

# Inclusion-Exclusion: Recasting the Issue of Boundaries for the Western Desert

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## **Inclusion - Exclusion: Recasting the Issue of Boundaries for the Western Desert**

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### **Abstract**

Australian Aboriginal Western Desert society has in the past caused considerable problems to anthropology. Solving these has shown that boundedness, closure and exclusion are inappropriate concepts and processes to describe this area, where openness, diversification of relationships and inclusion are dominant. However, new problems emerge: if there is no boundedness, what is to be a person of the Western Desert and where does it start or end? The paper suggest two approaches developing from two general observations. First, *walytja*, the concept that has vaguely been translated as ‘family’ and which is the idiosyncratic expression of boundedness, is in fact undefinable: it has no contours. It simply stands for ‘mutuality of being’. Second, the continuous tension between inclusion and exclusion, and between openness and boundedness, may signify the notion of society in general, and of Western Desert identity in particular.

The first approach tends to reflect emic categories in etic typologies. Here, the paper discusses what are considered the three pillars of social formations as summarized in the concepts of space or place, memory and modes of recruitment. Place is location, memory is legitimization

and recruitment is selection. The second approach is grounded in actor-network theory. Two ethnographic examples, one on increase rituals, the other on vehicles, illustrate the complementarity of the two approaches and suggest that *walytja* (family) is used by Aboriginal people to reflect an actual or potential path of extension and inclusion and works itself as an actor conveying a transforming value system.

**Keywords:** Western Desert; Family; Boundedness; Inclusivity; Actor-Network Theory

Let us be honest: not many scholars would respond the way Robert Tonkinson, alias Bob, did. I was a doctoral student beginning my first long-term fieldwork in the central-western part of the Australian Western Desert in 1994. Interested in analysing and cross-examining two aspects of kinship — formal discourses on rules and norms and actual practices — I was also collecting genealogies going back far beyond the first contact situations that had occurred in the 1950s for some of the Ngaatjatjarra-speaking families with whom I was working. For some if not most of these families, as one would expect in Western Desert culture and as I soon realised, the genealogical networks extended ‘naturally’, so to speak, into neighbouring groups and dialects. Indeed, the social connections of the inhabitants in and around the community of Tjukurla at the Western Australian – Northern Territory border close to Lake Hopkins, my main ‘residence’ during fieldwork, reached as far as Mutitjulu and, for some, even further to the east, as well as towards Warburton and even Jigalong to the west: thousands of kilometres of social networks. Ngaatjatjarra-speaking people had ‘family’ everywhere.

Though Bob’s main Australian fieldwork is located in and around Jigalong, the most north-western community of the so-called Western Desert cultural bloc, it was, in fact, not because of this experience that, after long hesitation, I ventured to write to him in the first place. As early-stage PhD students often seem to be, I was at the time still too involved in my own little preoccupations defined by over-concrete and geographically micro-localised questions to be able to think beyond them and look further afield at work done in Jigalong or other communities. Actually, the letter was written in an attempt to get clearer ideas about Tjukurla connections to the Clutterbuck Hills and what is called by Aboriginal people the ‘life-line’: a string of waterholes that stretches over a few hundred kilometres on a north-south axis joining the Clutterbuck Hills in the south, today close to Karilywara community, and Jupiter Well in

the north, not that far from Kiwirrkurra community. Bob, I knew, had taken part in trips to this area, as an expert and interpreter accompanying patrol officers in 1964 and a member of a film crew (Dunlop et al. 1966) in 1965, experiencing first contact or early contact situations with family groups living along the life-line. He was most likely aware, I hoped, of their family background and genealogical connections, their link to the Clutterbuck Hills and to other Ngaatjatjarra-speaking groups. To my surprise, at least at the time and before knowing Bob better, the answer not only arrived promptly, but included actual photocopies of his own notes taken during these trips.

How many of us have shared their notes with students?

A trip from the desert to Perth with wife and child the following year to actually see the man permanently established a friendship of nearly twenty years with Bob and Myrna, his wife and fellow anthropologist — a friendship that in a few years time will have lasted half of my own life. ‘Naturally’ again, Bob became a member and the president of my PhD defence jury at the EHESS along with Godelier, Viveiros de Castro, Désveaux, Glowzcewski and Tjon Sie Fat in 1999, as well as my mentor during the postdoctoral and ARC postdoctoral positions I held until the end of 2002 at the University of Western Australia. After leaving Perth, not without regret, in early 2003 to move back to France where I had been offered a tenured position — and despite the geographical distance that separated us from this moment onwards — there have not been many years during which my family and I have not had the chance to catch up with Bob or Myrna in Europe or some other place.

To make a long story short, in such circumstances, heightened by the fact that Bob’s and my own fieldwork are in some if not many respects astonishingly parallel, it is, for me, particularly difficult to think about Western Desert or Vanuatu culture and society without seasoning the analysis with the spices stemming from the many discussions cementing our relationship. I am not aware of any more or less significant matter on which our analyses of Western Desert society contradict each other. Some may contend that we have talked ourselves into a fictive cultural construct. Others will argue positively that, since convergence is possible, anthropological method and theory are worthwhile enterprises. We are obviously convinced of the latter, and there are many topics that could illustrate this convergence.

The one I have chosen to address in this paper has persistently occupied my mind and our discussions, but it is also one I have never dared to write about, at least not in such explicit terms: is there ‘boundedness’ in the Western Desert? Where does the Western Desert start and where does it end? Do people express feelings of corporate belonging when talking of the Western Desert or its dialectal groups? Is there a better place to take up this challenge than

here: a collection of papers concerning Bob in a journal he edited for many years? My aim is not, as the reader will soon understand, to propose actual answers to these questions. Rather, the objective is to suggest some well and lesser known routes of interest to thought and investigation and, quite the opposite, to demonstrate that the question of boundedness can reasonably be deemed irrelevant if the analysis of social practice and structure in the Western Desert follows these routes of investigation.

### **The problem(s)**

The Western Desert has confronted the anthropology of kinship with a considerable problem in the past. Here I will not go into a detailed discussion of the complexities, since I have addressed them elsewhere (Dousset 2002, 2003b, 2012); however we need to briefly recall the issue, as resolving it has created a new problem. In an era during which kinship had been the bastion of anthropological inquiry, Western Desert or Aluridja kinship, as it was called, was considered highly unconventional, intermingling aspects of various so-called systems in one and the same place (Tjon Sie Fat 1998), or was even dismissed as being ‘aberrant’ (Lévi-Strauss 1967 [1947], 231, 251 and 249 figure 56) and hardly worth further inquiry, to quote just these two examples. The problem arose from Elkin’s original ethnography (1938-40). He reported kinship terminologies in which cross-relatives are distinguished in Ego’s parents’ generation, but where the offspring of these cross-relatives are classified as siblings in Ego’s own generation. In other words, people of the Western Desert were seen to be marrying siblings according to a Hawaiian level, a feature that is in contradiction with their Dravidianate classification of the parent’s generation.

I have shown that the so-called Aluridja ‘problem’ is in fact one of poor ethnography, not of inconsistency. Even contemporary genealogies demonstrate that there is a very high frequency of marriage between cross-relatives. Moreover, Western Desert people do in fact have a cross-relative terminology in Ego’s generation, but will use this only in particular contexts: those in which marriage is actually envisaged. The cross-terminology, which is also an affinal one, is employed for people who are genealogically and geographically distant enough to be potential and desired affines. Conversely, cross-relatives who are too close in these terms are ‘cut-out’, as Tonkinson reported in a seminar held in 1975 (n.d.), from the pool of ‘wives’ and become sisters.

Classifying cross-cousins on a case-by-case basis as either spouses or siblings must be interpreted as a social technology (Dousset 2012) that contributes to the extension and

diversification of the social network — Keen’s shifting webs (2002) — in an economic and ecological context where the unpredictability in time and space of rainfall and natural resources in the past, as well as monetary resources in the present, is a dominant characteristic. Marriage and even the promise of wives were and still are a means of strengthening mutual rights and obligations of distribution and redistribution, but, more importantly, also of accessing land and its resources (Dousset 1999).

Not surprisingly, this shifting webs social technology, with its strategies of extension, diversification and non-repetition of alliances, goes hand in hand with a particular land tenure system. As Tonkinson (1991, 65) argued for the Mardu, ‘local organization is notable for its flexibility and fluidity and a lack of stress on boundaries and exclusiveness of group membership’ (see also Poirier 1992, 759; Sackett 1975; Myers 1990). Western Desert people do not recognise clans or lineages, and they do not consider genealogy and inheritance to be sufficient criteria for claiming land ownership. Other conditions, such as place of conception, birthplace, and sites for which one has accumulated considerable religious knowledge or of prolonged residence, play an equally important role. Not surprisingly, again, these facts considerably complicate Native Title claims (Dousset and Glaskin 2007), in which the recognition of society, law or forms of land ownership are framed by already ‘acceptable’ social forms, leaving no room for alternative lifeways and worldviews (Glaskin and Dousset 2011).

In fact what dominates in Western Desert thought and practice is not the exclusion of others from access to land and resources or from participation in daily or ritual activities. Quite the opposite, as Tonkinson has consistently underlined and as he aptly put it in 2003, Western Desert sociology is characteristic of ‘a strongly inclusivist ethos that defines “society” in the widest geographical and social terms’ (Tonkinson 2003, 98). Showing concern for others (*ngaltutjarra* among the eastern groups) and humility/restraint (*kurnta*) are the two pillars of the socio-moral order (also Tonkinson 1991, 150) and, I would add, epithets of a third central concept, that of *walytja* (family), also *yungarra mari* among certain groups. And this is precisely the place where we encounter the new problem alluded to above. Indeed, as Myers (1989) shows, *walytja* is among the Pintupi, and beyond, a concept designating relationships to people as well as relationship to things, including land.

While the poor ethnography of Elkin and false interpretations of Lévi-Strauss and others depicted a society that was supposedly enclosed within itself, bounded by repeated brother-sister marriages or, worse, organised into entirely fictitious clans (Tindale 1988), we are now confronted with modes of thought and practice that emphasise openness, inclusiveness and

extension. *Walytja*, the concept that has vaguely been translated as ‘family’ and which is the idiosyncratic expression of inclusive boundedness, is in fact undefinable: it has no contours, no beginning or end. It simply describes those with whom one already shares some experience; it stands for ‘mutuality of being’ (Sahlins 2011a, 2011b). As I wrote above, Ngaatjatjarra-speaking people have family everywhere. So, where do the Western Desert and its dialectal groups, called societies rather than tribes after Berndt (1959), start and where do they end? Is Western Desert society anything more than the limits imposed by others who decline the mutuality of being they are offered?

### **The Irresolvable(s)**

The question is that of identity: identity as an expression of belonging and belonging as some kind of answer to the question of to what or to whom. A truly existential topic in anthropological inquiry: if we propose inclusion, openness and extension, we also infer the possibility of exclusion, boundedness, and limitation. At least temporarily, one could postulate the continuous tension between inclusion and exclusion, and between openness and boundedness, as signifying the notion of society (the thing that attracts an intention of belonging), which, as Godelier (2009) explains, is not coextensive with that of culture. There are at least two approaches depicting the idea of society based on these tensions. One is to reflect emic categories in etic typologies — an approach not that distant from the usual anthropological modus of investigation. The other has been designed as an actor-network theory that does not assume ontological entities.

According to the first approach — here I take a shortcut in what I believe to be the achievement of decades of investigation — a society as momentarily identified above is something that emically needs to erect three fundamental pillars of value-systems in order to reproduce itself in time and space: place, memory, and recruitment.

*Place.* Whether you are a group in the Kalahari Desert or an Internet community, address and location are necessary criteria for existence (alias recognition). What this space is and how it is carved into meaningful parts or segments, how it is identified or located, is not an inequitable element for discussion. In the Western Desert, surface as such has no particular social or semantic value. Rather, specific sites with no areal extension but with individual, social and mythological significance are the points of reference in the segmentation and nomination of the socio-spatial continuum: a vertical rather than horizontal space. As

Tonkinson underlined in the quotation above, there is a lack of stress on boundaries, and I would like to suggest that the notion of boundary itself, even when used in negative terms, might be inadequate. People think of and represent space in terms of particular identified sites interlinked by customary routes of mythological and human travel. Furthermore, at least among Ngaatjatjarra-speaking people, a person can be referred to by using the name of the site to which he or she has strong links, and vice versa. Hence, the geographical web is a spatial as well as a religious and social cartography (see Dousset 2003a for an example of such indigenous socio-spatial cartography).

*Memory.* Rather than history, it is memory — implying and including simultaneously oblivion — that composes the reservoir from which discourses on identity are constructed through the mobilisation of selected imprints from an experienced or imagined past (Ricoeur 2000). Clans' or tribes' myths of origin or national days and memorials are such imprints. For some researchers, such as Kolig, the question of identity is or was not a sociological problem in remote Australian Aboriginal communities because it is supposedly based on continuity (Kolig 1977, 37) and 'change was not so much dogmatically forbidden as its existence denied' (Kolig 1989, 58). From the perspective of memory, we can reinterpret Kolig's suggestions as being a permanence over time of the imprints that are used to compose collective memory. According to this view, people are passive recipients of their own historical traces, which they reproduce without question.

However, as Godelier (2000) puts it, people do not live in society, but continuously produce society in order to live. In support of the latter, we have evidence of significant change which confirms the fact that the view of the pre-contact Western Desert as static and based on continuous identical memorial narratives is erroneous. The spread of the section system into the area, introducing a new and additional cognitive and social model for classifying people, proves, if ever it was necessary, these peoples' capacity for syncretism (Dousset 2005). Syncretism, or the potentiality for syncretism, understood here as involving other domains than religion alone, is however, and as we know, not merely endured but also a place for resistance. For Jigalong, Tonkinson writes that

[...] the Aborigines refused to see any parallels or convergence between Dreaming-oriented culture and the wholly alien culture of the whites. They made a spatial division between *maya* 'house' and *ngurra* 'camp'. Each domain had its own loci of authority, and within it that authority was paramount. [...]

The challenge now is to fuse the two domains in such a way that the heritage of strategies and organizations for the marshalling of resources and channelling of power can be applied to the realm of ‘whitefella-become-Aboriginal’ business. (Tonkinson 1988, 407-8)

Due to lack of space, it is not possible to go into further details here. My point is simply to suggest that mobilising (or not) historical traces, which involves simultaneously articulating oblivion, belongs, in the Western Desert as elsewhere, to the realm of authority and power, since archiving (let us understand it here as the result of a selective construction of memory) is an internal contradiction between a compulsion for conservation (memory) and a compulsion for destruction (oblivion) accompanied by an adoration of authenticity, as Derrida (1995) explained. Memory is a place of authority over history, authority that through the thus constructed accessible and therefore shared memory encourages self-legitimation. Needless to say, it is within considerations of memory, be they individual or collective, that emotions are shaped or, at least, embody values.

My favourite example to illustrate this proposition is that of the authority of a man over a particular site gained through the linking of his physical appearance with the reinterpretation of a mythological event. One important site in the northern central Western Desert was created in prehistoric times by a mythological being that for various reasons became angry and therefore repeatedly hit the ground hard with his digging stick, hence creating a deep depression. Blood is an important substance in the Western Desert and, since in the same myth modern men later climbed out of this particular depression, the mythological figure’s blood must have flown into the hole, contributing to modern men’s shape and existence. The man we are talking about here was born hundreds of kilometres away and had never visited the above-mentioned site. He was born, however, with a missing toe. Discussions and reinterpretations of this physical characteristic by senior people resulted in the man being affiliated to the above mythological figure’s site, for the blood that flowed into the depression might have come, among other sources, from the foot he injured when striking the ground with his digging stick. It is through the selection of certain traces of the collective memory — the mythological figure’s injury that during these particular discussion is revealed as a significant trace of the past — that authority is vested in a person, providing him with the responsibility and power over an important religious site in the landscape.

*Recruitment.* Once we have supposedly identified the spatial attribution and the selective

models of memory-construction at work, we also need to name the criteria according to which an individual can or cannot claim the particular identity that is shaped by a definition of belonging 'to what or whom'. Place is location, memory is legitimisation, and recruitment is selection. In former times, anthropology was concerned in so-called small-scale societies with the mechanical and quasi-biological aspects of these processes, such as belonging to a clan or lineage through filiation or descent. In other places it is the idea of 'nationality' that has been dominant. In more recent times, notions such as 'relatedness' have made their way onto the agenda to vouchsafe for other mechanisms that complement the only 'genealogical' argument for selective belonging (Carsten 2000). As we have seen above when mentioning kinship and affiliation to land, the picture is somewhat complex for the Western Desert, where mechanical aspects of belonging (and its transmission) are insignificant and where actual episodes of individual lives are dominant criteria for a person's placement in the geographical and social landscape: place of conception, of birth, prolonged residence, religious knowledge, or physical similarities with a mythical figure are the criteria people use to claim (or to be attributed) relative authority over identified sites.

Despite this particularism, Western Desert people underline that they are 'one mob', 'all family', 'all close', 'all *walytja*' or '*yungarra mari*'. They are also members of a particular subgroup or society: Ngaatjatjarra, Pitjantjatjara, Mardu, Manjiltjarra, Pintupi, whether these collective names are recent or historical, and some of which are closer than others, 'more family' than others. One could, of course, argue that it is the sharing of memory that is in itself and for itself the criterion for belonging. But then there are Ngaatjatjarra descendants who have been born outside the lands, not growing up in a community, not sharing much if anything, let alone life experience, with other Ngaatjatjarra-speaking people. Yet, no one would dare to consider these people anything else than family. 'Blood suddenly is thicker than water' among indigenous peoples themselves, and against all expectations, in particular those suggested by Schneider (1984) who thought this to be an ethnocentric vision proper to the West.

So much for the first approach, which, as the reader will have understood, is not alone capable of satisfactorily depicting Western Desert sociology. It seems in need to be combined with the second approach, which is not based on pillars but on an 'actor-network theory' (ANT) that does not assume ontological entities (Law and Hassard 1999). In France, the best-known representatives of this approach are Bruno Latour (e.g. 1987) and Madeleine Akrich (e.g. 1987); in the Anglophone world, among others, the sociologist John Law (e.g. 1991) should

be mentioned. A few fundamental propositions characterise the theory. First of all, it is not social groups or societies that are central in the approach, but networks. Secondly, actors are networks and networks are actors. Thirdly, the actors of a network are people, but also material and immaterial objects, as well as discourses or narratives. Relationships are established through translation-transformation operations in which individual or collective actors attempt to translate values and recruit new actors. Actors are thus mediators or go-betweens.

According to this approach, the idea of society in general, and of the Western Desert in particular, becomes a complex matter, since by definition a network is always moving, reshaping, extending and retracting. It is, one might expect, constantly remodelling the three pillars mentioned earlier. Here it is the notion of 'culture', rather than society, that seems to be relevant, since what actors, whether they be human or objects, mediate are systems of values and representations, ways of doing and of thinking, as the Durkheimian saying goes. And we must concede that in this context Mauss (1923-1924) was not very far off the mark when he declared that there are objects of inquiry, which he called 'total social facts', that digest the entirety of a value-system and its history, since if they are to mediate, they must be able to transmit and transform at the same time.

In order to be fully grasped, networks need to be described through the analysis of a certain number of material and immaterial scenes. Firstly, and as already mentioned, objects or styles must be understood to be actors because they do translate things. Secondly, translation (which is transmission plus transformation) has to be evaluated for its capacity for convergence (what unites and what separates?), and each actor must be seen as producing (or not) concerted action. Thirdly, convergence is expressed through mandatory loci of passage, be they geographical or discursive. Fourthly, translators need to maintain the network and encourage concerted action through the construction of a simplified and homogenised — normalised — discourse on values and procedures. The ethnographic examples below will shortly illustrate each of these material or immaterial scenes.

As we can already see, ANT is unable (and unwilling) to explain the boundedness of the Western Desert or define what Western Desert society is all about, where it starts and where it ends: this is not the aim of this approach and theory. However, it may shed some light on particular processes that take place in the Western Desert environment and are seen by its inhabitants to be emblematic of their identities. Let us have a look at some preliminary test cases.

## Ethnographic attempts

We could investigate in these terms the short example above mentioning the linking of a man's missing toe with the mythological events shaping a particular site over which he then gained authority, since all the ingredients of the ANT mentioned above are present. But let me attempt other illustrations. Increase rites were and still are, although to a lesser extent nowadays, important moments in the reproduction of Western Desert cosmogony (Tonkinson 1970). Since they are part of the secret-sacred domain — something that is in itself relevant with respect to selective translation-transformation processes which are central in ANT — I will limit the description to some elementary and generally known facts and relationships: a *homogenised and simplified discourse* reproduced from senior men's own depictions. On a periodic basis, men responsible for particular sites in the landscape that are *mandatory loci* perform a ritual whose objective is to maintain the capacity of the natural species or phenomenon associated with the site to reproduce itself in time and space. Objects and substances are involved. These are *mediating actors* conveying the strength of men to the potential strength of the mythical figure representative of the site; this, in turn, will strengthen the capacity of the particular associated species or phenomenon to exist and reproduce itself. Men's competence to perform the ritual appropriately is important for the world to continue to exist as it is.

We find here the three pillars mentioned earlier: a site for specified ceremonial action (a place), the associated mythology and biography of former performers (memory), and a selection of men who, in a recognised manner, can claim authority over the ritual and place (recruitment). We could be satisfied with this analysis, but we also know that increase rites are embedded in wide-ranging networks of collaboration and exchange. If one group of men increases a particular species of birds, another group will have to increase the species of seeds on which this bird feeds. Increase rites are efficient only if there is *concerted action* within a network of actors (including objects and substances). All ingredients of the ANT are indeed again central in the processes of increase rites: homogenised discourses, mandatory loci, mediating actors and their translation, as well as concerted action.

This is particularly noticeable when a species is rare: groups of men accuse each other of bad or unaccomplished ritual performance following a rhizomatic schema (Deleuze and Guattari 1972, 13): is it those who should have reproduced the bird or those who were supposed to look after the seeds that are the culprits? Or was it those who did not look after rain the seeds needed to grow? What these discussions and accusations make evident is that it is not so

much the unfulfilled obligations to reproduce the elements of the cosmos that legitimise a supposedly bounded cultural entity that are the root of the problem. What is critical is the lack of concerted action, the negligence of some actors and the potential breaking of the chain of complementary responsibilities. What is at risk is the network based on mutuality of being, and, with it, humanity in general. Looking at increase rites from the perspective of the ANT, we quickly realize that the change of scale (from the group of observed performers to a network of largely discursive interdependences between selected actors), also distorts our potential for envisioning social and cultural boundaries. In fact, the notions of boundary and boundedness themselves become increasingly irrelevant in understanding the value of interaction and interdependence.

Let us make another attempt. Four-wheel drive vehicles have become central objects in Western Desert everyday life and strategy (also see Myers 1989). Some have reported the Toyota Dreaming as a form of adaptation of so-called traditional cosmology and lifeways to so-called modern space. Trucks can indeed be considered epitomic objects for establishing, reproducing or unleashing relationships, marking one's presence or absence at events, and visiting country and sites. Trucks are things of mobility and *mediation*, between people and between people and land and its memorial imprints. They have also accelerated time and increased opportunities to meet family (*walytja*) in an environment where, not so long ago, one could walk for weeks without necessarily encountering other groups. As such, they have become objects of desire, if not necessity.

But they also create pressure in which absence or presence at events, reproducing or unleashing relationships, transporting or refusing to transport people have become matters of ostensible choices (or nearly so), and are thus interpreted as voluntary acts in maintaining and orienting social solidarity and mutuality. Deciding and organising a trip, to funerals for example, necessitates *concerted action* in which the inclusion and exclusion of travellers has immediate consequences on the network's shape, growth or decline, and therefore also consolidates or moves the contours of who falls within the realm of *walytja*, family or relatives, and with what quality or quantity of emotional and co-experienced proximity. The truck is a *mediating actor* in the constitution and definition of mutuality of being. This is particularly interesting when we consider, as Hansen and Hansen (1992) and Myers (1989, 17) suggest, the fact that the word *walytja* also includes in its semantic field the idea of 'baggage and personal effects' and even 'property'. To 'own', particularly a truck, is not that different from having relationships; or, as Myers (1989, 23) puts it, 'to have a car, one might

say, is to find out how many relatives one has’.

### **Impossible Conclusion(s)**

The question tackled in this short paper is misleadingly simple, at first glance at least. What are the limits of the Western Desert and of its constituents, the dialectal groups? Complexity arises as soon as one asks further questions, since defining limits involves unfolding whatever they contain in a metonymic manner. Is there any ‘content’ that embeds the ‘context’, anything ‘enclosed’ that characterises and names what ‘encloses’? Are the limits of the Western Desert really set by others who decline the mutuality of being they are offered, as was suggested as a quasi-pun earlier in this paper? What does it mean to be a Western Desert person? Even Myers (1988), who is one of the least essentialist anthropologists who have worked in this area, was confronted with these questions and ended up using the notion of ‘social aggregations’ to indicate Pintupi social formations. In the past, I have rather suggested the use of the notion of ‘regional groups’ (as opposed to ‘local groups’), for there is without doubt a spatial factor and an element of durability in Western Desert social formations that are insufficiently reflected in the concept of ‘aggregation’.

Solving the ‘Aluridja problem’ and realising that affiliation to land has to be framed in terms of non-mechanical processes expressed through individual life experiences and characteristics produces a change of scale in the practice of, and thought about, inclusion and exclusion: who belongs and who does not, who is family and who is not, who or what contributes to the network and who or what does not? Who is accused of performing rituals badly and who is not? Who is informed of or even invited to join the four-wheel-drive trip, and who is not? These are questions that seem to be free of only normative societal aspects, but which are part of the sphere of a diffused but simplified discourse about values. The concept of *walytja*, consistently used by indigenous peoples to suggest an actual or potential path of extension and inclusion, is itself a real actor conveying a transforming value. As Tonkinson (1991, 59) writes:

...people talk with satisfaction about the good feelings that come from being surrounded by so many others who are “one family”, “one country”, and “one people” with them and from whom nurturance and support can be sought.

*Walytja* could be analysed as a ‘total social fact’. The continuous tension between inclusion

and exclusion, and between openness and boundedness, that appears to inform particularised interpretations and mobilisations of memory, place and recruitment — of ‘society’ as ‘culture’ — seems to be the most visible aspect of the actor-network stretching across the Western Desert in search of concerted action. I am afraid this paper has not answered its original question: where does the Western Desert start or end? But I hope the reader will concede that I have provided avenues, which if followed, indicate that the question can be reasonably deemed irrelevant.

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