Making a Life: Getting Ahead, and Getting a Living in Aboriginal New South Wales

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ABSTRACT
This paper offers an ethnographically grounded examination of the intersections between work, employment and identity for Indigenous people living in a country town in far western New South Wales, Australia. It argues that work, employment and labour are locally deployed categories that meet mainstream discourse in a precarious fashion and, that this disjunction has clear material and ideological repercussions. For most Aboriginal people in Wilcannia, you are who you are, not by virtue of what you have ‘become’ in any economic, professional or educational sense. Who you are is not a becoming, it is established at birth. These genealogical forms of being through kinship see a construction of self which in many ways is at variance to the standard ‘autonomous self-regulating individual’ (Sennett 1998:215). This sense of self, for most, is not determined by engagement in the capitalist division of labour; indeed, the greater the engagement in the capitalist economy, the more problematic and fraught a sense of self and of belonging can become.

Key words: Aboriginal Australia, Wilcannia, employment, identity, social inclusion.

ATTITUDES TO WORK
‘People don’t like Jack, he’s always getting things’ (Beckett 2005:123).

The following song was written by a Wilcannia Aboriginal man in his early twenties. Titled ‘The CDEP¹ Lament’, it is sung to the tune of Jimmy Little’s song ‘Royal Telephone’.

I drove past the yard early Monday morning
All the boys just laying there just stretched out on the lawn
I asked them then ‘Is there no work today’
They said they were waiting there until we get our pay

Chorus: Telephone the office, Oh what joy divine
CDEP will pay you even if you’re not on time
You can go up to the yard and sit around all day
Because in the evening you will still get your pay

After smoko time I went to have a look
All the boys were sittin’ there reading dirty books
I just said to them, ‘There’s still no work today’?
They said ‘we are waiting here we never got our pay’

Repeat Chorus.
(Jarrid Cattermole 2003 Wilcannia).

_Oceania_ 80, 2010 143
Ideas, attitudes and practices relating to work, employment and identity are at once central and peripheral to daily life in Wilcannia for both black and white. The CDEP Lament written in 2003 recognises a particular attitude to work in a humorous way, yet the author names it a lament. The author may be lamenting the unpaid wages of the ‘boys’, or an acknowledged approach to work, or being ironic, or lamenting the whole situation of welfare dependence. What I can say is that the singer and author is known by both black and white as being ‘a hard worker’ – someone who has been in full time and sustained employment for at least the eight years I have known him. The fact that this song exists, that he can happily sing it to the appreciative mob (comprising many CDEP participants), and remain as one of the mob reveals something about how ideas and attitudes towards work and employment are tied in complex ways to belonging and to identity politics. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in Wilcannia, the following only scratches the surface of the complexities that are at play. Whilst I am limiting the paper to the particular circumstances of Wilcannia, this paper foreshadows further analysis based on my current research in Moree and Kempsey over the past two years, in that many of the practices and attitudes towards paid work in Wilcannia may be extrapolated out to other NSW country towns.

WILCANNIA TOWN

Wilcannia is a small country town over one thousand kilometres west of Sydney with a somewhat fluid population. According to the Wilcannia Community Working Party it is home for approximately 750 people, 700 (93%) of whom are Aboriginal people (WCWP 2001). This can be compared to approximately 24% in the late 1950s when the Aboriginal population was around 200 the core of whom was Barkindji (Beckett 2005:30). The Barkindji are the traditional owners of the area and comprise the majority of local Aboriginal people. The Barkindji-speaking peoples were historically known as different groups but are now referred to collectively as Barkindji (Hercus 1993). The Barkindji people who live in Wilcannia have come from various reserves and locations in the far west including Pooncarie, along the Darling River and, to a lesser extent Carowra Tank and Menindie government stations (Beckett 2005:76). The main other group represented in town is that of the Ngiyampaa people. In terms of general services, the town has one small food store, a pub, a golf club, two motels (which mostly cater to service and utility providers working around the region), two petrol stations which supply through travellers, including those who service the town, and a local hospital operated by nursing staff with the assistance of visiting Doctors and the Royal Flying Doctor Service (RFDS). As at 2009, it is one of the two NSW towns targeted by the Minister for Indigenous Affairs as part of the ‘Closing the Gap’ strategy which aims to attack entrenched disadvantage. Projected by the wider media as a marginal town with a marginalised Aboriginal community Wilcannia experiences high levels of unemployment, alcohol abuse, and associated violence (Sydney Morning Herald 2009). The unemployment demographic, like the demographic of Wilcannia, is ambiguous and difficult to ascertain exactly. A 2001 Wilcannia Community Working Party (WCWP) report stated that forty-five percent of people over the age of sixteen were unemployed. However, this number does not include those who are not actively seeking work. Also, the forty two adults who at that time worked for the (now cancelled) CDEP were considered employed. The data on unemployment, like the population data, are circulated across various documents and reports and scavenged from one to the other across time. This builds in distortions which are not checked for accuracy, a situation acknowledged by NGOs and local government who also comment on the inaccuracies of the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data. The point I make however is, Wilcannia has a predominately welfare economy.

WHO YOU IS?

In Australian mainstream culture and indeed in western cultures more generally, there is a tendency to conflate a person’s social value and worth with their occupation and to socially
position them accordingly. ‘What do you do?’ is often one of the first questions asked in social situations in the way of making small talk (itself a common social demand). However, the inferences made from this small talk are not so insignificant. The conflation of work, identity and social placement is evidenced every day. Game show hosts introduce contestants by telling us for example, ‘here is James, James is an accountant’, or ‘Mary is a policewoman’. Occupations no longer held, or gender or age may be used to identify someone — ‘John is a retired engineer’. ‘I’m a grandmother’ or, ‘father of two’. But the question ‘what you do’ is the major way of socially locating a person. What a person does, or indeed did for employment, has become increasingly the definition of who a person is, both for the self and others. However, the question ‘What do you do?’ is not, in the main, part of Aboriginal discourse in far western NSW. Instead people ask, ‘Who you is?’

The question ‘who you is?’ performs a function similar to the standard more conventional and wider society question ‘what do you do?’ among non-Aboriginal people, in that it operates as a two-way process which serves to locate interlocutors in the social structure. Yet, the kind of information fed back and its implications differ in the two cases. Whilst the question ‘who you is?’ is regularly asked of any new white face in town whites do not approach blacks to seek out this kind of information. Nor do blacks voluntarily or regularly identify themselves in these terms to whites. The answers being sought by Aboriginal people in response to ‘who you is’ are not related to job title or perceived income. When an Aboriginal person in Wilcannia asks ‘who you is?’ of another Aboriginal person, the response being sought is one which locates a person relationally, for example: ‘I’m X’s nephew’ or ‘my Mother is A’ or ‘Y is my cousin’. This is a relational identification in more than one sense as it seeks not only to identify self in relation to others but in relation to place (country). Here my experience in Wilcannia reflects MacDonald’s work with the Wiradjuri in central NSW, namely, that their ontology remains to some extent ‘a relational ontology [that] sees people defined through relationships rather than roles’ (2004:15) In responding to questions such as this, Aboriginal people explore and affirm kin relationships and social networks across towns and cities. This serves to socially and geographically locate the person(s) being met, thereby positioning them within recognised frameworks and determining the kind of social intercourse that may, or indeed may not be entered into.

One of many examples of this process took place one night in the Wilcannia golf club. An Aboriginal woman in her mid-twenties came over to the table where I was sitting with four Aboriginal people having a drink. She asked one of the men, ‘Remember me, Uncle Brian – you used to nurse me?’ Uncle Brian said ‘No, what your name?’ The woman replied by giving her name and saying who her mother and father are. These kin connections were then linked to other kin connections and events by those present. Uncle Brian then went on to tell those at our table that when the woman was a little girl he used to nurse her on his knee. The woman was quite large and Uncle Brian went on to say ‘I wouldn’t wanna fucken nurse you now’. This produced gales of laughter and the story, building up to the punch line, was re-told again and again to every person who joined the table. At the end of the evening all the people who sat at our table throughout the night knew who the woman was (if they did not before), had shared in past events of her life and the lives of related kin and located her accordingly. It is incidents such as this (which also draw on the storytelling matrix), that strengthen, highlight, renew and expand kin and social networks and sociality. They locate people within the social strata in ways which are grounded in knowing and being known in relation to others, to place, to events and in time.

For an Aboriginal person to ask a white person ‘who you is?’ and quickly follow this up by asking if one is a nurse, teacher, police officer or other possible Wilcannia employment option, is common. The occupational line of enquiry which follows this question is fairly standard when addressing a new white face. The question ‘who you is?’ when asked of a white person may not necessarily have as its preferred or even express purpose the elicitation of an occupation but, in the experience of the Aboriginal people of Wilcannia, most non-Aboriginal people respond to this question with an occupational answer. This is to a great extent how the people responding
perceive what is in fact being asked. ‘I’m a teacher at the school’ or ‘I’m a nurse at the hospital’ is who as well as what these white professionals perceive themselves to be. Occupation is often their purpose to being in Wilcannia (double entendre intended). Occupation is what white people for the most part are doing with – doing for – Aboriginal people in Wilcannia. This is not to discount the white farmers and graziers and their families who live on outlying stations, many of whom have long standing connections with Wilcannia, or the dwindling number of white people who have lived in Wilcannia for some years. These connections contain degrees of history on both sides and a certain familiarity which becomes of interest and note in the event of a perceived piece of news or gossip. But these people comprise a small percentage of the white minority and are no longer involved in the majority of jobs which ‘service’ Wilcannia. Indeed it appears that ties between black and white are weakening as the longer-term relationships which were established between station owners and their Aboriginal workers during the pastoral era have all but ceased. While these relationships may have had elements of the master servant dyad, there is much nostalgia on both sides: a sentiment also echoed in Beckett’s study in the 1950s which saw Aboriginal people remark how ‘things had been better between black and white in the early days’ (2005:13).

What seems clear is that work is now the main medium through which most whitefellas come into contact with blackfellas. But this is not a world of blackfellas working with or for whitefellas; it is a world of whitefellas ostensibly doing things for blackfellas through work. Indeed, blackfellas contact with whitefellas at work is, in the contemporary era, often their main experience of whitefellas. Austin-Broos, in discussing the situation of the Arrente states that blacks and whites meet only at the point of service delivery in a highly bureaucratised welfare economy (2003:124). This is equally the case in Wilcannia where most interaction takes place around service provision such as through the school, hospital, local police, legal services, employee services, Centrelink, the roadhouse and the small mixed business shop.

Whilst there is some degree of social mixing at the golf club and less so at the local pub — the latter being favoured by a majority Aboriginal clientele — for the most part, few of these relationships extend into the private domestic sphere of sociality. Exceptions mainly comprise de-facto and married relationships between white men and Aboriginal women. Yet even here the white spouse or partner is, as a rule, more immersed in Aboriginal community life. Black and white children who went to school together often cease to mix after leaving school. Whilst there can be friendly acknowledgement there is, for the most part a separation between black and white which is marked by unequal socio-economic status and cultural mores (cf. Cowlishaw 2004:9). What are primarily work-defined relationships between black and white shape interaction as they also create perception. This point of meeting and coming together is also, however, a point of separation and difference. This highly structured, regulated and limited zone of interaction which has been the norm since the pastoral era and following the introduction of more accessible welfare in the 1970s, sees the category ‘white’ become, or arrive in Wilcannia as, something of a monolith in relation to white identity and paid work. There exists at one level the idea of a uniform whiteness which at another level is complicated by apparently close black and white relationships. Yet the idea of a uniform whiteness remains the default position held by most Aboriginal people; particularly in terms of how easily jobs and the role of the worker come to whites.

For western cultures, labour in its most common guise of paid ‘work’ offers a cogent means through which people come to know themselves and become known to others (Crawford 1985). Willis considers Western societies’ mode of identification with work to result from the fact that ‘labour power... is the main mode of active connection with the world: the way par excellence of articulating the innermost self with external reality’ (1977:2). The self is expressed through work and working relations as these are understood. As Willis goes on to say, this active connectivity with the world through labour power is ‘...the dialectic of the self to the self through the concrete world’ (1977:2). Personhood in this model is in part defined through “badges of ability”, achievement, and the symbols of consumption that only success
at work can buy’ (Crawford 1985:78). This is tied to individual acquisition which is ‘articulated through personal possessions … rather than personal relations’ (Morris 1989:218 emphasis in original). In the Wilcannia labour context, non-Aboriginal people hold most of the better paid positions which are often short to medium term contract positions. The majority of these people are not from Wilcannia and the positions they hold are those known as semi-skilled, skilled or professional, for example, school principals, teachers, hospital administration, nurses, police officers and those working as indoor staff for Central Darling Shire Council (CDSC). Therefore, Aboriginal experience of who whitefellas are (that is, job-holders and town service providers) meets the self perception of the white job holder. In other words, white people are nurses, police, managers and office workers; black people, for the most part, are not – the majority being unemployed. This experience highlights and further ingrains inter-cultural differences which are a source of much ill-feeling as well as misunderstanding between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in terms of who runs the town and whose town it is perceived to be.

When a white policeman comes to work in town and his wife is appointed as a Shire clerk – when a local white farmer whose farm is suffering a downturn, and who is known by most Aboriginal locals as a bigot, is appointed as a ‘Cultural Sites Supervisor’ over Aboriginal workers – when his wife is appointed as a clerk at the Shire – when a new to town white is appointed as the town’s Community Development Facilitator and subsequently appoints his wife as a ‘mentor’ for Aboriginal people paid at consultancy rates – when all these things happen, Aboriginal people note and remark upon them: ‘Why don’t our own people get these jobs?’ At the same time, there is little awareness of the extent and nature of the training and skills required for certain jobs, and the allocation of jobs to whites is not understood in these terms. It is simply interpreted as preferencing whites, which is undoubtedly sometimes the case. But, the reasons for the perceived preferencing of whites in the labour market and the low rates of Aboriginal people in the private sector are complex and include both historical and contemporary aspects.

It might be argued that if few Aboriginal people are employed (in what is overall a relatively small pool of available jobs) then identification with an occupation is not possible or is, at best, a limited option. By looking historically to a time in Wilcannia when employment was, at least for men, quite readily available and comparing it with the uptake of available contemporary employment in Wilcannia, a sense of the place accorded to work as a part of life can be more fully expressed. Prior to the 1960s, many Aboriginal men in Wilcannia were employed within the pastoral industry. This mode of work for Aboriginal people was echoed across much of New South Wales and the Northern Territory from the end of the nineteenth century (Cowlishaw 1999; Jebb 2002; Macdonald 2004; Morris 1989). However, from the late 1960s the pastoral industry declined across the far west and indeed the nation (Beckett 1958). Many factors concatenated here; including economic downturn and environmental degradation of fragile soils. People around Wilcannia relayed to Jeremy Beckett that fencing, previously the main form of Aboriginal labour from the 1950s, was no longer required: they speculated that perhaps this was because it had all been done (2005:16). Whilst the push to equal wages by pastoral workers in the Northern Territory in the late 1960s (Cowlishaw 1999) is more generally cited as a cause of reduced work for Aboriginal people, this is perhaps less clear as an explanation for reduced Aboriginal employment in Wilcannia. Here, despite Aboriginal people of the region forming ‘a significant source of membership for the AWU’ (Ellem and Shields 2006:298) unionisation was more related to the larger stations and other industry such as mining. Wilcannia residents were invariably involved with non-unionised contract work and sub-contract work for a wage fixed according to the contract fee or a share in the contract (Beckett 2005:15). It was not uncommon for droving and fencing work to be sub-contracted to an Aboriginal person who would, in turn, select workers from his kin network (Beckett 2005). According to Beckett, up until 1970 those Aboriginal people who were skilled and willing to work could find some form of employment as a continuation of the post war
boom, and, could ‘enjoy the luxury of walking out on an employer ...in the certainty that he could find something else’ (2005:15; cf. also, Beckett 2000). Yet, as Aboriginal people became more emancipated and welfare entered the economy the low wages offered by the farmers and cockies, and which kept them away from home, was perhaps less attractive than being at home with a regular sum requiring no effort (Beckett 2005:16).

In terms of past identification with work, there is evidence from local Aboriginal people aged from their forties upwards of some expressive connection between identity and work roles held in the past. Older people said things such as, ‘I was a ringer’ (a stockman), or ‘I was a concreter with the DMR’ (Department of Main Roads) when talking about their past (Beckett 2005; cf. Cowlishaw 2004). These kinds of statements were not however responses to questions or discussions about work per se; they were an unsolicited part of everyday talk as people walked around town with me, pointing out such things as gutters, concrete culverts and tarred roads that they had helped to construct or talking about the kinds of clothes they used to wear when they were ringers: the ‘cowboy boot’, ‘real fancy shirts’, ‘the hat’. Austin-Broos (2003:119) has talked about the changing relationship of Aboriginal people in Central Australia to the meanings of country ‘as mythically interpreted’, and of how ‘their objectifications of self, or their “identities,” come not only from engagements with places but also through an engagement with things’. In the case of Wilcannia, ‘things’ such as concrete culverts invoke a sense of place as they also reinforce relatedness. Importantly, when telling stories such as this, people indicate who was present, who the people were in relation to themselves and significant others, where these people are now, if they have ‘passed away’, who did what on the job, and some of the laughs and incidents they shared. People who used to work in the pastoral industry before these jobs were lost talk about ‘doing fencing’, ‘mustering’, being ‘a ringer’ and ‘shearin’. For these older people who worked, often casually (this being the nature of the work available) for much of their lives, a clear association with occupational roles appears to be at least a nominal part of self-identity when relating aspects of their past. People were ringers, were sheep shearsers in terms of verbal identification. They were this however, most often, in the company of kin. People did speak, and still speak, with pride about their work in the pastoral industry yet they are people, place and activities stories more than work related stories (cf. Beckett 2005). They involve a sharing and a re-living of experience which reinforces and/or reminds the self and others of important aspects of social relations.

I contend that, even though jobs in the pastoral industry were a source of pride, the extent to which a sense of self – cultural identity proper – was, and is, currently linked to a recognisable work ethic or particular work role remains limited. In the Wilcannia case the overt and fond nostalgia and pride for the hard working pastoralist life often sits uneasily with the direct ethnographic evidence which asserts a quite limited approach to, at any rate, a readily understood sense of responsibility to the job or employer. Beckett’s work in the 1950s and my own work in Wilcannia from 2002 suggests that then, as now, being employed (or more specifically, being regularly employed) as a particular way of looking at life is, for most, at once peripheral to, irrelevant to, and resistant to the ‘business’ at hand: that is, the ‘business’ of being Aboriginal. Beckett states that,

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

This appears to suggest a ‘take it or leave it’ attitude to employment as well as a prioritisation of other things. Beckett goes on to state, ‘Men will say ‘...I don’t want to work all the time like some people do’. Leisure is something for which they are ready to forego the money they
could otherwise be earning’ (1958:195). MacDonald also asserts that financial considerations are not a priority and ‘Aboriginal understandings of relatedness often take precedence over working for the sake of work or for the pay packet’ (2004:12; cf Eades 1994:99). Beckett does however comment—in the revision of his 1957 work— that the nature of pastoral work meant fairly long absences of weeks and occasionally months away from home. He feels he may have been unduly harsh in describing the quite lengthy periods spent at home as ‘idleness’ rather than ‘leisure’ (2005:25). Nevertheless, the situation in the 1950s that Beckett describes whereby Aboriginal people made little effort to go out and find work, and where ‘some quite literally wait for it to come to them’ (2005:114), is one which resonates in Wilcannia today. One overriding difference is that up until the 1970s (and due to the nature of work available) it was a ‘sellers market for labour’ in the far west (Beckett 2005:15).

Currently, the lack of uptake of what appear to be available jobs and the Aboriginal people’s tendency to leave a job after a short period in Wilcannia appears to be in conflict with their expressed and strong rhetoric that having a job is the answer to the social ills of alcohol abuse and alcohol related violence. But the taking up or rejection of employment is no simple equation. Jobs and job prospects appear at face value to be available, yet many factors work against the taking up of these ‘opportunities’. What is available are often low paying, short term jobs and traineeships many of which have been funded by government programmes which have little long term possibilities for continuation or any real prospect of using the skills gained. On one occasion a young boy who worked extremely hard on a traineeship for twelve months found there was no available position at the end. He expressed disillusionment and an unwillingness to try as hard again - if at all. TAFE courses which seek to ‘skill people up’ require a minimum number of enrolments although Wilcannia is given special dispensation with eight as a minimum requirement. The efficacy of running any course for eight horticulturalists, or eight mechanics, or eight of anything in a town as small as Wilcannia has to be questioned. When a horticulture course was initiated in 2003 only two people attended on the first day, four on the second day, and two on the third. I bumped into two of the people enrolled in the course on the first day of class as they were walking down the street and asked why they were not in class. They laughed and told me, ‘Oh, we’re going tomorrow’. A few weeks in to the course, there was no-one in attendance. One girl got pregnant and felt that it was too hard to attend; her partner who raved enthusiastically to me about the course for the first week but attended sporadically during this time also dropped out. Most simply expressed no interest. They also however mention the difficulty of keeping up motivation and momentum when most of their peers are not working. If all of your mates are hanging out at home or around the town, the incentive to attend a course for which no obvious job prospects present themselves operates against the likelihood of attendance.

In many cases the jobs on offer have no historical precedent. Aboriginal people are engaged in a changing job dynamic where ‘gammon’ or bogus jobs are a new phenomenon and people are responding to these new conditions. Moreover, if one feels that the only jobs available to you are ‘shit jobs’, or indeed spurious jobs that Aboriginal people say whitefellas would not take, there is a tendency to ‘knock them back’. Why strive for the shitty jobs of the white working class? High unemployment and the offer of what are perceived to be lesser valued, lesser paid, often short-term government-funded jobs, and work programmes which do not lead to employment, neither encourage a strong work ethic nor any sense of personal worth in relation to mainstream regular paid work.

Here Aboriginal desires and articulations, echoing standard public discourses, that work is a panacea to many social ills do not reflect their structural position within the economy and bear little relationship to available employment in what is commonly termed ‘the real economy’. The desperate attempts by government agencies to find Aboriginal people jobs are not working. The political creation of designated jobs in the public sector and the glaring absence of unfettered private sector jobs reveals, as it does elsewhere in NSW, ‘the nature of the racial redistribution of employment opportunities in the contemporary period’ (Morris
1989:192). The once vibrant ‘Queen City of the West’ which provided Wilcannia residents and outlying farmers with supplies is not flourishing. The economy is one with limited services which are grounded in service provision for Aboriginal people by non-Aboriginal people and partly as a result, Aboriginal labour is not required.

What are perceived to be ‘good jobs’ are seen to be the domain of the whites. But whilst the idea of having these jobs appears at times to be envied by Aboriginal locals 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 socialisation required by the kinds of jobs they (to some extent) fantasise about and imagine holding.

**COCONUTS**

It is not only whites however, but those who are like whites that are the subject of Aboriginal ambivalence and envy where work, access to resources and consumption are concerned. Here we enter the territory of the coconut, those Aboriginal people who are said to be black on the outside but white on the inside – people who are charged with keeping ‘a white house’; people who ‘don’t sit down with us’, ‘who don’t share’, who ‘big note’ themselves and whose patterns of work, consumption and communication leave them open to the charge that they are not Aboriginal enough (cf. Cowlishaw 2004; Morris 1989:210-215). A Koori man from Sydney who was teaching a part-time TAFE art course for Aboriginal people in a neighbouring town told me that the students in his class had taken exception to his manner. Although identified as Aboriginal, he was seen to be acting like a ‘white boss’. He asked for order in the class and wanted students to think about and justify their reasons for art-making and its content. He told me that the people in the art course responded to him by calling him ‘a fucken coconut’. He said he took out his payslip and showed it to the class, saying; ‘see this, this is what I take home every week, I’ll be a fucken banana if it means I take this home’. In saying this he was demonstrating to the class that it did not matter what names the class called him, in the end he took home a sizeable pay-packet which we must read as something he valued and which allowed him to live in the way he wanted. Yet, this is precisely part of what the class was criticising. There was a clear difference in values operating, and which indirectly inverted the meanings of the class/teacher interaction. By demonstrating his worth and values in his own terms the teacher, for his part, thought that he had ‘got one up’ on the people calling him a coconut. But for those naming him a coconut his actions simply confirmed the label. This Koori artist does not see himself as being like a white. He is, in different contexts, and to many other Aboriginal people, a ‘brother’. His role as an artist, engaged with the white worlds of art education and exhibition, also locates him as something of a cultural broker for an Aboriginality of a kind. His dealings with both black and white in these institutions extend beyond specific geographic locations, specific language groups and families. It allows for a less stressful kind of engagement on Aboriginal matters which require consultation with, and approval of, what is broadly termed ‘the Aboriginal voice’. Whilst coconut status and behaviour is generally agreed upon and some people never seem to be free of the title, neither title nor status is fixed. One may shift in and out of being a coconut as behaviour is modified and/or a situation is perceived. Although having a job is not specified as being the cause of coconut status, and not all who hold jobs are named coconuts, it is often the pre-requisite of having a job, and therefore access to certain resources which enable coconut behaviour and make naming possible. Those coconuts who have gone ‘whitefella way’ are seen to have ‘rejected ‘sharing’ and ‘togetherness’ as significant aspects of social interaction’ (Morris 1989:213). Coconuts whether permanent or temporary have managed to some degree to make the separation between the idea of ‘home’ as a shared moral economy and their expended labour; they have managed to overcome the internal social constraints of shaming which were ‘used to subvert attempts to appropriate European ‘ways of life’ amongst community members’ (Morris: 1989:154). Kin versus market economy is not entirely hegemonic but there does seem to be little room to move outside the
more prevalent moral economy (cf. Peterson 1993; 2005) or maintain other kinds of connections on the basis of, for example, shared gender, being a parent or the notion of pan-Aboriginality. One cannot, with any certainty differentiate those who end up as coconuts from those who don’t.

There are those however who seem doubly damned; these comprise members of families who have achieved greater access to resources (‘black dollars’), for example in Land Councils, Aboriginal organisations and government jobs (National Parks being a prime example) and who have created enclaves of related kin employees and beneficiaries. Ironically perhaps, this is a kin related form of differentiation from the wider mob as well as a form of kin incorporation, but one which works against inclusion into the broader Aboriginal group or community. Favouring family in decisions to do with delegating housing, other resources and jobs over which one has some authority is not, however, always seen as being a coconut. Whilst some are labelled coconuts, others who engage in similar behaviours are named instead as ‘greedy bastards’ or ‘bitches’. The particular behaviour involved, as well as who is doing the naming, and their relationship to the named, will specify whichever title is in operation. Despite the general criticism of putting self or family ahead of ‘the people’ very few individuals appear to put ‘the people’, or the perceived needs of the people, before themselves or their own close family. Yet those who create what might be called coconut empires are also amongst those who talk most loudly and most often about their dedication to ‘my people’ over the individual or family view. A Barkindji man picked up my copy of Gillian Cowlishaw’s *Blackfellas Whitefellas* one day and laughed until he was wiping tears from his eyes – ‘Aaaaw fuuuuuuck’ he said as he continued to laugh. He had just read about a Murri saying of one black leader ‘If I hear her talk about *my people* again I’ll throw up’ (2004:131).

The much promulgated pan-Aboriginal trope of caring and sharing is implicated here in ways which have become increasingly complex as a changing cultural dynamic has favoured unequal access to social, political and cultural resources and cultural authority. One role which has become available for Aboriginal people in more recent times and which sits ambivalently within communities is that of the cultural broker. These are people who set themselves up or become, at the behest of others, authorities on, and mediators or vectors of, ‘culture’. This can be a fairly lucrative role when actively taken up particularly where consultation with ‘Aboriginal people’ or having Aboriginal representation on a board or committee is a requirement. It can however take authority out of the control of local hands and can operate as another form of distancing from one’s own group (as this is understood). One Aboriginal man I know has, with his non-Aboriginal partner, purchased a second property in Wilcannia through managing income gained from his and his partner’s job. Because this man moves easily in black and white domains he is thought by many to have achieved his two houses through having managed to get his hands on ‘black dollars’. His refusal to rent his property on an ongoing basis to an Aboriginal family, preferring to rent short-term to whites is behaviour that, at times, sees him located firmly in the coconut domain. Yet he is also seen by many of the same detractors to be a cultural authority. When sitting on the riverbank having shouted a party pack of grog or having shared cigarettes his coconut status is suspended as he is affirmed as a great fella.

These kinds of situations have resulted in a great deal of ambivalence and ambiguity in what it means to be a culturally successful and productive blackfella in Wilcannia today. Systems of sharing which in mission times used to operate on the basis of more basic needs such as food and shelter, are being re-worked as greater access to, and desires for, material goods has entered the informal economy and as networks increase in number and across areas. This situation of change has de-stabilised some longer standing hierarchies and more understood patterns of sharing.

Whilst the threat of social ostracism is ever present for those who do not participate in the sharing economy (Beckett 2005:108; Cowlishaw 2004), a small but increasing number of people are nevertheless choosing a position of selective sharing with varying degrees of
reticence or assertion. For instance some only share with close relatives, others are choosing to exclude certain family members, and long term friends are also being included in shifting forms of reciprocity. On one occasion a younger Aboriginal man in his late twenties who is known to be a keen fisherman bumped into two Elders and me as we were walking through the Mallee area of town. One of the Elders asked the young man if he had any fish. He replied that he had fifty in his freezer and would sell him one for $10.00. The other Elder, an Uncle of the young man told him ‘you don’t sell fish to the Elders’ to which the Elder seeking the fish replied, ‘no, no, that’s alright brother’ and proceeded to pay for the fish. He said to me later in not so many words that the young man ‘would keep’ indicating that at some later point in time the young man would get his come-uppance. The two Elders (both in their sixties) have been friends since childhood. I don’t know what changes might be occurring in alliances such as this but I was aware of tensions and embarrassment by both in relation to this situation. More generally, in relation to the sharing and caring ethos many are feeling torn in ways which have little precedent as people negotiate their chosen path of higher education, a more nuclear style family and the accumulation of the material. This generally requires leaving town, and often means cutting certain kin ties and perceived obligations. These forms of intra-cultural social and economic change have created a realm of much misunderstanding, anger and confusion as values shift in relation to obligations and needs. The contradictions and impossibilities are here and at times a double bind and a double burden.

LEAVING WILCANNIA

Those born in Wilcannia who have moved away in order to get work and ‘improve’ their lives and those of their immediate family often defensively justify their position. One man, a respected authority figure who moved to Broken Hill in the early 1980s and has sustained work as a cultural sites officer for over twenty years as well as being a well known and well purchased artist was in the Wilcannia golf club one night on one of his regular visits to town. I was with him having a drink with a few locals. Another man (his first cousin) kept ‘having a go’ at him in a light hearted way, about him ‘goin’ and desertin’ us’. The man accused of deserting responded by saying, ‘What would you want me to do, stay here an’ become a fucken drunk on the riverbank? Then you could call me a fucken old drunk’. This man said to me later, ‘I didn’t desert anyone; I went to get skills… If I had stayed I would have had the shakes an’ been older than I am’. He went on to say that it was only by leaving Wilcannia that he learned what tourists want to see and hear about. He said he knows now when he walks white people around Aboriginal sites that people want to hear things like, ‘this is where they used to cook emu’. This man said that when he ‘comes home’ to Wilcannia he brings money with him and that he shares this. He asked me ‘what should I have done…bring skills back to my people, or stay in Wilcannia and drink myself to death?’ He seemed to be expressing the alternatives as he saw them. If he had stayed in Wilcannia he felt that he would have become a drunk and, as he saw it, would not be respected. His self questioning, self justification and level of defensiveness are suggestive of a damned if you do and damned if you don’t scenario – where neither alternative is satisfactory. Yet, there is much ambivalence in his protestations including what he perceives as jealousy in his cousin’s reproach. He has his own home, has financial capacity as an artist and self-styled cultural broker who is well respected, comfortable and savvy in white as well as black worlds. He is also a kind of pied piper with many townsfolk wanting to be around him when he visits town. His cousin, despite having held many well paying Aboriginal designated positions within Aboriginal organisations has relatively speaking very little and is not so popular. The latter is fond of showing his house which is in a very dilapidated state and saying how, if he had only been thinking about himself and not ‘his people’ or if he had left town like others he would be not be ‘living like this’. But it would also be incorrect to say that the cousin is living in a dilapidated house primarily because of his financial largesse to others. Although jibes at people about ‘leavin’ us’ and ‘desertin’ us’ are
often said in a light-hearted way, underlying feelings run deep; this kind of seemingly jocular exchange masks strong feelings on both sides.

During my time in Wilcannia, the CDEP and Local Aboriginal Land Council (LALC) were under threat of being taken over by a government administrator unless they were willing to accept administrative assistance from the Broken Hill CDEP which operated out of Thankakali (your people, my people) Aboriginal Corporation.9 This caused quite a bit of dissent among a few Aboriginal members of the Community Working Party yet was well received by the majority of whites on the party, as well as quite a few blacks in town. One of the Working Party expressed the view that, ‘They’d [Thankakali people] better not think they will be takin’ over. I know some of ‘em was born and bred in Wilcannia, but they don’t live here anymore… We don’t want outsiders coming in an’ takin’ over’. One of the men to be brought in to give assistance was a Barkindji man who was born in Wilcannia and lived there from the early 1960s until 1985. This man moved with his family to Broken Hill to find work and worked with Thankakali CDEP until his death in 2004. I asked him why he thought the Working Party was against Thankakali helping out. He said the ‘people in Wilcannia are very hostile to outsiders’ and that he is trying to explain to them that ‘we just want to help ‘em’. He said he doesn’t know how it will go, and that there are ‘too many people doing what’s best for them as individuals’ and not for the community. I said ‘surely you’re not an outsider?’ He gave me a wry smile and said he apparently was now, despite being born in Wilcannia and living there until 1985. I asked him if the people calling him an outsider were Barkindji like him and he said ‘yes’, that many of them were. This might also allude to a possible shift in identification, one which sees Aboriginal Wilcannia identity occasionally supersede a wider Barkindji identity. Certainly, Barkindji people who have moved away from Wilcannia, who have ‘left’ Wilcannia, are in certain contexts not part of this stronger town identification and are viewed as ‘outside’ competitors for jobs.

Many of those who leave Wilcannia go to live in Broken Hill and there is a great deal of movement along the 200 kilometres of highway between the two towns. For some, the relocation may be anything from a few months to a few years, for others it can be a more or less permanent move. Those who leave cite many reasons for going: jobs, better schools, a house of their own, and/or to be near a favourite relative. Those who claim to have chosen not to leave make this assertion with no small amount of pride. It is said in a way that means that they didn’t desert their people; that they stayed despite what this means for them. Not deserting ‘my people’ has several meanings and inferences. Some of these inferences allude to the ‘giving up’ of a ‘better life’. Others claim these ‘losses’ are the consequence of making a seemingly firm decision to as one man says, ‘go down with the ship’. Most of the time when I saw this particular man he was either drunk or suffering from the shakes as a result of alcohol withdrawal. One morning about 10.30am, I walked past the pub on my way to a Community Working Party meeting and saw him outside waiting for it to open at 11am. I asked him what he was up to, and he inquired about my own activities. I told him that I was going to the Community Working Party meeting and asked him why he and most of the Aboriginal people in town did not attend. He indicated that it was a waste of time that the people on the Working Party only advanced the power and privilege of a few Aboriginal individuals and their friends and families. The Working Party, he said, ‘need to take the people with them. They need to be like a little ladder, take a little step and say come with me, and wait till everyone is on that step and then say take another step. But, they have to do this together’. This man was quite a force in the 1970s through Bakandji Limited (Memmott 1991:143), also known as the Barkindji Housing Association, which Beckett (1958:17) refers to as the ‘first grass roots organization’ in Wilcannia concerned with Aboriginal civil rights. From the 1970s onwards Aboriginal engagement with dominant culture in matters of civil rights and thence to the ‘politics of indigeneity’ (Beckett 1958:17) saw the emergence of politically aware Aboriginal leaders. Disputes between these leaders, entwined with aspects of family histories, saw battles for leadership positions which continue to this day. This man’s assertion, that he is voluntarily
going to go down with his people, cannot be read apart from his expressed bitterness and apparent despondency regarding the envy that (as he sees it) caused him to lose his position at Bakandji Limited and later at the Legal Service. Nor can it be read apart from local Aboriginal social acts and discourses which operate to discourage difference in these terms. This man concluded by saying, ‘ask yourself this: what is a man with my knowledge and my education doing here sitting outside the pub at 11 o’clock in the morning waitin’ for it to open…ask yourself this’.

Bell talks of the identification that Aboriginal people have with the group as taking the form of ‘participational identification which can be expressed in terms such as, ‘These are my people. I am at home with them and can relax with them’ (1965:403). Bell states that this ‘… is directly opposed to historical identification, or the interdependence of fate expressed in terms such as, “I am ultimately bound up with the fate of these people and there is nothing that I can do about it”’ (1965:403). The man who will go down with the sinking ship seems to be located between these identifications. They are his people and he is at home with them, but in his acknowledgment that he is going to go down with them he is also suggesting and or accepting that his people’s situation is not good and that he is bound up with their fate. The extent to which his position is seen as voluntary or involuntary is subject to interpretation.

**ASSERTING BLACKNESS**

Clearly, maintaining a distinctive Aboriginal identity in Wilcannia entails what may be perceived as certain sacrifices. Those who move away in order to ‘better’ themselves or who are seen to take on white values are judged harshly. Being seen to ‘get ahead’ can result in certain sanctions which seek to maintain equality. Asserting blackness often means positioning oneself against whiteness, and against white ways of working and being by means of particular identificatory practices, relations and alliances. However, such attitudes and practices can entail a continuation of subjection in certain terms – a self damning of sorts (Willis 1977:92). For some, and at some level, the recognition of this situation causes degrees of ambivalence, bitterness, anger and envy, as well as laughter and irony. Overall, success at work is seen to come to whites easily and they are not perceived to have to forfeit their way of life to take up job ‘opportunities’. Emotional responses such as these may or may not be subject to any cognised examination, and are directed towards both white and black. Yet, for those who resist this subjection, regular employment and associated choices have other effects and connotations. Intra-cultural divisions, and attitudes towards employment and those employed, are indicative of an increasing reflexivity and raised consciousness about differing social and economic expectations and positions. The Aboriginal experience of employment and its rewards to some extent (historically by virtue of the jobs held and currently by virtue of skill levels and job availability) militates against the likelihood of gaining equal positioning to whites in terms of material wealth and its associated cultural power. Through the trope of caring and sharing, differing expectations, desires and actions feed into a complex system which shapes ideas and practices relating to kinship and relatedness, social obligation, personhood, morality, and goods and services (cf. MacDonald 2000; Peterson 1993; Schwab 1995:3).

Most Aboriginal people in Wilcannia have a specific subjectivity in relation to mainstream employment, not harnessed, not self-surveilled and not defined in terms of work and leisure. Subjectivity in Wilcannia is connected (if not always in practice, then ideologically) to different domains such as kinship and the pan-Aboriginal trope of ‘caring and sharing’, which have their own economic and moral values. For many Aboriginal people, work and its rewards, whether possible or not, sit uneasily with the demands of everyday sociality. Family illness, a hangover from ‘a big night on the drink’, Nana’s need to get some shopping, the arrival of family or friends from out of town, or an unexpected occurrence of interest, continue to be the causes of much non-attendance at paid work. While many recognise that regular employment affords some desired material things, few are prepared to forfeit other culturally perceived and
culturally attributed values, social obligations and desires (as well as the time to fulfil these). I was talking one day to an Aboriginal woman about my two sisters in Scotland, and she told me about her two sisters who live in South Australia and Sydney. She said that one of her sisters and her immediate family visit Wilcannia two or three times a year and stay for two or three weeks. During these visits she did not go to her work as a teacher’s aide at the local school. This woman was highlighting to me the importance of family, not the unimportance of work. However, non-attendance at work for such reasons is, for whites, a sign of irresponsibility if not laziness. When I asked another young girl of about fifteen what she was going to do when she left school, she replied that her sister was going to have a baby and that she would look after it. I said that would be nice but the baby would not be a baby forever and asked what would she do then? I could see that for her, this statement made no sense. Being in Wilcannia with family and looking after family is what is considered important; this is ‘life’. Life in Wilcannia is not a carefully planned process which encompasses stages or periods of development as these pertain to employment.

Some Aboriginal people oppose and resist the way whiteness is linked with work more directly. A white workplace supervisor who works for an Aboriginal housing service was fixing up a house with some Aboriginal workers. The workers arrived late and then proceeded to make a cup of tea, have a smoke and a yarn. The supervisor told me that the work being done was spasmodic and often delayed whilst the workers talked with people they knew passing by. After lunch, one of the Aboriginal workers said that he was leaving. The supervisor asked him where he was going and the man replied that he had a doctor’s appointment. The supervisor then asked him why he had made the appointment on a day he knew people had been organised to come together in order to complete the job. The supervisor told the worker that his presence was required for the job to be completed that day. According to the supervisor, the worker ‘went off’ at him saying he had to look after his health and that he had diabetes. The supervisor said that he didn’t mean that the man should not go to the doctor, but that it might be better if he could plan his visits around work. The worker asked the supervisor if he wanted him ‘to work like a white cunt’. When the supervisor asked him what he meant he replied, ‘twenty-four hours a day’. Inhering within this dialogue is an assertion of differentiation, as well as a mutual assertion of ‘rights’, with inter-cultural overtones. In voicing his rights to good health, and in not wanting to work twenty-four hours a day, the man is asserting his difference from whites as well as his perceived rights as an Aboriginal worker. The supervisor, on the other hand, is asserting what he sees as his ‘right’ to expect a worker to account for time considered to be work time, paid time, time owned by the employer. The cultural characteristics of attitudes to work are here, in Cowlishaw’s words, ‘a kind of companion to racial identity’ (Cowlishaw 2004:118).

It is not unreasonable to say, echoing Weber, that for most in mainstream society, ‘…the idea of duty in one’s calling prowls about in our lives like the ghost of dead religious beliefs’ (1976:182). For the dominant culture, paid work continues to be a moral obligation and St Paul’s dictum that those won’t work shall not eat still resonates, albeit in less specifically religious terms. Although this view is also rejected by some whites, it remains a view of ‘moral agency vested in white identity’ (Cowlishaw 2004:100). While non-working whites are considered something of an aberration, for Aboriginal people unemployment appears to have ‘a uniformity and consistency’ which pervades ‘the whole Aboriginal community’ (Morris 1989:195). When white people in Wilcannia talk about ‘lazy black bastards’, this statement is not unconnected to the fact that whites perceive most Aboriginal people to be doing quite well by virtue of unemployment benefits and other perceived government ‘hand-outs’. They eat, but ‘they don’t fucken wanna work’. There is a sense of outrage and not a little jealousy.

The majority of Aboriginal people in Wilcannia are unemployed and are seen correctly by whites to have no desire to work in the way that the majority of employed whites do. Aboriginal people have a way of living and a perceived attitude to ‘work’ which the majority of whites condemn. The fact that Aboriginal people say that they do not want to work like
whites is an assault on whitefellas’ way of life and their moral values. Not only do whitefellas consider that it is ‘our taxes’ paying for the blackfella to ‘sit on his black arse’, but welfare payments are seen to support a way of life that encourages what is seen as a lack of self-discipline and social responsibility.

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

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

This I feel describes the tension and ambiguity whitefellas feel towards blackfellas of Wilcannia. It is ludicrous to suggest that most Aboriginal people in Wilcannia are constantly having a great time, or that poverty and high rates of violence are desired by either whites or blacks. However, I think the Sontag piece encapsulates a sense of some of the characteristics and behaviours attributed to blackfellas which whitefellas are resentful and jealous of. This kind of resentment, together with no small degree of ambivalence, continues to be expressed today in Wilcannia towards the Other’s way of living. These are, however, tensions which are tempered in part and made more ambiguous by some of the more positive and affectionate black/white relationships. The imaginary and real are not dichotomous – they bleed into one another. There are parallel envies and fantasies operating among Aboriginal people and between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in relation to work and paid employment.

KICKING AND SCREAMING

E. P. Thompson (1968) writes of the attitude to work during the period of industrialisation in England. He tells the diarised story of a Journeyman cotton spinner who itemised the ‘grievances felt by working people, [including] the disruption of the traditional family economy; the discipline, monotony, hours and condition of work; loss of leisure and amenities; the reduction of the man to the status of an “instrument”’ (1968:221-222). Despite practices of disciplinary power whereby, as Fromm asserts, the worker has arguably been ‘turned into his own slave driver’ and people have ‘become driven to work… by an inner compulsion’ (Thompson 1968:393), the discontent of workers in the eighteenth century remains relevant for many whites today. I am speaking here of a resentment and hostility towards a way of life that demands disciplinary power that operates in tension and in tandem with the drives of a consumer society. Weber asserts that the Western individual is born into a capitalist economy ‘which presents itself to him…as an unalterable order of things in which he must live… It forces the individual, in so far as he is involved in the systems of market relationships, to conform to capitalistic rules of action’ (1976:54). However, this fact does not remove the discontents which remain below the surface. These remain, for the most part, submerged to the daily drive and the often implicit inability or perhaps resistance to make explicit the powerlessness to alter one’s conditions. The personal stresses whites feel in relation to the structural conflicts associated with the leisure/work split should not be ignored. Lifestyle advice
on how to find a balance between work and leisure spheres (the latter encapsulating the family sphere) abound in books, television shows and through lifestyle coaches. Advertisements which entreat consumers to ‘get more weekend in your week’ (Crawford 1985:92) speak to the division of time and the tensions felt by many mainstream workers. The problem of what to do with the sick child, elderly family member, or a family crisis is a logistical nightmare for many working parents. The moral obligation to put work before family is something that divides not only time, but relationships and the self. These discontents re-surface in certain contexts, one of which is proximity to the racially ascribed situation of so called ‘lazy black bastards’. Resentment surfaces in response to close proximity with this ‘lazy’ Other and finds expression in targeting the Other. The resentments that one feels towards one’s own trapped way of life are projected onto those who do not seem to have to live this life and, furthermore, do not seem to care. A mutual misunderstanding not only of the nature of ‘work’ but of ‘obligations’ sees ‘the calling’ (particularly as moral obligation) interpreted differently by blacks and whites in Wilcannia.

In Western cultural values, ‘inactive contemplation is valueless, or even directly reprehensible if it is at the expense of one’s daily work’ (Weber 1976:158). This view sees the constant meetings and sitting around yarning about various social issues by Aboriginal people in Wilcannia as valueless inactivity, as Aborigines ‘sitting on their fat arses’. Yet an Aboriginal friend who worked for National Parks has a different take on this. He was telling me of how he sees his role as one of ‘lookin’ after country’. He said that although he learned to read and write more fluently after working for several years with National Parks, he was reluctant to spend much time in the office environment, in his words, ‘sittin’ around reading and writin’ and gettin’ nothing done’. Getting something done, to this man, is being out and about. Working for him is engaging with other Aboriginal people about the issues affecting them in their own terms and ways. ‘Work’ by white definition has very clear meaning. Work is linked to regular paid employment and to ‘productivity’ in terms of producing something of economic value as determined by dominant culture. Povinelli reminds that ‘productivity in the west is tied up with notions of working and particularly fixed notions regarding the nature of work’ (1993:26). To meet one’s social and moral obligations in Wilcannia one must productively work – at attending funerals, taking Auntie shopping, taking Nana to the doctor, staying home to defuse or prevent an argument, staying with mates who need you – being there. This is important social work and productive cultural work. Robin Kelly says that in black American ghetto culture ‘the pursuit of leisure, pleasure and creative expression is labor’ (cited in Cowlishaw 2004:85). An interpretation which can also (for example) see cultural reasons cited for getting sozzled at an out of town funeral, missing your ‘ride’ home and missing work for several days.

CONCLUSION

In small towns such as Wilcannia white moral values find their power and persuasiveness through discourse which gives force to the ‘alleged “transgressions” by Aborigines of mainstream social patterns...’ (Morris 1997:166). It is not work in Western definitions to ‘look after country’, ‘go huntin’ an’ get the old people some wild meat’, to take Nana shopping, to nurse children, look after sick family, or stay with family or friends who have come to visit rather than attend work. For many Wilcannia Aboriginal people, hunting, fishing and spending the day along the riverbank with kin and friends is, as Povinelli remarks (in the case of the Belyuen mob), ‘a form of production in the fullest cultural and economic sense of this term, generating a range of sociocultural meanings’ (1993:26). To say that many (or in general) Aboriginal people do not consider regular work as a social responsibility is at some level, to miss the importance and nature of what ‘work’ is. This paper has sought to emphasise and complicate the idea that Aboriginal people don’t want to work and locate it ethnographically as a structural, moral and historical issue with much associated ambivalence and ambiguity. There may be the common view that paid employment work for Aboriginal people is not
important but this disregards the ways in which life is often rich and meaningful without such work. For all its apparent disorganisation and difference Aboriginal society remains ‘diffusely effective in certain areas of life’ (Beckett 2005:14). In terms of attitudes to work, the sociocultural change effected to date and that required in order for Aboriginal people to participate in a fully commoditised market economy is enormous (Peterson 2005:8). The advent of welfare and the further decline of work opportunities has also reduced considerably the opportunity to participate in what Peterson calls ‘target working’ (2005: 11) That is working for short and intermittent periods ‘for specific purposes’ (2005:11). This might be for a car, or television, or, in one case I know of, the purchase of a pedigree dog. It is a pattern of working which appears to be the preferred mode that many might and some do choose, and which falls within the realm of a ‘life project’: one that meets ‘the desires of those Indigenous people who seek autonomy in deciding the meaning of their life independently of projects promoted by the state and market’ (Peterson 2005:7). Given that employment is not always, or even mostly, the be all and end all for many non-Aboriginal workers, the question remains as to why Aboriginal people should choose this option as the preferred mode of living. As Peterson attests, it is employment which is cited by government and Indigenous community plans and needs as ‘a, if not the, central issue in a better future for remote communities’ (2005:7). As long as the circulation of welfare meets the needs and obligations of the moral economy in terms of kinship and reciprocity, which seems to be the case for the majority in Wilcannia, there is little local motor for change. Gone are the cultural stimuli of cycles of exchange and ceremony which historically reproduced the social order (Peterson 2005; Sahlins 1972), and the replacement of welfare, and or gammon jobs, is not an attractive alternative.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost thank you to the communities of Wilcannia and Broken Hill for their ongoing interest in, and engagement with, my research. In this regard I particularly acknowledge the assistance of Badger Bates, Murray Butcher, William Bates and Paul Brown. I would also like to thank the women of the Wilcannia Women’s Refuge and Jenny Thwaites for their hospitality. The anonymous referees provided encouraging and thought provoking comment which improved this work as indeed did Professor Gillian Cowlishaw who provided some valuable suggestions – my thanks also to them.

NOTES

1. The Community Development Employment Programme (CDEP) is a government initiative. Up until changes introduced in 2008 which saw its reach substantially reduced CDEP sought to generate sustainable employment opportunities for Aboriginal people. Known colloquially as ‘work for the dole’ people work, on average, two to three days a week and receive ‘top ups’ to their welfare payments. In 2004 forty two people were registered to work with CDEP in Wilcannia.
2. Aboriginal people of Wilcannia have something of a history of articulating the experience of being Aboriginal and of social commentary through song. cf. the work of Dougie Young recorded by Jeremy Beckett (1958).
3. I spent sixteen months in Wilcannia between 2002 and 2004. Since that time I have made annual visits of one to two weeks each year with reciprocal visits by my Wilcannia friends to Sydney.
4. In Western NSW, greater freedom of movement has led to increasing social and geographic ‘beats’ (Beckett 1965: 9), which are areas defined in terms of kin who will offer hospitality. People move often and freely across towns for greater or lesser periods.
5. This is a State Government recognised and Aboriginal-run organisation which operates to represent Aboriginal people of Wilcannia. It has a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the government and acts as a representative liaison and conduit to government on Aboriginal matters. The WCP comprises a membership which they invite, which is drawn from community members, government and non-government agencies and community service representatives. I have provided WCWP population estimates as local organisations and community members consider the ABS statistics to be less accurate.
6. Place in the context of this paper refers to a number of towns and cities mostly in NSW, such as Dubbo, Bourke, Dareton, Broken Hill, Lake Cargelligo and Murrin-Bridge where Aboriginal people in Wilcannia have family or other cultural networks; where they may have been born, and where they may have travelled to. People in far western NSW have long since ceased to discuss Country in the terms of a descent of rights relating to ritual.
This particular sense of one’s Country which is arguably still held by many groups in other parts of Australia has been revised through the colonizing experience. People do however talk about ‘our country’ in reference to where one, one’s parents or earlier ancestors were born and where one may or may not have traditional ownership rights. ‘Our country’ or ‘country’ is also talked about in the sense of Dreaming sites, ancestral myths and stories, but this does not seem to be the primary connection that is being explored in asking ‘Who you is?’ Although the system of the Dreaming has a quite different connotation for Aboriginal people in Western NSW to pre-contact times, as MacDonald (2004:4) emphasises, ‘features of its social and spatial organization of life [continue] to inform Aboriginal belief and practice through the twentieth century’.  

7. Indoor staff are best described as white collar workers and include engineers, environmental health and administrative professionals. 

8. The Department of Main Roads employed local Aboriginal people as labourers until it moved its operations to Broken Hill in 1987. 

9. This is an Aboriginal Corporation registered in 1995 with the objective of operating a Community Development Employment Project in Broken Hill. The Corporation employs approximately fifty people in the Thankakali Cultural Centre and the Thankakali Yard Maintenance projects. 

10. Nor again can this man’s position be seen in isolation from the fact that he has been imprisoned for pedophilia; the loss of a son who had hanged himself; the loss of a brother who was found hanged while in police custody and the loss of a niece who drowned in the Darling River. 

11. The ‘counter-culture’ of the 1960s when Timothy Leary exhorted people to tune in, turn on and drop out is one example of the rejection of the Protestant ethic and its values by many young (and not so young) non-Aboriginal people.

REFERENCES


