

## Introducing the Signs of Social Life

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Diary 14 March 1998

*[The old museum in Dubbo on my way to Bourke]. Aboriginal display dusty and badly labeled; woman on duty is defensive. She tells me, "the staff are all volunteers – two Aboriginal women came in and demanded to take women's secret things – I can't think what they are called – they promised to come back and help us with the display." The curator's voice rises as she tells me the story. "Where does that leave reconciliation?" she says. "You do your best and there's no response." As I begin to offer an explanation she says, "They were local women and they know all right," implying they are deliberately keeping their knowledge from the museum. She asks if I can help and I take her card reluctantly, feeling guilty.*

### A Stigmatized Town

Bourke, which lies beside the wide brown Darling River on a vast flat plain of inland Australia, has a place in Australian iconography both as typifying the bush and as a site of racial tension. About a third of the town's 3,500 population identify themselves as Aboriginal. Journalists can call on ready-made meanings when they write headlines about Bourke: "The town that bashed Santa" (*Daily Telegraph* 20.12.95); "Youth crime a festering sore" (*Sydney Morning Herald* 24.2.97); "Rioters tear up Bourke" (*Sun Herald* 7.12.97). Such stories emerge every few months, as if news editors decide that it is time for another item on racial tension in "the bush" – a term which refers to anything outside the major coastal cities. In 1998 a television

crew traveled the 900 kilometers from Sydney to get a story on the “feral kids,” between 5 and 12 years old, who, the Mayor of Bourke had claimed, were roaming the streets at night, terrorizing the population. Some quite small Aboriginal children, caught in the reporter’s spotlight, made the most of the camera’s presence and boasted about stealing cars. The news item overrode the absurdity of the children’s claims in favor of deploring the threat they posed. The abhorrent incivility of such rural areas was confirmed. The Queen’s visit to Bourke in April 2000 seemed designed to counter such “bad” images of depressed conditions and racial tension. Thus Bourke can be seen as a moral touchstone where the nation’s racial sins are monitored.<sup>1</sup>

In media accounts, a series of petty binarisms form the moral contours of this cultural domain, which can thus be rendered as entirely knowable. Concerned news journalists can spark or douse proper responses as they play upon the national preoccupation of worrying about Aborigines and the nation (Hage 1998). The “pale humanist sentiment that fills our mainstream media” (Martin 1995: 26) is countered by tougher reporters who enjoy exposing mayhem and violence in the tabloid press. For years, complaints about Aborigines were censored by journalists afraid of appearing to give succor to the generalized hostility towards Aborigines which is defined as racism in public discourse. It is taken to be the duty of white, urban, self-styled anti-racists to recognize and deplore the racial discrimination practiced by redneck fellow-whites in these rural cultural wastelands.<sup>2</sup> Thus, urban consumers of cultural otherness appropriate not only selected elements of Aboriginal culture but also images and myths of outback racial bigotry. The demand for better conditions for Aboriginal people, with its background rhetoric of dispossession, deprivation, and discrimination, often locates the barriers to these aims in the racialized countryside or with the politicians in the nation’s capital, Canberra. The depressing nastiness attributed to the outback deserts of racism and poverty excludes knowledge of the wisdom, wit, and wickedness of Aboriginal people, as well as their complex and fraught relationship with whitefellas who are also condemned unheard.<sup>3</sup>

Imaginative processes are at work in these forms of communication between citizens with diverse aspirations, longings, and lacks. A cultural politics is at work here, where everyday expression is saturated with images generated from experience but constantly being reworked, embroidered, and fabricated into moralism and myth, icons and tropes. These are visible in mundane conversational forms of approval and disapproval, those automatic judgments of the desirable and the repellent around which everyday

identities are constructed. Cosmopolitan citizens value diversity while remaining well protected from its difficulties by cultural, class, and geographical barriers. That some things are beyond the pale is always understood or lamented by social theorists (Povinelli 2002). In either case, imaginative or vicarious participation in a multitude of cultures is a recognized privilege of modern urban life. However, ordinary daily life proceeds as if we all agreed about how we should live, which could be viewed as an extraordinary achievement or else a hypocritical social facade concealing the confused, conflict-ridden *mélange* and mix existing among us. While official discourse is dominated by a scientism that wants to quantify and manage social processes, the capacity for fabulation and fabrication continues vigorously. Memory is of course riven with gaps and absences, not due to disorder but, as we shall explore, to social and psychological processes which shape the past by selectively secreting and revealing, erasing and celebrating, in a never-ending conflict about the truth of our social being, past and present.

### Judged Wanting

Public imagery worms its way into the meanings a place has for its residents. The outsiders' gaze can generate considerable self-awareness. Residents are familiar with media images and ideas about their town, but these images accrue alien meanings on the national stage. The idea that everyday life in Bourke is fraught with tension and hatred, bereft of the ordinary pleasures of social life, operates locally as a joke on outsiders. Far from being empty of any positive sociality, lacking black or white culture, residents of Bourke experience their town as the site of rich social relations. Besides an abundance of social and sporting events, clubs and pubs,<sup>4</sup> there is always something or someone to talk about. Even predictions of apocalyptic doom, when the guns will come out because the law has failed, need to be understood as energizing social life.<sup>5</sup> Even the entrenched misery apparent in some lives is a source of others' moral vigor.

Outsiders' imaginings about Bourke share one crucial element with those of the insiders, and that is the racial dichotomy of the population. The whole population actively participates in reproducing this dichotomy in ways, I will argue, that reflect equivalent conditions throughout the nation. Thus, just as "it is possible to enter into the singularity of an object without renouncing the ambition of drawing out universal propositions" (Bourdieu

1984: xi), so it is possible, by entering into the singularity of a small town, to draw out propositions about the nation. To begin, Bourke should be viewed as a single cultural domain, albeit one marked by an ongoing dispute or rift between two segments of the population, just as the nation itself is. This segmentation is usually thought of as a pathology, a gaping wound that must be healed before normal life can begin. But what if it is the disputation around the division that gives social life its meaning? What if we were to think of the segments as valued and partially voluntary categories that no one really wants to abandon, even though the inequalities and injustices they entail produce pain? What if we were also to think about Bourke, not as a hellhole of racial tension and depression, but as a desired place, a familiar home that provides psychic comfort as well as pleasurable drama and dangerous excitement? What if we also see that it is blackfellas as well as whitefellas, and the relationship between them, which make this country/town what it is? Maybe we could then overcome our moral anxieties about confusing the good and the bad, and recognize that Aborigines are active participants in these social dynamics rather than merely passive, innocent recipients of racist stereotyping and exclusion. We should thus be able to recognize that these Indigenous lives include desirable and gratifying experiences, and that some of these satisfactions are entangled with both whitefellas and racial conflict. 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.

In racism, bodies are taken to represent a given truth which social relations are built on. But these social relations develop their own logic, one of rival identities that feed off the normalization of systematic inequality. The dichotomous population is founded on racial identifications that become entangled with unequal access to public resources and forms of expression. The material and symbolic inequality of this uneven playing field may make the notion of rivalry between racialized domains appear incongruous. But I want to go some way with Robin Kelly who, in his critique of the plethora of functionalist and po-faced analyses of American ghetto culture, says, “we have to acknowledge the artistry, the fun, and gamesmanship that continues to exist, if not thrive, in a world marked by survival and struggle.” Of lives that are relentlessly and sympathetically considered oppressed, Kelly further asserts, “Our dysfunctionality fascinates; it is alluring” (Kelly 1997: 3–4). Rather than allow the reader to be “fascinated” by “dysfunctional” aspects of Indigenous life, it is the artistry

and energy deployed in their numerous struggles that I try to follow. In this local environment, an element of racial rivalry for moral worth emerges, and the whitefellas whose vision must be combated include those that develop objectivist, sympathetic, dehumanizing studies of Indigenous problems. My argument is that this rural domain must be entered before it can be judged wanting.

Thus my book is not about the cultural successes of Bourke Aborigines. It is about other ways of measuring the significance of lives that appear to have no possibility of success in the eyes of those whose judgments dominate the world. It is about the legitimacy and interest of apparently abject lives. It is about the rejection of conventional construals of desirability, and accepting the significance of local meanings and passions. It is about how people live within a social domain which is subjected to systematic, age-old contempt from others, but which can also become a source of pride.

### Identifying Racial Identities

What then is the relationship between the racial loyalties and identities proclaimed by individuals and the ubiquitous racial categories of public discourses that cloud and contour those identities? What we notice at once is the imbalance between a usually unmarked “Australian” identity and the identities of others marked as having different, racial characteristics such as indigenous, or immigrant, Koori, Greek, or Chinese Australian. Australianness may be the subject of some self-contemplation among urban intellectuals, but it is usually a taken-for-granted, unproblematic condition, a normalized and assertive presence which wants to displace others, or to place them as other.<sup>6</sup> The category *Australian* is the common self-positioning of white, Anglo Australians, against whom Aborigines are contrasted, and Aborigines themselves sometimes use such constructions unreflectively, as when someone says “This girl came with us; she wasn’t Koori, she was Australian.” Here the unmarked category innocently becomes the dominant norm against which the minor dependent category struggles for legitimacy, a condition that has been argued persuasively in feminist and subaltern studies and more recently in whiteness studies (e.g., Frankenburg 1993; Moreton-Robinson 2000). The social identity of conservative Australians is said to depend on the sense of oneness with the norms of a unified nation, exemplified in the person of the white Anglo male with his dependants (J. Lattas 2001).

However, a further argument says that for the “national identity” to take on a specific character, some other form of identity must exist or be imagined. Balibar (1990: 285) points to the role the imagined other plays in the nationalist objective in helping conceal “the historical and social heterogeneity of the ‘people’.” It is easier by far to identify that which the nation is not, rather than to risk foreclosing on its unity by identifying the qualities of an ideal or essential national citizen. “The racial–cultural identity of the ‘true nationals’ remains invisible but it is inferred from (and assured by) its opposite, the alleged quasi-hallucinatory visibility of the ‘false nationals’: Jews, ‘wops’, immigrants, *indios*, *natives*, blacks” (Balibar 1990: 285, original emphases). Indigenous Australians have sometimes fulfilled this role in Australia – as the enemy within by Geoffrey Blainey (cited in Markus 1996), as the stubborn primitive by Johns (2001), and as the source of true spirituality by Philip Adams (cited in Lattas 1997). What is seldom admitted is that Aborigines are also rivals for the most powerful anchor of a national identity, that is “the symbols and fetishes of an *autochthonous* national character” (Balibar 1990: 283, emphasis added). Australian nationalism meets a chronic source of insecurity in the indisputably superior claims of the natives to indigenous status and to prior identification with the territory.<sup>7</sup> The immigrant origins of Australia’s nationals give added force to Balibar’s further observation that, in practice, the criteria for legitimate belonging “have to be constructed by means of ambiguous juridical conventions or cultural particularities” (Balibar 1990: 284).

Whitefellas’ sense of national identity or Australianness is, in practice, an entirely different kind of phenomenon from an Aboriginal sense of identity, because the latter has been constructed under duress. Fanon pointed out the fallaciousness of applying notions of “the Other” to black consciousness “because the white man is not only the Other but also the master, whether real or imaginary” (Fanon 1990: 125 n. 16). But this mastery is not given in nature, and the perceived, misperceived, and real limits to the white man’s masterliness are becoming apparent as the rights of Indigenous people are asserted, recognized, and accepted, though always partially and often painfully. Whitefellas’ identity in rural Australia has had a stable geographical location. They came to western NSW in the mid-19th century and settled firmly, naming and using the country and marking it with their artefacts. Once the last spear was broken, the invaders traveled everywhere with excessive freedom, establishing their quotidian practices and social meanings and making friends, enemies, or employees of Indigenous people according to specific local conditions. Government policies lurched from one

modernizing project to another, encouraging agriculture and pastoralism, protecting and assimilating the natives, running and rationalizing reserves under legislation in which Aborigines were unfree, exploited, and often incarcerated in “missions” or government stations or living in “black’s camps” on rural properties. Since the 1970s, by which time discriminatory legislation was replaced with policies intended to improve Aboriginal levels of education and health, many Aboriginal organizations have been set up and more police have been provided to control these newly equal citizens.<sup>8</sup> For over a century, not only was continuity with previous Indigenous conditions disrupted by settlers’ guns, fences, and sheep, and later by “protection” and welfare structures, but there was also no new secure place with predictable conditions within which a stable modern Aboriginal identity could be developed and reasserted. While not all Aborigines suffered directly degrading and painful conditions, all experienced changing laws and regimes and unpredictable local variations in governance. The ground was serially pulled out from under black feet, and even the reasoning that accompanied these events displayed instability and reversals, articulated in changing racial discourse and progressive ideologies. The historical instability of “Aboriginal identity” in this region is a source of anxiety among blacks and among whites, and this anxiety is apparent in wider national discourses.<sup>9</sup>

A contrast with immigrant identity is useful here. Mandy Thomas has vividly described the way immigrant Vietnamese come across Australian things which disturb their sense of the normality of their own everyday practices. For instance, they have to live in houses that have strange internal spatial arrangements which conflict with the ordinary needs for food preparation, with normal sleeping arrangements, and with customary visitor and family interaction. Vietnamese people, Thomas says, “find the isolation and privacy of Australian houses difficult: most are accustomed to contact with many people flowing into and out of their houses or in the courtyard areas” (Thomas 1999: 60). The explanation of their discomfort, which of course extends to their relationships with Australians, is obvious: they are in another country, not (yet) their own. But there is no such easy explanation for the equivalent social discomfort experienced by Aboriginal people. They are not strangers from elsewhere, and long for no other place or more familiar home. When the houses do not suit their needs, more complex and troubling reasons must be canvassed, reasons which include the good intentions of state officials. The *terra nullius* doctrine has been abandoned in the law but it still pervades popular conviction. While the legitimacy of

Indigenous claims to habitation of the continent from time immemorial is widely pronounced, for instance in the High Court Mabo decision, whitefellas seldom concede that they are “now walking on Aboriginal land.”<sup>10</sup> The “welcome to country” rituals which now regularly take place at privileged urban public functions appear as hypocrisy or farce from the perspective of rural Australia.

The Aboriginality produced within a national discourse is one where Indigenous people are saliently and chronically the object of governance (Morris 1989; Rowley 1970, 1972a, 1972b) and, more pervasively, of imagined governance (Lattas 1997; Lea 2002; Marcus 1991). *Aboriginal* is a household word, on everyone’s lips, arousing passions, both sympathetic and fearful, apparently in the whole population. Aborigines have faded in and out of national consciousness over the decades of my experience since the 1960s, intermittently the focus of art and thought and of various kinds of political endeavor. This shifting and temperamental attention is another framing of Aboriginal existence which exacerbates the sense of instability attached to Aboriginal identity.<sup>11</sup>

While terms such as *Aboriginal identity*, *Aboriginality*, and *Indigenous culture* pervade public and academic discourse in Australia, they have been largely emptied of any specific social location and meaning. This is because usages which seem to refer unequivocally to singular individuals, discrete categories, or historically stable being, cannot be sustained. Perhaps more than other social or ethnic groupings, Aboriginal identity is not predictable or knowable in any formal sense. The varied, unstable, and contested thing called Aboriginality is made up of contradictory elements of the romantic and the grotesque, the deprived and the despised, the noble and the savage (Langton 1997; Peters-Little 2001). As for those who live it in Bourke, their assertions of Aboriginality with its sense of ardor and unease, will be elucidated in Murriss’ words below.<sup>12</sup> Suffice it to say here that the force of the terms illustrates how life follows art, in this case the artistry of asserting imagined unitary identities. As with white Australians’ sense of belonging in the nation, the intimate psychology of specific Aboriginal individuals and their interpersonal social intercourse bears a systematic relationship to a national persona, a “social identity” in which none can resist a fraught sense of participation.

“Identity,” argues Povinelli, is “a locus of the struggle for power to control the epistemological relations between social action and meaning, social identity and practice” (Povinelli 1993: 284). That is, social boundaries, whether ethnic, racial, or other, are made in action and intention. The

particular “cultural domain” I am describing is known and shaped in racial terms, and is thus an arena of comprehensive contestation, as well as embedded and naturalized inequality. The separateness of white and black “identities” is a surface manifestation of a relationship which is historically deeply established. As elsewhere in rural Australia before the 1970s, employer–employee relationships were the commonest form of race relations, and local whites do not see themselves as complicit in the state’s earlier forms of governance. Nor do Murriss see local whites as responsible for the savage oppression which is becoming established as a definitive feature of Australian history. The owners of land and shops are usually known or remembered as past employers of Aboriginal people, while other locals were fellow workers and frequently fellow school pupils.<sup>13</sup> Though firmly hierarchical, and marked by implacable status inequality, relationships with white bosses are seldom recalled as humiliating or hostile. Though residents on the Brewarrina Reserve experienced oppressive and demeaning relationships with the managers (Keating 1994), these managers were outsiders, as were intrusive police and welfare officials.<sup>14</sup>

It was thirty years ago, when legal discrimination was removed and ameliorative policies established, that local whites developed an aggressively hostile discourse towards Aborigines as newly legitimized and assertively equal citizens. More forceful policing was demanded and more subtle forms of control instituted, including the use of local government powers (Cowlishaw 1997). But the self-perception of Bourke’s white residents remains that of good citizens, participating in national projects but rejecting the national discourse of sorrow and responsibility for racial injustice. Yet rural people are enfolded in the judgments of Australia’s historians, which have implicated them in the stories of massacres, stolen children, and contemporary woes. By finding points of cleavage and contestation in the nation’s reassessment of its history, I offer a depiction, not of “the culture” of one or another group, but of how the nation’s social dynamics have produced variously conceived identities in this specific location as historically constructed inequalities are played out among the impressive colonial architecture of the town’s banks, shops, government offices, and court house.

Accounts of the reshaping of Aboriginal cultural identities have usually been anchored in the false opposition between tradition and modernity which, as Fabian points out, is bad metaphor. “What are opposed, in conflict, locked in antagonistic struggle, are not the same societies at different stages of development, but different societies facing each other at the same time” (Fabian 1983: 155). The focus of this work is the discursive

identifying and reproducing of practices of identity which inhabit definable social and geographical spaces with some degree of comfort and stability over time. In taking the social relations of such a well-known town as my object of analysis, I am not trying to replace “bad” images with “good” ones. Rather, the aim is to destabilize the normative framings which are the basis of the knowledge we all carry, not so much of Bourke, but of race relations there and elsewhere in the nation. By bringing to the fore complex interactions and discourses, and by reimagining scenes which are muted or concealed out of fear or disquiet, a space can be cleared for imagining other possible relationships between Indigenous people and others. This book may be deemed revelatory in purpose, but it does not seek specific solutions to what are defined as social problems. Such a position would falsify the sense of subjecthood carried by Bourke residents, because none of them, however racially positioned, defines themselves as a social problem. Nor could a notion of “solutions” do justice to the ironies and the power carried by stigmatized social images. Like all sources of power, even those apparently self-destructive or abject, this one stubbornly clings to its own conditions of reproduction.

## Races

Social scientists have been taking the “naive no-race position” (Harrison 2000: 47) for decades, trying to replace race with class, culture, or nationalism as themes around which social inequality is constructed.<sup>15</sup> But the speed and assiduousness of responses to explicit references to race attest to the anxiety attendant on this disavowal. Mention of racial difference results in intellectuals getting to work to deny, neutralize, explain, and remove its legitimacy as a descriptor. Yet what Fanon (1990) called “the fact of blackness” has remained spectacularly apparent to Aborigines and others deemed black. This is not the fact of skin color, but the social significance attributed to racial identities of color which carry a pervasive but unspecified blot. When we deny it, we whitefellas deny the history that made us white, and it is we who continue to position ourselves as the unmarked category, the non-race, as we reproduce the significance of Aboriginality. The “fact” of race is not a material fact, but a fact of the imagination, as are the identities, rivalries, and hierarchies which surround it. Race is both a term and a tool, and tools and terms can be used for purposes other than those of their creators. The aphorism “The master’s tools will never dismantle the

master's house" (cited in Field 1999: 193) underestimates the power of inversion, of ironic appropriation, and of black humor.

An immense number of distinctions and discriminations are apparent in any population, and a multitude of principles on which people gather, or are identified, in common interest groups can be discerned. Age and gender differences, and other categories we take for granted – workers and women, drinkers and professionals, migrants and members of this or that family – have distinctive forms in Bourke. Here I foreground the racial categories which, while they have changed form over the decades, color all social relations just as they feature large in the national imagination. White identity is built around being in control of the land and the language, and signs of that control are displayed in public performances of authority, respectability, and ownership. An Aboriginality is being asserted that was shaped within a long-standing, but now vigorously contested, subordination.<sup>16</sup> These are the social processes to be explored in this book.

The folk categories of race, with vernacular binaries of whitefellas and blackfellas, Gubbas<sup>17</sup> and Murris, Whites and Aborigines, define the central mystery of this study. These categories have been created over time and their meanings are unstable and often ambiguous. But, contrary to popular perception, racial identities are highly valued, not just by white supremacists but also by the racially subordinated. The progressive attempt to rid ourselves of racial categorization has been a marked failure, as was the 1970s feminist strategy to undermine sexual categories by denying the significance of the sexual binarism because it seemed always to entail one term being subservient to the other. But it was the subservience rather than the categories that was the problem and the same is surely true of racial categories.<sup>18</sup> Hierarchical arrangements are not the natural concomitant of inherited difference, and erasing or neutralizing some characteristics of those who inhabit an inferiorized category is surely a case of throwing out the baby of difference and leaving the bathwater of inequality unchallenged. What is starkly apparent in Bourke is that a binary system of identification is sustained in the face of ambiguous racial heritage and much intermarriage, interaction, and interchange between the black and the white populations. These are cultured and raced bodies struggling over the same social space and the struggles take place most tellingly within families and even within individual beds and bodies (Critchett 1990: 23).<sup>19</sup> As noted above, this is one town, one community, and in a sense, one culture, albeit marked by a deep rift. A salient aspect of this milieu is that two social collectives occupying the same space are deeply at loggerheads in their competition

for moral worth. It would not be useful to try to identify these as *cultural* or *ethnic*, rather than *racial* groupings, because the rift is founded in bodies although it entails the more voluntary realms of practice, style, and meaning.

Hence, as well as emphasizing that this is a single town with an internal geography and one population with an internal sociology, it must also be recognized that the place has one history in which racial hierarchy has been reproduced in changing forms. The same events have been experienced; whites lived with the Bourke Reserve, while many blacks lived on it.<sup>20</sup> Not only employers, but also publicans, shopkeepers, and shire councilors, have always had regular dealings and interaction with the black population, and so have all the townspeople, not least in their imaginations. The history of the self-construction and the other-construction of the racial categories of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal is related to all kinds of elements and aspirations of the respective populations and to the relationship between them, although this is not my empirical focus in this book. Suffice it here to restate that a mutually constitutive relationship developed between the settlers who arrived in the 19th century and the Indigenous people (Cowlshaw 1988: 53 ff.). What is significant is not just the habitation of the same geographical and social spaces, but also the sharing and disputing of the signs of life, the myths and symbols which interpret the cohabited past in contradictory ways. Further, it is not only blackfellas that are stigmatized; both segments of the population are aware of their own secrets and stigmata. The experience of stigma is universal (Goffman 1963: 127) and thus the impulse to conceal parts of our persons from others is a shared, intimately known though disavowed experience. “We are all potentially . . . accused, deprived of language, or worse, rigged out in the language of our accusers, humiliated and condemned by it” (Barthes 1973: 52). While suffering at the hands of language and power may not be absent from any life, it is not equally distributed, for it is obvious here that the common language belongs to some more than to others. A further complicating factor is the change in Aborigines’ opportunities and aspirations. As many move to domains of higher status, the “hidden injuries of race,” like the hidden injuries of class analyzed by Sennett and Cobb (1973), are characterized by disfiguring scar tissue formed over wounds caused by trying to divest oneself of a stigmatized identity whose roots have penetrated into one’s body and soul.

Despite intense and intimate relationships, intermarriages, and interweavings, these two segments of the population have remained “other” to each other. Aborigines were ineluctably a race and remain so because of what Andrew Lattas calls “the fallible nature of human processes of self-

identification and objectification,” which ensures that “bodily differences are employed to essentialize and biologize the sociocultural processes that mediate and create identity” (A. Lattas 2001: 106). The term *racism* has become burdened with overuse, accruing an excess of meaning which leads to meaninglessness. But let us admit that, despite it being carefully suppressed among modern, cosmopolitan citizens, racism and bigotry are things we all know about, a common, banal aspect of human experience, evident in the tendency to stereotype and in a common wariness or suspicion of strange people. Castoriadis links racism with group identity:

Racism is an offspring, or a particularly acute and exacerbated avatar . . . of what, empirically, is an almost universal trait of human societies. What is at issue is the apparent incapacity to constitute oneself as oneself without excluding the other, coupled with the apparent inability to exclude the other without devaluing and ultimately hating them. (Castoriadis 1992: 4)

Such hatred will be glimpsed below, but Castoriadis is speaking of national imagery rather than of the ongoing relationships between two races living side by side. Hatred is not characteristic of most relationships in Bourke. Discrimination and contempt are common, but friendship, affection, and love are also apparent. It is this range of interpersonal relationships – with love and hate, trust and mistrust simultaneously existing between members of groups whose relationship is structured around a bitter rivalry – which precludes simple interpretations of this social domain.<sup>21</sup>

Just as a baby cannot remain unsexed, so a person in Bourke, and perhaps everywhere, cannot be unraced. Belonging to the category of “other” than the Australian norm, Aboriginality must be marked. Yet racial identity is not necessarily fixed at birth. Racial identification is constructed out of a mass of usually unraced and ambiguous elements and characteristics. One’s race may in fact change with a change of loyalty and desire. Like that well-worn notion of cultural identity, these are historically mobile categories, constructed as a relationship between insiders and outsiders. Skin color hovers as a companion of identification, but darkness is neither a necessary nor a sufficient criterion for belonging to the category Aboriginal.

The mantra of “socially constructed” is routinely applied to the notion of culture, trying to oust a more tractable and describable essential entity which lurks in the corner of our minds and in our prose. I am arguing that in Bourke the salient racial identifications are socially constructed, products of the conflictual, hierarchical relationship between the races. Markers of racial

boundaries are evident in social habits, dress and demeanor, housing and domesticity, employment and income, and in language, though none of these reliably identify a particular race. Relations and associates are dependable indicators. Women and men participate differently, but with equivalent enthusiasm and loyalty, in these categories. The Aboriginal social world is one where social engagement with kin commands the highest priority, and dense, encompassing forms of sociality shape and determine not only an individual's everyday reality, but also the whole community's style of life. Whites, by contrast, tend to arrange themselves in small nuclear families.

Thus Aborigines can take on the appearance, practice, and ideas of whitefellas so long as there is a way of maintaining contrasts with the Gubbas. I am arguing again for the recognition of the "indeterminacy and opacity of culture" (Cowlshaw 1999: 301). As Stewart says, culture "cannot be gotten 'right'," because "culture, if we can call it that, resides in states of latency, immanence, and excess and is literally 'hard to grasp'" (Stewart 1996: 6, 5). Now that social analysts claim to have abandoned essentialism, perhaps we can return the authority over cultural characteristics to their subjects and begin to describe the conditions under which meanings are produced, the phenomenology of localities.

## Tilly

Let me now introduce Tilly Delgarno, who insisted that I include a picture of her white friend in the book of Murri Stories of Bourke that I planned to publish.<sup>22</sup> I need to describe our relationship to illuminate the significance of her wish, and what she wanted to accomplish. Tilly, a woman of 68, said that if my husband came to Bourke with me he could also stay with her "so long as he don't mind dark people." She positioned herself as my informant, helper, and friend, and while knowing little of anthropology or social research, she had an understanding of my interest in Murriss. She was enthusiastic about "the book" and saw us as assisting each other in its realization. She wanted me to stay with her; money spent on accommodation was wasted, she said. I slept in her third bedroom, which was stuffed with possessions stacked under beds, in bulging cupboards and boxes. Dozens of family photos of some of her children and some of her grandchildren competed with posters of Elvis and Princess Di, crowding every available surface and wall in the house.

Tilly watched people come and go, sitting hidden behind the lattice work on the front step of her Housing Commission house on the northern side of Bourke.<sup>23</sup> She loved to relate stories which dramatized events and which elucidated things that tickled her fancy about the vagaries of human existence. She watched my reactions, with her intent sideways glance camouflaged behind her thick hair, which remained shiny and black with a little help. We exchanged experiences about our lives, embroidered stories and shared judgments. She wanted me to appreciate, not her suffering in the past, but its pleasures, and to share her enjoyment of the present. We both enjoyed driving out to the river to fish and cook johnny cakes, or to relations in Enngonia, or to visit the old pastoral station sites at Caiwarro and Tinnenburra over the border in Queensland. Sometimes we drank beer and danced at the club, joking about “painting the town red” and the good-looking men we might pick up. Tilly was not the “wise and dignified elder” of popular colonial imagery, although she had both wisdom and dignity. She was tough, suspicious, and full of complaints about others, and she let people know when she was displeased. When some house guests annoyed her one night, she locked them out, and she was unrelenting in her criticism of people who might “bludge” on me.

Tilly told me her personal history in idiosyncratic, selective, and enigmatic ways, through exaggeration, dramatization, and narrative. Born into a substantial Aboriginal community on Tinnenburra sheep station to a large family who worked there for many years, she had vivid memories of running free in the bush with the other children, and of traveling with her parents when they were droving stock. They were driven off the pastoral station by drought or recession when Tilly was a young girl, and after a brief stay at the Brewarrina mission her father brought them to Bourke in his sulky. Later, to support her children, she took droving contracts independently with her own droving plant. For much of her life she lived in huts or humpies,<sup>24</sup> or camped on the road.

Tilly saw clearly how the racial distinctions made in everyday life produced the Gubbas’ false sense of superiority, which infuriated her. Yet she loved the competence and glamor of certain aspects of life marked as “white” and she was proud of her knowledge, ability, and closeness to certain white people. This was vividly apparent when, in her enthusiasm for my plans to publish a book of Aboriginal people’s stories, she went to considerable lengths to obtain a photo of an old white friend, Stella, who, she explained, had come as a teenager to work on Tinnenburra. Stella used to go “down the camp” to play with the Aboriginal children. Tilly insisted

that such a relationship be recorded and recognized by including Stella's picture between Tilly's own and that of her sister. This was because Stella had remained friends "*even when we came to Bourke.*" In this, Tilly recognized her white friend's fidelity. She was also refusing the comfortable complacency of equating racial identity with moral worth, despite the raging against Gubbas that she sometimes indulged in. Her individuality is expressed in a way incontrovertibly Aboriginal. Her voice is an invaluable component of this book.<sup>25</sup>

### The Talk of the Town

It is through talk that I approached and understood much of this social world.<sup>26</sup> People talked to me about the town, putting me right, deliberately presenting their words to encapsulate their ideas about themselves and their existence. Unlike my 1980s research, I talked mainly to Aboriginal people, initially to friends from before, and then to their friends and relations and to those they thought I should collect stories from. I was within a world of talk as issues were debated and presented in gatherings of families, friends, and acquaintances, and on my tape recorder. And it was in everyday talk, come upon fortuitously and casually, that clues to more complex and hidden dynamics of the town were revealed. Talk is the major way that people represent, to themselves and others, the material and visceral experiences and interactions which comprise social life. Talk is also a way of managing opinion, dissembling, and heading off misrecognition and undesirable judgments.<sup>27</sup> I begin with outside talk, that is, talk that is easily encountered by visitors if they engage in conversations with white locals who defend Bourke from its bad reputation. Such talk is both complaint and self-assertion, and has its counterpart in the black community's complaints of misperception. Thus I use talk as a take on social dynamics. Yet the talk I recorded becomes disembodied on the page, and my own words will have to fill in something of the physical circumstances, bodily presentation, and sense of the affect accompanying the talk.<sup>28</sup>

I will initially be evoking the public domain where people are playing out their lives for each other's consumption, edification, and aggravation (Goffman 1972). These dramas change and new parts emerge in the play of colonial relations which began long ago. In many cases the characters are outflanking each other, improvising according to new conditions of possibility, competing for attention and validation. But the presence of danger in

this theater of Bourke keeps in mind the limits of metaphor and of language itself. While the scripts consist usually of variations on familiar themes, the bloodstains which are occasionally visible center-stage in the main street are testament to the deadly serious and damaging consequences of the drama being played out in these lives. Like Jean Genet, I admit that a perilous site can hold very specific attractions, though the hazards Genet faced among the Palestinian fedayeen are far from conditions among Bourke Murriss (Genet 1989; Swedenburg 1995: 30).

My descriptive, impressionistic accounts of particular scenes and my analysis of the social dynamics of this town are intended as exploratory and thematic rather than comprehensive and definitive. Another account might emphasize the links between rural and town dwellers, the particular way gender is shaped, or the contacts and connections between Aborigines and others, focusing on the many “hybrid” social forms and relationships. One of my intentions is to disturb the common responses of cosmopolitan sophisticates who evince knowing concern over a national disgrace when Bourke is mentioned. I want to demonstrate that in this dramatic and compelling cultural world, struggle and conflict is not necessarily a mark of pathology but is constitutive of identities. I also wanted to depart from the “you are there” realism of ethnographic description (Stewart 1996: 21), but this purpose has been somewhat deflected by my wish to document arguments, investigate miscarriages of justice, assess political circumstances, and tell some local stories. Thus there is an evidentiary intent as well as an interpretive one in what follows.

A lot of the talk which I document is from “organic intellectuals” (Gramsci 1971) in the Bourke community. These “grassroots” thinkers are not replicas of academics who position themselves as neutral, analytic observers, and who disavow their own interests in analytic results. Rather, they are the equivalent of writers and artists who try imaginatively to transcend their social position. Crucially, they subject their own community to scrutiny from inside, promoting its living complexity while advocating the purging of base or corrupt practices. Mostly they recognize that Bourke is one town with one future. It is this oneness of the town that can become lost in the analysis of its simultaneous twoness.

The empirical basis of this ethnography is the social interaction between Aborigines and others. This is a discomfoting arena where moral certainties and racial loyalties come into question. While the ubiquitous presence of the white’s language and the white gaze renders Aboriginal being suspect, whites are discomfoted by being forced to defend their racial

boundaries and assert their cultural standards. The emotional, moral, and political pitfalls of interpreting this social realm are manifold. To make my participation a part of the story, I use diary entries and other examples of my involvement. These devices are intended to suggest that the dilemmas and dramas of this social world are not merely others' problems. I do not see myself as an outsider sitting in judgment on the moral strengths or failings of this population, or as the hovering, unassailable critic. I am a participant, risking my reputation and relationships in describing my own reactions and presenting accounts of others. A major theme here is that any moral failings in this population are not so different from those elsewhere – but this does not mean that moral ambiguity swallows up judgments. Change is possible, not as a result of individuals discovering the error of their ways, but by recognizing the social forces which have produced particular antagonistic identifications. I am suggesting that there is a national rather than a local responsibility for the destructive effects of race and colonial relations generally. Habits, fears, and a plethora of intertwined reasons and rationalizations, urges and emotions, interests and self-interests, all reproduce the social conditions that are explored below.

### Stigma and Interpellation

I am using ideas taken from the work of a range of authors, and bringing their arguments into play in relation to particular conditions, and in this section I will lay out some interpretive concepts. Incipient metaphors in others' analytic language are extended, and thus these authors may meet their ideas here “with alarm or pleasure, even with shock” (Butler 1997: 31) as I put them to use in illuminating the social dynamics of Bourke and Australia more widely. The notion of performance is used to underline the ever-present movement in the social order and the intentionality of subjects. While as an anthropologist I seek patterns and determinants within the chaos of everyday life, these patterns are produced and reproduced as performances which can never be exact replicas of what went before. Rendering social life as performance and theater can also unlock the tensions that often silence observers and participants in the conflict-ridden domain of race relations. The audience for performance includes the self, and it is both as actor and audience that Bourke residents are invaded by images of the racial other.

We all, as Judith Butler says, emerge into a world already mapped and understood by others, and the language we learn categorizes us as this, that, and the other. We constantly and inevitably meet images and definitions of ourselves that we neither make nor control. The process of interpellation, of being hailed into being, as it were, and addressed in the language of those we interact with, cannot be resisted, as to resist it is to remain outside society, unknown and unrecognized.<sup>29</sup> The world which claims us does not know us as we experience ourselves, yet as social, that is, interpellated subjects, we depend on that which confines us. While the self we must inhabit is contoured by the world, independent of our individual existence and in language that precedes us, Butler recognizes an inevitable and inescapable ambiguity built into this language which provides an arena for accidents, mutations, and change. In re-enacting the complex and heterogeneous images we are presented with, we inevitably change them, as no mimicry reproduces exactly what it copies. Indeed, the desire to attain a social identity by inhabiting given norms is subverted by their very excess and ambiguity, as well as by a more primary, presocial, experience of the self. It is in the constant and impossible replication that there is a space of agency or will, albeit unconscious or impulsive, where the categories we are living in can be destabilized, altered, and partially reformulated.

Butler says “one may, as it were, meet that socially constituted self by surprise, with alarm or pleasure,” and perhaps any subject in any social field experiences such “interpellation” (Butler 1997: 31). My own sense of inhabiting an alien image was acute at certain moments during fieldwork. As I emerged from my car and approached the front door of an Aboriginal family home I felt a horrible sense of replicating a missionary or welfare official, there to inspect the condition of the house or to do good. An Aboriginal friend confirmed this but made me an exception when she said: “Mum didn’t mind you coming because you didn’t look around at the house” (disappointingly, she implied). This idea of having to don images others have fashioned seems especially apt for a town whose reputation is so grim. The interpellative process may work in the same way for black and white residents insofar as they grapple with the national imagery, but there is more to consider in this racially cleft social world. It is the relationship between self-consciously distinctive and warring cultures (if I may use that term) which meet and interact daily and proffer distinct images and evaluations, that appears to open up gaps in Butler’s work.<sup>30</sup> The experience of being (mis)recognized may be ubiquitous, but how does interpellation work

when contrasting and hierarchically arranged languages and images inhabit the one social arena and are part of quotidian experience?

Interpellation does not only refer to the hailing into being through images and stereotypes that are generated and circulate in the public arena. Individual Aboriginal subjects are interpellated, from quite different and antithetical positions. While addressed by outsiders as the depressed, grotesque, or exotic others, they are initially called upon to inhabit a more intimate, familial, Aboriginal position. As Frantz Fanon (1990: 108) said: “As long as a black man is among his own, he will have no occasion, except in minor internal conflicts, to experience his being through others.” In Butler’s terms, of course, interpellation is a universal condition. This raises the issue of the subject’s level of dependence on realizing themselves in particular social circumstances; in other words, a subject’s degree of intimacy and identification with the sources of interpellation, and the language and the bodies of those in whom they are reflected.<sup>31</sup> The question that thus arises for me is this: in conditions where more than one language calls the social self into being, is there a doubling of possibilities of freedom? In a world which appears to offer the subject at least two distinctively evaluated cultural selves, can one of these sets of images be rejected and another adopted? Of course, in Butler’s terms, both these selves share alien origins – both are made in a language neither created nor chosen by individual subjects. In fact the idea of two selves is partly illusory; Murriss do not have two subjecthoods, one existing in the black world and one in the white world. The antithetical sets of images which Indigenous subjects are offered are interdependent, having been created in relation to each other. Yet the power of the language to call one into being, for instance as the unsocialized black outsider, the racialized citizen who cannot attain a positive social self, is an irresistibly real part of personal experience within a black domain. And these circumstances create an increased sense of the contingent, fabricated, accidental nature of social life. The contradictory nature of black and white norms and images is lodged in the psyche, and responses must be juggled, images donned and discarded, and refuge sought in strategies of asserting a more primary sense of self which can be neither complete nor unified.

The double interpellation creates an imaginative gap. That is, those whose language partakes of two divergent – and contradictory – registers have an increased arena for imperfect mimicry, incomplete reproduction, faulty copying, schism, inversions. But this is no space of freedom where one set of images can be rejected and the other accepted. Mostly, Murriss can only ever “pass” as black or white, and the pain, shame, and sometimes

triumph of a complex, unstable social identity is embedded in the language one is forced to wear. Even the initial calling into being of the Indigenous subject by her intimate circle of family and friends is in a language which includes the recognition of conflicting views of who she is. Murri, Aboriginal, Indigenous, blackfella – black language does not exist independently of that of whites. Affirming a separate black identity made from the discourses and images of the black cultural realm entails recognizing and rejecting the stigma attached to those images and discourses. There are constant attempts by blackfellas to partially withdraw from intercourse with the white world, in order to gain the space to mount an explicit counter-discourse; that is, to talk back. But this entails adopting the mantle of resistance, becoming “the radical,” another grotesque phantasmagoric object of fear and anxiety. These conditions create an explosive tension which, as we shall see, is reflected in the considerable anxiety and hostility among whites, and in anger and distress among blacks.

While otherness is always available, to be garnered by the imagination from disparate sources, “others” come in very different registers. The physical presence of racial others, even those characterized by a generalized social inequality, creates an immediate, viscerally real and challenging possibility of other selves. But the possibility is often squandered, in this case because the agency attendant on whiteness rejects any racial variation. Combine this rejection with the density and dynamism of social interaction within a racially split population, and the notion of stigma must be brought into use to supplement the interpellative process which primarily works through language and images. The concept of stigma, as developed by Goffman (1963), refers to daily embodied interactions rather than abstracted imagery. The ideological inscriptions of white and black subjects are relevant to the national imagery (in its local and national manifestations), while stigmatized social identities are experienced by blacks in interpersonal relations. In the ethnography which follows, I employ the concept of stigma to describe the way negative conceptions of Aboriginality are both recognized and resisted as a ubiquitous condition of everyday life and social interaction. That is, the notion of stigma refers to the more conscious and active interaction with derogation, while interpellation is to do with a more abstract and irresistible social process. Thus, while both “rednecks” and “Aborigines” are interpellated, stigma comes into play in interpersonal relationships, most potently in Murri subjectivities.

The signs of stigma attached to race are expressed and understood indirectly, for of course no one openly admits to being racist. While Aboriginality

is never explicitly stated to be unacceptable or illegitimate, nonetheless rural racial dynamics could be described as a struggle to affirm and reproduce Aboriginality in conditions where it is threatened with erasure. There are two major problems facing such activist political intentions. First, Aboriginality has re-emerged in changing conditions in the lifetimes of those who now carry responsibility for its reproduction. The consequence is that the expression of Aboriginality takes contradictory forms about which there are divided loyalties and sharp disagreements. Second, there are limited and contested spaces in which to establish any form of Aboriginality. While the “great Australian silence” about Aborigines is ended, the conditions for Aboriginal people’s expression are limited. On both the national and local stage Indigenous actors must perform for a white audience, because the black constituency is small, divided, and scattered. Mudrooroo (1997) discussed how this condition makes for a particular form of expression, ever chained to the enemy whose imagery it is trying to displace. Fanon bemoaned his condition of being assailed at various points by a historico-racial schema, its elements provided “by the other, the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories” (Fanon 1990: 109). The idea of autonomy and the desire for spaces of expression are not confined to artists and writers.

Given that systematic misrecognition and disrespect is a shared Aboriginal experience, we can recognize the emotional conditions discussed by Axel Honneth in developing a theory of the moral grammar of social conflicts. Human beings, he argues, have a “constitutional dependence . . . on the experience of recognition” (Honneth 1995: 136).<sup>32</sup> When social subjects lack the experience of social approval, an emotional space is made for the negative reactions of shame and rage. Honneth’s notion of “evaluative disrespect” refers to assaults on “honor,” “dignity,” or “status,” or more generally to “the degree of social esteem accorded to his or her manner of self-realization within a society’s inherited cultural horizon” (Honneth 1995: 134). Where individual forms of life and manners of belief are deemed inferior or deficient, then the subjects in question are robbed “of every opportunity to attribute social value to their own attributes” (Honneth 1995: 134). If it is true that “the experience of being disrespected carries with it the danger of an injury that can bring the identity of the person as a whole to the point of collapse” (Honneth 1995: 131–2), then the entrenched and systematic disrespect, which sometimes comes in the guise of benevolent, patronizing concern, must be a major constitutive force which shapes contemporary Indigenous society. In this work the imaginative and

double-edged aspects of these social relations will be emphasized. By recognizing both unconscious and self-conscious aspects of the construction of identities and what they are intended to convey, I hope to bring relief from the texts which seem to take up the white man's burden in their aim to shed light on others' suffering, but which further ensnare these others in a language they do not make and cannot remake (e.g., Neil 2002; Sutton 2001).

Rural towns are parochial. They appropriate and recirculate populist national debates, while their feedback into the national arena is almost entirely of bad or depressed images filtered through outsiders' eyes or statistical pens. Good and redemptive accounts of Indigenous people's history and culture appear in the more serious national media and circulate mainly in an elite urban arena.<sup>33</sup> They bear little relationship to rural experience. Indeed, many Aborigines resent the common privileging of "full-bloods" and "traditional people," seeing them as irrelevant to their own experience, and envying them their automatic authenticity. Further, what the current prime minister has dismissed as "black armband history" seems unreal and inappropriate in Bourke.

### Then and Now

My earlier book with the same geographical setting, *Black White or Brindle* (Cowlshaw 1988), attempted to unmask and analyze the pattern of race relations behind the drama of intense, obvious, and mundane levels of racial hostility which I had encountered among white residents of the river towns of western NSW. There were elements of the response to that study which are instructive in showing why so few ethnographic studies of racial dynamics exist, although textual analyses and historians' accounts from archival sources have flourished. While my documentation of racism and race relations was positively received, my interpretation of Aboriginal cultural responses, summarized as "oppositional culture," was considered wrong and even dangerous.<sup>34</sup> Critics were concerned that I treated certain characteristic orientations within the Aboriginal community as legitimate, organic, and political responses to historically given conditions. The critics demonstrated anthropologists' moral anxiety concerning the position of contemporary Aboriginal people in Australian society, and exemplified the psychological processes of projection, where one's own unrecognized anxieties are displaced onto others' actions.

These anxieties and projections are manifested in a series of refusals and rejections. Anthropologists who study colonial relations have been criticized for seeing Aboriginal culture as *only* a product of colonial relations, or *simply* as resistance, rather than appreciating the continuing significance of traditional forms or the uniqueness of Aboriginality. Such conceptual crudities encumber the literature, making it difficult to explore contemporary local meanings that have developed within the Aboriginal domain, especially those named “disorder” and “violence.” Perhaps this is what Field meant by the “postcolonial paralysis syndrome” (Field 1999: 193). A mode of sympathy prevails, a welfare mode, in which whitefellas express a boundless sympathy for the victims of genocide and violence, while patronizing these victims’ understanding of their own experiences. Thus Aboriginal people are counseled out of their anger and violence, which are seen as merely destructive or pathological, and no attention is paid to their specific complaints. Part of this is due to “the near total exclusion of the study of racial(ized) practices, beliefs, and institutions *among* subordinate categories” (Wacquant 1997: 225–6).

I now want to situate this current work by providing my own criticism of *Black, White or Brindle*. The major weakness of that work is paradoxically hinted at in what the critics missed; that is, in the account of whites’ racialized practices. Despite my attempt to eschew explanations based on individual moral failings, I believe that work allowed readers to cling to the commonsense view that racial problems, in rural Australia at least, are the responsibility of rednecks. While the work developed specific counter-arguments to the view that racism was driven by irrational prejudice located in the minds of racist individuals, such irrationalities lurked in the margins. I fell back at crucial points on my own sense of the injustices of the past and the present, thus allowing the liberal detestation of racism to remain unquestioned. Let me ask now, why are racist sentiments, or more specifically, the expression of racist sentiments, so universally abhorred when racial inequality appears everywhere virtually uncontested?

Perhaps it is because the overt racists give the game away. We, the nation, have assiduously hidden the secret, shared fear and contempt for strange or strangers’ bodies, smothering occasional eruptions of racism with disapproval, and filling the blanks where actual relationships with them should be with assertions of goodwill and plans to improve their conditions. And here are these fools, exposing the secret! “Racists,” we call them, hoping they can be silenced. The objects of this racism know these sentiments intimately, so who is it we are so anxious to hide them from? Do we fear

that such sentiments could become legitimate? If so, that fear already hints that we understand them to be widely shared, only held in abeyance by the constant policing of language and sentiments. Perhaps, like the admonishing of children not to speak about the stigma they observe, and the agreement that we will not notice, for instance, physical disabilities, this interdiction on the expression of any critical sentiments about blackfellas is a part of the ordinary hypocrisy of social life. But this ordinary hypocrisy is visible and interrogated in Bourke.

This work will address the way people live out the rivalries between imagined racial identities. It tries to evoke the complexity and color, the sensory reality and moral ambiguities of these relationships, the mean strivings and generous humor in these spaces. It does this by focusing on the agency of Aborigines, rather than on white hegemony.<sup>35</sup> It also attempts to engage with the living and disputed domain of the whole population, and to draw from it insights that are relevant to a range of relationships with Indigenous people across the country.

#### NOTES

- 1 Bourke is only one such place; items from northern Australia and other western New South Wales (NSW) towns, as well as the notorious inner Sydney suburb of Redfern, feature intermittently in reportage of social/racial problems in the major metropolitan and national media. There is no equivalent in Australia of the “Harlemworld” which functions as a person’s natural home “if you’re black” (Jackson 2001).
- 2 There is a dearth of serious intellectual challenge to these common images and to the moralistic discourses that feed off them. Academic work tends to rise above rather than deconstruct these racialized social spaces. Social scientists would rather not mess with confused ideas in their material and embodied manifestations, preferring to deal with textual representations which stay still on the page. A series of sophisticated accounts of *The Dark Side of the Dream* (Hodge and Mishra 1990) and *Uncanny Australia* (Gelder and Jacobs 1998) analyze race relations from a distance. As Hansonism disrupted Australia’s image of itself as egalitarian and tolerant, intellectuals who believe it their task to interpret and re-textualize the Australian psyche and ideology have tried to theorize what went wrong with the redhead (e.g., Morris 2000), but few have paid close attention to the cultural domain of those who either fuel or share her political project. Jennifer Rutherford’s (2000) attempt to construct a sympathetic portrait is encumbered with an intellectual, bourgeois distaste.

## INTRODUCING THE SIGNS OF SOCIAL LIFE

- 3 I use the terms *whitefellas* as a loose category consisting of the domain where Anglo Australians and their traditions prevail.
- 4 *Pub* in the Australian vernacular refers to a public house or hotel, or rather the hotel bar, which is the traditional site for the life of drinking men, and, in urban and Aboriginal contexts, women.
- 5 Few people own guns, as gun control is strict and attracts wide support in Australia, and although police are armed, there have been no shootings in Bourke. In fact, interracial violence is rare. The frequency of shooting deaths in the United States arouses both horror and astonishment in Australia.
- 6 *Other* is used here in the existentialist sense recovered by Feldman to mean the stranger, an other to the self in a relationship which emerges from “situated practices of domination and social violence” (Feldman 1994: 416 n. 6).
- 7 It was this anxiety that some Australian commentators, including esteemed historian Geoffrey Blainey, exploited after the High Court decision which recognized native title (Blainey 1993).
- 8 The NSW Aboriginal Protection Board, renamed the NSW Aborigines Welfare Board in 1943, operated under an Act that gave the almost all-white Boards comprehensive powers over Aboriginal people. No independent Indigenous rights were recognized and they did not have equal civil rights. Gambling and liquor were forbidden and these became the focus of defiant habits and political demands for citizenship rights (Beckett 1994).
- 9 The place of rural Aborigines was serially disrupted through the 20th century with changes in the rural economy. Around Bourke severe dislocation from land began around 1860 and continued with massacres, forced removals from one area to another, children being taken to institutions, and confinement in “missions.” Many Murri adults grew up in families who worked in the cattle or sheep industry from which they were ejected between the 1960s and the 1980s when stockworkers, fencers, and even many shearers became redundant. A few gained laboring jobs, but most eventually became unemployed and many families have accepted life without work, living on meager unemployment benefits (Beckett 1988; Goodall 1996; Mathews 1977; Morris 1989; Rowley 1972a).
- 10 These words appeared on a widely distributed poster at the height of the land rights movement in the 1970s.
- 11 The terms *national debates* and *public discussion* refer empirically to news items, articles, opinion pieces, and letters in those media outlets where educated Australians get their news and current affairs; that is, the morning broadsheets such as *The Australian* and state newspapers, as well as the state-funded Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) and Special Broadcasting Services (SBS) radio and television broadcasts. Matters of serious public concern will be debated in these places, and it is assumed that most politicians, senior public servants, professional people, and other intellectuals read or watch them

- regularly. “National debates” are also aired in more exclusive and serious media outlets, and in the tabloid press and the commercial radio and television stations which are far more popular.
- 12 *Murri*, pronounced with a deep rolled *r* and sometimes spelled *Murdi*, is a local designation of Aborigines, the equivalent of Kooris, Murrays, and Nungas. *Koori* is a more common designation used by coastal and urban Aborigines of southeast Australia. Tribal identifications are also being asserted, as we shall see.
  - 13 There is both historical specificity and ambiguity here, which will be explored in chapter 7. In the main, specific humiliating experiences are recalled as aberrations, or as due to personal qualities, even though they are clues to a systematic structural condition.
  - 14 Aboriginal reserves in Australia were usually small areas set aside, mostly in the late 19th century, where Aborigines could reside under the control of the relevant state or territory government. Those called government stations, known as missions, like that in Brewarrina, had managers whose power was considerable (Keating 1994; Mathews 1977). Since the recognition of land rights and native title, what was left of the reserves is in the hands of Aboriginal Land Councils. Unlike the USA, reserves were never self-governing entities or the locus of Indigenous nations.
  - 15 In the past I have encountered objections to the reinforcement of “false” racial categories, which I have answered in detail elsewhere (Cowlshaw 2000). This work is committed to exposing the way race is lived as a systematic array of social meanings, both as category and substance.
  - 16 Tradition(s) are conventionally conceived as either authentic and incommensurable, with distortion or assimilation resulting from cross-fertilization, or else as constructed, where the recognition of agency carries the implication of spuriousness. The crudities of fixity on the one hand and fabrication on the other can be disrupted by the ethnographic immediacy of encounters with real people, situations, and struggles. A newer binary, between “internal dynamics” and “external forces,” is sometimes used as a replacement for “traditional” and “introduced” (Macdonald 2001), bypassing the need to examine how “the apparent taking up of non-Aboriginal cultural practices in many ways masked the continuance of an Aboriginal value system that underlay outward adaptations” (Wood 2001).
  - 17 *Gubba* or *Gub* is an Aboriginal term for whitefella. Its origins have been attributed to a term for “white demon” in one of the hundreds of Aboriginal languages, or alternatively to a characteristic pronunciation of *governor*.
  - 18 As Tess Lea pointed out, “criticizing the categories was a means of being non-subservient even if now we would see the optimism of replacement as naive. Renaming is a form of subversion and critical analysis” (personal communication).

- 19 Vicki Grieve has made this point in relation to what she calls her “mixed race” heritage, where she is affirming her Scottish as well as her Aboriginal forebears in her postgraduate research (personal communication). See also Johnson (1993).
- 20 The 10.5 hectare Bourke Aboriginal Reserve to the west of the town, established in 1946 as an unstaffed reserve, is still home to a small group of indomitable people who refused the encouragement to leave what was once thought of as a site of unqualified underprivilege and deprivation. The Reserve has been officially renamed the Edith Edwards Village, but there is still considerable social autonomy and separateness from the town.
- 21 Thus Bourke should not be equated with what Larry McMurtry, speaking of the USA, calls the “deep black, vicious, septic, century old hatred of Indians which permeates many of the hard little towns . . . Most of the people doing the hating have never read a page of history: they’re just mean, and their meanness is deadly” (McMurtry 2000: 27).
- 22 I promised to publish a book of the stories I and my research assistants had recorded. That book became a code among Murriss for dreams and fantasies, as well as an explanation of my presence.
- 23 With some important exceptions, Aboriginal families occupy public housing, either through the Aboriginal Housing Cooperative or as an allocation from Housing Commission resources. In the 1960s the Housing Commission built low-cost houses at the western end of the town, but in the 1970s the Aboriginal Housing Cooperative followed what was known as the “salt and pepper” policy, buying or building houses such as Tilly’s in other areas of the town. Thus Bourke’s residents are partially geographically interwoven yet socially separate.
- 24 *Humpies* is the name given to simple habitations constructed of bush or improvised materials.
- 25 I had intended to join Tilly and her older sister when they went grape picking at Mildura in January 2001, but she died suddenly and unexpectedly after a minor operation in December 2000 at the age of 70.
- 26 The main fieldwork for this book was conducted in 1998 and extended in 1999, interspersed with travels to other places and visits of Bourke friends to Sydney. Besides everyday interaction and observation, I taped the personal life stories and ideas which people wanted to record, with a local research assistant, John Mackay, and further assistance and cooperation from many others.
- 27 My analysis is not about how conversation works in the specialized way Harvey Sacks (1984) conducted his research on talk. Rather, the examples of talk I give typify and encapsulate certain meanings which are regular features of social interchange.
- 28 Kathleen Stewart (1996) was assisted in capturing on the page something of the meaning and pleasures of Appalachian mountain talk by the public familiarity

- with its sound and style, courtesy of hillbilly music, television, and film. There is no equivalent popular knowledge of Aboriginal English, despite some popular stage and television shows in recent years, such as the musical *Bran New Day*.
- 29 Judith Butler (1997) developed the notion of interpellation following Althusser (1971: 163). Her analysis skillfully marries the theorizing of psychic and social processes by emphasizing the *psychic* life of power embedded in language.
  - 30 In any social setting there will be some degree of different languages, or registers, which means the questions I am raising have a general significance. It is noteworthy that Goffman refers only in passing to “the important group of misunderstandings which arise during interaction between persons who come from groups with different ritual standards” (Goffman 1972: 17 n. 11).
  - 31 I accept Butler’s argument that there is no self prior to the social self, but the self is hailed into being at various stages in life, and from contrasting and contradictory positions. Self-conscious selves emerge repeatedly in inchoate and incomplete forms, always partially crystallizing into the social persona we become familiar with and try to integrate, as we sift memories and events with a flexible ability to interpellate even our own experiences as we age. I am not denying the permanence, or continuity, of the original moment of interpellation, but while we may ever remain strangers to ourselves, the impact of interpellation on the experience of the self is surely modified over time.
  - 32 Honneth begins from the work of Hegel and George Herbert Mead, and gives a technical precision to the terms honor, respect, and recognition as social processes, examining how these conditions, and the emotions they generate, can become the basis for social movements. Despite the apparent unimportance of strangers to one’s personal sense of self, there is a remarkable need for public respect and recognition, which is why the concept of honor is so socially significant.
  - 33 Articles in the serious press, and programs on government-funded ABC and SBS radio and television, have shown a growing appreciation of traditional Aboriginal cultural forms, as well as documenting colonial history in increasingly complex ways in the last two decades.
  - 34 These were made in a series of book reviews and references discussed by Lattas and myself (Cowlshaw 1993; Lattas 1993).
  - 35 Rowse (1990) misinterpreted my previous use of the term *hegemony*, which I use in Gramsci’s sense as incomplete ideological dominance, which has to be always reasserted and renewed. The intense responses evoked by Aboriginal practice precisely illustrate that they do present a threat.