THE LOOPIE TRAVELER: NON-ABORIGINES AND AMBIVALENCE

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Introduction

On the bus to Derby the drivers went through their usual dispiriting routine, mobile toilets, knickers round the ankles, no poofters in the rest area. It occurred to me as I dozed that there was an article to be written dealing with the problems most frequently associated with Aborigines - alcoholism, unsociable behaviour, an inability to be assimilated into polite society, irrational aggression, and so on - except that the subject of the article would be the white Australian male, not the Aborigine.¹

In early 1998 the ABC screened a documentary called “Grey Nomads.” This ethnographic style documentary “tracked” the movements of a small number of retirees who had abandoned or suspended their lives as working, urban dwelling and ‘settled’ Australians in order to take up lives as semi-permanent road travellers. Each subject of the documentary had a different story to tell but all seemed to have reached a similar chapter in their lives. All were reaching their ‘twilight’ years. One reviewer put it in this way: “while the disenchanted explore theories of the New Age, members of this close community, thousands of kilometres apart, are celebrating the Third Age: retirement.”² These were people who had decided that, as their children were busy with the care of their own family, it was time to leave the safety of their homes and see the country.

This documentary was of great interest to me for a number of reasons. During my last four or five trips to the north of Australia I have noticed the growth in this cultural phenomenon. The more I travel the more I realise that a great proportion of the domestic tourist population in the north are made up of Australians spending their holidays and retirement doing loops of the continent.

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When I quizzed one Kimberley friend about these people she replied, "oh the old loopies, yeh the loopies are in plague proportions."

In this article I want to work with ideas about the ambivalence non-Aboriginal Australians have for Aboriginal people and Aboriginality. The article features ethnographic material collected while in the Kimberley region of Western Australia. This will be used to demonstrate that in many ways, the ideas about the Aboriginal Other reflect deep-seated and long-standing patterns of denial and desire of many non-Aboriginal people. On the one hand, those I met often expressed disdain towards Aboriginal people. On the other, they seemed to be highly reliant on and attracted to Aboriginal people and Aboriginal life.

It has been said of elsewhere in the colonial world that you cannot know what is meant to be 'British' until you know what the British thought of those they colonised. This is so because the colonial other is so fundamental to the constitution of the self. The first step then in any analysis of ambivalence in loopies is to look at the kind of stories loopies, and indeed many non-Aboriginal tourists, take with them when they travel north. The next step is to compare these stories with the activities and practices of the loopies themselves. In the article I will compare discursive ideas about Aborigines with the lives, movements and aspirations of loopies. Using evidence from an ethnographic study in the Kimberley region, I will show that at one and the same time many loopies both spurn and yearn Aboriginality.

The discussion begins with a look at how loopies reproduce what they consider to be the Aboriginal tendency to go on walkabout. This is followed by a discussion of the vagrancy of loopies; loopies' fascination with tanning and 'getting a bit of colour'; the loss of culture thesis so popular amongst loopies; loopies' desire for timelessness; and the obsession of loopies with reclaiming land. What becomes clear, as I track the activities of loopies, is that many of their stories about Aborigines are more likely projections of their own unconscious desires. What is more, often these desires are expressed by loopies living out the very kind of life they ascribe to Aborigines. Given half the chance, loopies,
particularly male loopies, are the first to 'go walkabout,' 'go bush,' and 'become a blackfella.'

The article ends by reviewing the work of theorists such as Homi Bhabha who comment on the occurrence of ambivalence in colonial and neo-colonial life. It offers evidence of how colonial ambivalence results in the disruption of colonial discourse, disturbing what are thought to be simple relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. In subtle ways this ambivalence open up spaces for loopies to have their lives shaped by Aboriginality.

White Nomads on Walkabout

During one of my many drives from Halls Creek to Fitzroy Crossing I overtook an elderly couple travelling around the north west in a caravan called "The Gypsies." It was here that I first noticed non-Aboriginal people celebrating their status as nomads, on the move with seemingly little direction. Shortly after driving past this car I pulled in to Fitzroy Crossing to fuel up and refresh my family and myself. Those who have had occasion to spend more than a fleeting moment in Fitzroy Crossing will know that it is one of the many northern Australian towns where the presence of Aboriginal people is marked. After fuelling up, my family was joined by the gypsy travellers who, eager to strike up a fresh conversation, collared my partner and myself for what the woman was to call "a cup of tea and a wongee." When I first saw the man I shall call "Des," I was immediately reminded of a description offered of an older Aussie bushie in Jacobson's humorous travel account. When he jumped out of his old truck:

he was stripped to the waist ... wearing blue jeans and an old drover's hat ... from a distance he could have been taken for an Aborigine: there was the same slowness about his movements, the same melancholy in the set of his features, the same physical attenuation.

"Beryl," the woman, likewise had features that one does not tend to forget easily. Her eyes had the kind of over-alertness of one who has been the navigator for too long. She struck me as one who was in desperate need of company, shell-shocked from spending months, perhaps years, in closed quarters. Immediately,


\[\text{7 There is some irony in this couple's use of the term 'wongee' as it is an Indigenous term, found in several Aboriginal languages meaning to talk, chat or speak about something.}\]

\[\text{8 Jacobson 52-53.}\]
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without any real introductions, she launched into a detailed and quite intimate description of her grandchildren.

My partner and I were then ‘treated’ to a monologue on the ills and deficiencies of Aboriginal Australia. The monologue covered most of the usual terrain: Aborigines as lazy bastards who squander taxpayers’ money; Aborigines as those who receive special treatment by authorities and do-gooders; the trouble caused by half-castes from the cities; and the drinking and sexual excesses of Aboriginal Australia. However, most attention was given to the propensity of “blackfellas to go walkabout” at the most inopportune time - irresponsible and undisciplined people disrupting the life of others in the community.

We were being offered a glimpse of the powerful presence of loopie ambivalence in operation. On the one hand, these folk were openly displaying their disdain of, and hostility towards, Aboriginal people. In fact they were doing it right under the very noses, in earshot I am sure, of Aboriginal people. On the other hand, these people were celebrating their own status as white nomads. They were so proud of their own ability to get up and go at a moment’s notice that they felt it necessary to name their caravan in honour of their lifestyle. They were people whose lives consisted of travelling around and never stopping in one place for more than a few weeks. I listened as they described their social world - one that involved regularly moving on, not having a home base, and pursuing the kind of lifestyle that Aboriginal people are predominantly seen to live. However, for these people, being a nomad translated into being a tourist and seeker of the good life. This was, at least to them, in stark contrast to how they saw Aboriginal nomadic behaviour. Nomadic for Aboriginal people was equated with being irresponsible, walking away from discipline, not being a part of community. But of course this is what Des and Beryl, like so many other loopies, were doing, and doing in droves. These people had left their families behind, left or suspended their obligations to family and work whilst going adventuring and touring in search of new experiences and new country. Particularly in the last few years these people have flooded from the edges of the continent into the ‘heartland,’ to the red centre, to the desert country. David Tacey describes them as moving in “herds or flocks from one picturesque outback scene or beauty spot to another, shooting reels of snaps, slides, and videos to show others when they returned to the edge.”

This reminded me of something I read that Garralwuy Yunupingu was reported to have said to the National Press Club in early 1997. In his address he pointed out that Aboriginal people, who often have a history of ‘staying put’ on

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their land for as long as is possible, are regularly branded with the title of wandering nomads who go walkabout. The true wanderers, according to Yunupingu, who have strayed and regularly like to stray from their homelands are constituted as the settled ones. Likewise Benterrak et al. remind us that there is considerable irony in the fact that European history in Australia is the history of people travelling vast distances, completely unsettling themselves, only to arrive and call the locals ‘nomads.’

I confronted Beryl and Des with this little ironic observation and suggested that perhaps they had more in common with Aboriginal people than they might at first think. Des initially seemed a little offended, claiming he had worked all his life, paid too much in taxes, and cared for his children. In his estimation this meant he deserved to be able to get away - to “leave all their troubles behind.” He seemed not to be acknowledging that the same generation of Aboriginal people had also worked all their lives - long hours as cattle men and women, as workers in the pearling industry, as shearsers, boundary riders, clearers of the land, as domestic workers, child carers, cleaners and cooks.

White Vagrants

Another lesson in the power of cultural projection occurred as I was in a busload of people driving from Broome’s Chinatown to Town Beach in an attempt to find a shady and breezy place to cool our four-month-old boy. In order to get to Town Beach you travel past an area where there are many Aboriginal people sitting around in circles under palm trees. As we drove past some of my fellow travellers commented on how the “whole affair” was “a dreadful waste,” “an indictment on the destruction of Aboriginal culture,” a reflection of “ Aboriginal people’s inability to take advantage of the many benefits available,” “typically wasteful and shameful,” and something “that the authorities should do something about.” The general consensus was that the existence of Aboriginal people in “such a state” (in fact sitting on the ground in public places talking to family and

12 The Community Development Employment Program has operated in Australia since 1977 when it was established in response to the demand from remote communities for alternatives to ‘sit down money’ (unemployment benefits). In 1998 over 28,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people elected to forego receiving unemployment benefits in exchange for wages earned on community managed and controlled enterprise and activities (ATSIC Homepage).
friends, sometimes consuming alcohol) constituted a social problem of critical proportions.

Some minutes later we arrived at Broome Town Beach and set ourselves up for a picnic and an afternoon on the beach. The beachfront was busy, as is generally the case at this time of year. Scores of elderly loopies had made themselves comfortable on the grass under the palm trees. Some were enjoying the afternoon sea breeze while others had slipped into a snoring, dreamy state after consuming a little too much food and wine. As we were preparing to sit our son under a palm tree, it occurred to me that here was another example of how non-Aboriginal Australia’s indignity is fraught with irony. Here we were, just about to join busloads of others who quite probably had recently passed judgement on the decency of small groups of Aboriginal people, doing precisely what they were on their way to do. As we sat down under a palm tree to catch the coolness of the afternoon breeze I could not but help notice that scores of men and women were sipping on a little wine while others were catching a few moments nap. There was storytelling going on among people who were swapping photographs of their families. People were sharing accounts of where they were from and where they had been. People were enjoying this exotic location and socialising.

Unlike the group who were located a few hundred yards back towards Chinatown, these people did not seem to represent a social problem. They were not being frowned upon, they were not seen to be bleeding the economy, indeed they were engaging in the most celebrated of Australian cultural events: the annual holiday.

It struck me again that our stories about Aborigines were probably little more than projections of what we knew, yet largely denied, about ourselves. These stories about Aborigines as vagrant are highly revealing, particularly when I looked at ‘respectable’ non-Aborigines lying around unconscious after consuming ‘too much of the good life.’

Browning Whites

Yet another pattern in story-telling about Aborigines is an ambivalent attitude towards, and preoccupation with, physical features, in particular skin colour and degrees of blackness. This reflects old and established discursive ideas linking peoples biological make-up, particularly their skin colour, to intelligence, cultural practices and degrees of civilisation. As Atwood has noted, since the 1860s racial ideology has become the dominant political discourse concerning
Aborigines, commanding the support of policy-makers, administrators and the liberal press. 1

Many non-Aboriginal Australians, particularly those who grew up and formed their ideas about Aborigines during the period when ideas of racial superiority were formally entrenched in official policy, still rely heavily (sometimes exclusively) on the idea that one’s race and genetic make-up determines one’s behaviour and cultural form. I found this to be particularly so amongst loopies who constantly used racialised language such as ‘half-castes’ and ‘full-bloods’ to shape their discursive patterns and confirm their own cultural position. For example, one couple, travelling around the country in an old bus converted to accommodate themselves and their dog, talked to us about their ‘part-Aboriginal granddaughter.’ Apparently the ‘wife of their son’ (not called their daughter-in-law) came “from one of the good half-caste families that have been educated.” In what seemed to be an attempt to eliminate as much ‘Aboriginal blood’ as possible, they qualified their granddaughter’s Aboriginality by suggesting that “you would call her a quarter or a sixteenth caste Aborigine” and still further added that “when it gets to that stage you might as well talk about her not having any Aboriginal (blood) in her at all.”

Not only do many non-Aboriginal people consider skin colour significant, but there also seems to be considerable ambivalence about it. At one moment it was not uncommon to hear loopies claiming that they were the ones who had been disadvantaged because of their genetic background. For example, while preparing for a barbecue in a Kimberley caravan park I overheard one male looie claiming he was disadvantaged on account of the shape of his nose and the colour of his skin:

If I went and got an operation on my nose and made sure that it stayed this colour (pointing to his rather large tanned belly) I’d be set. I could just go down to Toyota and say, ‘I’d like a Landcruiser on hire purchase,’ pay the first two payments and keep the car. They get away with it cos they’ve got stumpy noses and black skin.

For this man, certain skin colour and facial features were associated with privilege. He clearly felt despondent and unfairly treated, annoyed because he

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believed others were more advantaged, more economically affluent. He understood himself to be the victim of racist discrimination and victimisation because of his white skin colour.

At the same time, many loopies seemed to secretly yearn for 'darkness.' As an Aboriginal friend from Broome said:

You Gadiyas (non-Aboriginal people) are strange. You spend thousands of dollars to come to Broome and either avoid or pity us lot (Aboriginal people). But then look at what you do. Whitefullas go down to Cable Beach, rip all their clothes off and lie there frying until they become brownfullas. Some of those people got blacka arses than anyone in my family.

It is a regular sight on a trip throughout the north of Australia to see how loopies have often got skin that has been so exposed to excessive sunlight that it takes on the same colour as the pindan soil. Despite constant warnings about the dangers of skin cancer and over-exposure to ultraviolet light, this generation of Australians have long insisted on tanning, worshipping the sun by stripping off as many clothes as is manageable or legal, often basting themselves in oils, and seeking to make themselves as dark as possible.

During one evening, while in the toilet block at a caravan park in Broome, I overheard a conversation between loopies who were discussing body and skin care. One woman, who was celebrating having "taken on the Kimberley colour," said:

I know these days we need to be careful of our skin but I do feel so good and I look so healthy when I have taken on a bit of colour. The other week we sent some photos to the kids back home. They said we were starting to look like the locals, you know the real locals (her emphasis).

There was clearly a little self-consciousness in this woman's story, evident in her nervous laugh after implying she had come to look something like the 'local' or Aboriginal population. At the same time there was also an obvious hint of pride in being taken for a local Aboriginal woman by her family. It was as if this added authenticity to her adventure and gave her journey a stamp of approval.

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14 This is despite the fact that according to every social indicator, Indigenous Australians are, on balance, materially and politically disadvantaged (see ATSIC's "As a Matter of Fact: Answering the Myths and Misconceptions about Indigenous Australians," (1998) for a detailed review of social indicators demonstrating Aboriginal disadvantage).
Once while relaxing on the banks of the Fitzroy River between Derby and Broome, I saw something else which suggested to me that, despite their disdain for Aborigines, many male loopies secretly harbour a romantic desire to become the dark Aboriginal male. A male looie was standing on the banks of the river reflecting on his day's fishing. He was brown skinned and naked except for a small pair of stubby shorts riding up his crutch, a dilly bag around his shoulders, standing one leg rested against the other, and partly supported by a fishing rod. It struck me that the pose of this man resembled the classic image of the romantic savage, dark and naked but for a lap-lap and a dilly bag, one leg resting against the other while leaning against his spear. I suspect that Jacobson is making a similar observation about non-Aboriginal men's secret longings for things Aboriginal:

One very curious and frequently observable fact of relations between the Aborigine and the White Australian is that no matter how much the second offers to despise and denigrate the first, he will nevertheless go to great lengths to secure his regard, to earn his approval, almost, you might say, to receive his blessing ... and in the face of quite opposing impulses and attitudes, those white Australians who value the idea of 'maleness' and associate it with bush know-how and outback fearlessness - a rugged and sometimes even vaguely mystical survivalism - acknowledge in the Aborigine their highest ideal. Time and again ... you will see enacted the same one-act social drama, in which the European seeks reassurance on the question of his manliness from the Aborigine, in which the white man is the eager petitioner for friendship - street friendship, equality, not intimacy - and the lordly bestower of it is the black.  

White Trackers and a Dying Culture

In many non-Aboriginal stories about Aborigines, particularly those living in urban centres, Aborigines are a people who have lost, or are losing their culture. Persisting within this popular discourse is that "the only 'true Aborigines' reside in the past." If we compare the loss of Aboriginal culture thesis with the practices of loopies we see more interesting things about non-Aboriginal desire, ambivalence, and how important Aboriginal people are to non-Aboriginal Australians.

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15 Jacobson 78.
In my travels it was certainly not uncommon to become embroiled in discussions about how Aborigines represent a social problem, a pestilent and embarrassing hurdle to modern development. However, I regularly heard loopies comment, particularly to tourists visiting from overseas, on how Aboriginal culture was something they revered and took pride in. For example, one looie I met said, "in this country we've got the oldest culture in the world. Aborigines were around those hills painting before the Egyptians even knew what a paintbrush was."

On another occasion, during a Saturday morning's visit to the Broome markets, I overheard two non-Aboriginal couples talking with a non-Aboriginal market vendor. The vendor was selling etched boab nuts, didjeridus, coolamons, and a number of clapping sticks. The couples were discussing which didjeridus they would choose to buy. One of the women who was probably in her early 60s, explained that she was keen to buy a didjeridu for her twelve-year-old grandchild. This was a most important task which she wanted to accomplish during the trip:

I want to get an authentic Aboriginal didgeridoo ... it has to be one from the real Aborigines in the north ... not like those ones made down in Perth by the half breeds down there ... they've lost all their culture down south so what's the point of getting some Aboriginal artefact they have just copied from the full-bloods up here.

Between the two couples they bought four didjeridus, all having been painted with what were claimed to be "authentic Aboriginal designs." The vendor threw in, as part of the deal, a pamphlet on the skill of circular breathing, the technique necessary for playing the instrument, and a small book on 'traditional' Australian Aboriginal culture.

After the transaction had been completed, I approached the stall and inspected the didjeridus a little more carefully. Having had some experience of didjeridu collecting in the south-west, I immediately recognised the timber as young wandoo. I then struck up a conversation with the vendor and discovered that he was based in Perth and had bought the painted timber from a Nyungar known to me. The couples had spent substantial energy and money travelling some two and half thousand kilometres in search of authentic Aboriginal culture, believing Aboriginal culture in their home country to be dead, only to buy a Nyungar didge, probably cut, shaped and painted by Nyungar. Despite their view about the death of Nyungar culture, a symbol of it was none-the-less on its way to finding a place on their mantlepiece. The passing of an 'ancient culture' in settled Australia was being mourned at the same time as evidence of contemporary cultural expression was being celebrated.
For many loopies I met, this ambivalence towards Aboriginal people and Aboriginal culture was paralleled by something of an insecurity and feeling of cultural inadequacy. I regularly heard people expressing the view that their own culture was in the midst of a serious decline. The following comment typically mourns the passing of by-gone happier years. For this man, Australian (read non-Aboriginal) cultural identity was in a serious state of decline - it was breaking down and he was unsure of his social position:

The Australia of yesterday is definitely passed on. Gone are the days when you knew exactly who an Australian was and could feel proud to be one. Kids are no longer taught to respect those things that we held to be sacrosanct: ANZAC day, the flag, the benefit of a good day’s work, respect for your elders.

Deborah Bird Rose suggests that such precariousness in their own cultural position often prompts non-Aboriginal Australians to seek out knowledge and skills possessed by Aboriginal Australians. In her ethnography of a northern Australian cultural tourism venture called “Max’s Tour,” Bird Rose makes the connection between non-Aboriginal masculinity, belonging to place, and the mastery of Aboriginal skills. The participants in this tour learn how to light fires, identify animal tracks and play the didjeridu - all symbolic markers of Aboriginality - as part of an initiation into an authentic Australian identity. Max’s Tour involves non-Australians playing out a script which confirms their identity as Australians by showing how they can master the art of becoming Aboriginal. For Max and his participants, non-Aboriginal belonging and identity requires verification. The badge of authenticity and belonging is bestowed by the authentic native - the Aborigine - so that non-Aborigines only take on the status of true Australians when they attempt to be Aboriginal.

Nowhere is this pattern of ambivalence more evident than in the promotion of eco-tourism and adventure tours. Within this domain of tourism, Aborigines, particularly Aboriginal men, are secretly respected for their tracking and exploring ability. Just recently I watched Malcolm Douglas in action on a television documentary. Douglas and a couple of his young adventurer mates filmed a kayaking expedition through the north Kimberley region. Like so many documentaries in this genre, the film featured, as a figure of authenticity, an old

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18 Bird Rose 127.
19 Bird Rose 136.
"full blood Bardi guide." In the early stages of the documentary Tom Wiggin (described as the last of the Bardi who practised his culture) taught Douglas and his mates various skills in Bardi bush and sea craft. Wiggin was positioned within the documentary as the keeper and teacher of primitive knowledge of the wilderness - a knowledge fast diminishing. The storyline of the documentary implied that the non-Aboriginal men were being initiated into an ancient set of knowledges. According to the narrator, Wiggin was the knowledge keeper whose people had refused to learn and practise authentic Aboriginal ways. According to Bird Rose, these kinds of narratives have all the qualities of the Boy Scout initiation which "draws on the emblems of the native to produce a fraternity of whites."

Much of the tourist marketing material which is geared to increasing the numbers of non-Aboriginal visitors to the north of Australia reflects this desire to discover, explore and track through the last frontier. These adventures exploit the idea that there is nothing quite as exciting as the thought of 'going off-road' to a location that 'no other white person' has been to. I saw evidence of this desire to conquer the elements in the caravan parks throughout the north-west. The places were packed full of retired, working-class men whose attitude towards Aboriginal people was marked by a marriage of disdain and desire. On the one hand they were more than happy to avoid all contact with local Aboriginal people. On the other hand Aboriginal men held for them the secrets of how to master the country.

Timeless Whites

Yet another idea about Aboriginal people is that they lack direction and resist making plans. According to this line of thinking, Aboriginal life is laissez-faire, lacking in rules so that Aboriginal people can 'go with the flow' and operate on 'blackfella time.' Mostly this idea about Aboriginal temporal forms is used in a derogatory way to imply that Aboriginal people are, at best, undisciplined, at worst, lazy and irresponsible. As one loopie said:

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20 Bardi are Indigenous people with familial, language, land and cultural affiliations to the north Dampier Peninsula and surrounding sea country.

21 This is clearly a fanciful idea. Bardi people are well recognised and widely respected for their maintenance of Aboriginal customary law and practices. Indeed it is widely believed amongst those working in the native title arena that Bardi people have one of the strongest land and sea claims to native title in the country. See G. Myers, M. O'Dell, G. Wright and S. Muller, A Sea Change in Land Rights Law: The Extension of Native Title to Australia's Offshore Areas (Perth: Native Title Tribunal, 1996) for a brief discussion of Bardi use of land and offshore waters.

22 Bird Rose 132.
It makes them unreliable. They say they will take you fishing or on a tour and they don’t. You stop at one of their garages in need of repairs and they take days to even look at the thing. You go to one of their art galleries and it’s not even open. They say something will happen on a particular date and it just doesn’t.

However, for most of the loopies I met, fluidity of time is something to be sought after, and once attained, celebrated. I regularly heard in caravan parks in the north of Australia phrases such as “no sweat,” “no worries,” “she’ll be right” or “we’ll get around-to-it.” As Jacobson comments, what are these phrases “but a sort of assurance that time stretches out infinitely and beneficently, and that no moment should ever be singled out for urgency.”

As the following examples demonstrate, the very quality that loopies often speak so disdainfully about Aborigines exhibiting is the same quality that tourism marketeers promote. Indeed, many tourism pamphlets try to entice the tourist to destinations that allow them to suspend their preoccupation with linear time and responsibility:

Broome and the Kimberley offer a sense of timelessness ... it is a mecca for travellers seeking an escape from the hurly burly of city life ... throw away your watch and settle into Broome Time (“Broometime” - tourist brochure).

Broome’s appeal has always been its sense of romance and adventure - the feeling of stepping into a timeless place where nature and culture blend into a unique experience (“Broome a place to relax” - tourist brochure).

Tourism brochures encourage people to ‘let their guard down,’ to ‘live like the locals,’ to ‘go native.’ In the Kimberley the tourist experience, particularly for loopies, is about slipping into what many describe as ‘Broome time,’ a mental as well as a temporal place that is lacking in confinement and boundaries. In the Kimberley region, tourists are encouraged to discard their heavily structured plans, instead allowing themselves to be directed by their spirits and any opportunity that presents itself.

Similar ideas about time and place are evident in the terminology, movements and aspirations of loopies. When I asked loopies about their plans - when and where they were heading - they would usually tell me that it would depend on ‘how things go.’ Most often their plan was to be directed by how they

Jacobson 317.
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felt at any given moment. As one couple from Adelaide remarked when I asked
them about their plans:

Who knows? We could end up anywhere. We've got no obligations, no
commitments, no real plans. If we enjoy ourselves at one place then we'll
stay there as long as we like. If we don't like another place then we'll just
keep driving on. That's the beauty of this trip.

Whites Seeking 'Land Rights'

Yet another view of Aboriginal groups is that they are land-grabbing, self­
serve and money-hungry. Not only was it 'common knowledge' amongst
loopies that Aborigines have an insatiable desire for land ownership, but as one
loopie remarked, "blackfellas won't be satisfied until they have the whole bloody
lot to themselves." I heard many loopies express, in no uncertain terms, the fear
that Aboriginal people are about to gain control over suburban blocks and lay
claim to most of the country. At the heart of this discourse of Aborigines as land­
grabbers is the fear and resentment that others might get what loopies have so
much sought after and have always wanted. I heard the following kind of
comment made repeatedly:

I don't begrudge people getting hold of land. But for God's sake don't just
give land to people who just let it sit and waste away. We all had to work
bloody hard for our own little block of land. These people expect to just
walk up to the government and have them hand over millions of acres of
land.

This is again interesting when one notes the position that real estate and the
individual ownership of land occupy in the economic and cultural lives of loopies.
The same people I heard commenting that they (Aborigines) want to take over
were constantly checking the value of their stock market portfolio or rolled-over
superannuation fund packages. Loopies, who talk so much about Aborigines as
land grabbers, seem to be rather obsessed with re-conquering and occupying
country feared to be being taken over by 'foreigners' and Aboriginal people.
These were the very same people I saw colonising the steps leading in and out of
caravan park swimming pools. From my experience many were also likely to be
presumptuous as tourists, regularly imposing themselves on people and country.
I also regularly noted caravan park rituals which involved loopies in the constructing of makeshift washing lines strung between trees, making it necessary for other park residents to push aside washing and risk being strangled to negotiate their way to the public toilet. These makeshift lines doubled as boundary fences which I suspect served to recreate the culture of suburbia and demonstrate the importance of people's private space. The strategic placement of clothes lines, rubbish bins, cars, chairs and tables all go a long way to demonstrating how much the culture of loopies is a culture where ownership of space is paramount.

Perhaps part of the popularity of four wheel driving into 'hard to get to' destinations, such as the Purnululu National Park, Karajini National Park and the Dampier Peninsula, can be attributed to the need by so many loopies to reclaim title to land they think has been lost to them.

While touring, I regularly heard loopies discussing their journeys and plans in caravan park laundries and shower blocks, listing off the places they had visited or planned to visit. The lists resembled the old Australian country and western song, 'I've been everywhere man.' Sometimes I thought I was listening to an incantation, a religious chant intended to pronounce and confirm the act of possession. When I heard folk talking about their travels in this way I felt like I at least partly understood why so many middle-aged and elderly white Australians were doing the loop of the country. They were prompted by something of a national crisis for white Australians - a crisis made all the more apparent since Eddie Mabo had reminded us that his was invaded land.

Anne Curthoys speculates that perhaps behind the widespread and vehement hostility towards Indigenous claims to land is an otherwise hidden fear of being cast out and made homeless after having made for ourselves a home so far from our cultural and familial roots. She says, "with their claims to the land so morally insecure, non-Aboriginal Australians are in danger of vagabond status, not only in the eyes of others but in their own as well." Tacey draws similar conclusions when commenting on how non-Aboriginal tourists are drawn to "the Aboriginal spirit of place in central Australia." Non-Aboriginal people who suffer most from this kind of repressed anxiety, such as many of the loopies I met, frequently need to draw on narrative reversals, constituting the invading migrants as settlers and the invaded as nomadic wanderers.

21 Curthoys 121.
22 Tacey 15.
Ambivalence in the Lives of Loopies

The history of colonisation in Australia is marked by deep and fundamental inconsistencies in the way non-Aboriginal people think about and deal with Aboriginal people. As Curthoys reminds us, stories about Aborigines have long been torn between “traditions of fear, hatred and contempt” and almost as long by “traditions of desire and yearning for Aboriginal culture.” Throughout its history, Aboriginalist discourse in Australia has been split so that non-Aborigines both revile and desire, find repugnant and fascinating, and conceive of as degenerate and dignified the wild Aboriginal Other. Bhabha suggests that similar patterns of ambivalence have been evident in most cases of colonial cultural relations. He claims that we regularly see ambivalence in the attitudes and desires of the colonial subject who is continually in a state of “fluctuation between wanting one thing and its opposite.” Richard Young agrees, suggesting that one of the features of colonialism in places such as Australia is the extent to which the coloniser has love-hate feelings towards Indigenous people. Young claims that at the heart of most acts of colonialism and racism lies an ambivalent double gesture of, on the one hand, repulsion and on the other hand, attraction. Indigenous people are looked down upon and despised as worthless, unattractive and ultimately not human. But at the same time the coloniser looks up to and reveres Indigenous culture, knowledge and bodies.

According to Stallybrass and White, this ambivalence occurs because the colonial subject relies so much on, indeed defines themselves through, the exclusion of the dirty, lowly, barbaric and repulsive Aboriginal Other. Indeed Bhabha goes so far as to suggest that ambivalent identifications of love and hate are central in binding colonial communities and identities together.

As Bakhtin suggests, the Other has become critically important because the colonial self can only construct meaning about itself through the making of and

26 Curthoys 123.
30 Young 115.
31 Young 115.
32 Cited in Young 115.
33 Bhabha 149.
dialogue with the Other. In fact, those living on the colonial side of the frontier “live on the very border of its opposite,” or in this case non-Aboriginality, as a constituted idea depends very much upon “black,” in this case Aboriginality, being used as the evil and distanced Other. We might then say that Aborigines, or ideas about Aborigines, become a necessary ingredient in the production of ideas about what it means to be non-Aborigine.

This means that Aborigines have come to serve as markers of what is dangerous and threatening, barbaric and unsophisticated. At the same time they have also come to represent those who offer non-Aboriginal people a target towards which to aim otherwise repressed feelings and desires. In other words, at one and the same time the Aboriginal Other is both repulsive-awful and necessary-desirable. As Fielder points out, “Aboriginality is produced as degeneracy at the same time as it is idealised as a signifier of primitive cultural plenitude (in its pure form).” This is because so often “ambivalent identifications of love and hate occupy the same psychic space; and paranoid projections ‘outwards’ return to haunt and split the place from which they are made.” Stallybrass and White go on to say:

disgust always bears the imprint of desire. These low domains, apparently expelled as ‘Other,’ return as the object of nostalgia, longing and fascination. The forest, the air, the theatre, the slum, the circus, the sea-side resort, the ‘savage’: all these, placed at the outer limit of civil life, become symbolic contents of bourgeois desire.

This kind of post-colonial analysis is useful in understanding the strange and erratic attitudes of loopies - attitudes that find people at one moment despising the Aborigine while the next featuring them as subjects to be celebrated. It helps explain why at one minute the Aborigine can be both feared and secretly envied, hated but unconsciously loved, distanced but longingly sought after.

Some might suggest that this merely serves as an example of non-Aboriginal people’s double standards, ignorance and inconsistent values. However, I would suggest that these inconsistent standards, this ambivalence, acts in a rather menacing way - always present and regularly available to disrupt and challenge

36 S. Hall 238.
37 Fielder 13.
38 Bhabha 149.
39 Cited in Young 115.
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colonial discourse. When I confronted people about how their ideas about Aborigines were often in contrast with their own practice there was almost always a mix of discomfort, annoyance, reflective humour, embarrassment and denial. Some easily saw the irony in their own behaviour and attitudes. Some were not prepared to contemplate it. Some even claimed to have thought about it from time to time.

It is my contention then that such instances of ambivalence do not only provide proof of the authority of colonial discourse and the double standards of loopies. In addition, ambivalence shows us just how vulnerable, incomplete and prone to disturbance is the authority of colonial discourse. As Bhabha says, such instances of colonial discursive bantering often involves the speaking in a tongue that is forked. Such tongue forking, where one's attacks of the other stand in contrast to one's own practice, continually produce slippages which threaten the authority of colonial discourse. Such ambivalence then gives rise to the seeds of its own challenge.

Conclusion

Travelling through regions such as the northwest of Western Australia one cannot help but notice the regularity with which non-Aboriginal tourists make reference to or find themselves thinking about Aborigines in negative terms. It is almost impossible to go on an organised bus tour in the northwest without having the tour guide or fellow travellers make some subtle reference to Aboriginal deficiency. One does not have to travel far to find someone who provides 'expert' commentary on the tensions between non-Aboriginal pastoralists, local business people, tour operators, and Aboriginal communities. In my travels I found myths about Aboriginal waste, welfare dependence and economic advantage emanating from around the barbecue or swimming pool in almost every caravan park, almost every evening. Although the faces of the loopies would change each day, the stories were told almost verbatim, with Aborigines represented as those hellbent on waste. Day in and day out I heard people speaking as if they were reciting lines from a preconceived script prepared by a writer from the One Nation Party.

However, it would be a mistake to simply draw the conclusion that loopies are merely red-neck racists who only 'know' and speak about Aborigines in negative terms. At the same time as 'running Aborigines down,' many possess a deep yearning for things Aboriginal. In my travels I saw loopies trying to emulate

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40 H. Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London: Routledge, 1994) 85.
41 Ashcroft et al., 13.
what is often considered to be the activities and cultural practices of Aboriginal people. Ironically it was loopies who were on 'walkabout,' going brown, lazing around, insecure about their culture, putting time on hold, and obsessed about land-grabbing. This interesting feature of loope life is, I believe, another example of the ambivalence non-Aboriginal people feel and express towards Aboriginal Australians.

This serves as an example of how colonial ambivalence has the potential to disturb the authority and social worlds of non-Aboriginal Australians. In doing so, ambivalence results in Aboriginal people and Aboriginality maintaining a central position in the cultural identity of non-Aboriginal Australians. This opens up possibilities for Aboriginality and Aboriginal people to play a significant part in a subtle transformation of non-Aboriginal Australians.

\textsuperscript{42} Tacey 135.