

We Don't Do Dots

Aboriginal Art and Culture in Wilcannia,
New South Wales



Lorraine Gibson

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THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO PAUL, EMMA AND FRASER

ABOUT THIS BOOK

What does it mean when whites say that certain Australian Aboriginal people have 'no culture', but accept that they have art? Why are notions and images of Aboriginal art and culture still dominated by those from the Centre and North of the Australian continent, despite most Aborigines residing in the South-East? This book explores these questions, why they matter, and to whom they matter. It draws on eight years of research with Barkindji¹ Aboriginal people in the small country town of Wilcannia in New South Wales, Australia, and engages with questions that my Aboriginal research partners took to be among the most significant in their lives. In true anthropological style, this book makes sense of a social realm, but in this case a difficult one that is seen by many to lack the very thing that anthropologists value – 'culture'. The ethnographic analysis examines how notions of Aboriginal art and Aboriginal culture are wielded as instruments of power in everyday racism in Australia. I demonstrate how Aboriginal people deploy ideas of art, artists and culture to assert individual and group identity and to subvert dominant culture ideas and ideals that operate as tools of oppression, distancing and harm.

The art and people of this book are not those living in the more remote 'Centre', 'North' or 'Top End' communities of Australia which have, to date, been the focus of art-world, anthropological and public admiration and attention, both within Australia and overseas. When the Aboriginal people of Wilcannia come to the attention of the wider public they are often marked by discourses and images of welfare-ism and alcohol-related violence and are depicted as having 'no culture'. Yet, Aboriginal people of Wilcannia, like Aboriginal people in other parts of South-East or 'settled' Australia, have a profound sense of cultural identity which remains under-theorized, under-researched and under-valued. This book works to address this and, in so doing, interrogates and challenges current discourses of art, culture and their intersection with ideas of Aboriginality and race. Through Wilcannia artworks, art talk and art making, I show how Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people come to imagine and evaluate each other. Barkindji ideas of art and culture, and the practices and experiences they inform, differ from those of mainstream art worlds and society, and

from those of other Aboriginal people and groups. These differences are explored for their roots and meanings; for their effects on art practice, on wider race relations and for their relation to Barkindji well-being. This exploration occurs through the artworks themselves and through 'on the ground' accounts by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community members. The works and the accounts together serve to illuminate the processes through which the assertion and formation of cultural identity and belonging come about, and how this translates into black and white relationships in ways which both harm and inspire. In exploring examples of artworks from Wilcannia, and through participation in the daily lives of people, I show what the act of art and culture making *does*, and how these unique signifying cultural practices operate across their historical, cultural and social dimensions.

I have chosen to place a strong emphasis on individual artists, thereby grounding my discussion in particularities. I have taken this approach as, it seems to me, if art is contextualized by engaging not only with the artworks but also with the life of the artist, we can see how 'taken for granted' notions of art and artists, as well as Aboriginal culture writ large, are contested and negotiated. This focus also highlights the extent to which anthropologists find that their research has benefited from close associations with particular informants, though the extent to which this positions the ethnographic work is often not adequately addressed, if at all. This is therefore also a book about the anthropological endeavour. It comes replete with the affects and questions that are part of a deep engagement and immersion with people of Wilcannia where I lived for sixteen months between 2002 and 2004 as part of my Ph.D. fieldwork and with whom I continue to work.

NOTE

- 1 The Barkindji speaking people come from the Darling River area, and extend from Bourke in the north to Wentworth in the south (Hercus 1993:3). Most remain within the far-west region, with perhaps the largest concentration living in Wilcannia.

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My time as a Postdoctoral Fellow (now Research Associate) at the Australian Museum also deserves comment as it is here that I really began to appreciate the importance of *being with*, as opposed to talking about, or looking at images of objects. Thanks to my Museum colleagues past and present, Paul Monaghan, Phil Gordon, Melanie Van-Olffen, Glen Ferguson, Madeleine Bennison, and Barina South for their friendship and in many cases for their generosity of spirit in sharing their knowledge. Last, but by no means least, thank you to Brian Lassig for being who you are and for being there.

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INTRODUCTION

Just any day in Wilcannia



It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.
(Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*)

When I first went to Wilcannia in 2002 and asked some of the white townspeople what they could tell me about Aboriginal culture, I was told that I was ‘lookin’ in the wrong place; and ‘they’ve lost their culture’ – unless I called ‘floggin’ the missus’ or ‘getting maggots’ (very drunk) ‘culture’. There were also attempts at local humour such as that of a local white nurse, who said, ‘I’ve never heard a didgeridoo played in Wilcannia but I’ve treated three people hit with one.’ I found myself laughing along with this, and I shared the anecdote with friends both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, who similarly found it amusing. Yet the nurse’s comment could also be read as the epitome of an insulting and careless white discourse, a kind of race to the bottom of social relations, where whites compete with Aborigines in a lose-lose game that shores up difference in dehumanizing and damaging ways. These kinds of exchanges, my own and others’ reactions, and the ways in which these were experienced and interpreted by Aboriginal and white-settler society, are explored in this book.

To ask whites about ‘Aboriginal culture’ in Wilcannia elicits answers according to particular views of what ‘culture’ is. The statements and exchanges referred to above are indicative of local white beliefs about what does and does not constitute ‘Aboriginal culture’. This is not to say that ‘whitefellas’ in town do not ‘flog their missus’ and ‘get maggots’;

indeed, while I was in Wilcannia a white policeman was removed from the town and from duty over the alleged assault of his wife. There was much consternation amongst the white population over this event, and the whitefella reaction was mainly one of shock. They also expressed surprise; he was seen to be 'such a nice fellow'. What distinguished this 'flogging' by a white man of his partner from those of Aboriginal men and their partners was that the former was seen as an aberration. Black on black violence of this kind has, on the other hand, become normalized and is judged to be a part of normal Aboriginal behaviour. It is not, however, judged to be civilized or acceptable behaviour by the wider, predominantly white, settler society.

Erving Goffman suggests that, society 'establishes the means of categorizing persons and the complement of attributes felt to be ordinary and natural for members of these categories' (1965:2). The attributes through which Wilcannia has come to be known through mainstream media and discourse, speak of Aboriginal disadvantage and marginalization, opposition to white authority, high levels of unemployment, violence, drunkenness and social irresponsibility. These stories continue to be the main focus of media and public discourse about Wilcannia, further embedding already entrenched images of the town and its majority Aboriginal population. Importantly, however, the imputed attributes accorded to the people of Wilcannia, as a result of these kinds of categorizing, and the ways in which these are interpreted, leads to the normalizing of expectations: often, what you anticipate is what you will impute. Many, if not most, of the small white population of Wilcannia, as with many other country towns in the state of New South Wales (NSW), judge the Aboriginal populations in terms of racial imperfections. These serve to differentiate them from the category of 'normal' people, who are invariably white.

Wilcannia is a small country town of around 600 people, of whom 402 (67.4 per cent) are Aboriginal (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] 2006). The town has received substantial media attention, particularly as part of a larger discourse about Aboriginal deaths in custody following the death of Mark Quayle. On 24 June 1987, Mark Quayle, a 22-year-old Aboriginal man, was found hanged in the Wilcannia police station. The subsequent Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody saw the Commissioner Hal Wootten offer a stinging rebuke of 'the dehumanized stereotype of Aboriginals so common in Australia and in the small towns of Western NSW in particular' (1991:2). Eighteen years after Mark's death,

the circumstances associated with his demise remain an unsolicited topic of town discussion for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people alike. This event, and the circumstances surrounding it, continues to serve as a foil for larger Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal inter-cultural sentiments: which are seen to demonstrate what whites are like, what blacks are like, and what types of behaviour one can expect from each (see Carrington 1999).

These are not merely localized expectations or ways of thinking, nor are they always grounded in experience. In the Wilcannia context, much of what comes to be known of the town is by 'word of mouth' as well as through visual and textual forms such as newsprint and television. Travellers to and from the region carry from town to town these reports, which, as in the parlour game of Chinese whispers, become distorted and embellished as they are shared. Local residents of towns either side of Wilcannia advise non-Aboriginal travellers driving west along the main highway through Wilcannia to Broken Hill, or east through Wilcannia to Cobar, not to stop; to 'drive straight through'. Often no specific reasons are given to travellers (of which I was one), other than general statements such as 'It's a dangerous place', 'very violent', 'full of blacks'. White travellers are advised especially not to stop on 'pension day', when 'they're all out on the street'. These exhortations and the perceptions that underlie them have assisted in the construction of the image and frame through which Aboriginal people of Wilcannia have come to be known.

In the late 1980s, Peter Myers, in his paper 'Just any day in Wilcannia', describes a non-Aboriginal family passing through the town as they 'nervously' hover around their station-wagon at the roadhouse; parents 'anxious to avoid their children's questions about all these black people sitting in gutters... Indignation gives way to fear, fear instantly converts to anger.' (Myers 1988:140). When I lived in Wilcannia, local whites echoed similar sentiments about nervous hoverers who, en route to the nearby town of Broken Hill, 200 miles further west, alight from tourist coaches at the toilet block a little further up the main street from the roadhouse (see Figure 1). Here, having relieved themselves, the visiting whites are said to stand like 'flocks of sheep' as they mill around the vicinity.



Figure 1 The roadhouse on Myers Street at Wilcannia 2010.

There is recognition and understanding by local whites, that the coach travellers are wary, afraid and uncomfortable to venture down the street. This is a recognition that, for white residents, prompts reactions that vacillate between anger and mirth. There is anger at the 'blacks', who are seen to be responsible for this situation, at the media's negative reportage, at the perceived loss of business and at 'truckies' whose CB radios issue the 'don't stop' message, warning drivers to be alert for rocks thrown at the passing traffic by local children. There is also a more mirthful reaction, borne out of the relative safety of the experience of being white in Wilcannia: 'poor bastards', 'they' (visiting whites) are not to know it's really quite safe despite all they may have heard and read. Indeed, for some long-term white locals there is a discernible sense of achievement in having 'stayed the distance', as demonstrated through their continued residence in the town.

Although Wilcannia is portrayed as a violent place, townsfolk know that most of the (physical) injury is black on black; as for emotional and psychological injury – that's a different story, and a matter that is hotly

debated. There is what I describe as a noxious miasma of ambivalence that permeates what is itself a problematic term (though I can offer no useful alternative) – ‘inter-cultural relations’ in Wilcannia. The ambivalence is representative of the conundrum and paradox at the heart of daily interactions. Everyday tensions between blackfellas and whitefellas are drawn upon to discuss aspects of unequal and poor treatment by and of each other, by levels of government, and by the city fathers and agencies that service the town. However, generalized and negative blackfella/whitefella categorizations and sentiments sit ambiguously with the many positive inter-cultural relationships and experiences. Yet even fairly positive inter-cultural sentiments and relationships at the individual level can quickly shift to more generalized stereotypical condemnation in response to minor inter-cultural misunderstandings or incidents. Inter-cultural differences and feelings exist as a festering undercurrent: for the most part these simmer and are verbally submerged, if at times being expressed through the language of the body; however, overt public eruptions do occur.

Just as there are contradictions and ambiguities between expressed and actual black/white relations in Wilcannia, so too are the Aboriginal people of Wilcannia located in ambiguous ways within the broad ‘types’ or ‘categories’ of Aborigines that have come to be known in the wider Australian public sphere. That is, Wilcannia Aborigines do not seem to, and indeed at some level refuse to, fit within the wider publicly, and indeed anthropologically, determined overarching categories of Aborigines: namely, the ‘remote’, ‘tribal’, ‘traditional’ or ‘traditionally oriented’ Aborigines, on the one hand, and ‘urban’ or ‘settled’, on the other.

To raise the equivocal nature of black–white relations is also to question Myer’s idea of ‘just any day in Wilcannia’. To talk of ‘just any day in Wilcannia’ is to conjure some sense of a normalizing or regular image, yet a ‘day in Wilcannia’ requires, rather, the location of oneself within a range of possibilities. It is to consider different contexts, views and values. White travellers driving through Wilcannia with little or no experience of the town will take their cues from their immediate experience as this is filtered through previous ‘knowledge’; that is, what they have heard or read. Local whites who have a history with the town and who are more inured to, and practised in, the general comings and goings of locals and visitors, will perceive a different day. Locals discuss daily events – including challenging Aboriginal behaviours such as public drunkenness, loud and public hailing and swearing and the odd street brawl – in more knowing

terms. For the travelling white stranger, what is going on signals a variety of differently perceived and understood 'truths'. To talk of just 'any day' raises the questions of 'any day' for whom and from whose point of view? The liberal white working on a short-term contract with romantic leanings towards Aborigines and disgust for other less liberal fellow whites? The avid racist? The black or white visitor who has come to town to visit family? The black woman living with the white man? Those with business interests? The black or white government or non-government service provider? The black or white alcoholic? The welfare recipient? The suicidal young woman or the parents of a young man who has just hanged himself? The white teacher or police officer 'doing their time' in Wilcannia to speed a promotion? Those who have come to 'help' with the Aboriginal problem? The anthropologist doing research?

To talk about a day in Wilcannia may be to talk about one of the monthly 'court in session' days. These are days preceded by at least one night of those scheduled to appear, their mates and kin talking over the range of possibilities and consequences. There are questions to be asked. Will he or she get a jail term? How long? Which category prison? Will it be Broken Hill or Ivanhoe? What if it is the more distant and less accessible Bathurst Jail, and family can't visit? Will they lose their driver's licence? Will my case be held over yet again? How big will the fine be? Will it be probation? People comment on the cases of others, passing judgment on what might, or should, happen: 'He'll go down this time'; 'What about that bitch?'; 'She shouldn't have charged him'; 'She was asking for it'; 'She made him wild'. This is a day when the town is host to lawyers, magistrates, Aboriginal Legal Aid representatives, Family and Community Service staff and locals, all of whom have their own 'day' in Wilcannia. There are also returning locals who have had court orders to remain out of town until their hearing date. At these times, the town population is raised. The two motels are filled and street traffic is swelled by company, private, government and non-government agency cars as they make the journeys from the court house to homes, motels and the Golf Club; the latter being the only place in town that serves a meal after 6:30 p.m.. At some level, then, one might be able to talk about 'just any *court day*' in Wilcannia.

Then there are weekly pension- and welfare-payment days, when Myers Street, the main street in town, is a hive of activity from the time the local bank opens its doors.¹ These are days when the screen doors of the roadhouse and the only small supermarket barely have time to make

their usual closing clang, as people come in and out in a steady stream, carrying plastic bags full of shopping, replenishing smokes, squeezing up and down the aisles and past the narrow counter exit; as children hurtle in and out, and certain staff take on an air of greater vigilance. The main street is noisy and lively on these days, as people mill around, sometimes sitting on the pavement, along the gutter's edge, in the park, on street corners, on scattered benches and outside the pub, in shifting numbers and groups. Children run from school at the morning break on these days to find mum, dad, auntie, uncle or any appropriate kin member, getting in on the feeling of plenty and abundance that pay days seem to generate. Those who went to bed with the cupboard bare, become exuberant in the face of a good feed and treats. Debts are settled, creditors hunt out debtors and vice versa. While some keep a low profile, trying to get in and out of the main street with supplies and unpaid debts intact; for the most part, transactions of lending, repaying and borrowing are part of a well-practised thrum.

The smell of fried foods, dim-sim, hot chips and gravy, chicken and chips, chicken balls and spring rolls permeates the air. Paper bags, soggy with sauce and grease, and cardboard containers with squashed remnants of uneaten contents litter the street and spill out of public garbage bins. People sit around talking, eating, laughing, shouting at one another and negotiating the day's events as children on bikes do wheelies and skids, babies in prams watch, and curious toddlers play together with the usual street detritus and treasures of childhood, such as little sticks or stones; most seem to feed on and gain sustenance from the general energy of the day.

At eleven in the morning the pub doors open to the street, and the waiting queue enters to buy drinks, do some 'pressing' (play the 'poker machines', a type of electronic-gaming device) or purchase take-away alcohol for pre-arranged drinking groups that, by various means and according to certain prescriptions or arrangements, have contributed money or agreed to the purchase of supplies. Bank keycards are given by aunties, uncles, mums and dads to younger, trusted or more fleet-of-foot friends and relatives. How much to take out, how many cases of VB ('Victoria Bitter') or casks of 'mosey' (Moselle white wine) to purchase are topics of discussion. Children hang around outside the pub, hoping for a few bucks from a 'lotion' (a relative). Those who have gone back to school after the morning break will have to wait until school has ended to see if any more money is available for lollies, chips, a carton of iced coffee or a can of Coke. In the evening, mums and dads might head up the 'Golfie'

(Golf Club) for one of Joe's Chinese meals and, sometimes, a few drinks. The town has an air of vibrancy on pay days; there is a sense of the possible and a pervading *bon vivant*. For me, this heightened activity is linked with summer and the smell of the ageing pepper trees that line the main streets in town as they respond to bodies brushing past and as pink peppercorns are crushed underfoot. For me, the anthropologist, thoughts of these days evoke a scented memory: of pay day and of plenty.

Toward evening, the red dust that has been raised from the lanes around town and deposited on the main street's concrete sidewalk loses its traces of bare, thonged and sneakered feet, as it is slowly erased by the shifting air. Myers Street is now quiet. The slow drawling 'caw, caw, caw' of the crow of the hot sunny day has given way to the sound of dogs barking in the distance. Up 'the Mallee' and down at 'the Mission' (see Figure 2) are the sounds of parties, voices and drinking groups, those who have chosen to maximize their dollar by drinking at home rather than the pub or Golfie. People laugh, drink, argue, sing karaoke, occasionally strum guitars and eat with friends and kin; for the more serious drinkers, eating is held over until one can drink no more. Dope is mulled, bonges are filled, and mosey is distributed into empty soft-drink bottles, as Assemblies of God adherents, both black and white, pray for the souls of others, including anthropologist others.

Tomorrow will be 'just another day' in Wilcannia, hot or cold, money or no money. Perhaps a flurry of visiting bureaucrats, court day, visiting sports personalities seeking to build the self-esteem of Aboriginal children, NAIDOC week,² visiting kin, those coming back to town from jail, government sponsored 'fun days,' feuds and family; all will coalesce to make a day that is socially, culturally and contextually patterned, yet full of difference and possibility. Underlying all this diversity and difference, however, one can detect something of the sentiments of Myers' (1988) representation of 'just any day in Wilcannia,' as they allude to both superficial and more deeply embedded tensions between blacks and whites, all tied up in complex ways to experience and cultural baggage. But then, there are also the black and white friendships, lovers and partners to consider. Nothing is straightforward – even if it seems, for most, to be so.

On Saturday 2 May 2002, I had my own experience of Wilcannia. I drove west across the road bridge and pulled up at the roadhouse on Myers Street, which runs through town to Broken Hill ('the Hill').³ I had left Sydney the previous day, staying overnight at Cobar, 700 km west of

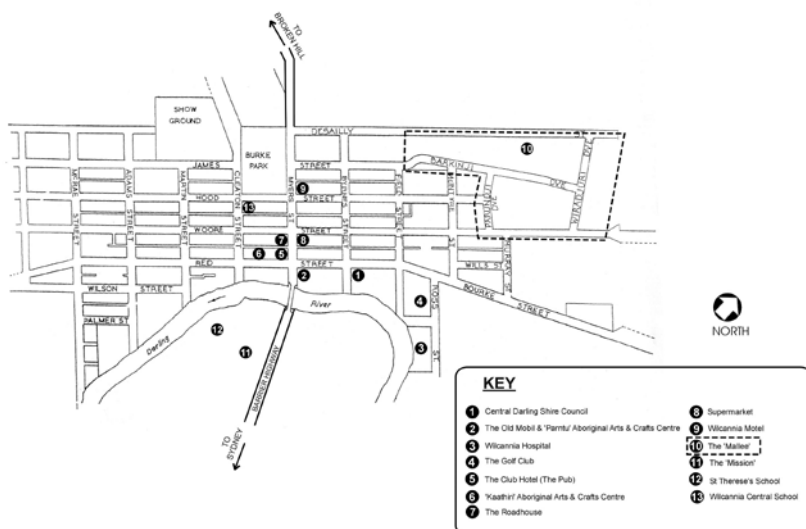


Figure 2 Map of Wilcannia, from image supplied by Central Darling Shire Council 2003.

Sydney and approximately 300 km east of Wilcannia. I was on my way to the Hill, a further 200 km west of Wilcannia, to meet Badger Bates, an Aboriginal man born in Wilcannia over fifty years ago and now sharing his time between Wilcannia and Broken Hill. As an Aboriginal man of community influence, I wanted to ask him about gaining permission to do fieldwork in Wilcannia. The following is my diary entry for that first day:

I got out my car [at the roadhouse] to fill up and two young Aboriginal girls aged about twelve years old were riding around the petrol bowlers on their push bikes. One said to the other 'fuckin cunt' the other replied 'in your cunt'. The first girl responded 'no, in your cunt'. This went on for a couple more rounds and then an older Aboriginal man from across the street yelled out 'hoi' to the girls; this stopped the exchange. Went in to the roadhouse. No lattes, soyachinos or bruschetta here. The town was very quiet, hardly anyone about. Quite a few kiddies came into the shop for fried food (dim-sims, hot chips and gravy) and lollies.

Schutz makes cognizant the baggage of experience when he says, 'I ascribe to you an environment which has already been interpreted from my subjective viewpoint.' (1972:105). My immediate experience was a visceral response to hearing the word 'cunt' being used loudly, publicly and with feeling by two young girls. In thinking about this later, my response was at least twofold. The visceral reaction to hearing the language of the girls' exchange was, I believe, partly conditioned from childhood. The 'c- word', as I have mostly known this term in the past, is not common parlance in the world in which I have lived since coming to Australia from Glasgow, Scotland, in 1978; nor indeed is it every-day public language in mainstream Australia. Indeed, for most of society the term is seen to be crude and distasteful when used by adults and even more so when used by children. I put part of my physical response to the word down to a period in my childhood when I was taken to live in a socio-economically 'deprived' area of Glasgow, having previously come from a fairly well-off environment in a middle-class suburb. I remember my initial shock at hearing people swear so readily and at the use of the 'c' word in particular. To call someone a 'cunt' in this area was to tread on dangerous ground. It was in the local vernacular, to risk getting 'your heid in yur hawns to play wi' ('your head in your hands to play with'); in other words, to risk getting severely beaten-up. 'Cunt' was the final insult; 'bastard' and 'fucker' had their place, but the 'c- word' was the *piece de resistance*.

My physical and emotional reactions were closely followed by the more cognized awareness that the stereotypes trotted out about Wilcannia are cultivated by 'drive through' events such as this. Regardless of these initial reactions, over my time in Wilcannia, I came to hear, experience and understand the many ways the word was being used in the community. Just as there are different inflections of the word, there are different kinds of 'cunts', generally understood rules for who can be named such, and who can do the naming. Over time, my physical responses came to match more closely the different emphases and meanings of its use. This is not to deny that the word may be thrown as a challenge and an extreme insult; however, the word may also be used benignly and even as a kind of endearment: 'you little cunt' is often said with affection. 'Ya cunt' is an expletive when someone stubs their toe or fumbles and drops something. Material objects can be 'cunts': an awkward piece of packaging is 'a cunt of a thing', and on one occasion my neighbour said of her car that 'you have to rock the cunt to start it'.⁴ I learned the difference between the terms

everyday benign uses, and its particular use. My experience with the word 'cunt' serves as an analogy for my experience of Wilcannia more broadly. I use the analogy to demonstrate the difference between a general principle of subjective preconception versus lived experience. Just as the word 'cunt' grew to have a different feeling and meaning for me, I began to grasp a more contextual understanding of what was 'going on'. In what follows, I attempt to reflect upon and describe my experience of Wilcannia as I came to understand the place and the people.

On being a Scot, on being an ethnographer

I want to emphasize a salient aspect to my making and developing the kind of relationships I did, and how this, in turn, affected the kind of research data I collected. From the very beginning of fieldwork, it was clear that having been born in Scotland, my 'Scottishness' was seen by many Barkindji as a sign of affinity. People drew parallels between my and their upbringing, in that I was, like many people in Wilcannia, 'reared' by my Nana. Having a Scottish accent was something of a bonus and the start of many conversations. Some people told me that the Scottish were like the Aboriginal people, in that they were given a 'raw deal' by the English. I am not suggesting that the historic experience of the Scots can be paralleled with that of Aboriginal people,⁵ but the perception that I was neither English nor Australian was definitely beneficial to my relationships and interactions.

Several times Aboriginal people drew comparisons between Barkindji and Scots, saying that 'they're both fuckin' wild', 'they're like us – mad cunts', an allusion to the Scottish reputation for fighting and drinking. This stereotype was aided by the film *Braveheart*, starring Mel Gibson and based loosely on the life of William Wallace, a thirteenth-century Scot and warrior who fought for Scottish independence from the English. Some people in Wilcannia had seen this film on video and quoted lines: 'we're fucked' and 'they'll never take our freedom' were favourites. Another stereotype of the Scots is that they are big whisky drinkers and lovers of alcohol; some Barkindji recognized the similarity between this stereotype and that of the 'drunken Aborigine'. They and I understood that these epithets were cause for mirth and celebration as well as an identifying stigma. Although Scottish people are stereotyped as 'drinkers', unlike Aborigines they are not detrimentally haunted by the power of the stereotype (Cowlishaw 1993). Those Barkindji who talked about the Scottish predilection for whisky

were surprised to learn that I did not drink it, and, indeed, disliked the taste intensely. While I was not much of an alcohol drinker at all when I arrived in the field, I drank more over the course of my fieldwork, and had more to do with alcohol than I had ever done previously. Drinking was a large part of life for many in Wilcannia, and provided an avenue for making contacts and relationships. In the early days of fieldwork, as I walked around town, people sitting in drinking groups would sing out to me, asking who I was and we would strike up conversations. When I refused drinks at the pub or Golf Club, feeling that I had had enough or because I already had four or five full glasses of wine lined up in front of me, I was told, 'You with Barka now, you have to be like Barka', 'Enjoy yourself'. Getting drunk with friends was a sign of trust and sociality: 'We'll look after you.' Over the period of fieldwork my tolerance of alcohol increased – from two glasses of wine making me tipsy, to being able to drink the equivalent of a bottle and walk home quite satisfactorily. Although wine was generally bought in casks (cardboard boxes), not bottles. While I did not often drink during the day, I did spend many days with groups of drinkers at various outdoor locations and homes in town, and on a few occasions became the minder of the 'grog', ensuring that only those who had contributed or were otherwise permitted could access the supply.

A few weeks into my fieldwork, I was having drinks with a Barkindji man and his friends and family at his home. As with many Scottish working-class families, when people got together for a few drinks or to have a party, it was customary to have what in my youth was referred to as a 'sing-song' (Figure 3). A 'bit of a sing-along' was also a strong custom in Wilcannia.⁵

When it came my turn to sing, I chose *The Scottish Soldier*, a tune from my childhood; this was after much prompting to 'Sing a Scottish song!' During the first chorus, a Barkindji man who had repaired to the outside toilet near where we were all sitting began to join in with me,

Because those green hills are not Highland hills
Or the island hills, they're not my land's hills
And fair as these green foreign hills may be
They are not the hills of home.

This impromptu duet was a surprise to me and seemed quite surreal. I learned later that many Barkindji people had Scottish heritage. One old



Figure 3 Having a sing-along at the Mission 2003. From left to right, Jarriid Cattermole, the author, Michael (Smackas) Whyman and, seated, Muriel (Mooney) Riley (nee Bates).

woman in particular would quite often say 'I love that *Scottish Soldier*'. Many Aboriginal people living in Wilcannia had sung and had heard played on cassette tapes many of the songs I had sung and heard as a child. Scottish and Irish songs and Scottish relations are an element of many Aboriginal childhoods, and were for many Barkindji people part of a generalized nostalgia. One Aboriginal man constantly referred to himself as being 'smoked Irish' when I used to tease him about his taste for singing old Irish ballads.

I do not wish to present any 'affinity' between myself and the people I met as some magical meeting of the minds. I am fully cognizant of Fox's comments that 'conventional representations of sudden baptisms into native society or other stories of rapport we achieved in fieldwork are greatly suspect' (1991:6). Moreover, I wish to avoid the kind of reflexivity cautioned against by Gellner who observed that sometimes

a social anthropological study degenerates from having been a study of a society into a study of the reaction of the anthropologist to his own reactions to his observations of the society, assuming that he ever got as far as to have made any (in Sandall 2001:68).

With this in mind, my Scottishness, in this context, nevertheless gave me cause to reflect on my identity. Because my Scottishness was something of interest to most of the people I met, and because I was asked many questions about Scotland, I found myself having to rethink my own roots in order to respond. In responding to questions about Scotland, I brought forth and shared parts of my early life, dredging up songs and memories that had been recessed for a long time. As a naturalized Australian for over twenty years, this was both interesting and at times unsettling. How I considered my identity and how this was perceived by the Barkindji people I met was clearly, at times, different and at odds: a circumstance common to the many Aboriginal people who are 'known' in the white imagination. Rethinking my own identity was an experience that illuminated the ways in which inter-cultural relations, and indeed the role of the ethnographer, feed upon one another in reciprocal and effectual ways.

Ethnography as partial and positioned

There is an emphasis throughout this book on two particular individuals who were influential during the ethnographic process, and this is a testament to the importance of 'informants' as well as serving to highlight individual differences. Through contrasting the different cultural 'takes' of Badger Bates and Murray Butcher, two Barkindji men from Wilcannia, we can see individual and alternative interpretations of what constitutes Barkindji culture. Their similarities and differences in relation to their art, its content, interpretation and motivation allow us to see the diversity of Barkindji views of 'culture', and what this is made to mean, and why.

Most anthropologists find that their research benefits from close association with particular informants, yet the extent to which this positions the ethnographic work is often not adequately addressed, if at all. Deger points out that, despite a 'detached authority and de-personalised tone', most ethnographic accounts of culture are based on 'highly individualised portraits of society authorised and authored by local cultural activists' (2006:28). The benefits of personalizing data are illustrated in the ethnographic work of Stanner (1979) and Turner (1967), who concentrate

discussion on their key informants, Durmugam and Muchona the Hornet, respectively. These two informants directed the course of fieldwork and strongly influenced the ethnographers' theoretical analyses. In drawing extensively on the views of single informants, both Stanner and Turner demonstrate the richness and depth that this approach can provide. They highlight the ways in which the ethnographic method results in data which is always partial and positioned. Despite this, apart from some notable exceptions in anthropology (e.g. Beckett 1958, 2000; Burnett Horne and McBeth 1999; Camfoo, Camfoo and Cowlshaw 2000; McCarthy-Brown 1991; Shostak 1990), this approach remains uncommon. In most instances, the debt to individuals remains under-theorized and, for the most part, unacknowledged (see Deger 2006). One cannot undertake ethnography with everyone in a community on anything approximating an equal basis. As well as simply 'being there,' the anthropologist selects and is selected during fieldwork on the basis of circumstances, particular needs and interests.

Those undertaking fieldwork reject certain opportunities in favour of others, as they are also rejected by members of the communities in which they work; this enforces its own limitations. Whilst recognizing the risks that such an individualized approach may involve – questions of reliability, accuracy of memory and personal bias (Horne and McBeth 1999) – it nevertheless allows for an ethnographic richness and thickness of description. While remaining subject to the anthropologist's editing and selection of data, a concentration on the individual offers something of the intra-cultural diversity and transformative potential of engagement frequently sacrificed in the pursuit of shared understandings.

There is much I would like to say about the experience of being in Wilcannia that I am unable to share. This is not because of any unwillingness to disclose about myself, but because to do so would be to implicate others in ways not of their choosing. I mention this because it seems disingenuous at times to 'write up' the lives of others and to ostensibly 'bracket out' certain events, circumstances and relationships that affected the course of my fieldwork and my life, and the lives of others. It is for these reasons that this ethnography, as with any ethnography, is both partial and incomplete (Clifford and Marcus 1986). Vincent Crapanzano portrays ethnographers as tricksters, promising like Hermes not to lie, but never undertaking to tell the whole truth either (Crapanzano 1992). As an ethnographer, I am in the same position. This work is neither confessional nor apologetic; it is a

book about relationships between people and between people and things. Such is ethnography, such is life.

NOTES

- 1 There are no images of people or groups in the street in this book. Because Wilcannia people have been the subject of negative media they are often against being filmed or photographed in the street as they go about their business. Part of this backlash against the media arose following a television story by Ray Martin that Aboriginal people claimed portrayed them incorrectly and negatively, while protecting the reputation of certain whites.
- 2 NAIDOC (National Aboriginal Islander Day Observance Committee) week is when various events and celebrations of Indigeneity take place.
- 3 Broken Hill is a substantial regional centre that supports a population of around 21,000 (ABS 2006). From reputedly having only one Aboriginal family living there in the 1950s (Beckett 2005), it now claims an Aboriginal population of 6.6 per cent (ABS 2006). Broken Hill was established when silver-lead was discovered in the late 1800s by Charles Rasp, who in 1885 formed 'The Broken Hill Proprietary Company Limited' (now BHP), fostering the development of a prosperous mining town. Although mining continues, tourism has become increasingly important to the local economy (see Blainey 1968 for a full history).
- 4 Marcia Langton has written of the role of swearing, along with fighting, in Aboriginal customary law. She aims to demonstrate the ways that swearing and fighting 'in contemporary Aboriginal society constitute dispute processing and social ordering devices derived from traditional Aboriginal cultural patterns' (Langton 1994:201–2). My discussion of the swear-word 'cunt' makes no pretence to such a grand scheme. I do draw on it as a metaphor for broader understanding, and it is clear that the use of the word offers some insight into 'the thin line between aggressive exaggeration and humorous exaggeration, always a risky business, even for the insiders' (Langton 1994:215).
- 5 In the late 1800s Scottish people were effectively 'cleared' from their crofts in the Highlands by means of unaffordable rent increases. Although the English are invariably blamed for these 'clearances', many times it was the greed of the crofters' chiefs and lowland land 'improvers' that were the cause of many Highlanders seeking (some forcibly) a better life through emigration. Many emigrated to the United States, Canada and Australia. In Australia,

Highlanders dispossessed of their own land in Scotland similarly dispossessed the Aboriginal people of theirs (Watson 1984).

- 6 The karaoke machine has added to this aspect of Wilcannia. The spontaneous 'sing along' where acoustic and electric guitars appear out of the woodwork is also common. People talk fondly of the 'olden days', when they used to go out to the 'claypan' outside the town limits, place a lot of old car tyres around for seating and have a party. 'Amy Quayle played the squeezebox', others would play the mouth organ and there were always acoustic guitars. Going out to the claypan does not happen anymore.

CHAPTER 1

Plenty of Aborigines, but no culture



Oh wad some po'er the gift ti gie us, to see oorselves as aithers see us
(Robert Burns, *To a Louse*)

Wilcannia – a little history and contemporary impressions

The sentiments of the Scottish poet Robert Burns, familiar to me as a child, were called into sharp relief during my fieldwork. The absence of the power to see ourselves as others see us results in what us humans do well – judging one another from the blindness of our own cultural and social perceptions and values. The way the inhabitants of Wilcannia perceive one another and their town is bound up with daily interactions and varied cultural, social and structural legacies. Some of these legacies allocated value to bricks and mortar, others not so much. Most residents bemoaned the loss of the butchers, bakers and other retail services that, along with their proprietors, began to leave town as the pastoral industry declined.¹ The steady loss of white residents and a concomitantly increasing Aboriginal population is noticed and commented on by whites, but not by blacks. The latter do not seem to consider population ratios with quite the same unease as whites. Something of the history of the town will assist in situating the different positions held. The town of Wilcannia was formally proclaimed in 1866, becoming known during the 1870s and 1880s as the ‘Queen City of the West’. During its heyday, it was the third largest port along the Darling River, and home to approximately 3,000 people. At its height, the town had thirteen hotels and its own newspaper. A stroll



Figure 4 The Darling River at Wilcannia during a drought, 2004.

down Myers or Reid Streets at this time would have revealed butchers, bakers, banking services, a coach-builder and, further back from the main streets, Edmund Resch's 1879 brewery, the first to be built in Australia. The wharf, which at that time hosted up to 200 steamboats annually, and loaded the majority of the wool from north-western New South Wales, now sits in a tangle of fallen timbers. Today's children tether ropes to the wharf and swing out over the river, water levels and drought permitting (see Figure 4).

Many magnificent single- and double-storey public buildings, built in the late 1880s from locally quarried sandstone, still stand today in mostly good order. The nineteenth-century bank and the old fuel store on the riverbank have been reincarnated as offices for the Central Darling Shire Council (CDSC) and as a residence cum art gallery, respectively (see Figure 5).

Today, Wilcannia town is a mix of 'glory days' architecture and derelict or abandoned commercial buildings (see Figure 6). The one small supermarket adjoins a boarded-up cinema that closed in 1980; the latter's art deco façade testimony to a period of prosperity during the pastoral era that ended with the economic downturn of the 1970s (Beckett 2005).² Not long before that time, Aboriginal people had watched movies from their racially segregated seats; a practice resulting more from an unspoken



Figure 5 Central Darling Shire chambers on Reid Street, 2003 (built 1890).



Figure 6 Derelict shops in Reid Street, 2004.

understanding than official policy. Whites new to town and unaware that blacks sat on the left, and whites to the right of the cinema, were advised by other whites of their error (Carrington 1991:165). One Aboriginal man recalled sitting on the left of the cinema, watching the cowboys and Indians at the Saturday matinee. He talked of his fondness for the screen character of the Lone Ranger, a masked white cowboy, who always lived to 'ride again' on his horse 'Silver'; he also remembers 'cheering for the Indians' and identifying with Tonto, the Lone Ranger's Native American companion. His cognizance of these mixed identifications continues to be worked out in daily life in other contexts. Such is the case for many others whose lives have seen previous racial boundaries crossed, muddled and contested.

Walking through Wilcannia streets, one will see cottages and bungalows built from galvanized iron, weatherboard, timber and occasionally brick veneer. These are spread throughout the town in various states of repair; the tin roofs embrace the colours and weather of the day. Some of these dwellings are neat and tidy, with well-tended gardens growing roses and other exotics that fight hard against the arid environment and seemingly endless drought. Others appear derelict and uninhabitable, yet are home to large extended families. Most gardens grip solitary weeds and occasional untended plants. Many homes sit amongst the domestic spillover of used disposable nappies, discarded and half-buried kitchen utensils, general household rubbish and spare car parts. A mix of new government-owned company vehicles and older-model cars in various states of repair sit outside these homes. Older-style metal beds, mostly single, recline outside some of those houses that appear least tended. These are there for a reason: they generally belong to the larger households and families that see a great deal of traffic of relatives in and out. As well as accommodating spillover, the beds offer the possibility of a cooler sleep on a summer evening. During the day, they serve both as outdoor seating and as a place to have a nap, some with bare springs or a mattress, and others piled high with assorted blankets, quilts and clothes.

In 1919 the construction of the Sydney to Broken Hill railway, which bypassed Wilcannia, caused a loss in local jobs and a concomitant drop in population and services. From this time onwards, one can speak of a general erosion of the town's white population. This was noticeably and further exacerbated by the downturn in the pastoral industry. From what was effectively an all white population of around 3,000 in the late 1880s,

the number of Wilcannia's inhabitants has shrunk considerably, and a majority of them are now Aboriginal. The Australian Bureau of Statistics places the total population at 596, with 402, or 67.4 per cent, Aboriginal (ABS 2006). Local agencies such as the Wilcannia Community Working Party place the figure at closer to 650 and 90 per cent Aboriginal. The precise number is, however, difficult to gauge; it is also fluid, as Aboriginal people are highly mobile and travel frequently to visit and reside with kin and friends elsewhere in NSW and beyond. Attendance at the many funerals occasioned by the extremely high rates of Aboriginal mortality, a common reason for travel, often leads to unplanned and extended periods of absence from town. The location of the Aboriginal population within and around the town has also shifted over the years. In the 1950s most Aboriginal people lived in humpies along the bank of the Darling River on the opposite side of the town. Limited Aboriginal housing, comprising fourteen cottages, were then constructed in 1952 on what was officially named the 'Warrali Reserve' on land provided by the Aboriginal Welfare Board. This area is known today as 'the Mission'. Twelve of these cottages remain, having since been renovated, and two additional flats have been built by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs (DAA). The flats were built to accommodate what is a burgeoning number of young adults who are expressing the desire, as well as asserting what they see as a right, to more private accommodation outside of the extended family home(s) that often accommodate multiple generations. All that remains of the humpies is a few sheets of corrugated iron, some broken crockery and the odd rusting paraffin fridge. But there are also the memories: people spoke fondly of waking up in the mornings to the sound of crying babies and radios, and the smell of open fires newly lit in preparation for a cup of tea with bread and syrup. There is a palpable and commonly expressed nostalgia for those days, evoked by the sentiment that 'everyone shared' back then. The cottages and humpies were located on the opposite riverbank from the established town, and the river effectively separated black and white households at this time.

In 1966 the Roman Catholic Sacred Heart Mission built 'St Therese's Mission School' near the Mission cottages and humpies to educate Aboriginal children. In the early years the school was managed and staffed by two teacher-nuns of the Sisters of Compassion. In 1989 the school was renamed 'St Therese's Community School'. It still has a predominately Aboriginal student base. During the period I lived in Wilcannia, there was



Figure 7 The Mallee from the water towers, 2003.

only one non-Aboriginal child in attendance. Despite the official name change, St Therese's is still referred to locally as the 'Mission School'. In March 2010 two nuns who had been at the school for sixteen and fifteen years, respectively, left Wilcannia to retire; it is now managed and staffed by secular male and female teachers and remains one of the Catholic Schools within the Wilcannia-Forbes Diocese.

In 1970, a large flood threatened to engulf the riverbank humpies and residents were moved, under the direction of the Shire Clerk, into tents on the town common, a piece of land on the northern fringes of town known as 'the Mallee' (see Figure 7). There they joined a small group of Aboriginal people who had lived at the Mallee since the previous flood in 1951. During earlier flood events, Aboriginal people had been directed by the Central Darling Shire Council (CDSC) to move from the riverbank to the Mallee until the flood waters subsided; they were then encouraged (some Aboriginal people say forced) back to the riverbank. As one man explained, after the 1970 flood he decided to stay up on the Mallee, as his humpy was becoming impossibly full of holes from being moved and re-nailed. After the flood in 1973, however, the local Shire Council encouraged people to remain at the Mallee. Some local Aboriginal people speculate that this decision was to force a government response to the

perceived Aboriginal problem of town campers; those who were living on the fringes of town (Memmott 1991). Now gazetted as an Aboriginal reserve, the Mallee continues to house Aboriginal residents. Over the years the housing stock of locally built humpies was added to at various times with a mixture of army tents provided by government following floods, government provided tin sheds (1970s) and concrete breeze-block homes (1980s). Between 2004 and 2006, twenty-four architect-designed houses were built to replace the breeze-block homes. Residents living in the breeze-block homes commented quite frequently that these had been built by government as 'temporary' housing at the time, and they eagerly awaited their replacement. The number of government homes provided continues to remain vastly inadequate for the population. A projected increasing Aboriginal population across rural and regional Australia means that this situation, and associated overcrowding, shows no signs of improving, and will indeed become more problematic (Taylor 2000; Taylor and Biddle 2004). No longer relegated to the fringes of town, Aboriginal people now live in and across the length and breadth of Wilcannia town proper. Apart from the Mission and the Mallee, where only Aboriginal people live, the other residential areas of Wilcannia are largely shared by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. Exceptions include a few scattered groups of houses provided by the various government departments for education-, police- and health-department staff.

Today in Wilcannia there is little industry, and the few outlying farming and grazing properties are mostly family-run affairs. The town itself has limited commercial services. The remaining small supermarket sells a range of fresh and processed foods, and a small selection of mixed goods. As with most small stores in isolated locations, choice is limited and prices are high. This sees accusations of greed levelled against the owner, which he counters with an appeal to the high cost of haulage. Prices are much lower in Broken Hill, where several of the larger supermarket chains operate. Those with private vehicles drive this 200 km distance, sometimes weekly, to stock up. As there is only one public daily bus service between Wilcannia and Broken Hill, and not all have private vehicles in good repair or can afford the increasing cost of petrol for the journey, many are forced to pay the local prices.

Of the two petrol stations in Wilcannia, the one hidden from the main thoroughfare is frequented by most locals and the larger haulage vehicles coming through town. It is cheaper than the one located on the main road.

The husband and wife who own the business are long-time residents, the wife's family going back several generations. The wife aimed to know everything that was going on in town, and sought information from me every time I called in for fuel, with a 'So where are you off to today young lady?' I found her friendliness, candour and knowledge of the town's goings-on most welcome. The other petrol station (the roadhouse) had a small post office operating within the premises. Because of its location on the main road through town, this station attracted most of the passing trade. This was also owned by a husband-and-wife team, who, in this case, came from a much larger city down south. The roadhouse was the only venue other than the Golf Club which sold cooked or take-away food, and it catered to a steady clientele of locals and passing tourists.

Rachael, who I would guess was in her fifties, was one of the two mainstays of the roadhouse staff, and a compact, cheerful and friendly woman of Pacific Island heritage, as well as an enthusiastic member of the Assemblies of God Church, which came to Wilcannia in the late 1990s. James, a white Australian who appeared also to be in his fifties, was the other steady presence at the roadhouse. He was one of a handful of men (and women) I have met in small country towns who are resolutely single and vastly overqualified for their jobs, but who have been drawn to this lifestyle for various personal reasons. Country towns such as Wilcannia offer a home to many who come to reject, or who have found difficulty living in, busier and more impersonal urban environments. Behind the counter Rachael and James work to deliver burgers and chips, bacon-and-egg rolls, saveloys, fried chicken, dim-sims and other offerings, along with tea, coffee, Coca Cola and the popular coffee-flavoured milk. The healthier options, including freshly made sandwiches, seem to lack the appeal of the warm, illuminated options in the bain-marie. The roadhouse owners also ran the motel behind the station, which was my accommodation for two nights early in my fieldwork. As with the language of the two girls riding their bycycles at the petrol station, my time at the motel is memorable. I arrived and rang the bell on the locked door of the motel reception, and was greeted by a loud, deep bark. The female proprietor came to the door holding the collar of a rather large dog and ushered me in. The dog continued to bark from behind the reception desk as I collected the key for my clean, though sparsely furnished, room. A print above the bed entitled 'Scotland – Highland Pass' welcomed me, though it seemed an incongruous choice of artwork.

At around three o'clock next morning I woke to the sound of breaking glass and shouting. The roadhouse windows had been smashed. The next day, my hostess told me that the damage had been done by a particular Aboriginal teenager who had not been happy with the service he had received the previous day. The youth had, according to staff, taken too long to decide whether or not to have gravy on his hot chips. He was finally given gravy and more or less told by the non-Aboriginal staff member to take it or leave it. The youth went outside, hurling both chips and abuse around the roadhouse forecourt. The broken window was believed to be his revenge.

This was an introduction to events that are not straightforward; they are part of a town dynamic in which blackfellas are seen by whitefellas to do damage to both whites and themselves. A white neighbour can boast (as did one of mine) that their dogs do not like blackfellas, can apparently sense them, and bark (untrained) only at them as they walk past their houses. Events and circumstances such as these signify elements of frustration and race. Provocation, if considered at all, is considered differently by black and white. Aboriginal people spoke of the boy who threw the chips as a particular and known troublemaker who had recently come back to town and would need monitoring; to the whites he was just another Aboriginal troublemaker. Interpretations of the specific and the general are, in towns like Wilcannia, differences which are made to make a difference in racialized terms (Bateson 1972).

The second motel in town, as with the roadhouse motel, catered mostly to visiting staff from a number of government, non-government and other agencies that serviced and maintained the welfare, community and utility needs of the town. This motel was more attractive in appearance, more comfortably furnished and sat prominently on a corner of the main street. It lay in an 'L' shape around a gravel forecourt on which cars parked outside each room, and had a grassed barbecue area that adjoined the street. This motel became something of a haven for me during fieldwork. Many a scorching summer's day, when the temperature soared over forty degrees centigrade, and in the colder months, when the boredom, frustrations and cross-cultural misunderstandings of fieldwork became difficult, I would sidle in and perch at the kitchen bench where the owner, Paul, a tall and sturdily built white Australian with a large bushy beard and a head of thick greying brown hair would offer easy conversation, a cup of tea and a biscuit. Paul's motel was a place of quiet and order, not only for me, but

for many of the local Aboriginal children. As a place of calm and of rules, a group of children ranging from eight to twelve often congregated there after school. In return for picking up rubbish or papers around the yard, Paul would give them chocolate milk and currant biscuits; 'dirty milk' and 'squashed fly biscuits' to the kids.

On the riverbank opposite the main part of town sat the caravan park, which saw few customers. While the location was quiet and scenic, Wilcannia's reputation, and the caravan park's rudimentary amenities block, saw the passing 'grey nomads' (older retirees), who comprise the bulk of caravan tourists, push on through to Broken Hill.

Across the river and adjacent to the caravan park was the only pub in town. To the unaware it looked deserted: its windows had long-since been boarded-up and the only entrance was through two tall, narrow dark-green swing doors that were usually shut to the street. The cave-like ambience was increased by the dull, artificial lighting and older-style furnishings. The majority Aboriginal customers stood or sat on bar-stools or played the handful of poker machines that occupied about one-third of the small space. The pub restricted its service to the hours between 11 a.m. and 6 p.m., and served beer only in cans to reduce the danger of broken glass. The pub stopped serving drinks in glasses after an incident a few years ago: a young Aboriginal woman had been in the pub drinking when her boyfriend, angry over gossip that said she was carrying another man's child, had stabbed her in the neck with a broken bottle. She died in the street outside the pub, despite the best efforts of hospital staff and bystanders to staunch the blood flow with towels. It was clear to me that whites perceived such events as stemming not simply from alcohol abuse, but from Aboriginal people's reaction to alcohol. Drunken Aboriginal people are seen as violent, less respectful of life and limb, immature in their conduct and as having low emotional control compared to whites. The highly visible and vocal nature of Aboriginal drunkenness and violence fuels such ready assessments.

Outside the pub, on the corner of Reid Street and Myers Street, sat a couple of benches, a good spot to assemble and watch the passing foot and vehicular traffic moving through town. A large Morton Bay fig tree shaded one side of the pub; its strong thick trunk provided cover for the clientele who wished to hide a beer can or two from the police, who cruised past in their four-wheel-drive vehicles. Some officers were more interested than



Figure 8 The Club Hotel ('the pub') on the corner of Reid and Myers Streets, at right of photograph, 2004.

others in enforcing the ban on public drinking, as they made their way to the police station a few doors down (see Figure 8).

It was in this police station that Mark Quayle died some fifteen years earlier. His brothers Johnnie and Greg spoke often of Mark's death, repeating the same stories several times. Their ire focused most directly on the way in which they and their mother Amy were informed of Mark's death, and at the police attempt to have Mark's mother identify his body from the back of an ambulance, where it lay in a body bag. The brothers said that they had refused to allow this, insisting that Mark be laid out in the hospital morgue to which they would later bring their mother. Several times, Mark's mother said that 'they wouldn't have done this to a white boy' – a sentiment originally expressed by Amy in 1987, when she gave evidence to the Royal Commission about the treatment of her son by police prior to his death in jail (Carrington 1991). Sitting in her house at the Wilcannia Mission, Amy pointed to her fridge and other white goods that she said she had bought with 'Mark's money', referring to the compensation given for her son's death (see Figure 9). No such compensation was forthcoming when her grandson hanged himself from the water-tower in



Figure 9 Amy Quayle (dec.) and her daughter, Gloria (Sister Girl) Quayle (dec.) at Amy's house at the Mission, 2003.

her backyard some years later. Nor was it forthcoming when, later still, her granddaughter was found drowned in the Darling River – her death also believed to have been suicide. Amy herself passed away in 2009, following the removal of a leg after diabetes related gangrene had set in. Her only surviving daughter, the mother of Amy's drowned grandchild, followed in September 2010, after years of ill health, self-harm and alcohol abuse.

Compensation marked only one of these lives and deaths, when the system was publicly held to account and was found wanting. The longer-term harm of the colonizing process, reaching across time and lives, is part of less visible systems and networks. In a town which is racially divided, questions of Aboriginal entitlement or compensation for the damages of colonization is a vexed issue. The dreadful mortality rate of Aboriginal people is openly and commonly attributed by many whites to death by choice of 'lifestyle'. It is difficult to argue that a lifestyle of heavy drinking, smoking and physical abuse does not result in early death; few whites look beyond this for a cause, and few blacks look beyond the harm done to their people by whites and history. What is complex and multi-dimensional is, for the most part, reduced to racial difference and mutual disregard.

Apart from the pub, the only other licensed premises was the Golf Club. This had a small restaurant area, a TAB (a sports betting agency), a quite substantial area for poker machines and a small stage with a large screen used for occasional live bands, balls, karaoke nights, broadcasts of events such as Australian Rules Football (AFL or 'Aussie Rules') and the Melbourne Cup racing carnival. Bingo was run several times a week during the day and evening. The club's manager, a thin-faced man of medium build and a somewhat chauvinistic attitude towards women, oversaw the day-to-day running of the club. On Thursday to Saturday nights, when the club was at its busiest, two security guards vetted the membership of those coming in. The guards kept control, evicting those who caused or threatened to cause trouble, usually as the result of too much to drink. The club was no longer the exclusive 'venue for building social cohesion among white public servants,' as described by the Royal Commission in 1987 (Carrington 1991:168). Like the town population, its customers were now mostly Aboriginal. It remained, however, the preferred drinking venue for whites.

Down the street from the club is the local Wilcannia Hospital, from which Mark Quayle was taken and moved to the police cells on the night he died. The hospital was serviced in shifts by a handful of mostly non-Aboriginal staff, principally registered and enrolled nurses; though there was one local Aboriginal woman who had worked at the hospital as a registered nurse for many years. The nurses were assisted by Aboriginal Health Workers. As Wilcannia has been unable to attract a resident doctor for some time, the most serious medical cases were flown elsewhere by the Royal Flying Doctor Service (RFDS), as were birthing mothers. Townsfolk made do with regular visits by general practitioners and specialist doctors working in such fields as dental and mental health.

The one bank in town shared a building with staff overspill from the Shire Council premises. As the only facility for dispensing money, apart from the Automatic Teller Machine in the Golf Club, which is restricted for customer use, the bank did a brisk trade, especially on welfare pay days. Next to the bank, the old sandstone Athenaeum, built in 1883, functioned as office space accommodating staff of the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS), who managed nearby Peery National Park. The Athenaeum has seen many incarnations, and is remembered for its role as a small informal 'Museum' or 'keeping place' for Aboriginal artefacts, though this has long since closed. Having fallen into disrepair, the building

was extensively renovated in 2002, and from then until 2005 two rooms were available for small exhibitions and functions. The remainder of the space was given over to the staff and operations of the 'Telecentre'. This community technology function was funded by a government 'Networking the Nation' programme. Under the auspices of the Shire Council, the programme was to encourage and allow for community training and access to personal computers. When the National Parks took over the space, the 'telecentre' service was reduced to two personal computers situated within the foyer of the bank, which community members could access for a fee payable to the Shire.

Wilcannia is well served by religious institutions. The Roman Catholic Church comprises a group of approximately eight white parishioners, who have been self-organized since the last resident priest left in 2002.³ While attendance at the Catholic Church is low, it is the preferred location for Aboriginal funeral services, with 72 per cent of local Aboriginal people identifying as Catholic (ABS 2006). Wilcannia is also home to an Assemblies of God Church run by a pastor and his wife, who arrived in town in 1999. The Assemblies of God lease premises from the Anglican Church, whose use of the building ceased due to a combination of lack of demand and resident minister. The Assemblies of God has seen devotees come and go, with 8 per cent of the town identifying as either Pentecostal or evangelical in 2006 (ABS). There are two schools in town: St Therese's, at the Mission, which teaches children from Kindergarten to Year Two; and Wilcannia Central School, which takes children through to Year Twelve, the final year of secondary education in New South Wales. In a town where few jobs exist, and fewer still exist for the mostly unskilled Aboriginal population, career aspirations are not a driving force; unsurprisingly, few children reach Year Twelve.

Although Wilcannia is located in the state of New South Wales, most of its goods are transported from parts of Victoria and South Australia, which are geographically closer than NSW suppliers. Many people ally themselves with these southern states in matters of sport, such as 'Aussie rules' football, and much newsprint media also comes from these states. Therefore, while governed by NSW, much of the reportage on Wilcannia is filtered through South Australia.

A population divided

The Barkindji

The traditional owners of Wilcannia land are the Barkindji (also written as Bakandji, Paakantyi, Bagundji). The name, which comes from the word *barka* (river) means to belong to the river (Hercus 1993). As one Barkindji man, Badger Bates, put it,

I was reared up on the river, that's where we get our name from. Barka means river, Barkindji means river people. Without the river we lose our culture, we lose our identity.

This sense of belonging is cogent and important in expressions of art, culture and identity. The Barkindji peoples, whose land stretches from Bourke in the north to Wentworth in the south, were known historically by different group names, but all spoke variants of the same language (Hercus 1993). Only a handful of people remain who are able to speak a Barkindji dialect to any degree, and of these only one woman in Wilcannia was said by local Aborigines to be fluent; she passed away in 2011. Although Wilcannia is currently home to descendants of groups of Aboriginal people who came from outside of traditional Barkindji land, the overarching rhetoric holds that the Aboriginal people of Wilcannia are all Barkindji. Barkindji identity, however, is a hotly contested domain, as certain rights flow from determination of this identity. Reasons for this include recognition under the Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1983 (NSW), which can provide compensation for loss of land and allow certain access to land, as well as under the Native Title Act 1993, which may accord particular access and use of land for identified groups under certain conditions. Aboriginal people identified as Traditional Owners of land such as that of Mutawintji, which is now a National Park, have the right to be elected to boards of management; others may be paid as advisors to government and non-government agencies on Aboriginal matters. This has seen a legislative as well as a social need to discriminate more closely between who is and is not entitled to claim Barkindji identity, and who is and is not entitled to the ensuing benefits of this identity. This elicits much discussion in Wilcannia, for there is seen to be much at stake. Assertions of identity and rights to Barkindji and Aboriginal culture in the realm of art, therefore, have great significance.

Whitefellas in Wilcannia

The great majority of whites living in Wilcannia are there on the short- to medium-term contracts that mostly exist to service the majority Aboriginal population. Since the collapse of the pastoral industry, much of the original economic reason for the town's existence has gone. Wilcannia has become a world of whites working for Aboriginal people who are living within the constraints of a welfare economy. Of the current white population, the majority are said by Aboriginal people to be 'blow ins'. This term is used to refer to new and temporary residents who are not Wilcannia-born, but who are mostly employed in agencies and institutions such as the schools, the hospital, the police and local government. Von Sturmer's assertion that 'to witness attempts at direct dealings [with Aboriginal people] is almost always to witness something like First Contact' (1995:112) is true of many of the whites who come to work in Wilcannia. Many are confronted, often for the first time, with behaviours such as public drunkenness and violence that in Wilcannia are normalized, if not habitual; loud public arguments and casual swearing by adults and small children alike cause visible shock. Racial tensions develop and continue in these daily interactions, which most whites find challenging. Not all whitefellas recoil in the face of such behaviour; one white acquaintance, who is married to an Aboriginal woman, laughingly told me that his daughter's first words were 'uck you'. This man's pride in the telling, whether fanciful or not, and his insistence on another occasion that he 'had to give' his wife a 'floggin'" when her behaviour had caused him to have 'had enough', shows something of the ambiguity in according strict racial divisions to what most local whites judge to be unseemly, and characteristically, Aboriginal activities and mores.

In the case of those who come to 'help' to educate children at the school, improve health outcomes through the hospital, or maintain law and order as police officers, many become disillusioned and many do not complete their assignment. Many come wanting to help marginal and suffering people, only to find an assertive people with a different view of themselves. Black and white notions of helping and of gratitude, in relation to service provision and service providers, who is or should be helped, and who is or should be grateful, and why, are often at variance.

Not all non-Aboriginal people who come to work in Wilcannia are Australian. Short-term contract staff have come from America, Ireland, The Netherlands, South Africa, Sweden, England and Zimbabwe. It was

thought by white hospital staff that two black Zimbabwean nurses would have greater affinity with the Aboriginal patients than the white staff. The assumed affinity of skin colour extended to discussions by hospital management to the merits of sourcing medical staff from Papua New Guinea, although nothing came of it. One Zimbabwean nurse left within a few months of her year-long contract; the other stayed for the full period of his contract, but with reservations. He said he had been shocked and offended when an Aboriginal patient told him to 'Keep your filthy black hands off me, ya cunt, youse lot have all got AIDS.' The use of colour in this insult surprised both him and some local whites, including some staff who assumed that his being black would accord Aboriginal acceptance and a degree of compatibility. As it turned out, the two Zimbabwean nurses developed stronger friendships with the whites in town than they did with Aboriginal people. For some of the whites, Zimbabwean blackness combined with 'good' behaviour was a refreshing difference. For some of the Aborigines, Zimbabwean blackness offered not affinity but threat of contamination. Thus are racial categories present and experienced in varied ways.

In addition to 'blow ins' working in the service sector, the white population of Wilcannia includes a few descendants of white families that have lived in the Wilcannia region for substantially longer periods of time. These include farmers who live on properties outside the town, and whose family members may work in town to supplement falling incomes resulting from extended drought. Many whites who come from 'away', have come from cities or larger regional towns, and have incomes in the middle to high range. Many have second-hand mainstream society knowledge of Aboriginal people, though some have worked with Aboriginal people from other regions in NSW, and across Australia. Those whites who have worked in remote areas where Aboriginal communities have not lived in such close proximity to settler culture, or for as long a period as in the south-east, draw comparisons, and conclude that the Wilcannia Aborigines no longer have any Aboriginal culture.

Wilcannia is also home to a handful of whites who once came to town on short-term contracts, or came to visit friends, but liked the place and the people so much that they have stayed. A few of these people are highly active in their support for Aboriginal self-determination, and have forged long-term associations and friendships with Aboriginal residents; race politics is effectively the 'glue' that initiates and binds these relationships.

Ironically, it is often race politics that provokes the demise of these relationships, when there is disagreement about the nature and goals of Aboriginal self-determination and ways of being. As Aboriginal people become more engaged in dealing with bureaucracies and agencies, they are less likely to accept at face value the 'we know best' advice still being offered by some whites.

A black for all seasons

'Culture' is one of the most tortured and laboured of terms. The anthropological meanings given to it have a long and conflicted history (see Williams 1983; Kuper 1999). Indeed, in current anthropological discourse there is little agreement on how the term should be used. This said, the anthropological meanings of 'culture' do have effects on popular understandings. The lack of agreement on the meaning and nature of 'culture' has far-reaching ideological, political and social effects. I want to expose the messiness of the culture concept, and the lived expression and articulation of this term for the black and white people of Wilcannia, and, in addition, how these reach far beyond the local scene. First, what do local whites and the Aboriginal people of Wilcannia, in particular the Barkindji Aboriginal people who are the Traditional Owners of Wilcannia, mean when they use the term 'culture'? And, what does this concept mean to Australian Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people? Why does this matter? In responding to these questions, 'culture' is shown in its chameleon colours, colours that can remain hidden even as they operate practically and discursively through every-day, taken-for-granted assumptions.

In ordinary Australian discourse, the term 'culture' may refer to 'high culture' – culture with a capital 'C', inclusive of fine arts, opera and so on – or to 'popular culture'; and more recently it has been used describe the desired values, attitudes and behaviours of a business, organization or nation. However, the term acquires a different loading and salience in the context of multiculturalism when referring to ethnic and indigenous cultures. It takes on a sharp edge within Australia when material interests are involved, including claims to government money and land. To say people have 'no culture' is to question their entitlement, but, beyond that, it is to question who they believe they are.

The concept of Aboriginal 'culture' is, for the majority of the Wilcannia white population, something of a paradox. Whites implicitly

recognize some notion of Aboriginal culture in the anthropological sense of 'a people's way of life', but simultaneously assert culture's absence: 'they don't have any culture'. Wilcannia Aboriginality as recognized by whites is mostly associated with getting uncontrollably drunk, being lazy, fighting, and the failure of self-control and parental responsibility. This uncivilized behaviour is contrasted with ideas of 'real' Aboriginal culture: that is, the imagined 'traditional', 'tribal' or 'full blood' living a hunter-gatherer lifestyle in remote parts of the continent. These are the markers of Aboriginal culture that Aboriginal people in Wilcannia are seen to lack.

Multiple signifiers, expressions and ideas of Aboriginality and Aboriginal culture operate across Australia, where equivalent judgments and fantasies about Aborigines are linked to visibility and national discourse. Importantly, Aboriginality is distinguished from culture in complex ways. Since the majority of townspeople in Wilcannia are Aboriginal; where we might ask, if not in an Aboriginal community, is 'real' Aboriginal culture thought to exist? The nature of this question will become more visible in the chapters that follow.

Continuing intersections

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when Social Darwinism was a dominant paradigm, and Australian Aborigines represented an earlier stage of human social life, empirical data was produced to support the 'doomed race' theory (McGregor 1993). Civilization, and in particular its vices, was seen to render Aborigines a race doomed to extinction. While whites who practised such vices as excessive drinking and drug taking, and who succumbed to conduct and diseases associated with 'immorality', may have been viewed as being in a degenerate state of civilization, they remained part, if an undesirable part, of an overall white hierarchy.⁴ Contemporary reference to these social evolutionary views, although discredited, continues in everyday discourse. 'Political correctness', that is, the fear of saying what is socially unacceptable, has made expressions of such views more guarded. In Australian anthropology, from the mid-1970s onwards, some scholars working in the area of 'Indigenous studies' drew on the concept of culture to replace that of race. As Cowlshaw points out,

The term 'the Aboriginal race' was replaced with Aboriginal culture, but the category relied on the same markers and 'traditional culture' carried the same symbolic messages of heritability, primitivity and blackness as had the 'Aboriginal race'.

(Cowlshaw 2004:59–60)

As a result of the 'culturalizing' of racial difference, perceived racial shortcomings are subsumed under cultural attributes and characteristics. Biological racial difference has been recast as cultural difference (Taguieff 2001). But now culture has been elevated to the superior position.

According to many whites in Wilcannia, and more widely, the racial category of 'Australian Aborigines' can be differentiated into sub-categories. That is, certain Aborigines – those thought to be 'traditional', 'full-blood' or 'real' – are viewed as a separate category from Wilcannia and other 'settled' Aborigines. Aboriginal people from the more remote parts of the continent imagined as 'traditional' or 'tribal' are accorded a positively valued culture. This distinction relies on notions of ancestry as measured (if unofficially) by perceived proportions of Aboriginal and white 'blood'.

Within globalization discourses there is a tension between the ideal of a shared common humanity and the desire for, as well as the fear of, difference, exemplified in the notion of 'the Other' (Kahn 1995). In relation to the Aboriginal people of Australia, cultural difference from whites is embraced by whites parasitically and partially. That is, much of white Australia valorizes, consumes and is at times envious of the cultural difference as imagined through the trope of the remote, 'traditional', 'real', 'authentic', 'full-blood' Aborigines. This is particularly evident in relation to the visual arts: here it is precisely the recognition of a 'traditional' Aboriginal culture that is valued. This has seen Aboriginal people as a discursive category increasingly defined by the products of art (Merlan 2001; Myers 2002). The significance of art for both black and white in Wilcannia became evident to me very early on in fieldwork. As with the concept of culture, the concept of art has multiple meanings. These powerful discursive concepts are intertwining categories and are manifested through social actions with social effects.

What these concepts *do* at any particular moment can never be divorced from the larger historical context. Where 'Aboriginal art' and 'Aboriginal culture' are concerned, a history of colonization and appreciation of Aboriginal people has played out differently across the continent. Michael

Nelson Tjakamarra, a Warlpiri man from the centre of Australia, has observed that whites want to see the art of 'traditional' people and paintings from 'The Centre' (Myers 2002:291). Tjakamarra is 'contrasting this attention with the lack of interest in the work of urban Aboriginal art' (Myers 2002:291). There is indeed a comparative lack of interest in urban Aboriginal art that has come about partly through anthropological and art-world interest in what is asserted to be traditional or tradition-oriented Aboriginal art from the north and centre. Government policy also sought to advance the 'art and culture' of Aboriginal people in ways which were not as targeted at, or as available to, urban, country and rural Aborigines (Department of Aboriginal Affairs [DAA] 1989).

The trope of 'real tribal' Aborigines remains potent. Hamilton captured the conventional view.

There ... was the 'real' Aborigine, a good figure whose wisdom could be tapped by whites ... The 'real' Aborigine was a full-blood ... participated in Aboriginal communal rituals and preserved aspects of his culture, especially singing and dancing... The Otherness of 'real' Aborigines came to be affirmed and re-affirmed by the very continuation of their ritual practices, the custom of 'walkabout' when they put off the trappings of European civilization and 'returned to the wild'.

(Hamilton 1990:22)

A less benevolent view constructed an utterly negative picture of 'mission blacks', 'half castes' and 'fringe dwellers' who displayed the kinds of behaviours that civilized society condemned – excessive and public alcohol consumption, living on the streets and displays of public disorder. It was the public display of such behaviour that should have been hidden that condemned them. Marcia Langton (1981:17) discussed the ways in which negative attributions were being made in relation to Aborigines living in urban, country and rural areas some time ago. She wrote:

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

Much of what she says is still reflected in white views of Wilcannia Aboriginal people. White discourses about urban, country-town and rural Aborigines remain marked by attribution of a lack of culture, a 'non-culture'. Unlike the positively valorized bush black, whites can observe something of themselves in fringe-dwellers – a fearful and always potential possibility that they wish to distance themselves from (Hamilton 1990; Cowlshaw 2004). Importantly, these negative and positive characteristics are ascribed to Aboriginal people in relation to geographic location.

More recently, some Australian anthropologists have argued against the pathologizing nature of the 'culture of poverty' first introduced by Lewis and recently revitalized by American sociologists (Small *et al.* 2010; Lewis 1966). In 1988, Cowlshaw proposed the notion of 'oppositional culture' in relation to the undesirable behaviours of Aboriginal groups in country NSW (1988a, 2004). This argued that certain Aboriginal groups living in marginalized socio-economic conditions subvert and challenge dominant systems of meaning in ways that mainstream society finds challenging, but which offer some degree of Aboriginal autonomy (Cowlshaw 1988a, 1993; Lattas 1993; Cowlshaw and Morris 1997). The efficacy and usefulness of the concept of oppositional culture as a means to understanding disadvantage within marginalized groups continues to be strongly debated in the American literature (Scott 1985; Martin 1995; Carter 2000; Fryer and Torelli 2005). However, in citing heterogeneous Australian Aboriginal responses to colonization, some Australian anthropologists, most notably Rowse, have questioned the usefulness of Cowlshaw's theory for the Australian context (Larbalestier 1990:158; Rowse 1990; Trigger 1990).

While ideas of oppositional culture have been intellectually debated in Australia, apart from some earlier work by Cowlshaw in NSW, there is no sustained empirical research on this issue in relation to Aboriginal Australia. My own empirical research suggests that while oppositional culture cannot be homogenously applied, strong elements of it exist, as described by Cowlshaw in small country towns such as Wilcannia; and that there is indeed much pleasure to be gained by those who actively oppose and flout mainstream values; those who choose not to engage in such behaviour also gain some vicarious enjoyment through an implicit and shared understanding of what constitutes white provocation.

At a Wilcannia Community Working Party meeting a white representative from the Department of Aboriginal Affairs explained the high cost of maintaining Aboriginal housing, comparing it unfavourably to

that of the 'mainstream'. He said that the average life of an Indigenous house in the region was eight years; and that seven houses had burned down in the wider region in the last three years, with all but one conflagration having been caused by humans. The cause of one fire was silver foil being used to replace a fuse, another was when a 'drug-dealer's house was firebombed'; and a third when candles were used by a resident who did not pay their electricity bill. In this comparison with mainstream housing, the DAA representative was seeking to communicate the seriousness of the situation as he saw it. This was not the reaction he received. There was amused recognition of the circumstances by many local Aboriginal people present; a wry understanding that Aboriginal people thought about these issues differently. One man spoke of a 'missing house' in the nearby town of Brewarrina, which he and most Aboriginal locals referred to as 'Dodge City' in view of its reputation as a violent place. Many of us laughed when he told us that the house that went missing had slowly been dismantled for its parts, and that finally the roof was floated down the river for a tin hut. This was not the response the DAA representative was looking for. What was an amusing example of the ingenuity and mischievous qualities of 'our people' to many Aboriginal people present, was for most whites present a serious flouting of accepted social responsibility and standards. The differing expressions on the faces around the table evidenced the judgements being made.

Broad geographic and empirical research is required in order to elucidate how oppositional culture can be considered a distinct cultural response, as opposed to one of several contextually orientated or competing forms of identification, accommodation and position-taking (Willis 1977; Wacquant 2008). It seems to me that such research would provide a crucial contribution to understanding why, and in what ways, Aboriginal people who appear similarly disadvantaged and who appear to share similar structural conditions, interpret, frame and experience the decisions and choices they make in relation to opposing dominant ways of being (Akerloff and Kranton 2000; Young 2004, 2010).

The ever-present threat of bleed or contamination

Following the trail of the imagined 'bush black' and 'fringe-dweller' and their various manifestations is fertile ground for understanding contemporary inter-cultural perceptions (Borsboom 1987; Hamilton 1990; James 1993, 1997; Meek 1976; Rowse 1998; White 1976). As stereotypes

fixed in the public imaginary, their meanings are relegated to the past in ways that deny the contemporary work that they do. Hamilton's 'circuits of meaning' retain their power and remain active in the minds of Wilcannia whites. To bring these meanings to consciousness is to see and understand their effects on the lives of contemporary Aboriginal people.

These circuits of meaning retain the power to dismiss Aborigines who no longer live the modern romantic dream of being in harmony with nature or their fellows (Hardy 1976). These are the new miserable brutes, the violent, uncivilized, treacherous and primitive savages. This is precisely how local Aborigines are viewed by many of the white populace of Wilcannia.

No such fear exists in white discourses of 'traditional Aborigines', who are both spatially and ideologically distanced from Wilcannia, and acceptably Other. The 'good Aborigine' lives somewhere else, not in Wilcannia; the bad Aborigine is close by. The question of race does not disappear so much as become less present in the case of the 'good Aborigine'. The difference is largely one of proximity rather than a genuine shift in thinking about racial difference.

One evening, I was invited to dinner with three white couples, and as is usual in such circumstances, the subject of Aboriginal peoples' rights, behaviours and use of resources was raised. One of the women present said that some time ago she had rolled her car and had broken her sternum. She said she had 'waited five hours to be attended to at the local hospital' because the Matron was 'attending to a screaming baby and stitching up the throat of a bloke who had tried to cut his throat'. Someone asked of the bloke who cut his throat, 'Did he die?' The injured woman's husband replied 'No – unfortunately'. The injured white woman clearly felt it an injustice that she had to wait while a screaming baby and badly injured suicidal man were attended to. The husband's remarks also echoed a commonly expressed and standard resentment. One of the couples did not share these views, but they did not raise objections to the tenor of the discussion. Indeed, my own comments were less open than I would have liked: a professional hazard where one plies one's trade through being privy to unguarded discussion. I would have liked to offer some criticism of the dehumanizing assertion of superiority that I perceived at the dinner party, but to do so would have been to stifle the kinds of conversation that were playing themselves out and on which my work depends. In some undeniable ways this work has its own questionable motives and morals.

The easy, unguarded discussion in white circles is a standard and everyday way of dehumanizing Aboriginal people. Screaming Aboriginal babies and suicidal Aboriginal men are somehow less deserving of attention because they are connected with behaviours and situations that these white speakers deem unacceptable. They elicit disdain, not sympathy and certainly not empathy: they are signs of Aboriginal irrational incivility. The screaming baby and the suicidal man are – ‘not like us’; they are part of a racialized ‘Other’ that is differentiated from, and by, whites. What appears as disordered behaviour – suicidal men, drunken and public violence and the use of crude language of adult sexuality by the young girls – reinforces such judgments. Many whites have difficulty understanding, let alone accepting, this behaviour, which appears as Aboriginal degradation. There is anger at this conduct, much of which is viewed as being subject to Aboriginal lifestyle decisions and choices.

My own empathy for certain Aboriginal behaviour was at times also found wanting. During fieldwork, when friends and associates had consumed too much alcohol and began to fight or take risks with their physical safety, I found myself becoming both weary and annoyed at what I perceived was a disregard for life, and at the apparent senselessness, as I saw it, of the cause of much of the arguments and physical harm. Why not just walk away, I asked, when your wife or partner repeatedly yells at you, ‘C’mon’ big man smack me then?’ Was it not more manly to resist, I asked? I would try to place the behaviour within the specific social, cultural, historical and structural context. Yet, at times, my internal and disapproving cultural dialogue meant that empathy was not readily forthcoming. In many ways it could not be so. Difference is created out of a life of patterned, historical and cultural loyalties and practices; empathy, as opposed to sympathy, with what appears to whites as self-destructive behaviour requires the direct experience of not only being Aboriginal, but of particular Aboriginal lives. Since this can never be so, white judgments and degrees of sympathy, empathy or understanding must always, to a greater or lesser extent, remain coloured by an absence of experience.

After the Golf Club closed one winter’s night, a young women walked drunkenly to the middle of the main highway through town and sat down. She said she was waiting for a passing truck to run her over, all the while screaming the uselessness of her life. Events such as this are not rare. They are, moreover, the daily fodder of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal gossip, laughter and concern. When alcohol was being consumed to excess,

situations such as this were regular occurrences. Participating in, observing and hearing about events such as this saw my internal dialogue go between distress, sorrow, sympathy, irritation and anger for what I perceived to be the futility and predictability of similar behaviours. What, I wondered, was to be gained by sitting in the road waiting to be killed? I began to realize that it was through actions such as this young woman's, that a form of compassion could be elicited from friends and family. As the girl sat in the road, friends and family, themselves mostly inebriated, spoke to her, 'Come on bub,' some coaxing some crying, 'come off the road.' They showed, in various ways and through various words, their distress at her potential loss, fear for her safety and sense of her importance. Events such as this take on a form of performance in which each participant and witness acts in ways which are meaningful and significant to those involved. There is, in effect, a kind of working consensus on the roles taken and the selves presented (Goffman 1987; Stanner 1968). In subsequent discussions the events are dramatized: people discuss their role and actions in the proceedings, they tell the girl, and each other, what they did, how they (re)acted (Langton 1988; MacDonald 1988). These are stories which 'illustrate and emphasize' concerns and features of Aboriginal social life in nuanced and locally understood ways (MacDonald 1988:180). As well as demonstrating their various levels of concern and even ingenuity, there is often laughter in these recollections, 'Silly cunt sittin' up there waitin for a truck'; 'She was that small [the] truck would have fuckin' run right over her.' How one responds forms part of the social glue of understanding and reciprocity.

Next week, the young woman who was waiting for the truck might show concern for a young drunk man asking, 'Are you okay Wayne, you okay bub?' In this scenario, Wayne has twice punched his partner Chrissie to the ground at a party. Chrissie has been punched for knowingly flouting an understood value in public, thereby impugning Wayne's manhood. This has placed him in a position where the social rules require him to gain redress. Chrissie has had a shower at the party house, when there were other men around and the chance of her being seen naked. The hostess has alerted Wayne yelling, that 'There is a mad drunk [Chrissie] walking around here naked.' She yells at Chrissie, 'I've got my husband here and a houseful of men, fuckin' go home ya cunt.' But Chrissie stays and is bashed by Wayne. People at the party who hear of Chrissie's behaviour generally agree that Wayne is the aggrieved party. Chrissie has 'brought it on herself', she 'went silly' and is 'an attention seeker'. Chrissie is ignored as attempts

are made by some friends and family at the gathering to calm Wayne down. Chrissie, angry at being punched to the ground and feeling hard done by, retaliates. She runs at Wayne from behind and jumps onto his back, lashing out and hitting him. Wayne shrugs her off and puts her to the ground again with a couple of punches to the side of her face; he then begins to kick her. A young woman intervenes, yelling at Chrissie to 'get up', someone else shouts to her, 'Go home ya cunt.' A few women gather around Chrissie, while a couple of men look on. It would be bad form for Wayne to continue the kicking (cf. Langton 1988). Wayne withdraws. He is asked by a middle-aged woman, 'Are you okay my son?' He sulks that he is going home. An escalation of violence is averted when a number of women, some of whom have earlier berated Chrissie, take her to a small area of the garden and sit with her, telling her to sleep it off. Women stroke her hair as she lies sobbing; some of these women openly sympathize with Wayne's plight, but some have also been in Chrissie's shoes. There is a hiatus when something akin to Stanner's description of 'an invisible flag of prudence [is] waved over the battlefield' (1968:209). Unlike the historic situation described by Stanner, it is not land or marriage rights that have caused this fight; it is sexual jealousy and the impugning of male honour that are at stake in this blood-letting. Wayne has hit her sufficiently to assert his masculinity and to make her aware of her improper behaviour: there is jealousy, anger and love in his actions – and hers.

In a far corner of the garden a group of men and women, some of whom are unaware of Wayne and Chrissie's goings on, and others aware but either unconcerned or disinterested, sing karaoke to the strains of country and western.

These events are real and unsurprising to both blacks and whites living in Wilcannia. This is not to say that all participate in or approve of the actions, or agree with or share the values exhibited during such events. However, most Aboriginal people would recognize *and* comprehend the actions and reactions of the characters in events such as these. There is something of a ritual being enacted that is at some level tacitly understood and accepted (Langton 1988). To the uninitiated and to mainstream society in general these circumstances make no sense beyond their public naming as dysfunctional, repugnant and abject. While many Aboriginal people in Wilcannia do not live this way and indeed live what might be described as fairly average and relatively peaceful lives, a strong Aboriginal culture of

autonomy means that most accept and do not publicly condemn people's life choices.

It is hearing the stories, together with sharing the experiences, of Aboriginal lives that allows us to glimpse beyond mere behaviour. Yet the white townspeople of Wilcannia mostly cling to their distance from the Aboriginal townspeople, fearing being drawn into a world that they can only see as one of degradation. The constancy of events such as those described has seen many whites become hardened and inured to this world. In so doing, they fail to look beyond appearances, thereby also missing the liveliness, ready humour, acceptance and understanding that are also part of this world.

Cowlshaw, in writing about Bourke, another Western NSW town, talks of the long white historical practice of 'attributing grotesque and anti-social practices to Aborigines'; where whites retain a power that precludes the need for explanation or sympathy at certain conduct; where the ready-made sociological categories of 'social disorder' and the 'disadvantaged' are applied unthinkingly to Aboriginal lives in ways which are 'imbued with a habitual, pre-emptive moralism' requiring no analysis (2006:431–2). Meaning arises through habit. Whites who choose not be part of Aboriginal sociality fail to see what lies behind such events; their own meanings indeed contradict the possibility of finding value in Aboriginal sociality.

Moral judgment comes through practice and habit until it is unthinkingly conditioned. Young white adults who had close black friendships in childhood, have grown up to form attitudes about race which contrast starkly with those childhood relationships. Black and white childhood friends, who once shared food, games and fun, grow to claim the differences of Otherness. One young white woman recalled sharing a tube of condensed milk with her then Aboriginal schoolmate with revulsion. She wouldn't want to share anything with this man now, as 'you wouldn't know what he'd been sucking on'. Rather than a growing understanding, there is instead a reproduction of racial disharmony. As Cowlshaw suggests, this is 'partly because racial identity is a site where social and subjective meanings are formed' in a place where 'everyday cultural differences are part of mundane sociality' (2006:430).

That not only cultural difference but perceived raced difference remains an embedded concept is evident from a discussion with an old resident. This man could not recall the cause of a riot over 60 years ago, but said that 'they had to lift the Wilcannia Bridge to keep the Aborigines out

of town'. In the ensuing *mêlée*, he recalled one of his white mates 'breaking a crank-handle over one blackfella's head'. The speaker was incredulous that the blackfella 'got up and walked away', repeating this several times. One wonders what kind of man is being portrayed here; what kind of man could just get up and walk away from being hit over the head with such force? One with a very thick skull, perhaps? A different kind of man? That these stories are being relayed as confirmation of racial difference, and not as some reflective examples of past racial misunderstanding or ignorance, shows the fixity of racial concepts. These biologically underwritten differences are, however, more often framed by whites as cultural rather than racial, thus appearing more benign.

It would be incorrect to think that these views are confined to locals or a particular socio-demographic group; they reach beyond the town and its social milieu. At a public 'Fun Day' I was in Baker Park. A man in an Australian army uniform, in town for the day, came up to me and asked if I was writing about Wilcannia. I explained that I was looking at the relationship of the Barkindji people to the Darling River. He asked, 'Only the blacks?' I said 'Not only, but mainly.' He then asked if I had noticed 'the bearded women' around town. I said that I had noticed. Indeed, many women, both young and old, in Wilcannia are noticeably hirsute, and some have pronounced facial hair. Some chose to remove what they perceive to be excessive hair, others wear their facial hair as a culturally acknowledged sign of wisdom, and others again seem not to notice its presence. The soldier then asked me if I had heard any stories about this, and I relayed a native cat story that a local Aboriginal man had told me.

At one time all women had beards. One day a native cat was being hunted down by some women. The cat ran down a hole and the women were looking down the hole trying to get the cat out. The men told them to leave the cat alone, that it was not their business. Some of the women listened and moved away – some did not. The native cat blew fire out of the hole and burned the beards off the women crowded round the hole. Those that had paid heed to the men kept their beards and were thought to be wise.

At this the army man laughed quite dismissively, and said 'Oh well.' His version of why Wilcannia women have beards had a quite different meaning. On 27 August 1841, he said, there was a massacre of approximately

twenty Aboriginal people from Lake Victoria, c.500 km from Wilcannia. The group was attacked by a police expedition and some overlanders from Adelaide. Lake Victoria, he added, is 'covered in skeletons'. These people, he said, are 'the missing link'; 'they had long arms' and 'stooping shoulders'. 'When the police came, two [Aborigines] escaped – they ended up here [Wilcannia]'. In this version, Aboriginal bearded women are neither mythically relevant nor culturally valued: they are another species. That which is a cultural marker for some Barkindji was for him a sign of primitivity making them entirely Other; marginally human. The army man went on to tell me that he had come to Wilcannia with some other army officers to 'drum up interest' in the army from Aborigines. He indicated that there was 'plenty of interest', but that 'most of them are a waste of time – no education'. Such bizarre stories may be marginal, but they have an imaginative power beyond questions of empirical truth. His convictions about Wilcannia Aboriginal primitive origins were not what precluded an army career, but a lack of education did.

Despite living in a town, one of the edifices of civilization, Wilcannia Aborigines do not qualify, for many whites, as civil men and women. This is part of the point of conflict: Aborigines live in the same communities as civil man; they share the same geographic and economic space as civil man; and yet they refuse to be civil in certain terms.

Though physically proximal, the Wilcannia Aborigines, according to many whites in Wilcannia, have chosen to eschew civilization. In rejecting the white man's way of life, the Wilcannia Aborigines are seen to be rejecting a superior way of life. White ambivalence towards Aborigines and the denial of a Wilcannia Aboriginal culture arises out of a self-referencing hierarchical concept of culture bound to historic ideas of Western superiority (Bauman 1973). While these ideas may be implicit, rather than overt, they are subject to greater public manifestation and reflexive thought when the space of the Aborigines in question is not only proximal to whites, but is considered by whites to be ideologically and physically white-controlled, civilized space. There is the ever-present threat of bleed or contamination when black and white live in close contact. While uncivilized whites have the potential to, as it were, redeem themselves; uncivilized blacks are irredeemable by 'nature'.

Aboriginal people in Wilcannia may be socially marginalized by many whites, but they are not fringe-dwellers, nor do they live in the margins in any spatial sense. They shop, go to the pub, the Golf Club and the

school; they move and interact in the same physical space as whites and form a majority in the town. Aboriginal people fully inhabit the town. Control and monitoring of the white self requires greater work in these conditions. Many Aboriginal people openly display a sizeable complement of the named vices of white civilization: they are mirrors of a potentiality that must be avoided. Since physical avoidance is not possible, mental and emotional avoidance through disdain and rejection serve to bolster the white self against possible contamination. There are complex and contradictory ideas operating here: the Aboriginal people of Wilcannia are seen to lack civilization; yet there is an underlying and ambivalent recognition that the vices of civilization are not only of white making, but are ever-present white possibilities. There is an unresolved tension between a perceived a priori lack of civilization seen to inhere in blacks, and a white anxiety grounded in evidence that whites also demonstrate (if less publicly) those characteristics disdained in Others. This may be especially so in country towns, where life can at times be frustrating and bounded. Here whites struggle to retain their civilized demeanour and lifestyle. Many fail, as the prevalence of white heavy drinkers and alcoholics attests. Whether these characteristics are more prevalent amongst blacks or whites in country towns or not, I cannot say, but it is clear that most white violence and drunkenness is secreted behind a respectable façade. In country towns such as Wilcannia, white disappointments, frustrations, self-loathing and the fear of a potential self can be, and are, deflected onto the Other.

While violence and alcohol abuse are noticeably present in the Aboriginal population, and an almost daily point of discussion between black and white, it would be wrong to give the impression that all Aboriginal people in Wilcannia live violent and drunken lives. Many live ordinary lives similar to many white locals and the broader population; there is little that appears to differentiate them. However, those Aboriginal people who do not live the kinds of lives openly disdained by whites have more pragmatic attitudes as to why those lives are lived, and for the most part, they do not condemn them.

NOTES

- 1 The pastoral industry in Australia began in the early days of the colony and refers to the farming of sheep and cattle that ranged, or were driven, across large distances and between water-sources.
- 2 For a full and in-depth historical reading of the Aboriginal population of Wilcannia and the far west from the 1900s onwards, Jeremy Beckett's (2005) work is as comprehensive as one could hope to find.
- 3 Father Peter Williams is a priest who came to live in Wilcannia in 1987, after his retirement. In Wilcannia he began to officiate at weddings and funerals, as well as giving pastoral care to the community. He left Wilcannia in 2003, to finally retire to Newcastle, NSW.
- 4 This is a broad, but nevertheless valid, simplification of what is a complex social and scientific history of thinking and writing (McGregor 1993; Anderson 2007). Whether in a monogenecist argument, which placed all races as part of one human species, all in a state of decline from Adam; or in a polygenecist argument, which saw human races as separate biological species 'descendents of different Adams' (Gould 1981:39) – whites remain at the top of the highest and strongest tree.

CHAPTER 2

Art and culture

The two main things, right?



Art and culture: the two main things, right? Because you get any visitor what come along ... they interested in Aboriginal culture, they interested in art, right?

(Badger Bates, Wilcannia Aboriginal artist)

In the early twentieth century, art was informed by hierarchical notions of cultural development. This saw societies ranked in evolutionary terms, from the lowest to the highest, with capabilities in art and technology bearing a direct relation to their ranking. In the case of Aboriginal art, this evolutionary paradigm posed a problem for theorists confronted by art that seemed at once both sophisticated and yet the product of ‘savages’. This resulted in theorizing of the kind typified by George Grey, who discovered cave paintings in the north-west of Australia in 1838: ‘I wondered that so fair a land should only be the abode of savage men; and then I thought of the curious paintings we had this day seen.’ (Grey 1964 [1841]:207).

Grey deduced that the existence of this art was evidence of the habitation of a superior race, and proposed that Malayan artists had created the work (Mulvaney 1990:19). Such theorizing persisted for another hundred years. That these paintings had indeed been created by Aboriginal people proved problematic for post-Darwinian Theory (Mulvaney 1990).

The power of Aboriginal art and culture, and the discourses and practices that deploy and bring these concepts into being, have their

shifting nature shown in the case of Pintupi people of the Western Desert. In the present, the Pintupi are internationally recognized for their art; yet in the past, the Pintupi were thought to 'demonstrate limited cultural achievement' and were 'despised as representing the lowest levels of savagery' (Myers 2002:6). How did this shift from thinking of the Pintupi as having no culture, to being considered the epitome of culture, come about? What is this art?

The close conceptual relationship between art and culture has special resonance in the context of Wilcannia, where art is made and culture is denied. It raises several questions. In what ways can Aborigines in Wilcannia, who are seen to lack culture, be ascribed art? What is it that differentiates the Barkindji from Aboriginal groups such as the Pintupi, the Warlpiri or the Yolgnu, who live in the remote areas of the central and northern Australia, and who are afforded both culture and art by the wider Australian society?

The 'Acrylic Art Movement' emerged out of Papunya in the Western Desert region of central Australia during the 1970s. At that time, a young, white art teacher named Geoff Bardon encouraged senior, mainly Pintupi, Aboriginal men, living at Papunya, a government settlement established in 1960 for Aboriginal people, to express their ceremonial life and cosmology in acrylic paints on board and canvas. These designs had previously been depicted through the more ephemeral forms of body- and sand-painting, as well as on shields and other ceremonial paraphernalia. Since Bardon's time, 'Aboriginal art' and 'Aboriginal culture' are increasingly viewed as being inseparable, if not synonymous (see Sutton 1988; Kleinert and Neale 2000; Myers 2002). The Acrylic Art Movement and increasing popularity of Aboriginal art, including on the world stage, have helped lay the groundwork for widely held expectations that to be Aboriginal you have to have art. Media images of Aboriginal people sitting on the red earth dotting paint onto canvas with a stick dipped in an old tin or plastic container have become ubiquitous. These images have come to signify an unspoken Aboriginal connection to 'country' and the presence of a valued Aboriginal culture.

The artworks of these and other 'remote' Australian Aboriginal people arguably perform as tangible evidence of the presence of Aboriginal culture for the wider Australian public and internationally. Yet culture is flatly denied for some groups of Australian Aborigines. In the case of Wilcannia, saying 'no' to Aboriginal culture and saying 'yes' to Aboriginal art, cloaks

and hides some extraordinarily destructive effects; at base, it is a refusal of who Aboriginal people believe they are.

Tradition, art and the Dreaming

Looking at the Wilcannia social scene through the categories of art and culture, we begin to see how the continued and productive effects of the differentiating tropes of 'traditional' and 'settled' Aboriginal people are crystallized. Ideas of Aboriginal art can serve as a measure of the ways in which 'detribalized', 'settled' and 'part-Aborigines' are separated from those thought 'traditional', 'tradition-oriented' or 'full-blood' Aborigines. An important measure of tradition is the practice of the Dreaming or Aboriginal Law (Stanner 1979; Williams 1988). Indeed, most 'traditional' Aboriginal art is claimed – through 'traditional artists', curators, exhibitions, art dealers and many anthropological texts – to be grounded in the ceremonies, stories and other elements of the Dreaming.¹

When the acrylic paintings of the Central and Western Deserts began their rise in public popularity, the idea of the Dreaming was trenchant in their marketing and valorization. Exhibitions, texts, art advisers and art dealers stressed the importance of the Dreaming and of the authentic and timeless nature of artists and their work (see Cohodas 1999 for similar judgments of 'authentic' Native Americans). In the book that accompanied an exhibition of Aboriginal art held in New York's Asia Society Galleries, Sutton explains the relationship between art and the Dreaming thus:

Most Aboriginal art, at least until comparatively recently, has been enmeshed in religious performance and the social networks and territorial groupings of its practitioners. The imagery of Aboriginal art, and that of the songs, dances and ceremonial paraphernalia, is related both to the bodies of Aboriginal mythic narrative and to the wider symbolisms of daily life and belief. Together these symbolisms constitute a complex code of interaction that continually remodels, and at the same time reflects, Aboriginal cosmology, sociality, and notions of the person. *Reproducing the culture, in this sense, is also in Aboriginal eyes reproducing or 'following up' the Dreaming.*

(Sutton 1988:14, my emphasis).

This exhibition and its book was something of a watershed for the international recognition of Aboriginal art. A difficulty for Aboriginal

art arises from the view that traditions, particularly those of eastern and southern Australian Aboriginal people, 'either became extinct or declined to a point where only a handful of individuals still knew some remnant of them by the 1970s' (Sutton, Jones and Hemming 1988:181). Remnants of tradition are not what the market wants; what the market wants is the imagined purity and authenticity of tradition untainted by colonization. If, as is generally the case for Aboriginal Australians, culture is portrayed as something that can be depleted but not added to following contact, Aboriginal people in the south-east of Australia can only ever be viewed as having less of the qualities required for positive recognition by the art world and by some anthropologists.

The Dreaming and tradition as indices of authenticity are viewed as proportionally possessed more by Aboriginal people living in the centre or north of the continent than by those living in the south-east. In fact, the more substantial the perceived and actual spatial and cultural distance from whites, the greater the possibility for authenticity of these kinds to exist. Notions of a pristine, holistic, untouched culture untainted by contact are 'artificial' (Sutton and Anderson 1988:5). Yet it is the extent of contact that is the basis for the separation of Aboriginal cultures into categories of 'urban', 'traditional' or 'tradition-oriented' that continues to be made in both arts-related and other contexts.

Howard Morphy, one of the foremost anthropologists of Australian Aboriginal art, states that divisions 'between "tribal" and "urban", "classical" and "modern", "traditional" and "non-traditional" pose more problems than they help solve' (2001:7). The problem being that 'any dual division ... simplifies the variety and internal dynamism of Aboriginal art and threatens to impose rigid external categories which constrain the development of the art and define its authenticity' (2001:7). Despite this warning, Morphy goes on to discuss the Aboriginal art of south-eastern Australia by differentiating it according to its connection with the Dreaming; a foundational and current characteristic in evaluating the authenticity of 'Aboriginal art':

In some parts of Australia Aboriginal Art almost lost contact with the Dreaming for more than a century. Aboriginal people as victims of colonialism, deprived of their land, decimated by disease, murdered and dispersed, often forcibly separated from their children, found it difficult to continue their ceremonial life. Indeed, it was taken for granted by the wider society that Aboriginal art had disappeared from the South-East

by the end of the nineteenth-century. Aborigines entered a period of invisibility when they were no longer thought of as a presence in the land.

(Morphy 2001:319).

To draw attention to these dichotomizations of Aboriginal art is not to deny that differing degrees of white contact have an impact, but rather to question the way this is assumed to produce analytic categories that are useful or meaningful. The identification of the resulting categories in terms of authenticity, continuity of tradition and the Dreaming serves, in many ways, to invalidate Wilcannia Aborigines and their art. The evolutionary relationships posited to exist between 'traditional' and 'urban', the latter encapsulating south-eastern Aboriginal people by default, continues to 'mark an inevitable falling away' of the former (Collmann 1988:227). Roberta Sykes, who identifies as Aboriginal, asks what 'uniquely Aboriginal theme then, is left for urban Blacks whose Dreaming has largely been obliterated by the white people?' (1990:6). In answer to this question, she cites the urban artists' celebration of, and struggle for, survival, and the highly politicized expression of urban art. From a situation in which urban Aboriginal people were seen to have no culture, or merely remnants of culture, there are now the beginnings of equally strong assertions by Aboriginal people that those deemed not 'traditional' do in fact have a cultural way of life which is recognizably not white, and that they value it. This recognition is not yet as strong in anthropological discourse as it is in the art discourse; although some, such as the ethno-historian Kleinert (1994) have taken this on, as have some upcoming Ph.D. scholars. In scholarly discourse, some argue for a previously unrecognized continuity of 'tradition', whilst others place the stress on adaptability, resilience, and the oppositional and politically challenging nature of the artworks, paintings in particular (Johnson 1990; Kleinert 1994; Kleinert and Neale 2000; Morphy 2001; Sykes 1990). In both positions, however, there nevertheless remains a clear separation between 'remote', 'traditional' (more recently 'tradition-oriented') and 'urban', 'non-tribal' or 'settled' Aboriginal people. The art of regional and country Aboriginal people, when considered at all, is often subsumed under the 'urban' or 'contemporary' category by virtue of what it is not, that is, 'traditional'.

The distinctions between 'urban' and 'remote traditional' Aborigines share discursive and imagined parallels with notions of Aborigines

as disenfranchised 'drunks' and 'Aborigines as masters of the land' respectively: the two poles of a continuum along which 'Australians typically interpret Aboriginal experience' (Collmann 1988:225). I am not denying that there are differences in the degree of contact, and that these differences have different consequences for a changing social world; the problem lies with what these analytical divides drag in their wake, and the paucity of more nuanced analyses. Few take the kind of art that is made in Wilcannia seriously. Those who decide what is real, serious art, and what is not, arbitrate on the basis of perceptions of remoteness and 'tradition'. The early marketing of Aboriginal art, which located its value in these terms, keeps conceptions of Aboriginal art constrained in ways which restrict any serious recognition of Wilcannia art.

Social commentators and anthropologists have, to some extent, recognized the ability of Aboriginal people in Central and Northern Australia to incorporate recent events, physical structures and entities such as cars, introduced animal species and white settlers into their Law and Dreaming (Myers 1986). While many anthropologists and Aboriginal people from those areas are happy to talk of 'Toyota' or 'bullocky' Dreamings that have been created post-contact, Aboriginal people from Wilcannia have taken on board the earlier anthropological meanings of 'traditional Aborigine': that which is untouched and unchanging. When I mentioned 'Toyota', 'goat' and 'bullocky' Dreamings to Aboriginal friends in Wilcannia, these notions were variously mocked as inauthentic, fraudulent or laughable; people thought I was in fact joking. In Wilcannia, no one spoke of newly realized Dreamings; Wilcannia Aboriginal people argue for non-Aboriginal recognition of their 'traditional' Dreamings under conditions and terms not of their making. In many ways it is this position that precludes Wilcannia artworks from being taken seriously. If artists were consciously 'political' or 'hybrid', they could fit one of the new categories that afford value in art-world terms.

The valorization of the timeless, traditional Aborigine has been fed by tourism, followers of 'new age' spirituality (Byrne 1996) and, to a lesser extent, some environmentalists. This has led to a situation whereby 'non-Aboriginal Australians enjoy ancient traditions while suspecting the authenticity of the Aboriginal subject; [and] Aboriginal Australians enjoy their traditions while suspecting the authenticity of themselves' (Povinelli 2002:57). A position that resonates for many in Wilcannia:

in contrast to the concept of, say, a 'unicorn', most Australians believe that to which 'traditions' refers existed at some point in time and believe some residual part of this prior undifferentiated whole remains in the now fragmentary bodies, desires, and practices of Aboriginal persons.

(Povinelli 2002:48)

That many Aborigines also continue to measure themselves against, as well as seek, this imagined 'lost' state, and its knowledge, is part of anthropology's legacy. It is also an element of a more recent national history that has emphasised the pleasure of a comprehensive and full ancient Aboriginal tradition against a hollow lack of settler belonging (Lattas 2000).

Aboriginal people in Wilcannia have a strong sense of their Aboriginal identity, yet, as culture has increasingly come to require externalized tangible demonstration, many struggle to possess this thing which has been 'lost'. Like whites, they talk of the 'real tribal people', the 'full-bloods' 'up north', and mourn this elusive creation called 'traditional culture'. For Aborigines in Wilcannia, as with Aboriginal people in other parts of south-east Australia, interest in gaining knowledge about Dreaming stories and rituals has been revived with the Land Rights process of the 1970s, which served to validate traditional forms of Aboriginality previously deemed lost and worthless (Beckett 2000). This focused interest in Dreaming knowledge, in particular the ancestral being of Ngatyi, the Rainbow Serpent, is echoed in the content of contemporary Wilcannia artworks (see Figures 10 and 11). There is a level of yearning among Wilcannia Aborigines for a way of living and of being that cannot fully be articulated or experienced, but that the promise of traditional culture is thought to fill. People draw on what is known of the now limited circulating vocabulary of the Barkindji language, stories of mythical beings and their travels, mythological sites, and artefacts such as boomerangs and clubs held in museums, as a way of demonstrating that they have not lost their culture. What might be thought problematic, is that culture is being sought in these particular ways and specific terms. While reflexive 'culture' is always an imagined arena, a fantasy space in which we imagine who we are; the extent to which Wilcannia culture is sought in artefacts and symbols outside of lived daily life is troubling.

This *thing* called 'culture' is actively being sought at the same time that it is actively asserted as present, real and alive. This is taking place within a



Figure 10 Lino print 'Ngatji Nguku Minger' (Rainbow Serpent at his waterhole) by Badger Bates. © Badger Bates 1994. Reproduced with permission of the artist.

social domain in which knowledge of 'culture' is increasingly recognized as a resource. At the home of a Barkindji friend one day, his 'little mate' came to visit. His mate was very drunk and kept asking my friend to 'tell me some more tales, bruh' (brother). He kept saying how he was a Barkindji man and loved his country and began to get quite emotional, saying to my friend, 'Cut me, bruh. Cut me, bruh.' – referring to a ritual scarring practice. My friend said that they did not do that anymore: 'That's gone, bruh.' He went on to say that they do not have the law or the lawmen that know how to do it, and that the meaning of each '*nincka*' (cut) had been lost. His mate kept insisting that if my friend did not cut him, then he would do it himself; that he just felt like throwing himself against a tree³ or jumping into the river. He said, 'I want to learn, bruh. I'm all ears.' I asked if speaking to one of the elders might help. He said that one of his uncles (an elder) was going to take him to snake cave (a sacred site at Mutawintji, where male initiation ceremonies used to be held),³ but that each time he tried to talk to or learn from this uncle, his uncle was drunk: 'He's a drunk cunt.' My friend told his



Figure 11 *Ngatji surrounded by native river life. 'Untitled' acrylic on canvas by Barney Williams (dec.). © Barney Williams 2003. Reproduced with permission of owner.*

mate that he had a right to his opinion, but that this particular elder had taught him much and that he respected him.

Some time later I was talking to the elder in question, and I presented a hypothetical question to him around the young man's comments. He said that he felt very responsible for teaching the young ones, but that the demands on him and his time in relation to 'teaching culture' were so great that if he didn't get drunk he would 'go mad'. This apparent safeguard against being burnt out by the cultural demands of kith and kin (see also Schwab 1995) sits alongside the much in demand resource of 'cultural knowledge', which is asserted as being present but also recognized as scarce.

The onus on the elders to share what they know of 'culture' can be in tension with the fact that 'cultural knowledge' is also, more than ever, a primary political, economic and socio-cultural resource. Family and other rivalries have seen restrictions on the sharing of what is talked about as 'cultural knowledge'. This is particularly so in relation to the nature and location of certain sites. The sharing of certain knowledge, which might

assist with a young man's feelings of ontological dissonance, is rationed in accordance with a different economy of exchange and under different conditions. While Barkindji people recognize, to some extent, what they view as a loss of culture as a structural failure of colonization, this sense of loss is also expressed, and indeed experienced and embodied, for some, as a more personal and individual failing. The young man who wanted to have scars cut into his body can be considered to be not only longing for a conspicuous sign of cultural knowledge, but also for an embodied pain: for culture to be carved into his flesh in ways that might let him know that he is alive. He longs to feel *something* of this *thing* called culture through embodied rites that he hopes might work to cancel out his present pain of cultural loss (Jackson 1983).

Push and pull – artistic freedom and making a living

During my time in Wilcannia, artworks from around the western NSW region were being collected for a 2002 exhibition titled 'What's going on! Contemporary indigenous art from the Murray Darling Region.' The exhibition was being curated by the Mildura Arts Centre, located in a country town in northern Victoria 500 km south of Wilcannia. This exhibition sought to provide 'engagement with contemporary indigenous artists in our region' (Mildura Arts Centre 2002). A friend whose work was to be included in the exhibition, told me that the curator had selected some of her paintings and rejected others on the grounds that she wanted 'only the tribal ones'. I asked her how she felt about this; she said, 'It made me feel split.'

The curator's approach is interesting in a number of ways; the tribal distinction was perceived and made as if natural, and was upheld while espousing, as the exhibition title suggests, the 'contemporary' nature of the artwork. In the framework of this exhibition, art, culture and tradition become requisites of one another. The extent to which frameworks such as this guides artists' decisions about their future work while unclear, must nevertheless be considered for the personal emotions such distinctions elicit. One might postulate quite a different Aboriginal art scene today, if Geoff Bardon in 1970 in Central Australia had not insisted on: 'Nothing whitefella. No whitefella colour, no whitefella perspective, no whitefella images.' (1991:xv; see also Michaels 1994). My friend faced a similar injunction forty years later when her painted flowers were not selected for the Mildura exhibition; native flowers painted in a more realist

style, as these were, did not satisfy the requirement for an exhibition of contemporary Aboriginal art.

Many Aboriginal artists have responded to the subsequent increase in demand for 'traditional' Aboriginal art by creating work that is readily recognized as such, at the expense of free artistic expression. This response to commercial reality is particularly understandable given the dire economic need of many Aboriginal artists. Some anthropologists are critical of Aboriginal people who look to tradition or who essentialize stereotypes as a way of creating an identity; accusing them of fabricating politically unhelpful identities.⁴ However, the Aboriginal people creating these identities have their own agendas, which include the capacity to earn some money and bolster their autonomy through the sale of their art. Along with Lattas (1993), I question the efficacy of such a negative position on the part of white intellectuals; equally, I question their right to attempt to determine what should be considered fruitful and valid in building Aboriginal identity.

The expectations of the art world and art dealers also impacts on those artists more readily deemed 'traditional' and who work for or in art centres across Central and Northern Australia. In Central Australia, for example, the transference of ideas about authentic and 'traditional' art is, some may say unavoidably, prescribed by certain art critics, advisers and dealers, who discriminate between the art on offer on the grounds of good taste and market pressure (Michaels 1994). Expectations and pressures such as those applied to my friend could be viewed simply as being part of a free market economy. Seen in this way, it is the demand of non-Aboriginal buyers for authenticity that has created this particular art scene, and in many ways my friend and others like her choose to be part of it: at times the capacity to exert personal artistic agency is present, at others not. Creating art certainly provides a source of income in an environment of otherwise scarce employment. Yet the uneven power differentials between the artists, the dealers and art-world decision-makers leaves open the question of whether the artist can always choose what to paint. Ultimately, it is never artists who determine art fashions and markets, and the outcome and implications of artists and art-world relationships and dealings are not fully understood by many of the artists concerned.

The presence of Aboriginal art in Wilcannia, together with the white denial of Aboriginal culture, reveals the ambiguities and tensions that mediate views, images and experiences of Aboriginality, Aboriginal Art and

Aboriginal culture. One such tension is the desire of whites to appropriate aspects of a perceived Aboriginal world, while retaining distance from its actuality. Artworks, their production and circulation offer a perspective on this position. Robert Hughes' much-cited review of the Paris exhibition, *Magiciens de la terre*, is an example of this romantic and nostalgic embrace of Aborigines, in which, although no longer savages, Aborigines remain primitives embodying a desired spirituality:

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

(Hughes 1988:80)

The suggestion that Aboriginal paintings vicariously offer a redemptive spirituality is not simply a discourse of 'new-agers,' it is also a nationalistic endeavour (Marcus and Myers 1995:1–51; Lattas 2000). It is those Aborigines deemed 'tribal' and 'traditional' that have, in effect, been charged with helping white Australians reclaim a spirituality and connection to land from which they are disenfranchised. This is a valorization embodied in public displays and events such as the 1988 national celebrations for the Australian Bicentenary (commemorating the establishment of the British colony) and the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games, both of which projected a traditional Aboriginal performativity and presence onto the world stage. The cultural space that the nation has assigned to traditional Aboriginal people and their art, because it is an ideal and mythic one, calls for – indeed, in order to remain possible, necessitates – a proximal distance from physically present Aborigines. Discourses that align aspects of Aboriginality with narratives about nationalism operate as myths, not because they are 'false,' but because they inhabit 'an imaginary space full of primordial truths about identity and society' (Lattas 1990:54). Myths of this type can only be sustained through distance, to avoid contamination of the ideal by the real. Indeed, as Sutton (2005) rather sardonically points out, cultural relativism,

works best in its simplest and strongest form when exotic people stay in exotic locations. Indigenous urban migration and the penetration of the media into remote places ... have in recent years brought mainstream Australians into new degrees of contact with foreign cultural patterns and behaviours that at times they find unacceptable or even repugnant.

(Sutton 2005:10–11)

Real contact and relationships with Aboriginal people are not conducive to the maintenance of these myths. In Wilcannia and other NSW country towns, these myths collide with actual patterns and behaviours. This is not to say that they do not also collide in more remote locations in which the presence of 'traditional Aboriginality' is thought to exist. Walking around Alice Springs in the centre of Australia, for example, there is much that not only mainstream Australians, but also the many international visitors who come with a view to seeing traditional Aboriginal culture find surprising, challenging and even repugnant in Aboriginal behaviour. Regular public drunkenness, begging, fighting and body odours (such as the, mostly now unfamiliar, smell of fresh sweat together with unwashed bodies and clothes) are met with obvious signs of breath holding and vocal disgust by many of the wider public. This reality does not mesh with the glossy advertising that draws many to Central Australia. However, in tourist destinations such as Alice Springs these impressions can be filtered out by the omnipresence of the commercial Aboriginal world on display. The high-class art dealers' windows stretching along Todd Mall and the glossy cultural posters and tours feature Aboriginal people and culture in ways at odds with the immediate surrounds and the majority of lives. Here, bracketing out is possible; all kinds of imaginings are possible when one is surrounded by the red desert, where Aboriginal people hawk their paintings seated in groups on the ground and the ever-present didgeridoo comes in sound bites from the gift shops selling 'Aboriginal' souvenirs made almost anywhere but in Australia. It is much more difficult to imagine this commercial world of spiritual Aboriginality in many NSW country towns where these familiar cues are all but absent.

Conflating Aboriginal art and culture

The purposes, production and reception of Aboriginal art sees the myths of Aboriginal culture reconfigured in interesting ways. Tracking the trajectory of what might now be called the Aboriginal arts-and-crafts

industry illustrates the conflation of Aboriginal art and culture, and the centrality of artworks to contemporary perceptions of Aboriginality. After the 1967 referendum in which Australian Aboriginal people were granted citizenship, 'self-determination' became the direction of government policy, one which the Australian Labor Party endorsed on its election in 1972. The advancement of Aboriginal culture and the arts was part of this foregrounding. In the early 1970s, the 'Cultural Policy' of the Aboriginal Arts Board (AAB)⁵ had among its eight objectives,

to develop programs designed to encourage the teaching and practice of *Aboriginal culture* ... to educate the wider community in the value and quality of all aspects of *Aboriginal art and culture* ... to encourage a pride in, and knowledge of, *Aboriginal culture* among the wider community both in Australia and overseas.

(DAA 1989:111, my emphasis)

Similarly, the DAA had a 'strictly cultural' objective of providing,

a better understanding of Aboriginal Australia and respect for all aspects of *Aboriginal cultural expression* through the maintenance, support and promotion of *Aboriginal arts and culture*.

(ibid.:112, my emphasis)

These policies and objectives, which linked art and culture, encouraged and claimed a 'growing recognition that in many parts of Australia, cultural production provides the only means to improve economic status' (ibid.:123, my emphasis). The inclusion of an economic emphasis nevertheless retained 'a great deal of cultural significance' (ibid.:123). The Community Development Employment Programme (CDEP)⁶ in Wilcannia provides an example of a situation in which Aboriginal people could choose to 'work' at making art with the aim of creating some economic benefits and as a means of building sustainable employment. The fact that art was offered as a standard work pathway, irrespective of any art training or recognized artistic ability, points to race-based assumptions that Aborigines make art and that art is an intrinsic aspect of Aboriginal culture. It is important to realize that through such policies and associated programmes, culture becomes something which can, and indeed must, be objectified and made tangible in order that it can be practised and sold.

It is a taken for granted anthropological maxim that all people have culture; at a basic level, culture can be found wherever people are to be found. Yet for a group or individual to articulate what constitutes their culture is never easy; nor is it a demand made of white Australians. For Aboriginal people, it is now necessary for culture to be verbally and practically demonstrated in order to be recognized and credited. Indeed, in some circumstances, the nature of that demonstration of culture is prescribed: the requirements of Native Title as well as cultural tourism are examples of this. Art-making is a readily identified vehicle through which Aboriginal people can signal knowledge and gain recognition; but this too is an arena fraught with contradiction.

Locating assumptions: timeless mystic or drunken bastard

During fieldwork I spent time with several Barkindji men who work as Park Rangers and Tour Guides for the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) at Mutawintji National Park. Mutawintji sits about 100 km west of Wilcannia and was the first National Park in NSW to be 'handed back' to the Traditional Owners under a joint management agreement with the NPWS. It is a place rich in Aboriginal history and Dreaming sites, with galleries of stencils, rock paintings and engravings (see Figures 12, 13 and 14).

Described by the NSW state tourism agency as 'one of the most important spiritual meeting places in Australia', the visitor is invited to tour the park with Aboriginal tour guides and to 'hear stories of the Dreamtime as you stand beside an ancient fireplace on the arid plain' (Tourism New South Wales 2010). Part of the tour guide's role requires them to take visitors to particular sites and to explain the Aboriginal history, stories, myths and ways of life associated with the area. During tours, the guides received celebratory tributes from the mostly white visitors: 'I wish we had your culture', 'Where can we go to learn about your culture?', 'You have such a spiritual culture'. Visitors sought knowledge on 'culture', 'Aboriginal art', 'spirituality', 'the didgeridoo', 'bush foods' and 'the Dreamtime'; all those familiar objectifications that have come to signal Aboriginal culture in the public imaginary. When pressed in this way, the guides were often unwilling or unable to answer such questions, responding with a mixture of silence and embarrassment. When looking back on such encounters in conversation with me, the guides recalled with much laughter how non-



Figure 12 Mutawintji National Park 2002. Photograph reproduced with the permission of William Bates, Traditional Owner.



Figure 13 Stencils at Mutawintji National Park 2002. Photograph reproduced with the permission of William Bates.



Figure 14 Engraving of Hunter and Kangaroo at Mutawintji National Park 2004. Photograph reproduced with the permission of William Bates.

Aboriginal people ‘go on’ about Aborigines; in particular, the white fixation on anything relating to broadly perceived notions of Aboriginal spirituality.

During the lunch break on one particular tour, I spoke with some of the non-Aboriginal tour participants who were visiting the park. They were curious about Wilcannia, partly because of the advice they had received. Bill, the white tour-operator, with whom they were travelling extensively in Australia, warned them when they made their overnight stop in Wilcannia that they were ‘not to go outside.’ They said that this advice surprised them as they felt that Bill ‘is very Aborigine orientated,’ as one tourist put it. When asked for a reason, Bill said that Wilcannia is ‘not very safe,’ and that this was especially the case ‘on pay day.’ Since the majority of the Aboriginal tour guides live in Wilcannia, and many were born there and have lived there all their lives, these were the people from the community the tour group would see and meet if they visited the town. Such second-hand representations of Aboriginal communities are not uncommon. Indeed, most Australians will only ever experience contact with Aboriginal people through images and discourses produced by the dominant settler society (Langton, quoted in Nicholls 2000:6).⁷

For these visitors, Wilcannia and the Aboriginal people who live there are framed by white tour operators, as well as by the media. Trevor, the Aboriginal tour guide for this particular group, had lived in Wilcannia all his life. The coming together of Trevor and the tourists in a remote bush setting at Mutawintji prompted assumptions that he was not the kind of Aborigine one finds in Wilcannia. Situations such as this demonstrate how the characteristics associated with the 'traditional', 'remote', 'bush black' are contextually applied to persons and situations, and shows the contradictory nature of these tropes. Assumptions and images regarding the supposed attributes of the 'remote', 'traditional' and 'bush black' continue to be played out, particularly as these are connected to geographical remoteness and readily imagined Aboriginal realms.

Not only has 'white man got no dreaming', as a senior Aboriginal man told Stanner (1979), many whites feel that Wilcannia Aboriginal people 'got no dreaming' either. Yet the purchase of Aboriginal art by whites in Wilcannia is often premised on whites seeing something of the Dreaming in their art. In this white discourse the Dreaming is located in country one hundred kilometres west of Wilcannia in Mutawintji National Park. It is deeply ironic that the Aboriginal tour guides from Wilcannia who take white visitors around Mutawintji are denied Aboriginal culture in their town context: yet at Mutawintji, the Aboriginal tour guides are seen by tourists to embody Aboriginal culture; indeed their presence serves to increase the authenticity of the Dreaming's presence.

Aboriginal rangers and tour guides from Wilcannia belong to a community that, in the town context, is denied 'traditional culture' by both local and visiting whites. But further, when located at Mutawintji, these tour guides serve to reinforce the viewpoint that leads to their own exclusion. By falling in line with the expectations of the tourists, their discourse and practice as Aboriginal tour guides serves to increase the authenticity of a traditional Aboriginality: the 'full blood', 'bush black', 'real Aborigine', a good figure whose wisdom can be tapped by whites (Hamilton 1990:22). Many Barkindji people asserted that presenting an image of the traditional 'noble savage' is a requisite for maintaining public interest in the tours; they consider and express that this is what the public expects and, in some cases, desires from this kind of 'Aboriginal' experience. They are right. White tourists with whom I spoke expressed disappointment when their guide was not sufficiently dark-skinned; they wanted a guide who 'looked like' an Aborigine. This was confirmed by Aboriginal people, who

told me that tourists want to see the 'darker ones', and some of whom try to accommodate this desire when organizing tours. The Aboriginal people concerned consider and imagine what it is to be more authentically, and acceptably, Aboriginal (Gunew and Rizvi 1994; Myers 1994, 2002).

One Mutawintji Ranger from Wilcannia, whose skin could be described as 'dark brown', said he wished that he was 'real black'. He joked with me that if he were 'real black', he would put on a *lap lap* (traditional genital covering), and when the tourists approached the historic site, he would jump out speaking the 'lingo', shake a spear at them and then run off into the distance. Although said in a light-hearted way, he is also expressing a sense of longing and lack. There is recognition by this Ranger that it is impossible for him to change his skin or perform this 'role'. His nostalgia for the 'traditional Aborigine' echoes the desire of white tourists for an authentic Aboriginal experience. There is clear pride in his connection to a powerful tradition, but also a deep sense of loss and sadness that to gain legitimacy requires a performative act and can never be fully achieved. Similar experiences and desires are replicated and shared by many Aboriginal people across the south-east. These expressions demonstrate the profound emotional and subjective effects of dominant signifiers of Aboriginality applied by both black and white (Lattas 1990; Marcus and Myers 1995:1–51). For many people, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, being a 'real Aboriginal' still equates to having black skin and living remotely in close physical connection with the land. This is despite the fact that over 65 per cent of Australia's Aboriginal population live in urban and town environments.

While Aboriginal discourse often appears to 'fall in' with the hegemonic discourse about what constitutes Aboriginal culture, it differs in important ways. The example of Donny, who is a Mutawintji tour guide and also an artist, is instructive here. In the Wilcannia town context, local whites discuss Donny in terms of his talent and his 'traditional style' paintings. This talk is invariably connected to Donny's propensity for drunkenness, which has often led to violent domestic situations and frequent incarceration. Non-Aboriginal visitors travelling through Wilcannia who stay at Paul's motel also comment on, and are often surprised by, the very presence of Donny's work, which Paul has displayed together with the work of other local Aboriginal artists.

In commenting on the work, motel visitors expressed not only stereotypical notions about Wilcannia Aborigines, but also more popular



Figure 15 'Meeting Place', acrylic on canvas by Willie Don Hunter. © Willie Don Hunter 2003. Reproduced with permission of the artist.



Figure 16 'Untitled' and undated acrylic on canvas ©Wayne Ebsworth. Reproduced with permission of the owner.

notions of what properly constitutes Aboriginal art. People expressed surprise that there were no 'dot paintings' at the motel of the style made popular by art from the Western Desert. Some customers were excited to find that Wilcannia art differed from these better-known styles of Aboriginal art yet was still recognizably 'Aboriginal'. That is, the work of Donny and other artists depicted Aboriginal figures, native animals such as kangaroos, emus, goannas, lizards, snakes and echidnas, animal, human and bird tracks, fish and turtles of the river, and boomerangs with recognizably Aboriginal motifs and designs. Many bore the subdued palette which has come to signify traditional 'authentic' Aboriginal colours: yellow, red and white ochres, with mixes of brown and black. Some featured the geometric elements common to art of the south-east (Tacon, South and Hooper 2003), and which are an element of the wooden weapons from the area held in the Australian Museum in Sydney (see Figures 15, 16, 17 and 18).



Figure 17 Boomerang from the Tallywalka area near Wilcannia held in the ethnographic collections of the Australian Museum Sydney. E03035 registered 1890). Photograph by Carl Bento, Australian Museum. Reproduced with permission of the Australian Museum.

For many local whites who are aware of Donny's personal life, the practice of art-making, as well as the content and style of Donny's art, is considered to be in tension with his perceived behavioural characteristics: if only he didn't drink, didn't hit his wife, he could be something, be someone, be a great artist. Donny's life, as lived, is seen to be in conflict with what he produces on canvas. Art is linked through these evaluations to its conferral of value on the human scale (Myers 1991; Merlan 2001): art is imagined here as a marker or redeemer of 'Culture' (with a capital c), as well as being construed as a sign of Aboriginal culture of a particular kind. It is seen to stand for something of worth: both the art and Donny are seen to have greater potential, 'if only...' These 'if onlys' are figured differently, however, for white artists.

On 15 June 1992, the white Australian artist Brett Whiteley was found dead in a motel room in Thirroul on the south coast of NSW; he had died from a drug overdose. This death was seen as his 'inevitable, almost inspired ruin' (Dickins 2002:7). A popular website selling Whiteley prints described the outcome as the result of a 'deliberate course of self



Figure 18 Boomerang from the Wilcannia area. Held in the ethnographic collections of the Australian Museum Sydney. E003028 (registered 1890). Photograph by Finton Mahoney, Australian Museum. Reproduced with permission of the Australian Museum.

destruction [which] seemed the natural corollary for achieving the ultimate freedom in self-expression' (Australian Local Lifestyle's Online 2005). Here we sense the admiration of certain dissolute beliefs because they are taken to accompany genius. Whiteley's death was not perceived to be surprising; indeed, it is viewed by some as natural, inevitable and even inspired. Although Whiteley's death drew various responses including sadness, 'mocking, slander and excoriation' (Dickins 2002:8), the point is that there is 'something' about not just Whiteley, but the 'artist' in Western society that almost expects and at times sanctions behaviour such as drunkenness and self-abuse. However, this behaviour is not sanctioned for black artists. When white artists engage in this behaviour, it is often taken as evidence of a tortured artistic soul. When Aboriginal artists in Wilcannia get drunk and, as they put it, 'muck up', whites speak of this in terms of negative, uncivilized and racially ascribed behaviour. While mucking up for Aboriginal people is not always or necessarily something to laugh about, it does not acquire the moral judgment applied by whites. Donny and others like him are blamed and condemned for their actions, which are seen to detract from, rather than enhance, their art and artistic potential; unlike Whiteley, artists like Donny are seen to be socially irresponsible and a societal burden.

Whether Donny is being viewed by outsiders as a traditional bush black, a tribal Aborigine, a cultural and artistic luminary, a useless drunken black bastard, with or without culture, as civilized or uncivilized, depends not only on which whites are ascribing the labels, but on context, experience and interpretation. For instance, the visiting art teacher might credit him with cultural capital, whereas the tourist might see only a good-for-nothing blackfella. Perhaps only his relations will value his tribal knowledge. But he is also his own person, a unique individual whose being includes and exceeds all of these categories. And he, like anyone else, has to deal with his awareness of others' readings of who he is. Context, location of meeting and the particular and imagined attributes assigned to 'types' of Aborigines all play their part in how an outsider might see him.

Donny's case tells us something about the complex issue of competing appeals to 'problem' Aboriginal behaviour. At times it is the bad behaviour, not the absence of traditional culture, that marks Donny and others like him; yet at other times both are asserted simultaneously by local and external whites. For some Aboriginal people, of course, what others deem 'bad behaviour' is merely the rough end of social relations. But,

the social and personal circumstances of their expression invokes the difference. Art becomes a site where this complexity is experienced and expressed agonistically. Yet these contradictions go beyond those between art, behaviour and primitivity. They reach into the wider social relations of a community where Aboriginal 'mucking up' is a general white condemnation. The constancy and anticipation of Aboriginal public aggression and disorder, on the part of whites, works against any nuanced community understanding of either the general condition or the specific cases. 'Race' and racial stereotyping is sufficient explanation. Race thus forms its ever present undercurrent in the daily interactions of Wilcannia and many other small country towns.

While many Aboriginal families live peaceful and quiet lives, and it is the minority that bash their family members and display aggressive behaviour, the impression of wide dysfunction casts its effects more widely within the densely interacting community. White observers tend to confuse general roughness with violence, ordinary arguments and fights with abusive violence, and ordinary teasing and swearing with violence and abuse. There are, of course, some very disturbed Aboriginal people, but they are part of a network of relations and part of the community. Aboriginal people do not eject their problem community members, but continue to accept and cope with them. What outsiders consider unacceptable, disturbing behaviour is accepted and normalized by the wider Aboriginal community.

Stressed lives and moral narratives

In towns like Wilcannia that have a predominantly welfare economy, black and white mostly come together around the provision of services. The few businesses, the school, the hospital, the police station and the local Shire Council are variously, run, owned or managed by members of the dominant white society. 'This is world of whitefellas doing things for blackfellas through work ... These primarily work-defined relationships shape interaction as they also create perception.' (Gibson 2010a:130). The categories of black and white are positioned in Wilcannia, for the most part, as racial monoliths. So, people approach situations in particular and practised ways once they have been in town a while. For example, the practice of being a white police officer, nurse or teacher entails the power to deal with the majority black recipients of these services in ways which are invariably construed in racial terms. An engineer or rates clerk at the

local Shire Council will have different experiences from a nurse at the hospital, whose occupation services Aboriginal individuals and families in situations that are often highly emotionally fraught, heated or the result of violence. Non-Aboriginal police and nurses new to town often arrive full of idealism, hoping to build good relations with the community. A few manage this for a while, or even occasionally for their whole stay in town. For the most part, however, the nature of their dealings with the community does not augur well for building Aboriginal friendships. After a short period they find themselves socializing with other whites who would rather adopt the standard stereotypes than struggle to maintain difficult relationships.

This is no simple divided world of 'blacks' and 'whites'. The experience of working at the hospital serves to illustrate the complex nature of social relations in Wilcannia. One evening an ambulance was called to attend to an Aboriginal patient, who was thought to be having a heart attack. Pauline, the nurse in attendance, said that when the ambulance got to the address, it was 'mayhem', that 'everyone was drunk and being generally abusive'. Pauline, together with the ambulance driver, John, tried to practise what is referred to locally as a 'swoop and scoop' – getting the patient out as quickly as possible, a practice used when there is trouble at the patient's location. This proved difficult, as most of those present were drunk and were 'arguing amongst themselves'. When Pauline and John got the patient into the ambulance, the patient's partner, who was also very drunk, got into the back of the ambulance to accompany her partner to hospital. Pauline said she had administered oxygen to the patient and reminded his partner not to smoke. The woman 'went to light up', and Pauline asked if she could 'hold your cigs till we get to hospital'. The partner replied, 'I'm not giving you my fags, you cunt'. In relaying this story to me later that evening, Pauline found some humour in what to most of mainstream society would seem a difficult, if not absurd, situation; one where she was also afraid of being 'blown to kingdom come' by the partner's belligerence. This is not an isolated situation. Sadly, such conflict-ridden cases are common, as are the charges of racism levelled against the white nurses who service towns such as Wilcannia. This criticism is mostly made by those who live some distance from these kinds of communities. Nurses speak of fearing for their and their patient's safety. They ask whether the job is worth the risk. The working relationships with certain Aboriginal staff, some of whom work to mediate between black and white worlds, and the many gentle and grateful

Aboriginal patients, makes the question of risk a vexed issue and is a matter of some ambivalence.

Alcohol is involved in most of these aggressive and difficult situations. Patients who abuse staff while drunk, do not do so when sober. Previously abusive patients may later laugh together with staff over past events; some ex-patients express shame at their behaviour. Nursing in Wilcannia is stressful, as staff both meet, and are part of, the stressful lives and conditions of many in the community. Different nurses relay medical situations with variations of disgust, humour, sadness and bewilderment. Racial difference nevertheless lies at the heart of these stories and exchanges. Some hospital staff joked that Wilcannia was 'one big ward'; that Aboriginal people use the ambulance like 'a taxi service'; and that Aboriginal people 'have learned manipulative behaviour'. One nurse said that this perceived manipulation was not to say that people 'were bunging it on' when they called the ambulance for what turned out to be minor medical conditions, but that this was ingrained behaviour and part of 'their disturbance'. Here 'disturbed' social conditions are the equivalent to the widely accepted designation of 'pathological'. I remain undecided whether it is the conditions or the community that is pathological or dysfunctional; such labels seem too easy.

Given that there is no public transport, no taxi service and private cars are not always on hand, it would seem reasonable to call for medical assistance from the only source of aid available – the hospital. There is no medical centre in Wilcannia, just as there is no resident doctor. The hospital is the only place where medical help can be obtained. I asked two nurses, Stewart and Lily, if calling for the ambulance in this way might be looked upon as sign of trust and confidence in the hospital staff. Stewart, who was on his fourth annual month-long secondment from a large, city hospital was amused; while Lily, who had recently arrived to undertake a one-year contract, sat nodding at this suggestion. Lily had come from a large regional teaching hospital and was keen to build her experience. She had not yet formed her opinions of the sociality of the town and its inhabitants.

Three months later Lily left Wilcannia. She felt that she was being pressured to treat patients beyond her training, and was 'not prepared to compromise either her patients or her career'. A senior hospital staffer said that while Lily had done all the 'super duper courses', she was not 'very capable'. While some nurses relished the opportunity to, for example,

stitch a wound without previous training, Lily was one who stuck firmly to the prescribed rules. Sometimes, the rules could get one into difficulties. After giving treatment to an infant she believed had suffered physical abuse, another nurse reported the family to the Department of Community Services (DOCS). A local enrolled nurse, who was also on duty, asked her what on earth she thought that she was doing, saying that she, the enrolled nurse, had to live in the town. Threats of violence from members of the baby's family saw the nurse who phoned DOCS leave town in fear. The enrolled nurse said that she went to see the baby's family, telling them that she did not know what would happen as a result of the report to DOCS, and that she had 'had no part in it'. These dilemmas are complex and have no easy answer. I felt similarly challenged when a friend relayed that one of her relatives had burned her month-old son with a cigarette. She claimed she was going to 'report the cunt'. I wondered, was she telling me this so that I, as a non-related white, could report it? I did not. For many readers my lack of action will be questionable, as it is also to me.

Aboriginal people feel anger at DOCS, for what they see as a heavy-handed response to reported cases and also cite a lack of cultural understanding. This situation has seen the position of DOCS caseworker in Wilcannia generally remain vacant. A white nurse who innocently asked why this was the case, was told that any successful candidate would have to 'be able to fight like Cassius Clay, talk like Martin Luther King, and run like Jesse Owens'. This humour takes the edge off the matter of child abuse; talk is around the generalities of such problems rather than the specifics. In a nation where the protection of children is a national concern, some charge the DOCS with becoming hyper-vigilant over child-protection matters, while others rail that more children should be removed from their parents. Events such as these hint at some serious problems that may be called 'pathological', but which are in fact specific cases that arouse deep anxieties and conflicts in everyone, myself included. The fact that many people in this town are inured to violence is not a condition that is easily dealt with. What was not an acceptable risk to the contracted nurse who was forced to leave town, was within the acceptable range for the local nurse. Those with local and longer term experience in Wilcannia not only have a different yardstick for what situations might need external intervention, they are also more in tune with the full extent of what might be going on in particular families.

There are diverging ways of dealing with the circumstances of patients by white hospital staff. Some nurses seem to draw permanently on sarcasm and attempts at humour in trying to make sense of a community with a great deal of dysfunction. Others are stoic, kind and sympathetic in the face of what are very difficult and trying circumstances in which they often bear the brunt of verbal and threatened physical abuse. Some of those who have spent longer periods in town are seemingly so accustomed to the kinds of situations discussed that they have become habituated to high levels of dysfunction. They operate in the practised ways that have become acceptable to the majority of those in town. The attitude seems to be that this is just the way things are, and that one has to be pragmatic.

One evening hospital staff were waiting for the arrival of a patient who had phoned up with 'sore ribs' and a 'sore arse'. Stewart, who took the call, looked up the patient's record. He was very blasé as he read out the patient's previous hospital visits, which included the patient presenting several times with 'a kick to the head'. He added that this particular patient looked like she 'had gone through the windscreen of a car'; and that these were 'not new injuries' but the result of 'a lifetime of abuse'. Stewart also determined that that the patient was related to 'that woman who got the investigation into the royal commission'. The case of Mark Quayle has left a bitter taste in the mouths of blacks and whites alike; no-one wants a repeat of this. Stewart's impersonal and almost cynical treatment of the patient and her circumstances was not appreciated by Pauline, the other nurse on duty. Whether Stewart's tough exterior was a way of protecting himself from the distress before him is not clear. There is much complexity here. Why he spends one month per year at Wilcannia away from his permanent nursing job in another Australian city hospital is also not entirely clear. What does seem clear is that some thrive in these often highly adrenalin-charged situations; while they would not take this kind of job permanently, a short stint at Wilcannia is both good for the career and creates a short frisson in otherwise dull lives. Both blacks and whites are alert to being taken advantage of, each by the other; there is a sometimes veiled, sometimes explicit, battle as to who is using who and who will gain the upper hand, as this is understood.

Aboriginal people in Wilcannia expect a high level of service from their hospital staff. The last decades have seen them gain awareness of their status as victims and the weapon of accusations of racism. White staff are fearful of charges of racism should they not appear to respond

appropriately to community requests and demands; some Aboriginal people knowingly use this fear. In Wilcannia I drove a white Subaru, the same make and model as government employees cars. Early one evening I was visiting at a house in the Mallee, and a relative of the home-owner was sitting outside; she had had a great deal to drink. Her broken leg was in a cast. As I got into my car to leave, she yelled at me to take her to the hospital. She said she was meant to have gone to hospital for an appointment earlier that day, but could not get there; she told me in no uncertain terms to take her immediately. I replied that I was not going to the hospital, I was going home. Mistaking me for a nurse, she yelled 'I'll report you on Monday, ya cunt.' Her niece came outside and told her to stop being silly: 'That Lorraine, she not a nurse.' The woman continued to rail at me, while the rest of us found shared quiet amusement in her non-recognition of me and her general demeanour. I did take her to the hospital; as I dropped her off, she instructed me several times to 'wait here' until she had been seen to, and I was then to take her home. There is a level of entitlement and expectation that has come about through various structural and historic factors. The woman's expectations are, in part, a response to the poor treatment of Aboriginal people, white guilt and the white fear of the charge of racism.

At the same time, many white people who are long-term residents of Wilcannia are tired of the reputation of the town; they are tired of seeing and hearing about drunken and violent behaviour; they are tired of well-meaning 'blow-ins' who seek to educate them on the trials and tribulations of colonization; they are tired of being viewed as 'rednecks'. White 'solutions' to the 'problems' of Wilcannia vary. The relative lack of job opportunities for Aboriginal people, their perceived reluctance to work, and their reluctance to leave their home town for work is commonly presented as creating many of the town's social problems (Gibson 2010). One man likened Wilcannia people's unwillingness to leave for work or education to them being like 'non-migratory birds,' which 'are not the brightest'. A white farmer said that she did not want to send her children away to boarding school, but that whites know that this is what needs to be done for their children to get on in the world. She indicated that whites are prepared to make this sacrifice for the good of their children and society. Many Aboriginal people see this as whites valuing careers and material possessions over relationships; a sign that whites do not have the close family networks and dense sociality enjoyed by Aborigines.

Disenchantment with racial charges and behaviours is echoed by Aboriginal people, who relay their own stories. One evening a local Aboriginal woman called the police for assistance as there were children sniffing petrol at the back of her house. They were, she said, setting fire to someone's house, and the woman 'didn't want to go out and scare them,' as she was afraid they 'would panic' and someone would 'get burned'. The police informed the woman that they were on another job. After a while she said she phoned them again, telling them she was very afraid someone was going to be badly burned. The police, she said, had told her that 'they wouldn't be hard to find if they were on fire'. The woman hung up the phone. She said 'police are meant to look after our kids'. Alleged police responses such as this serve to confirm to Aboriginal people that whites really do not care. They also highlight the special role allocated to police in negotiating social relations. Had the woman attended to, or scolded the children, and they had been hurt, she would have incurred some of the responsibility and blame from families. Police, as whites operating outside Aboriginal sociality, can act in ways which allow for a separation between the complainant and the action taken. That is, requests for police to respond in situations such as that described above sees them vicariously located by the wider Aboriginal community as the initiators and instigators of any police action, thereby leaving the person(s) complaining out of the equation.

More recently a young Aboriginal man, having fought with his partner, put his fist through a sheet of glass, badly lacerating his arm. The family called the police; the young man was said to be so terrified of being arrested that he ran off. He was found dead some time later, having bled to death. Those who relayed this story spoke of the young man's fear of police. They posed the following question: how scared would one have to be to run off with what must have been a cut artery? While Aboriginal people focus on the fear, whites focus on the fact that the deceased man put his fist through glass because he was drunk and aggressive. These differences in moral narratives are, for the most part, irreconcilable.

While many whites tut-tut at the public street fight, and while those fighting often fail to see a problem, most of the town's population, both black and white, go about their business without taking part in these disturbances, concentrating mostly on the discourse they give rise to. Many times I found myself asking, what was it that kept whites living in Wilcannia, given the litany of their complaints? Answering this is difficult. Staying in

Wilcannia, it seems to me, comprises voluntary and involuntary aspects. Many long-term whites continue to uphold the idea that Wilcannia is a town built by whites and their forebears, a town where blacks have come to live and they (whites) are not going to be driven out; some rub along with the Aboriginal community in ways that involve little public socializing, choosing to remain distant from or oblivious to the less desirable activities. Their socializing occurs within the homes of like-minded people, and while they may discuss or gossip over the town events, there is little that directly affects them; vandalism and theft being two exceptions. One reason for certain whites staying in Wilcannia is, ironically, precisely because of the perceived poor behaviour of certain Aboriginal people, and, the ready acceptance of this by most of the Aboriginal community. That is, while the behaviour of certain troublemaking individuals is resented, there is also, a sense of freedom in knowing that one can, unless extremely disliked, equal this behaviour without sanction from the Aboriginal community, who are far more ready to understand and excuse, for example, a drunken rant, domestic abuse or casual infidelity. Having had too much to drink at times, staggering home from the Golfie I found myself both freed up by, and grateful for, the level of acceptance I was afforded in exhibiting such behaviour.

While painting and artworks may seem remote from such situations, they offer something of a focal point and salve to community relations through a sharing of art's importance.

Perceived disparities: beautiful art, ugly lives

The buyers of Wilcannia art comprise mainly the transient white workforce, those who come to town periodically for business and those who stop for the night at the local motel. Stopping for the night at the motel is, in itself, often seen to be risky behaviour; a dinner-party story to talk about on the return home. For many of these people, working in or passing through Wilcannia, there is a sense of 'Been there, got the T-shirt'. Indeed, one local whitefella had a T-shirt made for his visiting granddaughter with 'I survived Wilcannia' printed on it, which he said was created as a sardonic act. The demand for a supply of the T-shirt, by both blacks and whites living in Wilcannia, speaks to a disparity of values rather than to any shared ones. The paintings purchased by whites, as with the T-shirts, are a token of 'them' (Aboriginal people) and of 'us' (not Aboriginal), and mark the gap between them and us.

The paintings here not only perform Aboriginality, they signify a certain danger or wildness that the purchaser may be able to enjoy vicariously from the comfort of their own home. The perceived ambiguity between what the artwork represents and the life of the artists may be experienced by the purchaser as a tension in the artwork itself. People ask, how can the makers of such beautiful images live such ugly lives? One woman asked one artist where on earth did the artists get their ideas from, prompting him to ask me later if whites think 'we're fucken' animals or somethin'. The disparity between the artwork and the lived life may be experienced as a kind of frisson: there is clearly a certain cachet in being the owner of an artwork from Wilcannia, in view of its reputation as a violent and marginal place.

Art is produced by Aboriginal people in Wilcannia and purchased by visiting and local whites. While whites acknowledge that art is culture, comments such as 'Do you have ten minutes?' were given in response to my requests for information about the nature of Aboriginal culture in Wilcannia; the implication being that since there is little culture to describe, little time is needed to describe it.

The constant practice of articulating Aboriginal culture and culture's forms by the art industry, academics and government has seen increasing Aboriginal reflexivity in matters of culture and what it is thought to be. The colonizing process, together with a European self-consciousness, has resulted in the increasing externalization of culture as a symbol (Linnekin 1990:149). Rather than engaging with real Aboriginal people, the nation can appropriate the commoditized images and symbolic forms of Aboriginal culture as a means of connecting with an ancient past and a sense of belonging which many settlers feel they lack (Hamilton 1990:18). It is not only commodified images that are appropriated, but the physical paintings themselves. Importantly, as Lattas recognizes, 'it is the incorporation into the commodification-of-culture circuits that renders [Aborigines] admirable' (2000:270). Ideas of Aboriginal culture and its spirituality can, through material artworks, become something to be grasped, achieved and bought. The artwork can thus be separated from the worker who makes it in particular ways.

Ordinary Australians who may have trouble dealing with the poverty, customs, and appearances of Aborigines, have finally been able to

respect their art form. For Westerners, beautiful artifacts are the accepted currency of cultural achievement.

(Pekarik 1988:52)

This involves more than the separation of the person from the product of their labour, as occurs with paid employment in a capitalist society. The artist's presence can, in fact, detract from the message the art carries or is made to carry. The artworks, although functioning as entities separated from the people, are not, as we see in Donny's case, separated from certain ideas about the people who make them. These ideas are informed by social Darwinism and discourses regarding what constitutes 'Aboriginal art and culture' proper.

Greater engagement in the political, economic and social aspects of Australian life has afforded some Aboriginal people a voice in the ways they are represented. For Aboriginal people in Wilcannia projecting this voice outside of the local sphere is limited by both circumstance and motivation; the two being closely connected. Only two Wilcannia artists actively self-promote their work beyond the town. Both have travelled widely throughout Australia and have an easy confidence and capacity to make and build contacts and networks with whites who are linked into the art world and its dealings. The majority of Wilcannia artists do not seek, explicitly consider or aspire to these kinds of external recognition. There are many reasons for this; these include, little knowledge of the art world, a disinclination to being singled out and praised, as this can cause embarrassment or provoke envy in others, and economic reward for the sale of art being sufficient recognition. In any case, external recognition is less likely, as Wilcannia is not imagined as the 'go to' place for culture and art, because Wilcannia artists are not the imagined romantic figures that the public, or many in the art world desire. The space that Aboriginal art has found in Australian and international art worlds serves to reinforce rather than reduce the traditional/authentic or settled/inauthentic separations:

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

enchanted with the mystic power of the timeless primitive, now renegotiated as the ultimate in expressive culture.

(Hamilton 1990:22)

It is bush Aborigines from far-flung deserts who are asked to perform their art: one cannot, by definition, or in theory, be both 'savage' and 'civilized'; yet, if one can qualify as a noble savage or 'bush black', then one is sufficiently of value among the 'civilized' to be welcome, and to qualify for entry into the civilized canon of the Western art world. Known variously as 'traditional', 'tribal', 'tribally oriented' and 'contemporary', the work of particular Aboriginal artists is selectively admitted into the canon and domains of high art. Despite academic, art critic and art advisor assertions that 'contemporary' Aboriginal art stands apart from the trope of the primitive, the characteristics of the primitive remain implicitly, and at times explicitly, referenced (Price 2001). This is certainly the case for the acrylic paintings of the Central and Western Desert, where the idea of touching or being part of an ancient primitive culture is part of the attraction for buyers and admirers of the works (Marcus and Myers 1995:20). In the Wilcannia case, the attribution of 'culture' to things as opposed to people is an important distinction for locals: people may love the paintings and find the makers repugnant.

Australians have long ascribed 'culture' to pre-contact Aborigines on the basis of their material culture or artefacts; these include the Mutawintji cave paintings and engravings. Unlike pre-contact material culture, the Wilcannia artworks are the 'cultural' work of people living in the present. What the archaeological and the contemporary artefacts have in common is that in neither case is it necessary to engage with the person who made the artwork. Culture is seen to be present in the tangible artefact, but can be denied in the person and the group to which the artist is culturally affiliated. The artwork stands for culture: it is ownable, visible, harmless, acceptable, permissible culture. It symbolizes culture, operating under the 'innocent illusion' that we can reduce culture to its artefacts, thereby allowing for a safe commodification of a culture that inheres in things (Rowse 1983:82). Both the artworks of more 'remote', 'traditional' Aboriginal people and the artworks of Wilcannia Aborigines share a dubious commonality: they can be appreciated apart from contact with Aboriginal people. While imagining the artist of a remote traditional

artwork serves as a source of value and legitimacy, imagining the settled artists may detract from the work.

The contradiction between the affirmation of art as culture, and the denial of the artist as having culture, is inextricably connected with social values and ideas that link particular characteristics to 'settled' or 'traditional' Aboriginal people, and to place. At times then, both the work of the artist and the artist are accorded Aboriginal culture and Aboriginal identity. Both, however, can be denied in other contexts and at other times. For instance, at a Community Working Party meeting attended by both blacks and whites, an Aboriginal man who was a well-known artist and accepted by most Barkindji people as having cultural authority, asserted his view on a Shire Council proposal. He explained how Aboriginal people felt in relation to a proposal to beautify the town and attract tourism, much of which would centre on the town's Aboriginal heritage. He presented the view that Aboriginal people were not being included as part of the decision-making process. Following the meeting, the man's opinion was denied credibility by some whites because he 'has a white father'; this meant that he is 'not a real Aboriginal', 'not really Barkindji'. However, at other times, such as when advancing Wilcannia's reputation as a tourist destination, these same white people draw upon this man's artwork and his wider reputation as a 'very cultural' man with 'cultural knowledge'. Such contradictions are particularly evident in economic considerations, such as the town's capacity to gain what Aboriginal people call 'black dollars' – government funding for developing Aboriginal programmes and initiatives which requires those making such applications (mostly non-Aboriginal agencies and local government) to demonstrate consultation with, and the agreement of, certain Aboriginal people locally, externally or nationally.⁸ The according of art or culture to Wilcannia Aboriginal people by whites is complex, shifting, subject to multiple discourses and interests; local discourses operate differently from the national and international. Whether one lives in town, is passing through or simply hears about Wilcannia through the media or from other sources, all who come in contact with Aborigines here have some investment in their imagery – the visiting researcher gaining data for a qualification or project; the white, city artist who returns home to claim a special connection with Aboriginal people and spirituality; the government minister seeking votes; Aboriginal NGO's arguing the need for funding; the artworker or curator seeking to discover a new 'acrylic Lassiter's Reef' of artistic talent (Michaels 1994:146–7).

Although the place where Wilcannia artworks have been produced is not physically the place and space the white imagination desires, in terms of being traditional, full-blood and therefore 'real' Aboriginal space, the artworks of Wilcannia nevertheless do embody a sense of place, they have echoes of a certain rootedness that buyers are willing to accept. The depiction of the animals, fish and bird-life of the area; images and representations of creation ancestors; Dreamings and personal and local events in history; and motifs and figures from the rock art from sites with which Barkindji affiliate, such as Mutawintji and Mt. Manara – all speak to local connections and relationships. Through art, and what it is made to mean, whites can join an imagined Aboriginal symbolic community where ideas of connection to land, lost nature, mysticism and spirituality is anticipated; and where, most importantly, little if any reciprocity is required. Whites can engage with the artworks to vicariously experience a form of Otherness which is attributed value and is an acceptable part of a mirrored Other that is reflected on the self.

The Aboriginal people of Wilcannia explicitly call upon a surety of knowing who they are, 'We are Barkindji'; and there are both explicit and implicit allusions in the art to knowing one's home, one's kin and the land. This indexing of art to place and to people remains an important dimension for purchasers as well as producers.

Aboriginal Art that is made contemporaneously appears to operate, for many whites, as a residual, tangible cultural essence: a physical sign of what they imagine used to be in greater measure. In this imagining, the art of Wilcannia, together with that of central or north Australia, plays itself out in social and racial distinctions that have political effects. The acrylics of the Central and Western Desert are seen by buyers as tokens representing the mystery 'of what the place/country is prior to or outside its appropriation into the uses of white society. Australians, therefore, can obtain such tokens and display them as representations of some part of themselves on their wall.' (Myers 2002:303). Through artworks, a kind of culture is accepted in ways that appear to be external to the Aboriginal people. This is contra the Western idea of 'Art' being (undeniably) an expression of what is, in the first instance, an internal process whereby it articulates and communicates an individual consciousness or, as some would argue, the sub-conscious (Barber 1986).

In the Wilcannia case, there is a clear disparity between the culture that Aboriginal artists say they are articulating through their art, and the

whites' view that these Aboriginal people have no culture to speak of. This variance becomes partially sutured in the white acceptance of the art as culture, but not the artist; here the desire for the art object can bracket out what whites see as Wilcannia's less authentically Aboriginal ways of being in the world.

Complicating and intervening in these perceptions is the influence of more positive one-on-one relationships between blacks and whites in Wilcannia. There are friendships, marriages and cooperative ventures as well as fights and conflicts. These demonstrably affect the perceived presence or absence of Aboriginal culture and art, and what these concepts mean and come to mean. It is clear that the views that non-Aboriginal people hold about Aborigines, Aboriginal art and culture are shifting and fluid, and strongly relate to particular experiences as well as the imagination. The concrete presence of art can create a questioning dissonance for whites in terms of what constitutes Aboriginal culture and its presence or absence.

Art is both present and purchased by whites who come to work in Wilcannia, and who transit through Wilcannia. I have tried to show that the presence of art in Wilcannia challenges the clear conceptual and ideological opposition between remote traditional Aborigines and settled country-town Aborigines. The paradox of culture being denied and art being attributed to Aboriginal people in Wilcannia offers no real challenge to the mythical characteristics associated with the ideas of the 'bush black' and 'fringe-dweller'; what this contradiction does is shift material culture into a realm at one remove from the people who make it. Indigenous culture presents itself in this way in disembodied, abstracted, "pure" artistic form' (Nicholls 2000:5). The presence of art in what are manifestly very challenging social circumstances of Aboriginal life in Wilcannia, acts to offer some tangible and redemptive aspect, which, in turn, signals something of value in Wilcannia Aboriginal culture. The presence of tangible artworks is something whites can more readily recognize, understand and come to grips with. Yet, as we see in what follows, the binary construction is not affected and these signifying categories are still applied to persons, creating a double bind and a double burden for Aboriginal artists.

NOTES

- 1 For international readers unfamiliar with the concept of *The Dreaming*, the work of Stanner is useful and instructive. 'A central meaning of *The Dreaming* is that of a sacred, heroic time long ago when man and nature came to be as they are; but neither "time" nor "history" as we understand them is involved in this meaning ... We shall not understand *The Dreaming* fully except as a complex of meanings.' (1979:23).
- 2 To throw oneself against a tree is to talk of suicide by hanging.
- 3 A photograph of snake cave can be seen in Black 1942:17, plate 81.
- 4 Lattas considers that anthropologists have promulgated this narrow, static view of culture (1993).
- 5 The Australian Commonwealth Government established the Aboriginal Arts Board in 1973 as part of the Australia Council for the Arts, the government's arts funding and advisory body.
- 6 The CDEP is a government initiative that seeks to generate sustainable employment for Aboriginal people. Known colloquially as 'work for the dole', people in Wilcannia worked (from 2002–6) an average of two or three days per week gaining 'top ups' to their social security payments. This work included projects relating to building and town maintenance, art-making and a women's sewing group. Austin-Broos (2003:120) describes the CDEP as a 'subsidised alternative to the dole that originated in remote communities when elders negotiated with the government for ways to prevent their unemployed young from simply receiving "sit down money"'. During 2004, there were forty-two people working for CDEP in Wilcannia. From 2008 the government began to progressively abolish CDEP in favour of encouraging the development of 'real' jobs under a 'jobs package' that would assist in the creation of non-subsidized jobs. CDEP in Wilcannia was abolished in July 2009.
- 7 The majority of Aboriginal representations on television and through tourism do not promote the view that the fair-skinned person sitting next to you on the bus may be Aboriginal. Most people I know and meet in Sydney and other major cities and who are not directly connected with Indigenous issues tell me that they have never met an Aboriginal person. When I know that some in fact have met an Aboriginal person, and tell them so, many are surprised. This raises a larger question of disputed identity which is beyond the scope of this book.
- 8 This money can be accessed by various bureaucracies and agencies where they can show Aboriginal cultural need, a strong cultural presence and Aboriginal

consultation. The Aboriginal man at this particular meeting has the ear of several bureaucrats and a couple of Federal Ministers of Parliament, a fact that grates for some who feel that this access is granted by virtue of his being Aboriginal, which is a matter of doubt for some. At no time, however, did anyone say this to him openly. His popularity and his following among many whites external to the town, and most Barkindji locals, his influential contacts and the economic benefits that his artistic and cultural reputation affords the town, grants him shifting, contextual and partial recognition by white locals. This partial valorization is linked to whites gaining some vicarious positive association with acceptable aspects of what is considered to be real Aboriginality and real Aboriginal culture.

CHAPTER 3

Badger Bates

Granny Moysey's baby



It is ... naïve to look for a pristine, authentic indigenous voice; it makes better sense to recognise that any text is to a greater or lesser degree an artifact of collaboration. The difficulty starts as soon as the talking begins ... and the current and previous relationship between interlocutor and subject is bound to affect the way matters are discussed and stories told.

(Jeremy Beckett 2000:3)

One man's art and culture

This chapter takes a semi-biographical approach to one particular Wilcannia-born artist – Badger Bates, a man with whom I continue to work closely. When art is contextualized by engaging not only with artworks but with the life of an artist, we can see how taken-for-granted notions of art and artists, as well as Aboriginal culture writ large, are contested and negotiated.

Over and over again during the time I spent with Badger, he would say ‘I’m Granny Moysey’s baby’, ‘I’m the last baby Granny reared up’, and, in relation to his art, ‘I do it for Granny.’ Annie Moysey, Badger’s maternal grandmother, was thought to be aged 106 when she died in 1976 (Martin 1996:12).¹ As a recognized matriarch, Granny Moysey remains a dominant figure in the memories of Aboriginal people in Wilcannia, where many of her descendents continue to live (Beckett 1965; 1994) Memmott 1991). Badger’s sense of obligation to pass on his knowledge of culture as learned

from his maternal Grandmother and the 'old people' was palpable, and he saw art as one vehicle for this. He explained it this way: 'What I'm tryin' to do is teach what Granny taught me an' the only way I know to do that, I reckon, is by artwork.' Art in these explicit terms can be understood to materialize culture as part of a discourse on life. Aboriginal art's recognition as a material expression and objectification of culture facilitates this, and Aboriginal people have begun to echo the white idea of art as culture in their own terms.

Berlo states that there has long been a bipolar model at work in the field of ethnographic arts. Much scholarship has focused on normative statements about the group, about tradition, and about a collective aesthetic, instead of what is specific and individual. The resulting impression that individual agency is of less importance in small societies than in our own has been one of the fictions of Western culture and Western scholarship about non-Western art – a blindness to individuality and creativity under conditions different to our own (Berlo 1999:183).

As well as focusing on an individual artist, I include here an engagement with the content and form of artwork, the artist's interpretation, when the art is undertaken, why it is undertaken and where the art is undertaken. Also considered is the lack of art making; that is, when art is not produced. This tells us something about the complexities that many Barkindji people negotiate as they grapple with their multiple life-roles, including that of 'artist'.

In bringing social theory and biography together, I focus on a Barkindji man for whom art has played a role in facilitating a particular cultural identity and self-authoring, within the Wilcannia community and within the context of white art worlds. In terms of what is understood to be cultural authority and cultural knowledge, Badger is recognized by non-Aboriginal people as a cultural broker. I have elected to introduce Badger here so that the ensuing chapters and their discussions about art, race and culture can be read with his powerful influence and presence in mind. This cuts across the stereotypes and conventional images that dominate ideas about Aboriginality and art.

Later, I will introduce another influential cultural figure, the Barkindji artist Murray Butcher. The purpose of these semi-biographical chapters is to expose the ethnographic endeavour. The relationships developed between the anthropologist and others is a journey of collaboration; this individualized approach permits an open acknowledgement of the

collaborative positioning of the anthropologist. The production, form and content of individual artists and their work also highlight some of the inter- and intra-cultural differences regarding the role that art plays in producing, performing and mediating what is taken to be 'culture'.

Badger Bates is considered by many of the people I met during fieldwork, both black and white, to be an exceptional figure.² His recognition as an Aboriginal man and artist both inside and outside Wilcannia demonstrates the ways in which individual personality, cultural understanding and social circumstance influence and affect cultural production and transformation. By providing this account of Badger's art and culture talk, as well as his art and culture practices, I give the reader something of the context and motivation for this. We can understand what art *does*: specifically, how art affirms, practises, produces and teaches Aboriginal culture through a personalization of what culture means for Badger. It is through the individual vision and individual practice of the artists that we begin to see personal decisions articulated that can be obscured by focusing on group practise and interaction (Berlo 1999).

The photographs shown overleaf (see Figure 19), taken around 1965, indicate and foreshadow Badger's personal awareness of lived cultural difference; they are a visual articulation of his perception of being black, or indeed white, in Wilcannia. His 'performance', which he said was an idea he 'came up with ... just for somethin' to do' was enacted with his cousin, Christopher Payne, and for the unseen photographer whose name he can no longer recall. This tableau of armed white overseer and thieving native shows an understanding and insight of racial perceptions and relations unusual for his then sixteen years.

I first met Badger when he came to the house I was living in at Broken Hill. He had come to see me after my many attempts to speak to him by phone or to catch up with him at the offices of the National Parks and Wildlife Service in Broken Hill, where he worked as a Cultural Sites Officer. I had tried to make contact on the recommendation of the Australian anthropologist Jeremy Beckett, who had known Badger as a young boy during his fieldwork in the 1950s and with whom he had stayed in contact. I wanted to talk to Badger about the prospect of undertaking research in Wilcannia. While this was a priority for me, it was, given the demands on his time by various researchers, government and Aboriginal organizations and his 'people', understandably not a priority for him. After several



Figure 19 Badger Bates as a young boy of about sixteen years. Photograph supplied by, and reproduced with permission of, Badger Bates.

attempts to catch up with him, and some false starts, we arranged that he would come over to where I was staying.

It was a warm day and the front door of the house was open. A small bluestone and tin-miner's cottage, it had a long central hallway that ran from the front through to the back, ending at the kitchen where I sat waiting for him to arrive. He sang out 'hello' and as I walked down the hallway to greet him, he stood leaning against the open doorway, saying: 'They told me you wanted to study me so I've come to be studied.' Hearing my work described in this way was embarrassing, and echoes of earlier anthropological and other scientific studies in which Aboriginal people had been objects of knowledge felt excruciatingly close. I soon learned that Badger did a good line in embarrassing professional researchers and, for the most part, this was his jocular way of breaking the ice. This was not always the case and, as I saw many times later, he gave short shrift to those he considered to be professional 'know it alls' or he felt were singularly self-serving.

At the time I met Badger, he was a youthful-looking fifty-five year old with closely cropped greying black hair and a droopy moustache. He spoke slowly in a measured way and had the deep, throaty voice of a thirty-a-day man. Over six-feet tall and lean, he brought to mind a dark-skinned Clint

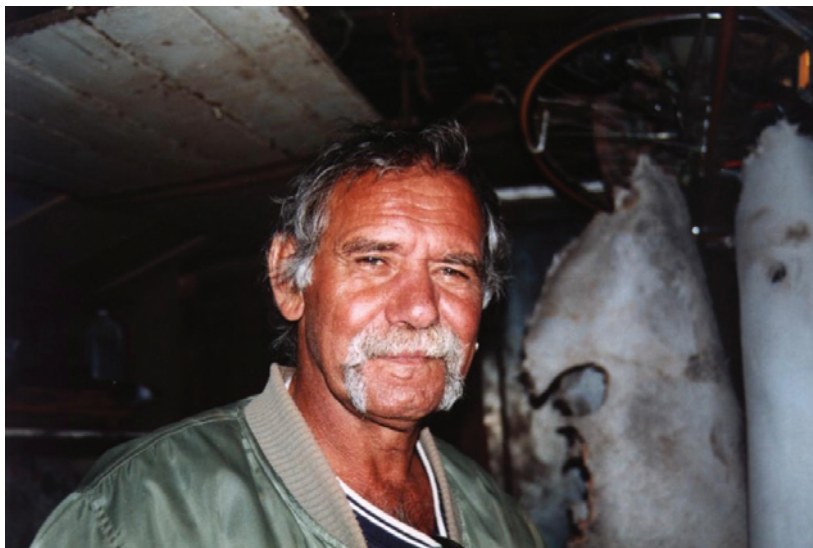


Figure 20 Badger Bates in his shed at Broken Hill, 2002.

Eastwood, right down to the semi-closed squinting eyes, half smile and slow easy walk (see Figure 20).

Like Clint Eastwood, Badger's stare could become steely and intimidating if he was displeased. I witnessed this on several occasions and was glad not to be on the receiving end. Most of the time, however, Badger is something of a charmer, often coming across as somewhat shy and self-deprecating. A newspaper article I had read prior to meeting him described him as 'tall, composed and shy' (Ball 2002). My own first impression records that 'he looked a bit shy at first'; an impression he made on many whites, yet it was not one that those who knew him well would ascribe. I came to understand this initial shyness, particularly with whites, as a cultivated characteristic which added to the 'charisma' he was often said to possess. Prior to my meeting Badger, Jeremy Beckett described him to me as a 'leading light for his people' (pers. comm.). Badger's reputation as a culturally knowledgeable man, as reported in various media, meant that I was more than a little nervous in anticipation of our first meeting. It was clear that without his support my research project might have difficulty getting off the ground. Thankfully, we 'hit it off' immediately and thus began a collaborative association and friendship that continues to this day.

Adroit at engaging people from all walks of life and cultural backgrounds, Badger has a way of making people feel important; he observes and listens closely to those who speak with him. This quality ensures his success within both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal local community. He was often called upon to meet with politicians and bureaucrats to explain, provide opinion on and mediate issues that members of the local Wilcannia 'Aboriginal community' had raised or which had the potential to affect Aboriginal people across the wider far-west region of NSW. When he wished to raise a community issue for discussion, he was able to get government ministers to respond to his phone calls.

Badger is an artist, both in his own eyes and in the art world, and was generally consistent in identifying himself as an artist in art-related contexts. Yet he is much more than this – he wears many hats. He often alluded to the demands placed on him in his role as a cultural ambassador and a much in-demand advisor for 'my people'; he said, 'I'm an artist, an archaeologist, an anthropologist, a politician, a marriage-guidance counsellor, 'I'm everythin', me.' He also said at times, 'I'm not an artist, I'm a bullshit artist'; and at other times, 'I don't want to be a good artist, I want to be a great artist'; 'I want to be the best artist'; 'I want people to buy my work and love it.' The title of 'artist' has become normalized for Badger, because of the amount of time he spends on making art, the number of exhibitions that show his work, and, since his retirement from paid employment, through his increased level of art production.

Both the content and form of Badger's artwork bespeak aspects of personal identity, as well as Barkindji culture in a broader sense. His desire to be the 'best artist' can be closely linked to his being the best Barkindji man that he can be. Offering and making the 'best art' reflects what Badger considers to be an important aspect of his personal identity: Badger links being the best Barkindji man with being 'faithful to my culture', with a corresponding obligation to share and teach his culture to others. For Badger, art-making was one way of doing this. Not all Aboriginal people accept Badger's claim to cultural knowledge; unsurprisingly, given the contested notion within Barkindji circles as to who is and who is not considered to be Barkindji. Such tensions are common for Aboriginal people, for whom rights and access to land and resources involve a heavily politicized and increasing cash economy that has become part of the socio-economic fabric. Contention about Badger's cultural credentials did not stymie his ambition to be the best artist; indeed, in the local

domain, contestation of his identity and heritage seemed to fuel this desire. Importantly, however, being the best artist is not the primary identifier for Badger; it is but one aspect of his identity.

Badger told me that a whitefella, Jim Patterson, once told him: 'You're a good artist.' Badger said he told Jim that he was going to 'be the best artist' and that he would 'take my people with me'. Jim said, 'well, get off your fucken arse', which, Badger suggested, was Jim's way of spurring him on. Badger's desire for people to love his artwork is connected, I believe, to his desire for both his own people and white people to respect and value Aboriginal culture. I do not consider that this can be easily separated from the desire for people to also value Badger, as a man or specifically as a Barkindji man. The artwork itself appeared to be a consolidation as well as an expression of his identity. The reception and evaluation of Badger's artworks stand as both a measure and driver of how both whites and blacks perceived him and, in my view, of how he in turn perceived and valued himself in specifically cultural terms.

Badger's apparent ambivalence about calling himself an artist while wanting to be a 'great artist' (or the 'best' artist) may appear contradictory. Yet, the idea of what an artist is and what an artist does is different in Wilcannia than in dominant-culture art worlds and within the wider public. People who create artworks in Wilcannia are certainly thought about by those in the local Aboriginal community, as is their art, but this was not principally because it was 'art' that had been made. The artwork and its making is more closely linked to who an artist is and how Aboriginal kin and the broader community in Wilcannia relate to them, and are themselves related. For the most part, who the person making the art is, their relationships within community, their potential to signify authority, to garner respect and their perceived knowledge about culture is connected. They come together in ways that affect what art does and the ways in which local Aboriginal people in Wilcannia speak about the artwork. The art is talked about in relation to the particular artist as part of a relational inter-subjectivity in which the artwork itself acquires, at times, something of the agency of a subject (cf. Gell 1998).

For Badger, culture meant many things. In the context of an artwork, Badger discussed how painting, drawing or carving particular art objects and styles could teach which forms of representation and content are culturally appropriate; that is, 'what belong to us'. 'Teachin' culture', outside of art-specific contexts, could refer to taking children or adults

out to places such as Mutawintji National Park and telling them how to look out for and protect exposed burials and artefacts. It also referred to taking children out into the country and teaching them how to hunt or to recognize plants for their medicinal or other properties. 'Teachin' culture' also involved talking about rock-art paintings and engravings, or telling the stories of particular sites; perhaps a Dreaming story about the journeys and qualities of some ancestral being, or a story about an event that happened in history or to relations within living memory. Many of these discussions occurred sitting in and around Wilcannia; on the riverbank, in homes, or at the Wilcannia schools where Badger used to occasionally drop in to talk to the children. Culture is also 'our way' of doing things and seeing things and 'our traditions', and is invoked by Badger when talking about art or when defending Barkindji culture against the discourses and perceptions of others who deny its presence in the Barkindji way of life. 'Our culture' is also held in museum collections and is represented through and by artworks. As such, 'culture' is not simply or only a people's way of life, it is purposeful and reflexive activity and is inscribed physically and symbolically in visual artworks and other artefacts.

The separation of artworks from the artists who make them occurs, for the most part, in white art worlds, where ethnographic description to accompany the work is commonly eschewed; this has arisen in part because of the supposed negative connotations of primitivism, with its ethnographic explanations that served to differentiate Aboriginal art from other art. In Wilcannia, the connection between the art and, importantly, the life and relationships of the person producing the art makes this separation not only less likely but less desirable. Given the ways in which Badger talked about his work, it is clear that art is a vehicle through which he expresses his cultural knowledge, cultural identity and his cultural authority in both the art world and, increasingly, community contexts. Indeed, art appears to produce and index these aspects and individual attributes in hitherto unavailable and more tangible and objectified fashion.

This is not to say that all Aboriginal (or non-Aboriginal) people are in agreement with what Badger might set out to show or teach through his work. Aboriginal views, interpretations and understandings of Badger's art, as well as perceptions about his artistic motivations, varied depending on the relationship people had with Badger. The interpretation of Badger's work and the ways in which it was considered depended on where one was located in the cultural field of art and the social field of culture(s) (cf.

Bourdieu 1993), which themselves are subject to multiple interpretations and receptions. One of the other factors that contributed to the reception of a work, its cultural efficacy and how it is understood, was the context of the viewing. Badger's presence or absence when one of his works was being talked about or viewed made a striking difference to sales where non-Aboriginal buyers were concerned. When Badger was present at an exhibition of his work, it was clear that many sales were made because of his engagement with buyers. He invariably spent time to personalize the content of the work, whether a lino print or a carving, in ways that whites found authoritative and authenticating.

For Badger and other artists in Australia, the daily practices and lived activities of those who are mediating, producing and participating in the social formation of art is diverse (Holland and Lave 2001). Curators, tourists, art-gallery managers, other artists (black and white, international and Australian) and Wilcannia locals (black and white), at various times and to varying degrees, sought to interpret and evaluate Badger's art. Some whites undoubtedly had their ideas of Aboriginal art and Aboriginal people affected and altered by interactions with Badger. It seemed at times that personal charm, rather than Aboriginality per se, could account for perceptual shifts in certain people's views of south-east Aboriginal people as lacking Aboriginal culture.

It was clear that the content of Badger's art was differentiated on the basis of his relationships, context and (although in different ways for whites) the degree to which his cultural knowledge was accepted and understood to be authorized. While the importance of external non-Aboriginal recognition should not be discounted, the importance of Aboriginal recognition, most particularly Barkindji recognition, was seen by Badger to be critical if he were to qualify for the title of 'great artist'. Paradoxically, recognition by whites and the white art world is germane to the creation of this avenue of identity: that is, the conflation of Aboriginal art and culture by white art worlds and by popular culture more generally, has influenced and facilitated Aboriginal visual art as a way of expressing identity and, indeed, as a new way of being Aboriginal. As such, the production of art is a way of expressing identity that has credibility in both Aboriginal and white communities, if in different ways and to different extents. Importantly, Aboriginal art in its most recent manifestation is simultaneously generating a new Aboriginal domain as it lays the groundwork for cultural transformation.

Art that is compelled

Granny Moysey, a Kurnu-speaking Barkindji woman, is thought to have been born on the banks of the Warrego River at Ford's Bridge, north of Wilcannia near Bourke. A renowned 'clever woman', she is said to have spent much of her life travelling up and down the Warrego, Paroo and Darling Rivers in earlier times by means of a dugout canoe (Beckett 2005). Badger links much of his identity as a Barkindji man to his relationship with his Granny. He often talked fondly about travelling with her, as a young boy, in a red wagonette with a 'yella cat called Tom', his dog 'Spring', and horses 'Snip, Ranger and Larrikin'. He spoke about the journeys he and Granny took all around the Western region and was, at different times, wistful, energized or extremely sad when recounting these journeys. He linked his early years of travelling to his ongoing desire, and indeed practise, of constantly travelling around and being on the move, if always returning to Broken Hill or Wilcannia. He talked of how Granny would tell him 'Dreamtime stories', teach him the Barkindji language,³ and describe the ways of 'my people', past and present, saying, 'I learned all about my culture' from Granny.

It is Granny that Badger credits as being the person who 'saved me from bein' stolen generation', always 'keepin' ahead of the welfare', a risk accentuated by the fact that Badger had 'fair skin'. Badger's father, Michael Joseph Horal, a white Australian known locally as Stinger, lived in Wilcannia until his death in 2003. Although not denying Badger as his son, Stinger took no active interest in Badger's upbringing or his life. At Stinger's funeral in Wilcannia, all the members of his family, apart from Stinger's long-term white partner, Elaine, who passed away in 2010, were from out of town. None of Stinger's friends seemed to have any idea of Badger's existence. When Badger got up to speak at his father's funeral, two people sitting behind me whispered, 'Who's that?'

According to Badger, his Aboriginal 'poor mother' Emily was a 'heavy drinker' and could not always be relied upon to care for him. It was Emily's mother, Granny Moysey, who Badger saw as the stable influence in his life, and to whom he gives most credit for 'rearing me up'. Badger was constant and vehement in emphasizing the influence that his Granny continued to have on his life. He explained: 'I'd walk away from anyone, elder, government, anyone who discriminate against Granny. She got me to where I is today. She guides me. Anything I do, she guides me.'

Badger attributes much of his self-authoring, and his identity as an Aboriginal man, to the relationship with his granny, which he perceives as *ongoing*. He did not explain this as dialogic in the sense of a two-way discourse, but states that Granny continues to talk to him, and to give advice. Sometimes, he said, he hears her voice issue warnings, to which he claims he listens and actively responds; at times he could simply hear her say the word 'No'. At other times he described Granny's guidance as being neither linguistic nor audible, but a feeling. Badger said that when he was doing his artwork, 'Granny guides my hand', Granny is 'lookin' after me, lookin' out for me', 'she here'. He explained that he sometimes senses her presence in the rustle of trees or in a gust of wind. Badger's perceived awareness of a spiritual presence is not restricted to that of his Granny: on many occasions, when we were in the town and out at Mutawintji, he would suggest that we were being watched by ancestral spirits. He indicated that these were observing us or were indicating happiness or displeasure at his, our or my presence.

Granny's influence is stressed in the following anecdote. One day Badger and I were at Mutawintji National Park. A group of Australian tourists, who were part of a busload travelling across Australia, were introduced to Badger through their tour guide, Barry who had known Badger for some years. Barry spoke about Badger's artwork, some of which was on display at the Visitor's Centre at the park.⁴ After talking with Badger, four tourists each placed an order with him for one of his carved emu eggs at AU\$400 each. The tourists wanted to pay him there and then, but he declined, asking that they pay him on completion. When I asked him later why he had not accepted payment up-front, he said that he would have been obliged to produce the eggs, and that he preferred not to have the pressure of commissioned work. Twelve months later, the eggs still had not been completed. When I enquired why he had not finished them, he told me:

The wind not talkin' to me, Granny not talking to me. I get them out an' look at them; it's not the right time, something wrong. I know I'm failin' them customers, but I just can't do it. It's not the right time.

In this case, the lack of contact with his Granny seemingly prevented the completion of these particular works. After taking the order for the emu eggs, Badger continued to produce other artworks, including several

large commissioned public sculptures. Granny not talking to Badger was therefore not a blanket lack of communication, but was restricted to the making of the emu eggs. Some months after taking the order for eggs, Badger began work on a large public commission at Mount Annan Botanical Gardens. During the making of this sculpture, Badger said he felt that Granny was expressing her pleasure at its production (see Figure 21).

Badger seemed unconcerned by, and disinterested in considering, the reasons why Granny spoke to him during the making of this and other public commissions and artworks but was silent on the matter of the emu eggs.

Although Granny's genealogy as a Barkindji woman is demonstrable, her authority as a Barkindji cultural figure is not unanimously agreed by local Barkindji. Some local Aboriginal people insisted to me that Granny was not Barkindji. Several people in Wilcannia told me that they believed Granny to be of Maori descent. Some said this quite explicitly, while others were a little less direct: they asked whether I knew that 'a lot of people say she's from New Zealand' and 'say Badger is not Barkindji'. When I mentioned Badger's apparent cultural credentials and his capacity to speak some Barkindji, one older woman, who was viewed by several other local and non-Aboriginal people as the only remaining 'real' Barkindji woman in Wilcannia until her death in 2011, said that 'there are a lot of lies going on about culture'.⁵

In view of the intrinsic influence on his life that Badger attributed to Granny, it is clear that, for him, those who question Granny's identity, question not only her cultural credentials but her very being, and, by association, Badger's. It is not only his Granny's heritage that has come under attack. Badger said that as a 'little fulla' he suffered for being fair skinned (see Figure 22). He remembered his Granny covering his body in emu oil to try to darken him up and prevent unwanted attention from the authorities, who, until the 1960s at least, were often keen to foster children of mixed heritage with white families or place them in government institutions where they would receive a Western education. He recalled being taunted by some of his darker Aboriginal peers, who called him 'white liver', an insult related to his status of being, in his words, 'a piebald' Aborigine with a white father: 'I wasn't good enough ... wasn't black enough.'

Although many of the people who had called Badger 'white liver' were kin-related, and he referred to these and others within his network



Figure 21 Sandstone sculpture by Badger Bates as part of the 'Memorial to the Stolen Generations' at Mount Annan Botanical Gardens, NSW.
© Badger Bates 2007.



Figure 22 Badger Bates (first left) with his classmates in Wilcannia. Photograph supplied by and reproduced with permission of Badger Bates.

as 'close brothers,' he explained that the taunts of the past continued to resonate deeply. Anger continues to surface through these recollections: 'They all called me white liver, but since I joined National Parks everybody want a piece of white liver now.' There is deep ambivalence here: Badger recognizes that many Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in and out of Wilcannia have come to see 'little white liver' as a man who knows his culture. He also recognizes, at times, that he is used for the influence and contacts he has in relation to government and non-government officials and agencies; often by the same people who once taunted him. There is pain, bitterness and pleasure here, but little emotional resolution.

When Badger says he wants to be the best artist, he makes it clear that part of this aim involves a desire for one-upmanship; to pay back the people who put him and his Granny down. The expressed and often enacted cultural sanctions that work against a person being singled out and held up as special in Aboriginal communities, and Badger's desire to be the best artist, sit here in something of an uneasy alliance. Badger's linocut prints sell for between \$500 and \$1000 unframed; his wooden and metal sculptures for approximate \$2000; and his large public stone sculptures can reach \$50,000. Since 2002, Badger has won four lucrative public commissions. When his work sells well or he sells a more expensive piece, he will say 'Not bad for a mission-school kid.' While telling wider kin about the sales or commissions may promote borrowing or envy, the

telling also serves as a public demonstration of his prowess and is a source of pride vicariously applied to Granny. In order to deflect the notion that he may be 'big-noting' himself, Badger constantly precedes statements about his art with the phrase, 'I'm not praisin' myself, but ...' – followed by a reason, or reasons, why what he might have to say or do can be considered culturally valid and important. He often validated his capacity to speak authoritatively by referencing the context, event, or statement in question back to the datum point of Granny's or other 'old people's' knowledge. Here Granny Moysey becomes a source of local legitimacy that Badger is able to transfer to his role as an artist, and which enables him to stand out from other members of the community without invoking the sanctions that notions of 'success' can generate.

The authority that Badger ascribes to 'the old people', his Granny and some of those referred to as elders is not shared by all Aboriginal people in Wilcannia. While many from their teens to early twenties recognized, at some level, the authority of Badger and certain 'elders' (both those living and those dead), they treated this authority with varying degrees of superficiality, irreverence and ambivalence. The young man who referred to one of his elders as a 'drunk cunt' while longing to be taught something of his ancestral traditions reflects the ambivalence of cultural authority, and echoes the wider society's arguments about the importance and legitimacy of 'settled' Aboriginal culture. It is notable, however, that the denial of elder authority rarely took place in front of the elders concerned; unless alcohol was involved. Some thoughtful young people, although fewer in number, seemed to view with some reverence the kinds of cultural dialogue they had with influential older people. They spoke of drawing on this dialogue as a form of self-authoring, the lessons of which, at least verbally if not always in practice, were treated respectfully and were not overtly challenged (Holland and Lave 2001:14). In many ways these responses mirror those of mainstream society, where respect for one's elders is no longer as automatic and assumed as in earlier decades. The difference lies in the fact these mainstream cultural shifts have been of a more voluntary nature; and they are not tied to the loss of identity in the harmful and destructive ways that affect Aboriginal people.

Art from early days until now – context and circumstance

The form and content of Badger's artwork has changed over time, as has the naming of his work as 'art' – by himself, by other Aboriginal people and

by white art-world institutions. Throughout this time, however, culture – in the sense of a particular set of explicit beliefs, values and experience – has underpinned what he and others refer to as his ‘artwork’, an expression which variously encompasses the art object, the content of the work and the practice of making art. This, together with economic necessity, has been a main factor in the production of the artworks. This cultural referencing did not negate Badger’s desire to be singularly creative or innovative in his art, yet there appeared to be a tension between the desire for individual creativity and a broader loyalty to the Aboriginal community and, beyond that, the non-Aboriginal community. As Badger sometimes said, ‘I don’t wanna do fucken borin’ snakes an’ goannas all the time.’ This statement addresses what he perceived as rigid art-world expectations regarding what is seen to constitute ‘suitable’, ‘authentic’, ‘real Aboriginal’ content, which in turn is seen to equate to a demonstration of ‘real Aboriginal’ culture. People such as Badger must negotiate such complexities in the production of their art: the divided loyalties between producing culture (as perceived by the mostly white buyers), producing art from a place of artistic freedom and producing art for ‘culture’ and economic return. Being buyer-oriented is a dilemma felt by many artists, black and white, but for whites cultural identity is not at stake in the same way.

Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people use Aboriginal art in both similar and different ways. They are similar in that both groups see Aboriginal art as referencing culture. They are different in that while whites want and valorize what they see as ‘traditional Aboriginal culture’ in Aboriginal art (often understood to be demonstrated through content associated with past ways of living), Wilcannia Aboriginal artists use art to argue for contemporary manifestations and continuities of culture.

Badger has been making objects out of wood and carving emu eggs since he was eight years of age. This was when his Granny began teaching him to ‘carve little snakes’ with an ‘old timer knife’ and bits of shaved glass, and how to use ‘an old shearing blade’ to carve the eggs. In talking about his artwork he said that, ‘Really, it started in the 1980s with a machete that my nephew stole off a pig-shooter and sold it to me for ten dollars.’

Badger still owns the machete he used to carve wooden sculptures and artefacts, and claims it as ‘my pride and joy’. This machete is no ordinary tool: he talks of it being an important precursor to his engagement with what he perceives to be art proper. It was in the 1980s, he said, when ‘I

really got into it,' although 'I knew about it before.' Before then, 'carvin' eggs and boomerangs, that was our survival.'

This deeper engagement with art coincided with Badger's gaining access to Mutawintji National Park as part of his role as a Cultural Sites Officer with the NPWS. Badger's position was one of several created since the 1980s as part of the federal government's push towards Indigenous self-determination.⁶ Mutawintji was a place that Badger's Granny had told him a great deal about. He said:

I was never at Mute [Mutawintji] until '83, I just felt, yes, I'm here, you know? I'm at this special place an' that's why I was sad, I was happy, I had tears in my eyes but it was full of, I was frightened but I was happy. An' I was glad I was there. An' I just had a sort of a, I don't know what you call it, mixed emotion, but it was good. You know? An' that night, I didn't camp in a tent, I camped outside near the fire because I wanted to be with those old people that was there. An' I think they accepted me – from how my feelins' was. An' then from there on I jus' never looked back.

Badger's sense of being recognized by the spirits at Mutawintji, and of having interacted with them, was clearly a very powerful experience. It affirmed his Aboriginal spirituality and who he believed himself to be. The fact that he had not been to Mutawintji until his adult years was not as important as the fact that he had *known* this place, recognizing it and acknowledging its power through the connection with his Granny. It had been a living constituent of his imagination and therefore his experience. His cultural awareness was given acknowledgement by the spirits. Articulating this connection and identification with the land and its ancestors is a conscious act linked to the pressures of demonstrating a shared origin and shared characteristics of being Aboriginal.

The idea of a connection with the old people who have passed away, particularly when at the location of one's ancestors, or at sites that have previously only been known through stories, is common to many Aboriginal people across NSW. They are part of a general and essentializing notion that all Aboriginal people have access to these emotional and embodied forms of knowing, which are deemed as natural rather than supernatural. Yet this natural association, affinity with, and awareness of, the world of ancestral spirits, and what is referred to by many Aboriginal people across

NSW as 'Aboriginal spirituality' more generally, is not extended equally by Badger to all Aboriginal people. Badger and other rural Aboriginal people infer that what they call 'Sydney-type' Aborigines have a more diluted or hollow experience of Aboriginal culture, with a concomitant lessening of spiritual awareness. This sits in contrast to the essentialist view of Aboriginal spirituality as an always inherent quality.

Those living in urban situations, or who have chosen or been forced to pass as white, or who have been adopted and raised as white, are differentiated on the basis of some perceived *distance* from this natural and essential source. Aboriginal spirituality is here rendered as existing naturally or latently at birth, with the potential for being accepted and nurtured. It may also be reduced, lost, abandoned or not acknowledged. Distance from Aboriginal spirituality may be due to geographical distance, an urban upbringing, separation from social and cultural ways and relations, denial of one's Aboriginality or unawareness of one's Aboriginality. This is not the view of many urban dwellers, who claim that Aboriginal spirituality is innate as part of their Aboriginal heritage. In both cases, levels of miscegenation through marriage and across generations is deemed irrelevant. Spiritual awareness is a latent quality, but with degrees of potential strength that are assessed and measured by Aboriginal people differently. Aboriginal spirituality is subject to the maintenance of the symbolic and material resources required for its sustenance; the emotional force of its claiming takes place within a social and political climate where its conferral or denial can threaten or strengthen identity (see Hall and du Gay 1996). Like the fantasy of one Australian Aboriginal culture, Aboriginal spirituality as a category offers the possibility for economic and political power, and some Aborigines concede to this desire (see Michaels 1994).

For most of the twentieth century identifying as Aboriginal, or expressing Aboriginality, has been socially and politically disadvantageous (Morris 1994). Those who chose to or were pressured into passing as white, are seen by many Aboriginal people in NSW country towns as having lost the right, as well as the capacity, to now claim their cultural and spiritual connection as part of the mob. Passing as white, or living as white, occurred mostly in areas with larger white populations. Aboriginal people in close-knit rural communities are well aware of those families who chose to 'pass' or live as whites. Those who suffered from racial discrimination yet did not seek to pass as white see themselves as loyal to their heritage and are scathing of those who 'passed' and who now want to 'identify'; that

is, those who have come back to their Aboriginality. Greatest ire is reserved for those who sought to pass or live as white, but who now draw on their Aboriginality to gain the advantage of school or university scholarships, training and the gaining of identified jobs.

The 'stolen generation' story evokes sympathy for those who were unaware of their heritage, and who now wish to 'learn their culture'. They can be taken into the fold as neophytes, as having the capacity to learn and regain their sense of spiritual awareness. Indeed, many such people speak of having had some sense of a spiritual connection to the land which was unexplained until they found their Aboriginal ancestry.

Just as whites extend degrees of Aboriginality, so too do Aboriginal people differentiate on a continuum of Aboriginal culture. There is an undefined awareness of those differentiating aspects of culture which most people find difficult to articulate but which are often loosely defined as a 'spiritual' or particular Aboriginal ways of knowing. Where Aboriginal spirituality is viewed as inherent, in potential, and able to be built upon, those who gain access to important cultural knowledge, sites and objects stand to increase their cultural 'levels' of knowing and awareness.

Badger's role as a Cultural Sites Officer not only provided access to Mutawintji; it enabled his first visit to the Australian Museum in Sydney. According to Badger, this was something of a watershed in his thinking about his culture. He talked of seeing the ethnographic collections of the wooden weapons from the south-east; those he spoke of were mostly clubs and boomerangs of his ancestors, bearing some of the same designs he had been taught to carve on emu eggs and wood by his Granny:

I just felt proud because, in my mind, I knew it through what Granny taught me. But also I felt proud because the old people that carved those things would've passed on, but their work was still there.

(see Figures 17 and 18)

Badger's physical connection with these objects of his heritage, previously alive in his imagination only but now palpably present in the world, strengthened his sense of the significance of his Aboriginality. Access to the museum collections evoked a physical as well as a visual affirmation and confirmation of his specific Barkindji identity. After years of feeling marginal, the experience of being at Mutawintji and seeing the museum

artefacts served to show the ways in which ideas of culture are consolidated, produced and re-produced through contact with place, objects and designs.

Art media

In the early 1990s Badger began to experiment with lino prints. He said that his partner, Sarah Martin, and Karen Donaldson, a white artist living in Wilcannia, had both talked to him about trying his hand at lino printing. Yet it was 'Bill Hudson⁷ inspired me when I saw what he could do'. Badger said he showed his first lino print, *Mutawintji* (Figure 23) to Bill and asked, 'What do you reckon?' When Bill did not respond, Badger asked, 'What's wrong, don't you like it?' Bill said 'Fuck you brother, like it! I fucken love it! Here's me three years to do my work.'

According to Badger, the encouragement from Bill spurred him on: 'He was telling me I was good.' Around this time Bill had arranged the 1993 exhibition, 'The Backyard Boys', in the Tin Sheds gallery at The University of Sydney. Bill asked Badger, 'Do you wanna' come in with me?' Unfortunately, Bill passed away before the date of the exhibition. Badger asked Bill's wife if the exhibition should still go on 'an she said Yeah'. It was at this exhibition that some of Badger's lino prints were purchased by the National Gallery of Australia.⁸ According to Badger,

It was Bill that got me into the National Gallery, really. That's when they came and bought my work. I knew I could carve, but after the National Gallery I never looked back, I knew I could make things.

Having his work exhibited in the National Gallery speaks to the legitimizing role that Badger ascribes to the white art world in marking the beginning of his artistic standing; a status that Badger has begun to cement among some of his people.

Around 1994 the Western Institute of the College of TAFE organized courses in linocutting and printmaking in Broken Hill and Wilcannia in which Badger played a substantial teaching role. Following this, the students' works were exhibited regionally in 'The Outback Touring Art Exhibition' in 1995, and then at the Sydney Maudespace in 1996 (Martin 1996). This was prompted in part by the activity of Gary Corbett, then Director of the Broken Hill Regional Gallery. Following these exhibitions, Badger's non-Aboriginal partner, Sarah, an archaeologist and ethno-historian, wrote a journal article that talked of the development of 'a school



Figure 23 *Badger's first linocut, Mutawintji.* © Badger Bates 1993. Reproduced with permission of the artist.

of linocutting [which] began with local Paakantji emu egg carver Badger Bates' (Martin 1996:3). The majority of the Wilcannia students associated with these courses are no longer active in linocutting or other art forms, although new cohorts have since tried their hand at linocutting in subsequent classes. The lack of ongoing momentum and engagement owes much to the lack of any continuing motivating mentorship. Some of the original lino-print workshop students have since married and have young families to look after; they say they do not have the time to make art; many claim a lack of space, quiet and materials, as well as of inclination or money to continue. The lack of a printing press and the labour-intensive process of transferring the prints manually has been given as an explanation as to why people did not print linocuts they had previously made in workshops.

A lack of money for materials, and the fact that the paper could only be bought 200 km further west at Broken Hill, were also given as reasons for not continuing with making prints. One woman who had been associated with the lino school showed me a linocut that she said she would like to print, but which she never had, because, she reported, she had no paper. I gave her a few sheets of paper, but as far as I know she did not produce any prints. This could have been for any number of reasons, though I believe that she may have considered me a potential customer for the work, and decided against printing when it became clear that this was not my intention. As with this woman, many artists are keen to produce work for financial gain, as opposed to having an artistic drive per se. Many who were part of lino-print workshops enjoyed the sociality, but do not display an interest in making art; nor do all who participate have artistic ability.

For Badger, lino as a medium lends itself to the designs that he has been taught to carve on emu eggs and 'traditional style wooden artefacts' (Martin 1996:12). The artefacts that Badger saw in the Australian Museum, however, had a wider and more complex range of designs and motifs than those which Badger and some others had until then been producing for sale. Lino as a medium facilitated the development of Badger's own style, which Martin describes as encompassing 'an amalgam of influences: the rock engravings, stencils and paintings from his country around Mutawintji and Mount Manara; traditional designs on wooden artefacts and a strong tradition of oral history' (Martin 1996:12) – see Figures 24, 25 and 26.⁹

The actual cutting into and incising of the lino is evocative of familiar practices for an artist such as Badger, who likes to 'feel' his work. Badger often told me, 'I can't draw properly, but when I touch it I can get it.' This cutting into, intaglio and sculptural quality of mark-making is repeated in Badger's wooden carving and emu eggs, as well as his work in metal and stone.

Regardless of the media, the tactile aspects of his work are, for him, necessary creative and expressive qualities. They are, moreover, qualities that he considers innate for Aboriginal people, and he relates this to his and others' cultural continuity with the incising practices evident at Mutawintji and other rock-art sites. Yet these claims of natural affinity do not match the preferred practices and skills of other Barkindji artists. Badger alluded to his affinity in making linocuts:



Figure 24 Engravings at Mutawintji which depict some of the engraved elements and figures shown by Badger in his work. Photograph taken 2003. Reproduced with permission of William Bates, Traditional Owner.

See that lino? Because I carve emu eggs I could see my work on lino and I could picture how it was gonna come out when the print was there. An' I don't know, it might just be stupid, but I can reverse my mind to it. Even when I do my lino I can see how its gonna come out on the paper. An' why I won't paint is, I like to, my work I like to touch it.

According to Badger, painting cannot offer the tactile quality of outline, or the raised and incised surfaces which are of paramount importance:

To me, my lino prints, my stonework, my steelwork, to me, and the wood, it's all just the one thing' ... To me, why I don't like paintin', cos I can't touch it. I can't feel the grooves an' the lines. If I can't feel the marks I don't like it.

Many times, Badger talked of being 'like a blind man' and being able to 'see through my fingers'. He described how it was not possible for him to look at a drawing on a blackboard or other flat surface and to replicate it.



Figure 25 Linocut 'Bilyara witalana marnti' [Eaglehawk looking after his country] by Badger Bates. © Badger Bates 1993. Reproduced with permission of the artist.

Aboriginal people are carvers ... White teachers can bring in other people's prints and pictures in books ... but you can't draw on a blackboard and say carve it. An Aboriginal person has to have the picture in their mind and heart. If you tell them to copy a drawing their mind will go blank.

(Badger, quoted in Martin 1996:15)

Badger's carved lino prints utilize complex geometric and abstract shapes and designs which form part of, and flow around, the figurative and other elements and motifs in his work. Many of these designs and elements



Figure 26 Linocut 'Thina Yappa' [Foot tracks] by Badger Bates. © Badger Bates 1993. Reproduced with permission of the artist.

are based on those he has seen on artefacts at the Australian Museum, Mutawintji or Mount Manara, some of which were taught to him by his Granny. In one case that I know of, Badger gained part of his inspiration for an Aboriginal figure from a photograph in a book by an early-twentieth-century anthropologist. He drew the outline of a figure from the photograph onto the lino in pencil before cutting it. He would often use bits of paper to draw rough sketches of ideas for sculptures. In Badger's case, then, a stated inability to copy a drawing cannot be considered indicative of an inability to draw per se. It can, perhaps, best be considered as being more indicative of an ideological and embodied preference for

feeling both the concept and the motif, together with the perceived need to have a picture 'in his mind and in his heart'.

Although Badger emphasized that copying from a two-dimensional flat surface is neither feasible nor desirable for Aboriginal people, this is not the case for all Aboriginal people, as the data from Wilcannia attests. Many, indeed most, artists in Wilcannia painted with acrylics on flat surfaces and some copied (mostly animals and fish) directly from books. It is not the case that all Aboriginal people, or even all Barkindji people, choose carving over other media for artistic and cultural expression. Indeed, one of Badger's sons, Phillip, as well as carving wood, painted in acrylics on canvas, board and wood, with painting on canvas accounting for the greatest proportion of his output. Badger's claim that all Aboriginal people are carvers may have been born out of a passion and desire for a unique Barkindji art identity, for a place of one's own, to overcome the running dispute with wider white perceptions about Wilcannia Aboriginal art and culture.

Art talk

Badger's discourse about art and culture often strayed far from that of the non-Aboriginal mainstream, although it intersected with mainstream discourse in the context of art exhibitions and at other art-related sites such as catalogue blurbs. When Badger spoke about art as part of culture, as a way of expressing culture, his use of the terms 'art' and 'culture' appeared axiomatic; yet, as we have seen, in their various cultural and contextual uses, they are not so straightforward.

There are of course multiple Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal discourses about art, but these remain heavily prescribed and controlled through Western art-world jargon, history and ideals. At the close of one exhibition, Badger expressed the distance between himself and the mainly white visitors in the following way: 'You know how [whitefellas] go on: "Where do you get your inspiration?" What do they think we is? Fucken animals or something? We is livin' in the twenty-first century!'

Satirising the art-world dilettantes and cognoscenti, he then mimicked a polite and high-pitched female voice, and proceeded to emote and wave his arms and hands about, describing 'this flow 'ere and 'this movement 'ere'. He said to me, 'Watch my arms, am I getting it right?.'

When whitefellas talked with Badger at exhibitions and other cultural tourism venues, he was careful and gracious in his comments. That is,

he appeared to moderate his views in ways that did not result in any contentious challenges to those held by whites. He did assert opposing views afterwards in more familiar contexts and surroundings. Badger has gained a certain feel for the white art-world game and, in the right context, could play it ruthlessly (Bourdieu 1993).

There are, however, many games to learn in art-world contexts. One involves meeting the expectations of gallery-goers of all types, including the general public, curators and critics. The presence of the artist and the way they speak about their work is an important part of the gallery experience for most gallery-goers. In this respect, Badger had a real feel for the game; while he could be nervous and strategic, and did have respect for many who were drawn to his art, when he got into his stride he wooed gallery-goers and could 'bung it on' to good effect. Sometimes, however, he would recount situations and exchanges where he had felt that he was 'getting' the game, or even 'putting one over' certain white people he thought were too big for their aesthetically inclined boots; whereas, it seemed to me that he was, in white terms at least, 'missing' the game. At other times, the reverse was true, and whites who were feeling that they had a complete 'handle' on Badger's or 'Aboriginal art' in general, entirely missed the point from Badger's perspective. There are multiple agendas and perspectives in the game of cross-cultural arts, as well as a constant battle for epistemological supremacy and much slippage in-between. When Badger and I discussed art-world objectives, agendas and practices we often became frustrated with each other's explanations of 'what was going on'. This would see us expressing a 'you don't get it' view to one another, despite our willingness to open up to each other's taken-for-granted world-views. In the end, despite our very conscious mutual attempts at interpreting the motives of the art-game and its various players, our consciously lived and habituated cultural differences remained markers of the diversity that must remain the explanation for our disagreements (Bourdieu 1984, 1993).

According to Badger, it is not only whitefellas who 'don't get it right' when talking about Aboriginal art and its intersection with Aboriginal culture. Many Aboriginal people trained in the Western art canon are, according to him, 'different to us, they talk different, they just different. They don't talk about [art] like me.' He said that while some Aboriginal people might also talk about 'this movement here', Badger will say 'this fish here' or 'when I was young'. He claimed that his art talk is no different to other talk, in that it was about his life, what he did, what he does, what he

was taught, what he teaches, what others did, what others do, what was and is done together and, importantly, how his art projected and depicted what he saw for his and other people's future. He compared his art-talk to that of what he called Aboriginal 'Sydney-type people', who appeared more invested in discussing the art in more esoteric and, to him, obscure terms and ways. The language of shared Indigeneity is made distant by different art-world knowledges and frames. Many 'Sydney-types' (a shorthand Badger uses to refer to city-based artists) have gained arts degrees along with a learned awareness and understanding of Western art theory, history and movements. By virtue of this they have gained a greater understanding of the rules and conventions of art worlds both in Australia and overseas. They may choose to critique or contest the art world and its processes of value creation, but their qualifications equip them with a greater feel for the game.

According to Badger, Aboriginal 'Sydney-type people' who go to the 'Centre or Top End' are self-serving:

To a lot of artists, they just do it for where they wanna be with the old people. They use the old people to get what they want. They come back an' use it as their own power.

Badger makes it clear that he differentiates city Aboriginal artists from himself:

It's like me, I can go to the flashest restaurant, wearing the flashest suit an' then come out an' take it all off and sit down and throw some meat on the coals. They wouldn't be able to do that. They might have a taste [of the food]. Even though I'm piebald, I'm still Aboriginal.

It would be incorrect to say that Badger did not like or admire some Aboriginal 'Sydney-types' or number some of them amongst his close friends. Nor did he suggest that all Sydney-types 'use' the old people. I draw on this exchange to demonstrate the ways in which the often used, seemingly blanket categories of 'Aboriginal artist', 'urban artist', 'Koori artist' and, 'Sydney-type artist' are, as with the term 'whites', culturally and socially invested and contested categories. The term 'Koori', which became publicly used by Aboriginal people in south-east Australia from the 1960s onwards, has 'long been used by Aboriginal people in NSW and Victoria

amongst themselves' (Morphy 2001:321). While this term is deemed by many Aboriginal people living in the south-east of Australia to be an acceptable all-encompassing term, in Badger's words, 'if anyone call me a Koori I say don't swear at me, I'm a *Wiimpatja* [Barkindji blackfella]'.¹⁰ Such specific local identifications are highly valued.

The category of 'urban' often appears to cover all those who are not from specific and geographically differentiated and 'remote' places such as the Top End, the Western Desert or the Centre. Despite attempts to include art and artists from outside these specific geographic locations, the practice of culturally homogenizing people from Wilcannia, Sydney, Adelaide, and so on as 'urban' in both the literature and gallery contexts excludes what are important differences to the artists concerned; Badger contests this homogenization.

Badger rejected the term 'urban artist' as a meaningless and incorrect label; he also rejected the label, 'contemporary artist'. At an exhibition in Broken Hill featuring his work, one of his Aboriginal friends said to him, 'You not an Aboriginal, you contemporary.' Badger replied,

Me, I don't care ... I can sit on the fence, sit both sides of the fence – doesn't worry me. I'm black when they want me to be an' white when they want me to be.

The 'they' referred to here by Badger are for the most part white, and Badger's assertion that he is who people want him to be can be considered an ironic twist on the white view that black people are only black when there is something to be gained. Aboriginal art categories such as 'urban', 'traditional' and 'contemporary' are created by market and media processes. Aboriginal people are categorized according to criteria that they do not necessarily hold to, and they are then criticized when they do not appear to fit the mould (James 1997).

Some months prior to our attending the 2003 Broken Hill exhibition I had asked Badger what he thought about the term 'contemporary artist', and he had bemoaned the title:

What am I, am I a contemporary blackfella or what? If we walk down the street with a lap-lap¹¹ and spear we'd be jailed for indecent exposure and having a deadly weapon. We who people want us to be.

'Contemporary' appears to imply not really black, not really Aboriginal; it is seen to refer to that which is not traditional – a now with no continuity with the past. The appellation of 'contemporary art' antagonized Badger and quite a few other Barkindji people in Wilcannia, who, when faced with this tag, responded by saying that the content and the form of their artwork is 'our tradition', 'our culture'. The category of 'urban artist' being applied to Barkindij, for Badger, is also a nonsense. His rejection of the term 'urban artist' may, at some level, be tied to the lesser status afforded urban Aboriginal art in the public domain, and at another, with the connection of urban to 'Sydney types'. Badger rejects the title of 'urban artist' at a basic level, deeming it simply incorrect.

The categories under which they are located clearly mean a great deal to Aboriginal artists across Australia and, indeed, to the curators of exhibitions. Whilst planning was underway for an Asia Society Exhibition of Aboriginal works in Adelaide, which was supposedly representative of all Aboriginal art, urban Aboriginal people 'were reputedly very angry with Peter Sutton the curator because their work was not in the show' (Myers 1994:689). One of the exhibiting artists, an Aboriginal man from the Centre of Australia, apparently came to Sutton's defence. Myers reports that the artist Michael Nelson Tjakamarra 'believes that people are really interested in his work and the work of traditional people because it derives from the Dreaming, the source of value from which most urban people have been separated.' (Myers 1994:690). Tjakamarra also commented that people 'want to see [art] from the Centre ... Urban Aboriginal people *ngurrpaya nyinanyi* (they are ignorant [of Aboriginal Law])', and Myers notes that Tjakamarra 'feels sorry' for these urban Aboriginal people (Myers 1994:689–90). Yet, as I've said, many of the Aboriginal people Tjakamarra might feel sorry for, and whom he (and the contemporary art world) labels 'urban Aborigines', do not see themselves as such. Tjakamarra is not alone here, and in some ways he can be seen to be responding to a particular parochialism, itself largely driven by art-world demands. The extent to which anthropology and the art-world dominate the interpretations of traditional (more recently 'tradition-oriented') Aboriginal art and people from the more 'remote' areas of Australia is apparent here.

This is not to suggest that Badger and others in Wilcannia do not recognize or express differences between people like Tjakamarra and others from the Centre and themselves. Badger sometimes said that he would like to go back¹² to the Centre and spend some time with the old

people, just sitting down with them and listening to 'find out' and 'to learn' from them. Badger, like others in Wilcannia, recognized that for Barkindji people there has been an historic loss of knowledge about the Law and the Dreaming: it is in these terms that they differentiate themselves from people such as Tjakamarra who appear to live 'traditional lives'. These differences were expressed as differing levels and amounts of historical and 'traditional' cultural knowledge. Aboriginal people in Wilcannia, as do whites, reference 'the real tribal people' and the 'full bloods' as being more 'Aboriginal'. But, while artists from the Centre, North and Top End can be culturally affirmed by white discourse, Wilcannia people do not see themselves as having this option. Yet, in some ways, they are asserting their right to be placed within this discursive framework; they continue to produce art. There is both agony and exhilaration where people are trying to find a place within the notion that they have 'nothing' and making a claim to 'something'. Public recognition is important terrain that affects the circumstances of people's lives. The influence of the anthropological, historical and legislative constitution of the category 'traditional Aborigine' is evident here. That Aboriginal people like Badger take on board, and sometimes grapple with, these dominant culture categories emphasizes the influence of these constitutions for Aboriginal self-authoring.

Badger spoke of the cultural difference between himself and 'urban' Aboriginal people, as he understood this category. He said that those who had been reared and lived in cities like Sydney and Adelaide, and who cannot go 'huntin' and 'get out in the bush' were urban. I asked Badger whether he agreed with Tjakamarra's statement about urban Aboriginal people. He replied:

I think in some ways, yes, some urban people ignorant of culture.
Sydney, Adelaide, they urban. Wilcannia is a city, so is Broken Hill, but
our food is outside. We won't eat rabbits, bog eyes [shingleback lizards]
in the street because of all the rubbish they eat. Come to Sydney – all
those white ants, they got all the colours on but they know fuck-all
about our culture.

This distinction suggests that what differentiates the urban from his own community is not only city life, but his community's ability to go hunting and to eat wild meat, and their distance from the kinds of meat and culture that is spoiled by city life. The reference to 'white ants'

(literally termites) is used colloquially to mean Aboriginal people who undermine culture. 'Uptown blacks' and 'showponies' are other terms used by Badger, and common across NSW, to describe Aboriginal people who make a point of drawing attention to themselves in terms of their culture but who are thought to know very little. Food, people and culture are all, in this statement, subject to spoiling by city life; there is a physical and geographical, as well as ideological, difference being claimed. Subsistence is intimately connected to the land and to identity. Here, wild meat is not simply a source of food; its ingestion is identity embodied. Urban Aborigines are portrayed by Wilcannia Aborigines as separated from the real substance of Aboriginality. Particular social practices acquire here the status of boundary markers.

Differences around art talk and art practice have deep effects, which is one reason why there needs to be engagement not only with the art, but the life of the artist. This allows for fuller expression of artists' individual motivations and personal explanations of what their art is trying to say, as well as of what they consider art to be doing. The successful Australian artists Tracey Moffat and Trevor Nickolls, both Aboriginal people, have reputedly expressed that 'they wanted to be known as artists in their own right rather than be stereotyped as Aboriginal artists' (Mundine 1990:9). As the Aboriginal curator and art critic Djon Mundine points out, they 'are certainly approaching this broader artistic credibility now' (1990:9). For Badger and others in Wilcannia, art is a vehicle for expression of their Aboriginal culture and Aboriginality. Whereas, for Moffat and Nicholls, the art and the role of artist within the context of the wider art-world seems primary.

'My white way' and 'my black way'

In 2004, Badger had a solo exhibition at the Broken Hill Art Gallery titled, 'The Wilcannia Mission School Kid'. At the exhibition a white woman asked Badger, 'Why is your work all black and white?' He replied:

What I wanted to say was, I went to the Mission School in Wilcannia and they learned me to write on a grey/black slate and I used to use a slate pencil made out of stone and when you put a mark on it, it goes white. Black and white work, it's me, because of my Mum and Dad. But I just said [to the woman], 'I can't paint.'



Figure 27 Linocut '*Bush Tucker on the Paroo*' by Badger Bates. © Badger Bates 1993. Reproduced with permission of the artist.

Badger constantly talked about 'bein' black an' white', being 'a piebald Aboriginal', having 'a white way an' a black way', not 'bein' black enough', not 'bein' white enough'. This was underscored in his discourse about his art and certain works in particular. His lino print *Bush Tucker on the Paroo* (Figure 27) is an example of where Badger says his lived perception of being black and white has expression. What is not immediately apparent and what we cannot understand from viewing this (or arguably any) artwork, is what the artist tells us of the print:

With my artwork what I try and do is, I always say, I've got two cultures,
I've got two laws. An' I can see things from like the white man's eye

'cause my dad was white. But I can also see from a blackfella ... black person, 'cause my mum, she was black. I'm black but I know when we eat those animals, I look at their bone and I try an' put them back in there, in my artwork. So you can look at ... the outline on the outside, it's like a white person drew it. But then when you look at the inside you got the black person, like so. What I try an' do, I do it so because of my white way I put it there and also because I'm black. I put everything, bones into the one thing when I do it.

Showing the internal organs and skeletal structure is the way Badger says he *sees* animals, and according to him is indicative of an Aboriginal hunter's way of seeing: highlighting as it does the edible and non-edible organs and medicinal parts. Badger asserts that his way of seeing spans two cultures, and that he has 'two laws' and 'two cultures.' Badger's use of the term, 'my white way' seems to refer more to his expressed ability to understand whites than to his being like a white.

Howard Creamer, in his paper concerning Aboriginal people of NSW, refers to mid-twentieth-century accounts of

Aboriginal people without Aboriginality, of lost traditions with nothing to replace them. Thus begins the image of cultureless outcasts, in a kind of cultural vacuum, neither ready for, nor accepting, the assimilation offered by white society. This is the 'between two worlds' model which contributes little to cultural theory, because it says little about the actual construct that has emerged; the ideas, beliefs and values of the Aboriginal people who remain; their rules for living; their symbols and their view of the world.

(Creamer 1988:47)

I agree that a 'between two worlds' model is neither helpful nor informative; yet neither is it helpful to ignore that certain people conceive of themselves as having two laws and two cultures. The distinction appears to be one of living with, as opposed to being caught or living between cultures. Badger lives with two cultures and two laws, his claim is that he sees things two ways and that he can assimilate both forms of knowledge; but he has one culture, one ontology. The 'living between' model implies a lack of a complete or stable identity, whereas Badger's assertions express a plenitude of identity. In one sense, his assertions can be considered synergistic. It

is a doubling rather than a halving, an addition rather than a division, a this-plus-that. His expressions speak more to being able to see things and understand things from a blackfella way and a whitefella way. This might best be understood as living *with* and knowing *about* two laws and two cultures, but not as living *between* them.

To live between two worlds is suggestive of splitting, of anxiety, and the ensuing disorganization of identity. I am not suggesting that living with two cultures and two laws does not involve elements of cognitive dissonance. Aboriginal people, especially people like Badger, are involved in negotiating and mediating Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relations, and are constantly called upon to justify what constitutes Aboriginal culture and identity and, in turn, their own way of life. There is undeniably a constant and cogent mediation required when one conceives of oneself as having two laws and two cultures: one of *inter*-cultural mediation between black people and white people. However, when Badger was explaining Aboriginal culture and ways to whites, it was from the point of view of being an Aboriginal man who understood the Other. Similarly, when he explained to Aboriginal people about white cultural motivations and ways; it was as an Aboriginal man with knowledge of white ways.

The 'between two worlds' model is one often ascribed non-Western artists from other countries. The Sengalese artist Moustaphe Dime has said,

I am not between two worlds; I am not a hybrid – I am Moustaphe
Dime and I represent only me. I will not let anyone (in the west)
imprison me in a little ghetto.

(MacClancy 1997:15)

When Badger talked about the past taunts from black and white, about not being black enough or white enough, he did not indicate that these criteria required mediation between a black self and a white self, but between how he was perceived by black and white others. As he often said when his identity as an Aboriginal man or Barkindji man was in question, 'I'm me.' His personal attributes allow him to deal with what, for many, would be a painful sense of instability or incoherence.

Personal influence and culture

Badger's atypicality is an important part of his ability to influence both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. In Wilcannia, authority and knowledge of culture are subject to struggle, dispute and variation, as Aboriginal culture undergoes change and contestation and is the object of much interference and avid attention. This makes it important to understand the ways in which certain individuals influence others' actions and views about what comes to stand for culture and cultural knowledge. How are diverse views and actions processed and taken up by others, and how do they become taken up as part of some loosely defined tacit body of shared understanding?

Drawing on Schwartz's model of 'personality as a distributive locus of culture', we are led to understand that

the distribution of a culture among the members of a society transcends the limitations of the individual in the storage, creation, and use of the cultural mass. A distributive model of culture must take into account both diversity and commonality. It is diversity that increases the cultural inventory, but it is commonality that answers a degree of communicability and coordination.

(Schwartz 1978:423)

The processes through which ideas and practices come to be held in common are of particular interest. How do Badger's teachings about culture through art content, practices and discourse come to be taken up others and *become* culture as this becomes reflexively understood, expressed and acted upon? Creamer considers that Schwartz's model is

particularly appropriate for description and analysis of a culture undergoing rapid change, where there is considerable variation in knowledge depending on individual experience – who people are, how old, where they have lived and so on.

(Creamer 1988:49)

This has particular salience as a general tool for cultural understanding and in relation to knowledge about art and culture. Individual experience and variations in knowledge cannot be divorced from personality and therefore from personal influence. Thus Badger's experience, cultural

knowledge and individual personality intertwine to increase cultural authority and credibility.

While I was living in Wilcannia, Badger was described in a Broken Hill newspaper as an 'ambassador for the region' (Barrier Daily Truth 2003). I too use the term 'ambassador' when referring to him, as this is one that Badger consented to. Badger did not like the term 'elder,' and preferred not to be referred to in this way. Indeed, he often said, 'I'm not an elder' and 'I don't wanna be an elder.' This was because he saw many elders in the contemporary context as arbitrarily named, as lacking integrity and as comparing unfavourably with those he had known in the past, most of whom have since passed away. Badger's refusal to be so named did not prevent the term 'elder' being used in relation to him by the media and elsewhere. For white politicians, bureaucrats, art curators and other agencies (both government and non-government), an elder hierarchy of a kind existed. The creation of this hierarchy was often linked to the ease with which whites could relate to particular Aboriginal people. People spoke of Badger as 'a leading elder,' 'one of the top elders,' a hierarchical distinction that I did not discern among his Aboriginal networks, although he was clearly one of the more popular community leaders, especially with younger people.

There can be no doubt that Badger has a certain cultural credibility and enjoys a well-travelled reputation as someone of cultural knowledge. This credibility at some level accounts for, and built on, the level of attention he is afforded and the degree to which his advice, his direction and his artworks influence both whites and his own people. That Badger has managed to cultivate this kind of credibility in matters seen to be cultural among both whites and his people stems in no small way from his charm, as well as from the 'power' and 'charisma' that is so often attributed to him.

Charisma is, as Geertz (1973:13) states, 'one of the most useful and the most tortured' of concepts, and it is a term that whites often used in relation to Badger. The concept evokes certain traits that Aboriginal people attribute to Badger. Non-Aboriginal people often referred to him as 'very charismatic' and 'very spiritual'. Certainly, whites I spoke with were not using charisma in its original theological sense of attributing Badger with any powers of a Christian Holy Spirit (Csordas 1997), neither did they seem to be using the term *absolutely* in the sense made sociologically popular by Weber, who defined charisma as

a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities.

(Weber 1968:48)

However, there is certainly a sense in which exceptional powers and qualities of a kind were attributed to Badger as an Aboriginal man. This is linked, I believe, to the generalized spirituality attributed to much Aboriginal art and Aboriginal people, as opposed to a specific attribution of powers or to the occurrence of specific events. It was my impression that many whites who attributed Badger with charisma brought together a generalized notion of Aboriginal spirituality with Geertz's description of charisma. In this conflation, charisma has been taken up and transformed into ideas of celebrity, popularity, glamour and even sex appeal (Geertz 1973:13).¹³ Part of this charismatic appeal can be connected to the process which has located Aboriginal people as embodiments of some desired spirituality now considered lost to those living a Western way of life (Root 1996; Lattas 2000).

One evening at an art-gallery opening in Broken Hill, I was sitting outside with Badger on the gallery steps as he was having a smoke. Before long, a steady stream of people, both black and white, came over and sat around him. Badger did most of the talking and the people listened; they seemed to be hanging on his every word. I teased him about this popularity later, saying, 'You don't have conversations, Badger, you hold court with your coterie of subjects.' He asked what I meant, and I said he was like a guru with followers hanging on his every word. He laughed, recognizing the truth of this. Badger's white following could not be discounted, it was a cogent aspect of Badger's self-identity and helped to affirm his status as a 'great artist' and valued Barkindji man. '[M]ost frequently it is the artist who is invited to speak' (Myers 1994:681). This is unsurprising: art is a domain that has come to reference the identity of the Aboriginal Other; moreover it is a relatively safe and understood form of cultural representation.

Some say that Aboriginal art does deliberately challenge dominant society's ideologies, norms and values. The work of Aboriginal artists Richard Bell and Adam Hills from NSW challenges Aboriginal stereotypes and also offers critiques of white Australian history.¹⁴ This is not the kind of 'Aboriginal art' most in demand by the market in Australia or overseas, nor is it the kind of art that Wilcannia artists make. While Wilcannia

Aboriginal people verbally and actively oppose certain values, traits and behaviours that they deem 'white', this opposition does not extend, in any overt antagonistic way, to the artwork – with one exception. One artist used his art to openly critique the treatment of Aboriginal people. His strongly political work was in its early stages, and his artistic capabilities were being nurtured by local artist Karen Donaldson, when, sadly, he was tragically killed.

I also saw Badger working his tourist 'mojo' with some older white Australian tourists at Mutawintji. On this particular day he was not officially taking a tour, we were at Mutawintji doing some research on the engravings. He and I decided to tag along on a tour being led by another Barkindji man. Before long Badger intervened, and started to explain about one of the sites to some of the tourists. At one point, he wandered off to collect some quandong fruit from a nearby tree. He then approached the tourists with the fruit. On seeing that 'there was not enough to go around', Badger smiled, broke some of the fruit in half and handed it to the throng, saying 'I'm not Jesus or anything...' He could not help himself in taking control of the tour, showing his expertise and playing the crowd. I joked with him later that he was a 'tourist slut'. He took to this title, repeating its genesis to his friends and acknowledging that that he often had people 'eating out of his hand' – 'I'm just a likeable lad', 'a loveable rogue'. This is a reputation that he clearly enjoyed.

Phrases like 'He a special one that one' and 'Aye gee that Badger, he is a spiritual boy' were common. Many of the older Aboriginal people in Wilcannia said that Badger had the powers of his Granny Moysey. Granny was said to have been accompanied at all times by two *mukutya*¹⁵ she was said to keep in her armpits. These *mukutya* are considered to have been handed on to Badger. On one occasion, a few Aboriginal locals and I were having drinks at the local golf club when a young Aboriginal woman reached out and touched Badger's arm with her hand; she then pulled back saying, 'I feel power, Unc'. She claimed that she could not touch him again because of his power and kept repeating this.¹⁶ There were many who did not see Badger as special but, because of a quite generalized and strong belief in spirits and *gunki* (ghosts), even amongst the more ambivalent, one could sense a certain hesitancy to question or reject outright his possession of special powers.

Badger's gregarious personality, perceived cultural knowledge and authority intersected at various times and in various contexts. These

aspects of his character were instrumental in facilitating the acceptance of cultural information and its transfer and transmission through his artwork to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. His strong influence on the art-making by and interpretation of Aboriginal artists in Wilcannia by virtue of his perceived cultural knowledge has resulted in change within the cultural and artistic milieu of the community. Art can be drawn upon as a tool for understanding cultural production, change and mediation. The process of making, seeing and talking about art gives rise to cultural flux. On one occasion, Badger came to see how some CDEP participants who were making art were doing. One of the artists, a woman, was painting a turtle. She had drawn the turtle with flippers, and Badger said to her, 'our turtles have claws', explaining that flippers are for 'top end' saltwater turtles. He then drew the claws of a freshwater Darling River turtle for her. Perhaps this artist, a Barkindji woman in her mid-twenties, had never seen a freshwater turtle in the river – the river at Wilcannia no longer sees an abundance of them. Perhaps she had seen a turtle but had not observed claws; perhaps she did not consider this difference important to her work. But, after that time, the young woman artist always painted her turtles with claws, and passed this information on to others, prefaced by 'Uncle Badger says'.

A similar incident concerned the painting of a goanna. One of the younger artists in Wilcannia had painted a goanna with four claws equally spaced and straight. Badger explained to him that goannas have five claws and they are not straight. He held his wrists almost at right angles to one another and then crossed his forearms. He said this is how the claws look and then proceeded to mimic the way a goanna climbs a tree. The artist took this on board and would tell people of how Uncle Badger showed him how to draw goannas properly. The opportunity and activity of hunting is much reduced for this young artist compared to Badger's generation. Goannas are rarely seen in Wilcannia, and walking and camping trips out of town are also rare for most. Both of these examples might elicit a 'so what' response. What does it matter if goannas have the right number of claws in the right direction, and whether turtles are of the fresh or saltwater variety when depicted in art? In art-worlds, is not stylistic artistic licence part of being an artist? But in Wilcannia, it matters, because it is culture-in-the-making through the medium of art-making. These were far from isolated incidents. When I asked Badger why these kinds of representations were important he said,



Figure 28 Linocut 'One Mile Billabong' by Badger Bates. © Badger Bates 2005. Reproduced with permission of the artist.

If you from that river and you rely on that river you got to give the animals in that river your respect. When you hungry you eat them. You respect your country, animals, old people, young people.

It matters to the extent that Badger sees a certain level of, or particular kinds of, visual and physical realism as an important form of respect for the animals and country being depicted. It matters at the level of the changes that will be made to artworks, for the perceptions that might arise for those making artworks and those viewing artworks. It matters at the level to which this advice may be taken up, rejected or ignored. All in all, it matters very much in considering how individuals and the characteristics attributed to them can effect cultural change in microcosm. Although I am specifically drawing on Badger here, I am also arguing that art, its content, form, its making and interpretation is a means of gaining insight into, not only individual viewpoints but also the process of cultural change, the effects of cultural teaching and the sharing of culture. The extent to which art does this is context dependent; it is tied up with who is behind the art, the art talk and the art practices. In short, art and culture cannot be separated, and in this instance, neither can art and culture be separated from the individual.

The self-authored identity that Badger sought, expressed and claimed through his artwork and art discourse, added to the overall cultural milieu in Wilcannia. His art also created for others a graspable and identifiable range of cultural forms from which to select: forms which could be absorbed into life through discursive and creative mimesis by repeating motifs in, and or making statements about, the art. Because art in the case of certain artists and in certain contexts was not so much about proclaiming difference as it was about proclaiming and claiming a coherent sense of cultural identity, what is grasped and what is rejected becomes important. Although people were struggling for recognition of culture and of being Barkindji, what this involved and what this meant differed at the individual and group level and across multiple situations. Contexts varied accordingly: 'people also fight over the different perspectives on what they are struggling about' (Holland and Lave 2001:27).

Art is a tool for proclaiming difference. Indeed, to proclaim a coherent sense of cultural identity and sameness is at once to proclaim difference from that which is 'not us'. I have shown the importance of individual

influence in the process of cultural distribution and validation, and that this in turn links to common cultural coherence.

As Schwartz's 'distributive locus of culture' posits, any externalized event or readable message or artefact has the possibility of being internalized within a continuous process (1978:423). In this way, what might be considered externalized minutiae become part of the whole in a synergistic way: the whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts. This is another reason why art is of interest: art and its practice are in dialogue with the wider community, art produces culture. The ways in which art does this cannot be separated from recognition of the role of dominant society in having conflated these two concepts. It is clear that Aboriginal people are making use of this conflation in ways that serve to reaffirm their identity. Whilst self-authoring is often overridden by dominant culture interpretations, the intersections between art and culture have also allowed people like Badger the possibility to improvise and carve out a niche for themselves as individuals in ways which feel comfortable, and which do not contravene established local Aboriginal values.

Artworks are drawn upon in discourse to signify and perform a multiplicity of roles that speak to the singular individual identity as well as to the more incorporative community or group identity. In Wilcannia Aboriginal people

use art objects, for example, to resist colonialism, to subvert racism, to demolish demeaning stereotypes, to better their own position or that of their own group, to defend a challenged notion of their people's identity, to re-invent that identity.

(MacClancy 1997:2)

When art objects are brought together with discourse, art as culture can resonate synergistically to reinforce and strengthen individual and group identity.¹⁷ Art objects and their creation, purposefully or otherwise, together with their multiple imaginings, *do* things, *make* things and *mean* things. In the following chapters I take up the extent and level of power seen to be exerted by art objects and their designs, and the ways in which these processes relate to individual and artistic freedom.

NOTES

- 1 The spelling for Annie Moysey varies considerably (Annie Moisey, Annie Moysey, Anna Moisey, Anna Moysey). Louise Hercus, who worked with Granny Moysey, referred to 'Annie Moisey' (1993). In past publications I have followed Louise Hercus, a linguist, in this regard. Badger Bates has asked that his grandmother's name be spelled as Annie Moysey. Sarah Martin who has researched the 'white side' of Granny Moysey's family states that the Births, Deaths and Marriages Register uses the spelling 'Moysey'. There remains some confusion as to whether Granny's first name is Annie or Anna. Most people who knew her refer to her as Annie, although Martin (pers comm. 2011) states that she may have been 'Anna' or 'Hannah'. Given these differences, I have chosen to use Annie Moysey.
- 2 When Badger was a small boy of about eight years old, his teacher at the 'Mission' school read Kenneth Graham's *Wind in the Willows* to the class. Badger's cousin, Brucie Harris, started to call him 'Badger', and Badger, whose birth name is William Brian Bates, 'got wild and bashed him up'. However, the name stuck and he has been known as Badger since that time.
- 3 Many Aboriginal groups from South-East Australia no longer speak their language with any fluency. One person I met in Wilcannia could still speak Barkindji with some fluency, but she has since passed away. Murray Butcher and Badger Bates were the only others I came across who could write or speak Barkindji with sufficient capacity to allow for the preparation of a short speech or a few sentences. Although the language is being taught as a subject in schools, those lessons are limited to learning vocabulary such as body parts, plants and so on.
- 4 Badger had been associated with the Mutawintji Visitor's Centre since its inception. It is his voice that can be heard behind the audio-visual recording.
- 5 Native title, kin-network politics, the value of cultural 'knowledge', personal grievances, jealousies and plain dislike all play their role in the propensity to question the right to assert Barkindji identity and, by extension, cultural knowledge. In the arena of art the enduring inter- as well as intra-cultural struggles that 'forge identities' have particular importance (Holland and Lave 2001:3). All attest to historical disruptions.
- 6 This sought to involve Indigenous people in the decision-making processes around the laws and policies that affect them and their communities. The National Parks and Wildlife Act (1974) saw National Parks empowered to protect and record Aboriginal sites and objects of Aboriginal importance that

lie within park boundaries. In NSW, the NPWS was an active employer of Aboriginal people as the nation moved towards involving Indigenous people in the joint management of National Parks with a view towards building Indigenous economic development. The fact that the positions were often outdoors was also seen to be sympathetic to the notion that Aboriginal people preferred this kind of work, in view of their perceived special connection to the land. My current research shows that the perceived preference for working outdoors can be argued to have stymied the progression of Aboriginal people into other kinds of jobs; particularly those with a higher professional trajectory. Many employers continue to conflate a love of the outdoors with the stereotype of 'walkabout' and employee instability, further hampering potential job opportunity. While it is the case that many young Aboriginal males in the NSW towns of Wilcannia, Kempsey and Moree state a preference for working outdoors, this can also be linked to a lack of confidence in taking on the types of training needed to take up jobs which require higher levels of office administration skills.

- 7 Bill Hudson was an Aboriginal man and 'brother' from Moree in NSW who spent three years at TAFE learning about art.
- 8 The National Gallery in Canberra purchased and holds three of Badger's lino prints from this exhibition.
- 9 The rock art at Mutawintji includes engravings of lizards, kangaroos, boomerangs, human figures in stick form, emu eggs, bird and animal tracks; stencilled and painted hands and human feet; geometric lines and shapes; paintings of lizards, boomerangs, snakes (Ngatji) and bird and animal tracks. Mount Manara is known for its stencilled hands, thought to have been created across the Dreamtime, prehistoric times and within historic memory. Some of the stencils are thought to have been created following an (undated) event when a star is thought to have fallen to earth at Murtie Station north-east of Wilcannia, resulting in a large flood. Mt. Manara was where some of the Aboriginal groups fled to for safety, with others going east to Mt. Grenfell. It was from Mt. Manara that the people spread out to become the Aboriginal Barkindji sub-groups known today (Jones 1989).
- 10 One young Aboriginal girl of about fourteen years of age said that she did not know that she was Koori until she had visited Sydney some weeks prior and had been told that 'you a Koori' by an Sydney Aboriginal person who identified with this title. I did not meet any Aboriginal adults in Wilcannia who would accept the term Koori being applied to them. Koori is widely used as a collective identifier by Aboriginal people in the south-east of NSW, while the

term Murri is used further north in NSW and in parts of Queensland. Other parts of Australia have different terms which similarly serve to offer some unifying identity.

- 11 A common local colloquial term for a lap-lap, the traditional male genital covering, is a 'cock rag'.
- 12 Badger visited Alice Springs and Uluru with the NPWS in the 1990s. He said to me that the 'old people' there told him he can go back there anytime he likes. 'I've got country there.'
- 13 I have no wish to argue in this book as to whether charisma 'is a quality imputed to an individual, rather than a quality of an individual' (Bell 2005). Nevertheless, Bell's case study of what she terms 'failed charisma' would suggest that charisma is relational as opposed to an inherently personal quality (Bell 2005:1–16).
- 14 Richard Bell a Kamilaroi man in his fifties is known for his work as an artist and political activist. In 2003 Bell won the Telstra National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award with his polymer on canvas work, *Scientia E Metaphysica (Bell's theorem)*. Much of Bell's work uses text across images and across his winning Telstra work is written *Aboriginal Art – It's A White Thing*. This painting and the giving of the award received mixed reviews and caused much white discomfort. Adam Hills a Sydney 'Koori' and another Telstra art award winner trained initially as a graphic artist and has transferred this quality to his paintings on canvas. His work provides commentary on Aboriginal social justice issues and draws on irony and humour in making incisive political statements about the position of Aboriginal people as governed and treated by 'white' Australia.
- 15 The linguist Luise Hercus (1993) states that *mukutya* means short, small. *Mukutya* were described to me as being two 'short' spirit men of about three-feet six inches in height. Both are said to have beards, one to his chest and the other past his chest. They are said to have supernatural powers and are 'both good and bad'. They 'look out' for Barkindji and 'rouse on trouble-makers as well'. Several people claimed to have seen the *mukutya* in Wilcannia.
- 16 Badger's own response to the woman's claim was one of annoyance. While he claims that he has the power to summon the *mukutya*, he felt that on this occasion she was being disingenuous; presenting herself and trying to convey an impression that would gain her social acceptance in his circle (Goffman 1987). When she kept this up he went on to tell her, in no uncertain terms, to behave herself.

- 17 While I am talking here about the compounding effects of artworks and associated discourse, artworks have stand-alone effects and agency according to some artists, as I discuss in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 4

Stakeholders and their dispositions

Creating and selling 'art' and 'artists'



*If I knew for a certainty that a man was coming to my house
with the conscious design of doing me good, I should run for my
life ... for fear that I should get some of his good done to me.*

(Henry Thoreau, *Walden*)

I have been emphasizing the power that hegemonic Australian discourses hold over Aboriginal life and self-perception, yet there is considerable productive power independently wielded by Aboriginal people over their own spaces. For instance, we might say that artists in Wilcannia currently have or hold the idea of 'art' in their own terms. Those who focus exclusively on the powers of non-Aboriginal culture and art worlds deny the agency that Aboriginal people assert over the naming of their art, its forms, circulation and production (Fry and Willis 1989): they assert that Other interpretations retain their hold.

Aboriginal art and Aboriginal involvement in the art world may appear to offer no basis for a self-directed Aboriginal culture. Indeed, many argue that the production of Aboriginal art is firmly fixed within the gaze and terms set by settler society (ibid.). Others afford greater agency to Aboriginal people as they trace the journey of Aboriginal cultural production through its manifestations from ethnographic object to primitive fine art, to fine and contemporary art. It is nevertheless difficult to argue that Aboriginal involvement in mainstream society art worlds has not, for the most part, been filtered, relayed and legitimated through Western cultural lenses and

values. This is unsurprising, as 'Aboriginal art' is, in the first instance, a named entity of Western shaping. Notwithstanding, Aboriginal people have drawn upon the art concept, connecting it to values within their own culture, in interesting ways. Aboriginal people in Wilcannia have their own, multiple views on the ways in which Aboriginal art can be, and is being, used as a form of self-production and self-representation as they understand this.

As we have seen, Wilcannia Aboriginal assertions of 'having' Aboriginal culture and Aboriginal art often do not mesh with the ways these concepts are considered by local whites, by art worlds, or the discourses of the wider Australian public. This is importantly and precisely the point: Aboriginal art and Aboriginal culture are, taken separately and together, concepts of diverse meanings and makings. In a Bourdieuan sense, they involve multiple and subjective dispositions and forms of knowledge that are conceived and re-worked across time, circumstance, experience and geographic location. Wilcannia sits at something of a crossroads in the art game, at which black and white both recognize the value of Aboriginal art, but where primary ideas of what *makes* art, or artists, leaves most Aboriginal people at something of a disadvantage.

'Artist' is not who or what I am

It is important to prefigure the ways in which those who create art objects – 'artists' – are considered in Wilcannia, as opposed to mainstream society. Being an artist in mainstream society generally requires that the holder of the title has a desire and heart for artistic creation, and that art-making activities are something of a focal-point. In the mainstream, the title of 'artist' is a mantle sought and taken up by the individual as a result of particular practices, as well as being one which is conferred by those who operate within art-world domains. Conversely, if anyone is Aboriginal in Wilcannia and picks up a paintbrush, they are likely to be automatically named as an artist, of one level or another, by those with links to mainstream art organizations. This circumstance may owe something to the general reluctance of arts-related individuals or groups to make any public determination that any Aboriginal art is 'bad art' (Michaels 1994). Private determinations, on the other hand, are commonly made. The unwillingness to name Aboriginal art as bad is also connected to the view, first promoted in the 1980s by media and some art dealers alike, that Aboriginal people are 'natural' artists and that their communities

are therefore 'naturally' pre-disposed to contain more artists per capita than others (Michaels 1994). This is a self-fulfilling prophecy that has associated commercially vested interests. It is an approach, however, which also creates anger and disillusionment for Aboriginal locals, when not all artwork offerings translate into the large sums of money commanded by those artists who are selected for art-world elevation.

The view that artists abound in Aboriginal communities and that 'art is everywhere' is one encouraged by those in art-world and more mundane retail environments whose primary interest is in selling 'Aboriginal art'. While the avant-garde and high-class dealers who procure artworks from remote communities similarly evoke the notion of abounding 'natural' Aboriginal artistic talent, not all work is considered equal. Work declared spectacular requires the kinds of selective legitimation and decoding expertise that only those with the relevant cultural credentials and capital can distinguish. The arbiters of 'taste' who set the international market for artwork are not flocking to Wilcannia; the art does not boast the currently desired irony or overt colonial critiques of much 'urban' Aboriginal art, nor can it claim the required signifiers of a primordial essence. This said, there is a developing interest by smaller regional art-world players in the art being produced in Wilcannia, and this is exerting increasing influence in the making, naming and selling of local art and artists.

In Wilcannia, Aboriginal people are drawn into the art game of the dominant culture without necessarily endorsing or understanding the field or the players, and, therefore, its possible implications (Bourdieu 1993). Mainstream notions of what an artist is, and the expectations these create, are often at variance with Aboriginal worldviews. For most Aboriginal people in Wilcannia, the term 'artist' is an indication of certain activities that some people undertake to varying degrees. Most Aboriginal people in Wilcannia do not, in general, refer to community members who undertake activities such as painting and carving as 'artists', at least in terms of this being a primary identifier or role, even when art-making is more or less a daily activity. People in Wilcannia who create artworks do not ordinarily identify themselves as artists, although they are automatically viewed as such at art exhibitions, art galleries and similar occasions where artists and art are the central focus. The automatic conferral of the title of artist, or more specifically 'Aboriginal artist', by the gallery-going public and associated art-world staff is mostly accepted and expected by Wilcannia 'artists' in these contexts; indeed, in these specific situations, a few revel in

both the title and the external recognition. In the local domain of Wilcannia, however, the acceptance, expectation and recognition of this title by the 'artists' and by the majority of Aboriginal people is quite differently figured. The complexity of identity and identification is elaborated through these different approaches to, and ideas of, cultural practices and social processes as these come together in the field of cultural production (Bourdieu 1993).

When I first went to Wilcannia I asked some of the Aboriginal people I met if there were any artists in town; a question reflecting my own assumptions about Aboriginal people and art. Responses were varied. Some adults appeared puzzled by the question. One child of about ten years of age asked, 'What that is?' I stumbled out something akin to, 'You know, do paintin' an' that.' At times the response from adults was along the lines of 'Uncle Willie does paintin' or 'Waddy carves bowls, boomerangs an' that there.' At other times, in art-world-related situations, or when my interest in art and artists had become known, I was told, for example, that 'Uncle Badger' or 'cousin Dougie' is 'a great artist'. Some of the interest in telling me that particular people were 'great artists' stemmed from the possibility of selling a mate's or relative's painting: whites such as me are known to be buyers of Aboriginal art. While for Wilcannia Aborigines, identifying artists and artworks in art-world terms is a developing awareness and sensibility, the relationship between art and artists in terms of economic return is clear.¹ It is, for the most part, an uncritically evaluated relationship, in the sense that paintings are generally priced according to size, the amount of work involved and neatness of rendering. While many Aboriginal locals comment freely and unfavourably on Aboriginal art which is not made by locals, there is a clear reluctance to evaluating local works as 'not good'. While this is conducive to maintaining local social relations, the reluctance to evaluate work as bad is antithetical to the art-world rulings of artistic competence that are being introduced to the community.

After several months of fieldwork, when people got to know me and my interests, the statement that someone was an artist was usually followed up with information or questions about particular artworks created by individuals. For example, Uncle Willie is a 'great artist, have you seen his snake paintin'?' or 'Have you seen Uncle Badger's boat?', 'It's deadly.' or 'It's neat, ay?' When people speak of artworks they are primarily referring to people and their relationship to the maker of the art object. Although someone may be said at particular times to be a 'great artist', this has quite different connotations to 'artist' as a primary role or identifier.

In Wilcannia, when someone paints, carves or sculpts, they are not considered to be undertaking a special class of activity within a designated field. In many ways, the artist is no different from the person who drives a truck for the local Shire or pours concrete for the local Community Development Employment Program (CDEP). Indeed, some people in the community 'do art' as a CDEP work initiative. I saw little evidence that the 'artist' had a special position in society purely by virtue of this kind of production. While Uncle Willie Don may paint, and Uncle Badger carves and makes things with steel, they are more readily known as X's Poppa, son of Y, cousin to A, B, C or D: they are family who sometimes paint and sometimes fish and do other things besides. My own use of the term 'artist' in relation to Aboriginal people in Wilcannia should be read with this in mind.

Some artists, particularly those who have attained some degree of recognition in the broader art-world milieu are fully aware of the special status this title can accord. While this is less the case for the wider local Aboriginal community, the creation and value of artworks does not go unnoticed; quite the contrary. The importance and value given to artworks, economically, socially, politically and culturally is recognized by both the artists and the Aboriginal community. Individual as well as group pride and interest is particularly vested in the content of the artworks and in the price achieved through sale. The technical execution of the work (other than neatness) is, as mentioned, less commonly discussed. The artworks of certain individual's gain special recognition by virtue of the creator's assumed knowledge of culture, and the authority and respect in which they are held. The attention and admiration given to a particular artwork is strongly dependent on the identity of its creator. The creation of artwork, the respect and authority of the person making the work, the content, the extent to which one's work sells, whether one sells one's work, and the price for which it sells, all operate at different culturally understood levels and accrue different kinds of cultural value within the local Aboriginal community.

In the local context, certain artists stand as ambiguously placed entities, with the potential to mediate and navigate the precarious envy/respect divide in ways not permitted other individuals. The social sanctions that are applied to those who appear to 'get above themselves' or 'big note themselves' or who are considered to have the potential to achieve economic, political, social or cultural difference are powerful local forces.

In this respect, there is some qualitative differentiation made between those artists who are seen to be culturally knowledgeable and culturally authoritative and those who are not recognized as such.

In artwork terms, and reminiscent of Gell's (1998) proposal for an anthropological theory of art, the artworks of culturally knowledgeable people are thought to be imbued with the agency of the artist. The artwork is here an index of the person as part of a network of relations, and is, in some ways, viewed as an extension of the artist (Gell 1998:4; Thomas 2001). On a purely pragmatic level, it is unwise to denigrate anyone who has the capacity to share their financial, political or social largesse through artistic success. On another level, certain culturally knowledgeable people are thought to have particularly 'special' or magic powers. While these are undefined, the community at large is generally wary of publicly offending individuals who are thought to retain some of the qualities of *miikika* (clever people). The local relevance and importance of the workings of sympathetic magic, artworks and artists is taken up in greater detail in Chapter 6.

Art production and outlets in Wilcannia

The production of art in Wilcannia has, over time, involved many individuals and groups, each with their own experiences, and agendas, as to what properly constitutes Aboriginal art and what direction(s) arts marketing and production should take. Those involved in such matters have largely been non-Aboriginal locals with an interest in art, artists and others in nearby Broken Hill, and staffs of smaller regional galleries and government funded arts organizations, in particular Broken Hill Art Gallery and West Darling Arts as part of Far West Regional Arts. Until quite recently, Wilcannia had not suffered (or gained, depending on one's point of view) from a continuous or formalized stream of non-Aboriginal arts advisors, museum curators, art dealers and arts-related organizations (cf. Williams 1976). The external determinants that prompt this kind of interest, such as government funding, have been sporadic since becoming more available to Wilcannia in the 1980s.

In exploring the art scene in Wilcannia since this time, we see more clearly the cultural intersections and divergences between the symbolic and material aspects of social life. In different ways, art production and its sale in Wilcannia work to challenge presuppositions about the field of art and Aboriginal people's location within it.

Kaathiri Aboriginal Arts and Craft Centre, 1987

Around 1987, an 'Aboriginal Arts and Craft Centre' opened on Reid Street, in what was previously an electronic-games arcade, 'The Old Fun Parlour'. The Centre, which provided art materials and space, was run by the Local Aboriginal Land Council (LALC) and funded by LALC and the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), then known as DETYA. Known officially as 'Kaathiri' ('boomerang') it closed, according to the best estimates of people in town, after only four years of operation. All records associated with the centre were lost in a fire, or as an Aboriginal man laughingly said, they were 'torched'. A throwaway line, which is nevertheless attuned to white views that this destruction of records hides perceived Aboriginal inefficiencies and corruption in business. Various reasons for the close of Kaathiri have been advanced, although most Aboriginal people did not really know what had happened. Many said that the Centre just 'ran out of money', that there was too much in-fighting or 'tribal fighting' and that people were not looking after the brushes and were wasting paints. Both white and black in Wilcannia agree about the common 'failure' of Aboriginal-run organizations, although reasons for this vary.

As with most government programmes, the Art Centre relied on short-term funding and the people involved were assumed to be able to learn administration, procurement and management skills on the job, with little or no training, experience or guidance. Some had never been in paid employment before. Some of those who had worked previously had histories in the long-gone rural industry as stockmen, fencers or drovers, or in mainly non-skilled labouring positions which were then available with the Department of Main Roads. From the introduction of the self-determination policies of the 1970s, Aboriginal people were expected to move into managing programmes and organizations with the same levels and measures of accountability as those being applied in the mainstream (see Cowlishaw 2004). Skills in budgeting, decision-making and general 'office' skills were assumed and glossed as common sense, rather than being seen as historically evolved and requiring training and education. The disparity between black and white social values and practices in relation to kin obligations and resource sharing was also, at best, ill-considered. Mismanagement is a distinct possibility in such circumstances. There is a strong sense that the rise or failure of Aboriginal organizations is something of an acid test of Aboriginal character traits for many whites. The short-

term nature of funding for the Art Centre and other programmes which target Aboriginal socio-economic development does not inspire long-term thinking or planning. Nor does it encourage individuals to stick their necks out in developing the kinds of business ideals and practices that may see them named a 'coconut', a denigrating term for someone whose patterns of work, consumption and resource sharing sees them viewed as being too much like whites and, therefore, not Aboriginal enough (Gibson 2010a).

There were about five Aboriginal people associated with the running of Kaathiri, and many more who, as they put it, came to 'work' there to make 'art and craft'. The difference between art and craft is neither agreed nor clearly defined. The historic Western definition of craft as being something carefully and well constructed holds for some items so designated in Wilcannia, but not others (Michaels 1994:50.1). Items which showed little craftsmanship, such as Styrofoam can-holders and disposable cigarette-lighters, painted in 'Aboriginal colours' (red, black and yellow) and bearing an Aboriginal motif, or sporting the colours and insignia of a favourite football team, were deemed both art and craft at times. A Broken Hill Prison inmate from Wilcannia produced such a styrofoam can-holder when asked if he would show me his 'artwork'. The kinds of distinctions made between art, craft and, indeed, 'ethno-kitch' or 'tourist art', are not made by most locals (Graburn 1976: 6). The most common local Aboriginal differentiation made between art and craft, is that craft included objects which were made of wood and which were made in the recent past or within living memory. This included boomerangs, clap-sticks, shields and *nulla-nullas* (clubs), as well as flowers made from feathers and jewelry made from nuts and seeds. The age of the object was one principal of differentiation, with boomerangs, clap-sticks and *nulla-nullas* which were considerably older or were held in museums being named as 'artefacts', a label that placed them higher in the local scale. Most people unambiguously considered all paintings on canvas and board to be art, whether or not they were rendered in any technically proficient way.

One of the five original workers at Kaathiri said that the objects made there included carved shields, boomerangs, spears and drink coasters made out of mulga wood, bowls made of red gum, bark paintings made with river red-gum bark and perhaps with 'little blackfella' or 'welcome to Wilcannia' painted on them, didgeridoos made of mallee wood, and *bundis* (women's digging sticks). Poker-work, which involves using heated wire or a poker tool to burn an image or design into wood, was a popular

method of decoration. The heated poker iron was a popular craft tool of settler culture, and was used initially for branding animals in the pastoral industry of which the Barkindji and other Aboriginal groups in the south-east were a part (Kleinert 1994). Painted seeds such as quandong, kurrajong and acacia, and the quills of the echidna (which Aboriginal people in Wilcannia refer to as 'porcupine') were used to make, 'necklaces, earrings and trinkets'. Acrylic paintings on canvas board and Masonite were also produced. Thus, the work was varied and the enterprise seemingly very productive; it is also fondly remembered. One man who has kept up his art practice and interest, recalls receiving his first pay-packet of \$132.50 from Kaathiri in 1990, while still a schoolboy. When the Centre closed he went back to school. He recalled that due to his and others' inexperience at the time, they did not consider that the soft fresh acacia seeds used to make necklaces at Kaathiri would shrink when they dried; we laughed at the idea of people being left with 'half a necklace'.

When asked about the closure of the Kaathiri Art Centre, whites spoke of 'poor administration', 'inter-clan rivalry', 'poor stock control and ordering' and 'creaming-off' of profits by particular individuals. The Centre failed according to these views as a result of Aboriginal inferiority: 'they' don't understand business, 'they' give away what does not actually belong to them to their families and 'they' don't want to work. Some of the reasons for closure seem at face value to be echoed by both black and white, with a focus on familiar notions of Aboriginal people having little interest in or acumen for administration and business. One Aboriginal man joked that if he were ever to start a business, there was 'no way' that he would let blackfellas run it. This is said in a matter of fact way: that is, as if this is simply just the way things are. This view is not taken to be a negative judgment of Aboriginal traits. Indeed, according to many Aborigines, whites are seen to be better at business than Aborigines because they are far poorer at relationships. For many Aboriginal people, the success of whites in business or careers marks their deficiencies in 'caring and sharing.' While most whites saw the reasons for Kaathiri's closure to lie in Aboriginal traits which were judged as inherent cultural failings, most Aboriginal people who spoke about the Centre's demise were more pragmatic. For them, the business did not succeed for any number of reasons, none of which incur the kinds of moral judgment imposed by many whites (Gibson 2010). Notably, however, Wilcannia Aborigines did not give up on the idea of the business of making art.

Parntu Art Centre, 1995

Following the failure of Kaathiri, the Local CDEP, officially named Ngarpa ('working together'), opened another art centre called Parntu ('fish', 'cod'). This was located at a site perennially known as the 'Old Mobil' after its closure as a petrol station.² The Parntu Centre was said to have been established around 1995 and was also funded by DETYA under a Work Australia or job-skills programme. The people at Parntu produced mostly wooden carvings, 'didges' made out of mallee, boomerangs made by men and painted by women, and shields and *bundis*; other items included paintings on bark, Masonite and canvas, painted and carved emu-eggs, poker-work and necklaces made from seeds. On one occasion a bone needle was made and sold. The objects were sold to 'travellers' although locals also 'put in orders.' Money from the sale of objects was divided with 40 per cent going to the CDEP and 60 per cent to the artist. Unlike Kaathiri, Parntu was not purely an arts and crafts centre. While art materials and art space were provided, the Centre also employed a non-Aboriginal horticulturalist, Steve Crann, who encouraged the creation of a permaculture garden: this included fruit trees, vegetables, ducks and geese. Both black and white locals imply that this was intended to be a more holistic cultural endeavour. Non-Aboriginal notions of Aboriginal 'community', a mythical *gemeinschaft* of co-operation and the much promulgated 'caring and sharing' ethic appear to have underwritten this venture (Peterson 1993; Schwab 1995). Similar, mostly government-driven, 'community' initiatives which offer 'start-up' funding and seek to 'train' Aboriginal people in cooperative type business are found across Aboriginal Australia.

Parntu closed after only two years and the records of this Centre have also been 'lost'. The notion of files being 'lost' is frequently a charge made by whites in connection with Aboriginal organizations to imply that something untoward is afoot. This 'loss' deserves mention as, in the case of *Parntu*, the local Shire had responsibility for managing and monitoring the expenditure of some of the funding. I had hoped to follow the journey of Parntu through a search of Council records, but their archives showed the file to be marked as 'missing'. Losing and torching acquire different meanings where raced interpretation is involved.

Two Aboriginal people associated with Parntu put its closure down to a combination of running out of money and vandalism. They said that there was 'no-one to do stock control or ordering', they 'ran out of stock

and therefore couldn't work; and that people 'wasted the paints.' Kirina, an Aboriginal woman who worked at Parntu, said that it was difficult to get the message through to participants that the Centre had to make a profit. The concept of profit is not alien to Aboriginal people. Aboriginal friends spoke proudly about the profit made in selling 'hits' of ganja (marijuana); one man was proud that he made a profit while giving great 'value for money' in packing the plastic bags full to the top. However, the notion that one might work to make a profit for another's business enterprise, or to reinvest in capital, is not widely shared. In a welfare economy, and where Aboriginal people do not own the businesses in town, profit making in these terms does not need to be understood or adhered to.

Profit has not been a driver or goal of government-funded Aboriginal organizations in Wilcannia. This is not to say that many who run Aboriginal organizations are not economically savvy. Most are fully cognizant of available funding streams and how to gain government and non-government grants and 'buckets of money' for programmes. Yet, few who participate in programmes are aware of the sources of these funds and many are unaware of quite basic aspects of the mainstream economy, though they are fully conversant with the local informal and moral economy.

In 2004, the local Shire employed an Aboriginal person to act as a part-time lifeguard at the local swimming pool. The lifeguard, Billy, wanted to stock the small kiosk at the pool with 'chips and drinks for the kids' to have after school. I asked him whether the kids would be able to afford this. Billy replied that he did not mean for the kids to pay; he said that the stock for the kiosk should be paid for out of 'the funds'. When I asked, 'what funds' and where they came from, Billy could not pinpoint these beyond, 'You know, the funds, the funds.' He went on to talk in abstract ways about the money that is supplied by various unnamed sources, 'for our kids'.

Kirina was unusual in that she had attended part of a short course in business administration and had a good grasp of business fundamentals. In another role within the CDEP I observed her subtle attempts to instill more acceptably mainstream work practices in relation to hours of work, attendance and the use of CDEP resources. Her attempts at explaining loss of pay for non-attendance or when people had left work early were mostly met with abuse and indignation – 'It isn't her fucken money.' Kirina's attempts run counter to the assertion by many whites and some blacks that Aborigines have no interest, or are no good, in business. Aboriginal

resourcefulness and enterprise in the informal economy defies the claim of being no good at business; the 'business' at hand must, however, offer something of value. Disinterest in white ways of working is different to ignorance. Disinterest is fuelled for those Aboriginal people who do try to implement mainstream work rules, when the status quo operates against them doing so, and when to do so is contrary to local Aboriginal practices. It is doubly difficult when such decisions have detrimental effects on relationships with friends and kin, relationships which are seen by Aboriginal people as their most valued asset.

Many, if not most, local Aboriginal people have no desire to work in the way of their white counterparts. Many factors contribute to this. What are perceived as 'good jobs' are seen to be the domain of whites, with blacks being allocated the 'shitty jobs'. This is mostly the case. There is a tension between wanting to have a good job and the material things this brings, and being seen as too much like a white. While some Aboriginal people envy the jobs and incomes of whites, 'it is questionable whether most would want them or more precisely be prepared to undertake the levels of education as well as undergo the regulation and socialization required by the kinds of jobs they (to some extent) fantasize about and imagine holding' (Gibson 2010: 150).

Apart from Kirina, others who had worked at Parntu cited a loss of motivation and heart for its closure: as one person put it, 'Every time they [the artists] got a stockpile of art together to sell, the kids broke in and vandalised the place and people just said stuff it'. The non-Aboriginal horticulturalist who instigated the permaculture approach, who many people, both black and white, said had been a 'mentor' for Aboriginal people and had kept people engaged in the Centre, left town and was not replaced. Following this, a group of 'kids' broke into the Centre at night and killed all of the ducks and geese by weighting their necks down with large rocks; they were not killed for food, they were left to die. Most adults in the community, black and white, were shocked by this behaviour. Boredom, the lack of recreational activities and poor parenting were variously invoked as causes.

A number of whites who have lived in town for some time said that the momentum was not retained at Parntu following the resignation of the white co-ordinator, as Aboriginal people are reluctant to place themselves in positions of leadership or to take on mentoring roles. Certainly those who attempt to lead or mentor are often accused of 'big-noting' themselves:

‘Who the fuck does they think they is?’ In many ways leadership is linked to control and to negatively viewed white ways of being.

The CDEP Art Shed, 2003

For around nine months during 2003, yet another art space was set up by the CDEP. This was situated in a large tin shed in the backyard of a house owned by the Local Aboriginal Land Council (LALC). During this time I shared the house with the LALC Manager, and would wander into the back shed to sit and chat with those painting. The core group of painters comprised four women and two men. Only two of this group showed any real interest in learning about art or in building upon whatever art skills they had, the others generally mucked about with the paints and appeared bored. The items made consisted of painted coasters, table place-mats and small paintings on canvas boards. The group hoped they would be able to sell their work to tourists and locals through the CDEP office. Another idea was to build up a stock of items for sale and set up a stall in the main street, with a view to selling to the traffic passing through town. This arrangement had apparently been successful on another occasion, when Paul Brown from the motel had set up such a stall outside his business. This had generated both tourist interest and local pride and ‘surprise’ at the artistic ‘talent’ in town.

The stock of coasters, mats and paintings which were being built up did not, however, make it to market. The Art Shed was broken into by (what was widely known to be) a particular group of children, and the stock and many of the art supplies were stolen. This was the first of two thefts at the CDEP Art Shed. As with most thefts and break-ins in town, the culprits were generally quite quickly identified by members of the community. The culprits were, however, far less often reported to police by members of the Aboriginal community. Local views and actions in response to these thefts offer some elucidation of the value of social relations and that of material goods. Although the art materials were replenished on both occasions, people did lose heart. The Art Shed finally petered out after a period of nine months when the main artist and central figure of the group left town, moving south to Dareton to live with other family members. This situation is typical of small towns, which rely on just a few individuals with the necessary initiative, drive *and* skills to sustain momentum.

The Motel, 2001

Paul Brown came to live in Wilcannia in 2001, having bought the local Wilcannia Motel. Before arriving in town he had been a successful city businessman with an idea for a sea-change. Not long after Paul arrived, Aboriginal people began to come in to the Motel asking if he wanted to buy their paintings. Paul then set up his reception area as a small art gallery and began to sell the art produced by local Aboriginal people as a means of, 'furthering interest in art in Wilcannia'. The paintings at the motel varied greatly in quality and were rendered on a range of materials. Some were on old pieces of chipboard, plywood and fibro-cement and, in a couple of cases, on old plastic roller-blinds that had been cut into pieces. As a genial and generous personality, Paul began to offer free acrylic paints and canvas to those who wanted them. Few had a ready supply of materials and so many took advantage of this offer. Most of the artists offered the completed canvases back to Paul, who purchased those he felt were good and which he felt would find a ready market, although, by his own admission, he had no background in the arts to assist with such assessments. He would, however, offer his advice in terms of buyer feedback, and encouraged work that did not look 'hurried' and which he felt looked finished. Not looking hurried or 'rushed' is one of the few judgments or evaluations that local Aboriginal artists are prepared to make of each other's work; if it looks as though it has taken time and care, then the painting is generally described a good. The painterly style of artists such as Emily Kame Kngwarreye and Minnie Pwerle are eschewed by Barkindji painters, who tend to favour and value neater work with symmetry of design.³ The buyers of Wilcannia art are not the dealers of fine art whose tastes have been refined by learning to 'see' in the terms required, or which shift as they seek to (re)classify that which is worthy of distinction (Bourdieu 1993). Most Wilcannia buyers are the passing tourists, contract workers and service workers whose tastes tend towards less gestural paintings, preferring clearly delineated and symmetrical iconography and 'tidy' figurative work. The aesthetic of the art-buying Wilcannia public most closely resembles that of the *petit bourgeoisie* (Bourdieu 1984). They are people who know what they like, and why, but this rarely mirrors the evaluations of the trained or class-born art-world aesthete or artist.

At the local motel, Paul kept many of the works for his own burgeoning collection. Others, he sold at little or no profit to clients. The small reception area was usually crammed with local artwork. Canvases of various sizes

placed in ready-made frames hung on the walls, and one work usually featured on a freestanding easel. There were also, at times, a few wooden carvings, the odd shield, the bust of an Aboriginal male or some painted emu eggs. Acrylic-on-canvas paintings, however, made up the bulk of what was on offer. The quality of these works in terms of technical skill varied considerably, and Paul had a large store of work that did not sell and which he was aware at the time of his purchase would not find a ready market. These he bought with a view to encouraging mostly younger people to build their capacity as painters, as well as to encourage self-esteem and build an economic base. Paul built quite a rapport with a few of the artists, and was quick to encourage potential where he saw it, trusting his own judgment while recognizing his artistic inexperience. One downside of this limited outlet was that works that were noticeably exceptional were often bought by Paul for his own personal collection – reducing their circulation to a wider audience and market. To help overcome this, Paul was willing to make his collection available for exhibition. One particular artist's significant body of work in Paul's collection has been shown in at least two exhibitions that I am aware of.⁴

When Paul sold the Motel in 2009, a central and locally understood outlet for art was removed.⁵ At the time of writing, no equivalent organized means of selling local art had been established in its place.

The Old Fuel Store

There is another outlet for art that sits across from the local Police Station and next to the boarded-up sandstone Bond Store in Reid Street. 'The Old Fuel Store,' a small building also made of local sandstone, functions as a residence, with two rooms given over to the owner's art gallery. The gallery has limited hours, opening its doors for about four hours each week. The gallery is owned by Karen Donaldson, a non-Aboriginal artist who has lived in Wilcannia since the 1980s, and whose wonderful painting of Barkindji man Jim (Jimalo) Whyman is the famous poster bearing the now well-known phrase, 'Always was, always will be Aboriginal Land.' These are words carved into a tree trunk at Weinteriga Station by Badger Bates in 1986 with assistance from his partner Sarah Martin. Barkindji people say that the phrase was coined during the 'buy back' by the State Land Council of Weinteriga Sheep Station, which sits on the Darling River near Wilcannia on land traditionally owned by Barkindji people (Memmott 1991). Karen's gallery chiefly displays her own artwork for sale, but there are also a few old

lino-prints by local Aboriginal people, the result of a linocut and printing class discussed earlier, which was run by the College of TAFE in the early 1990s, and in which Karen and Badger Bates had been instrumental. Karen remains a force in the artistic and community life of the town, and is active in using the visual arts to work with children at Wilcannia Central School and St Therese's; this work particularly involves children who may have behavioural, emotional or learning difficulties. Karen is representative of a number of 'educated whites' referred to by Beckett, of whom, he says, Aboriginal people may draw on for support (Beckett 2005 [1958]).

Woore Street Art Centre, 2005

National and international public interest in Aboriginal art increased in the decades following the 1970s. Concomitantly, government and non-government grants and funding became more available to regional and rural organizations with the aim of developing artists and their work. As such, who does, and who it is thought should, control the production and circulation of the arts in Wilcannia has become more important and more contested for all kinds of social, political and economic reasons. The issue of qualification(s) is central: who has the artistic and business credentials, as well as the dispositions, to *know* about Aboriginal art and to adjudicate on the *best* direction Aboriginal art should take? The potential of the artistic scene to develop, along with certain careers and reputations, drives some in the staking of claims around the development of the arts scene in Wilcannia. The following account details something of the path travelled and the participant dynamics at the Woore Street Art Centre, which opened in 2005. The inauguration of the Woore Street Art Centre signalled the notable arrival of competing interests in Wilcannia art and its future trajectory. It serves to highlight the differing ideological presuppositions held, and assessments made, of what constitutes success; not only in terms of the development of 'the Aboriginal arts', but in the development of what is understood to be the socio-economically disadvantaged population of Wilcannia.

The initial move towards a greater formalizing of the Wilcannia arts scene gained momentum in 2002, when the local 'Wilcannia Arts Committee', which had been in existence for some time, approached Paul Brown to join their number. This saw membership comprise a non-Aboriginal Shire representative, two non-Aboriginal community representatives and two Aboriginal community representatives. By all

accounts, this was a small local affair in which the three non-Aboriginal members were most active. Initiatives involved bringing together people with an interest in 'the arts', attempts to build the skills of local artists, and engendering local and regional interest in the kind of art being produced in Wilcannia. The art being made at this time was, and currently remains, primarily that created by Aboriginal people. Two of the non-Aboriginal members of the Wilcannia Arts Committee also represented Wilcannia on the West Darling Arts Regional Arts Board. West Darling Arts is a NSW government-funded Regional Arts and Cultural Service based in Broken Hill. West Darling Arts board members are drawn from the local-government communities of Broken Hill City Council, Central Darling Shire Council, Wentworth Shire Council and the unincorporated area of NSW. Membership comprises an Executive Officer, an Admin/Finance Officer, a Communications Officer and a community and council representative from each of the various local government areas. The Central Darling Shire was represented by the Manager of Economic Development and a local Wilcannia Aboriginal artist.

Some members of the Wilcannia Arts Committee and current members of West Darling Arts disagree as to the level and type of affiliation they officially shared prior to c.2005. Several members of the Wilcannia Arts Committee considered the arrangement with West Darling Arts to be loose and informal, and were surprised to be advised by West Darling Arts in 2005 that they were deemed a subcommittee. It was around this time that West Darling Arts began referring to the Wilcannia Arts Committee as 'Wilcannia Arts'. Agreement over the extent and period of the connection at 2005 is important, as this date heralds West Darling Arts desire for a new direction for the arts in Wilcannia. Retrospective discrepancies around levels of involvement in this direction, who did what and when, cut to the heart of the perceived competing interests and goals that are now a part of the Wilcannia art scene.

In 2005, 'Wilcannia Arts' obtained permission from the Uniting Church to use, for a peppercorn rent, the small fibro-cement church in Woore Street as an Arts Centre. The building no longer functioned as a place of worship and had been vacant for some time. Paul Brown stated that a senior member of the church approached him at this time, to ask if he had any 'thoughts on how the building could be protected from vandalism and if there was any possible community use for it' (pers. comm. Paul Brown, 2010). Paul, as a member of Wilcannia Arts, said he



Figure 29 Woore Street Art Centre, November 2010.

suggested that artists needed a place to work, and that the church then offered Wilcannia Arts a lease on the building. Since Wilcannia Arts was not an ‘incorporated body’, West Darling Arts agreed to hold the lease on behalf of Wilcannia Arts. The Uniting Church then provided \$5,000 for renovations to the church building, to make the creation of an art centre a reality (see Figure 29). There seems to be little agreement or clarity around who was actually responsible for moving discussions for the use, lease and renovation of the building forward, and therefore who should take credit.

Around this time, ‘Wilcannia Arts’, under the aegis of ‘West Darling Arts’, applied for funding from the NSW Regional Arts fund to run a three-year ‘artist-in-residence’ programme at the Woore Street Art Centre. This successful application was guided by the Executive Officer and Project Officer of West Darling Arts.

Prior to the commencement of the artist-in-residence programme, structured organization of the art scene in Wilcannia had been infrequent and limited in nature. Wilcannia art had not been directed in its production and style to the degree that has occurred in ‘community art centres’ such as Papunya, Balgo, Yuendumu, Hermannsburg and Yirrkala. In these centres, mostly white art-coordinators with knowledge of ‘the art market’

are employed to advise on, and develop, art production and markets. At its core, the Aboriginal art being produced in Wilcannia before 2006 was created within a framework of Aboriginal intersubjectivity, interests and epistemology. To that extent, what constituted 'Aboriginal art' in Wilcannia was something primarily understood and shared between Aboriginal people.

Following the advent of the artist-in-residence programme, an increasing number of people began to take an active interest in being involved in or managing the Wilcannia Aboriginal art scene. For some of these people, making art in Wilcannia into a viable business concern had become an important goal. The push to a more commercial or structured art scene was largely driven by non-Aboriginal forces, many of which were external to the town. The Executive Officer of West Darling Arts and the Manager of Economic Development at the local Shire Council were strong drivers of the push towards a more formally organized and structured art scene.

Both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal local Wilcannia community members whose interests in art were less directly related to their employment role were divided on this approach to developing 'the arts' in Wilcannia. There was also disagreement between non-Aboriginal people with an interest in the arts over 'exposing' Aboriginal artists to work, techniques and ideas that are part of Western mainstream arts practice. For the most part, these discussions were raised and held between whites. One white man, for instance, claimed that Wilcannia Aboriginal people have 'huge talent', that they 'are not cluttered up with fashionable ideas' and that they 'have a simplistic attitude' to art. He added that 'suffering tends to make people very true', and supported this perspective by appealing to the music of black people in South Africa. This engaged concern, albeit unintentionally, reproduces racial stereotypes. It is but one example of the various cultural views which circulate and influence the direction of arts production. There is much concerned white debate that does not connect with Aboriginal people and which operates in separate discursive domains.

While the three year artist-in-residence workshops were open to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, as per the conditions of the grant, the drive to expose Aboriginal artists to professional artists who worked across various media was instrumental in West Darling Arts choice of resident artists over the succeeding two years. In year three of the residencies, West Darling Arts said they sought community involvement

in the selection of artists and media (pers comm. James Giddey, Executive Officer West Darling Arts, July 2011). A key focus of the artist-in-residence programme was to further;

The skills development and inter-relational Arts development sorely lacking in such an isolated community [and to provide] a tangible exposure for local Artists to professional Artist practices, skills and processes. Broadening the influence in the use of materials and medium, approaches and consideration to subject matter and extending the visual vocabulary.

(unpublished Wilcannia Art and Culture Centre Working Paper 2011)

Over the next three years, the Woore Street Centre hosted eight artists, six of whom were non-Aboriginal with tertiary art qualifications in art. The two Aboriginal artists, Badger Bates and Pam Bugmy, have both attended community- and TAFE-run visual-arts classes, with Pam having achieved Certificate II in visual-arts practice.

Badger Bates took up the inaugural residency, teaching lino-cutting to the community, a skill for which he has become well known. Geoff de Main and Peter McGlinchey, both Broken Hill artists, also took up their residencies in the first year of the programme. Geoff worked with the local community to teach charcoal drawing and sculpting; the latter included participants making drums from river red gum and kangaroo skin. Peter taught sculpture and the production of art pieces from natural found objects and manufactured materials, some of which had functional qualities as furniture.

One measure of the success of the workshops put forward by West Darling Arts was that of numbers: 390 'students, adults, local residents, tour groups, individual tourists and CDEP participants' are said to have come through the centre in the final three months of the first year (Eassie 2007). Numbers, while important to West Darling Arts and most ventures seeking to build or maintain enterprises and funding, were not the measure of success cited by many of the Aboriginal participants. By most accounts the workshop provided by Badger Bates saw the greatest local Aboriginal interest, with many saying that they had approached the Centre and tried their hand at lino-cutting because it was Badger who was teaching. West Darling Arts, in recognition of this, referred to the 'Badger factor' (Wilcannia Art and Culture Centre Working Paper 2011). Badger would

often sit outdoors in the grounds of the Centre, where he could be seen by passers-by, encouraging the involvement of local Aboriginal people. His presence marked the Centre as Aboriginal community space in important ways. Adults, children and their dogs wandered freely through the Centre and its grounds, comfortable and secure in the knowledge that this was acceptable. Infants from St Therese's primary school who were too young to make lino prints were, at Badger's request, brought to the Centre, where they collected and painted sixty kurrajong seed pods. These were then hung on the originating tree's branches in the grounds of the Centre as markers, not of artistic skill, but of community participation and ownership. These levels of community sociality, typical of Wilcannia and other Aboriginal communities, mark a difference with the more disciplined mainstream approach to arts workshops. A difference openly appreciated by many members of West Darling Arts and Wilcannia Arts, but recognized as bringing certain organizational difficulties. There is an obvious tension between allowing open access to infrastructure and art materials and the constraints placed by programme budgets and accountability.

At the close of the first year of the artists-in-residence programme, sixty-six linocuts and forty-eight linocut prints had been made most of which have since been sold (Eassie 2007). The year concluded with an exhibition held at the Geo Centre in Broken Hill which presented the work of the three artists in residence and included forty-eight works by forty members of the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Wilcannia community, including children. A smaller exhibition was held at the Woore Street Centre which showed all of the work created by the community. Of the Aboriginal people involved in the Geo Centre exhibition, many were young first-time artists although at least four people had had previous experience in making linocuts under Badger's tutelage.

During the second and third years of the artist-in-residence programme, a further six periods of residency were taken up at the Centre: by Pam Bugmy, a local Barkindji woman; a second residency by Badger Bates; and one each by the non-Aboriginal artists Rick Ball, Virginia Kaiser, Julie Barratt and Pamela Houghton Jones. The works ranged from sculpture to textiles, collographs, linocuts, basket weaving, printmaking, wood carving, painting and drawing. For those Aboriginal people who attended, this was the first opportunity most had had to work with professional artists, to work in different media and to draw on styles and techniques that are more readily the domain of non-Aboriginal arts practice. At the end of the

residency programme, a four-week-long exhibition was opened by Badger Bates at the Broken Hill Regional Art Gallery. This featured twenty-five works by Wilcannia community members, including non-Aboriginal people, and fifty by the resident artists.

The 'Wilcannia Arts and Culture Centre Working Paper' prepared by West Darling Arts states that the artist-in-residence programme has 'significantly furthered the skills development and inter-relational arts development sorely lacking in such an isolated community' (2011). However, changes in art production or style as a result of exposure to new media and art practice is not agreed. Most local Aboriginal people say that their art style and interests have not changed substantially as a result of the workshops. This is consistent with my own observations of the works created since the conclusion of the programme. Changes were anticipated: West Darling Arts considered that the artist-in-residence programme 'challenged the unconscious development of "cottage industry" art styles and *inappropriate visual icons* and languages that can develop when lack of interaction across art forms and cultural practices occur – particularly for remote indigenous [*sic*] communities' (2011: emphasis mine).

These value judgments or *distinctions* between appropriate and inappropriate 'icons and languages' are firmly fixed within the philosophies, dispositions and language of a Western arts milieu. They are, however, somewhat foreign, and often meaningless, to most if not all Wilcannia Aboriginal artists, who generally aim to paint and make works in terms and criteria they perceive to *belong to them*. What *belongs* in an 'artwork' is of course a cultural and epistemological question. When cultural-authority figures in Wilcannia encourage artists to 'paint what belong to you,' there is broad agreement as to what this involves. There is a clear idea that this centres on aspects of daily life, 'traditional' style and content, and the designs and iconography found on museum artefacts and Barkindji cultural sites. What is being encouraged by these cultural brokers is a return to, or a revival of, what is considered by many Barkindji cultural figures to be an existing 'Barkindji style.' The style being encouraged by 'Wilcannia Arts' is the 'creation of a "Wilcannia Style" that embodies the Paakantji [Barkindji] Culture and land' (Wilcannia Arts and Culture Centre Working Paper 2011). What is already present in great measure for some cultural-authority figures is in the process of creation for others; while both may appear to seek the same goal, the language and practice directed towards attaining it are at epistemological odds.

Most of the non-Aboriginal locals involved with the running of the residencies say that they have learned a great deal from the workshops: mainly that Aboriginal people have shown a clear preference towards carving wood, making linocuts and painting. One local Aboriginal artist in his mid-thirties who has been painting, drawing and carving wood since he was a young boy, did express that he was keen to complete a basket that he began during the residency of weaver Virginia Kaiser in 2008 – a workshop which drew a great deal of Aboriginal interest. Although this man had not completed the basket as at 2010, he nevertheless felt that basket weaving was a skill he wished to pursue because it is a practice that was undertaken historically by his people – one which he would like to resurrect. This might indicate that the expected ‘changes’ in art styles, media or production may be expressed and seen in the longer term. The long-term view of building ‘cultural, economic and social benefits’ is certainly the one being espoused by Wilcannia Arts (Wilcannia Art Centre Working Paper 2011). In the case of basket weaving, this can be viewed as a ‘back to the future’ skill in line with the drive towards cultural revival.

The choice to reproduce in art that which is known and valued is also indicated through local Aboriginal preferences in technique and style of painting. Some local Aboriginal people described one non-Aboriginal resident artist’s work as ‘throwing paint’ and ‘sloshing paint around’. As a local said, people ‘walked in, had a look and walked out again’. The loose and painterly style of this particular artist does not resonate with the chosen choice of content, favoured designs, precision of detail or interests of Barkindji artists. The abstract is eschewed for its nonfigurative, non-representative intangibility of meaning – it is seen to be meaningless and the grammar is neither known nor sought. The tendency towards continuing and relearning what is seen as ‘traditional’, and meaningful, is an important aspect of Wilcannia art practice taken up in detail in a later section of this book.

Out of town art outlets

Shared Aboriginality cannot be considered an incontrovertible basis for building local or regional art-related business links. The nearest out of town outlet for the sale of Wilcannia Aboriginal art is the Thankakali (‘your people, my people’) Gallery in Broken Hill. The gallery began as part of a CDEP initiative and comprises several floors of Aboriginal painting and carving, mostly by artists living around Broken Hill. Whilst Thankakali

allows 'outsiders' (those not from Broken Hill) to exhibit, few artists from Wilcannia choose to do so. There are a number of reasons for this. The art is not pre-purchased by Thankakali, so artists are required to wait until their work has been sold before they receive payment; this is not the preferred way of operating. Many artists paint to gain immediate funds, a form of targeted work in which a painting is made for sale in order to make an immediate and specific purchase (Peterson 2004). Some are suspicious of the consignment model. Thankakali's practice of taking a percentage of the sale price for art materials and other management and infrastructure costs is also disliked. Artists who have little experience of galleries taking their cut for marketing services rail at this 'commission', saying they are being 'ripped off'. Most feel that they should get the full sale price and do not take into account the costs that Thankakali incurs in providing materials and the infrastructure to sell their work. Many view the arts economy in the same light as the welfare economy, in that there is a strong expectation that services provided to Aboriginal people should be provided free of charge. Some artists are hesitant and shy of approaching Thankakali, and personal, family and institutional rivalries between those in Wilcannia and those associated with Thankakali also work to reduce this site as a potential market.

The 'incorporation' of Wilcannia Arts

In May 2010 West Darling Arts registered 'Wilcannia Arts' as 'Wilcannia Arts Incorporated'. The move to incorporation by West Darling Arts was, according to the 'Wilcannia Arts and Culture Centre Working Paper' (2011), as a strategic step towards the commercial representation of Wilcannia visual artists as an entity or group, and building infrastructure for the production and marketing of artworks across the wider West Darling region. Wilcannia Arts Incorporated then sought involvement from representatives from the Commonwealth Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) and the regional Indigenous Co-ordination Centre (ICC),⁶ together with representatives of other Aboriginal groups from across the region, to form part of a larger 'Wilcannia Arts Incorporated steering committee'. The role of the committee was to oversee the implementation of Wilcannia Arts Incorporated's business plan, therein reflecting a form of organizational governance that is routinely applied across and within Aboriginal communities. This move raises larger questions about the meaning and form of the Aboriginal 'self

determination' that 'Wilcannia Arts Incorporated' seeks to engender. The larger plans of 'Wilcannia Arts Incorporated' and the notion of this kind of committee do not sit comfortably with some in the local community. The extent to which the 'Aboriginal community' participated in the development of the 'Wilcannia Arts Incorporated' steering committee, and its direction, is an ongoing point of contention between some, mostly white, members of Wilcannia Arts Incorporated and those on the Board of West Darling Arts.

Demonstrating appropriate community participation and 'consultation' with Aboriginal communities is notoriously difficult. While unanimous decisions are, as in most communities, something of a pipe dream, they take on a particular focus where government funding is involved. Because of the sensitive nature of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal race relations in the wider Australian society, government bureaucrats, agencies and politicians tread carefully in trying to demonstrate that 'appropriate' consultation and agreement with the 'Aboriginal community' has taken place. At every turn, however, 'community' consensus can be ambiguously constructed and argued, in good faith and in mischief. For every argument put forward that appropriate consultation with the 'Aboriginal community' has taken place, those against a proposal, black or white, can easily find a representative group or individual who will argue to the contrary.

Attempts to widen participation of 'Wilcannia Arts Incorporated' in the face of some local-community criticism saw the Executive Officer of West Darling Arts convene a meeting in December 2010 at which the Wilcannia Arts Incorporated constitution was amended to include all of the Wilcannia community as members. This meeting drew further disapproval from a number of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community members and service providers who claimed that there was little 'local' community representation at this meeting. They expressed that many if not the majority of those attending were non-Aboriginal, and that Aboriginal representation was largely provided by the Aboriginal staffs of government and non-government agencies that service Wilcannia but which are based outside of Wilcannia. A few local Aboriginal people who had heard about the meeting 'on the grapevine' turned up to express their dissatisfaction at their exclusion.

Decisions about who should or should not be invited or involved in such meetings are part of a larger Aboriginal discourse concerning appropriate authority to speak on community matters. The claim by many

local Aborigines that 'Wilcannia Arts Incorporated' is non-consultative has strong roots in local politics, where there is dissatisfaction with the particular individuals that Wilcannia Arts Incorporated is consulting with. One clear concern expressed by some Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people alike was that the venture was being driven by West Darling Arts and a particular employee of the local Shire, who are said to have based their consultation on one particular Aboriginal artist. This artist, who shares a more commercial focus, has been the most open to the efforts of West Darling Arts. According to the Executive Officer of West Darling Arts, this artist is 'one of the people responsible for bringing the Aboriginal community together and working together [with] Wilcannia Arts' (pers. comm. WDA Executive Officer, 6 January 2011).

Although born in Wilcannia, the artist in question has lived elsewhere for many years and until quite recently. According to some Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal locals alike, this reduces her authority to speak on behalf of the Aboriginal community in these matters. Others do not share this view, and are strongly supportive of the woman's involvement in the Wilcannia art scene. Those who support the woman's level of involvement cite her strong local family networks and connections and her family's long-term involvement in art. Authority to represent the 'Aboriginal community' in this and other matters is never straightforward or clear-cut. The individual's identity; their reasons for leaving, and for returning to, Wilcannia; the strength (political and numerical) of family who remain in Wilcannia; the potential resources at stake – all come to bear on whether an individual is sanctioned to speak, and for whom.

The development of 'Wilcannia Arts Incorporated' and its plans for art in Wilcannia saw community members raise some key questions that do not divide opinion along strictly Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal lines. Questions included: Should only locals drive the direction of the arts in town? Do local non-Aboriginal people know more about the local Aboriginal community than non-Aboriginal people from 'away'? How important is arts expertise to building an arts-related economy, as opposed to local knowledge and relationships? Overall, it seems that the push towards development under the 'Wilcannia Arts Incorporated' model is favoured more strongly by whites, many of whom either live outside of Wilcannia, or live and work in Wilcannia on contracts. This is not to say that Wilcannia Arts Incorporated do not have strong Aboriginal supporters.

Those most keen to pursue the 'Wilcannia Arts Incorporated' model claim that an incorporated business with a brief to regulate art standards and build markets can offer greater social and economic stimulus to the town and its residents than can alternative models. Those opposed to the model express the opinion that a move in this direction will take control out of local hands, specifically out of Aboriginal hands, and that the professional aggrandizement of certain individuals, rather than wider Aboriginal community interest, is behind this push. The latter view is strongly expressed by those who feel that a move to incorporation is neither culturally sympathetic nor sustainable. Their belief is that a less externally directed, smaller, less bureaucratic, more locally driven approach is necessary if the aim of building an economic base through art for Aboriginal people is to be achieved. While there are a few local Aboriginal voices involved in these discourses, there is a strong sense that the pros and cons being expressed owe much to power conflicts between whites.

Certainly, if the art being made and the visual-arts scene is to be determined by Aboriginal people, then time is a necessary requisite; though this is not necessarily the view of those whites who have the desire, the ready expertise and skill to build and develop an arts business within the context of their employment. There is a 'lead time' tension between those connected professionally to the arts world and those who seek a slowly, slowly and local ground-up approach.

The tensions between an incorporated or locally driven approach to the arts was brought to the fore when the Central Darling Shire Council submitted a proposal to the Federal government in 2010 for the creation of a new 'Art Centre' in Wilcannia. The impetus for this was said to be a desire to locate Wilcannia as a hub for the wider Barkindji community living across the region. While West Darling Arts provided a letter of support for this proposal, their spokesperson felt that the proposal lacked appropriate community consultation. The proposal was rejected by the Federal Government's Department of Infrastructure, with lack of community consultation being given as a key reason. The Executive Officer of West Darling Arts, who is the Public Officer for 'Wilcannia Art Incorporated', continues to work with FaHCSIA and DEEWR towards a planned Art and Culture Centre which will promote Barkindji visual arts, language and culture. To this end, West Darling Arts is developing the 'Wilcannia Creative Arts Strategy'. This strategy includes a proposal to employ an Indigenous Arts Development Officer and two trainee Business Support

Officers as a means of building local skills and capacity (Wilcannia Arts and Culture Centre Working Paper 2011).

It is clear that the Woore Street Centre cannot accommodate West Darling Arts' larger plans for 'Wilcannia Arts Incorporated'. This is a disappointment to some in town, who agreed with West Darling Arts' own assessment following the artist-in-residence programme that the Woore Street Art Centre was a 'user-friendly' and 'non-threatening' space, one which many in the community had begun to feel comfortable with (Wilcannia Arts and Culture Centre Working Paper 2011). Some feel that the Woore Street Centre has been abandoned by West Darling Arts because it does not qualify for development under Federal government funding. West Darling Arts also hopes to develop working agreements with professional art bodies, including the College of Fine Arts (COFA) in Sydney, which they believe are well placed to provide art advisors and technical support to Aboriginal artists of the West Darling Arts region (Wilcannia Arts and Culture Centre Working Paper 2011). At the time of writing, COFA was providing such support to the Aboriginal community of Papunya in the Central Desert of Australia. West Darling Arts' proposal for a Wilcannia Arts and Culture Centre includes facilities where artists from the wider region can work, create and print. The proposal also includes a shopfront for art sales and a cultural programme for the wider Australian public and consumers of art.

Arts practice in Wilcannia is embedded in the Aboriginal way of life; it is socially and culturally integrated, if historically typically ad hoc in its organization and practice. It is unclear how the proposed Wilcannia Arts Incorporated/West Darling Arts approach, which is formally organized and structured, will impact on this. The kind of organized arts-development proposed raises a number of significant issues not confined to Wilcannia. As is common in communities with high Aboriginal populations, the government funding process rests on the underlying assumption that there exists a coherent and cohesive 'Aboriginal community' with whom consultation can take place. It further assumes that the communal production of art, the model upon which the proposed Arts Centre is based, is one that works well for 'Aboriginal communities'. These assumptions run counter much past arts practice in Wilcannia.

The art of prison: solitary practice and social bonding

It is my experience that those Aboriginal artists most serious about their art-making prefer to work in a less communal environment. This is not to say that art-makers do not enjoy participating in events such as the artist-in-residence programme. Indeed, earlier lino-print and other workshops, by virtue of their communal nature, proved to be popular. For many participants, these were illuminating, rewarding and sociable experiences, akin to attending the kinds of art classes, workshops and master-classes run for and by artists in mainstream communities. There is, however, a qualitative difference between attending art workshops through a desire for sociality, a passing interest in the novelty of art-making, and art-making as a specifically considered concern.

Those Wilcannia artists who are known for their steady and long-term production relay the difficulty of producing art while being distracted and interrupted by members of family and community. Some 'art-making', such as that of the CDEP Art Shed, was a group activity. However, this formed part of a structured work programme, attendance at which allowed participants to gain financial top-ups to their welfare payments. Participation was a choice made against the alternatives of 'working' at mowing lawns or other forms of general town maintenance.

Most artwork in Wilcannia is undertaken as a solitary pursuit. This preference for solitary art-making echoes that of many *non*-Aboriginal artists, but it is not one generally attributed to 'Aboriginal artists', who are mostly portrayed as sitting around painting in groups. The Aboriginal inclination to lone art-making may correspond, to some degree, with the high levels of incarceration of Aboriginal men from Wilcannia. When I asked one young man where he had learned to paint, he replied: 'Like everyone else, in prison.' Jail offers the time to produce artworks. Aboriginal people made up 22.2 per cent of the NSW prison population in 2009, with many local Aboriginal men spending at least some of their sentences in Broken Hill or Ivanhoe jails. In Broken Hill prison during a visit in 2003, thirty-two of the thirty-nine male inmates were Aboriginal. Most male Wilcannia Aboriginal artists who went to jail increased their production of artworks while imprisoned and other Aboriginal men became interested in painting while in jail.

The officer responsible for introducing art-making for inmates of Broken Hill Jail has tried over time to bring people together to paint as a group activity, but inmates prefer to spend much of their time painting

alone in their cells. This cannot be understood as a rejection of sociality *per se*, as many men say that jail is where they have the opportunity to catch up and spent time with friends and family. The opportunity afforded by jail-time to discuss 'culture' and cultural issues, and to think these through in art-making, is difficult to achieve in Wilcannia. Men spoke of the positive contribution that the lack of alcohol, women and children made in strengthening their relationships with the (male) friends and family with whom they were spending time in prison. It is here that many young men get to spend intensive periods with relatives, one-to-one, in ways that may not occur outside of jail. One man spoke of the rare opportunity to spend quality time with a favourite, culturally knowledgeable Uncle. Prison offers time to 'have a laugh and forget about family', when domestic violence or 'family' is often the catalyst for imprisonment.

There is a fondness for painting alone, as it affords 'time to think'. This is at a premium, as homes are often crowded, noisy and chaotic, a situation that affects the productivity of many who paint. For many artists in Wilcannia, while creating artworks provides a means to represent and express themselves, it also provides a space for contemplation, resolution and catharsis on matters to do with culture, life and identity – Aboriginal identity in general and Barkindji identity in particular. This is not to say that there is no place for a communal art space in Wilcannia; it is to question the idea that a communal space for art-making is culturally more in tune with Aboriginal artistic practice, rather than being a need arising from crowded family homes. Communal art space would enable the safe storage of art materials and works for established and aspiring artists living in overcrowded domestic situations; a welcome aspect, say some, of the newly proposed Arts and Culture Centre. As is the idea of the Centre as a social gathering space. The lack of housing, overcrowding, alcohol and physical abuse, and poor recreational opportunities in general are, however, structural economic and social matters: the presence of these factors does not equate to a desire for communal arts practice.

The pottery initiative: the politics of cultural business

Art, and its making, production, circulation, exhibition and management, has become a site in contemporary Aboriginal life for contextualizing and tracking the material and political forces that shape, create and recreate social and cultural difference (Marcus and Myers 1995). As Aboriginal 'culture' is increasingly connected to art, and objectified as art objects

(Merlan 1989), who controls art talk, art education, art making, production and circulation is, as we have seen, an increasing site of contest. The pottery venture is an example in microcosm of the daily politics of a town that acts in a world where race, culture and their control are relentlessly present in sight, discourse and the imaginary.

At the time of writing, a professional ceramist had entered the Wilcannia art scene and had affected the practice of local Aboriginal art-makers in ways that a previously run TAFE ceramics course had not. The potter's wife had been appointed as the principal of Wilcannia Central School, and the potter began to teach classes to school students as part of a Federal Government funded Parents and Community Engagement Initiative (PACE). Before long, classes were provided in one of the school sheds in the evenings and on weekends for interested adults and children. These proved popular, with community classes on Saturday mornings drawing between fifteen and twenty-eight children. An 'Artists' Sunday' was then introduced for those adults who were more seriously inclined.

When I interviewed the potter at Wilcannia Central School, he expressed the wish for Wilcannia to become as well known for its Aboriginal pottery as Hermannsburg, an Aboriginal community in Central Australia that has been producing ceramics for several decades. His desire is to build economic development for the Aboriginal community through engagement in the visual arts, using the transference of his skills to achieve this. The potter outlined what he believes is required in order to achieve a commercially viable ceramics industry in Wilcannia, one which would have people expressing the desire to go to Wilcannia. He estimates that for this to occur, approximately ten people would need to be throwing three pots each a week. After some months, three Aboriginal people were decorating pre-cast plates; all the pots of marketable quality were being thrown by the potter. Hopes for a steady production and quality product are, for now, dreams of the future.

Whether or not this pottery initiative will continue and grow into a commercially successful venture for artists in the community depends on a number of factors. These include the desire of locals to make pottery, and, importantly, support for the potter and his wife from the local Aboriginal community. The ongoing viability of the initiative rests on the presence of the potter, which in many ways depends on the continued employment of his wife. Over a recent nine-year period five principals came through

Wilcannia Central School's doors. While a high staff turnover brings fresh ideas, it works against any sustained development.

The fact that the principal's husband was allegedly employed to run the pottery classes under a PACE initiative is seen, by a small group of parents, to smack of nepotism (Gilmore 2010). This claim is not unconnected to intra-cultural dissent over the principal's approach to managing the school and the disciplining of students (*ibid.*). Differences between forms of discipline are being framed as 'cultural' by a small group of Aboriginal parents – a common complaint levelled at many previous principals.

In the Wilcannia context, such dissent readily extends beyond the confines of the town. Scrutiny of education and other services in Wilcannia by various government agencies is intense. Education, as one tranche of the Commonwealth Government's 'Close the Gap' programme, has seen Wilcannia identified as having 'one of the lowest attendance rates in NSW' (Stevenson 2011). Such scrutiny is also part of the media's disproportionate interest in any conflict seen to arise from perceived racial politics. Issues that in less racially identified communities might be resolved at a local level, often gain wider and media attention for Wilcannia. Local disagreements between the school, other agencies and the community are often framed by both black and white in racial terms. The ready capacity of the town to gain wider exposure in this way sees vexatious contact with the media or government agencies driven by group, individual, personal and family differences. The mechanisms and institutions that drive and affect the pottery initiative and other 'community' initiatives operate within a network of potential racialized blockages that threaten their existence and continuation.

Tradition, culture and commercial success

Prior to his involvement in the school-based pottery programme, one Aboriginal artist, John, had achieved modest commercial success with his acrylic paintings on canvas, with artworks fetching up to AU\$3,500. Over the years his work has incorporated a broad range of art styles and designs – most recently exactly painted canvases densely covered in depictions of brightly coloured insects. In taking up pottery, John's art style has again seen change. His pots and plates, although still densely covered in designs and figures, have a more fluid, abstract quality, frequently using a soft white slip to trail loose designs of stylized native animals and their tracks. The result when fired is an intricate web of raised white design on a dark, highly

glazed, black background. With the encouragement and help of the master potter, black and white is showing early signs of becoming a signature style in Wilcannia pottery (*Wilcannia News* 2010). Colours which, not incidentally, echo the popularity among Wilcannia Aboriginal people of black-and-white lino prints.

While John seems more than happy to embrace advice in relation to his art style, William, one of the other Aboriginal artists learning pottery, appears to be far more selective in this regard. Although happy to work in black-and-white glaze, William continues to reproduce the designs and content which are a feature of his canvas paintings and pencil-and-ink drawings.

John, having lived in many areas of Australia, has been influenced by artwork from other places. Much of his earlier artwork seems to have drawn on an amalgam of influences, particularly the heavily dotted style which is a feature of Aboriginal art of the Western and Central Desert. While some works are dotted almost in their entirety, the content draws on the fish, native animals and ancestral beings common to Barkindji life and Dreaming. Some works bring together the geometric elements common to the art of south-east NSW together with heavily dotted backgrounds. Despite being a Barkindji man raised in Wilcannia, John does not eschew the use of dots, which other Barkindji artists and cultural brokers – such as Badger Bates, Murray Butcher, Willie Don Hunter and Phillip Bates – see as not belonging to them. Whereas John's work continues to reproduce thematic representations of animals, fish, mythical ancestors and stories of his Barkindji 'Dreaming', the style he uses is flexible – he is not averse to producing designs which might appeal to a wider market and which have their genesis in other Aboriginal groups.

William, on the other hand, has maintained his previous style as he moves from carving and painting to pottery. In William's case, his work on pottery features the incision into clay of traditional designs that were taught to him by the 'old people'. In this way, the design and content of William's pottery reiterate those of the carvings into wood, paintings on canvas and drawings on paper he has been making since he was a small boy. For William, the continuation of what are known as Barkindji designs is paramount; the medium of clay is simply another vehicle for this. William's sense of himself as an artist is bound up with continuing to produce designs that are seen to belong to Barkindji people. Although focused on traditional designs, William is nevertheless willing to blend the

contemporary with the traditional; this means increasing his repertoire of designs and colour choices, additions that, as he says, offer him choices not previously available historically. The contemporary innovations are not, however, substitutes for traditional designs and content; what is most flexible for William is not the style, but the medium.

Segments of the Wilcannia Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community judge differences between these two artists in relation to their willingness to work for the market, as well as on their choice of art styles. John's business orientation and relative commercial success is praised by some Aboriginal people, and viewed negatively by others who associate this with white ways of being and a white desire for material accumulation.

Whether commercial or financial success is seen as un-Aboriginal often depends on whether the artist shares the fruits of their success, and more broadly on whether engagement with a capitalist economy is valued by peers. Divisions and disagreements about tradition and commercial 'success' divide black and white, but also reach across black and white difference; whites seek black allies and vice versa to bolster each other's case or cause. Invariably, these alliances are argued in terms of benefiting, or being 'true' to, Aboriginal 'culture'.

The involvement of various councils, galleries, dealers and art buyers serve to accord value to the art being made in Wilcannia, setting in train a commercially focused momentum that, to a great extent, has been imposed upon the community. The school potter, like many who come to live and work in Wilcannia, expresses the desire to remain distant from the politics of race and culture. This is not a real choice. The presence of racialized cultural difference affects every aspect of Wilcannia life.

At the Central School one day, a young student came to where the potter and I were discussing a plate that had been decorated by John. The child said, 'Uncle John did that bowl!' I asked her what she thought of it, and she replied: 'That's my Nan's brother.' The strength of Aboriginal family networks and relationships affects every social and business space in ways that disallow any desire for cultural or relational distance. In throwing the pot for John, which was then decorated by John, within the school attended by John's nieces, nephews and cousins, the potter, the pot, John's extended family and the school principal as the potter's wife are, like it or not, implicated in a web of relationships.

Who owns cultural works?

The prison at Broken Hill, in common with many country town government-service buildings, has murals painted by Aboriginal people that feature Aboriginal content. Made with the assistance of art teachers from Broken Hill College of TAFE, the murals in Broken Hill Prison adorn many surfaces, with the earliest showing a date of 1986 – a time at which ‘Aboriginal Art’ was being widely lauded and funded across the nation. Some dates, along with the names of those who had completed the murals, have been erased as the paintings were ‘touched up’ by later inmates. The re-working of murals, rather than their obliteration, echoes the more traditional Aboriginal practice of re-touching rock art, which continues in some parts of Australia, mainly the north and centre of the continent and some parts of Queensland. The practice is contentious, as it contravenes other high-art values. In 1987 some cave sites in the area of the Gibb River in the West Kimberley were repainted (Frederick and O’Connor 2009). This created intense controversy around questions of ownership, rights to paint and authorized knowledge of the context and the nature of the work. The re-touchers were accused of being ‘work-experience youth’ who knew nothing of the tradition represented by the rock paintings. Local Ngarinyin traditional owners had neither been sought out nor consulted by those funding this CDEP initiative (Michaels 1994:63). Questions were thus raised about who the art belonged to – the local Aboriginal group or the world? Was it, in fact, art? Was there continuity of meaning associated with the paintings? Had the paintings’ aesthetic and value been destroyed by the needs and desires of contemporary youth to ‘reconnect with their traditions?’ (Michaels 1994:64–5).

The Barkindji people I spoke with did not agree with the practice of repainting their ‘historic’ rock-art sites. There was less resistance to the re-touching of murals in the prison. The latter were viewed as being of a different order from paintings in the caves and cliff overhangs at sites such as Mutawintji and Mt. Manara. These were considered to be completed by Aboriginal ancestors and Dreaming figures at sites of great historical and cultural importance. While some Aboriginal people in the prison were reluctant and some ambivalent about repainting or painting over murals, in some cases it was non-Aboriginal prison authorities who saw some murals as having enough significance to merit preservation in their original condition. This was the case with one large mural of Ngatji, the ancestral rainbow serpent, which was featured along a main wall of the prison

interior. It had been painted by several inmates, one of whom had spent several periods in Broken Hill jail. This man said that he was one of a group of artist inmates who had painted part of the head of Ngatji on this mural. He felt that in having rendered this image, that Ngatji kept 'calling him back' to prison. He wanted paint out his contribution to it, as he felt that this would prevent his return to prison. He asked if he could do this, but was told by a prison officer that the prison owns the mural – they refused him permission. The man felt that his rendering of Ngatji belonged to him, so he should have the right to paint over it. For the authorities, the mural is owned by the government as an unpaid commissioned work.

In this context, the prison wall evokes similar questions of rights and ownership to that those prompted by the rock paintings controversy. In the case of Ngatji's head, the prison is owner and individual painters do not have copyright, or indeed any of the rights that might normally be associated with being either an 'artist' or an owner. Ownership remains, for this man, a vexed issue. The prison's refusal to allow the artist the right to paint out his work leaves him feeling tied to prison in ways which, as he sees it, are outside of his control.

The question of ownership is one that frequently arises when ostensibly 'community-work' art projects, including murals as well as works completed as part of TAFE courses, are concerned.⁷ Legally, TAFE can lay claim to all artworks completed as part of its courses, though it does not, as a rule, enforce this. On one occasion that 'Wilcannia Arts' ran an art workshop in conjunction with TAFE, several wooden 'story poles' were made collaboratively by the students, with a great deal of teacher input.⁸ West Darling Arts subsequently sold these poles on behalf of the 'artists' after they had been shown at an exhibition of Wilcannia artwork in Sydney. The funds raised allowed for the purchase of a much-needed lino-printing press and materials, and at the time of writing these were temporarily installed at the Wilcannia Central School. According to West Darling Arts, the contributing artists were consulted and were happy with this arrangement. I was unable to confirm this, but many Aboriginal locals commented that the artists should have been individually recompensed. On the other hand, several whites commented that in the case of the story poles the non-Aboriginal teaching artist did most of the work. The implication here is that economic return to individual Aboriginal contributors was not warranted. Yet, the poles are attributed to the Aboriginal 'artists'. Indeed, one can say that their value and purchase is

predicated on this. Who owns the work and who should be recompensed are issues which rest on differing cultural understandings of 'art worlds', artworks, artists, bureaucratic requirements, value creation and race politics that are difficult to reconcile.

The greater interaction of Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginally regulated art worlds also has consequences and significance for aspects of the Aboriginal domestic moral economy. The upsurge of Aboriginal art that has come about as a result of external, mostly government-related, funding and workshops has also offered a new form of identity, an economic opportunity and work interests. Many talented people have been afforded the chance to shine through these historically contingent events. The partly artificial project of governments and other art-related organizations to 'solve the Aboriginal problem' through the co-development of art and culture has also been taken up by some as rare opportunity. Those who oppose Wilcannia Arts Incorporated's plan for a new and larger Art and Culture Centre (including some who are members) see it as a sign that West Darling Arts have lost interest in maintaining Woore Street as a working site for local artists.

During 2008 the Executive Officer of West Darling Arts was advised that the Centre was 'rumoured' to contain asbestos in its structure. This news saw the use of the Centre 'restricted' (pers. comm. Executive Officer, Jan. 2011). In late 2010, there was still much speculation and disagreement around town as to whether the Woore Street Art Centre was officially closed or open, or whether it had or did not have asbestos. While it was confirmed by the Executive Officer of West Darling Arts in early 2011 that the asbestos in the Woore Street was limited to the exterior and would be stabilized with metal cladding, those opposed to the Wilcannia Arts Incorporated Working Paper's proposal for a larger Art and Culture Centre expressed that this was an excuse to close the Centre down.

As I write, these differences remain; the divisions, however, are not purely along the lines of race or culture, although many seek to assert these as reasons for disagreement.

NOTES

- 1 While a few 'artists' have a growing awareness of being able to distinguish between what curators, dealers and the general touring public want to see and the level of proficiency, technical expertise and presentation expected of each market (including framing, quality of the paper and canvas and so on) most of those who 'do art' do not categorize or specify the qualitative differences between the painted styrofoam drink holder, a finely executed lino-print and a painting with little sense of composition.
- 2 While the official names of art centres, and indeed of many Aboriginal organizations, are drawn from the local Aboriginal language – as in Kaathiri, Ngarpa and Parntu – these names were not those readily used by local Aborigines in recall. People spoke instead of the Art Centre, the Art and Craft Centre or the Old Mobil. It is taken for granted by black and white that Aboriginal organizations should have Aboriginal names. This process sees Aboriginal people consulting language dictionaries and cultural authorities for appropriate terms and correct spelling. My own use of the Aboriginal names Kaathiri, Parntu and Ngarpa when introducing the centres is also purposeful. Perhaps, on reflection, this marks my own desire for Barkindji recognition in the terms valued by mainstream society.
- 3 Symmetry of form is a feature of the aesthetic of classical cultures, and reflects 'the balanced dualism, reciprocity, and equality that underlie the intellectual framework of so many Aboriginal social institutions and their cultural emblems' (Sutton 1988:62). While Wilcannia people do not make this overt connection, they do speak of having an aesthetic of 'balance'.
- 4 In 2008 I curated an exhibition of Wilcannia art, 'Life on the Darling', for the Australian Museum in Sydney. It was based on the work of four artists. I appreciated the ready availability of Paul's representative collection, which, had the work been more widely dispersed, would have made the showing of work completed over a period much more difficult.
- 5 Paul plans to stay in town and open a café cum art gallery to display local works. He has purchased one of the old sandstone houses on the main street and is renovating it with this in mind.
- 6 At the time of writing, ICCs were operating in regional centres across Australia under the Federal Government's Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA). ICCs were created to bring the diverse services and service providers specific to Aboriginal communities into the proximity of physical offices, to encourage them to speak

to one another, to reduce overlap and reduce costs. The ICC that concerns Wilcannia is located in Dubbo, approximately 550 kms east of Wilcannia.

- 7 Tertiary and Further Education (TAFE) is an institution that provides qualifications ranging from the level of a certificate of attainment to a diploma.
- 8 The poles were modelled on Tiwi Pukumani mortuary poles. They were made in Wilcannia as part of a TAFE course run by Broken Hill artist Geoff De Main. The question of ownership of specific cultural forms is yet another issue in the contemporary era.

CHAPTER 5

Art as an agent of social relations



'we don't do dots' – 'dots do not belong to us' – 'ours is lines'
(Barkindji sentiments)

People in Wilcannia create artworks for many reasons: social, cultural, economic and political. I am not suggesting that art will offer up some holistic amalgam of Aboriginal cultural knowledge and identity. Art should not be made to stand for a culture in any bounded, essentializing sense; nor do I want to reify the artwork, as this creates unnecessary limitations. In adding an emphasis on cultural revival and Culture with a capital 'C' to the Australian Aboriginal literature, I am also tracing the changing meaning of culture from the anthropological 'whole way of life' to the role and place of 'identity politics'. In the latter sense, culture is an external set of images, icons and conscious rememberings available to identify one's social being with. At the same time, however, there is still a 'whole way of life' being alluded to as a living reality. Layton (1991) suggests that art objects are ideological agents of social relations. In light of this consideration, what role does art play in the social relations of Wilcannia now and in living memory?

In a one year period in 2006, Paul from the Wilcannia Motel purchased three-hundred artworks, mostly paintings, with a handful of wooden carvings, from local Aboriginal people. Other works were certainly sold elsewhere, although probably a modest number. From a population of only 268 Aboriginal people aged over fifteen years, this is a very substantial

production. While one can say that most 'families' have an 'artist' within them, this owes more to the breadth afforded the term 'family' rather than the sheer numbers of artists. I would estimate that there are six people who consistently produce artwork in town who might properly qualify as skilled 'artists,' as this term is widely understood. Five of them mostly paint, two are also occasional carvers, and one artist carves wood alone. A far higher and shifting number of locals, possibly as high as 20 per cent 'of the Aboriginal population aged over fifteen years of age at any one time, enter and leave the arts scene according to the flow and presence of organized workshops, art centres, CDEP and other art-related ventures. While some are opportunistic in their art-making endeavours, many who take part in organized art events display talent and skill, though, in other circumstances, they would not be deemed as 'artists.' A comment that Paul makes to many is that while there are a 'large number of people who are technically capable of reproducing attractive designs. What we haven't got are numbers of artists who translate that into "artworks"' (pers. comm., July 2011). While evaluations such as these might also place the fine Rarrk or cross-hatching line-work of some artists in the Northern Territory as technically proficient designs, as opposed to artworks, Paul's comments are consistent with many other local and regional art-world evaluations.

Memories of art

Little physical evidence exists to indicate that much in the way of paintings was being produced in Wilcannia prior to the introduction of government funding for the arts in the late 1980s. A few examples estimated to date from the late 70s and early 80s sit stacked against the walls of a privately owned and disused building which, in the 1970s and 80s, had operated as a pub. Many of these works are undated and unsigned, and I am relying on best estimates from people in town as to the dates of their production. Some of these works are interesting for their obvious use of dotting as a background, and demonstrate the long-term interest in art in the area (see Figure 30).

The ex-publican also owns a residence next door to the pub, where approximately one dozen more paintings hang on the walls. These are rendered in acrylic and gloss house-paint on Masonite, plywood and canvas boards. The content – fish, turtles, kangaroos, emus, goannas, eaglehawks (*bilyara*), Ngatji (rainbow serpent), foot tracks, animal tracks and Aboriginal human figures – is the same as that being currently



Figure 30 'Untitled' and undated heavily dotted acrylic painting signed D. Bugmy. © D. Bugmy. Photographed in 2003 with permission of the owner.

produced. Like Paul, this man had traded the art with the artists in return for cash, although the ex-publican said he had also offered alcohol as a form of exchange. Some of the older Aboriginal people said they remembered 'old people' carving before the Art Centres opened. Many described an Uncle or another, usually male, relative who had carved wooden artefacts for sale. Items now re-cast as artworks, such as 'feather flowers' (flowers made from brightly coloured bird feathers), carved boomerangs, *nulla nullas* (clubs), spears, shields, stock whips, carved emu eggs and jewellery made out of nuts, seeds and mussel shells, were made for sale as 'souvenirs' and 'trinkets' prior to the eighties.¹ Indeed, these objects, other than feather flowers and stock whips, have been produced almost continuously for as long as many people can remember. The production of the intricately carved stock-whip handles was linked to the pastoral industry to which Aboriginal people had a strong connection. As the pastoral industry and therefore the utility of whips reduced, so did their production (Kleinert 1994).

A white man who has lived in Wilcannia for nearly two decades said he that could not even remember any of the 'old people whittling wood'. Jeremy Beckett's memories of the 1950s do not include art or artefact making (pers. comm., 2006). The memories of some Aboriginal people may thus reflect the socio-political importance, indeed the current legal and institutional necessity, for Aboriginal people to demonstrate continuity with tradition (Povinelli 2002). For Wilcannia Aboriginal people, as with many other Aboriginal groups, there can be no argument that art has become a recognized and valorized vehicle for demonstrating continuity of practices and traditions.² As Brewster observes,

Aboriginal people's narrativisation of the past is always relative to their position in the present, and this relationship is in a constant state of flux as the present changes.

(Brewster 1996:4)

In the present climate, the value of art and art traditions promotes a necessary narrative of continuity. Although many of the objects are said to have been made for sale to whites, some works, old and new, remain in the Aboriginal families of their creators. Aboriginal people around town showed me carved emu eggs said to have been made in the 1970s. There were also a few carved wooden shields, boomerangs, spears and

nulla nullas said to be from around the same time. More recent additions to family collections included acrylic paintings, clap-sticks, boomerangs and carved and painted emu eggs. These objects are also present in those homes which are most poorly furnished. It is difficult to date precisely many of these objects; they have generally been passed down within families and a large number have been sent 'home' as gifts or as repayment of loans from friends or relatives living in other towns. None, however, in my estimation, would pre-date the 1970s.

Paintings and carvings are also sent home to family from relatives in jail to be sold and thereby assist with family needs. For instance, a painting, which the artist claimed was worth AU\$2,000, was offered up as bail for his brother. To the surprise of the artist this offer was not accepted by the court. While the imagined value of art may be confusing to the art-world neophyte, importantly, art is offered here as a valued trading object in demonstrating the importance of kin relations.

Sometimes, I felt that I was being shown artworks as a potential customer. Usually, however, the art was shared with me to demonstrate the connection between the artist and the recipient(s). It is the events, people and places associated with these works that were most valued and described in detail. Precisely dating or knowing the date of a painting or artifact is secondary and indeed irrelevant to most of the Aboriginal people I spent time with. It is the value placed on their relationships with the makers that causes people hold these objects as precious possessions. While they have clear economic and instrumental value, there are many instances where this is secondary to lived social relationships.

Aboriginal people recognize that the production of acrylic paintings and other art forms, such as lino prints and other current media, are a more recent phenomenon. They also agree that wooden carvings, painted (as opposed to carved) emu eggs and jewellery have markedly increased in production when compared with an indeterminate period referred to simply as 'before' (precise dating being a mostly white concern). New forms which do not undermine traditional connections are welcomed. While one discourse emphasizes tradition, both new and old forms, materials and designs benefit local Aboriginal identity and add market value.

Carved bowls, boomerangs, *nulla nullas*, spears, shields and carved emu eggs are said to have 'always' been made. That non-Aboriginal people in Wilcannia, prior to the advent of public art outlets such as *Kaathiri* and the *Parntu* Art Centre, were not generally aware of the production or

sale of these objects might say something about the stringent physical and relational distance between black and white that was historically observed, and indeed at times expected and demanded by whites. Beckett, speaking of the interaction of black and white in the far west in the 1950s, states: 'Few whites show any interest in becoming involved in aboriginal affairs, and they are not always ready to allow aborigines to become involved in their own affairs.' ([1958] 2005:33). The racial divide and its effects on socialization in Wilcannia and other NSW country towns since this time is well documented (Cowlshaw 1988a, 2004; Morris 1997; Morris and Cowlshaw 1990; Myers 1988; Wootten 1991). Today, on the other hand, distance is neither physically nor publically possible. Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people live in close daily contact, and Aboriginal affairs, if not those of whites, are firmly within the visual and bureaucratic sights of the mainstream.

In considering the discrepant views regarding the presence of art objects in Wilcannia prior to the present, it is important to acknowledge the renaissance of Aboriginal interest in Aboriginal culture and identity from the 1970s onwards, as well as the growing role played by Aboriginal visual art in national and international representations of Australia. Physical and verbal evidence demonstrates that some artworks, then known as 'artefacts', 'craft' and 'souvenirs' were being made in Wilcannia prior to the policies beginning in the 1970s that began to emphasize art and culture as intertwining aspects. Irrespective of the lack of agreement between local Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people about the extent of art production at this time, all consider that it was not as substantial as it is currently. They also recognize that Aboriginal people in Wilcannia are developing an Aboriginal art and culture discourse and practice as a means of building a particular Barkindji identity, as well as for more personal purposes and ends.

Social relations and material objects

Just as artists are valued, and thought of, differently in Wilcannia than in the mainstream, so too are artworks. There is a high level of tolerance and acceptance by Aboriginal people in Wilcannia to the theft of material goods, whether from businesses or from friends or family. Artworks are no exception: being portable and in demand they have the advantage of being fairly easy to sell to whites passing through or working in town. Art objects circulate within an economy as gifts, as exchanges (including for

bail), as identity markers, as treasured possessions and as stolen objects for economic gain in ways which reflect local understandings and values pertaining to people and things. Stealing from whites or from businesses (invariably white owned) is accorded a different significance to blacks stealing from blacks in ways that cast light on the comparative import of social relations and objects. Stealing from family does not seem to be differentiated to any noticeable degree.

After the CDEP Art Shed had been broken into twice in as many weeks, one of the artists indicated that the theft was particularly deplorable since it involved stealing from 'your own people'. She glanced at me apologetically after saying this, adding that it was, of course, bad to steal from anyone, but that it was surely worse to steal from your own people: 'Blackfellas stealin' from blackfellas.' Around the same time as these thefts occurred, some Aboriginal children broke into the local College of Technical and Further Education (TAFE) and smashed the ceramic pots that some older Aboriginal women had been making. These events drew comments from local whites that blacks would 'even' steal from their own: 'they talk about culture and sticking together' but they 'destroyed their own people's stuff, those old women who were making pottery'. White and black views of these events both have at their base some perceived sense of an Aboriginal *communitas*. Yet, what hurts, angers and rankles, where these incidents are concerned, is not shared or understood along 'community' lines.

If theft is considered part of the human condition as opposed to a racialized matter, then logically, given the high proportion of the Aboriginal population, a higher incidence of black on black theft is hardly surprising. The Aboriginal disappointment being expressed at black on black theft is confluent with an expressed ideal of a 'caring and sharing' Aboriginal community. It is one, however, which sits uneasily with the regularity of black on black theft. Whites similarly assert a disappointment in Aboriginal culture as 'community' when talking of black on black theft. Whites do not, however, conceptualize white on white theft in the same terms; theft is not racialized in this way. Acts of white on white theft are not construed in cultural or community terms. Neither are they made to reflect back onto the white community in negative ways. Both black and white are aggrieved at the act of theft, but perceive and respond to this differently.

While it was generally known who had stolen the goods from the CDEP Art Shed, no official complaint was lodged with the police. I am

not sure what informal means were used to deal with this incident, though certain Aboriginal individuals talked of the actions they would like to take towards the parents of the children concerned.

An account of another theft of artworks, this time from the house of an Aboriginal couple, provides some further insight into the relative values ascribed to social relations and material objects. Unbeknownst to me, a young teenage boy had stolen a carved wooden shield and some other items from his Auntie and Uncle's house. I was offered the carving for sale by this boy and his mate on their push-bikes, as I walked down the street one afternoon. The shield was very well made. It depicted an Aboriginal man holding a spear and a boomerang. The colour of the wood indicated that it had not been recently carved, and I asked the boy to tell me about the work. I received an imaginative and elaborate story from one of the boys about how he had just made the piece in school. When I asked why he had not signed the work, he said he had but had 'rubbed' his name off as people could not read it. He then pointed to an area where the wood had been scraped back, as if to illustrate his point. He went on to say that the shield depicted 'him from the star story', and when I asked who, he replied 'the man on the two-dollar coin'.³ The carving certainly appeared to be styled on Gwoja Tjungurrayi (One Pound Jimmy), a Warlpiri man from Central Australia whose image inspired that on the Australian two-dollar coin. I asked the boy how much he wanted for the shield, and he said 'forty dollars'. I decided to buy the shield, thinking that it may have been stolen and hoping to return it. I offered him twenty-two dollars, which was all I had on me at the time, and he accepted.

I gave the shield to an Aboriginal friend, hoping he could find the owner and telling him how much I had paid to retrieve it. His enquiries soon revealed that the shield was the property of the Auntie and Uncle of one of the boys, and that it had been taken together with some other items from their house. I assumed that they would reimburse me or mention my role in its return. Yet neither the Auntie nor Uncle mentioned it and nor did I, though I recall feeling a little peeved at what I took to be their ingratitude. I would grow to learn later that, without my intervention, the carving might well have found its way back to the owner through Aboriginal networks. Yet again, it might not, since other stolen items were sold on to passing tourists. Whether goods are returned, however, is in some ways irrelevant. Thefts of this kind between Aboriginal people (family or not) can result in initial anger and a break in relationships for various periods

of time, but relationships appear to be repaired without any defining or obvious discussions on the matter between the parties most directly affected. Appropriate distance between the parties, indirect discussion or threats delivered through others, and the letting pass of intervals of time, are practices that seem to circumvent direct discussion. A close Aboriginal friend told me that my involvement in this theft, as a whitefella, may have created shame or annoyance, or both. My involvement in this incident early in fieldwork may have precluded my getting close to these people. Many Aboriginal people do not readily discuss events that serve to enhance the negative reputation that Aboriginal people in Wilcannia have in many white eyes – such black on black theft – with whitefellas. Aboriginal people are cognizant of the different values operating when thefts such as this are given meaning.

A couple of days after this incident, Paul at the Motel said that the boy had offered the shield to him. Having seen 'Barkindji man' and the name of the artist written on the shield he had declined, knowing that it did not belong to the boy. A few days later, the same two boys, this time driven in a car by an older man, knocked on my door asking if I wanted to buy some painted emu eggs – I declined. I could tell who had painted them, although not who owned them. My purchase of the shield no doubt meant that I was seen to be a likely buyer. The following day the artist who painted the emu eggs and her husband knocked on my door, asking if two boys had sold me her work. Word gets around quickly in a small town. I explained that I had been offered the eggs, but did not purchase them given my previous experience with the shield and thinking it likely that the eggs had been stolen. At no time did the artist ask me if I recognized the two boys; but there was an unspoken acknowledgement that we both knew who the boys were. Thereafter when I was offered what I knew to be stolen artwork, I removed myself from a situation that, in my own judgment at least, I could not understand. I was unable to fully grasp the rules of what was happening and how I should locate myself in the relations at play.

Depicting nature and super-nature

While 'country' is full of 'safe and dangerous places' (Biernoff 1978),⁴ in its artistic manifestation as 'environment' it stands as an ideal and ready foil for shared black and white values and concerns. The river, the fish, the animals that come to drink and the flora which the river nourishes are important vectors of social discourse and Aboriginal identity, the politics

of which can more safely be represented through art. Art's ability to express cultural and social views in a less antagonistic way than other forms of communication is confirmed by Barkindji artist Badger Bates:

Well I am just glad that we have another chance, Aboriginal people of Western New South Wales, to go around and expose ourselves more to the art world and more people can get involved. Because I feel that down this way we haven't got a real lot of land that we own, we know our country but we haven't got any land that we can go out on, so, and with all the developments like the cotton farming you know, and they are draining the rivers out, it's just ruining out culture and its breakin' our heart. But when we get up and try to express ourselves and tell people to look after the environment, they just call us trouble making black people so we do it in a different way, we just express ourselves in and do it in our artwork.

(Mildura Arts Centre Catalogue 2002)

Badger encapsulates several concerns here: first the notion of 'another chance' is a reference to an earlier era in which there were no opportunities, due to the effects of early colonization. He alludes to the lack of land rights, the negative effects of the drawing of water for irrigation upriver and the disturbed connection to their country, in this case the river. He also refers to a more recent past, when there was little art-world interest in NSW Aboriginal art. Badger made such statements several times, including at exhibitions and meetings with representatives of the Murray Darling Basin Commission.⁵ He, as do others, sees art as providing a particular avenue and mode of expression through which Aboriginal concerns about the environment of the Darling River can be relayed and expressed to the wider settler society. From 2000 until 2010 the Far West of NSW was officially in drought. By 2002, the river was sufficiently dry that saplings had begun growing on the dry riverbed in Wilcannia. Aboriginal people spoke sadly of how they could no longer fish. They also talked of how few and skinny the kangaroos and emus were looking, 'poor thing(s)'.

Badger's lino-print *No More Catfish* (Figure 31), which depicts the Darling River in drought, is an example of how art can express social concerns in potent ways. In 2008 he said of this work:

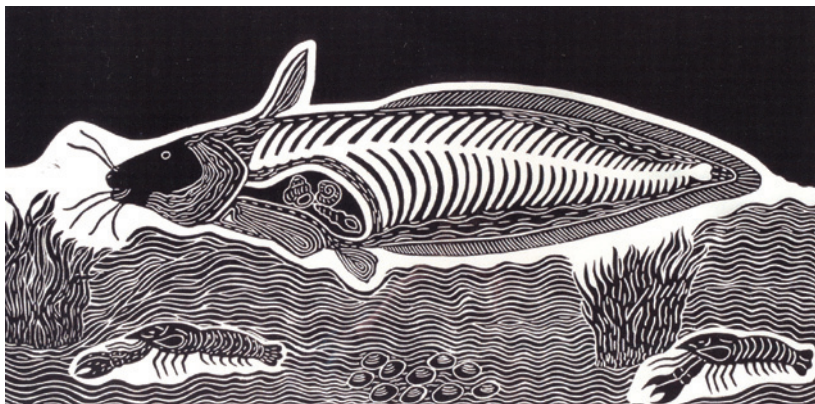


Figure 31 Linocut 'No More Catfish,' by Badger Bates. © Badger Bates 2004. Reproduced with permission of the artist.

We used to catch a lot of catfish. The bottom part with the wavy lines an' that, and the yabbies in the weeds some mussels. And the catfish is sorta out of the water. But when I was a kid the catfish was in the water. I call this now *No More Catfish*, an' the little shells inside the catfish stomach that's what we used to catch the catfish with. But, why it's black up the top is because, if we don't try to look after the environment, look after Barka, the Darlin' River – that's the future of our River up here – the black – it's finish.

(pers. comm. 2007, recorded in the film *One man, his Art and his Country*)

As well as visibly portraying the physical loss of catfish from the Darling River and the possibility of a dying river, there is the metaphorical allusion to a dying culture. When Barkindji people say 'we are the river,' 'the river is everything' and 'without the river we are nothing,' 'we have no identity,' they speak to a relationship that is as embodied as it is ideological. Badger's son Phillip's painting *Barka in Trouble* shows the skeletal remains of fish out of water, echoing his father's concerns, which resonate with Barkindji people in Wilcannia and beyond.

The concerns in the paintings are reflected in the local discourses about the land and water. The Darling River, referred to affectionately as the Barka, is part of 'country' or 'my country' a term rich with meaning here as elsewhere in Indigenous Australia. Country can be the place where

one was born, where one's ancestors or parent(s) were born, the wider Barkindji traditional lands or, in fewer instances, the country of Australia. A complex of myth, story and ceremony inform country's essence. Relationships to people, 'our country', 'the animals', 'our traditions', 'our Dreaming' and in particular, to Ngatji (The Rainbow Serpent) comprise much of the content of the Wilcannia artworks.

As a recognized creator of country, the Rainbow Serpent is enshrined in myth across much of Aboriginal Australia. Associated with water and rain, these serpents are understood to have moved across country creating the landscape and rivers. Barkindji people speak of there being both male and female Ngatji, and they are said to live in the deep waterholes around Wilcannia. Knowledge of and teaching about Ngatji is widespread. Many representations of Ngatji show them blowing a rainbow, a sign that follows rain and a demonstration, the Barkindji say, that Ngatji is happy with his people. The people too are happy after rain, as it nourishes them, the animals and plants of country and the life of the River. (see Figure 10).⁶

It is to be anticipated that Ngatji occupy a central place in art in an area where drought is common and where identity, and in earlier times physical survival itself, was bound up with the river. While artistic depictions of Ngatji are commonplace, one must not speak of Ngatji near the waterholes where they rest; to disturb them is to risk their anger and repercussions. An ambivalent figure, Ngatji can act to protect, heal or drown and punish people and communities.

Some years ago in Wilcannia, a small toddler who had been playing with a friend unsupervised on the riverbank was drowned in the river. According to many older Aboriginal women, the drowning was a purposeful and deliberate act of Ngatji. It was also said of the toddler that 'it was his time'. This thinking is also relayed at the local Mission school, where an Aboriginal education assistant advised the children that 'Ngatji takes young kids and drowns them,' going on to explain that this is why little kids should never go down to the river on their own. In a culture where many (although not all) subscribe to beliefs in supernatural intervention and which also places a high value on the autonomy of children, Ngatji's will (as opposed to childhood accident) is generally seen as responsible for children's, and indeed adult, deaths by drowning. Not all Aboriginal people attribute all drownings to Ngatji. Some say certain deaths are caused by Ngatji while others are said to be due to negligence and others again to the will of a suicide. It is important to note that these views are not unanimous,

and may also be a way of avoiding the direct accusations that would sever relationships in a small, densely interrelated community. Local whites have their own perspective on the drowning of the child in question, one attributing it to sheer neglect, saying 'Who in their right mind would let a small child play near a river unsupervised?' She was not alone in this view.

Wilcannia artists are encouraged by authority figures to 'paint what belong to you' and speak of making artworks that reflect their lived realities, yet the more negative actions and attitudes of mythical figures – which are wholly present in contemporary life and belief, and remain strong in the oral record – appear to be absent from the artistic record. Ngatji are not portrayed in artworks in their full natures, there is an absence of their punishing qualities or attitudes. Artistic representations of Ngatji show them as static or at rest, swimming in the river alone or entwined with their gendered counterparts. Static images of forms do not necessarily connote inactivity. As noted by Sutton (1988:70), in relation to images of the body, including those of ancestral figures, '[e]nergy in Aboriginal art is not to be equated simply with depictions of movement'. They also depict Ngatji's beneficent qualities for example, blowing rainbows or protectively curled around their eggs and future progeny.

Ngatji is considered by many Barkindji as an ever-present figure that acts in the world (cf. Hiatt 1975).⁷ Just as Barkindji must not speak of Ngatji near their deep waterholes and 'won't go near' where 'he' is at night for fear of making 'him' angry, they fear that 'making pictures' that show his more harmful actions and dispositions might 'make him turn nasty'. We 'won't do that 'cos we don't want to stir him up [he will] get touchy ... we like him [Ngatji] to be happy', '[that's why] we leave him alone'.

To depict Ngatji as malevolent could cause the representation to share in or acquire 'the properties of the represented' (Taussig 1993:48). In this way, visual representations and the spoken word have similar proscriptions and effects. The agency afforded visual images and the belief in imitative or sympathetic magic held by many in the Wilcannia community, and the question of what will or will not be represented in paintings, in terms of the representation drawing on the power of the original, is cogent and is discussed in detail in the following chapter (cf. Taussig 1993).

Besides these religious concerns, Barkindji also have political reasons for restricting certain images of Ngatji in their art; they 'don't want to make him look like he's mean' to outsiders. The position of Wilcannia in the public imaginary is primarily one associated with extreme Aboriginal

dysfunction and violence, not without some reason. While there is also much ready laughter and fun, indeed, one might say more than in the mainstream, the fact remains that, as with many Aboriginal communities, there is a great deal of angst, death and grief. Life in Wilcannia, as we have seen, does not reflect the white romance with the traditional Aborigine. But nor are the realities of Wilcannia life reflected in the majority of Wilcannia Aboriginal artworks, which speak only to the more valorized aspects and to 'traditional' society. This focus may be considered necessary on many fronts: economically, emotionally and politically. Barkindji religious beliefs aside, whites are not calling for artistic depictions of Aboriginal life or 'myth' that show the darker side, nor are Barkindji people eager to represent this through art.

Aboriginal art, as it is now contextualized and made, does not have the history of the Western canon, which has seen a continuous tradition of artistic development since the classical Greco-Roman period of 8 BC. The white art-world and settler society may not, one can imagine, be receptive to the Aboriginal equivalent of the historic Western canon, which depicts malevolent or violent mythologies such as Rembrandt's *Andromeda Chained to a Rock* (1631), Titian's *The Death of Actaeon* (1559–75) or Goya's *Saturn Devouring his Son* (1819–23) and *Witches' Sabbath* (1821–3). Notably, these are paintings made by Western artists about ancient mythologies which were rendered with ontological distance, and in later centuries when the myths no longer held any real force in the world. While violence in life and in myth is present in Aboriginal society and history, as in non-Aboriginal society, violent representations of Aboriginal mythology are not present in Wilcannia art. Although no subject is theoretically off limits for a work of art in the West, neither are white Australian artists portraying these aspects of Aboriginal myth, though this may be credited more to contemporary sensitivities and politics of race relations than to disinterest.

This is not to say that violence is not part of contemporary Aboriginal art. Outside of Wilcannia, violence is both directly depicted and alluded to in Aboriginal artworks. When present, however, it tends towards the portrayal of historic repercussions in the contemporary natural world and on a human scale. That is, the violence wreaked on Aboriginal people as a result of colonization – poor health, poor education outcomes, alcohol abuse and domestic violence – themes which point to the breakdown of traditional value systems and the terrible acts committed in 'settling' the

colony. They are the effects of things done to Aboriginal people by settler society. Representative of such art are Warmun artist Rover Thomas's paintings of the 'killing times', *Bedford Downs*, 1985, and *Mistake Creek*, 1990, which depict the massacre of Aboriginal people around Turkey Creek in the Kimberley.

The deliberate drowning of small children by ancestral beings in the present day is not of the same order. What is acceptable as historicized narrative or myth is not widely acceptable as a present ontological reality (cf. Hiatt 1975). The attribution of death to supernatural forces, while strong in the literature, is absent from art in any overt visual way.

The place of story

The 'story' is an integral component of artworks for many white buyers of Wilcannia art, and most Barkindji artworks, whether by public demand or cultural tendency, have 'a story'. Some Wilcannia artists explicitly stated that 'you can't appreciate it' without the story. Art is a recognized way for Wilcannia Aboriginal people to get a message across, and art stories, as well as being conveyers of these messages, are also a response to Aboriginal perceptions of what whites want. It seems to me that this interest in art stories by outsiders has both legitimized claims to traditions that were fading from memory, and stimulated their expression, revival and deployment.

The importance of the art having an Aboriginal story, preferably a story from the Dreaming, is high on the list of requirements for many non-Aboriginal purchasers of art. The practice of providing a story with artworks was popularized by art dealers, particularly those dealing with Central and Western Desert work. Dealers offered paperwork showing a photograph of the artist holding the work for sale, with biographical details and an accompanying 'story' as signs of authenticity and value.

Many Aboriginal artists from the Central and Western Desert express their connection and relationship to country through 'the story', which, in its form as artwork, is a visual re-making of, and embodied connection with, segments of myths of Dreamings (Sutton 1988:91). Indeed, as the Pintupi producers insisted to Fred Myers: 'These are not just pretty pictures. We don't just make these up. They come from the Dreaming.' (Myers 2004: 251). The story also serves as a sign of authenticity for Wilcannia buyers. Artists understand the expectations of buyers and provide this evidence of authenticity.

Some local artists offer to pose for photos with their paintings, but most accede to the request with reluctance and reserve. There is some annoyance that white buyers always require 'the story' or an explanation of the artwork. This annoyance is echoed by Aboriginal female artists at Ernabella in south Australia, who repeatedly advising the public, 'don't ask for stories' in relation to their non-narrative designs (Eikelkamp 1999:ix). Aboriginal artists in Wilcannia who have had some dealings with the art world, either directly or through others, pre-empt the expectation that they will be asked to provide an accompanying story. At the home of one artist, who was at the time in jail, his brothers unrolled some of the paintings he had sent home. In what was clearly an incentive to purchase, the brothers said that the paintings had 'real good stories.' I never heard anyone talk of a bad story in the context of an artwork, but some stories are more important in the cultural lexicon than others. I asked what these stories were, and they replied that their brother 'had the stories' and that it was up to their brother 'to tell them.' They went on to say that 'the paintings all have meanings, everything means something.' The stories of the paintings cannot be told until the brother gets out of jail. They, like the artist, are confined. However, in telling me that their brother's painting had 'real good stories,' these younger men are also responding to perceived buyer expectations.

Although Aboriginal people in Wilcannia represent stories of their Law and their Dreamings in their art, the strictly gendered, kin-based structures and associated custodial rights to paint certain images, such as those which operate in many Central and Northern Aboriginal communities, are no longer observed or present. Many of the older structures have broken down so that most stories and representations of what people refer to as their Dreamings appear to be of a generalized and more widely shared nature. Some sites and stories, however, remain gendered. Visiting, or painting certain content from, these sites is restricted both by gender and lines of authority. Certain stories are seen to belong to particular Barkindji linguistic groups, and arguments do occur as to ownership as well as over whether a story is being told correctly. The advent of native title and the assigning of certain rights and resources to those demonstrated to be 'Traditional Owners' has stimulated these protections, and has created new divisions which, anecdotally, did not exist previously.

In Wilcannia, the stories associated with paintings (and drawings) range across ancestral beings, their sites, forms and journeys, and more personal histories and events. For example, a painting by Barney Williams



Figures 32 'Untitled' painting of an emu. Acrylic on canvas by Vicki Dutton; date unknown but thought to be around 2002. © Vicky Dutton. Reproduced with permission of the owner.

(dec.), completed when he was in his thirties, was about his getting lost in the bush some years prior. Other themes depicted include environmental degradation and its consequences; native animals their characteristics and habits; and the use of animals and plants as food and medicine in both current and historic Barkindji life. Many paintings show representations of the animals associated with the two matrilineal Barkindji moieties of Kilpara ('the cold wind' or 'east wind' and associated with the 'kangaroo' 'totem' or 'meat') and Makwara ('the rain wind' or 'east wind' and associated with the 'emu' 'totem' or 'meat' (Hercus 1993:123; Jones 1989) (see Figures 32 and 33).



Figure 33 'Untitled' painting showing the moieties of kangaroo and emu together with the goanna and Ngatji. Acrylic on canvas by Douglas (Doug) Jones. © Douglas Jones 2003. Photographed with permission of the owner.

Moieties and totems are a familiar, if little referred to, part of life in Wilcannia. People know whether they belong to the kangaroo people (Makwara moiety) or whether they are emu people (Kilpara moiety). Many refrain from eating what they refer to as their 'meat', although artists paint the meat of both moieties. Reference to one's 'meat' as one's 'totem' is common. In one of the rare recording of details about kinship in NSW, Marie Reay observed that, in 1964, strangers to camps in north-western NSW were asked 'What meat (clan) are you?' in order to be directed to the camp where they would be looked after by their own people (1964:106). Reay's (1945) fieldnotes⁸ from a discussion with Barkindji man, Hero Black, in Bourke state that the 'Gilpara [Kilpara]' moiety on the kangaroo side is divided into the subsets of sand goanna, emu, pademelon, possum and carpet snake, and the 'Makawara' moiety on the emu side into bandicoot, kangaroo, dingo, eaglehawk and bilby.



Figure 34 'Untitled' of goannas and eggs. Acrylic on canvas by Douglas (Dougie) Jones. Date unknown but thought to be around 2003. © Dougie Jones. Reproduced with permission of the owner.

Today, representations of the goanna, emu, kangaroo and eaglehawk (*bilyara*) predominate in art. Images of eaglehawk (*bilyara*) and crow (*waaku*), figures which together in Barkindji myth represent situations of conflict and resolution, are commonly shown together in paintings (Berndt and Berndt 1989:4). Much imagery relates to Ngatji and the fish and turtles from the Darling River; goannas, kangaroos, emus and echidnas are also common (see Figures 34, 35 and 36). I saw no representations of pademelons or possums, and only one Barkindji woman, Pam Bugmy, depicted what she referred to as 'Mother *thurru* [a general Barkindji term for snake]'; something that was frequently present in her paintings.

Aboriginal artists are so used to being asked 'what the story is' or 'what the painting is about' that they often automatically start with 'This one's about ...' when showing a painting. Importantly, stories comprise events or circumstances that were part of the lives of Barkindji people past and present. That is, they are meaningful beyond the artist's or individual's imagination. Of course stories are important in different ways for different



Figure 35 'Untitled' of fish blowing bubbles and shrimp. Acrylic on board by Walter Dutton. Date unknown but thought to have been painted around 2003. © Walter Dutton. Reproduced with permission of the owner.

Aboriginal people, but it is important to recognise that a painting and its making do not operate independently of either the artist's community or of buyer expectations. Buyer expectations, both real and imagined, are, in turn, influenced by the world of art and its changing aesthetic and marketing priorities.

Limiting limitations

Some art dealers at the high end of the fine-arts market perceive Aboriginal art as produced primarily for the market and as 'detached from its base in Aboriginal cultural practices' (Myers 2001:199). To a great extent this is a consequence of a deliberate practice whereby elite galleries and exhibitions shun ethnographic explanation and description, choosing instead to rely on the purely aesthetic qualities of the work. Stories are irrelevant to this market. Thus, in exhibiting, they provide the minimal information of artist's name, date of birth, name of the work and artist's language group. This is primarily to heighten the status of the art as contemporary fine art rather than an ethnographic object. It signals a rejection of the



Figure 36 'Untitled' single fish. Acrylic on canvas by Wayne Ebsworth. © Wayne Ebsworth 2003. Reproduced with permission of the owner.



Figure 37 Untitled painting of Ngatji. Acrylic on canvas by Mark Lawson. © Mark Lawson 2002. Reproduced with permission of the owner.

identification of the ethnographic with the primitive – which has its own, if different, site of value.

For some artists with an established reputation, and who may have been professionally trained within a Western arts philosophy, the refusal of the ethnographic portrayal is a stated preference. This said, I have not yet seen an exhibition in Australia where the work of an artist of Aboriginal heritage and identity is shown without identifying at least the language group of the artist – and thus their Aboriginality. It is not surprising that both artists and curators are ambivalent about the association with Aboriginality. While artists are proud of their Aboriginal heritage and identity, some wish their art to be evaluated for its artistic qualities first or alone. None of the artists in Wilcannia made this kind of distinction between their art and their culture. Their art is all about their Aboriginality, both in its making and in its content. This said, some recognize that certain white expectations about what Aboriginal art, artists and content are, serve to hamper their individual, artistic and cultural freedom. The demand for ‘traditional’ works will no doubt crush the creativity of some artists. There are at present only a few indications of artists being irritated at the preconceptions that come with the title of ‘Aboriginal artist’. These do not refuse the title ‘Aboriginal artist’ in favour of that of ‘artist’, but show a desire for the removal of limitations placed on content by virtue of that title. One can speculate that it is only through gaining an increasing profile that the possibility of choosing how one is represented is offered up as an option.

Many Aboriginal people in Wilcannia express frustration at mainstream society’s view of Aboriginal culture and identity as shifting and contextual – i.e., admired in remote places but denigrated locally. Despite this, as the content of some artists’ works suggest, the attention to Aboriginality – even when it is negative – makes for possibilities of self and group identification. Art has the potential to bring things into being: it has productive dimensions. Artworks serve as at once visual existential narratives, cultural mnemonics, ontological definers and creators of identity. Identity can be affirmed, and consciousness of identity can be expressed, through the practice of art-making, both through the content selected and in talking about the art.

These motives are all expressed in the range of reasons Wilcannia people give for making, marketing and talking about their artworks. They say they are expressing a personal connection with ‘country’ and

cultural knowledge; showing that 'we still have culture'; fulfilling cultural obligations; making political statements; educating whites; teaching their children; engaging in a recreational pursuit ('it's somethin' to do'); making money; and concretizing cultural continuity. That is, irrespective of agreement about the nature and meaning of art, art is clearly recognized as symbolic capital.

Not all Aboriginal people in Wilcannia create artworks, although a great number have tried their hand at painting or carving in response to the public emphasis on Aboriginal art, and the institutional support provided in the last two decades, as discussed above. Many people with some clear talent are nonetheless intermittent in their practice. Some, after a sustained period of creating artworks, give it up completely. For others, creating artworks is a sporadic activity which may be undertaken infrequently or daily, for days or weeks, and then not at all for weeks, months or years. Talent is not synonymous with art practice or production.

Art for culture's sake

Unlike the 'art for art's sake' dictum so popular among Western aesthetes, which views the commercialization of art as an aberration from art's *raison d'être*, we have seen that Wilcannia Aboriginal people have many specific, often pragmatic reasons for creating artworks. In exploring the different motivations of individual artists we see the complex nature of art making and production. One of the artists once told me that he was going to 'knock out' a painting so that he could 'buy a telly for my kids'. He said that his three children would not stay with him if he did not have a television; they would go and stay with other relatives who did have one. This man then painted a canvas over two days and sold it for AU\$400 to Paul Brown at the Motel. In this instance, art is operating as a commodity and economic resource. Yet, the use of the expression 'knocking out' refers to the time it took the artist to complete the work and the urgent need for cash; it does not indicate that he is indifferent to the content of the work. My experience with this artist demonstrates that he gives a great deal of consideration to what he will or will not paint and why. This is not to deny that some of his paintings can look a little more hurried than others; works completed when he is in jail or when he is not drinking are his most carefully rendered. As an Aboriginal man, having his family live with him is crucially and culturally important; at the same time, his cultural knowledge and the way he represents it is also crucially important. Although the artwork in question is motivated by

both cultural and economic imperatives, the artist's expressions of haste could lead to the interpretation that his motivation is purely economic – an interpretation that is less favourable than might otherwise be the case, and one not borne out in my experience with this artist and his work.

Cultural and economic motives are not mutually exclusive. For those who sell their art, a sale signals a successful assertion of identity as well as its monetary value. As is the case for other colonized peoples, people in Wilcannia have been inventive in their use of artworks to gain economic reward and to lay claim to their identity according to time and circumstance (Phillips and Steiner 1999). I suggest they are practising a new dictum of 'art for culture's sake', which is altogether more purposeful than art that is purportedly practised for 'art's sake' alone. 'Art for culture's sake' envisages art as a means to maintain, redefine, rediscover, remember, remake and teach culture, while at the same time being part of culture. As the artist who needed the television to keep family with him shows, these purposes are not distinct from making art for the art market with the point of sale in mind.

The art of Phillip Bates demonstrates the links between art as commodity, economic resource and identity. Phillip, who was born in Wilcannia, told me that he paints 'just about every day. Like, it's not a job or anything, it's art now. It just get part of life.' Although Phillip has not lived for extended periods in Wilcannia for some years, and moves between Broken Hill, Sydney and Wilcannia, he continues to sign all of his work 'Phillip Bates, Wilcannia'. He had asked permission from his elders and uncles: 'No matter where I live, can I put Wilcannia on there, you know?' The reason he gave them was that people say nothing good comes out of Wilcannia, and that Wilcannia is still home for him.

Here Phillip's words and works demonstrate the personal as well as the inter- and intra-cultural role and motivations for art making, the effects and affects of art making, as well as the relationships of art to culture and of culture as identity. The content of Phillip's art making, the practice of which is now 'part of life', has been influenced by his travels in Australia, as well as by his father, Badger Bates:

I'm sorta, I've been around, ya know. I seen lotta Myall people artwork an' that. An' my Father's artwork. An' I gotta lotta influence off him – my Father. He told me lotta stories. An' what he told me I tried to put in my pictures, you know. An' the way I see that is our Dreamtime still

alive 'cos he telling me a story an' I'm painting his story, ya know? That's, that's my thing, ya know? To keep our culture alive. That's the way I see it. So there you are.

(Pers. comm, 8 December 2002, Broken Hill)

Here it is clear that art making does something else besides satisfying economic possibilities. Phillip is committed to daily painting, and while he can earn between AU\$300 and AU\$3,000 per painting, he does not consider it 'a job or anything'. That is, he differentiates this work from paid labour of the kind whitefellas do (Gibson 2010). The contention that paintings having a value beyond the economic, is further supported by Phillip having given some of his favourite works to his father for safekeeping. The intent is to reduce the temptation to sell them, and thereby decrease the tension between economic need and 'keeping culture'.

According to Phillip, culture is kept alive by the practice of painting, and the presence and stories of the paintings. In this way, as Phillip explains, 'Our Dreamtime still alive.' The Dreaming is not viewed as being in the past and no more – it continues and lives through Phillip, through his father and through their art. Phillip talked about his Dreaming and his culture within the context of a visit to the Australian Museum in Sydney. At least three of the artists I worked with have had access to the Barkindji weapons and other artefacts held in the Australian Museum collection, and it is clear that these visits had a significant impact in terms of their art production. Phillip, who visited the Australian Museum on a school excursion as a young boy, says,

I seen some stuff there. Yeah. Like the people we was with, they showed – sorta said – this is your people here, an' that. An' we had a couple of our elders from home with us an' they was telling us, you know, this our mob here, 'n things.

(Pers. comm, 8 December 2002, Broken Hill)

Phillip remembers the shields, boomerangs and spears and recalls that 'it was a good buzz' to see his people's work. The importance of the maintenance of culture was a factor in Phillip's painting. I asked Phillip why he started painting,

I do lotta. Mainly for my kids, you know. An' it's for other little kids so they see that our culture – not dyin', you know. It's still alive. Cos it's drummed into everyone's head everyday that, ah, this mob losing their culture or whatever, you know? But me out here in the West, you know, our people learnin' our culture again, you know? ... So I say I paint for my kids an' for the future kids, ya know? How they understand things a bit better. Yeah.

(ibid.)

Phillip alludes here to culture being both continuous and re-learned. He is referring not only to the practice of painting, but to the content of paintings, where symbols of a spiritual realm which are seen as powerful and present in the world are reproduced and emphasized. This alternative reality is important for children to see that culture is still alive. The importance of passing on and asserting these cultural beliefs, symbols and particular meanings and values is common to many Indigenous groups whose identity is contested. Holland and Lave, writing of this phenomenon, say:

In practice, participants struggle to affect the implications of different versions and meanings of ongoing practice for their future lives, especially for their children and for their own future place in history.

(Holland and Lave 2001:28)

There can be no disagreement that art and culture for Phillip are inseparable in this context. His art makes culture, and his culture makes art. Indeed, his culture is art, and his art is culture. Culture is kept alive and re-learned through, in Phillip's case, painting daily.

Phillip's motives include a wider 'political' one of countering Wilcannia's portrayal in the media as lacking anything of cultural value:

We always get shit from the news about nothing good comes out of here, only bad, you know? But, wherever I go, I might have an exhibition, paintins, ya know and stuff. People will ask me, you know. Do you come from Wilcannia? An' then I can say yes I do. It's not a bad place it's just what people make of it, you know? It's good. That's my, my way of I suppose of just sayin', you know, I'm from there, I'm not a bad person.

(Pers. comm, 8 December 2002, Broken Hill)

Phillip describes how the presentation of artwork can demonstrate worth and act as a carrier of positive cultural images and signs. On one level, he is responding to the contemporary reputation that Wilcannia has gained as a problem town in which Aborigines are the problem. On another level, Phillip is alluding to the role that art plays in ascribing positive identity. That is, he is appealing to the 'common humanity' theme, as attached to Western notions of art. Thus, as Myers says, Aboriginal people assert and demonstrate that they,

have 'art', value it, and that the tradition is very old (implying that they are able to preserve things of value) and that therefore their culture is vital and worthy of respect.

(Myers 1991:35).

Indeed, the acrylic art movement in central Australia, and its emplacement within the rubric of Aboriginal culture, has been enormously influential in disseminating the idea of the continuity of culture. Phillip's statements suggest that showing his artwork, while at the same time tying himself to the work, serves to reflect not only his worth but the wider worth of people in Wilcannia. His presence, his paintings and his affiliation with Wilcannia are here perceived as being able to effect change in the thinking of others.

Place lines – art styles and subject matter as a means of affirming cultural identity

Barkindji people and artists say that they 'don't do dots'. This axiom references their difference from the Central and Western Desert artists who are known for the dotting style, and from other Aboriginal people who have taken up 'dot paintin', but to whom, according to Barkindji, dots do not belong. Barkindji people's assertion that 'we don't do dots' is a signifier of Barkindji difference and, indeed, uniqueness. As we shall see, it also speaks to an assertion of continuity.

In the 1980s some of the Kaathiri Art Centre funding was used for two artists to visit Alice Springs, as one said, 'to see what was happening with art out there'. This visit took place because people in Wilcannia were aware of the public interest in Aboriginal art and, in particular, 'Central Desert Art'. It was thought that Wilcannia would be able to learn from this experience. Their new knowledge resulted in 'a rush of dot painting',

but this interest was short lived. The decline in interest was said to be due to certain Barkindji individuals impressing upon people that dots were 'not from here', that dots 'do not belong to us' and that dots are 'not Barkindji'. This overt and explicit articulation of what belongs to the Barkindji coincided with the increasing Aboriginal political awareness and engagement from the late 1970s onwards discussed previously.

The Mutawintji blockade played a major role in this rising awareness. Mutawintji is a national park covering 68,912 hectares and is dominated by the gloriously red Bynguano Range. The raw ruggedness of the range is softened by deep gorges which enfold pockets of thriving river red gums. Steep rock faces and overhangs display 8,000-year-old rock paintings that look down upon the surrounding plains and the scattered remains of Aboriginal habitation. The ranges and the surrounding plains are the 400-million-year-old remnants of a sea that historically served Aboriginal people well as a reliable source of water and food. Mutawintji's role as a place of ceremony and initiation was, however, interrupted by European settlement. From the mid 1800s the land was used for pastoral runs, the ruins of which can still be seen. Further incursions into the park include a hotel, now only remains, built at the turn of the twentieth century to accommodate travellers going between Broken Hill and White Cliffs, where opals were being mined.

In 1927, areas of Aboriginal rock art were reserved by the government for protection, and from this time onwards the areas under protection were expanded under the control of the National Parks and Wildlife Service to include what is now the area known as Mutawintji National Park. In 1983, some Barkindji and other Aboriginal people of far-western NSW who had a relationship to the land, set up a protest blockade at the park and barred access to unsupervised tourists, some of whom had desecrated the site. Rock engravings had been damaged and some had in fact been chipped out of the rock and stolen (cf. Beckett 2005:17). After sustained protest and negotiation, the NSW Government officially handed back Mutawintji to its original owners in 1998. William Bates, as representative of the Mutawintji Land Council, was the recipient.⁹ Until this point Mutawintji had been spelt and pronounced as Mootwingee. It reverted to the preferred Aboriginal spelling and pronunciation in 1998.

Following this, there was an increase in the number of Aboriginal-designated positions related to Aboriginal cultural heritage, particularly within the NPWS but also more generally across government institutions

and departments. These positions facilitated Aboriginal people's access to cultural-heritage sites and to museum materials and to historical, anthropological and archaeological information. It was the first time many Aboriginal people, including Barkindji, had viewed these places and objects. Aboriginal awareness of how the wider society was thinking about, drawing on and mediating Aboriginal culture and identity was growing. This increased awareness was the result of a number of forces, including the growing profile of Aboriginal culture and heritage in mainstream society, specifically in relation to the visual arts and as a result of the earlier Papunya movement, in which Aboriginal culture was represented as 'art' (Merlan 2001:204). The Australian Bicentenary celebrations of 1988 further promoted Aboriginal culture. There were also the wider effects of the land-rights laws of entitlement, which 'demanded that both Aborigines and whites develop and articulate definitions of a unique Aboriginal identity' (Jacobs 1988:31).

Awareness of a unique Aboriginal identity is made explicit by Barkindji through statements such as 'we do lines', 'ours is lines', 'we don't do dots', 'dots are not ours' and through the absence of dots in their artistic practice. Most artists, though not all, observe this stylistic restriction. A young female artist of seventeen said that she made up her designs as she painted, 'Going along, going along, doing dots, dots, and more comes to ya.' When I said 'Dots aren't from here though are they?', she replied, 'Dots all over Australia now.' As a younger Barkindji artist who had been raised elsewhere in NSW, and had recently come to live in Wilcannia, she said she didn't know what constituted Barkindji designs. She was also less inclined to be swayed by cultural brokers with whom she had little history of association. Many artists stress the association between a specific artistic style, particular design elements and Barkindji cultural identity. They have been informed by recognized community authority figures such as Murray Butcher and Badger Bates that 'we do lines', 'we don't do dots', and they take these exhortations as guidance for their art practice. When seeking affirmation of their cultural knowledge from these same authoritative figures, both artists and non-artists will say, 'Ours is lines unna, Unc?' One artist said that he had,

started out doin' dot paintings for a while an' then Uncle Badger explained, you know, that's not our culture to do dot painting. So, I learnt how to do all my people's designs, you know, like river people an' that'.

(Pers. comm, 8 December 2002, Broken Hill)



Figure 38 *Untitled painting of freshwater turtles. Acrylic on canvas board by Willie Don Hunter. © Willie Don Hunter 2003. Reproduced with permission of the artist.*

For a number of the artists it is important that they ‘do what belong to us’, what they own. Some also see doing dot painting as ‘ripping people off’, as they themselves are not from the ‘mob who do that dot paintin’.

The ‘lines’ referred to by Barkindji artists are indicative, for those who are aware of them, of the incised geometric elements and wavy lines that are a feature of Barkindji and other western NSW wooden artefacts. The representational design systems on these artefacts are thought to be indigenous to much of the south-east of Australia (Morphy 2001). In these systems, the repeated outlining of forms (also common to the art from the Centre) is seen along with predominating geometric shapes (Morphy 2001) (see Figures 38 and 39).

Sylvia Kleinert, an art historian who has done a thorough study of Aboriginal art and artists in south-east Australia (1900–80), also refers to these distinctive geometric design elements, which were a distinctive feature of elaborately carved and incised weapons, displaying ‘cross-hatching, herring-bone, chevrons, zigzags, diamonds, and rhomboids – used in conjunction with an equally rich array of figurative imagery’ (Kleinert 2000:241).

Lines are a kind of mantra for the most influential Barkindji artists – Badger Bates, his son Phillip, Murray Butcher and Willie Don Hunter



Figure 39 *Untitled painting of kangaroo and joey. Acrylic on canvas by Willie Don Hunter. © Willie Don Hunter 2002. Reproduced with permission of the artist.*

– and they have become such for the majority of Barkindji artists from Wilcannia. Indeed, among many of the Aboriginal people in Wilcannia who do not paint, the idea of lines in art is generally spoken of as being part of a 'Barkindji style'. Culture is articulated here as being in the design and as belonging to a people; even if people are not actively aware of this and do not replicate, or sparingly use, the design elements attributed to the south-east in their artwork. This articulation clearly has as much to do with establishing a group identity in the present as it has with remaining true to a particular tradition. Pressure to conform to these traditions may, as noted earlier, become confining and stifle original expression; if the art scene continues to thrive and develop, strict ideas of Barkindji style and belonging could become a straightjacket for those with original talent. But in the current climate, facing racial and cultural contempt as they do, the Barkindji emphasis on overt 'cultural' expression as a source of legitimacy in art is clearly all-important.

Some artists of south-eastern Australia are not actively aware of the importance of lines and do not replicate or sparingly use the design elements attributed to the south-east. In the Barkindji case, the complement of elements such as cross-hatching, herringbone, zigzags, diamonds, rhomboids and chevrons are often used as outline and infill for figurative motifs such as kangaroos, emus, fish, turtles, goannas, Ngatji and echidna (*wantjilli*). Other motifs used include emu eggs, boomerangs, clubs, spears, bird, human and animal tracks, axes, the human figure, and hand stencils and prints. Stencils are either painted as solid shapes or in outline, as they appear at Mutawintji and Mt. Manara. The internal organs and fat of fish and animals are also shown as solid shapes without pattern. The human figure is shown in many forms, as a solid shape, in outline or as a stick figure, such as those engraved and painted at Mutawintji. Phillip Bates and Murray Butcher also represented the human figure and ancestral spirits through various kinds of fluid, flowing shapes in which the feet and hands appear to stream into their surrounds. The latter is also a feature of some Aboriginal artists living in Broken Hill. In the Broken Hill case, artists working alongside those using this feature quietly but reprovingly disclaimed this design, stating that it has been 'lifted' from an image on a space-invaders electronic game machine at Thankakali. The feature displayed on the machine was almost identical to that made by two Thankakali artists in their work. There is little separating the form of the fluid ghost-like figure on the machine, from those of the two artists



Figure 40 *Untitled pen drawing on paper by Murray Butcher. Drawing shows Kilparra and Makwara males and females coming together with the Darling River flowing into Lake Whoychucca. © Murray Butcher. Reproduced with permission of the artist.*

charged with copying it, to those of Phillip or Murray (see Figures 40 and 50). The point of difference and value judgment is that the latter are thought to have arrived at the image through their imagination. As such, the design belongs to them in important ways not demonstrated by the supposedly 'lifted' designs. There is much in common here with the notion of dreamed designs as legitimate ways of knowing and having ownership in other parts of Aboriginal Australia.

Not all Barkindji art is recognizable as having a resolved and clearly attributable style, as some Aboriginal art from other parts of the continent does. However, most Barkindji artists use at least some of the geometric design elements described by Kleinert, and much of the art carries echoes of these motifs that are further reinforced by similarities in content. It is the parallels in art discourse and content that unites the styles of Badger Bates, Murray Butcher and Phillip Bates, all of whom are advocates for the existence and use of a unique Barkindji style in terms of 'lines'. The artworks of about six Wilcannia artists display an easily recognizable

similarity of style. But these artists do not necessarily adhere to any rules or standardizations of style that might limit their individuality.

Interestingly, one artist whose work is notable for the repeated outlining of form and the constant and strong presence of geometric design elements, appeared to disavow any significance to their use in his work. When I asked him about the meaning of the flowing lines behind the figures in one of his paintings, he responded with, 'Nah, nah, nah, the designs mean nothin.' This artist is fully aware of, and repeats, the discourse of 'ours is lines', and I found his response puzzling. He went on to say that the flowing lines which repeatedly outlined the turtles in his painting represented water and the flowing river of the Darling. What could appear as a paradoxical response, might be explained by the flowing lines in his painting being a straightforward representation of the river by a 'Barkindji River person'; the meaning is visually evident for all to see, there is nothing hidden. It might be that it is only when designs work in combination with other factors that they become meaningful for this man. Further, his response could be a reply to the standard white expectations that it is the story of the painting which carries meaning. There are, of course, a complexity of meanings in paintings – symbolic, spiritual and representational – that may be meaningful as individual elements or when combined with others.

In the work of Arnhem Land and the Central and Western Desert the designs are connected to ritual and build their power through the process of painting. Barkindji art from Wilcannia does not use design to evoke the effect of vibrations or the shining qualities of phenomena such as rainbows, the sun sparkling on water or the intensity of sunlight as it touches the land (Morphy 2001:185). Unlike Arnhem land bark paintings, Barkindji 'lines' do not strive to build a process that moves the painted surface from that of dull to a shimmering brilliance in order to show the strength and presence of ancestral forces (Morphy 2001:188; cf. Deger 2006). Colour is not central to Barkindji artworks, indeed many of the Barkindji representational forms are rendered in black and white. Movement is, however, key to the designs, which flow around forms and figures, but this aesthetic is not geared towards demonstrating colour, optical effects or sheen. The diversity of art meanings and practices in relation to Barkindji life as a result of history is, as expected, reflected in the multiplicity of explanations and interpretations of the artworks and their production.

While 'so little information survives' about the motifs and designs on south-eastern artefacts, the historic documents hint that these may be linked to group organization and religious ceremony, as elsewhere across Australia (Morphy 2001:336–7). Some artists in Wilcannia advance meanings for particular design characteristics. Free-flowing and curvilinear lines within or repeatedly outlining a motif are said to represent 'the Darlin', 'the river'. Many Barkindji artists say the free-flowing and repetitive lines are used to represent particular rivers and creeks through their direction and shape and the flow of water more generally. The expression of water through flowing lines is claimed as an artistic characteristic intrinsic to Barkindji people. This essentialist invocation may be interpreted as demonstrating the importance of the river and its interconnectedness to people, animals and objects. Yet country without rivers and creeks is also at times depicted by wavy lines, which one artist says 'just come natural to us', adding that he does not know whether 'it's because of the river, we respect the river so much that we put wavy lines in to represent water and creeks and stuff'.¹⁰

Not every artwork created by every Barkindji person reflects this 'natural' practice of wavy lines, as is clear from the perceived need to 'correct' and 'teach' other artists the appropriate designs, styles and content. When asked by a cultural broker why she was painting a dolphin, as these were not Barkindji, the artist said 'because I just like them' and continued to produce this and similar content. According to the most influential cultural brokers, lines are Barkindji, 'dots' and 'dolphins' and freshwater 'turtles with fins' are not. Artists are not explicitly prohibited from choosing their own content and style, but most conform to reproducing 'what belong to us', as taught by those seen as culturally authoritative. What is painted, who paints it and the way it is painted combines to effect and reflect this knowledge and authority in a circular feedback process.

There are differences of opinion between Barkindji Aboriginal people from Wilcannia and other Aboriginal people from 'away' about content and designs, and about broader art values. Such debates are evidence of a living socio-cultural world with its own internal conflicts. At a display of the work of TAFE students completing a Certificate II in Aboriginal Arts and Cultural Practices in Broken Hill, a Barkindji woman artist from Wilcannia was showing me one of her paintings. Her teacher, an art-school graduate from Sydney and a *Koori*,¹¹ had asked her why she had painted a frill-necked lizard infilled with geometric design elements and

with lines outlining the form. To her explanation 'Cos I'm a blackfella,' the teacher responded 'That's not good enough.' The woman¹² was puzzled, not offended, and said that previously she had painted dots but that she had learned that 'Barka is lines.' The teacher had not wanted the artist to hang the lizard painting in the exhibition. Later, the teacher explained his ideologically driven view of the responsibility of artists:

Indigenous artists have a moral and ethical responsibility to produce art from the area ... the complicated thing about Indigenous art is about shifting community consciousness to thinking about art-making and the power of art-making.

While it was 'fine to reproduce animal life and traditional stories,' he wants students to ask, 'What relationship do I have to a traditional story today?', 'How can rock engravings be re-interpreted and put into painting, what is the relationship?' For this teacher the woman's reason for using lines in this way was not a valid justification for artistic expression.

As someone trained in Western art theory and history, the art teacher clearly wants to extend the students' horizons beyond unthinkingly reproducing traditional forms to which they may not, arguably, have any direct relationship. I do not contest his view that contemporary expression should not be forever anchored to traditional forms. Rather, I want to demonstrate the kinds of challenges made to Barkindji regarding what is, or what is not, a valid subject for an artwork by an Aboriginal person. The teacher's life experience and his professional role as an art teacher combine to produce an approach to art that is aligned with the more established ideals and values of the Western art world. There are, of course, influences and pressures everywhere. The influence of cultural brokers has seen some Wilcannia artists develop a very specific view of art, both in style and substance, that has meaning politically, socially, historically and spiritually. They are trying to create a particular approach and form that will legitimize and establish the self-image of Barkindji people in Wilcannia, and give them a profile in the world. This assertive teaching of Wilcannia cultural authorities is being questioned and challenged, by an art teacher, and probably by others, in ways that are quite interesting. Barkindji people have complicated motives and desires; for example, to be recognized and to be free. There are tensions and challenges that call for individuals to

affirm or reject certain entreaties and advice, and for each to assert their own authorities, values and motives.

Cultural production – artistic depictions and their changing interpretations

The carving of emu eggs (*kalti paarti*) is said by Aboriginal people in Wilcannia to be a pursuit that has been undertaken by both Aboriginal men and women for as long as most can remember. Today it is mainly people over fifty years' of age who do the carving. Younger people prefer to paint scenes and subjects on the eggs, as it is much quicker and there is less chance of breaking the fragile egg through the thinning of shell layers. Eggs are still readily available around the region, and people hunt both emus and their eggs for food; on one property near Wilcannia, 300 eggs were collected in one day. Hunting emus and collecting eggs remains an important cultural activity which allows people to get out onto the country, and where emu shells for painting and carving are an additional benefit. Gathering eggs for food requires a licence from the NPWS, which limits the number of eggs that can be gathered in any one year. Those who choose to make artworks of the shells are required to carve the licence number they have been allocated onto the egg.

Emu eggs measure roughly 15 cm in length and 33 cm in circumference. Their heavily granulated surfaces, which fade over time, come in various shades of green (from a deep dark green through to a blue-green). The carved surface can have several layers of colour, some artists say up to fourteen, becoming paler in the deeper incisions, and turning to shades from brown to milky white with age.

The depictions carved into or painted on emu eggs have changed over time, demonstrating the effects of changing political circumstances. Families in Wilcannia, Broken Hill and Menindee treasure emu eggs that are decades old, often carved by family members in the 1970s. These eggs depict a range of subjects, from those associated with the pastoral industry, such as cowboy-type figures on bucking broncos, to figurative depictions such as male and female hunting-and-gathering scenes, male and female heads in profile, and native animals (see Figure 41). The hunting-and-gathering scenes are mostly depicted in historic form, with the men naked or wearing lap laps and the women bare breasted.



Figure 41 Carved emu egg from far-western New South Wales held in the ethnographic collections of the Australian Museum. E092449. Photograph by Finton Mahoney, Australian Museum. Reproduced with permission of the Australian Museum.

What was depicted on eggs for sale was shaped to the desires of white buyers of the times. Sarah Martin commented that most emu egg carvers in earlier decades,

depicted European influenced scenes or motifs, including bucking horses, native animals, or depictions of the 'noble savage' ... The irony was not lost on the carvers, but the economic hardship made it necessary to be buyer orientated.

(Martin 1996:12)

The irony of which she speaks is of the carvers knowingly reproducing European 'stereotypical views of the outback' that did not match their own lived realities (pers. comm. Martin, June 2011).

It is quite possible of course that Aboriginal artists were also interested in depicting these scenes, especially as many were skilled with bucking broncos. Barkindji people were part of the pastoral economy until the 1970s, working as shearers, fencers, ringers and stockmen. The artistic renditions of the work being undertaken by Aboriginal people and, more particularly, work of which they were proud, may be quite independent of the perceived wishes of white purchasers (Beckett [1958] 2005). Other depictions of hunting scenes and animals have also been shown to have a degree of continuity as depictions of choice in the south-west since the late 1800s (Tacon *et al.* 2003). The depiction of the naked tribesmen is more likely to have been for commercial reasons, because of the negative view of primitivity that prevailed so intensely until recently.

Kleinert, like Martin, speaks of the production of emu eggs as part of an Aboriginal economy. She says that the production of emu eggs and other crafts,

far from representing a form of cultural colonization ... might be seen [instead] as a form of strategic resistance that successfully disrupted the disciplined approach to regular, dutiful labour favoured by government authorities.

(Kleinert 2000:244–5)

Here, the very act of engaging in alternative forms of labour is viewed as an index of Aboriginal agency. Kleinert suggests that the images used by these artists came from the 'vernacular art form popular among itinerant

workers from the mid-nineteenth century onward', and 'also drew upon the cultural memories embodied in rock art imagery [and] the skills acquired in carved wooden weapons' (ibid.:244). She adds that;

in all cases, whether the forms outwardly resemble earlier traditions of appropriation – in a form of bricolage – from a colonial genre, they do so from a culturally distinctive, Indigenous perspective.

(ibid.:245)

This approach clearly emphasises that the making of art is always an expression of the artist and his or her milieu. That is, art is always a cultural activity. A certain degree of self-conscious matching of depictions to market demand is not surprising, since the sale of carvings was not infrequently 'our survival', as one artist explained. But nor does this eye for the market negate the creativity and autonomy of expression. There has no doubt been an increasing conscious reflexivity about their art among Wilcannia Aboriginal people.

One artist who has carved emu eggs since he was a small boy in the early 1950s, carved the image of a Japanese *geisha* into an emu egg and installed a small electric bulb inside to illuminate it. He thought he might perhaps have got the idea from the many *Reader's Digest* magazines he had enjoyed reading when a younger man. He made it in the 1970s for his own pleasure, although he tells me it was much admired by whites. His current work offers no such depictions of other cultures. He continues, as he did as a small boy, to depict animals such as the echidna, turtle, goanna and kangaroo that he and his family have always eaten and still hunt, and, as with many Barkindji paintings, his emu-egg carvings emphasize the ancestral creation figure of Ngatji. The conditions of art production have seen re-interpretation and re-consideration of previous depictions, as well as self-conscious views on what is now said to have motivated them.

Beckett points out that in Wilcannia in the 1950s, children felt ashamed of anything that was seen to be part of 'the old ways' including speaking the 'lingo', and singing or dancing the old songs. Children were increasingly disregarding 'the traditional culture [and placing] a negative valuation on some of its features' (Beckett 1958:93–5). It might be expected that, at that time, the production of idealized 'noble savage' images in artworks would be inconsistent with this resistance to the 'old ways'. An awakening interest in 'our tradition' from the 1970s, when government policies softened and

self-determination was established, may have seen Aboriginal people of Wilcannia actively choose to create depictions of native animals and 'noble savages'. If these entailed a sense of irony, it is not evident now: these elements now appear as part of an inter- and intra-cultural process to educate the self and Other, and are a source of pride.

Neither cattle mustering nor bucking broncos have been artistically rendered in Wilcannia in recent decades. Given the close historical involvement that many Aboriginal people had in the pastoral industry up until the 1970s and the feeling of pride and recognition this continues to generate, the lack of such depictions is puzzling (see Beckett [1958] 2005; Gibson 2010; MacDonald 2004; McGrath 1987). In the past, Aboriginal people were drovers and ringers, rode the fences and enjoyed the local shows where they rode bucking broncos. These activities were part of the lived practices of Aboriginal cultural life. While it could be argued that the pastoral era is gone and therefore is no longer of relevance to Aboriginal people, frequent references to those days and the fond nostalgia they evoke makes this unlikely.

There are several factors that are relevant in considering the erasure of references to pastoral life in contemporary artworks. First, Australian rural history has been re-evaluated to stress the dispossession and oppression of indigenous people (Cowlshaw 2004:205–6). As such, notions of traditional Aboriginality do not sit comfortably alongside their involvement in the pastoral industry. Further, the political landscape requires the demonstration of continuous tradition to gain rights to land and claim authenticity in the public domain. Then there is the public desire for 'traditional' Aboriginal culture. The absence of such images in artworks may also be tied to the fragile identities of many Aboriginal people in south-east Australia as they struggle for cultural recognition in terms not necessarily of their making. The desires of the mostly white buyers reinforce this identity issue. The era of the 'noble savage', like the pastoral era, is long gone, but depictions of the former continue to feature in emu-egg artwork created in recent times.

Badger Bates, who has been carving eggs since he was a small boy, told me that when he first 'kicked off carving [eggs], I was just doing bullocks and that, because I worked on stations and rode in rodeos ... All the old people used to wear R.M. Williams – silk shirts, big hats – men and women.' It was only much later in the early eighties, when he saw



Figure 42 Carved emu egg by Badger Bates held in the ethnographic collections of the Australian Museum. E085855 (1991). Photograph by Finton Mahoney, Australian Museum. Reproduced with permission of the Australian Museum.

for the first time the engravings, carvings and stencils of his ancestors at Mutawintji National Park, that he said he thought to himself,

I'm going to change all this [carving bullocks and so on] ... When I saw Mutawintji, I felt, this is not right carving foreign animals. Emu, porcupine, kangaroo, they my food ... They what helped me in my life.

The first time Badger went to Mutawintji was in 1983, soon after being appointed as a Cultural Sites Officer for the NPWS and at the time when Aboriginal people mounted the blockade at Mutawintji. Badger's work with NPWS and his involvement with the blockade saw him begin to reflect on his early experiences as a child and on the stories and ways he had been taught. He said that he considers riding horses in rodeos as also part of him and of his life, and therefore part of his lived culture. However, he also said he came to see that carving bullocks as a representation of his culture was 'not right'. Badger's changing priorities and growing sense of his Aboriginality were part of the identity politics, the activism, and the discourses of the 1970s and 80s. He no longer wanted to invest his Aboriginality in images of the pastoral era, or even his own place in it. There has been a reflexive distancing from that which is not readily understood to be an acceptable and understood form of Aboriginality.

I suggest that the fragility of these renewed forms of Aboriginality, emerging in a still unpredictable social environment, cannot afford to encompass too much complexity or a multiplicity of images. The burgeoning Wilcannia artistry and expression needs to establish its purely Indigenous roots, both for its practitioners and its public, before it can venture into more ambiguous and complicated accounts of the past. It is the indigenous core that inspires and sets this art apart as unique. The sources of Wilcannia art are the spiritual force symbolized by Ngatji, a deep knowledge of the environment, and the expression of a special relationship between human beings and the land. The Wilcannia artists both feel and consciously activate the power of their autochthonous origins as they assert its significance in the world.

Badger's 1993 lino-print *Life on the Darling* (Figure 43) depicts both native animals and idealized 'noble savage' images. As one of the few remaining carvers of emu eggs, his work shows mostly native animals and Ngatji, the rainbow serpent. While these images are popularly associated with 'traditional' Aborigines, and while they are also eminently marketable



Figure 43 Linocut 'Life on the Darling' by Badger Bates. © Badger Bates 1991. Reproduced with permission of artist.

to whites, it would be incorrect to say that their production is motivated only by market return or a perceived need to portray a more publically desirable imaginary of Aboriginal life. I asked Badger why he called his lino-print *Life on the Darling* when, in my experience, life 'on the Darling' was not at all like that depicted.

Badger responded by saying, 'We still hunt, we still eat wild meat, we still fish.' This may appear as a reductionist argument, with cultural identity distilled to basic human needs of food, shelter and clothing. However, these images should not be viewed as a form of self-deception or, as is sometimes said, an attempt to deceive whites. While it is true that boomerangs are no longer used for hunting, people no longer live in *gunyas* or *mya-myas* (bark huts or bough shelters) and men and women no longer walk around either naked or wearing the minimal coverings of their ancestors, for Badger, the clothing, accoutrements and tools symbolize an ontology that is still present in some form. Others share his perspective: although some of the 'old ways' are no longer practised in the same way, many are viewed and experienced as being continuous. Depictions such as those in *Life on the Darling* are a means of maintaining a particular identity: they reflect an ontological view which persists through certain practices and reflexive

thinking about culture. Such depictions are part of a political and cultural moment which both draws upon and uses the conflation of art and culture to teach, to re-think, to re-make, to re-produce a legitimate Aboriginality in the present.

Another artist said that he had 'started out drawin' Mickey Mouse cartoons an' that'. He said he did this until an authority figure influenced his thinking and the direction of his artwork, particularly in relation to content. He was told to 'paint what belong to you', 'your own culture'. In fact, Mickey Mouse, along with bullocks and bucking horses, are part of this man's and others' lives as lived. This said, all the art, and even doodles, I saw were notable for their emphasis on what might be considered more culturally aligned images. Not only would such depictions of Mickey Mouse not sell, they contradict the new impetus of culture, and its new importance in the lives of many Aboriginal people in Wilcannia. There are clear cultural limits to what does or will constitute culture. The artist who no longer paints Mickey Mouse also resisted painting a platypus on a mural in Ivanhoe jail because this was 'not his meat' and therefore 'was not his' to paint. Culture and its representation are not a 'free for all'.

While many artists paint what they perceive as belonging to them, there is clearly also an element of nostalgia and longing operating in some of these representations. Many Aboriginal people speak fondly of important sites and locations of both historic and Dreaming importance. But traditional lands are seldom accessible any longer: they are private property, the cost of transport is prohibitively high, and family responsibilities interfere with such visits. There are occasional visits to important sites and locations arranged by community organizations such as the Wilcannia Working Party, the Land Council and the NPWS, who meet all associated costs. Such assistance is now expected, an assumed entitlement. Only a handful of people in my experience self-organize visits to Mutawintji, and this is expressed as a need or desire to either 'get out of town' or to hunt for wild meat. The dependency on organizations for visits to sites of traditional or historical significance should be seen against the background of decades of such travel being discouraged, disallowed and, indeed, illegal.¹³ Now it is the expense and lack of resources in a poor, disadvantaged community that makes such visits difficult. Resources permitting, visiting kin in other parts of NSW and maintaining these relational links is a higher priority.

For a group of people, many of whom feel strong in culture but who express an inability to live as they might wish, the capacity to make art

allows for an affordable form of remembering and expressing that which is denied. This is the case whether it is the physical denial of visiting country or the white denial of Aboriginal culture. As Barkindji people have lost much access to country, depicting country in art is one way of expressing how elements of country can be retained. Country can be 'lived' through its depiction. As Berlo (1999: 91) says of the Inuit, for many artists, 'drawing the old ways rather than continuing to follow them is a way of maintaining identity'. For some Barkindji, to draw, paint or carve a campsite or a waterhole no longer visited, or a favourite activity no longer practised, induces an affective sensorium. Memories of places, people and events, the smells and feelings, can be re-activated by the act of re-presentation. The artwork resonates, strikes a chord, rings a bell not only for the artist but for those who view it. This is not to promote an essentialist view of culture, or an essentializing continuity of tradition. It is to say that 'Aboriginal culture' has become, for many Aboriginal people in Wilcannia, a self-conscious matter which is evoked and lived through the imagination. Art objects, and just as pertinently art-making, are tangible, affective and creative expressions of this consciousness.

The renaissance of culture in Wilcannia, already taking place in difficult circumstances, faces a final difficulty. Just as Aboriginal people in Wilcannia have begun to draw pride from, and show an increasing and greater interest in, 'our traditions', mainstream society is beginning to demand that Aboriginal people reject outmoded representations. The power of the mainstream to dictate what traditions should be, how they will be imagined and who is permitted to have them is a constant presence. As Aboriginal people reject bucking broncos in favour of native animals, Dreaming stories and noble savage images, the reception of this imagery by those whites who pass through, work in or have been born in Wilcannia, has become more critical. Many accept the art with a measure of pleasure and surprise, and some only reluctantly accept the validity of 'tradition' in representations; that is, they accept the scholarly discourse of what 'tradition' looks like and can see this in the art. What arouses criticism is the disparity between 'traditional' lives as described and what is apparent in the daily lives of the Aboriginal people. Wilcannia locals treat Wilcannia Aboriginal depictions of what is thought to be tradition with a mixture of confusion, pleasure and contempt. The final irony is that some in the art world are now beginning to recognize bucking broncos as valid and valuable portrayals of Aboriginal culture.

As with people anywhere, the Aboriginal people of Wilcannia 'project multiple, inconsistent self-representations that are context dependent and may shift rapidly' (Ewing 1990:251). The artworks and the artists that I engage with, speak to, and of, the complexities of what constitutes Aboriginal identity and culture, and Barkindji culture in particular. There is no doubt that the liaison between art and culture serves as a means of objectifying Barkindji culture writ large. Barkindji people are learning and being taught to see and feel through the more recent media of painting and lino-cutting in particular. Painting canvas and carving lino and wood is generative. Design elements may evoke, create and even represent, but the very act of painting or carving is its own form of creation, allowing for all kinds of formations of the self. Further, these strong, self-fashioned Aboriginal artists are providing the imagery and icons for a whole community that is struggling to emerge as representative of Australian Aboriginality.

NOTES

- 1 Martin (1996) suggests that emu eggs were used as containers pre-contact; and Kleinert (1994:188) states that the 'earliest known carved emu eggs attributed to Aborigines is dated to the late nineteenth century'. Emu-egg carving was also undertaken by whites during the pastoral period; based on the practice of scrimshaw on horn and wood.
- 2 The use of art in these contexts is most famously demonstrated by the Yolgnu people of Yirrkala in North East Arnhem land. Their bark petition in 1963 (which was in fact two petitions) showed the respective Yirritja and Dhuwa moieties' sacred designs, which it was hoped would prove their relationship to their land and the Yolgnu Law in relation to this land. The petitions were a response to the government excising Yolgnu land for a Swiss mining company against the wishes of the Yolgnu people.
- 3 The Story of the Falling Star is a well known Barkindji story which has been documented in a book of the same name and as told by Barkindji Elder, Elsie Jones (Jones 1989). There are two main men in the story of the falling star, Punritj and Malkarra who were both *miikikas* (clever men with powers to heal and harm): the man in the shield did not resemble either.
- 4 When Biernoff wrote of safe and dangerous places he had in mind the system across many parts of Australia where certain sites and tracts of country contain 'highly ambivalent and potentially dangerous powers' related to mythology

and ceremony (Biernoff 1978:93). Access to these places is denied or restricted to those who are authorized and appropriately initiated (*ibid.*). Unauthorized access can result in severe punishment from the living or the ancestral spirits. Patterns of movement are restricted and directed by cultural knowledge and classification of the land. Because NSW was settled early in the days of the colony, patterns of Aboriginal movement became increasingly restricted as their land was taken up and became 'owned' by settlers. While many parts of NSW remain replete with 'safe and dangerous' places linked to mythology, and to a lesser extent ceremony, the notion of what is safe and dangerous in relation to NSW Aboriginal people accessing or claiming special cultural connection to, or knowledge about, land has taken on additional meaning. The non-Aboriginal denial of 'Aboriginal culture' for those in NSW sees their requests to restrict non-Aboriginal access to 'sacred secret' sites as spurious. Aboriginal claims to special cultural connections to land are viewed with suspicion and, at times, anger. The dangers are political, terrestrial and human. However, in its artistic manifestation as 'environment' the land can stand as an ideal foil for shared black and white values and concerns.

- 5 The Murray-Darling Basin Commission (since 2008 The Murray-Darling Basin Authority) is an initiative of government. It was developed in 1987 to create a national approach to the management of the basin water which runs through the states of New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia.
- 6 Ngatji's power to make rain can be harnessed by Aboriginal 'clever people', one of whom was Annie Moysey, a matriarch of Wilcannia, now deceased. I was told by one of Granny Moysey's descendents that it was Granny Moysey's grandfather who 'split the rain' – referring to the way that rain seems to split before it gets to Wilcannia, going around the back of the McCulloch Ranges and then coming in from the north. Most people around the Far West consider that there are no clever people left in the south-east in general. However, Granny Moysey's grandson Badger Bates is reputed by some Barkindji people to have inherited some of her powers.
- 7 Aboriginal people speak of Ngatji as both a singular and definite article and in plural. The term floats unproblematically between the two forms. Ngatji is/are referred to as 'he' and 'they' at different times and depending on context. Ngatji is not referred to as 'she', although people recognize that there are male and female rainbow serpents.
- 8 Reay's fieldnotes are held in Canberra at the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies.

- 9 William is Badger's first cousin, and held the position of Chairperson of the Land Council until 2004. The Park was subsequently leased back to the NSW Government and is currently jointly managed by a board comprised of members from Mutawintji Local Aboriginal Land Council, Broken Hill Shire Council, local landowners and the NPWS.
- 10 Lines which repeatedly outline elements and wavy flowing lines that represent water are also a feature of art from the Centre and Western Desert (cf. Morphy 2001), for instance in the repeated outlining of circular forms such as waterholes and soaks (e.g. Lena Pwerle's *Watersoak*) or the free-flowing lines of underground water emanating from solid roundels (e.g. *Ngapa Dreaming* by Janet Long Nakamarra and *Rain Dreaming* by Ronnie Tjampitjinpa).
- 11 *Koori* is a term used by many Aboriginal people of south-east NSW and Victoria to describe themselves. In some languages this term can mean 'people' or 'person', as in an Aboriginal people or person.
- 12 This woman (who lived mostly in Broken Hill), was one of only two women I met who was gaining or had received some art-training in a dominant society institution. She lived for a few years in Queensland and Sydney and her art has shifted with these geographic experiences and continues to show further technical and stylistic change. The content however has remained almost the same with animals in particular Mother Thurru (snake) being a common aspect of content.
- 13 Under the Aboriginal Protection Board and Welfare Board, Aboriginal people had to have permission to travel. Those living on missions and reserves were subject to high levels of surveillance and were often physically isolated from the outside world (Beckett 2005:53–7). However, in Wilcannia it was the police, rather than the local staffs of the AWB, that seemed to play the more active role in surveillance of the Aboriginal population and their affairs (Beckett 2005:67–9).

CHAPTER 6

Big Murray Butcher

‘We still doin’ it’



Magic registers and publicizes the strength of desire, increasing the (inductively supported) likelihood that the much desired, emphatically expressed outcome will transpire, as frequently happens with respect to those outcomes we loudly clamour for.

(Alfred Gell 1998:101)

Important introductions

One day, early into fieldwork, I was looking at Badger Bates sandstone sculpture outside the Wilcannia hospital and I struck up a conversation with Janet Jones. Janet suggested that if I wanted to explore Barkindji culture, then I should talk to her son, Murray Butcher. Others offered that Murray knew the ‘lingo’, pointing out that he had been reared by his Nan, Elsie Rose Jones, a Barkindji woman who had come to Wilcannia from Albamarle station near Menindee in 1925 (Hercus 1993). Although Elsie passed away in 1996, memories of her garner great respect amongst both black and white locals, who speak fondly of her. It was Elsie’s ‘brilliant knowledge of vocabulary’ that assisted Hercus in formulating the *Paakantyi* [Barkindji] *Dictionary* (Hercus 1993:2). Both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Wilcannia emphasize Murray’s language proficiency as evidence of his cultural credentials.

Murray’s mother said that I should call him. When I did, I found myself trying to explain my research interests while talking above a great deal of raucous laughter and background music; there was clearly something of a



Figure 44 The author and Murray Butcher at Murray's house in Wilcannia 2006.

party going on at his house. We agreed to meet at Baker Park the following Sunday, where a 'fun weekend' with a band and sausage sizzle was to be held.¹ I asked him how I would recognize him. He said, 'I'm fair, six-feet tall, robust, broad shouldered and I've got big feet.'

I was standing with his mum at the park a few days later when Murray came along and she introduced us. He did not recall that I had spoken to him previously. I suggested that he may have been 'celebrating' at the time, and received my first taste of his inimitable and infectious laughter. His self-description had been accurate: fair, tall, robust and broad-shouldered (see Figure 44); what I would learn over time was his easy-going nature, calm disposition and attributed role as something of a peacemaker and arbiter when things got out of hand on social occasions. Expressions such as 'I never heard anyone say a bad word about him' and 'everybody likes him' were commonly used. Everyone I met seemed to like Murray, including me. He was a little embarrassed and had a bit of a giggle when I reminded him of his self-description. His mate, Michael, joked, 'Didn't he say handsome?' We talked about my project and Murray said, 'I'll be into that.' We arranged to meet and talk the following week and have remained friends since.

Whether a personal introduction goes well is often crucial to the kinds of relationships that form, or not, over the course of fieldwork. This chapter, as was Chapter Three, is semi-biographical, bringing together social theory and ethnography in ways which I hope show something of the warmth and value of ethnographic relationships. While the pitfalls of perceiving truth(s) (Denzin 1997) in the ethnographic endeavour are recognized, they sit subservient, I believe, to the rich sharing of lives and understanding that long-term fieldwork facilitates and permits.

Murray was born in 1974 to his Barkindji mother Janet, the only Aboriginal Registered Nurse at the Wilcannia hospital, and his white father Michael Butcher, who passed away in tragic circumstances when Murray was three years old. I found it remarkable, when I met Murray, that someone of 28 (in 2002) was treated with such credibility and as possessing a high degree of cultural knowledge and authority. Murray is one of the few locals regularly asked to give 'cultural' advice to professional consultants and academics; this includes providing social, linguistic and artefact-related information in relation to Barkindji sites. He is commonly asked to work with archaeologists during site clearances when there are proposals for infrastructure development. As one of the few people in Wilcannia with any degree of fluency in Barkindji, he is often asked by whites to speak at local events such as NAIDOC week or when visiting dignitaries came to town. As an Aboriginal Education Officer at the local Wilcannia Central School since 1997, Murray teaches the Languages Other Than English (LOTE) programme. This role within the education system exists across Australia, and involves assisting teachers in primary and secondary schools in mediating, distilling and teaching aspects of culture with parents, school staff and students. Of this role he said:

Ahm, I've been workin' with schools since I probably left school on and off. I used to work over there on the Mission school for a while. Helping out with the language an' just helping out in the classroom. Ahm, I really got into the schools in 1996 after my granny [Elsie Jones] passed away, 'cause she used to teach language, an' it was one of her dreams gonna see her language bein' taught in the school. An' after she passed away I didn't want her dream to be finished.

Murray's desire to continue his Granny's work through the teaching of language has parallels with Badger's desire to show what his Granny taught

him through art. Local Aboriginal people link the teaching of language to cultural authority, status, identity and credibility. The two matriarchs, Annie Moysey and Elsie Jones, sit for many locals as sentinels of Barkindi authenticity in this regard; both were fluent speakers of Barkindji. The semantics of Barkindji dialects were drawn upon by some locals as indicators of who and what really is Barkindji. While there is no open hostility over which matriarch was the more 'culturally' important, and there appears to have been harmonious and respectful relations between the two women in question, there is a sense, rather than direct evidence of, some rivalry between a few descendents of these two women. While this was mostly short asides in general conversation, there were hints that people vied for cultural ascendancy in relation to the perceived knowledge of these ancestors; in this, language played a part. There was no mediation required in the matter of cultural ascendancy between Badger and Murray, who each publicly and privately held one another in esteem, seeing differences in the semantics of dialect as of interest rather than being of culturally hierarchical import.

Murray is also an artist, and often expressed the importance of 'teaching culture', particularly at the local level, to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. His local 'success' as an artist is, as with Badger, linked to his status as someone seen to possess a high level of 'cultural knowledge'. These two aspects are intertwined and mediate one another; they are critical to Murray's particular position in a community where success is treated with a great deal of suspicion (Gibson 2010). The local lack of awareness of the status that artists have in mainstream art worlds allows for some freedom from the social constraints applied by, and impressed within, a community where social sameness is seen as necessary to cohesion and survival, and where envy over differences in social status and access to resources is never far from the surface.

'We still doin' the same designs on our artwork'

What has come to be known as 'culture' has increasingly included not just artworks, but the designs on artworks and artefacts (Morphy 1991; Munn 1973). For Murray and others, designs are 'part of our culture'. The content of artworks, the consideration of content and the art talk between artists, their friends and family served as catalysts for negotiations of, and about, culture and identity, as well as affirming and consolidating identity.

'We still doin' it' refers to something that Murray once said to me. At the Australian Museum in Sydney we had arranged to go 'behind the scenes' into the ethnographic collections to see some artefacts made by Aboriginal people from the Darling River area. The artefacts are dated from the late 1800s and some have explicit provenance from the Wilcannia area. They were mostly *nulla-nullas*, *bundis* (clubs), boomerangs, spears and shields. Murray was 'amazed' at the carved and incised designs on some of the wooden shields and *bundis*. He said, with a kind of joyful astonishment, 'We still doin' it', 'We still doin' the same designs on our artwork.' For Murray these artefacts operate as a tangible and visual affirmation of the continuity of his culture, and, as he discovered, they are an important part of the nation's recognized heritage. We talked about how his sense of being Barkindji and of being Aboriginal was enhanced, confirmed and distilled by physical and visual contact with the objects and designs of his ancestors in the museum. Because culture for Barkindji has become increasingly linked to cognized action, for example, teaching the Barkindji language to schoolchildren, speaking the lingo at cultural events, taking children 'out bush' to 'learn culture', making legal assertions of identity, this makes culture something that is being *sought* as much as it is *possessed*.

I asked Murray, 'When you're painting, what ... do you paint about? What sort of subjects do you use? Do you tend to do the same things?' Murray replied:

I try to put a theme, something of a story, or think of a story about something growin' up. Mainly thing around the river an' fish an' stuff like that there ... We do Aboriginal style story an' that there. 'Cause we was told we wasn't dot people, that's not our tribe. An' I remember sittin an' askin' Nan: 'What sorta art we do, ya know?' An' she said, 'We do, sort of, stick art like little stick figures, an' do tracks an' stuff. We do lines an' sometimes we do little spots an' that, y'know? Ahmm, we don't do dots like out on, like them desert fullas do their paintins.' So I try to stick to lines.

One of Murray's paintings was notable for its use of elements common to nearby Mount Grenfell National Park, which sits approximately 280 km east of Wilcannia. For example, the style and solid colour of the emus (yellow) and kangaroos (red) depicted, the white grid patterns and ladder



Figure 45 *Untitled painting showing the two moieties of Kilpara and Makwara. Acrylic on canvas by Murray Butcher. © Murray Butcher 2003. Reproduced with permission of the artist.*

patterns, the attitude and style of the stick -figures and the solid painting of the echidna (see Figure 46).

Mt. Grenfell is part of the Barkindji Falling Star Story as told by Elsie Jones; a story she said was 'so old we don't even know how old it is'. It concerns a fallen star (*purli ngaangkalitji*): a falling star described by Elsie as looking like 'a great big ball of fire' came to earth near Murtee Station (approximately 11 km north-east of Wilcannia, between Wilcannia and Mount Murchison Station) killing many Barkindji and causing a great flood event (Jones 1989: pages unnumbered). Mt. Grenfell is known today as the traditional land of the Ngiyampaa Aboriginal people.² However, in the Falling Star Story some Barkindji (Paakantji) fled south from Murtee Station to Mount Manara, and some fled east to Mt. Grenfell. After the worst of the flood, those Barkindji who had fled to Mt. Grenfell then went south joining up with the others. Although Mt. Grenfell is traditional Ngiyampaa land, Murray has an affinity with this location through this story as told by his Nan Elsie Jones. Murray's was the only art that I saw in Wilcannia which clearly drew on the Mt. Grenfell paintings and



Figure 46 *Untitled painting with elements common to Mount Grenfell. Acrylic on canvas board by Murray Butcher. © Murray Butcher 1997. Reproduced with permission of the artist.*

designs. Art styles and their capacity for particular cultural belonging and alignment are important given the lack of recognition of Barkindji culture in the public arena. Murray and others addressed notions of authenticity by actively and consciously drawing on information handed down by those thought to be authoritative.

From the age of eight Murray was 'always interested in drawin' an' stuff. An' with what Nan told us we should be drawin' an' that, you know'. The kinds of things Murray's Nan thought he should be drawing were things from 'everyday life': 'fish and waterholes and stuff' in the styles she showed him. His desire to draw his life echoes Badger's entreaty to 'do what belong to you'.

Paintings, artefacts and their designs are tangible signifiers of the presence of Barkindji culture, as well as being reproducers of culture. This does not mean, at least in Murray's case, that justification of culture to non-Aboriginal others is the main motivation for production; this said, the

need to affirm and authenticate oneself in cultural terms arises through the demands of others. I asked Murray:

What do you hope for when you do a painting or carving? I mean, do you do it hoping that it'll have a particular destination or do you care who buys it? Does it matter?

Murray responded:

Well, first an' foremost why I do the paintin' is to get some sort of contact with our culture – whether it just be animals, what we eat or our relations with the land or sometime try an' do a story. Try to, ah, put a message across about our Dreamtime stories.

As he explains, his first motivation when painting is to get some contact with culture. Here, culture and contact with culture is something which comes about through the practice of painting. Painting culture can be the animals that are eaten and their relationship to the land, and, just as importantly, giving consideration to not painting certain animals and land that is 'not ours'. The painted kangaroo, emu and 'porcupine' become, in their visual objectification, materially concrete referents of culture. Painting animals eaten and the shared relationship to the land suggests not only a pointing to culture, but a practice that stands for evidence of the presence of culture. The painting of the animal, fish, human and bird life, food and water sources, animal and human tracks, in history, in the Dreamtime and in the present are sources of and signs of culture. Thus, the content of paintings declares aspects of culture as it also refers to unspoken aspects of culture.

According to Murray, contact with culture is made through 'painting' relations with the land. Whereas the actual practice of hunting and fishing might be viewed as living culture, stories that are expressed in paint can also be understood in this way. A painted story is seen by the artist as a cultural act and as such the performative and embodied aspects involved in making a painting can be considered as 'culture in action' (Jackson 1983). Hunting and fishing as contemporaneously practised or as depicted in the actual practice of painting, or through narrations of the painting all re-produce culture and provide 'contact with culture' – they are culture.

While for Murray the production of art has among its many objectives the intention to address others' denial of culture, this is not his primary objective. Murray, like many other local artists, is only prepared to reveal limited information about the stories connected with his paintings:

What I prefer – like the paintins with our stories – is to stay with us, our people an' that, an' all them in my family. I do some paintins for the general public, but what I'm careful about is not to, ehm, like, give them a general outlay of the story but not the whole detail of the stories. So I reckon we be still be empowered by our own stories and traditions. Also, give outsiders insight into our culture where, ehm, they can see we have stories an' art an' stuff. And whether it's ... whatever influence it come from, it's still us. An' how we, ahm, I don't know, try to bring our culture alive in a, in a medium what's available to us.

Stories which, in white terms, might serve to authenticate Aboriginal culture and strengthen sales and appreciation, are held back to strengthen what is viewed as more important. Certain works are invested with private and special moments and messages. Murray intimates this in stressing the importance of 'keeping' culture, and in his valuing of culture as something which is not a free for all, but as something which is empowering and precious. It is important to limit and to share. To:

keep things for ourself an' stuff and that there, so that we can still have, still be, still have the power and the knowledge an' that there. An' I believe, like, if we give our stories away, it's ... might be, ah, like ... it's give' the general public a chance to learn about us, but I believe it empowers people other than ourselves.

In Wilcannia it is the individual artist that chooses the content of a work and, therefore, the extent of cultural knowledge present or able to be shared in a painting reflects that of the painter. Restricting knowledge of stories in paintings to the right people allows for both individual and group empowerment. There is a wider tension between the desire to keep certain stories private and needing to make them public in order to confirm Aboriginal culture to those who deny its presence and legitimacy. The articulation of this position also demonstrates the degree to which Aboriginal people in Wilcannia (as with many other communities in the

south-east) have consciously considered and thought about their place in society, the power differentials that exist, and how this might be handled.

Art as performance and renewal

In thinking about the content of the art and in making the art, past and present matters of interest, of difficulty and of pleasure are considered, resolved and mediated. Culture is also made anew: it comes about through the practice of art-making, through the forethought of content and in displaying and talking about the artwork. Culture as an objectified, tangible entity is writ large and made visible through art. In the Wilcannia context a number of activities such as hunting and gathering and forms of ceremony or ritual associated with the ancestral and historic period at sites such as Mutawintji and Mt. Manara have been lost to time and become fractured across generations. Some of these activities have seen renewal and refashioning, others remain entirely absent. A 'culture' of a particular kind has come to be increasingly represented in discursive acts and made present in visual art objects. What is striking is the extent to which knowing about 'culture' increasingly relies upon access to museum displays, published works, verbal instruction and fixed times of learning (as part of school education and 'going bush') rather than on the direct experience of a lived cultural world.

Murray and many others spoke regularly about their fear that 'our culture' will be 'lost', as the 'kids' were not interested in learning about it. As with many children who have access to American popular culture and the influence of 'hip-hop', Wilcannia teenagers have adopted aspects of this dress style and celebrate its black American heroes. The cultural world of the ancestors and the 'old people', both living and in memory, are of little relevance in the daily lives of most Aboriginal youth. That 'culture' of the kind promoted by cultural brokers and many artists requires consideration and has to be actively 'learned' is, for many young people, an unwelcome chore.

Children are constantly spoken of as being 'our future'. The slogan, 'Our Children, Our Future' is frequently used and replicated on banners and posters at community events. Indeed, the expression has become something of a pan-Aboriginal trope. Passing 'culture' onto children by way of learning a language and undertaking activities which are now no longer part of Aboriginal mainstream life is seen as necessary for ensuring a recognizable and desired Barkindji future. As culture is seen to flow from

and between the old people who have passed away and those living now, this flow must not be cut off if culture is to live on. For Murray, art has a strong pedagogic dimension in relation to teaching children. Special stories, moments and people are linked by him and other artists to the creation of artworks. In this way, artworks in their creation and completed presence can also become biographical objects for future group memory and recall. In many ways the paintings take the place of, and indeed become through their making and in their explanation, a cultural or ceremonial activity.

Reflecting on the past and past relationships is integral to the notion of 'keeping culture alive'. An older Wilcannia man was reminiscing about hunting, dustpan dances and of how people used to share as 'one people'. He explained how he thought things had changed:

People haven't been lookin' in the past (sigh). When, when you need a future that is something you should always do, is dig in your past and make a future. Now, you, you gotta have a past. To have a past, digging steps that you take is towards your future and the future of your children, an' everybody. But dese are some of the things that we would 'ave to do: look at our past. If you don't look at your past – what are you looking at in the future?

Looking into the past is a means not only of remembering, but of making a future; it has prospective as well as retrospective elements. Holland and Lave speak of the potential usefulness that daily struggles of community identity-making may have for 'staking claims into the future' (2001:27). This is a comment on the importance and connection between available versions of history, the future and future histories. Futures, 'like histories, are constrained and shaped by lived experience ... Discourses of the past and discourses of the future feed off each other; indeed they are often only different chapters of the same narrative story' (Malkki 2001:328). Physical artworks and their making play an important role in constructing these narratives; in a world where narratives compete and where identity is contested they present a concrete referent to work with.

Murray's drawing *Nan and Pop coming to Wilcannia* holds the narrative of when his grandparents came to Wilcannia and the circumstances of their arrival. When Murray paints or draws about growing up – the people, the places, the events and the stories – this remembering or looking back creates a sense of cultural continuity as well as offering a way forwards.

In this way, Murray affirms his links to his cultural history and his lived existence as well as responding to those who would deny his culture's presence. When Murray paints or draws what he remembers of the past and then tells it to the children, he is, in many ways, also painting potential futures. Shared dialogue about the painting can become shared culture. As Murray paints his memories, both recent and distant, he expresses culture, his way, in visual form. He draws upon a network of thoughts linked to a network of people and places and, in so doing, he individualizes his culture as he sees it and as he remembers it.

Napachie, the Inuit artist says,

Back in the early days, I used to draw what I had heard from my mother, the things she used to talk about from long ago. I didn't ask my mother's opinion of what I was going to draw, but when I heard stories from my mother, I drew them the way I pictured them.

(Berlo 1999:192)

Berlo contends that such representations of others' memories constitute autobiographical acts:

When Napachie represents the kind of tent her grandmother used fifty years earlier, based on the oral reminiscences of her mother, Pitseolak, both the mother's reminiscences and the daughter's art are autobiographical acts.

(Berlo 1999:192)

Similarly, when Murray draws his Nan and Pop his representations are similarly autobiographical; they are his visual rendering of what his Nan had told him. Although Murray was not present when his Nan and Pop came to Wilcannia or at the *Making of the Darling*, a self-authoring can nevertheless be envisaged as taking place through depiction (Figure 47).

Some events make the place of art as a living performance of culture clear. One of Murray's paintings had been in progress for about three years. From time to time he would bring the painting out and do some work on it, and then put it away for a while until he felt the urge to do some more. On one occasion Murray and one of his closest friends (I'll call him Andy) were having an argument. Murray 'king hit' Andy, who is slightly built, and 'downed 'im', knocking him out. On coming round, Andy was bleeding



Figure 47 'The Making of the Darling'. Pen drawing on paper by Murray Butcher when he was a young man. Date unknown. © Murray Butcher. Reproduced with permission of the artist.

from his mouth and he spat the blood from his mouth onto the painting. Murray had been telling me about this incident in front of this particular painting while Andy was present. I asked Andy why he had spat on the painting. He said that he knew how much Murray's art meant to him, and being unable to 'king hit' him back retaliated by taking it out on the painting.³ After spitting the blood onto the painting, he then put his hand on it, making a bloody handprint. Amongst those privy to this event, the painting is now known as 'Andy's painting'. When it is completed, Murray will give it to Andy, 'my little mate' (see Figure 48).

Each time the painting is brought out and worked on, those who were present at the event remember and talk about it. Others not present at the initial event, would also look at the painting and talk about the king hit and the bloody handprint. In his remembering and retelling, Murray expresses his regret and sadness at hitting his friend, but there is also much laughter as the story is told and retold. The painting is a visual reminder and an



Figure 48 'A's painting'. Acrylic on canvas by Murray Butcher (work in progress).
© Murray Butcher. Reproduced with permission of the artist.

existential mnemonic for those in the know. It serves as a cathartic release, as tensions are reworked and resolved in the retelling and talking about the work. Clearly, this is not the discourse that might be invoked by those outside this cultural group when the painting is viewed. Art performs here in ways which are central to cultural relations. Special stories, moments and people are linked to the creation of the works as well as to the works themselves. In this way, artworks, as they are being created, can also become biographical objects for future group memory and recall (Berlo 1999:192). In many ways, the artist takes on the role of the storyteller and becomes one with the audience. While the art may be widely consumed, the artist is claimed by the local community, as they create with, and receiving cultural sustenance from, one another. Through making art, the production of myth and story is grounded in local, and locally important, ways.

The strong pedagogic role of art in keeping culture alive, and the practice of art-making as a catalyst for identity construction and production, can be considered as a continuation of Aboriginal social practice. Historically visual and oral expressions have been extremely important for Aboriginal societies as a means of elaborating the social (Langton 1993:9). Whilst these expressions were historically less individually personalized and less explicitly fixed in time than is current for Aboriginal people in Wilcannia, the performativity of art-making and the social discourse around art talk

can nonetheless be viewed as an extension of Aboriginal sociality and practice. This integration of the visual arts with life, in the ways previously described, is not generally the case for mainstream Australian society, in which, Aboriginal scholars Brokensha and Tonks suggest, the Aboriginal arts

are seen as an activity quite separate from mainstream social, economic and religious pursuits and the relatively high levels of professional interest and involvement in the arts ... are not as widely translated into the sorts of deeper group and personal experiences suggested by our Aboriginal paradigm.

(Brokensha and Tonks 1986:4)

While this statement owes much to an essentialist view, and is not the case for all Aboriginal artists, Murray's experience of art production demonstrates the integration of art in the social, economic and cultural life of Aboriginal people in Wilcannia. During one of our regular discussions I asked Murray, 'When did you sorta start drawin' an' painting an' that?' He responded,

I was always interested in drawin' and stuff [but] it's not until I went away down to Sydney.⁴ We went to a hostel there an' seen some other Aboriginal lads doin' paintin' an', eh, they was from all over the State like Bourke, Engonia, Walgett an' all that there – Western towns. An' it was down there an' I used to sit down and I used to like 'em how they used to paint and draw. An' so I started doin' it. So that's when I really started getting interested in it.⁵

This was in the late 1980s, when government policy was promoting Aboriginal art and its production as a way of both expressing and maintaining culture, and as a means of encouraging some economic independence (DAA 1989:122–8). Murray remembered selling his first painting to Maxie Helmer at Helmer's store in Wilcannia.⁶ He noted, 'When I seen I could get money an' that I got a bit more interested in it, an' I've been doin' art since, I suppose.' According to Murray, there are several motivations at play for locals making art, the primary one being economic: 'Some people like art, some people know they're good at it. But I think one of the primary reasons is, ah, economic – for money, for cash.'

Painting offers Aboriginal people in Wilcannia an opportunity to generate some kind of income in a situation where there is little paid employment to be had. Yet economic concerns are not divorced from other motivations. Murray considers that when people sell their paintings,

It gives them a good feelin' inside that they achieve something, that they've done something that somebody else likes, I suppose. Because, well I know with myself, when I do a paintin' an' that there, I'm proud of it, an' eh when they buyin' paintins an' I see on their face that they liked it, y'know, an' it gives me a good feelin'. It lifts my spirits up to know that I've made someone happy for something that I've done. An' I think a few other people get that same sort of feelin', you know. I mean feelin' of empowerment within themselves that they can do things, an' achieve things.

I should point out here that most local Aboriginal people do not consider art made for sale to be a negation of culture, nor to be detrimental to culture or culture's value; quite the reverse. Only on one occasion did an older woman in her sixties suggest that the sale of works might somehow be against cultural values. I had been talking about an exhibition at which a Wilcannia artist had some works displayed, and a younger woman asked me if the works were for sale. Before I could answer, the older woman stated quite emphatically that, 'No, X wouldn't sell them.' I understood this to mean that she saw X's work as having some kind of value that rendered it inalienable. I knew that close relatives of this older woman sold their artwork with her knowledge and without her disapproval. I began to realize that certain artists and their works were being differentiated; that for some people, and in some cases, it was desired or expected that artworks made by certain artists (by virtue of their perceived cultural knowledge and in some cases other undefined qualities) should be culturally inalienable in market terms. Most artists, however, did not seem to place any such proscriptions on themselves or others. On the contrary, the sale of work was an indicator of success for many Barkindji artists, as is the case for many Indigenous groups outside of Australia (see Svasek 1997 for a similar perspective from Ghana).

However, as mentioned previously, and as Murray made clear, certain stories that are implicit in particular artworks were neither made known, nor sold as part of the artworks. Although the symbols, mythical and

non-mythical characters and other background aspects of a story may be implicitly present at some level, these elements would only be evident to those who had shared in the gaining of this knowledge. This is not to say that the knowledge was always of a culturally religious or sacred nature – it could have been a secular story known only to a few. In general terms, certain aspects of culture are not sacrificed at the altar of the market by being sold, or by being made explicit as part of the sale.

Museums and cylcons – refle(x)ion and motivation

One of my concerns is with what art objects *do* within a network of relations. I am interested in the motivations for their construction as well as the ways in which art objects, as indices of the *agency of prototypes, artists and recipients* (Gell 1998),⁷ operate to 'motivate inferences, responses or interpretations' (Thomas 2001:4). It is important to recognize that whilst the artist's presence and their discourse about his or her work are important, many Aboriginal people believe that the artworks themselves have their own agency, as well as being subject to the agency of others. Frazer's (1980) idea of imitative or sympathetic magic is pertinent here, as is Gell's (1998) notion of art objects as agents that have the ability to do service as persons whereby 'the mutual resemblance of the image and the original [are] a conduit for mutual influence or agency' (Gell 1998:100).

Not every Aboriginal person in Wilcannia makes artworks, nor does every Aboriginal person seem interested enough in Barkindji artefacts and designs to make a trip to the Australian Museum in Sydney to see them. However, I knew Murray was interested in his art and his cultural history, and that he was someone recognized by many in the community as being 'a very cultural person'. This was certainly a motivation for my asking him if he wanted to take a trip to the Australian Museum. Murray was keen to do this, and the trip was eventful for both of us.⁸ Prior to going to the Museum, I asked Murray if he had seen any of the artefacts there. He told me then that this would not be his first trip to the Australian Museum, as when he was a child, he and some other children from Wilcannia were taken there on a school excursion with some of the local elders. Murray remembers seeing

the *bundis* [clubs] and stuff, an' the Darlin' River area an' all that there. An' seein' all of them designs on the clubs made me feel so proud and sad. It was at that time when I seen them artworks, there was a big

movement for the Central Australian art, for the dot painting, an' we were all school age stuff an' I thought, 'What about our art?' 'Cause I knew dots wasn't ours, an' all that was written in books an' that was about Central Australia art or Top End art or stuff like that – nuthin' about the art around our region.

I am not suggesting that Murray's recall, or perhaps re-visioning of this visit spawned a Barkindji style; Barkindji people claim a more-or-less continuous production of, most notably, incised and decorated wooden weapons (Kleinert 1994). Yet Murray's memory is potent and suggests a level of cognizance of the inattention accorded Aboriginal people from the south-east in more general terms. It shows an appreciation that certain kinds of Aboriginality were being viewed, indeed promoted, in some quarters (in particular art worlds and tourism) as a valuable form of difference. It also bears mention that at around this time Australia was preparing for its bicentennial celebrations, in which the idea of traditional Aboriginal art figured strongly. Murray went on to say that he thought that this lack of interest and recognition of the art of his region was,

maybe because our people was hit first with invasion an' that, an' like things they was lost. That made me think, y'know, well our art has to be recognized too. Because our art is our art

Murray expressed that the Barkindji art 'is only starting to be recognized lately, I suppose. An' contemporary and traditional art mixed together'. As the only Barkindji artist with whom I spoke who did not take issue with the term 'contemporary'⁹ being linked to his work, Murray had developed his own motifs and design elements, including stylized human figures, trees and plants, which he would integrate with the more traditional design elements and stick figures (see Figure 49).

I argue that for Murray and for some other artists, the practice of *making* the art provides moments of catharsis, mediation and resolution in relation to self-identity, as this intersects with white discourses of Indigenous identity and culture. Art-making is a form of productive ritual: art-making moments, the actual physical materiality, visual content and connection with the artwork, serve to consolidate and affirm notions of individual and group culture. Myers talks of the 'intercultural transaction' between the non-Aboriginal gallery-goers (the audience) and the Aboriginal



Figure 49 'Lake Whoychucca'. Acrylic on canvas by Murray Butcher. © Murray Butcher 2003. Reproduced with permission of the owner.

performers at events, and provides an account of the making of a sand painting as part of an art exhibition (Myers 1994:679). He discusses the 'ironies and fabrications' of such events, during which what is happening (in a cultural sense) is worked through by both the performers and the audience, and emphasizes that their significance as emerging constructs of Aboriginality should not be dismissed (1994:680). These

new demonstrations of spirituality and authenticity – that is, redefinitions and rediscoveries of identity are worked out in the face of challenging interrogations from an "other". They are, however, no less sincere or genuine as cultural expression in this response to history.

(Myers 1994:680)

In a similar vein, Deger (2004:20), who works closely with Yolgnu Aboriginal people, talks of how 'indigenous media – might in the name of Tradition and Culture – actually produce new, "non-traditional" meaning

for its subjects.' Although Deger is referring here specifically to film and radio, cultural production through art-making similarly demonstrates a role in mediating and refiguring the connections and continuities of culture, as well as generating new meanings. Whilst Murray did not often produce his paintings in front of a cross-cultural audience, at times he produced work with this audience in mind. The ways in which Murray redefined and rediscovered cultural identity and cultural forms through his reflections on cross-cultural dialogue and discourse, is no less of a creative performing of Aboriginality. It too holds possibilities for the transformative potential described by Deger and Myers.

The visit that Murray and I made to the Australian Museum highlights the mutual reflexivity of cross-cultural interaction in relation to the reworking of ideas about cultural production and identity. Shortly after we left the museum, Murray said that when he was in with the ethnographic collections he had 'wanted to talk in the lingo to the old people'. He spoke of how special it felt for him to hold objects that had been made by people who had passed away, and he commented that perhaps some of his own relations had made these artefacts. According to Murray, this visit spurred him on to reproduce culture for the future. On his return to Wilcannia, Murray mentioned frequently that he was going to introduce some of the designs to his artwork that he had seen on the boomerangs and clubs at the museum labelled from the 'Darling River area' and 'Wilcannia area'.

Following our visit to the museum, I gave Murray a copy of the introduction to *Cylcons: The Mystery Stones of the Darling River Valley* (Black 1942), which documents some cyclons that are incised with designs and some that are not.¹⁰ Although Murray had not previously read the literature on cylcons, he was familiar with them. Indeed, he has been in possession of several and claims to have 'experienced' them, as I go on to discuss. There are many theories about the meaning and uses of these stones, which a few Aboriginal people in Wilcannia know by the abridged term 'cylcons' (Black 1942:2). Although referred to as 'ceremonial' stones, as Black (1942:2) points out, 'It has been found extremely difficult to obtain reliable information as to the use of these stones.' Many theories of use were initially proposed under the categories of 'utilitarian' (e.g. 'seed grinders', 'tomb-stones' and 'records of the dead') and 'magical' uses (e.g. stones for making rain, for tooth avulsion, snake increase, death-bone pointers and phallic emblems) (Black 1942:3). Apart from 'phallic emblems' and, to some extent, 'snake-producing fetishes' (1942:3), these uses have

largely been discredited. The distribution of these stones is centred in the 'valley of the Darling [River] between a little above Bourke on the north, and the Murray Junction on the south' (Black 1942:37) and extends as far as the Paroo River. This distribution takes in the town of Wilcannia and traditional Barkindji land. Indeed, Black notes that the Barkindji 'were the great exponents of the cylindro-conical stone culture' (1942:40).

At the Australian Museum we had taken photographs of some of the wooden artefacts and weapons, which Murray later viewed with some of his friends and family. He said, 'Well them photographs what you gave me, we were lookin' at some of them – see if I can incorporate those designs into this painting.' After being given a copy of Black's (1942) introduction, Murray started a painting depicting nine cylcon shapes, which he blocked in with paint colour (see Figure 50). He decided that each cylcon in the painting would represent a Barkindji dialect¹¹ and said that the designs that he intended to incorporate into the paintings around the cylcons were 'from the boomerangs an' clubs [at the museum] ... I wanna show it to our kids, that this is one thing what's unique to the Darling River region is our cylcons.'

Holland and Lave point to the ways in which the 'creation and development of subjectivities, even those marginal to power [are] made possible, even likely, because cultural forms are not only tools for positioning the other but also tools for positioning the self' (2001:20). Murray's desire to draw the cylcons as something unique to Barkindji and as belonging to Barkindji can be read as a sign of this positioning, which shows the difference of Barkindji people. The cylcons are unique to the region, and therefore, by extrapolation, so are the Barkindji. Bearing in mind Murray's explicit reason for painting is to 'get in contact' with his culture, I am particularly interested in *how* painting does this. I am also interested in the restrictions that Murray places upon himself in relation to certain representations: in this instance, the representation of the cylcons in paint. The incised designs on the cylcons figure strongly for Murray, but because he knows little about the properties of the stones, he is reluctant to paint them. He does not know what the designs mean, who they belonged to, what they can do or their purpose:

I don't know what the meanings was ... I don't have a problem paintin' them like this 'ere, but I do have a problem with 'em – putting those little meanings or those little designs.



Figure 50 Acrylic painting on canvas depicting four cylcons by Murray Butcher; work in progress, as at 2010. © Murray Butcher 2010. Reproduced with permission of the artist.

While the designs on the boomerangs and clubs in the museum ‘amazed’ Murray because of their continuity (‘we still doin’ it’), and he is happy to reproduce them, the designs on the cylcons are of a different order, and are seen to be particularly open to an abuse of power and misdirected use. According to Murray,

I believe we can paint them [the cylcons] and this here. Respect it to keep that memory alive of what was part of our culture. They have a lot of meaning to me but I think, I won’t, well, suppose, abuse it or something.

‘Abusing culture’ in this context would result from fully copying the cylcons, in terms of both the designs and the shape; ‘abuse’ is reproducing unknown meanings and indeed unknown power. The memories and meanings that are being kept alive when Murray utilizes aspects of the cylcons in his art, are not the memories of the cylcons’ owners or makers, nor the meanings of the stones themselves. What is being kept alive is a

continuity and traceable connection to culture, to the old people who have passed on.

As the following exchange demonstrates, the cyclons are thought of as ritual objects with indeterminate power, which Murray claims to have experienced. It is in part because of this experience that he will not copy the designs on the original cylcons.

Lorraine: You know how, that, ehm, reading that we had on the cylcons?

Murray: Yeah, mmm ...

Lorraine: An' it showed some of the incised engravings. Would you ever reproduce some of them?

Murray: I don't think I would because, I don't know, really know, the true meanings of them. They could be things that they were women. I wouldn't put them sorta things on, onto an artwork because, well, I've had an experience when I was younger when with a cousin and me an Uncle X. We was muckin' around with [a cylcon] an' Nan was telling me to leave it alone: 'You don't' know nuthin' about it, y'know? [Murray takes on Nan's character] 'Shouldn't even be lookin' at it, it's nuthin' to do with you.' An' I was about fourteen or fifteen I was very stubborn, an' 'Ah it's only a piece of old stone an' that, y'know? It's only old stone with little markins on.' An' she said, 'Murray you don't know what those markins mean. It's got nuthin' to do with you. You shouldn't be touchin' them or lookin' at them.' An' I went to bed that night an' she said, 'You watch, you. Something gonna happen with you.' ... I went to bed that night an' eh, I was havin' trouble goin to sleep an' I started hearin' voices. An' these voices, they was of old women singing. They was singin' in language and I couldn't get to sleep. Those voices come louder an' louder and then it went on all night, until the sun came up and at the same time it just stopped.

Murray then ran out of the room crying, 'Nan, Nan something funny happened with me. I'm not campin' in there again.' Murray's Nan responded to this event by asking 'Uncle Badger' to 'smoke' him. Murray said that 'ever since then I've been very reluctant to, I suppose, look at cylcons'. For Murray, what was a piece of old stone at fourteen years' of age became, overnight, a meaningful symbol and the locus of a productive power.

Objects and personhood

In the first century BCE, Titus Lucretius Carus, the Epicurean philosopher, wrote his most important work, *De Rerum Natura* ('On the Nature of Things'). In this book, Lucretius discusses the flying simulacra of things and the 'the existence and nature of filmy images emitted by objects' (Ferguson-Smith 2001:99). In his book *Art and Agency*, Gell (1998) takes on Lucretius' idea to demonstrate the 'convergence of images of things and parts of things'. According to Lucretius,

Pictures of things and thin shapes are emitted from things off their surface, to which an image serves as a kind of film ... because such image bears an appearance and form like to the thing whatever it is from whose body it is shed and wanders forth. [Many visible objects] ... emit bodies, some in a state of loose diffusion, like smoke which logs of oak, heat and fires emit; some of a closer and denser texture, like the gossamer coats which at times cicadas doff in summer ... since these cases occur, a thin image likewise must be emitted from things off their surface.

(Ferguson-Smith 2001:44–5)

Gell extends Lucretius' notion,

That if 'appearances' of things are material parts of things, then the kind of leverage which one obtains over a person or things by having access to their image is comparable, or really identical, to the leverage which can be obtained by having access to some physical part of them; especially if we introduce the notion that persons may be distributed around the ambience, like the discarded 'gossamer coats of cicadas ... which are both images and parts of the living creature.

(Gell 1998:105–6)

Like Gell, I am neither positing nor invoking a 'mimetic faculty' as a 'primitive compulsion to imitate, and thus gain access to the world' (Gell 1998:100).¹² I am, however, interested in 'this notion of the copy, in magical practice affecting the original to such a degree that the representation shares in or acquires the properties of the represented' (Taussig 1993:48).

The idea of painting cylcons as a magical practice might unsettle some readers; however, according to Gell,

the truth is that 'magic' is what you have when you *do without* a physical theory on the grounds of its redundancy, relying upon the idea, which is perfectly practicable, that the explanation of any given event (especially if socially salient) is that it is caused intentionally ... Magic registers and publicizes the strength of desire, increasing the (inductively supported) likelihood that the much desired, emphatically expressed, outcome will transpire, as frequently happens with respect to those outcomes we loudly clamour for.

(Gell 1998:101)

Murray's continued reluctance to handle or represent certain aspects of the physical cylcons brings allusions to flying simulacra, the mimetic faculty, and concepts of imitative magic into grounded focus, and he is not alone in his disinclination (Frazer 1932 [1980]).

Other Aboriginal people share a reluctance to make physical or visual contact with the stones, a fact demonstrated to me prior to learning of Murray's own concerns. When I was in Broken Hill, an Indigenous man raised in western NSW and of Torres Strait Islander descent gave me a cylcon that he told me had been 'picked up' years ago by Murray's white father, and which had come to be in this man's hands. He gave this cylcon to me, as he thought that, as I was an anthropologist, I would know what to do with it. I disabused him of this notion, but suggested that perhaps I could give it to Murray and he might know if there was some 'right way' to handle it or 'right person' to give it to. We agreed that I would offer the stone to Murray, since it was his father who had removed it 'from the Darling River'.

I told Murray that I had the cylcon and asked him if he wanted it. He said that he did, and that he would bury it at a certain spot along the Darling riverbank, near other cylcons and 'ritual objects' which had come into his possession over the years. Prior to giving the cylcon to Murray, I

told a close Aboriginal friend about it; he said to make sure that I did not touch it. I told him that I already had, and he became quite panicked. He said to make sure that I did not touch it again, not to look at it and to wrap it up. As with Murray and Murray's Nan, this man was mindful of the power of the cylcons, and felt it could be dangerous to have close contact with it. The danger, according to this man, extended to me as a white woman. Despite those who are aware of the existence of cylcons saying that they were not sure of their meanings and original use, they are seen to be associated with ritual, and strong power is attributed to them.

Murray's reluctance to look at or handle the physical cylcons did not, however, extend to looking at images of them in the journal article I gave him, which has photographs of incised cylcons. Murray therefore makes several distinctions in relation to the physical and visual properties of these stones, as well as to how these properties might come to bear on their reproduction in art-making.

The uniqueness of Barkindji culture can be emphasized and made known through representing the images of the cylcons in art. However, there is more to consider than this. When Murray reproduces partial images of the cylcons in paint, while restricting himself from copying the designs, there is a form of reflexive mimesis operating. Gell considers that we

cannot, in general, take up a point of view on the origination of an artefact which is the point of view of the artefact itself. Our natural point of vantage is that of the originating person ... because we, also, are persons.

(Gell 1998:67–8)

In offering a theory for an anthropology of art, Gell argues that in such a theory, the artwork itself would become an 'index of agency':

whatever type of action a person may perform vis-à-vis another person, may be performed also by a work of art, in the realms of imagination if not in reality – not that we are always in the position to decide what is 'real' and what is not.

(ibid.: 66)

For an object to be considered as an index of agency of the maker, and to stand for the maker in any instance, there must, in the first instance, be some desire to consider the object as an index of the maker's agency. There must be an interest, or disinclination, to connect with the originator of the object; otherwise, what is the value in considering objects as persons or 'social agents'? If, as in the case of the cylcons, the originating person or persons are no longer present, nor have they ever been personally known, then translation of the artefact through the available knowledge and experience is required.

When Lindsay Black (1942) provides his interpretation of the cylcons, he does so from a theoretical and analytical perspective. He seeks to know what the stones are, who used them and why. He does not necessarily wish to make any personal connection with the people who made the stones. The stones as indices of agency of the makers would seem superfluous to Black's intentions. In contrast, for Murray and other Barkindji people, understanding and interpretation of the stones appears to involve internal identification with the maker through the objects. Indeed, more than this, the objects are seen to hold the essence of the makers (Dubinskas and Traweek 1984; Munn 1973). For Murray, the stones index the agency of the 'old people' and 'those old women'. Moreover, through the act of partial reproduction and Murray's stated desire to show what is unique to Barkindji, the stones index his agency and that of other Barkindji: those present contemporaneously and those who have passed on.

Gell does not consider that these indices possess personhood intrinsically, but rather that they mediate it. Yet

the personhood of the artist, the prototype, or the recipient can fully invest the index in artefactual form, so that to all intents and purposes it becomes a person, or at least a partial person. It is a congealed residue of performance and agency in object-form, through which access to other persons can be attained, and via which their agency can be communicated.

(Gell 1998:68)

A similar person-object relationship is described by Hoskins:

I have to go out a bit further on a limb: I have to transgress the usual boundaries between persons and objects and show how far certain possessions can come to be seen as surrogate selves.

(Hoskins 1998:7)

The notion of the image in an art object allowing access to the person represented is one shared by Phillip Bates. Phillip considers that others can obtain power over him and his family through access to their painted images; he is not alone in this thinking. Phillip had completed a picture of his family with their faces obscured by a mesh-like design; I asked him why he had done this (see Figure 51).

Phillip: Aaah, they will always be like that, yeah. Like, you can talk to me now but when you go away you could change. You know what I mean?

Lorraine: Mmm. An' if you were showing your face there, what would, what could I do? What difference would that make?

Phillip: That'd be me.

Lorraine: I'd see too much of you? Is that what you're saying? You don't expose too much of yourself?

Phillip: Yeah. No, no, I don't show myself to anyone.

In the case of the cylcons and Phillip's art, representations can index certain effects, responses, inferences and interpretations.¹³

For Murray, looking at, touching and talking about the stones invoked the literal and physical personhood of the old women in his room. The stones did not become persons, but engagement with the object was seen to mediate the presence of those old women. This, and Murray's refusal to copy the designs, suggests a belief in surrogacy to the degree that to make a full representation or even to talk disrespectfully of the stones can invoke uncontrollable and unknown events. Designs and life are mimetically and ontologically interconnected, and awareness and intention are given here to stones.



Figure 51 'Untitled' acrylic on canvas painting depicting a kangaroo surrounded by Phillip and his family, by Phillip Bates. © Phillip Bates 2002. Reproduced with permission of the artist.

What Murray has more broadly enacted in painting stories and designs, and telling and sharing stories can be figured as a purposeful mimesis with purposeful restrictions. The choices and selections he makes while being purposeful are also unaccountable, in the sense that what will 'become' of the act of 'tracing' the cylcons in an artwork is unknown. It is clear that some Aboriginal people consider the mimetic faculty to be powerful and can assume the power of the original. It is not the otherness of the cylcons that is produced through mimesis, it is something of the sameness, but partial sameness. It is similitude, but, by design, a restricted similitude.

Mimesis is active: it does things, makes things. It is 'a vital, bi-directional and sensuous modality of becoming-in-relation' (Deger 2004:133). In this case, there is a becoming-in-relation to living culture through that which is understood to be in part lost, in part unknown and in part in the past. The stones become a painting which in turn produces and becomes living culture, in ways that pass through nature, supernature and culture.

The propensity for storytelling and for remembering and talking about past events is an aspect of Aboriginal culture in Wilcannia that binds people, places and things together. When Murray thinks about the cylcons, their makers and his experience, there is an embodied interaction that brings the living and the dead into relationship (Jackson 1989; Csordas 1994). These embodied affects, while verbally explained, contain a non-linguistic experience cutting across time and space, connecting Aboriginal people of Wilcannia to each other and to their ancestors.

Murray's reluctance to look at or handle the physical cylcons and his reluctance to copy the designs are linked to his experience of 'mucking' with a power unknown, but importantly a recognized power which *does things*, which has *effects* and *affects*. In representing the images of the cylcons, there was a danger that properties of the cylcons would come to bear upon Murray through the *practice* and *act* of painting, as well as through a copying of the visual image. Murray's desire to paint the cylcons consciously reconciled this danger by limiting or reducing the potential powerful properties of the stones by rendering a *partial* copy.

The difference between the cylcon designs and the boomerang and club designs at the Australian Museum, and the reluctance to paint one but not the other, can be considered in the following way. Although the meaning of many of the designs on the boomerangs and clubs are also not known, and those on the cylcons appear to be completely unknown, some of the club and boomerang designs are still used today. That is, they are

argued to be a known quantity in terms of practice and repetition. The cylcon designs are, however, unknown and have not been practised. It is also the case that boomerangs and clubs are not primarily or overtly known for their secret ritual and ceremonial use, whereas the cylcons are.

The fact that Murray can safely look at images of the cylcons, complete with designs in a published journal, might seem something of a paradox, but one which can be understood in this way: in the case of the journal, Murray is not responsible for producing the representations. The journal article was produced by an other who is also a whitefella. From this premise, it can be considered that when Murray paints or draws the cylcons, he is implicated in the act of making, as well as the act of reproducing properties of the stones. This can account for Murray's reluctance to draw the designs which are present on the stones or to make them visible through his own action.

The Warlpiri practices of *yawalyu* and *kuruwarri*¹⁴ make for an interesting comparisons:

In *yawalyu*, a flattened stick bound at one end with cotton thread, knitting wool or hair-string is used to apply ochre to skin. The stick (*watiya*) is literally dragged through the oil. So too in *kuruwarri* application to canvas, the paint mark follows behind the movement of the finger or paintbrush. In other words the *kuruwarri* sign is understood not only as an imprintational trace, but it is literally produced as one.

(Biddle 2001:183)

The trace as an act of marking does things, makes things, remakes things. Dubinskas and Traweek (1984:29) stress that '*guruwarri*' (also *kurawarri*) designs are an active process that 'recalls the ancestors not just to memory, but to the ongoing present as a visible, sensible force of life maintenance'. The making of these marks on canvas, on ground and on bodies is, importantly, not medial. That is, they exude, infuse, penetrate and permeate.

Whilst the marks and practices of the cylcons are no longer known and are not associated with ongoing ceremonial practice, mark-making remains an active process which Murray and others recognize. In drawing the outline of the stones and in talking about this process, Murray limits the power of the stones while, to an extent, still drawing on their power.

Unlike the physical stones, which had power by virtue of their physical presence and which mimetically made present the power and presence of the old people, the power is restrained by providing the stones' image in outline only.

According to Murray, the shape of the cylcons can be painted as long as the designs are not copied; to copy the incised designs would be to 'muck' with their power, a power which for Murray is both experientially known and epistemologically cognized. Yet, this must be considered as different to the original power which is not known. There is, at one level, a sharing of the power of the cylcons by virtue of copying their shape in outline. It is, at once, a shadow of power as well as an actual power. The representation assumes power but not of identical character or potency. The copy draws on the power of the original in innovative and careful ways. This should not be viewed as a 'siphoning off of power' or an 'appropriation of power' in response to or in opposition to colonial forces (Huggan 1997:97). Indeed, as I have tried to relay more generally, opposition to others, to whitefellas, although important in certain contexts and implicit at many levels, is not an explicit driver of self-identity. The mimetic faculty Murray draws upon cannot be understood as a co-opting of colonial power, neither is it a 'refusal to see itself as a second-order cultural product' (Huggin 1997:102). It is perhaps best understood as a rejection, if unconscious, of 'the imagined priority of cultures other than its own' that denies Barkindji these kinds of cultural power (Huggin 1997:102).

Murray's desire to copy the cylcons can be read in several ways. He is aware that whitefellas claim that the meanings of the stones is lost.¹⁵ He said:

Even though I might not know the full meanings of those cylcons, I know they belong to us. In us ritual and in other things, y'know? And, ehm, those things were important to our ancestors an' we shouldn't let that die just because we no longer practice that part of our culture.

Culture is kept alive and made contact with through the practice and act of painting images of culture. Culture is remade not only through the making of art, but through talking about and transmitting art to others, including whitefella others, in ways controlled by Barkindji. Just as Murray limits the knowledge that whitefellas are permitted to have, so too he limits himself regarding what he can draw on from the cylcons.

Lindsay Black (1942:2) cites a Mr E. Milne, a collector of cylcons, in relation to the apparent lack of knowledge about the cylcons and their purposes. Milne had proposed 'reticence on the part of old blacks, ignorance on that of the later generation, and off-hand opinions of careless and often ignorant white observers.' As with the discrepant memories as to the presence of carving in Wilcannia by black and white, this does not mean that the purposes or practices of cylcons are entirely unknown to all Barkindji people. The fact that something is not known in the public arena is, as we know, not an argument for its non-existence.

The outline of the cylcons that Murray draws and paints might be read as a palimpsest, a now re-textualized creation in which part of the image, and hence part of the power of the stones, shines through. Murray claims that the night he felt the power of the cylcons, it 'gave me an insight into the ritual life of cylcons.' The trace of the cylcons is all that he permits himself, but that is enough to keep them alive. Also kept alive is the relationship to his ancestors, the old people who have passed away, the 'old women' who were singing in his bedroom. In painting the outline of the cylcons, traces of ritual and traces of people past (including Murray's Nan) are brought into present being. The cylcons become important not only for the ancestors but also for the living, through the practice of painting. In the physical practice of painting the cylcons, ritual is both remembered and practised in new ways. At the time of writing, it is yet to be seen how the painting of the trace of the cylcons will more broadly communicate new information and ideas, and if these will produce new forms of sacred knowledge. However, from the practice of restraining the trace, Murray understands and observes the notion of a literal production possible through trace.

Daniel Miller writes 'that an important function of material objects and other signifying practices is to provide "artificial" resolutions to "real" contradictions in society' (Miller 1987:145). Whether one agrees that painting the outline of the cylcons is an artificial resolution to the clear struggles and contradictions of remaking and reproducing culture, the process of painting and the content of painting permits a form of resolution in which Murray reconciles what he can, will and will not copy. It also opens a door into the new:

I think why I'm paintin' them, it could be, ehm, givin' ourself empowerment within our own art. We could be developin' our own art styles an' bringin' something that sort of belong to us but in a different medium.

There is intent and purpose here in his drawing upon the styles of the past, in enabling their continuity while deflecting their power.

The differing values attached to art, culture and artists, and differing motivations and evaluations, serve to illuminate the multiple factors at work in performing, producing, talking about and interpreting what art and culture are, and what they do, both within and between cultures. Whether, as with Murray, art and its evaluation and intersection with culture is of a more local concern; or whether, as with Badger Bates, cultural evaluation, values and identity are bound up with a wider audience; both artists and both sets of artwork demonstrate art and culture as mutually enforcing concepts. For Murray, art provides an important tool for teaching culture as well as offering a direct link with the past; it actively reproduces and re-embodies culture in powerful ways.

NOTES

- 1 This event was one of many such community events held each year that were sponsored and funded by local and outside businesses, government and non-government sources and Aboriginal organizations, including the Wilcannia Community Working Party.
- 2 Traditionally owned by the Ngiyampaa people, many Barkindji have an affiliation with this site through a history of inter-marriage. From 1924, Barkindji and Ngiyampaa came together to live at the government stations of Carowra Tank (1924) and Menindee Station (1934).
- 3 The economic and emotional value of artworks renders them as possessions that can be used against the artist in personal relationships. It is not uncommon for a partner or relation to threaten to destroy or sell-off another's work when they are having a disagreement. Sexual jealousy has a strong presence in Wilcannia across all age groups, and on one occasion a partner destroyed all of the artworks in her artist partner's collection, as she was angry that he had 'gone out' for a drink with his mates without her.
- 4 Murray said he was eleven years' old when he first went to the hostel in Sydney. Children from disadvantaged communities or backgrounds in Wilcannia and

- other country NSW towns are subsidized by the government to spend short periods in hostels. These are generally by the seaside. In Murray's case he came to Stewart House in Manly in Sydney, NSW.
- 5 Stewart House in Sydney's Manly, the children's hostel to which Murray refers, continues to provide two-week breaks for children in need across NSW and the ACT. Wilcannia children remain users of this service funded by the NSW Department of Education and Training and charitable donations.
 - 6 Max Helmer and his wife owned the old 'Knox and Downs' store on the corner of Reid St and Myers Street in Wilcannia. This heritage-listed property built in 1899 was destroyed by fire in 2002, and only the façade remains at time of writing.
 - 7 Nicolas Thomas succinctly and elegantly summarises these relations well. 'Prototypes are the things that indices may represent or stand for, such as the person depicted in a portrait – though things may be 'represented' non-mimetically, and non-visually. Recipients are those whom indexes are taken to effect, or who may, in some cases, be effective themselves via the index. A view of a country estate commissioned by the landowner may be a vehicle of the recipient's self-celebrating agency, more than that of the artist. Artists are those who are considered to be immediately causally responsible for the existence and characteristics of index, but as we have just noted, they may be vehicles of the agency of others, not the self-subsistent, creative agents of Western commonsense ideas and art-world theory.' (Thomas 2001:4–5).
 - 8 I am grateful to the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Societies (AIATSIS) for the provision of a research grant which facilitated this trip.
 - 9 This is not to say that all other artists or Barkindji people did take exception to the term 'contemporary artist', some were ambivalent, but many objected to this term being applied to them or their art.
 - 10 While I have done so in a previous publication, I have chosen not to reproduce the cylcons again because many Aboriginal people prefer not to view these images due to the unknown quality of the power they are seen to hold. Those interested in viewing them should consult the original publication (Black 1942).
 - 11 The Barkindji dialects are listed in Hercus (1993).
 - 12 Huggin (1997:93) refers to the 'ways in which mimesis operates strategically in colonial contexts, as a means both of relating the self to others and of usurping other's power'. With reference to Murray, my use of the mimetic faculty is concerned more with the process of mimesis that is operating, rather than the

political strategies that might be made to explicitly operate through mimesis. Nor am I concerned with arguing for the efficacy or otherwise of sympathetic magic.

- 13 Belief in sympathetic magic became a particular community-wide issue when the story of 'The Falling Star' as told by Elsie Jones was to be published as a book. The book depicted drawings of Malkarra, a *miikika* or clever man, which many in the community wanted removed as they found this frightening; others said to 'let it go'.
- 14 Nancy Munn writes that 'throughout Central Australia totemic Ancestors are represented by graphic designs that are of considerable importance in the visual symbol system focused on Ancestral belief' (Munn 1973:73). Munn explains *guruwari* as 'the major ancestral designs, which are controlled by men and in large part prohibited to women and children' (Munn 1964:84). Unlike Munn, who arguably sees these designs as medial and denotative, Dubinskas and Traweek (1984:29) argue that the designs are not of a mediating nature, and do not represent the ancestors, but are immediate and real.
- 15 The Australian Hindmarsh Island case exemplifies, perhaps, knowledge arguably present but not shared (Bell 1999).

EPILOGUE

A young black boy dips his face into a bowl of flour and says, 'Look Mum, I'm a white boy.' His mother smacks him and tells him to go and show his father. His father smacks him and tells him to go and show his grandmother, with the same result. The boy says, 'I've only been a white boy for five minutes and I already hate you black cunts.'

(Joke told to me by Aboriginal friend, 2010)

Humour and survival

In daily Wilcannia life, there is much misery but also a great deal of enjoyment to be had in the name of cultural difference. Perhaps I have failed to represent properly the joy and ready laughter that is a part of the daily sociality of the town. As with other groups that are defined in terms of disadvantage and socio-economic deprivation (which is indeed experienced by many), Aboriginal people's capacity to laugh at the wider society and at their own circumstances is part and parcel of the daily constitution and diversions of social life. Such is the case with the joke quoted above, in which the stereotype of 'black cunts' is recognized and subverted. In so doing, the hurt intended and evoked by this naming is reclaimed and rendered humorous; Aboriginal people assert power over this naming and over the racial relations and circumstances they seek to present. Other stereotypes which serve to mark the Aboriginal population of Wilcannia, such as that of the constant drunk or the 'lazy black bastard' who will not work, while subjects of deep concern to most whites are also the fodder of everyday humour.

High unemployment is conventionally seen as a deeply troubling problem, but it allows for levels of spontaneity and freedom not afforded those whose daily lives are more tied to the strictures of paid employment and the demands of the clock (Gibson 2010). When wandering around town with James, he introduced me to his daughter. I commented that she had an unusual name, and he said he had named her after a fortified wine, as he had been enjoying two flagons of it on the day she was born. I asked if he had a son called VB (Victoria Bitter beer, his current tippie). He replied that at least he hadn't given his daughter the middle names of 'sweet' and 'sherry'. Later, at a party at Bluey's house, Alice makes up a dance called

'diggin' for wombats'. Ruth also dances as though scrabbling in the dirt, and says, 'this one called diggin' for mosey', in reference to the white wine she is so fond of.

During an impromptu drive through town in my car with Alice and Ruth, the radio plays out the Lenny Kravtiz song 'Are you gonna go my way' and I'm asked to turn it up. Alice says, 'I love him.' Ruth tells Alice 'he wouldn't look at you,' and Alice lifts the edge of her shirt saying 'I'd just have to show him my tit and he'd be on for me.' We all rock with laughter. Tits are 'good to think with' and good to laugh with. A hungry baby being cared for by friends and relatives while his mother is playing the pokies in the pub is not content with a bottle of water; 'he want tit'. Two young boys are sent over to the pub to get the baby's mother. One woman says to tell the mother to cut off her tit and put it in a plastic bag for the baby, adding 'plenty of tit here but no milk in them' – more laughter. When young Michael, aged twenty, says his Mother was 'drinking two flagons a day' while he 'was on the tit' he also raises laughter.

The possibility of laughter and the ever-ready willingness to laugh is pervasive in Wilcannia. People seem primed to a heightened degree to a variety of emotions when the precarious, mundane and spontaneous aspects of life are thrown into relief. While Michael raises laughter with his comment, the ready laughter elides the known and very painful conditions certain lifestyles present. When Michael says he was born with hepatitis, on this we are silent.

Being black in Wilcannia

In this book, my overarching concern has been to make sense of what it means to be black in Wilcannia and to illuminate the competing values and norms that operate across relationships, cultural identities and ancestry. The ways in which Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people tacitly and reflexively express and interpret difference and the mixed emotions that come to bear in these interactions are importantly a product of individual, as well as communal, experience of historical conditions.

The ways in which art and culture, as separate and as intertwining categories, are figured and qualified offer glimpses into black and white social relations and personal relationships; they serve to show that these relationships are not clear-cut and crisply divided. The white world that rejected Aborigines is now keen to recognize them, but only some of them, and only for some specific qualities. Aboriginal people are not

compliant with the limited legitimacy they are accorded, and recognize it only partially and intermittently. Black and white social spaces are no longer physically divided. Nor are there separate white or black social worlds; although, at different times, the desire for, and pretence of, separate social domains is present for both black and white. The shoring up of differences is ideological as well as practical work; arguing for difference is made more necessary, because it is the supposed qualities of difference that are imbuing identities with value. The anxieties of mutual recognition, difference and acceptance are bound up in a world where fear, romanticism and the imaginary of *them* and *us*, whoever *they* might be, compete as *facts* to be argued for or contested within a socio-economic domain with increasingly muddled lines of demarcation.

My work is a contribution to the dialectical relationships between black and white, and may even contribute to what Cowlshaw calls the 'dialectical relations of domination' (Cowlshaw 1993:184). That is, academic discourse that seeks to interpret or challenge racialized discourse is a political act that may entrench negative public opinion of Aboriginal lives. I hope, however, that it presents something of the complexity of life in Wilcannia. Being black in Wilcannia is, for an Aboriginal person, a multifaceted field requiring negotiation with affinal and consanguineal kin, both white and black, community members and high levels of engagement with bureaucracy, government and non-government organizations. In this the Aboriginal people of Wilcannia are no different from many other communities, of varied ethnicities, who are the target of, and who largely rely on, government- and non-government-funded programmes and welfare. While none of us make our social worlds, in these circumstances how one identifies is in some cases, legislatively compelled and especially constraining. Culture and identity have become 'work', as they have to be continually asserted and proven in the face of pervasive resentment and suspicion, and also of desire for the authentic. Thus people in Wilcannia work with, for and against 'culture' in implicit and more objectified ways, whether they want to or not. It is work that by its nature requires differentiation for its very existence, because there are competing ideas about what Aboriginality is and how it is to be expressed. Difference from the mainstream – its establishment, its meaning, its legitimacy and its effects – sit at the heart of communities where identity and culture are the tools of the trade that allows entry and access to valued 'markets', resources and forms of recognition.

The close daily proximity of black and white, with their often deeply divided values and norms, means that seeing and feeling difference in Wilcannia is unavoidable. It is notions of black and white cultural ways of being that are invoked when there is inter-cultural dissatisfaction with an event, an idea or a proposal, or with a host of other simple happenings in everyday social intercourse. While there is a certain fashionable love of cultural variety in contemporary cosmopolitan society, the specific differences in Wilcannia arouse a sense of discomforting and, at times, enraging illegitimacy. Everyday events are replete with racial overtones and have the potential for violent conflict and serious consequences.

An Aboriginal woman who had been drinking came into Wilcannia hospital late one evening. She became verbally abusive to the white nurse on duty, calling her a 'white cunt', demanded Valium, and threatened to bash the nurse if this was not supplied. The nurse was fearful and was unable to contact a doctor by phone. The nurse made the decision to give the patient some Valium to calm her down. She knew that she should first attain the permission of a doctor before administering a 'scheduled' drug, but reasoned that giving the drug seemed the safer option given the violent nature and state of the women in question. The patient had been administered Valium and Largactil on previous occasions for similar symptoms. After administering the drug the nurse tried to phone the local Wilcannia police to explain the situation, but got no response. She then tried Broken Hill police, who also said they could not raise the police at Wilcannia. She eventually asked an off-duty white colleague to drive the patient home; the patient was by then able to be discharged. To all intents and purposes, it seems that no harm was done. The nurse recalling this incident talked of being scared at the time, but later the story became just another dinner-party anecdote. Following several similarly fraught incidents, the nurse cut short her contract and went home to a life she considered to be more 'normal'. Such stories are legion.

For the patient, the recall of this and similar hospital admissions brings laughter as she shares her behavior towards the white nurse with friends, and recounts her words and actions with repeated mirth. There is some level of shame at her behavior towards the white nurse, and much despondency and sadness over what she feels her life has become and the barriers she sees to a happier life. These obstacles are listed, they include being over thirty years of age and having no home for her and her children, with no prospect of this on the horizon, a problem with alcohol and

generalized depression and anxiety. For the patient and her audience these stories are similarly legion. They are a form of assertion and a defiance of what Aboriginal people see as the judgements of an oppressive institutional world always staffed by whites. Yet their assertion threatens the services on which they rely, and is at the expense of the nurse in this case. Her fear and confusion in the face of personal abuse cannot simply be dismissed as racist, and the patient's lingering sense of shame reveals the double-edged nature of such defiance.

But what if the patient had reacted badly to the drug? What if the nurse had withheld the drug and been bashed? The Royal Commission into Aboriginal deaths in custody resulted in changed policies and procedures, and much goodwill all round. Whether events such as those of the contract nurse and patient end up well, or not, involves human relationships and judgment, and luck. It is good fortune and chance that stand between this nurse and the situation of Sister Sophia, the nurse in the Mark Quayle case, who was made to bear the accusations of racism made by sympathetic urban liberals. When things go wrong, as they do, the individual element is detached by both black and white in favour of racialized intention (cf. Carrington 1991). When Mark Quayle hanged himself in Wilcannia police station, the findings of the Royal Commissioner offered a stinging rebuke against 'the dehumanized stereotype of Aboriginals so common in Australia and in the small towns of western New South Wales in particular' (Wootten 1991:2). When Mark's now deceased mother Amy said that 'they wouldn't have done this to a white boy', she echoes the sentiments of the Royal Commissioner. Not long before she passed away, Amy again said 'they hung my boy in jail'. She wanted to 'get them police [because] it sticks in my gizzard what they done to my son'. The police as a monolith of white law are seen to stand against black ways and black people. The charge of stereotyping as the cause of Mark being taken to the police station instead of remaining at the hospital to be treated for delirium tremens was real and founded. Yet, as the abusive woman demanding scheduled drugs shows, incidents such as Mark's untimely death are ripe for repetition.

White professionals are held to account if they do not perform their duties according to procedures; this is reasonable and as it should be. They are, however, not supported by resources. This has created a climate of fear amongst white service providers when dealing with situations that have the potential to be interpreted as individual racism, with serious consequences for careers and lives. In these circumstances black and white dance around

one another in ways which are counterproductive to changing these conditions or for building more productive responses. Ideology and good intentions, such as those delivered by the Royal Commission, recognize the defiance and anger of Aboriginal people. What is lacking are the means and processes to deal with the consequences of this defiance and anger. Ideology and good intentions are no substitute for lived reality.

Occasionally, I provided a meal and a bed for a young boy of eight (I will call him Tim) when his mother did not come home at night. I was telling Tim one day of my recent and first visit to a prison. He said he had been to 'lots of prisons', and had even stayed in the Wilcannia police cells one night. His mum had been away in another town for a few days, and he had been staying with an 'auntie'. The auntie threw him out as he was fighting with his cousins. The police picked Tim up as he was wandering the streets, and took him to the cells overnight. He said how great this was, as they gave him a 'big breakfast of eggs and toast and Milo' and then gave him a 'pie for lunch'. Are we to think of this as a kindness, or as an example of the worst kind of racism in which the Wilcannia cells are seen as a fit place for a young boy? It is acceptable practice for many Aboriginal families for Tim to move between aunties' homes in the absence of his mother. According to this cultural norm, Wilcannia is a large house with many potential rooms. It is not, however, acceptable practice for the majority of the mainstream, or indeed for other local Aboriginal families. Different customs and values see the situation and the outcome marked in different ways. The question as to whether the police should have reported the mother to the Department of Community Services (DOCS), or searched for another family member, or sought some other solution is part of a moral dilemma involving the norms and values of Tim and his family, the police, the wider community and society at large. The criteria for who should be called to account are multiple, subject to adversarial standards and often conditional upon the outcome of the situation.

I found Wilcannia to be a contested town. For most whites, Wilcannia is a white town: it is their town and Aboriginal people have come to live in it. For most Aboriginal people, Wilcannia is a black town: it is their town and their land – no question. Wilcannia is a space over which whites, many of whom are transient workers or 'blow ins', nevertheless remained vigilant in their desire for a certain kind of physical and social order. The ways in which the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people of Wilcannia position and frame others and themselves within the bounds of the

desired and the taken-for-granted ('just the way it is') ways of life, and their reasons and rationales for doing so, highlight and demonstrate the work of contemporary racial sentiments in social and cultural action.

My Aboriginal friend Maurice recounted the following event, in which he was clear that he was dealt with as he was because of being Aboriginal. He had gone into the roadhouse to ask for change. Julie, the white girl serving, opened the till, took a cursory glance, and said she had none. Maurice thought this strange as it 'was holiday time' and 'lots of cars were coming through'. He said he 'tutted' in a kind of 'oh bugger' way rather than at Julie. Julie however took his 'tut' personally, and told him sharply that the roadhouse was not bank. When Maurice replied 'I never said you was', Julie told him to 'fuck off out'. Maurice retorted, 'you fuck off you fat little cunt', and crossed the road to get some change from the shop. He became angry at Julie's attitude, which he felt was racially driven, and went back to the roadhouse and 'let her have it' (gave her a piece of his mind). Later that day, the police arrived at Maurice's house to tell him he was barred from the roadhouse. The roadhouse is also the postal agency, and Maurice asked the police how would he get his mail or pay his bills. They agreed he could come into the roadhouse as long as he 'did not look at' the girl. He replied that he 'didn't want to look at the cunt' and further nicknamed her as that 'little fat dim-sim' in view of 'all that greasy food they have there'. As a purchaser of these same greasy foods himself, Maurice's response is typical of these kinds of hurtful incidents. Exchanges such as this become the subject of competing interpretations about intent and blame; they add to a history of racial hurt and suspicion for both black or white. Giving the benefit of the doubt is an anathema.

Myths and moralities of social life

How whites and blacks are *known* within the imagination of others can be changed and tested by personal contact and personal relationships. Overarching stereotypes are harder to maintain in these circumstances, but for the most part, persist they do. Once an idea is entrenched, it becomes hard to shift. A neighbour's incessantly barking dog, once noticed, becomes a problem amplified each time the dog makes even the slightest of sounds. In the same way, Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal people who anticipate seeing or experiencing dysfunction, superiority or tradition, are more likely to experience their expectations than test their validity. Difference needs signs of difference to exist. Cowlishaw (2004:4) asks:

[W]hat if it is the disputation around the division [black and white] that gives social life its meaning? ... We might also find that these two warring elements depend on each other for their sense of reality and purpose, and that they use each other to create the everyday moralities and myths of social life.

Aboriginal people are charged with demonstrating difference in order to gain a place in the world; they have an imperative to maintain difference. Much is at stake – identity, land and resources. People will use whatever tools and abilities they have at their disposal in order to shore up and affirm their specific form of presence. For Aboriginal people the apparatus are limited, and involve both ideals and the very body itself as sites of assertion. While powerful, these are no match for the powers that set the moral values and norms of society. How these have been formed and nurtured, together with what is seen to be at stake, will be made manifest in the kinds of actions taken to assert identity and power.

The following example is both common and demonstrative of the binds, burdens and kinds of bracketing out necessary for asserting a particular social identity. An Aboriginal woman (Mary) had one Aboriginal and one non-Aboriginal parent, and identifies as Aboriginal. She married a white man and she and her husband (John) had a daughter (Jade), who also married a white man (Barry). Mary, her children and Jade's children (Mary's grandchildren) all identify and are identified as Aboriginal. Mary claims publicly, and often, that 'whites can't be trusted'. At face value, this places her husband John and her daughter's husband Barry as people to be mistrusted – as enemies of sorts. How the grandchildren reconcile Mary's views with their relationship with their father and grandfather is an important question, and one that is usually avoided. Some Aboriginal people who are aware of Mary's publicly offered views laugh at the way she rails about whitefellas. Some point out the irony of her position – but not to her. She is not alone in making generalizations about behaviours and characteristics one can expect from black and white, as this text attests.

The maintenance of these kinds of ideological and social boundaries sits alongside extensive evidence of intermarriages and other engagements.¹ The situation where ideological divisions are held to, despite actual loving affinal and consanguineal relationships, is one reflected around the world in the face of cultural, ethnic and religious difference. While it is the subject

of considerable social analysis, there is a coyness in Australia with regard to research in this area.

As a teenager I had a boyfriend whose parents were Irish Catholic; I and my parents were Protestant. Watching a news item with my boyfriend and his parents that showed the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) proudly taking responsibility for killing some Protestants, my boyfriend's father cheered at the television and expressed his pleasure. I said, 'But I'm a Protestant.' The father said, 'No, not you, I don't mean you, I'll dance at your wedding.'

As an Irish Catholic, my boyfriend's father talked of being subject to a life of oppression by Protestants; his anger and hate were broad and non-specific. Two of his daughters were married to Protestant men with whom he had very cordial relations. When reduced to the level of individual personal relations and experience, his overarching attitude of hating Protestants was contradicted. While this situation is based on religious as well as cultural experience, both my boyfriend's Irish father and the Aboriginal grandmother illustrate the effects of long experiences and histories of oppression. The currency of their disdain and even hate is often unquestioned, weighed down as this is by heritage, memory and habitual practice. Imagined categories of culture, nation and race are not necessarily the basis of personal relationships, and while personal relationships can transcend socially powerful categories they do little to break down the process of categorization (Gilroy 1991; Merton 2000).

In understanding that culture is artifice and construction, Taussig (1993) asks why culture nonetheless appears so natural. Anthropologists' views on the social construction of culture notwithstanding, in Wilcannia the perceived immutability of culture presents itself as the basis of most black and white tension and much ambivalence. In Wilcannia, concepts about 'blackfella culture' and 'whitefella culture' are constantly being played out in practice and through discourse. What appears at face value to be common understandings and common terms, are revealed as ambiguous. The binaries of black and white are constantly tested and challenged through everyday interactions, through particular black and white friendships, partnerships, marriages and relationships, and in the face of the often unconsidered and stereotypical baggage that these two categories carry. At the same time, the categories of blackness and whiteness are daily and readily drawn upon as a means of justifying misunderstandings or to

remove the work of clarifying inter-cultural confusion – race in its avatar as culture is the first port of call for explanations.

Many whites in Wilcannia say that Aboriginal people are either incapable of grasping the realities of a Western and capitalist culture, or are defiantly and arrogantly reluctant to do so. This example of category thinking is particularly significant when unemployment is high and Aboriginal people say that they don't want to work like 'white cunts' 24 hours a day (Gibson 2010).

There is an omnipresent racial awareness operating whereby many whites perceive the Aboriginal in terms of a lack of culture and civility. In Australian country towns such as Wilcannia, many whites clearly figure difference from others as a superior difference (Snead 1991). While this difference is at times explicitly stated, it is primarily a historically and structurally assumed superiority: it is a given. Few whites in Wilcannia consider that they have a superior 'culture' in the Boasian sense: such culture is what others have. Whites certainly see themselves as having 'Culture' (as in High Culture); however, apart from this, they have 'way of life' – they 'simply are,' living according to standard, conventional social norms.

'Culture,' as a particular way of living, on the other hand, is seen to be intrinsic to 'traditional' Aboriginal people, something which can be lost but never acquired or regained (Byrne 1996). Indeed, as Kahn (1989) points out, for some whites with a romantic bent, 'traditional' Aboriginal people are seen to have more 'culture' than whites. Salvage anthropology of the past, the focus of study on Aboriginal people of the North and Centre, and the requirements of native title have all contributed to entrenching attitudes about what constitutes Aboriginal culture in public discourse. It is clear that Aboriginal people in general have been turned into an 'object of knowledge' with state institutions, the media and other authorities being the primary producers and judges of what is seen to constitute 'authentic' Aboriginal identity. This is a politics of identity that is not visited upon whites. While Aboriginal people in Wilcannia may not continually and consciously dwell on their identity, they understandably show assertive indignation when faced with the denial of their existence.

Aboriginal people in Wilcannia are forced to live subaltern lives in the face of dominant-culture legislation and welfare dependency, as well as in the Australian imagination (Cowlshaw 1988a, 1993, 2004; Lattas 1990, 1993, 2000; Morris 1989, 1997; Povinelli 2002). This is particularly true for those

Aboriginal people in urban and country-town areas who are often viewed as not 'real' Aborigines but pretenders out to milk the economy by false representations, wily subterfuge or plain self-deception. While Aboriginal people might wish to, and to some degree do, go about their business with little concern for how dominant culture views them, the required level of engagement with the dominant culture and the contexts in which black-and-white relations take place, makes forgetting one's cultural identity and social placement well nigh impossible. Aboriginal people in Wilcannia increasingly express their identity in conscious and reflexive terms; they talk of 'our culture', 'our way', 'our traditions' and 'blackfella way'.

Many, if not most, whites in Wilcannia accommodate Aboriginal culture when it enhances white national identity, and rail against it when it conflicts with white (personal and group) social, economic and political interests and values. It is here that culture as art opens up a space that allows for some distance from other spaces more readily identified with political action or ideology (Merlan 1989). The space of art offers a view on Wilcannia's cultural landscape(s) that is not offered by other perspectives.

Art: a new way of being Aboriginal

Art is one way that Aboriginal people in Wilcannia choose to publicly and privately perform, assert and create a distinctive identity for themselves, enabling them to regain a degree of control over their identity and representation. Although this kind of expression is not entirely controlled by the artists, and depends on institutional support or funding through state institutions, there is nevertheless, in the choice of art content, representations and art talk, an asserted autonomy, despite the pressures of market demand.

Because the cultural field of art has little precedent for Aboriginal people in Wilcannia, the production and interpretation of artworks in relation to Aboriginal societal norms means that there are new possibilities for the construction of identities not offered in other areas of life. Art appears to offer a permissible way for artists to negotiate pressures to act in accordance with communal values, including the social sanctions against behaviors that make an individual stand out. The relatively recent role of 'artist' is an identity that Aboriginal people in Wilcannia have begun to incorporate, and allows a degree of latitude within the complex social minefield of demonstrating acceptable difference and achieving success.

This is not to deny the restrictions and sanctions to the expression of Aboriginal identity applied from within the Aboriginal community.

While art-making and the role of artist allow a degree of intersubjective freedom from the constraints of 'the community', in important ways, and as we have seen, the art produced and the role of artist is not set apart from the local Aboriginal community. Individuals play a role in negotiating the extent and direction of these possibilities, and the way they are viewed by the wider Aboriginal community.

There is a fine line between those artists embraced by the local community as cultural ambassadors, and those who are seen to be 'big noting' themselves to the detriment of the community or group and thereby affecting their capacity to belong. Aboriginal identity of a purposeful and overt kind is seen by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people to be reproduced, reconstructed and represented in an interactive process. In this way, art and culture and their importance are relational. That is, art and culture, and how these categories are constructed and perceived derives from relationships: relationships between people and relationships between people and things.

Some view the conflation of art and culture as reducing Aboriginal people and their culture to their artefacts (Fourmile 1994), and others see 'Aboriginal art' as an area that is too controlled by the dominant culture to offer any real challenge to it (Williams 1976; Fry and Willis 1989). The former claim does not give enough credence to the fact that, for many Aboriginal people, art and culture are intertwined and meet the Aboriginal view that art is part of life and not an 'autonomous pursuit distinct from other aspects of life' (Fourmile 1994:76). The latter claim, that art is too controlled by whites, implies that subscribing to art-world values is the primary goal of art-making for Aboriginal people who create art.

As we have seen, it would be incorrect to say that the only, or even the primary, motivation of Wilcannia Aboriginal artists is a desire to prove an Aboriginal identity or the possession of Aboriginal culture to other Aboriginal people, to others or to the self; or to deny that gaining economic benefit is a significant incentive for art-making. Yet the private and public frequency with which artists say that their artworks show and demonstrate the presence of this elusive *thing* – 'Aboriginal culture' – is symptomatic of a yearning. This yearning is impossible to fill, given that its basis lies in the imaginary. Conscious revival of forms, customs and art designs may pull the pieces of a valorized 'traditional culture' together and

go some way towards reducing the sorely felt sense of loss, and, for some, may even assist in the creation of 'traditional culture' as an objectified 'reality', as behaviour is modified (Jordan 1994:110). However, the focus on the Dreaming and past behaviours and practices as the 'idententials' of Aboriginality is problematic (Jordan 1994:110). Many Aboriginal realities operate in Wilcannia, having been formed by diverse experiences and personal capacities. It is here that art-making affords possibilities for new constructions that reflect local heterogeneities and which can expand the wider view of Aboriginal art.

Artists such as Murray Butcher, Badger Bates, Willie Don Hunter and Phillip Bates demonstrate that the practice, discourse and sale of art offers prospects for three crucial aspects of identity formation: 'self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem'; as well as the opportunity for the shaping of an 'attitude towards oneself' (Honneth 1995:xi and xiii). Although claimed by the community in certain ways, and restricted by certain aspects of the dominant-culture art worlds, these and other artists demonstrate that they have latitude to enter the art domain on their own terms.

The impact of the proposed changes taking place in art in Wilcannia has yet to be determined. Barkindji art style and content has, in recent decades, been pedagogically articulated by the Barkindji artists and cultural brokers as a means towards all kinds of freedoms: economic, social and cultural. Their articulation, while offering the prospect of a unique and unified identity, also removes certain freedoms across the same domains. Whether, under the new pressures of Wilcannia Art Incorporated, Barkindji art style and content, as this is currently imagined, will remain a significant feature of Barkindji art is unknown. The alternatives would be that the continuity of design in art that many Barkindji people believe themselves 'still to be doing' becomes a dying art and articulation; or that this continuity will be reborn in a form and articulation as yet unknown. What is known is that both art and culture, as instruments and tools of power, have potential as sword, shield and salve.

NOTES

- 1 In the case of western NSW, the 2001 Census indicated that '68% of Indigenous couple families – some 45,000 couple families – include a non-indigenous partner' with 94% of the children born from these relationships being classified as Aboriginal (Peterson and Taylor 2002:11).

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