In 2002, the ‘The Wilcannia Mob’, a group of five young Aboriginal boys from Wilcannia in Far Western NSW, had a hit record called ‘Down River’. The following print media story about ‘The Wilcannia Mob’, or ‘The Barkindji Boys’ as they are also known locally, is framed to introduce us to the town’s “unlikely” musical success story. According to the article, “The three boys sitting in the school library shovelling down hot chips with gravy do not look like rock stars and Wilcannia, the town baking in the heat outside, does not look like the kind of place that produces them” (Peter Munro, Sydney Morning Herald, November 29, 2002).

The article goes on to describe the town in the following way:
The long straight road to Wilcannia, almost 1000 kilometres north-west of Sydney and 195 km east of Broken Hill, runs across a bridge over a river and past a street sign. The sign is headed ‘Things to see and do in Wilcannia’, beneath which runs a list...

Chat with the locals. This isn’t much of an option. The streets are deserted, the only locals within sight are drinking outside the town’s only pub, the chance of a conversation sinking with every can of VB [Victoria Bitter beer] they knock back.

Take a leisurely walk through our permaculture gardens. The gardens behind the sign may have once been a botanical attraction but a brief walk through the surviving weeds and bushes reveals that the only features still thriving are dust, rocks and old shoes.

Relax on the Darling River. The local Aborigines are the Bakandji [Barkindji] people, meaning ‘people of the river’. The Darling River stopped flowing in early October and stinks. The drought has exposed sandbars across its width and old trees and tyres that used to be hidden on the river bed.

Now covered in white spray-paint graffiti, the sign itself is a reminder of better days. It was a project of the Aboriginal Arts and Craft Centre. The Centre is now closed, its windows barred and boarded up, and its insides trashed. Welcome to Wilcannia. Population 750. Climate: hot, slow and dry (Munro 2002).

The likelihood of ‘success’, indeed the likelihood of getting ‘anywhere’, is linked in this story to some very cogent and often metaphorical images and ideas: boys who break the school rules, the lack of an orderly and well maintained built environment, ‘failure’ in business, a trashed Aboriginal Arts and Craft Centre, a permaculture garden now uncultivated and given over to nature, discarded remnants of human clothing, and drunk Aborigines who are unable to articulate. The lack of water in the river together with a plenitude of environmental destruction and general rubbish are cues to dominant culture ideas and images typifying disorder and that which is thought abject by mainstream society. This behaviour, this scene, these attributes and characteristics, are neither portrayed as normal or valued.

Barkindji people are the Traditional Owners (TOs) of the land that is now the town of Wilcannia (Beckett 1965:10; Hardy 1976; Hercus 1993). According to Beckett (1965:10),

Along the Darling, from about Wentworth to Bourke, lived the Bagundji [Barkindji] speaking peoples, and back from the river to the north, along the Paroo, and to the northwest as far as the South Australian border, lived a number of tribes who spoke dialects of the same language, most of whom have now died out (Beckett 1965:10).

In Bobbie Hardy’s book, ‘Lament for the Barkindji’, the Darling River and its environs was where “innumerable generations [of Aborigines]...had lived in profound harmony [with the land]...its foibles and its bounty” (Hardy 1976:unnumbered introduction). Their “souls as well as their bodies drew sustenance from its beneficence” (Hardy 1976: intro. pages not numbered).
The locals in the media story knocking back the cans of VB and getting drunk cannot be reconciled with Hardy’s lamented Barkindji. The permaculture garden is neither bountiful nor going ‘back’ to nature in any harmonious or orderly sense, but in a maladaptive sense. The people in this media report are not, according to mainstream definitions, living in untouched natural surroundings in harmony with the environment, nor are they portrayed as having healthy souls or bodies. When the newspaper article tells the reader that the local Aborigines are the “Baakandji” [Barkindji]: “people of the river” and that the river is dry and “stinks”, it is not overly conjectural to consider this as a metaphorical framing of the Barkindji people.

There is no culture portrayed here in the sense of cultivation of soil, nor is there any ‘Culture’. No ‘civilisation’, tools of industry or industriousness mark this story. There is no culture represented here in any respectful or recognised sense. This does not read as healthy unspoiled land or people, it reads as spoiled land and spoiled culture. The trashed arts and craft centre, its windows barred and boarded up and covered in graffiti, speaks not only of the crumbling structures and edifices of civilisation, but of culture’s lack.

Image 2. The sign listing ‘Things to see and do in Wilcannia’, Myers Street Wilcannia.

For me to make these claims about culture in this apparently unproblematic way begs the question: what do we mean in using the term ‘culture’? This question and my previously unproblematic ‘taken for granted’ use of culture foreshadow precisely the work of this thesis. That is, my aim is to unpack certain categories, their underpinning and underlying concepts and inter and intra-cultural effects for the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people of Wilcannia.

On Saturday 2 May 2002, I had my own experience of Wilcannia. I drove west across the road bridge, past the ‘Things to see and do in’ sign (Image 2) and pulled up at ‘the roadhouse’ on Myers Street, the main street running through town to Broken Hill (‘the Hill’).
I had left Sydney the day before, staying overnight at Cobar, 700 kilometres west of Sydney and 300 kilometres from Wilcannia. I was on my way to ‘the Hill’, another 200 kilometres west of Wilcannia, to meet Badger Bates, an Aboriginal man who was instrumental in my gaining permission to do fieldwork in Wilcannia. The following is my diary entry:

I got out my car [at ‘the roadhouse’] to fill up and two young Aboriginal girls aged about twelve years old were riding around the petrol bowsers on their push bikes. One said to the other ‘fucken cunt’, the other replied ‘in your cunt’. The first girl responded ‘no, in your cunt’. This went on for a couple more rounds and then an older Aboriginal man from across the street yelled out ‘hoi’ to the girls: this stopped the exchange. Went in to the roadhouse café had a really crappy hamburger (frozen little beefer) and chips and two ginger beers for $17.50 (very expensive). No lattes, soyachinos or bruschetta here. The town was very quiet, hardly anyone about. Quite a few kiddies came into the shop for fried food (dim sims, hot chips and gravy) and lollies.

Schutz makes cognisant the baggage of experience when he says, “I ascribe to you an environment which has already been interpreted from my subjective viewpoint” (Schutz 1972:105). My immediate experience was a physical response to hearing the word ‘cunt’ being used loudly, publicly and with feeling by two young girls. In thinking about this later, my response was at least twofold. Initially it was a strong visceral reaction to hearing the language of the girls’ exchange. This was followed closely by the thought that the stereotypes trotted out about Wilcannia are cultivated by ‘drive through’ events such as this.

The ‘c’ word, as I have mostly known this term in the past, is not common parlance in the world in which I have lived since coming to Sydney from Glasgow, Scotland in 1978. Neither is it everyday public language in mainstream Australia. I put part of my physical response to the word ‘cunt’ down to my childhood in Glasgow. During a short period of my childhood I was taken to live in a socio-economically ‘deprived’ area of Glasgow. In this area to call someone a cunt was to tread on dangerous ground. It was to risk getting “your heid in yur hawns to play wi” (your head in your hands to play with); in other words, to risk getting severely bashed up. ‘Cunt’ was the final insult; ‘bastard’ and ‘fucker’ had their place, but cunt was the piece de resistance.

However, over my time in Wilcannia, I came to hear and understand the word ‘cunt’ in the many ways it was being used in the community. Just as there are different inflections of the word there are different kinds of ‘cunts’, generally understood rules for who can be named such, and who can do the naming. My physical responses came to match more closely the ideational perception of the context of its use. This is not to say that the word was not often thrown as a challenge and an extreme insult, “white cunts” being a case exampled in this thesis. But it is also used benignly and even as a kind of endearment at times; “you little
"cunt" can be said with affection and jocularity. "Ya cunt" is an expletive when someone stubs their toe or fumbles and drops something. Material objects can be cunts: an awkward piece of packaging is "a cunt of a thing", and on one occasion my friend said of her car that, "you have to rock the cunt to start it". Basically, I learned the difference between its 'everyday' more benign uses, and its particular use. I mention this by way of analogy to my time in Wilcannia and my particular experience there. I use the analogy to demonstrate more broadly the difference between what might be termed a general principle of subjective preconception versus learned experience. Just as the word 'cunt' grew to have a different 'feeling' and 'meaning' for me, I began to grasp a more contextual understanding of what was 'going on'. The following thesis represents an attempt to reflect upon and describe my experience of Wilcannia as I came to understand the place and the people.

Marcia Langton has written of the ways in which Aboriginal customary law is expressed through swearing and fighting. She aims to demonstrate the ways that swearing and fighting "in contemporary Aboriginal society constitute dispute processing and social ordering devices derived from traditional Aboriginal cultural patterns" (Langton 1994:201-202). My use of the swear word of 'cunt' makes no pretence at such a grand scheme. I draw on this as a metaphor for broader understanding although it is clear that the use of the word 'cunt' offers something toward understanding "the thin line between aggressive exaggeration and humourous exaggeration, always a risky business, even for the insiders" (Langton 1994:215).
Introduction - Coming to Wilcannia

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

*The gap existing between the promise of a traditional presence and the actual presence of Aboriginal persons is not simply discursive. It also produces and organizes subaltern and dominant feelings, expectations, desires, disappointments, and frustrations sometimes directed as a particular person or group, sometimes producing a more diffuse feeling* (Povinelli 2002:49).

Dominant society discourses and images have widely depicted Aboriginal people of the town of Wilcannia in Far Western New South Wales as having no culture. Through an ethnographic examination of what it means to be black in Wilcannia from both black and white perspectives, this thesis explores different ways of knowing and being. It describes the mechanisms through which Aboriginal people of the town tacitly and reflexively produce, perform and interpret culture, as well as the ways in which non-Aboriginal locals and dominant society consider these forms of culture more broadly. The work offers counter-discourses to the dominant society claim that Aboriginal people of Wilcannia have no culture.2

In general terms, this thesis is about cultural identity, cultural recognition and difference. Recognition is by necessity a relational phenomenon. Therefore, I am concerned with the ways in which Aboriginal people in Wilcannia perceive non-Aboriginal people and vice versa, and also with the ways in which Aboriginal people perceive themselves in relation to one another. A special focus rests on how these perceptions are shaped and produced by underpinning ideologies inhering within certain dominant society cultural categories and concepts.

The thesis asks 'what is culture?' What does this concept mean to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Wilcannia and more broadly? What is it made to mean and why does this matter? In responding to these questions, 'culture' as category and concept is shown in its chameleon colours: colours which, for the most part, remain unproblematically hidden as

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2 This is not an apologetic for an anthropological argument that those Aborigines who do not practice traditional ceremonies or language are 'Real' Aborigines (Gillian Cowlishaw 1993:192:note 3). That all Aborigines are 'real' is taken to be a given. Neither do I argue for continuities as a sign of cultural 'authenticity' or legitimacy. Rather, the work seeks to expose the popular understandings of culture for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people and the affects of these understandings, economically, politically, socially and culturally.
they operate practically and discursively through ‘taken for granted’ and ‘everyday’ assumptions.

In ordinary Australian discourse, ‘culture’ when it is used at all, refers to ‘High Culture’, the arts, opera etc. It is doubtful whether people would extend the word to, say, television sitcoms or mainstream movies and it is not generalised beyond certain items. It is not generally applied even in popular anthropology to the ongoing tacit everyday practices of life as lived. However, the term acquires a different loading and salience in the context of multiculturalism – ethnic cultures and Indigenous cultures. It takes on a sharp edge in the latter context because material interests are involved, including claims to government money and land. Thus to say people have no culture is to question their entitlement and, beyond that, who they believe they are.

Given that Aboriginal people as a discursive category have become increasingly indexed by the products of art (Merlan 2001:681) this ethnography also engages with the category of ‘art’ and explores the ways in which whites and blacks in Wilcannia and more broadly understand ‘art’ and ‘culture’ in more ‘taken for granted’ ways. These are powerful and productive discursive categories that manifest in social actions and have social effects.

In asserting that “...with good reason postmodernism has relentlessly instructed us that reality is artifice...[and] that race or gender or nation are so many constructions”, Michael Taussig nevertheless asks why, despite this, life appears to be so immutable – how come culture appears so natural? (1993:xv-xvi). Notwithstanding the position that anthropologists might take regarding the ‘knowledge’ that ‘cultures’ are constructed, Taussig’s assertion that culture remains natural is the basis of much inter-cultural tension and ambivalence in Wilcannia. The inter-cultural assumptions made on the basis of what constitutes ‘culture’ and what is deemed to be good, bad, real or false ‘culture’ do more than confirm artifice; they demonstrate the operating effects of these constructions.

Wilcannia is a place where concepts about blackfellas and whitefellas are constantly being played out in practice and through discourse. What appear to be ‘common’ understandings and ‘common’ terms are revealed to be ambiguous and ambivalent as well as differently understood. The easy binary categories of blackness or whiteness are often drawn on as a means to justify misunderstanding or to remove the work of clarifying inter-cultural confusion.
People do not willingly explore difference; however, proximity of black and white and often quite different ways of being, make seeing and feeling difference unavoidable. Simultaneously, the binaries of black and white are constantly being tested as they are also challenged through everyday interactions and particular black/white relationships. However, despite the challenges to the categories of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal culture, the unconsidered and stereotypical baggage that both these categories carry is, in the final analysis, invoked when there is inter-cultural dissatisfaction with an event, an idea, a proposal or simply a happening in everyday social intercourse.

Blackness and whiteness are readily called upon categories offering reasons for and justification of prejudice. These categories operate at different times as both final and as first judgment in relation to (and despite) situations that evidence their ambiguity and disjuncture. Cowlishaw asks: “But what if it is the disputation around the division [black and white] that gives social life its meaning?...We might also find that these two warring elements depend on each other for their sense of reality and purpose, and that they use each other to create the everyday moralities and myths of social life” (2004a:4). I argue that this is experientially evident, and that these forms of essentialising are not in and of themselves problematic (see also Lattas 1993:249). What is problematic are the social effects of the meanings ascribed to blackness and whiteness and the implicit, taken for granted hierarchy they entail.

Wilcannia is a place where dominant culture institutions and agencies attempt to both ‘exert’ and ‘maintain’ control (in many senses of this term) over the majority Aboriginal population. For the majority of whites, Wilcannia is a white town. It is their town and Aboriginal people have, over time, come to live in it. For the Aboriginal people it is their town. It is contested space over which whites, many of whom are transient workers or “blow ins”, nevertheless remain vigilant in their desire for a certain kind of physical and social order.

The ways in which the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people of Wilcannia position and frame Others and themselves within certain categories and concepts, and their reasons for doing so, highlight and demonstrate some inter and intra-cultural sentiments which prevail in Wilcannia, and the work of these sentiments in social and cultural action.
Normalising Categories – Pre-Conceptions about being Black in New South Wales

Goffman suggests that “Society establishes the means of categorizing persons and the complement of attributes felt to be ordinary and natural for members of these categories” (1965:2). The attributes through which Wilcannia has come to be known contemporaneously through mainstream media are those of opposition to white authority, unemployment, violence, drunkenness, sexual abuse and ill health. These stories continue to be the main focus of public discourse and media reportage about Wilcannia, further embedding particular images of what the nation ‘hears’ and ‘reads’ about the town and its Aboriginal population. Importantly, however, the attributes accorded to the people of Wilcannia as a result of categorising are ‘normalised’. Anticipations about people become “normative expectations” (Goffman 1965:2), a kind of ‘what you see is what you get’, or ‘what you think you are seeing is what you will impute’. Goffman (1965:5) also states that “we tend to impute a wide range of imperfections on the basis of the original one”. As I argue, for many if not most of the white population of Wilcannia and more widely, being a NSW urban/country town Aborigine is the original imperfection, an often ‘naturalised’ imperfection which differentiates them from the ‘normals’ – who are white.

Wilcannia came to particular prominence through the wider Australian media as part of a larger discourse about Aboriginal deaths in custody and following the death of Mark Quayle. Mark was a twenty-two year old Aboriginal man who was found to have hanged himself “in the early hours of 24 June 1987 in Wilcannia Police Station” (Wootten:1990:1). The findings of the Commissioner offered a stinging rebuke about “…the dehumanised stereotype of Aboriginals so common in Australia and in the small towns of western New South Wales in particular” (Wootten 1990:2). Eighteen years after Mark’s death, the alleged circumstances associated with his demise are an unsolicited topic of discussion for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people alike. This event and the circumstances relating to it continues to serve as a foil for wider inter-cultural sentiments which are seen to demonstrate what whites are ‘like’ and what blacks are ‘like’, and what sort of behaviours one can ‘expect’ from whites and blacks.

Much of what comes to be known about Wilcannia is by ‘word of mouth’ and through visual and textual forms in newsprint and on television. Travellers to and from the regions nearby ‘carry’ these discourses like Chinese whispers. However, like Chinese whispers these discourses become distorted as they are shared. Local residents of towns either side of
Wilcannia advise non-Aboriginal travellers driving west along the main highway through Wilcannia to Broken Hill or east through Wilcannia to Cobar not to stop, to "drive straight through". Often no specific reasons are given to travellers other than general statements such as: it "is a dangerous place", "very violent", "full of blacks". White travellers are especially advised not to stop on "pension day" when "they're" all out on the street. These perceptions have assisted in constructing a certain image and frame through which Aboriginal people of Wilcannia have come to be known.

Peter Myers' paper 'Just any day in Wilcannia', describes a family passing through Wilcannia as they "nervously" hover around their station wagon at the petrol station, and of other "[p]arents anxious to avoid their children's questions about all these black people sitting in gutters...Indignation gives way to fear, fear instantly converts to anger" (in Foss 1988:140). During my fieldwork, local whites in Wilcannia also talked about nervous hoverers who alight from coaches for a toilet stop a little further up the main street from the roadhouse. Here the visiting whites are said to stand like "flocks of sheep" all milling around. There is recognition and understanding by local whites that the people on the coaches are wary, afraid and uncomfortable to venture down the street. This is a recognition which vacillates between anger and mirth: anger at the 'blacks' who are seen to be responsible for this situation as well as the media and the "truckies" on their CB radios who are seen to exacerbate the 'problem', and a more mirthful reaction borne out of the relative safety of the experience of being white in Wilcannia. "Poor bastards", they, the visiting whites, are not to know it's really quite safe after all they may have heard and read.

Townsfolk know that most of the (physical) injury is black on black; the emotional psychic injury, well, that's a different story and a matter which is hotly debated between blacks and whites as to who 'suffers' most at one another's hands. There is what I describe as a habitué of ambivalence that seems to permeate inter-cultural relations in Wilcannia. It is representative of the conundrum and paradox that sits at the heart of daily inter-cultural interactions.

Tensions between blackfellas and whitefellas as daily used categories are drawn upon to discuss aspects of unequal and poor treatment by and of each other as well as by Federal and State government and by the city fathers and agencies who service the town. The general blackfella/whitefella categories sit ambivalently against many positive inter-cultural relationships and experiences. However, even fairly positive inter-cultural feelings and relationships at the individual level can quickly shift to general stereotypical condemnation.
in response to minor misunderstandings or other incidents. Inter-cultural differences and sentiments exist as a festering undercurrent: for the most part these simmer and are verbally submerged if at times bodily articulated; however, overt public eruptions do occur.\(^3\)

Just as there is an ambivalence in black/white relations, so too are the Aboriginal people of Wilcannia located ambivalently in the binary categorical ‘types’ of Aborigines who have come to be known in the public sphere. Wilcannia Aborigines are not seen to be ‘remote’, nor ‘tribal’, and neither are they ‘urban’.

**Just Any Day in Wilcannia**

To raise the ambivalence of black white relations and category ‘types’ is also to question the idea of ‘just any day in Wilcannia’ (Myers 1988:140). To talk of ‘just any day in Wilcannia’ is to conjure some sense of a normalising or regular image. However, the idea of such a notion is something of a misnomer, as to consider any day in Wilcannia is to locate oneself within a range of possibilities. It is to consider different contexts, different views and different values. White travellers driving through Wilcannia with little or no experience of the town will take their cues from previous ‘knowledge’ and immediate ‘experience’.

Whites who have a history with the town and who are more inured to and practiced in some of the more general comings and goings of locals and visitors discuss these and the more challenging behaviour such as public drunkenness, loud and public hailing and swearing and the odd street brawl in more ‘knowing’ terms of who, why and where. For the travelling white stranger these signal a variety of differently perceived ‘truths’. To talk of just any day begs the question, any day for whom? From whose point of view? The short term liberal white with romantic leanings towards Aborigines and a disgust for ‘other’ less liberal fellow whites, the avid racist, the black or white family visitor or elite, the black woman living with the white man, those with business interests, the black or white alcoholic, the suicidal young man or the mother or father of a young man who has just hanged himself, the white teacher or police officer who may be “doing their time” in Wilcannia as a quick means of promotion, the anthropologist working on a PhD?

\(^3\) I was often present when a situation involving a white person was being discussed in no uncertain terms. Sometimes during or following the tirade someone would say “sorry, sister” as a means of recognising my whiteness as well as my distance from the particular incident. At other times I felt that my presence encouraged the person complaining make more of a meal of their tirade. On one occasion it was clear that the person verbally attacking another white in town was indicating to me that they were neither cowed not scared by whites of any description.
In this short section I try to represent any day in Wilcannia by drawing on my perception of the possibilities such a notion raises. To talk about a day in Wilcannia can be to talk about one of the monthly ‘court in session’ days. These are days when when for at least one night prior to the court sitting those who are to ‘appear’ before the court, their mates and kin talk over the range of possibilities and effects. Will I/he/she get a jail term? How long? What category prison? Will it be Broken Hill or Ivanhoe? What if it’s Bathurst and family can’t visit? Will he/she lose their licence? Will my case be held over – again? How much of a fine? Will it be probation? He’s going down this time. What about that bitch? She shouldn’t have charged him she was asking for it she made him wild etc. This is a day when the town is host to lawyers, magistrates, Aboriginal legal aid representatives, Family and Community Service staff as well as locals, all have an agenda. There are also those returning locals who have previously been ordered by the courts to remain out of town until their hearing takes place. At these times the town population is raised, the two motels are filled, vehicular traffic increases on the streets as company, private and government-owned cars traverse the journey from the court to homes, to the motels and to the golf club the latter being the only place in town that serves a meal after 7pm. At some level, then, one might be able to talk about just any court day in Wilcannia.

Then there are weekly welfare pay days when Reid Street (the main street in town) is a hub of activity from the time the local bank opens its doors in the morning. These are days when the roadhouse and grocery store screen doors barely have time to make their usual closing clang as people enter in and out in a steady stream, carrying white plastic bags full of shopping, replenishing smokes, squeezing up and down the aisles and past the narrow counter exit as kiddies hurdle in and out and certain staff take on an air of greater vigilance. The main street is noisy and lively on these days as people mill around, sometimes sitting on the pavement, in the park, on street corners, on scattered benches, outside the pub in shifting numbers and groups. Children run from school at the morning break on these days to find mum, dad, auntie, uncle or any appropriate kin member, getting in on the feeling of plenty and abundance that pay days seem to generate. Kiddies who went to bed with the cupboard bare become exuberant in the face of a good feed and treats. Debts are settled – creditors ‘hunt’ out debtors and vice-versa whilst some debtors keep a low profile trying to get in and out of town with their supplies and unpaid debts intact. For the most part, however, transactions of lending, repaying and re-borrowing are part of a well practiced thrum.
The smell of fried foods, dim sims, hot chips and gravy, chicken and chips, chicken balls and spring rolls permeate the air and paper bags soggy with sauce and grease and cardboard containers with remaining squashed uneaten contents litter the street and spill out of filled street garbage containers. People sit around eating, laughing, shouting and negotiating as kiddies on pushbikes do wheelies and skids, babies in prams watch and curious toddlers play together with the usual street detritus and other street ‘treasures’ of childhood, little sticks, stones – most seem to feed on the general energy and sustenance of the day.

At eleven in the morning the pub doors open to the street and the waiting queue enters to buy drinks, do some ‘pressing’ (a play on the pokies) or purchase take away alcohol for pre-arranged drinking groups who by various means and according to certain prescriptions have contributed money and/or agreed to the supplies to be purchased. Bank key cards are given by aunties, uncles, mums and dads to younger, trusted or more fleet of foot friends or relatives. How much to take out, and how many ‘cases’ of VB, or casks of ‘mosey’ (Moselle white wine) will be purchased are topics of discussion. Kiddies hang around outside the pub hoping for a few bucks from a ‘lation’. Those children who have gone back to school after the morning break have to wait until school’s end to see if there is any more money available for lollies, chips, a carton of iced coffee or a can of coke before mum and/or dad might head up the ‘golfie’ for one of Joe’s Chinese meals and sometimes a few drinks. The town has an air of vibrancy on pay days – there is a sense of the possible and a pervading bon-vivant. On summer days this movement is linked for me to the smell of the ageing pepper trees which line the main streets around town as they respond to bodies brushing past their branches and pink peppercorns are crushed underfoot. For me, the anthropologist, thoughts of these days create a scented memory – of pay day – and of plenty.

Towards the evening the red dust which has been raised and shaken from the lanes around town and deposited on the main street’s concrete sidewalk loses its traces of bare, thonged and sneakered feet of all sizes as it is slowly erased by the shifting air. The main street becomes quiet. The slow drawling ‘caw, caw, caw’ of the crow of the hot sunny day gives way to the sound of dogs barking in the distance. Up ‘The Mallee’ and across at ‘The Mission’ the sound of parties, voices and drinking groups, those who have chosen to maximise their dollar by drinking at home rather than the pub, variously laugh, drink, argue, sing karaoke, occasionally strum guitars and eat with friends and kin. Dope is mulled, bongs are filled as Assemblies of God adherents both black and white pray for the souls of others – including anthropologist ‘Others’.
Tomorrow will be just another day in Wilcannia, hot or cold, money or no money, perhaps a flurry of visiting bureaucrats, court day, NAIDOC week, visiting sports personalities, visiting kin, those coming back to town from jail, government sponsored 'fun' days, feuds, family, all will coalesce to make a day which is at once socially, culturally and contextually patterned, yet full of difference and possibility. Underlying all of this diversity and difference however, one can detect something of the sentiments of Myers' (1988) representation of 'just any day in Wilcannia' as these allude to both surface and deeper black and white tensions which are themselves tied up in complex ambivalences linked to experience and cultural baggage. But then, there are also the black and white friendships, lovers and partners to consider. Nothing is straightforward even if it seems, for most, to be so.

**Wilcannia – A Little History**

In 1866, Wilcannia was formally proclaimed a town and was subsequently incorporated as a municipality in 1881. During the 1870’s and 1880’s Wilcannia was known as the ‘Queen City of the West’. The then third largest port on the Darling River had a population of approximately 3000 people at its height and included thirteen hotels, its own newspaper, ‘The Wilcannia Times’, and many local businesses and services, including butchers, bakers, banking, coach building and the first brewery built in Australia in 1879 by Edmund Resch. In 1887, over 200 riverboat steamers stopped at Wilcannia wharf taking on (among other goods) the majority of the wool from North Western NSW (Image 3). During Wilcannia's 'heydey' many magnificent single and double-storey public buildings quarried out of local sandstone were built. All bar two of these are currently in use and all are listed on the register of the National Estate (Image 4).

The termination of river traffic and the construction of the Sydney to Broken-Hill rail (which by-passed Wilcannia), together with the downturn in the pastoral industry and associated services has seen the erosion of the town’s white population and service sector. From what was ostensibly an all white population of 3000 in the late 1880’s, Wilcannia has become home for approximately 750 people, 700 (93%) of whom are Aborigines (WCWP 2001). Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) figures are not provided as local organisations, including Local Government and The Wilcannia Community Working Party⁴ (WCWP), consider them to be quite inaccurate (See Appendix number one for more statistical information).

Today, in physical terms, Wilcannia town is a mix of ‘old glory days’ architecture together with many boarded up and derelict retail and commercial buildings (Image 5). Cottage and bungalow-style houses built of galvanised tin, timber or brick veneer are in various states of repair.

⁴ 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 an invited membership drawn from agencies and community service representatives including The Department of Community Services (DOCS), The Department of Aboriginal Affairs (DAA), The Police Department, the Schools, the Local Hospital, the Local Aboriginal Land Council (LALC), the Central Darling Shire Council (CDSC) and a non-Aboriginal grazier and horticulturist who has lived on a property outside of Wilcannia for over thirty years. Many of the people who attend are non-Aboriginal, but not all are deemed “members” and are therefore not allowed to cast votes.
There is no industry and the few outlying farming and grazing properties are family run affairs. The town has limited services: one supermarket (Image 6), two petrol stations (one with a roadhouse and a post-office agency), two motels, a caravan park, one pub (Image 7), a golf club, a local police station, a hospital (serviced by the Royal Flying Doctor Service (RFDS), a Westpac Banking agency and ‘The Telecentre’ (a community technology centre).
There is a Catholic church, which since 2002 has had no resident priest but a self-organising congregation of about eight white people, and there is also an Assemblies of God Church that leases the Anglican Church premises. There are two schools: St Therese’s which teaches children from kindergarten to year two, and Wilcannia Central School (Image 8) which takes children up to year twelve. Although Wilcannia is part of New South Wales, most of its goods are transported from Victoria and South Australia. Many people ally themselves with these southern states in matters of sport, such as ‘Aussie rules’ teams and much newsprint media also comes from these states.

5 Father Peter Williams is a priest who came to live in Wilcannia in 1987 after retiring at age sixty. Although retired he provided his services to officiate at weddings and funerals as well as giving pastoral care to the community. He left Wilcannia in 2003 to finally retire to Newcastle NSW.
Aboriginal people of Wilcannia – Past and Present

The name Barkindji (also spelt Bakandji, Paakantyi, Bagundji) comes from the word Baaka (river) “and literally means ‘belonging to the river’; the river being the Darling” (Hercus 1993:3). As one Wilcannia man put it, “I was reared up on the river, that’s where we get out name from. Baaka means river, Baakantji means river people. Without the river we lose our culture, we lose our identity”. The Barkindji-speaking peoples were known by different groups, but they “all spoke what were basically dialects of the same language” (Hercus 1993:3). People from around Bourke in the north to Wentworth in the south were able to understand one another (Hercus 1993:3). These river groups including those who came from the Paroo and Warrego rivers are now referred to collectively as Barkindji (Hercus 1993:3).

According to Beckett (1965:10-13), there were only a few Aborigines living in or near Wilcannia at the turn of the century. By 1958 this number had grown to 230 and 300 by 1965 (Beckett 1958b, 1965). Job prospects following the war saw a large number of Aborigines move to Wilcannia. Beckett speaks of a voluntary “group migration” of Aboriginal people from “Pooncaira” [Pooncarie today] and Menindee (both Barkindji country) “upriver to Wilcannia”, with economic opportunities speculated to be the cause (Jeremy Beckett 1958b, 2005b). Of these migrants, the large majority were Barkindji people, although a few Maliangapa from the Corner Country (around Tibooburra) and some Ngiyampaa (sometimes called Wongaibon) from around Cobar also moved to the area.

In 1948 the Aborigines Welfare Board (AWB) excised some land as an Aboriginal reserve across the bridge and east of the river opposite the town (Beckett 1958b; Memmott 1991). Known both then and now as the ‘Mission’, fourteen cottages were built between 1951-1952 (Memmott 1991:86) of which twelve (since renovated) remain and continue to house Aboriginal people (Map 1). The remainder of the Aboriginal population continued to live in tin ‘humpies’ extending for about five kilometres up and down the river, mostly on the ‘left bank’ as there were restrictions on camping on the ‘town side’ for a kilometre in each direction (Memmott 1991:82-83).

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6 During the early 1930’s a lack of work saw the creation of a government mission at Carowra Tank. Marriages and relationships between Ngiyampaa (originally from around Cobar, and Ivanhoe and since 1949 from Lake Cargellico NSW) and Barkindji were created during the days of the ‘Mission’ at Carowa Tank from the 1920’s until its closure in 1934 (Beckett 1965:13), (1933 according to Memmott), (1991:68). When Carowa Tank’s water supply failed many Barkindji and those from Barkindji/Ngiyampaa unions “moved back” to Wilcannia. Others went to a new mission at Menindee also on the Darling (Memmott 1991).

7 Following the completion of the fourteen houses on the reserve (the mission), the Sacred Heart Mission built St Therese’s.
Map 1. The town of Wilcannia showing the 'Mission' and the 'Mallee'. Map adapted from one provided by Central Darling Shire Council.
In 1956 the riverbank humpies or ‘shacks’ which often housed ten to twelve people (sometimes more) became flooded out (Memmott 1991:83). People then moved to an area on the north west fringes of town (Beckett 1958b:102) known as the ‘Mallee’. Following this flood some people chose to stay “up the Mallee”. In 1974 another large flood saw many more Aboriginal people move from the ‘camp’ up to the Mallee, where many were housed in tents provided by the army. One old man told me, “we was moved from the river in the fifties because of the flood”. He said that following the 1974 flood he was again moved up the Mallee and “decided to stop and never move”. When I asked him why he did not move back he said “we got sick of movin’” and “the tin had holes”. Whilst this man asserts that he was ‘moved’ on both occasions, Memmott’s (1991:94) research suggests that moving up the ‘Mallee’ was voluntary on both occasions with Council pushing people back to the Mission site when flood waters subsided in 1956 and by informing them to remain after the 1970’s flood until “the Government decided what to do with them”. Beckett (2005b and pers.comm) also indicates that the people moved themselves up the ‘Mallee’ and that Council “denied them services as a means of getting them back across the river”.

In 1975, the Mallee was transferred from ‘Crown land’ and gazetted as an ‘Aboriginal Reserve’ following a media flurry which included an ABC television Four-Corners documentary which highlighted the conditions in which the Aboriginal people of Wilcannia were living; several bureaucrats and politicians, including the then Federal Aboriginal Affairs Minister, Mr. L. Johnson visited the town (Memmott 1991:181-183). Approximately thirty concrete block houses were built over several years following this visit and Aboriginal people continued to reside in these during my fieldwork (Image 9).
In 2003 a government Aboriginal Community Development Programme (ACDP) delivered by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs (DAA), approved a seven point nine three million dollar grant to demolish and replace twenty-seven houses on the Mallee plus three renovations. Aboriginal people now constitute the majority of the town population. The majority of Aborigines live in the town proper and there are no black or white enclaves as such, although houses for those who work for the Education, Police and Health Departments are mostly located in groups located in groups (Image 10).

According to Beckett, apart from those born after 1945, almost no Aborigines living in Wilcannia in 1957 were Wilcannia born (pers. comm.). This is not to say that they were not Barkindji. However, who and what constitutes Barkindji is of an ambiguous and often contested nature. Context determines the nature and extent of this contestation. Native Title claims, Traditional Ownership recognition, access to jobs, the authority to represent and ‘speak for’ other Barkindji, and disagreements about whether ‘real’ Barkindji identity can be passed on other than through the matrilineal line are all implicated in who is and who is not recognised.

8 Many of these houses are complete although there are alleged structural problems that are the subject of some investigation.
Although Wilcannia is currently ‘home’ to descendents of groups of Aboriginal people mainly from around NSW, there is an overarching rhetoric that the Aboriginal people of Wilcannia are all at some level Barkindji. Being Barkindji has become “a general term of self-identity employed by the people of Wilcannia” (Memmott 1991:23). Local Government, the Wilcannia Community Working party, the Local Land Council (LALC), the schools, and other government and non-government agencies and organisations that deal with Wilcannia all respond to, and at varying levels give service to, this group identification. An example of this occurs at the local primary school where all the Wiimpatja Muurpas (Aboriginal children) sing,

*Our Nanas are the people of the river*
*Our Poppas are the people of the river*
*We are the people of the river*
*The river is our home*
*Oh the Darling River*
*We are the people of the river*
*The Barkindji people of the river*
*The river is our home.* (Elizabeth Buckley 1988).

At one level, encouraging this kind of generalised and cohesive identity is useful for those agencies and other funding bodies who deal with the town, as well as facilitating certain kinds of government and agency funding. The fact is, however, that Barkindji identity is a hotly contested domain.

It is clear that Barkindji identity has become much more strategic, much more explicit than a hitherto mostly implicit personal, kin or group identification. Reasons given for this include the ‘blockading’ of Mutawintji National Park in far Western NSW in 1983\(^\text{11}\), the processes

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9 As at 2005, the local Catholic primary school, St Therese’s, which caters for kindergarten through to year two has enrolled forty-two Aboriginal children and one Nepalese child (pers comm., Sister Margaret McGrath, Principal St Therese’s school, Wilcannia August 2005).

10 Elizabeth Buckley was a school teacher at St Theresa’s Mission school.

11 Mutawintji National Park is historically the tribal area of the Malyangapa and Bandjikali people. In 1983 Aboriginal people from Wilcannia blockaded Mutawintji “in protest against its desecration by unsupervised tourists” (Beckett 2005a:8). In 1998, Mutawintji was formally handed back by the New South Wales Government to William Bates, a Malyangapa man and representative of the Mutawintji Land Council. William held the position of Chairperson of the Land Council until he was replaced by Kim O’Donnell in late 2004. Mutawintji is said to be a place where many tribes including the Barkindji met together.
which followed, including the requirement for the recognition of Traditional Owners (TOs), and the genealogical requirements of Barkindji Native Title claims.\textsuperscript{12} (Image 11)

These concatenated in the legislative as well as social need to discriminate more closely who was and who was not ‘entitled’ to claim Barkindji identity and who was and was not ‘entitled’ to the flow-on ‘benefits’ of this identity. Anecdotally, up until as late as 1991, which is when the legal process to ‘hand back’ Mutawintji began, claiming Barkindji identity did not seem to have so much at stake.\textsuperscript{13} Some Barkindji also point to a mineral sands project on Barkindji land at Pooncarie in the south west of NSW and the royalty returns from this as the catalyst for the splitting of Barkindji into “Northern” and “Southern”\textsuperscript{14} groups: a division which many of the older people claim did not exist prior to the requirements of Native Title and TO status.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{12} Fifteen Barkindji Native Title claims have been lodged since 1995. Of these claims six have been dismissed, six discontinued and three remain active.

\textsuperscript{13} Awareness of a distinct Aboriginal identity in a broader sense was prefigured by the New South Wales Land Rights Act which saw Aboriginal people of Wilcannia gain Weinteriga sheep station a few kilometres downriver of Wilcannia in 1987.

\textsuperscript{14} Luise Hercus (1993:3) divides the “Paakantyi” [Barkindji] language group into “Northern” and “Southern” dialects claiming that although people “spoke dialects of one language the people had allegiance to their own separate group”.

\textsuperscript{15} Older people also talk of how the informal ‘adoption’ of children by Barkindji step-fathers, step-mothers and other relatives did not lead to ‘tribal’ differentiation from their biological children, all were seen to be Barkindji. However, following Native Title claims and the legislative need to ‘trace’ TO status, the Barkindji status of these children (now adults) has been questioned. There has been an increasing emphasis on and concerns with Barkindji identity, progressively from the 1970’s as Land Rights and identity politics have increasingly become an issue. Certainly, Aboriginal citizenship and the advent of Land Rights and Native Title placed Aboriginal people on the political agenda as never before. The latter two have given an added dimension to Aboriginal identification which could be the subject of a thesis in itself. Therefore I can only allude here to the added dimension that these factors have created and the level of complexity they have given to Barkindji identity and its contestation.
Identification, descent and the right to choose an affiliation are complex and politically fraught. The potential and real social, cultural and economic effects, as well as the real and perceived gains to be made in having a legally and/or socially agreed identity make asserting Barkindji status a contested domain. Conversely, the promotion of a holistic Barkindji identity is also advanced as being (somewhat paradoxically) politically, economically and culturally advantageous in many contexts. For these reasons, ‘tracking’ one’s family roots and routes is of paramount importance. Who is and who is not Barkindji elicits much discussion in Wilcannia for there is much seen to be at stake.

**Non-Aboriginal People in Wilcannia**

Of the current non-Aboriginal white population, the majority are said by Aboriginal people to be “blow ins” “from away”, that is, people (mostly professionals) who have come to Wilcannia to work in the schools, the hospital, with the police or Central Darling Shire Council (CDSC known as “the Shire”). There are also a number of people in Wilcannia whom Beckett (2005b:17) describes as “educated whites who have lived in the town for long periods” and on whom the town has been able to draw upon for support in matters to do with political and cultural activism. However, Aboriginal people do not always welcome this support. As with all matters involving political and cultural activism (particularly where white activists take on issues which some Aborigines see to be Aboriginal matters), there is agreement and disagreement over the issues and ideologies being espoused and raised.

There are a few descendants of white families from the Wilcannia region, including grazier and farming families who live on properties around the town. Some of these families have members who work in town. These people have taken on jobs to supplement falling incomes as a result of extended drought. However, by far the majority of whites living in Wilcannia are “blow ins” who come to work on short to medium term contracts.

I offer this breakdown of ‘whites’ to make clear that when I talk about non-Aboriginal people or more readily the whites in town, I am talking about people who span different

16 See Jeff Collmann (1988:123) for the ways in which women from around Alice Springs manipulate matrifilial links and the naming of children around social and economic opportunities including welfare payments.
17 For a full and in-depth historical reading of the Aboriginal population of Wilcannia and the Far West from the 1900’s onwards, Jeremy Beckett’s work (Beckett 1958a, 1958b, 1965, 2005b) is as comprehensive as one could hope to find. Beckett considers that following a greater Aboriginal political awareness from the 1970’s onwards that most people in Wilcannia began to identify as Barkindji regardless of their parents or their own place of origin (pers, comm.).
18 See Chapter three, ‘Cultural Values and Identity: Ambivalences and Ambiguities’ for a full discussion of the role of whites in employment.
socio-economic milieux. I identify this difference where and when it is thought to be of particular importance. Those who come from 'away' are mainly city dwellers in the middle to high-income range with second-hand dominant society culture 'knowledge' about Aborigines. Some have worked with Aboriginal people who they refer to as the "real" or "tribal" Aborigines from the "top end" and "the centre". Not all whites who come to work in Wilcannia are Australian, or Australian born. Over my time in Wilcannia the local hospital, for example, had short term contract staff from America, Ireland, Holland, South Africa, Sweden, England and Zimbabwe. They were all 'white' barring the two Zimbabwean nurses. Each of us "blow ins", by necessity, brought our own cultural baggage.

**Traditional Culture and Detribalised Aborigines – What’s in a Name?**

From the 1940's there was a growing anthropological interest in research with the "detribalised remnants" where "little or none of the cultural life has survived" (Bell 1965:396). Marie Reay (1965:381), one of the earliest anthropologists who worked with what were known at the time to be 'part-Aborigines', talks of the "fruits of modern fieldwork among disorganised remnants" and credits much of the original impetus for the study of 'part-Aboriginal' communities as coming from Professor A Elkin who "foresaw the growing need for objective accounts of detribalised Aborigines" (Reay 1965:381).

Jeremy Beckett, writing of his early 1950's fieldwork in far western New South Wales, said of this time that,

> [apart from Elkin's various writings and Ronald Berndt's (1951) *From Black to White in South Australia*, anthropology was entirely concerned with what people called 'the real Aborigines', that is to say those of the Centre and the North who seemed to be living in some degree as their ancestors had done (2005b:6).

Moreover, studies undertaken with Aboriginal people in what Rowley (1971:vii) named 'settled' Australia tended to be looked down upon by other anthropologists (Beckett 2005b:6). Whilst Berndt may have been concerned with 'part-Aborigines', he believed that

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19 The two nurses from Zimbabwe who came to work at the hospital on one year contracts indicate something of the ambiguities of black and white difference. Only one of the nurses stayed for the full year. This male nurse experienced (what was to him) prejudice from a few of the Aboriginal population. The male nurse was shocked and offended when one day an Aboriginal patient told him to "keep your filthy black hands off me, ya cunt, youse lot have all got AIDS". This surprised both him and some of the white nurses who assumed that his 'blackness' accorded Aboriginal acceptance and a degree of compatibility. The two Zimbabwean nurses made stronger friendships with the whites in town than they did the blacks. They were black, but to the whites they were not Aborigines. To the Aborigines they were black, but they were also not Aborigines. For some of the whites Zimbabwean blackness was a refreshing difference. For some of the Aborigines this blackness offered a threat of contamination.
by observing the effects of "short-sighted" government policy in one region, "...it may be possible to arrest similar trends in parts of Australia not yet subjected to intensive contact" (Berndt and Berndt 1951:146). Elkin, on the other hand, as with many of his students (Malcolm Calley 1964; Ruth Fink 1957/1958, 1964, 1965; Marie Reay 1949, 1957, 1958, 1964, 1965; Reay and Sittlington 1947/1948), stressed the study of the "contemporary natives'" adaptation to the "necessity of co-existing with the 'white man'" (Reay 1965:387).

Beckett says of his own early work that although this was similar in subject matter to that of some of Elkin's students, "many of these studies had been supervised by Elkin and at times read as though they were reporting back to him on the progress of the policy of which he was the architect, and the implementation of which in NSW he oversaw as member of the AWB [Aborigines Welfare Board]" (Beckett 2005b:12). The policy to which Beckett refers was that of assimilation, which began in earnest in the 1940's, superceding the earlier protectionism (Bell 1965:399). It is hard to discern how many of these early studies of 'settled' Australia were motivated by an interest in the people of these areas themselves, and how many were a means to an end in securing the 'traditional', remote Aborigines a stay of execution, as it were.

The general view was that contact with whites (culture contact) meant the loss of culture. This was a time when anthropologists unthinkingly used terms such as "mixed blood" or "racial mixture" to denote acculturation (Beckett 2005b:11). Loss of tradition and miscegenation went hand in hand and diluted culture. Culture took the place of blood and the "pure blood" became the traditional Aborigine (Byrne 1996:291). Studies of what constituted Aboriginal culture were not clear in separating race and culture and purity of Aboriginal blood ('full bloodedness') became the measure of a purer form of Aboriginal culture (Beckett 2005b; Cowlishaw 1988a).

Anthropologists along with members of many other professions sought to record the authentic culture of traditional societies before it disappeared in the face of acculturation. This "led to the seekers of Aborigines...repairing to the remoter parts of the continent..." (Cowlishaw 1988a:278). There was an urgency to gather and salvage the culture of the remote full-bloods. This agenda was a feature of the inaugural conference of 'The Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies', held in 1961 (Berndt and Tonkinson 1988; Williams 1988:3&192). Although the 1961 conference was of an "avowedly general" nature, there was a separate section "termed the 'contemporary' Aboriginal scene [which] was virtually separated from others that emphasised 'traditional' aspects of Aboriginal
Australia” (Berndt and Tonkinson 1988:4). T G H Strehlow talked at the conference about “the destruction and rapid disappearance of ‘one of the finest treasure houses of living ancient cultures’ and urged a coordinated national research effort” (Williams 1988:192).

The recording of an “authentic cultural baseline” was the nation-wide project of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies for both anthropology and archaeology. The standard view was that “Aboriginality could be lost but not added to” (Byrne 1996:91&100). This view dominated despite some anthropologists such as Berndt beginning to express “doubt about the desirability of ‘separating out...indigenous from introduced features’” (Williams 1988:192).

The 1960’s saw a more general interest from the wider public in “contemporary Aboriginal society” (Berndt and Tonkinson 1988:10). According to some anthropologists this was signaled by a shift in attitudes toward Aborigines and resulted in the 1967 referendum (Williams 1988:192). Many theories as to this greater public interest have been forwarded. Ted Docker (1964:10), proposes that the general public’s interest in the “dark people” (in particular, those Aborigines who lived close to white settlements) from 1945 onwards was prompted by an “atmosphere of international do-goodism – expressed in the Four Freedoms, the United Nations [and] the Declaration of Human Rights”. This new political atmosphere also facilitated the denunciation of colonial exploitation, interest in South African apartheid and the scrutiny of what is known as the White Australia policy (Docker 1964:10). Cowlishaw (1988a: 130), in speaking of the public interest in the sixties and seventies, talks of the “changes in the political climate [such as] international opinion and the upsurge of protest [which are] alluded to as explanations”. These interests can be figured as being oriented towards civil rights and welfare as opposed to ‘traditional Aboriginal culture’ per se.

Stanner (1979:225), too, makes note of the “evidences of a large swing from depreciation to appreciation” of Aborigines around the time of the 1967 referendum, but states that the reasons for this are “difficult to interpret”. He does, however, talk of the increasing marketing and interest in Aboriginal art, dancing, music, film and old books about Aborigines, proposing that although it “…would unduly flatter anthropology and archaeology to credit them with having made the market [that] they and other research disciplines have strengthened it” (Stanner 1979:226). Civil rights, assimilation and welfare interests can be considered of a different order to the growing appetite for Aboriginal art and culture. Appreciation of Aboriginal art, film, books, etc., speaks more to an engagement with Aborigines as products and commodities of a detached nature (Byrne 1996:99).
posits a connection between the end of the White Australia Policy in the 1960's and an increasing use of (a previously embargoed) Aboriginality as part of a national identity (Byrne 1996:96-97). The growth of television may also have contributed to a wider interest in Aboriginality (Tuckson 1968:60).

The general public came to recognise and consume some notion of a persisting Indigenous 'traditional culture' which pre-dated contact through art, tourism, music and film (Povinelli 2002:50). This engagement was primarily if not exclusively confined to those Aborigines about whom anthropologists and other 'experts' had gathered knowledge: that is, the 'traditional' Aborigines. Since anthropologists were instrumental in creating this category, they were more often the people relied upon "...for authoritative statements concerning Aboriginal traditions" (Cowlishaw 1988a:277).

The Anthropology of Settled Australia

There is, I argue, ongoing anthropological resistance to the study of Other 'settled' cultures, although this reluctance is not restricted to studies conducted in this country. One's credentials as an anthropologist continue to be enhanced and validated by "...research in exotic surroundings...the more difficult, dangerous, and inaccessible the terrain, the better" (Lewis 1996:1). As Lewis notes, "Like shamans, anthropologists go on trips to distant and mysterious worlds from which they bring back rich stories of exotic wisdom" (1996:6). Despite the postmodern critiques (e.g., Clifford and Marcus 1986) of anthropology's attraction to the exotic, fieldwork in a remote and culturally distant location still carries a great deal of prestige within the academy.

Compared with places in the Northern Territory where it is often joked that each Aboriginal family has their own anthropologist, there remains a paucity of studies undertaken in 'settled' Australia (such as urban areas and rural and regional country towns), and even fewer which engage with exploring the experiential and interpretive interaction of black and white.

Calley’s work with the Bandgalung, although located within an assimilationist framework, is notable for the emphasis that it places on the agency of the Bandjalung as opposed to measuring Aboriginal culture in terms of reductive adjustments. Bell, Reay and Fink, who similarly immersed themselves in the lives of ‘non-traditional’ Aboriginal people, also did so at a time when degrees of assimilation and adaptation of ‘part Aborigines’ to dominant society norms were an important focus. For Reay, Fink and Bell, these foci to a great extent directed and set the course of study. In Bell’s case the work is almost an apologetic for assimilation. Reay’s work in Brewarrina and Walgett and with Sitlington in Moree, and, Fink’s work in Barwon emphasise what they propose as hierarchies of Aboriginal class and status as well as commenting on attitudes and elements of discrimination – the ‘caste barrier’.

Barwick’s (1964) work is notable for its early perceptive recognition of the importance of regional kinship associations in the maintenance of identity, as partly manifested in the mobile and socially comforting economy of sharing (see also Beckett 1994). C. D. Rowley’s (1971) *Outcasts in White Australia* is a comprehensive study of the lives and conditions of Aboriginal people in parts of rural Australia and the government policies affecting them. The title reflects the ideological agenda of the time and his section on Wilcannia describes the social and spatial boundaries between black and white and the attitudes and values that sustained them.

These early studies operated within a shared paradigm which saw Aboriginal people in terms of distance from tradition and ‘culture’: the authors’ concerns were mostly directed towards documenting what remained of ‘culture’ and the ways in which Aborigines had adapted, or not, to mainstream white society. The datum points for comparison were ‘traditional’ Aborigines and ‘normal’, ‘decent’ white society.

The 1980’s saw something of a relative efflorescence of works about Aborigines in the more settled parts of Australia and the works of four anthropologists, Barry Morris, Gaynor MacDonald, Gillian Cowlishaw and Jeremy Beckett stand out as key studies in this field. Barry Morris’ (1989) work in the Macleay Valley, NSW is a social history which follows relations between the Dhan-gadi people and the state. His work is concerned with the Aboriginal process of becoming, with culture as a relational and historic process as opposed to culture as a reified thing sitting outside of time and place. He documents the ways in which the Dhan-gadi people create identity through a peaceful politics of resistance within a dominating framework of institutional segregating and assimilating policies. His work in the
far west of NSW (Morris 2001) explores unequal relationships of power and the degree to which institutional processes (in particular those of the criminal justice system) are complicit with and reproduce racial inequality (Morris 2001). Morris’ work is important for the way in which Aboriginal politics of identity are considered as “an expression of resistance to attempts to make Aborigines experience themselves in the terms defined by the dominant society” (1989:225).

Gaynor MacDonald, (1994, 2000) who has worked for over two decades with Wiradjuri people in western NSW, was one of the first anthropologists to take seriously and to present what Aboriginal people themselves say they are doing from their own point of view. This is quite different to explicating Aboriginal action, understanding and motivations from white political and economic points of view and projected outcomes. Her work on Aboriginal fighting (1994), a theme which is generally pathologised as meaningless, unproductive and destructive violence, instead locates fighting within a social framework. MacDonald’s analysis informs us of the necessary processes, patterns, rules and stories connected to fights and fighting and the importance these have in the transmission and maintenance of shared Wirandjuri values and meanings. She shows the symbolic significance of fights and fighting as re-enactments of an “anecdotal expression of life”: the ways in which fights both connect to and transform social relations and the timeless quality stories of fights have in confirming aspects of social structure (MacDonald 1994:180). As such, MacDonald is one of the first anthropologists to give credence to and recognise the levels of organisation operating in Aboriginal ‘communities’ in NSW.

Gillian Cowlishaw’s work is notable not only for its sheer productive volume, but for its attempts to tackle subject matter and arguments which were (and perhaps are still) quite unpopular in anthropology. Cowlishaw's work (1987, 1988a, 1997, 2004a, 2004b) exposes and problematises the concepts of culture, race, racism and miscegenation through an exploration of the ideologies, processes and initiatives through which difference, exclusion and inequality are understood, defined, and produced in country NSW towns. Her perceptive eye exposes and analyses hidden and entrenched forms of racial injustice, prejudice and inequality (Cowlishaw 1997).

Drawing on her ethnographic work of the 1980’s in Bourke, NSW, Cowlishaw engages with Aboriginal attitudes and behaviours which include swearing and fighting, analysing and theorising these in terms of an ‘oppositional culture’ (1993, 2003, 2004a). This work, which is also concerned with the theme of Aboriginal representations in anthropological literature,
has “shaken up the definitional boundaries of what counts as power and resistance” (Lattas 1993:240), thereby provoking and stimulating debate in anthropology on this issue (see in particular Lattas 1993; Rowse 1990). Her work demonstrates the complexities, contradictions, ambiguities and ambivalences which come to bear in black/white relations in country towns and dominant society (including institutions) more widely.

Jeremy Beckett is a recognised pioneer for his work in the far west of NSW and his research is particularly relevant for this thesis. Beckett (2005b:8) spent “seven exhilarating weeks in Wilcannia” in 1957 as well as a number of months around other far western towns as part of his Masters in anthropology. Whilst operating on many of the historic assumptions of the time in relation to ‘mixed-bloods’ and the loss of culture (Beckett 1958b; 1964), Beckett was one of the first to make Aboriginal people present – and to engage at some level with the dynamic interaction between black and white, with the ways in which Aboriginal people resisted colonialism and with the complexities and inequalities of being ‘part Aboriginal’ in settled Australia (Beckett 1958b, 2005b). His work with George Dutton and Walter Newton (Beckett 1958a, 1978) gave voice and substance to Aboriginal people as individuals and informants at a time when ‘part Aborigines’ and ‘mixed bloods’ were not deemed to have a great deal to say and were not an important focus of study. His quite extensive use of informant quotations also occurred at a time when oral testimony and memory were not given much credibility in anthropology and his more recent oral history work (2000) demonstrates the many ways in which Aboriginality is lived and interpreted. The richness and scope of the material covered in Beckett’s 1958 Master’s thesis in relation to Wilcannia has provided me an invaluable anthropological resource for comparison: it is in and of itself also a comprehensive historical document.20

Work outside of NSW and deserving of mention includes Basil Sansom’s The Camp at Wallaby Cross (1980) and Jeff Collmann’s Fringe Dwellers and Welfare (1988), these works engage with Aboriginal ‘fringe-dwellers’ living in town camps. Collmann’s (1988) work in Mt Kelly speaks to an early reflexivity in anthropology and provides recognition of the

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20 Studies of Wilcannia and/or of the Barkindji people are few and far between. Apart from Beckett’s work (1958b [2005], 1994), other books include Frederick Bonney’s (1884) On some Customs of the Aborigines of the River Darling, New South Wales, S Newland’s (1890) The Parkengees [Barkindji], or Aboriginal Tribes of the Darling River 1887, and Bobbie Hardy’s (1976) ethno-historical book Lament for the Barkindji: the Vanished Tribes of the Darling River Region. Other studies were conducted by Rowley (1971), the prehistorian Harry Allen (1974), the linguist Luise Hercus (1993), and architects such as Memmott (1991), Myers (1988), and Savarton and George (1971).
attitudinal and experiential effects of the ‘traditional’, ‘contemporary’
divide for Aboriginal people. Whilst Collmann also engages with matters of adaptation, his analysis offers the
responses of ‘non-tribal’ Aborigines to change. He emphasises the ways in which Aborigines manage, control and resist the power of welfare agencies, pointing also to the complex strategies of co-operation and engagement that are employed in black and white relationships as well as those within the Aboriginal community itself. Both Collmann and Sansom highlight relationships, levels of social organisation and the ingenuity that Aboriginal people bring to managing these.

Francesca Merlan (1998) and Rosita Henry (1999) both frame their work in terms of inter-cultural socio spatiality, where place and relationships to place are explored for their political, cultural and ontological meanings: both look to change and continuity. Merlan explores the ways in which (specifically anthropological) representations of Aboriginality are deployed by Aboriginal people around Katherine in creating cultural identity and with the fluidity of identity as this intersects with the ways in which space and place are understood, contested, mediated, and re-interpreted. Henry’s work explores how the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people of Kuranda, ‘the village in the rainforest’ in Queensland “constitute themselves in relation to place, and actively construct communicate and contest categorical identities”. Henry (1999:1) demonstrates the way in which certain places are not only practiced places, but of how they can become a focus for the practice of identity making through discourse as practice and practice as discourse which shape, locate and produce relations and identities.

Whilst my own work has a certain kinship and affinity with the work of many of the anthropologists named above in ways which become clear in the thesis, my work departs from previous studies for the focus that I give to art as a means of interpreting what culture means and is made to mean for those named ‘non-tribal’, ‘urban’ and less commonly ‘rural’ – those who are not seen to be ‘traditional’. Cowlishaw (2004a:83-109), Henry (1999) and Myers (1994) engage with the ways in which performance produces cultural identity. I extend this idea to explore the performativity of art work in Wilcannia, that is, how art works and art making perform culture, as well the ways in which culture is produced, expressed and made manifest through art.

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21 Then as now ‘contemporary’ Aborigines often connotes non-traditional or urban, except in the art world where ‘contemporary’ is both an argument for ‘traditional’ Aborigines being able to cut the avant-garde mustard and speaks of efforts to create an ‘urban’ art market.
The 'Law' and Tradition – Art and The Dreaming

Through the categories of art and culture and their intersection, the continued and productive effects of the differentiating tropes of 'traditional' and 'urban' Aboriginal people are crystallised. The subject of Aboriginal art is an area that serves as a measure of the ways in which 'detribalised' 'part-Aborigines' and 'traditional', 'tribal' Aborigines remain as separate subjects for analysis under their new guises of 'urban', 'non-tribal', 'settled' versus 'traditional', 'tribal' and 'tradition-oriented' and the ongoing effects of this categorical and analytic division. An important measure of these traditions was/is the practice of the Dreaming and Aboriginal Law. Traditional Aborigines are seen to have and to practice the Dreaming and the Law; indeed, 'traditional' Aboriginal art tells the 'stories' of the Dreaming. Land Rights legislation has added to this notion of authenticity, attaching this to definitions of the Dreaming, the Law and tradition in ways which leave those classed non-traditional unable to validate themselves as 'real' Aborigines.

Unlike most Aboriginal land legislation which restricts claims to 'traditional Aboriginal owners', under the New South Wales Aboriginal Land Rights Act (1983) "Aboriginal groups [are allowed] to claim land on the basis of their historical attachment. The goal of the legislation is the "regeneration of Aboriginal culture and dignity...at the same time (that it lays) the basis for a self-reliant and more secure economic future for our continent's Aboriginal custodians" (Povinelli 2002:60). However, it is the definitions enshrined in the Federal Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act (1976) that have become the measure of Aboriginal traditions in the major legislative references (Povinelli 2002:51). The 1976 Act "defined 'Aboriginal traditions' as 'the body of traditions, observances, customs and beliefs of Aboriginals or of a community of group of Aboriginals, and includes those traditions, observances, customs, and beliefs as applied in relation to particular persons, sites, areas of land, things or relationships'" (Povinelli 2002:51). One can imagine that for the general public the finer points of NSW versus Federal Aboriginal land legislation are distinctions subsumed by the rhetoric and emphasis placed on (and the need to

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22 The Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act (1976) gave Aboriginal people the right to claim vacant Crown land in the Northern Territory (Povinelli 2002:45). The federal Native Title Act (1993) made land rights more of an Australia-wide concern and stipulates that "an Aboriginal group must continue to observe 'traditional laws' and traditional customs'" (Povinelli 2022:51). Although legislatively undefined these are nonetheless implicitly understood commonsense notions in the public imaginary.
demonstrate) 'real' and 'authentic' Aboriginality through the practice of Aboriginal traditions and a 'traditional' way of life.\textsuperscript{23}

Muta's now famous quote that "white man got no Dreaming. Him go 'nother way" (Stanner 1979) serves as a clear division between black and white ways of being. Aboriginal Law established and maintained norms, moral codes, sanctions and the passing on of knowledge within a ritual framework (Meggitt 1962:212-213 & 250-251). The Law refers to "an Aboriginal concept, which connotes a body of jural rules and moral evaluations of customary and socially sanctioned behaviour patterns that are believed by the Aborigines to have originated in…the Dreamtime" (Tonkinson 1974:7). Because of the Dreaming’s strong association with systems of land tenure (Williams 1988:208), some make reference to "Aboriginal land law" (Maddock 1981) and "customary land law" (Williams 1988:211). The authority of elders was, as Meggitt (1962:212-213) stated, "generally defined in terms of the ultimate dreamtime laws [and] normally limited to ceremonial situations" (in Williams 1988:206). The Dreaming, the Law, was what was passed on from the old to the young and what established continuity. The Dreaming, the Law and tradition was what had been thought lost to those Aborigines living alongside or on the fringes of settled Australia.

In 1968, Berndt talked of the increasing generalised interest in Aboriginal art, as well as the growing difficulty in obtaining this as Aboriginal people "become more Europeanized" (1968:1). Anthropologists were interested in "living art" and living artists (Berndt 1968:69), ergo they were interested in those Aboriginal people of the North and the Centre who were considered to be producing "genuine" and "traditional" art (Berndt 1968:18). Conversely, the art of ethnological interest in NSW was to be found in the rock galleries and caves: places where the living, genuine, traditional Aboriginal artists were no longer as these were places where they had "died out before we studied them" (Elkin 1968:15-16).

When the acrylic paintings of the central and western desert began their rise in public popularity, the idea of the Dreaming was trenchant in their 'marketing' and valorisation. Exhibitions, texts, art advisers, art dealers at different times and in different ways stressed the importance of the Dreaming and of the authentic and timeless nature of the artists and

\textsuperscript{23} The target for exhibiting and demonstrating the absolute requirements of the Federal Native Title Act are, according to Povinelli, an impossibility since, "At the most simple level, no indigenous subject can inhabit the temporal and spatial location to which indigenous identity refers – the geographical and social space and time of authentic Ab-originality" (Povinelli 2002:49). Pre-contact Aboriginal culture became the benchmark of authentic Aboriginality" (Byrne 1996:82). Therefore, one might ask what hope exists in demonstrating this kind of legitimacy for the Aborigines living in 'settled' Australia.
their work. Authenticity is a large part of what an Aboriginal art audience continue to seek. In 1988 Peter Sutton edited a book called *Dreamings* about the art of Aboriginal Australia. The book was published alongside an exhibition of the same name held in New York's Asia Society Galleries and explained the relationship between art and the Dreaming thus:

Most Aboriginal art, at least until comparatively recently, has been enmeshed in religious performance and the social networks and territorial groupings of its practitioners. The imagery of Aboriginal art, and that of the songs, dances and ceremonial paraphernalia, is related both to the bodies of Aboriginal mythic narrative and to the wider symbolisms of daily life and belief. Together these symbolisms constitute a complex code of interaction that continually remodels, and at the same time reflects, Aboriginal cosmology, sociality, and notions of the person. Reproducing the culture, in this sense, is also in Aboriginal eyes reproducing or 'following up' the Dreaming (Sutton 1988:14).

Having made the importance of the Dreaming to Aboriginal tradition and sociality clear, the book has a chapter towards the end entitled 'Survival, Regeneration, and Impact', about the art of eastern and southern Australia where their "traditions...either became extinct or declined to a point where only a handful of individuals still knew some remnant of them by the 1970's" (Sutton, Jones and Hemming 1988:181). Whilst current art texts make much of stating that Aboriginal artists (whether 'traditional' or 'urban') are 'contemporary', there remains an implicit as well as at times an explicit notion that the Dreaming, tradition and authenticity are proportionally greater, the more substantial the perceived and actual spatial and cultural *distance* from whites.

Fourmile (1994:71) speaks of the inaccuracy of the more recent stereotypes of urban and traditional: "a separation so beloved of many non-Aboriginal commentators on our affairs". Nonetheless, these differentiations continue to be made in both art related and non-art related contexts. Notions of a pristine, holistic, untouched culture tainted by degree of contact are artificial as Sutton and Anderson (1988:5) point out in *Dreamings*. However, degrees of contact remain the reason for the textual and theoretical separation of Aboriginal cultures into *more* or *less* tradition-oriented categories (Kleinert and Neale 2000; Morphy 2001; Sutton and Anderson 1988). This is not to argue against differing levels and dates of white contact or difference; it is to indicate the fairly unproblematic way in which these analytic divides are perpetuated based on a contact baseline of Aboriginal culture, which, in turn, remains tied up to notions of authenticity for Aboriginal people of Wilcannia and in the public imagination.

Howard Morphy, (2001:7) one of the foremost anthropologists of art, states in his book *Aboriginal Art* that the divisions "that have been proposed between 'tribal' and 'urban',
‘classical’ and ‘modern’, ‘traditional’ and non-traditional’ pose more problems than they help solve”. His inclusion of a later chapter titled ‘Settler Society, The Survival of Art in Adversity’ which is about the south-east of Australia, seems therefore somewhat contradictory and anomalous. The chapter starts by saying that,

In some parts of Australia Aboriginal Art almost lost contact with the Dreaming for more than a century. Aboriginal people as victims of colonialism, deprived of their land, decimated by disease, murdered and dispersed, often forcibly separated from their children, found it difficult to continue their ceremonial life. Indeed, it was taken for granted by the wider society that Aboriginal art had disappeared from the south-east by the end of the nineteenth-century. Aborigines entered a period of invisibility when they were no longer thought of as a presence in the land (2001:319).

Art and the Dreaming as part of its demonstration are given a partial resurrection here. Yet it seems that as Collmann (1988:227) states, the evolutionary relation between traditional and urban people continues to “mark an inevitable falling away” of the latter. Artists too challenge the urban traditional divide; however, the use of ‘traditional’ in Aboriginal art contexts, “seems to refer to a practitioner in a remote area, untainted by external influence” (Onus 1990:14). Rural, and regional are often either subsumed under urban or are ideologically and contextually placed in the urban grab bag by virtue of what they are seen not to be, that is, traditional.

Roberta Sykes (1990:6) asks what “uniquely Aboriginal theme then, is left for urban Blacks whose Dreaming has largely been obliterated by the white people”? To this question she cites the urban artists’ celebration of and struggle for survival, as well as the highly politicised expression of urban art (Sykes 1990:6). From urban Aboriginal people having no culture or remnants of culture, there are now equally strong anthropological assertions that they do have a culture, that they value it – and so do ‘we’. The more recent assessments of urban Aboriginal art strongly argue for the ‘value’ of urban Aboriginal culture (Kleinert and Neale 2000).

Anthropologists, art-dealers, art-afficionados and curators among others have begun to ‘recognise’ that in retrospect it may have been a little hasty to cast urban Aborigines as having lost their culture. Some argue for a previously unrecognised continuity whilst others place the stress on adaptability, resilience, and very commonly the oppositional and politically challenging nature of the work (Johnson 1990; Kleinert and Neale 2000; Morphy 2001; Sykes 1990). Whichever approach is taken there remains a clear separation between ‘remote’, ‘tribal’ (more recently ‘tradition oriented’) and ‘urban’, ‘non-tribal’ or ‘settled’
Aboriginal people. The urban and the remote Aborigines are ubiquitous categories of Australian public culture.

Jeff Collmann (1988:225) talks of the way in which Aborigines as drunks or as masters of the land stand as metaphors of two poles of a continuum through which “Australians typically interpret Aboriginal experience”. Whilst anthropologists may have been far more subtle in their analyses, nevertheless the remote and the urban remain analytically polar categories. More recent anthropological work comments on the previous hierarchy between tribal/remote/real and urban/inauthentic Aborigines emphasising that these categories should not be viewed as better or worse, superior or inferior in cultural terms, but simply as different. Difference however remains the one stable analytical structure of analysis. I am not denying the differences and consequences of contact, or that urban, remote and rural areas might require nuanced analysis, the problem lies with what ‘urban’ and ‘traditional’ continue to connote and drag in their wake.

Some Effects on Aborigines

In the late 1990’s, to counteract ‘Hansonism’ and its racial tone, “National spokespersons...spoke of the pleasures produced by concentrating on the vibrant ancient laws found not only in remote interior indigenous communities but also on...major networks and cable channels; in concert halls and art galleries; in the glossy magazines leafed though on airplanes, couches and toilets” (Povinelli 2002:43). The valorisation of the timeless traditional Aborigine has been fed by tourism, new agers (Byrne 1996:101), and to a lesser extent by green environmentalists. “Non-Aboriginal Australians enjoy ancient traditions while suspecting the authenticity of the Aboriginal subject; Aboriginal Australians enjoy their traditions while suspecting the authenticity of themselves” (Povinelli 2002:57).

Whilst anthropologists now recognise and write about the dynamism and ability of Aboriginal people in the Centre and the North to incorporate recent events, physical structures and entities such as cars, introduced species, and white settlers into their Law and Dreaming (Myers 1986) the theoretical and legislative mutuality of the land, the Dreaming/the Law, ceremony and song as ‘traditional’ and therefore ‘real’ locates (if sometimes indirectly) those classed as “urban” and “rural” in terms of being without. Whilst anthropologists are happy to talk of “Toyota dreaming”, non-Aboriginal people and Aboriginal people from Wilcannia have taken on board the earlier anthropological meanings
of 'traditional Aborigine': that which is untouched, unchanging, and Toyota Dreamings are variously mocked as inauthentic, fraudulent or laughable.

Elizabeth Povinelli hazards the assertion "...that in contrast to the concept of, say, a 'unicorn', most Australians believe that to which 'traditions' refers existed at some point in time and believe some residual part of this prior undifferentiated whole remains in the now fragmentary bodies, desires, and practices of Aboriginal persons" (2002:48). That many Aborigines also consider this to be the case, and continue to measure themselves against as well as seek this 'lost' state and knowledge, may be argued to be part of anthropology's legacy.

Aboriginal people in Wilcannia have a strong sense of identity; however, as culture has become something which is increasingly objectified and made tangible and demonstrable, many struggle to 'find' and to 'feel' they 'have' this 'thing' which has been 'lost'. They too talk of the "real tribal people", the "full-bloods" "up north" and mourn this elusive creation called 'traditional culture'. There is a level of yearning that the promise of 'traditional culture' is thought to fill. Language, stories of mythical beings and their travels, artifacts, mythological sites are part of demonstrating that people have not lost their culture, and are finding their culture. At the same time there is a sense that for some Aboriginal people this 'thing' of Aboriginal culture proper eludes them. Nevertheless, this 'thing' called 'traditional' culture which Aboriginal people in 'settled' Australia were said to have 'lost' is actively being sought as it is also being actively asserted by many Aboriginal people.

Indeed for Aborigines in Wilcannia as with others, interest in gaining knowledge about "Dreaming tracks, the stories, and the rituals associated with them" was revived with the land rights debates in the 1970's (Beckett 2000:11). These subjects are seen as validating forms of Aboriginality and comprise much of the content of Wilcannia art works (Image 12 and Image 13).
Lattas (1993:247) points out that some anthropologists criticise Aboriginal people who look to tradition or essentialising stereotypes as a way of creating an identity, stating that this identity is fabricated and politically unhelpful. Lattas, however, shows how those creating
Aboriginal identities have differing agendas and also questions both the efficacy and right of white intellectuals to set the stage for what should be considered fruitful or valid (1993).

Marcia Langton states that “[m]ost Aboriginal people in ‘settled’ Australia believe that ‘tribal’ Aboriginal law, which they understand to mean ceremonial life, is the only existing kind of Aboriginal law” (in Williams 1988:224). Moreover, Povinelli (2002:54), in talking of the Aboriginal people with whom she interacts, says that the non-Aboriginal desire for the presence of ‘indigenous traditions’ “...makes it more difficult for Aboriginal men and women not to see the failure of cultural identity as their own personal failure rather than as a structure of failure to which they are urged to identify”.

The Dreaming, the Law and the Land, and their expression are bound to real Aboriginality, to ‘traditional’ Aboriginality. The other Aborigines, those who have ‘lost’ their Dreaming are also seen to have lost all that goes along with this and are therefore invalidated.

**Why Wilcannia?**

In December 2001, I attended the NSW Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation Council’s Annual General Meeting. This was prior to my enrolling in a Ph.D. and my attendance there was in my capacity as a delegate for the Chatswood branch of ‘Australians for Reconciliation’. At this meeting an Aboriginal woman from far western NSW spoke strongly about her fear that the water of the Darling River (the Baaka) and Menindee Lakes (Wottanella) was being sold off by government to “big conglomerates” and that “our river” would be lost to the Aboriginal people. I began to follow the politics of the Murray Darling Basin Commission (MDBC)\(^\text{24}\), and read about how the Barkindji were ‘the people of the river’. If the Barkindji were the people of the river and the river was in trouble, what did this mean for and to the people? (Image 14)

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\(^{24}\) The MDBC is the executive arm of the Murray Darling Basin (MDB) Ministerial Council. The MDBC manages matters pertaining to land and water use and the environment of the Murray Darling Basin and advises the Council on these issues.
Upon starting my Ph.D., I contacted Jeremy Beckett and Jeremy kindly gave me a contact in Broken Hill. This contact was Badger Bates, a Barkindji man who worked as a ‘Cultural Sites Officer’ with The National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS). Badger seemed open to my project to study the relationship of the Barkindji people to the *Baaka* (the Darling River). On the strength of Badger’s interest, I moved to Broken Hill at the beginning of July in 2002. After several weeks of trying to get Badger to return my phone calls and with a mounting anxiety and frustration that I was not really getting into things the way I ‘should’ be Badger finally called and we arranged to meet. It will be evident on reading this thesis that Badger is an important part of my research (see chapter seven) as he was instrumental to the ways in which I began to theorise certain issues as well as being a friend, ally and informant.25

Within a day of my arriving in Wilcannia and being introduced as being there to “study ‘the river’”, many people told me “we are Baaka”, meaning in a literal sense that ‘we are the river’. I was told that “the river is everything” and “without the river we are nothing”, “we have no identity”. There is of course much about cultural identity that is not (and indeed cannot be) verbalised, and which, as Maurice Bloch so simply puts it, “goes without saying” (1992:129). Very early on it became clear that expressions such as ‘We Baaka’ and “we Barkindji” are used interchangeably and are voiced for all sorts of reasons, at different times, and in different contexts. They are expressed, for example, when relaying the correlation

25 Although Badger lived in Broken Hill he came to Wilcannia at least every fortnight for a couple or few days at a time.
between what it is to be Barkindji and the practice of eating fresh fish and johnnycakes “cooked in the ashes”; of liking to, and in some cases needing to, fish often in order to maintain some peace of mind; to express an affinity with the river and in the need to camp along the riverbank in the company of family and friends. Correlations are also drawn between what it is to ‘be Baaka’ or to ‘be Barkindji’ and the frequency with which townspeople go in and out of jail, the propensity for fighting and for male/female “jealousy”. In a drinking context I was often told “you with Baaka now” “you have to be like Baaka” meaning that you must “enjoy yourself” and “be like us”, which in this context means to “get charged up” (get “full as a boot”, get drunk).

Explicit expressions and actions of Barkindji identity and identification as well as implicit cultural action are often clearly and directly river related whilst at other times they do not directly connote a river association. These are symbolic as well as practical identifications with and identifiers of what it is to ‘be Barkindji’. What it is to ‘be Barkindji’ is importantly a holistic identifier which encompasses all of life as lived and cannot be reduced to a relationship with the river, or water in any isolated or separated sense. I began to cast my net beyond the river as I had initially imagined it.

I became interested in exploring black and white interactions and the ways in which categories of difference were being expressed, interpreted and played out through the social dynamics of the town. Being familiar with the literature on country NSW towns I was aware of the racial division said to operate, so much so that I initially took overt as well as hostile expressions of black and white difference for granted. Difference was so ‘in your face’, that I nearly overlooked it. However, I began to explore this complex field and the categories and thinking invoked.

I also began to take an increasing interest in the primarily ‘unseen scene’ of art work that was being created in homes in Wilcannia. The strong expression by Aboriginal people that art showed “our culture”, the fact that art was being produced for a multiplicity of reasons, and the constancy as well as variation in the representations of the art work caused me to redirect the focus of my research to ‘art and culture’ as explicitly expressed and related aspects.
When I arrived in town there was some suspicion of me at first amongst certain whites who felt that as an anthropologist I had come to gather knowledge for a native title claim on behalf of the Aboriginal people. As a white person researching what were seen to be ‘Aboriginal matters’ I found myself being asked a great deal by whites ‘about Aborigines’ as though I could provide ‘answers’ to what many whites saw to be “their problems” (the Aborigines). As an anthropologist I was seen to have certain sympathies with the Aboriginal people and it was apparent quite early on that some of the whites were going to ‘set me straight’, as it were. I was deemed to be someone who should hear “the facts” about “these people”. Blacks told me about whites and whites told me about blacks. Both did this at times with the view that since I was in Wilcannia to write things down that, somehow, in this documentation the ‘situations’ black and white feel themselves to be in would be ‘vindicated’ or would be somehow ‘seen for what they really are’. I therefore talked to both whites and blacks, adding of course my own interpretations and voice on the matters at hand. As anthropology has shown, much of the anthropologist’s ‘material’ is actively generated by participation with and in relation to others. This thesis and the material ‘produced’ was and is a changing and developing dialogue, which is, in the final analysis, my interpretation and selection of events in text (see Clifford 1983; Geertz 1973).

I interacted daily with both black and white and was on a few occasions invited to lunches, dinners and other social occasions with whites; indeed, I stayed for six months or so with the non-Aboriginal Administration Manager of the Local Aboriginal Land Council and CDEP. However, in the main, I hung out mostly with Aboriginal people. I formed some close relationships and spent a lot of time with the extended members of five particular family groups. Between these and other people I came to know there were eight key people with whom I spent concentrated time, and of that eight, two would become strong sounding-boards. There were two houses where I felt I could be ‘completely myself’ and to some extent take off my anthropology hat. I came to know many other families and members of families through introductions, by walking around town and through socialising at the pub.

26 A couple of days into fieldwork I was invited by the manager of the Rural Lands Protection Board to look through the historic records of the area. I accepted, not really knowing what I would be looking for but feeling that I would get a better idea of the history of land use and past and current environment issues. However, the Chairman of the Board got to hear about this and told the Manager that I was not permitted to look at the records. The board felt that I was looking for land use patterns that might bolster a native title claim including the use of ‘traveling stock reserves’.

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the golf club, and sitting with groups in the street and the park, and at the homes of artists while they worked.  

I attended all Wilcannia Community Working Party meetings and for some months worked as a part-time assistant to the Chairperson of the Working Party, who was also Chair of the board of Mutawintji Aboriginal Land Council. I took and typed Working Party minutes and wrote letters on behalf of both the Working Party and the Land Council. I stayed for a few nights at a time at Mutawintji and Kinchega National Parks with people from town. I also spent one week at Kinchega at a ‘Baaka Dreaming Art Camp’. I attended several meetings at Menindee held by the Murray Darling Basin Commission to consult with Barkindji people from around the region.

I went to Broken Hill every ten days or so to do my washing and get food supplies. Whilst in Broken Hill I also spent time at Thankakali (your people my people) an Aboriginal run and operated Art Centre. I recorded approximately thirty hours of taped conversations. Some were semi-formal in the sense that I asked if I could interview people about particular topics, eg, art work, the river (at times with a list of pre-prepared questions). At other times I asked if I could simply allow the tape to run during conversations. In total I spent over sixteen months in Wilcannia between July 2002 and December 2003 with one trip prior to and a few short trips outside of this time.

**On Being Scottish**

I want to emphasise what I consider was a cogent ‘hook’ to my making the kind of relationships I did and how this in turn relates to the kind of research data I conducted. As stated in the Prologue, I was born in Glasgow, Scotland, and from the very beginning it became clear that my Scottishness was seen as a sign of affinity with Barkindji people. Some of the parallels that Aboriginal people drew are linked to my working class upbringing and the fact that I was, like many people in Wilcannia, “reared” by my Nana. This was an important connective link to others.

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27 Most of the artists in Wilcannia are male, therefore I spent a great deal of time with men. Thesis length prevents me exploring more fully the social effects of sexual jealousy. However I have appended some anecdotal information which gives an indication of the effects gender had on my work. (see Appendix number two).  
28 This was a children’s art camp created as part of a collaborative effort by the Central Darling Shire Council and James Giddey, the Regional Arts Development Officer of West Darling Arts. Children from Menindee, Broken Hill and Wilcannia came together with Aboriginal artists from the region to learn about and take part in painting, drawing, basket weaving and dancing, and to ‘learn about culture’. 

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Several times Aboriginal people in Wilcannia drew comparisons between Barkindji and Scottish people, "they’re both fucken wild", "they’re like us – mad cunts" (an allusion to the Scottish reputation for fighting). This is a stereotype not unaided by the film ‘Braveheart’ based (loosely) on the life of William Wallace, a thirteenth century Scot and ‘warrior’ who fought the English for Scottish independence. Some people in Wilcannia have seen this on video and quote lines from the film, “we’re fucked” being a favourite. Another Scottish stereotype, the big whisky drinker, is one recognised as having some affinity with that of the ‘drunken Aborigine’. ‘We’ understood that these epithets are cause for mirth and celebration as well as an identifying stigma. Some people told me that the Scottish are in some ways like the Aboriginal people in that they are seen to have been given a ‘raw deal’ by the English. I am not suggesting that the historic experience of the Scots can be paralleled with that of Aboriginal people; however, this comparison is made for the reasons given.

A few weeks into my fieldwork I was having drinks with a Barkindji man and his friends and family. As with many Scottish working class families, it is customary to have what was in my youth referred to as a “sing-song” when people get together for a few drinks or when having a party. A “bit of a sing-along” is also a strong custom in Wilcannia. When it came my turn to sing I chose (after much prompting to “sing a Scottish song”) ‘The Scottish Soldier’, a tune from my childhood. During the first chorus, a Barkindji man who was in the outside toilet near where we were all sitting began to join in,

"Because those green hills are not highland hills, or the island hills, they’re not my land’s hills. And fair as these green foreign hills may be, they are not the hills of home".

This was a real buzz as well as a surprise to me. I would learn later into my fieldwork that many Barkindji people had Scottish heritage. One old woman in particular would quite often say “I love that Scottish Soldier”. Many Aboriginal people living in Wilcannia had sung and had heard played on cassettes many of the songs I had sung and heard as a child. Scottish

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29 Whilst Scottish people are stereotyped as ‘drinkers’, particularly whisky drinkers, unlike Aborigines they are not detrimentally haunted by the power of the stereotype (Cowlishaw 1993:191).

30 In the late 1800’s Scottish people were effectively ‘cleared’ from their crofts in the Highlands through large rent increases that they could not afford. Although the English are invariably blamed for these “clearances” many times it was the greed of the crofters chiefs and lowland land ‘improvers’ that were the cause of many Highlanders seeking (some forcefully) a better life through emigration. Many emigrated to the United States, Canada and Australia. In Australia Highlanders dispossessed of their own land similarly ‘dispossessed’ the Aboriginal people of theirs (Watson 1984).

31 The Karaoke machine has added to this element in Wilcannia. The spontaneous sing along where acoustic and electric guitars appear out of the woodwork is also common. People talk fondly of the “olden days” when they used to go out to the “clay pan” outside the town limits, place a lot of old car tyres around for seating and have a party. “Amy Quayle played the squeezebox”, others would play the mouth organ and there were always acoustic guitars. Going out to the claypan does not happen any more.
and Irish songs and Scottish relations are an element of many Aboriginal childhoods and are part of a generalised nostalgia for many Aboriginal people (Image 15).

Image 15. Having a sing-along at the 'Mission'. Left to right, Jarrid Cattermole, Lorraine Gibson, Michael (Smackas) Whyman and seated Muriel (Ma) Riley (nee Bates).

I do not wish to present any ‘affinity’ between the people I met and myself as some magical meeting of the minds. I am fully cognizant of Fox’s comments that “conventional representations of sudden baptisms into native society or other stories of rapport we achieved in fieldwork are greatly suspect” (1991:6). Moreover, I wish to avoid the kind of reflexivity which bring to mind Ernest Gellner’s comments that, “Sometimes...a social anthropological study degenerates from having been a study of a society into a study of the reaction of the anthropologist to his own reactions to his observations of the society, assuming that he ever got as far as to have made any” (in Sandall 2001:68).

However, because my Scottishness was something of interest to most of the people I met, and because I was asked lots of questions about Scotland, I found myself having to re-think my own roots in order to respond. In responding to questions about Scotland I ‘brought forth’ and shared parts of my life. I sang and dredged up songs that had been ‘recessed’ for a long time and I remembered and shared past events. This was an experience which illuminated the ways in which inter-cultural relations feed upon one another in reciprocal and effectual ways.
**Thesis Description**

This thesis has two distinct parts. Following a general exploration in chapter one of the categories of art and culture and how these concepts have been defined, part one of the thesis focuses on some key areas through which black and white difference emerge. Chapters two, three and four explore the themes of identity, work and productivity and success and opportunity. These are key arenas of inter-cultural conflict and the source of considerable misunderstanding in Wilcannia. Therefore, an examination of the values and practices relating to work, success and identity provide important insights into local Aboriginal ways of being as these are tacitly and reflexively expressed.

The second part of the thesis provides an examination of art in Wilcannia, for in this context inter and intra-cultural meanings regarding cultural identity and Aboriginality make themselves known in interesting ways. The second part of the thesis analyses the ways in which Aboriginal people in Wilcannia express their understandings and interpretations of art and artists and explores how these intersect with culture. I then focus on two Wilcannian artists, Murray Butcher and Badger Bates, to show the diversity and complexity of forms of Aboriginality and the extent to which art negotiates these. I demonstrate the ways in which culture and art are performed, produced and understood at an individual level and show how the individual can affect and change group understandings about culture.