Queensland Aborigines, multiple realities and the social sources of suffering:

psychiatry and moral regions of being

Part 1

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Abstract

This two part paper considers the experience of a range of magico-religious experiences (such as visions and voices) and spirit beliefs in a rural Aboriginal town. The papers challenge the tendency of institutionalised psychiatry to medicalise the experiences and critiques the way in which its individualistic practice is intensified in the face of an incomprehensible Aboriginal ‘other’ to become part of the power imbalance that characterises the relationship between Indigenous and white domains. The work reveals the internal differentiation and politics of the Aboriginal domain, as the meanings of these experiences and actions are contested and negotiated by the residents and in so doing they decentre the concerns of the white domain and attempt to control their relationship with it. Thus the plausibility structure that sustains these multiple realities reflects both accommodation and resistance to the material and historical conditions imposed and enacted by mainstream society on the residents, and to current socio-political realities. I conclude that the residents’ narratives chart the grounds of moral adjudication as the experiences were rarely conceptualised by local people as signs of individual pathology but as reflections of social reality. Psychiatric drug therapy and the behaviourist assumptions underlying its practice posit atomised individuals as the appropriate site of intervention as against the multiple realities revealed by the phenomenology of the experiences. The papers thus call into question Australian mainstream ‘commonsense’ that circulates about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people which justifies representations of them as sickly outcasts in Australian society.
Introduction

This paper is based on an ethnographic study undertaken at an Aboriginal town in rural Queensland in 1995-6 with yearly follow-up visits to the present time. The study sought to understand the residents’ high levels of social and emotional distress in terms of their relationship to a history of colonisation and institutionalisation. I explored too how these historical realities related to contemporary marginality and current dynamics between residents and the institutions of health, law, welfare and education. The paper focuses on issues that emerged during the fieldwork concerning contested local meanings of a range of magico-religious experiences and actions and how these meanings seek to establish Aboriginality as spirituality and challenge orthodox psychiatric and Christian interpretations.

Part 1 considers the phenomenology of the various experiences from the perspective of those who interpret them as the work of spirits. I take a combined socio-political and psychoanalytic approach to interpreting these accounts in the light of a history of cultural rupture and removal from country, genocide, diasporisation and institutionalisation and as forms of local resistance to such state control. I conclude that the experiences have multiple layers of meanings and reveal multiple realities, the significance of which is that the experiences are not merely psychological, social, cultural
or political but are experienced on all these different levels. They are not only legitimate forms of local knowledge and being but assert and recreate social ties and seek collective responsibility for and understandings of everyday grief, loss, suffering and poverty.

Part 2, maintains the focus on contested local meanings of voices and visions in relation to grief and loss and the impact of early death on the residents. In particular it discusses the interaction of competing interpretations of the experiences in terms of Christian religions, Aboriginal spirituality and local politics. It explores the interaction between this complex sociality and a heavily drinking lifestyle, trauma, suicide/ality and violence, touching on an ethos of care that involves physical restraint and feuds. It charts the saliency of suicide amongst two particular groups of kin and cohorts and the social meaningfulness of the voices and visions in relation to suicide.

It argues that the voices and visions are used to reinterpret and establish meaning in life’s unfolding events. The social distance between Aboriginal and white domains is described and it is argued that since the latter is the domain from which the helping professions emanate, their practice of treating persons as individuals, in this densely interconnected town where a relational view of persons holds sway, is a considerable problem.
Background

This paper is based on 16 months residential fieldwork in 1995-6 in a rural town in Queensland where the residents are predominantly Murris. When supporters yelled out “Up the Goonagullies” at rugby league football carnivals they proclaimed a specific identity as against the generic identifiers of Aborigines or Murris. The name Goonagullie, or in English, "shit gully" (also Guna Valley) describes both the entrance to the town where a clay pan turns into slippery mud when it rains and the nearby sewerage works that frequently wafts pungent odours across the town. Locals shared this ironically humorous name that added "shit" in a local language, to gully (gullie) in English, with evident pleasure. They used different layers of meaning to create an exotic sounding word with a mundane and vulgar underbelly. Since, to use the Australian vernacular, it is established that Murris on ex-reserves such as this, had long been treated "like shit"; I couldn't help thinking that their use of the name bore a pointed reminder of history.

The power of governments over Aboriginal people was made possible by the 1897 Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act that marked the beginning of over a century of evolving government legislation directed specifically at Queensland Aborigines. The residents often referred to the time that they were “under the Act” and then to the changes that happened when they “got that right” after the 1967 referendum. The reserve that grew into the present town was the one of a complex web of 17 government controlled Aboriginal
institutions in Queensland. Members of over 40 language groups from across the state were removed from their country and ‘settled’ there and some went on to be moved between the various reserves and to their jails, usually as a form of punishment for often petty misdemeanours or moral impropriety that the evolving legislation increasingly focussed on. The reserves were additionally an attempt to segregate *Murris* from the surrounding white population due to exaggerated fears of contagion both moral and physical and to access and control their participation in the domestic, agricultural and cattle station labour market.\(^3\)

Under the policy eras of segregation, protection, integration and assimilation superintendents in concert with various Christian churches attempted to inculcate the residents with Christian beliefs and values, the protestant work ethic, and the time values of monopoly capitalism.\(^4\) Until the early 1970s, the town operated for many residents as a total institution. It provided rations, had forced medical and household inspections, organized the population into a cheap source of rural labour, held back their wages, determined who could marry whom and, due to the state’s horror of miscegenation, raised the majority of children in a series of age graduated and gendered dormitories (Blake 1991). What was not clearly spoken was that many had white fathers who mostly didn’t claim them and whites had to deal with a dual horror in protecting their own moral universe. On the one hand they couldn’t blow the whistle on their men-on the other could they abandon these offspring of imperialism to the cultural universe of the camp? The assimilation policy answered no to this question.
The town is one of 17 Deeds of Grant in Trust (DOGIT)\(^6\) communities and with upwards of 2000 residents who are fiercely proud of their identity one of the largest ex-government Aboriginal reserves in the state. These were granted self-management in 1986. At the time of the fieldwork around 60\% of the population was under 25 years with a roughly equal distribution of males and females\(^7\).

Although the town has two small shops and a number of administrative, health, welfare and recreational facilities, it has no business centre and to this extent is like a dormitory suburb of the predominantly white town nearby. About four kilometres away, 90\% of its population and an even higher percentage of the workforce are non-Aboriginal. Notwithstanding some localised health gains in some parts of Australia in terms of improved immunisation and infant mortality rates, like many Aboriginal populations in Australia, Murris continue to experience low life expectancy, high morbidity for serious injury and diseases and entrenched poverty in terms of capital assets, education, housing, transport and income.\(^8\)

This brief historical background to contemporary social conditions reveals the enduring imbalanced power relations that characterise mainstream and Indigenous relations. The differentiation of local social worlds and ways of being that is exposed in the phenomenology of the experiences to be described presently, problematise the assumptions of psychiatry of a single external political space
with a uniform set of power relations that set the conditions of the individual’s self realisation, or the very barriers to that project.

**Focus and theoretical framework**

These papers describe the residents’ accounts of a variety of experiences involving spirits (including visions, voices, unusual smells, object transmigration and psychic communication) and reflect on their relationship to historical and contemporary social circumstances. Such experiences may be considered by bio-medical psychiatry to be first rank symptoms of major mental illnesses, such as the many types of schizophrenia, classified in psychiatry's Diagnostic Statistics Manuals (DSM). The DSM-IV (APA, 1994: xxiv) notes ethnic and cultural considerations, while Appendix I provides clinicians with a framework for assessing cultural influences on clinical presentation. However the fieldwork reinforced, as do various texts by Australian ethno-psychiatrists, that cultural issues are frequently not taken into account or are an aside to what is considered a more correct medical interpretation of phenomena (for example see Cawte 1988:19-28).

Arthur Kleinman, Professor of Anthropology and Psychiatry at Harvard who provided commentary to the DSM authors on cultural issues, complains that his offerings were reduced to two paragraphs and states that the ‘DSM-IV too easily…pathologizes ordinary and extraordinary experience [that] disaffirms the meaning-orientated subjectivity of suffering
in favour of technical diagnoses that often lack personal and collective significance’ (Mezzich, Kleinman, Fabrega and Parron 1996:20). Likewise, in the context of the doxa of medical psychiatry in Australia the term hallucination implies and presupposes an atomised pathological condition. Here I argue that hallucinations do not necessarily imply organic pathology but operate within a kind of lucidity that not only has mystical and religious dimensions but also is expressive of the micro and macro-politics of a given sociality. As van den Berg (1975b: 8-12) reminded us, hallucinations are a universal mode of human-being. They are possible in relation to a particular existence, to an overall state of being and to others.

To consider these issues I use the paradigm of the "other condition" described by Berger as ‘another region of being beyond the “paramount reality”, in Schutz's sense, [wakefulness] in which “normal life” takes place’ (1970:343-5). Speaking of various self-transcendent experiences such as those to be discussed here, Berger observed that: ‘The alien intrusions still occur and, in the absence of the old ecclesiastical “therapies”, new ways must be found to cope with this. One of these ways is provided by modern science, which can explain and thus legitimate the 'other condition' in psychiatric categories’ (Berger 1970:359).

I extend the paradigm of ‘the other condition’ to consider the ways in which the interpenetration of white and Aboriginal domains and the unbalanced relationships of power both between and within them, provoked
the residents to embrace spirituality as characterising the other condition of Aboriginality. Their embrace of spirituality asserted that colonisation, Christianity, and assimilation failed to eliminate the other condition of Aboriginality as internal differentiation and politics within the Aboriginal domain were fought out in these terms as we see in Part 2. At the same time psychiatry, as the latest way to control, eliminate or explain ‘the other condition’ is resisted as the latest way to control, eliminate and explain Aboriginal people and their spirituality.

My point of departure arises from Berger's question concerning exactly what are the conditions in which the *epoche*\(^{11}\) of the natural attitude breaks down, to allow a showing through of “the other condition”, where visions, voices, unusual smells, object transmigration and psychic communication erupt into ordinary consciousness and "haunt" everyday life? These conditions clearly existed at this town where such experiences were commonly described by men, women and occasionally by children. In general they were meaningfully related to the person’s social life and personal history (see D. Howard 1966:221). They were often associated with a perpetual sense of grief and loss that accompanied the frequent deaths of relatives and friends and with other forms of physical and emotional trauma (See A. F. Wallace 1959:81/65-82/66).\(^{12}\)

The interpretation that follows is inspired by the work of James Glass who,
in a political reading of the experiences of patients in a psychiatric hospital, observed that the value behind the patients’ narratives is ‘…not a pathology, a description of an isolated sickness but commentary on patterns of relatedness and their interruption… [they] shed light on such political concepts as community, citizenship, participation, action and transformation (Glass 1989:6-7).

Good also critiqued an individualistic focus when he commented that ‘In studies of “stress” or “care seeking”…rational behaviour and the ‘responsibility' of individuals is privileged at the expense of social constraints and intersubjectivity’ (1994:22, also see J. H. van den Berg 1975b: 3). As a means of problematising the atomising effect of institutional psychiatry, I reverse this trend by examining these embodied and emotional experiences in the light of current social life and social constraints of which a history of economic dispossession and marginalisation, diasporization, institutionalization, institutionalized racism and political dis-empowerment are aspects. I begin with an account of local responses to the practice of psychiatric medicalisation of the residents’ experiences.

A response to medicalisation

Many people I talked to were aware of, confused and worried by a medical rendering and treatment of these experiences especially as psychiatrists and mental health nurses were always non-Aboriginal.13 A local event that reflected
the processes of focusing on individual pathology at the expense of socio-cultural
dimensions as described by the theoreticians above, was when an Elder reflected
on how a young woman experiencing visions and voices had been sent to a
psychiatrist and given medication. She said:

> I believe that they shouldn't be [medicated]. They should be left alone
to be helped by their own who understand and know who has had the
same experiences. And it's up to that person to refer them on if
necessary. That's my belief. Because like I said before when [mental
health nurse] first come, 'Here! No! You can't do that [put people on
medication]. You got to know that family’. I know what that girl's
going through. If she is hearing them or talking to them that's real for
us, because I know that and that's why I was saved.

Here, we see clearly two different cultural approaches to the phenomena of
invisible interlocutors. For this woman, listening to these voices, speaking to
them and objectifying the self through them, insisted on a local and a social
interpretation which was meaningfully situated in the context of ‘that family’
and ‘what that girl is going through.’ Because hearing voices is ‘real for us’
(Aboriginal people) giving the young woman medication to block out the
voices, was seen as hindering the process of real therapy. The nurse's actions
were seen to deny the experiential basis of Aboriginality and those ‘who has had
that same experience.’
The nurse ignored the possibility of a different cultural paradigm to explain, respond to and hence to socialise the amplification of voices and visions.\textsuperscript{14} It was clear that local perceptions of a person were contrary to the model of persons inherent in assumptions underpinning Western rationalism. Many did not describe a radical separation between the psyches of individuals\textsuperscript{15} or a radical distinction between "mental and spiritual life". The body and the mind were conceived of as inter-connected and the living and the dead did not necessarily move in radically separated spheres (cf. Straus 1962:224; Hertz 1960: 29-37). As Keen (2006) described amongst the Yolngu, the self extended beyond the individual embodiment, parts of which were lost by the bodily death of others but were regained in visionary experiences. As Arieti (1967:420) puts it, these forms of mysticism (religion) are not simply a means to interpret the world they are ‘a way of hoping’ and a way of creating the world (Good 1994:131-133).

As we shall see presently, introjected others were projected beyond the self from whence they came, to a domain of intersubjectivity where they were corroborated. In such life-worlds phenomena that psychiatry designated as symptoms of illness residing within individuals, were ‘spiritual’ experiences, which however does not mean that they were always benign. Among the residents there was a strong awareness that these experiences chart dangerous regions of being. And yet, while people feared the disturbing nature of the experiences, they had meaning and were valued in processes of reintegration,
which rejected the notion that they were indicative of an individual illness (cf. Wallace 1959:82/66).

Rather residents gave interpretations that sought meaning in the domain of continually regenerated and therefore on-going social inter-connections, connections which transcended earthly distances and dissolved those of death. Many related to the appearance and actions of spirits as a kind of inter-subjective conscience or a moral order against which the behaviour of family members could be judged.\(^\text{16}\) By symbolizing their suffering in terms of Aboriginal spirituality they created at the same time ways of intervening and responding to those having such experiences.

The fact that many Murris have and value such experiences as against psychiatric and public commonsense that discounts them as meaningless ephemera of a faulty cognitive apparatus, has implications for the relationship between Aboriginal people and the mainstream spheres of health, welfare, law, education and labour. Although psychiatry may deem many of these narratives to be false beliefs Glass clarified that ‘delusions attack ideals, cultures, histories and consensually validated patterns of meaning’ (1989:16). Likewise, I argue that such accounts resist the powerful medico-legal and other discourses generated in the dominant culture and seek to claim a sense of control in arenas of existence from which Murris had been ever more firmly excluded.
Such an interpretation is highly relevant amongst people whose meanings, ideals, cultures and histories are routinely denied, invalidated and delegitimated. As Povinelli indicated, such representations are of interest, not merely because they are indicative of “traditional” or pre-colonial culture. Rather they are a means of expressing the contradictions inherent in the expression of Aboriginality, the disruptions of history and life in contemporary Australia (Povinelli 1993:137). The pre-colonial context of such experiences, imagined by anthropologists as static and coherent, was that they were ritually elaborated and embedded in politically charged relations to land. These circumstances largely no longer pertain in this context as the existential conditions of ‘spirit beliefs’ although the issue of rights in land still play a part. Likewise a relational form of the person is no doubt a continuous dimension of Indigenous culture. But it is clear that inevitably both the relational form of the person and the implications of relations to ancestors and contemporaries are now infused with suffering encountered in the struggle for autonomy and equality with other Australians as the new existential condition of existence.

The work of other anthropologists (Sansom 1980; Myers 1986; Dunlop 1988; Biernoff 1982; Brady and Morice 1982; Reid 1982; Povinelli 1993) present various local Aboriginal conceptions of the causality, meaning and appropriate response to (intra) psychic experiences and emotional suffering which include discussions of traditional aeteologies. These challenge the individualistic "deficit" or "deviance" discourses of psychologists and psychiatrists, and allow
the differentiation between forms of suffering, some of which are generated by global historically contextualised socio-political domains.  

**The phenomenology of spirits: domains of meaning**

The following exposes the limitations of a straightforward application of medical psychiatry to the issues at hand. Many residents related narratives concerning spirits that remained after bodily death and spanned physical and immaterial regions of being. Spirits appeared (visions), spoke (voices), in waking and dream states, when sober, when intoxicated and when in alcohol withdrawal. Whatever the context and condition of those experiencing visions and voices they always had meaning and, while not always comfortable experiences, in most cases there were highly valued opportunities to gain guidance and support.

Spirits manifested and communicated through both the natural world (primarily birds, fish, reptiles, animals and the human body) and the man-made world (everyday, inanimate and mechanical objects). Such events were called *ghost showing* and *ghost shine* and specific entities such as the *Tallman* and *the Old People* were frequently discussed. Further, various ailments such as minor skin irritations, headaches, or weakness in limbs, were interpreted by some people as the presence of and messages from deceased and living members of the family, dimensions that were continuous with those Elkin observed (Elkin 1937).
Some experiences of spirits were described in various narratives that reflected the competing and interpenetrating domains of meaning within which residents interpreted them, such as being-sung (the target of sorcery), mussing (the practice of magic), being-caught (by spirit possession), being-tormented (by a Christian devil or Aboriginal spirits), stressin’ out, going off (being violent/aggressive), schizo/psycho (aggressive, mentally ill), silly/doing them silly things (often referred to suicidal acts), and wangi, womba (local terms for insane, crazy).

Many residents discussed their experiences in terms of encounters with clever men or clever Murris. The powers of a clever Murri, sometimes also called a featherfoot, were generally attributed to males. They had magical (trickster) powers that allowed them to overcome the limitations of embodiment in terms of time, space, weight and form. They could enter the minds of other humans and torment them, whether still in a human embodiment or when deceased. They had knowledge and power that could be used for healing and for love magic and they could provide a communication link between living relatives who might be far apart. Clever men could also induce misfortune and ill health by the agency of spirit possession (cf. Austin-Broos 1996:5, Povinelli 1993:162-163; Keen 2006).

In several accounts people described extra-ordinary powers of communication between themselves and other living people and shadowy fears of who might be a clever Murri circulated in talk and reflections on various misfortunes. Elkin
(1994: 19ff, 96-98, 144-45) describes the powers of medicine men and sorcerers in Eastern Queensland who had similar psychic experiences and powers to those described above. Elkin noted:

The point to be stressed is that while the medicine man is considered to possess great power and specially developed faculties, none of this power is considered extraordinary or abnormal. It is possessed and exercised against an accepted background of belief, and in some degree…it is possessed by all (1994:14).

Here too they were claimed as a usual way of being for Aboriginal people more generally or at least amongst those who experienced and related these narratives as in some of the examples discussed presently.

A major local preoccupation was the conditions of social and material life in the town which many saw as the locus of widely experienced forms of psycho-social distress. While in a crude sense, such distress was expressed and experienced by individuals it also affected and involved the many others who made up a particular person's close universe of relations and friends. A person's social situatedness included realms which transcended but co-existed with the everyday paramount reality, realms which were peopled by significant others. These included generations of deceased relatives and friends (the Old People), God, the Devil and various other types of spirits, who in turn effected and were shared in, everyday life. The following accounts, where the spirits of the dead and various
other entities communicated with and resided amongst the living, were common
(see McDonald, 2001: 113, 146).

However interpretations of these phenomena as Aboriginal spirituality competed
and at times co-existed with two other paradigms namely the Christian and bio-
medical, issues that I discuss in more detail in Part 2 of this paper. Here I firstly
relay some accounts of when and how spirits manifested in everyday life and how
those experiencing them reacted. I then describe accounts of ghost shine and of
ghost showing involving the Old People and give an account of psychic
interference (mussing). In this case study the intermingling of spiritual and
psychiatric interpretations and interventions is evident. I conclude Part 1 with a
socio-political and psychoanalytical analysis of these complex circumstances.

**The work of ghosts**

The accounts of experiences of spirits in this section concern their continuing
agency amongst the living and have several dimensions. Some residents described
the presence of these entities as a comforting and protective one. They might
intervene to prevent disaster or give important information and guidance about the
problems of day-to-day life. In others, spirits, especially in animals and birds were
important in the grieving process, where they provided an everyday tangibility
and continuity of presence of the deceased in the phenomenal world and related to
local understandings of totems. While some animals and birds were seen as
inhabited by spirits, others simply accompanied the spirit of deceased people and
particular spirits (in various forms) followed certain people throughout their daily lives. Some people were uneasy when a group of black cockatoos took up residence in one of the small trees on the mish and a local convention was to spit on the ground three times in quick succession at the sight of a plover to protect themselves and their families from death. Others cited crows and owls as portents of death.

In local accounts, spirits of deceased were likely to be restive when their death had been violent or untimely (Hertz 1960; Keen 2006). Several houses were pointed out where babies had died and where residents had subsequently and often heard crying and seen small ghostly children, while the sound of marbles rolling across the floor signalled the spiritual presence of a child who had died in another house. In the three days following a death and preceding the burial many people related that they heard, saw or otherwise became aware of the presence of the deceased, although appearances were not limited to this period.

In one example in 1995 a well-liked and respected man, aged 45, died in his sleep. The night after the death, one of the deceased's work mates [aged 28] was startled when the toilet door slammed, as he was on duty alone in the building. He said he immediately left work and went home. Three other work mates (all men aged around 20) of the deceased, independently related this story and also said that the door had been slammed by the deceased. They laughed about how their mate left work and said he was still afraid of what other jokes the spirit might play on him.
One of the men said that the deceased was known for playing practical jokes on his mates and all agreed they expected other such pranks before his funeral.

A second of the men said that he and his colleagues had seen "a black shape" coming out of the shed of the deceased's home on the night the man had died. They had chased the shape but it had disappeared back into the shed, where they left it. Over the course of the several hours I spent with the men, the issue of this spirit, the slammed door and the black shape came up again and again. With much bravado they said they weren't personally scared of spirits, but that people who are afraid of them must be involved in wrongdoing. Here, it was not that the spirit had shown himself to his colleague that was indicative of this, but the man's reaction of fear. As Macdonald (2001:44) discussed in the Kimberley the black shape seemed to stand as a metaphor for the devil or at least collapsed any distinction between Aboriginal and Christian spirits. But the men’s shared experience of it did not suggest that they were in danger. Rather, it suggested that the deceased may not have been living a properly Christian life, or that other transcendent forces represented by the shape were responsible for his untimely death.22

A group of three women recalled the time a few years ago when they were walking through the paddock and how they took off and ran back to the mission when a fourth shadow joined their own. On another occasion a woman walking past the hospital, felt herself being pursued by something. She could not see
anyone but as she started to walk faster and then run she could hear heavy breathing and footsteps pursuing her. She eventually tripped over and fell and felt that this saved her from being "caught", as suddenly the "thing" was no longer after her. It was implied that the tripping-up was the work of another protective spirit agency. She no longer walked along that route and, like most local people she doesn't walk about by herself if she can possibly avoid it, since, as Jackson observed ‘ghosts don’t trouble people in company’ (1998: 165).

Various people described encounters with an entity called the *tallman* [also *that bigfella, that tall c**t*]. His continuing presence in the town was to do with his searching for and *tormenting* certain descendants and associates of a local man who married his promised wife some decades previously. In particular, the *tallman* tormented the son of the man who stole his wife. This son was surrounded by various troubles and at the centre of several conflicts when he was at the town. He was often physically sick from alcohol, he was the perpetrator of and subject to violent altercations with others and he had various types of bad luck (at gambling, as a sportsman). He died in 1998 aged 39 years. To some commentators, these conditions revealed that he was being followed and tormented by the *tallman*, who various people saw lurking outside the windows of the various houses the man frequented at night.

Another type of spirit could be considered as belonging to a collectivity of Aboriginal mythical spirits who possibly predate the colonial period. One form of
these, known as Jonjurries, were described as small, but hairy old men who appeared generally to children around dusk and who have trickster qualities (cf. R. Pelton 1980). While some felt that these were simply akin to the White fellas 'bogey man' used to gather and keep children safe after dark, others insisted that they were not a story made up for children. One 14 year old boy reported seeing a Jonjurrie near the back steps of his mother’s house, during a period when he was involved in various forms of petty theft and vandalism. The suggestion was that this spirit had come to protect him from others, (maybe the Devil), who were leading him into various forms of trouble.

Another example was a creature generally conceived of as the Rainbow Serpent, who inhabited a certain waterhole. All sorts of stories circulated about this place. No one would swim or fish in the hole, as the creature made its presence felt by causing the water to heave and bubble in an unnatural fashion (also see Merlan 1998: 69ff). One old man said that divers were employed to investigate the moving water, but to no avail. Another old man said that in the early days, the camp men had disembowelled a man accused of murder and filled his body with rocks and thrown him in there. A third old man likewise alluded to how wrongdoers in the early days were thus dispatched and how it tended to deter crimes of violence. It was also where a young man accidentally hanged in the early 1990s an incident that I revisit in Part 2. This and other parts of the town were avoided for fear of encountering spirits.
One man commonly warned newcomers to the town including me, not to be alarmed if they saw the two spirits that he said always accompanied him. Members of several different families said that particular family members inherited spiritual accompaniment, power and responsibility and were destined to be *clever Murris*. These individuals then became identified with an ambiguous realm of protective and destructive power.\(^{26}\) This special status was not relished by one woman and several men [aged 24-30] at the town [and others elsewhere] who tried to avoid the possibility that these responsibilities might become theirs (cf. Wallace 1959:82/66)\(^{27}\). Types of avoidance included physically removing themselves from within the family and living elsewhere, or pursuing a drinking/drugging lifestyle. In several cases the resulting "torment" from visions, voices and bad luck, were attributed to the agency of their senior relatives (living and deceased) who were calling them to assume these responsibilities\(^{28}\). Such circumstances could occur on the basis of their position of seniority in their family network which was fluid and shifted when those related to them became sick, were incarcerated or died. Thus someone with minimal overall kinship responsibilities might suddenly find themselves the senior person for some branch of the family network.

The stories above are just a few of dozens related to me with similar themes and experiences and they indicated the gravity with which *Murris* viewed activities that they conceived of as involving spirits. In short, ideas, actions and experiences among the population, that may be considered abnormal and
pathological under the diagnostic principles of medical psychiatry, count as normal and as reality among a significant proportion of the town’s population who experience them. Even when experiences and emotional states that were not considered "normal" by the subjects, their families or friends occurred, these were very often said to arise from encounters with the spiritual domain, and not to do with individual pathology.  

**Ghost shine**

The term *Ghost shine* was used to refer to telling ghost stories and to refer to the appearance of lights in and around the town, which for many indicated that spiritual entities were present (also see Jackson 998: 164-165). For example, a moving point of light at the cemetery in 1996 saw nightly gatherings on a nearby road of up to 50 people over several weeks to witness its existence. Here the atmosphere was one of intense speculation as to its source and possible import in terms of town life. The light was thought by many to be the reappearance of that which had periodically been seen down at the creek, up at the dip and over at the farm over the past decade. Some people read the light as a warning of some impending disaster such as a murder or a suicide, while others said it appeared in response to such events which had happened in the recent past. Some said it was someone playing tricks with a torch and others that it must be the TAFE floodlights reflecting on a bottle or some other shiny thing on a grave. These discussions led several people to decide one night, to drive up to the
cemetery and to prove one way or the other the mundane or magical quality of it. I asked to accompany the several men and women who proceeded to get into two cars, amid protests that going into the cemetery would be dangerous and altogether too spooky for many. The barbed wire gate of the cemetery was closed and one man got out opening it in the glare of the headlights. As he fumbled with the awkward thing, he stepped back and one foot went into a deep hole hidden by the surrounding darkness. As he reefed his foot out, he swore in surprise and pain, as his foot was cut and bleeding.

His thong remained in the hole and was not retrieved by his cursory and tentative search with his hand. With noticeably greater caution and nervousness, we continued into the cemetery to where the light had appeared to emanate. There didn't appear to be anything reflective from the various perspectives we took to view the area, and we could no longer see the light. The story of the lost thong and the cut foot proved the dangers of such actions to some in the waiting crowd.

Events such as the appearance of the light, produced a heightened atmosphere, a mixture of fear and excitement and a sense of ambiguous emotional gratification which was also evident in lengthy sessions of *ghost shine*, where the participants animatedly shared stories involving a vengeful God, the devil, ghosts and spirits. One associate said:

Leonie! It's not about believing… it really happen… but white people too eh?

You seen that program? What it is? The X-Files? That's him! What about in
them books (magazines such as That's Life), you [one is] always reading stories about all them people seeing and hearing things...some people say it's all in their heads, but Leonie, I tell you, things really happen. What you reckon?

My friend's comments clarified that she did not view the experience and import of immaterial voices, visions and supra-human agency, as unique to Aboriginal people or simply to do with Aboriginal culture. She sought to invoke a common humanity by an appeal to a shared 'other condition' which could transcend supposed cultural differences between us. She used the television programs (The X-Files and Tales of the Extraordinary), to point out that white people, indeed all people, have ‘strange’ experiences. However the X-files presented the experiences as physical contacts from aliens from other planets and there was always the hovering suggestion that the subjects ‘imagined’ what they saw.

**Discussion**

While these programs were favourites amongst my Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal friends, for the former the existence of spirits and their agency via the phenomenal world was a commonsense assumption, a given of everyday life and not a matter of belief but of experience (cf. R. D. Laing 1962:115; Povinelli 1993:31-32; Jackson 1998:161-165). As Kleinman (1995:54) stated ‘families hold the world to be a certain way... [they have] faith in a fundamental local reality.’ Local beliefs shaped the interpretation of such experiences which were taken as
evidence of the agency of spirits (Christian and/or Aboriginal) and were reflected on with a certitude that arose from personal experience, even as people worried that ‘some people say it’s all in their heads.’

I would argue that for many, life's shifting horizons of intelligibility and meaning and the movement between self differentiation and then dissolution into a group identity and ethos were negotiated by reading the world in the light of spirit agency and the moral domain they shared with humans. For example this dynamic was evident in several of the stories above. The loss of intelligibility that occurred with the point of light in the cemetery story was recovered by the observers, by negotiating and socially constructing meaning. Although individuals differentiated their personal take on the phenomena, the ethos of the group was that the light was a link between the present and the past and the shared nature of the experience specifically set it beyond an aberration within an individual psyche. Their speculations followed moral contours that linked the mystical light with human breaches such as suicide or murder that might explain why the light and the deaths were happening amongst them.

Thus I agree with Berger when he theorised that ‘the other condition’ in which visions and voices are experienced is older than all established religions and ‘ecclesiastical routines’ which were attempts to control it and replace it with a ‘generally understandable morality’ (Berger 1970:358). Good too critiqued the rationalist empiricist paradigm in philosophy and anthropology (1994:10-24).
These, he argued, had regarded "native beliefs" as erroneous if understandable interpretations of phenomena and biological and natural science therefore excluded them from the category of knowledge.\textsuperscript{33}

Further, Lutz and Abu-Lughod observe that recently the received wisdom of emotions as always and everywhere "internal, irrational and natural" has been shaken (1990:2).\textsuperscript{34} In their study of emotion and social interaction they discussed how emotion got its force and meaning from local discourse (1990:5-10). Likewise here, the residents spoke of their suffering and misfortune in terms of a suprahuman realm that invoked local and broader social and political relations. Their accounts had elements relating to their understandings of pre-colonial and colonial times and were used to articulate and endure forms of political and social violence and inequity continuing in the present (cf. Lienhardt 1961:170 in Good 1994:130, Arieti 1967:429). As Merlan observed ‘many ideas come to local communities…sometimes intersecting with locally held concepts, sometimes not’ (1998: 226). Such dynamics are evident in this context too.

That is the residents embodied spiritual/religious/psychic experience dialectically and inevitably, reflected the conditions of the material world as in the account of a conflict over the development of class divisions amongst the residents discussed in the next section. While earlier inequalities between Aborigines and whites were a kind of defence against white superiority these new inequalities (for example arising from the development of local power elites under the DOGIT and by differential claims to Native Title and Land Rights) represents a new kind of
rupture amongst Aboriginal people themselves. These critical political dimensions of the ethnography are taken up more fully in Part 11 of this paper while the phenomenology of the experiences discussed here are the background on which the issues must be considered.

**Ghost showing: The Old People**

*Ghost showing* was the term used to describe the phenomena of spirits revealing themselves in human form and stories of ghost showing revealed local forms of incipient class difference and conflict. Many residents made reference to *the Old People* who were deceased members of a particular family group and the ancestors of particular families who both predated and suffered the impact of colonisation.35 By bringing the *Old People* into contemporary times a realm was created that collapsed history and made it present. One common description of these spirits was of a group of three or more older men, who appeared *painted up*, naked and bearing weapons. Their appearance may provide guidance or reveal the wrongdoing of living agents who dishonoured them or disrupted their peace by not returning them to country for burial, or by not bringing the correct categories and members of kin together to mourn and conduct ceremony.36

Other more prosaic wrongs that might lead to spiritual assault (*being-sung/caught/tormented*) included a range of things such as violence (assault, homicide, and suicide) neglecting children, adultery, sexual assault, excessive drinking/gambling or wrong marriages or sexual liaisons with first cousins.37 Thus
local theories of misfortune included the involvement of these entities and several people rendered phenomena such as suicide as related to unfinished business with them.

Spirits were conceptualised as staying close to where their bodies were buried, especially when deaths were untimely or violent or they were buried in ‘the wrong place’ (Hertz 1960; Keen 2006). Two large European style cemeteries and several older burial sites on the town land gave extra saliency to the experience of spirits living with the residents. In an enduring conflict over a new housing estate, derisively called Snob Hill by many residents, the appearance of the Old People and other entities at or around the area was often raised as proof that authorities had disturbed them by building on a burial ground. Here the moral domain of Aboriginal spirituality was invoked as a means to criticize the development of superficial class divisions and power inequities between the residents that the new houses symbolized.38

But these narratives were about more than class dynamics as they expressed the locals’ conceptualisation of a traditional ideal of returning deceased to their home country which was unable to be realised for this population, many of whom were forcibly removed from country. Thus they had been unable to practice activities traditionally associated with deceased and these circumstances left the residents with a constant sense of fear and wrong doing over issues that were outside their control, dynamics that are reflected in the following. I start with a general
overview of the phenomena of psychic interference followed by a case study that reveal these dynamics.

Psychic interference: Mussing, being-caught, being-tormented

While all generations of the town residents felt subject to a supernatural realm, many did not feel knowledgeable about it, a situation crucially involved in experiences described. Representatives of over 40 different language groups were sent to the town and the majority of children were raised in Christianised dormitories (Blake 1991). While these conditions made the transmission of a coherent body of lore and practices impossible, domains of transcendent meaning were continually regenerated, while the cultural renaissance of recent decades had reinvigorated domains of Aboriginal spirituality (see Merlan 1998: 226).

Some older people were intensely conscious of and burdened by their lack of knowledge of a classical Aboriginal tradition of song, dance, language and lore/law on which respect, status and land partly depend. Since they were descendants of removed people, or had been removed themselves many were fearful of a whole realm of power and significance in relation to which they felt subject but powerless. They were socialised with stories about how their culture was in the old days and experienced the town as a realm that was ‘saturated with [the] significance’ of many, many tales of misfortune and experiences with ghosts and spirits.
Many local *Murris* asserted that Aboriginal people from further north had kept greater access to traditional knowledge and power. Many said that in the old days the town also had many social sensibilities, practices and customs that have now "dropped off," but that further north these are just as viable as ever. These narratives reveal regionally differentiated forms of claims to an authentic Aboriginal identity. The valorisation and rendering of the other condition of Aboriginality as spirituality seeks to overcome charges of inauthenticity and to decentre the agendas of mainstream domains such as the health system that individualise, pathologise and medicalise these social processes.

Some of the townspeople were afraid of what they call *mussing*, which referred to the practice of magic (also see Hegarty 1999:6), and felt vulnerable to psychic interference from other Aboriginal people, especially those from northern and more remote regions, to whom, through the diasporic process that was the reserve system, they may be biologically related. While there was a continuous, steady expansion of actual social relations and connectedness to people further north,\(^\text{39}\) there was a sense of mystery about all of those to whom they might possibly be related. At the nearest, predominantly Aboriginal town to the north, I was told one has to be extremely careful of *mussing* which makes the danger of ‘getting-caught’ (possessed by spirits) much more likely.

There one would be foolish to throw a cigarette butt on the ground because it has saliva on it that could be used for *mussing*. Likewise, hair from brushes, combs
and haircuts, nail clippings and soiled clothing which may contain sweat or other bodily secretions, cannot be left lying around as all make one vulnerable (see McGrath and Phillips 2008). You cannot share a cup or let anyone buy you are drink for example unless they are your own family (see Sansom 1980). People must also be careful where they walk as they might inadvertently come across places inhabited by spirits (see Povinelli 1993: 149-152).

People travelled between these communities for funerals, family reunions, weddings, 21st and other birthdays, christenings and romances, as well as for legal business, educational trips, custody business and so on. Various people sometimes relocated from the town to these other areas and then returned. Some local men were also thought to have the powers of clever Murris and to be using this power, or perhaps using people's fears of these powers, to attack the confidence of their opponents and to bring wealth and prestige to their own families at the expense of others. Many people had strongly felt fears that ran along these lines and which effected their lives, consciousness and well-being.

The issues of mussing, pointing the bone, being-sung, being-caught and being-tormented were repeatedly raised when several young people exhibited bizarre, threatening or uncontrollable behavioural syndromes. These included both extreme behaviour that could be diagnosed by psychiatrists as Personality Disorder and various experiences that psychiatrists would deem psychotic.
In the cases of three young men (aged 17, 21 and 24) the problems had been dramatic enough to attract psychiatric intervention.\textsuperscript{41} It was, however, obvious that the people themselves and their families did not see the problems as caused by an individual's own functioning. Some people pointed to experiences of trauma, loss and abuse that invariably featured in their personal histories. However, social relations that may have included unknowing contact with a clever Murri, were also emphasized. In these cases, while the medication provided was seen as reasonably efficacious to control bizarre symptoms or aggression in the short term, the aetiology of the problem was rarely seen as residing within individuals but within the social relations in which they were embedded and which, as indicated earlier, constituted a relational view of persons (Keen 2006).

The two men aged 17 and 21 were admitted for some months to a psychiatric units in metropolitan centres, the 17 year-old after he had begun speaking in tongues that were incomprehensible to his family and medical workers alike. It so happened that each of the men had been to communities further north within the preceding year and speculations that they had been \textit{caught} or \textit{sung} were commonly made by their relatives and in the general talk in the town. People discussed whether or not the family should take the victim back up north to seek assistance from traditionally orientated relatives there. Sometimes this was done when the person was released from hospital, as in the case of the 17 year-old.
I turn now to the circumstances of the 24 year old man, that shows the complex interpenetration of Christianity, Aboriginal spirituality and psychiatry that I unpack further in Part 2. The family G.P. had prescribed him a combination of anti-psychotic and mood-stabilizing medications, when he became increasingly disturbed. He had left his traineeship in the town and was scared to go back there. He experienced a period of heightened energy, little sleep, bizarre behaviours, obsessive thoughts and increasing aggression. He began to have panic attacks when on the streets of the predominantly white town nearby. His fears that the police were coming to get him reached a paranoid intensity, although they were grounded in his actual experience of local courts and the local police who commonly harassed young Murris. He had already served time in youth and then adult correctional centres.

He became increasingly threatening and violent toward his de facto wife and child, one of his sisters and his parents. A younger brother (who was suicidal) described him as ‘a stand over merchant’ that became aggressive if thwarted in his desire to control people. He was highly suspicious of everyone and became involved in an escalating series of arguments and punch-ups with his age mates when he encountered them. He had just been placed on anti-psychotic medication when I visited him, at the request of his mother and his Aunty (putative MS), who were worried about him. They were well acquainted with my work and knew that I would be interested in his situation. They were also worried about the tablets he'd been prescribed and didn't like the idea of madness that these implied. Family
members were scared of him and could no longer cope when he persisted in rearranging the furniture and sticking photos of various people on the front door.

When I arrived he insisted on going outside into the back yard to talk. In a lengthy conversation, he related the following. He was angry with his wife who was drinking and he worried about the welfare of their son. He told me about the sudden death two years previously of his young female cousin. They had been on a trip to North Queensland, had met and partied with several of their maternal relatives, who they had met for the first time that night. He said one of these, whom he named, was a clever Murri, who could ‘travel in his sleep...had red glowing eyes...could move on a breath.’

He and his cousin had returned to where they were staying, shared some steak and rice and gone to bed. The next morning the girl was dead. The man he called a *Clever Murri* returned and took the clothes the girl had been wearing and placed them in a cave which had snakes in it a practice corroborated by McGrath and Phillips (2008) amongst people in north Queensland. Although the autopsy report said the girl had died from food caught in her trachea, the young man was convinced that she ‘got caught’ (by supernatural forces). He said he too had felt different ever since that trip. He said several people had told him they had seen him fighting with people at places he hadn't been at the time. He said he sleeps deeply and he thought he must have been travelling in his sleep. This idea frightened him and he wondered if he was or might become a *clever Murri*. He
did not seem to relish this prospect and said the reason he wore a huge coat and sunglasses was to protect himself from interference from clever Murris and to protect him from getting ‘caught’. He emphasized that he trusted no one including his family.

He went on to say that his maternal Aunty had died on his 21st birthday (just after his cousin's death). He lamented that he couldn't enjoy that birthday and on subsequent ones had felt sad and thought of the deaths. He still felt the loss of a friend who recently suicided. He had already lost several other age-mates through accidental deaths and other relations through various illnesses. Of two older male friends (they were uncle and nephew) who were not related to him but who he admired, one had died and the other moved away after his own hospitalization, following a number of deaths in his family and after attracting a diagnosis of schizophrenia.

The man cried when talking about these losses and deaths and said how hard it was for him to repeatedly carry deceased relatives and friends from the church. Just before I left, he showed me a prolific outpouring of coloured drawings he had done in the preceding weeks. These were very busy and amongst the largely abstract emotional elements and Aboriginal icons such as the flag, were depicted scenes of crucifixion and resurrection, jail cells, graves and coffins. For colour, the paintings featured the black, red and yellow of the flag. Several months after our conversations, he was jailed after smashing plate glass windows in a nearby
One woman said the household was ‘violently religious’ and others attributed the young man’s difficulties to the ‘spiritual abuse’ he had suffered through childhood and still. Nonetheless his mother and Aunty felt that he should be taken to the north to see a particular old woman that would be able to help him. He was incarcerated before this could be arranged where he had stayed on medication and on release was ‘stabilized.’

This young man’s experience and his family’s reaction show that there is a significant relationship between psychology, Christianity and ‘traditional’ Aboriginal spirituality. This relationship is strongly informed by historical conditions (such as enforced Christianity with its demonization of Aboriginal lore) and the local and wider political realities that supported these efforts at social and cultural assimilation. The young man embodied and expressed the contradictions of these interpenetrating domains of meaning while his family attempted to invoke a traditional Aboriginal domain strategically juxtaposed against a white domain that sought to control and define the experiences and the family’s interpretation of them.

These widespread experiences reinforced among the town's residents, a fragile and shifting reality of Aboriginality as spirituality that seemed consensual but was revealed as highly contested by the complexities described above. I want to emphasise at this point, that this spiritual aspect of social experience is only one of many complex and inter-related factors. It articulated the local experience of
suffering and paradoxically, at times, contributed to its transcendence. Those who spoke of their experience and suffering in these terms saw problems manifested by individuals such as suicideality and substance misuse for example, as ‘community’ problems that had physical, emotional, spiritual, historical, economic and social dimensions. This perspective recognized the embeddedness of individual identity within extended families and the position of Aboriginal people generally and historically within Australian society. Quite devastating social problems effected numbers of interconnected people and not merely an individual or a bounded nuclear family a fact that families emphasised and which renders individualist medical psychiatry so problematic. Given the socially corroborated nature of the residents’ accounts of spirits, do we, as Merleau-Ponty (1962) asks, have to consider notions of a communal schizophrenia, or are there possible new insights?

**Mysticism and socio-political contexts**

…the mystical experience transforms confusion into clarity...hesitation and cautiousness into courage and determination...it is accepted “as reality”... [and] of all the creative processes it is the one that seems closest to the psychotic experience. (Arieti 1967:429)

Arieti (1967:426-428) distinguished between the creative/mystical experience and the psychotic experience and some characteristics of the residents’ experiences were consistent with his discussion of the mystical (also see E. Straus in L. V. West [Ed] 1962 226-230). Local accounts included visions, featuring old people or parent figures, that were gratifying and enriching, and as described, *ghost shine*
was the subject of intense interest and animated discussion. These experiences opened up new realities and options for intervention, which in Arieti’s terms also distinguished them from psychoses. While the domain my associates described was by no means benign, the experiences were socially meaningful and the person did not exhibit a general disintegration of the personality, a well known feature of psychosis.

While other aspects of the experiences conform to Merleau-Ponty's (1962:341) delineation of schizophrenic hallucinations as auditory and tactile, he notes that these sensory fields withstand the person's existential conditions, which are ‘possessed, jeopardized and de-individualized’. These terms aptly describe the historical conditions of institutionalisation and surveillance characteristic of life under the Act in Queensland’s reserve system. If as he argues, the mystical is grounded in care for others and the psychotic in hostile regression, then the case here seems grounded in both. As shown in the case study above and discussed further in Part 2 of this paper, the experiences invoke forms of care toward one's own and a domain of action/meaning that can both exclude and have power over others (including whites) and express hostility toward them (cf. Klein 1964:65 cited in Alford 1993:213-219)46.

It seems to me that the residents’ accounts of experiences of spirits evoked a collective form of responsibility for everyday loss, suffering and poverty. A realm of Aboriginal spirituality was an intersubjective stage onto which extreme
feelings of fear, rage and grief, arising from generations of state interference and victimisation and disrupted parent-child relations could be projected, made meaningful and dissipated beyond the bounds of a given individual who would otherwise be destroyed. In using the ideological power of communalism underpinned by a rendering of traditional Aboriginal spirituality, residents sought to extend their world of belonging and expand their space of being in the face of the social fragmentation of colonial processes, the individual moralism of Christianity and the racism that continues to exclude them from full participation with, and a legitimate position within, mainstream society.

Glass (1989) discussed the need for safety in public space as a powerful and necessary condition for mental health which is highly relevant for Murris who did not feel safe in predominantly non-Aboriginal Australia on a number of fronts (their physical safety and security in everyday activities, due to police harassment, in terms of their lowered life expectancy, in terms of financial/housing security). The focus on torment from spiritual domains (Aboriginal or Christian or both) can be read as a metaphor for the torment and harassment they experience as Aboriginal people and for the seemingly insurmountable forces ranged against their controlling their own fate. As Jackson argued ‘…ghosts come to encapsulate things one feels one has lost—one’s land, traditional livelihood, language and culture…a loss of balance and control over what is seen as vital elements of one’s socio-cultural identity (Jackson 1998: 162 emphasis in the original).
Glass’s (1989:4) observation that those experiencing delusions and hallucinations are ‘withdrawing from the power and structure of the external world, from society and history’ is crucial in understanding Murris’ situation. While I don’t characterise local beliefs as delusions, Glass’s formulation aptly described the situation of the town’s residents and their attitude toward white morality and society. Many saw these as flawed because the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people contradicted the most profoundly held socio-political tenets of the non-Aboriginal domain, such as fairness, equity and tolerance. Central tenets of Christianity, such as the Ten Commandments, were consistently ignored by the behaviour of whites toward Aboriginal people. Locals revered the Old People who lost their lives in poisonings and massacres which occurred despite the commandment of ‘thou shalt not kill’, and the theft of land, wives, and children by whites continues to inform the profound anger and mistrust that bedevil Aboriginal relations with mainstream society. I would argue that in this town, their withdrawal is not from the external world per se but from an external world dominated by whites or at best by the agenda of whites.

Glass (1989:4) argued that in psychoses the sufferer's ‘consciousness finds itself forced to confront the power exercised by its internal constructions,’ and that this overcomes the power of the drive for community and connectedness to others. Here their ‘internal’ constructions did not overcome the drive for community, but expressed it in a world of spirits and in the
context of history that connected the residents and expressed their sense of belonging to an intersubjective realm of Aboriginality that might overcome divisions among them.

Glass distinguished between the formal political objects of freedom, equality, power, authority, rights and justice, (which the Australian state claims to want for all its citizens) and *feelings* of freedom, power and authority. It was these feeling states associated with the non-realisation of normative democracy and social equity in daily existential conditions that characterised aspects of socio-political life in the town. As Jackson observed the relationship between people and spirits presents the same kinds of problems as the relationship between Aboriginal and white domains. As he put it the problem of how to ‘…maintain a viable distance between the living and the dead is at the same time a matter of how one can maintain some kind of control over one’s relationship with strangers’ (Jackson 1998: 162).

The brutal ontological impacts of removal from their country, their family and their language community, were consolidated by subsequent government practices, such as removal policies within and between the reserves and then by the loss of family inherent in high rates of morbidity and incarceration in jails and detention centres. In particular these historical conditions give death and separation a unique historical and political significance to the residents. In terms of the psyche and social
relations these conditions produced profound feelings of rage and fear arising from a deep sense of ontological insecurity over which the primary social value of family and the invocation of spirits attempts to assert order and control.

In psychoanalytic terms, the multiple losses of or separation from actual parent figures may have made primary process thinking, such as is represented by the appearance of and conversations with deceased relatives, a more dominant psychic organization than in other populations, into which subsequent generations have been socialized. D. Dietrich (1989:286-287) discussed internal dialogues with a deceased throughout the life of persons who had lost an actual parent in early childhood. He referred to this as an aspect of a ‘lost immortal parent complex’ and argued that the immortal lost dead parent ‘remain[ed] more deeply embedded in the primary process and drive organization’ because the lost object had not endured to become closely associated with secondary process conscious representations. This embeddedness in primary processes accounted for the dialogues and visions. An accelerated process of individuation due to separation from parents (primary love objects), under the assimilation policy, perhaps intensified external projection of these serial introjects, as immortal generations of idealized relations who are invested with eternal agency.
However recalling Wallace (1959:74/58), hallucinations are a universal mode of human experience. Here, local definitions and responses reflected the rhizomic context of their past-present-future existence. Residents of all ages were intensely interested in their families' histories and experiences and in finding and keeping track of their relatives. Further pre-colonial life (‘traditional culture’) had become increasingly salient during the life span of the majority of the townspeople. Around 75% of the population were under 25 years old, so they grew up in the period that fostered a revalorization and renaissance of Aboriginal traditionalism.

Social movements such as black rights and Land Rights/Native Title, policy changes toward self-determination, and issues concerning social justice/restitution and reconciliation characterized the period. Older generations often started life with traditionally orientated parents and many remember their removal from their own country to the reserves. These people were socialized within the climate of confusion, secrecy, fear and denigration that surrounded Aboriginal languages, stories, songs, dances and social practices on the reserve.

There were the burdens of the colonial history of Aboriginal pauperization, institutionalization and moral governance and the feelings of social solidarity that arose from these experiences, as against contemporary micro-politics of fragmentation and factionalism. There were also the peculiar shifting positions of individuals in complexly inter-related family networks that made conflicting demands on time and loyalty that I explore further in Part 2. The ever present
impact of State bureaucratic demands and actions were in conflict with those of the family, while the demands and actions of the family and the broader collective of the town community thwarted the demands and impulses of the self. The moral right to pronounce on the way people live was commandeered by competing Christian churches and by Aboriginal councils that co-mingled the realms of western medicine and Aboriginal spirituality. All this occurred in the toxic climate of local and wider ‘race relations’ and the poisonous bad faith of the State's fantastic dance with the chimera of Aboriginal restitution (Native Title, Land Rights, Social Justice), apology and reconciliation.

**Conclusion**

In the literature various critiques have been mounted against the cross-cultural use of specifically European post-enlightenment concepts, such as those that underlie medical psychiatry. It is immediately obvious from the above accounts, that the psychic experiences outlined constitute the stuff that occupies the range of psychoanalytic and medical psychiatric categories grounded in the concept of radically separate atomised individuals. Here, however, the experienced self was not a bounded, fixed entity, but emerged contextually and dynamically from and with the background of one's biological and social relations with extensive networks of largely known others (cf. Taylor 1985:277). Others were not considered separate to, but part of, the self and co-constitutive of selves. The body had boundedness, but was also permeable and related to other mind-bodies and
dis-ease, whether of a physical or psychical nature, was related back to this social body in complex ways.

The mind in particular was not conceived of as bounded and separate to other minds or to the body. Even as the mind had internal realms, these were permeable, social spaces and their products (visions, conversations, dreams, and sensations) were shared, discussed and corroborated socially (cf. Eastwell 1976, Merleau-Ponty 1985). Such orientations to the self, mind and body are part of social experience in this town and are the grounds of moral adjudication. As Kleinman (1995:46) emphasized, emotional action and response (moral decisions) arise out of assessing a practical dilemma in the here and now, not by reference to an immutable set of abstract beliefs and values.

While this work focuses on a Murri township it is my contention (following Schutz 1966, P. Berger 1978, A. Kleinman 1995) that the self is always and everywhere constituted in relation to others. That is the unique positionality of each life world (Umwelt, meaningful system of references), created by the boundary situation of embodiment, results in heterogeneous multiple realities as the phenomenology presented here demonstrates (Schutz 1966). This dynamic operates against the notion of a consensual reality constantly reclaimed in the tenuous hold of the ‘natural attitude’ in mainstream Australian culture.
In remaking these points, I aim to extend the critique of medical institutional psychiatry as the sole legitimate domain of inquiry, explanation and action in relation to social distress not only in Aboriginal populations, but more widely as its mechanistic assumptions and individualist corrective technologies are at odds with the lifeworld of people in any cultural context. Further, the related institutions of welfare, education and law operate on the same principle of individualist rationality\(^{52}\) and the assumption of a consensual reality, as medical psychiatry. These institutions, which aim to complement each other’s efforts at curing social ills (disease, crime, poverty), recreate them by focusing all efforts on controlling, training and curing individuals, thus ignoring the sociological nature of social distress including dis-ease.
References


1 A generic identifier used by Aboriginal people in Queensland and the bordering regions of New South Wales.

2 Probably from the Kabi word gu-nang meaning excrement (Mathew's 1910:29). Other examples are the word gubbament, meaning government, built on a local word for a white person, a gubba, and Bulliman (bully man) for policemen.

3 Hence the paradoxical process of domination as distancing and incorporation was evident (Sider 1987:11).

4 Elsewhere I have drawn continuities between these eras in the process I have called bureaucratic apartheid since Murris were always and remain subject to what Paul Kelly ironically calls ‘special treatment’ in a song of that name (Cox 2000).

5 Some women mentioned consensual relations with white men but many indicated that they were forced and/or coerced into sexual relations with white men when sent out to work on stations.

6 DOGITs are a form of land tenure under the Land Act (Queensland) and were formalized in 1986. They were a compromise over a struggle for Land Rights when the Bjelkje-Peterson government threatened to degazzette Aboriginal reserves. Fifteen of the reserves set up by the government from the turn of the century are DOGIT communities. See Brennan 1992 for a detailed account of these negotiations. Until recently Aboriginal Community Councils (fully elected by and from each community), administered the town under the Community Services (Aborigines) Act 1984 and they hold the Deed-of-Grant-in-Trust in perpetuity although there are provisions to terminate them. In 2003 the Queensland government established the “Meeting Challenges Making Choices” process to examine community governance on DOGIT communities as a response to Justice Fitzgerald’s 2001 Cape York Justice Study. (See http://www.mcmc.qld.gov.au/). Since 2004 various changes in the Acts that govern DOGITS attempt to bring them more into line with ordinary shire councils but various special provisions
In this essay, P. Berger uses Musil's novel *The Man Without Qualities* (1953) to illustrate the Schutzian analysis of "multiple realities", referred to by Musil as 'the other condition' (Berger 1970:343).

7 The annual report (August 2005) on Aboriginal health and social status prepared jointly by the ABS and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare repeated the many that have preceded it. Although reporting small improvements in some areas Aboriginal over-representation on a number of indicators: poverty, unemployment, low life expectancy, imprisonment rates, homelessness and so on continue.

8 In this essay, P. Berger uses Musil's novel *The Man Without Qualities* (1953) to illustrate the Schutzian analysis of "multiple realities", referred to by Musil as 'the other condition' (Berger 1970:343).


10 The epoche of the natural attitude (common-sense), is the suspension of disbelief, (the internal juggling, censoring, suppressing, repressing and projecting of information, sensations and experiences) from which arises the sense of a continuous everyday predictable shared [paramount] reality. The never ending constitution of the self occurs in this context and endures and manages various excursions into spheres or modes of being where one's sense of self and of reality are shown to be tenuous. We live in multiple realities, even as we share paramount reality and dreams, psychoses, sexual ecstasy and arts are other modes of being (James 1960) which constitute other orders of reality, which co-exist with paramount reality. See P. Berger (1978:349-352), J. Van Den Berg (1982:160).

11 See Merleau-Ponty (1964:16) cited in Good (1994:130-33) who likened the perception of artists to that of mourners whose grief suspends habits of thought that usually sustain paramount reality such that familiar things look strangely different or unreal. That is, the character of grief is to desolidify the world, which is in time made and remade through mysticism by 'formulating' a reality through language.

12 At the town for the period February 1994-February 1995 there were 455 visits made by 20 people for mental health services involving the major psychoses. In the same period there were 422 visits made by 69 people for mental health services, involving personality and stress disorders. In total then in one year there were 877 visits made by 89 separate individuals for mental health services (Hospital Statistics, 1995). These statistics were outstripped by the 857 people who visited the hospital for injuries and accidents, the 374 who presented for infected skin lesions, the 276 for respiratory diseases not including asthma and the 93 people who came for ear infections. It is interesting that none of the statistical categories include presentations for problems associated with drugs including alcohol, so I can only assume that these are included under "personality and stress disorders".

13 Laing (1962:114-115) argues that psychologically, these experiences signal *egoic* destruction (by chemicals, life's contradictions), which since the ego is "the instrument for living in this world", exposes the person to other worlds. Phenomenologically the experiences express in form and content a primary unity where ‘me and not me’ inhabit the same region, to which consciousness and perception are in an open orientation. This horizon and intention toward...
meaning socialize the experiences for a renewed egoic adjustment as against the destructive potential of rationalist hegemony.

15 See Keen (2006:516) for an overview of Strathern’s anthropological concept of the ‘dividual’.

16 See Arieti (1967:417-435) who differentiates creativity expressed in mystical experiences from psychotic breakdown. Also A. F. Wallace (1959: 82/66) who offers a variety of alternative responses to hallucinations that concur with my observations and include dismay, panic, enthusiasm, but also ideas for action, treatment or social change.

17 While these experiences are clearly indicative of pre-colonial culture, this is not why I’m interested in them. In my view all cultural phenomena, including pre-colonial cosmology, are related to suffering and its counterpoints. That is I don’t see them as pure unchanging cultural forms that arise fully formed and decontextualised from everyday life now or precolonially.


19 These features of contemporary mythic life at the town accord closely with those outlined in different contexts by Povinelli (1993:31-32, 149-162) and Keen (2006). See Merlan (1998) for an account that consciously seeks to overcome traditional anthropological dichotomies between persistence and change. Merlan privileges neither seeing both dimensions as having relevance for her interpretation of continuity and change. For her critique of anthropological traditionalism and its imaginings of static idealised cultures that deny history and the dynamic nature of culture see chapter 8.

20 These birds are fairly rare in this area.

21 For accounts of similar experiences in various regions in Australia see Elkin (1994:110-111); Keen (2006); Sansom (1980: 122) gives an account for Darwin where such spirits range until their garments are burnt; Morphy 1991 for issues concerning the control of ancestral beings and spirits; Hertz (1960) for an account in beliefs of lingering spirits outside of Australia).

22 Good (1994:23) discussed how, in the social fields he explored, the spiritual world was often the focus of local deliberations about suffering and misfortune and not the individual sufferer.

23 In his discussion on the status of the distinction between "inner" and "outer" being, which he argues does not "run deep" in medieval thought, Medcalf notes a similar hallucination described by Wordsworth who heard pursuit because he felt out of place and guilty of stealing something. Such experiences are possibly related to the local history of excess surveillance and control over Murris’ lives and their desire to realise autonomy by subversion.

24 Jonjurries like to play jokes on adults by frightening them by their sudden appearance, in their startlingly unusual but human form—2-3' tall, wizened, old but agile, jovial and protective of children. Several people related too the story of the non-Aboriginal matron, who had not taken their existence seriously, until she herself saw them playing all around and with a seriously ill but amused child in the hospital ward. A woman, a defacto wife of a man, is in a hostile relation to his family and calls one of the grandchildren of the Matriarch who is raising her, by the nickname Jonjurrie. No one else has adopted this nickname for the girl and it invariably came across as insulting to the girl and her family when the woman used it. This may be because it suggested that the girl (and by extension her family) was not quite human, a suggestion that may invoke much anger, fear and apprehension.

25 Elkin (1994:96-97) discussed the making of medicine men and their power and wrote that people in Eastern and Northern Queensland describe a rainbow spirit creature as half fish half snake.

26 See Jung (in de Laszlo [Ed] 1990:77) where in his 1946 essay On The Nature of the Psyche he discusses the numinous quality of archetypal images that defines them as 'spiritual' and the ambiguity which characterizes them, where they may have healing or destructive effects on the emotions.

27 Contrast this with Robinson's (1990:176) account of suicidality among young Tiwi men, who actively sought the transformative power of initiatory rites such as circumcision (sometimes
outside of their social networks) as a solution to their feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness.

28 See Sansom (1980:61) who argues that alcohol has become ‘the vector of mystical contagion’ (emphasis in the original).


30 Interestingly Keen (2006: 522) reports that piercing the footprint with hot wire was a method of ensorcellment.

31 See J. H. van den Berg (1975:9) who discussed Merleau-Ponty's "philosophy of ambiguity" where the perceptual world is neither completely given nor completely constructed. Phenomenologically, the essential character of human-being exhibits a unity of mind and matter.

32 As Berger argues, this is the same phenomenon that Max Weber called "the routinization of charisma". An example is how in the Catholic Church breakings through of "the other condition" were contained in monasticism. However as Berger says, the 'death of God' and the widespread secularization of the modern world has not "eliminated the problem." (Berger 1970:358)

33 Also see A. F. Wallace (1959:75/59) who designated emic formulations of hallucinatory phenomena as "native theories" which, along with the hallucinatory form and content, formed the proper subject of inquiry. Also M. Merleau-Ponty (1962), E. Straus (in West [Ed] 1962:220-232), J. H. van den Berg (1975) and A. Boisen (1962) for further critiques of Cartesian binarism in the study of human-being.


35 Keen (2006: 520) notes a similar 'transformation of old people into ancestors' described by Munn (1970) amongst the Warlpiri and the Pitjantjatjara.

36 Ceremony is understood in this context as arranging, providing for and attending funerals (or other family events such as weddings and birthdays) which for many families must include a traditional element such as didgeridoo playing and dance.

37 Foucault argued that the 'external' social field is value neutral, i.e. nothing is intrinsically good or bad. However these 'wrongs' contravened what Taylor (1985:266-269) called 'strong evaluations' of a collective against which members' behaviour is judged. He argued that reflexivity of such actions is a defining characteristic of human morality.

38 These power inequities concerned conflicts between those asserting traditional land rights and those asserting historical rights in the land.

39 For example through the activities of organizations such as Link-up; through the establishment of local land councils and corporations throughout Queensland which has seen increasing numbers of locals make visits to the countries of their parents or grandparents origin; and through reconciliatory processes such as the Bringing Them Home report and the public declaration of "Stolen Generations".

40 See L. Cox (1993) for expanded discussion of the diagnoses of Personality Disorder and why it is highly problematic particularly for Aboriginal people, also see R. Morice (1979:293-300).

41 In a fourth case a visiting health worker told of a young Murri girl currently in a metropolitan psychiatric unit. The health worker said she had been sung after running away from a promise marriage to a much older man. She said although young people don't respect such traditions they are still powerful as evidenced by the girl's increasing mental torment that had led to her admission. The health worker had wanted to arrange to bring an Aboriginal pastor to the hospital who she said would be able to cure the girl. The staff at the psychiatric unit had not been interested in following this recommendation.
This could have been a claim or an instance of not remembering a particular fight. Such a repression is easily accounted for in such circumstances as his. Alternatively, it is possible that he was in a fugue state at the time of the fight. A fugue entails a form of automatism and is sometimes associated with dissociative and affective disorders.

This relationship between madness and magic/spirit possession was suggested by Rowse in relation to the north-western Queensland sorcerer figure Djanba-he could only give corroborees to people "a bit mad, becoming magic." (Sullivan 1983:156 cited in Rowse 1987:95)

This incident most closely approached 'running amok' as described by Robinson (1990:163) and also had elements where the young man alluded to grief and loss as closely associated with his aggressive, chaotic, manic and paranoid state.

Such spiritual abuse is eloquently and chillingly evoked in James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*.

These experiences are consistent with mythic life described for other Aboriginal populations (Povinelli 1993 and Hiatt 1978).

This was powerfully brought home to me when the otherwise sanguine woman I was shopping with was too scared to try on a dress in the shop fitting room in a rural town. Likewise, when a couple who have lived away from the town for over two decades were nonetheless nervous about entering a Gold Coast hotel where we planned to meet and share a meal. They insisted that we arrive there together, because "we don't want any trouble."


These include the psychoses (schizophrenia, manic-depressive psychoses and psychotic depression) and the neuroses such as various anxiety states and neurotic depression. They also include the dissociative states, the interface between psychoses and neuroses, such as post-traumatic stress disorder and the borderline personality disorders which include drug, alcohol and gambling addictions. In short the range of mental illness/disorder as medically defined.

Such a perspective can be contrasted with J. H. Van Den Berg (1982:160) where he argues that the hallucinator and the dreamer do so alone.

The historical links between contemporary medicine (and therefore psychiatry), capitalism, bourgeois mechanistic rationality and sociology, have been amply demonstrated by Doerner (1981); and Foucault (1967 and 1975). The related critical discussion of rationally justified human social, psychological, economic, spiritual and physical repression and oppression-be it through racism, sexism or the imputation of insanity- has occupied many writers since the imperialistic excesses of the last two centuries. Some of these are Fanon (1967, 1980), Cesaire (1972), Cooper (1972, 1976), Kovel (1988), Illich (1977), Manganyi (1977), A. J. Saris (1994) and D. Levin, J. Satinover, Nathan Schwarts-Salant et al in D. Levin, ed. (1987).