Abstract
This paper elaborates on points made by post-colonial writers about ambivalence and how non-Aboriginal people draw on and use Aboriginality. Using evidence from an ethnographic study of loopies (alternatively known as Grey Nomads) the paper will explore how at one and the same time many non-Aboriginal people spurn and yearn for Aboriginality.

The discussion includes an exploration of how loopies reproduce what they consider to be the Aboriginal tendency to go on walkabout; “get a bit of colour”; lament their own lack culture; desire timelessness; and be obsessed with reclaiming land. What becomes clear is that many of loopie’s 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 affix to Aborigines. Given half the chance, loopies, particularly male loopies, are the first to “go walkabout”, “go bush”, and “become a blackfella”.

Introduction
In this paper I want to elaborate on points made by post-colonial writers such as Bhabha (1994) about ambivalence and how non-Aboriginal people, in this case loopies1, draw on and use Aboriginality. I will aim 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.

In the paper 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 spurn and yearn for 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 affix to Aborigines. Given half the chance, loopies, particularly male loopies, are the first to “go walkabout”, “go bush”, and “become a blackfella”.

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The chapter ends by reviewing the work of theorists, such as 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 (Ashcroft et al. 1998: 13).

**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 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. After fuelling up, my family was joined by the Gypsy travellers who, eager to strike up a fresh conversation, collared my partner and I for what the woman was to call “a cup of tea and a wongee”.

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.

It was here that I first glimpsed 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. 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.

I confronted these people with this little ironic observation and suggested that perhaps they had more in common with Aboriginal people than they might at first think. The man in particular was most offended, claiming he had worked all his life, paid all 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 could not see 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 over our own thinking occurred as I was in a bus load of people driving past an area where there were Aboriginal people sitting around in circles under palm trees. As we drove past some of my fellow travellers commented on how “whole affair” was “a dreadful waste”, “an inditement 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 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 rest. The beachfront was busy, as is generally the case at this time of the 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 sat down I could not but help notice that this was similar to what was occurring up the road. There was storytelling going on, people were swapping information about their families, where they were from and where they had been.

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 around 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. As Attwood (1989: 83) 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.

Not only do many non-Aboriginal people consider skin colour significant but there also seems to be considerable ambivalence about the value that is attached to it. It was not uncommon to hear loopies claiming that they were the ones who had been disadvantaged because of their genetic background. I spoke with many loopies who claimed they were disadvantaged on account of their ‘racial’ position’. However, many seemed to secretly yearn for ‘darkness’. As an Aboriginal friend said, many non-Aboriginal tourists who come to Broome engage in behaviour which displays secret desires for things black:

> 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 you get here and go down to Cable Beach, rip all their clothes off and lie there frying until they become brownfullas.

During one evening, while in the toilet block at a caravan park in Broome, I happened upon a conversation with an older loopen about body and skin care. She celebrated having “taken on the Kimberley colour” remarking:

> 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).

**Jacobson (1987: 78)** makes a critical observation about this kind of secret longing 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 (sic) will nevertheless go to great lengths to secure his regard, to earn his approval, almost, you might say, to receive his (sic) blessing. Absolutely without their realising that they are doing so …those white Australians …acknowledge in the Aborigine their highest ideal.
White trackers and a dying culture

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 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.”

For many loopies I met, this ambivalence towards Aboriginal people and Aboriginal culture was paralleled by their own cultural insecurity and inadequacy. Bird Rose (1997: 127-130) suggests that such precariousness in their own cultural position often prompt non-Aboriginal people 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 a part of an initiation into an authentic Australian identity. The badge of authenticity and belonging is bestowed by the authentic native - the Aborigine (Bird Rose 1997: 127) - so that non-Aborigines only take on the status of true Australians when they attempt to be Aboriginal (Bird Rose 1997: 136). Nowhere is this pattern of ambivalence more evident than in the area of eco-tourism and adventure tours.

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 seen as 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 looie said:

> 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.

However for most of the loopies I met, fluidity of time is something to be sought after, and once attained, celebrated. Indeed, as the following examples demonstrate, the very quality that loopies often speak so disdainfully about Aborigines exhibiting is the same quality tourism marketeers promote.

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 (“Broome time” - tourist brochure).

> Broome’s appeal has always been its sense of stepping into a timeless place (“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.
Similar ideas about time and place are evident in the terminology, movements and aspirations of loopies. As one couple remarked about their plans:

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. That’s the beauty of this trip.

**Whites seeking ‘land rights’**

Yet another view of Aboriginal people is that they are land grabbing, self-serving and money-hungry people. Not only was it ‘common knowledge’ that Aborigines seem to have an insatiable desire for land ownership but as one loopy remarked, “blackfellas won’t be satisfied until they have the whole bloody lot to themselves”. 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 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 individual ownership of land occupies 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 superannuation fund packages. These were also the same people I saw colonising the steps of caravan park swimming pools and constructing makeshift washing lines strung between trees, strategically placing rubbish bins, parked cars, chairs and tables to obstruct the movement of others through ‘their area.’

Curthoys (1997b, p. 121) 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 (1995, p. 15) 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.

**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 (1997: 123) reminds us, stories about Aborigines have long been torn between “long traditions of fear, hatred and contempt” and almost as long by “traditions of desire and yearning for Aboriginal culture”. Bhabha (1994) 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 often continually in a state of “fluctuation between wanting one thing and its opposite” (cited in Young 1995: 161). Young (1995: 115) agrees suggesting that one of the features of colonialism in places
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such as Australia is the extent to which the coloniser has love-hate feelings towards indigenous people. According to Stallybrass and White (cited in Young 1995: 115), 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. As Bakhtin (1984: 176) said, those living on the colonial side of the frontier “live on the very border of its opposite”.

Aborigines have come to serve as markers of what is dangerous and threatening, barbaric and unsophisticated. At the same time they represent those who offer non-Aboriginal people a target to aim otherwise repressed feelings and desires (Hall 1997: 238). As Fielder (1996: 13) has said, “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” (Bhabha 1994: 149).

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 Aboriginal people 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 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.

Such instances of ambivalence 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. Such ambivalence then gives rise to the seeds of its own challenge (Ashcroft et al. 1998: 13).

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. 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.

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 who were on ‘walkabout’, going brown, lazing around, insecure about their culture, putting time on hold, and obsessed about ‘land rights’.
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 (Tacey 1995: 135). This opens up possibilities for Aboriginality and Aboriginal people to play a rather significant part in the subtle transformation of non-Aboriginal Australians.

References

1 I use the term ‘loopies’ to describe a group other have called grey nomads (Mitchell, 1997). It is a term that seems to have some currency among people I met from Broome who use it to describe those who set out to do a loop of the country and, by the time they get to Kimberley region, are said to have “gone a bit loopy in the head”.

2 There is some irony in this couple’s use of the term “a cuppa tea and a wongee” as the term wongee is an Indigenous term, possibly taken from any number of Aboriginal languages. For example the Nyungar word wongi means to talk, chat or speak about something.

3 Jacobson (1987: 49) expresses similar sentiments.

4 This seems to reflect old and established patterns of ambivalence where ‘Aboriginal trackers’ are secretly respected and considerably relied upon.