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*Anthropology and the Ends of Worlds*  
*edited by Sebastian Job, Linda Connor***

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# Death as the end of a future

*Gaynor Macdonald*  
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## ***Abstract***

This collection offers an opportunity to reflect on one largely unacknowledged experience emerging in communities suffering social crises: that of older people living through the death of their children, their grandchildren and their cultural heirs. Ancestors are a common theme in anthropology, so too are the ways in which different peoples think about and develop ways of dealing with death. The 'end' that is encountered in the death of descendants cannot be encompassed by notions of culture as meaningful practice because it represents the *denial of meaning*. I explore the various impacts of such deaths in Aboriginal contexts I am familiar with, and their implications for anthropology's own concern with 'ends.'

**Keywords:** Death, disappearing worlds, denial of mortality

## ***Becker and our need for heroic illusions***

When Ernest Becker (1973) wrote of the heroic illusions by which we avoid our mortality, he was referring most of all to the systems of religious belief that emerge from our capacity for transcendence, for the consciousness that enables us to see our own death. Our illusions are the necessary denial of our mortality, the creations of futures which enable us to move into tomorrow. In immortality human beings enable themselves to live with the consciousness of inevitable death. Becker points out that the investment we have in our illusions of immortality brooks no challenge: to acknowledge or legitimate the illusions of others would confront us with the illusoriness of our own desires. And therein for Becker lay the root of human evil, in this uniquely human capacity by which we deny our mortality, illusions we cling to so desperately that we are prepared to kill as well as to die for them. Our struggles with the other are over the right to define life, death and immortality and so the other, as difference, must be repressed. We cannot allow the illusions of the other to kill our immortal selves by revealing our own fragility.

Post-modernist theoreticians have challenged the need for the collective meaning systems which Becker would call a people's heroic illusions. And so we are now in an age preoccupied with the ends of worlds, the death of God/s, the emptiness of promises such as progress for all or an end to poverty, and the bleakness of futures on a despoiled planet. In response, people turn to new cults, religions of a by-gone age, ever more bizarre forms of science/IT fiction, imagined indigenous worlds, in fact, to anything that can restore the illusion of immortality.

So far, I will have said little that would not be familiar. Here I want to use a story of the end of one woman's world, as she has known it, to examine anthropology's own heroic illusions. Notwithstanding its commitment to understanding the experiences, and illusions, of others, much of the discipline remains embedded in modernity's illusions, with its central ideas of history as the passage of time, the inevitability of progress and change, and the superiority of a way of life that not only has the ability but also the right to replace all others.

So I ask, how does Becker's work sit with anthropology's central question, 'what does it mean to be human', including what it means to die. We are all familiar with studies of mortuary rituals, cosmologies and cosmogonies of life and death. We spent decades looking at whole worlds supposedly disappearing under the weight of capitalism, modernity and the market. In response to these disappearances, the discipline has been subjected to regular prophecies of its own ends as its exotic subject disintegrated before its eyes (for examples, see discussions in Hymes 1972; Asad 1973; Price 2008; White and Tengan 2001).

## ***Humans***

For me a human being is a bio-psychosocial being, not determined by genes or DNA, although these will establish certain constraints on physical capacities and the meanings given to them. This human being is inextricably social, requiring the economic and social organisation of others from its inception, embedded in a mutually-constitutive world which it in turn will help to reproduce. This human being is also capable of consciousness, self-consciousness, imagination and innovation – extraordinary capacities by which to produce meaningful worlds, and to change and adapt to myriad environments and circumstances, including, as Becker argues, the means and the desire to produce evil. It is the very complexity of humanness as material, psychic and social that brings about the capacity for transcendence. Without it, the quotidian socialities through which we live our lives would not be possible: from the moment we require our mother's milk, we have to reach out of the self. This capacity brings about the awareness of life and death, good and evil. And so, we construct systems of meaning, illusory or not, to deal with the contradictions inherent in being a material, social, psychic human being. And these include the construction of ideas (illusions, legitimations, justifications) which protect us from ourselves, each other, and our morality.

Anthropologists have often glossed the outcomes of this extraordinary capacity for meaning by which our lives become bearable as 'culture'. This has led to culture being understood in synchronic terms, and certain human beings 'belonging' to one or another set of expressive outcomes. But it is not the outcomes, the ways of worlds of difference in a certain place and time, which is important so much as culture as capacity. Our *cultural capacity* includes the socially/materially-oriented capacity to make worlds shared with significant others meaningful, to weigh up the need for the social against the desires of the self, to cooperatively design systematic and shared means of using and sharing resources, of compromise, reproduction and stability. And it includes our capacity for transcendence, the sense of being able to reach out from one's self, to sense and engage the other, to imagine other worlds of possibility. These capacities, definitional

of humanness, work together to give meaning not only to life but also to death. They open up hopes and futures in the face of what would otherwise be frightening ends.

There are those who would throw out the concept of culture in anthropology. If they are referring to the static notions of yesteryear, the argument is hardly worth having – the discipline agrees. There are still those, who see it as having become synonymous with essentialism, radical relativism or racism, and reject it. There are those, who see it as watered-down, rendered insubstantial and meaningless, a poorly conceptualised notion within cultural studies and popular culture. But I retain it for the same reason that Sahlins (2008) continuously espoused Leslie White's dictum, that 'no ape could appreciate the difference between holy water and distilled water', and because it speaks to the capacity of human beings to bring imaginative meanings to bear on their lives such that they can keep on keeping on. This has recently been evocatively demonstrated in Austin-Broos' (2009) recent study on the Western Arrernte, a people subjected to waves of trauma through their experience of colonisation. We do not 'inherit' or 'belong' to 'a culture,' we are forever producing, reproducing and innovating expressions of what it means to be a human, social, cultural being, each day living our lives anew, drawing selectively on imagined pasts and presents to create (illusory) futures to make sense of our lives. We develop meaningful cultural practices to continually reproduce the material, social and transcendent conditions within which we can live with a sense of worth and hope. Hope is another expression of that transcendent power: we need a tomorrow to get through today. The concept of culture is inseparable from the notion of transcendence, as both are from the psychic dimensions of human life. This is to argue that 'being human' cannot be reduced to its biological/material and social dimensions (c.f., Mimica 2007).

Transcendence is too often reduced in anthropology to systems of religious belief, to spirituality, to something outside of the self. It is, rather, something inextricably part of the self, of the ways the self experiences the quotidian, the everyday – as Carla Stang (2009) writes – as well as what lies beyond it. This quality of transcendence produces our desire and capacity for sociality, enabling us to redefine a source of food into more than a biological – as culturally-constituted person. Becker may be right about our capacity for transcendence producing human evil to protect our immortality, but it also produces its opposite, feeling, empathy, oneness, love – it may go by many names but we know it as an experience that connects, with a landscape, a person, a newborn, or a stranger's smile – an experience that literally fills us with the knowledge that, at that moment, life surges through us. At that moment, in profound psychic depths we are barely aware of, we can also be immortal.

This capacity for transcendence brings about the illusions by which to combat our mortality but not simply in heroic style. It also brings about the less heroic sense of a future, a tomorrow, and hope that can prevail in despair. Agnes needs no great illusions to frame her own political efforts in terms of what she wants for her children's children. The beggar hopes each time he lifts the lid of the rubbish bin. Schona paints her nails even though she will spend the day rummaging through vast smoky piles of garbage dumped by the wealthy of her city. Many of us will have been profoundly affected by the suicide of someone we have known, someone who lost that sense of a future. It is fragile, not to be taken for

granted. Diverse cultural worlds of heroic illusion have developed over millennia to enable human beings become persons with tomorrows and a beyond. Many of these ways of being human, in the diversity of times and places anthropology is aware of have been torn apart during the past century and are in disarray: existential despair replaces heroic illusion. Mooney told me he drank because he wanted to die; for others alcohol is an easier, more social and thus meaning-filled option to deal with the emptiness of a life without hope, even without the effort illusions require: a small thread of drunken sociality proves that while there is life there is hope.

I have spent much of my career seeking to understand how Wiradjuri people of central New South Wales have, historically and today, wrestled with the challenges of being colonial subjects within the Australian state. If there is one phrase that sums up their struggles, it has been Agnes telling me that *she* may not see the future they are fighting for but perhaps her children's children will. How the Wiradjuri people I have spent much of my life with understand 'the future' permeates my work, if not explicitly. Social movements, identity quests, interest groups, art work, land rights – all are ways of living with a sense of a future, with hope, however fragile. Illusions take us through each day, heroic or not.

## ***Maisie***

My story is about one woman who is euphemistically referred to as being a person from 'the Kimberley' of north Western Australia, not that she uses this term. She is Worrora, from the spectacular Prince Regent River with its famous King Cascade. I met Maisie four years ago. She is a mother but not a grandmother, although she should be at her age. Her only son is a drinker who causes property damage and is caught in the revolving jail door. He doesn't have a social father, a man who has raised and instructed him. She has worked most of her life. Despite attending college and university courses aiming to become involved in community health services, she is a cleaner, although occasionally has short term jobs in her community. She is also beautiful with glowing skin and a face that can light up in a smile full of joy and humour. She loves to laugh although doesn't do so often.

A senior woman, although not quite in the ways that only grandmothers are, Maisie is respected locally but not always liked. She complains a lot and gets angry when she becomes so frustrated at the difficulty she often has in understanding whitefellas or in making her own meanings understood by them. She seems irrational to them, she can make whitefellas afraid and they may try and avoid her. She has spent hours with me, explaining the troubles around her, as I try and translate other people's intentions and her hostile reactions into words and concepts she can better grasp, that can help her act in her own interests and re-establish communication with people who are simply talking past her, perhaps because they can't be bothered doing otherwise. Most of her aggressive outbursts are caused by not fully understanding, by not being given adequate explanations she can make sense of, and the consequent powerlessness this leads to – stressful enough at times to warrant a phone call to Sydney to help sort it out. Her outlet is the church and a church retreat now and again to Perth or Darwin.

Maisie is not well. She has diabetes and, like many others, does not really understand its impact on her body or that it will kill her. If she is lucky, it will do so before she loses limbs or goes blind. Her growling and her angry outbursts leave her lonely. She likes living on her own in town rather than close to her family – although she would live closer if she could also keep her independence. She hates the mission manager, who even I think has walked straight out of a 1930s movie about Aboriginal Protection Board managers. But then, she hates anyone who speaks down to her, who doesn't treat her with respect, and there are many white people in that category, and a few Aboriginal people. She has become problematised. She ought of course to be a calm, assured, senior woman, replete with knowledge, respect and wisdom. But her life has been too disruptive, her own elders died too young, she embodies the history of removals and dispossession that commenced just before she was born.

Maisie has one burning desire, to return to visit her country, and to take some of the young people around her. She feels it as a great weight of responsibility although she doesn't know how to achieve her aspirations. It is not just about finding the money to go north. She wants to see young people taught navigation, catering, shipbuilding and so on, so they could run their own tourist industry. She is using royalty money from mining to accumulate camp gear for her trip home but she is frustrated by the paternalistic and bureaucratic structures which hold this money in trust and dole out portions as if they were rations of old, in non-commercial and non-reproductive ways. But it was not Maisie and her own heroic illusions about the rekindling of her country that I found challenging in my valued and warm relationship with her. It is the fact that I know, and she knows, that soon there will be no more of her people. A whole way of life a unique story of the extraordinary capacities of human beings; Maisie's people eked out a meaningful existence in the most beautiful but harshest of environments, even today almost inaccessible. No wonder the whitefellas' (Presbyterian) mission was an attractive new base: it provided food and sheltered them from the violent excesses of the cattle barons taking over the best parts of their country. They stayed on the mission until the government refused to support them anymore: it was too costly to send the boat up with supplies. And so they moved south, not forced to, but unable to sustain their old ways of life after so much disruption, and perhaps not wanting to return to the arduous work of hunting and gathering in a place that offered no Sahlinesque affluence. They were prepared to embrace a new life.

I doubt, however, that they would have had any sense of the enormity of the betrayal that would face them. They would not get the resources through which to join that new world – the education, the opportunities. They would stay on its margins, increasingly frustrated by good-hearted whitefellas who knew so much better than they did how they should be living out their lives. Their children would get third class education, would return home to poorly built and maintained houses, to diets which would exacerbate ill health. They would not be given opportunities to return north to renew themselves and their patri-country through ritual. And instead of proud, autonomous people, with a history that exemplified all that human beings are capable of, they would become generic Aborigines, the worst kind of Australian. And eventually, one patriclan after another would die out.

I was confronted in a new way. Not with death but with the end of a future. That is a death of a very different kind. It is not the death of society that Margaret Thatcher espoused, although neo-liberalism's illusions are cause enough for grief. Nor is it about childlessness in a conventional sense. One's own lack of children does not mean that one cannot see a future in the lives of other children. But it is the death of one people's story in the remarkable stories of human capacities to imagine themselves through a heroic illusion that seeks to fulfil their human potential in the face of their mortality, and thus enables them to keep on keeping on. This is not about mortality in the human sense, but the death of an experience of transcendent sociality, the life blood of lives shared in a place and time of the Kimberley.

## ***Maisie's illusions***

What made an impact on me was the knowledge I have, and Maisie has, that she is the last of her patriline, the way the law of her country is transmitted. Her son will take the country-identity of the man she should have married. She does have a brother, but he is childless, disinterested and also drinks most of the time. Hers is the last patriline, the last patri-estate of that particular stretch of country. While cultural tradition would allow for it to be taken up by neighbours, Maisie clearly understands herself as the last person of a people. I began to understand her aggression, her loneliness, depression and her driving sense of urgency in another way.

The north west Kimberley is inaccessible to any but the well trained and well equipped hiker. It is a series of steep gorges, cascading waterfalls, sharp rocks piled up like bricks, except that they are the size of skyscrapers. Those tourists wealthy enough to afford the cruises, with crews trained to navigate the fiord-like coastline, are offered the glimpses money can buy. The village set up by missionaries in 1915 brought Maisie's grandparents and parents in, willingly enough given the government-supply of food. This village is now a pile of corrugated iron covered in long grasses and a few old water tanks. Even if Maisie could afford a boat, when she reached the coast she would need to launch a smaller one to go upstream to the gorge, where she would need to climb a steep gorge, then follow the creek until it became incredibly narrow. Then it would widen out again, on for a couple more kilometres, and all the time she would be carrying the food she would need. Better still if she could find the thousands of dollars required to hire a helicopter which would enable her to enjoy the spectacular views.

There is money now from the gas being mined off the coast and she has bought a swag, camping gear, wet weather gear and so on in preparation for the trip. The pile grows bigger each time I visit. I suddenly realize that this is Maisie's 'heroic illusion', the return home which will make everything alright, make her life mean something in the face of death. It may alleviate the aggression, and provide her with stories. That glint in her eye when she dreams her dreams will be more apparent. It is what will allow her to die. Maisie is the end of a particular kind of future. But as a human being and a person, she still needs to be able to look ahead. She needs to know that she is recognized as a person, that her people mattered and

will remain in memories and will be commemorated. That someone, in some way, will give her and her people the immortality they always craved.

I found myself realizing that, in this nation called Australia, she doesn't matter. She will die, as the last of her people, and no one will notice – except for a few old people locally, who know they face a similar end without a future. No one will notice because there are simple cultural strategies in place to camouflage such ends. For even modernity does not want to admit that it produces ends – this is its internal dilemma, that its actions in bringing about other people's ends presage its own eventual end. Secular modernity also needs heroic illusions.

### ***Strategy 1: language***

One strategy to conceal the end of Maisie's people as a people in human history lies in our use of language. Just as civilians slaughtered by bombs become anonymous 'collateral damage', so Maisie's people will cease to have a name except as one of many. Already people talk about the Aboriginal – or, worse, the new form, Indigenous – people of the Kimberley. It is still possible to get a map which shows the distinct countries of this region, each named for its language. Many of the languages on this map are already extinct but remain on the map as if the language and the people who spoke them were still there, in country. Educational materials progressively homogenize them: as 'the people of the Kimberley', they are alive and well.

This happened long ago in Tasmania. When it became clear to the British that they had all but exterminated the populations of about nine different countries on the island, nine expressions of human creativity, and hundreds and hundreds of people, they stopped referring to them as 'the Tasmanians'. Once dead or successfully removed from the Island, the Tasmanians were renamed 'Aborigines'. The power to name is significant. It brings into being and it destroys being. Tasmanians were a distinctive people and while a few survivors did indeed slip through the violent deaths from disease and massacre, the life of Tasmanians was ended in an encounter intended to be genocidal. The British were never accused of genocide: it had not occurred because there were thousands of 'Aboriginal people' on the mainland. This nihilistic linguistic homogenizing served to conceal the genocidal evil of the white man's heroic illusions of superiority and progress, and thus the legitimacy of that evil. The Worrora, Ngarinyin, Wunambul, Wila Wila, Gaambera and others of the West Kimberley are fast becoming 'the Aboriginal people of the Kimberley.' No one need know that yet another group of peoples has disappeared under the governance of white Australia. In the glossing of an entire continent of social and cultural variation into the one notion, *Aboriginal*, no one need know that genocide has been, and was intended to be, the price that would be paid for the development of a nation.

## **Strategy 2: History**

The second strategy is the invention of history. Modernity has its own great illusions by which it confronts the death of other ways of life around it. It has caused those deaths, but need not acknowledge this. For in consigning 'other people' to the inevitability of history as a process of decay, because they were too 'traditional', we elide our need to destroy them to augment our own illusions. We celebrated our own capacity to change and to be modern, while denying 'them' the right or resources through which to do so. Instead, it is inevitable that the tide of history will wash certain ways of life away, inevitable that some worlds will disappear. After all, we have invented history to tell such stories. History is our great illusion that allows us to divert our gaze from the evil of our own actions.

## **Strategy 3: The future**

The third strategy which allows us to deny and destroy the heroic illusions of others to maintain the supremacy of our own is our obsession with technologies of their destruction and our longevity. However we name the 'us', as western, modern, white, we will fight wars to stop other people waging them, we will turn off the lights to stop glaciers from melting, and we will spend untold millions on health to extend our biomaterial selves. Now we are developing cryonics to freeze ourselves for the future, designed, apparently, to 'preserve and protect the gift of human life ... to maintain life, not reverse death' (<http://www.alcor.org/>). We appropriate the future of others such as Maisie. This is an appropriation of other people's capacity for transcendence as well as a denial of the transcendent quality of our relationship with them. We do not define them as part of a future but as washed away, inevitably, by history's tides.

## **Ends**

But still we fear. For in denying a future to others, in camouflaging the ways in which we have brought about their ends, we confront our illusions. It is little wonder that anthropology would think the time right to have a symposium on the ends of worlds. It has not worried much about the ends of any worlds over the past century. It has presided over a series of films on *Disappearing Worlds*. As recently as 1994 a video was released, *Disappearing World: Kayapo*. Ironically, it 'stars' the Kayapo. The old man on the cover is smiling. No one is offered a future in modernity's destructive world.

In 1992, Nguyen (1992:33), reminiscent of Ruth Benedict, was still writing about the irreversible destruction of anthropology's other: those 'intricate, exotic and delicate edifices which could not change.' As last vestiges they 'remain only in the form of historical and anthropological curiosities'. But these others are not the story of modernity's past that James Frazer envisaged a century ago. Rather, they are modernity. And as anthropology turns its gaze from the exotic to the marginalised, it becomes clearer that

our task has perhaps always been the examination of modernity's evil. Biehl (2001), writing of Brazil's Vita, its 'zone of abandonment', drew on Mauss to argue there was a social death capable of ravaging the mind and body of a person. Mauss's illusion was that social death stemmed only from witchcraft, prohibitions and taboos that were no longer part of modernity. Biehl's (2001:136) work contradicts both Mauss' illusions as well as any sense that modernity itself is not a carrier of its own death:

The *abandonados* in Vita are the carriers and witnesses of the ways in which social destinies of the poorest and the sickest are ordered. The experience of these who live in such a dead space/language is traversed by the country's structural readjustment, unemployment, malfunctioning public health system, and infamously unequal distribution of wealth and technology. ... Those occupying the upper strata of society not only live longer; their right to live longer is bureaucratically decreed or biomedically ensured through the mechanisms of the market.

In addressing the ways in which others have devised their own heroic illusions, and how they have dealt with their devastation, anthropologists confront the culpability as well as the illusoriness of our ways of being. If our subjects are the frightening story of our own future death, what is anthropology?

An anthropology of ends?

The current preoccupation in contemporary social worlds with 'the ends of worlds, evident in various forms: music, art, novels, film and computer games, alongside climate change debates and so on indicates that this preoccupation is an apt subject for anthropology. But the obsessing of middle class moderns/post-moderns about the ends of their worlds seems a world away from grappling with people actually facing the end of a world. While anthropology has concerned itself about worlds ending (usually 'disappearing'), it has seldom looked at the ethnographic experience of these endings. The focus has been on maintaining these worlds within their 'savage slot' (Trouillot 2002, 2003; Austin-Broos 1998), the disappearance of which was defined as inevitable, rather than how and why people's lives were being ripped apart, been changed to the extent that creative, imaginative cultural reproduction was no longer possible. In what contexts and conditions does this take place? Biehl (2001, 2005) has achieved this in his moving study of people living out their ends in La Vita, a 'town' of people who have become what Bauman (2004) aptly calls 'wasted lives', the inevitable 'outcasts of modernity'. These are the localized expressions that global forces take insignificant account of.

I do not suggest that anthropology has eschewed the study of change and innovation. Clearly this is a hallmark of the late twentieth century. Most notable perhaps is the work of Sahlins (1985, 1992, 1995, 2000), but many others could be cited. In the Australasian environment, significant work has been done by, for instance, Robert Tonkinson (1991), Diane Austin-Broos (2003, 2009), Merlan (1988) and Morris (1989). Earlier work includes that of Beckett (2005[1957]), Worsley (1955); Petri 1969, 1980; Petri and Petri-Odermann 1970), Lommel (1950), Roy Wagner (1974) and Alexis Biersack (1996, 2006) in Papua New Guinea. All of these demonstrate anthropology's long-standing and 'deep concern with innovation and change [as] a dominant theme in Aboriginalist anthropology.'<sup>2</sup>

But important as the realisation of change, innovation and creativity has been, it is not always possible. Worlds that have at least ideologically been able to reproduce themselves in both stable as well as changing conditions cannot always do so. There is change which, for some, is experienced as death. Lommel (1950), for instance, attributed the dramatically falling birth rate and disintegrating social organisation of the peoples of the north eastern Kimberley, including the Worrora with whom he had lived in 1930, to what we might refer to today as psychic violence, what he called 'the influence of modern culture on the psychological sphere' (1950:68) and the 'destruction of the psychic atmosphere' necessary to social and biological life (1950:75). Lommel recorded a new cult designed to assist people better deal with these modernist influences, including poisonous weeds, leprosy and syphilis, and 'picky-bas (police-boys) (1950:78).

To be part of an Aboriginal social experience (as distinct from the notion of community as residential entity, requires that one be located socially and spatially –in other words, in terms of kin and country. Maisie's experience is both that of the loss of viable attachment to country, when she and other Worrora were eventually located near Derby, as well as descendants through whom one's sense of an ongoing life which transcends one's own mortality can be realised (as captured so eloquently in the novel by P D James, *The Children of Men*, 1993). Spatial 'belonging' need not mean residence: it can be expressed through use of the language which adheres to that country (Merlan 1988) as well as through knowledge, with or without visiting (although *experience* is more highly valued as knowledge) and through being able to 'look after.' Maisie's country has been de-peopled, rendered remote and inaccessible except by the use of technologies of travel (such as helicopters) well beyond her financial means.

I was struck by the question of an anonymous reviewer of this piece, who asked for more detail about Maisie's life (which I have deliberately avoided for I do not wish to more specifically identify her when this is not pertinent to my argument) but, more particularly, who asked, 'Is she not part of a wider Aboriginal community? If so, is she in touch with them? And is the nature of her relationship with 'whitefellas' encompassed solely in the terms described? Does she have no close friends or acquaintances who are whitefellas?' In reply I can affirm that Maisie's abject loneliness is one experienced in a context in which she is surrounded by people, but they are not a part of her 'self', her culturally-significant others, nor her own future, and they cannot provide that future. The close kin she likes to spend time with are nieces and nephews and their children, her 'grannies,' but none of them, because of marriage and kinship rules, belong to her country and language. White people can only be acquaintances, however friendly. They cannot be part of the social self by which specific forms of personhood - and thus forms of immortality – are realised. There is no next generation to whom to pass on the specific knowledges and rights that she holds. She and her country are culturally orphaned and childless.

The transcendent is a necessary quality of Aboriginal being, inseparable from coming into being and one's progress back to the other realm of life (commonly referred to in Australia as the Dreaming). This is inseparably an individualised and social being, in that any person is but one expression of a totemically-

conceived whole. The person as a social and spatialised being is unique and autonomous at the same time as being inextricably networked. Unique social+spatial identity is constituted within a holistically conceived social-cosmic world. Being a member of a residential community or having 'friends' is not constitutive of Aboriginal personhood. The transcendental for Maisie relates to the conditions of possibility for the reproduction of selves. She reaches out for transcendence as her ancestors taught her, but it is all the more illusory in a world in which the conditions have been so radically altered. Christian ritual provides a proximate experience, valued in itself, but ultimately it cannot fill the social-spatial void. I find this circumstance so profoundly different from the Wiradjuri people on the Lachlan River of south-east Australia, among whom I have worked over many years. While they, too, are encountering devastating changes, and have done so in the past, those I know well live within the country of their ancestors, and have many descendants: they have had the ingredients of renewal throughout their much longer colonial history of modernist impacts. Any form of renewal or meaningful transformation requires certain conditions of possibility. There is no little irony in the fact that these have been more available, if in constraining ways, for Wiradjuri in the highly-developed state of New South Wales, but not for the remote Worora.

What 'conditions of possibility' might have made more sense of Maisie's life for her? First, I would interpret these as economic – no cultural production can take place where there is no possibility of reproducing the specificities of economic well-being through which specific cultural meanings can find expression. I mean economic in a wide sense, as those resources through which people can express their social selves, which give them a degree of personal and social autonomy through which to do so. The relationship between cultural capacity, economic viability and cultural reproduction is irreducible and interdependent. Without it, the psychic strength, the imaginings or illusions, cannot find expression, whether to evil (Becker's concern) or to open up the extraordinary wonder of human social life – the best as well as the worst. Even evil has its own value in the worlds of heroic illusion. The destruction of the psychic, social and economic conditions of possibility does not lead to evil (although it has led from time to time to increases in sorcery as people try to avert the worst) but to despair. Despair is the absence of illusion, which is a cruelty far beyond the evil with which Becker was concerned. Despair has led Maisie's own siblings, and many others, to seek refuge in alcohol, finding in it a conviviality to depress the reality that one cannot be an adequate, moral person in a world that offers no possibility. The knowledges and skills required of living as kin in country have not been transmitted or only partially so, or are derided and devalued in a colonial context, or the possibility of practice has been rendered impossible. When cultural reproduction is not possible, 'change' ceases to be an option, there is only despair. The hope, vision, vitality and imagination which produce the rich diversity of human illusions of which anthropologists are aware, by which the peoples of the world have lived and died, are a necessary condition of human social life. Alcohol has not been Maisie's refuge. She is tolerant of, but sad about those for whom it has been. She seems to know that she has little to offer those without hope, whose self-respect has been so eroded, but she doesn't let go of the hope that they may turn themselves around.

Maisie's story invites us to examine more closely the conditions of possibility that exist for people,

as individuals or as social entities. In Maisie's case, these will not – cannot – be found in better material conditions: housing, education, employment. They are in the conditions by which human beings realise themselves as culture-producers – not as heirs to tradition but, as has been shown to be possible by Austin-Broos (2009), for instance, as people able to reimagine themselves in situations of change. This re-imagining is not always possible: Maisie and her drunk siblings have not been able to do so. One requires a modicum of social and economic *autonomy* – a viable space (social+spatial) within which to imagine a life, which is psychically and biologically healthy enough to allow for intergenerational transmission; situations, which allow for the recreation of social selves. An increasing number of people in the 'modern world' are finding themselves in conditions which make these essentials of human expression impossible to realise. Maisie challenges anthropologists to understand the conditions of impossibility that produce ends for persons as well as for the ways of life which brought their personhood into being. More importantly, we can better identify the conditions of possibility by which illusions (whether heroic or not) become possible, thus allowing for the full expression of humanness, at its best as well as its worst. We have long studied the meanings (illusions) people give to their lives, and the extraordinary human capacity we each have to do so. We now live in a world that demands we more thoroughly explore the conditions in which life – and death – become meaningless, which is, in turn, to realise that the conditions of possibility for human social beings have to be understood, as the Worrora understood, in worlds of psychic well-being, without which, as Lommel understood, people cannot begin to live: meaningful ends require futures, preferably illusory.

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