive building” and her campaign to restore it (Cotton 2005, p. 27). As the historian Mark McKenna argues in his account of a similar campaign in the Bega Shire of New South Wales (McKenna 2002, pp. 86-87), attempts to bestow a physical presence upon the heritage of a community characteristically focus upon what are reportedly the oldest built structures in the town, such as the school-house, post-office, court-house, police station or bank (although rarely its public houses, which more frequently came first). While the preservation of significant buildings is common to the memorialisation of history throughout much of the world, McKenna associated it with a peculiar “sense of fragility” felt by local historians in his study region:

The belief that settler history needed to be sheltered and housed, to be made visible and given a physical presence, suggested that a people without a history were a people without a soul, a community without a shared memory (McKenna 2002, p. 87).

Opened in time for the town’s centenary celebrations in 1985, the Borrooloola Police Station Museum seems to exemplify McKenna’s observation. Inside the Museum, aside from some displays of text, reproduced photographs, and rusted metal artefacts, the main exhibit appears to be the amputated trunk of what is claimed to be a tree blazed by Leichhardt or a member of his party on his 1844-45 expedition from Moreton Bay to Port Essington. Rooted in iron now rather than soil, but with the explorer’s indelible blaze still visible amidst the cracks of old age, it is on display alongside the detritus of the region’s pioneering industry – weathered saddles, rusted stirrups, dingo traps, broken spectacles, glass bottles, and even a termite-eaten copy of the *Webster’s Dictionary* (see Photograph 7).



*Photograph 7: The Leichhardt Tree in the Borroloola Police Station Museum. Photograph by author, November 2007.*

The display accompanying the 'Leichhardt' tree credits a local man named Ted Martin for locating it on the banks of the Calvert River and moving it to the Museum. In the Museum, it might be seen to symbolically naturalise the historical 'roots' of the non-Aboriginal community in the southern Gulf, connecting the modern residents of Borroloola with the first non-Aboriginal people in the area. While the tree itself appears to be of interest to Aboriginal as well as non-Aboriginal visitors, the bulk of the Museum significantly ignores the lives of the Aboriginal groups who presently live in the town, presenting a view of Australian history ideologically consistent with that described by W. E. H. Stanner in his 1968 Boyer lectures as a "cult of forgetfulness practiced on a national scale" (Stanner 2009, p. 189). As Stanner describes it, this form of active 'dis-remembering' extends beyond an ignorance of frontier violence into a general lack of attention to Aborigines *per se*, beginning in the early twentieth century and lasting into the 1960s (Stanner 2009). While this forgetfulness has been challenged by the last

forty years of research into colonial Australia, it is helpful to observe that the 'forgetting' of Aborigines was always far more complex and subtle than simply drawing a veil over the violence of the past (as Roberts described it, 2005, pp. 111-142). Even today, numerous alternative narratives continue to circulate about colonial Australia, with different perspective upon the place of Aborigines therein. As McKenna argues:

Narratives that acknowledged frontier violence ... coexisted with historical narratives that erased the frontier from settler memory. This is true especially in the nineteenth century, and the period between 1970 and the present day (McKenna 2002, p. 63).

McKenna's perspective helpfully focuses attention upon the way in which the Borroloola Museum contextualises its display of a Leichhardt tree in a way which deliberately shapes people's understanding of the town along racially bifurcated lines, with Aboriginal people seemingly still dis-remembered today (Stanner 2009).

Like the Police Station Museum at Borroloola, the Post Office Museum at Burketown is also situated in the town's oldest building, although the Burketown Hotel inaccurately claims that honour. As in Borroloola, the Museum at Burketown is staffed by volunteers, and contains a similar assortment of colonial detritus. Like Borroloola's Museum, it may seem to exemplify the ideological baggage of 'white blindfold' history, producing a racially bifurcated representation of the town that seemingly dis-remember Aboriginal people. Unlike at Borroloola, however, Burketown's landmark explorer tree – marked by the explorer William Landsborough in 1862 during his search for the missing Burke and Wills – was never relocated to its Museum. Instead, volunteers at the Museum directed tourists towards the mud flats outside Burketown where an old Coolabah tree stood for some one hundred and forty years beside the ruins of the town's old Meatworks, forming a significant point-of-interest for generations of visitors (see Photograph 8).



*Photograph 8: The Landsborough Tree. Photographed by Alphonse Chargois, date unknown. Source: John Oxley Library, 76-8-3 (109946).*

In late 2002, however, this tree was destroyed in an act of arson (see Photograph 9). When I first visited Burketown some years after this event (in June 2008) and interviewed a volunteer at the Museum, he bitterly lamented the loss of the tree, which he associated with the impact of 'black armband' history. However, this act of arson provides an insight into local disputes about the meaning of exploration and discovery which are considerably more complex than any straightforward conflict between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people along the lines laid out by warring historians.



*Photograph 9: The Landsborough Tree, June 2008, showing the charred stump of the original tree next to a recently planted sapling. Photograph by author.*

More than a mere tourist site (like the town's now-disused meatworks, seen in the background of Photograph 8) the tree's connection with Australia's history of exploration seems to have stimulated a particularly emotional response from many local people, particularly non-Aboriginal residents, who appear to have identified most closely with the tree. As Burke Shire Mayor Annie Clarke told a journalist at the time: "People feel very strongly about being able to go in the path of the explorers, and suddenly it's not there anymore" (Australian Associated Press 2002). When I conducted fieldwork in Burketown a few years after this event (from 2007 – 2010) other non-Aboriginal residents expressed similar views about the loss of the tree, although several also joked about it. As a non-Aboriginal resident of some four decades standing, the mayor's comments about the arson are especially instructive. In an interview with Mount Isa's *North West Star*, Clarke described it as "a cruel blow" to Burketown (Jensen 2002):



In these days of recognition and respect for areas and items of cultural significance it's devastating to think this kind of thing can happen. How are we ever going to achieve anything when there are people with a certain mentality that have no respect for anything.... I believe there will be so many people angered that something of such significance gets treated so badly and self-interest prevails. I'm disgusted and sick of tired [sic] of people with this distorted point of view (Jensen 2002).

Like Clarke, Queensland's then-Minister for Police and Corrective Services Tony McGrady described the act as "un-Australian" (Australian Associated Press 2002).

It is part of our history and louts, the lowest of the low, have seen fit to destroy it, which is very disappointing for everybody. I hope the full extent of the law will come down upon them (Australian Associated Press 2002).

Despite the Hon. McGrady's personal interest in the case, however, the crime remains officially unsolved. My enquiries at the Burketown Police Station in July 2009 failed to clarify whether the perpetrator or perpetrators had even been identified by the police, although speculation abounds amongst both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people as to their likely identity.

In these brief quotations, Cr. Clarke and the Hon. McGrady suggest a reading of the act of arson that is implicitly racialised as a contest between competing views of history that are seemingly associated with Aboriginal people (and their supporters) and non-Aboriginal people, although both politicians allow for the fact that the arsonist(s) may not have been Aboriginal. McGrady's use of the term un-Australian seems particularly designed to invoke an ideological reading of the event. This reading is seemingly replicated in a piece of handwritten graffiti on the information board at the site. Added to the board by an anonymous person sometime in late 2008 or early 2009 (i.e. approximately six years after the arson) and removed a few months later, this note provides an attempt to explain the act. Scrawled on the sign in black permanent marker, this message reads in full: "The tree was burnt down (desecrated) [sic] by some of the "locals" in similar pattern as the Roper Bar Police Station, Jardine's "Somerset" in Albany Pass and several

other historical sites” (FB July 2009). While this note is unsigned, it provides a possible explanation for the act of arson, with the use of the word “desecrated” [sic] – i.e. “Deprived of its sacred character; treated as unhallowed, profaned” (OED) – suggestive of a concerted political campaign to damage particular sites, or de-create them (as the author’s solecism suggests). Following this line of reasoning, it is tempting to interpret the intonational quotation marks around the word “locals” as a reference to Aboriginal people, whose official status as indigenes is seemingly disputed, or at least dialogised in Bakhtin’s formulation. For Bakhtin, parodic intonation is always “double-voiced” insofar as any imitation also unwittingly includes the voice of its subject (Bakhtin 1981). Critically, this dialogical ‘doubling’ – intentional or not – disrupts the interpretation I have developed, generating proliferating explanations. It is possible to read this note as an expression of outrage along the lines laid out by Cr. Clarke and the Hon. McGrady. Alternatively, it may be read as a cryptic claim of responsibility by the arsonist, who in choosing to remain anonymous nevertheless attempts to associate the act with a broader political agenda. It is also possible to see this note as the product of an outsider sympathetic to this supposed campaign of ‘desecration’.

While it may be impossible to adduce the identity of the graffitist, the substance of his or her claim is easier to investigate. The other historical sites at Roper Bar in the Northern Territory and at Somerset in Albany Pass on Cape York Peninsula were indeed burnt down like the Landsborough tree. But contrary to what the note suggests, it is unclear how these events are otherwise connected. Drunken Aboriginal women who had sought shelter from the cold reportedly destroyed the Police Station at Roper Bar in 1981. According to a local non-Aboriginal resident interviewed for this thesis, the women were “pretty remorseful” about the damage, having built a fire “just to keep warm, it was pretty cold out there and that was the boundary of the drinking area” (FB September 2009). While these women identified themselves as the perpetrators they were reportedly not charged by the police: “I knew those two old ladies, they were devastated about what they’d done.... It was a complete accident” (FB September 2009). Similarly, it is unclear how the burnt homestead at Somerset is connected to the arson of the Landsborough tree. While the Somerset homestead also burnt down, that fire

occurred in 1960, some forty-two years before the Landsborough tree in Burketown. Moreover, unlike even the incident at Roper Bar, it is unclear as to whether Aboriginal people were involved in this incident at all. Heritage officers interviewed for this thesis were unclear about the causes of the 1960 fire, or indeed exactly when the fire occurred. There is no evidence that the destruction of the Somerset Homestead was the result of an act of arson, although heritage officers repeated rumours that Aboriginal people desecrated gravesites at Somerset following the death of the explorer Frank Jardine in 1919. According to a local historian, the Homestead was abandoned in the Second World War and simply deteriorated over time before being consumed by a fire (Hall 1990). The note attached to the information board therefore appears to draw a potentially inflammatory connection between apparently unconnected events.

Local people offer a variety of perspectives upon this crime. In anonymous interviews for this project, several non-Aboriginal residents blamed a man of mixed Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal descent for the crime. In late December 2002, this man was reportedly evicted from the Burketown Hotel for being overly intoxicated and drove out to the site to destroy the tree in retaliation. According to these informants, he escaped detection due to a fortuitous downpour that prevented the police from investigating the site until after his tracks had been destroyed. While this man declined an interview, other Aboriginal people have rejected this hypothesis, privately blaming a group of politicised Aboriginal people. One member of this group privately accepted responsibility for this arson, while declining to comment upon his motivation. But the destruction of the Landsborough tree must be seen in context. The crime of arson is not exceptional in Burketown: as well as the Landsborough tree, several private residences were destroyed in the late 1990s and early 2000s in a series of arson-attacks which culminated in the destruction of the town's Shire Council building and library. The rebuilt Shire Council building is today protected with close-knit metal-grills across its windows that were specifically designed to withstand petrol bomb attacks. According to a former Burke Shire Councillor, these events are connected with the scandal-ridden tenure of a non-Aboriginal Mayor accused of sexual crimes involving Aboriginal children. But as this informant claimed: "*everything* is connected", including protracted negotiations throughout the 1990s over the

distribution of royalties for Aboriginal people from the Century Lead and Zinc mine at Lawn Hill, as well as a number of other things (FB November 2009). While these motivations take us beyond the scope of this thesis into issues that remain legally sensitive today (i.e. in 2011), this apparent mixture of personal and political motivations indicates the many alternative pathways of signification leading away from the site of the burnt Landsborough tree into other present disputes.

The last interpretation of this suggestively ambiguous act may best be left to an older Aboriginal woman from nearby Doomadgee, who criticised those responsible for the arson while seeking to articulate the numerous ways in which Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people have learnt to live together in this small town in which so much of their histories overlap. In an interview conducted for this thesis in November 2009, she said it is “very upsetting” that the tree has been burnt down. She blamed Aboriginal “radicals”, and claimed they destroyed it out of “spitefulness”. Her comments suggest the way in which Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal mythmaking about colonization relate to all sorts of other issues, recalling the numerous other responses to the discourse of exploration and ‘discovery’ that I have already described. She said:

That tree was marked by Burke and Wills, or was it? That other name, what was it? Yes, that’s right it was Landsborough, he brought it from England and grew it there. They went and burnt it down. I think he started the meat-works there (FB November 2009).

The claim that Landsborough brought this tree from England and grew it there is odd given the iconic status of the Coolabah tree in Australia, but is nevertheless homologous in some ways with Rolly Gilbert’s account of Captain Cook in Wild Time. In fact, this senior Ganggalida woman is closely related to Gilbert through her mother, and professed great admiration for Gilbert’s ability to “talk up to White [i.e. non-Aboriginal] people, you know, he could tell them what he thought” (FB November 2009). On this occasion, however, she went on to explain that her mother had been born alongside the Landsborough tree:

Us older people are upset. What a lot of them [i.e. younger Aboriginal radicals] don't understand is our ancestors adopted those [non-Aboriginal] people into this area, into the Aboriginal tribe. My old Dad he wanted to include them. They looked after [fellow explorer] Kennedy, [who] ended up at Normanton. Kennedy floated into Normanton and the Aboriginal people looked after him. Aboriginal people were always kind to them. It was the White [i.e. non-Aboriginal] policemen who didn't want [Aboriginal people] to look after them, who used to hunt them [i.e. Aboriginal people] away. [That's the] difference between old people and younger people in attitudes, because [the] old people adopted them [i.e. the explorers and early settlers] (FB November 2009).

Intriguingly, this woman went on to connect this attitude to the explorers with the contemporary treatment of non-Aboriginal families with a long history in the region. She stated: "Aboriginal people helped to deliver their kids in those days and gave them all skin names. [It was] after the 1967 referendum [that] Aboriginal people stopped adopting them. People started fighting then about who had more rights than others" (FB November 2009).

This woman's comments highlight the diverse ways in which different residents situate themselves with regard to dominant narratives of 'the past'. Simplistic accounts of one perspective or another as 'Aboriginal' or 'non-Aboriginal' fail to account for this diversity, which arises from the ambivalence of colonial discourse. While the questions I have raised regarding contemporary memory and mythmaking about the past will recur in subsequent chapters, I return in the following conclusion to the problems of interdisciplinarity that I raised in this chapter's introduction. Given the vexed context of contemporary Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relations in regions like the southern Gulf, how can research rise to meet the challenges posed by such complex and contested representations?

## **2.4 Conclusion**

This chapter has discussed the historical development of Aboriginal and White identities in the earliest period of settlement in the southern Gulf. Alongside Aboriginal Australian myths, it has discussed the way in which the discourse of

exploration and 'discovery' is variously resisted, contested, and refigured with regard to present-day political concerns in the southern Gulf. This includes a variety of local Aboriginal as well as non-Aboriginal responses that crosscut the ideological positions of both 'black armband' and 'white blindfold' histories. As I have argued, they highlight instead the hidden complexities of place, race and identity in the southern Gulf today. Aboriginal people and other Australians can be seen to be in dialogue here about what happened in the past, and what that means, and indeed what Aboriginality and Whiteness mean. Critically, an interdisciplinary perspective combining literary/cultural studies analysis with ethnographic fieldwork facilitates an account that goes beyond the adjudication of one account or another as true or real. The point is not so much that there can be no true or real representation, but that representation is implicit in the construction of truth and reality, in the creation of place.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Classical Ethnography

*3.1 Shift from the discourse of exploration and 'discovery' to ethnography; 3.2 The classical ethnographer as writer 3.3 Turn-of-the-century encounters between ethnographers, pastoralists and Aborigines, and their impact upon representations of Aboriginality and Whiteness and their place(s) within the new nation-state; 3.4 Conclusion.*

This chapter deals with the rise of what I am calling classical ethnography around the turn of the last century. While this overlapped with the earlier discourse of exploration and 'discovery', it presented a much richer account of Aboriginal people's lives in regions like the southern Gulf. In this chapter, I examine the way in which this discourse was shaped by encounters between ethnographers, pastoralists and Aborigines around the time of Australia's Federation in 1901, as the place(s) of Aboriginality and Whiteness were repeatedly contested in representation.

As I have argued in Chapter Two, the spread of pastoralism throughout the southern Gulf in the 1860s, 70s and 80s severely affected Aboriginal people through dramatic population loss and dislocation in the colonial death-space. Its aftermath, for Aborigines, has been likened to vertigo, provoking shock, confusion, and fear, as it drew colonised and coloniser together in bewilderment and terror (Stanner 1979, pp. 230-231). As the brutality of Wild Time gradually came to an end in the 1890s and 1900s, a new era of protection began which was tied to the emerging pastoral economy. Whereas Aborigines served little or no role in the earliest phase of colonisation except as guides for explorers, they became increasingly important as a relatively cheap source of labour in areas remote from large populations of non-Aboriginal people as pastoralism began (Trigger 1992;

Baker 1999; Roberts 2005). Alongside the demand for Aboriginal labour, criticism of the brutalities committed by the Native Police and others was also growing throughout the 1890s, leading to the Queensland Commissioner of Police William Parry-Okedon's *Report on the North Queensland Aborigines and the Native Police* of 1897 (Rowley 1972a, pp. 170, 181). This became the basis for Queensland's *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act* in 1897 (hereafter 'the Act'), which established the official context within which interest in Aborigines was framed<sup>19</sup>. This Act became the model for similar legislation in the Northern Territory, and filtered into more positive forms of paternalism practiced elsewhere on the continent (Rowley 1972a, pp. 182-183).

Within this changing administrative structure, classical ethnography was charged with promoting a better understanding of Aborigines as fellow human beings. This role developed throughout the twentieth century with the rise of modern anthropology, dating from the establishment of the Department at the University of Sydney in 1925, and continuing (albeit in an altered form) into the present time. As such, 'classical ethnography' might be seen to continue well into the twentieth century, perhaps even into post-war anthropology<sup>20</sup>. However, in this chapter I specifically focus upon the period around the turn of the twentieth century, as the worst of the violence of Wild Time ended and a form of control developed that expressed itself as the power to "quantify, measure, appraise, and hierarchise rather than display itself in its murderous splendour" (Foucault 1978, p. 144). The career of Walter Edmund Roth is particularly interesting in this respect. Roth's 1897 monograph *Ethnological Studies Among the North-West-Central Queensland Aborigines* was the first to examine Aboriginal people in detail in the general area around the southern Gulf. Following its publication, Roth became Queensland's Protector of Aborigines for the Northern and Central divisions in 1898, highlighting the confluence between classical ethnography and colonial administration. While Protector, Roth published 18 *Bulletins* on North Queensland

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<sup>19</sup> Within present-day popular discourse in Queensland's Gulf country, 'the Act' has come to signify discriminatory legislation about Aborigines more generally.

<sup>20</sup> In the following discussion I rely upon a somewhat simplistic classification of Australian anthropology into epochal forms like 'classical', 'modern' or 'modernist' and 'contemporary'. While this scheme of 'classical'- 'modernist'- 'contemporary' forms a useful heuristic, it poses problems with regard to an anthropologist like Marie Reay, whose questions largely derived from the classical paradigm.



ethnography, prefacing *Bulletin 1* with his “trust that within the next eight to ten years the ethnography and anthropology of the north Queensland aboriginal will be a little better understood by the general public” (cited in Khan 2008, p. 187). As Protector he vigorously sought to defend Aborigines against the depredations of pastoralists and others, seeking to curb the sale of opium and alcohol to Aborigines, as well as their sexual abuse and labour exploitation. As he commented in 1903 in response to a policeman’s observation about the way in which Aborigines were being ‘dispersed’: “I blush in shame that I should be personally powerless to remedy such a state of affairs” (Roth 1984, p. 23). As I will discuss, however, shame came to overshadow his reputation following his promotion to Chief Protector in 1904 for rather different reasons as he became embroiled in a scandal over an incident in which he paid an Aboriginal couple to demonstrate a sexual position practiced by fully initiated men while he took photographs. As well as Roth’s publications, the turn-of-the-century work of Walter Baldwin Spencer and Francis Gillen – particularly *The Native Tribes of Central Australia* (1899) and *The Northern Tribes of Central Australia* (1904), but also their contributions to the popular press, later republished in *Across Australia* (1912) – is of interest here. Drawing upon both Spencer and Gillen and Roth’s work, I discuss the shift from the discourse of exploration and ‘discovery’ to classical ethnography, documenting the way in which these writers departed from the generic conventions established by explorer-writers like Leichhardt by means of what I analyse (following the literary critic Harold Bloom) as “ratios” or strategies of revision (Bloom 1997). At the same time – while cognizant of the tremendous contribution made by Spencer and Gillen and Roth to the study of Aboriginal people, and indeed towards their very survival in this period – I mount a critique of classical ethnography for the way in which it restructured the reality it set out to describe.

As the critique of classical ethnography exemplified by Hodge and Mishra (1991), McGregor (1997), Wolfe (1998), and others (Asad 1973; Clifford & Marcus 1986; Marcus & Fischer 1986) has persuasively documented, anthropology began as a kind of natural history which characteristically differentiated alternative cultures from the European as lower stages in the development of man. As Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin argue “anthropology and ethnographic discourse ... [are]

classic examples of the power of Western discourse to construct its primitive others”, “reproduc[ing] versions of the colonized subject that both were motivated by and rationalized the exclusion and exploitation of those subjects by imperial discourse” (1998, pp. 85, 86). While this critique has itself been critiqued as overstated, and for failing to assess or even properly understand the empirical substance of such ethnography (Trigger 1993; Rabinow et al. 2008; Austin-Broos 2011), it is nevertheless still valuable. As the anthropologist Rumsey argues, “a focus upon the textual features of ethnography” is far from inimical to a serious treatment of ethnography’s “descriptive content” and “theoretical claims”. In fact, he argues, a textual focus “is necessary in order to understand those claims, because ethnography is inherently figurative” (Rumsey 2004, p. 268). Following Rumsey, I undertake an analysis of the textual features of the classical ethnographies of Spencer and Gillen and Roth alongside an assessment of their empirical substance, seeking to understand the relation between a nascent anthropology and colonial administration in the southern Gulf. As I will argue, the turn-of-the-century encounters between ethnographers, pastoralists, and Aborigines that shaped classical ethnography in fieldwork-based research around the Gulf continue to impact upon representations of Aboriginality and Whiteness today in a number of different ways.

### **3.1 The Shift from the Discourse of Exploration and ‘Discovery’ to Classical Ethnography**

As I discussed in Chapter Two, explorers like Leichhardt generally expressed more interest in the country they were travelling through than its Aboriginal inhabitants, at least in their published documents. Where Aborigines are mentioned, the prevailing tone is characteristically dismissive, although it is by no means overwhelmingly negative. Leichhardt, for instance, describes Aborigines living a relatively industrious lifestyle – building fish traps, maintaining footpaths and preparing the otherwise highly poisonous cycad nuts for consumption (Leichhardt 1847, pp. 407, 427). On his circumnavigation of the continent some decades before Leichhardt, Flinders likewise describes the signs of Aboriginal habitation around the Gulf, despite elsewhere dismissing Aborigines as “divers cruel, poor, and brutal nations” (Flinders 1814, p. xi).

However, as the age of exploration and ‘discovery’ gradually came to an end, an “enthusiastic explosion” of writing about Aborigines accompanied a burst of activity in Aboriginal affairs (Elkin 1974, p. vii). This included the work of Spencer and Gillen and Roth as well as others including Alfred William Howitt, K. Langloh Parker, John Mathew and Robert Hamilton Mathews, and attracted in turn the theoretical interest of James G. Frazer, Andrew Lang, Northcote W. Thomas, Arnold van Gennep, Emile Durkheim, and even Sigmund Freud. Building upon the earlier writing of Lewis H. Morgan and Edward B. Tylor at Oxford University, these writers challenged prevailing conceptualisations of Aborigines by presenting a glimpse of the sophistication of their social organisation and religious system, even as they characteristically portrayed them as the most primitive ‘primitives’. As Spencer and Gillen argued (somewhat disingenuously?) in their preface to *The Northern Tribes of Central Australia*:

It is difficult, if not impossible, to write an account of the ceremonies of these tribes without conveying the impression that they have reached a higher stage of culture than is actually the case; but in order to form a just idea the reader must always bear in mind that, though the ceremonies are very numerous, each one is in reality simple and often crude (Spencer & Gillen 1904, p. xv).

While demeaning, Aborigines were at least – at last – recognised as fully human within this formulation, part of the “psychic unity of mankind” as postulated by Adolf Bastian and his followers (including Franz Boas in America and Tylor in England) (Stocking 1995). Merely by virtue of writing about them at such length, classical ethnographers (particularly Spencer and Gillen but also Roth) portrayed Aborigines as human beings deserving of better treatment than they had hitherto received.

At around the same time, legislative changes began to take effect in Queensland. These changes were both reflected in and in some respects promoted by classical ethnography, particularly that of Spencer and Gillen (although the passage of Queensland’s *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act* predated the publication of their work). A passage from Spencer and Gillen’s

travelogue *Across Australia* – an early draft of which was serialised in the *Leader* newspaper, between 25 May 1901 and April 1902 (Mulvaney & Calaby 1985, p. 442n) – illustrates this point. While atypical of Spencer and Gillen’s more conventionally ethnographic work (1899; 1904) this excerpt indicates the construction of the authors’ subject position with respect not just to explorers (or explorer-writers) like Leichhardt but to the complex and contested association of the broader discourse of exploration and ‘discovery’ with the violence of Wild Time as well. Leaving the Waramungu group at Tennant Creek on their way north towards the Gulf, Spencer and Gillen write:

For two days we travelled along across very uninteresting country. There was nothing to be seen except a wide open plain covered with poor scrub. On the evening of the second day we camped at Attack Creek ... one of the most interesting spots in Central Australia, because it was here that, more than fifty years ago – in 1860 – McDouall Stuart, one of the greatest of our Australian explorers, was attacked by the natives – hence the name of the creek – and forced to relinquish, for the time being, his attempt to cross the continent. A day or two before reaching Attack Creek, Stuart came across a few natives, one of whom was an old man, whom he describes as being very talkative and friendly. He endeavoured without success, by means of signs, to get information as to the whereabouts of the waterholes. To Stuart’s surprise, however, the old man, after conferring with the younger men, turned round and, in the words of Stuart’s narrative, “surprised me by giving me one of the masonic signs. I looked at him steadily, he repeated it, and so did his two sons. I then returned it, which seemed to please them much, the old man patting me on the shoulder and stroking down my beard. They then took their departure, making friendly signs until they were out of sight”. Two days later he discovered Attack Creek and followed it down for some distance. The natives were decidedly unfriendly. They gathered together in considerable numbers, “and commenced jumping, dancing, yelling and throwing their arms into all sorts of postures like so many fiends”. According to Stuart the attack was of such a serious nature that he felt compelled to fire upon the natives, and as his party was only a very small one, he fell back, and in his journal of June 27<sup>th</sup> he writes: “After

considering the matter over the whole night, I have most reluctantly come to the determination to abandon the attempt to make the Gulf of Carpentaria”.

Amongst the natives we met at Tennant Creek was a very old man of the Warramunga [i.e. Waramungu] tribe who had actually taken part in the attack upon Stuart’s party, and from what he told us, we came to the conclusion that Stuart rather exaggerated the capacity of the natives to hinder his progress northeast.

We spent a very pleasant evening by the side of the waterhole (Spencer & Gillen 1912, pp. 442-444)

The beginning of this passage (“a wide open plain covered with poor scrub”) is reminiscent of many explorer journals, whose stiff generic conventions manifest the hubristic confidence of an imperial culture (see Chapter Two). As modes of Western travel, ethnography and exploration and ‘discovery’ are indeed analogous in many respects (Clifford 1997, p. 8). As I have already discussed (see Chapter Two), explorer journals sought to produce a metaphorically disembodied point-of-view as a strategic form of control, creating a putatively ‘empty’ landscape able to be ‘filled’ by settlers. Similarly, in this example from the discourse of classical ethnography, Spencer and Gillen’s description of the “wide open plain” is contextualised without reference to the authors, as though this way of viewing the land as an empty landscape was indeed natural. By replicating this point-of-view, Spencer and Gillen reproduce the discourse of exploration and ‘discovery’ like amanuenses, creating a subject position that is similar to that of Leichhardt or indeed McDouall Stuart: objective, authoritative, and ‘realistic’. Terry Goldie calls this the “pervasive autogenesis” of colonial textuality (Goldie 1989, p. 6). As Spencer (writing without Gillen) put it some decades later:

There was no suggestion of our exploring, geographically, unknown country. The continent had been traversed and explored from south to north and east to west by men whose names are famous in the records of the early history of Australian exploration ... but, apart from purely geographical explorations, little systematic scientific work had been done (1928: viii-ix).

Ethnography (and other forms of systematic scientific work) is presented here as an extension of the discourse of exploration and 'discovery' by scientific means (Clifford 1997). More than simply an extension, however, ethnography as practiced here (and in Spencer and Gillen's more explicitly ethnographic work) involved a significant revision, as the authors sought to distinguish their work from exploration and 'discovery' in significant ways.

After the beginning of the passage I have quoted from *Across Australia*, Spencer and Gillen mount an implicit critique of Stuart's actions at Attack Creek, which proceeds rhetorically through the use of quotation, "in the words of Stuart's narrative"<sup>21</sup>. Like present-day tourists following in the footsteps of "one of our greatest Australian explorers", intertextuality might be seen to function here as a ritualised re-performance not just of the explorers' journeys but of their texts, re-embedded in contexts they represent as projectively 'the same' (Silverstein & Urban 1996a, p. 13). Simultaneously, however, their text distinguishes itself both diachronically and synchronically from those of the explorers. Despite seeming to emulate the explorers, Spencer and Gillen critique them, resisting their influence in much the same way as other writers are said to resist the influence of their predecessors through the use of a number of strategies of revision (Bloom 1997). In his analysis of the "anxiety of influence", Harold Bloom famously identified six of these strategies, arguing that strong writers utilise one or a number of them in order to create original work. Drawing upon the tropes of classical rhetoric, Bloom identifies them as *clinamen*, *tessera*, *kenosis*, *daemonisation*, *askesis*, and *apophrades*. While Bloom restricts his analysis to the work of canonical poets, Spencer and Gillen's work can be seen to 'swerve' away from the explorers' in a way that broadly corresponds to Bloom's *clinamen*, which he defines as poetic misreading or misprision:

*Clinamen* ... is poetic misreading or misprision proper; I take the word from Lucretius, where it means a 'swerve' of the atoms so as to make change

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<sup>21</sup> It is unclear whether any Aborigines were killed or injured when Stuart fired upon them. It is also unclear as to whether this 'attack' was provoked by Stuart and his companions.

possible in the universe. A poet swerves away from his precursor, by so reading his precursor's poem as to execute a *clinamen* in relation to it. This appears as a corrective movement in his own poem, which implies that the precursor poem went accurately up to a certain point, but then should have swerved, precisely in the direction that the new poem moves (Bloom 1997, p. 14).

In the passage I have quoted from Spencer and Gillen, *clinamen* occurs quite dramatically in the disjunction between "discourse-time" (or "the time it takes to peruse the discourse") and "story-time" (or "the duration of the purported [or in this case actual] events") (Chatman 1978: 62). Like the explorer journals, Spencer and Gillen's work is phrased as a journey in which the discourse-time of the text (i.e. how long it takes to read it) replicates the story-time of the narrative in a straightforwardly sequential fashion, according to a consistent algorithm (i.e. discourse-time multiplied by x = story-time). As a selection of first lines from the succeeding paragraphs shows: "This was one of the hottest days that we experienced"; "Leaving Banka Banka, we passed across a little bit of what is called 'Down' country"; "The first night out of Banka Banka we camped by the side of a rapidly drying-up water-hole called Prentice Lagoon"; "We left camp in the morning before 7 a.m." (Spencer & Gillen 1912, pp. 445, 446, 446-447, 447). Unlike the explorer journals, however, these lines all explicitly refer to a preceding discourse, which is conveyed through the use of toponyms, i.e. "*what is called* 'Down' country", "*called* Prentice Lagoon" [my emphasis]. While reinforcing the use of these names – many of which were presumably unrecorded at the time – Spencer and Gillen's use of intonational quotation marks conveys a critical distance from this discourse. In *Across Australia* this is evident in Spencer and Gillen's later description of this "'Down' country" as "nothing but thin scrub and porcupine grass and low quartzite ranges"; their 'Prentice Lagoon', similarly, is almost dry (Spencer & Gillen 1912, p. 446). In the passage I have excerpted above, however, Spencer and Gillen's use of *clinamen* extends beyond the use of intonational quotation marks to manifest a more explicit critique of the explorers, and particularly Stuart's failed attempts to communicate with the Aborigines.

Like Leichhardt's disappearance, Stuart's account of the Aborigines' supposed use of a clandestine Masonic sign became a centrepiece of the discourse of exploration and 'discovery'. Aligned with popular mythology about the origins of the Freemasons (which some members connect to the story of the Jewish King Solomon), this mystery posed the existence of a non-Aboriginal group of Europeans or proto-Europeans somewhere in the centre of Australia, a belief which appeared in Ernest Favenc's novel *The Secret of the Australian Desert* (189-?) (see Chapter Two), as well as a number of contemporary accounts of the Wandjina or 'Bradshaw' figures (Arthur 2010, p. 126)<sup>22</sup>. In this passage from Spencer and Gillen, however, Stuart's exchange of Masonic signs with Aborigines serves to dramatise the failure of communication between the parties, which arguably resulted in the 'attack' at Attack Creek, which is thereby undermined in a similar way as the 'Down' in "'Down' country", i.e. diachronically. With their considerably greater capacity to engage with Aboriginal people, Spencer and Gillen sideline the supposed mystery of the Masonic signs – McDouall Stuart's misinterpretation of an Aboriginal sign language described by Roth in his *Ethnological Studies Among North-West-Central Queensland Aborigines* published a few years earlier (1984) – and suggest that Stuart might have misinterpreted or at least exaggerated the attack that actually took place. This is significant insofar as reports of hostile Aborigines shaped the representation of them as a threat to colonialism in the years following Stuart's fateful confrontation. This was particularly so in what is now known as the Barkly Tableland area around Tennant Creek – near the site of Attack Creek – where a higher proportion of Aborigines appear to have been massacred than elsewhere (Roberts 2005, pp. 206-229)<sup>23</sup>. While Spencer and Gillen's published work makes scant reference to

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<sup>22</sup> This mystery has proved remarkably resistant to common sense, reappearing even in the course of my fieldwork. Several people interviewed for this project expressed a belief that Aboriginal people were not "really indigenous" to the region, but had displaced other groups, which were on at least one occasion identified as Caucasian. One conversant went so far as to speculate about a supposed resemblance between "proper" indigenous people (as opposed in his mind to present-day Aborigines) and Sephardic Jews (FB November 2007).

<sup>23</sup> I do not mean to imply any straightforward correspondence between Stuart's depiction of the Aborigines and subsequent violence against them. Aboriginal accounts of this discrepancy point to the lack of appropriate hiding places on the Tableland as opposed to more rugged country around the Northern Territory/Queensland border (FB July 2008).



violence against Aborigines, Gillen's diary is much more explicit on this point. Near Tennant Creek (i.e. in the corresponding section of Gillen's diary), he writes:

A blackfellow who has just come through from the Tableland country and Anthony's Lagoon informs us there are no blacks left in that country. He states they have all been 'shot or driven off on account of their murderous attacks on settlers and their continual depredations amongst the cattle'. In view of this statement, which we have no reason to doubt, we shall probably revise our original plans and strike across from the Newcastle Waters to Borrooloola on the McArthur River (Gillen 1968, p. 126).

While *Across Australia* does not elaborate upon these reasons for re-routing their itinerary, Spencer and Gillen's extensive quotations from Stuart nevertheless manifest a subtle critique here of the explorer, and indeed the broader discourse of exploration and 'discovery'. After conversing with a "very old" Waramunga man, Spencer and Gillen spend what they describe as "a very pleasant evening by the side of the waterhole" – i.e. the misnamed Attack Creek. The implication is clear: able to properly communicate with the Aborigines, they were not harassed by them, as the explorer was some fifty years earlier, and are able to continue on to Borrooloola, where Spencer first began work on *Across Australia* (Mulvaney & Calaby 1985, p. 443n).

Within the context of the times, the interest that Spencer and Gillen show in Aboriginal social organisation and ceremonial culture is remarkable, epochal. Even William Horn – the businessman who financed the Horn expedition – denied the existence of a secretive Aboriginal religion before the work of Spencer and Gillen made it all but impossible to do so (Stocking 1995, p. 89). When Gillen arranged for himself and Spencer to attend the performance of an Engwura initiation ceremony at Alice Springs in late 1896, the two ethnographers encountered a world of ceremony and traditional belief that Flinders, Leichhardt, Stuart, Burke and Wills, Landsborough and the other explorers completely missed. Even the early ethnographers Alfred William Howitt (who led parties appointed by the Royal Society of Victoria to Cooper's Creek in 1861 to search for Burke and Wills, returning with the survivor John King, and later the remains of Burke and

Wills themselves) and Lorimer Fison failed to move beyond the social evolution model in their “search for primitive promiscuity” amongst the Kurnai and other groups in south-eastern Australia, despite their work being acclaimed at the time as evidence of a new anthropology (Stocking 1995, pp. 17-34; Fison & Howitt 1880; Stanner 1972). Unfortunately, by the time they finally arrived at their “seventieth and last camp” at Borroloola, Spencer and Gillen’s enthusiasm had flagged; having “pictured the Gulf country as being more or less tropical”, the ethnographers were disappointed to find themselves “in an open plain with little to see save cracked earth, coarse grass, gum trees and grasshoppers innumerable ... making everything look as desolate as possible” (1912, p.477). Spencer and Gillen’s remarks about about Anula [i.e. Yanyuwa] and Karawa [i.e. Garawa] people (as well as other Gulf groups) are expressive of the physical and emotional toll of their long journey, as well as the discomfort of the season: “[i]f any one wishes a lesson in patience, we can strongly recommend an investigation into the classificatory system of some more or less highly specialised tribe like the Mara or Anula”; “[w]e were, on the whole, very disappointed with the weapons and implements of these tribes” (1912, p.481, 484). Delayed by the recent sinking of Borroloola’s steamer – and a dramatic attack upon a small ketch sent to reinforce the town’s stores – Spencer and Gillen whiled away their time reading and taking photographs (Roberts 2005, p.90), with “really not very much more that we could do amongst the natives” (Spencer & Gillen 1912, p.500-501).

While Spencer and Gillen’s substantive departure from nineteenth century ethnography takes us beyond the scope of this thesis into issues more germane to Central Australian anthropology than that of the southern Gulf, their contribution to the discourse of classical ethnography is relevant here. As Stocking argues, “[Spencer and Gillen’s] extended account of observed ceremonial behaviour, supplemented by information gained from informants in the immediate context of ceremonial performance [foreshadows] the ethnographic world of the next century” (Stocking 1995, p. 95). Just as Spencer and Gillen drew upon Leichhardt and the other explorer-writers in their representation of Central Australia and the Gulf, the next generation drew upon Spencer and Gillen. While what I am calling ‘modern’ anthropology is significantly different (see Chapter Four), turn-of-the-century ethnographers like Spencer and Gillen created a distinctive subject-

position derived from their association with the natural sciences as well as a strong commitment to field observation. In the following section I will briefly describe this subject position in the work of Spencer and Gillen and Roth before moving on to an examination of its impact upon representations of Aboriginality and Whiteness and their respective place(s) within the nation. At stake is a cluster of disciplinary practices central to the historical practice of ethnography, some of which stretch into the present time where they continue to impact upon representations of Aboriginality and Whiteness in Australia.

### **3.2 The Classical Ethnographer as Writer**

Even before Spencer and Gillen's work appeared, Roth published what has been described as the first ethnological study of Australian Aborigines (McDougall & Davidson 2008, p. 16), although it might more accurately be termed descriptive ethnography (Austin-Broos 2011). This 1897 work focused particularly upon those he called 'North-West-Central Queensland Aborigines'. In *The Native Tribes of Central Australia*, Spencer and Gillen acknowledge it as "the most detailed account yet published of any Australian tribe", although they distance their own work from Roth by claiming to have lacked the time to reference it properly (Spencer & Gillen 1899, p. viii). Despite this there are many suggestive parallels between the work of Spencer and Gillen and Roth, including Roth's account of the Aborigines' supposed use of Masonic signs. Upon observing Aborigines communicating with each other across the distance of some 150 yards (i.e. approximately 137 metres), Roth is led to make a study of what he describes as "an actual well-defined sign-language, extending throughout the entire North-West-Central districts of Queensland" (Roth 1984, p. v). At first, he writes, he "naturally concluded that his informant was uttering a falsehood" when the informant reported the existence of this language (Roth 1984, p. 5). Like Spencer and Gillen's reference to the same myth, Roth's account signifies the way in which the new discourse of ethnography 'swerves' away from the discourse of exploration and 'discovery' through the use of *clinamen*. As in the passage I have quoted from Spencer and Gillen, this anecdote from Roth is arguably presented to contradict prejudice about Aborigines, just as it is presented here as contradicting Roth's own initially prejudiced response.

Alongside Roth's reference to ethnography's 'swerve' away from the discourse of exploration and 'discovery' in his analysis of Aboriginal sign language, his 1897 Preface seeks to establish his *bona fides* in what would later become known as 'the field'. He writes:

[O]nly when [the Pitta-Pitta language spoken by Aboriginal people around Boulia] was sufficiently mastered did I find it possible to understand the complex system of social and individual nomenclature in vogue, and ultimately to gain such amount of confidence and trust among the natives as enabled me to obtain information concerning various superstitions, beliefs and ceremonial rites which otherwise would in all probability have been withheld (Roth 1984, p. 5).

Just as Ernest Favenc utilised his status as a late explorer to advertise *The History of Australian Exploration* (1888?) – as well as his novel *The Secret of the Australian Desert* (189-?) – Roth advertises his time in what would later become known as 'the field' here in order to substantiate his claim to esoteric Aboriginal knowledge. Unlike the explorer-writers, however, Roth's work in 'the field' necessitated gaining the confidence and trust of his informants rather than the suspicion and fear engendered by the explorers' encounters with Aborigines at Attack Creek and elsewhere (which arguably facilitated their creation of a putatively empty landscape in their writing, as Aboriginal people sought to avoid them). A year or so later, Spencer and Gillen made a related but slightly more radical claim that Arunta [i.e. Arrernte] Aboriginal people 'regarded' them as tribesmen; in *The Northern Tribes of Central Australia* they reiterate this claim that "both of us are regarded as fully initiated members of the ... tribe" (Spencer & Gillen 1904, p. x)<sup>24</sup>. With these claims, Spencer and Gillen and Roth prefigure the methodology of modern anthropology in several important respects. While these classical ethnographers write from a vantage point of assumed superiority rather different from that of modern anthropologists – and made no attempt to engage in participant observation, the signature methodology of modern anthropologists –

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<sup>24</sup> Mulvaney and Calaby (1985, p. 175) describe this claim to be regarded as fully initiated as a "venial" deception, in that full initiation would have entailed subincision or 'introcision', which neither Spencer nor Gillen underwent.

their attempts to engage with Aboriginal people for sustained lengths of time as something other than illustrative types manifests a breakthrough not just for anthropology but for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relations in Australia more generally, enabling them to highlight the faults within the discourse of exploration and 'discovery', swerving away from it in the way that I have already described.

However, while Arrernte may have 'regarded' Spencer and Gillen as fellow Aborigines, there is no evidence to believe that Spencer and Gillen ever came to regard themselves as fellow Aborigines, nor behave in the ways expected of a fully initiated member of that language-group or 'tribe'. Like Spencer and Gillen, Roth also remained detached from the lives of those he describes in several important respects. This detachment – which is reproduced textually in their ethnographies – had a variety of ramifications throughout the discourse of classical ethnography into the practice of Australian colonialism itself. In the first place, it introduced a distinctive observer effect or uncertainty into the representation of these ceremonies, despite the way in which they were (and often still are) construed as solely or 'purely' Aboriginal (Peterson 2006). As Stocking argues with regard to Spencer and Gillen's attendance at an initiation ceremony organised by the Arrernte, Gillen's "prodigality with provisions had in fact created a somewhat artificial situation in which adaptations and compromises were introduced to facilitate the participation of a large and diverse gathering" (Stocking 1995, p. 91). Within this context, classical ethnography played a unique role intellectually which hinged upon an opposition between 'pristine' Aborigines, and those who had come into contact (understood as corrupting) with European civilisation (Povinelli 1993, p. 77). In their attempts to conceptualise Aboriginality synchronically as a society that existed (i.e. exists hypothetically) in the past (Rumsey 2004, p. 290n), classical ethnographers like Spencer and Gillen and Roth characteristically disavowed the dependence of Aboriginal people on the settler economy. However, as Wolfe argues, "the great majority of anthropological data was collected from people who were dependent on the settler economy" (1991, p. 213). Insofar as they distributed provisions to encourage Arrernte participation in research, Spencer and Gillen's research on the Horn expedition was facilitated by rationing. As Rowse (1998, p. 17) argues, that expedition "coincided with the beginnings of the ascendancy of the argument, in Central Australia, that it was

better to ration". Spencer was sufficiently uneasy about this to remark upon the ways in which "the kindness of the whites" impacted upon Aborigines. In his contribution to the *Horn Report* he writes:

The very kindness of the whites which prompts them to supply clothing and habitation is disastrous to the constitutions of those whose restless and wandering habits lead them to alternate conditions of nakedness, exposure and semi-starvation with those of warmth, shelter and good food (Spencer 1896, p. 4).

As Rowse (1998, p. 24) argues, Spencer thought that such 'kindness' "was bringing about irreversible (and, to him, regrettable) change, an evacuation of traditional faiths and dispositions with little likelihood of some new 'faith' or understanding replacing them".

More seriously, Spencer and Gillen's status as detached observers – detached in and through the act of writing and photographing as much as they were detached from the ceremonies themselves as non-initiates [i.e. uncircumscised or subincised] – might be seen as a critical manoeuvre in the construction or reconstruction of Aboriginality as the subject and indeed object of the ethnographer's gaze. Critically, the slippage between author and authority in writing about others exemplifies and indeed reinforces domination by denying its subjects' right to withhold knowledge or express alternative worldviews (Said 1985 [1978]; Said 1993). This is particularly pronounced in Spencer and Gillen's representation of sacred-secret ceremonies, which formed the centrepiece of both of their classic ethnographies (Spencer & Gillen 1899; Spencer & Gillen 1904). Like Roth's boast of having gained the confidence and trust of North-West-Central Queensland Aboriginal people, the politics of the secret served to enhance Spencer and Gillen's status in much the same way as access to secrets enhanced the status of Arrernte people within the ceremonies they represented. Regardless of Aboriginal people's varied motivations for participating in such research, Spencer and Gillen's access to such secret-sacred ceremonies might also be understood as an attempt to exert hegemonic control over Aborigines by abrogating their power to represent themselves, although this argument is subject to a significant caveat.

Given the tremendous value of Spencer and Gillen's work to subsequent generations of Arrernte people, it is hard to be overtly critical of the ethnographers in this regard. Several Arrernte people reportedly archived copies of *The Native Tribes of Central Australia* (1899) and *The Northern Tribes of Central Australia* (1904) in secret-sacred storehouses alongside tjuringa, suggesting an alternative understanding of the hegemon in this relationship (Hill 2002)<sup>25</sup>. Who was really in control here? Lacking the means to represent themselves, the Arrernte may have agreed to allow Spencer and Gillen access to their secret-sacred ceremonies in part because they were grateful to Gillen for having prosecuted the murderous Constable Willshire (Peterson 2006, p. 16), or indeed for any number of other reasons. It is certainly hard to imagine that Aboriginal people might have been subject to less control without the discourse of classical ethnography. Nevertheless, Spencer and Gillen and Roth's construction or reconstruction of Aboriginality is liable to critique for its continuing impacts upon present-day Aboriginal people as a manifestation of hegemony.

Such hegemony is arguably particularly felt in classical ethnography's depiction of reality itself, through the naturalisation of a particularistic way of viewing the world. In much the same way as the discourse of exploration and 'discovery' accomplished the creation of an empty landscape through the use of an objective and metaphorically disembodied point-of-view, so too classical ethnography can be seen to fold back in upon its own point of origin. This is particularly obvious in Spencer and Gillen's depiction of secret-sacred ceremonies. In this context, the idea of the observer as somehow detached from their surroundings was an achievement of a peculiar kind, tied to a belief in the existence of being in the abstract as against an appreciation of particularistic becoming. In the following extract from *The Native Tribes of Central Australia*, they repeatedly stress the role of such ceremonies in classifying individuals according to the totemic system:

It was while watching and questioning closely the natives during the performance of the Engwura ceremony ... that we were able to find out the

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<sup>25</sup> Tjuringa are sacred stone or wooden objects that are customarily hidden from the sight of women and uninitiated males (Strehlow 1947).

way in which the totem names of the individuals originate and to gain an insight into the true nature of their totemic system.

The Engwura ceremony, which forms the last of the initiatory rites through which the Arunta native must pass before he becomes what is called *Urliara*, or a fully developed native, admitted to all the most sacred secrets of the tribe, consisted in reality of a long series of ceremonies, the enacting of which occupied in all more than four months. Those with which we are here concerned were a large number, between sixty and seventy altogether, which were connected with the totems and were performed under the direction of the old men, who instructed the younger men both how to perform them and what they represented (Spencer & Gillen 1899, p. 118).

Here Spencer and Gillen, like Roth, present an extended account of observed ceremonial behaviour in order to convey the experience of initiation. However, their emphasis upon the 'origin' of totemic identity arguably represents a form of over-determination in their attempts to explain what these ceremonies 'represented', as though the particularistic becoming of "a fully developed native" might be traced back to some pre-existing being evident outside the ceremony, in the ethnographer's 'reality'. As modern Australian anthropology demonstrates, however, Aboriginal ceremony tends to stress relatedness (Myers 1986, p. 239), creativity (Morphy 1991, p. 294), and secrecy (Keen 1994) over individuation, specificity, univalency or transparency. As Morphy argues with respect to the Yolngu (1991), ceremony as a system of encoding meaning articulates with the system of restricted knowledge to exploit latent ambiguity in determining the components of a ritual and controlling the release of its meanings. This is "the process of which meanings can be changed" (Morphy 1991, p. 294). Similarly, as Keen argues (1994), there is no determinate meaning waiting to be discovered within ceremony, simply varied interpretations of similarity and difference. In Spencer and Gillen's formulation, the body designs created for these ceremonies are 'emblematic' or symbolic insofar as they may be interpreted as signifying some other original sense, which is construed as totemic. Drawing upon the extensive anthropological literature on Australian Aboriginal people that followed



the work of Spencer and Gillen and Roth, the precise nature of this overdetermination may be more clearly detailed.

In their work, Spencer and Gillen describe Aboriginal ceremony in terms of the *alcheringa* or 'dream time'. In popularising this concept in the 1950s, Stanner noted that it "suffers badly by translation into our dry and abstract language" (Stanner 2009, p. 57). Drawing upon conceptual developments in the practice of ethnography since Spencer and Gillen and Roth, Stanner embarked on an attempt to "think black" by describing the way in which notions of body, spirit, ghost, shadow, name, spirit-site and totem are involved in ceremony, noting that "[t]he distinctiveness we give to 'mind', 'spirit' and 'body', and our contrast of 'body' versus 'spirit' are not there, and the whole notion of 'the person' is enlarged" (Stanner 2009, p. 59). As Stanner and others have argued (Stanner 2009; Strehlow 1947), Aboriginal ceremony produces multiple and crosscutting interconnections between things (individuals, ancestors, countries) with the mythically inscribed landscape at the centre of everything via the spatial and temporal paradox of the dreamtime or dreaming, which is understood today as both everywhere and "everywhen". Classical ethnography's tendency to contrast body and spirit and indeed mind – as in Spencer and Gillen's discussion of the Arrernte initiation in terms of a reality that exists outside the ceremony, which is symbolised therein through 'emblematic' body designs, or 'totemic' images – contributed towards a variety of issues, including confusion over Aborigines' understandings of conception and the role of procreation or physiological paternity in social organisation more generally<sup>26</sup>. Spencer and Gillen were the first to allege that the groups identified by them possessed no knowledge of the relationship between coitus and pregnancy (1899, pp. 122-125). A few years later, Roth publicised a similar supposed nescience amongst groups in north Queensland in his *Bulletin 5* of 1903 (1984, p. 22). In the following year, Spencer and Gillen made the same observation about Aborigines around Borroloola (1904, pp. 281-332). As Povinelli argues (1993), spirit children or totemic ancestors shape Aboriginal bodies in much the same way as dreaming characters or entities shape the physical

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<sup>26</sup> Stanner's use of the concepts 'body', 'spirit' and 'person' evokes debates within early Christian theology about the nature of Christ expressed in controversies about the Incarnation, the resurrection, and the concept of salvation.

landscape – in perpetuity – via the spatial and temporal paradox of the dreaming. Pivotal, these relationships are mediated by Aboriginal agents, who are “critical component[s] of the mythic process insofar as [they] provide[] the act[s] of interpretation necessary to understand the associations of sites in the landscape with sites on the body” (Povinelli 1993, p. 140). In failing to understand this, classical ethnography failed to discern the connections between landscape and myth that have come to play such a significant role in modern representations of Aboriginality after the development of land rights and native title (Merlan 2007). More seriously, Aborigines were castigated for their reported ignorance of physiological paternity in the same way they had previously been insulted for failing to till the earth or tend to herds of animals, dubbed “the rudest savages as to whom we possess accurate information” (Frazer 1992, p. 66; Montagu 1937). This representation figured into contestation over the place or places of Aboriginality and Whiteness in regions like the southern Gulf in the lead up to Australia’s Federation of 1901. As Gray argues, it may be associated with the need to justify the dispossession of Aboriginal people by more ‘civilised’ non-Aboriginal people (2007, p. 64). Against Gray’s interpretation, however, it must be emphasised that while classical ethnography partly shaped this negative representation of Aborigines, the ethnographers Spencer and Gillen and Roth played a rather more gallant role in contestation over Aboriginal people’s place in the new Australian nation.

### **3.3 Turn-of-the-Century Encounters between Ethnographers, Pastoralists and Aborigines and their Impact upon Representations of Aboriginality and Whiteness**

Within a discourse shaped by arguments between academics in Europe, the contributions of ethnographers like Spencer and Gillen and Roth (and others including R. H. Mathews and H. Basedow) informed the depiction of Aborigines as the most primitive ‘primitive’ people in the world. According to the evolutionary dogma of Tylor imbibed by both Spencer and Roth at Oxford University, Aborigines were supposed to simply die out in the encounter with non-Aboriginal people. Spencer expressed a version of this belief in his contribution to the *Report on the Work of the Horn Scientific Expedition to Central Australia*, on which he was employed as a biologist:

In contact with the white man the aborigine is doomed to disappear: it is far better that as much as possible he should be left in his nature state and that no attempt should be made either to cause him to lose faith in the strict tribal rules, or to teach him abstract ideas which are utterly beyond the comprehension of an Australian aborigine (Spencer 1896, p. 111).

However, while clearly depicted as primitive in classical ethnography, Aborigines were finally recognised as fully human and deserving of protection as a debate developed between pastoralists pressing for greater powers to disperse Aborigines and 'humanitarians' and 'progressives' who recommended segregation and a loosening of mission control (O'Brien 2011; Rowley 1972a). The work that Spencer and Gillen and Roth illustrates the vexed role that classical ethnography played in this debate. Roth's career as Queensland's first Protector of Aborigines in Northern and Central divisions and later Queensland's Chief Protector is particularly interesting in this respect, as his dedication to a particular kind of classical ethnographic research led to his being associated with the depredations of the pastoralists whom he so vigorously critiqued.

The perspective of many modern writers on debates about Aborigines in the period leading up to and immediately after Australia's Federation of 1901 appears somewhat overstated. As Haebich argues:

[T]here was no place for [Aborigines] in the emerging Australian nation.... Instead, they were to be swept out of sight into remote 'gulags' or their 'mixed race' children absorbed into the lowest rung of the colonial work force or kept permanently in segregated institutions (Haebich 2000, pp. 131-132).

Contrary to this view, however, the place of Aborigines was vigorously contested by many parties around the turn of the century. Retrospective readings of the reserves as gulags or "asylums" (Rowley 1972b, pp. 63-65) fail to account for the staunch opposition that proponents of reserves attracted at the time. While some pastoralists in the southern Gulf expressed sympathy for the Aborigines and

supported the establishment of reserves, others expressed hostility to Aborigines in general and aggressively repudiated the need for reserves (Trigger 1992, pp. 30-31). On the one hand, a pastoralist east of Burketown argued:

I do not see why the Governments of the colonies should not be compelled to look after the poor remnant left, to give them reserves to heal their ailments, and generally to smooth the path of the people from whom we have taken one of the finest countries under the sun [sic] (cited in Trigger 1992, p. 30).

On the other hand, the owner of the lease at Lawn Hill Station vociferously opposed anything that might conceivably weaken the pastoralist's position, including their power to summarily chastise those Aborigines suspected of spearing horses and cattle (Macintosh 1902). In a letter to Queensland's Member of Parliament for Carpentaria this leaseholder complained:

[W]e are simply at the mercy of these nomadic notorious half-civilised blacks under an Act which I consider should be restricted to those parts of the State where the aborigines do not come in contact with stock.... Blacks must obey and be taught to obey otherwise they will, as the saying is, 'ride rough shod over one' – Blacks and Stock in this country will not do together for many years (Macintosh 1902, p. 2).

The 'Act' in question was Queensland's *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act* of 1897, which legislated the positions of people like Roth, whose efforts this pastoralist bemoaned. Elsewhere in this letter the same leaseholder blamed "useless unbinding [employment] agreements" administered under the Act for "school[ing] [Aborigines] to all kinds of trickery which will in a few years require harsh and severe treatment to control". "Is this the protection that should be afforded people who settle this new country" (Macintosh 1902, p. 3)? Dropping even the rhetoric of paternalism (i.e. 'taught to obey', 'schooled to all kinds of trickery', 'protection'), he concludes by explicitly calling attention to the violence of Wild Time with a veiled threat:

I will not say more but the question is one that is becoming almost intolerable and steps must be taken by individuals unless the Police are allowed to use their discretion and bring to justice offenders (Macintosh 1902, p. 3).

Note the curious use of the passive voice in this passage (i.e. 'steps must be taken by individuals') to ventriloquise an opinion that must remain unspoken, or at least unattributed in print. Where Aborigines and stock "will not do together", Macintosh clearly privileges stock, objecting to what he says as Roth's interference, just as the Member for Carpentaria the Hon. J. Forsyth (simultaneously the head of the Brisbane office of Burns Philp) objected to Roth's attempts to secure payment for Aboriginal people employed as *bêche-de-mer* gatherers on boats owned by Burns Philp (Khan 2008, p. 189).

Against this, Protectors like Roth sought to defend Aborigines as fully human, deserving of protection and at least some pay for the work they did. For his part, Roth responded to these complaints by enquiring as to whether Macintosh could provide "accurate information as to the number of blacks who have been shot in the neighbourhood of Lawn Hills" (Roth 1902). In his official report as Northern Protector of Aborigines for that year he expressed himself similarly directly:

The time has now arrived when it is imperative that various areas in the extreme Western and Gulf districts be dedicated wholly and solely to the natives.... The whole question resolves itself into one of either sacrificing human lives, or losing a few pounds derived from rents.... The value of one human life, no matter the colour of the skin which clothes it, is more to me than that of all the cattle in creation (Roth 1903, p. 23).

Spencer and Gillen were similarly forthright in their views. As Special Commissioner and Chief Protector of Aborigines in the Northern Territory for a brief period after 1911, Spencer was reportedly an enthusiastic humanitarian, albeit a "paternalistic, authoritarian and ... Darwin[ist]" one (Mulvaney 1990). In 1912 and 1913, he [i.e. Spencer] proposed a policy of "preservation and uplift" as his original predictions regarding the inevitable doom of 'the aborigine' proved to

be inadequate (McGregor 1997, p. 72). As Sub-Protector at Alice Springs prior to joining the Horn Expedition in 1894, Gillen is also said to have vigorously defended Aborigines, bringing the murderous Constable Willshire to trial (Mulvaney & Calaby 1985, p. 125). As I have already suggested, Roth also argued particularly strongly on behalf of Aboriginal people, going so far as to “beg respectfully” the government for the power to promote “only [police]men of proven worth, humanity, common-sense and tact” to carry out duties within his prospective reserves, thereby implicitly calling attention to the lack of these basic values in others (Roth 1901, p. 6). However, despite his efforts only a small reserve was gazetted in north-west Queensland (Trigger 1992, p. 32).

In seeking to gazette reserves, Roth and others confronted those with “a vested interest in the flesh and blood of the native” (Roth, cited in Khan 2008, p. 190). Here the cluster of disciplinary practices constitutive of classical ethnography – particularly its construction or reconstruction of Aboriginality as the subject and indeed object of the ethnographer’s gaze – facilitated the efforts of those who conspired to sabotage Roth’s plans for reserves and bring an end to his career in Australia. As I have already suggested, Roth’s career illustrates the confluence of classical ethnography and colonial administration; it also illustrates some of the problems which plagued both, which I have already partly identified in my critique. It is noteworthy that upon learning of his appointment as Protector for the Northern and Central Districts, Roth wrote to Spencer to boast of the superior access to Aborigines that he would enjoy: “I am indeed a lucky fellow ... the real keynote of the situation ... [is] I shall only be accompanied by blacks as much as possible” (cited in Khan 2008, p. 182). In the brief he received from Queensland’s Police Commissioner Parry-Okedon, Roth was instructed to:

[P]roceed to Cooktown, make all possible inquiry concerning local aboriginals, number, disease, present condition, measurements, photographs etc ... making from time to time such local collection of ethnological and anthropological interest as possible (cited in Khan 2008, p. 183)

As Khan (2008) documents, Roth avidly pursued this brief, attracting allegations from those with vested interests regarding the improper sale of objects to the Australian Museum. More than these allegations, however, a scandal relating to photographs taken by Roth of a naked Aboriginal man and woman illustrating “the peculiar method of copulation in vogue throughout all these tribes” was highly damaging (Roth 1897, p. 179). While Roth was cleared by a Parliamentary inquiry, his credibility was damaged by this scandal, which probably contributed to his resignation and emigration to British Guyana shortly thereafter. As McGrath documents (2008, pp. 197-198), rumours about these photographs circulated widely in Queensland, with reports that Roth had “abducted” the woman in the photographs whom some commentators argued was being raped or at least forced to humiliate herself. Given his determined attempts to prevent the exploitation of Aboriginal people and particularly Aboriginal women by non-Aboriginal men, his motives in taking these photographs are remarkable, and paradoxical.

Like Spencer (who was initially employed on the Horn Expedition as a Biologist), Roth approached ethnographic research with Aboriginal people from the point-of-view of a natural scientist, having begun his career as a Government Medical Officer. In his *Ethnological Studies Among the North-West-Queensland Aborigines* as well as his subsequent bulletins, Roth recorded a variety of bodily postures including women’s birth positions. His interest in photographing an Aboriginal man and woman having sex derived from contemporary medical theories regarding the effect of penile mutilation or ‘subincision’ upon procreation; Roth contended that the position displayed in his photographs proved that semen could be discharged “into its proper quarter” regardless of this procedure (Roth 1897, p. 179). In some ways, these photographs were merely an extension of classical ethnography’s interest in Aboriginal people’s understandings of conception and the role of procreation or physiological paternity in social organisation. In other ways, however, these photographs ironically associated Roth with his fellow non-Aboriginal men with a vested interest in the flesh and blood of the native. In reporting upon the Aboriginal participants’ response to his request in a letter to the Bishop of Carpentaria, Roth stated:

Although half-civilised, they [i.e. the aged married couple who had agreed to pose] were a bit afraid of the camera at first, but could hardly refrain from laughing at the idea of my wanting to see them in the position asked for. However, Mr ... [their employer] promised them that I would give them money and tobacco etc. (I think flour) which I did – they were both contented (cited in McGrath 2008, p. 194).

Lacking Spencer's expressed disquiet about the negative impacts of "the kindness of whites", Roth comments frankly upon the price of Aboriginal sexuality, albeit in a way that distinguishes his own request from that of other non-Aboriginal men who sought to "square the boys [i.e. Aboriginal men], in order to make use of the gins", as a contemporary complaint to the Commissioner of Police phrased it (Harvey 1900, p. 2). While Roth's letter to the Bishop begs the question as to how Roth knew about the position he requested, in seeking and receiving the Church's support he verified the status of his own 'detached' dealings with Aboriginal sexuality as morally defensible. It is ironic then that trumped-up outrage over these dealings would result in non-Aboriginal men's somewhat easier access to Aboriginal women, at least for some time thereafter. As a journalist joked of Roth's successor in 1906: "'Long Dick' [i.e. the Protector Richard Howard] will never photograph them [i.e. Aboriginal people]" (cited in McGrath 2008, p. 204).

### **3.4 Conclusion**

While generically similar to the publications of the explorer-writers like Leichhardt, the classical ethnographies of Spencer and Gillen and Roth swerve away from the discourse of exploration and 'discovery' in presenting a rather more complex and detailed account of Aboriginal people in regions like the southern Gulf. As I have argued, however, the cluster of disciplinary practices central to the historical practice of ethnography generated a representation of Aboriginal people as primitives. As contestation over the place or places of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in regions like the southern Gulf intensified in the lead-up to Australia's Federation of 1901, this representation may be associated with the need to justify the dispossession of Aboriginal people by more 'civilised' non-Aboriginal people. As I have argued, however, the careers of



Spencer and Gillen and particularly Roth in colonial administration present a significant caveat to this critique, notwithstanding the ways in which they may be retrospectively associated with the actions of the pastoralists and others whom they sought at the time to restrain.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### Early Literary and Anthropological Writing

Down by Mingara's sweet lagoon  
Where brolgas dance, and lit by moon  
The spirit-children swim and play  
And skip towards the coming day,  
The sacred rituals first were danced,  
Their mystic power by 'gods' enhanced.

From 'The Mother (Anula Tribe)' (Harney & Elkin 1968, p. 17)

*4.1 The 'Real' Experts; 4.2 The Relationship Between Literary and Anthropological Modes of Representing Aboriginality and Whiteness in Mid-Twentieth Century Australia; 4.3 The Shift from Aboriginal Informants to Aboriginal Authors; 4.4 Conclusion.*

In April 1944, Sydney University Professor of Anthropology A. P. Elkin wrote to William E. (Bill) Harney at the Native Affairs Branch in Katherine to inform him that the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) in Melbourne was putting on a series of talks about "the romance of North Australia" and had requested a talk "on the Aborigines" and their "future" in Australia (Elkin 4/4/1944). Harney had worked as Acting Patrol Officer and Protector of Aborigines for the Native Affairs Branch in Katherine since 1940. In 1941 he began to publish in *Bulletin*, *Walkabout* and *Overland*, before Elkin helped to arrange publication of *Taboo* (Harney 1943). Before working for Native Affairs, Harvey led a colourful life that he drew upon in his writing. In 1921, he took up land with Johnno Kieran at Seven Emus Lagoon (now Seven Emu Station) near Borroloola, settling the account with

650 pounds that he won in a wager on the Melbourne Cup. After a brief stint in gaol for cattle stealing in 1923, he gave up his share in Seven Emus Lagoon and purchased a sailing vessel, which he used to gather trepang around the Gulf and transport salt from Manangoora station for sale in Darwin. In 1927, he married a woman of mixed Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal descent at Groote Eylandt and left the southern Gulf for the Victoria River District west of Katherine, where he settled for a time on account of her tuberculosis. He had little formal education (Kennedy 1996; Harney 1957; Harney 1961). While Elkin's *The Australian Aborigines: How to Understand Them* (1938) was the first and at that time the only scholarly publication to deal with Aboriginal cultures across the continent, the ABC's first choice was Harney. As Elkin put it: "they thought that you might be able to give this talk [but] if you cannot do it, then I will write it instead" (Elkin 12/4/1944). As it happened, Harney was able to put together a short script on aspects of Aboriginal culture, which Elkin offered to "dress up" and read on air for the broadcast (Elkin 12/4/1944). Afterwards Elkin wrote to Harney to enquire as to whether he listened to "our broadcast" (Elkin 23/6/1944). As he put it: "It came over very well, though I didn't recognise my own voice" (Elkin 23/6/1944).

In this chapter I deal with a third historical discourse about the Gulf which I have labelled, somewhat loosely, early literary and anthropological writing. More precisely, this chapter analyses the relationship between literary modes of representing Aboriginality and Whiteness and emergent (and recognisably modern) anthropological forms around the time of the Second World War. I particularly focus on the search for an appropriate 'voice' in this writing, by which I mean "a mode of expression or point of view in writing; a particular literary tone or style" (OED) – although I mean to emphasize the idea of vocalization and indeed ventriloquism within the word 'voice' here. While historians of anthropology might dismiss Elkin's enthusiasm for researchers like Harney as an idiosyncratic urge to patronise acolytes over rivals like Donald Thomson or Charles Mountford (McGregor 1997, p. 217; Gray 2007, p. 114), this 1944 example suggests a rather more ambiguous relationship between the professor of Anthropology and his "cobber" [i.e. friend] Harney (Elkin 1968, p. 9), as well as the relationship between literary and anthropological modes of representation more generally. As well as this collaboration for the ABC, Harney answered a range of

Elkin's questions about Aboriginal custom and material culture from late 1939 (when they first met in Sydney) throughout the 1940s. More than merely Elkin's "best informant" during this period (Wise 1985, p. 163), the two repeatedly collaborated, notably on an ambitious co-publication that sought to present Aboriginal 'myths' in a variety of verse forms entitled *Songs of the Songmen: Aboriginal myths retold* (Harney & Elkin 1949).

Besides this publication, I look at a series of texts by literary writers and anthropologists which loosely address the southern Gulf beginning with Xavier Herbert's bestselling novel *Capricornia* (1938) and concluding with the unique collaboration of Percy Trezise and the Lardil man Dick Roughsey (Goobaltheidin) from Mornington Island in *Moon and Rainbow* (1971) as well as a series of books for children beginning with *The Giant Devil-Dingo* (1973). As well as the search for an appropriate 'voice' in between literary and anthropological modes of representing Aboriginality and Whiteness in this discourse, I focus on the politics of authorship more generally in these texts. Despite the attribution to 'the Songmen' within the title of Harney and Elkin's publication, Aboriginal people are credited as informants rather than authors. With the publication of *Moon and Rainbow* and *The Giant Devil-Dingo* this changed. Aboriginal people began to be credited as authors, with their own 'voice'. While Roughsey is omitted from recent edited collections of Aboriginal writing (Heiss, Minter & Jose 2008; Davis et al. 1990), his work sits on the cusp of a significant discursive shift.

Alongside their experimental modality, the texts that I have identified by Harney and Elkin, Herbert, and Roughsey and Trezise illustrate Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal identities in a process of becoming during a uniquely experimental period in Australia, which roughly corresponds to the beginning (in the 1930s) and end (in the 1970s) of the policy or policies of Aboriginal assimilation (McGregor 1997). While the ethics of appropriation during this period of assimilation have been canvassed by critics (Van Toorn 2000, p. 22), much of this criticism rests on the simplistic assumption that texts created by collaboration and even uneven collaboration are not in some respects 'voiced' by their subject or subjects. As I suggested with regard to Arrernte people's decision to allow Spencer and Gillen access to their secret-sacred ceremonies, there is no reason to

believe that Aboriginal people did not engage with non-Aboriginal people during these periods partly in order to negotiate the ability to be heard, albeit within a discourse that sought to control what was spoken. In this chapter I examine the politics of authorship and how that constructed the textual voice or voices of Aboriginal people out of the discourse of early literary and anthropological writing, and indeed classical ethnography and exploration and 'discovery'. In analysing the factors that led to some non-Aboriginal people being rendered a credible substitute for Aborigines, I reflect critically upon simplistic assumptions of authenticity purveyed within literary and anthropological analyses of textuality.

#### **4.1 The 'Real' Experts**

When it was first published, the linguist Paul L. Garvin greeted *Songs of the Songmen* as "[a]n excellent way of presenting the Australian 'black fellow' to his white fellows" (Garvin 1950, p. 306). By the time of its 1968 reissue, however, Harney had been dead for years and Elkin had begun to attract criticism from Aboriginal activists and others for his "meddling interference" in their affairs (Wise 1996). As his biographer argues, Elkin was temperamentally at odds with activism in general, and suspicious of symbols and rallying cries which "smacked dangerously of all he had worked to avoid: divisiveness, separatism, apartheid" (Wise 1985, p. 254). With the growth of Aboriginal activism, new kinds of political sensitivities had emerged by 1968 that were probably unthinkable in the 1940s, although Elkin himself reports a "stirring of Aboriginal feelings" in this direction after the 1937-38 formation of the Aborigines' Progressive Association (Elkin 1974, p. 373). These political sensitivities have arguably heightened in the years since then. While non-Aboriginal people continue to publish collections of Aboriginal 'song poems' and other cultural material, the politics of authorship that Harney and Elkin more or less ignored in 1949 (and indeed in 1968) have come to preoccupy editors and publishers, at least on the surface level of accreditation (Dixon & Duwell 1990; Dixon & Duwell 1994). Critically, in the 1940s, the politics of authorship related to a rather different problem, namely concern about who the real authorities or experts on Aboriginal culture were, and indeed exactly what the reality they set out to describe was.

In contrast to modern conventions, Elkin's concern in the 'Personal Note' produced for the 1968 reissue of *Songs of the Songmen* relates to the role of Harney as primary authority rather than any concern with cultural property or propriety: "every alteration to, and rewriting of, lines and verses began only as a suggestion from me, which Mr Harney either accepted or if not, sent back a rendering that he liked better" (Elkin 1968, p. 11). One passage is particularly revealing:

Mr Harney sensed that some of his southern literary acquaintances would say that I had altered or rewritten much of the text 'off my own bat'.... A few individuals, remembering the ruggedness of the Harney declamations of some Songs, said or implied that the printed versions were anaemic compared with what they thought were the originals.... I, for one, hear his voice in this our version of the Song of the Songman (Elkin 1968, p. 11).

This concern with 'voice' echoes that which I have identified in Harney and Elkin's earlier collaboration for the ABC. In fact, Harney (like Elkin in 1944) claimed to "hardly recognise the original poems I brought down to you [i.e. Elkin]" and accordingly asked Elkin for what he called "the honour" of "your name with mine on the front page of this, our joint effort, on behalf of the Northern Territory Aborigines" (Harney 15/3/1945). As Harney's idiosyncratic phrasing (i.e. "your name with mine") suggests, theirs was a marriage of sorts. Like a marriage, their roles were obviously (if ambiguously) gendered. Whereas Elkin was said by some of his contemporaries to have "altered or rewritten" text, Harney (in Elkin's formulation) "declaimed" it with all the rhetorical flair of a professional speechwriter or politician. The sexism – and indeed heterosexism – of these remarks is perceptible: Harney was the 'rugged' bushman, whose "vivid and inimitable manner" was decisively masculine in contrast to that of his unnamed "southern literary acquaintances". As Geoffrey Dutton argues, mid-century Australian society was highly suspicious of artists and writers, tending to associate them with homosexuality or 'inversion', as well as a number of other supposedly deviant sexual traits (1986, p. 80). As the 'real' man in the relationship, Harney – rather than Elkin – was in some respects also the 'real' expert, despite frankly acknowledging that "you [i.e. Elkin] know more about

these things than I do” in his correspondence with Elkin (Harney 8/6/1949). More than the dynamics of their private relationship, however, the construction of textual authority in the relationship of these two authors or ‘author-functions’ (given what was evidently a close collaboration between the two actual authors) concerns me here.

In view of Elkin’s position as professor of Anthropology, his attempt to promote Harney’s status as the primary authority underlying what he called “our version of the Song of the Songman” is curious to say the least. While Elkin’s solely authored ‘General Commentary’ and ‘Notes and Glossary’ seek to establish an expert *reading* of the poems in contrast to Harney’s work as *writer*, the overall effect of the publication is clearly produced by the interplay between their respective contributions. Nevertheless, ‘Harney’ – rather than ‘Elkin’ – is produced within the text as the primary author and authority. This dynamic seems to have been established as early as 1943, when Elkin assisted Harney in the publication of *Taboo* (1943). In his Introduction to that collection, Elkin states that Harney decided “to present his knowledge and opinions on this important subject in the form of short stories, which recount or enshrine facts” (Elkin 1943, p. 4). Curiously, he is again at pains to stress his role as reader and editor rather than writer while using his position as professor of Anthropology to draw attention to the non-fictional aspects of Harney’s work:

My own part in this book, in addition to encouraging the author and writing the introduction, has been to read and edit it. In doing this, I have altered as little as possible Mr. Harney’s manner of expression, and have discussed with him every emendation (Elkin 1943, p. 11).

Exactly why Elkin went to such pains – repeatedly denying having altered or rewritten anything “off my own bat”, when his own contribution was clearly more substantial – seems to relate to Harney’s unique “manner of expression” or ‘voice’<sup>27</sup>. This voice – “his voice in this our version of the Song of the Songman” – comes from Harney’s command or supposed command of a particular Australian

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<sup>27</sup> Nicholas Jose argues that Harney was “helped” by ghostwriters and editors, although he regrettably fails to substantiate this assertion (2002, p. 99).



idiom. More than the crafted rapport of colonial gentlemen – which Elkin awkwardly emulates through his use of the cricketing phrase “off my own bat” – this idiom is that of the bushman, whose knowledge about Aboriginal culture comes from a different cultural domain to the academic.

Disavowing concerns about the ethics of cultural appropriation, the mingling of these two domains figured into the creation of an authoritative ‘voice’ in early literary and anthropological writing in Australia through the collaboration of people like Harney and Elkin. Critically, this ‘voice’ is thought to come from non-Aboriginal people who have closely interacted with Aborigines, rather than from Aboriginal people themselves. In his Personal Note to *Songs of the Songmen*, Elkin describes Harney as “[a] bushman [who] had a deep understanding of Aborigines, of how they thought as well as of what they did” (Elkin 1968, p. 7). Likewise in his introduction to *Taboo*, Elkin states that Harney is “one of those extremely rare persons ... who had lived in close contact with the aborigines and really did have some real knowledge of their life” (Elkin 1943, p. 3). In his introduction to Ronald Berndt’s *Kunapipi* (1951) he incongruously repeats this claim, describing Harney as “my friend ... [who] has a greater and sounder knowledge of Aboriginal custom, belief and ritual than any other layman” (Elkin 1951, p. xvii). In Douglas Lockwood’s biographical note of 1968 he adds another aspect to Elkin’s portrait of Harney: more than just understanding how they thought, Lockwood claims that Harney could actually “think like an Aboriginal” (Lockwood 1968, p. 5). “Few men got closer to them than he did” (Lockwood 1968, p. 5). Harney’s supposed facility with what Lockwood calls “Instant Poetry” – “begin[ning] at once and recit[ing] several stanzas which not only had rhyme but told a story” (Lockwood 1968, p. 5) – was thereby reconfigured as the vatic extemporizing of a non-Aboriginal man in touch with a numinous spiritual force. While this numinous spiritual force is associated with Aboriginality and the Dreamtime its relationship with Aboriginal people is arguably more complex, highlighting the peculiar yoking together of Aboriginality and Whiteness in the figure of the White Aborigine (McLean 1998).

As McLean argues (1998), the figure of the White Aborigine emerged in the heyday of assimilation as a solution to some of the contradictions of settler colonialism. This might be seen as an Australian iteration of a standard colonial

trope, analysed by Goldie as “going native” (1989). Tied to a belief in the cultural disintegration of Aboriginal society, ‘White Aborigines’ were thought to be able to take over from Aborigines as the custodians of Aboriginality, becoming in some respects more Aboriginal than contemporary Aborigines who were thought to have been corrupted by contact with non-Aboriginal people (Povinelli 1993, p. 77; Bird Rose 2004, pp. 120-121). Harney was arguably the quintessential White Aborigine for many of his contemporaries. As well as his collaboration with Elkin, he worked under Dr. Cecil Cook as a Protector with the Native Affairs Branch from 1940, and assisted Mountford in Arnhem Land in 1948, when the American-Australian Scientific Expedition encountered problems at Gove. As a contemporary newspaper report entitled “To The Rescue... With His Toothbrush” put it:

Mr Harney left the beach [at Darwin] this week to answer a distress signal from the expedition, which is moving into unknown and strange country of which few white men know anything (Anonymous c.1948).

In an addendum evocative of Lee Falk’s popular contemporary comic-strip series *The Phantom* the author writes: “*Already native signals have gone north over the jungle ‘wireless’ saying: ‘Old Bularney’ is on his way back to Arnhem Land*” [emphasis in the original] (Anonymous c.1948)<sup>28</sup>. As a figure analogous to Falk’s fictive Phantom, Harney was perfectly placed to mediate between Aborigines and Whites upon the colonising frontier – as resourceful as the Aborigines at sourcing bush food while maintaining the standards of cleanliness and (racial) hygiene that underwrote the civilising mission and imperial progress more generally, with ‘White’ people (and particularly ‘White’ men) at the top<sup>29</sup>. These standards are conveyed through the symbol of the toothbrush in the newspaper article, which functions as a standard-bearer for Whiteness, as well as a suggestive reference to the phallus. As McClintock argues apropos Victorian England, cleaning rituals like

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<sup>28</sup> Bularney is suggestively close to the subsection name Bulanyi. As Nicholas Jose argues, it is also suggestive of the Australian English word ‘blarney’, meaning to flatter, or con, or tell tales (2002, p. 99).

<sup>29</sup> Falk’s Phantom provides a popular illustration of Orientalist mythmaking. Phrases like “native signals” and “the jungle ‘wireless’ are heavily evocative of this comic book.

brushing one's teeth may assume the status of a fetish "during ... era[s] of impending crisis and social calamity, seeking to preserve ... the uncertain boundaries of class, gender and race identity in a social order thought to be threatened (1995, p. 211). While I do not wish to labour the point, it is noteworthy that Lockwood's biographical note about Harney appears to misrepresent him somewhat. While Lockwood mentions Harney's children by his Aboriginal wife Linda and explains the circumstances in which both died, he fails to mention Harney's surviving children by other Aboriginal women, including a son who came to bear his name: Bill (Yidumduma) Harney. While there may be all sorts of reasons for this misrepresentation, it likely served to maintain the boundaries of racial identity as Harney mingled in the threshold between Aboriginality and Whiteness, dutifully brushing his teeth every night. As Harney's contemporary Ernestine Hill argued of the Australian 'bushman' more generally: "he can live like a Black in a Black man's country and build a white man's empire" (cited in Bird Rose 2004, p. 120).

As well as in the biographical supplements about Harney penned by Elkin and Lockwood for the reissued *Songs of the Songman*, the peculiar contradictions embedded in the figure of the White Aborigine are evident in the songs or song-poems within that text itself. While Harney and Elkin were unusually sympathetic to the Aborigines for the period – "the 'Dreaming' comes, and we drift away/ Into myth and legend where we've caught/ The simple grandeur of their thought" (Harney & Elkin 1968, p. 2) – the figure of the White Aborigine upon which their co-publication partly relies for its authoritative depiction of Aboriginality represents a troublingly position with regard to Aborigines themselves. This is conveyed in the epigraph to *Songs of the Songmen*, entitled 'Native Saying', which follows:

"Mordja Amari Boaradja  
Ngu Borngga Amari Mordja".

*Literal Translation:*

"Forgotten I lost dreaming  
Country I left forgotten lost".

*Paraphrase:*

He who loses his dreaming is lost (Harney & Elkin 1968, p. 1).

From the transliterated Aboriginal language (which seems to have been recorded phonetically from an unknown Aboriginal language), the meaning in English emerges increasingly succinctly in this poem. In the first “Literal Translation” (i.e. the second stanza of the poem) the repeated emphasis upon forgetting and loss is reminiscent of a-grammatical aphasia (“I lost dreaming ... I left forgotten lost”), which creates an impression of fractured identity. In the second translation (i.e. the third stanza, entitled “Paraphrase”), the grammatical persons involved in the utterance shifts from the speaker or addressee (i.e. ‘I lost dreaming ... I left’) to a translator or over-hearer who is not directly involved in the event but is nonetheless privy to its meaning (i.e. ‘He who loses his dreaming is lost’). In my reading, this translator is the author or author-function ‘Harney’ more than ‘Elkin’, although the effect is clearly produced by both ‘actual’ authors. While the paraphrase arguably lacks the expressive force of the literal translation, this pronominal shift illustrates the broader project of the book as a whole, namely the distillation of Aboriginal myth in English by ‘Harney’, as a White Aborigine. Unlike the speaker in the literal translation, the translator or over-hearer of the third stanza is more composed, which enables his (i.e. ‘Harney’s’) later claim to have “caught/ The simple grandeur of their thought” (Harney & Elkin 1968, p. 2). More than a distillation of meaning, however, the third stanza appears to have simplified the meaning of the second. This is especially accomplished through the elision of the deictic centre or origo of the utterance, namely the speaker’s reference to country. In the literal translation, what Stanner and others describe as the spatial and temporal paradox of the Dreaming (Stanner 2009; Strehlow 1947) is suggested through the use of the word ‘country’, which is multi-referential in Australian English. More than the customary estate of the speaker, however, the deictic centre of this statement might be understood to have originally been the particular time and place in which it was uttered, or performed, which may have been distant from the speaker’s estate. By withholding any reference to this place, the ‘Native Saying’ is transformed into a simple lament for the loss of a dreaming, understood as a reified article of

Aboriginal culture. Culture, in other words, has become art (Acciaioli 1985). As Keane argues apropos early anthropological translations of ritual texts in Eastern Indonesia: “[t]he substitution of lexical meanings with equivalents in the vocabulary of another language captures everything but what counts”, “focusing on the obvious”, “misdirecting [our] attention from the real import ... of a ritual text” (1997, p. 42).

More composed than the aphasic ‘I’ of the literal translation, the White Aboriginal translator of this ‘Native Saying’ advances his claim to understand Aboriginal thinking even as he appears to represent it as art. Like the classical ethnography that I have previously described, this manifests a kind of symbolic violence through the imposition of an account that circumscribes the reality of those whom it depicts, or at least the cultural principles through which that reality is constructed. As in Spencer and Gillen or Roth’s focus on what is most distinct about Aboriginal religion and sexuality, this serves to deconstruct Aboriginality and re-present it as an object: one which is highly valued and honoured by Harney and Elkin but nevertheless aestheticised, even apotheosized. In so doing Harney and Elkin appear to support the colonial mythology that Aboriginal Australians were a doomed race, expressed most famously a few years before the publication of *Song of the Songmen* by Daisy Bates, who believed that nothing could be done to prevent ‘the passing of the Aborigines’ except “to make their passing easier” (1944, p. 243). While both Harney and Elkin opposed Bates’ somewhat fatalistic approach to Aboriginal welfare by working to promote support for the proper provision of medical services, education, wages and social service payments to Aborigines in the 1940s and 50s, the figure of the White Aborigine which *Songs of the Songmen* promoted was partly premised upon the forgetting and loss by Aborigines of classical Aboriginal culture, if not necessarily their passing (Gray 2007, p. 167; Wise 1985). Forgotten, lost – “he who loses his dreaming is lost” – Aboriginal culture might thereby be thought to have passed into the control of those non-Aboriginal people who remember<sup>30</sup>. Lockwood’s biographical note

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<sup>30</sup> The figure of the White Aborigine upon the Australian frontier evokes “the last of the Mohicans” myth in North America. For the literary critic Leslie Fielder, American literature and culture more generally is intensely preoccupied with the reconciliation of the ‘white’ and ‘dark’ races, exemplified by Fenimore Cooper’s Natty and Chingachgook as they meet in friendship over Uncas’ grave in *The Last*

about Harney provides an apposite example. Describing Harney's work at Uluru towards the end of his life, he writes:

[Harney] sat for hours and days and sometimes months with individuals and groups of Elders to learn their story.... When he first became the Keeper of Ayers Rock, its Protector rather than a tourist guide, his most intimate companions were fullblood tribesmen whose language he couldn't speak. Yet, in broken English, he managed to get from them the first authentic account of the mythology of the Rock (1968, p. 6).

From a Protector of Aborigines to the Protector of 'the Rock', Harney's 'intimate' Aboriginal companions facilitate his symbolic connection to the land: as a 'real' man, 'real' expert, 'real' Australian.

#### **4.2 The Relationship Between Literary and Anthropological Modes of Representing Aboriginality and Whiteness in Mid-Century Australia**

While the relationship between Harney and Elkin provides one example of the overlap between early literary and anthropological modes of representing Aboriginality and Whiteness, the work of Xavier Herbert at approximately the same time – particularly in *Capricornia* but also in *Seven Emus* and the short story collection *Larger Than Life* – provides another<sup>31</sup>. Whereas the sexism and

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*of the Mohicans* (1962 [1826]), by Ishmael and Queequeg's mock 'marriage' in Melville's *Moby-Dick* (2007 [1851]), and by Huckleberry Finn's drifting journey down the Mississippi River with the escaping slave Jim in Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (2003 [1884]). As Fiedler argues, these idealised relationships form the male counterpart of the myth of Pocahontas (the Native American maiden who saves Captain Smith) by portending racial harmony without the threat of miscegenation. While Fiedler's primal dream of the white man and his dark companion fleeing civilisation to found a new society somewhere else – in Fenimore Cooper's 'virgin forest', aboard Melville's ship the Pequod – is particularly American, it is arguably similar to mid-century Australian myth-making. Like Fenimore Cooper's Natty (also called Leatherstocking or 'Hawkeye' by the Delaware Indians), the figure of the White Aborigine was seen to symbolically connect with the land via his relationship with Aboriginal people, and particularly Aboriginal men.

<sup>31</sup> While *Capricornia* is popularly associated with the town of Darwin and Herbert's experiences at the Kahlin compound, Herbert's biographer records numerous experiences in what I have described as the southern Gulf.

heterosexism of Elkin and indeed Lockwood's remarks are somewhat ambiguous (for example in the image of the toothbrush), Xavier Herbert was rather more outspoken about his prejudices. As his biographer De Groen argues, Herbert worked ceaselessly to "embellish[] the myth of his masculinity", creating a punishing exercise regime to counteract what he saw as the "'feminine' occupation of writing" (De Groen 1998, pp. 203, 167). Like Harney, he was briefly employed in the Aboriginal bureaucracy, as Relieving Superintendent at the Kahlin Compound in Darwin in 1935-36 while awaiting the publication of *Capricornia*. At that time, Herbert described his own imaginative identification with Aborigines as "the gestation of a new self": "I have a blackfella's mind ... I can see things blackfella fashion" (De Groen 1998, p. 104). Like Harney, Herbert sought the support of Elkin and the Association for the Protection of Native Races to bolster his (fictitious) anthropological credentials<sup>32</sup>. Unlike Harney, however, Herbert was considerably more ambivalent about anthropology, which he came to portray as a "racket" (De Groen 1998, p. 125). While analogous to *Songs of the Songmen* in some ways, Herbert's early- and mid-career publications disclose an alternative relationship between literary and anthropological modes of representing Aboriginality and Whiteness. Instead of the expert White Aborigine, Herbert utilised the figure of the 'half-caste' Norman Shillingsworth and his partner Tocky O'Cannon, allowing mixed-descent Aboriginal characters to represent both Aboriginality *and* Whiteness and the relationship between them.

With the documentary-style prose with which it begins, new readers might perhaps be misled to expect a factual account or at least a fictionalised account of the facts in *Capricornia*. This has perhaps encouraged critics to interpret the novel in overtly political ways, following upon early reviews that stressed its vivid indictment of Aboriginal and White relations as its primary strength (De Groen

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Furthermore, Herbert's novel is an important referent for writing about northern Australia more generally.

<sup>32</sup> Despite Elkin's support, Herbert failed to secure the role of patrol officer. Following his award of the Sesquicentenary novel prize after the publication of *Carpentaria*, Herbert then rejected an offer from Elkin and the Association for the Protection of Native Races to inspect "native conditions in the bush" in favour of a position with the trade unions. Lacking Harney's obsequious faith in the professor, De Groen (1998, p. 111) cites Herbert eventual denunciation of Elkin as an officious "academic arm-chair temporizer[]".

1998, p. 110). Modern critics have tended to follow the same line, while generally identifying a tendency to over-emphasise its importance “as [an] indicator[] of a supposedly new, enlightened view of the Aboriginal people” (Shoemaker 1989, p. 41). Nevertheless, Herbert’s depiction of the repressed sexual and racial anxieties of settler colonialism is so different to the work of his contemporaries Ion L. Idriess in novels like *Lasseter’s Last Ride* (1931) and Arthur Upfield in *The Sands of Windee* (1931) as to seem to scarcely belong to the same century, let alone the same decade. While *Carpentaria* bears some similarities to Katherine Susannah Pritchard’s work on the Kimberley in *Coonardoo* (1929), as well as Vance and Nettie Palmer’s Queensland novels (Palmer 1928; Palmer 1930), his frank treatment of hitherto taboo material is probably unparalleled. While anthropologists like Elkin (as well as Radcliffe-Brown, Warner, Kaberry, Thomson, and McConnel) published on similar themes throughout the late 1920s and 1930s, it was Herbert and to a lesser extent Harney who arguably did most to alert Australians to the humbug and hypocrisy of the policies about northern Australia, thereby gaining recognition as the real expert(s) on regions like the Gulf. Herbert also went further than any anthropologist in confronting Australians, although Stanner’s 1939 article about exactly what it means to ‘preserve’ Aborigines might be cited in comparison (Stanner 1979). Unlike Stanner’s primary focus in that article upon people of solely Aboriginal descent, however, *Capricornia* tells the story of those of mixed Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal descent, whom anthropologists only began to research intensively in the 1950s (particularly in New South Wales) with work by Marie Reay, Malcolm Calley, Ruth Fink, James Bell, Judy Inglis and others (Gray 2001, pp. 152-154). Herbert did so through the explicit examination of the repressed racial and sexual anxieties of settler colonialism that had partly contributed to the policy or policies of assimilation. This resulted in significant shifts not just in representations of Aboriginality but also in what it meant to be non-Aboriginal in northern Australia at this time.

As putatively realistic reportage, Herbert’s work has provoked some comparisons with anthropology. For example, the anthropologist Basil Sansom describes Herbert “as the very semblance of an anthropologist”, at least in terms of what Sansom labels his “authorial practise” (2006, p. 83). Sansom particularly focuses on Herbert’s “Kaijek’s Newsong Story”, which Herbert composed in 1941 as part



of what Sansom calls his mature “middle period” (i.e. post-*Capricornia* and pre-*Poor Fellow My Country*). In “Kaijek’s Newsong Story”, a travelling songman “known from the red mountains of the Kimberley to the salt arms of the Gulf” assists a White prospector to locate gold in return for rations (Herbert 1963, p. 236). Having gorged on bull-beef, damper and treacle, syrupy tea and tobacco, the previously “impotent” Kaijek ‘finds’ his song, which happens to satirise non-Aboriginal people’s greed. Like Harney and Elkin’s ‘Native Saying’, this song is first presented in an unidentified Aboriginal language, which is transcribed phonetically:

O munnijurra karjin jai, ee minni kinni goold,  
Wah narra akinyinya koori, mungawaddi yu.... (Herbert 1963, p. 240)

Herbert then offers a translation in what he calls “Blackfella English”, but which might more accurately be described as rhyming doggerel: “Whiteman, what name you like ‘im that-one gold,/ You hunt him hot, you hunt him cold” (Herbert 1963, pp. 240-241). For Sansom, the first stanza of this song is an “authentic” Aboriginal cultural product analogous to those presented by Harney and Elkin (whom he cites approvingly) (Sansom 2006, p. 86). Sansom therefore sets out to re-examine this song as ethnography rather than fiction – although he draws his conclusions solely on the basis of “instinct, reason and experience” rather than textual or biographical information (Sansom 2006, p. 91). Sansom argues that Herbert probably encountered ‘Kaijek’s’ song during his travels across the country in the 1920s and 30s and added it to his notebooks as one of a finite number of anecdotes that he later ‘stretched’ into fiction. While professing “more than passing respect for Xavier Herbert as an ethnographer” – Sansom indeed describes him as an “ethnographic novelist” – Sansom attacks “Kaijek’s Newsong Story” (and Herbert’s work more generally) as an act of cultural theft (Sansom 2006, pp. 91, 98). With this publication, the “whitefella author [i.e. Herbert] takes over (appropriates, steals, purloins, pirates, lifts, liberates or loots)” from Aborigines (Sansom 2006, p. 89).

Whatever the merits of this particular critique, however, it betrays a mistaken approach to literary writing, which more or less replicates the problem I located

in *Songs of the Songmen*. Like Harney and Elkin's 'Paraphrase' in their "Native Saying", Herbert's glib 'translation' of 'Kaijek's' song "into Blackfellow English" (if that is indeed what occurred, which seems doubtful on the evidence that Sansom presents) amounts to something other than a distillation of Aboriginal cultural information. Inasmuch as Herbert's biographer discloses a subject position that veered from 'blackfella white bureaucrat', to pretend anthropologist, to old-fashioned broadsider and even martyr for 'the Aboriginal cause', Herbert consistently practised invention, seeking to distinguish himself from anthropologists on this basis. In rejecting an offer from Elkin and the Association for the Protection of Native Races to inspect "native conditions in the bush", Herbert revealingly described himself as "the only man who can smash this evil system here ... and I'm going to do it with another book, even if it ruins me" (cited in De Groen 1998, p. 111). This expressed desire to 'smash this evil system' with 'another book' (i.e. a novel) reveals Herbert's view of his own work in comparison to anthropology, whose "temporizers" he described (in 1938) as "more concerned about keeping their good jobs and basking in the lime-light than assisting the unfortunate blacks" (cited in De Groen 1998, p. 111). Despite intermittently pursuing an administrative career in Darwin under Dr. Cecil Cook in both 1927 and 1935 (De Groen 1998, p. 111), Herbert came to regard (or at least represent) anthropology as a form of licensed cultural theft (which representation likely provoked Sansom's critique). In the short story "Seven Emus" (written in 1941; eventually published in novella form as *Seven Emus* in 1959) he describes the efforts of a fictional anthropologist (Malcolm Goborrow) and his con-man offsider (Appleby Gaunt) to steal a valuable 'dreaming stone' from an Aboriginal group in the Kimberleys (Herbert 1959). That story and novella ends with Goborrow and Gaunt mistakenly stealing the replica stone which they had crafted to outwit the Aborigines. While Herbert might have bruised some anthropologists' egos with *Seven Emus* and later with unflattering portrayals of Cook, Stanner, and Elkin in *Poor Fellow My Country*, "Kaijek's Newsong Story" might be read more productively as an allegory of his own attempts to pass himself off as an anthropologist in the 1920s and 30s; speciously claiming credit (not to mention income) as a social scientist before he realised the potential to distinguish his own project on literary terms.

Like Sansom's attack upon Herbert, however, Herbert's attack upon anthropology conveys an unsustainable opposition between literary writing and anthropology in mid-century Australia. As both Herbert and Harney and Elkin's work suggests, anthropology and literature might be seen as complementary rather than contradictory or antithetic (although this is not to say that anthropology and literature are interchangeable, or that there is no such thing as a truth-effect within writing). Contrary to Herbert's attack upon anthropology, *Capricornia*, "Kaijek the Songman", *Seven Emus* and even *Poor Fellow My Country* may each be seen to present a troublingly ambivalent position with regard to Aboriginal people themselves. Indeed the yoking together of Aboriginality and Whiteness in the central figure of *Capricornia* illustrates similar issues to the figure of the White Aborigine in publications like *Songs of the Songmen*. In *Capricornia*, Herbert's central character Norman (from 'Nawnim', i.e. No-Name) Shillingsworth grows up believing that he is the orphaned son of a Javanese princess and a deceased soldier from the Great War. He only becomes aware of his mother's true identity as a young adult when he is subject to racism, whereupon he spectacularly claims or reclaims his Aboriginality in a chapter entitled 'Song of the Golden Beetle'. Nicknamed No-man when he was born, he becomes in some respects a new-man at this point in the novel: a manifestation of Herbert's belief that the mixing of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in the north of Australia would result in the birth of a new national type. Reversing the principle of assimilation – which posited the gradual sublimation of Aboriginal blood – *Capricornia* suggests that non-Aboriginal Australians might become more like Aborigines, taking their lead from those of mixed Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal descent whom Herbert identified with 'the best of both races' in a straightforward contradiction of orthodox contemporary opinion (i.e. that mixed-descent people inherit the worst of both races).

As Young argues (1995, p. 42) a conflictual tension between "two dominant oppositional theories of cultural development" characterised nineteenth- and early twentieth century anthropology and theory more generally. Young traces this back to the enlightenment, and the influence of Diderot, Rousseau and Herder:

[O]n the one hand, cultures develop organically into nations by virtue of their homogeneity, attachment to the soil, their traditions and single language, but on the other, the 'golden chain of improvement that surroundest the earth' tells a different story, namely that the progress of culture works by a regenerative development between cultures, in which one nation educates another through mixing and migration (1995, p. 41).

Herbert's position is suggestively close to that of Herder, who advocated the harmonising of 'primitive' or popular culture with European civilisation as the grounds for an ideological critique of progress<sup>33</sup>. As Young (1995, p. 37) argues "[t]he tension that materialized between civilization and culture rehearsed the oneiric operation through which what we now call 'culture' defines and demarcates itself". This is presented in *Capricornia* not through the thorough interpretation of an aspect of Aboriginal culture as art (as perhaps the chapter title 'Song of the Golden Beetle' suggests) but rather through a moment of suggestive mimicry. Herbert writes:

A golden beetle shot into the firelight, for a while dashed blindly round, then settled in a bush, began to sing: Whirrrree – whirrrree – whirrrreeyung – eeyung ... reverberating droning rising rising in compelling volume into miniature boom of didjeridoo diminishing to momentary pause then rising rising waxing waxing seizing mind compelling limb – eeyung – eeyung – eeyong – eeyong – eeyah – eeyah – voice of the spirit of Terra Australis (Herbert 1941 [1938], pp. 334-335).

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<sup>33</sup> Herbert's character Andy McRandy appears to paraphrase Herder's critique of ethnocentrism, when he attacks what Herder calls the "vain ... boast of so many Europeans, when they set themselves above the people of all the other quarters of the Globe, in what they call arts, sciences, and cultivation, and ... deem all the inventions of Europe their own, for no other reason, but because they were born amid the confluence of these inventions and traditions" (cited in Young 1995, p. 37). As Andy McRandy puts it in *Capricornia* (1941 [1938], p. 370-371): "Find me a whiteman in all this continent that's capable of inventin' [i.e. inventing] a steam injin [i.e. engine] – not makin' [i.e. making] it, but inventin' it, not knowing that it was ever thought of before. You'd have to look a dern [i.e. darn] long way Cos [i.e. because] only one whiteman out of millions of 'em [i.e. them] in thousands of years was capable of that".

This 'voice' is of course neither Aboriginal nor indeed non-Aboriginal; it 'reverberates' instead in the tension in between civilisation and culture, in the compulsion to become other within what Taussig suggestively calls "the inner sanctum of mimetic mysteries" (1993, p. xix). Critically, this is a product of the text rather than the transcription of any kind of 'authentic' Aboriginal voice; it draws upon the project of textual authority that Harney and Elkin began, and betrays some of the same failings.

In a typically provocative passage from a private letter, Herbert conveyed his broader life-quest as an attempt to "legitimise my bastard white fella genius" and "truly root myself in this dear earth" by "father[ing] a Euraustralian" (Herbert 2002, p. 71). Setting out to offend the sensibilities of contemporary readers with his frank depiction of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal sexual liaisons and their product in people like Norman Shillingsworth, *Capricornia* arguably expresses the desire for a "new interracial dispensation" (Huggan 2007, p. 92). At the same time, as the (erstwhile) Aboriginal critic Mudrooroo argues, the novel dramatises the impossibility of this desire in the grim "fatalistic attitude" which governs the ending, as Norman's girlfriend Tocky and their infant son are subsumed within Herbert's "universe of appalling waste" (Mudrooroo 1990a, p. xiv). As Ruth Morse suggests, *Capricornia* (like Pritchard's *Coonardoo*) seems to be "inherently contradictory" in this respect (Morse 1988, p. 96). However much Herbert's verve might be seen to militate against Herbert's fatalism, *Carpricornia* arguably forecloses the potential of mixed-descent people. While Tocky Lace's death in the empty water tank at Red Ochre is probably the most obvious example of this, it is also evident in the novel's false ending a few pages earlier, when Norman and his non-Aboriginal father Mark celebrate an economic boom in conventional (even clichéd) picaresque style. By this point, the plot-potential of Norman's vaunted Aboriginal identity seems to have been exhausted; the tiny sad skeleton of his infant son cradled in its mother's arms only reinforces this. Notwithstanding this ending, however, the 'voice' that Herbert created in *Capricornia* – like that of Harney and Elkin – contributed towards the creation of an Aboriginal subject position that gradually superseded Herbert's own status as a writer about Aborigines, as Aborigines themselves became authors and began to assert control over representation. As Huggan argues, Herbert's ending may in fact manifest a

“metaracist critique [of] the white desire to claim and control an Aboriginal point of view” (2007, p. 92).

Intriguingly, an early assertion of a distinctively Aboriginal voice occurred on the day *Capricornia* was published, on Wednesday, 26<sup>th</sup> January 1938. As well as the Sesqui-Centenary celebration of Australian settlement, 26<sup>th</sup> January 1938 also marked the inaugural Aboriginal Day of Mourning and Protest<sup>34</sup>. After struggling for several years to bring the novel into print, Herbert’s publisher P. R. ‘Inky’ Stephensen seized upon the opportunity to promote it on this unique Australia Day. As his biographer notes, the redoubtable Stephensen was also an early champion of Aboriginal rights (Munro 1990). Stephensen’s *Foundations of Culture in Australia* (1936) led in part to the founding of the Jindyworobak poetry movement, as well the radical-nationalist ‘Australia First’ organisation in the 1940s (Munro 1990). With the collapse of his P. R. Stephensen and Co. firm in 1935, Stephensen became increasingly active as a polemicist and organiser for Aboriginal rights and other issues as he struggled to publish *Capricornia*. Intriguingly, in the November 1937 issue of his radical monthly magazine *Publicist*, Stephensen explicitly linked the formation of the Aborigines Progressive Association with his forthcoming publication:

Our particular interest in this submerged national question [of Aboriginal rights] has been aroused by Xavier Herbert’s masterly novel of North Australia – ‘Capricornia’ – which is now in the press and will be published shortly (Stephensen 1937, p. 5).

Contrary to this presentation of *Capricornia* as that which aroused “interest” in the Aborigines Progressive Association, however, Stephensen’s biographer argues that the formation of the Progressive Association was partly Stephensen’s doing (Munro 1981, p. 99). Having printed and bound *Capricornia* ready for publication, Stephensen hoped the Progressive Association and its inaugural Day of Mourning and Protest would help to generate enthusiasm for *Carpentaria* and secure the award of the Sesqui-Centenary prize for the novel, which Herbert duly won. While

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<sup>34</sup> January 26<sup>th</sup> is the anniversary of the First Fleet’s arrival at Port Jackson (now Sydney Harbour) in 1788. It is celebrated in Australia as Australia Day every year.

Herbert worked for the rest of his life to “smash this evil system” operating in northern Australia at the time, Stephensen and the *Publicist* appear to have lost interest in Aboriginal affairs after 1938 (Winter 2005, p. 21).

#### **4.3 The Shift from Aboriginal ‘Informants’ to Aboriginal ‘Authors’**

For its inaugural Day of Mourning and Protest on Australia Day in 1938, the newly formed Aborigines Progressive Association held an Australian Aborigines Conference at the Australian Hall in Elizabeth Street in Sydney. While a New South Wales organisation, the Aborigines Progressive Association flyer for this event called upon “ALL AUSTRALIAN ABORGINES” to attend in large capital letters:

TO ALL AUSTRALIAN ABORGINES! PLEASE COME TO THIS CONFERENCE  
IF YOU POSSIBLY CAN! ALSO SEND WORD BY LETTER TO NOTIFY US IF  
YOU CAN ATTEND.

(cited in Kleinert & Neale 2000, p. 322)

Uniquely for the times, the organisers of this event stated: “ABORIGINES AND PERSONS OF ABORIGINAL BLOOD ONLY ARE INVITED TO ATTEND” (Kleinert & Neale 2000, p. 322). While Stephenson helped to form the Association and organise the event as part of the publicity campaign for *Capricornia*, this organisation was the first to specifically restrict membership to ‘Aborigines’ (i.e. people of solely Aboriginal descent) and ‘Persons of Aboriginal Blood’ (i.e. people of mixed Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal descent). As such, the Aborigines’ Progressive Association was one of the first genuinely Aboriginal organisations in the modern sense, alongside the Australian Aborigines’ League (or Aborigines Advancement League)<sup>35</sup>. Although its stated restrictions upon non-Aboriginal participation was somewhat disingenuous given the role that non-Aboriginal people like Stephensen played in setting it up, the Progressive Association nevertheless prompted the development of modern understandings of

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<sup>35</sup> Bain Attwood (2003, p. 33, 41, 357-358n) backdates the growth of Aboriginal organisations into the 1920s, with organisations like the Australian Aborigines’ League (established in 1934), the Aborigines Progressive Association of New South Wales (originally formed in 1924 and then reformed in 1937), the Native Union in Western Australia, and the Australian Aborigines Association in South Australia. In Attwood’s history, Stephensen’s contribution to the Progressive Association is buried in the footnotes.

Aboriginality as distinct from Whiteness. A generation after Herbert and Harney and Elkin's work, this resulted in the creation of an Aboriginal authorial 'voice' out of the collaboration of Percy Trezise (a mutual friend of Herbert and Harney) and the Lardil Aboriginal man Dick Roughsey Goobalthaldin. Unlike Hetherington's *Aboriginal Queen of Sacred Song* (1929?), Thonemann's *Tell the White Man* (1949), and Harney's friend Douglas Lockwood's *I, The Aboriginal* (1963), *Moon and Rainbow* (1971) and Roughsey (and Trezise's) numerous children's books beginning with *The Giant Devil-Dingo* (1973) are solely credited to Roughsey, bringing what I have described as the discourse of early literary and anthropological writing to an end, as the distinction between literary and anthropological modes of representation was increasingly founded upon access to an authentically Aboriginal voice<sup>36</sup>. In this final part of Chapter Four I argue against a critical tendency to ignore Roughsey and Trezise's work as the product of an uneven collaboration. I focus instead upon the broader connections between Aboriginal authorial 'voices' and the discourses of early literary and anthropological writing, classical ethnography, and exploration and 'discovery'.

*Moon and Rainbow* (1971) tells the story of Roughsey's life in a sequential fashion, beginning with the arrival of the missionaries on Mornington Island and ending with Roughsey's work with Trezise locating and recording rock art sites in Cape York Peninsula. Towards the end, it describes the ten-year plan Roughsey concocted with Trezise to promote himself as an artist, taking his paintings from the tourist strip of Cairns to the National Gallery in Canberra, and earning him recognition as a writer along the way. Like *Songs of the Songmen*, *Moon and Rainbow* is buttressed by a 'Foreword' and a 'Glossary'. Like Lockwood's and Elkin's remarks about Harney, this Foreword (by Trezise) establishes the author or implied-author Roughsey's *bona fides* as "a member of a society of people known as the Lardil tribe, owners of Mornington Island in the Gulf of Carpentaria" (Trezise 1971: 9). In it Trezise describes Roughsey as "the first full-blood Aborigine sufficiently literate and ambitious to attempt, and succeed, in writing a book about his people", which ignores the work of Unaipon (2001 [1951]) and Clements (c. 1930) and Rose (1969) but is at least true upon its own terms (i.e.

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<sup>36</sup> The exact publication date of *Aboriginal Queen of Sacred Song* is unknown. Its first known date is 1929.



based upon the distinction between people of solely Aboriginal descent, and those of mixed Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal descent) (Haag 2008)<sup>37</sup>.

Notwithstanding this claim, however, *Moon and Rainbow* displays many connections with early literary and anthropological writing beyond the surface resemblance that I have already described. These connections suggest that it should not be seen as a virgin birth; its genealogy can clearly be seen throughout not just early literary and anthropological writing, but classical ethnography and even exploration and 'discovery' as well. For example, like much anthropology of the period, *Moon and Rainbow's* description of Lardil Aboriginal society might be described as structuralist. This reflects the prevailing intellectual climate in Australian anthropology, as the contemporaneous work of David McKnight illustrates (McKnight 1999). A straightforward illustration of this is Roughsey's description of the division of the Lardil society into four basic units:

My own people own Mornington, Sydney and Wallaby Islands. We are divided into four groups by direction. The western group is called Balumbanda, the north Jirrgurumband, the east Lelumbanda, and south, my own group, Larumbanda (Roughsey 1971, p. 16)<sup>38</sup>.

This influence of contemporary anthropology is also evident in Roughsey's description of the Dreamtime stories of Marnbil, Gin-gin and Dewallewul, as well as the Rainbow Serpent Thuwathu within a chapter entitled "Legends of the Larumbanda". While such stories predate the arrival of anthropologists, Roughsey's presentation of much of this material arguably reflects the patronage pressures exerted by the publisher, the intended market audience and the mores (taste, morality, political conditions, etc) of the society at large. For example, in discussing Lardil beliefs about *puri-puri* or sorcery, Roughsey inserts a revealing apercu:

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<sup>37</sup> The date of creation of Clement's memoirs is unknown. The first known date is 1930.

<sup>38</sup> I do not mean to suggest that Roughsey invented these classifications, merely that the presentation of them in *Moon and Rainbow* reflects a contemporaneous anthropological concern with social structures.

I think that death by *puri-puri* is caused by worry. If you don't believe in it then you don't worry and you don't die. When the old people are all gone perhaps *puri-puri* will be forgotten, and our children will be able to live with peace of mind.

I once asked an old man why he couldn't kill a white man with his *puri-puri*. He said, 'We can't *puri-puri* white men because they've got too much salt in their bodies'.

I told him that I would be eating plenty of salt from then on and would be safe from his *puri-puri* (Roughsey 1971, p. 78-79).

Whatever Roughsey's attitudes towards such beliefs in sorcery, this passage illustrates his awareness of a broader society where Lardil Aboriginal people's beliefs about sorcery would likely be met with derision.

As such, *Moon and Rainbow* appears to contradict Heiss and Minter's argument that "Aboriginal literary writing grew directly from a complex and ancient wellspring of oral and visual communication and exchange", rather than existing genres of non-Aboriginal writing (2008, p. 2). Unlike many later publications by Aboriginal authors, *Moon and Rainbow* also lacks the experimental style that has sometimes been described as Aboriginal by critics (Mudrooroo 1990b; Mudrooroo 1997). In his early analysis of "modern Aboriginal literature", Mudrooroo associates autobiography with assimilation to an "Anglo-Celtic majority culture" insofar as it is "often written and revised in conjunction with a European" (Mudrooroo 1990b, pp. 15-16). Following Mudrooroo, Moreton-Robinson (Moreton-Robinson 2000, pp. 1, 16) argues that "the Indigenous self" is not individualistic but relational and communal, suggesting that the autobiography as a form is individualistic. In a related mode, Westphalen critiques the term 'autobiography', arguing that it tends to conceal the origins of Aboriginal prose in what she calls "the discourses of the Dreaming" (cited in Haag 2008, p. 6). *Moon and Rainbow* also lacks any straightforward commitment to an ideological cause. As a result, it has been excluded from recent edited collections of Aboriginal writing (Heiss, Minter & Jose 2008; Davis et al. 1990).

Contrary to what Heiss and Minter (2008, p. 3) characterise as Aboriginal literature's "concerted and unmistakably public struggle against the overtly assimilationist legislative regimes endured by Aboriginal people", Roughsey expresses somewhat nostalgic opinions about the impact of the missionaries at Mornington Island, and other contemporary political issues affecting Aborigines (Roughsey 1971, pp. 17, 131). For example, Roughsey writes of a scheme in which he and a friend deliberately killed a cow in an attempt to get sent to Palm Island and from there to a station, partly to escape the control of the mission. While that plan failed, Roughsey was drafted into cattle work in 1941 due to a wartime shortage of labour. He reports:

How happy we were to have a job after all those years sitting idea – a proper job with money and the chance to learn, and to see new things and new places.... We were glad to be doing our bit in keeping the tucker up to the fighting men – some of them Aborigines like myself.... We didn't get much pay but we got plenty of tucker and tobacco. It was better than lying about the mission or hunting tucker in the bush and on the reef (Roughsey 1971, p. 120-121).

While out-of-keeping with the contemporary political aspirations of many Aboriginal people, opinions like these are expressive of some Aboriginal people's experiences during the long era of assimilation. Indeed Roughsey's account of this period illustrates different ways in which some Aboriginal people were able to exert power. For example, at Lorraine Station in 1950, Roughsey and some other stockworkers quit their jobs to protest about the quality of the food; in response, the cook was sacked and the quality of rations improved (Roughsey 1971, p. 125-128). In excluding voices like Roughsey's, recent edited collections of Aboriginal literature have generated an unduly simplistic account of the past, tragically suppressing the spirit of adventure and indeed resistance that some Aboriginal people like Roughsey brought to bear upon the circumstances of their lives.

#### 4.4 Conclusion

In Elkin's 80<sup>th</sup> year, 1971, Australia's first land rights case *Milirrpum and others v. Nabalco Pty Ltd and the Commonwealth of Australia* was heard by Justice Blackburn in the Supreme Court of the Northern Territory. Despite being presented with evidence by anthropologists R. Berndt and Stanner as well as ten Aboriginal witnesses, Blackburn found that native title was not part of the law of Australia. While the Royal Commission established after this decision led to the eventual recognition of Aboriginal land rights, Elkin reportedly remained sceptical though not directly opposed to land rights until the end of his life (Wise 1985). As Wise argues, his interpretation of Aboriginal self-determination stressed inclusion and assimilation rather than separation, although this did not exclude political representation. As he put it in the final version of *The Australian Aborigines*: "Aborigines are Australian citizens and must *be* their own voice" (emphasis added, Elkin 1974, p. 376).

However, as I have argued throughout this chapter, Aborigines' 'own voice' or voices are best understood with reference to the discourse of early literary and anthropological writing, which eventually produced an Aboriginal 'autobiography' in Roughsey's *Moon and Rainbow*, just a few years after Elkin reissued the by then anachronistic *Songs of the Songmen*. While critics of Aboriginal literature are arguably overfond of stressing firsts, *Moon and Rainbow* marks the end of the discourse that I have described and the beginning of the next, particularly in terms of writing about the Gulf. Its omission from the critical work and edited collections of Shoemaker (1989), Davis, Muecke, Narogin, and Shoemaker (1990), and Heiss, Minter and Jose (2008) highlights the politics of the present discourse. As Mick Dodson put it in his foreword to the *Macquarie Pen Anthology of Aboriginal Literature*, "literature [or writing more generally] can be and is used as a powerful political tool by Aboriginal people in a political system which renders us mostly voiceless. It can give us confidence and pride to raise our voices through the silence" (2008, p. xiii). Whether Aboriginal people can truly be said to be 'mostly voiceless' within Australia's political system is moot; Aboriginality, in this sense, stresses an existential experience of being Aboriginal that is qualitatively different and true, indeed pure, purified (Latour 1993). As an essentialised weapon against

Whiteness, Aboriginality is ineluctably outside non-Aboriginal writing. As Anita Heiss argues in a website supplement to her co-edited publication *Macquarie Pen Anthology of Aboriginal Literature*:

Indigenous literature provides a platform for this country's First Nations people who are essentially still voiceless in the 21st century. Our poetry, our novels, our life-stories are all saying "this is who we are, this is what we aspire to, this is how we want to be identified, this is how we can work together, and this is why the history of this country is important to all of us." Indigenous Australia *is* the first story of this nation, we must therefore be a major part of the storytelling (Heiss 2009, n.p.).

As I have argued, however, *Moon and Rainbow* is better understood alongside the other texts I have considered in this chapter as a recognisable link between early literary and anthropological writing and the modern discourse of Aboriginal literature. By tending to ignore this link, the modern discourse of Aboriginal literature exemplifies the workings of purification as conceptualised by Bruno Latour (1993). As Emma Kowal argues, purification "tid[ies] up the messiness that is the legacy of colonialism", reinforcing boundaries between Aboriginality and Whiteness (2009, p. 237).

Crucially, the messy legacy of colonialism is involved in representations of Aboriginality, including anthropological ones, even when such representations are naturalised with regard to the land and the landedness of Aboriginal identities, as I will argue in the next chapter.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### The Creativity of Place

Oscar [Shillingsworth] held dominion over six hundred square miles of country, which extended east and west from the railway to the summit of the Lonely Ranges, and north and south from the horizons, it might be said, since there was nothing to show where the boundaries lay in those directions....

Jasmine had said that [Oscar] worshipped property. It was true. But he did not value Red Ochre simply as a grazing-lease. At times it was to him six hundred square miles where grazing grew and broilgas danced in the painted sunset and emus ran to the silver dawn – square miles of jungle where cool deep billabongs made watering for stock and nests for shouting nuttagul geese – of grassy valleys and stony hills, useless for grazing, but good to think about as haunts of great goannas and rock-pythons – of swamps where cattle bogged and died, but wild hog and buffalo wallowed in happiness – of virgin forests where poison weed lay in wait for stock, but where possums and kangaroos and multitudes of gorgeous birds dwelt as from time immemorial.

From Hebert, X., 1941 [1938], *Capricornia*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney p.79

*5.1 The Land; 5.2 Representations of Aboriginality and the Land; 5.3 Representations of Whiteness and the Land; 5.4 Poetic Relations to Place; 5.5 Conclusion*

This section will examine representations of Aboriginality and Whiteness in writing about the southern Gulf from what I am calling the land rights and native title period, dating from around the passage of the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* through to debates surrounding *Mabo vs Queensland [No 1]* and *Mabo vs. Queensland [No 2]* (1988-1992) leading to the *Native Title Act 1993* (Cth), and various amendments, particularly those following the *Wik Peoples vs Queensland* 1996 decision<sup>39</sup>. Moving from the analysis of the three recognizable 'historical' periods discussed in the first section, this section will bring the analysis up-to-date by looking at contemporary (i.e. post 1970s) material, opening the way for the more ethnographic analysis that follows (particularly in Chapters Seven and Eight). Drawing upon a diverse selection of texts, I discuss the meaning of the self within 'self-determination' here, and how this was shaped by a focus upon the land (Merlan 2007). At the same time, I examine how this focus has affected non-Aboriginal residents in the Gulf: the real-life counterparts of Herbert's fictive Oscar Shillingsworth who profess to value the land as more than just a grazing lease. Throughout, I seek to enunciate the legal, political and cultural conditions – and indeed contradictions – embedded and literally embodied in the simplistic opposition of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people based upon their relationship to land, or 'the land'. Insofar as both Aboriginality and Whiteness are relational products of the discourses I have identified (exploration and 'discovery, classical ethnography, and early literary and anthropological writing), this representation of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people as opposed – by which I mean that any person is presumed to be either 'White' or 'Aboriginal' in their relation to land – is inadequate.

Throughout this chapter, I range across approximately four decades of writing about the Gulf (c.1970-2010) while largely restricting the analysis to published academic texts by Avery and McLaughlin (1977), Trigger (1992), McKnight (1999; 2002; 2004; 2005), Baker (1999), and Bradley with Yanyuwa Families (2010), as well as more imaginative representations of the area published as fiction/creative non-fiction by McGinnis (1999; 2001; 2006; 2010), Jose (2002), Muir (2004), and

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<sup>39</sup> The most substantive amendments to the *Native Title Act* were passed in the highly controversial *Native Title Amendment Act 1998* (Cth). Further amendments were passed in 2007 and 2009.



the Aboriginal-non-Aboriginal couple John and Ros Moriarty (J. Moriarty 2000; R. Moriarty 2010). I will also make reference to a number of popular texts from elsewhere in Australia insofar as they have contributed towards writing about the Gulf, particularly Bruce Chatwin's *Songlines* (1987). While not an exhaustive account of writing from the period – which might take account of other publications on the Aboriginal architecture of the Wellesley Islands by Memmot (2007), or the archaeology of the Sir Edward Pellew Group by Kearney (2009), as well as supplementary publications by those I have identified – this selection of texts conveys something of the complexity and variety of publicly available writing about the southern Gulf<sup>40</sup>. While related accounts of writing about Queensland and the Northern Territory exist (Taylor & Perkins 2007; Dewar 1997), these tend to focus upon fiction and creative non-fiction at the expense of anthropological and other academic texts. When the analysis of representation does incorporate anthropological texts, its focus tends to be restricted to pre-1970s texts, if not pre-World War Two material (Gray 2007; Gray 2001). By largely restricting the focus to what Elkin (1974, pp. vii-ix) called the establishment of professional (as opposed to academic) anthropology, analysts have thereby perpetuated anachronisms about the present discipline which neglect to analyse anthropology's role the promulgation of representations of Aboriginality and Whiteness today (Langton 2011). As Langton provocatively argues (2011, p.10), such anachronisms have enabled those whom she calls "quasi-libertarian[s]" to ignore "the large body of scientific and humanistic evidence [generated by anthropologists] about the nature of Aboriginal societies". At the same time, however, anthropological analyses tend to mirror this problem, neglecting fiction and creative non-fiction entirely, or otherwise reading such texts as somehow symptomatic of their context, i.e. Australian culture, or the nation and its ineluctable consciousness<sup>41</sup>. My analysis will seek to redress these

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<sup>40</sup> While such material is publicly available, it is difficult to gauge the extent to which it is widely read. Despite an interest in academic and particularly anthropological work, many of the non-Aboriginal people whom I interviewed around the Gulf lacked access to even the most basic academic resources about Aboriginal society such as kinship charts, subsection diagrams and dictionaries. Moreover, it is unclear that those who have access to such material are able to understand it.

<sup>41</sup> For example, Povinelli (2002, p.50) asserts that the American author Marlo Morgan's various publications are somehow "ploughed" into what she calls "the

mirrored failings, bringing the critique of literary/cultural studies and anthropology up-to-date. This will be succeeded in Chapter Six by a more specific analysis of the Aboriginal author Alexis Wright, whose novels *Plains of Promise* (1997) and *Carpentaria* (2006) engage with issues raised by the land rights and native title period in a distinctive way.

As Said argues: “the struggle for empire is launched ... when a coincidence occurs between real control and power, the idea of what a given place was (could be, might become), and an actual place” (1993, p. 93). In many respects, representations of Aboriginality and Whiteness in Australia were particularly shaped by this struggle, in the “imaginative, cartographic, military, economic, historical or in a general sense cultural” arenas that Said associates with the creation of place (1993, p. 93). Critically, however, place is not just created but creative, as recent anthropology from the Pacific has substantiated (Leach 2003; Strathern & Hirsch 2004). As James Leach argues: “[i]f the creation of the world *was* autopoetic, the creation of the world is *still* autopoetic” (2003, p. 217). Like culture, it is in a continual state of invention (Wagner 1981). As Wagner argues:

The necessity to innovate is characteristic of all cultural activity. It amounts to the cultural necessity to attribute meaning to every successive act, event, and element, and to formulate that meaning in terms of already known referents and elements (cited in Strathern 1988, p. 17)

The struggle for empire that Said describes – between “Westerners taking possession of land and, during decolonization, for resisting natives reclaiming it” – is therefore misconstrued (1993, p. 93). As I will argue, representations of Aboriginality and Whiteness combine in poetic relations to place in the Gulf, where the creation of place is accomplished by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. As J. G. A. Pocock argues, “dreaming or imagining one’s way into a relationship with the environment is a high and precarious *human* achievement” (emphasis added, 1992, p. 48).

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[Australian] national consciousness”, though arguably Morgan’s infamous misrepresentation of Aboriginal culture has had far greater impact in North American than Australia, where even the least informed reader would likely be highly suspicious of the claims made in that text.

## 5.1 The Land

The early 1970s brought about dramatic changes in representations of Aboriginality and Whiteness. These changes involved an increasing focus upon issues of landedness, as the Australian state sought to recognise Aboriginal connections to what became known simply and somewhat ambiguously as 'land' or 'the land'. However, while this process returned control over alienated land on classical estates to many Aboriginal people, it cannot be seen as a simple restitution of Aboriginal people's rights (Attwood 2003). Instead, land rights and native title can be seen to have shaped contemporary understandings of Aboriginality and Whiteness out of the historical discourses that I have previously identified – exploration and 'discovery', classical ethnography, early literary and anthropological writing – just as 'the land' was shaped by these discourses.

Like many other settler colonial nations such as the United States, Canada, South Africa and New Zealand, Australia has a pioneering myth about the land, according to which men and women were transformed from immigrants into nationals through their struggle with a unique environment (Brett 2011, p. 33). Like Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis about American history (Turner 1921), Russel Ward's 1958 account of "the Australian legend" emphasised the impact of Australia's environment upon the character of the earliest convicts through to the shearers, drovers and boundary riders of the late nineteenth century (Ward 1958). The historian John Hirst developed Ward's ideas in the late 1970s, describing a complementary "Pioneer Legend" (1978) which included smaller farmers and their wives, whose courage and enterprise and plain hard work helped to settle the country.

However, unlike other settler-descendant nations with similar pioneering myths, much of Australia is arid or semi-arid, and of limited arability; "a sunburnt country" subject to "droughts and flooding rains" as Dorothea Mackeller famously wrote (1911). While early settlers dreamed of reproducing the closely settled countryside of America, Australia's "perceived character and destiny" was different (Said 1993, p. 93; Brett 2011). Although available land around the southern Gulf was rapidly taken up by wealthy investors following the positive

reports of Landsborough and other explorers including Ernest Favenc – who published in the *Queenslander* in 1879 of his successful crossing of the Barkly Tableland (Roberts 2005, p. 54) – many areas remained resistant to the dominant colonial regimes of pastoralism and agriculturalism for decades thereafter. Although cattle prospered more readily than the sheep that early explorers envisaged roaming around the Gulf, parts of the large stations that were carved out of the Gulf remained “useless for grazing ... haunts of great goannas and rock-pythons”, as Herbert puts it in *Capricornia* (1941 [1938], p. 79). While Australia became one of the world’s wealthiest countries in the nineteenth century because of rural exports (particularly of wool, although gold also contributed to Australia’s wealth during mining booms), many parts of the continent remained sparsely populated. Around the time of Australia’s Federation in 1901, most of the population lived around the coastal fringe, and although the population of the inland remained relatively constant over the following 50 years, it declined as a proportion of the population as the cities surged ahead, dropping to historically low levels around 1970 (Brett 2011, p. 20).

As in Dorothea Mackellar’s poem “Core of My Heart” (1911), Oscar’s ‘love’ for the land combines feelings of both success and defeat. For Oscar Shillingsworth:

At times he loved [Red Ochre] best in Wet Season ... till one was sodden to the bone and mildewed to the marrow and moved to pray ... for that which formerly he had cursed – the Dry! the good old Dry ... until one prayed for the Wet again, or if one’s heart was small, packed up and left this Capricornia that fools down South called the Land of Opportunity (Herbert 1941 [1938], pp. 79-80).

Such ambivalent ‘love’ for the land arguably extended to those who lived in the cities as well, as classic agrarianism supported by the myths identified Ward and Hirst – as well as a good dose of xenophobia, especially between the First and Second World Wars – prompted massive government spending in the form of subsidies for infrastructure and services in the country, as well as a number of grandiose irrigation schemes like the Ord River dam in north-east Western Australia. As Brett has recently argued (2011), the political consensus that

governed Australia over much of the twentieth century involved bipartisan support for what she calls “the country”. While Herbert decried the idea of a “Land of Opportunity” as a delusion of the “fools down South”, it underpinned spending in Australia for much of the twentieth century (1941 [1938], p. 80). However, beginning with the intensification of Australia’s industrialisation in the 1940s, this bipartisan support began to weaken. This weakening was accelerated by the growth of the environmental movement in Australia from the 1960s. As Brett argues:

Old-style agricultural country [was] no longer the taken-for-granted source of pride in the country’s hard work and productivity which it was for earlier generations, but now also [spoke] of cleared forests and absent birds and mammals (Brett 2011, p. 38).

By the 1970s, the land was being typecast as a villain in popular Australian novels and films like *Wake in Fright*, in which a young city schoolteacher on holiday barely escapes from a small country town with his life (Cook 1961; Kotcheff 1971). When Henry Reynold’s work on the violence of the frontier began to be published with *The Other Side of the Frontier* in 1981, representations of what had previously been known as ‘the real Australia’ had radically changed from Ward’s agrarian fantasy into the heartland of “racism, xenophobia, misogyny, intolerance and homophobia” (Brett 2011, p. 40). While the National Party and the mining industry successfully stymied the Hawke Labor government’s attempt to introduce a national land rights policy in the mid-1980s, understandings of the land had already changed.

While solipsistic (“Red Ochre was so named because an abundance of red ochre was to be found in the locality”), the name for Oscar’s station in *Capricornia* seems to acknowledge the pre-existing occupation of Aboriginal people: Red Ochre was Red Ochre because “[n]ot far from the homestead was a cleft hillock of which the face was composed entirely of red ochre that was scored by the implements of men of the Mullanmullak Tribe who had gathered the pigment there for ages” (Herbert 1941 [1938], p. 80). While Herbert does not comment on whether this fictive Aboriginal group continued to visit this place after Red Ochre was founded,

many such practices were substantially uninterrupted by colonisation. As Rowse (2011) recently commented, Australia's geography "blunted" colonial invasion. At the beginning of the land rights and native title period, C. D. Rowley's influential trilogy *The Destruction of Aboriginal Society* (1972a), *The Remote Aborigines* (Rowley 1972b), and *Outcasts in White Australia* (1972c), theorised this point based upon the distinction between 'settled' and what he calls 'colonial' Australia. For Rowley, 'colonial' Australia includes all of the southern Gulf, as well as much of the rest of northern and central Australia, where "Aboriginal culture retains, to varying degrees, its significance for conduct and as a determinant of the Aboriginal 'world view' and value system" (Rowley 1972b, p. 1). Although Rowley's distinction between 'settled' and 'colonial' Australia has since been critiqued by some anthropologists – Keen argues that those in "settled Australia" maintain distinctive kinship and economic practices, among other things, despite the imposition of severe and often violent breaks with their classical pasts (1988) – the idea of a more culturally distinctive Aboriginal society in remote-area Australia is widespread amongst non-Aboriginal Australians (as well as many Aboriginal people). As Merlan argues (2007, p. 140), Australians "have always fantasized 'undomesticated' Aboriginality, and imagined its continuation in remote spaces". With the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* the state set out a process according to which such 'continuation' might be adjudicated (at least in the Northern Territory) as traditional.

As Marcia Langton argues (following Beckett 1988, pp. 12-13), land rights and native title prompted the apotheosis of self-determination (2011, pp. 9-10). With this apotheosis, distinctions between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people (as well as amongst Aboriginal people themselves) began to be drawn on the basis of their relations to the land, as Aboriginal people were troped as indigenous or 'Indigenous' to the land, and other Australians as indubitably not. As Beckett argues (1987, p. 17), "at the ideological level the 'native', who once stood in opposition to the 'settler' and outside the pale of society, undergoes an apotheosis to emerge as its original citizen". This altered the view that Aboriginal people would or even should assimilate into the mainstream of Australian society. Instead, the state sought to validate Aboriginal difference as self-determination via land rights (as well as a number of other policies). With the gradual weakening

of the political consensus offering bipartisan support for the country, Keating's Labor government were able to legislate native title into existence in December 1993, after the High Court in *Mabo* established the judiciability of Aboriginal relations to land outside the Northern Territory. While Howard's Liberal government was broadly seen as hostile to native title, Howard left Keating's edifice of native title largely alone, even when he had Senate control, despite some tinkering at the edges with what he called his Ten Point Plan in the aftermath of the *Wik* decision in 1996 (Kelly 2009, p. 401)<sup>42</sup>. With the *Native Title Act 1993*, representations of Aboriginality and Whiteness were reformulated dramatically in a way that has largely endured.

As Merlan argues, land rights and native title cannot be interpreted "simply as indigenous [i.e. Aboriginal] initiative or a direct rendering of indigenous priorities":

No single kind of relationship to country can be presumed among the indigenous population. Nor would indigenous people by themselves be likely to project a single kind of representation, though many ... profess strong attachment to country (Merlan 2007, p. 133).

While land rights and native title drew upon anthropological accounts of Aboriginal territoriality, both pieces of legislation are now and always have been form of social engineering, as Nicolas Peterson recently argued (2011). As Merlan notes, the landmark Gurindji walk off at the Vestey's owned Wave Hill station in the Victoria River District in the 1960s began as a call for improved conditions rather than land:

[Gurindji people's] original claims ... were transmuted into a much broader emergent demand for 'land rights' that, although it resonated with Gurinjdjdi understandings of their relations to country, was in conception and organization partly of outside origin.... The conception of 'land rights' as

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<sup>42</sup> Strelein (2009, p. 7) offers a more critical assessment of Howard's amendments than I have presented here, citing "substantial reforms" in the *Native Title Amendment Act 1998* (Cth).

stemming from and sustaining a distinctively Aboriginal culture is more recent (Merlan 2007, p. 134).

Aborigines themselves often had something else in mind, as Cowlshaw argues (1999). While many Aboriginal people have embraced the concept of land rights as an issue of justice – particularly as the struggle for empire has been succeeded by the struggle to decolonise – it is a construction of discourse rather than a straightforward reflection of Aboriginal territoriality, although understandings of Aboriginality are of course entwined within the discourse. By focusing on representations of Aboriginality in the land rights and native title period I will analyse how this construction developed.

## **5.2 Representations of Aboriginality and The Land**

With the growth of the Aboriginal land rights movement in the 1970s, representations of Aboriginality began to promote Aboriginal relationships with land as the ‘traditional’ basis for the apotheosis of self-determination. As I have previously argued (see Chapters Two, Three and Four), earlier discourses of exploration and ‘discovery’, classical ethnography, and early literary and anthropological writing did *not* stress the importance of the land to Aboriginal people in the same way. While Spencer and Gillen, Roth, Mathews and other classical ethnographers noted the distinctiveness of Aboriginal territoriality, their focus was primarily upon social organisation; similarly, Elkin, Reay, and other early- to mid-century anthropologists working in the Gulf largely ignored the question of territoriality, although there are significant exceptions to this rule<sup>43</sup>. From the mid- to late-1960s onwards, however, anthropologists and others have increasingly focused upon the land and the landedness of Aboriginal identities, reflecting Aboriginal political agitation for land rights. While arguably politically necessary, this focus has withheld recognition to all but a few Aboriginal people, tending to prioritise an essentialised understanding of culture over the

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<sup>43</sup> As Ronald and Catherine Berndt argue (1985, p. 136): “Anthropologically, there is a common agreement on what constitutes Aboriginal relationship to land, how that relationship is manifested, what it means to individual Aborigines, and what its significance is socially”. This consensus rests upon work published around the time of the Gove dispute (1963 – 1971), by T. G. H. Strehlow (1970) and Munn (1964, 1973), as well as Stanner’s numerous publications.



consideration of how Aboriginal people actually live in regions like the southern Gulf.

The cultural geographer Richard Baker's work with Yanyuwa people in and around Borroloola provides an apposite example of the reification of representation of Aboriginal relations to land within the land rights and native title period. Baker's monograph *Land is Life* (1999) tells the story of Yanyuwa people's decision to leave their traditional estates and settle in the town, while suggestively affirming their ongoing connections to what he calls 'the land':

For the Yanyuwa, land is alive with meanings. The land tells the stories of creation. The spirits of ancestral beings reside in the land and demand respect. The land also tells the story of contact history. For example, the signs of old camps and old cattle yards are there to be read. Yanyuwa travelling the country will often address the land and their ancestors that are embodied in it. The intimate linking of land and life in Aboriginal ways of perceiving the world is well illustrated by the catch phrase of the modern Aboriginal land rights movement 'land is life' (Baker 1999, p. 5).

As Merlan argues (2007, p. 129), Baker's work illustrates the circulation in academic writing of ideas about the "consubstantiality of Aboriginal being with the land". In the above passage, Baker utilises the word 'land' without explicitly defining it, allowing the reader to formulate an understanding of the meaning of 'the land' with respect to related words like landscape, place, space, country, etc. In Baker's work, 'the land' seems to mean both the 'bush' and the 'town', indeed the totality of the environment itself, including the sea and the air. In this way, the land might be thought or said to be above or beyond any definition, as obvious and indeed obdurate as a tangible physical site – notwithstanding (indeed disavowing) its overweening ideological role in Baker's argument. For Baker, the land *itself* tells stories about creation and contact history to Yanyuwa people: in other words, the land *itself* is alive. In a significant departure from prevailing understandings of semiology, Baker asserts that "signs of old camps and old cattle yards" exert control over their own interpretation: these signs are "there to be read", just as the spirits of ancestral beings are able to "demand respect" from their Aboriginal

descendants (1999, p. 5). This enables him to assert that 'land is life' in the dual sense: both Aboriginal life and alive/life itself<sup>44</sup>. While noting that "there are many internal divisions affecting how people see the world" – including those which "cut across the Aboriginal-European divide" – Baker states that few 'Europeans' have understood "the importance of land" to Aboriginal people, nor indeed the importance of the land itself insofar as the land might be said to be 'alive', although a number of Baker's 'Europeans' clearly did, including Baker himself (Baker 1999, pp. 8-9)<sup>45</sup>. 'The land' therefore serves as a metonym or even a synonym of Aboriginality in *Land is Life*.

In different ways, each of the anthropologists whom I have identified (Avery & McLaughlin 1977; Trigger 1992; McKnight 2005; McKnight 2004; McKnight 2002; McKnight 1999; Bradley et al. 2010) discusses the nature of Aboriginal associations with the land in a way that is qualitatively different to what came before (i.e. within the discourse of early literary and anthropological writing), while maintaining clear continuities with this past. I do not mean to suggest that Baker or any of these anthropologists were simply making this up: each of these researchers documented people's everyday beliefs and behaviours. However, as Trigger has recently argued apropos anthropological research with Aboriginal people more generally (2011, p. 143), researchers "commonly ... encounter a deliberate politics of cultural revival, in the context of [Aboriginal people's] desire to prove tradition-based rights to the Australian legal system". Given that many of these researcher's academic research projects were completed alongside applied research for land rights and native title claims (with the significant exception of David McKnight's research on Mornington Island), claimants' self-conscious

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<sup>44</sup> This is a theological construct rather than a semiotic one. This intersection of the symbolic and the material here is precisely the issue that is present in the metaphors for the host in consubstantiation (especially in the Lutheran interpretation of the divine presence in the bread of the wafer). 'The land' in this sense becomes one of those materialities that is in and of itself a symbol and in which sign and signified are inextricable.

<sup>45</sup> Baker's writing recalls the vatic voice affected by Deborah Bird Rose in *Dingo Makes Us Human*, in which she asserts: "Country is alive with information for those who have learned to understand" (1992: 225; see also Chapter 4, fn22). As a cultural geographer, Baker learns "to see the landscape through the eyes of those who have lived in it", adopting a Yanyuwa perspective as well as what he calls "a purely European outlook" (1999: 8, 10), although Baker's own experience seems to belie the possibility of such 'purely' distinct perspectives.

aspirations were arguably particularly impactful upon their findings. I do not want to suggest that applied work has necessarily prevented a thoroughgoing analysis of Aboriginal relations to land, as Diane Austin-Broos argues (2010). Indeed much of the work that I have cited (including Richard Baker's) incorporates nuanced analysis of the politics of cultural revival and the complexities of Aboriginal territoriality. I argue instead that land rights and native title has created a mimetic and indeed aesthetic realm in which Aboriginal relations to the land have been reproduced, partly through anthropologists' representations of cultural continuities in 'traditional' spiritual affiliations to land.

Of all the anthropologists whom I have identified above, I focus particularly upon John Bradley's work with Yanyuwa people. Intriguingly, Bradley's work most closely resembles Baker's in terms of its stress upon the land and the landedness of Aboriginal identities. Both Baker and Bradley worked with Yanyuwa people over approximately the same period. Baker indeed credits Bradley with partly shaping his own view of Yanyuwa culture, and particularly Yanyuwa environmental knowledge (Baker 1999, p. xiv). A closer analysis reveals a series of similarities between them that are instructive for my analysis of land rights and native title writing. Like Baker, Bradley represents an ideal form of classical ('traditional') land tenure as distinctively Aboriginal – as, in some respects, Aboriginality itself. Developing Strehlow's use of the concept of songlines (1971), Bradley represents Yanyuwa *kujika* as the "keys" to Yanyuwa law about land (and sea) country (Bradley et al. 2010). Like Baker, Bradley represents the land as life for Aboriginal people, as well as something somehow alive itself. For Bradley, the pivotal expression of Yanyuwa people's life in country are the *kujika*, which he defines as "song line[s], song cycle[s], songs of power that are embedded in the earth and are thought still to be coursing through the earth" (Bradley et al. 2010, p. 285). From his 'number one singer' Jerry, Bradley reproduces song verses associated with the Dingo Dreaming, laid out on the page like poetry in a way which recalls the co-publication of Harney and Elkin: "*Warrakiwarraki/ Warrakiwarraki/ Kakami kakamayi/ Well-made stone blades/ discarded flakes lie scattered*" (Bradley et al. 2010, pp. 132-133). Rather than simply commenting upon the meaning of these songs, however, Bradley challenges readers "to come to feel something about it [i.e. the *kujika*] like these old men [like Jerry] did" (2010, p.

134). He thereby describes the creation of place, while encouraging readers to understand the 'poetry' of Aboriginal relations to land through *kujika*.

However, like Baker's representation of the land as life/alive, Bradley's work reveals an understanding of Aboriginal territoriality which represents cultural change as loss, while disavowing any overlap between Aboriginality and Whiteness (or indeed much overlap between Yanyuwa Aboriginal people and their Aboriginal neighbours). Of course a tremendous amount *has* been lost in a remarkably short period of time. However, much has also been reproduced in an altered form within the mimetic realm created by land rights and native title. As such it is inadequate or at least overly simplistic to assert that "Western readings on [Aboriginal] experience [such as those presented by anthropologists] could not reflect it [i.e. Yanyuwa culture] truly" (Bradley et al. 2010, p. 134):

[Yanyuwa] understandings, and the understandings of many of the men and women who have mentored me, have nothing to do with Western systems of categories; rather their knowing was, and is, about the relatedness of humans, non-humans and objects, and the potential of power to move between them. On that day at Kalkaji [a site on Yanyuwa country], Jerry [a senior Yanyuwa man] was concerned about regenerating his relationship to that country, and the authority he derived from the matrix of interconnectedness that was Yanyuwa law (Bradley et al. 2010, p. 134).

While a subtle and sophisticated account of Aboriginal relations to land, the question of cultural transmission in Aboriginal Australia is arguably more complex and indeed convoluted than Bradley represents here, incorporating a variety of other 'generative' means including those derived from non-Aboriginal cultures (Povinelli 1993). By ignoring such alternative forms of generation, the work of Baker or Bradley is expressive of strategically-essentialist form of ethno-genesis related to the apotheosis of Aboriginality within self-determination. Coupled with what Povinelli (2002, p. 273) calls the "monumentalising abstractions" of Aboriginal ritual-political life presented in land and native title claims (often by Aboriginal people themselves), this kind of apotheosis has

contributed to a variety of negative consequences for Aboriginal people, and particularly those of mixed-descent. Critically, the “matrix of interconnectedness” that Bradley identifies as Yanyuwa law embraces Yanyuwa and other Aboriginal people in relatively labile formulations that include agnatic and non-agnatic (cognatic) descendants – old *and* young – as well as others, including non-Aborigines, in the co-constitution and indeed consubstantiation of person-person and person-land relations. While many Yanyuwa people of his informant Jerry’s *Wuyaliya* semi-moiety may understand particular sacred sites associated with the path of the Dingo Dreaming as human spirit sources (*ardiri*) involved in conception filiation, other Yanyuwa people understand such places differently by drawing upon a range of cultural resources which include those derived from what Bradley dismisses as “Western systems of categories”. While Aboriginal ideology represents the ideal (‘traditional’) system of Aboriginal land tenure described by Bradley and others (Avery & McLaughlin 1977) as indubitable, ‘Yanyuwa’ people’s links to land are always political.

While it is not my intention to focus upon Aboriginal identity politics with the specificity they demand, accounts of the ideal classical system risk mistaking Aboriginal articulations of cultural pride for empirical reality by ignoring politicking, thereby perpetrating the over-simplification of Aboriginal relationships with the land. While I do not mean to restrict the focus exclusively to Bradley’s (or indeed Baker’s) work with Yanyuwa people, these publications illustrate some of the issues raised by land rights and native title writing, while also offering insights into the way in which these ideas have drifted into the broader discourse (Merlan 2007, p. 129). In Bradley’s book, ‘the ethnographic present’ stretches from January 1980 to the late 2000s<sup>46</sup>. As such, it broadly covers the period of this chapter. The drama of its plot concerns the gradual loss of Yanyuwa cultural knowledge about *kujika*. The tone throughout is doleful, interspersed with accounts of Bradley’s efforts to record *kujika*. Despite its record of a formidable number of Yanyuwa *kujika*, there is always a suggestion of more that has been lost: the *bangadirrinjarra kujika* – “broken songs” – which are no

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<sup>46</sup> It is important to note that Bradley’s work is not strictly ethnography. Although Bradley identifies himself as an academic anthropologist, his work is presented as a memoir, with frequent recourse to hindsight as the narrating self intrudes upon the observations of his experiential twin.

longer remembered in their entirety, despite their plangent appeal upon readers' imagination (Bradley et al. 2010, p. 171). Ironically, the loss of Yanyuwa cultural knowledge about *kujika* corresponds to an increase in Bradley's status as a kind of archivist anthropologist, pictured in a photograph towards the end with a transcribed and illustrated *kujika* spread out on the ground in front of him, as the Yanyuwa descendants of his original informants peer at it over his shoulder. Reflecting upon his own role in Yanyuwa society, Bradley writes:

I don't really know at what point it was that the Yanyuwa old people decided they were going to need a medium of communication between them and posterity – or that it was me who might possibly have that role. My thirst to learn Yanyuwa language took them by surprise, and my desire to 'go bush' in Yanyuwa country became a starting point (Bradley et al. 2010, pp. xv-xvi).

The memoir concludes with the death of most of the old men and women who taught him, "[which] meant that there were only three other old Yanyuwa people left [not including Bradley himself] who could speak with full authority about song, country and ceremony" (Bradley et al. 2010, p. 253). The rest remain ignorant in comparison, although their interest in Bradley's efforts to revitalise *kujika* is on display throughout the text<sup>47</sup>. This appears to be a paradox of post-colonial societies more generally – unable to value Aboriginal cultures until such time as they are thought to be endangered or more or less 'extinct' (Merlan 2007, p. 143). The recent extraordinary emphasis upon the land and the landedness of Aboriginal identity might be seen somewhat cynically in this light. It is surely no coincidence that Aboriginal rights in land only began to be recognised by Australian governments after the exhaustive expropriation of Aboriginal land was more or less complete (Rumsey 1994).

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<sup>47</sup> Bradley's work evokes suggestive comparisons to earlier anthropologists like T. G. H. Strehlow, whose claim to be the true custodian of Aboriginal cultural material courted controversy towards the end of his life (Hill 2002). I do not mean to suggest that Bradley's work is similarly controversial amongst the Yanyuwa families whom he identifies as co-authors in *Singing Saltwater Country*.

The point is not so much that change is represented here simply as loss – the destruction of Aboriginal culture and traditions dear to Bradley’s oldest informants is improperly described as ‘change’ – but that such a representation contributes towards an understanding of place as an artefact of the past, rather than a continuing accomplishment of autopoiesis. Critically, the loss of Yanyuwa knowledge about *kujika* does not necessarily entail the loss of Aboriginal identity, or a distinctive ‘Aboriginal’ territoriality. Bradley’s own experience suggests that a rather less essentialist approach to understanding Aboriginality might be useful, particularly with respect to the way in which associations with ‘the land’ have changed for Yanyuwa and other Aboriginal people, and indeed non-Aboriginal people like Bradley. Like Baker’s ability to “see the landscape through the eyes of those who have lived in it”, Bradley develops “new ways to sense and feel, as well as a whole new way of understanding the land of my birth” (Bradley et al. 2010, p. xiv). Despite the way in which the relationships between Aboriginality and Whiteness and the land are commonly counterpoised, there are in fact a number of ways in which they can be seen to combine in creative representations.

### **5.3 Representations of Whiteness and the Land**

The memoir *Black Sheep* by Nicholas Jose provides a recent example of the popular representation of non-Aboriginal relations to land or the land (Jose 2002). The ‘black sheep’ in question is a presumed relative of Jose who lived for half a century at Borroloola, as well as a play upon the racial history of the southern Gulf. Long before Nicholas Jose, the British journalist David Attenborough visited Borroloola to interview the same man, Roger Jose, and several other non-Aboriginal “hermits” in the town. For Attenborough, writing in the 1960s, men like Roger were anachronisms who had turned their back on the modern world. Throughout *Quest Under Capricorn* (Attenborough 1963), the quintessential Englishman pokes fun at Roger and the other “hermits” of Borroloola for spending too long away from civilisation. While the Australian writer George Farwell celebrated Roger as an ageing representative of the Australian Legend in *Vanishing Australians* (Farwell 1961), the life on the land that Russel Ward promoted appeared to have damaged Roger in Attenborough’s account, confronting the quintessential Englishman with his abnegated other. Coming to Borroloola some forty years later to find out about his presumed relation,

Nicholas Jose is somewhat more sympathetic. For Nicholas Jose, writing in the 2000s, men like Roger Jose were “before their time”: “eccentric characters [who] achieved a degree of harmonious, experimental co-existence that was impossible elsewhere” (Jose 2002, p. 137). According to Nicholas Jose, Roger was able to manage his experimental co-existence with Aboriginal people because of his rejection of the prevailing orthodoxy of his time. Nicholas Jose sees Roger as part of a diverse group of “existentialists, hippies, anti-racists and anti-consumerists”, and quotes approvingly a former welfare manager’s judgement of Jose and his group of fellow non-Aboriginal men as “dead-beat nohopers” who were “prepared to roll along with the punches and blend into the Aboriginal thing” (2002, p. 137). According to Jose, the “legacy of those old men of Borroloola” like Roger is properly measured in the lives of the “[Aboriginal] children of the Gulf Country” who “dream of running their own lives in their own land” (2002, p. 250). According to Nicholas Jose, “[i]t’s [the Ganggalida Aboriginal man] Murradoo Yanner’s time now” (2002, p. 258). Roger Jose exits the stage as a “comic sage”, alongside latter-day “lunatics with shotguns and trucks and pitbulls ready to take on any invading hordes” (Jose 2002, pp. 264, 258). While Nicholas Jose offers a somewhat more sympathetic account of Roger Jose’s life than David Attenborough, his memoir is nevertheless illustrative of a view shared by many from the metropole in the period that I describe, that regions like the southern Gulf are full of ugly, violent racists (Brett 2011, p. 40). Significantly, Jose’s memoir ends, not with the sought-after “recognition scene” in which Jose “finds the connection” between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people within himself, but with one of retreat, as he boards a plane “taking me to Cairns on my journey south to Sydney and home” (Jose 2002, pp. 259, 260). He summarily dismisses those who remain as “dopeheads and misanthropes and refugees from the CIA” (Jose 2002, p. 258).

Other writers like the pastoralist Kerry McGinnis provide a more sympathetic representation of the relationship between Whiteness and the land. McGinnis’s work highlights the flagrant essentialism associated with the apotheosis of self-determination. In contrast to Jose, McGinnis’s memoirs *Pieces of Blue* (1999) and *Heart Country* (2001) assert the strength of non-Aboriginal attachments to the land. The McGinnis family lived at Bowthorn station in Queensland for almost



thirty years, from 1966 to 2006. During this time, Kerry McGinnis and her sister Judith established a small accommodation facility at Kingfisher Lodge on the Nicholson River in an attempt to diversify the family's income, while their elder brother David saw to the day-to-day running of the station. In a contribution to the ABC's *Bush Telegraph* (McGinnis 2003), Kerry described her life at Kingfisher in revealing terms, complaining of up to fifty tourists a day traipsing through what she sardonically described as her "oasis". She wrote:

We answer the same old questions [every day], enjoy [tourists'] unconscious assumption that far out means shut in, and store up the more flagrant slips to enjoy at our leisure. Like the child who protested: 'But Mummy, we live in Geelong, and you told the lady Melbourne'.

'Yes, dear', mother said. 'But most people have heard about Melbourne' (McGinnis 2003).

As Kerry McGinnis explained in an interview for this project, the decision to open Kingfisher Lodge was partly a response to the economic reforms of the Hawke and Keating governments, which sought to make Australian agriculture more efficient by dismantling tariffs and quotas on produce, and various other forms of protection for farmers. This understandably produced considerable resentment, which is phrased here as a joke that McGinnis's implied audience of rural listeners might enjoy. In the mother's exculpation that McGinnis repeats, the toponym "Melbourne" represents an unambiguous urban identity, significantly larger than Geelong as well as presumably more sophisticated. Given that both Melbourne and Geelong have teams in a popular national sporting competition (and are therefore equally well-known nationally), the mother's dissembling seems pretentious, as the child protests. But while these jokes offer reprieve from the repressed emotional goad of tourists' misplaced expectations, they also reflect a strategic form of positioning; contesting representations of Bowthorn and the southern Gulf as unequivocally Aboriginal land.

Elsewhere in the same contribution, McGinnis addresses the relationship between Whiteness and the land more directly by disputing these tourists' presumptions about the Gulf. She writes:

The winter months are beautiful; the days are sunny, temperate, invigorating. Everything is amazing from the lyrebirds at the gate ('actually they're peacocks, mate') to the vegetable garden. Seeking to flatter your efforts they insult you instead. 'Well, we certainly never expected this! Flowers, and look, even a solar heater. Why, it's quite civilized!' Yeah, well we came down from the trees some time ago (McGinnis 2003).

In marked contrast to the exhortations of many environmentalists – that non-Aboriginal Australians embrace a uniquely “Australian style” by “going native” (Archer & Beale 2004) – McGinnis repudiates the tourists' expectations by raising peacocks in the place of native lyrebirds, and growing (presumably non-native) vegetables and flowers<sup>48</sup>. In this way, McGinnis locates Whiteness in the landscape, attempting to secure her status as a rightful ‘owner’ of the land with an implicitly racialised reference to monkeys, as well as the “beautiful”, “temperate” mid-year months she (wryly?) refers to as “winter”. While these non-native things (birds, vegetables, flowers) might indicate imperial prejudices about ‘natural’ ecology in Australia, they might be interpreted more sympathetically as evidence of the kinds of ways in which non-Aboriginal residents have sought to fashion cultural landscapes according to imported symbols as well as autochthonous ones, going beyond the political economy of property to accomplish the re-creation of place. While Kerry McGinnis might dispute the use of the epithet ‘remote’ to describe Bowthorn, the station is probably one of the most difficult-to-get-to inhabited places in Australia, situated on the Queensland side of the border about nine hour’s drive from Mount Isa. When the McGinnis family purchased the lease from the publican Marshall Boyd in 1966 it was (in the vernacular of the industry) largely “unimproved” land: a real “battler’s block”, as her father Mac puts it in

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<sup>48</sup> It is noteworthy that neither the Superb Lyrebird (*Menura novaehollandiae*, found in rainforest areas in Victoria, New South Wales, and south-east Queensland, as well as Tasmania where it was introduced in the 19<sup>th</sup> century) nor Albert’s Lyrebird (*Menura alberti*, rainforest in southern Queensland) is actually ‘native’ to the southern Gulf.

Kerry McGinnis's memoir *Heart Country* (2001: 178). With a mob of wild cattle, a few rotting Ti Tree yards and an old abandoned hut where the previous occupant 'Smiler' Smith once lived, Bowthorn seemed to have been scarcely affected by colonial settlement, as McGinnis describes it in her memoir. Arriving from neighbouring Yeldham station, the McGinnis's efforts to "improve" (i.e. transform) the landscape involved bringing a collection of seedlings to plant, including the non-natives bougainvillea, hibiscus, crepe myrtle, banana, mango, and Poinciana. The young Kerry McGinnis even sought to recreate a grass lawn at the foot of a clothes' line on the property, bringing this icon of suburban Australian life into the bush (McGinnis 2001, pp. 194, 203). More even than these non-native plants, however, it is domesticated horses, dogs, and cattle that help turn "wilderness into a property" for this pastoral family (McGinnis 2001, p. 35). "Country without cattle", McGinnis writes, "look[s] empty somehow": "[o]nly stocking would make of it first a station and then a home" (McGinnis 2001, pp. 34-35).

While this passage from wilderness to property stands in seeming contrast to most representations of Aboriginal territoriality as consubstantial rather than connubial or acquisitive, McGinnis specifically connects her aesthetic to Aboriginal cultural landscapes when she describes the onset of the first rains of the northern wet season (2001, p. 198). She writes:

And as if to celebrate, everything shone.... It was alive with the chirrup of frogs and aswarm with their jelly-like eggs, and the corpses of crickets and drowned ants.... This was why the blackfellas went walkabout after rain, I thought; not just for the harvest of new food a deluge brought, but for the marvel of renewal and the bright, evanescent beauty that lay hidden beneath the harsh face of the land (McGinnis 2001, p. 198).

Through musing on what Aboriginal people might find aesthetically pleasing, McGinnis attempts to imaginatively Aboriginalise whiteness; bringing the land "alive" with the sound of frogs and the sight of their eggs, as well as the (dead!) bodies of crickets and ants. While McGinnis makes scant referent to Aborigines outside of this passage, her work reveals the complex process of identity construction at play in contemporary writing about the Gulf from the land rights

and native title period. By imaginatively 'indigenising' Whiteness in this way, McGinnis's anthropomorphic fallacy expresses admiration for a de-materialised Aboriginality. At the same time, McGinnis repudiates Aboriginal connections to the land in line with the hardy colonial myth of the walkabout. This is a classic colonial trope used to illustrate Aboriginal people's failure to properly utilise the land, providing a core justification for the settler's claim.

Despite this brief reference, however, McGinnis's description of her "heart country" at *Bowthorn* is derived more from European romantic perceptions of landscape than classical Aboriginal traditions. Even in the above passage, as Trigger argues, there is a "strong sense of the author transposing her own Euro-Australian aesthetic onto Aboriginal consciousness" (2003, p. 7). In an interview for this project, Kerry admitted to scant knowledge of Aboriginal cultural information about *Bowthorn*. Although "the interest was always there", "that was their business, we stayed out of it" (FB February 2009). Most of what she knows she claims to have picked up from visiting anthropologists and from a desultory reading of the ethnographic archive. Despite the enforced propinquity of regional sociality (especially in the days before equal rights denuded stations like Bowthorn of their Aboriginal workforce), Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal residents of Bowthorn seem to have lived largely separate lives, developing divergent relationships with the land in line with the alternative aesthetic each deployed (as Strang argues apropos Cape York, 1997). In a particularly revealing passage in *Heart Country*, Kerry's character rebukes a visiting non-Aboriginal woman's attempts to interact with a local Aboriginal person. She writes:

'Shona', I said ... 'just listen to me! Aboriginals are under the Act [i.e. the *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897* and associated discriminatory legislation]. That means there are lots of things they're not allowed to do. They know that, and they have to get along as best they can with the whites.... None of them have it easy, so if you like them you should try and give them respect. And that means not carrying on like you do" (McGinnis 2001, p. 258).

While the remaining provisions of the *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897* ('the Act') was eventually repealed in 1971 (at around the time of this putative conversation in *Heart Country*), its influence can clearly be seen in McGinnis's representation of exogenous cultural domains, where social distance is construed as beneficent respect for the legal predicament of Aboriginal people rather than as the outcome of racism, which sadly ignores the extent to which settlement intruded upon Aboriginal life, even at places like Bowthorn where the development of that tourist "oasis" at Kingfisher Camp tragically interfered with ceremonial business for Waanyi Aboriginal people, who view this site on what they call the Ganalanja [i.e. Nicholson] river rather differently to McGinnis.

In imaginatively 'indigenising' Whiteness, McGinnis contests the apotheosis of Aboriginal self-determination under land rights and native title. While providing a more sympathetic representation of the relationship between Whiteness and the land than Jose or Attenborough (or numerous others), the politics of this manoeuvre are troubling. In a recent novel *Wildhorse Creek* (2010), McGinnis addressed the land rights and native title period for the first time in fiction. The novel concerns the fortunes of a roustabout named Billy Martin, who arrives in the Gulf at the start of the Bovine Tuberculosis Eradication Program (BTEC) in the 1970s, and falls in love with Jo O'Reilly, whose father owns the fictional station called 'Wildhorse Creek' after which the novel is named. However, the conventionally picaresque romantic plot of the novel is interrupted mid-way through when McGinnis introduces a villain called Harry Lucas: a "[b]ig tough-looking yella-fella ... from somewhere up the Top End" (2010, p. 109). Lucas is described by another character in the novel in conventionally racist terms:

Oscar ... recognised the chip on his [i.e. Lucas'] shoulder common to a certain type of half-caste. The ones that resented their Aboriginality, and any white man who dared to hint at it (McGinnis 2010, p. 125).

This "chip" on Lucas's shoulder leads him to mount a campaign against Wildhorse Creek that culminates in an attempt to rape Jo O'Reilly. This recalls the event of Lucas's own conception – his mother's rape – and raises the spectre of an

intergenerational vendetta waged by 'yella-fellas' against both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people (McGinnis 2010, p. 198). In the novel, peace is only restored after Billy Martin and his friends murder Lucas and hide his body at the bottom of an isolated waterhole. After this, Billy and Jo get married, restoring the racial status quo, and everyone gets rich<sup>49</sup>. By denying any relationship between Aboriginality and Whiteness in this way, representations of 'the land' within land rights and native title writing have impacted particularly upon people of mixed-Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal descent, as well as others whose sense of belonging borrows from both traditions.

#### **5.4 Poetic Relations to Place**

As I have already suggested, representations of the relationship between Aboriginality and the land and Whiteness and the land tend to be opposed in the sense that a person is assumed to be either 'Aboriginal' or 'White' in their relations with the land. This opposition impacts particularly upon those of mixed-Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal descent. If, as Bradley argues, Aboriginal connections to the land are stronger than non-Aboriginal connections, and have nothing to do with them, then what are those of partly non-Aboriginal descent to make of their own place, particularly when that place has clearly been informed by "Western systems of categories" (Bradley et al. 2010, p. 134)? The problem is similar when the syllogism is reversed, i.e. when non-Aboriginal connections to the land are held to be stronger than Aboriginal ones. Born of the non-Aboriginal pastoralist Oscar Shillingsworth and an Aboriginal mother, Herbert's fictional Norman Shillingsworth in *Capricornia* (1938) exemplifies this problem, and provides a possible synthesis: neither black nor white, Norman is able in the end to draw upon his heritage from both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal society in developing his own sense of place. Sadly, Norman's child by Tocky is forgotten in the courtroom climax of that novel while she lies dying in an empty water tank at Red Ochre. Against this, a variety of publications by people of mixed Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal descent have sought to disclose the messy complexity of people's lives.

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<sup>49</sup> Plot lines like this are heavily similar to *Capricornia*, which similarly maintains a conventionally picaresque narrative.

Representations of mixed-descent people as tragically orphaned of both their Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal heritage are engaged with in different ways in Marnie Kennedy's *Born a Half-Caste* (1985) and Hilda Jarman Muir's *Very Big Journey* (2004). In *Born a Half-Caste*, Kennedy protests that people of mixed-Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal descent are "punished along with our mothers for what we are" by "[t]he white man [who] makes us outcasts" (1985, pp. 3, 4). Throughout the memoir she identifies as a Kalkadoon person through her mother, while describing her non-Aboriginal father as "the rat" (Kennedy 1985, p. 3). At the same time, however, she describes herself as "neither white nor black but of a new breed" (Kennedy 1985, p. 3). Similarly, in *Very Big Journey*, Hilda Muir describes herself as Aboriginal through her Yanyuwa mother, while describing her repeated attempts to find out information about her non-Aboriginal father. While stating that "we [i.e. mixed-descent people] were all Yanyuwa" (Muir 2004, p. 4), she utilises old-fashioned racist terminology to identify a variety of differences between Aboriginal people on the basis of colour, including terms like 'half-caste' and 'Yellafella'. As a result of her categorisation within colonial regimes of assimilation as a person of mixed Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal descent, Muir was removed from Yanyuwa country as a child. Towards the end of her memoir she offers a particularly revealing anecdote about her attempts to re-engage with Yanyuwa people within the context of a claim under the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* (the McArthur River Region Land Claim No. 184 and part of the Manangoora Region Land Claim no. 185). In the year 2000 – some seventy-two years after she was removed from her mother – she returned to her former home on the Wearyan River at Manangoora station, accompanied by the anthropologist John Bradley. In his contribution to her memoir, John Bradley describes this trip:

I [i.e. Bradley] took Hilda by the hand and led her to the eastern bank of the river and I sang out in Yanyuwa: 'Here she is, one whose mother came from this place, her mother was a-Manankurrmara and this is her child standing with me. She has been away for a long time but now she has come back and is crying for this country. Please do not ignore her, she was away but now she has returned. She is truly a kinswoman to this place (Bradley 2004, p. 144).

This curious moment is suggestive of some of the complexities of Aboriginality and Whiteness under these circumstances, not least in that it is the non-Aboriginal anthropologist who speaks her claim. In her memoir, Bradley describes his work with her, developing testimony about this country for the legal claim. Ironically, it is only through the mediation of the anthropologist (who is described in the text as “a respected member of the Yanyuwa community”, as he undoubtedly is) that Muir ‘recovers’ this Aboriginal connection (Bradley 2004, p. 140). However, as Bradley describes in his contribution, this ‘recovery’ is complicated by the rigid system of patrilineal descent that Yanyuwa people used to present their claim, disavowing other corporeal relationships with land such as those Muir developed as a child. Because of Muir’s non-Aboriginal father, she becomes obliged to render her relationships with the land through the estate of her adoptive Aboriginal father [i.e. her mother’s partner] whom she never knew, rather than her mother’s country at Manangoora. In this example, figurations of patrilineal descent interact with felt connections to place to trouble conceptions of a home, reflecting a further unexpected displacement of Muir’s Aboriginality in the memoir. As Bradley writes:

When we arrived, I stopped the car and Hilda got out and kissed the ground. She was ‘home’ after about 72 years.... It was done. Hilda stood for a while on the banks of the river alone (Bradley 2004, p. 144).

Home, here, is placed within intonational quotations marks that appear to dialogise this word. This illustrates the dilemma for those of mixed-Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal descent involved in opposing the relationships of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people to the land. The self within self-determination is truly solipsistic here.

In contrast, the work of the much younger artists Judy Watson (1959-) and Gordon Hookey (1961-) represents a possible resolution of this dilemma. Born at Mundaberra in south-east Queensland, Watson identifies as a Waanyi woman though her grandmother [i.e. mother’s-mother] Grace Isaacson (nee Camp), who was removed from the area of Lawn Hills Station under policies of assimilation in



the early twentieth century (Watson & Martin-Chew 2009). Gordon Hookey's family was similarly displaced from the Gulf around this time, although many Hookeys remain in places like Burketown. Gordon Hookey was born at Cloncurry, but (like Watson) maintains links with Waanyi people in the southern Gulf (Anonymous 2011). Significantly, both artists combine a variety of images in their work, utilising mainstream Australian iconography about the land as well as more classical Aboriginal motifs associated with the apotheosis of Aboriginal self-determination, while asserting an identity that is fundamentally doubled rather than divided or split. As Judy Watson put it in a reference to a joke from the Hollywood film *The Blues Brothers*: "My work is both Country AND Western" (Watson & Martin-Chew 2009, p. 230n; Landis 1980). In her self-description, she rejects a solely Aboriginal identity, claiming: "I am Indigenous and non-Indigenous: I fit in somewhere in between" (Watson & Martin-Chew 2009, p. 16). At the same time, however, she describes a visit to Waanyi country around Lawn Hill as "a very important and defining moment for me because no matter what I do now it is an underlying source, like a spring that bubbles up out of the ground and comes through all of the work" (Watson & Martin-Chew 2009, p. 16). Likewise, Hookey's work draws upon a diverse cultural heritage in a series of overtly political pieces, while nevertheless identifying as Waanyi in biographical submissions (Anonymous 2011).

Drawing heavily upon the ethnography of John Bradley, the non-Aboriginal woman Ros Moriarty provides another glimpse of a possible resolution to the opposition between Aboriginality and Whiteness with regard to the land in her publication *Listening to Country* (2010). Phrased as a memoir, *Listening to Country* describes R. Moriarty's process of coming to understand the land "in a Yanyuwa way" upon her marriage to a man of mixed Aboriginal and Irish descent (Moriarty 2010, p. 213). R. Moriarty's memoir is in some respects the companion piece to her husband John Moriarty's earlier publication *Saltwater Fella* (2000). Removed from Borroloola as a young child under policies of assimilation and raised by Anglican missionaries at Mulgoa in the Blue Mountains, John Moriarty's own earlier publication strenuously asserts his Aboriginal identity over and above his non-Aboriginal ancestry and upbringing. However, J. Moriarty's Aboriginality arguably reflects the internalisation of assimilationist thinking in some ways:

At church we heard sermons that went, 'Repent and ye shall be washed as white as snow'. We didn't know what snow was but we'd look around at each other and say, 'There's not much hope for me because I'll never be white'.

Not that they didn't try to make us white on the inside.

If you chose a way of expressing yourself or saying something, or even moved a certain way, they would often challenge you. 'Why do that? It's a primitive way of doing things. That's not the way you should be doing it today'.

The way Aborigines move, walk and act is totally different to the way whites do. It could be the physical aspect – like being agile, having the agility you need to catch a rabbit or climb a tree or something like that. Then there are things like expressions. When we accentuate a joke or something funny, we often do it with movements (J. Moriarty 2000, p. 35).

In simplistically asserting that the way Aboriginal people "move, walk and act is totally different to the way whites do", J. Moriarty appears to reproduce the missionaries' racial ideology, while proudly asserting his Aboriginality in the face of numerous humiliations (see also J Moriarty 2000, p. 38, pp. 41-42). While J. Moriarty suggests that "an element of reconciliation" has taken place, such reconciliation is positioned as "in my own feelings and in how I relate both to being Aboriginal and to the white system" (2000, p. 271). As he puts it, "I've always identified as an Aborigine" (2000, p. 271). In contrast, R. Moriarty asserts her own connections to country gleaned through her understanding of the Yanyuwa concepts *anyngkarrinjarra ki-awarawu* (which she glosses as "listening to country") and *narnu-yuwa* ("I belong to a place in the minds of my ancestors") (J. Moriarty 2010, pp. 7, 29). In her memoir, R. Moriarty describes her association with the Borroloola area dating from the early 1980s – at the height of the land rights and native title period – when she met Yanyuwa people through her husband John. Like J. Moriarty, R. Moriarty traces her "journey to the heart of what

it means to belong” through her relationships with Yanyuwa people, and particularly older men and women, rather than through her non-Aboriginal family (2010). Towards the end of the memoir she reflects with great sadness upon the passing of the older generation of Yanyuwa people like Tim Rakuwurlma, Annie Karrakayn and Thelma Douglas in the 2000s. She writes:

When I think back to those three days when I watched Tim Rakuwurlma with our baby on his lap, I feel in awe of the generations of spiritual life on the Australian continent that he embodied. As well, I feel deeply sad and frustrated.... In the blink of this old man’s lifetime, the secret sacred world of his generation, and all the generations before him, was flickering passively, silently, towards its ending (Moriarty 2010, p. 47).

Echoing the mournful tone of Baker and Bradley, the death of Rakuwurlma and his contemporaries prompt R. Moriarty to lament: “what will all our Dreamin’ be” (Moriarty 2010, p. 229). In this way she explicitly links Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people through the use of the same terminology, suggesting that non-Aboriginal people might possibly somehow become Aboriginal or like Aboriginal people. For R. Moriarty, ‘All our Dreamin’ is embodied in the figure of those most maximally different to the author and (implied) reader of R. Moriarty’s work: Tim Rakuwurlma, Annie Karrakayn and Thelma Douglas. At the same time, however, glimpses throughout the text of R. Moriarty’s three children suggest a future in which Aboriginality and Whiteness might be creatively combined, even as R. Moriarty pursues attempts to turn Aboriginality into a commodity within a design business. In a revealing anecdote, her son Tim Moriarty offering a glimpse of a postmodern Aboriginal culture by performing on stage with the Irish pop group U2, with a didgeridoo tuned to an improbably precise C sharp<sup>50</sup>. Revealingly, U2’s front man Bono introduces Tim Moriarty as the descendant of “a tribal elder from

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<sup>50</sup> While it is possible to tune a mechanically bored timber pipe to an exact pitch, a termite-hollowed didgeridoo is a more imprecise instrument, whose blown overtones, undertones, etc., would likely compete with the sound of a bass guitar. The ethnomusicologist Steven Knopoff (1997) notes that studio engineers characteristically alter the tune of the didgeridoo using post-production re-tuning in Yothu Yindu’s recordings of the instrument.

Australia”, as well as an Irishman “from ... just down the road from *my* [i.e. Bono’s] house” (Moriarty 2010, p. 185).

## 5.5 Conclusion

Throughout this chapter I have sought to compare and contrast representations of Aboriginality and Whiteness in terms of their relationships with the land, working to contest the flagrant essentialism of ethno-genesis associated with the apotheosis of self-determination. As Langton trenchantly argues, “land justice ... when it was granted to a lucky few who could demonstrate a cultural repertoire that would convince the judiciary, came with a price tag (2011, p. 9). The price of such justice was in some respects the self, as Langton argues, as it accompanied “the loss of the opportunity to develop economically and modernise Aboriginal institutions that were no longer effective” (2011, p. 9). To contest this, I have argued throughout this chapter for a focus upon place as not just created but creative. As I have argued, the tendency to oppose Aboriginality and Whiteness in discussions of their relationships to ‘the land’ is insufficient, tending to particularly impact upon people of mixed Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal descent who may be thought or said to lack any place whatsoever. In the next chapter, I will continue to focus upon textual representations of Aboriginality and Whiteness while focusing more closely upon the work of a single writer: Alexis Wright. Having identified an overlap between Aboriginality and Whiteness in their creative ‘poetic’ relations to place, I will now examine how contemporary forms of representation offer the possibility of a politics contingent upon its specificity.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Alexis Wright

A nation chants, *but we know your story already.*

The bells peal everywhere.

Church bells calling the faithful to the tabernacle where the gates of heaven will open, but not for the wicked. Calling innocent little black girls from a distant community where the white dove bearing an olive branch never lands. Little girls who come back home after church on Sunday, who look around themselves at the human fallout and announce matter-of-factly, *Armageddon begins here.*

Wright, A 2006, *Carpentaria*, Giramondo Publishing Company, Artarmon, NSW, p.1.

*6.1. The Politics of Reading 6.2 A Welcome Stranger; 6.3 The Difference and Singularity of Aboriginality and Whiteness; 6.4 The Specificity of Place; 6.5 Conclusion.*

This chapter looks more closely at representations of Aboriginality and Whiteness in the contemporary period by discussing the novels of Alexis Wright, specifically *Plains of Promise* (1997) and *Carpentaria* (2006). It analyses the ways in which her novels relate to the work of other Aboriginal as well as non-Aboriginal writers – particularly Xavier Herbert – back through the discourses of land rights and native title, early literary and anthropological writing, classical ethnography, and

exploration and 'discovery'. I am particularly interested in how Wright engages with and critiques historical texts while offering the possibility of a politics more closely attuned to the difference and singularity of Aboriginality and Whiteness, as well as what I am calling the specificity of place.

Throughout, I focus upon *Plains of Promise* and *Carpentaria* as literary or at least *potentially* literary texts. While making reference to the ethnographic context within which these texts are situated, I resist the temptation to read either as straightforwardly political. As literary theorists have argued, meaning is created in "the event" when writers write and readers read, thus emancipating it from the control of either the subject or object of this putative 'exchange' (Attridge 2004). As such, literature is inevitably foreign to the reader – to any reader – as Derek Attridge argues apropos the event:

[L]iterature always involves the emergence within the reader's set of assumptions, routines, and expectations of an element of foreignness, something unanticipated, not immediately graspable, at a tangent to ingrained habits of thought and feeling. The pleasure we find in literary works derives, in part, from this experience of new possibilities opening up, and from the revelation of language's hitherto unsuspected power to produce this effect. Hence the importance of what we inadequately call form: the writer's skilful handling of the properties of language to make possible the literary event (Attridge 2010, p. 83).

Reflecting literature's potential to estrange readers' assumptions, routines and expectations, Wright reflected that she "wanted the reader to believe in the energy of the Gulf country, to stay with the story as a welcomed stranger" (Wright 2007a, p. 8). It is here – with Wright's focus upon the place of the foreigner or the stranger – that the contribution of literary and cultural studies to anthropology (and *vis-à-vis*) becomes clear. As I argue in 6.2, the idea of the "welcomed stranger" figures in both novels in a number of ways, but particularly through the representation of Elias Smith in *Carpentaria*. As Derrida argues (2000, p. 3), the foreigner or stranger raises "the question of the question": the stranger's question, which is also the question of being and being-in-question. In 6.3 I extend this focus

upon the foreigner or the stranger's question to look at the way in which her novels engage with and critique (indeed estrange) historical texts about the Gulf from the discourses of exploration and 'discovery', classical ethnography, and early literary and anthropological writing – as well as contemporary land rights and native title writing. I argue that this focus upon the stranger affirms the difference and singularity of Aboriginality and Whiteness, while calling attention to the specificity of place (6.4). It is noteworthy that Wright describes her project in these terms, as an attempt "to stare at difference right now, as it is happening" (Wright 2007b, p. 90). This is of course a profoundly ethical question, which is also political. As literature, however, *Plains of Promise* and *Carpentaria* avoid providing answers: both instead ideally re-awaken readers' sense of reality as different, singular, and strange. I begin (in 6.1) with an analysis of the politics of reading *Plains of Promise* and *Carpentaria*.

### **6.1 The Politics of Reading**

Published in 2006, Wright's *Carpentaria* was greeted with enthusiasm by the Australian literary establishment, garnering an impressive swag of awards including the 2007 Miles Franklin Award, the Australian Literature Society Gold Medal, Victorian Premier's Award for Fiction, Queensland Premier's Award for Fiction, and the Australian Book Industry Award Literary Fiction Book of the Year. The book was widely reviewed in newspapers around the world, including *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, and *The London Review of Books*. By mid-2009, it had sold approximately 25,000 copies (Brewster 2010)<sup>51</sup>. Wright's earlier novel *Plains of Promise* was similarly feted by the establishment, being shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writers' Prize, *The Age* Book of the Year and the New South Wales Premier's Awards. It was reprinted in 1998 and 2002, and published in a French translation in 1999 and 2000, indicating that it also sold "fairly well" (University of Queensland Press 18/2/2011). Wright herself has been feted at writers' festivals and conferences around Australia (Sydney, Brisbane, Adelaide, Perth, Mildura, Byron Bay) as well as overseas (London, Paris, Barcelona, Venice,

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<sup>51</sup> The average print run for Australian 'literary fiction' can be as few as 2,000-3,000 copies. This contrasts with data about what booksellers call 'popular fiction'. Interviewed in February 2009, Kerry McGinnis boasted of sales approaching 40,000 books for both *Pieces of Blue* and *Heart Country*. As a result, Australian publishers of literary fiction are notoriously secretive about sales numbers.

New York City). While Australian Aboriginal art has long been a fixture of the international scene (at least since the 1980s), this is exceptional success by the standards of Aboriginal literature.

Part of the credit for Wright's success is presumably due to the favourable reviews both novels – but particularly *Carpentaria* – received. The literary critic Carole Ferrier called *Carpentaria* “the best Australian novel in years” in the feminist journal *Hecate* (Ferrier 2006). Nicholas Jose – whose own work addresses similar issues (see Chapter Five) – stated that *Carpentaria* “shifts Australian fiction sideways” (Jose 2009, p. 6). Reflecting his admiration for Wright, Jose borrowed a series of metaphors from *Carpentaria* in his review, stating: “Her serpent can't be killed” [emphasis in the original], “[n]o dog can get it”, “[it] floods earlier tellings of northern Australia with a set of Aboriginal stories from past and present” (Jose 2009, p. 6). Other reviewers have looked elsewhere in the novel for superlatives, calling it ‘grand’ and ‘majestic’, while reflecting more critically upon its ‘inaccessibility’ (Lowry 2008, p. 26). For Lowry, “*Carpentaria*'s rapid shifts in mood and tone, its contractions of and jumps in time, and its conscious stylistic idiosyncrasies, do not always make it an accessible book” (2008, p. 5). The literary critic Francis Devlin-Glass went so far as to call *Carpentaria* “puzzling” and even “disturb[ing]” due to the way in which it “confound[s] European paradigms” – while nevertheless lavishing praise upon the novel, partly because of these seeming faults (Devlin-Glass 2007, p. 83). Reflecting a common element of critical confusion and even mystification about the novel, Devlin-Glass wrote: “Is it social realism, magic realism, Aboriginal traditional stories straight or fictionalized?” (Devlin-Glass 2007, p. 83). For Devlin-Glass, this mystification illustrates the “incommensurability of Aboriginal mythological systems and Western representations” (Devlin-Glass 2007, p. 83). Similarly, Penny Van Toorn argues that Wright's earlier novel *Plains of Promise* highlights nothing less than the limitations of “European perceptual conventions” known to “modern Western minds” (Van Toorn 2000, p. 39). She writes:

What looks, to the European eye, like a clash between two worlds or two discursive orders might in fact seem perfectly coherent, normal, and non-



anomalous from a different cultural perspective.... Traditional Aboriginal cultures had different ways of classifying stories (Van Toorn 2000, p. 39).

Van Toorn substantiates this broad generalisation with regard to what she identifies as the 'binary opposition' between "fact and fantasy, history and myth, the plausible and the unbelievable" within 'the West' (Van Toorn 2000, p. 39)<sup>52</sup>. Like Devlin-Glass and Lowy she identifies the possible influence of magic realism upon Wright, while refusing to categorise her novel(s) as such (Van Toorn 2000). While disputing the use of the term "magic realism", Ravenscroft broadly follows Devlin-Glass and Van Toorn in identifying *Carpentaria* (as well as *Plains of Promise*) as "very precisely *unreadable* to a white [i.e. non-Aboriginal] reader", while nevertheless asserting that it should be read (Ravenscroft 2010, p. 215)<sup>53</sup>. For Ravenscroft, *Carpentaria* highlights the incommensurability of "Indigenous Law[s]" derived from the Dreaming (2010, p.215). She argues that "[Wright] reverse[s] the colonialist distribution of rationality and irrationality between white [i.e. non-Aboriginal] and Aboriginal.... [*Carpentaria*] tell[s] tales of white [i.e. non-Aboriginal] irrationality on one hand and Aboriginal logic and intelligence on the other" (Ravenscroft 2010, p. 215).

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<sup>52</sup> Needless to say, this is an overly simplistic claim, which ignores the different ways in which Australians from diverse cultural backgrounds also mingle 'fact and fantasy, history and myth, the plausible and the unbelievable' with regard to the way in which the explorers are remembered (see Chapter Two), as well as a host of other things.

<sup>53</sup> Ravenscroft argues that "ethnography and anthropology can offer literary critics something very important, and this is a sense of our own profound bewilderment, the places where our own knowledge, our own senses, our own capacities to see and imagine as another does, must fail" (2010, p. 216). To substantiate this, Ravenscroft quotes from the work of the anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose on "the conception of the Law among the Yarralin of the Gulf of Carpentaria" (2010, p. 224n). With regard to Rose's account of embodiment at Yarralin, Ravenscroft comments: "What body is this? It's not mine. I don't live in a body arranged thus.... What strangeness is this?" (2010, p. 216). While helpfully reflecting upon the methodological challenges that confront literary/cultural critics with an interest in Aboriginal themes, Ravenscroft's argument for why critics outside anthropology ought to make a virtue of falling so far short of anthropologists in their understanding of Aboriginal cultures remains unclear. At the very least, critics in literary/cultural studies might avoid Ravenscroft's straightforward factual error in relocating Rose's fieldsite of Yarralin in the Victoria River District some 1000 kilometres eastwards into the Gulf.

These references by critics to the Dreaming are symptomatic of reaction to both *Plains of Promise* and *Carpentaria*, and perhaps Aboriginal fiction more generally. This element is probably responsible for critics' reluctance to categorise Wright's novels in conventional literary terms. In discussing the power imbalance between Aboriginal writers and non-Aboriginal consumers, Van Toorn asserts that the politics of reading are "highly ambivalent" (Van Toorn 2000, p. 44). She appears to endorse those who argue that Aboriginal writers should avoid "conceding ... to the dominant society's tastes and cultural values" by seeking to address "mainstream audiences" (Van Toorn 2000, p. 44). Rejecting analysis of the quality of Aboriginal writing, she argues that "non-Aboriginal readers" must "unlearn old habits, assumptions and values so that, eventually, they might learn to read ... as receptive, well-informed listeners in an equitable cross-cultural dialogue" (Van Toorn 2000, p. 45). Van Toorn's focus upon non-Aboriginal readers' re-education reflects the approach of those who espouse a social purpose to reading rather than the idea of solitary pleasure, believing that Aboriginal literature might somehow improve the position of Aboriginal people in Australian society, and indeed 'Indigenous' people internationally. Somewhat hubristically, Van Toorn adopts a military conceit to describe the reading, writing and publishing of Aboriginal literature along these lines as a war of position, reflecting the influence of the Italian revolutionary Gramsci:

Cracks and blind spots exist in most contemporary systems of cultural and financial domination. The trick is to find them, form alliances in them, and negotiate ways forward through them towards a more just and equitable future (Van Toorn 2000, p. 45).

Van Toorn's use of Gramsci evidences a tendency to explicate Aboriginal writing in narrowly political terms. This produces a lot of criticism of uneven quality, obscuring the actual complexity of literary writing in favour of a focus upon opposition. This is well illustrated with reference to the critical reception of *Carpentaria*.

In a broadcast interview with Wright on the current-affairs programme *The 7:30 Report* – which was felicitously scheduled a few days after the Howard

government's announcement of the Northern Territory Intervention on 21 June 2007 – the journalist Kerry O'Brien introduced *Carpentaria* with reference to "the ongoing social crisis in Aboriginal communities" (O'Brien 2007). Addressing Wright, O'Brien asked particularly about Aboriginal "gains and losses in your [i.e. Wright's] lifetime" (O'Brien 2007). For her part, Wright stated: "we're at a [sic] all time low", before declining O'Brien's proffered subject-position as an "angry" Aborigine (O'Brien 2007). Despite Wright's focus upon the actual complexity of her own subject position as the author of *Carpentaria* (and *Plains of Promise*), others have broadly followed O'Brien in associating her novels with an Aboriginal political agenda. For example, the English novelist Elizabeth Lowry describes *Carpentaria* as "a political novel" about Aboriginal affairs in her article on the novel in the *London Review of Books*, connecting it with the "ultimately ... fruitless" campaigning of the Ganggalida activists Clarence Walden and Murrandoo Yanner against the Century Lead and Zinc Mine in the 1990s (Lowry 2008, p. 2)<sup>54</sup>. As evidence of its "political" character, Lowry makes reference to Wright's representation of a multinational mining company in *Carpentaria*. Alongside this, Lowry notes, *Carpentaria* (as well as *Plains of Promise*) makes reference to a series of other 'Aboriginal' issues, including problems relating to high rates of violence, alcohol and drug use (such as petrol sniffing), child sexual abuse and neglect, and all the other indexes of the statistical "gap" between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in life-expectancy, as well as overall health, housing, economic participation, etc. Like Lowry, other critics have tended to offer a superficial analysis of Wright's novels along these lines. Nonie Sharp takes Lowry's reading one step further, describing *Carpentaria* as "a powerful allegory of our times"

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<sup>54</sup> This is an inaccurate account of recent Gulf history. In the first place, Lowry argues that Clarence Walden "unsuccessfully opposed ministerial proposals to reform the permit system that restricts public access to Aboriginal lands" (2008, p. 1). However, contrary to Lowry's assertion, these ministerial proposals (associated with the Northern Territory Intervention) did not affect access to Ganggalida country, which is solely in Queensland. Lowry's typification of Murrandoo Yanner's "energetic but ultimately ... fruitless campaign" against the Century Lead and Zinc mine is also inaccurate (2008, p. 1). Murrandoo Yanner's part in the negotiations with the mine might be better understood as an attempt to secure a lucrative compromise rather than oppose any development whatsoever. It is unclear from her review as to why Lowry represents these issues in such a negative way. For her part Wright extolls both Clarence Waldon [sic] and Murrandoo Yanner for guarding her "ancient homeland" in the frontpiece to *Carpentaria*.

(Sharp 2007). Citing the 2007 floods in country Victoria, Sharp claims that the novel describes “the Earth’s retaliation in Gaia-like fashion”, while fatuously apologising for her use of such “Westerners’ language” (Sharp 2007).

In different ways, each of these perspectives seems to be motivated by political considerations rather than a close engagement with Wright’s novels. In support of overtly politicised ways of reading Wright, both *Plains of Promise* and *Carpentaria* seek to explicitly identify themselves with the Gulf: “Plains of Promise” being the explorer Landsborough’s description of the area around modern day Burketown and Doomadgee; “Carpentaria” being a more inclusive name for the region as a whole. Moreover, both novels also seem to evoke quite specific places in the Gulf. The fictive St. Dominic’s mission in *Plains of Promise* suggests the Exclusive Brethren’s Doomadgee mission. The “outstation” where the novel ends (“a lonely place with a look of abandonment”) could be Najabarra on the Waanyi/Garawa Aboriginal Land Trust at Nicholson River, with which Wright was reportedly involved (Wright 1997, pp. 288-298). The esoteric “secret” of “the great lake” glimpsed by the narrator as she begins her journey south could be a reference to a Dreaming at Woods Lake near Burketown (Wright 1997, pp. 303, 304). Normal Phantom and Angel Day’s “Number One house” on the edge of Desperance in *Carpentaria* (“the first blackfella place”, “amidst a grove of prickly pear thickets, right next to the mosquito-swarmed swamp”) may also be a reference to Woods Lake, where the ramshackle house of a now-deceased Ganggalida woman still stands (Wright 2006, pp. 12, 14). The town of Desperance in *Carpentaria* is heavily suggestive of Burketown, which also “lost its harbour waters when the river simply decided to change course” (Wright 2006, p. 3). Desperance’s peculiar mix of residents also seems to closely mirror Burketown – including the *waydbala jarrbikala* or *bulliman* [i.e. non-Aboriginal policeman] Truthful, whose career evokes the story of Sergeant (now Senior Sergeant) Chris Hurley, who was resident in Burketown for several years before he (like Truthful) became embroiled in an Aboriginal deaths in custody investigation (Hooper 2008)<sup>55</sup>. The

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<sup>55</sup> Chris Hurley was a Sergeant at Burketown and Doomadgee before he moved to Palm Island. On 19 November 2004 he arrested Cameron Doomadgee on Palm Island. ‘Mulrinji’ (as he became known in the press) later died in police custody in circumstances that are the subject of continuing legal argument. While stationed

novels also contain references to Waanyi cultural information, including anthropomorphic creatures called *gundugundu* and *gardajala* (although Wright's account is somewhat inconsistent with the accounts I have collected about these creatures). Given this affiliation with Waanyi, I find it difficult not to interpret the four-hundred-year old conflict between "two warring [Aboriginal] nations" in *Carpentaria* as a reference to long-running tensions between Waanyi and Ganggalida people, although it would be stretching the truth to describe this tension as a "war" (Wright 2006, p. 12)<sup>56</sup>. The Waanyi/Ganggalida conflict might also explain the marital dispute between Angel Day and Normal Phantom in the novel, insofar as these characters might be associated with these different identities: Waanyi "river people" (like Angel Day?) from hilly country towards the south; Ganggalida like Normal ("[a] saltwater man who insisted he belonged to the sea like fish") from further north towards the sea, mixing freshwater and saltwater (Wright 2006, p. 402). The next generation of Will Phantom and Hope seem to duplicate this divide (Hope is remarkably afraid of the sea), although the child Bala offers the possibility of reconciliation here with the narrator reporting that "the otherside was flowing side by side with Westside in that child" (Wright 2006, p. 514)<sup>57</sup>.

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at Burketown and Doomadgee, Sergeant Chris Hurley is reputed to have mixed closely with the Aboriginal population, much like his fictive counterpart Truthful.

<sup>56</sup> Aboriginal oral history connects a remote burial site in Ganggalida country with a great "battle" said to have taken place three or four hundred years ago between Ganggalida people and members of another (unnamed) Aboriginal group. Contrary to such present opinion, however, anthropological research suggests that pre-colonial violence was more sporadic than the word warfare conveys. For example, Trigger (1992, pp. 23-24) details the remembered killing of a large number of people on Bayley and Pains Islands, offshore from Bayley Point or possibly Allen and Forsyth Islands (in what was recently described as "shared" Yangkaal/Ganggalida country), prompted by a young couple who "been run away *gunjiwa*" [i.e. eloped]. This is broadly supported by related ethnography from around the region. Warner's (1937) ethnography of the Murngin (now known as the Yolngu) is somewhat exceptional in associating the concept of "war" with pre-colonial violence, alleging extensive lethal confrontations of clan against clan and 'tribe' against 'tribe' in what is now known as Arnhem Land. However, ethnographies of the Gulf tend to agree with Trigger. In his account of violence in the Wellesley Islands, McKnight (2005, p. xxi) argues that Kaiadilt killed for women and for food, whereas Lardil and Yangkaal operated within a more ritualised environment. Unlike Warner, however, McKnight resiles from the use of "war" to describe this violence.

<sup>57</sup> Critics have universally ignored the question as to whether Will and Hope Phantom's reported treatment of Bala amounts to child neglect. *The Social Justice*

While such simplistic recourse to contextual indicators (whether authorial, historical or cultural) might align with an anthropological tendency to approach art as a meta-discursive construct that grows out of and refers to actual cultural practices, it arguably underestimates the power of literature to re-define our sense of reality. Approaching Wright's novels as such risks reducing literature's contribution to humanity to a simple humanism, and missing what makes *Plains of Promise* and *Carpentaria* so unique and different (and indeed difficult) in the first place. This is particularly so when Wright's identity as a Waanyi Aboriginal woman is offered as evidence of some kind of radical difference. It is noteworthy that in response to Kerry O'Brien's persistent questioning on exactly why she had been "so long getting to this point", Wright remarked that she had sought to create "a fine book, a fine novel" in *Carpentaria* (O'Brien 2007). This focus upon the novel as literature rather than politics is arguably reflected in the novel itself, particularly in a few pointed lines in the opening chapter ("From time immemorial"). While the title of this chapter and its descriptions of "[t]he ancestral serpent ... laden with its own creative enormity" reference well-established clichés about Aboriginality, the novel actually begins with "[A]

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*Report 2007* (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner 2008) defines child neglect as "any serious omissions or commissions by a person having the care of a child which, within the bounds of cultural tradition, constitute a failure to provide conditions that are essential for the healthy physical and emotional development of a child". Of unspecified age, Bala is first described as alone on the beach foraging for food. His mother Hope appears to have been kidnapped by agents working for the Gurfurrit mine; his father Will has abandoned mother and child to join the religious convoy of Mozzie Fishman. While these explanations may account to a justification of sorts, their failure to provide for Bala would probably still be classified as child neglect by authorities in present-day Queensland or the Northern Territory. While child-rearing practices are clearly culturally specific, it is noteworthy that the Aboriginal character Normal Phantom appears to see Will and Hope's treatment of Bala as neglect, being sufficiently worried about the boy to make a shelter for him in the face of an oncoming storm (2006, p. 297). In fact, Will himself reflects upon his treatment of Bala (and Hope) in the following terms: "there had to be something wrong with somebody searching for a wife and child he practically could not even remember? This was the problem of being a man of constant vigil. They were people he barely even knew" (2006, pp. 476-478). Towards the end of the novel, Wright appears to be advocating a cultural renovation of Aboriginal society when Normal assumes custody for Bala and reflects: "[d]isadvantage and advantage: what could this bring? Very special care would be needed to keep an eye on this child" (2006, p. 514).

NATION[‘S] CHANT, *BUT WE KNOW YOUR STORY ALREADY*” in screaming capital letters (Wright 2006, p. 1). Rather than the (overly) familiar account of the Dreaming that the chapter-title portends, the novel emphasises “a particular kind of knowledge” requiring “the patience of one who can spend days doing nothing” (Wright 2006, pp. 3, 2). As Wright puts it, “this was not Vaudeville” (Wright 2006, p. 11). Addressing the reader, she writes:

If you are someone who visits old cemeteries, wait awhile if you visit the water people. The old Gulf country men and women who took our besieged memories to the grave might just climb out of the mud and tell you the real story of what happened here (Wright 2006, p. 11).

As I will argue, the “real story” that Wright tells in *Carpentaria* and indeed *Plains of Promise* is not about Aboriginal history, or culture, despite the elements of Aboriginal (and indeed non-Aboriginal) history and culture that she includes. Neither are *Plains of Promise* and *Carpentaria* necessarily about the author, despite Wright’s well-publicised Waanyi identity. Critical exegeses that describe them as such risk relying upon the kinds of cultural categories that Wright’s novels (in my reading) appear to undermine: reifying Aboriginality and Whiteness as racialised identities rather than relational constructs. The truth – as Wright’s novels seem to be suggesting – requires a little more attention.

## **6.2 A Welcome Stranger**

In *Carpentaria*, a shipwrecked mariner is washed ashore close to Desperance one day, “[m]outh agape, hoarse throat yelling nothing but silence”, his memory lost to an “austere cyclone called Leda” (Wright 2006, p. 43). He is described by those who witness him staggering from the water in ambiguously racialised terms as “a descendant of English gods”, with “long white hair and beard” and “Slavic eyes” (Wright 2006, pp. 49, 48, 63). While he is initially greeted with suspicion as potentially “dangerous, contagious ... or a foreigner trying to gain illegal entry”, he is eventually accepted as a “stranger” by the non-Aboriginal residents of the town and offered the conventionally English surname Smith, “like everyone else in [non-Aboriginal] Uptown” (Wright 2006, pp. 73, 57, 72). Having renamed him, these Uptown Smiths come to associate the new arrival with their own “original

forbear”: “a ghostly white man or woman, [who] simply turned up one day, just like Elias” (Wright 2006, p. 57). Given a name, he ceases to be the wholly other, becoming “responsible before the law and before [the] hosts ... a subject in law” as Elias Smith (Derrida 2000, p. 27). In a satiric echo of Australia’s recent political history, Uptown then appoints him its new guard (Wright 2006, p. 83). Transformed into a guard, Elias dutifully “search[es] for clues about what he should be guarding against”, pointlessly patrolling the circumference of the town (Wright 2006, pp. 85, 84). In due course, despite Elias’ seeming diligence, the Shire Council office burns down and the Queen’s portrait is destroyed (Wright 2006, pp. 85, 167). Like the real-life arson of the Burke Shire Council building in Burketown, this crime is left unsolved in the novel. However, unlike the events in Burketown (which led up to the burning of the Landsborough Tree in December 2002, see Chapter Two), the non-Aboriginal Elias is eventually accused of this crime, charged with sedition and run out of town. Having been accepted as a named subject in law by the non-Aboriginal citizens of Uptown, he is duly rejected as an outlaw when he fails to satisfy the terms of their pact, expressed in the vernacular by an unnamed resident of Uptown: “Nobody touches the Queen” (Wright 2006, p. 167).

In his late meditations upon “poetic hospitality”, Derrida (2000, p. 3) describes the question of the foreigner as “a question *of* the foreigner, addressed *to* the foreigner” which also ultimately questions the host’s identity:

As though the foreigner were first of all *the one who* puts the first question or *the one to whom* you address the first question. As though the foreigner were being-in-question, the very question of being-in-question, the question-being or being-in-question of the question. But also the one who, putting the first question, puts me in question (Derrida 2000, p. 3).

Addressed to the amnesiac Elias, this foreigner question goes unanswered: he does not know who he is. Even as a guard, he is unable to protect the community from “the question of being-in-question”. Wright indeed suggests that Elias may have burned down the Council offices himself, mounting a challenge to the *logos* or thesis of the state as it is embodied in the picture of the Queen and the “brand-



new Shire Council offices” (Wright 2006, p. 167). Uptown responds by finding him “guilty of sedition and treachery to the throne”, dismissing him as “a new Australian” and “screaming like a landlord at him to leave their continent forever and never come back” (Wright 2006, p. 167)<sup>58</sup>. This is a good illustration of Derrida’s “possible hospitality”, which invariably posits a limit on where the other can trespass, and therefore has a tendency to be somewhat inhospitable. It is noteworthy that the town’s other guard – the Policeman Truthful, who is also known as Constable E’Strange – provides another illustration of the internal contradiction of the term hospitality, suggesting a likely theme of the novel. Whereas “the stranger” Elias is evicted (and later murdered) in an illustration of conditional ‘possible’ hospitality (which is somewhat inhospitable), the improbably named Truthful E’Strange (the estranged truth? the truth of the strange?) provides an illustration of unconditional ‘impossible’ hospitality, which is as the name suggests equally contradictory<sup>59</sup>. As Derrida argues, hospitality as a concept always involves some claim to property: unconditional or impossible hospitality involving the relinquishment of all claims to property and control is scarcely hospitable insofar as it entails the abandonment of the power to host. Truthful E’Strange’s response to the death of the three Aboriginal boys in his care illustrates this contradiction. Finding them dead as a result of his inadequate care (i.e. ‘possible’ hospitality), Truthful E’Strange goes insane, caring for the boys as though they were still alive:

One by one he placed them back on the floor where they had been sleeping the last time he saw them.... Things were going to be better in the morning,

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<sup>58</sup> Australia’s first Minister for Immigration the Hon. Arthur A. Calwell (1896-1973) coined the epithet ‘new Australian’ in the late 1940s to refer to migrants from the Baltic states and Eastern Europe (Freudenberg 1993). In this context, it may have encouraged ‘old Australians’ to be more welcoming to the new arrivals, helping to ensure the success of large-scale immigration from non-Angloceltic nations. While ‘new Australian’ has recently assumed pejorative connotations, it is worth referencing John Hirst’s (2010, p. 210) observation: it is indeed difficult to imagine boatloads of non-Angloceltic migrants arriving at Dover in the 1940s and 50s being addressed by the citizens of England as ‘New Englanders’.

<sup>59</sup> In the novel, there are two other guards: a “neighbourhood-watch person” named Gordie, whose murder is blamed upon three Aboriginal children, and Captain Nicoli Finn, who also dies.

he promised. 'What a breakfast'. A feast he would prepare for his boys with his own two hands (Wright 2006, p. 359).

As Derrida argues, the very possibility of hospitality depends upon the tension within the concept between these twin poles of possible and impossible hospitality (Derrida 2000, p. 83). This is the 'poetry' of hospitality – e.g. "An act of hospitality can only be poetic" (Derrida 2000, p. 2) – which Wright illustrates. Against the examples of Uptown's 'possible' (in)hospitality towards Elias and Truthful E'Strange's 'impossible' hospitality towards the three Aboriginal boys, Wright's identification of the reader as a "welcome stranger" offers the possibility or potentiality of a place-based politics which is genuinely 'agape' (in the multiple senses of that term), even if the place of such true hospitality only really exists within language or 'poetry'<sup>60</sup>. As I will argue in the next section (6.3), this is connected to the way in which Wright 'estranges' familiar representations of Aboriginality and Whiteness from the discourses of exploration and 'discovery', classical ethnography, early literary and anthropological writing, and land rights and native title; for now, I will focus upon the working of the theme of the stranger/foreigner with particular reference to the character of Elias Smith.

Unlike his fellow Uptown [i.e. non-Aboriginal] Smiths, Elias is one of the few distinguishable non-Aboriginal characters in the novel. Besides the strangers Elias (1) and Truthful (2), only a few non-Aboriginal characters are even bestowed with a personalised surname in the novel, the others being (3) Libby Valence, the officious Town Clerk; (4) Captain Nicoli Finn, "*the crazy whatever!*" town guard before Elias; (5) "poor Gordie" who replaces Finn and Elias as guard; and, lastly, (6) the Mayor Stan Bruiser, the "citizen of the year ... for ten straight years" (Wright 2006, pp. 64, 234, 6, 34). If conditional 'possible' hospitality is only rendered to the other upon the enjoiner of a name, then few of these non-Aborigines are hospitably accommodated by the Pricklebush [i.e. Aboriginal] characters in the novel. Indeed, the suggestively Aboriginal narrator describes

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<sup>60</sup> Poetry, in this sense, involves the bringing together of contradictory and even incommensurable meanings within language, summoning a place that does not or could not really exist within the symbolic order. This could be re-theorised as the senseless material contingency – the *objet petit a* – analogous to the Real in Lacan, which is similarly unsymbolisable (Lacan 2001).

several of these other named non-Aboriginal characters as sexually predatory despite scant evidence in support of this allegation<sup>61</sup>. In contrast, Elias Smith maintains a prolonged relationship with Normal Phantom within what is characterised as a “sphere of honesty” (Wright 2006, p. 93). Indeed, Normal’s relationship with Elias is a good deal more honest than Normal’s association with other Aboriginal characters like Mozzie Fishburn and Angel Day. Like the story of the ‘English’ god Leda’s other children, the Dioskouroi Castor and Pollux/Polydeuces (Elias was symbolically birthed or re-birthed by the cyclone Leda), Elias is suggestively twinned with Normal as a fellow sailor<sup>62</sup>. Normal is

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<sup>61</sup> Ravenscroft asserts that “Truthful ... sexually abuses Norm’s daughter” (2010, p. 209). This is something of an exaggeration. While Truthful has an affair with Norman Phantom’s daughter Girlie that aggravates her father, this scarcely amounts to sexual predation, although readers might well be troubled by his reported thoughts that “she knew what she was asking for” (2010, p. 226). The other allegations levelled against Truthful – that he molests children, and “like[s] to watch women fight from a distance” (p. 222) – are left at the level of innuendo. Given the resolutely vernacular voice adopted by Wright, it is worth treating this innuendo as innuendo rather than evidence. Throughout my fieldwork I recorded a number of similar comments about policemen and other authority figures throughout the Gulf that often focused upon sexual matters. For example, Aboriginal residents at Borroloola repeatedly described a young (heterosexual) policewoman stationed in that town as a lesbian on the basis of her short haircut. On the strength of this, they joked that she might abuse them if they happened to be incarcerated. A sympathetic reading might connect this fear with a history of sexual abuse suffered by many Aboriginal people who were removed under policies of assimilation. Less sympathetically, such statements might be construed as simple homophobia.

<sup>62</sup> In the Roman and Greek myth (recast as ‘English’ in Wright’s novel), Castor and Pollux shared the same mother Leda, but had different fathers: Tyndareus and Zeus. If Elias is Castor, then Normal Phantom is Pollux, the immortal son of Zeus. In *Capricornia*, Normal is known far and wide for his fishroom, “where he competed with the spirits of who knows what, to make fish from the sea come back to life, to look immortal” (2006, p. 205). He strips them of flesh, preserves them, then laboriously repaints their scales until they appear to be alive, hanging from the ceiling “in schools by the dozen, suspended in oceans of air” (2006, p. 205). In many versions of the Roman and Greek myth, Pollux asks his father Zeus to let him share his own immortality with Castor upon his brother’s death, whereupon they are transformed into the Gemini constellation. When Elias (like Castor) dies, Normal beseeches the “powerful” “perfectionist” “spirit” of his workroom to grant Elias immortality too (after Elias’ body has been desecrated by agents of the Gurrfurrit mine). It is worth observing that the post-burial flight of Elias’ spirit through the air on “the journey back to his own country, or the place he wanted to call home” resembles Greek and Roman mythology as much as classical Aboriginal belief (2006, p. 258). As a surrogate Dioskouroi, Elias (like Castor) becomes a star, “[a] man like a star” (2006, p. 258). Indeed, when Norm

Elias' "best fishing mate"; Normal describes Elias as his "one trusted friend" (Wright 2006, pp. 84, 254). Their friendship – and the various plot-elements that flow from it – forms the core of the novel. As Brewster (2010) argues, it suggests the possibility of a kind of reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. This is particularly evident in Wright's depiction of Normal's response to Elias' death.

Early in the novel, the narrator states that Elias was "sent ... out of oblivion into Desperance with good reason" by "the spirits of the seas and storms" (Wright 2006, p. 54). Understanding this, the "blackfella mob" of the Pricklebush are critical of "this spectacle of the snow man taking place on the beach", rejecting Uptown's phatic embrace of Elias as Santa Claus (Wright 2006, p. 54). In contrast, Aboriginal witnesses associate the new arrival with Aboriginality:

This was the story about Elias Smith which was later put alongside the Dreamtime by the keepers of the Law to explain what happened once upon a time with those dry claypans sitting quietly out yonder there for anybody to look at (Wright 2006, p. 54).

Throughout, Elias is particularly associated with the sea and sea creatures by Aboriginal characters in the novel, and particularly by Normal. For example, Elias is said to be able to communicate with fish; slapping his hands under the water when he and Normal go fishing together in order to attract hundreds of big gropers towards their boat. This contradicts the narrator's earlier claim that Normal as "the rightful traditional owner" is the only one able to see the "big grouper in the Gulf of Carpentaria" (Wright 2006, pp. 52, 230, 236). For his part, Normal is astounded at Elias' seeming ability, as is much of the Pricklebush:

In the minds of local people there had always been an infallible certainty without evidence or proof of Elias's knowledge which was said to have come from travelling the main seas of the world (Wright 2006, p. 166).

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and Hope and Bala are lost after the cyclone that obliterates Desperance at the end of the novel, Norm searches for Elias in the constellations to guide him home: "Norm felt as though he was up in these heavens, travelling with them" (2006, p. 504).

As a result of Elias' rare "knowledge" of the sea, Normal resolves to return him to his "home" there upon his death, offering Elias a permanent place within Aboriginal ontology alongside the coral trout which are said to "belong[] to Elias' spirit" (Wright 2006, pp. 236, 237). Normal's quest to return Elias to his "home" takes him on a journey to find the gropers' hole "in the middle of the sea" (Wright 2006, p. 236). This evokes regional Aboriginal beliefs in the destination of deceased persons' spirits "in the middle of the sea" (Trigger & Asche 2010, p. 98; Trigger 1992, pp. 205-207; Sutton 1978, p. 147). These are relatively consistent amongst littoral communities around the Gulf of Carpentaria, tending to stress the separation of a person's spirit (which travels to a place in the middle of the sea) and spirit-image (which returns to the spirit-image centre associated with the clan of the deceased, from where it may be reborn)<sup>63</sup>. During the course of my

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<sup>63</sup> Peter Sutton's account of classical rituals of death amongst Wik-speaking peoples from the Cape Keerweer area is instructive: "When a person dies, their spirit or /koethoetha/ goes immediately west over the Gulf to Onychana, where Wuut Ma 'a-punh-matha looks after it and from whence it does not re-emerge. Their spirit-image or /maanya/, which is also spirit (/koethoetha maanya-thàma/ 'spirit image-having'), does not go to Onychana. It is taken all over the known world by small "devils" until the kin of the deceased sing it to rest in the spirit-image centre or /aak pam-kaawkanya ('place person-send') used by the clan of the deceased" (1978, p. 147). Howard Morphy's work on the other side of the Gulf – at Gurka'wuy on Trial Bay, Eastern Arnhem Land – provides a long-range comparison which locates this spirit-place in the forest rather than the sea. Morphy reports: "Two dimensions of the person's spirit are addressed in mortuary rituals, the *birrimbirr* (soul) and the *mokuy* (ghost). The *birrimbirr* spirit is conceived of as the positive dimension of the dead person connected to the ancestral spirits of the clan, and the objective in mortuary rituals is to return the *birrimbirr* back to the clan lands from which it came. In order to achieve the *birrimbirr* spirit's journey the ritual is structured in the form of a metaphorical journey. The physical route taken by the corpse from the place of death to the grave is used as a framework for acting out the spiritual journey that takes the *birrimbirr* from the place of death back to its spiritual home, where it will be reincorporated in the ancestral domain. The *mokuy* spirit, on the other hand, is a malevolent ghost which comes back to haunt the living, to spread blame for the death and make demands on the living. Much ritual energy is directed to driving the *mokuy* spirit away to areas of the forest distant from habitation sites where it can linger until memory fades" (1998, p. 206). This is relatively consistent with accounts I have collected from Aboriginal people at Burketown, Doomadgee and Borrooloola, each of which have stressed the spirit's journey to a place "in the middle of the sea", accompanied by the singing of appropriate mourning songs which exhort the return of the spirit-image to its ordinary image-centre, although

fieldwork, I recorded multiple accounts of this belief at Burketown, Doomadgee and Borroloola, including from one informant with Waanyi ancestry who reportedly witnessed the journey of a spirit across the sky on its way to this place in the middle of the sea. Ganggalida and Garawa people present at the time broadly endorsed this account<sup>64</sup>. In taking Elias' body to this place "in the middle of the sea", Normal appears to be offering the ultimate welcome to the stranger/foreigner.

However, while this episode is evocative of classical Aboriginal beliefs about death, Normal's journey with Elias' body actually contradicts these beliefs in several important respects, highlighting Wright's profoundly complex account of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relations in the Gulf. In the first place, classical Aboriginal beliefs about death stress the disembowelling and desiccation of a corpse prior to platform or tree disposal/cremation and/or burial, rather than the kind of sea burial that Normal offers Elias (Roth 1897, pp. 165-166; Berndt & Berndt 1988b, pp. 453-470)<sup>65</sup>. The place "in the middle of the sea" that Waanyi, Ganggalida and Garawa informants identified during the course of my fieldwork was described as the appropriate repose of one part of a person's spirit rather than their physical body. Normal's journey with Elias' body to this place arguably reflects elements of Christian belief as much as classical Aboriginal tradition. In support of this, Normal indeed kneels down "and pray[s] for Elias" as he buries him at sea (Wright 2006, p. 253). Given both Normal and Elias' close association with the sea throughout their lives, this sea burial might be more meaningfully associated with customary maritime traditions, which are still practiced in Australia, as well as Greek and Roman mythology about the Dioskouroi<sup>66</sup>. In

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few people appear to know these songs today at Burketown, Doomadgee and Borroloola.

<sup>64</sup> Trigger and Asche (2010, p. 98) offer an account of related beliefs about the journey of a recently deceased Ganggalida woman's spirit across the sky.

<sup>65</sup> Missionaries have long enforced burial throughout the Gulf. Despite this, contemporary Aboriginal rituals of death display some continuity with classical practices. A deceased person's possessions are characteristically handled with great spiritual care all around the Gulf and may be returned to particular areas closely associated with that person.

<sup>66</sup> Burial at sea is regulated under the *Environmental Protection (Sea Dumping) Regulations* 1983, administered by the Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts. The *Sea Dumping Act* stipulates that people wishing to be

strictly classical terms, Normal's journey with Elias' body to this place might be interpreted as an offense against Aboriginal law and customs. Realising this, Normal reflects at length upon the meaning of "trespass" with regard to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal society:

Remembering to pray, he [i.e. Normal] started reciting the Act of Contrition, 'Oh! My God We are sorry. Forgive us our trespasses', and then he stopped. Church had been a long time ago. Pausing momentarily, he tried again to recite the prayer, before stopping to linger once again on the perplexing word *trespass*. *Trespass* had been a big word in his life. It protected black men's Law and it protected white men. It breathed life for fighters; it sequestered people. The word was weightless, but had caused enough jealousies, fights, injuries, killings, the cost could never be weighed. It maintained untold wars over untold centuries – *trespass* (Wright 2006, p. 267).

In lingering over the dual meanings of the word "trespass" (i.e. both a "breach of law or duty" and an unlawful entry "on the land of another", OED), Normal juxtaposes "black men's Law" with the rules and regulations governing "white men" (particularly Christian law), each of which (in Normal's view) "sequester[s] people". He continues:

Trespassing was the word which best described his present situation, and it occurred to him that he was wrong to have taken this journey with Elias in the first place. He should have just let the girls dispose of his body (Wright 2006, p. 267).

Within this intercultural context – which combines elements of classical Aboriginal mortuary practices and non-Aboriginal Christian beliefs – both the non-Aboriginal Elias and the Aboriginal Normal are equally out-of-place at this

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buried at sea purchase a dumping permit costing \$1,675. The website of the Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities notes that "Permits are generally only granted to those with a demonstrated connection to the sea, e.g. long serving navy personnel, fishermen" (2011). This scene in the novel also recalls Greek and Roman mythology about the Dioskouroi.

point in the novel. This provokes an attack by something that Wright calls “the sea lady”, who calls forth “legions of warring spectres” in an attempt to kill Normal, to reunite him with Elias in the afterlife (Wright 2006, pp. 261, 266). In the ensuing “storm”, Normal narrowly escapes, only to be seduced by a “devil woman Gardajala” on the beach (Wright 2006, p. 274). For many Aboriginal people with a belief in the extra-human features of the landscape, hospitality to the foreigner or stranger invokes the support or otherwise of potentially malevolent spiritual forces like *gardajala*, as well as a myriad of other things. While some senior Aboriginal people express the view that *gardajala* might be propitiated by traditional owners with an invocation in Ganggalida, the true host is neither black nor white here; both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people are equally foreigners/strangers here.

### **6.3 The Difference and Singularity of Aboriginality and Whiteness**

Wright’s representation of the foreigner/stranger poses what Derrida (2000, p. 3) calls “the question of the question” – “the question of being-in-question, the question-being or being-in-question of the question” – in an interesting way. Throughout both *Plains of Promise* and *Carpentaria*, she stresses the difference and singularity of Aboriginality and Whiteness by ‘estranging’ the established ways in which both identities are commonly described, “generating an era of self-analysis not seen in the Gulf for a very long time” (Wright 2006, p. 56). This is the problem with critical approaches that evoke incommensurability between Aboriginality and Whiteness; it is difficult to imagine a reader for whom *Plains of Promise* and *Carpentaria* would not be strange or somehow foreign. Following Ravenscroft (2010, p. 198), I argue that the narrator’s unique subject-position in *Carpentaria* (and to a lesser extent *Plains of Promise*) “points to the necessary estrangement of its white [i.e. non-Aboriginal] readers”. More than this, however, *Carpentaria* (and *Plains of Promise*) de-familiarises Aboriginality as well, for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal readers. It is difficult to imagine a fellow Waanyi Aboriginal person finding the novel any easier to read than a non-Aboriginal person, particularly a sophisticated literary critic. In rejecting the critics’ blinkered reading of Wright, I argue instead that *Plains of Promise* and particularly *Carpentaria* focus attention upon the difference and singularity of *both* Aboriginal



and non-Aboriginal identities by critically engaging with historical and contemporary discourses about the Gulf.

As I have already noted, *Carpentaria* begins with “[A] NATION[’S] CHANT, *BUT WE KNOW YOUR STORY ALREADY*” and an (overly) familiar account of the Dreamtime myth of the Rainbow Serpent (Wright 2006, p. 1). However, after this satiric reference to the reader’s expectations, Wright plunges into a distinctly different story about Normal Phantom and Angel Day’s tumultuous relationship in the Number One house; Mozzie Fishman and his hundred pilgrims endlessly traversing the continent along the path of an ancient Dreaming; Joseph Midnight and his renegade mob of “so-called Wangabiyas” mounting a challenge to the “rightful traditional owner[s]” of the Westside; Will Phantom and Hope and Bala and their confrontation with the Gurfurrit Mine; as well as all the Uptown [i.e. non-Aboriginal] business I have already described, including the story of Elias Smith and Truthful E’Strange (Wright 2006, p. 52). While a number of critics have drawn comparisons with the work of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Salman Rushdie, and Alejo Carpentier (all of whom are associated with ‘magical realism’, and with an imputed critique of ‘the Western canon’), Wright’s debt to the great modernists William Faulkner (and Toni Morrison) and James Joyce has been largely ignored. It is this comparison – particularly to Joyce – that best illustrates Wright’s estranging approach to Aboriginality and Whiteness. In highlighting the analogies of incident and character that link Wright and Joyce, I seek to contest a tendency to overemphasise the significance of a purely Aboriginal culture upon *Plains of Promise* and (particularly) *Carpentaria*. Instead, I argue that these self-consciously literary novels critically engage with the historical discourses of exploration and ‘discovery’, classical ethnography, early literary and anthropological writing, and land rights and native title.

While Wright’s temerity in comparing herself with Joyce is perhaps surprising, *Plains of Promise* and *Carpentaria* are evocative of the great Irish writer in some ways, not least in her attempt to blend history and myth with a kind of everyday comedy. It is easy to see a little bit of Leopold Bloom in Normal Phantom; his beautiful unfaithful wife Angel Day sharing a bed with Blazes Boylan/Mozzie Fishman. Even more striking is the similarity between Stephen Dedalus and

Normal's son Will, blending Telemachus and Icarus from classical mythology with a touch of Hamlet too, most explicitly towards the end of *Carpentaria*: "Continuously, thinking of his father, remembering him.... *The father calls the son home. Sons sail home in ships of nostalgia*" (Wright 2006, p. 481). Other episodes evoke more obscure parallels: between Councillor Bruiser and the Citizen in *Ulysses*, as well as between the "devil woman Gardajala" and Joyce's Nausicaa Gertie McDowell<sup>67</sup>. Indeed the 'wily one' Will's journey throughout *Carpentaria* might be seen as an odyssey of sorts, complete with a trip to the underworld, where "the boats of the dead-language people" float upon an "open sea" (Wright 2006, p. 438)<sup>68</sup>. Alongside Joyce, arguably the most important analogy here is with Xavier Herbert, and particularly *Capricornia*. Cited in Ravenscroft (2010, p. 205), Wright claims to have "no time to read" Herbert, being "too busy learning from other people". This is disingenuous, perhaps reflecting Bloom's (1997) anxiety of influence; as their titles suggest, *Carpentaria* and *Capricornia* can be productively read alongside each other, despite the seventy-odd years between them. The similarities are indeed striking: not just between the names of the novels and the main characters (Norman and Normal) in each, but in their structure, style, and tone. Like Herbert, Wright offers a cynical exposé of the hypocrisy and cant of non-Aboriginal society. By restricting the narrative's information in relation to the experience and knowledge of Normal (and other more hypothetical Aboriginal members of her story-world) Wright's critique closely mimics that of Herbert, whose primary focaliser Norman Shillingsworth is similarly Aboriginal (or at least of part-Aboriginal descent). Where Wright and Herbert differ, however, is in the depiction of Aboriginality. A closer analysis of this difference highlights Wright's singular representation of Aboriginality.

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<sup>67</sup> Joyce's Gertie McDowell exposes herself to Bloom on the Rocks in Dublin while he masturbates himself to orgasm. In Joyce's Gilbert schema, this episode is entitled Nausicaa. In Book Six of *The Odyssey*, Nausicaa is a kind of surrogate mother figure for Odysseus, ensuring his return home after he is shipwrecked on the coast of Phaeacia. When Normal is shipwrecked on the coast of Carpentaria, his Nausicaa appears to him out of a mist, much like one of Homer's gods (2006, p. 274). Wright's Nausicaa (the devil woman Gardajala) then makes love to Normal on the beach, after which he is symbolically reborn: "Then they both curled up in foetal positions on their earth beds, hers of grass, his of sand" (2006, p. 275).

<sup>68</sup> There is no evidence of Waanyi people using boats at all prior to colonisation. Even today, few Waanyi people go much to saltwater country, although some living on Mornington Island have done so.

Whereas Herbert offers “the voice of the spirit of Terra Australia” as an untranslated stream of poetic language in “Song of the Golden Beetle” (Herbert 1941 [1938], p. 317), Wright’s depiction of Aboriginal difference is more finely nuanced. A brief comparison of the novels will suffice. In *Capricornia*, Norman Shillingsworth flees Red Ochre in shame, having been identified as a “half-caste” by the racist Charles Ket (who is also of mixed-Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal descent). Caught in the “wilderness” by the onset of the wet season, he senses what Herbert calls “the Spirit of the Land” (Herbert 1941 [1938], p. 316). As I have argued, ‘the land’ often figures throughout recent historical discourse (particularly in early literary and anthropological writing, as well as land rights and native title) as a materiality that is in and of itself a symbol, in which sign and signified are inextricable. For Herbert, Norman’s Aboriginality is bequeathed as a “heritage” to be “realised” in his encounter with the land, rather than a culture needing to be learnt (Herbert 1941 [1938], p. 317). Norman realises his heritage when he hears a golden beetle begin to sing:

Whirrrree – whirrrree – whirrrreeyung – eeyung – eeyung – eeyong – eeyung – eeyahng – eeyah – eeyah – eeyahn, eeyung – eeyong – eeyong – eeyong – eeyah – eeyah – eeyah – reverberating droning rising rising in compelling volume into miniature boom of didjeridoo diminishing to momentary pause then rising rising waxing waxing seizing mind compelling limb – eeyung – eeyung – eeyong – eeyong – eeyah – eeyah – eeyah – voice of the spirit of Terra Australis – eeya-eeyah-eeyah – and Norman, wrapt, with eyes on Southern Cross, took up a stick and beat upon a log – click-click – clickaclick-click – click-click – clickaclick-click – eeyung-eeyung-eeyong-eeyahng-eeyah-eeyah-eeyah – O mungallini kurritai, ee-tukka wunni wurri-gai, ee-minni kinni tulli-yai –ee-yah-eeyah-eeyah! (Herbert 1941 [1938], pp. 316-317).

Against this superficial account of Aboriginality as a revelatory insight into the land by Herbert, Wright offers a much more radical depiction of Aboriginal life with all the manifestations of modernity, mixing *kujika* song-cycles with Country and Western music and even reggae. Even the bearers of “the feared secret Law

ceremony" in *Carpentaria* move in a car convoy, wearing "Roy Orbison sunglasses ... with the windows of their cars wound up, so the devil-devil spirits of mosquitos could not get in and inject them with the dreaded encephalitis disease" (Wright 2006, pp. 119, 123). In contrast to Herbert's stream of incomprehensible gobbledygook Wright's prose here is filled with the words, rhythm, syntax and sound of Aboriginal English. In this way, Wright's work approaches the strangeness or estrangement of literary art. As Wright puts it:

*Aborigine* people were different now, they knew the scientific [sic] as well, like the sophisticated naming of what mosquitos carried around in their little bodies. And if mosquitos were bad, the devotees of Mozzie's convoy would get the Mortein Plus out, like the television advertisement, and hit them hard right between the eyes (emphasis in the original, Wright 2006, pp. 123-124).

As I have already argued (see Chapter Two), "*Aborigine*" came to signify an Aboriginal person from any part of Australia within the discourse of exploration and 'discovery'; this involved the making of an essentialised a-historical 'Aborigine' out of the many disparate 'Aboriginal' cultures of Australia (Attwood 1989, p. 149). By italicising "*Aborigine*", Wright subtly critiques this process, re-imagining Aboriginality in a way that neither excludes classical Aboriginal culture, nor entraps people according to any solely 'traditionalist' orientation. This contests the kind of liberal closure I have elsewhere described (see Chapter Five), which tends to withhold recognition to all but a few Aboriginal people on the basis of their supposed connection or consubstantiation with the land. Instead, Aboriginality is presented in *Carpentaria* in its true complexity, in a way that embraces the culture of sanitation and hygiene and general Aboriginal health, as well as a host of other things. Difference and singularity is suggested here at the level of word-choice and syntax, stretching the Englishness of Wright's prose to suggest Aboriginal difference *without* surrendering meaning (as Herbert does) into pure signifier and sound.

In so doing, Wright critiques established representations of Aboriginality as well as Whiteness. This is arguably the real value of reading *Plains of Promise* and

*Carpentaria* in an interdisciplinary way: not to recoup cultural information from them, but to understand the way in which they estrange familiar concepts, introducing readings to a sense of the place which exists within language, and beyond it. This 'place' is aptly illustrated by the story of Mozzie Fishman's convoy, which endlessly traverses the Gulf until it is summoned somewhere by an inscription in the dirt:

[W]ithout thinking about it, this person who you had been watching and just turned your back on what they were doing for a second, had gone and written the name Mozzie Fishman in the dirt and walked away, leaving the name in the ground behind them (Wright 2006, p. 132).

As a result of this invocation, Mozzie 'the word' is duly 'made flesh' in a (presumably) tongue-in-cheek reference to the search in Aboriginal writing for spiritual enlightenment or revelation that I have earlier connected with the apotheosis of self-determination (see Chapter Five). Even in this most seemingly 'traditional' context, however, Mozzie's convoy presents as a promiscuous mixture of cultures, as a Western (indeed North American) song irrupts within the narration, bending Aboriginal English into the rhythms of another country:

This stretch of road always caused Big Mozzie to break into nervous singing with a great deal of soul to the spirits. 'Goodbye Joe, me got to go, me oh! myo! me got to go for the codfish ladies down the Bayou'. Seriously, he told Will Phantom, a young man in his mid-twenties, who was travelling in the same car right next to Big Mozzie as his driver, he was a living expert on every Hank Williams song known to mankind. Older convoy members pretended this was true. It saved the peace. However, they knew, he knew, he never remembered the lyrics of any song, and simply invented new words to suit himself. But why not! (Wright 2006, p. 144).

Travelling with Waanyi Aboriginal informants along many of the roads in the Gulf country often elicits *kujika* about Dreamtime heroes like *Birinya* (Water Rat), as well as *Bardagalinya* (Red Kangaroo), *Lirradu* (Black Cockatoo), *Balaga* (Flying Fox) and others. These totemic beings brought ceremonies, artefacts and laws of

human conduct to the people in *Wanggala* Time (see Chapter Two), while making springs, rivers, clay pans, hills, and plains. In place of these sacred narratives, however, Wright focuses upon the resolutely secular account of some faraway place in North America, which Mozzie sings about “as if he knew where it was: ‘A buzzin, having fun down the Bayou’” – whatever he or we (as readers) might make of this American phrase (Wright 2006). While Wright makes no reference to Bradley’s broken *kujika* (see Chapter Five), the suggestion is implicit in Mozzie’s “nervous singing ... to the spirits” that he might otherwise placate with a classical song. Rather than a reference to lost Aboriginal knowledge, however, Wright presents Mozzie’s expertise on Hank Williams as an instance of the kind of cultural creativity that Bradley’s concept of an irretrievably broken *kujika* seems to disavow: “But why not!” as Wright puts it (Wright 2006). The language itself suggests this, bending and stretching English to the point of collapse into gibberish, into pure signifier and sound. Unlike the corresponding passage in Herbert’s *Carpentaria*, however, Mozzie’s song suggests a mixed or multiple heritage ‘recovered’ (insofar as that word makes sense) through the act of reinvention and indeed transformation<sup>69</sup>.

Against the kind of anagogical interpretation of spiritual elevation or enlightenment that Mozzie’s mysterious appearance as in *Desperance* as ‘the word made flesh’ suggests, Wright offers a representation of Aboriginality that is constitutively singular and different. More than any cultural content (her novels indeed disclose little about Waanyi Aboriginal culture beyond references to *gundugundu* and *gardajela* spirits), this kind of creative reinvention or transformation is in fact what Alexis Wright’s novels convey in estranging Aboriginality as well as Whiteness. Their true untranslatability is that of all aesthetic objects, and particularly works of literary art. What they offer instead is a glimpse of the specificity of place.

#### **6.4 The Specificity of Place**

In the late lucubrations of Derrida, poetic hospitality turns to that which “does not belong to the order of the day, the visible, and memory” (2000, p. 2). While to

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<sup>69</sup> American country music is extremely popular amongst older Aboriginal people (Nehl 2000).

some extent unrepresentable (“a silence around which discourse is ordered, and that a poem sometimes discovers, but always pull itself back from unveiling in the very movement of speech or writing”), this hospitality is inherently political insofar as it contains a double or contradictory imperative: to be unconditionally hospitable, on the one hand, and to place some limitation upon hospitality on the other (Derrida 2000, p. 2). Ethics, for Derrida, are therefore implacably necessary and ‘impossible’; as such, justice is always “to be done”, “restlessly negotiated in the conflict between these two imperatives” (Critchley & Kearney 2001, p. xii). For Wright, this ethics of the ‘impossible’ involves an attention to a specific place, particularly attuned to the absolute, exceptional, and extraordinary: the different and singular, indeed difficult reality of the Gulf country. This is what reader’s might ideally glean from *Carpentaria*, along with the patience to “wait awhile” for “the real story” (Wright 2006, p. 11).

Writing about a world “that few Australians had been too [sic], let alone those of any other country tied up with the Gulf of Carpentaria”, Wright targets popular representations of the area as inaccurate:

Anything in this new world could be created, moulded, and placed on television like something to dream about, or a nightmare.

What stirred their souls was the pureness of silence and the intriguing sense of loneliness each had discovered on their arrival (Wright 2006, p. 413).

The ‘they’ in this passage are the media from southern Australia rather than the totemic beings who are also thought to have ‘created, moulded’ a ‘new world’. By this point in *Carpentaria*, sympathetic readers would probably pick up on Wright’s savage irony here, preferring the more thorough view of Gulf society presented in the novel to the trivialising clichés of these journalists. Writing about a world “few Australians had been too [sic], let alone those [journalists] of any other country tied up with the Gulf of Carpentaria”, Wright withholds “the real story of what happened here” (Wright 2006, pp. 413, 11). In this respect, Wright’s malapropism (“few Australians had been too”) is appropriate, designating the excess at stake in

journeying 'to' the southern Gulf and adequately representing it as a destination: in this respect, 'to' is indeed 'too [much]'. Those few episodes with a direct analogy to historical events (such as the arson of the Burke Shire Council) are left deliberately unresolved, much as they indeed are in real life (see Chapter Two). Despite this, however, *Carpentaria* (and *Plains of Promise*) communicates *something* about the Gulf country: some sense of it as a specific place, full of unique strangers like Elias Smith and Truthful E'Strange, as well as all the Aboriginal characters of the Pricklebush, even if these characters only exist in her storyworld. Significantly, however, Wright's depiction of the southern Gulf suggests something else existing beyond the novels.

This something else is signposted in the language itself, not as the radical incommensurability that numerous critics have identified, but as a real place existing somewhere outside language, or within it, in some kind of contradictory 'poetry'. This is particularly conveyed – or, better, summoned – through Wright's use of Waanyi words within the novels. Whereas Elkin and Harney (see Chapter Four) and R. Moriarty (see Chapter Five) provide English translations alongside Aboriginal words and phrases in publications like *Songs of the Songmen* (1949; 1968) and *Listening to Country* (2010), Wright's use of Waanyi words in *Carpentaria* interrupts the predominantly Aboriginal English prose at a number of points in the novel. For example, she writes:

Oh! Magic big time. A land full of tricks. The sea full of spirits. Poor land woman devil Gardajala. The sea woman, whose name must not be mentioned because she might be listening, far out at sea, was spinning herself into a jealous rage..... And all the while, all poor old Gardajala could do was to raise herself up into a *wirriwidji* whirly wind to throw her spiteful hand full of dirt at the sea (Wright 2006, p. 276).

While this suggests difference, it does not surrender meaning, nor signify some kind of radical incommensurability. In fact, Wright credits the non-Aboriginal linguist Gavan Breen for creating the "resource for me to draw upon in bringing the words of our language into the novel" (Wright 2006: 520). Even without recourse to Breen's word-lists, however, readers might understand these few



Waanyi words in context, as they function as a supplement to (rather than a substitute for) English or Aboriginal English words. A fluent Waanyi speaker addressing fellow Waanyi speakers would be no more likely to say “*wirriwidji* whirly wind” than a fluent English speaker addressing fellow English speakers would say “whirly wind *wirriwidji*”; the juxtaposition of the English/Aboriginal English and Waanyi words allows for communication across languages, while suggesting the existence of an alternative language (if not world-view) which remains unsymbolised, but nevertheless suggestively out-there. Rather than simply estranging Aboriginality (and Whiteness), Wright’s novels therefore suggest the existence of a supplementary something, particular and specific, as well as difficult, different and strange.

For Wright, the particular and specific involves her public association with the southern Gulf as a member of the Waanyi community through her Great-Great-Grandmother (mother’s mother’s mother) Opal. Opal was abducted from Cresswell Creek on the Barkly Tablelands by the pastoralist Frank Hann in 1881, a few months before the foundation of Cresswell Downs station, near Anthony Lagoon on the modern-day Tablelands Highway (Roberts 2005, p. 262). Her first child (Spider) was by an Aboriginal man at Lawn Hill. Shortly after this, she married Sam Ah Bow, the Cantonese cook at Lawn Hill. With Opal, Sam Ah Bow bought and managed the Chinese market garden at Louie Creek. Together they had seven children. Three of their sons reportedly visited China, where two reportedly resettled (FB July 2010). Other children settled in and around Cloncurry in Queensland, joining a thriving community of mixed-Chinese and Aboriginal-descent people in the area (see Chapter Seven).

Over recent years several of Opal’s many descendants have sought recognition as the ‘traditional owners’ of Louie Creek for inclusion within the Waanyi Native Title claim group. Reflecting upon this process, another descendant of Opal (her son’s daughter’s daughter) remarked:

Waanyi knew us.... I didn’t try to convince people....

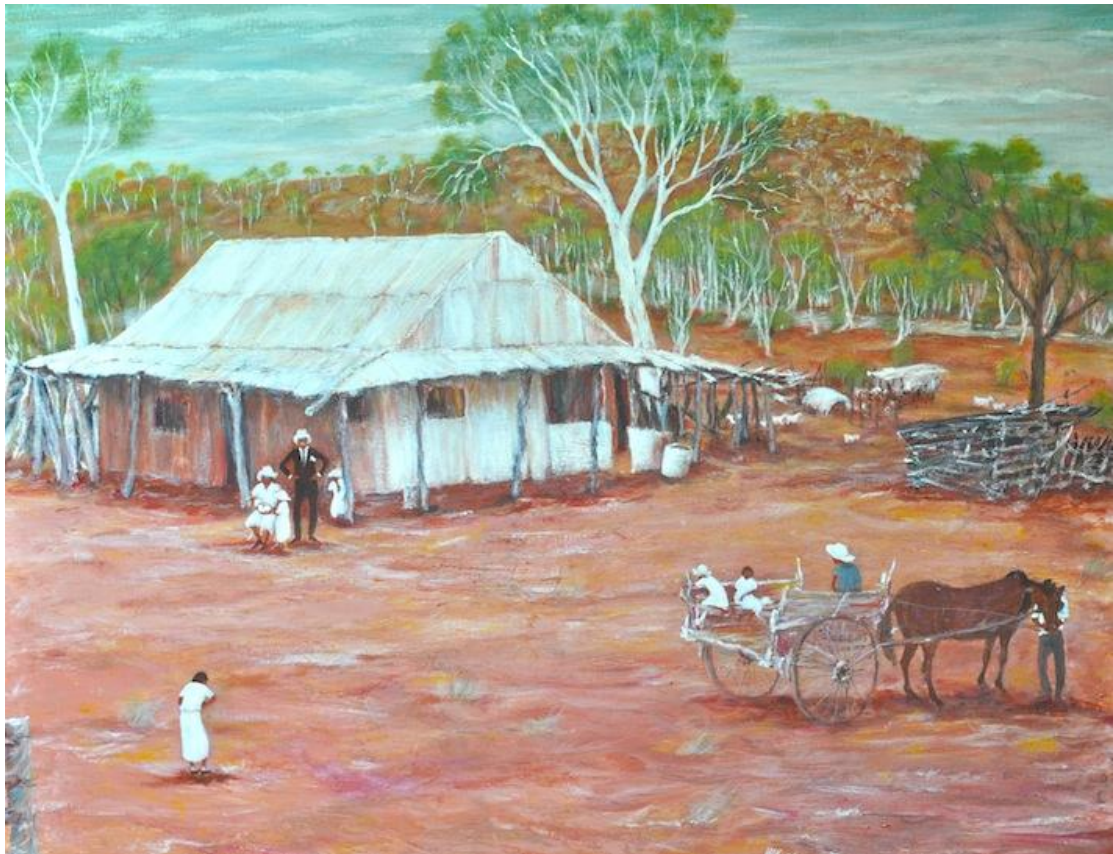
[Eventually] I was invited to a meeting to join [the] Waanyi elders group, they got to know me, [they] knew about Opal. They said [we] could be [part of a Waanyi clan group]. [T]hey said you're related to [people within this clan group], [which is an] offshoot of Waanyi people. I just wanted people to recognise that Louie Creek was special to me (FB July 2010).

While my reading of *Carpentaria* (and *Plains of Promises*) stresses Wright's critique of historical representations of Aboriginality and Whiteness (including those contained within land rights and native title discourse), it is important to emphasise the particularity or specificity of place therein, which is the meaning of Louie Creek and the broader country of Waanyi people for a member of this descent group. As my informant (Wright's father's mother's sister's daughter's daughter) stated:

[I] just [wanted] recognition. I don't care what they do [with Louie Creek].... To me, I just love that place, that's my little bit of ... [muffled word].

I like being everywhere else but I like to go there all the time. I hear my father telling the stories [i.e. when he was alive]. I think I got it from him, he was a real Louie Creek man (FB July 2010).

In November 2010, this recognition was finally formally granted in a Native Title Claim Group determination delivered by a Federal Court judge at Century Mine, concluding a process that began at least a decade earlier. It is noteworthy that my informant faltered as she discussed this place, overcome with emotion on the point of cliché while discussing Louie Creek as "my little bit of ...". The absence here is suggestive – not of an abstract place, not even of the powerful ideological pull of the land – the focus here, instead, is on a specific place, a real place, existing somewhere outside language, although language discloses it: opens it up, uncloses, unfolds, unfastens it, and sets it free (OED).



*Photograph 10. A painting of the house at Louie Creek depicting Opal (seated) holding a child next to Sam Ah Bow, by Harold Ah Kup. Photograph by author, painting in the collection of Ethel Clarke.*

## **6.5 Conclusion**

*Carpentaria* and to a lesser extent *Plains of Promise* suggest something significant about the southern Gulf and representations of Aboriginality and Whiteness therein. Despite this, few anthropologists tend to bother with novels – preferring to read them, at best, as partial and probably unreliable accounts of a fieldsite. In contrast, literary and cultural studies critics have tended to read novels in simplistically political ways, authorized by the author’s affiliation with a disadvantaged minority culture. Throughout this chapter and the section of which it forms a part I have proposed an alternative approach to reading novels and all the other more creative forms of representation that exist alongside more conventional anthropological resources. At best, such textual material poses profoundly ethical questions, which, while political, are in no way reducible to the ephemeral concerns of liberal or conservative politics about Aboriginal people or indeed non-Aboriginal people. These questions concern the difficulty, difference,

singularity, and strangeness of our reality, including the identities we tend to take for granted. Above all, they concern the challenge of being in place, and what it might be said to mean to live together and to belong.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Discourses of Belonging

I'm talking about the whole Gulf area. If you're a Gulf resident, it doesn't matter if you're from the Territory or Queensland. Basically, Gulf people put themselves into a different category. It doesn't matter if you're Black, White or Brindle, if you're a Gulf person you just put yourself in a different category.

From an interview with a non-Aboriginal pastoralist, FB July 2008

*7.1 Gulf People; 7.2 Paternalism and Post-Colonial Relations; 7.3 The Politics of the Gulf; 7.4 Conclusion*

In Chapters Two, Three and Four I identified the colonial discourses that have shaped Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal identities in the southern Gulf, along with a sense of what 'the Gulf' is as a region. In Chapters Five and Six I examined the ways in which contemporary writers engage with historical constructions of Aboriginality and Whiteness to locate ambiguity or ambivalence within these discourses. I particularly focused on the work of the Waanyi Aboriginal writer Alexis Wright, whose publications *Plains of Promise* and *Carpentaria* work to de-familiarise Aboriginality and Whiteness and point to the specificity of place. Throughout this chapter and the next, I take an ethnographic turn to examine how the discourses I have described (i.e. exploration and 'discovery', classical ethnography, early literary and anthropological writing, and land rights and native title) affect relationships between persons, particularly with regard to their associations with places in the Gulf as what my informant above calls 'Gulf people'.

Drawing upon ethnographic material collected between 2007-2011 in this Chapter Seven and the following (Chapter Eight), I contest representations of an exclusively Aboriginal discourse of belonging to place(s) in the Gulf. While Aboriginality and Whiteness are commonly contrasted in discussions of belonging, my fieldwork suggests that both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people engage with place(s) in ways that belie any simplistically racialised distinction between them. As I argue, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal associations with place(s) are substantiated in aspects of lived experience, as residents collectively imagine social life in the Gulf (Taylor 2004). While this collective imagining involves representation, it is not reducible to it. As such, it necessitates a movement beyond purely historical and literary modes of analysis towards an understanding of discourse as a product of interaction as well as an ideological regime (Fairclough 1992; Fairclough 1989).

I therefore begin this chapter by focusing upon a dialogue about belonging involving two pastoralists and myself at a station in the Gulf, in which one pastoralist proposed the concept of 'Gulf people'. I develop this in 7.2, identifying how the dynamics of paternalism affect present-day relationships between Aboriginal people and pastoralists throughout the Gulf. In 7.3 I conclude with a discussion of the contemporary politics of the Gulf.

### **7.1 Gulf People**

With its December 1996 judgement in the Wik and Thayorre people's claim for native title over areas of land and sea in the Cape York Peninsula, Australia's High Court found that pastoral leases did not necessarily confer rights of exclusive possession upon the pastoralist. In a 4-3 decision with separate judgements from Justices Toohey, Gaudron, Gummow and Kirby in the majority, the Court argued that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people's rights could coexist (Strelein 2009). As Chief Justice Brennan argued in a minority judgement for himself and Justices McHugh and Dawson, this represented a new theory of land law that would throw the whole structure of land titles based on Crown grants into confusion (Brennan 1996). As the president of the National Native Title Tribunal Justice French commented in *The Australian* newspaper, this meant that claims on pastoral

leases would have to be negotiated on a case-by-case basis, with “talk about gates and fences and vehicles and camping” (cited in Kelly 2009, p. 393). While the Howard government’s Ten Point Plan secured a political compromise, many pastoralists like my above informants responded to Wik with a sense of outrage and betrayal. As they put: “With all this native title stuff, there’s no future on the land” (FB July 2008). I conducted a series of interviews with this couple and with other pastoralists whose properties were included within Part A of the *Gangalidda* [i.e. Ganggalida] and *Garawa Peoples 2* native title claim in Queensland and with other similar claims in Queensland and the Northern Territory which arose as a result of the Wik decision. I draw extensively from one of these interviews here to convey a sense of what pastoralists perceived as the threat posed by Wik.

It was a hot afternoon in July, in the middle of the dry season. My regular guide had stayed behind to attend a meeting of the Carpentaria Land Council Aboriginal Corporation (CLCAC) about two disputes within Aboriginal politics in the Gulf. The first of these concerned the location of the border between Ganggalida and Waanyi Aboriginal people’s country. The second related to a group of people mostly resident outside the Gulf who were claiming to be Waanyi based upon descent from an Aboriginal woman called Minnie, who died in the 1940s. Both of these issues were highly volatile, so I avoided this CLCAC meeting to conduct an interview on my own for a change. I had organised to talk to a pastoralist couple on a station adjoining Doomadgee who had been resident in the Gulf since the 1970s. When I arrived at the station and met the couple they greeted me warmly, drawing me into a back room where we could relax over corned beef sandwiches and cans of Coca Cola. They expressed considerable interest in my research and were taken with my articulated focus upon non-Aboriginal people’s feelings for place(s). They introduced themselves as immigrants to the Gulf from somewhere “down south”, having acquired the lease of their 1735 km<sup>2</sup> station in 1973, just before a slump in the price of beef sent them spiralling into debt. What follows is a record of part of the conversation:

Speaker One: I just love the Gulf country. Fell in love with it immediately.

Speaker Two: When I first came up to look at [the station] it was August and the creeks were all still running, and it had been a real big wet season and you had to be careful where you went or you could get bogged. I couldn't work out why there was so much lovely grand country and no one was using it. There's just something about the Gulf....

Speaker One: I'm talking about the whole Gulf area. If you're a Gulf resident, it doesn't matter if you're from the [Northern] Territory or Queensland. Basically, Gulf people put themselves into a different category. It doesn't matter if you're Black, White or Brindle, if you're a Gulf person you just put yourself in a different category.

RM: What is it? What kind of category? What does that mean to you?

Speaker One: Well, it's an emotional connection to the land. I've mixed with Aboriginal people all my life. I think some White people would never get it but there are White people who can and do get the same connection to the land. There are families that are on properties with five or six generations and their connection with that land would have to be every bit as strong as any Aboriginal person. Then there are there are people like us, it doesn't matter where we go, it will probably never be broken, and probably always remain a part of us because of what we've put in it, what it's given us, what it's cost us, and I'm not only talking of [this station], I'm talking of the whole Gulf area.

Speaker Two: A lot of the Gulf people, like [a pastoralist of mixed Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal descent] and [another pastoralist of mixed Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal descent], they've been around for years and years.... They're all friends we've known for years. They're not all pure Aboriginals but they've got Afghan in them and a bit of this and that in them, and they're not a real dedicated Black person, but they're dedicated to the country and their ancestors in the country. That's why the Gulf people have got a binding situation, and any of those people coming through they'll know us and they'll help us and it's sort of like a bind or a



tie. That's mostly with the people of mixed ancestry, but the other Aboriginals will always pull up if I'm stuck on the road, if they can help me get it [i.e. my vehicle] going they will. It's one of the unwritten rules of the bush.

While I began the conversation by prompting them to dwell on what it meant to have a personal sense of place, both speakers referred to place as a social or communal experience rather than a solitary one. People were 'Gulf people' in their formulation insofar as they shared a range of historical experiences. I was particularly interested in their account of this as a bind or a tie, holding them in the grip of a shared identity mapped isomorphically upon the Gulf.

In my informants' view, this shared identity bound Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people and people of mixed Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal descent together. As the conversation continued, my informants repeatedly stressed this point:

Speaker Two: When I came up [to the Gulf] I had a project, making the station work. People had gone up previously but we were the first people that made a success of [the station], everyone else had gone broke on it. And lots of times we could have sat down and cried and walked away but we stuck with it instead.

Speaker One: I think basically one of the things that keeps us driving is knowing the capacity of the land and being able to develop it to its fullest, and having a clear direction where you want to go and hopefully leaving something behind and people can look at it and say 'well they did do something that was worthwhile'.

Speaker One: It doesn't matter if you're Aboriginal or not. There's caring for that country and looking after the health of that country and it's basically the same with Gulf people, Aboriginal or White. Regardless of whether it's financial, emotional or spiritual, and where the Aboriginal family has a connection that might not be financial until such time as there's a mining interest involved, theirs is basically an emotional and

spiritual connection, and there is no difference between their connection and that of a White pastoral family. The bottom line is if you're a grazing family and you don't care for your country you're out (FB July 2008).

By this point in my fieldwork I had completed about a dozen interviews with non-Aboriginal pastoralists from all around the Gulf. Like this couple, each of those whom I interviewed asserted some kind of connection to the Gulf, albeit at varying levels of intensity. In speaking of "country" (which is a multi-referential word in Aboriginal English) this couple appeared to be mimicking Aboriginal people, making a claim to a particularly strong connection. As I later discovered, both the mother and sister of the pastoralist whom I have identified here as Speaker One are actually listed on a native title claim over the New South Wales town that she identified in the interview as her birthplace. She admitted as much in a follow-up interview, while simultaneously identifying New Zealand Maori ancestry (FB July 2009)<sup>70</sup>. At the conversation continued, however, it struck me that both her and her husband's identity was tied to their successful management of the station, having "stuck with it" through long decades of struggle. The colloquialism might be interpreted as another way of expressing this couple's bind or tie to the Gulf, which was clearly strong enough to see them through the emotional upheavals involved in making a success of a marginal station. While the 'it' that they index here is clearly property, it struck me that their expressed attachments to this station superseded the reification of property relations in some ways. Having "stuck with it" for so long they envisaged "leaving something behind" to that "people can look at it and say 'well they did do something that was worthwhile'" (FB July 2008).

As a result of this close connection with the station, land rights and native title was seen as an existential threat to their identity:

Speaker One: This claim thing has been more divisive than any other legislation and it's not just divisive where Black and White is concerned, it's

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<sup>70</sup> Her claim to a non-racialised identity as a Gulf person therefore assumed a more complex dimension. "I am indigenous", she asserted, "in the sense that I was born here [i.e. in Australia], that's it, this is where I belong, I've got no interest in claiming native title anywhere else" (FB July 2009).

divisive among Aboriginal people themselves, and the main reason is that the government in their stupidity has never had the brains to talk to the real people who live and work and have died in the country. There are a few local families that we have a longstanding connection with – a friendship with – and they do come [to the station] and we can trust them to not leave the gates open and not cut the fences and not interfere with our cattle. They've got a connection here [i.e. to the station]; I wouldn't be offended if they listed themselves on a native title claim. They're real people, proper Gulf people. We've had incidents when they've come in and reported things that they thought weren't right about the cattle. And that sort of liaison is valuable to us as well as them.... But I've had other people here that couldn't track an elephant through a snowstorm and yet they'll tell you it's their country and they are traditionally connected to it. Their family may have come from it but they're not connected to it anymore....

Speaker Two: Look at [a pastoralist of mixed Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal descent]. They tried to put a claim on his country. He's probably got one of the strongest connections around, but some bloody White solicitor come in and wanted to inspect his country so they could put a land claim over it and he's very suspicious and you can't blame him.

Speaker One: With your land if it's not part of you, if you don't *feel* it, then you don't really belong. Any person that lives and makes their living off of the land, they have a real feeling for it the same as any Aboriginal person, they couldn't live and work it if they didn't. You have to have basically the soil in your blood (FB July 2008).

According to these informants, “real [Gulf] people” are those who live and die in the country, who have “the soil in [their] blood”. Hence these pastoralists describe native title here as the work of government, spearheaded by the apocryphal “bloody White solicitor” who sought to put a claim over the station of a pastoralist of mixed Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal descent. Against this, these pastoralists asserted historical relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in

the Gulf. As I will argue, these historical relationships were particularly based upon the colonial dynamics of paternalism.

## **7.2 Paternalism and Post-Colonial Relations**

Prior to 1970s, pastoralists commonly employed solely Aboriginal labour, resulting in relatively close propinquity between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people on stations across northern Australia. In an interview with an elderly woman whose connections with the Gulf stretch back to the mid-1940s, I was told:

We [i.e. my family] went out there [to the Gulf] because we wanted to get into wild cattle. And in the first six years – between 1945 when my father bought the property ... until 1951 when we [i.e. her and her partner] got it [i.e. purchased it] off him [i.e. her father] – we sold twenty thousand head of mostly unbranded beasts. We did it on our own. You couldn't get white people to go there. It was just me, my father and mother, two sisters and two brothers. It [i.e. the station] was virtually untamed and unexplored and undeveloped, there was nothing there, there was no fence and no vehicles, it was a lost, a forgotten place, you couldn't get any materials in [and] it took days to get out. We were just out there, like in an adventure (FB February 2009).

“On our own”, in this respect, meant without other non-Aboriginal people; at this time, the Aboriginal camp at this station numbered dozens of people in daily contact with this woman. Living alongside each other in these situations established close relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. Just as many Aboriginal people grew dependent upon the stations for rations, so too the stations grew dependent upon Aboriginal people for labour. Indeed, the land beyond the homestead remained Aboriginal land in some ways, insofar as Aboriginal people knew and understood it best, helping new non-Aboriginal lessees to work it. While many of the older generation of non-Aboriginal pastoralists whom I interviewed for this thesis exhibited scant interest in Aboriginal culture, many Aboriginal people claimed to have helped to “grow them up” (FB June 2008). As Ann McGrath (1987, p. 102) argues, Aboriginal people on

some stations actually encouraged bosses to become attached to the land “to ‘tie him to the country’ ... and make him more understanding of its people and their needs”, sometimes even inviting the boss to attend Aboriginal ceremonies and share knowledge of bush foods. While close, these co-dependent relationships were governed by the colonial dynamics of paternalism. As Ann McGrath argues:

For managers and lessees, [paternalism] helped justify the appropriation of black labour. For Aborigines, it was a promise of protection for themselves and their community, allowing them to stay on traditional lands. It encouraged the acceptance of class relations of patronage and dependence, with all their material and psychological implications (1987, p. 99).

The dynamics of paternalism combined kindness and cruelty in relationships entailing complex reciprocal obligations that endure in some forms. On a fieldtrip in June 2008, a group of Aboriginal people with whom I was travelling enquired at the homestead of a station with an erstwhile Aboriginal camp for a gift of meat in the form of cherished rib bones, reviving a practice that dates back to the rationing system of Station Time. On this occasion, however, we encountered the pastoralist’s son, who privately commented: “I don’t know their names really, [but] they might know me better [i.e. than I know them]. I’ve never really had anything to do with them [i.e. Aboriginal people], but you know, Pop [i.e. my father] knows them, he used to work with them. You know it was different in the old days” (FB June 2008).

The nature of this difference was powerfully conveyed to me in a remarkable story that I recorded during my fieldwork from an elderly non-Aboriginal pastoralist who recalled her first visit to the Aboriginal camp at her station in the mid-1950s. She stated:

I went down to their camp once to deliver a baby, but that was it [i.e. the only time she entered the Aboriginal camp at the station]. Now they never told you when they had one [i.e. a baby] but I found out about it [i.e. the woman in labour] and went down [i.e. to their camp]. Before me they just gave the girl [i.e. the mother] a pole to grab hold of [while she gave birth

standing up]. It was hard work to get them lying on their back because they didn't know me, you see. There were these two old gins [i.e. Aboriginal women] standing there watching. They watched me pretty closely while I worked. I was under surveillance you see. They never commented or interrupted, not a smile on their face, [they] just had these sharp stones from the riverbed which they gave to me [to cut the umbilical cord]. After that they never attended any births they just brought the girls up to the homestead, and I never really went down there [i.e. to the Aboriginal camp] again. It was really their land. After you got down through that turnstile [i.e. a rudimentary wooden gate] it was theirs. It was to give them privacy. They could always come up to the homestead for a meal but we wanted our privacy too. Through the turnstile was theirs; the homestead was ours (FB June 2008).

As she went on to explain, this pastoralist named every baby that she delivered, referring to them as "my girls" throughout the interview and insisting that I carry her regards to those she remembered well (who likewise expressed fondness for her). The language of her account is interesting with my informant's focus upon the "turnstile" which divided the homestead from the Aboriginal camp. As May (1994, p. 155) argues "the working relationship ... [was] dependent on the maintenance of social distance between blacks and whites". Like my above informant, May argues that such social distance was desired by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, although it arguably ultimately served pastoralists' interests insofar as physical segregation "helped to foster in Aboriginal minds the fact that they were different from whites and therefore their separate treatment was justified" (1994, p. 157).

By the late 1960s, however, the world of these older pastoralists had begun to change. With the beef slump coming a few years after the introduction of equal wages for Aboriginal workers in the 1970s, widespread Aboriginal employment on the stations ended. One pastoralist explained this transition in detail:

Prior to the 1967 referendum [which granted the Commonwealth government power to legislate on behalf of Northern Territory Aborigines,

and contributed towards equal rights for Aboriginal people], the cattle stations were the social security net for these people. They provided the food for all of them.... But once that award wage came in you had to go out and say to the three old girls who used to work in the kitchen – and every day you’d hear them chatting away – but when we went out there and said “now you’ve got to pay for everything, we can’t afford to pay three of you, just one”. But then from being a fun thing it becomes a drudge, and then the next day they don’t come back. It didn’t take long to stop. And we used to have four or five or sometimes six girls raking the yard!” (FB July 2008).

Another pastoralist who oversaw this transition on a neighbouring station in the Gulf reported:

We used to employ a lot of them [i.e. Aboriginal people]. Cowboys they called them, to look after the yard, feed the pigs and do the gardening, but that all went by the board [i.e. overboard]. There wouldn’t be a station in all of the Gulf country today that had a dedicated gardener (FB February 2009).

As a result of these changes, pastoralists largely withdrew from everyday sociality with Aboriginal people. “We had to let them all go”, I was told: “family comes first” (FB February 2009). Despite some pastoralists referring to their Aboriginal dependents as ‘boys’ and ‘girls’ and often expressing (in hindsight) genuine feeling for them (especially those that they had delivered as babies), ‘family’ was reconceptualised here to exclude Aborigines, who became employees rather than dependents. While the decline of Aboriginal employment in the cattle industry cannot be solely attributed to the introduction of equal pay (other issues affecting employment included the gradual modernisation of the industry), equal pay clearly signalled the end of paternalism as the dominant ideology governing relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in the region (see May 1994, p. 160-173). In contrast to those few mostly female members of the earlier generation who are still alive – who came up with English names for many Aboriginal people and remember them fondly – the younger generation of

pastoralists whom I interviewed in the Gulf appeared to be familiar with far fewer Aboriginal people.

With the decline of Aboriginal employment on the stations, interactions between pastoralists seem to have increased on the stations. To compensate for their location on a particularly remote station, one pastoralist constructed an all-terrain vehicle nicknamed 'The Bug' with the chassis and engine of a Volkswagen and a fibreglass boat-style body that allowed it to float across rivers (FB August 2009). This pastoralist reminisced with evident pleasure about social events at Doomadgee. When I enquired as to his connections there, I was informed: "I mostly used to catch up with the teachers, when the mission started opening up [towards the end of the 1970s] (FB August 2009). In fact, this pastoralist found his wife amongst these teachers, and they married in the early 1980s. Together, they reminisced about social life in the 1980s:

We got to know each other [i.e. neighbouring pastoralists]. We didn't have phones until the 1980s but there was a lot of chatter on the HF [i.e. high frequency] radio. There was a session every afternoon when you could talk to your neighbours so you knew exactly what was going on even if you only met once or twice a year at the Gregory races or something (FB August 2009).

While this couple claim to have fallen out of touch with the community, they used to travel to certain stations for large social gatherings like the Gregory races that sometimes involved Aboriginal people every year throughout the 1980s. However, as McGrath puts it "Aborigines were spatially segregated from the white [i.e. non-Aboriginal] people [at such events], who were using the venue as a rare opportunity to reinforce their own social networks" (1987, p. 170). As I was told: "You'd say hello to people, but you know it wasn't really about meeting Aborigines!" (FB August 2009).

Pastoralist's comments upon their relations with place(s) must be seen in the context of these changing relationships with Aboriginal people as well as Aboriginality more generally, which has been affected over time by each of the



discourses I have described in this thesis, but particularly by land rights and native title. As Ann McGrath argues, Aboriginal people occasionally encouraged pastoralists' sense of belonging to country under paternalism (McGrath 1987, p. 102). The end of paternalism and the beginning of land rights and native title changed such relationships dramatically. As I was told:

I don't really want to talk about it [i.e. land rights and native title], because ... um ... the ... you know we've had Blacks [i.e. Aboriginal people] here and they've asked us to come in and they've never been refused. But I mean to say, surely one must have some rights, they [i.e. lessees] have paid for it, and they have ... I mean this is home, it might have been their home in days gone by, but wherever you have settled is your home, right? Don't you reckon? Yeah, it makes you feel like home. Everyone's got a right to have an attachment to somewhere. I never felt like the old Aborigines didn't want us here. I remember them saying to me: "It's your home too" (FB June 2008).

This pastoralist claimed to have an intrinsic connection to her station "as strong as any Aboriginal person" (FB June 2008). However, other pastoralists dismissed the strength of Aboriginal people's connections to country. One pastoralist with connections to the area stretching back to the early 1980s [i.e. after the end of widespread Aboriginal employment on the station governed by the dynamics of paternalism] asserted:

Aboriginal people aren't spiritual. There's [i.e. there are] a lot of mistaken beliefs about Aborigines. They aren't spiritual, you see them in a place, they take everything, root and branch, everything, they've got no feeling for a place. They're actually afraid of the bush – no, it's true, they are. I think everybody can love the land, not just Aborigines. I don't think the Aborigines ever lived here, even in the early days (FB July 2009).

Despite this, however, this pastoralist claimed that her son had been "adopted" by Aboriginal people at Bamaga in Cape York. "They told me that 'this child belongs to the land'", she said, at which point her son interjected: "I always felt that" (FB

July 2009). “I’m less airy-fairy than my mother”, he said, “but I always felt like I belonged to the land” (FB July 2009). He argued:

I think it makes you superstitious being around Aboriginal people, they are very very superstitious and suggestible. So yes, you did sense things sometimes. There was a place that was a bit creepy [on the station]. But maybe I was just a bit claustrophobic. I was poking around in a cave there [on the station] and I definitely got the impression I shouldn’t go poking around there (FB July 2009).

As this interviewee noted, Aboriginal people would habitually avoid caves, fearing to encounter Ti Tree bark coffins possibly stored there. As the interview continued, this man’s mother claimed to have discovered a cache of dried Aboriginal heads in a cave on the station, which she believed to have been recently ‘planted’. She also claimed to have discovered a group of Aboriginal people visiting a rock art site on this station to retouch the paintings. “It’s all crap”, she asserted: “they had the paintbrushes right there!” Before abruptly terminating the interview she reiterated: “I just don’t believe Aboriginal people were ever here” (FB July 2009).

However, while everyday interactions between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people on pastoral stations around the Gulf declined after the 1970s, relations between pastoralists and Aboriginal people continued in other ways. Despite the higher wages they are now obliged to pay, many pastoralists continue to hire small groups of Aboriginal people to work on some stations, particularly during the muster when demand for labour is high. Moreover, as many pastoralists sought to diversify their revenue-stream during 1970s and 1980s beef slumps, they were drawn into new relationships with Aboriginal people. At one station, the lessees turned to barramundi fishing to generate cash flow, working with a number of Aboriginal employees. At Bowthorn (as I have already noted, see Chapter Five), they developed a tourism venture for well-heeled ‘grey nomads’ – promising an “oasis in the outback” – on a small excision to their lease that drew non-Aboriginal people into the vicinity of a significant Waanyi site. Other pastoralists created small general stores to service passing traffic in the dry

season. With Social Security payments, the residents of Aboriginal outstations became a ready source of income for those on nearby stations. In some instances this reportedly outstripped the income that some stations received from cattle. For example, the owners of a lease in the Northern Territory reportedly subsidised the growth of their herd by selling supplies to their Aboriginal dependents. Other pastoralists opened canteens selling alcohol, which were often extremely lucrative. One informant reported witnessing a car full of Aboriginal people leaving a station canteen (which has since closed down) with ninety cartons [i.e. 2160 cans] of beer on the roof (FB July 2008).

While it is difficult to imagine such a large load of alcohol atop a single vehicle, stories like these are expressive of a breakdown of paternalism, with this pastoralist's disregard for the social cost of such binge drinking on vivid display. This breakdown is also evident in lurid Aboriginal rumours about pastoralists' lives in the region. One pastoralist is said by many Aboriginal people to be "a proper mafia man" (FB July 2008). When I raised his name with a senior Aboriginal man I was told to be very careful, "he might kill you, you'll wake up dead, under the daisies" (FB July 2008)<sup>71</sup>. Other pastoralists are subject to even more libellous stories. One non-Aboriginal pastoralist is said by many Aboriginal people to have murdered his partner's first husband and fed the body to crocodiles<sup>72</sup>. Another pastoralist is said to have trafficked non-Aboriginal women as slaves into harems in Asia and the Middle East<sup>73</sup>. Yet another pastoralist (from an earlier period) is said to have murdered his wife and infant son in order to cover-up an incestuous affair with his adolescent stepdaughter. However, notwithstanding his reported involvement in this double-murder, this pastoralist was said to be a good man by those who remember him: "[he was] tough but fair to us Aboriginal people". "We knew him" (FB August 2008). Indeed one of my Aboriginal informants went so far as to say that this pastoralist may have been

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<sup>71</sup> The Italian mafia were reportedly active on this station during the late 1970s, when the present owner sold part of the lease to a man named Bela Csidei. When Csidei was arrested in 1979 following a raid upon the property, he defaulted on his payments and the present owner returned to the property, generating (false) rumours about his connection to the mob (Jiggins 2004, p. 186). There is no evidence that the present owner had any connection to these events.

<sup>72</sup> There is no evidence in support of this rumour.

<sup>73</sup> There is no evidence in support of this rumour.

informally adopted into the Aboriginal subsection system: “Might be he got skin” (FB August 2010).

As Ann McGrath argues (1987), the dynamics of paternalism interacted with Aboriginal cultural expectations to lead some Aboriginal people to informally adopt pastoralists into kinship networks, seeking to ‘settle’ them down on the stations. A number of pastoralists were said by Aboriginal informants to have semimoiety affiliations based upon such adoptions (see Chapter One). Even when informants were unclear as to the semimoiety affiliation of a particular pastoralist, senior Aboriginal people were commonly reluctant to reject the possibility that they may have been adopted. After a discussion amongst a mixed group of senior and junior Aboriginal people about a pastoralist with limited contact with local Aboriginal people, the seeming consensus was that this man was probably adopted into the kinship system: “that was before our time [when he acquired the station]. That old [Aboriginal] fella [whom he worked with] might have given him one [i.e. skin name], they were all over that country together” (FB August 2010). Indeed, many if not most of the pastoralists whom I interviewed (mostly those who had been resident in the area for some time) were said by at least some Aboriginal people to have ‘skin’ affiliations, although this was frequently the subject of discussion and even dispute. When I turned the conversation towards another resident pastoralist of many decades standing, several younger Aboriginal people stridently asserted that the second pastoralist “got no skin, I call him dog [i.e. dingo, an animal which is thought to be unable to recognise kinship ties]” (FB August 2010). On that occasion, the older Aboriginal people in the conversation remained silent, signifying if not assent then at least a refusal to publicly contradict the remark. On another instance, however, an older Aboriginal woman publicly contradicted a similar assertion about another pastoralist: “she got skin, just like you” (FB August 2010). While this woman married into the family that owned the station lease (and thus arrived at the station as a grown woman), this older Aboriginal woman claimed to have helped her to “settle down” to life on the station: “you know, show her what to do ... like my husband, he grow up that boss [i.e. pastoralist]” (FB August 2010). Like their mother and father, their two children (now in their thirties) are also said to have skin affiliations, and even ‘bush names’ connecting them to particular spiritual conception places on the

station. Thus as Smith (2002, p. 26) has argued for central Cape York and Redmond (2005, p. 237) for the northern Kimberley, Aboriginal people seem to recognise the ties to places of non-Aboriginal pastoralists, drawing in part upon the dynamics of paternalism in doing so.

With the rise of land rights and native title, many Aboriginal people returned to places on the stations for the first time in decades on site surveys with anthropologists. This inevitably produced considerable strains. At the same time, however, older dynamics occasionally continued. On a fieldtrip to a station in the region with a large group of Ganggalida, Garawa and Waanyi Aboriginal people in November 2007, I encountered an older pastoralist who surprised me by remembering most of my companion's names, shaking the hands of all of my companions in turn. As we drove away that day from this encounter, the senior men whom I was with commented: "he's still there, hey, that old man, I remember him from when I was just a boy" (FB November 2007). As I completed further fieldwork I observed similar encounters, particularly upon cultural heritage surveys. But the politics of the Gulf have changed.

### **7.3 The Politics of the Gulf**

In an interview with a Ganggalida Aboriginal man at Doomadgee in July 2010, I recorded the following remarks:

Lots of things bin happening all the way along here, that's how they begin this place here. You've got Waanyi, Ganggalida, Garawa, Min.ginda, Kutharn, Kaiadilt, Lardil people, Yangkaal mob. That all this mob, really all mixed up now. Bit of a Jingali mob from Eliot. People come from Ngukurr, from Hodgson Downs, from Jumbali area, that's that Duck Creek mob from outside Mataranka. Like that Ganggalida mob, we all in different different groups again, Dumbarra, Giwagarra, Wambilbayi, Point Parker, *Bugaji* Dreaming.... They all one tribe but all in different pieces like a jigsaw puzzle. In here we all live like one mob but we're all still in different tribes. Waanyi, Gudanji, Binbinga, Wagaya mob ... Bidunggu too.... But they're all one mob (FB July 2010).

While conspicuously excluding Gulf residents of non-Aboriginal descent, this quote includes diverse Aboriginal identities from all around the Gulf in its account of who belongs, listing numerous language names like Waanyi and Garawa as well as more generalised identities associated with predominantly Aboriginal settlements like Ngukurr and Aboriginal-owned pastoral stations like Hodgson Downs. The speaker concludes by listing numerous estate groups associated with particular sites on Ganggalida country like Dumbarra and Point Parker, before returning to the concept of different 'tribes': Waanyi, Gudanji, Binbinga, Wagaya, Bidunggu.

Of interest is the speaker's focus upon "how they begin [i.e. began] this place here [i.e. at Doomadgee]". In this context, the speaker refers to the *Bugaji* Dreaming at Point Parker near Old Doomadgee. For many senior Aboriginal men like this speaker (who has since passed away), the *Bugaji* or *Bugajinda bungurdu* [i.e. Kite Hawk Dreaming] is said to have taken seeds from a site around Westmoreland station to Point Parker on the coast. This journey is encoded in regional mythology expressed in ritual in the form of *kujika* or songlines (Trigger 1989a; Trigger 1982), although such songlines appear not to be known by the relevant landholders today. Major Dreamings like *Bugaji* have a subsection couple/semimoiety affiliation, and the country in which they are located also has that affiliation (see Chapter One). Persons with a strong spiritual affiliation or responsibility for such sites ideally have the same skin, which they inherit from their father's father, although other types of relationships exist based upon a person's father's mother's brother, mother's father, and mother's mother's country. Connections to places are thus distributed non-contiguously across the landscape by these world-creative dreaming figures, "like a jigsaw puzzle" based upon kinship (as my informant puts it in the above quotation). For example, within Ganggalida law, when a person speaks of *nijinda durlga*, my country, it commonly designates their father's (and often their father's father's) estate, their *ganggaliju* country, although the *dulmarra dangga* or senior male owner of the *Bugajinda* estate (within the Wudaliya semi-moiety) asserts his claim as the the eldest grandson of his *jamba* or mother's father's, and his mother's father's father, who held a king plate to the area (FB November 2007; see also Trigger 1992). Yet at another "level of resolution" (Sutton 2003, p. 93), all Wudaliya, Wuyaliya,

Mambaliya and Rhumburriya people are conceivably members of the same 'mob', holding rights and interests in all Ganggalida country; indeed all Ganggalida, Waanyi, GudANJI, Binbinga, Wagaya people might similarly be described as 'one mob' in some circumstances. Hence my above informant focuses simultaneously upon "one tribe ... but we're all still in different tribes", working to create a diffuse sense of loyalty while dealing with demand (Peterson 1993).

As many anthropologists have argued, a plurality of inherited identities in places like Doomadgee engenders a diversity of local level political interests (Trigger 1992, pp. 104-127). Contrary to my senior Aboriginal speaker's assertion that "we all live like one mob", Aboriginal life in places like Doomadgee and in the broader southern Gulf continues to be dominated by an intense localism, even amongst those grouped in what Sutton calls post-classical 'families of polity' (1998). As David Martin writes:

Aboriginal localism is characterised by such features as a strong emphasis on individual autonomy, by people according priority to their connections to local or small-scale groupings ... and conversely mistrusting those outside the group (2005, p. 128).

Such localism impacts upon Gulf politics in complex ways, particularly as people seek recognition in meeting eligibility criteria established under land rights and native title legislation (Bauman 2006). As Trigger argues (2011, p. 152), the long-established tension within Aboriginal society between atomism and collectivism may be giving way to a resurgent atomism in many parts of northern Australia, as many Aboriginal groups seek to restrict membership to the smallest recorded unit. Such atomism has been affected by the need to form corporations that manage relations with the broader society. The influence of non-Aboriginal romanticism about bounded 'tribal' units is evident here, alongside native title claim group research particularly focused upon the idiom of linguistic affiliation (Correy, McCarthy & Redmond 2011; Correy 2006). At places like Doomadgee, these factors have led to attempts to mobilise 'Ganggalida people' (like this speaker) or more recently 'the Ganggalida people' or even 'the Ganggalida nation' as salient political identities, with corresponding formulations for Garawa,

Waanyi, Kaiadilt, Lardil, Yangkaal, Kutharn, Kukatj and Kurtjar language groups, etc (Trigger 2011, p. 156). This runs counter to data that suggests a high rate of linguistic exogamy between these groups (Trigger 1987), as well as a generally attenuated competence in speaking or understanding each language or possessing detailing knowledge about the territory associated with each. It also runs counter to evidence suggesting Aboriginal people's engagements with other Australians.

The broader context of the above Aboriginal speaker's comments about 'one mob' was a simmering tension amongst Aboriginal residents at Doomadgee. A number of issues provoked this tension, including a long-standing dispute over whether the site of Doomadgee falls within Ganggalida country or Waanyi country. As Trigger reported on the basis of his fieldwork at Doomadgee in the late 1970s and early 1980s:

Disagreement on this issue was infused with substantial sentiment, for what is at stake is not only the status of one's own linguistic identity, but also evidence of primary ties to the country in which the valuable material property of the settlement is located (Trigger 1992, p. 110).

Another issue concerned the efforts of a group of Aboriginal people in the diaspora to be recognised as Waanyi and included in the Waanyi Native Title Application. The group in question was related through cognatic descent to a woman named Minnie, or Mayabuganji, who died at Woods Lake near Burketown during the Second World War. Like the dispute between Ganggalida and Waanyi people, argument over the linguistic affiliation of Minnie and her descendants highlighted the bellicose nature of much Aboriginal politicking within the context of land and native title. The Minnie case is particularly interesting insofar as it focuses attention upon the ways in which Aboriginal identities and collectivities relate to processes of recognition and misrecognition involving anthropology (Merlan 2006; Povinelli 2002).

According to available data presented by Trigger (2009a), Minnie was born during what Aboriginal people call Wild Time, sometime in the late 1860s or early 1870s, although her precise birth date and birthplace are unclear. In the early 1880s, she



married a man reportedly associated with the site of an old Aboriginal camp to the west of Massacre Inlet near the Northern Territory/Queensland border (in what is currently regarded as Garawa country). At some point thereafter she moved to Lawn Hill station, within what is currently regarded as Waanyi country<sup>74</sup>. In 1888, she married a Chinese gardener and cook known to have worked at Lawn Hill named Sam Ah Choo (also known as Ah Kun or Ah Sam). With Sam Ah Choo, Minnie had a number of children of mixed Aboriginal and Chinese descent while resident at Lawn Hill between 1888 and c.1916 before moving to Woods Lake near Burketown. Two of their children (both boys) were sent back to China when they were small and did not return (this seems to have been a common practice amongst Chinese fathers). Their other six children (all girls) remained in the Gulf. When Sam Ah Choo passed away, Minnie lived with a man of mixed Aboriginal and Chinese descent at Woods Lake, joining a thriving community of mostly mixed-descent people there. She died during World War Two, after falling sick at Egilabria station homestead near Burketown. Over the years the bulk of Minnie's descendants left the Gulf, becoming part of a large and diffuse group of people in the diaspora. During this time it is unclear as to how Minnie's descendants identified themselves with regard to language-affiliated Aboriginal identities in the Gulf. At least one of Minnie's children reportedly emphasised her ties with Ganggalida Aboriginal people through Minnie's first husband (Trigger 2009a, p. 32). Others reportedly emphasised their Chinese parentage and identified as non-Aboriginal people. They are not listed on the genealogies for the 1982 Nicholson River (Waanyi/Garawa) Land Claim adjoining Lawn Hill. Nor were they involved in negotiations connected with the early 1990s development of Century Mine at Lawn Hill. Since the late 1990s, however, many of Minnie's descendants have asserted publicly that Minnie was a member of the Waanyi group and have identified themselves as Waanyi people in accordance with what seems to be a greater inclination amongst some descendants of Aboriginal and Chinese unions to identify as Aboriginal and publicly assert that identity in the Gulf (see Chapter Six). In 1999, this family sought to join the broader Waanyi group in the

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<sup>74</sup> I use the somewhat curious formulation "what is currently regarded as" to indicate a tendency for the language affiliation of country to change over time. Minnie may have been a member of the now defunct Nguburindi group who reportedly occupied country running eastward from Lawn Hill Creek to the middle of the Gregory River prior to colonial settlement (Tindale 1974).

application for native title over a claim area centred upon Lawn Hill. At the time, however, meetings of the native title claim group consistently excluded Minnie as an apical ancestor of the group, thereby rejecting the presumptive claim of all of her descendants to belong to the southern Gulf in the sense of having rights and interests recognised under Australian law.

While this dispute centred upon the language-affiliated identity of Minnie, much of the discussion that I recorded about the dispute focused upon the character of those claiming to be Waanyi, dubbed 'the Minnie mob'. Many Aboriginal people with whom I spoke felt that the Minnie mob had simply spent too much time away from the Gulf. It was felt that they had turned their backs on Waanyi people during difficult times and were only coming back now "for the money" (FB July 2008). "They're not Waanyi", I was told, "all just greedy half-caste people" (FB July 2008). However, many Garawa and Ganggalida people (and some Waanyi people and others) privately expressed the opinion that senior Waanyi people should "let them in" to the Waanyi Claim Group, and try to live together (FB July 2008). However, Waanyi people's inability to fit the Minnie mob into established kinship categories inhibited this incorporation. While land rights and native title has authorised an enormous amount of genealogical research amongst Waanyi people, such research failed to conclusively resolve the identity of the family group's deceased forebear Minnie. Indeed, the Minnie mob's absence from genealogical research conducted for the 1982 Nicholson River (Waanyi/Garawa) Land Claim and the early 1990s development of Century Mine at Lawn Hill may even have fuelled scepticism about their claim. Many Waanyi people with whom I discussed the issue expressed the view that "it is no good trying to change things now when the old people [i.e. senior remembered Aboriginal people] are all gone" (FB July 2008). "We got to go off that paper [i.e. recorded genealogies]" (FB July 2008).

As these comments suggest, land and native title claims processes have tended to rigidify orally transmitted knowledge. While such rigidification may be resisted by anthropologists (Trigger 2011; Merlan 1998), it is often promoted by Aboriginal people themselves. In this instance, many Waanyi people with whom I spoke seemed prepared to take the matter to court. In an attempt to avoid this, the Carpentaria Land Council Aboriginal Corporation (CLCLAC) convened a number of

meetings to try to resolve this dispute that mostly ended in disarray, with grandstanding speeches from senior Aboriginal people interspersed with threats of violence against CLCAC staff. In the end Minnie's descendants' case was heard in the Federal Court (*Aplin on behalf of the Waanyi Peoples v State of Queensland* 2010). This case built upon land rights and native title legislation and jurisprudence designed to recognise Aboriginality and resolve issues of claim group membership. As a result of sustained opposition to their claim, members of the Minnie mob applied to the Federal Court to contest the capacity of Waanyi people to determine membership of the Waanyi native title group, insofar as that concerns assertion of a Waanyi identity and the Waanyi group's acceptance of that assertion. The applicant asserted that Waanyi descent recognized by one senior Waanyi person (or more) is sufficient qualification for being a Waanyi person pursuant to Waanyi laws and customs. The claim was heard in the Federal Court with evidence from several anthropologists and a number of Aboriginal witnesses. As Trigger commented in his expert opinion in that case, assertions of membership require a reasonable degree of acceptance across the relevant jural public, which privileges oral face-to-face communication and associated first-hand social relationships (2011). However, as this case illustrates, land rights and native title provides a vehicle for parties to seek legal recognition of family identities against the wishes of an identity group. After three days of hearings, the judge made a finding of fact that Minnie was a Waanyi person, or identified as such throughout her lifetime, and was accepted by particular Waanyi people at Burketown and at Lawn Hill as being Waanyi (*Aplin on behalf of the Waanyi Peoples v State of Queensland* 2010, p. 88). He rested this finding on the evidence of two senior Aboriginal people who had met Minnie. However, with regard to the applicant's assertion, he commented:

[T]he case really addresses the entitlement of Minnie's descendants to Waanyi identity. That question depends upon group acceptance of each of them as being of Waanyi descent which question, in turn, depends primarily upon whether the present Waanyi people accept that Minnie was a Waanyi person. As the applicant asserts, the claim group must determine that question. To date they have refused so to recognize her. I cannot take that decision for them. Nor can I find that during her lifetime, the Waanyi people, as a whole,

accepted her as being Waanyi. My findings as to such acceptance are limited to the position as it was at Lawn Hill and at Burketown. It is for the claim group to determine whether that is a sufficient basis for accepting that she was a Waanyi woman, descent from whom is a basis for Waanyi identity (*Aplin on behalf of the Waanyi Peoples v State of Queensland* 2010, p. 93).

The decision thus remains in Waanyi hands, although the judge bound Waanyi people to his findings of fact that Minnie was a Waanyi woman, suggesting that Waanyi people create a committee of sorts to resolve the issue.

This dispute provides a fascinating insight into the production and reproduction of Aboriginal identities like Waanyi as well as the meaning of Aboriginality and Whiteness more generally in the Gulf. As Merlan argues (2006, p. 179), “[b]oth popular understandings, and the requirements of the land [and native title] claim period, have contributed to the imagining of solid, bounded, self-reproducing ‘groups’”. However, she argues:

Other social processes should have at least as immediate a claim on our ethnographic and analytic efforts. I am thinking of a whole spectrum of processes involving the making and unmaking of social collectivities and their various dimensions as aspects of the engagement of Aboriginal social orders with colonial settlement and post-settlement (Merlan 2006, p. 179).

Such social processes inevitably involve understandings of Whiteness as well as Aboriginality, particularly in view of the context within which disputes between Aboriginal people are adjudicated in places like the Federal Court. In propounding the imaginary of independently self-reproducing domains at places like Doomadgee, the politics of the Gulf refute this, leaving the question of relations with the broader society largely unexplored. As David Martin argues:

The intensity of connections and shared meanings and values within the group, accentuated by pervasive discrimination and exclusion by the wider society, can lead to a form of ethnocentrism in which engagement with the

wider society (while objectively an intrinsic part of everyday life) is devalued and even scorned (2005, p. 128).

By focusing on the production of discourses of belonging I identify the interrelation of representations of Aboriginality and Whiteness here.

#### **7.4 Conclusion**

Throughout this chapter I have examined the production and reproduction in discourse of relationships between persons and place(s) in the Gulf. As I have argued, the methodology of anthropology is critical to a consideration of the collective imagining of social life in the Gulf, allowing a movement beyond purely historical and literary modes of analysis toward an understanding of the extra-textual ways in which people understand their lives. In focusing upon the dynamics of paternalism I have described the way in which the close spatial and social propinquity of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal residents produced an objectified social imaginary of 'Gulf people'. Drawing upon fieldwork completed between 2007 and 2011, I discussed how the politics of the contemporary Gulf relate to this imaginary, and how disputes about the identity of particular individuals and the meaning of Aboriginality and Whiteness more generally sheds light on colonial and post-colonial experience in the Gulf.

I began this chapter with reference to what many pastoralists perceived as the threat posed by the Wik decision, which Speaker One (in the pastoralist couple I began with) interpreted as "the end" of their "life on the land" (FB July 2008). At the time of this interview, this couple's property was subject to the *Gangalidda* [i.e. Ganggalida] and *Garawa Peoples 2* claim. A year or so later I revisited this station with a group of Ganggalida and Garawa people to complete a cultural heritage survey for a mining exploration company. In being listed on the *Gangalidda and Garawa Peoples 2* claim, these Ganggalida and Garawa people had legally recognised rights on this station, even prior to the resolution of their claim. When we arrived I was surprised to observe a gift of fish from the Ganggalida and Garawa group to the pastoralists accompanied by an ostentatious display of gratitude for facilitating the survey (see Photograph 11). When I asked about this gift, a senior Ganggalida man explained:

It's something we always try to do, just to smooth things over. It is important to us Ganggalida and Garawa people coming here to keep things friendly. We try to keep things going on a good basis, like working together and looking after the land. We know them [i.e. the pastoralists who own the lease]. They're a bit upset about things but they're alright (FB October 2009).

As we worked on the survey over the next few days, I observed the Ganggalida and Garawa people with whom I was working making repeated efforts to maintain good relations with these pastoralists. Rather than a servile display of residual subjection associated with paternalism, I interpret their solicitousness as an attempt to facilitate the concept of coexistence, drawing upon a long history of personal interactions to accommodate Aboriginal as well as non-Aboriginal people's connections to place(s) in the Gulf in an apt illustration of the continuing significance of formulations like 'Gulf people'. The following year, parties to this claim reached agreement on a consent determination that was finalised by the Federal Court of Australia on 21 June 2010, recognising Ganggalida and Garawa people's non-exclusive rights over the station. This couple's fears that they might be somehow dispossessed as a result of the Wik decision proved unfounded. Despite the codification of each party's rights that this determination involved, Aboriginal and 'non-Aboriginal' people (or people who identify as non-Aboriginal despite some ambiguity about their descent) continue to negotiate their relationships, mindful of each other's attachments to place(s) and the overdetermining historical and indeed political context in which such attachments are understood.



*Photograph 11: Barry Walden with a frozen barramundi presented as a gift to pastoralists on Ganggalida country. Photograph by author, October 2009.*





## CHAPTER EIGHT

### Issues of Indigenism

I don't hear Whitefella call us Blackfella. That must be hurting you. Like we happy with Aboriginal or that ... um ... um ... Indigenous, we happy with that. But we gotta find another word [for you]. You know that skin, always make me worried that skin. I don't like to call a Whiteman all the time. He don't call me Blackman. Whiteman don't call me Blackman, he call me Aboriginal. That's more better. That's like, what we calling you, it's sort of rubbishing you, or what? But we just not too sure [what] to say. Whitefella used to call him people Blackfella hey, before, same as Nigger or what they call 'em nother name, it's just Negro now isn't it? European no good, got to call him some other word. He come from here as well, not from Europe. Some come from Europe but some from China, not like proper Chinamen, something else. But whatyoucallit, Whitefellas? It just got me worried.

From an interview with an Aboriginal man at Burketown, FB July 2011.

*8.1 The Ambivalence of Colonial 'Settlement'; 8.2 Contemporary Aboriginal Relations at Wollogorang; 8.3 Whatyoucallit, Whitefellas?; 8.4 Conclusion*

Over the last few decades, relationships between Aboriginal people and other residents of the southern Gulf have changed as previously negative connotations associated with Aboriginality have been expunged from public discourse. This seems to have been promoted within government bureaucracy, where a kind of "moral excitation" might be observed in dealings with Aboriginal people (Beteille 1998, pp. 190-191; Trigger 2008). The excerpt above from a conversation with an Aboriginal man reveals one response to these representations, as my conversant

grapples with the overweening ideological context in which relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people are construed. As the speaker comments with reference to the impact of the shift from colonial to anti-colonial or post-colonial discourses upon representations of Aboriginality: “Whiteman don’t call me Blackman, he call me Aboriginal”, “we happy with Aboriginal or ... Indigenous”. At the same time, however, the speaker expresses doubt about the appropriate language with which to address non-Aboriginal residents of the Gulf, ending the conversation with an expression of seeming unease: “whatyoucallit, Whitefellas?” In this chapter I develop an analysis that traces such unease through the multiple discourses I have described in this thesis, arguing for more relational understandings of Aboriginality and Whiteness than those conveyed under the aegis of indigenism.

While I have focused specifically upon the southern Gulf throughout this thesis, the shift that I discuss in this chapter relates local residents to international discourses of indigenism whose “principal institutional home” is the United Nations rather than any local, regional or even national context (Merlan 2009, p. 303). As Merlan argues (2009, p. 303), the concept of indigeneity has recently come to presuppose “a sphere of commonality among those who form a world collectivity of ‘indigenous peoples’ in contrast to their various others”. While the UN’s recent (September 2007) Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples fails to define the variety of claims and diversity of situations that count as acceptably indigenous, the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations promulgated a fourfold criterion a few years earlier. According to the Working Group, indigenous people are those with:

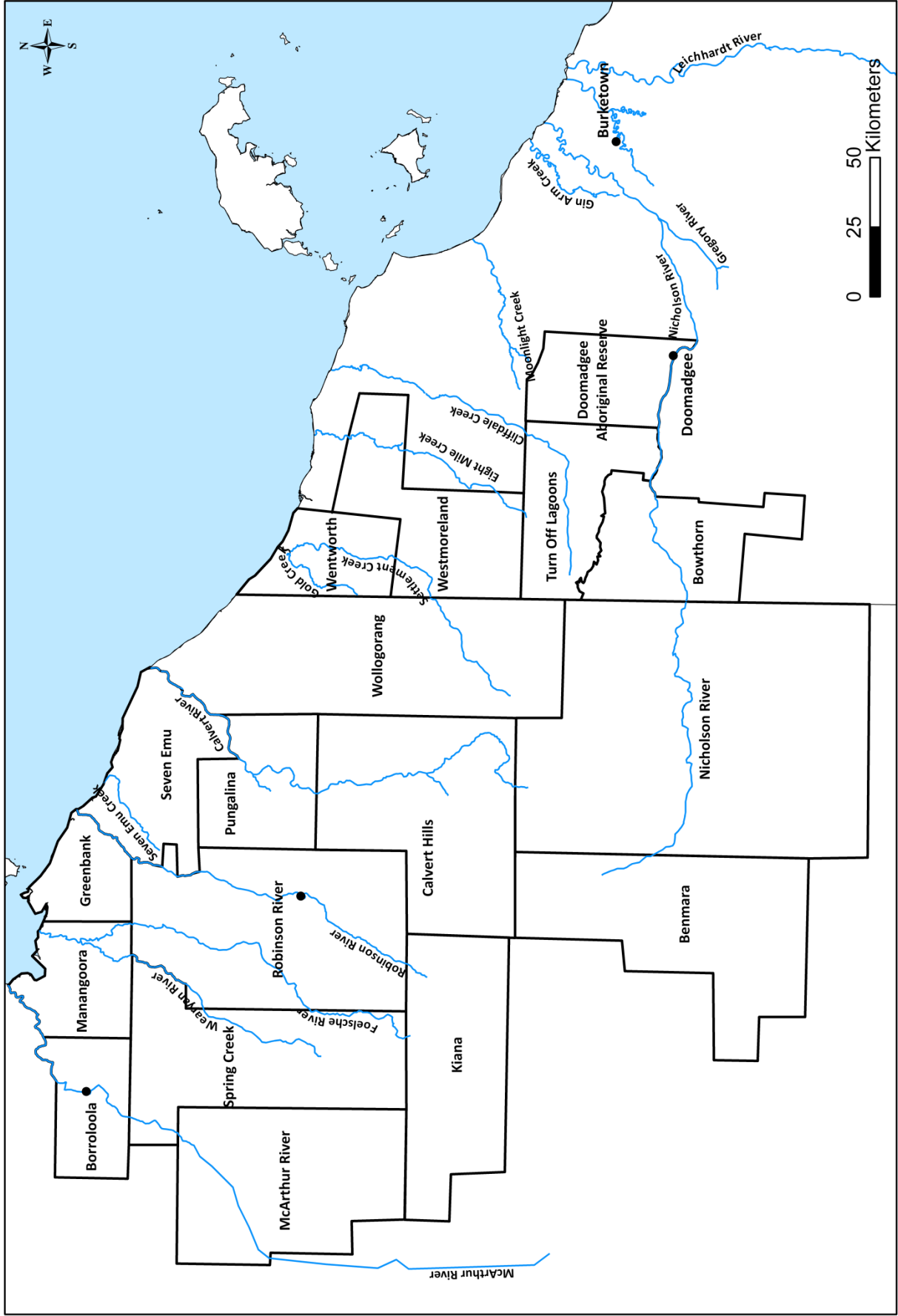
1. Priority in time, with respect to the occupation and use of a specific territory;
2. The voluntary perpetuation of cultural distinctiveness;
3. Self-identification, as well as recognition by other groups and by state authorities, as a distinct collectivity; and
4. An experience of subjugation, marginalisation, dispossession, exclusion or discrimination, whether or not these conditions persist (Kenrick & Lewis 2004, p. 5),

On this basis, the UN identified “370 million indigenous people worldwide”, seeming to associate such indigenes with settler colonialism, and specifically British colonialism (United Nations 2007). It is noteworthy that several states (such as China, Myanmar and Indonesia) ratified the Declaration by either claiming all their people as indigenes or by claiming that they do not have any – thereby peremptorily stripping indigenous status from the Taiwanese aborigines of China (the Ami, Atayal, Bunun, Kavalan, Paiwan, Puyuma, Rukai, Saisiyat, Tao, Thao, Tsou, Truku), the Akha, Hmong, Karen, Lahu and Lisu of Myanmar, and the Pribumi of Indonesia. The United Kingdom’s Ambassador and Deputy Permanent Representative similarly failed to recognise any such indigenous people “within the territory of the United Kingdom and its overseas territories” (United Nations 2007). Those indigenes who particularly justify the Declaration’s “concern[] that indigenous peoples have suffered from historic injustices as a result of, inter alia, their colonization and dispossession of their lands, territories and resources” are the aboriginal citizens of the four Anglo settler colonial nations, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States (United Nations 2007). Unlike the United Kingdom, China, Myanmar, Indonesia and other states which formally ratified the Declaration while claiming all their people as indigenes or by claiming they do not have any, each of these nations initially opposed it, citing a series of objections to the text. Ironically, they thereby each acknowledged the existence of a category of indigenous people within their borders, as well as the presumptive claims of such indigenes to special rights. In the event of the UN General Assembly vote on the Declaration, Australia led New Zealand, Canada and the United States in opposition its ratification, before later reversing its decision following a change of government.

Building on my analysis in Chapter Seven of the politics of belonging to the Gulf, this chapter explores this analogy between Aboriginality and ‘indigenes’ by focusing upon the somewhat exceptional case of a group of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people who claim descent from a pioneering European leaseholder. In this chapter, I analyse the different kinds of claims which this non-Aboriginal man’s descendants make to a station named Wollogorang on the Northern Territory/Queensland border, where assertions of connection by

Aboriginal people intersect with articulations of an emergent autochthony amongst non-Aboriginal Australians with long histories of residence in the area. The juxtaposition of such differing claims reveals the lines of tension and cleavage that exist between these “strange relatives” (Redmond 2005) and within the discourse of indigenism itself, where questions of blood, culture, history and place define who is thought to belong. According to many advocates, the international discourse of indigenism is an emancipatory development of world historical significance, forming part of “a concerted political movement that could retake control of state policy making from the current neoliberal hegemony” (Turner 2003, p. 63). While the urge to de-naturalize indigeneity as historically contingent upon a facile opposition between Aboriginality and Whiteness may inhibit such a vaunted aspiration, it may helpfully provide the analytical tools to better understand the lives of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people with related histories in the Gulf. This hinges upon a thorough understanding of the ‘settlement’ that occurred at places like Wollogorang station around the end of the nineteenth century.

I explore the meaning of such ‘settlement’ in 8.1. I then examine specific Aboriginal relations to this station (in 8.2) before turning to the question posed above by my informant in the Gulf in 8.3: “whatyoucallit, Whitefella?”



Map 2: Selected pastoral stations around the Northern Territory/Queensland border

## 8.1 The Ambivalence of Colonial 'Settlement'

Wollogorang is the largest of the Gulf stations, with 712 246 hectares (1.76 million acres) and some 40 000 head of cattle. Including the lease of Wentworth (which has historically been connected to the station), Wollogorang is considerably larger than the neighbouring stations Westmoreland, Turn Off Lagoons, Bowthorn, Nicholson River (the Waanyi/Garawa Aboriginal Land Trust), Calvert Hills, Pungalina (which was previously part of Wollogorang), and Seven Emu (see Map 2). The only stations in the broader region that rival Wollogorang in terms of its size are Anthony Lagoon (formerly Anthony's Lagoon) at 607 900 hectares with approximately 40 000 head, and Gregory Downs in Queensland at 266 425 hectares with approximately 30 000 head (neither of which is shown on Map 2). Wollogorang is also one of the most valuable of the Gulf stations, worth up to 80 million AUD<sup>75</sup>.

The pastoralist John Chisholm established the station in 1881, although the station's boundaries were not firmly fixed in place until after the Second World War (Trainor 1997). During the earliest period of settlement in the Northern Territory Gulf, land applications had to be made in person at the Lands Department in Adelaide and leases (where they were issued) had to be stocked within twelve months and improved thereafter (Roberts 2005, p.15); similar legislation existed on the Queensland side of the border (May 1994, p.28). These stipulations necessitated hefty financial commitments as well as a certain amount of logistical nous. Trainor (1997) estimates that in the 1880s alone more than 200,000 cattle travelled along the 'Coast Track' across Wollogorang in one of the fastest land-grabs in Australian history. In this context, imperial technologies of spatial representation – not just the instruments of cartography but the broader discourse of exploration and 'discovery' – created a cultural projection intimately

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<sup>75</sup> This is my estimate based upon the price-per-beast-area established by the AA Company's July 2006 purchase of the comparable Anthony Lagoon, which traded for approximately 90 million AUD. This figure was arguably inflated by the easy availability of credit prior to the Global Financial Crisis. With 40 000 cattle worth approximately 18.9 million AUD (based upon the price established by the AA Company's March 2011 purchase of 55 000 cattle from Tipperary Station, i.e. at 473 AUD a head) the value of Wollogorang would nevertheless be considerable. A rumoured 2008 offer for the station was reportedly rejected at 52 million AUD. Based upon a reasonable 8-10% annual return on this investment, the station would need to generate well in excess of 4 million AUD per year.

bound up with the culture and identity of the colonizers, whose ideological and political hegemony altered the landscape itself, particularly as those 200,000 cattle sought out water in the many rivers and creeks and springs beside the 1880s Coast Track. The control of land was thus connected to the capacity to exploit it, with labour understood as the beginnings of property (Pocock 1992; Locke 1821). Colonialism naturalised this cultural projection, creating boundaries out of blazed trees like those marked by the explorers (see Photograph 12).



*Photograph 12: Jack Campbell in front of a blazed tree that marks a borderline at Wollogorang, circa 1945. Source: David Trigger.*

According to Paul Carter, the act of enclosure that boundaries represented in photographs like this “permeates the entire structure of settler society” (2010 [1987, pp. 155-156]). He argues:

The settler's proliferating boundaries are not simply physical necessities: they serve the symbolic function of making a place that speaks, a place with a history (2010 [1987], p. 155).

Over the years, such cultural projections gradually associated new names with places in the Gulf, reinscribing the land as receptive to settlement with names like Settlement Creek, as well as others like Hells Gate and Massacre Inlet, which are arguably expressive of the epochal violence of colonialism<sup>76</sup>. The name Wollogorang is actually attached to a lagoon outside Goulbourn in New South Wales near where John Chisholm lived, where it is reportedly derived from an Aboriginal language. Chisholm never actually visited Wollogorang station; Henry and Frank Carne transported stock to the Gulf in his stead in 1883, along with the name Wollogorang (Trainor 1997). Naming here might be seen to function as a form of control, albeit a critically ironic one in that it deployed an Aboriginal word from elsewhere on the continent as a metonym of imperial power and knowledge.

This transplanted name for Wollogorang station evokes the somewhat ambiguous status of Aboriginal people within settlement more generally. As several historians have documented, Aboriginal people were recognised by at least some members of South Australia's Colonial Office to have "proprietary title to the soil" as early as the 1830s (Roberts 2005, p. 92). Understandings of ownership were therefore somewhat complex and varied, revealing figurations of Aboriginality in this period which contest the doctrine of *terra nullius* in Australia and support Aboriginal people's ability to 'take hold' of land even in the terms of the dominant discourse (Austin-Broos 2011, p. 41). However, notwithstanding this complexity and variation, pastoralists largely ignored Aboriginal people's legal rights throughout the southern Gulf, at least prior to the imprecations of Walter Roth (Roberts 2005, pp. 94-95; see also Chapter Three). This resulted in the unprecedented movement of Aboriginal people around the region, which dramatically altered the structure of nested language-groups or 'tribes' that

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<sup>76</sup> Some Gulf residents identify Settlement Creek as the place where drovers 'settled' the exchange of stock during the transport of cattle to markets. The meaning of Hells Gate and Massacre Inlet is similarly ambiguous.



existed in pre-settlement times (Trigger 1992, pp. 227-234). Pastoralists impelled the movements of what Roth (1901, p. 3) called “immigrant [i.e. Northern Territory] blacks” into Queensland (and across Wollogorang) by tending to stock the country according to the carrying capacity of its waterholes rather than the load of any particular licence or lease. As a result, Aborigines were excluded even from legally unoccupied land, for “where the cattle are ... the blacks have to be hunted away” (Roth 1901, p. 2). Aboriginal people as well as non-Aborigines were thereby drawn into a colonial culture of terror (Taussig 1987; Trigger 1992).

Critically, colonial settlement involved the separation yet continual mixing of coloniser and colonised, or Aboriginality and Whiteness in Australia. In some ways this corrupted or was thought to corrupt the boundaries upon which colonisation relied. Notably, even in this early period, Roth reports a “consensus of opinion amongst the Europeans on the Queensland side of the border ... that ... Northern Territory blacks are not to be trusted”, being somehow “wilder” than “the more peaceful aborigines” on the plains due to relatively longer contact with non-Aboriginal people (Roth 1901, pp. 3, 2). In other words, the frontier produced wildness. This is ironic insofar as the stated official justification of colonialism was to civilise! This illustrates the contradiction between the civil address or stated official justification of colonialism and its varied manifestations. This contradiction is evident in settlers’ responses to those whom the enforced emulation of the civilizing process actually produced – the wild-civilised subjects – who were invariably dismissed as not quite right, or otherwise inauthentic and spoiled. As Bhabha (1994) argues, colonial authority was therefore alienated at the point of enunciation, producing a paradoxical feature of colonial resistance called “mimicry”. For Bhabha, such “mimicry” always contains an element of “menace” associated with its slippage, excess or difference, in that it is always “almost the same, *but not quite*”, “*less than one and double*” (emphasis in the original, Bhabha 1994, pp. 127, 139). The comparatively progressive contemporary pastoralist R. M. Watson provides a striking example of this in his diary of these years. He retails the story of a Kalkadoon man called Drummer whom he saved from the depredations of the Native Police.

This boy [i.e. Drummer] and his mate were caught by the Native Police on the Leichhardt and they were to be shot, but luckily Mr. [Price] Fletcher [a fellow settler] and one of us [i.e. the Watson family] came on to the police just as they had shot Drummer's mate, and he was told to walk out on to the plain to be shot, but we objected to the execution, and after a lot of argument the Sub-Inspector of Native Police handed the boy to us, but on condition that we took him out of the district.

The reason given for wanting to kill these two blacks was because they knew a few words of English so were likely to teach the wild blacks some villainy etc. This man Drummer was a wonderful chap. He could find anything lost from a horse to a pocket knife and never failed to do so. After some month Drummer wanted a wife, so we went down the [Gregory] river to near [where] the Punjaub Station is now and found some gins in a lagoon getting waterlily roots and mussels. The poor things were so scared that they would not come out until they were nearly frozen or drowned.

Well, we had a look through them and told Drummer to pick one but to try and get one with curly hair and small feet (as they are the most intelligent). Drummer chose one, put her on his horse behind him, and we all returned to the 20 mile camp. This gin – Louie – was a good woman and settled down straight away (Watson c.1873, pp. 17-18).

As either 'wild blacks' or 'nomadic notorious half-civilised' ones, Aboriginal people had little hope of reprieve from colonial death-space here. Despite saving Drummer from death at the hands of the Aboriginal Native Police, the Watson brothers sought to transform him into another agent of colonialism, bringing a curious kind of ethnological knowledge to bear upon his 'choice' of a wife. The anxious iteration of what Bhabha (1994, p. 107) calls "pleasure/unpleasure, mastery/defence, knowledge/disavowal, absence/presence" is not so much resolved here as masked by Louie's "settl[ing] down" here. As Watson continues:

She [i.e. Louie] afterwards had two children whom we christened Archie and Murray (after our two nephews, M[urray] and A[rchie] Black of Tarwin, Gippsland).

Murray ... was one of the most intelligent boys I ever saw. One time, P. S. Watson was driving a waggonette and had a little naked Murray with him on the seat. P.S. Ran across a gutter instead of going round it, which gave a nasty jolt.

P.S. said to himself 'Well, I am a damn fool!' Then little Murray looked up into his face and said – 'Mine think it Boss!' (Watson c.1873, p. 18).

The mask of settlement slips: the narcissism and aggression of colonial discourse – naming these Aboriginal children after their own non-Aboriginal nephews – manifests the ambivalence that subverts the authoritarianism of the colonialist address, producing a kind of sly servility or “civility” in which the observer becomes the observed: the stereotypical ‘damn fool’ of Bhabha’s analysis.

A related story from Wollogorang station reveals a similar kind of slippage while offering an insight into the production of other kinds of difference beyond those disclosed in Bhabha’s analysis. In a disturbing presentiment of the policy of assimilation, the abduction of women and children was widely practiced on the frontier in order to ‘tame’ Aboriginal people and turn them to the purpose of domestic chores, which sometimes included sex. To ‘settle down’ here was to submit to the recursive logic of colonialism and be deemed both a cause and an effect of the system, “imprisoned in the circle of interpretation” (Bhabha 1994, pp. 127, 139). In his gallant defence of local Aboriginal people, Roth commented on this as a “special abuse at present being practised” on the frontier, describing the movement of such children from the Northern Territory into Queensland and New South Wales (1901, p. 4). A contemporary eyewitness account of the practice of child abduction is provided by Emily Caroline Creaghe, who accompanied a group of explorers (including Ernest Favenc) in an 1883 trip through north-west Queensland. From successive diary entries for the 20<sup>th</sup> and the 21<sup>st</sup> of February 1883, Creaghe comments upon a trip to Lilydale station near Lawn Hills, where she observed the proprietors Frank and Ernest Shadforth’s return from a hunting trip:

They brought a new black gin with them; she cannot speak a word of English. Mr. Shadforth put a rope round the gin's neck and dragged her along on foot, he was riding. This seems to be the usual method....

Frank's wife Louisa and her daughters and Bob's wife Betsy were reportedly the first non-Aboriginal women to return to the district after the epidemic of Gulf fever decimated the population at Burketown in the early 1860s. In the year before Creaghe's visit, on the 13 May 1882, the *Queenslander* newspaper gushed: "these ladies travelled overland from Beechworth [in Victoria] – an 18 month trip – and made light of the undertaking" (cited in May 1994, p. 31). Contrary to this representation of tough pioneering women, Creaghe reports:

The new gin, whom they call Bella, is chained up to a tree a few yards from the house, she is not to be loosed until they think she is tamed (cited in Roberts 2005, p. 236).

Who is wild here? In the end, Creaghe reports that Bella "decamped in the night", reportedly fording a river in order to evade recapture (cited in Roberts 2005, p. 236). Named for beauty – "one who dresses so as to set off her personal charms" (OED) – she fled the death-space which bound Aboriginal people to settlers by the threat and use of terror, although she may well have been recaptured in the future, or otherwise drawn again into what Taussig calls its "ontological and epistemological murk" (1987, p. 121). The ambivalence of colonial 'settlement' – not to mention its blatant hypocrisy – is vividly on display here.

After decades of haphazard violence throughout the border country, the sedentarisation of remnant populations of Aboriginal people on Wollogorang station was accomplished through the use of a broker named Yilibara, whose *Juwalnguna* estate encompassed the homestead area. I will focus here upon a particularly vivid account of violence that occurred in the aftermath of (Ernest Shadforth's son) Robert (Bob) Shadforth's abduction of one of Yilibara's wives. The story of Yilibara and Shadforth forms a fascinating history of resistance and accommodation as Aborigines fought to survive Wild Time by developing different types of relationships with the colonists, disclosing different meanings within

settlement here. Following a raid by Shadforth and others upon a Kunabibi ceremony at Settlement Creek in 1897 (in which a number of women were reportedly taken) Yilibara attacked the Wollogorang homestead. According to European sources and Aboriginal oral histories, Aboriginal women called out to the abductor Shadforth to tempt him outside whereupon Yilibara speared him through the hip, after which the former fired a shot that reportedly wounded Yilibara (Trigger 1992, pp. 21-22. The papers of Harry Anning provide the most detailed account:

Just before dawn, there was a cry from gins "Blackfellow, Blackfellow". Shadforth leapt from his blankets, and for an old hand, did a very foolish thing indeed. Clad in his pyjamas, he took out a double-barrelled gun, loaded with copper slugs. He could make out a little group of gins in the dim light near the kitchen. They were crying out incessantly, "Blackfellow, Blackfellow", and pointing across the creek. It was a simple stratagem and very nearly succeeded. Shadforth naturally thought they were station gins, as no doubt the wily Healy Burra anticipated. He walked boldly up to them, with trigger cocked, and called out, "Where, blackfellow?"

That was all that the sable assassin wanted. Rising stealthily and silently to his feet, he launched the spear that he had fitted into his woomera, with a savage expulsion of breath straight at Shadforth's stomach. Fortunately, the spear, a stone headed one, touched him on the elbow, and was deflected slightly, just sufficient to save his life. Still, even then, it just missed the stomach, and he immediately realised all the facts.

With a bitter curse he let go right and left barrels at the blackfellow, whose form he could just make out, and must have hit him, as blood drops were tracked away from the place.

By that time, [a visiting stock agent] Matthies must have walked out. He was carrying his revolver, and when he heard the shots go off, he fired his weapon at nothing in particular. That must have frightened the blacks.

They realised that Shadforth was not alone, and there was a stampede that sounded like rushing cattle (Anning 1953-54).

Matthies' unexpected shots "at nothing in particular" no doubt revived the Aborigines' fear of a death-space in which men and women and children were indiscriminately killed. These were "the facts" of frontier life to which Anning alludes with such characteristic colonial rhetoric ("the sable assassin", "a savage expulsion of breath", etc). As Taussig argues (1987, p. 121), stories like this were indispensable to the "flowering of the colonial imagination", "[creating] an uncertain reality out of fiction". However, even in Anning's account the foundation of an alternative relationship between Aboriginal people and settlers is clearly evident, as 'Healy Burra' [i.e. Yilibara] is described as "wily" (i.e. "crafty, cunning, sly, artful", OED) and even (elsewhere in Anning's account) 'treacherous' rather than simply savage and/or civilised. This suggests the existence of a relationship between Yilibara and Shadforth founded on something other than sheer terror. After this incident, intriguingly, Shadforth and Yilibara went on to form a relationship that has been described by their descendants on both sides (i.e. both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) as a "friendship" (Dymock 1982, pp. 81-83; Trigger 1992). This was strengthened with the exchange of gifts, which culminated in the relationship of Shadforth's mixed-descent son Jack Shadforth and one of Yilibara's daughters named Jeanie Jujamalanja (see Figure 1).

'Settlement' here therefore assumed a somewhat different form relating to "the deed or instrument" upon which "[t]he act of settling property upon a person or persons" is effected (OED), namely via 'marriage'. As shown on the following partial genealogy, Robert Shadforth had a child named Jack Shadforth via an unnamed Aboriginal woman prior to his marriage to the non-Aboriginal woman marked on the far right hand side. According to Garawa Aboriginal people with whom I discussed this genealogy, the relationship between Jeanie Jujamalanja and Jack Shadford eventuated as a result of the encounter between Yilibara and Robert Shadforth (although different accounts of this 'settlement' exist), manifesting the way in which the two reportedly "get friend up" (Trigger 1992, p. 22).

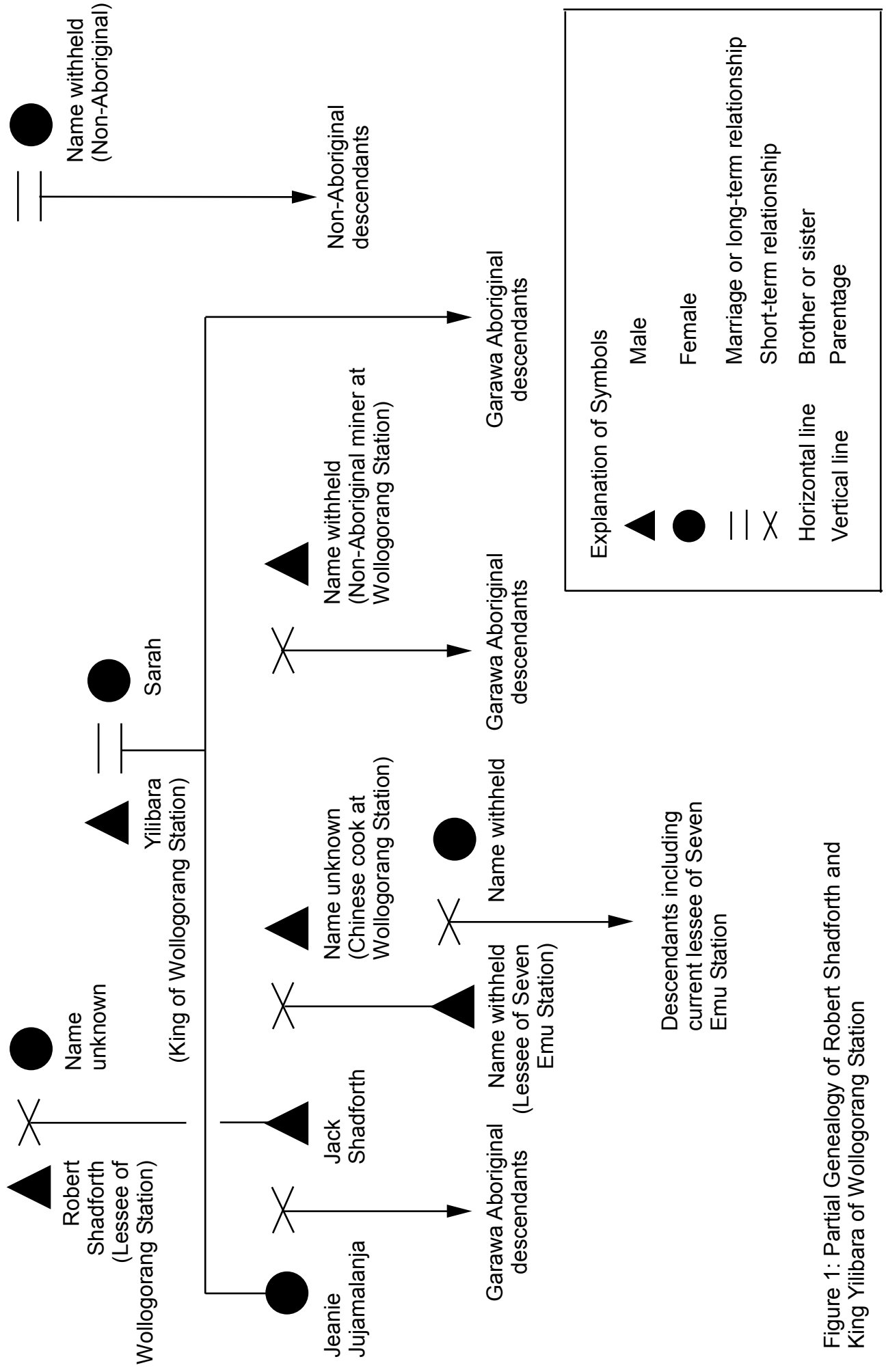


Figure 1: Partial Genealogy of Robert Shadforth and King Yilibara of Wollogorang Station

The ethnographic detail here highlights the shortcomings of Bhabha's dichotomy. Whereas the narcissism and aggression of colonial discourse evident in the Watson diary produced the kind of sly civility that Bhabha identifies in his account of resistance, the event of settlement at Wollongorang also produced relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people like this. Those who identify, today, as Aboriginal, as non-Aboriginal, or as of mixed Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal descent represent Aboriginality and Whiteness in multiple ways at different moments within such 'settlement'. These multiple figurations are evident in assertions of connection to the station by present-day Aboriginal people, as well as those of mixed Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal descent. Within this context, Wollongorang is no mere backdrop to experience as landscape or property. As a cultural projection it becomes instead intimately involved in the embodiment of identity. Rather than tracing the disturbances of cultural, racial and historical difference in colonial discourse along the lines laid out in Bhabha's analysis, I will therefore analyse the relationships which developed over time between persons and places at Wollongorang station, linking the kinds of historical stories with which I began this chapter (and indeed this thesis, in Chapter Two) with the plural articulations of belonging expressed by present day residents of the Gulf.



## 8.2 Contemporary Aboriginal Relations at Wollogorang



*Photograph 13. Wollogorang Homestead, circa 1897. Source: Bev O'Hara.*

Photograph 13 presents an image of Wollogorang station homestead taken sometime prior to 1897. After this photograph was taken, the homestead was remodelled with wire stretched around the veranda posts forming a tight mesh designed to deflect spears following the attack by Yilibara and others upon the station manager Shadforth. According to Aboriginal oral histories, after Yilibara attacked the Wollogorang homestead, the two men engaged in what one of Yilibara's descendants described as a "peace process" (FB September 2007). While this may have been related to the withdrawal of the native police from the area (also in 1897), it represented the beginning of the end of what many Aboriginal people refer to as 'Wild Time'. To mollify Yilibara, the manager gave him a modified military gorget called a 'king plate'<sup>77</sup>. In return, Yilibara reportedly gave

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<sup>77</sup> In colonial Australia, settlers distributed a type of military gorget known as a king plate to certain Aboriginal people in an attempt to secure their cooperation. As Jakelin Troy argues (1993), king plates were handed out from the earliest years of colonial settlement through to the first decades of the twentieth century.

the manager's mixed-descent son one of his own daughters in marriage. Yilibara then came to live a semi-sedentary life at the station alongside other Aboriginal people, including the family who presently claim to be 'traditional owners' of the area according to the criteria established under relevant land rights and native title legislation. The colonial practice of designating Aboriginal 'kings' alongside the non-Aboriginal inhabitants of pastoral 'grass castles' had a variety of impacts upon understandings of Aboriginality and Whiteness here, even into the present time.

With regard to classic territorial organisation at Wollogorang, the Aboriginal people with the strongest classical [i.e. 'traditional'] connection to the area are said in Garawa to be 'proper' *yaji mungguji* for their father's-father's 'home', with *mungguji* meaning a joint or company relationship between persons and place(s) (Trigger 1989a). As well as this clearly kin-defined connection to land, this patriclan is also said to share the same inner essential distinguishing feature ('skin' or 'hair' in Aboriginal English) of an estate around the homestead, at least in the ideal system as it was described for example in the Senior Anthropologist's Report for the Garawa (Robinson River) Land Claim (Trigger 1989a). However, while this gloss suggests a relatively fixed approach to Aboriginal law and custom in designating 'traditional owners' within the framework of land rights and native title, the ethnographic context is more complex. As the Australian courts have acknowledged, a number of situations around the country illustrate cases of 'succession' in the absence of a clearly defined patriline, thereby substantiating a range of ontological and other associations with place(s) as adequately indigenous according to the specifications of the *Aboriginal Land Rights Act* and the *Native Title Act*. At the station in question, an Aboriginal group from a neighbouring area has come to assert connections through the skin way as the original patriclan associated with this area appears more or less defunct as a result of the demographic catastrophe of colonisation. While Garawa country includes lands

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Kingship formed part of Governor Macquarie's attempts to 'civilise' the colony and create a comprador class of Aboriginal people complicit with the values of the White powers (Troy 1993). While their significance gradually declined following the sedentarisation of Aboriginal people on stations, they reportedly functioned as intermediaries in this critical 'settlement' period, enjoying privileged access to colonial patronage (Trigger 1992).

from the coast east of Robinson River to around the Queensland border, classical ethnography suggests the existence of another Aboriginal group named Gunindiri, albeit one within the same language family as Garawa and Waanyi (Sharp 1935; Tindale 1974).

This complexity provides a neat illustration of strategic responses within the system of classic territorial organisation, which provides a number of genealogical paths towards the designation of 'joint' or company relationships between people and places, despite a countervailing ideology of fixity. Amongst the Aboriginal people whom I have interviewed, this border country continues to be associated with Gunundiri or Gunundiri-Garawa, which is said to be "like Garawa, but heavy [i.e. with a stronger pronunciation]" (FB Nov 2007). The sole surviving speaker of Gunundiri-Garawa is said to talk in a way that Garawa speakers understand, but "a bit like American, like American language to English", "same but different" (FB Nov 2007). She "comes from" [i.e. is ritually associated with] an Emu Dreaming site called *Ngalanja* at Seven Emu station west of Wollogorang. That is, her patriline country is at *Ngalanja*, for which she has the right 'skin', Wudaliya. However, because she and her relations "grew up" at Wollogorang, they assert a claim there. To put this relationship in Aboriginal terms: while she and her consanguinal kin "really sit down" [i.e. belong] at *Ngalanja* through their *ngawuji* [i.e. father's mother] they "put claim down" [i.e. have come to assert themselves] as *mingaringgi* [i.e. owner] or *mingaringgi* 'half-way' [i.e. assistant owner] through their *gugudi* [i.e. mother's mother] upon the basis of historical residence at Wollogorang due to the absence of a clearly defined patriline with superior rights and interests. According to census results for Wollogorang between 1963-69 – i.e. prior to the introduction of equal wages and the rapid depopulation of the Aboriginal workforce at pastoral stations in the Gulf – this 'mob' formed about a third of the workforce resident at the station (Mackett 2004). While they acknowledge that the Aboriginal estate around the Wollogorang homestead is not their father's father's country, they engage with the traditional system to articulate their claim for what they call "granny country" [i.e. mother's mother's country or mother's mother's brother's country]. While the colonial encounter produced that family's location at Wollogorang, they articulate their relationship to it through the classical system as owners 'half-way'.

However, while I have used the designation 'consanguinal kin' to describe the relationship between this woman and the 'mob' of Aboriginal people who claim this area as *mingaringgi* half-way, blood is not the sole nor even the primary idiom in which such kinship is understood. The preponderance of 'blood' within understandings of Aboriginal kinship – in formulations of jural descent, for example – is arguably another result of colonial attempts to understand Aboriginality in Euro-centric terms with an idea of descent which has been embraced from the wider society (Sutton 2003; Austin-Broos 2011). While *Mabo v Queensland [no. 2]* (1992) took the view that native title has a *sui generis* character and cannot be specified *a priori* (Keen 1999), the interpretative concepts with which such the courts begin (e.g. the concept of 'title' itself, as well as some understanding of nativeness or indigeneity) has led to such processes being understood as forms of recognition rather than transformation (Mantziaris & Martin 2000). However, in the complex figurations of Aboriginality and Whiteness involved in the event of 'settlement' at Wollgorang, such *a priori* concepts of title are arguably inadequate, posing questions about anthropological analyses of cultural continuity within the land rights and native title space of recognition. Having been long resident at Wollgorang station, the ritual connections of those who themselves as *mingaringgi* in terms of their association with the Possum Dreaming at *Juwalnguna* were no doubt reinforced through profane work of a kind that was heavily shaped by contact with settlers. As has been extensively documented elsewhere (Povinelli 1993), Aboriginal people's labour complements otherwise ideological connections to place(s) providing biographical and spiritual links to it which challenge the theoretical divide between Aboriginal culture and Aboriginal economy, as well as between Aboriginal culture and economy and the broader culture and economy of other Australians<sup>78</sup>. While the cultural and economic connections of those who assert themselves as *mingaringgi* at Wollgorang come together, other assertions of connection to the station draw upon other figurations of Aboriginality and indeed Whiteness which trouble this neat example.

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<sup>78</sup> This is a subject of considerable debate in anthropology. In the case of the Belyuen Peninsula, the primary spiritual affiliations of Larrakia people left other Aboriginal residents bereft of any recognised connections (Povinelli 2002).

It is difficult to reconstruct the precise circumstances in which the succession of [western] Garawa people to Gunindiri-Garawa country around Wollogorang occurred. However, archival sources provide some insight into violence between Aboriginal people and settlers prior to the attack by Yilibara upon the station homestead, and indeed for some time after that attack. When Harry Anning was instructed to “take delivery” of Wollogorang in the late 1890s he was reportedly warned by his father to “take care son, the blacks are bad”<sup>79</sup>. Besides the conflict between Shadforth and Yilibara, violence between settlers and Aboriginal people continued at least until 1926, when an Aboriginal man was reportedly shot dead “and draped over the woodheap for a few days just to let the other ones know what would happen”<sup>80</sup>. However, despite such violence, the resolution of the confrontation between Yilibara and Shadforth has been described by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in the region as a critical ‘settlement’. As I have already suggested, Shadforth gave Yilibara a king plate in order to mollify him and encourage the sedentarisation of remnant Aboriginal populations at the station, precipitating an exchange of gifts between the pair.

Critically, ‘settlement’ here seems to have subtly altered Aboriginal perceptions of territorial organisation in the area (as well as non-Aboriginal ones), complicating simplistic accounts of colonialism as a struggle between Westerners taking possession of land and resisting natives reclaiming it (as Said suggests, see Chapter Five). In return for his king plate and position as a colonial middle-man, Yilibara reportedly gave the manager’s mixed-descent son one of his own daughters in marriage. Many of Yilibara’s daughter and this manager’s mixed-descent son today assert the existence of an implied hereditary office, claiming to be of ‘royal’ descent. While this belief is inconsistent with the ideal system of territorial organisation I have described, it is nevertheless consonant with what Sutton describes as “the cultural emphasis on remembered, named, distant ancestry and recognised particular ‘lines’ of descent ... characteristic of post-classical Aboriginal cultures” (Sutton 2003, p. 224). As such, it reflects the impact

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<sup>79</sup> The present day lessee of Wollogorang station made this comment during an interview in July 2008.

<sup>80</sup> The present-day lessee of Wollogorang station reported this comment during an interview in July 2008.

of non-Aboriginal notions of jural descent figured into the concept of Aboriginality and arguably reified within the space of recognition created by land rights and native title. In an interview conducted by David Trigger at Borroloola in July 2009, one of Yilibara's descendants asked: "How come if he's the King he only got a bit of land?" She continued:

I want to know where my ancestors come from.... You know, very interesting, us coloured people, we go indigenous mother, we don't get recorded in any land claim, we get left out. When they had this thing [i.e. land and native title claims in the region] you had to get a family tree to prove your Aboriginality, fair dinkum. They [i.e. Garawa people] gave me a hard time. Us mob get really hard time, here we are, speaking our mother's tongue.... (Trigger 2009b)

While this represents a straightforward misinterpretation of the concept of kingship – not to mention the ideal Aboriginal system of territorial organisation – it appears to be a relatively common one amongst the descendants of the kings. In this instance, it also has a racial element, as this woman alleges discrimination on the basis of her mixed ancestry, highlighting the question of blood (as well as culture, history and place) in land rights and native title discourses. In fact, this woman's father (Yilibara's daughter's son) was adamantly opposed to the land and native title claims process throughout his life, giving evidence through a non-Aboriginal employee during the Garawa/Mugularrangu (Robinson River) Land Claim against the award of land to his Garawa mother's relations due to its impact upon his lease over an adjoining station. In that evidence he both dismissed Aboriginal connections to the station in question and asserted countervailing connections of his own based upon the possession of a lease. Later in his life he increasingly distanced himself from Garawa people, seeking to trace his ancestry through his mother's husband's father Bob Shadforth despite the strength of his classical connections to this area through his mother's father Yilibara. This unique positioning relates to a number of historical factors; above all, it derives from his status as one of the first Aboriginal leaseholders in Australia.

In the early 1950s, a drover named George Butcher purchased the lease of Wollogorang from a consortium that included the famous pastoralist Sir Sidney Kidman (known to many Australians as ‘the cattle king’)<sup>81</sup>. A few years later (circa 1953), as payment for mustering 100 cleanskins [i.e. unbranded cattle] Butcher gave the lease of a neighbouring station to Yilibara’s daughter’s son. In the words of one informant who discussed the price with both parties in the 1950s, the amount was “fairly academic” (FB July 2008). “[Jeanie Jujamalanja’s son] just went back over the hill a bit and found enough cleanskins there. He wouldn’t have gone all the way off to Seven Emu station to get one hundred cleanskins!” The expectation of the owner of Seven Emu therefore appears to have been that mustering would happen on Wollogorang. Such practices were not unusual in this period. Butcher himself reportedly ‘purchased’ the lease in a similar way in the early 1940s. According to his widow, Butcher “cleaned up” [i.e. mustered] the property for several years in exchange for the lease (FB February 2008). Leases like it were essentially worthless in this period. Contrary to this account, however, Yilibara’s daughter’s-son’s descendants assert that their ancestor purchased the lease to Seven Emu station with money earned from delivering a plant of horses from Elsey station (near Mataranka) to meatworks in Darwin. In a further fabrication, the family assert that Yilibara’s daughter’s son wagered this money on the Caulfield Cup and then the Melbourne Cup and spent the winnings on purchasing the lease from the non-Aboriginal drover. The interplay of representations of Aboriginality and Whiteness seems more significant here than the question of falsity or truth. Both stories point to this man’s [i.e. Jeanie Jujamalanja’s son’s] unique status amongst those of fellow Aboriginal descent due to his reputed relation to Bob Shadforth, the erstwhile manager of Wollogorang. As mentioned above, following the ‘settlement’ of the dispute with Yilibara, Shadforth’s mixed-descent son ‘married’ Yilibara’s daughter, who was previously involved with the Chinese cook at Wollogorang. Within the racialised world of mid-century southern Gulf society, the difference between someone of solely Aboriginal descent, and someone of mixed-Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal descent was immensely significant. As the widow of the drover who ‘sold’ the lease to Yilibara’s daughter’s son explained to me: “You could not get White people to go

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<sup>81</sup> Ion Idriess presents a fictionalised account of Sir Sidney Kidman’s life in a 1936 novel.

there. You had Blackfellas [i.e. people of solely Aboriginal descent] and you had Yellafellas [i.e. people of mixed Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal descent”]:

In those days, if they [i.e. stockmen] were Blacks [i.e. people of solely Aboriginal descent], they ate at the Black table. At an outside table. If they were half-castes [i.e. people of mixed Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal descent] they ate with the Whites, inside at the White table. If you're a half-caste in the bush you're looked on as good as a white man. If you insulted him by suggesting he was a blackfella he was within his rights to pick a fight with you, he was a Yellafella, he was as good as a White man. It was a proper apartheid system [i.e. in which people of different 'races' were kept apart] (FB Feb 2009).

In fact, the system that this pastoralist describes was subtly different to South Africa's apartheid. Nevertheless, informant's perceptions of this system as a rigidly objectified racial hierarchy partly shaped its functioning, producing the kinds of internalised racial ideology that my informant displays. As Trigger reports (1992, p. 175), such racialised thinking became part of Aboriginal ideology, extending to the notion “that White characteristics and capacities were inherited through ‘the blood’ and ‘the genes’”. Colonial discourse was thereby embodied in the opposition of Aboriginality and Whiteness, which was perhaps partly reliant upon the unstable meanings attached to those of mixed descent. Being a ‘Yellafella’ [i.e. a man of mixed Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal descent], this descendant of Yilibara and Shadforth was positioned apart from and above people of solely Aboriginal descent, including his relations, enabling him to rise to the status of head stockman and eventually ‘purchase’ the lease of the station neighbouring Wollogorang. His view of what he reportedly called “the poor old Garawa” (FB July 2008) can be interpreted as a result of this internalised racial ideology, as well as the more tangible impacts of land rights and native title claims upon his lease of the station neighbouring Wollogorang.

This man's daughter's asserted connection to Wollogorang via her father's mother's father Yilibara in the interview I have quoted from above [i.e. “how come if he's the King he's only got a bit of land”] are best understood in terms of the co-



constitution of Aboriginality and Whiteness within the event of settlement here. In this instance, the questions of blood, culture, history and place that I have identified within colonial as well as anti-colonial or post-colonial discourses are particularly involved. By at least asking these questions – outside of the transcendent totalisation of indigenism – Aboriginal people’s aspirations with regard to land and native title might be better understood. In this instance, this informant’s comments reflect an element of agency on her behalf, in tracing her identity along variable lines of descent, e.g. “go[ing] indigenous mother”, “speaking our mother’s tongue”. It is noteworthy that few interviewees used the word ‘indigenous’ at all during my fieldwork, seeming to prefer the label Aboriginal, or identities related to more specific language-affiliations. For understandable reasons, land and native title claims have encouraged people of mixed Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal descent to re-emphasise their Aboriginal ancestors against the efforts of more senior generations to reposition themselves and their descendants away from Aboriginal society. Until relatively recently at places like Borroloola – where this interview took place – Aboriginal people’s lives were severely circumscribed by the kinds of racism that my informant (quoted above) called apartheid. As these formal circumscriptions eased, material and political benefits were more decisively linked to Aboriginal people. Yilibara’s daughter’s son’s daughter’s comments about her ancestor “the King” therefore reveal lines of tension and cleavage that exist within understandings of indigeneity – as a re-turn from and a turn to colonial discourses – highlighting the interconnections between Aboriginality and Whiteness that continue to generate meanings about place, indeed places themselves.

### **8.3 Whatdoyoucallit, Whitefellas?**

Throughout this chapter and indeed the whole thesis I have approached Aboriginality and Whiteness as relational identities. While cognizant of the politics of identity that these representations invoke, I have been critical of attempts to unproblematically ‘ground’ either within ‘the land’ as autochthonous or authentically belonging, focusing instead upon the specificity of places like Wollogorang in the southern Gulf. The event of ‘settlement’ at Wollogorang suggests that both Aboriginality and Whiteness are in some respects products of discourse, just as place is: there is no place outside of representation. The issue

with indigenism is that it tends to take this 'place' for granted. By focusing instead on what Kaplan calls "the field of plural articulations" (1989, p. 18), the analysis of emergent assertions of autochthony amongst non-Aboriginal Australians with long histories of residence in the Gulf might be seen not as an attempt to supplant Aboriginality as the appropriately 'indigenous' representation of belonging, but to better understand the interrelation of Aboriginality and Whiteness in discourse. Rather than deconstructing Aboriginal people's status in Australia as properly indigenous, a critical account of non-Aboriginal Australian's attempts to consciously mirror Aboriginal people's connections may contribute to a better understanding of the complex event of settlement in northern Australia. As my conversant in the epigraph quoted at the beginning of this chapter asserts, simplistic oppositions between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people conveyed in the vernacular as Blackfellas and Whitefellas are inadequate. In asking "whatdoyoucallit, Whitefellas?" he raised the issue of non-Aboriginal people's connections to places in the Gulf while resiling from offering any solution to this quandary, which is an existential one for many non-Aboriginal leaseholders worried about the impacts of native title upon their rights in property and indeed their lives in the Gulf (see Chapter Seven).

With regard to Wollogorang, the granddaughter [i.e. daughter's daughter] of Bob Shadforth spoke emotionally about her connections to places in the Gulf, not just to the station in question, but to another nearby station where her great-grandmother [her mother's father's mother] died. "I have a connection to that country too", she stated, "because my ancestors sort of settled it" (FB February 2009). However, when prompted to expand upon this she drew upon understandings of Aboriginality in reframing her connections as indigenous. She remarked: "Hillyborough [i.e. Yilibara] welcomed my grandfather into that country" (FB February 2009). While disputing my account of the conflict and failing to recognise the descendants of Yilibara's daughter as her own kin, she drew upon her understanding of Aboriginal kinship to assert a connection to the Gulf. While refusing to recognise Yilibara's daughter's descendant's claim to be related through Bob Shadforth's mixed descent son Jack, she claimed to have been informally 'adopted' by another senior Aboriginal man: Dick Roughsey. She stated:

I'll tell you, in fact when I worked in Cairns and visited [the Gulf] once, I met Dick Roughsey, who knew my name and who I was, and [he said] I'm part of their family sort of thing, and I can remember him saying, the only difference is one father White, one Black (FB Feb 2009).

This woman's stated connections to country clearly mirror those of Aboriginal people, self-consciously or otherwise. In her focus upon a 'line' of descent from a remembered ancestor, her connections are not dissimilar to those advanced by the station manager's other, Aboriginal, descendant, who stands to her as something like a 'niece'.

#### **8.4 Conclusion**

As my conversant asserts in the introduction to this chapter, "we gotta find another word" for non-Aboriginal people to re-conceptualise accounts of their relationship with Aborigines as a zero-sum game in which one or the other party is dominant or oppressed. While many Aboriginal people reject non-Aboriginal people as inveterate colonisers, more sympathetic attempts to analyse non-Aboriginal people's lives in regions like the Gulf revolve around the question of who is indigenous here? In "The Return of the Native" (2003), Adam Kuper provocatively exploring the slippage between signifier and signified in discourses of indigenism, citing numerous cases in which the conventional grounds used to justify indigeneity rest upon outdated if not obsolete anthropological notions, as well as romantic if not downright false ethnography. There can be no return to place, as some advocates within the environmental movement, or the alternative spirituality (New Age) movement have advanced. As Dominy puts it, "the authenticity of place is as illusory as the authenticity of culture" (2001, p. 273). Likewise, attempts to simply co-opt indigenism to the task of sympathetically documenting and analysing non-Aboriginal people's feelings of belonging in Australia risk remaining trapped within the totalising logic of indigenist discourses, short-circuiting a more thorough analysis of colonial history. By focusing on a specific pastoral station in the Gulf I seek to disclose instead the creation of place in representations that are in some respects not representational at all.

I conclude with some remarks about the ideology of autochthony, authenticity and belonging as it operates under the aegis of indigenism in this context, turning away from criterial definitions of indigeniety and towards a reconsideration of the multiple figurations of Aboriginality and Whiteness involved in the event of settlement at Wollogorang and indeed at other places around the Gulf. In the juxtaposition of Aboriginal and other people's claims and counter-claims I have sought to produce a slippage between signifier and signified, producing new answers to the old questions of blood, culture, history and place, struggling to escape from the embodied opposition of Aboriginality and Whiteness that I have drawn on throughout this thesis. 'Aboriginal' and 'non-Aboriginal', the lives of the residents of the Gulf country engage with each other in multiple ways. Despite the complementary analysis of Aboriginal and other Australian assertions of connection to place like Wollogorang, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people's relations to place are not interchangeable or equivalent. My analysis suggests that they are instead individuated within the event of settlement as related if not actually relations.

## CHAPTER NINE

### Conclusions

You're not the first University bloke we've ever seen.

From a conversation with an Aboriginal man at Doomadgee, FB September 2010

#### *9.1 The Limits of Representation; 9.2 Research in 'the Gulf'*

In this thesis I have attempted to bring ethnographic research to bear upon the examination of representations of Aboriginality and Whiteness in a region of northern Australia. Having described this region as a field of articulations (Chapter One), I examined the multiple discourses that demarcate it, arguing that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal identities emerge in dynamic relation to representations within these discourses. At the same time I also gave an account of the disciplinary divide between anthropology and literary/cultural studies with regard to the analysis of such discourses in Australia, suggesting means by which researchers might productively bring these disciplines together.

I then set out to substantiate this methodology. In Chapters Two, Three and Four I analysed various historical discourses about the southern Gulf, tracing the development of my key themes of identity, place and race into the contemporary period. Chapter Two dealt with the discourse of exploration and 'discovery', providing an ethnographic account of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal resident's accounts of epochal violence in the Gulf. In the case study of the arson of the Landsborough tree outside Burketown I identified a dialogue between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal histories – or, more precisely, between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in history – that echoed throughout the analysis of subsequent discourses. Chapter Three, dealing with the discourse of classical ethnography,

examined the earliest representations of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in the Gulf dating from around the time of Australia's Federation in 1901. As I argued, the relationship between a nascent anthropology and colonial administration created the place of these respectively racialised identities. At the same time, by focusing upon the role that particular ethnographers played in contemporary debates about Aboriginal people, I sought to qualify the post-colonial critique of classical ethnography. Chapter Four extended this analysis into the twentieth century, identifying a broad discourse of early literary and anthropological writing corresponding to the beginning and end of the policy or policies of assimilation in Australia. By focusing upon the shift from representations by Aboriginal informants to those by Aboriginal authors, I identified the extent to which negotiations to acquire the ability to be heard constructed the textual 'voice' of Aboriginal people out of not just early literary and anthropological writing as a discourse, but classical ethnography and exploration and 'discovery' as well.

In my effort to write a thesis that bridges the divide between anthropology and literary/cultural studies Chapters Five and Six focused on the analysis of representations about the Gulf. In dealing with the transition of government policy from the concept of assimilation to one of self-determination in Chapter Five I brought the analysis of discourse up to the present or immediately past era of reconciliation. Foregoing idealizing accounts of Aboriginal culture as synonymous with 'the land', I sought to contrast representations of Aboriginality and Whiteness with regard to their relationships with place(s) in the Gulf. Having argued against essentialist representations of Aboriginality in a wide variety of texts from the land rights and native title period in Chapter Five, Chapter Six focused closely on the work of a single writer: Alexis Wright. In discussing Wright's novels *Plains of Promise* (1997) and *Carpentaria* (2006) I argued for a new type of literary analysis which moves beyond simplistic ways of reading Aboriginal literature in terms of a political struggle against domination. I argued instead for a focus upon texts like Wright's as different, singular, and strange, leading towards a politics more closely attuned to the specificity of place.

Chapters Seven and Eight attempted a shift from predominantly textual analysis towards an ethnographic account of the ways in which current residents of the southern Gulf construe their own connections to place(s) in the region. Chapter Seven returned to representations of 'the land' and the relationships between Aboriginality and Whiteness and the land with a focus upon property and property relations. The folk concept of 'Gulf people' that I describe in Chapter Seven provided a focus for discussion of who and what is thought or said to belong in the Gulf, in the sense of having rights and interests in property protected under the law. In Chapter Eight I extended this analysis to draw numerous themes from across this thesis together with a concluding case study of a pastoral station in the Gulf. As I argued, the juxtaposition of textual material with ethnographic analysis manifests the complex field of plural articulations within which representations of Aboriginality and Whiteness relate to each other in regions like the southern inland Gulf country. As I argued at the end of that chapter, such analysis produces a slippage that troubles attempts to ground either Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal identities as autochthonous or authentically indigenous. In my conclusion to that chapter I focus on the ways in which 'Aboriginal' and 'non-Aboriginal' identities are individuated within the event of settlement as related if not actually relations. I return to this conclusion here.

In the discussion that follows I describe in more depth the role of research in the Gulf and the limits of representation. Given my attempts to displace the field through interdisciplinary research in literary and cultural studies as well as anthropology, I ask: what is the position of the researcher therein? How does research in this field figure into local people's assertions of privileged knowledge about themselves? What are the ethics of research understood here? How is it related to the politics of the Gulf? How are researchers like myself related?

### **9.1 The Limits of Representation**

In the introduction to this thesis (Chapter One) I discussed my incorporation into Aboriginal kinship networks in the southern Gulf. As a *Mandagi* or non-Aboriginal person from a distant place, I relished this designation, which seemed to signify my acceptance within the Gulf as a certain kind of relation. As well as helping to facilitate my research, being Yagamari suggested a kind of trans-culturation,

moving beyond the vernacular opposition between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people into a more relational space in between. As I discussed in Chapter One, this involved a kind of ontological shift in my identity towards a reckoning of myself in relation to others. At the same time, however, I rapidly became aware of the limitations of this new identity as I travelled around the Gulf, particularly as I sensed my presence beginning to stress some of my closest relations. As I prepared to leave the Gulf in August 2010 for what I expected to be my last fieldtrip for this thesis a Garawa Aboriginal man dramatically questioned this identity shift with a threat of violence during a late night encounter at Doomadgee. While this was an isolated incident, I will briefly dwell on it here as it is germane to my conclusions.

As I wound my way home through the dark after the close of the annual Doomadgee rodeo in August 2010 on what I had planned as my final fieldtrip in the Gulf, I hailed a passing Aboriginal man whom I recognised as a friend. As he came closer I realised my mistake and struggled to place him within my understanding of the regional politics of the Gulf. But when I introduced myself he declined to offer a name, instead demanding to know what I was doing in Doomadgee. "I'm just heading home, [I have] been doing some work with Garawa and Ganggalida people, [I have] just been at the rodeo, checking everything out" (FB August 2010). When this explanation failed to satisfy him he menaced me. I later wrote down the conversation in full, as best as I could remember it:

Speaker: You're an anthropologist?

RM: Yes.... Well, yes, I'm doing some anthropology stuff.

Speaker: You come here.... You've got your camera right – nice fancy camera? You've been taking some pictures here? You think you can just do whatever you want? You've probably got a notebook too right, writing everything down. I'll bet you do. You're not the first University bloke we've ever seen.



RM: Yes, of course I do. My name is Richard. I'm working with Garawa and Ganggalida people, and some Waanyi people, doing some research about the Gulf country. I've been doing some work with [a senior Ganggalida person] at the Land Council too.

Speaker: Oh yeah? Well you can go back where you came from, tell X that he doesn't speak for me. I don't want you here. You can fuck off.

RM: Well, what's your name then? Who am I talking to?

Speaker: I'm not going to tell you my name. But you know what? Richard, hey? You take a good look at my face if you want to remember me. Take a good look now because you'll need to describe it in court (FB August 2010).

I had no idea what he was upset about. I thought at first it might be related to the dispute between Ganggalida and Waanyi people over the location of the border between them given his stated objection to the authority of the senior Ganggalida person whom I named (see Chapter Seven). I therefore sought to position myself outside this dispute:

RM: You're Waanyi, hey? No? Ganggalida? I'm not ... I'm just doing my own work. All that stuff between Waanyi and Ganggalida people has got nothing to do with me; I'm just doing my own research at the University down in Perth.

Speaker: I'm Garawa mate.

RM: Garawa? Garawa hey? What's your worry, what you got upset about? You know that old man [name withheld], and [name withheld]? What family [are] you from?

Speaker: That's my grandfather, [name withheld].

RM: You're one of the [name withheld] mob? From [an estate on the Northern Territory/Queensland border]? He's your *ganggu* [father's father], eh? You're *mingaringgi* [i.e. owner] for that place there, that story? (FB August 2010).

He was enraged. He glowered at me. He was drunk, swaying a little. I kept as close to him as I could to try and get inside his swing if he decided to punch me. His response was interesting from a number of different perspectives. He spat it out:

Speaker: How you hear of him now, you're from Harvard [University] or someplace, how do you know my grandfather? Who told you? Think about it carefully because if you lie to me then I'm going to hit you and I'll knock you out and then I'll kick your head and jump up and down on it.... You'll need the [Royal] Flying Doctor [to take you] down to Brisbane. I'll kill you I swear I will. How the fuck do you know about me? Some fucken anthropologist! I'll fucken kill you. I've been to gaol. I'm happy to go back. You're just a fucken White cunt (FB August 2010).

I could taste alcohol in the air between us. I felt intensely afraid for a second, and then profoundly fatigued, even resigned to what might happen next. What was I doing in Doomadgee? How to answer him truthfully without infuriating him further?

We were arm in arm in a curious embrace. I sought to drag it out, try to walk him a little closer towards a group of people in the distance. He resisted this and reiterated his demand for answers. I had no choice but to try and explain myself:

RM: I read about [name withheld] in the [Garawa/Mugularrangu (Robinson River)] land claim. What he did for the Garawa people, speaking up in court. It's all there in the transcript. I've been reading the transcripts and talking to people about what country means to them – Garawa, Ganggalida and Waanyi people mostly plus some Whitefellas too, what they have got to say about where they come from, and how they feel about the Gulf. We don't need to fight about it (FB August 2010).

It was not the most thorough account of my topic that I attempted in the field but it was one of the most succinct. He calmed down a bit after I gave it and promised not to punch me but his objection remained:

Speaker: I've been through business [i.e. initiation]. They cut the end of my dick. What about you? You still got your foreskin mate? What? Or you still got a boy's dick? I'm a proper Garawa mate. I know my language. Look at me, look at my face mate. There ain't no White blood in me. I'm from the bush. I grew up there. I know my culture. Fucking [name withheld, a senior anthropologist] knows nothing. There's plenty of stuff that you blokes don't know. It's not in any book (FB August 2010).

He let me go home after that, a little shaken but otherwise unharmed. Would it have been any different if I had been a teacher, doctor, or shop worker? Did it make any difference that I was a University bloke if he was just looking for a confrontation? He was drunk after all. Drunks are said to threaten everybody, lacking appropriate control of themselves (McKnight 2002, p. xi; Trigger 1992, p. 122). However, it seems insufficient to reject any political interpretation. As Brady and Palmer report, drinking is one of the ways in which Aboriginal people find the courage to challenge non-Aboriginal people:

Drinkers have ... told us that the drinking experience is one in which they become bold and audacious in their interactions with Whites [i.e. non-Aboriginal people] and are prepared to state the nature of past injustices and demand restitution (1984, p. 70).

While I resile from interpreting Aboriginal drinking solely or even primarily as a form of resistance, my interlocutor remained lucid throughout our encounter, confronting me forcefully in a way that shook my confidence. Over twelve fieldtrips undertaken for this thesis, this was the only one that involved such a threat, and without it I might have ended this thesis differently. However, as it occurred while I sought to sum up my fieldwork, I am forced to reflect on the role of the researcher – and of my research – in the Gulf. As I worked on this thesis

over the weeks and months after this encounter I repeatedly returned to it in my thoughts, examining and re-examining my own position with regard to the long and lamentable legacy of colonial and post-colonial experience in Australia, generating numerous questions for anthropological research and research more generally.

What are the ethics of research? What are its limitations? What do I really know about the Gulf?

## **9.2 Research in 'the Gulf'**

In a trenchant critique, Talal Asad argues that anthropology's conception of social structure and of culture remained in the service of colonial administration even as anthropologists themselves often did not (1979). This distinction is pivotal insofar as it generalises Asad's critique to other disciplines apart from anthropology. While often mounted within literary/cultural studies, this discipline is by no means exempt from Asad's criticism, seeming to invest more significance within anthropological conceptions of social structure and of culture than many anthropologists currently do. As Merlan argues, one aspect of this colonial conception of social structure and culture that affects many of those involved with Aboriginal people has been traditionalism:

By this I mean the reproduction of idealized representations of native societies as they allegedly are, in terms of how they supposedly were.... This conception yields categorical terms of representation that to some extent suppress or by-pass history and the theorization of change and continuity (1998, p. 231)

Needless to say, the politics of such idealized representations are complex, drawing even Aboriginal people and their representations and self-representations into the ambit of this critique. In focusing upon Aboriginality and Whiteness as interrelated representations with which 'Aboriginal' and 'non-Aboriginal' people variously identify I have followed Merlan in arguing against such traditionalism, particularly as it is expressed in a focus upon ethno-genesis.

However in so doing I have trespassed on highly sensitive areas, making arguments that many of those who identify as 'Aboriginal' or 'non-Aboriginal' in the Gulf would likely reject. In repositioning me that night as a University bloke and stridently asserting phenotypicality, full-bloodedness, cultural essentialism and esoteric knowledge as constitutive of his Aboriginality, my interlocutor maintained a sense of separateness and distinctiveness that militates against my analysis of the relatedness of Aboriginality and Whiteness in representation. "You don't know", he said (FB August 2010).

In response to confrontations such as this, many prospective researchers have withdrawn from working with Aboriginal people in regions like the southern Gulf. As Trigger argues:

In some way anthropological work in settings other than indigenous Australia is more attractive, in part due to ambiguity about whether the researcher will necessarily be welcomed or accommodated among Aboriginal groups and also to the generally highly politicised context of indigenous affairs (2011, p. 143).

This applies equally to work in literary/cultural studies, where some prominent academics have questioned the ethics of research conducted by those who identify as non-Aboriginal (Muecke 1992; Moreton-Robinson 2000). While the politics of working with Aboriginal people has arguably shifted since these critiques as a result of the Intervention (Sutton 2009; Kelly 2009), this shift has generated new complaints from those who present themselves as opposed to the new consensus (Lattas & Morris 2010; Povinelli 2010). In this context, research is often dismissed as simply too difficult, too dangerous. That night in Doomadgee I confess to feeling of despair.

Following this confrontation I returned to my swag on the floor of a Ganggalida friend's house. I wrote down my account of what had happened and then fell asleep over my field diary. I was awoken a few hours later by women screaming and pounding on the door outside with another fight, this one not involving me; my host's two sisters attacking each other on the front step, the younger seeking

refuge in the house. I fell asleep before it was over. When I woke up the next day I heard the details, and some other news: my host's son was flown out after injuring a kidney in another fight. I had dropped him off at Doomadgee's Clinic an hour or two before my late-night encounter; he was clutching his stomach and vomiting. They sent him to Cairns for observation. After listening to these stories of violence I told my own to the Aboriginal family I was staying with. They sought to reassure me that "we want you to keep coming up here", "we'll have another word with him, that's no good", "I just hope that [the Aboriginal person whom my interlocutor dismissed] doesn't hear about this or he'll skin him alive", etc. (FB August 2010). Later that afternoon I was told that my interlocutor of the night before had apologised through an intermediary. Over the following days as the story went around town I was repeatedly reassured with comments like: "you're our anthropologist" (FB August 2010). These developments provided some comfort, without conclusively resolving the issues that my interlocutor raised. An apology is not necessarily a retraction: the extent to which my interlocutor and others continued to hold the views that he expressed to me while drunk remained unclear when I left the Gulf. A day or two later I too flew to Cairns, and from there to Brisbane and then Perth, a little relieved if truth be told to have finished my fieldwork, although I later returned to the Gulf in 2011 for further fieldwork (which was thankfully less eventful).

In this context, it is little wonder that research in regions like the Gulf appears to have declined. However, the point that I wish to emphasise in conclusion concerns the merits of fieldwork, and its role in writing about representation. I do not mean to claim that ethnography or anthropology has privileged access to the truth. All knowledge is partial and positioned. However, this is not to say that all knowledge is invalid or untrue, or equally fictional, or seriously fictional. In combining anthropology with literary/cultural studies throughout this thesis I have sought to give ethnographic substance to the analysis of place, race, and identity in the Gulf. I have nevertheless sought to maintain a border between these disciplines, avoiding attempts to conflate them along the lines laid out by Muecke (2002) and Taussig (2010). I do not attempt, as Taussig does, to "cross the divide, scary as it may be, and become [a] storyteller[]" (2004, p. 314). In telling the story of my encounter that night with a drunken man in Doomadgee I emphasise the limits of

representation, including my own. Rather than usurping the cultural authority that this man proclaimed in the service of some transcendental truth, I focus instead upon multiple perspectives with the plural field, where those who identify as Aboriginal or as non-Aboriginal or as any of a plethora of other identities continue to create their connections to the Gulf and their feeling for the placeness of a place outside representation.





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