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James Cowan and the white quest for the black self

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Abstract: A literary genre is emerging in which Aborigines are cast as the spiritual saviours of the supposedly alienated Western self. One of the most prolific authors writing in this field is the Australian, James Cowan. Through a series of books Cowan moves further and further into the Aboriginal metaphysical realm until at last, he would have his readers believe, he actually enters the Dreaming and becomes an intrinsic part of it. In this article I critically examine these books, focusing on Cowan's construction of Aborigines and the sorts of claims he makes. I also consider some possible consequences of his particular portrayal of Aborigines. Despite his prominence in this field, and publishers' claims that he is 'an internationally respected authority on Australian Aborigines and other indigenous peoples', his work so far has received little critical analysis.

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Since colonisation, many writers have included Aboriginal characters and/or references to Aboriginal cultures in their work. This sometimes tentative inclusion was motivated by a range of disparate factors and agendas, one of which for various authors was a genuine 'attempt to overcome the tyranny of cultural distance' (Healy 1989:1; see also Curthoys 1997:124). In so far as this attempt took the form of endeavouring to explain the nature of Aboriginality to non-Indigenous readers, one might have suspected that come the explosion of writings by Aborigines since the 1970s, most of which are intended for a non-Aboriginal readership, the number of white authored texts explaining 'them' to 'us' would have diminished markedly.

Instead, a new genre is burgeoning, a genre in which Aborigines and Aboriginal cultures are depicted in a primitivist guise that owes much to late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century constructions. Rather than complementing the writings of most Aboriginal authors, this body of work, which promises to bring 'true' Aborigines and 'real', 'authentic' Aboriginality to its readers, builds a people—rarely peoples—that stand in opposition to much Aboriginal self-portrayal. Underpinning the emergent genre is the desire to cast Aborigines in the role of saviour. Aborigines, it is said, bear the cultural mechanisms and attributes that will enable reintegration of the alienated Western self, assist non-Indigenous Australians to overcome their alleged alienation from landscape, save the world from environmental catastrophe, bring spiritual fulfilment to those so questing, and solve a myriad of other Western crises, personal, social and cultural.

James Cowan, an Australian author—although one who does not like to be labelled as such (see Rolfe 1995)—has written a series of non-fiction works that fall within the genre that portrays Aborigines as the saviours of the West. Published both in Australia and overseas, where his books seem to do well, and despite his prolificness in this sensitive area, his work, which raises a number of serious issues, has attracted little critical comment. In fact, the *Warner Books' Author's Corner* (1998) website describes Cowan as

being 'an internationally respected authority on Australian Aborigines and other indigenous peoples'. However, as I argue, Cowan is not so much interested in Aborigines and Aboriginal cultures as in using Aborigines to address his own fears, needs and desires.

To these ends he perpetuates the damaging notion that 'true' Aboriginality is only to be found in so-called traditional settings. Each of his publications on Aborigines brings him and his readers ever closer to an imagined pre-colonial authenticity. It is in this postulated authenticity that Cowan finds the cultural and religious attributes he desires. To facilitate the appropriation of these attributes he then argues that they are not the cultural or intellectual property of Aborigines, but of all humankind. Further indicating that his primary concerns are not in bringing to his readership a greater understanding of Aborigines and Aboriginal cultures, but rather in addressing his own needs and interests, is the fact that through a series of contrivances his explanations of Aboriginality merge into his own personal journey towards an Aboriginal sensibility and self.

In this article I critically examine Cowan's constructions of Aborigines and Aboriginal cultures, and explore some of the possible consequences of these constructions. I also examine the issue of appropriation and the claims he makes about his own identity. Making this analysis of his work even more timely is the fact that the Australian Literary Society awarded Cowan's novel *A Mapmaker's Dream* (1996) its Gold Medal for 1998. While this award was for a novel that does not concern itself with Aborigines, it is possible that such an accolade could lend authority to the non-fiction works discussed here.

Cowan's *Mysteries of the Dream-time* is subtitled 'The Spiritual Life of Australian Aborigines'. In the introduction, which mentions the destruction wrought upon Aborigines by the colonial endeavour, Cowan likens the Dreaming to an 'exquisite jewel' on the cusp of being destroyed (1992a:1). Not only does this simile crystallise the Dreaming into something fragile that is easily lost, or whose beauty is readily tarnished, the deleterious impact that the European occupation of Australia had upon Aborigines, and is still having, is set in the context of the non-Aboriginal value ascribed to Aboriginal spirituality. Cowan takes umbrage because what is 'at risk' is something that he deems to be valuable. In such instances, Aboriginal spirituality is not accorded value on its own terms but is subjected to measurements that have their origin in a different political economy and culture. It is on this

basis that the preservation of the Dreaming is advocated and the attempts of those who sought to destroy it criticised.

Cowan also alludes immediately to the richness of what Aborigines supposedly once had, and the 'emptiness of a material existence' experienced by the West (1992a:2). But, as Hamilton (1990:16) reminds us, 'an image of the self implies at once an image of another, against which it can be distinguished'. This insight is equally true in the broad terms of the image one has of one's culture. Cowan's understanding of Western culture as a materialistic carapace bereft of a life-nurturing and humanistic spiritual underbelly creates an image that demands its contrary, and the space for it to fill. As this space is already enclosed by Western materialism, rationalism and empiricism, Aborigines fill the emptiness as purely spiritual beings (see Lattas 1990:58-9).

In its capacity to satisfy the non-materialistic, spiritual self, Cowan asserts that the Dreaming is more important to Aborigines than political or social concerns. This is because 'it is the only unsullied possession left to them'. All other aspects of Aboriginal life have been either tainted by the dominant culture or destroyed. Thus, Aborigines are urged to take the path that will lead them back to the Dreaming, so that they can 'rediscover...their cultural identity' (1992a:4). But the Dreaming is not an isolable spiritual element, but an intrinsic component of Aboriginal social and political organisation. As Djinyini Gondarra (1988:6) asserts, the Dreaming 'is based on three fundamental areas in Aboriginal life systems. They are religious, social and political.' Strehlow (1970:111) noted how, among the Arrernte, the 'ceremonial chief was not viewed by his Aboriginal community as performing merely the religious functions...each ceremonial chief held, in a sense, also the status of a head of a vital food-producing organisation'. By wrenching Aboriginal belief systems from the contexts in which they operate and confining their relevance to the metaphysical realm, the issue of the near-impossibility of leading life in accordance with the ancestral heritage without first addressing political, social and economic issues is avoided. So too is the issue of the liberation of the subject people (Hountondji 1983). In this way, Cowan parallels the manner in which much ethnology was practised, for, as Hountondji (1983:163) argues, ethnologists 'tend to isolate the cultural aspects of society and to stress it at the expense of the economic and political aspects'.

Cowan typically extends this approach to his support for land rights. Aborigines must be given land, he declares, so that they can repossess their totems and enter the metaphysical realm of the Dreaming (1992a:129–34; see also Cowan and Beard 1991:12, 214). The fact is disregarded that land offers a material base upon which to secure a living and that Aboriginal beliefs are an intrinsic component of their land-oriented political economies. As Jeremy Beckett (1988:207) comments, 'the Aboriginal claimant for land [is] cast in the role of *homo religiosus* rather than *homo economicus*'.

One implication of locating Aboriginal cultural identity solely within an abstracted metaphysical realm is that Aborigines must never change, certainly not in so far as their beliefs are concerned, for, Cowan (1992a:4) implies, to do so is to lose their identity, necessitating its rediscovery. This stance overlooks the fact that a culture is only ever temporary in that it 'is not a *state* but a *becoming*', a phenomenon that is continually made afresh and one wherein 'cultural traditions are always a complex heritage' that is subject to tensions, discontinuities, restrictions, options and choices made (Irele 1983:24; Hountondji 1983:160–3). Although as a concept the Dreaming is vibrant within *Mysteries of the Dream-time*, by not allowing changes to the belief structures as a whole, Cowan is permanently arresting the further development of these beliefs and implying that Aborigines, if they want to be perceived as such, must continually re-enact a set of traditions derived from some point in their culture's development which is said to represent all of their unique past. Thus, the Dreamtime is petrified and made to fit that anthropological myth of cultures being 'always identical to themselves in the homogeneous space of an eternal present' (Hountondji 1983:164). Cowan is seeking to lock the Dreaming, and Aboriginal cultural identity which he shackles to his interpretation of this concept, into a state of ceaseless, unchanging repetition.

Cowan sees the Dreaming, as he understands it, as something that 'must be preserved as a living reality at all costs'. This is because he believes it to be 'the metaphysical expression of primordial truths that trace the birth of the world and man's place in it'. Under this notion the Dreaming is no longer the province of Aborigines, but the expression of 'truths' that we in the West once possessed but have now lost. Aborigines are unique not because of the complex systems they established in order to best exploit their *particular* environment and explain the world they

moved in and perceived, but because these systems, lumped indiscriminately together as the Dreaming, 'utterly possessed' them. This clearly implies that far from being the creators and hence proprietors of the Dreaming, Aborigines are simply extant carriers of what was once a *universal* phenomenon. They are the passive bearers of humankind's heritage, the caretakers of property that belongs to us all. On this premise Cowan urges that 'men and women of goodwill, both European and Aboriginal, must begin to regard the mysteries of the Dreaming as being important in their own lives', and he anticipates the day when the Dreaming will become 'a sustaining metaphysical principle for all Australians'. It is, after all, an expression of our origins, our 'primordial truths' (1992a:2, 4, 131, 132, see also 134, 137, 138).

While appearing to support Aboriginal cultures, Cowan's endeavours to make Aboriginal cultural property world heritage actually play a converse role. As Henrietta Fourmile (1989:6) argues, these endeavours are 'responsible for the destruction of a culture by placing the preservation of appropriated cultural property above the continuity of that culture'. This is evident in Cowan's linking the survival of Aboriginal culture and identity to the continuation of the Dreaming in what he imagines to be its pre-colonial form. For instance, in the chapter 'The World of Totems', he argues that in order to maintain contact with the Dreaming a totem is necessary, and that, while it is impossible for Aborigines to lose their totem once it is acquired, many urban Aborigines have not been born into a totemic environment. As the Dreaming is the '*raison d'être* of Aboriginal culture', in losing this essential link they lose their cultural identity (1992a:106, 131; see also Cowan and Beard 1991:10). Countering such a notion, Estellie Smith (1982:135) has argued that:

all traditions of identity, even when claimed to be derived from an unalterable inventory of 'past facts,' consist in large part of events altered in scale, sequentially rearranged, freshly 'understood,' and even lately created.¹

Thus, cultural identity, like culture itself, is in the process of continually being made anew, and this provides the mechanism by which sociocultural continuity can be achieved. The traditions—'a most powerful practical means of incorporation' (Williams in Chase and Shaw 1989:11)—which cultures articulate at any given time are selected so as to address current exigencies, while simultaneously

addressing the need for sociocultural continuity. All traditions, therefore, can and do change as demands dictate (Chase and Shaw 1989:10–14; Kolig 1981:5–6; Ranger 1983:250–1).

Cowan's failure to acknowledge that traditions of identity are forever in a state of flux leads to an inability to accept cultural dynamism and the diverse ways in which Aboriginality is expressed in the present. As noted by Jacobs (1988:33), those Aborigines whom the non-Aboriginal community consider to be no longer living their lives in accordance with their ancestral heritage, such as urban Aborigines, continue strongly to articulate their Aboriginality and cultural uniqueness (see also Pierson 1982:3 and *passim*). While conceptions of a traditional past still inform urban expressions of identity, these expressions include the range of experiences following colonisation and dispossession, and reflect the demands, difficulties and rewards of a modern inner-city lifestyle. For example, in forcefully rejecting the notion that urban Aborigines have lost their culture and are divorced from their heritage, Marcia Langton explains how these Aboriginal cultures are internally consistent and integrated systems that derive their meaning from Aboriginal heritage, their historical experiences and resulting contemporary circumstances: 'It may not be the Dreaming as Stanner saw it that has persisted into urban Aboriginal life, but at least an altered world view derived from the Dreaming' (Langton 1981:21; see also Behrendt 1995:56–61).² While Langton is acknowledging the role that an imagined, recollected or anthropologically inscribed pre-contact heritage plays in constructing a stable—as in a continuing—identity, she also allows for the factors responsible for making cultural identity a responsive, ever-changing social entity.

Cowan, however, conceives of the Dreaming as a homogeneous system of beliefs impervious to time, history and evolutionary change. He shackles Aboriginal culture and identity to this static construction. He then argues that Aboriginal cultural property is the heritage of humankind and therefore a product available to all. In these arguments, he is perpetuating notions that have assisted in the subjugation and expropriation of Aborigines. Unfortunately, *Mysteries of the Dream-time* establishes the foundations upon which his subsequent publications, those describing his journeys to the self through 'the Aborigines', build.

Noting the propensity of non-Aborigines to assume a controlling interest in Aboriginal cultural property on the basis of its value to them, Harry Allen (1988:86) argues that:

Historians and archaeologists, through the 'Heritage Movement', have become involved in their own attempt to establish spiritual and emotional ties between Europeans and the land by taking over control of the material links that existed between Aborigines, the land, and its past in the form of archaeological and sacred sites. These are not being preserved because of their value to Aboriginal society but for their value to the Europeans.

The value of such sites to non-Aborigines is also championed by Cowan, who, although not in a position to exercise control of the material links, seeks to appropriate the metaphysical relationship between Aborigines and place.

This is made evident in *Sacred Places in Australia*, published in 1991. This glossy publication, boasting at least one colour photograph on almost every page, was written in collaboration with the photographer Colin Beard. Together they travelled over 30,000 km across Australia in order to discover *djang*, a telluric power or energy imbued in certain places by Aboriginal Sky Heroes in the creative phase of the Dreaming (Cowan and Beard 1991:12, 228). These are the title's 'sacred places in Australia'.

Cowan was hoping that, through coming into contact with these site-specific manifestations of the Aboriginal metaphysical realm, he would 'understand the country at a deeper level'. The belief that this realm also contains 'information pertinent to the survival of everyone and everything on this earth', as reflected in the notion that Aborigines had nurtured the land 'for countless millennia without damaging it in any way', provided further incentive for his 'pilgrimage'. Thus, the revelation of selected Aboriginal sacred places is being coupled to a private and general non-Aboriginal agenda. Aboriginal spirituality will lead Cowan himself to a better understanding of place and country, help save the world from total environmental destruction, and provide spiritual nourishment to a hungry West.³ Knowledge of Aboriginal sacred places will also serve as a barrier against the depredations visited upon the body and psyche by the Western secular world (Cowan and Beard 1991:13, 14, 212, 214, 224–7).

Typically, the encounter with sacred places occurs in the remote regions of Australia. A chapter is devoted to each site, and six of the twelve places visited are in the Northern Territory, with another four in northern Western Australia. While the importance of visual imagery in a glossy book may well have dictated certain locations, Cowan suggests that chance encounters through following the spirits within the land were also responsible for some of the sacred places included (Cowan and Beard 1991:14). Whatever the intention or reason, the text and photographs reinforce the perception that, today, authentic Aboriginal spirituality exists only in remote and sparsely populated regions. (The leading acknowledgement to Mazda for supplying a four-wheel drive vehicle in order to undertake the research emphasises the misconception that most true sacred sites are now found in rugged and almost inaccessible areas.)

The Rainbow Serpent, for instance, is always encountered in such areas, never in metropolitan sites such as the Old Swan brewery in Perth. This is despite the fact that the Nyungar people of the Swan Valley fought a long, very public and ultimately unsuccessful campaign to have this Rainbow Serpent site protected against development by the Multiplex company and turned into parkland.⁴ At sites where Cowan and Beard were accompanied by Aboriginal custodians they are described as 'tribes-people', another distancing term hinting at pre-colonial vestiges. It adds further restrictions to where Aboriginal cultural heritage can be found by locating it within a specifically defined category of people. In accounts such as this, it is rarely found in fringe-dwellers or urban groups, the very people struggling to protect the Swan Valley sacred site. By feeding popular perceptions of authenticity extant in remote regions and certain groups of Aborigines only, texts such as Cowan's threaten to further dispossess all Aboriginal people.

Cowan claims that there was no intention to expropriate the sacred sites visited. It was, however, 'to acknowledge them as part of the rich heritage of Australia'. This blurs the distinction between heritage that is the property of Aboriginal groups and that which belongs, as it were, to the continent itself and in which we all can share. This raises the question as to who controls and/or has access to this heritage and on what terms. Cowan clearly believes that non-Aborigines not only can and should share Aboriginal

heritage but also, through an encounter with it, can enter the Aboriginal metaphysical realm and experience their sense of the sacred.

Furthermore, he casts himself almost in the role of saviour. Describing the sacred places where he and Beard were joined and guided by custodians as 'living sanctuaries', he lists the 'dead' sites for which he claims there are no surviving custodians. The glibness of this statement indicates Cowan's pressing need to situate Aboriginality in the context of readily observed markers of continuity. That Tasmania has a vibrant autochthonous population despite their alleged extinction should have sounded a warning. Nevertheless, at the places lacking custodians, Cowan and Beard (1991:14) were 'left to our own devices, to attempt to draw the dead sanctuary back into the mainstream of Aboriginal spirituality, so that it too might become an inspiration for later generations'. In other words, through the mediums of printed word and photography, and an unguided personal encounter with a sacred place, Cowan hopes to deliver a lost metaphysics back to Aborigines.

Mutawintji (Mootwingee), to the northeast of Broken Hill, is the last sacred place visited by Cowan and Beard. Owing to the 'extinction of its custodians', it is also one of their 'dead sanctuaries'.⁵ Nevertheless, by this stage of their journey, Cowan writes that they both felt as though 'the whole of Australia was ...within [them]', and that, although there were no surviving custodians or guides, they had learnt from Aborigines in other places visited 'how to revere what they held to be of supreme importance'. Completely ignoring the specificity of Aboriginal beliefs so as to universalise their relevance, Cowan declares that he and Beard 'were now initiates into the sacred realm of place' (1991:208, 210). In other words, he is asserting that he would be spiritually cognisant of any Aboriginal sacred site.

As evidence of this, he recounts an experience. Contrasting the Aboriginal world view and their sentence to a spiritual power emanating from the landscape with Western secular modernity, Cowan finds himself in the presence of guardian Crack Men when returning along Nootambulla Creek gorge to the campsite one evening. 'The Crack Men were protecting me. They were guiding me homeward, while at the same time giving me a curious sense of oneness with the bush.' Thus, he alleges that he was actually in contact with manifestations of the Dreaming in what was, or at least had been prior to

his arrival, a 'dead' sanctuary. No longer needing guides, he 'understood now what it was like to believe in Jarapiri [the Rainbow Serpent] and his ilk': Aboriginal 'sacred places had at last become a reality, adding a new dimension to my life' (1991:218, 222).

The premise upon which Cowan and Beard undertook their foray into Mutawintji—that premise being that all the custodians are extinct—raises a very serious issue. Could it be that in order to write himself into the Aboriginal sacred script Cowan wrote the custodians out? For the rightful owners of Mutawintji do survive. They have in fact been very active in having their existence acknowledged, rights recognised, and demands over access and control to certain sites within the national park met. So much so that in 1984 the Western Regional Aboriginal Land Council organised a blockade which succeeded in closing access to one of the most popular sites in the park. While eventually this site was reopened, it is on a restricted and controlled basis, and the Snake Cave, which Cowan and Beard visited, is closed to the public (see Creamer 1990:136). Significantly, Cowan does not mention whether he sought permission to trespass there, for to do so would immediately counter his claim of there being no surviving custodians, for it is they who control access.

The following appears in publicity distributed during the blockade:

Mootawingee is a very special place for us. Our people have camped here for thousands of years...Whites have not shown respect for this sacred place. The National Parks and Wildlife Service have turned it into a tourist attraction. People who have no right here have disturbed this land. The pamphlet...is insulting; [it tells] tourists that people from this area no longer exist. (quoted in Creamer 1990:136)

Claims of an interest in and rights over a sacred place, let alone broadcasting one's actual existence, could not be much clearer. Moreover, following changes to the park's literature and signboards, and to the way in which access to sites is controlled and managed (including the provision of an educational centre), it would be difficult to visit Mutawintji without becoming aware that there are Aboriginal custodians to that area, even if they are not physically present during the time of one's visit.

Cowan and Beard (1991:14) commenced their pilgrimage to the 'sacred places of Australia' in the winter of 1990, so their 'research' did not take place prior to these events. Nor has the activism ceased. Since 1992 the National Parks and Wildlife Service

and the Mutawintji Local Aboriginal Land Council have adopted a joint management approach to managing the culturally significant sites. In fact, ownership of Mutawintji lands has recently been transferred back to Aborigines, the first of such lands to be returned in the state of New South Wales (see *National Parks and Wildlife News* 1997/1998). What Cowan actually means by telling his readers that the custodians of Mutawintji are extinct, or why and how he came to make such a claim, is not known. In the circumstances, however, it is difficult not to conclude that he did not want custodial Aborigines interfering with, mediating or obstructing his intended possession of their property. As he states, 'it was fitting that I should find myself alone at Mootwingee, without the support of my friends any more' (1991:222).

Cowan's pilgrimage into Aboriginality continues in *The Elements of the Aborigine Tradition*, published in 1992. Among other matters, the back cover promises that contained within is an explanation of Aboriginal secret rites, rituals and reincarnation. Cowan states in the introduction that the book is 'a small attempt to protect one of the world's oldest spiritual heritages'. The reason for protection is 'that without such heritages the world will soon wither and die at its root'. Leaving aside the issue of whether the best way to protect cultural heritage is to publicly divulge its 'secrets', this sense of impending world calamity serves to underpin the rationale for and need to colonise the 'Aborigine Tradition' 'before it is too late'. Confirming the sense that Aboriginal non-material cultural property is a resource to be exploited, Cowan declares that 'traditional wisdom...is a field that offers the prospect of a bountiful harvest' (1992b:3, 5, 6, 52, 81, see also 66). In this we have the notion that, the material benefits accrued from harvesting the resources of usurped Aboriginal land having already been reaped, now the fruits of another rich field under Aboriginal proprietorship are coveted and are to be similarly taken.

In addition to being conceptualised as resources that can be plundered, the Aboriginal metaphysical realm and cultural identity provide a space or territory that can be entered and colonised. This is made explicit when Cowan reveals the significance of his pilgrimage to the 'sacred places of Australia'. Listing the places visited that appear in the earlier book (Cowan and Beard 1991), but now also including the Torres Strait, he attests that all of these sites are now part of his 'spiritual homeland'. Whereas Aborigines are affiliated with and assert proprietary rights to specific locations and particular tracts of

land, which means for instance that the Yolngu people of northeast Arnhem Land would not and could not claim the Pitjantjatjara lands in Central Australia as part of their spiritual home, through the expedience of universalising Aboriginal spirituality Cowan is able to do so. He declares that he has become, 'in a sense, "Aboriginalised", absorbing into myself a way of looking upon the world which is uniquely theirs. Now the Rainbow Snake and the Lightning Brothers are part of my own spiritual pantheon' (1992b:5-6).

Thus, through an understanding of certain principles and ignoring their application in the context that sustains them, their territorial boundedness for instance, and taking as his cue certain ancestral beings that transcended language groups, such as the Rainbow Snake, Cowan colonises all localised manifestations of Aboriginal spirituality and consequentially gains access to the entire country. This is a facility that he denies many Aborigines, such as those that live in urban areas—for have they not been born outside a totemic environment, and are not totems the only way of accessing the Dreaming, and do not totems have territorial specificity anyway? (Cowan 1992a:105-15, 1992b:45; Cowan and Beard 1991:12). This is not to be read as an endorsement of Cowan's explanation of totems or their function; it is simply to demonstrate the power of the coloniser to deny the colonised that which they, the colonisers, take as their own and self-interestedly change or reinterpret.

In what appears to be a rare display of defensiveness, Cowan asks: 'If an Aborigine can absorb the teachings of the Gospels into his life, why can't I absorb those of Marlu, the Great Kangaroo, or the Maletji Law Dogs into mine?' (1992b:6). First, one must consider the power differential between Aborigines and non-Aborigines and the possible consequences of non-Aborigines assuming the right (let alone the capability) to assimilate Aboriginal beliefs. As Cowan sees the Dreaming as being integral to Aboriginality, and as this is inseparable from the land and confers specific tracts of country to those within the Dreaming's embrace, in entering the Dreaming non-Aborigines will also be able to claim spiritual affiliation with place and stake their interests accordingly.

Cowan is already doing this. And he is not alone. Julie Marcus (1988:255) explains how non-Aborigines in Alice Springs 'who have a basic knowledge of local Dreaming Ancestors, are quick to point out that they too have "birth rights" in the Yiperinya Caterpillar Dreaming sites of the town'. The Catholic theologian

Eugene Stockton (1988:40) makes a similar point in respect to the area where he was born. The context in which these claims are made indicates that the interest is not in preserving the integrity of an acquired spirituality based on the Dreaming, but in satisfying other needs and ambitions. Cowan (1995:12, 325) also makes this apparent. He is not claiming birth rights to place as conventionally understood but, rather, a spiritual affiliation with the country as a whole. Through Aboriginal cultural mechanisms, he is attempting to make all Australia his place. As Annette Hamilton (1990:23) has argued, 'it is as if the whole question of Australian identity is being reopened through an appropriation of the Aboriginal presence as a sanction for the settler presence in the country'.

Another problem with Cowan's defence of his claim to be absorbing the Dreaming, just as Aborigines have 'absorbed' Christianity, is highlighted by the fact that when Aborigines adopt Christianity they often draw from their ancestral heritage and impose their own interpretations upon the instruction received, thereby creating a composite metaphysical belief structure (see Gondarra 1988; Ungunmerr-Baumann 1988). This is not unique but a universal practice. Non-Aborigines claiming to have 'absorbed' Aboriginal spirituality and sense of the sacred will also subject these beliefs to modification so that they too form a composite which is compatible with their own needs, interests and viewpoints, as Cowan does himself. As noted by Igor Kopytoff (1986:67), 'in situations of culture contact...what is significant about the adoption of alien objects—as of alien ideas—is not the fact that they are adopted, but the way they are culturally redefined and put to use'.

However, as Marcien Towa (in Irele 1983:25) warns, material inferiority places cultures at the mercy of the materially powerful. Thus, non-Aborigines such as Cowan can place at their disposal selected and abstracted aspects of Aboriginal beliefs, in addition to having the political and economic dominance to ensure that the adapted cultural concepts are not only self-serving but also become orthodoxy. Moreover, as Lowenthal (1990:310) argues, many minority groups, including Aborigines, view their past as perhaps the only leverage they have left with which to influence the dominant political economy. If non-Aborigines seek to make the same or similar use of the Aboriginal past as Aborigines themselves, then conflict is inevitable (Allen 1988:87).

Furthermore, Cowan's defence—that 'if an Aborigine can...why can't I...?'—expediently ignores

the fact that Christianity is an evangelical, proselytising religion that was imposed upon Aborigines and that Aboriginal religious beliefs do not work from the assumption of universal relevance, nor do they share the missionary principles of Christianity (see Wilson 1979:25). The imposition of Christianity upon Aborigines (and the subsequent adoption of the religion by many Aborigines) is not the equivalent of the practice of non-Indigenous people appropriating and distorting selected aspects of Aboriginal religious beliefs in order to satisfy their own needs and interests.

In the light of longstanding pejorative descriptions of Aborigines and their cultures and the readily available racist taunts, it is a mistake to see work that values the cultures of indigenous minorities so highly as being necessarily supportive of those cultures and their bearers, and as commendably non-racist. This is notwithstanding the fact that many weave into their exaltations of Aboriginal cultures criticisms of how Aborigines were treated under the colonial endeavour. As Harris (1979:74) finds, 'if there is one person more damaging to the position of Aboriginal Australians than a racist, it is the person who idealises and romanticises them'. One reason for this is that Aborigines are still locked into the position of Other, not in the capacity of an independent and self-determining status but in binary opposition to the expressed dissatisfactions with and problems faced in non-Aboriginal society and culture and the proclaimed spiritually unfulfilled self (Lattas 1990, 61).

Yet, in *Messengers of the Gods: Tribal Elders Reveal the Ancient Wisdom of the Earth*, Cowan presents the themes evident in his earlier work with greater force and a growing sense of urgency.⁶ He warns, and is warned by the elders he meets, that rational thought, modern science and capitalism have not only led to personal alienation from the sources of human nourishment but have also placed the world on the 'brink of annihilation'. The impending catastrophe would be prevented by turning to the 'earth-wisdom' of 'traditional people'. Their knowledge is 'vital to the preservation of the world' (1993: 2-3, 6, 7, 13, 14, 201-2, 205-6).

Cowan also develops more thoroughly his assumed role as saviour to the cultures that he argues are vital for our survival. He believes his agency is necessary because the healing beliefs and practices that could reintegrate Western society are being lost. To lend this assertion verisimilitude, he includes the

lamentations of elders who speak of cultural perdition, and their criticisms of the youth that appear to be shunning their ancestral heritage. However, being a 'writer-man', Cowan is asked by elders in the Kimberley to help bring their culture back. A bargain is struck whereby he will be told Dreaming stories and, in return for writing them down so that future generations of Aboriginal children will have access to them, he is taken by fully initiated custodial elders to selected Wandjina caves and taught the associated law. This entails the learning of many 'secrets', for Waljali, one of the instructing elders and a 'lawman', believes that the best way to preserve their culture is to abandon their conventions of secrecy. Instead of seeing this in terms of potentially facilitating the loss of even more cultural property, he argues that 'if we keep them [the Wandjina] secret...then we lost. White people only care about what they know. We got to make sure they respect our culture. That means the Wandjina have got to come to our rescue.' On the basis of the opinions of the particular elders encountered, and in the belief that it is important for people 'who retain a paleolithic vision' to share their knowledge, Cowan appears to have no hesitation in publishing the 'secrets' divulged (1993:38-40, 47-8, 70, 162-3, 164, 166-7, 169, 172, 173, 195, 200).

Thus, Cowan is the messenger, bringing what he regards as the needed but threatened vestiges of pre-colonial Aboriginal culture to a wider audience. He knows the distant Other and is delivering us their proffered secrets. But he claims a more active part than simply being the deliverer of 'earth-wisdom'. For each Indigenous people visited he takes a creative and tutelary saint role too. For example, on the island of Mer in the Torres Strait, he suggests to an elder the creation and content of a new story and dance in order to restore a 'broken' connection with the Dreaming. The elder immediately accepts the suggestion, and the first tentative steps of the dance take form (1993:71). It should be noted that this was Cowan's first visit to the island, and his suggestions were not based on exhaustive studies or intimate knowledge of Mer mythology but were opportunistically spontaneous. In the Kimberley, he claims to be the catalyst reinvigorating the elders' waning interest in their own heritage by disturbing the ennui engendered by welfare payments:

My presence...had given these men new enthusiasm for the old ways. In me they could see someone who understood their deep need to express the mysterious

power of the Sky Heroes, and the hold their myth life had over them. I was their lightning rod so to speak, able to draw to me all their undischarged fears of becoming an extinct race. (1993:178)

Hence it is Cowan, not other Aborigines, who so often recognises the value of Aboriginal culture and who is trying to save it from extinction. It is this premise that reveals the full extent of the role he casts for himself and which highlights his attempts to colonise Aboriginal beliefs. Unless he alone gains a foothold in the Dreaming, it will be lost.

Extending this notion, Cowan claims that he is told secrets 'about the Wandjina's hidden form known only to fully initiated tribesmen' (1993:174). In other words, he is being given information that no other Aborigines beyond a select few elders know. Furthermore, as the elders taking him into their tribal territory were old, he was accompanying them on what was perhaps their last visit to key Wandjina Dreaming sites (1993:178). Having information that no one else knows and that Aboriginal youth allegedly do not want to listen to, and in implying that he was in the presence of the custodial elders on their very last visit to the caves where their ancestral Dreaming beings reside, which is another way of stating that no one else—Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal—will have the opportunity to acquire the knowledge he gains, Cowan assumes control of significant sectors of Aboriginal spiritual knowledge from that region. We are to understand that not only is he being given secret knowledge but also that, in the near future, he will be the only custodian of this knowledge.

Having received this tuition, Cowan is far from being a detached repository of information about the Dreaming. Whereas in *Sacred Places of Australia* he feels the presence of certain Dreaming manifestations and an abiding sense of numen residing in the earth—except where supposedly extinct—in the Kimberley he actually enters the Dreaming and becomes a part of it. He declares it 'was a world in which I felt I was beginning to belong'. The sense of belonging stems from the fact that Cowan holds that the Dreaming was reacquainting him with his 'racial memory' (1993:14, 182, 183). Thus, in entering the Dreaming he was actually entering the self and becoming reunited with that part of him that represents his primordial origins.⁷

He proceeds to make this point unambiguously clear. Visiting another sacred cave which was the locale of spiritual conception, or 'Dreaming place', of

his guide Krunmurra, he is sent off alone to explore the paintings. As he made his way to the overhang, he entered:

the moment I had been waiting for. I had become a living vestige of my own origins. The world as it once was had begun to surge through my veins, the baptismal blood of Sky Heroes, the wordless wonder of Wandjinas as they fashioned order out of chaos. I was about to climb up to the cave where I was born and confront the august countenance of my maker, he who had dreamed me into existence. (1993:195)

Although in his autobiography Cowan is conveniently obscure about his place of birth, it was most probably Sydney, and in any event was certainly thousands of kilometres from the Kimberley (Cowan 1995:15, 77–8). In entering a Kimberley Dreaming and claiming the conception place of another as his own, Cowan is once again demonstrating how manipulative his interpretation of Aboriginal metaphysical beliefs can be in order to suit his own purposes. For someone so anxious to locate 'authentic' expressions of the Aboriginal spiritual realm by travelling to remote locations where he believes their culture is still intact, if only just, it seems remarkable that he is so creative with the authenticity he believes he has encountered. Conveniently forgotten, too, is his earlier declaration that, in order to have contact with the Dreaming, a totem is necessary (1992a: 105–6, 115–16), because at this point in his series of 'pilgrimages' he is yet to acquire one.

Just in case there was any doubt about his claim to have actually entered the Dreaming—a literary flourish perhaps to emphasise the significance of what he was being shown—Cowan (1993:197–8) confirms the transformation:

I had become a part of the Dreaming, my ancestors those Sky Heroes who had made rivers, mountains, and deserts. The earth was in my bones, each fibula and rib a blend of its elements. For the first time I no longer felt like a *kamaliwany*, a stranger in this land. Someone had thrown down an aerial rope for me to climb, and now I was able to travel great distances, traverse mountains with the help of my *gadidja* sandals. Wodjin and Dalimen had made me feel free, freer than I had ever felt before. For they had taught me how to dream an interior landscape for myself. In me their law, the law of the Wandjinas had been realised.

These are exceptional assertions to make and, as discussed previously, they have serious implications

in their capacity to undermine the Aboriginal argument of their unique relationship with the land, upon which their claims to native title, among other things, rest. Not only does it destroy the argument of uniqueness, it also suggests that *anyone* from *anywhere* with appropriate instruction—and there seemed to be little enough of that, anyway—can lay claim to whatever part of the country they desire. In fact, non-Aborigines are advantaged, for they appear to be spared the restriction of forming a spiritual affiliation with one specific location or tract of territory. The entire continent, providing you are non-Aboriginal, is literally within your spiritual grasp.

And, in return for this 'gift', Aboriginal poverty is awarded respect. Those living on Gibb River Station, a pastoral property now owned by Aborigines who do not have even basic accommodation but make do with galvanised-iron lean-tos, are 'content to live as they had always lived—outside on the bare earth, close to their horses and under the stars at night' (1993:190). At another community he visits, houses vandalised or otherwise in a state of severe disrepair are interpreted as 'reflecting the disinterest Aborigines often manifest towards possessions, particularly their houses. The squalor of the place was brought about by a people who had not yet come to terms with their transition from a nomadic life-style to that of urban dwellers' (1993:170–1). Here, we are led to believe, are the same Aborigines observed by Captain Cook (1897:170–1), who 'covet not magnificent houses, household stuff etc'. Ignoring the fact that the horse is an introduced mammal and thus Aborigines have not *always* slept under the night sky with their steeds, this is nonsense.

In 1987 the Aboriginal Development Corporation found an Australia-wide housing shortfall for Aborigines of 16,179 dwellings, 2565 of which were needed in Western Australia, the state in which the communities Cowan visited are situated (Torzillo and Kerr 1991:337). These conditions had not been alleviated by the time of Cowan's visit, nor even yet (see Gunn 1996; Kennedy et al 1996). Furthermore, the report of the Committee of Review of Environmental and Public Health within Anangu Pitjantjatjara Lands in South Australia (1987) comprehensively dispels the myth that traditionally oriented Aborigines find it difficult to adapt to living in houses and need to be taught how. The response to the provision of appropriate housing designed for the harsh environmental conditions, coupled with properly installed infrastructure, proved beyond doubt that the facilities

were at fault, not Aborigines (see also ABC 1996; Torzillo and Kerr 1991:337–52). In romanticising poverty and pointing to squalor as an example of primitive authenticity, Cowan is merely propagating a common myth to suit his own purposes. Real Aborigines do not live in houses. Aborigines have no want, nor are they yet ready for living with material possessions. It is a myth that defies substantiation. Its purpose in this instance is to enable the colonisation of Aboriginal cultural property without the bothersome consideration of enduring inequalities.

Cowan, who was born in the early 1940s, reveals that his interest in Aborigines was sparked by his inability to cope with the final breakdown of his marriage. On a holiday in 1976 to Broome, Darwin and a day trip to Ramingining, a community on the north coast of Arnhem Land, he met Aborigines for the first time. These chance encounters in the 'heartland of Aboriginal Australia' introduced him to the Dreaming and he immediately saw in it a way of overcoming his own despair, of gaining spiritual fulfilment, and of creating among non-Aborigines a sense of belonging to the continent which he believes is lacking. Cowan admits to self-interest coupled with the felt need to redeem non-Aborigines from their alleged sense of alienation as the factors precipitating his journeys into Aboriginality (1995:293, 297, 316–17).

However, although Cowan (1993:197–8, 1995:297) claims that through Aborigines he became reconciled with the country from which he had always felt alienated, he curiously resists being labelled 'an Australian writer' (Rolfe 1995), preferring, perhaps, to consider himself a true cosmopolitan in the light of his extensive travelling and periods working and living overseas. But such a stance is a strange position for him to take, for in *Messengers of the Gods* (1993:13) he laments the fact that people are ineluctably forgoing their ethnic and regional identities and becoming 'citizens of the world'. This he sees as being partly responsible for the dehumanisation of humankind.

It is yet another example of how Cowan seeks to imprison autochthonous peoples within a realm detached from the rest of the world, while at the same time exploiting the opportunities available to him to travel the world sampling any indigenous culture that takes his fancy. The fact that he then universalises the cultural property he seeks by arguing that it constitutes knowledge from humankind's collective past further indicates the contradictory and self-

serving positions that he adopts. On the one hand, he is lamenting that we are becoming 'citizens of the world'; on the other, he is arguing that what Aborigines (and others) bear is the world's spirituality.

Nevertheless, as already evident, Cowan not only exploits a manufactured sense of crisis—alienation—within the Australian psyche in order to justify his interventions in and appropriations of Aboriginal cultural property (see Lattas 1990:51–4), he also sets it in the broader context of the decadence, failings and problems he has detected in Western society in general.⁸ Therefore, it is ironic that, while he states after his first brief visit to northern Australia and meeting with Aboriginal drunkenness that he knew 'that somehow their suffering must be addressed' (1995:295, see also 312), it is his own suffering and that of the West that he continually stresses, not that of Aborigines. And the central tenet of all his work based on Aborigines, which appears to culminate in *Two Men Dreaming*, is the search for self-fulfilment, not the working towards equity and justice for Aborigines.⁹

It is not surprising, therefore, that all of the themes in his work so far discussed are united in *Two Men Dreaming*. This is an autobiography in two parts that meld towards the conclusion. There is the story of Cowan's life from childhood to the present which, after the loss of childhood innocence, becomes a ceaseless search for spiritual fulfilment. This broader narrative encompasses the telling of a recent journey made with a Pintupi elder and 'rain-man'—the 'wild fellow' Sunfly—along the tracks of his Dreaming ancestors to the old man's birthplace. This is a spiritual peregrination for Cowan too. As promoted on the book's front and end flaps, the promise is that it will take the reader on a 'timeless journey' and that the 'need to make *inner* journeys in search of identity and knowledge is central to Cowan's theme'. In this way, his autobiographical voyage to the self and yet another pilgrimage into Aboriginality coalesce as he becomes part of the Pintupi metaphysical realm, and as he progressively blurs the distinction between non-Aborigine and Aborigine.

The widespread use of a stereotyped portrayal of desert Aborigines as a national emblem dates from the late 1940s, although there are several earlier examples. As noted by Jeremy Beckett (1988:206):

In postage stamps, travel brochures, art catalogues and assorted tourist merchandise, the Aborigine was represented as black, male, bearded and scantily

dressed, holding a spear and with his eyes fixed on some distant object—all against a background of scenic splendour.

This is the image in which Cowan believes Aboriginality still resides, and the pilgrimage into the desert with Sunfly brings him forever closer to it.¹⁰ For added effect, Sunfly himself is given this emblematic status. On the first page, we learn that he is a 'Pintubi tribesman, the last of a dwindling band of Aboriginal bushmen who had once lived the full nomadic life'. He is old, bearded, chest scored with cicatrices, septum pierced, sitting on the ground absorbed in making a dot painting of his Dreaming (1995:9–10).

Cowan is careful not to let any accoutrements of civilisation impinge on this portrait. And it is this that demonstrates his consistent failure to address issues of social justice and equity, and how he subordinates all indicators of inequality to his quest for tribal authenticity. It is another example of what bell hooks (1992:25) calls:

a contemporary narrative where the suffering imposed by structures of domination on those designated Other is deflected by an emphasis on seduction and longing where the desire is not to make the Other over in one's image but to become the Other.

Thus, Sunfly's home and possessions—calico strung between fence posts, a few blankets, a billy can, tattered clothing, broken sunglasses, a tomahawk, and most importantly the emblematic digging stick and spears—were 'an expression of the minimal', not abject poverty. Although forced to sleep at night with his food (kangaroo tail) with him under his blankets to prevent it being eaten by dogs, 'Sunfly had managed to separate himself from things in order to become an extension of some inner landscape'. Cowan argues that these conditions represented *choice*. Sunfly had rejected the emptiness of material comforts for the richness of the Dreaming: 'He had no need of anything unless it contributed directly to the Dreaming' (1995:10, 27, 274). As Césaire (1972:39) states of the implication of grounding a people solely within an ontological, spiritual realm: 'Decent wages! Comfortable housing! Food! These Bantu are pure spirits, I tell you...In short, you tip your hat to the Bantu life force, you give a wink to the immortal Bantu soul. And that's all it costs you! You have to admit you're getting off cheap!'

Moreover, in consideration of the work of such diverse figures as Tacitus, Montaigne and Lévi-Strauss, Hayden White (1972:28–34) reminds us that

their use of the concept of 'wildness' to establish a disparity between 'natural' and 'artificial' humanity should not be taken literally. It was a means of establishing distance through which to critically examine civilisation. As apparent, Cowan not only uses this contrived disparity as a critical device, he also takes it literally. Hence, he declares that 'it was impossible to convert a wild fellow like Sunfly into someone who was even half civilised' (1995:54, see also 22, 59). Here we have a statement that was used incessantly in the past, as justification for dispossession and atrocities committed in realising that objective, re-presented as the basis for according utmost respect. For Cowan the notion of the primitive, natural state of 'wildness' first created for its critical uses is exemplified by uncivilised 'tribal' Aborigines who alone retain the last vestiges of the essential humanness that civilisation has destroyed. Instead of simply imagining this category of people, though, Cowan, in the company of Sunfly, takes us on a journey to meet them.

In the introduction to *Mysteries of the Dream-time* (1992a:3), Cowan defensively 'emphasise[s]...[that he] did not undergo any tribal initiation ceremony, nor did [he] feel this was necessary'. By 1994 he was lamenting that there were few opportunities to be 'initiated into a tribe' and that ritual circumcision and body scarification were not options available to him. What is more, the initiation practices that are now followed are only 'pale imitations' of what they once were (Cowan 1994:13). In *Two Men Dreaming* (1995), however, the issue becomes one of determining significance for him. In attempting to dispel any doubts about his preparedness and suitability to make a spiritual journey with Sunfly and to accept the accompanying responsibilities, the reader must know that Cowan is ritually and symbolically ready to enter into and be reacquainted with his lost Aboriginality.

To this effect he is told that he cannot just follow the Dreaming path into the desert and learn from Sunfly his secrets: he must both be initiated and have a totem (1995:21). Cowan responds that he is circumcised, as if the surgical procedure in infancy parallels the adolescent initiatory ritual. However, he had not been 'tested' by subincision, an important ceremonial step to acquiring the knowledge sought (1995:22). Here Cowan is tapping into both the central issue of the mythopoeic men's movement and one of Australia's myths concerning its national identity. The men's movement, which relies extensively on an assortment of practices and objects appropriated from

various 'tribal' groups, sees initiation as the key to achieving "'pure" and "authentic" manhood' and of affirming a masculine consciousness (Torgovnick 1997:156-71).

With respect to national identity, the notion that some ordeal is a prerequisite to establishing a sense of self and of nation has long troubled Australians. It is still popularly believed (and taught), for instance, that Australian nationhood was forged on the bloodied sands of Gallipoli. Tom Griffiths (1987:27), among others, has argued how the denial of the violence associated with the colonisation of Australia, in terms of conflict with Aborigines and obfuscation of the convict past, led to a nation that was 'straining after conflict, trial, sacrifice—after a proper history of which people could be proud'. Cowan personalises the vestiges of this national longing to be tested. Although he felt he could offer surgical circumcision as evidence of the first stage of ritual initiation, he lacked the sense and experience of personal trial and sacrifice or the spilling of blood—'Sunfly's whole body spoke to me about spilling blood'—that would suffice in his mind for the second stage of subincision. In the interests of establishing his credentials with the reader, he expresses a willingness to undergo this procedure (1995:22).

Explaining the attraction of what might be considered strange or even shocking practices recalled from history, Lowenthal (1989:1279) comments how 'seeming familiarity with even the least savoury or commendable aspects of the past enhances its verisimilar appeal'. Although not suggesting that subincision for Aborigines is or was unsavoury or not commendable, the ease with which Cowan, a non-Aboriginal man in his fifties, steps forward as a willing initiate seems somewhat unlikely. It bespeaks the knowledge that the contemporary practices are 'pale imitations' of the past and that he will not be forced to submit (Cowan 1994:13). Nevertheless, it places the onus upon Sunfly to make the decision. If Cowan is not subincised, it will be because it is deemed unnecessary by Aborigines, who will decide—as they do—that he is already a man (1995:28). It is not because Cowan, in attempting to realise his desire to return to an imagined primordial telluric spirituality, is unwilling to be a full initiatory participant.

To further prepare Cowan for his journey into the desert along the Dreaming paths, he is given a classificatory or skin name. Songs are sung to warn the spirits of the impending trip, and he is given a

hair-belt for his waist and hair-string for his head to denote his initiatory status in preparation for learning his Dreaming and 'becom[ing] a man of law'. Once again, despite the efforts to demonstrate the authenticity of the 'ancient' practices Cowan was to participate in, the matter of Pintupi country being thousands of kilometres from where he was born, and where presumably his Dreaming would be if it were possible for a non-Aboriginal person to share in this realm, is overlooked. Nevertheless, not only is Cowan to acquire a Dreaming but he also wonders if he is being prepared to become an Aborigine (1995:28–9, 32, 36).

As with all of his pilgrimages, the journey into the desert is a journey into the past, and it involves the gradual stripping away of the layers of civilisation until the 'real' Aborigines become manifest. This is established through a series of images, each one demonstrating less evidence of acculturation. Thus, at the first community visited, 'old warriors' dressed in jeans and stetsons, some of whom were brandishing spears, surrounded the vehicle looking menacing, unhappy that a respected 'lawman' and 'rain-man' like Sunfly should appear in the community with a 'whitefella'. After it was explained that Cowan wanted to help them to save their culture, an elder—Wimmitji Tjapangarti—offered to take him to a sacred Rain Dreaming site. Indicating that a further boundary was being crossed from the modern world into another, Wimmitji was so unfamiliar with vehicles, and presumably seats, that he had to be shown how to sit in one. Upon arriving at the site, and reaching ever closer to the sought-for representation of 'authenticity', the old man retrieved etched sacred stones from their cache and then broke into song, accompanied by Sunfly tapping a rhythm.

The object of the scene depicted is to establish the fact that Cowan was in the presence of an event that mirrors the popularly accepted image of Aboriginality: two scantily dressed, bearded old men squatting on a sacred site with their *Tjurunga* before them, chanting and tapping out a clap-stick rhythm. Significantly, it was also an event that Cowan not only saw but also fully understood. He declares that seeing the sacred stones made the spirit-beings whose path they were following 'as real to me as they were to Sunfly and Wimmitji. They now existed, two men of superhuman dimension, an embodiment both of landscape and cultural knowledge' (1995:87–9, 113, 126–8).

Given the lack of formal instruction, the brevity of this journey and his lack of language skills, the

claimed parity of Cowan's Dreaming vision must be doubted. Nevertheless, he may well have been *witness* to such a scene. It is the interpretation placed upon it that raises questions. Instead of experiencing *an* aspect of Aboriginal culture, Cowan wants his readers to believe that he was experiencing the vestiges of *authentic* Aboriginal culture as performed by 'real' Aborigines. It should be noted that, while performances such as the one he describes do continue, the scene could also have been culled from many dated anthropological texts or collection of early photographs, or from recollections of museum exhibits of yesteryear. In other words, he is continuing to shackle contemporary Aboriginality to its past portrayals. Therefore, given his earlier pondering as to whether he was going to be made into an Aborigine (1995:36), and that he appears to believe that Aboriginality is a personal possibility for him, Cowan is suggesting that his transformation could only take place in the circumstances he records being in, for only in these or similar conditions does Aboriginality really exist.

Moving even closer to the popularly accepted image of genuineness, at the next sacred site visited Wimmitji daubed himself with ochre and pipeclay, a dance ground was prepared, and ritual poles and fire-torches were made. It was the totem site for fire, for which no one had responsibility for all of that totem had died. Wimmitji had been acting as caretaker but thought that, after this final ceremony, the time had come to let the site's significance lapse. Sensing an opportunity, Cowan suggested that he be given responsibility for the place and, consequently, custodianship was bestowed on him. Therefore, in satisfaction of a long-held desire, fire became his totem. On this basis he asserts that here was his place of 'spiritual conception' (1995: 136–41, 174).¹¹ To impress upon the reader the reality of becoming the 'owner' of the Fire Dreaming, he states that immediately following his investiture, Wimmitji became uncomfortable, for he was now in effect a trespasser on a site belonging to another.

Thus, Cowan is now claiming to be the custodian of an Aboriginal sacred site, with the recognised authority to prevent or allow Aborigines access to it. However, having gone to such trouble to acquire what he has long desired and to establish the authenticity of the product, it seems extraordinary that he should not only accept the incongruity of the situation—he does not know the relevant language nor any of the applicable Dreaming songs—but also immediately suggest making changes to his ritual obligations. In

recognition of the fact that he is not going to spend the rest of his life as a desert hunter-gatherer, he declares that he will learn the relevant songs so that he can sing them wherever he is. He admits that this is an innovation: 'It was evident that the idea of carrying the songs of a place beyond their actual location had not occurred to [Wimmitji] before' (1995:174, 175). This is a clear example of bell hooks' (1992:23) argument that 'to make one's self vulnerable to the seduction of difference, to seek an encounter with the Other, does not require that one relinquish forever one's mainstream positionality'. Cowan obtains the spiritual sustenance and non-material cultural accoutrements he sought on a brief pilgrimage into Aboriginality without renouncing his comparative material wealth and comfort, conditions which have made his many, well-provisioned 'pilgrimages' possible.

In making changes to his custodial obligations, Cowan is setting himself up as an arbiter of Aboriginality. This is evident in his finding Aboriginal culture in decline or absent wherever Aborigines vary from his blueprint (1995:21). Innovation initiated by Aborigines is deemed to be detrimental to their cultural identity. Yet the moment that he becomes custodian of a Dreaming site he assumes the right of being innovative without apparently jeopardising authenticity. While Pintupi land tenure arrangements do allow a degree of fluidity as to who can become custodians, being resident in the area and maintaining an association with place are usual prerequisites (Myers 1989:29–30). Furthermore, how does Cowan know, for instance, that urban Aborigines are not similarly singing songs in absentia? And what if they are not? Why is one form of innovation approved and not the other? Moreover, the particular changes to cultural practices that he is suggesting abstract the songs from the context in which their meaning and significance are found. If the link between song and site is lost, they lose their cultural contingency.

Paul Johnson has examined how, in marketing shamanism, the Foundation for Shamanic Studies in the United States has produced cassettes which allegedly contain the sonic driving or 'power' necessary to assist in the inducement of a shamanic state of consciousness. This is an innovation that negates the use of the live drum, which normally produces the 'power'. A Foundation trainee explained that, as the 'power' was not actually in the drums themselves, the tape could be used as a reminder of where it came from, and on this basis it was effective.

As Johnson (1995:172) comments, 'the shaman's "power", in this view, is independent of specific objects, places or persons; it floats free of contextual limits' (see also Albanese 1990:163).

This is exactly what Cowan is doing with the song-cycles that belong to Djindjimirinba, the place where fire was first made. In locating the meaning, function and significance of the songs wholly within the song itself, he is reducing a complex contingent practice to a core trait—the song—and is thereby able to free it of its culturally determined contextual limits. In the interests of universalising Aboriginal cultural property, he is displacing it from the interrelated context of place, people, language, dance, clap-sticks, bullroarer, fire and ceremony, and is therefore introducing radical distortions. By going to considerable effort to prove the authenticity of the abstracted product at its source, he attempts to obfuscate this distortion.

A theme reiterated in Cowan's work is that Aboriginal youth, and the younger generations, are not interested in what he believes are the essential attributes of Aboriginality.¹² For example, Sunfly's criticism of youth's apparent lack of interest could well be the politicking of an elderly man privileging conservative stability over youthful rebelliousness,¹³ but Cowan encourages and supports Sunfly's disapproval of them. He overlooks the power plays between elders and youth over not only control of knowledge but also the sort of knowledge or traditions thought relevant. For instance, it is within the elders' sociopolitical interests to marginalise the new skills of the younger generations, for these pose a threat to their managerial monopoly. That the 'traditions' upon which the elders base their control are at least now partly a product of colonisation is also ignored (see Kolig 1995:35; Myers 1982:91; Ranger 1983:255; see also Rowse 1992:94–9).

However, perhaps anxious to write for himself the starring role of cultural saviour, Cowan implies that Sunfly's ambition of educating children in Aboriginal culture could well be frustrated. He tells him: 'You know yourself they don't want to hear you old fellas when you talk. They don't want to have their chest cut, or suffer from hunger,' and that, although the youth do not think Sunfly is important, Cowan does. Inconsistently, he cites their preference for Coca-Cola, Toyotas, beer and pre-cooked dinners as agents responsible for cultural decline (1995:85, 133, see also 308, 327). Yet Cowan, who managed to be initiated, acquire a totem and become part of the Dreaming

without painful cicatrices or submitting to subincision, displays no stomach for a life in the desert beyond a well-provisioned excursion and takes the songs of his custodial site with him in his Toyota. Furthermore, and crucially given the nature of his assertions, despite a proclaimed interest in Aboriginal cultural esotery spanning two decades, there is no evidence of his ever attempting to learn an Aboriginal language.

Nor does Cowan consider, let alone allow for, the possibility that the maintenance of some songs and/or myths, among other cultural practices such as dance, may breach customary laws. A complex system of ownership and management rights to the various components of the interrelated artistic endeavours exists. By failing to consider that the right to receive, transmit or produce any of the 'arts' is determined by initiatory status, age and sex, Cowan's criticism of youth might be misplaced in some instances (see Lattas 1991:319; Morphy 1989:18–24). If there is no one with the authority to transmit information, even though it may be known, or an appropriate person does not exist who can receive it, then the retention of a story breaks tradition rather than sustains it.¹⁴ Thus, Cowan's disinterested youth who are failing to maintain their culture could well be exemplary manifestations of the authenticity he so desperately seeks. However, in the interests of universalising Aboriginal culture so that it becomes the spiritual waters from which we can all drink, Cowan ignores such possibilities.

Before leaving the Fire Dreaming site to walk back to his community, Wimmitji asked Sunfly and Cowan to look for an old couple living in the desert (1995:175). Because their marriage transgressed kinship rules, they had escaped to the desert when young to avoid punishment, possibly death. For perhaps 50 years, this couple had supposedly lived the life of nomadic hunters and gatherers. In this way Cowan introduces the prospect that he will encounter the most authentic Aboriginal cultural product of all: the very last Aborigines still living according to their ancestral heritage.¹⁵ The final layers of civilisation will be stripped away on this journey into humankind's spiritual origins. When contact with the couple is made, which fittingly takes place at the end of the pilgrimage to Sunfly's birthplace, they appear in the emblematic form of the late 1940s (see Beckett 1988:206). They stand in the dawn against the desert skyline in traditional pose: the man on one leg, resting

opposite foot on inside thigh of standing leg, and leaning on his spear; the woman is naked save for a waist-belt of bone-beads (1995:340–1):

These were Australia's last nomads. It was hard not to stare at them, so archaic, so different were they to anyone I had ever witnessed before. I felt as if I were gazing upon the origins of myself. They were the first couple, the first innocence, the first exiles from the Garden. Their every movement and gesture were those of humanity's encounter with a world not yet defined.

Hence, they were not Pintupi, or even Aborigines, but the progenitors of humankind.¹⁶

Constructing the same scenario as when visiting the Wandjina caves (Cowan 1993:174–8), Cowan quickly establishes that he will probably be the last non-Aboriginal person to witness these 'last nomads'. Even though close to death, instead of returning to a community, they elect to stay in the desert with their Dreaming. Furthermore, Sunfly himself, the 'rain-man' and 'lawman', and Cowan's guide along the Dreaming paths, someone as 'precious as a churinga board', decides to stay too so that he can look after his tribal and personal country. Thus, Cowan manages not only to introduce what he considers to be authentic Aboriginal culture into his pilgrimage but also to make it his exclusive preserve. No one else will be able to draw their knowledge and experience from such encounters. By killing off, even if only metaphorically, the fount of Aboriginal cultural authenticity, Cowan emerges as the last true Aborigine. He is the custodian of a sacred site, the possessor of a totem, caretaker of the land. He had become a 'maparn', a tribal clever-man, or sorcerer, 'someone able to fly towards the Dreaming with the ease of [his] totem'. Confirming this, Sunfly tells him that the Dreaming is now a part of him. As Cowan has previously established that these features are the essence of Aboriginal culture and identity, there is only one possible conclusion: Cowan the Aborigine. By way of confirming this reading, Sunfly allegedly tells him just before they both part that 'nobody learn from me like you do' (1995:57, 348–51).¹⁷

The purpose of Cowan's contact with Aboriginal culture was driven by an inability to cope with a marriage breakdown, the desire to reward his lifelong search for spiritual fulfilment, for a sense of oneness, or belonging to the land, and to save the world from environmental destruction and spiritual nihilism. These agendas shape how he depicts Aborigines and

their culture. In order to universalise, and personalise, Aboriginal non-material cultural property, he reduces the desired elements to core traits, then abstracts them into a metaphysical realm stripped of its cultural particularity. Just as various arguments were advanced by earlier colonists as to why Aborigines were not owners of the land, Cowan proffers reasons why Aborigines are not the proprietors of selected aspects of their cultural property, such as their myths and the Dreaming. It is not the struggle for equity and justice that surfaces in his oeuvre, but the rationale for and defence of the colonisation of this new terrain. As there appears to be a growing market for the fruits of the resultant cultural harvest, Aborigines are chastised for not ceaselessly re-creating their culture in the form desired by the West.

Through the appropriation of Aboriginal cultural property, Cowan is continuing not only the process of colonisation but also the practice of non-Aborigines' deciding who and what Aborigines are, and placing this template upon them. While Aborigines are of course a people independent of the text, it is important to remain cognisant of the fact that documentation was and is a means of 'possessing indigenous people by "knowing" them'. This 'knowing' was central to the colonial, then state, control assumed over them, how this was exercised, and the outcome envisaged (Healy 1990:520-1). The continuing documentation of Aborigines as found in the work of Cowan does have repercussions for those beyond the confines of the pages.

NOTES

1. See also Ranger (1983:250) and Urry (1979:15). See Hanson (1989) for a provocative account of the creation of traditions and identity among the Maori.

2. Robert Bropho's *Fringedweller* (1980) provides a powerful statement of the identity maintained by the Perth fringe-dwellers, despite the impoverishment of their city camps, displacement from their lands, and their seemingly non-traditional lifestyle.

3. These references are examples only. The themes, in one form or another, permeate the entire text.

4. Literature distributed by the Fringedwellers of the Swan Valley, Guildford, Perth, and by Robert Bropho (pers. comm., 15 September 1992). See Mickler (1991) for a detailed account of this struggle.

5. The other 'dead' sacred places visited that, according to Cowan, no longer have surviving custodians are Carnarvon Gorge in Queensland, and Depuch Island (Womalantha) and the Burrup Peninsula (Murujuga) in Western Australia.

6. In an article about Cowan for the *Bulletin* magazine, Patricia Rolfe (1995) claims that, when *Messengers of the Gods* was featured on ABC's Radio National *Books and Writing* program, 'it got more inquiries and comments than any book that year'. However, *Books and Writing* has never featured this work (pers. comm., 2 July 1997), nor has the Radio National program *Book Talk* (pers. comm., 14 April 1998). Probably it was discussed on a metropolitan ABC radio station and it was this which drew a large response. I have been unable to confirm this.

7. This notion is found in much of the literature urging non-Aboriginal (re)possession of Aboriginal spirituality.

8. For an example of the range of ills that Cowan sees afflicting the Western world, and as an indication of the frequency with which he cites them, see Cowan (1995:112, 142, 143, 153, 201, 202, 203, 205-6, 208, 212, 232, 233, 247, 282, 283, 317). This list is by way of example only; it is not exhaustive.

9. My suggestion that Cowan's authorial interest in Aborigines may have culminated in this memoir is based on the fact that the series of what are ostensibly non-fiction works in which he writes about Aborigines are in reality more about himself. As will become evident, *Two Men Dreaming* (1995), an autobiography, reaches a climactic point at which the self desired and pursued throughout his books on Aborigines is (re)discovered and liberated, obviating the further need of Aboriginal assistance. Perhaps indicating this anticipated turning from Aborigines to other arenas, the publication of Cowan's that followed *Two Men Dreaming* was the novel *A Mapmaker's Dream* (1996).

10. Cowan's oeuvre is marked by its sexism. Women are not excluded simply by gender-specific language. There is no acknowledgment of a separate body of cultural heritage peculiar to Aboriginal women, or of their role as co-custodians of much heritage. Men are the keepers of the sacred, according to Cowan. It is men's voices that are vital to nature and responsible for the fecundity of the earth. If separated from ceremonial activity, men are the ones who suffer the most (1995:79, 281). When acknowledged at all, women are totally subordinate in his rendition of Aboriginal life. The metaphysical world that the all-inclusive 'we' must embrace is that solely within the domain of ageing Aboriginal male elders, which is given universal applicability.

11. This will surprise attentive readers of *Messengers of the Gods*, for Cowan is now effectively asserting that he has been spiritually conceived twice, once in a cave in the Kimberley (1993:195), and now in the desert region of the Pintupi.

12. This is a common and long-held perception. In 1927 Baldwin Spencer warned in the preface to *The Arunta* of the dangers of receiving misinformation about certain practices from younger, more acculturated Aborigines, and lamented that with the death of the few remaining elders much customary knowledge would be lost (Spencer and Gillen 1927:ix-x).

13. See M. Estellie Smith (1982:129-35) for a discussion on sociocultural continuity and 'tradition' (the elders) versus 'change' (the young) in an Indian pueblo, and Bernard Delfendahl in Smith (1982:136) for a response suggesting that the alleged 'Anglo' influence that elders decry among Indian youth could be the response of mature conservatism.

14. This is not unique to Aboriginal culture. For instance, Jonathon Mané-Wheoki, a Maori scholar, has referred to situations where important Maori stories have not been passed on because there was no one with the right to do so (McBryde 1995:9).

15. Such apocryphal apparitions exist in popular 'confidential' stories, much as the thylacine does in Tasmania. I was made aware of this while living in the Northern Territory and on subsequent fieldwork trips to the Centre in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The prospect of the 'last real Aborigines' who had never seen white people was the hot, though whispered, subject of the rumour mill. It takes the usual format. Anyone who fancies they know 'about the Aborigines' knows someone who knows someone...that knows of...and so on. Although not of concern here, there are a number of factors in Cowan's description and explanation of the 'last nomadic' couple that cast considerable doubt on the veracity of his story or, at the very least, point to considerable embellishment of the facts.

16. In many respects Cowan's journey has been undertaken before. It bears remarkable similarities to the journey recounted by WJ Peasley in *The Last of the Nomads*, first published in 1983. The location is different, the country of the Mandildjara being well to the south of Pintupi land but still part of the desert region. However, Peasley, like Cowan, was on a quest to find the 'last' nomadic couple who had remained as hunter-gatherers in the desert because their marriage, too, had breached customary law. Many factors in Cowan's mission parallel or closely resemble the experiences related by Peasley. Even the detailed description of the couple encountered—the male partner in both books bearing the same name—are all but interchangeable, right down to Warri, the man, limping (see Cowan 1995:322, 340–1; Peasley 1983:113, 139–40).

17. Cowan appears to be casting himself as a latter-day TGH Strehlow, whose work he has almost certainly read (see Cowan 1995:312–13). Strehlow believed emphatically that he had been entrusted with secrets that Arremte elders refused to pass down to their sons and grandsons, and that he was in effect both proprietor and custodian of the knowledge imparted and of associated artefacts, a claim hotly disputed by younger Arremte who wanted Strehlow's collection returned to them. Strehlow actually came to see himself as the last of the Arremte (see McNally 1981:39–40, 176; Morton 1995:56). Cowan is similarly contriving—on much weaker grounds—a situation where it is possible to see him, with the imminent death of Sunfly and his two nomadic companions, as the last of the Pintupi.

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