Spurning, yearning and learning Aboriginality:
Ambivalence shaping the lives of non-Aboriginal Australians.

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This thesis is presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of Murdoch University.

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Declaration:

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary educational institution.

Some of the work outlined in Chapters Four and Five was shaped by earlier work completed in collaboration with Len Collard. Some of the work outlined in Chapter 7 was shaped by a piece written in collaboration with Jennifer Buchanan.

David John Palmer

August 1999.
Abstract

Much academic work concerned with social and cultural processes in Australia takes as its field of inquiry how the lives of Aboriginal Australians have been changed and impacted on by colonisation. Rarely has scholarship attempted to uncover some of the ways Aboriginality and Aboriginal people have become integral in the shaping of the lives of non-Aboriginal Australians.

This thesis takes to heart the challenge of subjecting oneself and one’s own social and cultural position to the rigours of sociological scrutiny and sets out to examine how crucial Aboriginality and Aboriginal people have been in shaping the lives, identities and economies of non-Aboriginal Australians.

Drawing on the work of Homi Bhabha the thesis argues that ambivalence, which underlies much of colonial discourse, can have a tremendously disruptive and unsettling effect on the authority, identities and everyday social lives of non-Aboriginal people. The thesis explores something of the diversity of this ambivalence by focusing attention on five groups of people (One Nation Supporters, retired tourists, ‘alternative lifestylers’, governmental workers and early colonists); two historical moments (early colonial times and the late 1990s); and two regions (the south-west and Kimberley of Western Australia).
The thesis argues that one of the effects of this ambivalence is that the social worlds of non-Aboriginal Australians are often subjected to challenge and change. In early colonial times many ‘settlers’ were torn between the will to colonise and economic and cultural reliance on the efforts and knowledge of Aboriginal people. More recently, One Nation supporters attempt to distance themselves from Aboriginal people by constituting them as the barbaric and parasitical other. At the same time, Hansonites indirectly position Aboriginality as central to their own identity and political future. Another group, retired tourists, regularly perpetuate old colonial tropes and publicly express their disdain of Aboriginal people. At the same time, these people yearn for and engage in social practices otherwise associated with Aboriginal culture. Behind both groups’ public attacks on Aborigines as cannibals and the ‘Aboriginal Industry’ as spongers lies a deep political and cultural reliance on Aboriginality. Romantics and others who aspire to consume and mimic Aboriginal culture are likewise regularly ambivalent and contradictory in their treatment of Aboriginality. It is arguable that many are self-interested and seek to plunder Aboriginal cultural. However, the very romance that prompts their mimicry can and does act to unsettle the certainty of non-Aboriginal dominance. This prompts people to re-examine their identities and social practices. Ambivalence and complexity is also central to the lives of those involved in the business of Aboriginal governance. On the one hand, these people are clearly implicated in the government and regulation of Aboriginal people. On the other hand, liberal discourse on fairness and equality of opportunity force governmental workers to increase their contact and reliance on Aboriginal people. This often has the effect of provoking changes in non-Aboriginal people’s personal and working lives.
The thesis concludes that the engagement of colonial discourse with Aboriginalities inevitably leads to an ambivalence that disables the monolithic dominance of non-Aboriginal Australians. In a range of ways this ambivalence can and does produce conditions which undermine and transform the cultural lives and identities of non-Aboriginal Australians.
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Finally, I would like to dedicate this piece of work to my son Callum. I trust that as he grows he will come to appreciate how crucial are Nyungars and other Aboriginal Australians to his life and the lives of other non-Aboriginal Australians. I also trust that, despite the impression he might get from some of our ‘leaders’, he, and his unborn sibling/s will grow up learning how important it is to seek out ways to open up possibilities for equity, fairness, respect and collaborations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians.
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