

Aboriginal Australian Cowboys and the Art of Appropriation

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IN AMERICA, THE IMAGE OF THE COWBOY configures the ideals of courage, freedom, equality, and individualism.¹ As close readers of the genre of the Western have argued, the cowboy fulfills a mythical role in American popular culture, as he stands between the so-called settlement of the country and its wilderness, between an idea of civilization and the depiction of savage Indians. The Western vaulted the cowboy to iconic status, as stage shows, novels, and films encoded his virtues in narratives set on the North American frontier of the nineteenth century. He became a figure of the popular national imagination just after this frontier had been conquered.² From the beginning, the fictional cowboy was a character who played upon the nation's idea of itself and its history. He came to assume the status of national myth and informed America's economic, political, and social landscape over the course of the twentieth century.³ Yet this is only one nation's history of the cowboy. As America became one of the largest exporters of culture on the planet, it exported its Western imagery, genre films, and novels. These cowboys were transformed in the hands of other cultural producers in other countries. From East German *Indi-nerfilme* to Italian spaghetti Westerns and Mexican films about caudillos (military leaders), the

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¹ John R. Erikson, *The Modern Cowboy* (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 1981), 7; W. Wright, *The Wild West: The Mythical Cowboy and Social Theory* (London: Sage, 2001), 1.

² John Cawelti, *The Six-Gun Mystique*, 2nd ed. (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1984), 23.

³ Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth Century America* (New York: Harper, 1992); Wright, *Wild West*.



image of the cowboy was colonized by cultures that American culture had colonized.⁴ In Australia, the cowboy did not represent the defeat of indigenous people but an empowerment of them. Aboriginal stockmen identified with the heroic characters in Western films, who, like them, rode on horseback wearing broad-brimmed hats. In what remote Aboriginal people now call “station times,” Aboriginal stockmen worked the country that they had once roamed as hunter-gatherers.

Station times had violent beginnings, as pastoralists invaded the Australian frontier with mobs of cattle. The dry interior of Australia was converted into grazing land. As water sources were ruined by the hooves of animals and as edible plants were eaten, the hunter-gatherer lifestyle became more difficult. For Aboriginal people, joining stations (ranches) was a pragmatic option. Australian historian Marcia Langton imagines how the lives of remote people were changed: “Aboriginal people of course have had the fear of God put into them, and clearly the last option left for them is to work around the homesteads and to work with cattle, because there’s nothing left for them. Their environment has been destroyed by the cattle.”⁵ In this and many other accounts of Australian history, station time is born of desperation.

In turn, station owners had an interest in keeping Aboriginal people on their properties to prevent them from killing cattle for food and to secure a cheap supply of labor. Often, they resorted to violence. In the northwest of the country men’s feet were scoured with files so that they could not run away, boys were kidnapped to ensure that their families would not return to the bush, and women were locked up and fitted with iron balls and chains.⁶ As generations of Aboriginal people lived and worked in camps on the stations, the relationship between pastoralists and the Aboriginal people living in these camps stabilized into one of codependence. Although Aboriginal people worked alongside non-Aboriginal people, their situation was not an equitable one. For the most part, they were not paid but instead were given supplies of food and clothing. When they were paid, it was only so that they could obtain the minimum of supplies from the station store. By the 1930s, the national government was subsidizing even this pittance, supplying stations with clothing and rations, and even money, which the stations would not pass on to their own workers and their families. The stations were paternalistic toward their Aboriginal populations, keeping them supplied only to the extent of keeping them alive, and on some stations barely this. The first wave of historians to tackle the issue of Aboriginal people on stations described their situation as little better than slavery.⁷ Later historians and anthropologists working with the oral testimonies of Aboriginal station workers have, however, revised this description to include the opportunities that stations gave Aboriginal people to become independent and achieve esteem in the eyes of Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people alike.⁸ They have

⁴ Bert Fridlund, *The Spaghetti Western: A Thematic Analysis* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006); Tom R. Sullivan, *Cowboys and Caudillos: Frontier Ideology of the Americas* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990).

⁵ Marcia Langton interview, “There Is No Other Law,” episode 4 of *The First Australians* (TV series, ABC TV, Australia, 2008).

⁶ Pamela A. Smith, “Station Camps: Legislation, Labour Relations and Rations on Pastoral Leases in the Kimberley Region, Western Australia,” *Aboriginal History* 24 (2000): 80.

⁷ Robert Foster, “Rations, Coexistence, and the Colonisation of Aboriginal Labour in the South Australian Pastoral Industry, 1860–1911,” *Aboriginal History* 24 (2000): 3; Frank Stevens, *Aborigines in the Northern Territory Cattle Industry* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1987).

⁸ Ann McGrath, “Playing Colonial: Cowgirls, Cowboys, and Indians in Australia and North America,” *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2001), doi:10.1353/cch.2001.0010; Martin Preaud, “Loi et culture en pays aborigènes: Anthropologie des réseaux autochtones du Kimberley, nord-ouest de Australie” (PhD diss., James Cook University, 2009), 37.

also documented the continuity of ceremonial Aboriginal culture through station times and placed less emphasis upon the historical schism between preinvasion and postinvasion Aboriginal Australia.

Station times came to an end in the late 1960s. While Australian historians generally attribute this to the federal government's mandating that Aboriginal people were entitled to a reasonable payment for their work, it was also the case that the industrial development of remote Australian cattle stations was making intensive labor obsolete. Pastoralists were increasing fencing, mustering with vehicles rather than horses, and sinking a greater number of water bores on their land—all to reduce the amount of labor necessary to run their cattle.⁹ Debates over the significance of station time largely take place in controversies over its beginnings and ends. Its beginnings are caught up in the violence of the Australian colonial frontier, while revisionist accounts of station time generally focus upon its end, when Aboriginal people were forced off the stations and into government settlements or improvised slums on the fringes of towns. This was foreseen by the national government, which supported more equitable payment to station workers knowing that this would result in their exile from stations, as pastoralists claimed that they could not afford to pay their Aboriginal stockmen and support their families. Even the pastoralists anticipated the cruelty of the new situation. In the 1965 hearing over pay to Aboriginal stockmen, one pastoralist testified that it would "break their hearts. . . it would kill them to have to go away to another settlement."¹⁰ Despite this, pastoralists across Australia stuck by their threat to expel them from stations when the pay decision was enacted. Contrary to the government's expectations, the movement of thousands of people from stations to government settlements and shanty towns did not succeed in making them more of a part of mainstream Australia. Instead, it enabled remote people to enlarge their ceremonial, cultural activities. A population boom and new influx of wealth, largely from pensioners newly empowered by equitable policies toward Aboriginal people, enabled remote Aboriginal people to travel in vehicles across the continent.¹¹

Amid this cultural revival the cowboy took his place as a figure of pan-Aboriginal mobility and freedom. For the seeds of this cultural renaissance were laid by Aboriginal stockmen, who during station times had traveled across Aboriginal Australia, keeping people in touch as they ran cattle over great distances. The seasonal nature of pastoral work allowed Aboriginal stockmen to also continue their ceremonial life, as they moved from what they called station time back into "law time" over the months of summer, when great gatherings of Aboriginal people held dances and initiations. They remained tied to ceremonial life, while also living beyond it, moving from blackfella to stockman, from classical to pan-Aboriginal worlds. With access to vehicles, this new society was able to travel even farther, and the Aboriginal diaspora was more connected than it had ever been.¹² The cowboy became an image of the previous period of Aboriginal history, one who configured a sense of community that had persisted through the experience of colonization and the establishment of a new regime of cultural, economic, and social

⁹ Thalia Anthony, "Reconciliation and Conciliation: The Irreconcilable Dilemma of the 1965 'Equal' Wage Case for Aboriginal Station Workers," *Labour History* 93 (November 2007): 18.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹¹ Kim Akerman, "The Renaissance of Aboriginal Law in the Kimberleys," in *Aborigines of the West: Their Past and Their Present*, ed. R. M. Berndt and C. H. Berndt (Perth: University of Western Australia, 1979), 234–42; Geoffrey Bardon, *Aboriginal Art of the Western Desert* (Adelaide: Rigby, 1979); Judith Ryan, "Bones of Country: The East Kimberley Aesthetic," in *Images of Power: Aboriginal Art of the Kimberley*, ed. Judith Ryan with Kim Akerman (Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 1993), 40–47.

¹² Akerman, "Renaissance of Aboriginal Law in the Kimberleys."

power on the stations. To come to terms with the symbolic power of the cowboy in remote Australia, it is possible to turn to the most famous Aboriginal cowboy, the artist Albert Namatjira. His paintings captured not only the drama of the central desert landscape but also the imagination of the Australian public. He was also famous among Aboriginal people, as a figure of independence and success who had risen to visibility. Although he became known as an artist, Namatjira began his life as a stockman, riding horses, mustering cattle, and fencing on the Hermannsburg Mission and on stations around it. As the time of the Aboriginal cowboys came to an end in the late 1960s, both Namatjira and the cowboy became models representing remote Aboriginal people nostalgic for life on the stations. In this, the Aboriginal cowboy is like his American counterpart, in becoming a point of heroic identification in an era that is no longer his own.

In his account of the transformation of the myth of the American frontier in twentieth-century America, Richard Slotkin argues that democracy represented a new frontier that offered the cowboy another chance to test his qualities.¹³ The argument can also be made about remote Aboriginal Australia after station times. The freedom of the cowboy became the freedom of Aboriginal people and their communities to find their own way. The qualities of the cowboy were also the qualities now demanded of Aboriginal people. Western narratives are often about the hero defending a small town, symbol of civilization. Such was the fate of the retired stockmen, whose cosmopolitan experience of working across the country now translated into a capacity to negotiate within and without these new communities. As genre theorist John Cawelti notes, the cowboy must never be driven to passionate violence but must show good judgment even in moments of intense threat and stress.¹⁴ The freedom of life as a stockman had become a different kind of freedom, with responsibilities, so that, to pick one example, to own a vehicle is to give rides to others and to lend the car to those who want it, to fulfill the obligations of kinship. The cowboy here is more like the Mexican caudillo than the American hero, as the caudillo is tied to a particular community rather than having no obligations.¹⁵ Freedom in different national contexts has different meanings, and the cowboy in the era of settlement is able to negotiate multiple responsibilities with wisdom and knowledge.

Aboriginal stockmen were already cowboys before the arrival of the American image of the cowboy. They were wearing broad-brimmed hats and working with stock, their identities already caught up in a life on horseback. When the gramophone record brought Country and Western music to cattle stations, and television brought Western genre films to townships and remote settlements, these stockmen found their identities confirmed in the American cowboy. The landscapes of cinematic Westerns are suitably ambivalent, and not cinematically dissimilar to that of outback Australia, with big open spaces and lots of dirt, rocky outcrops, pillars of stone, and men on horseback. These imports were the forerunner to the Americanization of rural Australia more generally, as bull-riding and Stetsons came into fashion at rodeos, while distinctly Australian customs like stump-jumping were taken off their programs.¹⁶ Yet these Americanisms would also take on a different meaning when Aboriginal people adapted them. Their identification with American images and ideas was part of a pan-Aboriginal differentiation from greater Australian society. Australian historian Ann McGrath compares the Aboriginal cowboys to black American cowboys in their exclusion from national mythmaking and in their identification with

¹³ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*.

¹⁴ Cawelti, *Six-Gun Mystique*, 29.

¹⁵ Sullivan, *Cowboys and Caudillos*.

¹⁶ McGrath, "Playing Colonial."

the Western's rebellious yet noble figure.¹⁷ As early as the 1930s, the American cowboy was seen as dangerous. The Chief Protector of Aborigines in the Northern Territory banned early Westerns in schools.¹⁸ The stated reason for this was the fear that Aboriginal children were identifying with the rebellious American Indian, but it is just as possible that the rugged independence of the cowboy offered a role model to children isolated from their families, who were often living on stations. As Aboriginal people got caught up in debates over their national identity during the Aboriginal rights movements of the 1950s and 1960s, the independence of the cowboy retained his appeal to stockmen and to Aboriginal society more generally, as the persistence of American country fashions testifies.

During station times, horses and their riders were etched onto black water tanks. As historian Richard Kimber observes, "From the 1880s to 1970s depictions of cattle station life were also favoured: the rider on a bucking horse, free-running horses, and long-horned cattle were universal favourites."¹⁹ The practice of drawing cowboy scenes continued after Aboriginal people had left the stations. Geoffrey Bardon, working on the government settlement of Papunya in the early 1970s, noted that while children drew animal tracks in sand, on classroom paper they would draw cowboys and Indians.²⁰ He also reports on visiting the artist Johnny Warangkula Tjupurrula: "A good fire was blazing and photographs of cowboys were stuck on the wall, next to the door; graffiti on the exterior latrine walls had European names or cowboy profiles or were of someone who loved someone else, in the European manner."²¹

The first Aboriginal stockman to achieve notice for his art during this time was Albert Namatjira. A market for Aboriginal artifacts had long been established by anthropologists, museums, and tourists, and Namatjira was one of many carvers and painters of such artifacts. He also painted and sketched the "scenes and incidents around him . . . the cattle yard, the stockmen with their horses, and the hunters after game."²² Namatjira's series of watercolor landscapes of the McDonnell ranges and surrounding country of Central Australia was immensely successful and turned him into the most famous Aboriginal person in Australia. Accounts of Namatjira's work have long focused on the political and tragic dimensions to his life story, of the problems that his fame created for his life and family. They emphasize how his life was split between Aboriginal and colonial societies.²³ His Christianization at the Hermannsburg Mission is taken as a sign that he lost contact with his Arrernte culture, to become a figure for the whole assimilation

¹⁷ Ann McGrath, *Born in the Cattle: Aborigines in Cattle Country* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1987).

¹⁸ McGrath, "Playing Colonial."

¹⁹ Richard G. Kimber, "'Play About': Aboriginal Graffiti in Central Australia," in *The Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture*, ed. Sylvia Kleinert and Margo Neale (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 2000), 124–25.

²⁰ Geoffrey Bardon and James Bardon, *Papunya: A Place Made after the Story; The Beginnings of the Western Desert Painting Movement* (Farnham: Lund Humphries, 2006), 3.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 80.

²² Sylvia Kleinert, "Namatjira, Albert (Elea) (1902–1959)," in *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (Canberra: Australian National University, 2006–), also available online at adb.anu.edu.au/biography/namatjira-albert-elea-11217/text19999 (last accessed on February 12, 2012).

²³ Jane Hardy, J. V. S. Megaw, and M. Ruth Megaw, *The Heritage of Namatjira: The Watercolourists of Central Australia* (Melbourne: William Heinemann, 1992); Alison French, *Seeing the Centre: The Art of Albert Namatjira, 1902–1959* (Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 2002); Philip Jones, "Objects of Mystery and Concealment," in *Politics of the Secret*, ed. Christopher Anderson, Oceania Monograph 45 (Sydney: University of Sydney, 1995), 67–96; Sylvia Kleinert, "The Critical Reaction to the Hermannsburg School," in Hardy, Megaw, and Megaw, *Heritage of Namatjira*, 217–48; Andrew Mackenzie, *Albert Namatjira* (Sydney: Mallard Press, 1989).

era of Australian colonial history.²⁴ Australian art historians have foregrounded this biographical story and regard his work as being in a non-Aboriginal Australian landscape style. As Bernard Smith points out, Namatjira's work carries on the tradition of the so-called gum tree school of Australian painting, which set out to capture the sensibility of Australia by painting its countryside. Smith places Namatjira in the lineage of the gum tree school's most famous painter, Hans Heysen.²⁵ More recent assessments of Namatjira's paintings have instead turned to his literalism and naturalism, attempting to see his work apart from a scholarly critique of landscape, with all the cultural baggage that this entails.²⁶ Conceptual artist Ian Burn and art historian Ann Stephen point out the tactility of Namatjira's paintings, the way that despite simulating the depth seen by a perspectival eye, they are also replete with the details of the country even in the far distance.²⁷ The paintings simulate, not the flat image of the reproduced camera image, but the rich detail available to one who stands and walks in the country. Burn and Stephen's revisionist art history is quick to point out that the tactility of Namatjira's style resembles other, more classical Aboriginal painters of Central Australia.

This oscillation between Aboriginality and non-Aboriginality has typified the writing on Namatjira, often re-creating his biographical tragedy and obscuring his life in station times. Instead of a conflict between indigenous and nonindigenous cultures, the figure of the stockman emphasizes the continuity of indigenous identity through the colonization of the country. A third way of thinking about Namatjira is through North American art history, where the cowboy also emerged as a kind of mythic figure configuring some of the contradictions of this settler society. In New York a group of photographers who largely worked with material from popular culture would become known as appropriation artists.²⁸ These rephotographers, including Richard Prince, took photographs that reproduced or recalled other photographs, setting up a regress of cultural memory as their works brought to light a kind of popular unconscious of American imagery. Prince is of particular relevance here, for his series of images of the Marlboro Man advertisements, with their cowboys wearing broad-brimmed hats, riding horses, and smoking cigarettes. Here the freedom to appropriate is at one with the freedom represented by the cowboy riding through country. Prince's cowboy series of rephotographs are in a double bind as they both celebrate and critique American mythmaking. It is possible to see in Namatjira's watercolor landscapes the features that made the New York appropriation artists so influential, although Namatjira was working long before them. For like Namatjira, these rephotographers were opportunistic, taking liberties with what was around them. For Prince, this was popular culture and its imagery, while for Namatjira, it was the genre of pastoral modernism that was in vogue in Australia at the time.

Prince's work is of interest here not only because of its cowboy content. His style is also pertinent to the effect of his work. Instead of simulating the original advertisements, to make slick images that recall their origins, Prince's photographs are blurry and off-center, mocking the sleek professionalism of commercial imagery. Prince's difference from the other appropriation

²⁴ Jones, "Objects of Mystery and Concealment," 89.

²⁵ Bernard Smith, "Creators and Catalysts: The Modernisation of Australian Indigenous Art," *Australian Cultural History* 25 (2006): 21.

²⁶ See, e.g., French, *Seeing the Centre*.

²⁷ Ian Burn and Ann Stephen, "Namatjira's White Mask: A Partial Interpretation," in Hardy, Megaw, and Megaw, *Heritage of Namatjira*, 249-82.

²⁸ Douglas Crimp, "Pictures," *October* 8 (1979): 75-88.

artists, such as Cindy Sherman and Louise Lawler, lies in this distance from the first image that he puts in place. In this, Prince's work resembles that of another group of artists that would emerge in America at this time: the neo-expressionists who worked with great big brushstrokes and commercial subjects, and whose paintings are blurry and out of focus. These painters were critiqued for being all too commercial, for returning to canvas after the radicalism of conceptual art.²⁹ In the movement of his camera, Prince also seems to be foregrounding his own hand and style, to rebuke the cool detachment of the more conceptual rephotographers. His choice of image to rephotograph is also a heroic one, as the Marlboro Man is nothing less than a hypermasculine figure. Marlboro's advertising campaign was originally geared to turn what was a women's style of cigarette into a masculine one. It was a successful campaign too, as Marlboro cigarettes became a best-selling product through their association with this fantasy located in the American past.³⁰ Prince worked with the heightened sense of irony that distinguished postmodern art, his photographs of photographs playing out the tension between the myth and its degraded reproduction. These blurry images of the cowboy configured the new place of the Western hero in high postmodern culture, in which he is adrift in a sea of representations.

At first glance, the works of Namatjira and Prince appear to be poles apart. Namatjira's landscape painting cannot be separated from the artist's intimate relationship with the country in which he was born, while Prince's work is done in a style famed for its ambivalence, its distance from its subjects. Prince seems to confuse the discourse of empowerment by appropriating that which has already been appropriated from American popular culture. Yet Namatjira's work can also be read as an appropriation—in this case, an appropriation of the Western style of landscape painting to illustrate an Aboriginal relationship to the country of Central Australia. That this landscape style is familiar from a European history of art sets up a regress in which the artist's intentions are blurred, obscured in the history of cultural representations of Australia itself. This freedom that Namatjira creates for the viewer to interpret his enigmatic work is the freedom that station times afforded Aboriginal people, whose experience of the country from horseback was one that confused the lines by which Aboriginality was defined. The appropriations of stockmen-turned-artists in Australia take the cowboy as an image of freedom over and against the unfreedoms of colonial times. The mobility of the cowboy stands for a postcolonial Aboriginal freedom, yet it is, like the American cowboy, also tied to a nostalgia for times long past. Indeed, station times offer a similar myth of origins for Aboriginal people, not unlike the frontier of the Wild American West, by which Americans have oriented their own identities.

To unravel this logic more precisely, we can turn to the heritage of Namatjira, to other artists who also work with historical material from station times. Billy Benn, for example, is a contemporary landscape artist who models himself on Namatjira.³¹ Benn's expressionistic visions of the landscape are indebted to his time as a stockman. Apart from his landscapes, he also sketches cowboys. As arts worker Catherine Peattie describes,

Cowboys carry a special significance for Benn, linked to cherished memories of reading cowboy comics, playing with toy guns and of John Wayne's visit to Australia in 1943. Most

²⁹ Geoffrey Batchen, "A Riddle Unravelling: David Salle and the Politics of Postmodernism," *Art Network*, Summer 1985, 11–15.

³⁰ Katherine M. West, "The Marlboro Man: The Making of an American Image," <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~class/marlboro/mman.html> (last accessed on February 10, 2012).

³¹ Ian McLean, "Billy Benn, Outsider Art and Art History," in *Billy Benn*, by Billy Benn Perrurle and Catherine Peattie (Alice Springs: IAD Press, 2011), 60–62.

importantly, cowboys represent freedom on the land. During this period, when jobs for Aboriginal people were scarce or subservient, affinity with country made them excellent stockmen. Aboriginal stockmen earned respect in both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal worlds. The clothing and lifestyle of a cowboy were also attractive to them.³²

Benn lives in the Central Australian town of Alice Springs, a capital of cowboy fashion. Its elderly ex-stockmen and younger generation alike dress in the men's fashion of hats, shirts, and boots. These well-dressed men signal with their clothing their role in the middle classes of a cosmopolitan society that extends across Australia. They cross not only between white and Aboriginal cultures but also between Aboriginal cultures, as well as within and without the camps of Chinese and Afghan people. However, they are not like the "bushies" or "blackfellas" still living in the bush.³³ The significance of cowboy fashions goes right back to the earliest moments of colonization. Jimmy Pike (Yinti), an artist who exchanged life as a hunter-gatherer for life on a station, recalls the importance of the "long trousers, checked shirts, broad-brimmed hats and leather boots," the clothes nearly as attractive as the riding of horses.³⁴ Pike's own paintings of cowboys are replete with broad-brimmed hats that sit atop figures on horseback who are branding, shooting, and mustering. As the popular fiction theorist John Cawelti notes, the cowboy is a cool character. He dresses well, in dandyish fashions.³⁵

A third artist under consideration here never knew station times: his paintings of horses and their riders are nostalgic for an era and identity he never knew. Lance James signifies the continuity of the cowboy as a figure of cultural power in pan-Aboriginal society. His horses and landscapes are highly colored and loosely painted. The horses are often rearing and galloping, sometimes bucking and grazing, and are rendered in a colorful and expressionistic style. James's biography tells us that he

is a Pitintjarra man from Kaltukatjara (Docker River). Lance has been painting at Mwerre Anthurre Artists Studio for the past seven years, he still lives in Docker River but comes to Alice Springs for respite. There is great movement and strength in his work. Lance has been painting horses, cowboys, bulls and landscape since he was a little boy. Lance paints "Kaltukatjara," the country around Docker River.³⁶

Two conventions at work in this description are common to the mainstream art world and Aboriginal art, respectively. The first is to attribute the causes of an artist's practice to his or her biography, so that, for example, Namatjira's work is due to his Christianization. A second convention is particular to Aboriginal artists: for example, locating James within his country and by implication within the particular Dreaming to which he belongs. It is noteworthy that Aboriginal artists who identify with station times break to some extent with this second convention, as their style is indebted to a country that has been broken up into pastoral stations. In this, James's style is international, as his horses, riders, and landscapes could well be located in any part of the world in which ranching takes place. In this sense, James is a more precise stylistic equivalent to Prince, as his work relates to an international iconography. Indeed, James's background is, like Prince's, predominantly urban, as he moves between the community of Docker River and the

³² Catherine Peattie, "Tracing Billy Benn," in Perrurle and Peattie, *Billy Benn*, 18–19.

³³ Pat Lowe and Jimmy Pike, *Desert Cowboy* (Broome: Magabala, 2000), 65; Benn, in Perrurle and Peattie, *Billy Benn*, 2.

³⁴ Lowe and Pike, *Desert Cowboy*, 7.

³⁵ Cawelti, *Six-Gun Mystique*, 29.

³⁶ "Lance James," www.bindiart.com/artists/lance-james (last accessed on February 16, 2012).

town of Alice Springs, with little experience of station life. His works are not naturalistic but call attention to the process of painting, as James blurs his marks to give an impression of movement. The free and expressive painterliness of James's style is consistent with the idea of a cowboy, who is free to rove across the country. Yet there is an ambivalence within the image too, an ambivalence that has to do with the contingencies of the cowboy himself, this American icon that has turned up in remote Australia to become the model for indigenous people. In this, his cowboys and horses resemble Prince's blurry rephotographs, which capture not so much the movement of the horse but the movement of its reproduction. These mobilities may not be as different from each other as they appear. For the freedom of the horse that is imagined by James figures the freedom of Aboriginal life during station times, while the freedom of Prince is that of American capitalism, as his works became, like the cigarettes they picture, a highly profitable venture.³⁷ The differences between their cowboys only disguise what they have in common, in the way that this image symbolizes a form of freedom.

While the Western genre to which the cowboy once belonged is no longer a large part of popular culture, having been surpassed by a different constellation of genres, he remains a potent symbol of mobility. James is symptomatic of generations of remote Australian people who are nostalgic for a time they never lived through, precisely because of the power of this symbol. As Australian historian Cathie Clement reports, Aboriginal men remain nostalgic about station times rather than the precontact period, the law times, and are proud of the way that Aboriginal workers transformed the country into what it is today.³⁸ Theirs is a nostalgia for what the post-colonial theorist Dipesh Chakrabarty describes as the freedom of a subaltern reality created by people living in a diaspora.³⁹ The stockman configures the freedom of mobility that was later lost when Aboriginal people were confined to settlements, as decisions made by the urban population of Australia ended the employment of Aboriginal people on pastoral stations. While the Aboriginal communities and outstations established in the self-determination era that followed assimilation brought a degree of political independence to remote people, they also meant the loss of gainful employment, forcing many Aboriginal people to rely solely on pensions and unemployment benefits to survive. After earning the respect of white bosses and fellow Aboriginal people alike, stockmen were left to negotiate a new place in this new society. If the appeal of the Marlboro Man in America is a symptom of the crisis of masculinity in a country that by the 1950s had become a predominantly white-collar workforce, then cowboy fashions can be read as compensating for a lost era of manual work. The paintings of stockmen-turned-artists and of artists looking back to station times as a kind of golden age can also be seen as attempts to revitalize this masculine identity. Then, the road to social status appears simpler, being achieved on the back of a horse. The cowboy, seen on fuzzy television screens and on the back pages of magazines, offered a model not only of freedom and mobility but of masculinity as well.

It is, then, possible to read Namatjira's paintings as expressing the power of the cowboy idea across cultures. His landscapes configure an idea of freedom that reflects the aspirations of his people, a freedom that would come to inspire later generations of Aboriginal artists, who

³⁷ On the art market, see Irene S. Leung, "What Does 'Recovery' Look Like in the Art World? Or Surviving the Next Art Market Bubble," *Ctrl+Pdf: Journal of Contemporary Art* 15 (2009): 8.

³⁸ Cathie Clement, "Australia's North-west: A Study of Exploration, Land Policy and Acquisition, 1644–1884" (PhD diss., Murdoch University, 1991), 35.

³⁹ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

took Namatjira as a model of what they could achieve. It may be no coincidence that those ex-stockmen who choose to paint station times, rather than the more popular classical subjects of Aboriginal art, are the elder statesmen of their communities. Gija landscape painter Patrick Mung Mung is a leader of his Warmun community, while Alan Griffiths and Mervyn Street of the Kimberley are both immersed in negotiations for native title over their country. Griffiths and Street are both interested in painting the history of their lives with cattle, depicting great herds of cattle moving over the country, with stockmen riding alongside. In the political flux of remote Aboriginal Australia, in which communities are constantly being threatened with closure and social problems are often endemic, station times offer a stable identity for those who recall the life back then. Similarly, the hero of the West is the cowboy who assures America that it once had an identity, as this identity unraveled across the course of American history in the twentieth century. In both cases, the cowboy's movement embodies a freedom that compensates for a lack of movement in more settled situations. He points to a cross-cultural history of appropriation that has labor as its driving force, the physical labor that men lost in both America and Australia as times changed around them. In this situation, and for remote Aboriginal people, art becomes a means of reempowering one's place in the times, in realizing again the freedoms that are imagined to have been lost. A