

# Performing Aboriginality: The Politics and Poetics of Citizenship in Everyday Life

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*The search for human dignity seems like a positive action men undertake; history, however, shows that the images of human dignity in society can be enormously destructive.<sup>1</sup>*

## **A stigmatised town**

Bourke is an isolated Australian town in western New South Wales, notorious across the nation as a site where Aboriginality is manifested in racial tension.<sup>2</sup> This is a town of which a journalist can write with confidence and an element of horrified fascination: ‘Go to a place like Bourke—young [Aboriginal] people don’t expect to live beyond their 20s. They have nothing to hang on to.’<sup>3</sup> While this was written about the need for Aboriginal communities in northern and remote Australia to retain their languages, the argument relies on the foundation myth of Bourke as a social space empty of any positive sociality, lacking culture and real Aboriginality. Indigenous people here are definitively ‘have nots’ in two senses; statistical evidence of Aborigines’ lack of jobs, education and health is a regular part of a concerned public discourse; further, these are Aborigines with no (traditional) language, no (traditional) ceremony, and not even black enough skins to be credited with authenticity, though such a view is not articulated in the public domain.<sup>4</sup> One task of this paper is to counter the view of lack by showing some aspects of what Aborigines in Bourke ‘hang on to’.

What is obscured from the nation’s anxious narratives of a depressed Aboriginality is the humour and energy, the specific

sense of history and the intricate forms of sociality which are evident in the world of Murriss. It is not necessary to assert to this readership that where there are people there is culture, but the extent to which contemporary Aboriginality can be characterised by its response to colonisation is a contentious matter, with the dichotomous categories of 'traditional' and 'urban' Aborigines still haunting the literature, interfering with the exploration of conditions under which a distinct culture or identity is reproduced and transformed. In this essay I emphasise how the social world of Murriss in Bourke is ordered and reproduced as a conversation with whitefellas, an 'answering back' with all the transgressive and rebellious implications such a term can have. However, I do not assume that this process is the *only* source of contemporary Aboriginal identity; a larger canvas would include sources of identity anchored in experiences, stories and fantasies of the past.

#### Agency derived from injury

The process of stigmatisation and response can be analysed beginning with Judith Butler's work on hate speech and the politics of the performative, where she takes up Althusser's notion of interpellation, whereby the subject comes into being when hailed. When the policeman calls 'Hey you there', and the passer-by turns, an identity is acquired which is 'purchased, as it were, with the price of guilt'.<sup>5</sup> In order to be recognised and taken as real social beings, Aboriginal people from infancy have to accept the meaning of 'Aborigine' with its salience in national and local discourses as the focus of strong, contradictory and dynamic emotions. Interpellation 'seeks to introduce a reality rather than report on an existing one' and 'to indicate and establish a subject in subjection, to produce its social contours in space and time'.<sup>6</sup> I believe it was a response in recognition of this process that led an Aboriginal woman in Bourke to bounce her daughter on her knee, chanting repeatedly, ironically, 'You're an Aboriginal', as if warning her, or perhaps getting her used to the social space into which she would be expected to fit.

Butler further emphasises that we all share a vulnerability and susceptibility to this 'call of recognition that solicits existence', that is, to a 'language we never made' but through which

we acquire 'a tentative ontological status'.<sup>7</sup> The dependency on language and on being named is such that 'we find ourselves preferring the occasion of being derogated to the one of not being addressed at all'.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, the socially constituted self may not be recognised by its bearer, so that one may meet one's image with 'surprise, alarm or pleasure, even with shock'. Thus the power of the name to constitute its subject is 'indifferent to the one who bears the name'.<sup>9</sup> Butler is here considering responses to hate language, and argues that state-sponsored censorship is neither appropriate nor effective. Rather she emphasises the 'social and cultural struggle of language ... in which agency is derived from injury, and injury countered through that very derivation'.<sup>10</sup> The political possibility of reworking the force of the speech act against the force of injury consists in misappropriating the force of speech from its prior contexts. 'The kind of speaking that takes place on the border of the unsayable promises to expose the vacillating boundaries of legitimacy in speech'.<sup>11</sup> It is these vacillating boundaries that are made use of in the performances of Aboriginality, both within and outside the Murri community.

### Performing stigma

The ethnographic arena I am analysing is a racial and cultural borderland, a notion I take from Rosaldo, but use to refer to the arena of social interaction in which Murriss' social existence takes place under the observing, judging eye of whitefellas whose authority is bolstered by their identification with the state, an issue to be explored below.<sup>13</sup> There is sparse ethnographic material emerging from the cultural borderlands, perhaps partly because it is a discomfiting space where sparks fly and observers recoil. Few flourish in this no-man's-land. I present here some ethnographic material which I have observed and participated in while in Bourke, in the 1980s, and more fully in 1998.<sup>14</sup> The ubiquitous presence of the white's language and the white gaze renders Aboriginal being suspect and problematises Aborigines' intersubjective identity. Gladys Darrigo expressed this in saying, 'The gubbas [whites] look at you as much as to say you shouldn't be here.' This came from a woman who has had a life-long love of the competence and glamour she associates with whiteness.

The attribution to Aboriginality of a recalcitrant outsider status, which dismays, disgusts or evokes the righteousness of those within the realm of good citizenry, is familiar to the black residents of Bourke. Such images can become the source of creative reworkings, an example of agency being derived from injury.<sup>15</sup> Picture the main street of Bourke. Aborigines gather regularly outside the 'pub' (as the hotel is known), lounging against the windowsills. Men and women talk beside the open pub doors and children play on the wide pavement. On 'pension', 'social' or 'endowment' days the crowd thickens and gets in the way of other pedestrians, sometimes spilling onto the street among the cars. There is a lot of movement, loud laughter and shouting, an assertive presence that sometimes erupts in verbal and physical violence. People have not dressed up to go to town because they are at home in the street, available to their network of kin, participating in a dense community-wide quotidian sociality. Some children seek their parents here, and news can be exchanged with cousins on their way to or from the shops or the courthouse at the end of the street. People are contributing to the poetics and politics of everyday life in a space on the side of the main street, a space where a continuing struggle for control is being enacted.<sup>16</sup>

When some Aboriginal girls begin shouting violent abuse at one another in the main street, a white woman serving in the shop opposite claims me, her white customer, as one of her own. Expressing a combination of embarrassment and contempt she says 'The circus has come to town' in an attempt to distance herself and her town from identification with the event in the street. Another day a black woman yells abusively, cursing and swearing at another who is walking away from her down the street. At full volume she screams, 'I'll kick your cunt till it bleeds', loud, intense, her anger apparently out of control. The waitress in the cafe opposite shrugs and says to her customers, 'They're at it again.' While these white women are positioning themselves as Other<sup>17</sup> to the event, the black women are acting out the grotesquerie attributed to them by their white fellow citizens. When a woman screams at her child, 'I haven't got \$2. Get, go on, get away you little black cunt', I detect grins and nudging among the black audience as

this woman takes satisfaction from expressing at full volume her shocking sentiments of frustration and fury. Among local whites these public displays evoke a palpable air of anxiety, repressed anger and contempt, but they are routine, habitual responses evoked by routine, predictable experiences.

An incident was relayed to me of a black woman, arrested in a drunken incident, sitting in the dock in the police station being charged. When she asked to go to the toilet, the police told her to wait and she wet herself. The policewoman said 'Look at you, how disgusting you are, and you're a grandmother too.' In such scenes the police and shopkeepers sanctimoniously repeat the maxims of their faith in propriety, while the Aboriginal people act out responses to a harsh world, portraying themselves as without sensitivity, warmth or delicacy. One element in the performance is the thrilling ability to shock white observers with an exaggerated version of their known fears. To those outside the Aboriginal realm these performances are taken as immediate and incontrovertible evidence of a serious social problem. In an example of what Feldman, following Bloch, calls, 'the cult of the immediately ascertainable fact', drunken shouting in the street attests to the fact of Aboriginal recalcitrance.<sup>18</sup> But, like other insiders, I do not see the street scene as typical or as direct evidence of a fundamental truth about Aborigines. Rather, those expressing violent sentiments in the main street are particular performers who are responding to their social typification, crying out: 'You think we're disgusting? I'll show you disgusting'.

The police station event was relayed to me by Murriss with a combination of laughter and outrage, both as an accusation of the unfairness and lack of humanity among police, and also as evidence that counter attack is possible. There was a latent but unstated implication that the woman's act of urinating in the station was deliberate, stating, in effect, 'Look at how you treat people, making me piss myself. Look what you made me, a grandmother, do.' Social honour within the Aboriginal community is not damaged in such interactions, but is enhanced by challenging police and white authority generally. Bodily functions, urinating in the police station, expressing fury in the street, throwing stones at shop windows,<sup>19</sup> can be weapons deployed to sabotage hierarchy, independent of speech acts.

Minor subversions, such as an assertive and noisy street demeanour, can nudge at and irritate the habitual sense of order assumed by whites. These actions are symbolic victories which 'expose the vacillating boundaries of legitimacy' by causing tension and fear among those external to their secret, ironic meanings.<sup>20</sup> They take place on the borders of the unsayable and the undoable. The force of these responses derives precisely from turning the terms of interpellation back on those who purvey them, performing in public the iniquities which are the subject of accusations in the privacy of white's gossip, which blacks only have access to in paranoia-inducing hints and glimpses, and leaks across the racial boundaries from whites who are disloyal to their racial domain.

By appearing to affirm stigmatised images in public, such performances assert and deploy their symbolic power. The amplification of grotesque images can be seen as both an affirmation of their truth and an inversion of their meaning. The inversion derives from the shift away from accepting the definitive shamefulness of the images, and instead producing them voluntarily and intentionally, claiming them as their own. For instance, swearing is not illegitimate, but normal, as are family fights and drunkenness, so why should such practices be carefully confined to the privacy of the domestic realm?

These street performances can be seen as an answering back by the black recipients of white judgments, and they are deeply and powerfully political. One direct political effect is that they define the contours of race relations by emphasising the separation between the cultural arenas of disreputable Aborigines and respectable white citizens. They also create a division within the Aboriginal community concerning what constitutes a black identity, particularly its public face. This can be glimpsed in the everyday decisions people make about how to dress, talk and greet people in the street. Aboriginal people risk the accusation that they are flash if they dress up too much or if they cease to greet others, for instance those who are drunk. Such people are commonly accused of forgetting who they are. The more 'respectable' blacks who do not contribute to these performances, those with jobs and/or more restrained habits, are forced into a double bind in relation

to their own self-presentation, and in their relations with whites. Such a politics was evident in the remarkable shift in the demeanour of two active young men who had been proud of their ability to get on well with whites, and who had taken pride in their conventional neat attire. They began to wear beanies, tee-shirts and sneakers; they swore more and even managed to look darker skinned. Their changed orientation was part of a bid by a section of the community to displace an entrenched family-based group from control of a community organisation. The aspirants needed support from the core of the black community who tend to deride as 'coconuts' (white on the inside), those whose demeanour is too 'flash'.<sup>21</sup>

Whites also take decisions about how to conduct themselves in relation to the black population. Multiple markers of the racial boundaries are evident in social habits, dress and demeanour, housing and domesticity, employment and income, and in language, though none of these are absolute or reliable indicators of individual identity. Whites who nurture intimate interracial relationships, as spouses or friends, experience chronic problems in participating in the sociality of whites, where blacks are regularly objectified and disparaged in private conversations. In relation to the assertion of social identity in public places, the majority of whites take care not to mimic practices that are seen as characteristic of black social life. While for some young whites, especially teenage boys, association with Aborigines can be a form of rebellion, most young people would echo the sentiments of a young white woman who, with a sense of shame, recalled that as a teenager she had felt that 'Aborigines represented everything I didn't want to be: poor, badly dressed and looked down on.'

This identity politics is complicated further by the developing consciousness of the newfound legitimacy and power of tribal identities (Ngemba, Budjidi, Gunu and Wangkumara) in this era of the recognition of land rights and native title, and the possibility of royalty monies from mines, gas pipelines and other uses of land now under claim. What are known as traditional cultures, or tribal identities, are being activated in conscious attempts to make the Indigenous past speak to the present in ways other than as victims of dispossession and whiteness. A hitherto hidden store of knowledge and

experience of things deemed 'tribal' among many older people has emerged. Fragments of languages are being revived to circulate in everyday speech. An Aboriginal language from the region has been learned by several young men who are teaching it with much enthusiasm to many school children. These activities demonstrate a palpable hunger for definitive, iconographic Aboriginal things among these 'have nots'. Complications stem from the rivalry between the relative strengths of tribal identifications in relation, on the one hand, to potential material rewards, and on the other to the authority they confer over the locality of Bourke. Further, some Murriss express cynicism about the evoking of tribal identities in self-conscious opportunistic ways.

Thus the street performances are but one manifestations of a struggle underway about how a contemporary Aboriginal identity is to be expressed. Many Murriss, even those who otherwise contribute to the exaggeration of stigma, deplore the most outrageous street behaviour, and condemn the violent language used by some individuals inside and outside the pub. On the other hand, the contempt and even cruelty shown by whites towards the small number of old alcoholics who sometimes stagger around the streets or create minor disturbances, tend to unite people in sympathy for their distressed kinsmen and in support of Aborigines' rights to the streets. Further, the more 'respectable' Murriss enjoy the outrageous performances, not only because they are deeply aware of the symbolic meaning of this sometimes ghastly impromptu street theatre, but also because its style and black humour is echoed in other, less contentious and less visible features of black sociality. That is, Aboriginality is performed in the street that is home, but it is also performed in other social and domestic spaces to which we will now turn.

### **Fabulations**

Performance may be an ordinary part of all sociality, but in Aboriginal communities there is a recognised tradition of mimicry and a conscious dramatisation of narratives, which are performed in everyday domestic circumstances.<sup>22</sup> The domestic realm of Murriss is not centred in the interior of the house, but in front and back yards and in the street. Murri

children inhabit the streets of Bourke as their own, homely space, another goad to white disapproval, because autonomous children in the public domain are in danger and endangering social order. The idealised social existence of whites is split into a private realm within the confines of the family home where intimate relationships are experienced and the true self emerges, and a public realm where a more socially constrained self and sociality appear. This conventional split is what fuels the disapproval of unconstrained and boisterous behaviour in public. The narrativised Aboriginality produced on front steps and in back yards in Bourke delighted me, with its humour, social commentary and fabulations. Here I found the ‘alternative social knowledge’ that exists among those who have been the ‘subjects’ of the social sciences.<sup>23</sup> Perhaps the warnings against lies and superstition that pervaded the childhood of those of us who are modern Anglo subjects have created a fear and contempt of flights of fancy and the imaginary. A faith in facticity seems to paralyse whitefellas when they come across the kind of fabulations that comprise the body of conversation among Murriss of Bourke. Some of the stories recorded can provide examples:

That Opera House it will be all under water. That water is going to come and drown all them people in Sydney. The old Aboriginal people said that, and now that white bloke [Nostradamus] is predicting it. They [the elders] were that wild when it was built, on the site where they did whatever they used to do there. Sacred place. They was wild that all that money was spent on the Opera House. What’s the good of that? It’s no good, all them squeaky voices.<sup>24</sup>

Elaborated stories are usually relayed by several interwoven voices. One person begins to recall an event, another takes up the thread and hooks in other filaments of memory, a third will add in a further strand. As elements are fitted together the tale is strengthened and enriched. Each performer searches for more embellishments to add to the significance and pleasure in the story. One story told by two people, speaking in turn and overlaying, interrupting, repeating, was about a group walking home one day after the races where they had

been drinking. I noted the story's outline:

Bruce was staggering with a heavy Eski full of beer to drink at home. They asked police for a ride, tried to appear sober. When they got home, found the Eski was full of ice, besides only 4 stubbies and a bottle of champagne. Bruce's stagger, surprise and outrage that others had drunk it all were all evoked. The story was interspersed with that of the bloke whose mother in law put a knife to his throat. He said 'Fuck the lot of youse, you cunts, and pricks [X] family, I'm going', and he was pulling his port [suitcase] around — 'he had wheels on it see'. He kept saying, 'Fuck the lot of youse'<sup>25</sup>

Each person in the story, including the history of their relationships with the police and each other, is well known to the tellers, who savour the scene, repeating and echoing bits to wring from it whatever humour it contains. The story is forced to yield up its maximum potential to astonish, intrigue, entertain; paramount is the ability to evoke laughter.<sup>26</sup> The skill is in coming at the event at the right angle, striking the right note to make the laughter come. There is a marked contrast with the anaemic niceness of much whites' conversation as I experienced it among the aspiring middle-class office and shop employees in Bourke,<sup>27</sup> with its narrow precision about events, its overwhelming moralistic flavour, and its occasional chilling nastiness.

Dramatisation is also evident in the almost gleeful Murri response to a new sign put up in the Post Office Hotel, 'the P.O.'. This statement read: 'We request that patrons show respect to members of the New South Wales police force when they enter these premises.' There was also a new notice that children were not allowed inside the door of the pub. 'See, it's racial discrimination', Dianne and her brother said with satisfaction. I was sceptical, and they explained that the notices were not put up in other pubs. That is, they recognised that the patrons of this mainly Aboriginal pub were being 'hailed' as ill mannered and foul-mouthed. They not only rejected the naming but wanted to name the namers who had let their impartial guard slip. The assertion that the notice

addresses *Aboriginal* patrons and is thus discriminatory illustrates Murri's sharp awareness that an element of the moral superiority claimed by the police and good white citizens is that they are non-discriminatory. The application of the law is systematically monitored in the light of the formal egalitarian principles which are now central features of legal and social race relations.<sup>28</sup>

The notices and the responses are also moves in an ongoing struggle concerning the P.O. hotel and the main street. The activities around the pub are a source of despair to the Bourke Chamber of Commerce because they discourage the tourists who might bring prosperity when they come to savour the outback history the town tries to stand for. Providing visitors with access to comforting conceptions of the past, (the paddle steamer on the Darling River, memorabilia of the writer Henry Lawson and stories of the first settlers), will be ineffective lures if visitors are frightened by the robust performances of Aboriginal people in the main street. Attempts to recruit Aborigines to perform in a different manner for tourists, to revive some dances or to act as guides and informants on 'bush medicine' or local indigenous myths, have met with little success so far, although they are beginning to gain a positive response in some quarters. Regular attempts have been made to close the P.O. pub down, so that the repugnant Aboriginality is removed from sight, but recently the old building has been given a face-lift and the publican is prospering, especially since poker machines were installed.<sup>29</sup> Thus, various interests in the town are positioned differently in relation to the black drinkers whose intermittent presence in the street is so definitive of Bourke's public reputation, yet whose image is the antithesis of the white resident's idea of what it is to be a modern citizen. These modern citizens though, cannot express in public any racial antipathy towards Aboriginality; to do so would be to betray Australia's firmly established identity as an egalitarian and non-racist nation.

However, there are nooks and crannies both in cities and in the country, where a concealed racial hatred, fear and contempt gains expression. This expressive domain was glimpsed by a Murri woman who overheard a white woman denigrating Bourke Aborigines on the public telephone. The

listener said, 'That person will believe that story. They will never come here to see what we are like.'<sup>30</sup> Such naivety is not shared by those who have come across the hate speech that is audible or visible on specific and significant occasions. On the gate of a property just outside of Bourke in capital letters and idiosyncratic spelling a sign read:

IF YOU DONT KNOW ME DONT COME UP

NO MINERS RITES LAND RITES NO CIVIL ORE  
MARRAIGE RITES

CROSS THIS FENCE IT WILL BE YOUR LAST BLOODY  
RITES

Gladys immediately recognised this form of interpellation, one that has become common since the state recognised Indigenous rights to land and heritage. Exaggerated rumours of Aboriginal demands have flourished in the bush at times gaining an incendiary force as Aborigines became the enemy inside the nation, the avaricious, illegitimate threat to our property and peace.<sup>31</sup> Gladys's response to the sign was one of semi-vengeful wrath and a half serious threat that she would send down some of the boys to fix up the fellow who wrote it.

'What they call us behind our backs' is known among Murris who can never be sure of either who has written the words, or who has read them, let alone how the readers have responded. Sentiments that are forbidden in public are thus made known to Aborigines in these extreme forms by people who are regarded as marginal by other whites but who nonetheless voice the disavowed racial antagonism and repugnance which are usually evident only in oblique forms, and in the consequences of exclusionary or punitive acts. These sentiments are the foundation which enable the construction of a disputed, unequal and unwilling form of Aboriginal citizenship.

### Rejecting citizens

While Aborigines' formal equality before the law has been established and their historical disadvantage recognised in

the last three decades, overt and continuing contestation of the meaning of citizenship is embedded in daily conflicts such as I have documented in relation to the control of public space. I also want to argue that, contrary to public perception and legal assumptions, Aborigines are offered equal citizenship status contingent upon their abandoning practices deemed repugnant.<sup>32</sup> What other meaning can we attribute to the presence of thirty police officers in Bourke, with the consequent level of intrusion and surveillance in the lives of those deemed chronic suspects?<sup>33</sup>

Civil, political and social rights of Indigenous subjects are now formally recognised in Australia. But the refusal of Aborigines' rights in the past, indeed the great effort put into ensuring their lack of rights was not merely a formal condition which could be reversed by legislative change.<sup>34</sup> The conditional acceptance of native title has been addressed in a number of studies.<sup>35</sup> I want to add to these concerns the recognition that there are limitations on the rights of Indigenous people 'to share to the full in the social heritage'.<sup>36</sup> Ironically, elements of the social heritage of Aborigines are sources of suspicion, fear and violent hostility from established citizens. What needs recognising is that the 'social dimension' of citizenship is embedded in and inexorably bound to present and future relations *with other citizens*. Citizenship can be obstructed by other citizens in the very process of enjoying their own citizenship to the full. The enjoyment of Indigenous citizenship depends on other, already secure citizens extending acceptance to those newly recognised as citizens, and according them the status of fellow citizens. Rouse raises the important question of what responsibilities accompany Aborigines' accrual of citizens' rights, but a prior question is, what is the responsibility of those who are secure in their citizenship towards those whose citizenship is precarious because they have formerly been rejected as citizens?<sup>37</sup>

I will use the words of Alan Knight to illustrate the awareness among Aborigines that the offer of citizenship is contingent on accepting derogation. Alan's accounts of his lifetime of interaction with police evince a deep and abiding sense of being misperceived as dangerous and alien.<sup>38</sup> After a long series of specific complaints, Alan said:

I'm not saying this because I hate police. Why I hate police is because they are very very racist people. I could show you all the names they made up for me, like 'ape' and everything. That's how much they hate me. This was in the magistrate's chamber while I'm getting bail. I said 'What's those names there?' [on the charge sheet].

And they said 'They're just names that you're known by.'

'I said, known by who? I've never been known by these names in my life. It's what the police put there.'

And one of the coppers said, 'Oh we'll take it off then'.

'NO!', I said 'You leave it on there. Don't you touch it. Because the clerk has seen it and if you do touch it now, I'll take it out in court, cause it shows they're racist, and the reason they're against me.'

I'll just show the magistrate how much they hate me these bastards.

Like Dianne's reaction to the notice in the pub, Alan gains a bitter satisfaction from finding evidence that police are prejudiced and call him 'ape'. He does not recognise himself in this interpellation, but it could count in his favour in court and it vindicates his own consuming hatred. This meeting a ghastly parody of oneself is not a unique event for Murriss; their lives are regularly caricatured in the legal process. Alan told me of this encounter during a street brawl which, after police intervened, became a riot with a shop window smashed and goods stolen:

Then next minute this policeman came out of nowhere, and I said to him 'Why didn't you stop it when it started down the street down here. You all scared or what? What are you doing in uniform? Gutless bastard.' And something I said there, well he said to me, 'Go on hit me big man, hit me', like that. I couldn't pass up an invitation like that, and, 'whack', I hit him once under the chin and knocked him out. And I'm supposed to have started the riot! I can't see how I started the riot.

Alan is quite willing to be charged with 'assault police', an

act which accrues a degree of social honour, but he is deeply angered by the ability of police to multiply and transform his crimes. Here the 'the dialectic of antagonism' turns a ritual event, in this case regular spats and brawls, 'into resistance at the moment of intervention by the higher powers'.<sup>39</sup> There occurred a shift of the meaning and trajectory of the fight from internal Murri dynamics into an occasion for the expression of protest, anger and revenge on the bodies of the police and the body of society. Further transformation is brought about when the event is represented in the metropolitan press as 'rioters tear up Bourke'.<sup>40</sup> Yet another mutation is called up when the individuals' crimes are identified, recorded and punished according to police practices and the law, entailing the accused repeatedly being summonsed by alien directors to perform a bit part in a familiar drama acted out in the court room. In these ways Murris have to face a constant contortion and misrepresentation of their lives and experiences.

Occasionally a reversal of this process is achieved. One day, as the magistrate convicted a number of young Murri 'rioters', a youthful voice, clearly audible within the courtroom, yelled from the vestibule: 'Give us a fair go you poofters. Why don't you give us a fair go?' The Aboriginal people hanging about inside the courtroom and in the vestibule giggled excitedly at this breaching of the 'boundaries of legitimacy in speech', which asserted a profound objection to the proceedings.<sup>41</sup> The court rendered itself deaf. No flicker of recognition was apparent from the magistrate or lawyers. What Butler, in relation to hate speech, called 'the rush of excitement that, for some, went along with the utterance' was here enjoyed by the Murris, while the officials firmly suppressed any response to these irreverent, vulgar obscenities, just as they do when the terms 'white cunt' and 'fucken copper' are spoken regularly inside the court in the recounting of evidence of street crimes.<sup>42</sup>

### Conclusion

I began by showing that the stigmatised images of a violent and incoherent modern Aboriginality, which attracts obsessive national attention in the popular media, generates performative responses among Murris in Bourke. While

Aboriginal communities in rural Australia cannot take part in the 'production of [public] truth' about themselves because they are outside the circuits which activate the 'ensemble of rules' for this game,<sup>43</sup> they nonetheless respond to their interpellation by producing counter-truths which circulate within a narrower social domain. These are part of a counter-discourse, which employs dramatic fabulations characteristic of contemporary Aboriginal narratives as well as legalistic anti-discrimination and egalitarian language. Willis showed working class kids in London engaging in a politics which successfully defended and celebrated their working-class values and practices and protected them from moving into the middle class and the office jobs that their teachers wanted them to aspire to.<sup>44</sup> Similarly in Bourke, the celebration of the poetics and rhythms of everyday Aboriginal community life combines with a street politics which confirms the power of the Aboriginal domain while severing it from engagement with the white world.

But this severance is only partial. All kinds of interactions occur which breach the racial divide, in places of work and recreation, in marriages and in the identities and the very bodies of individuals. Yet even within the intimacies of family and domestic life the racial boundary is reproduced; white spouses virtually always join the black community or their family remains relatively socially isolated. However, at a more profound social level there exists a generative dialectical relationship in which 'high discourses ... are structured in relation to the debasements and degradations of low discourse'.<sup>45</sup> In the forms of 'creative disrespect and radical opposition to the illegitimately powerful' described above, Murriss are striking back at the conventional, disapproving and superior gaze of local whitefellas by at once mocking the images and deploying their symbolic power.<sup>46</sup> In answering back to the white discourse, these performances confound, disconcert and embarrass the white audience. Because they cannot be approached, answered or treated as legitimate social events, they produce a certain kind of fear, interrupting and temporarily silencing white voices in the vicinity. They do not institute a dialogue but rather seem to affirm the grotesque images of a deformed Aboriginality. That is, they are elements

of a quarrel with citizenship, an assertion of other social forms which challenge the normality of white practice.

Finally I need to comment on the street performances as a specific political practice. I have argued that the black counter-narratives which emerge at the margins of society use the symbolic power of violence and of racialised bodies to create a space in which to perform, through speech and movement, startling parodies of the conventional discourses about Aboriginality. The meanings produced have been built, in part, on an understanding of the fear and censure of violence in the white world. This practice exaggerates and exposes rather than ameliorates and dissolves the space of fear and horror between the races. I do not underestimate the cost of this racial battle to those caught up in it. It cannot be celebrated as a brave struggle for freedom from oppression, though there are moments of liberation both in the actions and their effects. The outbursts in the street are also cries of pain which are clues to deeper disturbances, to a domain of destructive emotions and habits, which can reproduce and entrench the very conditions they protest against.

In the context of another situation of derogation, Feldman said, what is needed is a '*re-perception*' that would recover 'stratigraphies of pain ... the historical limits, manipulative omissions, and sanitising censors of media and juridical realism'.<sup>47</sup> Such a re-perception would allow us to appreciate and even to enter into dialogues with those who shout in the streets where 'God, staggers, sly in a drunken rage'.<sup>48</sup>

### *Reflection*

It is an unambiguous pleasure to be asked to republish a 13-year-old essay, thanks to the editors of this volume. I am delighted that urban readers—my Murri friends would call you the 'latté set'—have a chance to appreciate the drama, humour and challenges created in Bourke. Or will they? Will the urban reader reel back in dismay when confronted by these robust challenges from people we are used to pitying?

My first book about Bourke was *Black, White or Brindle* (1988). It was criticised for excusing—even celebrating—the 'bad behaviour' of Murris, so I felt further research and a second book was necessary to ascertain the truthfulness of the depiction of 'resistance'.

Gladys Darrigo, a natural satirist with a scathing tongue, invited me to stay with her because, I believe, she understood my ethnographic intentions. In her company it became ever clearer and more important to show that one man's bad behaviour is another's rebellious fun or even serious resistance to white hegemony.

Of course there is a level of creative license in interpreting social processes, in finding the social logic behind a complex of mass of social relationships. This is not unambiguous 'science'. But the necessity to get things right, meant, in this case, plunging into a social world of conflict, of love and hate, pleasure and pain, and ongoing moral rivalry. Transcribing recordings made on the windy riverbank, in a crowded house, or on the street, takes a great deal of time. An unusual phrase might take an hour or two to decipher, and its significance can only be established if it is precisely understood. This article was a major stepping-stone in the research project that culminated three years later in *Blackfellas, Whitefellas and the Hidden Injuries of Race* (Blackwell, 2004), a book that won a Premier's Literary Award for critical writing.

Ambiguity remains. In the first publication of this article, I spelt Aboriginal peoples' self-designation Murdi, thinking I could correct the usually pronunciation of Murri by emphasising the rolled 'r' at the back of the mouth—it sounds more like a 'd' to me. I did not have the linguistic skills to offer a precise phoneme and anyway a 'correct' orthographic representation would mean little on the page. I now revert to the usual Murri, accepting that no one can wield authority over how we use words.

## Notes

- 1 Richard Sennett and J. Cobb, *The Hidden Injuries of Class*, Vintage Books, New York, 1973.
- 2 About one third of Bourke's 3600 population are self-identified as Aboriginal. Western New South Wales was invaded by white pastoralists from the 1850s, often with violence. From the early twentieth century the remaining Indigenous population was 'protected' under a repressive regime in reserves and missions. Legal equality was increasingly granted from the 1950s under an 'assimilation' policy, and after 1970 positive steps were taken to ameliorate social inequality under a policy of 'Aboriginal self-determination' (see, for example, Tim Rowse, 'Indigenous Citizenship and Self-determination: The Problem of Shared Responsibility' in Nicolas Peterson and Will Sanders (ed.), *Citizenship and Indigenous Australians: Changing Conceptions and Possibilities*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1998).
- 3 Mark Whittaker, 'Tongues Tied', *Weekend Australian*, 23–24 January 1999.

- 4 Indigenous activists of the 1970s rejected the fractional designations which Aborigines had carried for years exemplified in the categorisation into 'half-caste', 'quarter caste' and 'quadroon' and in the assimilation policies. Experience was stressed as the more important basis of Aboriginality than skin colour, though biological ancestry remained a necessity. Such a view is now the standard one adhered to by public officials, but other beliefs circulate in coded forms and in private opinion.
- 5 Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, Routledge, New York and London, 1997, p. 25.
- 6 Ibid., pp. 33, 34.
- 7 Ibid., p. 26.
- 8 Ibid., p. 27.
- 9 Ibid., p. 31.
- 10 Ibid., p. 41.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Renato Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1989.
- 13 Gillian Cowlishaw, *Black, White or Brindle: Race in Rural Australia*, Cambridge University Press, Sydney, 1988.
- 14 I cannot do justice to this idea here, but I am referring to the deep ambivalence generated in this seventy year old who loved the dancing and music and admired the attainments and cleverness of whitefellas, while never accepting their sense of their own superiority. Gladys successfully encouraged her younger children to pursue education and enjoy its fruits, far from her humble rural existence, notably as a drover.
- 15 Jeremy Beckett, 'I don't care who knows': *The Songs of Dougie Young*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1994; Julie Carter, 'Am I Too Black to Go With You?' in Ian Keen (ed.), *Being Black*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1988, pp. 65-76; Suzi Hutchings, 'The Great Shoe Store Robbery', *Oceania*, vol. 63, no. 4, 1993, pp. 345-61; Cowlishaw, *Black, White or Brindle*, p. 235.
- 16 Kathleen Stewart, *A Space on the Side of the Road: Cultural Poetics in an 'Other' America*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1996.
- 17 'Other' is used here in the existentialist sense recovered by Feldman to mean the stranger, an other to the self in a relationship which emerges from 'situated practices of domination and social violence', Alan Feldman, 'On Cultural Anaesthesia: From Desert Storm to Rodney King', *American Ethnologist*, vol. 21, 1994, p. 416, fn. 6.
- 18 Alan Feldman, 'Violence and Vision: The Prosthetics and Aesthetics of Violence', *Public Culture*, vol. 10, no. 1, 1997, p. 36.
- 19 The frequent stoning of shop windows in the main street has led to virtually all of them being covered in heavy wire mesh, and more recently with roll-up metal shutters which can be retracted, allowing the town to appear normal in daylight hours.
- 20 Butler, p. 41.
- 21 This is but one small example of the ongoing drama of Aboriginal organisations which are often sites of intensely nepotistic political struggle. Accusations of corruption are commonplace and the state has instituted auditing and accountability systems which are stricter and more thorough than those for other organisations.
- 22 Basil Sansom, *The Camp at Wallaby Cross*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, 1980, p. 95ff.
- 23 Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1983, p. xvii.
- 24 Interview with Gladys Darrigo, 1998.

- 25 From the author's diary notes.
- 26 I have not yet analysed the form of this humour and its wider significance which is related to the teasing and harsh ribbing which is so common a part of Murri interpersonal interaction.
- 27 These are the office and shop employees who Murriss interact with. In the pubs and among working-class Gubbas embellished stories are told, but they are not such a widespread feature of everyday life and they lack the enthusiasm and creativity of Murriss. These forms of talk are expressions of differently disciplined bodies and voices; verbal habits and expressions are characteristic of specific socialising regimes.
- 28 See also Bruce Kapferer, 'Bureaucratic Erasure: Identity, Resistance and Violence: Aborigines and a Discourse in a North Queensland Town', in Daniel Miller (ed.), *Worlds Apart: Modernity through the Prism of the Local*, Routledge, London and New York, 1995; Barry Morris, 'Racism, Egalitarianism and Aborigines', in Gillian Cowlisshaw and Barry Morris (eds), *Race Matters: Indigenous Australians and 'Our' Society*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1997.
- 29 Gambling on the poker machines is called 'playing the pokies' or 'pressing' and, along with drinking is a frequently deplored practice of people on unemployment benefits. It is Aboriginal mothers who are subject to the most severe criticism, including self-criticism, for their addiction to pressing. Whites, of course, engage in similar conduct in the town's well patronised clubs.
- 30 Cowlisshaw, *Black, White or Brindle*, p. 260.
- 31 In the fierce public debate which emerged after the Mabo High Court decision and its legislative consequences and subsequent related court decisions, a number of prominent figures, including academics, fomented the fears and what was called the 'uncertainty' of the public. See Gillian Cowlisshaw, 'Did the Earth Move for You?: The Anti Mabo Debate', *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*, vol. 6, no. 1-2, 1995, pp. 43-63; Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs, *Uncanny Australia: Sacredness and Identity on a Postcolonial Nation*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1998, pp. 2-3; Hal Wooten, 'Mabo and the Lawyers', *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*, vol. 6, no. 1-2, 1995, pp. 116-33.
- 32 Elizabeth Povinelli, 'The State of Shame: Australian Multiculturalism and the Crisis of Indigenous Citizenship', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 24, 1998, pp. 575-610.
- 33 A 'law and order' campaign in north-western New South Wales, which was code for racial resentment and hostility, saw the number of police assigned to Bourke rise in the 1970s to nearly ten times that of an equivalent all-white town. See Chris Cunneen, *Criminal Justice in North-West New South Wales*, Bureau of Crime Statistics, Sydney, 1987, p. 207. The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody found that while under 25 per cent of the population, Aborigines represent 30 per cent of Australians in custody. See Gillian Cowlisshaw, 'Inquiring into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody', *Journal for Social Justice Studies*, vol. 4, 1990, pp. 101-15.
- 34 '[Aborigines] were subjected to discriminatory practices of quite extraordinary severity and detail. The sheer amount of legislative ingenuity and administrative effort that went into devising and maintaining these discriminatory regimes is truly astonishing.' John Chesterman and Brian Galligan, *Citizens without Rights: Aborigines and Australian Citizenship*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997, p. 9.
- 35 For example, see Nicolas Peterson and Will Sanders, *Citizenship and Indigenous Australians: Changing Conceptions and Possibilities*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998; Francesca Merlan, 'The Regimentation of Customary Practice: From Northern Territory Land Claims to Mabo', *The Australian Journal of*

- Anthropology*, vol. 6, no. 1-2, 1995, pp. 64-82.
- 36 T. H. Marshall [1950] cited in Chesterman and Galligan, p. 5
- 37 Rowse, 1998.
- 38 And earlier with officers of state institutions where he was incarcerated as a child and experienced extreme cruelty.
- 39 Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, Methuen, London, 1986, p. 16.
- 40 *Sun Herald*, 7 December 1997.
- 41 Butler, p. 41.
- 42 *Ibid.*, pp. 37-8.
- 43 Michel Foucault, 'The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom' in J. Bernauer and D. Rasmussen (eds), *The Final Foucault*, MIT Press, Boston, 1988, p. 6.
- 44 Paul Willis, *Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids get Working Class Jobs*, Gower Publishing Company, Hampshire, 1977. This kind of defence of a familiar cultural milieu against upward mobility or modernisation is not confined to working-class youth, but nor is it free of deep seated ambivalence which has been a theme of countless fictionalised and ethnographic accounts of social processes in the modern era. See Sennett and Cobb.
- 45 Stallybrass and White, p. 3.
- 46 Stallybrass and White, quoting Stamm, 1982, p. 55
- 47 Feldman, 'On Cultural Anaesthesia', p. 414.
- 48 Colin Johnson, *The Song Circle of Jacky and Selected Poems*, Hyland House, Melbourne, 1986, p. 31.