

## **Part IV. Interrupting the frontier**



## 9. Eight seconds: style, performance and crisis in Aboriginal rodeo

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One Sunday late in August 1999 I was in a car travelling to Koongie Park station, just outside of Halls Creek in the Kimberley, with Quentin and Aaron, two Aboriginal cowboys just finished competing at the Broome Rodeo. They had not won a buckle or taken home a cheque, but they were, despite a couple of misgivings, reasonably happy with their participation in the bull-ride, one of the three, with saddle bronc riding and bareback bronc riding, basic rough stock events at any rodeo. One of their reservations concerned the quality of the stock, both the bulls and the bucking horses, as they did not buck high or fast enough for their liking. They also regarded the judges as less than impartial in their scoring, giving out point scores that were sometimes hard to fathom.

In their opinion the judges showed a partiality towards contestants based on station affiliation. That is, they felt the non-Aboriginal judges favoured riders who worked on particular stations over other riders. This was a criticism of judges that cropped up at most rodeos but at this particular rodeo there was also the accusation made by some Aboriginal onlookers that a particularly good bull-ride by a young Aboriginal boy was not recognised in the score he was awarded. A subsequent ride by a non-Aboriginal cowboy from another station was awarded higher points from the judges and it was felt by some that judging consistency was not maintained between the two riders. Quentin and Aaron put the inconsistent scoring down to the judges favouring contestants from particular stations and firmly rejected my suggestion that race was an issue, but other Aboriginal people felt that it was a clear matter of racial prejudice. One Aboriginal woman succinctly expressed her frustration at the perceived prejudice when she said that the next time that he rode, 'we should make him white', to ensure impartiality in the point scoring. In contrast her Aboriginal husband said that the non-Aboriginal rider had mastered a particularly difficult set of manoeuvres by the bull and deserved his high points.

While there was disagreement about the points awarded to different riders in Broome, it was similar sentiments expressed by this Aboriginal couple that led them to organise a rodeo in 1992 in the town of Fitzroy Crossing that was unique in Kimberley rodeo history. In this rodeo the participants, organisers and judges were exclusively Aboriginal, the first Kimberley rodeo to exclude non-Aborigines. As the principal organiser told me, his staging of this rodeo allowed the Aboriginal contestants the freedom to compete without the scoring bias that they regarded as being so prevalent in previous non-Aboriginal

organised and judged rodeos. Rodeos had been an annual event since the mid-1960s in the Kimberley, but none had been organised by Aborigines or held on their stations. Prior to this time, rodeos were not an organised event in their own right in the Kimberley, although rodeo events occurred in race meets around the region, the most well known occurring at the Negri River during the 1940s and 1950s and organised by the Vestey's firm. So, some 30 years after the first independent rodeo in the Kimberley, the situation was reversed, not because the organisers did not like white people or regard them as tainting the sanctity of their rodeo, but simply so that they could compete amongst themselves and be assured that they would receive equitable scores. The following year, 1993, the same Aboriginal man organised an open rodeo, but this time held it in yards on the Aboriginal-owned station that he manages. He has not organised a rodeo since that time, but it is now commonplace for one rodeo a year to be organised by Aborigines in either Broome, Fitzroy Crossing, Halls Creek or Kununurra, which together comprise the yearly rodeo circuit in the Kimberley.

On the face of it this situation looks no more than Aboriginal people struggling to have their presence felt in an event that they have participated in for many years, but had little say in. However, there are two specific features of Aboriginal organised rodeos and Aboriginal participation in rodeos that reveal more consequential aspects of this struggle. The first feature is that the participation in, and particularly organisation of, rodeos by Aborigines reflects the rapidly changing place of Aborigines within the Kimberley pastoral industry. The organisers of rodeos in the Kimberley are almost always those who own and manage stations or are involved in the service sector of the beef industry. Unlike the large American and Canadian rodeos written about by Frederick Errington and Elizabeth Furniss, Kimberley rodeos are highly localised affairs and rarely draw contestants, spectators, or sponsors outside of the Kimberley. Local stations provide the horses, cattle and rodeo labourers such as chute bosses, judges and clowns and no Kimberley rodeo committee registers rodeo results with any of the regional or national governing bodies for professional rodeo.<sup>1</sup> Station organisers value their independence too highly to submit themselves to the regulations these organisations require, so have nurtured their own regional rodeo circuit independent of the central Australian, eastern and western state circuits. Since the first purchase of four stations in 1976 for traditional owners, there has been a rapid increase of Aboriginal-owned stations in the Kimberley. Today there are 26 Aboriginal-owned stations with a further three in the process of being handed over to the traditional owners. This is slightly more than 28% of all Kimberley pastoral leases which effectively places grazing rights, pastoral

<sup>1</sup> The two national rodeo associations, the Australian Professional Rodeo Association and the National Rodeo Council of Australia, are independent organisations with responsibility for separate rodeo events around Australia. Other regionally based organisations tend to be affiliated with these two national bodies.

designated lands and cattle in their hands for the first time since sheep and cattle entered the Kimberley in the 1880s at the hands of Queenslander pastoralists.<sup>2</sup> If the frontier in the Kimberley has been largely defined by a century of pastoralists taking Aboriginal lands and utilising cheap and at times, slave Aboriginal labour, then the current state of affairs with regards to lease-land ownership represents a shift in frontier relations.<sup>3</sup>

The second aspect of Aboriginal rodeos that is worth highlighting is the challenge that Aborigines and rodeos make to general tenets of frontier theory, that biography of settler-colonial nations that enlists the environment and indigenes to the historical project of defining a distinctive national ethos. The frontier thesis offers an interpretation of national genesis and development in which Aborigines are usually posited as being subject to the violence of colonisation, itself an object and process in Australia that provides for a pragmatic and energetic national character to emerge. Further, rodeo has generally been interpreted as performatively expressing the importance of the frontier of colonisation to the development of nationhood.<sup>4</sup> As a historiographical interpretation of colonialism, the frontier is generally defined by the distinctive causative roles granted to the environment and indigenes. Their generative status derives from the consistent interpretation of a defining 'otherness' that is attached to them in frontier analysis, not in their particular distinctiveness, which could conceivably contribute to different national scenarios. To make only one international comparison of environments – the celebrated chronicler of American settler history, Frederick Jackson Turner regarded the open and empty expanses of American wilderness as contributing to self-reliance, restless individualism and the distinctiveness of New World democratic ideals.<sup>5</sup> By contrast, across a number of genres the Australian environment, as bush, outback and desert, revealed itself to contribute not only to the conditions for the development of laconic, anti-authoritarian virtues in white male pioneers, the local equivalent of Turner's frontiersman, but also a more somber, tragic timbre to national culture.<sup>6</sup> In both historical cases though, the wild, anti-civilised status of the environment and indigenes are often regarded as providing the

<sup>2</sup> J. S. Battye and Matt J. Fox, *The History of the North West of Australia, Embracing Kimberley, Gascoyne and Murchison Districts*; G. C. Bolton, *A Survey of the Kimberley Pastoral Industry from 1885 to the Present*.

<sup>3</sup> See D. B. Rose, *Hidden Histories*.

<sup>4</sup> E. A. Lawrence, *Rodeo. An Anthropologist Looks at the Wild and the Tame*.

<sup>5</sup> F. J. Turner, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*, p. 27; F. J. Turner, *The Frontier in American History*.

<sup>6</sup> The contrasting themes of the relationship of the Australian environment to grandeur and heroic failure, finding significant voice in the last decades of the 19th century, have been explored by a number of Australian writers. While that period fostered attention away from the influence of a British heritage, later considerations of the influence of the environment on nationhood were no less concerned to chart the particular impression of landscapes on culture. See Blainey 1992; Griffiths and Robin 1997; Haynes 1998; Schaffer 1988; Smith 1989.

flashpoints by which the nation can define itself, implicating them as the compulsory other in the process of civilising, racialising and gendering a continually emergent nation as well as idealising them as the necessary sources for national crises. To restate this in more succinct terms, the frontier conceptually links the environment and indigenes to the nation through the tense medium of crisis. The most noticeable feature of this ideology is that the undifferentiated nature of indigenous peoples and the environment allows for a mutable national identity to develop. It is at this point that I wish to suggest that Aboriginal rodeos and contestants call into question the validity of locating mutability with the nation, while immutability resides in Aborigines.

## Ideology of indigenes

In her discussion of the schools of Old and New Western History in American historical scholarship, Furniss (this volume) notes that both the analytic and descriptive uses of the term 'frontier' are so varied as to make any integrative theory about it almost impossible. Further, following Patricia Limerick's<sup>7</sup> and Richard Slotkin's<sup>8</sup> critique of the ethnocentric bias of frontier theory, frontier scholars' ignorance of other critical factors in settlement, and its own status as triumphalist myth, there is considerable difficulty in using any notion of the frontier to discuss the relationships between power, settlement and invasion. Limerick's trenchant critique takes aim at the triumphalist nationalism assigned to racial conflict in the Turnerian thesis. Turner's reflections on the American frontier, which dominated interpretations of American history for the first half of last century and has been influential in the analysis of other national histories in liberal democracies despite its embodiment of a particular type of American progressivist ideology, used the geographical and racial frontier to define 'national self-consciousness'.<sup>9</sup> As 'an unsubtle concept in a subtle world'<sup>10</sup> Limerick regards it at once too monolithic, ethnocentric, racist and masculinist to be usefully employed. However, amongst American as well as Australian scholars, the conceptual flexibility of the term has led to alternative conceptions of the frontier imagination than dispossession, that describe cultural boundaries, intercultural processes, interlocking practices, and the formation of subjects in their relations to each other.<sup>11</sup> Some of these developments continued aspects of the Turner thesis while others introduced new ideas about the asymmetrical relations of power operating between social groups as well as introducing concepts of culture into the analysis of frontiers. As Kerwin Klein has noted,

<sup>7</sup> P. Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West*.

<sup>8</sup> R. Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization 1800–1890*.

<sup>9</sup> F. J. Turner, 'Problems in American History', p. 72.

<sup>10</sup> P. Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest*, p. 25.

<sup>11</sup> K. L. Klein, 'Reclaiming the "F" Word, or Being and Becoming Postwestern'.

anthropological uses of culture, at least in a relativistic sense, are not synonymous with the social evolutionist ideas of social groups that were common in Turner's day and so the meanings and usages of the frontier tend to be different when different theoretical tools are applied.<sup>12</sup> The multiple uses of the frontier led Limerick to reluctantly accept its continuing usage even if she continued to object to the placement of celebratory conquest at the heart of defining nationhood and civil society.

I want to continue this revisionist strain and return to the notion of the primitive that Turner developed, especially with regard to the question of its importance to defining the distinctiveness of settler-colonisers and nationhood in general. I wish to suggest that notwithstanding their transformation as political subjects from natives to original citizens, as Beckett describes it,<sup>13</sup> in terms of a frontier imagination Australia's indigenous peoples continue to be defined against settlers and are critical to creating a settler identity. Here, I think, the weight Turner gave to the colonised in defining the frontier is worth considering. Mark Bassin elucidates the character of Turner's quest for a defining national story as one which draws on 19<sup>th</sup> century European ideas of scientific history, in which society is regarded as an evolving organism.<sup>14</sup> Social development, in Turner's thinking, was predicated on a struggle with wildness and its peculiar features in any particular geographic and territorial setting. Nature consisted of, broadly speaking, environment and indigenous, both characteristically wild, in the sense of '...awaiting discovery, and that it would be the antidote for the poisons of industrial society'.<sup>15</sup> Where human society (which excluded indigenous peoples) interacted with nature was the frontier, and the character of that interaction defined the settler nation's central characteristics. By constantly testing the margins of what constitutes national character it reinforces those very attributes that are regarded as central such as institutions (jural), political types (democracy) and characteristics (entrepreneurial individuality). The frontier is also, said Turner, that place away from the central communities of national life where settler society returns to be reborn and renewed. There at the frontier, resides the primitive, immutable and constant, to provide the conditions by which the character of the nation might recreate itself before it succumbs to the hubris of civilised life. In regards to this process in America he says,

American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, p. 186.

<sup>13</sup> J. Beckett, *Torres Strait Islanders: Custom and Colonialism*, p. 17.

<sup>14</sup> M. Bassin, 'Turner, Solov'ev, and the 'Frontier Hypothesis': the Nationalist Significance of Open Spaces', p. 477.

<sup>15</sup> S. Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, p. 7.

with the simplicity of primitive society, furnishes the forces dominating American character.<sup>16</sup>

The primitive, the nation's indigenous companion, is the antithesis of civil order. It is both the conditions of wilderness and the primitive condition, 'our untamed selves ... in tune with nature',<sup>17</sup> an empty expanse and a presence to be subjugated. Where the environment is concerned there is recognition by Turner that it undergoes transformation as it is subject to the frontiersman's developmental urges. By contrast, Turner never imagines the indigenous as being affected by its interactions with the settler nation except in a deleterious sense. Neither its violence, nor its subtle promptings invigorates positive change there. In Turner's recapitulationist frame of thinking, a return to barbarism brings about individual and social rebirth and a consciousness of the progress modern man has taken from indigenous hunter to urban manufacturer.<sup>18</sup> All of these types are expressive of increasing social complexity, but at the moment the ideology of the natural development of social complexity reaches its apex, it is in crisis. Without recourse to the earliest mode of social being, which is predicated on direct and unimpeded reliance on the environment, the nation is in danger of losing itself. In a colourful passage from his original 1893 lecture, Turner describes the decivilising process:

The wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel, and thought. It takes him from the railroad car and puts him in the birch canoe. It strips off the garments of civilisation and arrays him in the hunting shirt and moccasin. It puts him in the log cabin of the Cherokee and Iriquois and runs an Indian palisade around him. Before long he has gone to planting Indian corn and plowing with a sharp stick; he shouts the war cry and takes the scalp in orthodox Indian fashion. In short, at the frontier the environment is at first too strong for the man. He must accept the conditions which it furnishes, and so he fits himself into the Indian clearings and follows the Indian trails.<sup>19</sup>

In this moral economy of a continually beginning nation, the frontier defines necessary and ongoing crises. Paradoxically, these crises are predicated on a struggle ('its continuous touch') with the wilderness and the Aboriginal, both fabricated as interior peripheries. The causative logic that bound these components of settler nation-building rested on the maintenance of fundamental differences between settler-colonists, indigenous inhabitants and the environment

<sup>16</sup> F. J. Turner, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*, p. 28.

<sup>17</sup> M. Torgovnich, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives*, p. 8.

<sup>18</sup> F. J. Turner, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*, p. 28; Mark Bassin, 'Turner, Solov'ev, and the "Frontier Hypothesis": the Nationalist Significance of Open Spaces', p. 506.

<sup>19</sup> F. J. Turner, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*, p. 29.



in which there is transfer of creative energy from indigene and environment to settler-colonist. The frontier is that discourse, that active struggle, which does not recede as long as the settler nation consists of a set of relationships and principles that are predicated on the ever-continual transfer of those energies.

## Performance

The frontier's distinctive annexation of nature, it has been argued by Elizabeth Lawrence, has its performative expression in rodeo. In Lawrence's words, 'rodeo embodies the frontier spirit as manifested through the aggressive conquest of the West, and deals with nature and the reordering of nature according to this ethos. It supports the value of subjugating nature, and re-enacts the taming process where the wild is brought under control'.<sup>20</sup> While the rural pageantry of Australian rodeos undoubtedly lends itself to this analysis, there is significantly more occurring in rodeos in both performative and social terms than the symbolic control of an abstract 'Nature by Culture'. At a symbolic level the riding, catching and roping of cattle and horses performatively expresses the resolution of the crisis of national anxiety that is implicit in the frontier. These eight second events then, within the ludic structure of rodeo, are also crisis events. As I have suggested, the wild in this instance is simultaneous with the Aboriginal and the environment. Within frontier theory there is little room to consider what constitutes relationships between these two as they are fundamentally differentiated from settler-colonists and their nation-forming activities. If the function of rodeo is to performatively resolve national crisis and replay the colonial venture then how does one explain what is occurring in Kimberley rodeos, where Aborigines compete in and organise rodeos which are sometimes exclusive, but tend to be inclusive? A general answer to this is that Lawrence's argument rests on a series of presumptions about the categorical separation of humans and nature that she regards as uniquely Western. A more substantial response though is possible if rodeo competition is regarded as more than human dominance over animals, as many riders experience a relationship to the animal they ride where the boundaries between animal and human are fluid, and that distinctive Aboriginal perceptions of land, that underlie their participation in rodeo events, further erode this classical opposition.

## Rodeos and stations

As a total performance Kimberley rodeos have a recognisable, often repeated structure. All events take place within a single open ring around which yards and chutes holding stock are located. Opening events usually involve all or some of team roping, rope and tie, steer wrestling, campdraft and barrel racing events, after which come the roughstock events. The early events have a mixture of

<sup>20</sup> E. A. Lawrence, *Rodeo. An Anthropologist Looks at the Wild and the Tame*, p. 7.

women and men competing whereas the roughstock events are almost completely devoid of women competitors. Another distinction between the two groups of events lies in the preparation of the stock and contestants. In the non-roughstock events the stock are usually held in an open yard separated from the rodeo ring by a gate around which contestants, friends and assistants assemble to prepare. From this yard, out into the rodeo ring, come the calves and steers for roping and campdraft as well the riders and their horses that chase them. The preparation of contestants and release of stock are different in the roughstock events. After departing from family and friends around the rodeo ring the usually male contestants gather in a secluded area adjacent to the rodeo ring where they put on their contest apparel: chaps, padded vest, riding boots, gloves, etc. While they are visible through the surrounding fence, theirs is a public seclusion and noticeably fewer friends gather round them than the non-roughstock events. When their ride comes near, they move over to the chute area where their ride will be guided into a small area barely larger than animal itself. After they lower themselves on to the back of the animal, secure themselves to the rope that is wrapped around the bovine or horse, the chute gate is opened and within specific rules about body placement and self-support, they have to stay on for eight seconds, after which they will receive a score and relative ranking.

Kimberley rodeos are complex social events in terms of prestige, gender and race relations. They create a social space in which people involved in the commercial cattle industry come together and socialise on the basis of their shared cattle-based activities. Managers, stockhands and their families mingle together in the public space around the rodeo yards and those Aboriginal people who have come into the rodeo off the stations set up camp around the perimeter of the rodeo ring on the basis of family affiliation. These are independent groupings, and stockhands may or may not have a separate camp to their manager, moving between groupings as it suits them. As people move around the ring, conversations are struck up between people who may not have seen and talked to each other for months or years. Race rarely informs the overt structure or content of these interactions, mirroring the ideal of competitive egalitarianism informing the rodeo events. Rather, status is determined through the prestige achieved in contesting rodeo events as well as being determined by the success of a station in achieving monetary profit, independent of government intervention, through successful grazing, stock-handling, labour recruitment, infrastructure maintenance and other aspects of station management. Aboriginal-owned stations have historically been less likely to have achieved this position, and it is usually those families which are associated with commercially viable stations that involve themselves in the attendance and organisation of rodeos. Men who attend rodeos and work on a station that is in severe financial difficulties can avoid the implied detrimental status implications

by emphasising the quality of their technical work on the stations<sup>21</sup> as well as their rodeo prowess, both of which are interconnected. These are matters between men as stock workers and managers on Aboriginal cattle station are always male, women are rarely afforded the opportunity to acquire the skills to negotiate such technicalities. The exclusive gendering of the Aboriginal station workforce is not as common in non-Aboriginal stations, but they nevertheless employ far greater numbers of men than women. Some of this gender exclusivity and status achievement is evident in the rodeo events themselves. Apart from those events in which young children compete, adult events are usually defined by their gender inclusiveness or exclusivity. The prestige of an event can be gleaned by reference to the amount of prize money attached to it, the size and ostentatiousness of the buckle and trophy that goes with the prize money and the corresponding levels of personal danger that each event poses to a contestant. Men and women compete in roping, bulldogging and barrel-racing events, which are regarded as involving a low degree of risk, whereas the roughstock events – bronc and bovine (steer, bullock and bull respectively) rides – are almost always contested by men. The men-only events carry the highest cash prizes and the largest trophies and buckles, the latter worn with great pride whenever possible.

In Kimberley rodeos most of the contestants are directly involved in Kimberley located cattle stations. Few contestants are permanent or semi-professional rodeo competitors, contributing to the localism of Kimberley rodeos. The prestige gained in these events circulates around the cattle community, generating a rodeo history that is rarely touched by outsider interventions. While Aboriginal people have been present as audience and as event contestants for as long as rodeo has been performed in the Kimberley, their ownership of stations is a relatively recent affair. Since the mid-1970s various Commonwealth government departments (Department of Aboriginal Affairs, the Aboriginal Land Fund Commission [ALFC], and Indigenous Land Fund) have purchased pastoral leases on behalf of Kimberley Aborigines. In each of the Aboriginal leases the reaction to their acquisition has differed with some caring little for the cattle they have obtained and others regarding the cattle as an opportunity to establish commercial cattle operations for their own benefit. Those leases where a congruence of good quality land, desire by traditional landowners and capacity to run a business exists, structure their stations in a similar manner to non-Aboriginal Kimberley stations. Historically, Kimberley stations have been owned by absentee landlords, companies or the more common resident owner-managers. In some stations the management team is a family where decision-making powers rest with the male manager and his wife, a continuation of pre-transfer station management styles.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> cf. G. McLaren, *Big Mobs: The Story of Australian Cattlemen*.

<sup>22</sup> A. McGrath, *Born in the Cattle: Aborigines in Cattle Country*, p. 27.

In this centralised management system the manager, sometimes called 'boss', takes operational responsibility for the herding of cattle and establishes himself and his family in a homestead around which mechanical workshops, plant machines and stockhand quarters are located. On those stations where the manager makes his decisions after discussion with a group of experienced Aboriginal stockmen and landowners, he is still accorded high status as manager and is credited with responsibility for making sure the decisions are carried out effectively. All cattle handlers on stations are men and their preponderance in the industry is reflected in roughstock events where it is rare for more than a single woman to compete amongst up to forty competitors. The economic returns to managers and stockhands are typically low, but the high social status and corresponding levels of self-worth are often cited by both as compensating for a meagre pay packet. Cattle movement is controlled by the use of water points, paddocks and stockyards. The life-production cycle of a commercial bovine, in station terms, ends in the stockyard, no matter their age or sex. They are primarily reared for their commercial potential and their exit from a station almost always occurs on the back of a cattle truck as it speeds away from a stockyard from which it has just picked up its livestock load. The only other use for cattle is as meat for the station and Aboriginal communities that are established nearby or on the leases.

## Landed cowboys

Scratch an Aboriginal man long enough in the Fitzroy Valley region of the Kimberley and you will undoubtedly find he was or is a cowboy. Even those men who no longer are fit enough to handle the rigours of long hours of station work, will express their cowboy experience and pride in their dress: a large hat with upturned brim, press-stud shirt, blue jeans and riding boots. This gear says that he is able to handle himself in the saddle and with cattle, is conversant with a stoic work ethic, and likely he also has a cosmological knowledge and experience of land that cattle are moved across. For such an Aboriginal man his personal identification with land is entwined. It derives from the ability to physically survive in the land and ensure the good health of his cattle with a cosmological geography in which the physical environment manifests the actions of ancestral beings and their continual and ever-present palpability.<sup>23</sup> The twining most often appears at water holes where those holding ancestral beings and exuding power are learnt of through song and ceremony. The knowledge of their whereabouts also allows a cowboy immersed in these traditions to guide cattle to them in times of drought. It is notable though that cattle are rarely

<sup>23</sup> D. B. Rose, *Dingo Makes us Human; Life and Land in an Aboriginal Australian Culture*, pp. 40–45; H. Morphy, *Ancestral Connections: Art and an Aboriginal System of Knowledge*; N. Munn, *Walbiri Iconography: Graphic Representation and Cultural Symbolism in a Central Australian Society*.

accorded a place in that cosmological geography and the social correlation to this is that some young Aboriginal cowboys actively seek to identify their relationships to land as cowboys, rather than through the mythico-ritual aspects associated with initiation.

There is considerable variability amongst Aboriginal cowboys as to why this is the case. While no one person outlined to me the full range of reasons as to why station-based cowboys choose rodeo over initiation or participated in both, a number cited their own reasons that were shared by others. For some, rodeo offers the chance to meet female partners, foster friendships and through the rides display their competence as good stockmen. Attached to the latter capacity is the opportunity afforded by rodeos for young men to participate in highly visible, prestige-granting festivals that offer a land-based alternative to initiation ceremonies, cults and other collective ceremonial activities in which locality based knowledge and candidature is controlled by senior men or prompted by territorial organisation. This is particularly so for men who are residentially town and station based and find admission into that field of ritualistic activity complicated by their own parents' or appropriate relatives' lack of involvement in ceremonial or cult activities, issues of locality, and concerns of relatedness beyond the Aboriginal domain. This is not always the case though and some, who judged themselves suitable for candidature, stated that they just did not want to go through initiation, although they did not clearly articulate rodeo as the alternative ritualised domain. The most elaborate rejection of initiation candidature was expressed to me by a 19-year-old cowboy who said that despite his mother's father being a senior custodian for the country his station leased and in a position to advance his candidature, he had no desire to go through the circumcision aspects of initiation as it amounted to an unwelcome violence being visited upon him. He did not clearly state that rodeo was a land-based alternative or a domain in which his identity could be publicly regarded, instead he narrated an alternative career path that envisaged rodeos and responsibility for land generated from cattle related activities. He planned a long-term career in rodeo, hoped that financial sponsorships, prize monies and monies earned as a station hand would sustain him for the foreseeable future and eventually saw himself inheriting the managerial responsibilities from his father for running the cattle station. Station managership was often mentioned by Aboriginal cowboys as a desirable personal goal but not as often as the almost universal aim, informally granted by others in the cattle community, of recognition as a ringer, a cowboy fully versed in cattle-based land knowledge and horse riding skills, an aim that was also shared by non-Aboriginal cowboys. It is in this context of personal recognition and prestige that rodeo participation can be regarded as producing social persons in a most public arena. As rodeos draw participants and spectators from across the Kimberley region they can also be said to produce a wider regional sociality based on egalitarian, non-residential principles between

Aborigines and between Aborigines and non-Aboriginal persons resident in the region. From an Aboriginal perspective commensurate relations with non-Aboriginal stockmen and across the Aboriginal domain would be one outcome of Eric Kolig's series of observations that changes in the religious life of the Kimberley region during the 1970s would result in increased egalitarianism within the religious community, individuation on the basis of personal assessment rather than classificatory positioning and expansive, non-localised connections forming the basis of ceremonial activity.<sup>24</sup>

Many Aboriginal cattlemen refer to themselves in day-to-day conversation as 'cowboys', rather than 'stockhands', 'stockworkers' or 'stockmen'. The compound 'stock' has historically been the self-reference of station workers' choice throughout Australia, differentiated from the use of 'cowboys', which has a more populist or American inflection. The difference is more than country based though. Some of the flavour of this difference is evident in the work of Glen McLaren who emphasises technology as an indicator of competency amongst white northern Australian cattlemen as much as land-based skills.<sup>25</sup> As the 'stock' compounds suggest, station-based labour is emphasised, where technical proficiency is summarised in an informal tradework designation. The use of the term 'cowboy' does not diminish the fundamental importance of competency with respect to land traversal and animal handling but it introduces a more self-conscious stylistic and performative sense to station work. Australian stockmen have certainly been aware of screen cowboys independent of television broadcast as American films were shown on stations at least as far back as the 1950s. The American actor John Wayne is still remembered fondly by older Aboriginal cowboys as they saw him pass across the station screen in the evenings in his cowboy guise. Indeed, the powerful depictions of stylishly dressed, gun-toting cowboys had an indelible effect on dress sense and resonated strongly with the use of force and guns on the Australian stations that Aborigines laboured on. Attention to style, an expression of a vigorous independent filmic masculinity, flowed from the screen into Aboriginal sensibilities. Alternate racial subjectivities and associations could be made in this imaginative space that offered more to race relations than the model of white mens' capture and possession of Aborigines that Aboriginal stations workers laboured under. From the point of view of some Aboriginal men who worked on stations in the decades after the Second World War, film cowboys spoke to them about independence, power and vigour. Were they not also cowboys, as was John Wayne, did they not work for a boss, fight, drink, work together, chase women and drove as did their filmic companions? The critical eye that Cowlshaw knew to be cast on white bosses by Aborigines expanded to include commensurability with white

<sup>24</sup> E. Kolig, *The Silent Revolution: The Effects of Modernization on Australian Aboriginal Religion*, p. 182.

<sup>25</sup> G. McLaren, *Big Mobs: The Story of Australian Cattlemen*.

men whether they were aware of it or not.<sup>26</sup> Film did not alleviate the power of station bosses over station Aborigines but it did provide alternative imaginative spaces for expression by Aboriginal men. Knowing what it was that powerful independent white men wore meant that wearing a pair of recognisable riding boots or cowboy hat, or a particular style of clothing allowed for a vital, if small, reclamation of an integrity that was so often denied on stations.

More recently, the sensual immediacy of filmic social engagement has found renewed life through television. The ability to scrutinise film and television for its prompts to style has taken a new twist as many cowboys are aware that being a cowboy is itself an iconic exercise in a nation that has embedded pastoralism and the romantic traditions of stockwork deep within its national psyche. Their awareness of their public iconicity is exacerbated by the many documentaries, films, newspaper and magazine articles and photos that are produced about them and their lifestyle.<sup>27</sup> The preponderance of such media is linked to the increased consumption of the cowboy as a commodity and a national figure that can be draped in fashion, itself tightly circumscribed amongst cowboys in terms of association with specific commercial brands. Rodeos are an important aspect of the circulation and exchange of commodity, representation and person, allowing as they do the creation of an audience (anywhere between 50 and 500 people at any given moment) comprised of industry regulars and others to witness the exchange. An unwritten rule of rodeos requires that contestants personally supply and wear appropriate dress, which does not mean safety clothing, but clothes that are recognisably cowboy clothes in pattern and cut.

To a large extent rodeos express station skills and the particular knowledge of cattle handling that mustering entails in a sporting dance between rider and beast. The bronc events mimic the breaking in of horses for the mustering season, the roping, bulldogging and campdraft events reproduce the separation of calves around the muster herd and the barrel races display an all-round horse riding proficiency. The only events that do not have a direct correlation to cattle and horse handling are the poddy, steer, bull and bullock rides. On the property they may be ridden for fun but there is nothing gained from riding a bovine. Nevertheless, riding on the back of a bull in a Kimberley rodeo usually denotes

<sup>26</sup> G. Cowlishaw, *Rednecks, Eggheads and Blackfellas: A Study of Racial Power and Intimacy in Australia*, p. 57.

<sup>27</sup> It is not possible to do justice to the vast amount of print and film media that has been produced about Australian cowboys, but let me make brief mention of a few works. Most recently the magazine *Outback* has devoted itself to maintaining the importance of cattle for binding people, land and the nation. Regular features are devoted to land, stations, individuals, including Aboriginal people and properties (cf. Dunn 2000). A recent publication by Jenny Hicks (2000) on Australian rodeo has already reached a second publication run due to its popularity. Made-for-television works specifically relating to rodeo include director David Batty's Kimberley-based documentary *Rodeo Road*, televised on the ABC on June 7, 2000 and the Queensland-based documentary 'Born to Buck', televised on the ABC July 15, 2000 as part of *Australian Story* series.

that the competitor works on a station, because the general skills needed to do so are often only acquired by working with cattle and horses on stations. Competitors in Kimberley rodeos come in off the stations to the towns and often are announced to the onlooking crowd by personal name and station affiliation. The latter is immensely important and announces an association to the activities of that station and the land it encompasses, Aboriginal or otherwise. It is rare for an Aboriginal competitor or onlooker to express an identity that is not station related. The only time I saw otherwise was when the Aboriginal station hands of the Mt Pierre station, Gooniyandi country, wore a padded vest with a Rainbow Snake painted along the spine every time they competed in an event. Even then the snake was crested by the name of a cattle-trucking company, so that the two associations with land lay across their backs. These symbolic expressions of identity show that Aboriginal cowboys are not readily amenable to the dominance of nature argument that Lawrence<sup>28</sup> holds, which uncritically assigns whiteness as the racial identity of the rider. Indeed, as I will show, this inconsistency about symbolic categories also applies for beasts, but for quite different reasons.

Despite the dangers involved, all of the crisis events are expressed by riders as a playful contest with chance: 'too much fun', as one cowboy running to the fence after being thrown sky-high by a bull, shouted out at the Broome crowd. But as to dominance, that is less clear. Indeed, to ride a horse or bull successfully, the rider must give themselves up to extreme velocities in the steep, jerking, manic movements of the animal. There is no pretence of affect before the onlooking eyes, only the solitary becoming with the beast: to blend the edges of the body, to freely dissolve the surfaces of beast and man, to find a series of moments amongst incredible speeds and forces when one's centre of gravity is a point and not a weight to be repudiated by the animal. It is constantly said by all riders that successfully riding a bucking beast is about a state of mind (calmness and clarity) and a physical concurrence with the beast so that, 'There is a reality of becoming-animal, even though one does not in reality become animal'.<sup>29</sup>

That other supposed aspect of nature in the frontier, the beast, is also shown to be more than the function it has been assigned; that of a vigorous masculine wildness to be tamed. This is because all bovine in rodeos are wards of capital and to a certain extent, the state. In the system of capital to which they belong, their value is monetary as their identity is primarily assessed in terms of cash for weight units (kilograms). They are continuously classified with characteristics pertaining to this system by the state as it seeks to tailor their growth to market forces. At the beginning of each calendar year, Department of Agriculture officials

<sup>28</sup> E. A. Lawrence, *Rodeo*.

<sup>29</sup> G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, translated by Brian Massumi, p. 273.



advise station owners to produce bovine with particular characteristics: meat with distinct marbling qualities; to breed cattle with single colour skins; encourage weight types; to remove horns and to regulate teeth numbers. They are told each year new characteristics to promote or avoid in congruence with market expectations and are given regular updates through widely distributed departmental newsletters (Kimberley Pastoral Memo). Far from the beast being a wild animal, it is already produced by the twins of capital and the state the moment it enters the rodeo ring. Remember Aaron and Quentin's complaint about the torpidity of the bulls. This was because they had been mustered for sale and had been waiting for a few days in uncovered yards for a truck to remove them, not because it was their natural state in rodeos. In my abstractions, this repudiates the distinctions needed between non-Aboriginal and bovine in order to generate the conditions for taming as both are, in symbolic terms, expressive of far more than civil society and wilderness. This situation would seem less an issue of the dominance of one over the other, than the both expressing different aspects of money, state and nation.

At a symbolic level then we see that Aborigines and animals frustrate the place assigned to them in frontier theory. While the masculine and sexual associations in rodeo are undiminished in Aboriginal rodeo, Aboriginal participation in and organisation of rodeos display a *mélange* of expressions beyond dominance. At a political level, Aboriginal-organised rodeos show how important Aboriginal people are to regional society in general and the cattle industry in particular. This is congruent with what Liz Furniss<sup>30</sup> has said regarding Canadian Rodeos where Canadian Indians organised cultural displays to raise the profile of Indians in Canadian regional society. In the Kimberley, Aboriginal rodeos strategically display cattle competence and knowledge of the land that is comparable to their non-Aboriginal neighbours and challenge the racism and pessimistic stereotypes of Aboriginality that are still common there. Also, I argue there is a subterranean knowledge of land displayed by Aborigines in rodeos that is never openly mentioned in rodeo grounds but is often talked on outside of the arena. The landscape for all Kimberley Aborigines, whether within the ceremonial tradition or not, is imbued with a personal, collective and cosmological history that very few non-Aborigines can claim. In this experience of the land, personal movement is oriented by '...ways of talking, seeing, of knowing, and a set of practices ...'.<sup>31</sup> This experience maps totemic ancestral presence in the landscape as both enduring and negotiable.<sup>32</sup> As one Aboriginal station manager said to me, 'I will always listen to the advice of the oldfellas for this country when I am working out where to put a bore. They know the land because they have walked

<sup>30</sup> E. Furniss, 'Cultural Performance as Strategic Essentialism: Negotiating Indianness in a Western Canadian Rodeo Festival', p. 36.

<sup>31</sup> K. Bentrak, S. Muecke and P. Roe, *Reading the Country: Introduction to Nomadology*, p. 14.

<sup>32</sup> A. Rumsey, 'The Dreaming, Human Agency and Inscriptive Practice'.

it, not like these consultants, they don't know the land, the way the water flows under the ground'. The walking he refers to is the walking done during the wet months after the cattle season was over and people visited each other, went to sacred sites and gathered for ceremony. An even clearer account of the dual experiences of land an Aboriginal cowboy can have is expressed by Morndi Munro.<sup>33</sup> When he recounts his entrance onto the earth he describes it in two different ways. In one account he says, 'My name is Morndi, it's a saltwater name in Ungummi and Worrora. I'm just about saltwater myself. I'm Morndi, the saltwater mirage. I came to my father as a vision. He caught sight of me out of the corner of his eye'. In the second account he says: 'I was born raw in the bush at Hawkestone Peak, in the cattle yards between Kimberley Downs and Napier. Right in the middle of those two stations. My bush name is Morndi and my whiteman name is Billy Munro'.<sup>34</sup> The different place names and conception stimulant, in both accounts, suggest a dual consciousness of orientation to place that registers Morndi as the outcome of two creative fields of agency, a process Alan Rumsey,<sup>35</sup> Francesca Merlan,<sup>36</sup> Jeremy Beckett<sup>37</sup> and Deborah Bird Rose,<sup>38</sup> amongst others, have noted in other locations across Aboriginal Australia. In Morndi's case his articulation of two different aspects of identity based on distinctive and conjoined social references generates modes of articulation and relatedness across Aboriginal and pastoral domains that looks for simultaneous identification, although it could well lend itself to a blended and possibly hybrid formulation in the intentional and agentive sense Homi Bhabha grants the term.<sup>39</sup>

To return to Broome and the two Aboriginal men, Aaron and Quentin, I shared company with on our drive to Koongie Park. As I said, they were not amongst the placegetters there but Aboriginal men were first and third in the bull ride and first in the other roughstock events. Indeed in the five rodeos held throughout 1999 in the Kimberley, Aboriginal men won the crisis events and took out the overall cowboy award at each rodeo. If rodeos play out themes about the relationship between settler-colonists, Aborigines and the environment implicit in the constitution of nationhood then far from rodeos recreating the settler-colonist taming of the wild, Aboriginal participation in and organisation of rodeos in the Kimberley performatively express an Aboriginal repossession of the nation.

<sup>33</sup> M. Munro, *Emerarra: A Man of Merarra/Morndi Munro Talks with Daisy Angajit, Weeda Nyanulla, Campbell Allenbar and Banjo Woorunmurra*.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 1, 3.

<sup>35</sup> A. Rumsey, 'The Dreaming, Human Agency and Inscriptive Practice'.

<sup>36</sup> F. Merlan, 'Narratives of Survival in the Post-Colonial North'.

<sup>37</sup> Jeremy Beckett, 'Aboriginal Histories, Aboriginal Myths: An Introduction'.

<sup>38</sup> D. B. Rose, 'Ned Kelly Died for Our Sins'.

<sup>39</sup> H. Bhabha, 'Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority Under a Tree Outside Delhi', p. 173.

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# 10. Boxer deconstructionist

## Stephen Muecke<sup>1</sup>

A ghost is haunting Australian politics, the ghost of Aboriginal power. Perhaps in the way that Marxism has been a 'critical factor' in the articulation of world politics, Aboriginal power has been a spectre in white Australian history. And despite all the struggles, the regular announcements of victory, assimilation, 'reform' or ten point plans, Aboriginal power persists. Marxism, too, continues to haunt the languages we use to analyse politics and history.<sup>2</sup> How does one explain the persistence, even the growth of Aboriginal power; the power it uses to unravel those often-held certainties of politics and history?

In order to attempt to answer this I shall have to avoid that language which seems to aim towards certainty and closure (history and politics) and stray into philosophy, a mode of activity that rarely engages with Aboriginal knowledges (or is indeed rarely seen as a kind of Aboriginal knowledge; you have religion, but not philosophy, why is this?<sup>3</sup> ).

My discussion will centre around a famous Kalkatungu man, who lived with the Duracks in the East Kimberley when they started their pastoral empire. 'And on the more benign stations,' says Tony Swain, 'there was room for the creative philosophic thought of people like Boxer.'<sup>4</sup> What kind of philosopher was he? Mary Durack also mentions philosophy, in a book talking a lot about Boxer, *All-about*, 1935, in which the dedication, the most significant encapsulation of the book, ends by saying: 'Yours is the gift of laughter and human kindness and true philosophy. Were you ever savages?'<sup>5</sup> .

'Were you ever savages?' is the question picked up by Tim Rowse for his significant article, his historical and political analysis of the turn-of-the century frontier in the East Kimberley, "'Were you ever savages?" Aboriginal Insiders and Pastoralists' Patronage'. Why this interrogation about savages, from Durack in 1935 and then Rowse 50 years later, when the thrust of the question is that you can no longer be considered savages? We know this from the change of tense in Durack: 'Yours *is* the gift of laughter ...' becomes '*Were* you ever ...'

<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Stephanie Bishop for research assistance, the delegates at *Frontier Australia*, Darwin, September 23<sup>rd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup>, ANU, NARU, for their generous comments, and John W Durack for his generous reading of the paper and suggestions for improvement.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*.

<sup>3</sup> For Kierkegaard, according to Žizek, 'religion is eminently modern: the traditional universe is ethical, while the Religious involves a radical disruption of the Old Ways – true religion is a crazy wager on the Impossible we have to make once we lose support in the tradition.' *The Ticklish Subject*, p. 115.

<sup>4</sup> Tony Swain, *A Place for Strangers*, p. 233.

<sup>5</sup> Mary and Elizabeth Durack, *All-About*.

But 50 years later Tim still asks the same question, and I will ask why again later.

Now I want to ask about that gift, that precondition for not being savages. 'Yours is the gift of laughter and human kindness and true philosophy.' Unlike Tim I want to begin with what Durack asserts in that present of 1935; *true* philosophy (and *laughter*, not many jokes in historical and political analysis, these are no laughing matter); and *kindliness*, which is of course about kinship – knowledge and kinship, kith and kin, go together in the philosophies I am speaking about. Laughter, human kindness and true philosophy are of course the opposite of savagery, as Durack implies, questioning the assumptions of her readers (just as Bruno Latour was to do in 1993, telling his European readers, 'We Have Never Been Modern'<sup>6</sup>), so my interrogation of the analysis of certainty might just have to pop the question, might your analysis not be getting a little bit savage, or at least a bit blunt, to the extent that it does *not* incorporate laughter, human kindness and true philosophy?

So I am going to tell the story of the philosophy of Boxer, an 'insider black', a 'magic', a *maban*, and how his *work* made Aboriginal power persist. I am going to re-read the available texts, which give us just about all we know about Boxer. I am going to make these texts work a little bit harder – this is deconstructive method – find the words in them which have given up and, it seems, can go no further on the road to truth. Exhausted words which fall back on our old assumptions.<sup>7</sup> Tim Rowse, for instance, knows that the arrival of the Europeans

<sup>6</sup> Latour, 1993, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge Mass.

<sup>7</sup> Critics of deconstruction say that it is apolitical, that it is all negativity and has nothing positive to offer, that it denies the existence of reality. Keith Windschuttle, for instance, says: 'Because we are locked within a system of language, Derrida argues, we have no grounds for knowing anything that exists outside this system. "What one calls real life," according to Derrida, is itself a text. Hence it follows that all we have access to are texts. "There is nothing outside the text", he has claimed in a famous aphorism (Windschuttle, *The Killing of History*, p. 24).

Derrida would never make such arguments, and the quotations are not referenced. For a book that is supposed to take questions of history and truth seriously, it is very shortsighted and self-serving. It aims only to create a skirmish in a little academic field. However, I want to take some of the accusations on, to correct them and reveal more of the method I am using. The thrust of 'there is nothing outside of the text' *il n'y a pas d'hors texte*—better translated as 'there is no outside position on a text' is not to deny the existence of objects in the world, but to argue that a philosophical project, like deconstruction, does not consist in bringing a theory to a situation, or text, as if the theory would enlighten it, but rather to scrutinise what is being said in order to 'articulate the problematic foundations of our currently conceived political programs' (Elizabeth Wilson, *Neural Geographies*, p. 22). In other words there is no outside in the sense of a stable, overarching or common sense position from which all things can be examined for their truth values. If deconstruction works from the inside, then its aim is to question the most basic assumptions and concepts underpinning a project. To neglect them is to acquiesce to political stasis. Elizabeth Wilson states the problem for feminism:

'Feminism's complicity with patriarchy, for example, is the structure of violence that is the 'origin' of feminist politics in general. An examination of this 'origin' is neither a disinterested pursuit nor a leeching [parasitic] one; on the contrary it is the hard political work of feminism itself. Without such (self) scrutiny, that is without an examination of how this violent origin enables feminism in general, feminism may be tempted to declare itself a sanitized and sanitizing political practice' (p. 22).



on the Kimberley frontier was a massive disruption of the old way of life: 'a world in such ferment'<sup>8</sup> and, 'the unprecedented nature of the phenomena confronting Aborigines'<sup>9</sup> are phrases he uses. And before too long he divides the frontier between 'insider' station people and 'outsider' wild blackfellas – which is pretty convincing – yet he uses too quickly, for my liking, the word 'order' to describe station life: '... the universe of Kimberley Aborigines came to be divided between the pastoral *order* and its dangerous exterior'<sup>10</sup>, and, 'to be lost, as in Jack Bohemia's police tracker stories, is 'to be in a state of moral *disorder*''.<sup>11</sup> The crucial question is, whose life was more ordered? Whose law is wilder, the cattle spearkers or the blackfella-shooters (and there is evidence that the Duracks as well as their insider blacks like Boxer, were among the shooters, though almost surely not the worst of them). Old Bulla (from Kununurra) puts the same question, talking about magic: 'Who's the powerful? Who's the strongest? The white man or the blackfeller, see, out of those two?'<sup>12</sup>

Now, having posed those questions, I am not going to be in a position to answer them here and it is not my place to do so. I have simply woken up a sleepy word, 'order', which was happy to go along with the assumption that the whitefella world was taking over on this frontier, that this would be the new world order, so to speak, what Rowse calls the *Pax Durackia*, and others have called the 'golden age' in Northern frontier history:

Here is a lasting ideology of paternal responsibility – timeless compared to the shifting government philosophies of protection, assimilation, land rights and self-management ... It is this ideology, as much as Durack's books themselves, which enjoys classical status in Euro-Australian culture. An ideology as secure as this must have reason to be so. Jack Sullivan's memoirs have shown us one reason: he and his fellow stockmen

Now, this can be argued for Aboriginal political situations, and the notion of inside and outside is most relevant to the frontier as reality and as metaphor. There is indeed a founding violence in the colonial or frontier situation. Many have experienced that this violence can be perpetuated by the words used in the analysis of it, and that another kind of critical or symbolic violence has to be performed on those words to open up a space for new political conception and action. This is deconstruction. It works from the inside, it does not bring ready-made concepts from somewhere else and 'apply' them. And if we agree that there is no Aboriginal politics which is not complicit with the colonial violence which created the need for them in the first place, then there will be no pure Aboriginal position *outside* to provide a critique of what is going on *inside* Aboriginal politics. Those doing these politics are working within and continually on the symbolic violence of colonial history, where that history can never be purely a whitefella imposition, nor a pure blackfella revolution from the other side. So, for this paper, Boxer is the enigmatic figure of frontier ambivalence whose work should be able to cast some light on how we think about Aboriginal politics and power.

<sup>8</sup> Rowse, 'Were You ever Savages?' p. 93.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, p. 88, my emphasis.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, p. 89, my emphasis.

<sup>12</sup> Bulla, in Shaw, *Countrymen*, p. 181.

were able to expound their good fortune as subjects of the Durack's peace.<sup>13</sup>

After many thousands of years of Aboriginal reign in the Kimberley, we have a picture of a 'lasting' new peace, a 'timeless' and classical ideology installed at Argyle under the benevolent patronage of the Duracks. But what happened? Charlie Court had grander plans for the Kimberley, and in 1971 the lands around Argyle were submerged by the waters of the Ord, a veritable biblical flood. This new order hadn't lasted too long, on the scale of Kimberley history.

But yet it lives. The Duracks transformed this pastoral order into books, and *All-about* is a fine pastoral classic. Boxer, for his part, transformed it into a new cult, *Djanba*, the ceremonial boards of which are disintegrating along with the remains of the station (the homestead itself was relocated) under all that water. Whose magic is the more powerful? I can only keep asking that question, but I am an *outsider* critic, a group Rowse perceptively included. Who *were* the enemies of the Duracks' order?

From the Durack point of view there were two sets of outsiders to be dealt with: the urban critics of pastoralists' apparent enslavement of local Aborigines; and those local Aborigines who distanced themselves from the homestead's regime of rationed work and remained a danger to people and to cattle. For the Duracks and their contemporaries 'the insiders, both black and white' enjoyed an accord that neither the critics with pens nor those with spears could share.<sup>14</sup>

The critic with the pen is wild in the sense of being out of line. What would those city folk know? For instance, there is a profound accord, a loving trust, which makes Mary Durack able to write in the following way about the housekeeper who comes up from the camp to wake up the people in the homestead each morning:

Nubbadah's coming marks the beginning of the day for the white community. She pads noiselessly, from one to the other, and upon the sounder sleepers lays a firm black hand. 'Cub-a-dee!' she says, thrusts a cup and saucer into half-dazed hands and disappears.<sup>15</sup>

Do a bit more work on the text. There are two sorts of hands; 'firm black' ones and 'half-dazed' [white] ones. Each day her coming 'marks the beginning'. Who is running this show? And already on the previous page we have met Boxer for the first time, as a young boy, insisting that a boab tree be planted in the garden against the wishes of the gardener who found them

<sup>13</sup> Rowse, 'Were You ever Savages?' p. 97.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 81–2.

<sup>15</sup> Durack, *All-About*, p. 14.

hideous ungainly things; but Boxer the ten-year-old rascal, had brought it in to be planted in the garden and called after himself. Boxer thought very highly of boab-trees (particularly boab nuts), and what Boxer said, even in those days, went. 'Boxer' the boab tree is nearing its forty-fifth year.<sup>16</sup>

Where did this powerful boy come from, who could boss around the white gardener? Mary Durack tells us that he was

... from the Mt Isa area ... the eight year-old Boxer had come across from Queensland with his mother and a man called Wesley Lyttleton, then on their way to the Halls Creek goldfields. Pumpkin, so the story goes, took a fancy to the boy and acquired him in exchange for a good packhorse and a tin of jam.<sup>17</sup>

This boy grew up to be so trusted by the Duracks that he virtually ran the cattle camp, as did Jack Sullivan who followed in his footsteps and left his oral history with Bruce Shaw. As a Queenslander, raised by another Queenslander (Pumpkin), he had some conflict with the locals, but at the same time learned the local languages and mediated strongly between 'inside' and 'outside': 'Boxer was a man who flowed around like the wind,' said Bulla.<sup>18</sup> He was always turning up just as he was needed, the whitefella and blackfella testimonies agree on this.

Most importantly, for my argument, he was a cultural innovator. Was he happy with the 'order' the Duracks had installed, or rather the order that his peoples' cooperative effort had installed *with* the Duracks, which was only to last a little more than his lifetime? There was obviously such a huge disparity between these two ways of life that he could not help but have his intelligence challenged in making sense of it all. Not totally unlike Mary Durack writing *All-about* to make sense of it all, from her point of view. But while Mary Durack's text was sent off to the *Bulletin* to be published far away from its source ('You will never read this, for to learning you have no pretensions ...' she says in her dedication to her 'all-about' mob, 'You cannot sue us for libel'), what Boxer did was *performative*: he created a new cult, called *Djanba*, which would have been quite opaque to the Duracks (they too, had no pretensions to learning):<sup>19</sup> This *Djanba*, that Boxer created, really took off:

Old Daylight ran that *Djunba* from down near the jetty road at Wyndham. He just flew around like that , all over, like this *Mulalai* who started from that way too. *Djunba* flew in the sky, Mulali went on the ground.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, p. 13, the dating puts Boxer's birth date in 1880.

<sup>17</sup> Durack, *Sons in the Saddle*, p. 379.

<sup>18</sup> Bulla, in Shaw, *Countrymen*, p. 170. *Djanba* is variously spelt and appears as *Djunba* and *Tjanba*.

<sup>19</sup> 'You wanna come down see 'm corroboree to-night?' Nubbandah asks the white community. "Im properly good one, all right." 'Different kind?' we ask sceptically, being fully acquainted with the usual somewhat monotonous procedure. (Durack, *All-About*, p. 60).

*Djunba* started from Wyndham and came this way past to Argyle right back this way to Darwin. The corroboree belonged in Queensland to those Kaukadunga, in mixed English ... They were really clever men and flew over just like the wind.<sup>20</sup>

Tim Rowse quotes the full text from Lommel, who observed the cult in the 1930s:

In the myth of *Tjanba*, some of the characteristics of this ghost are borrowed from modern culture: his house is of corrugated iron and behind it grow poisonous weeds. *Tjanba* is able to impart the hitherto unknown diseases of leprosy and syphilis by means of little sticks which have lain in those weeds overnight. Men who possess [name deleted, but incised boards thought to have circulated from the desert Aborigines] are able to infect other people. *Tjanba* hunts with a rifle and ornaments his slabs with iron tools. To distribute his slabs to men (some of his slabs are stolen, others he himself sends out) he uses aeroplanes, motor cars and steamers. When showing the slabs to fellow ghosts, he asks them for tea, sugar and bread. Following the myth, the modern cult demands exuberant feasts with tea, sugar, bread and as much beef as possible but no meat from any indigenous animal. The cult places have to be in the vicinity of farms and stations. The cult language is Pidgin-English. The cult is directed by a 'boss', the slabs are stored away by a 'clerk', the feasts are announced by a 'mailman', and order and discipline during them is maintained by some specially appointed 'pickybas' (from police-boys).<sup>21</sup>

Now Tony Swain has written about this cult, and others like it, in interesting ways. Swain's habit, when citing these Aboriginal innovations is to talk of the 'cosmic marriage' of two laws: '... having of necessity allowed White Law to impose itself on them, they have sought their salvation partially by employing its representations, but pre-eminently by conjoining it with the law of the lands and their spirits.'<sup>22</sup>

To which one has to ask, is 'salvation' what cultural innovators, even philosophers, seek? Are these two laws 'conjoined', 'married'? All of these metaphors suggest closure, the pious end of the story. But *Djanba*, like Boxer knows how to flow around, and put himself *inside* every ceremony: As Swain says:

Jack Sullivan [says] ... *Djanba* 'was a wild human' ... The multifaceted *Djanba* has a chameleon-like capacity to conceal himself within ceremonies; 'he puts himself in every corroboree; just fits himself in'.

<sup>20</sup> Bulla, in Shaw, *Countrymen*, p. 180

<sup>21</sup> Lommel, 1950, p. 23, cited in Rowse, 'Were You ever Savages?' p. 96.

<sup>22</sup> Swain, *A Place for Strangers*, pp. 238-9

His ability to appropriate perhaps reached its height when, at the request of the Catholic priest who asked that traditional songs accompany mass, Djanba entered holy communion: 'he goes through the white fellers now that Djanba'.<sup>23</sup>

Swain makes a strong case for power coming from the East, not only the colonisation by the Durack mob, but also a tradition of new cults emerging from Arnhem land. Coming on that wave Boxer seemed to have brought, from his own country around Mt Isa, a way of thinking which coupled fierce loyalty to the whites with a culture, which according to Swain, was 'more subtle and dangerous' than the millennial cult of *Mulunga*, born about the same time as Boxer, in the late 1880s, and spreading right down through the centre to South Australia. This was a millennial cult, with a compelling reason for people to participate in it. If you didn't, you would die, along with all the white people. It thus proposes a magical solution to white power, and a possible return to the way things were before. Swain argues for its historical source in the famous Kalkatungu battle of 1884 where 600 warriors died. Boxer would have been about three at the time, though we don't know if he was anywhere near there.

Now, unlike *Mulungu*, the argument goes, *Djanba*, Boxer's cult, does not promise as its outcome a return to homelands free of whites. It does three rather new things. It articulates Aboriginal power with white objects like cars and aeroplanes, giving it speed of transmission. The second is insider work, 'he puts himself in every corroboree; just fits himself in'. The third innovation opens up time by proposing a future; personal immortality in the form of stories about Boxer's resurrection after death, the introduction of the subsection system (by Boxer) and Moon stories which involve recycling of individual bodies rather than places, and possibly also the promise of equal co-existence with whites. Swain is assertive ('Time is central to the innovations of Boxer ...'<sup>24</sup>), but not entirely convincing on these questions, he lacks evidence.

Now let me consider these with a deconstructive attitude which is attentive to the persistence of Aboriginal power in the face of the opposing power of white philosophies. Take an innovative object for instance, as described by Tonkinson in Swain:

Crayon drawings made by Aborigines of *badundjari* [dream-spirits] sometimes resemble aircraft, and vehicles said to be used by *badundjari* to transport others are depicted as aeroplanes, complete with wings, tail, windows and headlights, but with sacred boards, not propellers or jets, supplying the power source.

Swain concludes:

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, p. 236

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*, p. 240.

In other words, these spirit aircraft were propelled to their lands by icons manifesting the potentiality of place. Beyond dreams filled with invading places are visions of place-planes offering a ride home.<sup>25</sup>

This innovation, which articulates Aboriginal power with white objects of power, speed and travel, has a poetic resonance in the very shape of the propeller boards and the sound they make. But we all know those guys must be quite wrong to think *that* is what gives these machines power, it is of course the engines, the petrol ... unless we make one little shift, which is to humanise the object, not fetishise its technology. The plane articulates with the bodies which use it, the seats and controls are made for bodies to occupy, it cannot function without them. The object has emerged out of human invention, out of bird-dreams, and how far is it from them in the ways we enjoy it? The power is ultimately human. Whether the humanism is relevant or not, understanding the plane from this perspective makes the Aboriginal version no longer primitive. It sees it from what we might call Aboriginal connectivist (relation-based) thinking, rather than thinking in terms of discrete objects and beings. We can ask once again, with Bulla: 'Who's the powerful? Who's the strongest?' – not to decide that contest, but to deconstruct notions of strength, and explain the paradoxical power of weakness.

Tim Rowse supports his history of the stability of insider station life, *opposed to* the 'landscape of terror'<sup>26</sup> on the outside, with narratives in the 'police tracker genre', as documented by Bill McGregor. In these narratives, understandably because told by a police tracker, there is no safe return for outlaws, people would generally die out there.

The safe return of the lost is a non-event in Bohemia's narratives because, in the moral order that gave rise to police tracker narrative, people had no business being out of place.<sup>27</sup>

But there is another genre which contradicts this one, one which suggests to me that people like Boxer who had no terror of the outside,<sup>28</sup> might just have soon been *inside on the outside*, so to speak, flowing around, getting in with the locals. So when Boxer is put in gaol, he can escape at will with his magic:

They put the poor bugger in the jail house in Wyndham, locked him in. He'd done nothing. They just put him in the jail, that's all, and he came

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*, p. 238.

<sup>26</sup> Rowse, 'Were You ever Savages?' p. 82.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, 'Were You ever Savages?' p. 89.

<sup>28</sup> Mary Durack writes that Boxer was usually M. P. Durack's travelling companion because, 'unlike the Kimberley-born Aborigines, he did not mind how far afield he rode, or among what potentially hostile tribespeople. It could hardly be said that he was without fear, or had no reason for it, but he prided himself on being alert to every native wile and strategy, sleeping at all times 'with one eye open' and a hand on the revolver on his belt.' (*Sons in the Saddle*, p. 63.)

out and went away. After a while they saw Boxer walking round in the pub out there. 'Oh blimey', the policeman said, 'There Boxer outside walkin around.' 'Oh well', old M. P. Durack said to him, 'You can getim and putim in jail if you wantim.' They went up. The policeman caught him and took him back and locked him up in the jail house. As soon as they walked away, two or three hours after, they saw Boxer again walking about outside. 'Ah well, give him another go.' The third time they tried again and saw Boxer sitting down in the store in a chair, the old bastard. They didn't know what to do. The policeman couldn't do anything.<sup>29</sup>

This escape narrative has exactly the same structure as Paddy Roe's 'Mirdinan', even down to the three-part structure.<sup>30</sup> Mirdinan goes further afield, down to Fremantle, to dramatically escape from the noose as he is hanged, transforming into an eaglehawk and flying back to his country. Boxer's magic persona shares some of these features of freedom of movement; self transformation (changing into an emu, also in Paddy Roe's stories); letting his guts spill out and putting them back; creating songs and stories, all in explicit assertion of blackfella power.<sup>31</sup> This, I would argue is inside work on the representations of both black and white culture. It is less the mediation of the clever man, creating a syncretic culture by going backwards and forwards, and it is certainly not the culture of a radical outside, as in the Mulunga cult (or Pigeon's guerilla warfare in the central Kimberley) which would bring whitefella rule to an end and take things back to the old ways.

Boxer's infiltration and conceptual change of both laws is open-ended. As Swain says, it incorporates time, perhaps for the first time, in a significant way in Kimberley cultures. We don't know what happened to Boxer in the end. Unlike Paddy Roe's Mirdinan, who was defeated by a whitefella power, alcohol, and dumped in the deep water off Broome (another source of ceremonial power according to Swain), Boxer, in a way, still lives. One source says he was 'in our

<sup>29</sup> Bulla, in Shaw, *Countrymen*, p. 181–2 (see note in Shaw).

<sup>30</sup> Paddy Roe, 'Mirdinan', in *Gularabulu*, pp. 1–17.

<sup>31</sup> He'd open his guts just to show a trick and they'd all go back the same way again, with all the guts sewed up again ... That fella was wide open like when you kill a killer. You could see his guts hanging right down to the ground, his heart, liver, and everything (*Countrymen*, pp. 180–81).

(...)

At Ivanhoe they'd say, 'Ah, look out look out, emu comin through the ration camp', the old people's camp, 'sendim up dog'. There was no more emu, only Boxer. The next minute when they went out along a little bit you saw him. Well, where's that emu gone?

(...)

Same as the white man doctor the blackfellers are just the same. Who's the powerful? Who's the strongest? The white man or the blackfeller, see, out of those two? To tell the truth the white man doctor didn't know what to say. I saw this done, you know, and I knew that. That's fair dinkum (*Countrymen*, p. 181).

cemetery down at Argyle.<sup>32</sup> Jack Sullivan says he was buried in Darwin, but then years later seen in a pub in Hughenden, North Queensland, by a white station manager, who returned to Darwin to find his grave split open.<sup>33</sup> 'I don't think magic people die,' concludes Bulla.<sup>34</sup>

And it's my turn to conclude. In my experiment of inflecting deconstructive method with the changing stories of Aboriginal power, leading up to the radical challenge to historiography posed by Boxer, I am left with further questions: What is the most appropriate method for understanding that frontier history? As Tim Rowse says, 'The most difficult part of frontier history for Europeans is the history of Aboriginal understanding: how did they make sense of the invaders ... ?'<sup>35</sup>

My feeling is that we have to go further than the opposition of inside and outside, that the method will also involve simultaneous inquiry of how the invaders understood the Aborigines. I also think that it is not just a question of getting the words right, for if the Boxer story has taught us anything, it is about the importance of performance. The stations and the country of the East Kimberley were the *theatre* of his life as 'a magic'. I haven't been able to reproduce any of that drama in my poor performance today (maybe I should make an excuse, like old Bulla: 'I could dance it but my knee's bugged'<sup>36</sup>). But that is the question: what forces does history writing mobilise which reach truths other than, or as well as, the factual? What will be their poetry, their magic?

And in deconstructing the insider/outsider opposition, let me recall that spectre of communism with which I began. Tim Rowse, quite rightly warns against 'city' outsiders, who are too quick to condemn exploitation on the stations, armed as they are with a Marxist theory insensitive to the more 'human' relations of affection on the Durack stations which enabled survival and cultural innovation for the station Aborigines, pretty much on their own terms, running the stations almost as much as they were run by them. Now what is curious is that Swain's book concludes with another infiltration of that Marxist philosophy, but one which works its way up from the Pilbara, becomes known as Don McLeod law, infiltrates ceremonies like *Djuluru*, and perhaps culminates at Wave Hill with the revival of the lands rights campaigns. This is the law of the 'fair go', of the historical, future-oriented promise of equality and moral rights. Was it Boxer, perhaps the first Aboriginal modernist, who paved the way along this frontier for the passage of these ideas?

<sup>32</sup> Mandi, in Shaw, *Countrymen*, p. 39.

<sup>33</sup> Durack, *Sons in the Saddle*, pp. 158–66.

<sup>34</sup> Shaw, *Countrymen*, p. 183.

<sup>35</sup> Rowse, 'Were You ever Savages?' p. 93.

<sup>36</sup> Bulla, in Shaw, *Countrymen*, p. 80.



How can it be, that communism, now dead as a social system (capitalism is triumphant on the world stage) came both inappropriately from the city as European theory, and from the bush as insider knowledge, to produce, in conjunction with local cultures which I have been unable to expand upon, a radical transformative cult which still lives in the name of Boxer. Boxer's story has the power that is often attributed to European theories, stories with the power to change our understandings of things. Boxer is dead, we are pretty sure<sup>37</sup> (maybe we should check that grave again), but as the Algerian-French philosopher says 'the dead can often be more powerful than the living.'<sup>38</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Deborah Bird Rose says that Boxer may not have been born, a story she has from the Yaralin says that he came out of a hole in the Pinkerton Ranges. Personal communication.

<sup>38</sup> Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. 48.

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# 11. Absence and plenitude: appropriating the Fitzmaurice River frontier

Andrew McWilliam

## Introduction

The concept of the frontier has been an enduring one over the course of European colonisation and settlement in Australia. In its classical form, it may be defined as an expanding boundary of conflict created in the process of colonial settlement and associated with coercive appropriation of land and landscape from its indigenous residents.<sup>1</sup> In Northern Australia the frontier was contested comparatively recently under the guise of 19th century pastoralism, prospecting and missionisation. The impacts differed in character but the results were more or less the same. Writer Ernestine Hill, renowned for her heroic prose puts the issue succinctly;

To form a station you brought a few thousand cattle and swung them clear of the world to new waters. If there were blacks around the waters you moved them over with a gun<sup>2</sup>

As elsewhere, Aboriginal resistance to the appropriation of their land dissipated under the pressure of these dispersals, the ravages of disease and demographic decline. Pastoralism, by necessity, also held out the prospects of a 'taming' process whereby 'wild or bush blackfellows' were incorporated into pastoral settlements and mustering camps as ringers, cooks, sexual partners and dependents. Physical resistance tended to be sporadic, contained and ultimately, untenable.

A second order definition of the frontier in Australia, one which also has its counterparts in other colonised indigenous landscapes, is the notion of the frontier as a physical unknown or environmental wilderness.<sup>3</sup> Reflecting on this idea Rose has commented that, 'frontier mythology depends upon the creation of a vast emptiness in which the new nation forms itself'.<sup>4</sup> In Australia the frontier was found at a conceptual level through the doctrine of terra nullius (i.e. land belonging to no one), and its supporting legislative apparatus, which denied and subsumed Aboriginal rights, and cultural identity. At the same time

<sup>1</sup> R. White, 'Frederick Jackson Turner and Buffalo Bill'; R. Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment*.

<sup>2</sup> E. Hill, *The Territory*, p. 175.

<sup>3</sup> F. Turner, 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History 1893'.

<sup>4</sup> D. Rose, 'The Year Zero and the North Australian Frontier', p. 22.

the 'advancing' frontier of colonial settlement also needed to actively create this perceptual fiction because of the uncomfortable reality of large numbers of resident Aboriginal populations all over the country. Proactive erasure of the Aboriginal presence was therefore also an inherently complicit component of the Australian nation building project and the image of an open unpeopled environment.

In some cases however, these emptied regions remained beyond or outside the subsequent settlement process. In other words, the frontier was 'conquered' and de-populated of its indigenous identity but it remained unsettled, undomesticated so to speak. This continuing emptiness of certain frontier regions has come to be viewed in terms of an environmental otherness, one that lies both physically and imaginatively beyond the familiar and settled social landscape. In other words the qualities of the empty frontier in contemporary Australia have been transformed and positively revalued in terms of environmental and conservation significance. Thus we arrive at the notion of the 'untouched wilderness' and the so-called pristine qualities of the remote and empty bush. Much of the present-day tourist industry in the Northern Territory is promoted on the basis of just these qualities on the northern frontier lands, popularly known as the 'last frontier' in Australia.<sup>5</sup>

If the creation of the Australian 'wilderness' was in part a fiction of European frontier mythology, the actual Aboriginal depopulation and disappearance in many landscapes was an historical reality. In this process of Aboriginal de-population of traditional lands there is an inexorable loss and disintegration of generational knowledge and life experience about the constituent symbolic meanings of the land and its topographical features. From an Aboriginal perspective the absence of a continuing residential presence within a landscape and the increasing remoteness of ancestral experience and knowledge creates new kinds of alienation. It may become a dynamic boundary of separation between a contemporary Aboriginal experience of everyday life, and an increasingly distant ancestral knowledge; a distinction between the familiar and local on one hand and the remote and external on the other. In this context it might be argued that Aboriginal Australians can experience an emergent form of the frontier, one constituted as a frontier of knowledge and experience.

In her article, Rose has drawn a sharp contrast between the cultural perspectives of settler and indigenous society in relation to landscapes in northern Australia. She argues that '[t]he white people who have conquered this country find themselves in a liminal and paradoxical time-space (time zero), unlike the

<sup>5</sup> For example, promotional material for media personality Troy Dann, refers to the outback as 'one of the last frontiers with a spirit and freedom all of its own' (Radio promotion NT May 2000). A travel magazine describes Darwin as 'a favourite today with backpackers, who like its frontier appeal' (Trips, 2000:74).

indigenous people for whom it is neither liminal nor paradoxical'.<sup>6</sup> The experience of the Fitzmaurice River indigenes however is that the consequences of colonial settlement of Australia are less categorical and more ambiguous than this analysis suggests. Just as the character of contemporary Aboriginal society reflects the historical experience of colonial settlement, so relationships to ancestral landscapes have taken divergent paths. Caught up in the colonial processes that have transformed their societies and reordered residential practices, the relationship between contemporary and ancestral knowledge of Aboriginal place can become increasingly tenuous.

The great tidal Fitzmaurice River in western Northern Territory, exemplifies many of these attributes of frontier mythology and practice. My purpose in the following paper is to explore the changing values and historical perceptions of this classic frontier in the Northern Territory. I am concerned to map out some of the historical interactions and contemporary realities of indigenous and settler community (exdigenous)<sup>7</sup> attempts alike to appropriate the landscape of the Fitzmaurice and convert it from the frontier to the familiar. I want to do so, however, from a particular perspective, one that arose out of a project to record and document Aboriginal toponyms and sacred sites on the Fitzmaurice River. This project developed over a number of years and coincided with a movement among affiliated Aboriginal communities to reinvigorate their historical and traditional ties with the Fitzmaurice, which had grown increasingly weaker in recent times.

## The colonial frontier on the Fitzmaurice

The existence of the river, which became known as the Fitzmaurice, remained unknown to the colonial settlement of Australia until 1839. In that year Stokes and Wickham, aboard the *Beagle* ventured into the area with a view to completing a more detailed survey of the northern coast. The Victoria and the Fitzmaurice Rivers were both named by Stokes during this exploratory trip. The latter river being given the name of assistant surveyor L. R. Fitzmaurice on the *Beagle*, who led a small party 30 miles up river to confirm its existence and chart its lower reaches. No mention is made of any Aboriginal presence on the river at the time.<sup>8,9</sup>

The next European visits occurred some 17 years later when the redoubtable A. C. Gregory and party traversed the Macadam Ranges and crossed the

<sup>6</sup> D. Rose, 'The Year Zero and the North Australian Frontier', p. 31.

<sup>7</sup> The term is suggested as a neutral label for Australians with ancestral origins beyond the country.

<sup>8</sup> J. L. Stokes, *Discoveries in Australia, with an Account of the Coasts and Rivers Explored and Surveyed During the Voyage of the HMS Beagle in the Years 1837-38-39-40-41-42-43*.

<sup>9</sup> The curious date of 1814 found carved on a boab tree on the banks of the river has been attributed to the birth date of Fitzmaurice, possibly as they waited for the tide to turn and carry them back to the mouth of the river (Masters 1999).

Fitzmaurice on their journey south to the Victoria River. They make mention of the difficulties of finding a suitable route through the rugged topography, but report only two brief encounters with local Aborigines, both evidently in the Majalindi valley which extends from the northern banks of the river.

Steering north-east and east for three miles along a salt creek, came to the termination of the salt water, where we saw four natives digging roots; on observing us they decamped.<sup>10</sup>

Near the creek we saw a native man and two women, who were much alarmed at the sudden appearance of the party, and retreated across the plain.<sup>11</sup>

One of the consequences of Gregory's extensive explorations in the Fitzmaurice and Victoria River region, were his favourable reports for the prospects of rich grazing lands which lent weight to the increasing calls in southern capitals for the north to be opened up and developed. It wasn't until the early 1880s, however, that colonial interest was translated into practical effect through the burgeoning pastoral industry. Within a decade a series of pastoral runs was carved out on the land and large numbers of cattle introduced into the region. They included the huge Victoria River Downs (1883) and Auvergne Station (1886), and a string of other stations such as Leguna, Bullita, Delamere, Innesvale and Bradshaw's Run, Lissadell and Newry stations among others.

The consequences of pastoralism and the pressures placed on local Aboriginal populations in the region were little short of devastating and resulted in a major decline in population through a combination of introduced diseases and the 'clearing' of the land through shootings and reprisals. Between the 1880s and 1920s Aborigines across the region were rounded up and 'quietened' down on the developing stations<sup>12</sup> (see Shaw 1980, Riddet 1988, Rose 1991 and McGrath 1987 for examples). Ernestine Hill gives another insight in to the flavour of the times in her 1951 history of the Territory,

To the new station you brought working blacks from some far country – no conspiracies, they were terrified of the 'bush niggers', and for protection of your 'muckity', musket, never ventured out of your sight. There was quiet nigger country and 'bad nigger' country....<sup>13</sup>

The great influx of cattle into the region provided local Aboriginal populations with an inadvertent new source of meat protein, which they took to securing with great alacrity. Indeed the spearing and later shooting of cattle was one of

<sup>10</sup> A. C. Gregory and F. T. Gregory, *Journals of Australian Exploration*, p. 103.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, p. 105.

<sup>12</sup> See B. Shaw, *My Country of the Pelican Dreaming*; L. Riddett, *Kine, Kin and Country*; D. Rose, *Hidden Histories*; and A. McGrath, *Born in the Cattle* for examples.

<sup>13</sup> E. Hill, *The Territory*, p. 175.

the major sources of friction between the settler pastoralists and the Aborigines. Massacres and murders of local Aboriginal groups suspected of cattle duffing or the intentional wounding of cattle went largely unreported although it is a theme frequently cited in local oral histories.<sup>14</sup> 'Dispersal' was the widely adopted euphemism of the times to describe the use of guns against any 'problem' Aborigines. As Hill has noted, '[A] big item on the books was ammunition, and it was not for shooting kangaroos'.<sup>15</sup>

On Bradshaw's Run, established in 1894, and which originally extended from the Victoria River to well north of the Fitzmaurice River into what is now the Daly River land trust, the story was little different. In a diary entry for April 1896, for example, it is noted that;

...the myalls made themselves obnoxious by spearing horses and cows so had to be dispersed near the stockyard at Angle point (Bradshaw Log Book 1894-1901)

The high number of rock paintings across Bradshaw station, which depict examples of carbines and other guns, is a striking if mute testimony to the importance and impact local Aborigines accorded this weapon (field observations 1996-98). However, it is also the case that most of the pastoral and mustering activity on Bradshaw's Run occurred in the southern part of the lease in the vicinity of the Victoria River that served as the supply route. The Fitzmaurice River region to the north remained for the most part a distant and largely unvisited region for European settlers.

In the turmoil of the frontier during this period into the early 20th century, the choices for surviving Aboriginal groups were limited. The distinction between the 'quietened down' blackfellas living in the comparatively safe haven of work camps on the station,<sup>16</sup> and so-called 'myall or bush blacks' who remained largely outside the pastoral system but foraged on its fringes, represented an uneasy compromise. Bush Aborigines maintained constant, if furtive, connections with the station camps that evolved within the pastoral leases.

From the early days of contact, tobacco figures as a major enticement for Aborigines to approach the European settlements, stock camps and mining areas. It is this theme which punctuates the following description of the life of old Pat Ngulunung whose ancestral lands lay in the middle Fitzmaurice River.

Old Pat, he born Kartinyen.[on the Fitzmaurice] When he was a lad, till he come big kid, just around Fitzmaurice ... Kimul. Till he come big boy.

<sup>14</sup> B. Shaw, *My Country of the Pelican Dreaming*; B. Shaw, *Countrymen*; K. Mulvaney, 'What to Do on a Rainy Day'; and D. Rose, *Hidden Histories*.

<sup>15</sup> E. Hill, *The Territory*, p. 176.

<sup>16</sup> Life on the stations, however, was often marked by brutality and neglect (see Rose 1991 for example)

Took him from there to Bradshaw ... big station there. He stop one week, workin tobacco, they off again. Pat's father worry about bush, want to go back bush again. He trying to take Pat with him. Early day whiteman been there, they like those kids too. Stop them to make ringer. They caught Pat to hang on there. Pat's father take him away. All the time every night, take him to bush again. Take him level to Fitzmaurice again – Kartinyen. Big mob always bin there. Hang around there again. Follow that tobacco. When they come too short, they off again. All the family go, Pat's father take him down to Bradshaw get more tobacco. They never go daytime. Sneak in there in dark. Relations there. Come to them boy, get little bit tobacco, tea, then off bush to Fitzmaurice again. Round there they follow tobacco ... used to worry for tobacco. (Translated by Captain Waditj)<sup>17</sup>

The pattern described here for Pat Ngulunung was a common experience for all the groups and families living along the Fitzmaurice from the late 19th century. The river and its rugged dissected hinterland remained a comparative safe haven from which local families and individuals made forays across the frontier to engage the European settlers and hopefully profit from association. Unlike the violent encounters of early pastoralism and the notorious police 'dispersals' on pastoral leases along the Victoria River and beyond, the Aborigines of the Fitzmaurice do not appear to have been coerced from their riverine homes. Rather, as the anthropologist, Stanner, who worked in the region during the 1930s and 1950s (1936, 1950) has put it, 'there is no evidence ... that the exodus was other than entirely voluntary'.<sup>18</sup> Drawing on Aboriginal explanations he notes that:

They say that their appetites for tobacco and, to a lesser extent, for tea became so intense that neither man nor woman could bear to be without. Jealousy, ill will and violence arose over the division of small amounts which came by gift and trade. The stimulants ... were of course not the only, or the first, European goods to reach them...but it was the stimulants which precipitated the exodus. Individuals, families, friends ... simply went away to places where the avidly desired things could be obtained. The movement had phases and fluctuations, but it was always a one way movement.<sup>19</sup>

Although there is no clear record on the process of exodus from the Fitzmaurice, it is apparent that by the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, an extensive migration of the riverine populations was already underway.<sup>20</sup> In the upper Fitzmaurice people

<sup>17</sup> A. McGrath, *Aborigines and Colonialism in the Upper Daly Basin region*, p. 9.

<sup>18</sup> W. E. H. Stanner, *White Man Got No Dreaming*, p. 46.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>20</sup> *cf. ibid.*, p. 46



sought connections with Dorisvale and Claravale Stations in the east, Coolibah, Bradshaw and Auvergne Stations in the south and Leguna Station in the west across the Victoria River. Legune in particular attracted and retained a large population of Aboriginal groups from the Fitzmaurice and Macadam Ranges area. Known collectively as *Garamau*, and probably comprising Murrinhpatha and Murrinhkura speaking language communities, they utilised seasonal footwalk trails, which criss-crossed the western corner of Bradshaw's run, to move between Auvergne or Legune Stations and the Fitzmaurice River region. The practice of seasonal Aboriginal residence following the end of the annual cattle muster continued for decades as locals returned to live on country and attempted to maintain ritual links to ancestral estates. However, this pattern had little impact on the general trend of out-migration and the long-term demographic decline of the area as a focus for residential and ritual practice.

Just as local indigenous populations were moving away from their clan estates for extended periods, eventually all but abandoning them, the Fitzmaurice region also took on the reputation and status as a sanctuary or hideout for Aborigines evading capture or retribution. During the early 20th century, the so-called 'Blackfella wars' resulted in significant bloodletting between remnant populations of Aboriginal residents throughout extensive areas of the Victoria River District. This took the form of retaliatory killings and the mutual abduction of women from adversary groups. Social dislocation and the disruption brought about by pastoralism clearly exacerbated the situation. Some insight into this period is expressed in Shaw,<sup>21</sup> reporting the memory of a Jaminjung man from Bradshaw Station:

All our people, the Yilngali, died out because all the blackfellas were killing, sneaking. That other mob who were in that country, the Garamau, they were the blackfellas who were running around the country murdering one another in the early days ... The Garamau people were silly by killing my father, and then the Yilngali did the same. They were cruel. They smashed everything, his head. All my people, we were in the bush. If they lost a countryman, a brother or uncle like that, they'd come back and kill other people in cold blood. We wanted to kill that mob for our people, our mates.<sup>22</sup>

The emergence of the Fitzmaurice River region as an Aboriginal sanctuary for evading European legal and extra-legal process was based to a significant extent on the limited appeal of the region for settler society. The huge expanse of the riverine country of the Fitzmaurice, with its broken, rocky topography and tidal flats was never attractive grazing country and no serious attempts were made

<sup>21</sup> B. Shaw, *Countrymen*.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, p. 58.

to settle the area. European incursions remained sporadic and usually ill fated. Indeed, until well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century the threat of untimely death from murder and misadventure on the Fitzmaurice tended to confirm the continuing frontier reputation of the river. By way of illustration one well-reported incident that exemplified this reputation was the spearing murders of two European prospectors on the river in 1932.

Late in that year during the seasonal 'build up' of stifling humidity and big thunderstorms prior to the onset of the wet season proper, Alfred Koch, otherwise known as Alfred Cook, and his Russian colleague, Charles Arinski, (aka Stephans), set out on the motor vessel *Maroubra* from the Victoria River Depot to pursue prospecting interests on the Fitzmaurice River. They did so against the advice of the local policemen, Constables Fitzner and Langdon, who warned them against the dangers of their proposed venture. Aborigines of the Fitzmaurice River region were known to be 'particularly hostile to whites at the time'.<sup>23</sup> Undeterred, the prospectors arrived at the mouth of the Fitzmaurice where they lowered their supplies into a canoe and paddled away.

Some months later concerns were raised about their safety and, in the continuing the absence of any news, it was generally concluded that they had probably met their deaths.<sup>24</sup> Still, it was not until nearly a year later that the Timber Creek Police initiated a patrol to investigate their disappearances.

In October 1933 Constables Fitzner and Langdon left Timber Creek with four black trackers and a pack of horses and mules bound for the Fitzmaurice River. They covered some 100 miles of rugged sandstone country to the north and then spent eight weeks in the area tracking down likely suspects and interviewing witnesses. Deciding that the prospectors had indeed met an untimely death at the hands of local Aborigines, they set about rounding up eight offenders and six witnesses to the murders of Koch and Arinski. Following several gruelling months of travel, made difficult due to wet season flooding, they brought the accused Aborigines into town and 'to justice'.

The case was tried in the new courthouse in Darwin. The eight accused appeared 'with tousled hair and woolly whiskers wearing handcuffs attached to bright new chains'.<sup>25</sup> The eight included, Tiger (alias Tappin), brother of the even more notorious Namarluk<sup>26</sup>, Barney (Waddawurru), Chugulla, Chalmar, Fryingpan (otherwise Chiniman),<sup>27</sup> Alligator (or Woombin, or Coonbook), Maru

<sup>23</sup> *Northern Standard*, 16 January 1934.

<sup>24</sup> I. L. Idriess, *Man Tracks*, pp. 297–8.

<sup>25</sup> *Northern Standard*, 20 January 1934.

<sup>26</sup> Namarluk was renowned for his involvement in the killing of a Japanese shark fishing crew near Port Keats in 1931, and his later exploits while evading capture by the authorities. He was also sought unsuccessfully by Police on the Fitzmaurice River, which only added to his fame. (see I. L. Idriess, *Man Tracks*).

<sup>27</sup> Mistaken spelling for Tjinimin – little bat – a key mythological figure on the river.

(otherwise Leon) and Harry (or Walung). All were charged with having feloniously, wilfully and with 'malice aforethought', killed and murdered the two prospectors.

Evidence during the case certainly identified Tiger as a primary participant in the murders, the motive for which was said to be desire for tobacco, flour and rations. One witness stated that 'Tiger and Barney bin chukem spear. Three spears hit short fellow (Koch) and three the longfellow (Stephans)'. The bodies of both men were carried to the bank [where they were] hacked to pieces by Tiger with an axe taken from the canoe. He cut off their heads, arms and legs, the severed portions being placed in the canoe'.<sup>28</sup> The canoe was then sunk in the river.

It is apparent from the newspaper reporting of the trial that the prosecution evidence was contradictory and at times 'most unsatisfactory' with the Barristers 'experiencing considerable difficulty in getting coherent replies'.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, and despite strong argument by the defendants' counsel, the Judge duly found that 'a cold-blooded and diabolical murder had been committed and there were no extenuating circumstances whatever'.<sup>30</sup> A sentence of death on all accused was pronounced, later commuted to life in prison and, indeed further commuted as all were subsequently released after serving up to 10 years in prison.

As an Australian version of the theme of the conquering victim,<sup>31</sup> the case of these murders on the Fitzmaurice in the 1930s is an exemplary text of its time. It provides a snapshot of social conditions in the region, the uneasy relationship between Aborigines and settler Australians and the contested nature of the colonial frontier. At the same time the qualities of the riverine environment as an Aboriginal sanctuary and hideout in the context of an inexorable depopulation are also exemplified. Living as they did on the northern margins of the pastoral grasslands of the Victoria River District, the Fitzmaurice River people escaped some of the worst excesses of colonial violence and invasive pastoralism, but ultimately they could not resist its subversive attractions.

## Images of the contemporary frontier

Unlike the bounteous grasslands of the central Victoria River District which, in the space of a few short years, became subject to the proliferation of pastoral establishments, the Fitzmaurice River basin held little attraction for pastoralism. Difficulties of terrain, poor grazing potential and access problems meant that the river always lay on the margins of pastoral settlement and never attracted significant settler interest. This remains the situation into the present day where

<sup>28</sup> *Northern Standard*, 2 February 1934.

<sup>29</sup> *Northern Standard*, 29 May 1934.

<sup>30</sup> *Northern Standard*, 1 June 1934.

<sup>31</sup> R. White, 'Frederick Jackson Turner and Buffalo Bill', p. 29.

the Fitzmaurice River region lies largely beyond settled society and continues to exhibit a range of enduring qualities of liminality or transition. While the overt violence of the river frontier receded, many of the qualities that characterised frontier perceptions of the river persist in a variety of ways. This can be understood from the perspective of both settler and indigenous society alike.

Ecologically speaking, the river defines the changeover between the wetter, more heavily forested, swamp country of the Moil and Daly Rivers to the north, and the drier open savannah lands of the Victoria River District in the south. This ecological distinction contributed to the development of social differences between Aboriginal communities. The 'cowboy' culture, with its social origins in the mustering camps of the cattle stations contrasts with the mission culture that developed north of the river around Port Keats and the Daly River.<sup>32</sup> The latter experienced an entirely different history of religious-based discipline and orientation. The distinction persists to this day despite increasing interaction between the respective communities.

These distinctions between Aboriginal communities separated by the river, however, have much earlier origins. In traditional and historical terms for example the river marked the limits of the subsection naming system, the skin system, that extends throughout the Victoria River District. It also formed the northern extent of ritual subincision practices with their attendant ceremonial and ritual support structures.<sup>33</sup> Contemporary myths support this conclusion. All told it seems that in times past the river may well have formed a long-standing social barrier or filter that constrained the extent of direct communication. Stanner, for instance commented on the apparent recent adoption of the subsection and *ngurlu*<sup>34</sup> naming system among the Murrinhpatha people. 'Both [he noted] have undoubtedly spread from the Djamindjung to the Murinbatha, perhaps in the last twenty years'.<sup>35</sup> Given the likely strong pre-colonial history of the subsection naming system in the region, the recent adoption by the Murrinhpatha suggests a shift in the nature of ritual communication between the neighbouring communities, possibly as an inadvertent effect of colonial intervention.

From a somewhat different contemporary perspective, the 1996 acquisition by the Australian army of the Bradshaw Pastoral Lease which extends to the southern edges of the Fitzmaurice River, represents a modern and rather ironic expression of the river frontier within Aboriginal Australia. On the northern banks of the

<sup>32</sup> J. Pye, *The Port Keats Story*.

<sup>33</sup> cf. N. B. Tindale, *Aboriginal Tribes of Australia*.

<sup>34</sup> What Stanner (1936) refers to as a non-cult, non-local and directly matrilineal form of social totemism. Ngurlu systems are still extant in the region but only weakly articulated.

<sup>35</sup> W. E. H. Stanner, 'Murrinhpatha Kinship and Totemism', p. 197.

Fitzmaurice River is the expansive Aboriginal freehold territory of the Daly River Land Trust. Thus the tidal flow of the river, demarcates a new and enduring legal and cultural boundary between Aboriginal land on one side and army or federal state land on the other.

In this context of multiple boundaries and transit points, which coalesce on the river, we can recognize something of the continuing expression of the colonial frontier in the contemporary world. But it is one in which the frontier experience has different consequences for Aboriginal and settler society alike.

From a settler perspective it is the 'pristine wilderness' quality of the river that conveys the frontier character and persists into the present. This conception is well demonstrated in one of the distinctive features of the construction of frontier landscapes, namely its representation in cartography.

The business of map-making might be described as one of those classic handmaidens of colonialism.<sup>36</sup> The construction of maps and more particularly the appropriation of new topography and named landscapes through the creation of toponyms form a primary vehicle for asserting hegemonic ownership over land. It represents the cartographic equivalent of the erasure of indigenous identity in land and its replacement by more 'familiar' European referent points and orientations. Indeed, it might be said that the very process of map-making itself in the development and expansion of colonial settlement served to effect a transformation of the 'wild' and unknown frontier into a domesticated space, remade into a familiar landscape.

In this process Aboriginal toponyms and cognitive or iconic maps of places within landscapes<sup>37</sup> are simultaneously erased, subsumed, or converted into the language of the dominant nomenclature. Hence the contemporary maps of northern Australia are replete with evidence of the naming process of colonial settlement. Regional toponyms such as the Victoria River itself, the Pinkerton Ranges, Blackfella Creek, Massacre Creek as well as all the Sandy Creeks, Lilly Waterholes, Top Yards and so on, all represent the historical legacy of this cultural appropriation of landscape.

At the same time, and by contrast, one of the striking features of the Fitzmaurice river basin is the comparative absence or paucity of named topographical features on current map sheets of the region. This vast riverine landscape boasts just a handful of European names mapped onto the country. Most of these derive from the 1839 maritime visit of Stokes and Wickham on the *Beagle* and are focused to a significant degree on the major riverine features of the area. They include names such as Keyling Inlet, Quoin and Clump island, and the Fitzmaurice River

<sup>36</sup> J. Jacobs, 'Resisting Reconciliation'.

<sup>37</sup> P. Sutton, 'Icons of Country'.

itself. The few other official place names generally derive from Aboriginal terms and for the most part are erroneously located on the maps.

Now, the absence of named places is not an uncommon feature in Northern Territory mapping and there are numerous map sheets for example, which are largely devoid of any named topographical features (see Australian Topographic Map Survey series). For the most part, however, these official maps reflect landscapes that exhibit relatively minor topographical variation. The regularity of the sand deserts, the stone plateau country and the contiguous single-species eucalypt scrub are examples.

The Fitzmaurice River, on the other hand, is a region of rich topographical diversity and landscape variation. It has multiple islands, inlets, waterholes, rock bars, cliffs, waterfalls, rivers, creeks, mountain ranges and so on, virtually none of which carries a European toponym. In other words, from an exogenous (settler) perspective the river and its environs might be said to constitute an unnamed land, a *terra innomina*, that speaks to the ineffective or stalled appropriation and resolution of the river frontier. In other words, settler society resolved the opposition of the indigenous river population by absorbing it into pastoral and mission society but it failed to fully incorporate or domesticate the 'wild' river environment into the 'settled' world. In these terms the river remains an empty frontier, rarely visited, unmodified and cast imaginatively as a wilderness. Even for the rangelands which lie within the Fitzmaurice River basin and which operate on informal pastoral maps with their top paddocks, bores and yards, there is no extension of this nomenclature into the river environment proper.

**Figure 11.1. Topographic map section of the Fitzmaurice River**



Source: Extract from the National Topographic Series SD52-11 Port Keats, scale 1:250,000. Commonwealth of Australia 1984)

This great sense of the ‘emptiness’ of the Fitzmaurice River, I would argue, is not simply a construction expressed in and by the symbolism of settler society. In many ways it is also a social reality for many members of contemporary Aboriginal communities and families who represent the present traditional owners of country within the Fitzmaurice River basin. Their distance and separation from the river began with the early and inexorable long-term demographic decline of local Aboriginal resident populations on the river.

Accompanying the physical absence of the indigenous presence was a corresponding decline in traditional patterns and knowledge of nomadic life and a weakening of meaningful ties to Fitzmaurice River estates. For young members of these communities the Fitzmaurice has become, over time, a newly mythologised and remote ancestral space. Barber describes this generation shift of population and settlement especially after the Second World War and into recent times in the following terms:

The Fitzmaurice River basin became a social desert. No one visited, or lived there and only the oldest of the community had been there. Those born since the establishment of the Mission (Port Keats 1935) are as a

result, almost without exception, ignorant of the totemic geography of the area.<sup>38</sup>

In other words, for many Aborigines with traditional affiliations to the area, the sense of ancestral belonging to the river is tempered, even detached from everyday social reality through its remoteness from present-day settlements. In the decline of personal lived knowledge of the land and its traditional places, and the disappearance of the 'old people' who walked its paths and spoke its language, I would argue that the Fitzmaurice might also be seen as an emergent Aboriginal frontier. No wilderness to be sure, but as a known environment of Aboriginal significance, the river echoes absences as much as it does the presence of Aboriginal history and residence. It is the 'absent' presence of a once thriving riverine culture that abandoned the relative security and familiarity of the river and voluntarily entered the world of the missions and mining camps to the north and the mustering stock camps to the south. In this context, concepts of liminality and absence in relation to Aboriginal home countries become an imagined reality for a growing community of younger affiliated members to the Fitzmaurice.

The notion that there could be an Aboriginal frontier, is perhaps stretching the definition and sense of the term from its more classical meaning. But frontiers are rarely clearly demarcated, and similarly the subjective experience of frontier realities varies markedly between individuals. In this sense my point is made more heuristically, and serves to highlight the complex impact of colonialism on Aboriginal lives. Mission and town life and its focus on settlement and sedentary living have greatly contributed to a growing sense of separation and detachment from traditional lands. Apart from the physical separation of Aboriginal people from ancestral lands for extended periods, social activity became increasingly focused on the sedentary world of housing complexes and fixed communities. Welfare dependency, the disabling effects of unemployment and drug abuse of various kinds, combined with a marked enthusiasm, especially among younger Aborigines, for European consumer goods and commodities, all contributed to a turning away from ancestral pathways.

It is fortunate then that at the very moment, historically speaking, when the links between ancestral country and contemporary life were at their weakest, there emerged processes of reclamation by those among the Aboriginal community whose ties to country remained grounded in personal experience. In this case, it was the select groups of older Aborigines whose youth was spent camping, foraging and hunting within the riverine environment.

The possibility of renewing ties to the Fitzmaurice was to some extent a reflection of broader trends in Aboriginal aspirations in northern Australia for a return to country. The emergence of the out-station movement and the possibilities offered

<sup>38</sup> K. Barber, *History of the Mystification of Culture*, p. 14.



by land rights and native title legislation generated a renewed interest in reasserting land-based identities.

More particularly, however, one significant development in the nascent revitalisation of Aboriginal ties to the Fitzmaurice River, was the opening up of an access track in the early 1990s to the 'Bele' (Majalindi valley)<sup>39</sup> for mustering stock owned by the Aboriginal community at Palumpa. This encouraged affiliated families from the neighbouring communities of Wadeye and Palumpa and Peppimenarti to begin regular dry season camping visits to the valley. For the older community this provided a belated opportunity to re-acquaint themselves with the ancestral sites and food resources, which the Majalindi holds in abundance.

When the Australian army subsequently acquired the southern pastoral lease of Bradshaw Station for training purposes in 1996 and sought a general site clearance for the lease, there was an opportunity to explore Aboriginal connections and knowledge of the river on a wider scale. Between 1996 and 1998 detailed site and place name surveys were undertaken in cooperation with a number of older Aboriginal affiliates to the river country whose personal origins and early experiences were intimately tied to the area. Using a variety of field transport including helicopters, trucks, and boat trips, substantial areas of the river could be visited.

What emerged from these mutual explorations of country was a patchwork of detailed place-based knowledge and named sites, although gaps emerged in the toponymic map of the country, reflecting the localised consequences of demographic decline among the populations of the river estates. Collectively the cultural mapping revealed a detailed abundance of landscape-based cultural knowledge, in striking contrast to the comparative paucity of official European place names.

To date, over 100 place names and sites of significance have been recorded, located and documented in varying degree.<sup>40</sup> Figure 2 illustrates the results of this cultural mapping in general terms. The map reflects the knowledge of a comparatively small group of traditional owners who, individually, may only have a detailed knowledge about segments or particular regions of the river, but who can collectively identify a unique world of place-based cultural meanings.

Place names recorded for the river estate known as Yambarnyi are a case in point. This region lies in north-west Bradshaw Station on the western reaches of the Fitzmaurice and there are no longer any living traditional owners with detailed

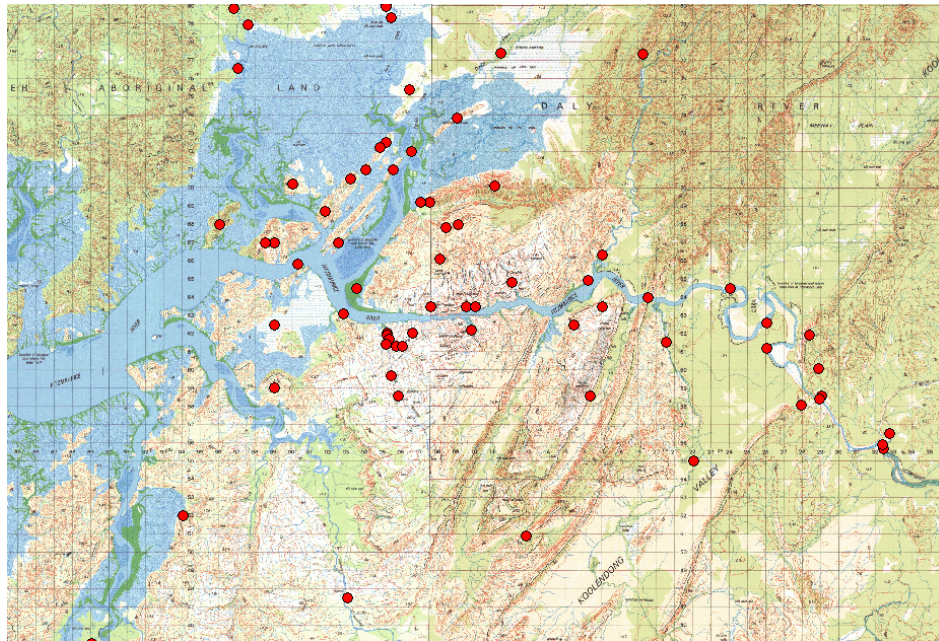
<sup>39</sup> The valley is an extensive, more or less flat black soil plain with a number of freshwater tidal tributaries of the Fitzmaurice and contained by an amphitheatre of rocky hills and gorges.

<sup>40</sup> A. R. McWilliam, *Big River Dreaming*.

knowledge of the locations of significant places on the estate. Access to a comparatively rich store of this knowledge, however, was made possible by the enthusiastic participation of an elderly Aboriginal woman, Polly Wandanga, now resident in Kununurra (WA). Polly was married to a former senior man of the Jaminjung language patri-country of Yambarnyi, and spent her youth footwalking between the Fitzmaurice and Legune Station where she worked for many years as a cook. In a series of extended helicopter surveys it proved possible to follow in Wandanga's earlier footsteps, so to speak, and identify with her the places and prominent cultural features of the landscape. In this way she located two prominent footwalk trails and their sequence of place names. One path followed the hills and shallow waterholes that fringe the estuarine mud flats for use in the wet season. A second dry-season track followed a large tributary of the Fitzmaurice inland past the cliffs of Wiritmangiung to the Victoria River near Purulun or Entrance Island.

Through these exercises, Wandanga was able to reveal unique sequences of place names across a broad landscape that remains otherwise unknown and un-visited by other Aboriginal affiliates to the country, and largely devoid of any cartographically named natural features.

**Figure 11.2. Map showing general location of place names on the Fitzmaurice**



Source: Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority cartography

## Conclusions

The Fitzmaurice River<sup>41</sup> in the western Northern Territory remains an enigmatic region of the north, arguably for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people alike. From a broader Australian viewpoint, since the first exploratory European journeys into the north west until the present day, the Fitzmaurice River has been regarded as a remote or wild region beyond the scrutiny, security and comforts of settled Australia. In the popular imagination, the river is a place of physical dangers and hostile nature; latently so in its remote unpeopled expanse of some 10 000 km<sup>2</sup>, and manifestly so in its treacherous currents and sand bars, as well as the many large saltwater crocodiles that populate the river channels and banks. In the past one measure of the frontier character of the river, for non-Aboriginals, lay in its threat of attack from hostile Aborigines. Today its wilderness status is couched in terms of remoteness, 'scenic beauty and superficially unspoiled pristine state'.<sup>42</sup>

I have also argued that the historical process of colonialism on the Fitzmaurice River and its dislocating effect on resident Aboriginal populations has contributed to the emergence of frontier-like perceptions of the river among the descendants of the Fitzmaurice River ancestors. Physical separation from the river and an emergent alienation from the historical experiences and cultural knowledge of the past contribute to this sense of a frontier quality.

In recent years, this disjuncture or emergent frontier in contemporary Aboriginal perceptions of the river is undergoing a process of re-affirmation and reclamation. Drawing on the threads of knowledge and personal memories from a small group of senior affiliates, there has been a concerted effort to recall and reinvigorate traditional relationships to the Fitzmaurice landscape. In this sense one might speak of a double notion of the contemporary frontier on the river, one which remains in a kind of dynamic tension. First, there is the conventional settler frontier, a frontier which remains in the process of appropriating the 'new', although seemingly stalled through an absence of settlement and domestication. Second, one can speak of an incipient Aboriginal frontier which is undergoing another kind of appropriation, that of the old and once familiar, as contemporary Aboriginal communities reassert long-standing associations with the river. Perhaps in the recent collaborative and consultative exercise of mapping place names and mythologies along the river, a collaboration of indigenous and exogenous, are the tentative steps towards a post-frontier reconciliation on the Fitzmaurice.

<sup>41</sup> I use this name as a device to describe or encompass the whole length of the river. There is no satisfactory Aboriginal equivalent term to describe the whole river. Yitpiling ngala is a Murrinhpatha phrase referring to the 'big river'.

<sup>42</sup> H. Messell et al., *The Victoria and the Fitzmaurice River Systems*, p. 45.

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