

Dreamtime and the Culture of Poverty: Aboriginality and the State in Australia

Alexander Rankine Cuthbert
The University of New South Wales*

In the process of establishing its own culture, Australia has necessarily had to reject with some force, the domination of Anglo—Saxon influences. In doing so it has embraced the idea of multiculturalism, a term which is itself replete with problems. The idea assumes equality for all immigrant cultures within a homogenized Australianism which somehow emerges from a blending of difference, a kind of cultural pot-pourri. In so doing an important aspect of history is continually submerged, that all of these people from whatever background are living in a borrowed land. Not only this, but the original owners are the most dispossessed, the poorest and the sickest members of contemporary Australian society. Within a climate of generalized hopelessness, aboriginal people survive in the face of endemic poverty, disease, alcoholism, drug addiction, and within degraded psychological and physical environments. This paper is based upon a case study of Wilcannia, a desert town of eight hundred persons in Western New South Wales. It has been the scene of violent riots, killings and deaths in custody, and is a 'representation' of an entire social condition. The paper addresses two related questions—to what degree are the circumstances we perceive problems of aboriginality as opposed to poverty? Or stated differently, which answers to the question of the aboriginal condition lie within the realm of culture, and which should be ascribed to the modern state?

Keywords: aboriginality, poverty, state, hegemony, reality, racism.

PREAMBLE

The end of innocence came in 1979 with the death of Warri and his wife Yattungka, the last of the nomadic Warrindjarra clan of the Gibson Desert in Western Australia, an event which was cataclysmic to native Australian history, as it was to the entire planet. It marked with absolute finality the end of a unique state of consciousness now lost to humankind. It signified the conclusion of a rare form of being where material life and spiritual existence were not merely inseparable, they were experienced within a continuous symbolic geography represented in the natural landscape. This particular relation to the land and therefore to the Dreamtime would never be regained by Aboriginal people, and a culture which had endured for 50,000 years was finally extinguished from the face of the earth.

* School of Planning and Urban Development, The University of New South Wales, Sydney 2052, NSW, Australia.

The new relations are not the result of one barbarism replacing another barbarism, of one crushing of man replacing another crushing of man. What we want to discover is the man behind the colonizer; this man who is both the organizer and the victim of a system that has choked him and reduced him to silence.

Franz Fanon (1965)

Constable Demol admitted that there was no master plan to any of the crimes, nor were they discussed. It was just an established pattern that he followed, like everyone else.

The Sydney Morning Herald (1995)

The following observations are based upon a case study of Wilcannia, a desert town of some eight hundred persons in Western New South Wales. The region covers an area of some 28 million hectares, where only 0.5% or some 150,000 acres is held by aboriginal people in some form of tenure (Thompson, 1994). In a very real sense, the actual physical location of the problems discussed is unimportant, since the town, like many others, effectively symbolizes in microcosm the problems of the entire aboriginal nation. Below, I examine what happens when a people who have been wholly or partly dispossessed of their traditional awareness, environments, social relations, relatives and friends, customs, language and even their food, are forced to inhabit the environment of white settlement. In the process, patterns of association, communication and behavior inherited from the stone age are inserted into the adopted forms of commodity producing capitalist society. The town has been the scene of riots, killings and deaths in custody, and its name is synonymous with persecution and violence in all of its forms. During the writing of this paper, one death in police custody took place and two aboriginal youths successfully executed a suicide pact in Wilcannia.

While the following observations are concerned with the organization of social space, there are several intriguing levels of engagement which give the study a significance extending far beyond the confines of the considerable social problems which etch the surface of the local community. At one level, all of the normal modes of academic inquiry and theorization are challenged as to their validity. At another, questions of self-determination in regard to property ownership, customary laws and environment and finally to the role of the modern state, and the relationship between social justice, ideology and political power. I will allow such questions to surface gradually from the structure of my argument, but in order to ground the paper I will concern myself directly with three fundamental issues.

First, to what degree are the circumstances we perceive problems of *aboriginality* as opposed to *poverty*? If the problems of poverty were taken care of, would the associated issues of aboriginality (culture) become manageable? In my own life I have seen the region where I was born in central Scotland go from a vibrant mining

community to one of endemic unemployment and total despair. Today this condition wraps itself round my own relatives, where the people and the social environment exhibit many similarities to the aboriginal inhabitants of Wilcannia—exploitation, corruption, poverty, a degraded physical environment, alcoholism, drug addiction (usually prescribed), the abuse of women and children, poor health, lack of motivation, violence and deviant social behavior in all of its forms. The point is that in neither location is *culture* to blame for the conditions which people experience on a daily basis. Indeed, culture as a whole is suppressed by the material conditions of existence. The single significant difference that exists between the exploitation of the working class in central Scotland and the superexploitation of Aboriginal Australia is the presence of white supremacism and racism in the latter situation. This topic is seldom addressed even in texts which purport to deal head-on with the question of ‘The Construction of Aboriginality’, preferring instead to describe indigenous Australians in sentimental bourgeois liberal terminology as “objects of charity, scientific research, amusing anecdote or artistic representation” (Creamer, 1994:45).

Second, and following from the above, *which* answers to the question of the aboriginal condition should be ascribed to the modern state, and which lie within the realm of ‘culture’? To what extent does economic dependency deny cultural integrity? In what specific ways is a white person on welfare exploited less than a black? These are not new questions, but as yet they have been unsatisfactorily answered in the literature. The first act of merchant capital when Australia was colonized after 1770 was to declare a state of *terra nullius* which abstracted all rights to land into the hands of the British government (Stephenson and Ratnapalla, 1993). Since then the entire population of Australia, black, white or any color in between, has operated within a system of capitalist production where the private ownership of land was central to the economy. From that point onwards, aboriginal culture has been degraded from one whose respect for the land guaranteed its survival in perpetuity, to a culture largely dependent upon the handouts of state welfare capitalism today. In Wilcannia the native culture is so eroded that even the language has been shredded of syntax. Only nouns and verbs are left to describe the worlds of self and spirit.

To complete this introduction, the third and final question I have relates directly to the question of *knowledge* and in this connection, one precautionary statement is necessary—I make no claims whatever to be an expert on aboriginal affairs. I have however spent my life investigating problems of development, and one of the factors that drove me to write this paper was precisely because ‘expert advice’ appeared to have had little bearing on the resolution of problems in the town (Coombs, 1977; Myers, 1974). If Wilcannia is anything to go by, much good advice has been around for decades and has been studiously ignored in a great many cases. Nor does the vast reservoir of money allegedly spent by the Federal Government appear to alleviate the conditions described above in any significant way.

STATE, CULTURE AND CAPITAL

In the colonization of Australia, the indigenous people offered little to the British for their long sea journey that could assist in the expansion of the capitalist system. Aboriginal society was stone age, and survived at the lowest material level of production. Consequently there was virtually nothing to exploit since nothing was produced. Unlike other colonies, there were no towns and cities, no developed agriculture, mining, or other sources of raw materials, and no luxury commodities produced such as tea, silk and opium that had fueled the China trade. Apart from a fringe of green, Australia was a desert environment, inhospitable, barren and impenetrable. Additionally, the cultures of imperialism and of the Koori dreamtime were so far apart that no hegemony was possible (Rowley, 1972; Bernt, 1992; Creamer, 1994).

In contrast to the Blacks of South Africa whose control over their own destiny has recently been recaptured, the Aboriginal population of Australia will never experience such liberation. In spite of the undeniably criminal history of oppression in Africa as a whole, genocide was not part of the process of colonization as it was in Australia. Additionally, settlement and farming were ubiquitous in Africa, whereas the aboriginal people of Australia (Kooris) were nomadic. They possessed neither architecture nor even the most basic form of urbanism, akin to the bushmen of the Kalahari desert. While they had been adapting to white settlement since 1770, the end of nomadism was the symbolic marker for a new historical trajectory which thereafter would accommodate aboriginal people as a totality. More importantly, it meant generating patterns of settlement which were altogether absent from traditional lifestyles, and relating to systems of value, behavior, religion and technology which were imposed and indeed alien to their entire traditional basis for social life.

In order to establish its own cultural identity, Australia has necessarily had to reject with some force, the domination of Anglo Saxon influences. In doing so it has embraced the concept of *multiculturalism*, a term which is itself replete with confusion, and one which a cynic might define as the need to absolve racism against Blacks in Australia by importing more preferred races from other locations. The liberal view assumes equality for all immigrant cultures within a homogenized Australianism which somehow emerges from a blending of difference, a kind of cultural pot-pourri. In adopting this ideology, an important aspect of history is conveniently obscured, that all of these people from whatever background, are living in a borrowed land. Not only this, but the original owners are also the poorest and sickest members of contemporary Australian society.

The end result of colonization was the systematic annihilation of a nomadic people within those areas where white settlement was considered desirable. In the remainder of the country, the Kooris assisted in the creation of a significant pastoral industry which flourishes today. Having had their land rights expropriated, they did not share in the wealth so produced, and as technological efficiencies gradually removed the need for their labor, the Kooris joined the ranks of the unemployed, predomi-

nantly in the rural districts such as Wilcannia. At that point, divorced from the land, from traditions, from kinship networks and dependent on charity, they became part of a totally dispossessed class of people and entered the enfolding arms of the world capitalist system. From then on, poverty became a way of life. Within a climate of generalized hopelessness, aboriginal people survive in the face of endemic poverty, and a generally degraded psychological and physical environment. Any counter resistance to the enormous structural constraints of superexploitation and racism make Foucault's 'microphysics of power' seem inadequate to the task of cultural reconstruction.

POVERTY AND ABORIGINALITY

Within capitalism, poverty is a socially manufactured product as I have illustrated above. This does not mean that poverty is absent from other political and social environments. Nor does it suggest that any particular conspiracy exists within capitalism to *consciously* generate poverty on the part of individuals, organizations or agencies. It is much worse than that. Poverty is reproduced as an ongoing tradition *in spite of* singular efforts by governments to eliminate it. It is a fundamental systemic construct. Therefore in principle it cannot be excised from the social body. To eliminate inequality is tantamount to rejecting the entire system within which it falls. Within this context, it is interesting to compare the aboriginal condition in Australia to the specificity of Black America (West, 1988).

West argues that there are four basic conceptions of Afro-American oppression within a Neo-Marxist paradigm:

1. The existential condition of Blacks is subsumed to the rubric of class oppression (vulgar economism);
2. Recognition of the specificity of black oppression on the basis of racial discrimination, but within the context of working class exploitation as a whole (economistic);
3. The combination of working class exploitation and of *national* oppression of Blacks (hegemonic);
4. The combination of working class exploitation and *racial* oppression (reaction against the popular Black nation thesis).

While accepting that each position has merits which need to be sustained, West maintains that they remain analytically indistinct at a macrostructural level without the necessary genealogical and microinstitutional (localized) contextualizations that allow us to understand for example:

1. The discursive conditions of hegemonic and supremacist logics, (namely Judeo-Christian, scientific and psycho-sexual);

2. The mechanisms that inscribe and sustain these logics 'within the crevices and interstices of what logocentric Marxists call superstructure' (i.e., ideology) and;
3. The agencies of political repression and the possibility of resistance (counter-hegemony)—all within the context of historical structural constraints (West, 1988:20–26).

While the historical conditions of both Black 'Nations' are substantially different, these basic analytical features remain relevant to Black Australia, and have begun to be addressed in a somewhat fragmented manner over the last ten years (Creamer, 1994). A central structural condition of both, that of poverty, has received scant attention in the Australian literature. The term *poverty* is not an easy one to grapple with analytically. Two basic positions exist, the positivistic and the materialist. The former, which I will reject as fast as possible, deals with the analysis of poverty in terms of descriptive conventions and the analysis of income determination at the level of individuals. These derive largely from neo-classical economics which deals with society as an abstract analytical convention ('the market') whereby the reality of capitalism and its inherent structures remain unchallenged.

Within this system, definitions of poverty focus largely on *income* and the individual's inability to exert adequate command over a particular basket of goods necessary to sustain life. Here individuals are considered wholly responsible for their actions and conditions, and poverty is frequently considered attributable to individual laziness. Poverty is then defined as 'absolute' or 'relative', or in various associated classes such as 'purely relative', 'quasi relative', 'alternative quasi relative', etc. Without examining causes, this position will forever bypass any understanding of how society selects and embalms the poor in a culture of poverty which is not of their own creation.

From a materialist perspective, poverty is not only a relative phenomenon created from the totality of social relations, it exists in at least two significant dimensions. In the material dimension, exploitation occurs through the expropriation of surplus value from the labor process, from land rent, profit from floorspace, etc. Importantly, labor power is *not* cheated through market relations since it receives the full exchange value of the commodity, labor power, within the overall system of exchange. Exploitation is not fundamentally effected through wage differentials between individuals at the level of the market, but through systemic political control over the entire system of production. This process is not only material. There is an inherent psychological dimension as well, induced by the commodification of labor power and the resultant alienation of workers from the products of their labor. Given that surplus production invariably results in unemployment, social welfare becomes a necessary condition of social stability—it is the cost capital is prepared to pay for excess profits.

In the case of the Kooris, it was impossible to separate the material dimension of life from the mental, as is perhaps possible in societies which have gradually adapted to the groundrules of the capitalist system. As I have indicated in the introduction,

to the Kooris the material world and that of the spirit were one and the same thing. To become dependent on a system of welfare was not merely to trade one material existence for another, but to lose one's spirituality as well. The real tradeoff was not therefore between a perceived state of wealth and one of poverty, but between a destitute *white fella's* reality and the death of the spirit.

THE (IN)HUMAN CONDITION

It is this environment which most Kooris inhabit today, one of utter degradation and despair. The central components of welfare, namely housing, health and education are significantly worse in Koori communities than they are in any other sector of society. In addition, these components are systemically linked in ways which do not apply in non-aboriginal communities (Memcott, 1990; Pholeros, et al., 1993). It is a reflection on the state of Aboriginal housing that the first comprehensive survey of indigenous housing needs has just been released to the public on February 12th 1995. This study reveals that Aboriginal families make up just 1.4% of the population but represent 22% of the homeless. In the Northern Territories, 30% of the Koori population are homeless in comparison to some 2% of the general population in the state. While deficient sewerage, water and electrical supply are ubiquitous, some 137 communities surveyed had no sewerage system at all.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSIC) Commission Report indicates that some 35,000 additional bedrooms are urgently needed, estimated to cost AU\$3 billion at current rates, rising from previously given estimates of AU\$2 billion in 1989. ATSIC's actual budget currently stands at AU\$250 million to solve the combined problems of housing and health, or some 8-9% of the required sum. The most important point to note however is that ATSIC is only a supplementary funder in terms of housing and infrastructure, and that it is the responsibility of State and Local Governments to provide these essential services.

To give a single example, in 1990 The New South Wales Aboriginal Task Force indicated that aboriginal health required a pro rata share of 1% of State Health Department funds. The actual amount allocated was less than 0.002%, and historically it has been estimated that of the AU\$61.4 million spent in 1973 on Aboriginal affairs, less than AU\$3 million or 4.8% was spent on Aboriginal organizations. Chronic underfunding is the reality of political powerlessness within the Koori communities. The overall result is that "should an aboriginal baby born today survive beyond a year, it can expect to live only as long as children born in Ghana, Mongolia, India, or Papua New Guinea" (*The Australian*, 11.2.1995).

In greater detail, this means that an aboriginal woman is eight time more likely to die in childbirth than any other woman. Young adults are dying at five times the national average, and twenty percent of aboriginal children in the Northern Territories are malnourished. Alcoholism is endemic in virtually every Koori community, whose side effects include a massive amount of interpersonal violence, child and

wife abuse, suicide and self inflicted injuries through accidents. Even social welfare is worth significantly less than it is to other welfare recipients. Because of the location of many Koori communities, the price of basic foodstuffs can cost up to 200%–400% more than the equivalent item in urban areas. From experience in Wilcannia, many items are simply not available at any price.

WILCANNIA—HISTORY, TRADITIONS, ENVIRONMENT

Wilcannia was proclaimed a town in 1864. It generated a wealthy and prosperous economy on the basis of the wool trade and became the third largest port in Australia, being sited on the Darling River. One of its singular claims to fame was the siting of the first Resch's brewery in Australia. Today, Wilcannia remains a symbol of black oppression in Australia. It has a population of some 900 persons, eighty percent of whom are Bakanji. On the surface Wilcannia looks like a quiet, sleepy and well ordered town, a truck stop between Sydney and Adelaide, with a couple of decent motels, a supermarket and a couple of pubs. Some nice old stone buildings occupy prominent positions on the main streets, and the thick green waters of the Darling river define the southern edge of town.

Physically, three recognizable areas exist. The first is the main gridiron which defines the town 'proper'. The remaining two areas are black ghettos called 'the Mission' (1953) and 'the Malee' (1986) respectively, both of which are on the periphery. Each has been the subject of exhaustive research, most notably by Paul Memmott (1991). It is not therefore my intention to retrack this work which was predominantly concerned with housing provision, but instead to focus on the question of poverty and social reform.

The relative nature of poverty discussed above is clearly expressed in Wilcannia, and its most obvious site is in the location, provision and use of shelter (the word house is an inappropriate noun). This relativity is based on the traditional production of the material basis for life within the black (Bakanji) and white communities. In the case of the Bakanji, hunting and gathering was the foundation stone. Archetypes derived from that mode of production are transposed into contemporary social life. Significant among these are the following:

1. The desire to live *in* nature (as opposed to out of it);
2. The need to derive one's material life directly from nature;
3. The predominance of symbolic culture over the material;
4. The pre-eminence of social relations over spatial forms;
5. The acceptance of a flexible space-time continuum;
6. The rejection of geometric definitions of time;
7. The collective ownership of possessions and social space;
8. The creation of social order from non-institutional forms.

In commodity producing society all of these properties would be reversed. In each case, poverty can be defined as the *absence* of the right of access to each particular norm. Generally speaking, the resistance of each community to the other is based on a rejection of these 'cultural' values which are directly associated with survival. For example, the apparently chaotic aboriginal occupation of built form, particularly the dislocation of material objects in space results in an environment which in the white community would be associated with *squatting* and therefore poverty (i.e., wino's, drug addicts, derelicts, crime, prostitutes, etc.) While the actual location of these two ghetto areas on the margins of white settlement and previously in an area prone to flooding can be accounted for through no other reason than racism, the outward appearance of aboriginal settlement in the mission and the Malee comes predominantly from three central facts.

Firstly that permanent housing as a whole is not a Bakanji invention. Western ideas of housing are accommodated by conceiving it from the outside in—life is lived in the open. Hence 'sleeping' for example is not associated with the concept 'bedroom'—you sleep wherever seems most appropriate. Nor is it associated with the location of 'personal' effects, an idea which was counter productive within nomadic society. Secondly because the concept of ownership is weakly developed, any relative may come at anytime and live since the 'house' for all practical purposes belongs to everyone in the extended family. Hence there is no such thing as any standard 'occupation' of a dwelling, and numbers vary enormously over time. Thirdly, culture dictates that houses which in some cases have been specifically designed for the occupants may be totally abandoned in the case of a death in the family. One such dwelling remains unoccupied and derelict today precisely for this reason. Overall, this results in a community which on the surface looks totally out of control if viewed from the values of non-aboriginal society, yet it conforms as closely as possible to the belief system of the inhabitants. The actual poverty of the Bakanji is therefore compounded by the production of signs which are misinterpreted by the white community as those of total decay.

The realization that Koori housing cannot be designed using the conventions of commodity producing society is not new (yet this information has still not reached Wilcannia (Pholeros et al., 1993)). As early as 1974, it had been made clear that the patterns of occupation in the Malee area perfectly reflected the needs of the Bakanji people. It was maintained that if any upgrading of that environment was necessary, it should take place on the pattern of pre-existing social relations. What actually took place is symbolic of the state's attitude to aboriginality as a whole, i.e., to impose a social and technical solution which had no bearing on the needs of the residents of that area. In 1982, the local council merely extended the existing grid-iron pattern to cover the entire area of the Malee, and relocated the occupants along the roads in typical suburban fashion, disregarding Bakanji culture in its entirety.

In Wilcannia, virtually 100% of all employment is commandeered by white society who constitute 20% of the population and own 99% of the land. This does not

merely concentrate employment into the hands of the white community, but all professional, administrative, technical and skill based processes. A basic principle operating within Australian society today suggests a reversal of this trend by the decolonization of Aboriginal society through education and a state of total self sufficiency—ownership and or control over land, housing, institutions, employment sources, infrastructure, etc. In Wilcannia this principle has been tied closely to home building. The first time this was tried in 1989, a Bakanji owned and operated enterprise was established in order to cultivate this tradition. Three homes were built before the enterprise went into liquidation, the dwellings being expropriated by the local shire to pay for back rates owed by the Bakanji community. In 1992 a similar project was launched. The Department of Housing decided to build four houses for the local Aboriginal land council using welfare labor. It has taken three years to get the houses 50% complete. The homes have been designed as prototypical three bedroom dwellings and would fit well into any Sydney suburb. They are costing 200,000 dollars each to build, in an environment where they would fetch 50,000 each on the open market. As yet the outcome of the project is unknown.

Housing, health, construction and employment are therefore intimately tied together within the community. Furthermore, apart from a single female Bakanji school-teacher, the few trained people in the Wilcannia are the carpenters, and one or two who have an elementary knowledge of plumbing. This training also holds political significance, since anyone who is trained to do anything is automatically pressured into membership of some committee and an active role in governance. Since work and training of any kind is difficult to come by, a project called CDEP (Community Development Employment Project) was established, a euphemism for 'working for the dole' with a current participation rate of about eighty persons (Bakanji). It is through CDEP that the housing project described above is being built. The value of unemployment is currently AU\$138 every two weeks. Combined with a commitment to CDEP, this figure is reinforced by an additional AU\$60 per week. CDEP therefore has a complex function in providing social welfare and supplements, training programs, a community center and a measure of social stability.

In many ways the examples noted above challenge all traditional approaches to development. Few, if any of the standard assumptions to solving problems of employment, housing, infrastructure and social services can be brought to bear on the town. On the other hand, even the most sophisticated model for Koori development established in 1977 by the Tangentyere Council in Alice Springs has not been assessed as to its worth in Wilcannia. More importantly, the exhaustive research and expert local knowledge of Myers (1974), George and Smith (1975), Memmott (1990), and Thompson (1994) generated over the last twenty years—the decades of work by professionals such as Pholeros, Coombs, and others too numerous to mention—has for all practical purposes had no effect whatever in improving the existential conditions of the Bakanji. From this we can draw certain observations e.g.:

1. The problems are known but are being deliberately ignored;

2. The problems that are known are not the real problems;
3. The real problems are being conflated to the known problems;
4. No improvement is possible until the real problems are exposed;
5. Current research is not exposing the nature of the real problems.

In order to suggest a method of revealing what the real problems are, let me recapitulate on my initial comments about the relationship between poverty and culture. Poverty has two key dimensions, the first is material, the second is symbolic. I have also suggested that the symbolic cannot be reinstated until the basic problem of resource provision is solved; furthermore that the agency responsible for the material dimension is the state, wherein the real problems are located. In greater depth it is unclear whether the state is really interested in solving the problems of the Koori community as a whole, because of the massive underfunding indicated in the statistics noted above. While the state allocates millions of dollars annually to aboriginal society, it must be accepted that welfare is the state's method of perpetuating dependency rather than freedom. In spite of the fact that there is no apparent conspiracy to avoid issues, since the Aboriginal problem is recognized as Australia's greatest obstacle to civil(ization), nonetheless the state cannot find answers to material provision in spite of the fact that it is within the economy to do this. It would therefore appear logical that the *real* problems lie within the *ideological* dimension of state power in several key arenas:

1. In the hegemonic nature of the state as a whole;
2. In power conflicts between state agencies over policy;
3. In the fundamentally distorted nature of communication within the political realm (Habermas, 1979);
4. In the 'micro-physics of power' at all levels of engagement, but particularly at local level;
5. In covert racist attitudes inherent within (4) above.

In not answering these propositions in depth I offer the usual apology of space, reserving answers for subsequent publications where each of the above elements may be given appropriate consideration. If I can make one single observation it is that no amount of time spent determining 'The Aboriginal Problem', or 'The Koori Problem' or 'The Bakanji Problem' will advance the resolution of native Australians until the fundamental questions of state organization and ideology are resolved. We already know that taps leak, electricity bills are not paid, septic tanks get blocked, adolescents sniff petrol, and children are abused. What we do not understand are the reasons why the state is incapable of delivering an acceptable material basis for life at the point where it is clearly demanded. Or more to the point, why a government which chooses to call itself socialist enduringly disgraces its own philosophical inheritance.

CONCLUSION

It is clear from the above that no significant reconstruction of Bakanji culture can take place until the material basis for life rises above that of third world countries, and that this will not take place until the role and function of racism within and among institutions of production and government (has been) exposed (West, 1988). All of the dot paintings, didgiridoos and folk dances currently representing aboriginal culture are in fact reinforcing commodity producing society and bourgeois middle Australia, while mainstream aboriginal culture commits euthanasia in the desert. The political structuring of social issues is such that no political capital (i.e., *careers*) can be made from a commitment to the Koori cause. Hence the first priority in the process must be to depoliticize issues of aboriginal settlement into those of conscience at a Federal level. To quote Brendan Nelson, the President of The Australian Medical Association, the question of Black Health "should be considered nothing less than a national emergency...and should rise above the mediocrity that passes for political debate in this country" (*The Australian*, 11.2.1995).

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