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# The End of Time? Aboriginal Temporality and the British Invasion of Australia

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## **The End of Time? Aboriginal Temporality and the British Invasion of Australia**

Mike Donaldson

For reasons which are both sensible and profound, if somewhat Eurocentric, much of the best scholarship in the history, sociology and political economy of time has focused on the transitions from one temporal order to another. In particular, researchers have been concerned with the origins and global impact of capitalist metric time, that is, of that European 'bourgeois, mercantilist and mathematical account of duration as discrete and equal temporal segments' (Nguyen, 1992: 29). It is the completeness, acceptance and pervasiveness of this impact which has been most noted.

And yet, perceptive as this work has been, it runs the risk of attributing to mechanistic time a facticity and durability which neglects or ignores that of other 'times'. After all, capitalism impacted on something. It came to living, vibrant, changing social orders, possessed of their own stresses,  
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strains and motive forces. And it came unevenly, affecting different parts in different ways, over different periods of time, with dissimilar results (see also Donaldson, 1982: 438). This study challenges Nguyen's (1992: 33) assertion that 'the last vestiges' of 'all other temporal regimes in the world ... remain only in the form of historical and anthropological curiosities'. It does this by exploring the temporal order of Australian Aborigines and argues against the claim that their time 'ended' with the British invasion of their land and began again only when they 're-entered history' by engaging with the moving frontier of advancing settler colonialism (see Hunter, 1993: 24). In contrast, I am focusing here primarily on the continuities of the temporal order which the Australian Aborigines constructed, maintained and changed, in part against that order imposed by the British and their descendants (elements of which were subverted to suit Aboriginal purposes). Hence, the article positions itself against the idea that change 'was either created or directly managed by Europeans.... Thus Aboriginal people [are] seen as passive, as receptors rather than initiators' (Murray, 1992: 18). Nguyen's (1992: 33) view that 'irreversible destruction' was the fate of non-capitalist temporal orders implies, moreover, that 'native cultures [are] intricate, exotic and delicate edifices which could not change. The metaphor of destruction [is] entrenched, fixing the ongoing complex events of colonisation into a one way process of collapse to which the appropriate response is passive sorrow' (Murray, 1992: 25).

This brings us, then, to the realms of anthropology and history. The former places 'more emphasis on the different culture-based meanings and forms of time', thereby rendering them incomparable, while the latter has 'shown the use of time as a resource and a commodity to be a recent phenomenon of Western industrialised societies' (Adam, 1990: 2, 102). This poses some problems, since I am going to help myself to anthropology's findings and insights to make observations across centuries, cultures and places to show how Aboriginal time, to this day central to Aboriginal definitions of being human, was certainly a resource (but not a commodity) long before 'Western industrialised society' was a gleam in anybody's eye. At the same time, I am trying to avoid the 'unquestioned assumption' of clock

time which 'anthropologists and sociologists [take] as a norm against which societies are compared and found lacking' (Adam, 1990: 96).

In the case of anthropology, the problem is further compounded by its tendency 'to minimise change, its agency and consequences.... Wide and continuing reliance on the concept of the ethnographic present introduced a strong and ahistorical bias and an air of unreality into much of the literature' (Donaldson and Good, 1988: 26). We are offered 'the  
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anthropologists' timeless Aborigines' (Cowlshaw, 1992: 27). Nonetheless, these ethnographies are often painstakingly detailed, hesitant, non-judgemental and, in their own terms, generally excellent descriptive work (see also Donaldson, 1984: 194). As Connell (1995: 34) notes, ethnography 'works by suppressing this historical dimension.... But we need not accept this amnesia. I would argue that ethnographic knowledge ... is valuable precisely to the extent we understand it as part of a global history, a history marked by dispossession, struggle and transformation.' Here the view of Tonkin (1994: 4), namely, that while the interests of historians and anthropologists are different, 'in so far as they are studying human beings in society, the theoretical premises of their inquiries ought to be consonant', will be adopted. In this article, then, I offer a consideration of the conceptions of time indicative of Australian Aborigines, their successful resistance to attempts to dispossess them of the Dreaming, and the continued assertion of their own temporal order against standardized metric time (nevertheless taking from it certain agreeable features). Time is thus presented not only as a 'contested site' (Lattas, 1992: 56) but as fundamental to the contestation which defeated British attempts to crush Aboriginal culture.

### **In the Beginning: Continuity and Change Before the British Invasion**

Long before the Babylonians had divided the day into 24 equal parts, the people who would come to be known as Aborigines had settled in what has recently been called Australia. The continent was first inhabited, according to recent estimates, between 70,000 and 50,000 years ago, possibly in the separate migrations of two quite distinct types of Homo sapiens whose later fusion formed the forebears of the modern Aboriginal population (O'Neill, 1992: 5; Beale, 1995: 3). It is possible that they came when the sea levels were lowest, up to 200m below present levels, crossing about 100km of water in the final stretch before they reached their new homeland, thereby placing themselves among the world's first successful seafarers (Broome, 1982: 9; Flood, 1989: 68, 74). In any event, their migration from Asia was a 'remarkable achievement of human adaptation, courage and technical innovation' (Butlin, 1993: 9).

Over 2500 human generations, the spread of the first Australians across the continent was gradual. Long before the division of one hour into 60 minutes of 60 seconds had become widely accepted among Europeans (around the middle of their 14th century), Aboriginal people were living in every part of Australia. In their cosmology, the Dreamtime (or Dreaming), they joined 'time, spirit and supernatural event' (Williams,  
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1986: 234) and through it they directed and coordinated the use of their efficient, original and `bewilderingly diverse' technologies (Flood, 1989: 79, 131, 150, 151-4). The temporal order sustained by the cosmology of the Dreaming was shared by 16 major regional groupings of interacting Aboriginal societies. These societies consisted of nearly 900 named social groups with distinctive ways of life, forms of social organization and custom, material culture and art styles. By the time of the white invasion, Aborigines numbered between 750,000 and one million and spoke about 200 different languages, an important basis for and sign of land usage and cultural identity (Hunter, 1993: 26). The `First Fleet' arrived in the land of the Iora, stretching over 700 square miles from Botany Bay to Pittswater. To the north and south of the harbour lived the Cameragal and the Kadigal and, out past Windsor and the Hawkesbury River, dwelt the Daruk whose territory covered some 2300 square miles stretching to the Blue Mountains.

These peoples were linked across the continent by a multitude of trade routes, Dreaming paths, hubs of ceremonial exchange and sacred centres through which flowed sacred and profane knowledge, as well as various goods. Arabana, Diyari and Tirora traders travelled up to 500km from Lake Eyre to the Flinders Ranges to obtain red ochre for their religious ceremonies. Shells from the Gulf of Carpentaria reached southern Australia; and tobacco, stone axes and blades regularly travelled hundreds of kilometres (Flood, 1989: 202-3, 206; Mulvaney, 1989: xv, xvi, 3; Fox, 1991: 8).

Communication and trade were not restricted to the continent. Regular visitors from Indonesia and Papua New Guinea brought to northern Australia their senses of time, and a variety of myths, religious rites, art designs and technologies. The coastal peoples in Arnhem Land incorporated visits from Sulawesi into their seasonal cycle, perhaps as long as 1000 years ago, certainly before the Portuguese and Dutch intrusions, and regularly at least a century before Cook's arrival in 1788. They obtained cloth, knives, glass, pipes for smoking tobacco and pottery, new maritime technology and skills and rituals from fishermen who came annually to harvest trepang (beche-de-mer) with the assistance of their hosts (Broome, 1982: 11; Williams, 1986: 28; Butlin, 1993: 196, 198). Some travelled on Praus to Macassar (Ujung Pandang). Baillie (1994: 174) notes in the 'Afterword' to his fine novel *Songman*, set in this pre-invasion period of northern trade and travel, that as late as 1876 there were still 17 Aborigines recorded in the Macassarese census. The northern visitors came to be part of the cycle of the seasons so crucial

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to Aboriginal temporality, by which they ordered and organized their active relations with the environment.

The impact of the Aborigines on the vegetation and animals of the continent was considerable, for they became `managers' and 'improvers' of the environment rather than remaining passively symbiotic to it (Butlin, 1993: 55). In the process, over thousands of years they rendered extinct substantial numbers of large mammals. Much of the vegetation encountered by the white invaders was not natural at all, but the product of Aboriginal 'fire-stick farming' over a similar length of time. Burning distressed the animals and drove them from hiding. After the firing process itself, the Aborigines easily hunted the non-human fire followers who sought to enjoy a variety

of barbecued food with them. New grasslands, assisted by the fertilizing ashes, grew quickly, attracting in turn a greater abundance of game. The fire-resistant eucalypts spread more quickly than other flora, creating a patchwork of alternating landscapes (Flood, 1989: 158-9, 170, 223).

Time was a crucial factor in defining this dynamic relationship between the people and the wide range of ecologies they inhabited. Between the coastal areas, forests, inland river systems and desert, there were substantial differences in the quality, number, availability and variety of potential resources. The utilization of these resources was organized according to the seasonal cycle, in which the range of sequential and circular human movement was a function of the time it took to move across the landscape in relation both to very long periods as well as short intervals (Williams, 1986: 218; Altman, 1987: 18; Flood, 1989: 218, 225, 235, 261; Mulvaney, 1989: 26-7, 62-7, 97). A group would need to know the temporal distances to be covered and every detail of each species in the area inhabited - the seasonal breeding and feeding habits, the patterns of migration of the fauna, and the reproductive rhythms of plant life. Within each social group, every mature person, according to sex and age, was expected to be spiritually attuned to, knowledgeable of, and technologically competent in the use and management of the local environment. This might mean as much as 100,000 square kilometres of desert or as little as 500 square kilometres of fertile coast (Broome, 1982: 11). As T.G.H. Strehlow, who grew up with the Arrernte (Aranda), explained: 'each local group in the Western Desert had to know all the habitats of the food plant, all the habitats of the game animals, and all the locations of even the smallest rockholes and temporary waters in its own territory in order to survive' (Strehlow, 1971 in Broome, 1982: 12; Rowse, 1992: 91).

When the time was right in conjunction with the Dreaming cycles, Aborigines would move across the land. They manipulated their diverse ecologies according to temporal, religious, technological and social considerations,  
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thereby taking advantage of periods of peak productivity of plants and animals. The regional responses to the various environments ranged from moth hunting to sealing, from eel trapping to cycad harvesting. The normally poisonous cycads were gathered at the appropriate time and carefully prepared. Those who lived around the southern Alps in Victoria knew exactly when to climb the mountains to eat the Bogong moth. Those in southern Queensland knew precisely when the Bunya nut feasting could begin. Complex hydraulic systems for fish farming and water control were examples of resource management and engineering skill in coastal Victoria, visited during the appropriate months by those who constructed and maintained them (Broome, 1982: 11; Flood, 1989: 218, 225, 235, 261; Mulvaney, 1989: 26-7, 62-7, 97).

Notwithstanding this rich diversity, all Aborigines were hunters and gatherers and their societies exhibited a number of shared characteristics. Time was central to the definitions of who and where they were, where they had been and who they might become. Like other nomadic peoples, their social ties were more temporal than territorial, and more sacred than spatial (Williams, 1986: 216). Most groups exhibited an ability to move easily over a wide area to take advantage of seasonal change.

Blainey (1982: 185) writes of this movement as 'the logic of unending travel', by which groups of people moved sequentially across their land in accordance with the Dreaming and its ceremonies in order systematically to utilize the flora and fauna. Time always had to be left for the visited area to regenerate as the cycle continued. To accommodate the seasonal variability in accessible resources, Aborigines possessed an elastic sense of group size and composition. In the course of a year they would live and cooperate with a variety of persons and groups in a number of places. They travelled to meet, visit and to make pilgrimage. Seasonal factors and religious ritual influenced the timing, size, composition and location of groups (Williams, 1986: 219). Accordingly, an openness in the ownership and use of land exemplified Aboriginal societies, as did the reciprocal sharing of physical and cultural necessities and luxuries. A lack of tangible and accumulable wealth, as well as an immediate and direct connection between the labour performed and the rewards received, characterized the relation between work and wealth. There was a regular alternation of work and leisure or, more accurately, a non-recognition of that dichotomy. Days were not divided into work and non-work (Williams, 1986: 220; Tonkinson, 1988: 546). The Aborigines knew no weekend.  
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### **Aboriginal Time**

The Dreamtime was part of what anthropologists suggest was a set of basic similarities in the social structures and cultures of Aboriginal societies. This encompasses people's relationships with each other, the various groups in which they lived and the landscape. Through the Dreaming, every person was inseparable from the non-human world, that is, from the non-living world, the world of holy landscape and sacred places, and from the living world of plants and animals to which every person had a species-affiliation, a 'totem'. Aborigines were intimately connected with and related to the natural world and the Dreaming: it was indissolubly part of them. Thus, Strehlow (1971: 17) remarked in his *Songs of Central Australia*:  
Mountains and creeks and springs and water holes are ... not merely interesting or beautiful scenic features in which [the] eyes may take a passing delight: they are the handiwork of ancestors ... recorded in the surrounding landscape [is] the ancient story of the lives and deeds of immortal beings ... who for a brief space may take on human shape once more: beings ... known as fathers and grandfathers and brothers and sisters. The whole countryside is [a] living age-old family tree.

History, present and intimate, was not about events and persons strung like beads through time, but about the past containing the present, and the present representing the past in accordance with the Dreamtime law (Bell, 1983: 12, 46-7). Time was enveloping. Both cyclical and circular (Williams, 1986: 28), it accorded with the need for seasonal movement, the aggregation and disaggregation of groups. At different seasons, people would be at different places in groups of varying sizes and memberships, their movement to the appropriate site both calling forth a preexisting propensity for seasonal change and responding to indications of its nearness. Thus, Aborigines were profoundly committed to ensuring that this annual cycle was accomplished properly and with appropriate ceremony. Being at the right time and in the right place was crucial, for if this did not happen, then they thought the earth would 'harden', and might not be as fruitful as it could be. Famine, deluge, drought, disease and scarcity were understood to occur because of the failure on the part of

humans and the earth itself to honour their respective bonds with each other through the Dreaming, each requiring the active participation of the other (Cowan, 1992: 27-8).

Time, place and people were as one. Time was central to where one was and with whom. One knew the time by the place one was in, and by the company one shared. At any given time, one would find a particular  
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assembly of people carrying out at that place the human activity required by that season and that location. Thus, for example, the time of the Bunya nut feasting found the places of such feasting inhabited by those appropriate to the occasion (Broome, 1982: 11).

Daily time was marked by daybreak, sunrise, morning, midday, afternoon, late afternoon, sunset, evening and night. Time could be and was counted by sleeps, moons, phases of the moon and by seasons. Seasons were marked by religious ceremony, by temperature, winds and weather; by the appearance and disappearance of particular people and groups of people; the arrival of certain blossoms, plants, insects, birds, fish, animals, each according to their locality. Was the return of the peewee birds the harbinger of the wet season's end, was it the end of the wet season which brought the birds, or was it the journey of the appropriate people to the place of the lily roots, which prompted one or the other or both? Aborigines continuously created the cycle of time. Through ceremonies in which they re-created the events of their origin, they rejuvenated life - growth, depletion and renewal - through ritual activity. The cycle of human life, too, passed from spirit birth to birth to initiation to marriage to death to rebirth in spirit form (and in some cultures to reincarnation). The causal one-to-one relationship, the unidirectional linear causality basic to European thought since the classical Greeks, although not ignored, was not privileged. What was more important was that the natural cycles continued to be circular, one sign called forth by and calling forth the next, part of the movement from place to place, phase to phase, until the circle was completed and the same event occurred again in the place that contained it (Williams, 1986: 30). All that happened was already present, with movement at the appropriate time, the calling out of the landscape, the naming of the names, confirming what simultaneously was, is, and would be. Life was lived, in Stanner's (1979: 23) memorable expression, in the 'everywhen'.

Aborigines did not continuously criss-cross the land solely in pursuit of food or goods for trade. Rather, as they traversed the landscape of the Dreaming, economy and mythology encompassed and incorporated each other. Each time they made the sacred journey, they encountered their history, their current time imbued with their past. Ritual made the past anew and ensured the future (Cowan, 1992: 46). Art spoke its temporal conceptions also, with many of its creations ceremonially erased almost immediately on completion, and others surviving thousands of years. Time in art was often symbolized by a crescent representing a new moon, while a circle represented a full moon. Such depictions of time possibly constitute the earliest narrative paintings in the world (Flood, 1989: 79, 131, 150, 151-4, 202).  
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The use and distribution of time itself clearly expressed the social and political inequalities which were a feature of all Aboriginal societies (Bern, 1988: 570). Time was appropriated by the mature males, with younger males expending relatively more of their time on material production. Perhaps those older stood in a clearer or more powerful relationship with the forces which maintained the land and its products, for they certainly had a stronger claim to the higher protein food items. In some regions, polygyny also increased the political and economic power of certain men while women were denied access to particular areas and forms of knowledge. Significant, too, was the absence of women from the power of interpretation and transmission of the Dreamtime law and thus from control over the time of others, the resolution of differences and the settlement of disputes. However, as Williams and Jolly (1992: 12) have noted, 'more recent researchers are beginning to question even this impression of rigid role segregation, by examining regions and cases where economic, ceremonial and spiritual functions may be sometimes shared; and men and women tend, in certain circumstances, to defer broadly to each other'. Pettman (1992: 124) suggests that Aboriginal women considered themselves 'strong and relatively autonomous'.

Aboriginal time was organized so that life was richly intellectual and social. In these societies, which considered aesthetic creativity pre-eminent, the concerns of the spirit - art, ceremony, music, dance and legend - surpassed all others. Mulvaney (1989: 23, 27, 32) has produced evidence that the pre-invasion Nyungar, for example, expended considerable labour enriching and developing ceremonial and spiritual life. They built earth banks and enclosures of the *bora* and *keepora* grounds in circles, lines and intricate geometric designs, including assemblages or single standing stones far more ancient than Stonehenge.

Not only did Aborigines have more leisure, they also generally enjoyed a more balanced, varied and nutritious diet than most of the early white inhabitants of their land. As Captain Cook wrote in 1770, 'the natives of New-Holland ... are far more happier than we Europeans. They live in a Tranquillity which is not disturb'd by the Inequality of Condition: The Earth and sea of their own accord furnishes them with all things necessary for life' (cited in Flood, 1989: 245). In this Cook was right: Aborigines produced food, shelter and clothing to meet their needs swiftly and readily. Only a bad day, in tough country, might they have to work to meet material needs for six or seven hours, maybe even eight. They 'appear to have had', as Blainey (1982: 217) notes, 'an impressive standard of living at the time of the European invasion'.

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### **Enter 'A Strange and Plodding Race'**

The 'timeless and empty land', the 'wide-open space', that the British invaded was to the Aborigines a topography whose sacredness was reflected in the sum of the landscape and in its parts. The bond linking all these entities constituted the Dreaming cycle itself. The landscape was 'a complex and luminous spiritual edifice reminiscent of an open-air cathedral. They were not living in a lonely and desolate place, but in an environment conducive to well-being and happiness' (Cowan, 1992: 25). Not surprisingly, then, even with at least 50 different cultures within a varied and contrasting physical environment, Aborigines often resisted what Governor Gipps of



New South Wales called 'the restraints which are imposed on ordinary labourers'. According to one pioneer settler quoted in Morris (1989: 13), to Aborigines a white worker's life 'appear[ed] to be one of unmeaning toil, and they would by no means consent to exchange their free, unhoused condition for the monotonous drudgery of such a dreary existence'. Despite a 'labour crisis', pastoralists in New South Wales abandoned the attempt to make Aborigines into rural workers in the first half of the 19th century because, 50 years on, they still rejected European patterns of time discipline. As a missionary noted, the Aborigines considered the whites to be 'a strange plodding race, for the greater part slaves, obliged to get their living by constant drudgery' (Reynolds, 1988: 10). Indeed, as Butlin (1993: 3, 200) has observed, there appears to have been very little that the British brought that the Aborigines valued, at least initially, for as a government surveyor and scientist asked concerning the Dhan-gadi of northern New South Wales, 'What great inducement does the monotonous and toilsome existence of the labouring classes in civilized communities offer?' (Hodkinson, 1845: 242 cited in Morris, 1989: 25; 1992: 83).

Not much incentive at all, it seems. Arnhem Land Aborigines, according to the anthropological work studied by Sahlins (1974: 17), did not labour long or continuously. In this, of course, he is adopting a view of life and work that is not that of Aborigines themselves, but that of metric time. But even when refracted through the prism of western time, translated as it were into the frame of European time consciousness, Aboriginal time use reveals a startling distinctiveness. Four or five hours a day seemed a maximum for obtaining and preparing food in the particular place and time in which those studies were undertaken. Even allowing for the vast differences in climate, season, flora, fauna and taste, Aborigines probably would have engaged in material production at most for eight hours a day, and more typically between two and five. People produced what was sufficient for the day's physical needs, preferring to do a few  
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hours' work most days, rather than to amass and store products (Blainey, 1982: 162-7).

### **Surviving Clock-Time and Meaningless Toil**

Certainly, Aborigines did not believe in obedience to the clock. To them, time was not a tyrant. Instead, they possessed a cyclical view of time, and a tightly structured and detailed historical knowledge which the whites vigorously attempted to expunge. W Tench, one of Sydney's earliest white settlers, observed, 'All savages hate toil and place happiness in inaction,' while Governor Macquarie wrote to Lord Bathurst in 1814:

Those natives who resort to the cultivated districts of this settlement, altho' prone like other savages to great indolence and indifference as to their future means of subsistence, yet in general are of free, open and favourable dispositions.... The principal part of their lives is wasted in wandering thro' their native woods, in small tribes of between 20 and 50, in quest of the immediate means of subsistence making opossums, kangaroos [sic], grub worms, and such animals and fish as the country and its coast afford, the objects of their fare.

'TB.A. Bushman' informed the Sydney Gazette in July 1840, from his hut in the Snowy Mountains, that Aborigines 'are as may be expected from their rude

untutored state, strongly adverse to labour of any kind, and may expect as regards their hunting and fighting expeditions, be classed as lazy in extreme' (quoted in Organ, 1990: xxxv).

In other words, despite the wide diversity of their cultures and ecologies, Aborigines almost uniformly despised the temporal inflexibility and spatial rigidity of the settler's life. When they did toil for whites, they did so on their own terms and within their own time, incorporating a period of employment into their cycles of movement and fructification in much the same way as they included visits to the other physical and spiritual resources within their land. Their 'Wild wandering and Unsettled Habits', to which Governor Maquarie referred in 1814, were in fact far from erratic: they reflected the knowledge of generations. To these patterns of the Dream Journey post-invasion Aborigines tied the rhythms of the pastoral industry, stopping on stations which were part of their territory when there was a demand for seasonal labour - shearing, clearing, mustering, droving and doing domestic work. In this way, they maintained the linkages between humans and the land, ensuring the continuation of the critical cycles of regeneration and rebirth (Reynolds, 1989: 104; Fox, 1991: 12-16). 'I go because I must' was the usual explanation offered to those who required one (Read, 1988: 16).  
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British settlers of the 19th century called this 'walkabout', and to this day many associate it with laziness and unreliability.

The term implies both moral condemnation of the Aboriginal work ethic and a desultory incomprehension of Aboriginal religious life. If an Aboriginal stockman chose to go walkabout - that is make a Dream Journey - his employer would inevitably conclude that the man wished to avoid work. Thus an attitude of suspicion was born which pervades any dialogue between white and black Australians even today. (Cowan, 1992: 43)

The missions and government stations, too, were keen to save souls for their God who had created the world in six days. They wanted to demonstrate the benefits of European temporality and to instil their work ethic, particularly in the young, whom they found less resistant to their message. A school to make Aboriginal children 'domesticated and industrious' was opened in Parramatta, New South Wales, in 1815, only to be closed down after a short period. 'Leonidas', the leading student at a school for Aboriginal students on Flinders Island in the 1830s, was taught the names of the months and the days of the week, the Lord's Prayer, the Collect, to count to 100 and a basic catechism. The stations themselves survived on the largely unpaid labour of Aboriginal workers. Women workers received no remuneration, being schooled in domestic labour and the 'virtues' of dependency, while the men, trained to become 'breadwinners', often received some small payment to demonstrate that 'men's work' was suitably rewarded (Reynolds, 1989: 172; Fox, 1991: 46).

Aborigines maintained their own temporal order and its priorities against this regime. In 1843, James Gunther recorded the failure of the mission at Wellington Valley in New South Wales: 'Several of those who used to stay at or frequent the Mission resorted to their old migratory habits. ... Even those few who may be considered as still attached to the Mission ... have too frequently made excursions into the bush, and when at home they evinced not much desire for instruction and improvement.... I

could rarely get one or two of them at the one time to be instructed, which is very disheartening' (cited in Reynolds, 1989: 174). Such was their defiance of mechanical time that Governor Hutt of Western Australia wrote in 1844: 'They cannot be persuaded to give up their roaming propensities, and to associate together in a self supporting community, they dislike regular habits, and above all, they are averse to continued toil and industry' (cited in Reynolds, 1989: 128).

The establishment of reserves for Aborigines, enclaves of the new work ethic and European temporality, dates back to the early 19th century. To smash the connection between time and place, people were forcibly relocated and put under government or missionary control whence the  
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'heathen' and 'savage' spirituality of the Dreaming was discouraged and condemned. Aboriginal values of time and work were rejected in favour of 'regimentation, discipline, parsimony and control . . . "like a jail" ', according to one young woman (Huggins and Blake, 1992: 43). Resistance continued, however, such that 'from wherever the whites had penetrated came dismal reports of the failure of the mission stations' (Read, 1988: 23).

In 1923, this account appeared of life in North Queensland at Yarrabah, a station admired in missionary circles:

How far have the blacks got in twenty years? ... Morning by morning [the missionary] rings the work bell, calls the roll, and starts the day's work with prayer.... The savage, who forgets so easily and sees only the present need, or immediate pleasure, must learn to think ahead.... Sometimes sternness and discipline, fines of tobacco or Saturday punishment work, sometimes the appeal to the slowly developing conscience.... Sometimes it is the world of devils.... A spirit of opposition to overcome, sinister influence to drag out into the light, one of Satan's mouthpieces to be publicly exposed and reprov'd. Sometimes a strike must be deliberately broken, and even the level of actual starvation used to force home the fact that men's Christianity is no shield to save them from the consequences of their sins. (Cited in Reynolds, 1989: 179)

Some whites hoped that the attractions of the market economy would be sufficient to ensure continuous work. As Jack MacLaren explained of the workers on his coconut plantation in Cape York at the turn of the century:

'We worked yesterday and are tired and would rest', they would say adding pointedly that in their habitual mode of life they worked not at all and hunted only when the need for food was on them. Whereupon I would point out that in their wild life they had no tobacco, or flour, or coloured cloth, or tinned meats, or tinned fish, or any other of the luxuries they coveted, and that the only way to obtain them was by working all day, every day. (Cited in Reynolds, 1982: 143)

Trading time for 'luxuries', however, did not prove successful, for as Read (1988: 21) observed of the Wiradjuri of central New South Wales, 'They took such material goods as they wanted. Spiritually and intellectually, they remained untouched.'

When persuasion, education and exposure to the market failed, whites resorted to more tried and true methods. In the 1890s, pastoralists in Western Australia had succeeded in passing legislation which they themselves, as Justices of the Peace, could inflict on their Aboriginal employees. This allowed for three months' imprisonment and a flogging with a cat o' nine tails for absconding from work.  
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Another example concerns the Aborigines who worked on pearling boats in the north in the 1870s and 1880s. Some were kidnapped and stranded on islands off the coast. One observer noted in 1905:

I have seen numbers of natives brought in from the interior, and some of them had never before seen the face of a white man, and they were compelled to put their hand to a pen and make a cross which they never could understand, and having done this they were then slaves for life, or as long as they were good for pearl diving. (Carly, cited in Hunter, 1993: 41)

The male pearl divers worked 10 hours a day, seven days a week, for eight months of the year, while `women were driven to work "beachcombing" the reefs by stockwhip-wielding overseers' (Fox, 1991: 45).

The stereotyping and brutalization of Aboriginal workers continued into the 20th century. In 1916, by a vote of 28 to 3, the NSW government amended the Aboriginal Protection Act to enable children to be removed from their families. `They were taken as far away as possible and enslaved - to work as free labour on farms or as domestics in private homes' (McLaren, 1993: 39). During the 1940s the Department of Native Affairs in Western Australia developed and imposed a raft of coercive measures, including the stealing of children from their parents, the imposition of compulsory wage labour for men and the removal of `recalcitrants' from their communities, in its attempt to suppress `native habits' and `shiftlessness' and to inculcate the white work ethic. The key protagonist of these methods, the Chief Protector of the Department, freely conceded that they were used nowhere else in the world, except in Nazi Germany. Aborigines were represented as being `mostly socialists' inclined to `sponge' off each other, and their sharing of resources was strongly discouraged. Their attitude to work was `casual' and `irresponsible' and they had `little sense of husbandry for the morrow' in the view of departmental officials. Nor did they deserve full award wages (Hodson, 1989: 26-50, *passim*).

Marginalized in the labour market, Aborigines sought to turn this to their advantage, continuing their Dreaming cycles by utilizing the freedom of movement seasonal labour required (Hunter, 1993: 37). The fruitfulness of the properties on which they worked was safeguarded by incorporating them into the sequential movement of the group across the country, thereby allowing Aboriginal time to be maintained. The Nyungars of the south west of Western Australia lived and worked over a stretch of country (a `run') to which they had ties of traditional ownership, and where they buried their dead. This land contained their *bora* and *keepora* grounds and they moved through it in a circular fashion,  
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clearing, shearing, crutching, shed-handing and ploughing (Hodson, 1989: 119). Similarly, Read records of the Wiradjuri:

... a great deal of day-to-day living patterns survived the squatters' domination. Unnoticed by the whites ... ceremonies survived for decades... Seasonal fruit-picking reinforced the desires of family groups to move about long-familiar areas. Alternative child rearing patterns, . . . decision making by consensus and the resolution of conflict without outside force ... went hand in hand with the rejection of peculiarly European lifeways such as the work ethic and nuclear-style families. (Read, 1988: 28)

For about 100 years until the 1970s, Aborigines made up a large proportion of the 'unskilled' and seasonal labour in the countryside. The Dhan-gadi of northern New South Wales 'held marginal and temporary, but stable, positions within the local economy ... for a full three generations' (Morris, 1989: 188; see also Altman and Daly, 1992: 5; Castle and Verrucci, 1992: 2). According to Fox (1991: 155-7), Aboriginal workers came to monopolize seasonal employment like fruit picking in New South Wales and Victoria, working together in groups of kin close to the land of their ancestors. Amongst the Nyungars, 'key men' often contracted the work with farmers and paid their kin. There seems to have been a preference for contract work, which not only paid a better hourly rate, but was 'task work', the sort of work preferred by most people given the choice, as the duration and intensity of labour and the timing and amount of leisure could be controlled by them (Hodson, 1989: 37, 50).

In Hodson's (1989: 13, 118) view, it was not until the 1930s that the Nyungars were proletarianized in Marx's sense. Yet despite capitalist work relations eventually being viewed as 'natural', 'Nyungar time' persisted. This was true even of the young, for in 1960 the West Australian Commissioner of Native Affairs reported to his Minister that 'many of their teenagers do not want post primary education or training or being submitted to any restriction of their liberty in any shape or form' (Hodson, 1989: 115). Nyungar time continued, for the Nyungars were able to retain their close ties with the land and to maintain a collective orientation to wage labour which blurred the distinctions between work and leisure, child and adult tasks and pleasures, and domestic and public production. According to a farmer who had contracted some clearing work, 'half a dozen might turn up and do it and they'd all knock off and kick a football around or something,' while a woman recalled 'building castles of stone as a child helping her family clear stony ground. Others mention collecting and consuming 'bush tucker', catching and cooking rabbits, while on the job'. And all enjoyed this type of work best because they could vary its pace and ignore the clock (Hodson, 1989: 119).

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### **Reasserting the Dreamtime**

From the 1970s, structural and technological changes in agriculture and the end of the full-employment economy destroyed most of the rural jobs performed by Aborigines (Altman and Daly, 1992: 5; Castle and Verrucci, 1992: 2). Moreover, the collective orientation and land-related nature of the least disliked form of wage labour were displaced by energyintensive production techniques (Morris, 1989: 189, 191). Yet Aboriginal conceptions of time survived even these developments, especially where ties with the land endured. Some of the more remote people, such as the Eastern Gunwinggu of the Maningrida region of north central Arnhem Land, retained their temporal cycles despite 25 years of intermittent involvement with

representatives of the Australian state and capital (Altman, 1987: 11). That is to say, not only did their hunting, fishing and collecting meet the bulk of their subsistence needs, but these practices were conversant with ways of doing things (and the lived temporality) that predated the white invasion.

Nevertheless, the demise of those forms of wage labour amenable to Aboriginal temporality and styles of work was met by the reassertion of an Aboriginal time tied even more directly to the land. The federal parliament's House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs (1987: 1) noted that movement to 'homeland centres or outstations', such as those in Arnhem Land, 'is one of the most significant developments in the last 15 years' and 'the period of greatest social change, other than the initial arrival of Europeans' (Hunter, 1993: 72). The election of the Labor government in 1973 made possible the gradual rearticulation of political power by Aboriginal people at the local level. This coincided through the 1970s and into the 1980s with an economic recession and an acceleration of technological intensification which particularly hit rural workers. There was also a significant increase in migration from the more centralized townships and mission stations back to satellite communities on clan land (Altman, 1987: 5). Many returned to protect sacred sites and to confirm the ownership of their land. By the late 1980s, about half the population of Maningrida lived most of the year in about 20 outstations. Nationally, the majority of the Aborigines live in non-metropolitan areas, 47 percent in centres with populations of less than 3000, and about 30 percent live in remote communities with populations of between 20 and 1000 (Altman, 1987: 5; Castle and Verrucci, 1992: 3; Gallagher, 1992: 5).

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## **Conclusion**

In this article I have attempted to show that when the British, 'one of the most recently formed of human societies in the world', collided with 'one of the most ancient' (Butlin, 1993: 227, 2), the former's temporal order did not destroy that of the latter. The evidence reproduced here calls into question Nguyen's (1992: 33) claim that global standardized metric time's 'hegemonic deployment signified the irreversible destruction of all other temporal regimes in the world'. The problem; as I have tried to show, is that the 'end of time' suggested for those who continue to ignore, avoid, oppose and confront the imposed temporal order, entails closing them out of the future. On the contrary, it may be that, Whitefellas' time will prove to be little more than a temporary interruption of Aboriginal history, given that it accounts, according to Butlin's (1993: 227, 2) calculation, for less than 0.5 percent of Australian human history.

The evidence from 'the world's oldest continuous culture' (see Murray, 1992: 14) indicates that temporality may not be expunged when relatedness to the past and openness to the future are combined with a flexible and imaginative use of counter-hegemonic temporalities. Australian Aborigines prevented the extinction of their temporal order by their resistance to the white work ethic and by the incorporation into their Dreaming cycle of elements of it which enabled them to remain 'as close as possible to the land for which they hold spiritual responsibility'. They maintained, too, where possible, the collective performance of and a task orientation towards work, and a refusal to separate 'work time' from 'life time'. The movement to the homeland centres and the Land Rights Acts of more recent times seem to have assured the

further development of their temporal order by strengthening its relations to the land (House of Representatives Standing Committee, 1987: 3; 163-72).

Nguyen (1992) may be surprised to learn that an appreciation of this ancient temporality is actually growing amongst non-Aborigines in rural communities and even beyond them. Ernabella is a small town in the Musgrave ranges in the remote north west corner of South Australia, about 1500km north west of Adelaide and 450km south west of Alice Springs. Near the town centre is a hill on which sits a mini-Eiffel tower. On the top of the tower sits a giant revolving electrically operated clock. For years the community had used a siren system to tell people when it was time to work, and when it was time for a break. No one was listening to the siren. The clock was put there in 1977 by the town council which had decided that the Pitjantjatjara needed to be educated about time. In 1984, a white community adviser to the Pukatja community noted that  
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... the clock [was] a waste of time ... the fact is that nobody looks at [it]. The clock has not been working for months. No one knew that it was not working.... European staff use time and watches to regulate their activities but often they also work until the job is completed or it is too hot or cold or dark to continue. This local adaptation to time is still going on. (Butcher et al., 1989: 1.9[b])

While whites in the Northern Territory speak of the year in terms of the wet and dry seasons, the Eastern Gunwinggu see 'the wet' comprising three and 'the dry' comprising three distinct seasons. These six seasons are marked by variations in the availability and state of animal and plant life and by changes in the weather and wind (Altman, 1987: 18). For Aborigines, the reading of the seasons is still a crucial determinant of human well-being: what people are to eat, where they ought to be and with whom, is signalled and synchronized by the seasons. People could travel or gather depending on the ability of a particular eco-system to support them. Available resources determine group mobility and size (Tonkinson, 1988: 546-7), while the time of year determines camp locale, the number and composition of the group inhabiting it, the inhabitants' mobility, and the character, duration and initiation of their cycles of production and reproduction.

In May 1995, Steve Symonds, a spokesperson for the Weather Bureau of New South Wales, said that it was an 'excellent idea' that Australians should cast off the four seasons imposed by the white invaders:

If you ask an Aboriginal person in the western Kimberly they will tell you five, in Darwin and Kakadu they have six and in the Cape York area there are eight. We are cultural imperialists and we have just said what we want the weather to be. We came out here and said that there are four seasons in Europe so four seasons there should be here. Why should there be four seasons in Australia just because there are four seasons in London?  
(Woodford, 1995, 5)

Who knows? Perhaps philosopher Mary Graham is right in saying: 'This land is persuading in a spiritual or psychological way whitefellas to take it easy, to be slower, and not be in such a hurry to go some place' (Film Australia, 1995).

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