

## Going Feral: Authentica on the Edge of Australian Culture<sup>1</sup>

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In a study of an Australian 'alternative lifestyle gathering', I investigate the authentica (the multiplicity of discourse and practice valued as 'true', 'natural', 'pure') championed and performed on-site. Using emic description, the article details the authentica of 'play' (ludic exploration via alterity, especially indigeneity), 'earth' (ecological consciousness) and 'tribe' (the search for belonging in community) which are axiomatic to ConFest (Conference/Festival), one of Australia's principal sites for the celebration of alternative ('edge') culture. In this counter-space, an outsider status I call 'ferality' is conditioned. A repository of authenticity for many ConFesters, the ambivalent category feral, with its particular subcultural traits, is realised in a hyper-liminal zone on the margins, the cultural hinterland, of Australian society. Using the work of Turner (on 'liminality') and Maffesoli (on 'neo-tribalism'), I seek to throw light on the (re)production of alternative culture in an analysis of an event where new frontiers in the fields of leisure, health, environment, religion and community are explored.

Some time ago MacCannell argued that, for modern seekers of authenticity, self-discovery is achieved through a complex search for an 'Absolute Other' (1976:5). The

1. I have conducted research on the Victorian *Down To Earth* Co-operative Society (*DTE*) and ConFest between 1994 and 1996 for a doctoral thesis. Written and verbal responses of *DTE* members and ConFest participants are given throughout and pseudonyms are used. Information has been gathered via questionnaires (70), on and off-site interviews (50), archival research (the 'Rainbow Archives' held at Sydney's Mitchell Library), viewing film and video recordings and, most importantly, participant observation. The latter has involved attendance at weekly *DTE* meetings (about 50), observation of and involvement in various site preparations, operations and village organisation at five ConFests, and participation in performances and workshops. Such involvement has led to the formation of friendly relationships and, generally, good rapport, with ConFesters and many *DTE* members have been given the opportunity to read and make comments on earlier drafts. I extend my deepest gratitude to *DTE*. It should be noted that I speak the same language, live in the same city (Melbourne), and hold similar values and attitudes as many of my informants. As I have also been engaged in and inspired by the same sense of spirit and community that draws most participants back to ConFest (and which originally inspired my research), I have become something of an 'in-group' ethnographer.

requirement for othering, often construed as a nostalgic pining for rediscovery, has generated the popularity of 'cultural productions' which may operate to satisfy the desires of tourists who are 'searching for experience and for their origin through the rural, the primitive, the childlike, the unpolluted, the pure, and the original. They are returning to the Garden' (Bruner 1993:324). Though such desires launch contemporary consumers of experience into temporary global migratory vectors where others (especially indigenes) are fetishised for their strength and purity, and where a lost 'spirit of festivity' (Manning 1983:26) may be relocated, you do not need to make pilgrimage to distant, international events, such as the Rio Carnival to experience a 'return'. This is clear in the appearance of a heterogeneity of cultural productions and pilgrimage destinations at 'places on the margin' (Shields 1991) within the geographical boundaries of advanced capitalist societies, which variously accommodate the fascination with otherness in their claims to promote 'natural', 'healthy', 'tribal' lifestyles. I have in mind certain events, gestating out of the ferment of the 1960s and 1970s, which typify a distinct, festive-reactionary genre: the 'alternative lifestyle gathering'.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps performative alternatives to 'alternative tourism', such events play host to popularly desired valuations—healing, primitivity, ecology and a sense of belonging in a dystopian world—among the comparable subcultural milieus attracted.

I wish to draw attention to a successful local form of this genre, ConFest, being an amalgam of Conference and Festival. I will argue that in exposing participants to a range of 'original' experiences, what is sought at ConFest is not 'the Garden' but the decidedly uncultivated. As a 'closed phenomenal world', the event, for participants and observers alike, is a 'privileged point of penetration' (Handelman 1990:15, 9) into the amorphous culture of alternative Australia. It provides a lens, albeit prismatic, on the current production of alternative identities in what I regard as a hyper-liminal (meta-transitional) zone on 'the edge' (margin). There, participants experiment with authentica, an emic trio of which—'play', 'Earth' and 'tribe'—I investigate in turn. In the ludic world of 'play', of 'having fun', of escape, self-identity is [re]constituted through the purifying potential of otherness. Through a discussion of on-site nudity and indigeneity I attempt to explore the complex role of appropriation in the production of identity. 'Earth', addressing the sacra of the environmental movement, attends to the dramatisation of ecological concerns and the performance of a 'nature' orientated religiosity (neo-paganism). Finally, 'tribe' evokes the apparent formation of a community of interconnected cells ('villages') and the generation of an affectual, defended, centredness: 'the ConFest Spirit'. I will maintain that the ConFest experience might best be described via the concept 'ferality', referring to an ambivalent, risk-laden, human condition that undermines an historically reinforced

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2. There exists preliminary, though undeveloped, research on such events: Britain's *Stonehenge* free festival (Hetherington 1992), and the North American derived now international *Rainbow Gathering* (cf. Niman 1991), which Australia hosted for the first time at Om Shalom near Tenterfield NSW in November 1996. I appreciate Newton's (1988) brief investigation of the popular culture of Australian alternative life stylers in her work on the 10th anniversary of the *Aquarius Festival*: the 1983 *Nimbin Lifestyle Celebration*. Such events should not be confused with 'pop', music or folk festivals, which, as in the case of Queensland's *Maleny/Woodford* festival (Lewis and Dowsey-Mag0 1993), are often heavily commercialised.

nature/culture distinction. Elucidating and enlivening this experience and the authentication pursued therein, I focus on attributes of 'liminality'—the ludic, drama and *communitas*—apparent in Turner's exposition of ritual, alluding also to Maffesoli's work (1993, 1996) on the elective, unstable, centrality of 'neo-tribalism'. However, it is first necessary to provide some background on the event and to trace the contours of the ConFest landscape by outlining its distinctive features, paying particular attention to the unique Conference/Festival combination.<sup>3</sup>

With the rallying cry 'A Call for a New Society' (front page headline of the first *Down to Earth Newsletter*, Autumn 1977 [*DTE*]), ConFest became a regular calendar event for Australian alternative lifestylers following the Cotter River ConFest in the Australian Capital Territory in December 1976. Planned, operated and dismantled by volunteers most of whom are members of *DTE*, the event has since been held annually in nearly all Australian States but mostly Victoria and New South Wales over New Year and more recently at Easter. It was former Labor Deputy Prime Minister Jim Cairns, using his political muscle and personal magnetism, who channelled widespread disillusionment and the disorganised search for 'the way out', into this nascent forum for the exchange and celebration of alternatives. Generally, though not exclusively, middle class, *DTE* has around 1500 members and there are about 8-10 000 regular ConFesters: a diverse amalgam of students and teachers, artists and scientists, accountants and anarchists, ferals and professionals, musicians, activists, crafts people and the unemployed. In an occasion for militants and mystics to bed down together, a multitude of organisations converge to fabricate a miasmatic switchboard of discourse and practice. The groups include: therapy and healing; environmental awareness and protest; wicca and pagan; and a miscellany such as Ananda Marga, 'the Highwaymen' Motorcycle Club, the Vegan Society, the Australian Nudist Federation and fringe artists, for whom ConFest, according to one woman describing herself as an 'artist—ex-art teacher—on the dole', is 'the answer to Moomba'. It seems useful to explain ConFest via the concept 'heterotopia' (Hetherington 1993:xviii): a site of dispersion and 'outsiderness' attracting 'all forms of ambivalence and disorder' in the wider culture, including displaced and rejected knowledge (1993:92). For Hetherington, 'heterotopic' sites are 'centres' on the margins 'sought out by marginal people because they are sites which rupture the order of things, offering little aporias for them to perform acts of transgression in the production of other ways of being' (1993:90).

According to Ben, aged 70 and a *DTE* 'elder', 100 000 people have probably experienced ConFest: '... it's like a vast school of consciousness'. The curricula appear in a large range of workshops (up to 250 at summer events) their content mirroring the dialectic of self growth and political activism outlined by Musgrove (1974). The workshop is the conventional conference medium. Developing into a popular psycho-spiritual forum, the 1990s 'esoteric tourist' (Goodman 1990:51) of the mind, body and spirit, has, in the workshop, a smorgasbord of personal development stratagems from which to select (as

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3. I rely specifically upon data gathered at two five-day Easter events held on private land adjoining the Murray River near Tocumwal NSW, each attracting near 4000 people (see maps A & B). The events—Tocumwal 1994 and 1996—will be referred to as 'Toc 94' and 'Toc 96'. I will also draw attention to the more popular New Year ConFest held near Moama in recent years (with populations near 10 000).

Jung has taken narrative precedence over Marx). Participants 'do workshops' on a huge range of holistic therapies like 'flower essences', 'gem elixirs', 'kundalini energising', 'shamanic journeying', 'didjeridu healing' and numerous 'playshops' such as 'magic theatre' and 'Sufi dancing', and discussions on 'Celtic mythology'. In an orgy of complementarity, a host of healers—trained doctors and nurses, urban shamans, spiritual alchemists, dream interpreters, psychonauts, self-styled gurus and past-life therapists—converge with a synergy of preventatives, panaceas and do-it-yourself remedies for the afflicted. ConFesters also participate in a range of politically motivated sessions contesting and resisting spiritual pathos, nuclear family, drug prohibition, sexual repression and environmental abuse. As the popular mantra 'heal thy self, thy planet' (theme at Walwa ConFest 1990/91) indicates, there is a complex relationship between self growth and ecological sustainability (person and politics) emergent here: 'healing the planet' is taken to start with the self: one's own spiritual growth and conscientious consumption practices. And such occurs in a space where popular alternative neo-spiritual and 'eco-friendly' ingredients are ingested to the point of hedonistic excess, as participants free-wheel a hyper-market of authentica, 'enacting lifestyle' (Shields 1992a:16) in the process of consumption.

In the market, itinerant stall holders trade in goods and services palatable to New Agers and 'greenies': handicrafts, candles, folk-jewellery, crystals, incense, hemp products, herbs and oils. Here, you can find numerologists, aromatherapists, tarot, palm, aura and rune readers, buy 'tribal staffs', 'rainmakers', 'dream catchers', 'medicine sticks', 'roo-bone amulets', a range of percussive instruments and didjeridus, and get your body pierced or hair tied. Food and drink sales are strictly vegetarian, wholemeal and non-alcoholic; meat, animal derived and disposable products condemned, and inorganically produced foodstuffs disfavoured. Bio-dynamic juices are popular, as is chai tea (in the 'chai tent', a familiar meeting place), and the converted bus of the bohemian 'vege out cafe' is a favourite venue.<sup>4</sup> Ananda Marga (a spiritual community of Indian origin) erect a large marquee restaurant serving Indian cuisine and at these events GECO (Goongerah Environment Centre Office), FOE (Friends Of the Earth) and HEMP (Help Eradicate Marijuana Prohibition) had tents wherein their own agendas were promoted.

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4. Vegetarianism and veganism are practices by which consumers act to erode the Nature/Culture divide (James 1993:212). As Atkinson (1983:17) points out, 'eating what is good for you' (especially a raw macrobiotic diet), is always more than a matter of nutritional value. 'Health food' ensures 'virtue' as it is less cultivated (subject to interventions like artificial pesticides, additives and preservatives) more 'natural' (organic/whole) and associated with the past and the rural.



Alongside the market one finds the 'fire circle', the festive centre of ConFest. This serves as a gathering area, a focal point for the collective release of energy. At Toc 94 the 'fire circle' was the site of daytime performances such as the meditative 'morning sharing', children's parades and 'wild women' (the celebration of the Goddess) wherein one hundred females danced in a circle pulsating towards and out from the centre (a fire) chanting to a steadily increasing drum beat:

We all come from the Goddess  
and to her we shall return.  
Like a drop of rain  
falling to the ocean.

At dusk, when most workshops have finished, this space metamorphoses into a mischievous nocturnal playground where the boundary between performer and spectator is fluid or non-existent (a spontaneous combustion of youth, colour, sound and spirit. On one night, following an invocation of the original inhabitants of the area (the Yorta-Yorta), 1000 people gathered to perform a fire walk under the full moon. Vertiginous dancers, many of whom were naked, with mud, ochre and paint-based body and facial designs, gestured frenetically to the accompaniment of tumultuous orchestras. On this, as with every other night, the air dense with dust and the ringing of bells dangling from a thousand limbs, necks and temples, and with the roar of firesticks overhead, there occurred one rapturous Dionysian cacophony in which the fire remained a central element. For the five-day duration, the drums rarely ceased.

Around the market and 'fire circle' numerous 'villages'—the location of the majority of workshops—are arranged. The villages, some of which I will draw attention to below, are (see maps A and B): *Alternative Technology* (display); *Anarchist* (a zone for disaffected dissenters); *Art* (mud pit, body painting and 'sweat lodge'); *Celestine Prophecy* (New Age); *Community* ('an experiment in group living'); *Cosmic Celebration* (chanting, harmonics and psychedelics); *Fairy* (imaginary/mythological character theme); *GECO* (environmental activists); *Great Walk* (wilderness education and support network); *Gypsy* (kombis, campers and caravans); *Healing and Massage* (reciprocal massage and a range of healing modalities); *Kids* (games, parades, story telling, mask work); *Koori Culture* (Aboriginal issues); *Pagan* (earth-based spirituality/wicca rites); *Performing Arts or Music* (billed acts, fringe circus, spontaneous ensembles); *Queer* (celebration of homo/bi/trans-sexuality and 'queer spirituality'); *Rainbow Dreaming* (or 'techno'-electronic 'trance dance'); *Self Development and Therapy* (a wide range, including 'past-life regression therapy'); *Sexuality* (a remote *cul-de-sac* featuring a variety of discussion and practice); *Spiral* (drug-free community and performance space); *Spirituality* (variety, predominantly Eastern derived); *Teen* ('exploration of being a teenager'); *Tipi* (*tipi* space); *Warrior* (sacred space/fire walk).

*DTE* is concerned with protecting the delicate balance of conference and festival, and nurturing a sense of autonomous community (often referred to as 'the ConFest Spirit'). This is attempted by discouraging and even prohibiting a range of external threats (inauthenticities). Indeed, there is a preoccupation with recognising, containing and eliminating perceived dangers. For example, 'dodgy' commercialism (i.e. 'exploitative goods' made in Korea) rendering the event 'a mall', is a cause for alarm. Spatial

sacralisation is attempted by separating the 'profane' car park from the rest of the site. The kind of vigilance required is suggested by a poster for Queensland's 'Yadonday Harvest Festival' stressing that there be 'no pollution, no heavy drugs, no glass, no throw-aways, no pets, no K-mart type of stuff'. However, those threats considered most dangerous to the survival of ConFest ('yobs', 'pub music' and 'techno') will be discussed later.

## Hyper-liminality

In common with other alternative lifestyle gatherings, ConFest is a temporary demarcated interzone of suspension, subversion and, by implication, possibility. It fulfils some of the criteria of the 'Temporary Autonomous Zone' (or 'TAZ')—which the anarchist-philosopher Bey describes as '. . . a guerilla operation which liberates an area (of land, of time, of imagination) and then dissolves itself to re-form elsewhere/elsewhen' (Bey 1990:100)—and it does so in its impermanence, clandestineness and its non-hierarchical impulsion. Yet the event's periodic return—suggesting that it is not entirely proto nor 'invisible' to the State—indicates that it is, given its special performance framework, both a vivid reminder and unique manifestation of that transcultural and necessarily recurring moment 'liminality' (from the Latin *limen*, meaning 'threshold'), also referred to as the moment of society's 'becoming' (Turner 1982). Approximating both the process *inside* rites of passage where the self is deconstructed as a precondition for reconstruction, and pilgrimage to a location *outside* the parameters of the everyday where inspired travellers seek affirmation and wholeness, ConFest orchestrates the (re)production, the becoming, of self, identity, attitude, lifestyle. In a 'time out of time' and place, where the dissolution of persona—a stripping away of roles and status—is often experienced, individuals are given access to transcendent moments of numinosity. Such a suspended, licentious atmosphere permits the imaginative inquisition of perceived fallibilities in dominant discourse and practice, and the exploration and production of alternatives. It therefore holds the potential for personal and social transformation. And in this '. . . realm of pure possibility' (Turner 1967:97), this paroxysm of transgression somewhat reminiscent of Maffesoli's 'unproductive life' of 'Dionysiac' sociality (1993)<sup>5</sup>, and evocative of the insurrectionary 'TAZ', the self engages what I have interpreted as three archetypal elements of liminality: (1) being pervious to subjunctivism (creative inversion and experimentation with personae in an as if ludic frame); (2) receiving, exploring and expressing the 'sacra' (dramatic, reflexive counter 'truths' and 'designs for living'); and (3) forming affectual relationships with others, co-liminaries.

As such, ConFest is a passage way, a conduit for change, a moment of becoming. Yet, I maintain that the design is distinctively hyper. Rather than indexing a controlled transition or possessing a recognisable telos (as do most rites of passage), this is an indeterminate zone of condensed experience, a celebratory occasion host to a dense simultaneity of 'ramified' (MacAloon 1984) performance genres and spaces motivating a confusion of participatory involvement: passage rituals (e.g. 'fire walk' and 'wild women'), healing

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5. Which is, for that author, 'nebulous', therefore everyday and ephemeral, not merely 'anti-structural' as in Turner.

rites (e.g. *Spirituality*—rebirthing', 'tantra'—and *Massage*), community dance and percussion (e.g. *Spiral* and 'fire circle'), games and parades (*Kids*) and entertaining spectacles (*Music* and the market); and, of course, a curious combination of play (see below) and work (site organisation/maintenance and workshops). In a 'heterotopic' zone where a profusion, indeed excess, of protean symbolic forms are encountered, selected and expressed, participants become familiarised with a veritable tableau of otherness/othering. And, needless to say, there are many possible outcomes.

The individual freedoms characteristic of such an event are, in part, anticipated in Turner's historical perspective. As a metaphor, 'liminality', beyond depicting the obligatory 'liminal phase' in mostly pre-modern life-cycle and seasonal rites, was extended to describe an explosive plurality, a 'hall of magic mirrors' (Turner 1985:166), of voluntary 'liminoid' leisure genres or 'cultural dramas' (i.e. theatre, film, festival, literature) emerging in (post)modernity. The important point is that such open-ended and uncertain interstices are, for their participants (audience and actors), characterised by an experimental, interpretative freedom, thereby—while retaining a weakened redressive potential (perhaps 'neo-liminal': MacAloon 1984:269; Lewis & Dowsey-Magog 1993)—harbouring a critical and subversive impulse. Yet, though this is true for ConFest, figured into the event's design is an open-endedness of an outrageous magnitude, by which there is produced a radically indeterminate rearrangement of the habitual and familiar: in its active multifarious celebration of difference, ConFest offers a meta-experiential labyrinth of pathways, alterities and possibilities. It is a hyper-threshold.

## Ferality

Covalent with the feeling of in-betweenness ConFest incubates a nascent Australian outsiderhood—'feral'. A word originally applied to animals which have been domesticated but have subsequently gone wild, 'feral' is now a metaphor widely used to refer to an outsider lifestyle the adherents to which commonly experience dissonance from dominant cultural patterns (e.g. work, religion, family, consumption). Most often of middle-class origin, ferals are associated with the following, not necessarily complete, mosaic of sub- and counter-cultural traits: transience (Lesser 1994); welfare subsistence; forest dwelling (i.e. north-east New South Wales' Rainbow Region, or East Gippsland, Victoria); low-rent housing or squatting; vegetarianism and the avoidance of animal derived food additives and non-food items (e.g. cosmetics and clothing); identification with indigenous religion (a syncretism of Celtic paganism, American Indian, Australian Aboriginal): 'strongly connected to . . . Aboriginal dreaming' according to the creator of the 'Rainbow Temple' near Lismore (Murray 1994:58); elective membership in 'green' activist organisations, co-ops and communities; engagement in wilderness preservation campaigns ('environmental work') and attendance at gatherings (forest raves, festivals and protests). They are perhaps spurred on by something like the directive 'turn on, tune in and lock on' (McKay 1996:131), which, inciting non-violent direct action, is a declaration, on the part of the so-engaged, of disassociation from hippie forebears. Invariably literate, artistic, musical, in recycled garb (e.g. ex-army fatigues) and dread locked, ferals may be

adorned with body piercings, road-kill fur, folk-jewellery, foliage, feathers, birds feet, skulls and umbilical-cord necklaces ('feralia').

Though the label 'feral', along with other wholesale appellations, may not be appreciated by some of those who display the distinctive valuations, codes of conduct and attitudes outlined above, many do identify with the word and its conceptual imputations. Other associated tags have included 'born again' or 'new age hippie', 'bush punk', 'eco-warrior' and 'crusty'. The latter reminds me of the frequently applied labels 'dirty' and 'filthy', designations notably fostered by residents of, for example, logging communities, who, as Peace conveys in a study of such a community in south-east New South Wales, are disturbed by 'their unkempt appearance, their unseemly habits, and, above all, their smell' (Peace 1996:5). On first glance, the label 'filthy' seems to arise out of an abhorrence for the assumed insanitary condition and unsightly disposition of ferals. Together with their notorious use of cannabis, 'trips' and a nomadic outsiderhood, this 'dirty' trait perhaps conditions a 'risk identity' similar to that assumed by Britain's 'New Age travellers' who, for 'locals', are 'harbingers of uncertainty and discontinuity' (Hetherington 1992:92).

Yet the risk associated with such a lifestyle has a distinctive quality which is located in the definition of the word 'feral': '1. wild, or existing in a state of nature, as animals (or, sometimes, plants). 2. having reverted to the wild state, as from domestication [L. *fera* wild beast (properly feminine of *ferus* wild) + -AL]' (*The Macquarie Concise Dictionary* 1988:347). Implied here is a traversing of the borders of Culture (cultivated, tidy, predictable, bound) and in so doing becoming closer to Nature (uncontrollable, untouched, animal-like, wild). It is this transitional process which underscores ferality,<sup>6</sup> an ambivalent human condition the hazards of which are revealed in the classification of ferals in and around such places as Nimbin as 'unwashed layabouts' (McGeough 1995) 'bloody pests' and 'rat people' (Murray 1994:54). It seems, then, that they are regarded as unclean for reasons other than and above physical hygiene and appearance: as human *ferae naturae*, as outsiders, ferals are categorical anomalies, 'matter out of place' (Douglas 1966), voluntarily trespassing, living astride, the Nature/Culture divide. Ferals are 'dirty' as they stray from dominant cultural patterns: as they disassociate with the formal economy (cf. Rojek 1988) and domestic consumption patterns (the cultivated). And, often regarded as 'eco-warriors', engagement in anti-logging 'action' or anti-road protests amplifies the ambivalent status of these Australian 'edgemen' (Turner 1969:128). Therefore, by subverting grooming and hygiene norms, eschewing production routines and the accumulation of capital, threatening the livelihood of loggers, the commercial pursuits of private contractors and the State, ferals become, in effect, 'crusty pests'.

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6. Though I do not broach psychocultural parameters of the process here, 'ferality' can be seen to embody 'unsettlement'—the intentional 'sacrifice' of the defensive, masculine ego (perhaps our 'huddled' domesticity) and the simultaneous descent into the transcendent, feminine otherness/remoteness of the landscape (and also 'unconscious')—which Tacey (1995) deems conditional for settler Australians to achieve spiritual maturation: 'to become less human and more like nature' (1995:7) is 'the seed of real cultural wisdom' (1995:74-5).

ConFest is a temporary juncture for ferals, a haven accommodating many semi-nomadic tribes. Yet, as an invitation to transgress 'normality', to stray from the paths, it also provides a safe space for one to take a risk, to go feral, since feral seems to be the repository for much that ConFesters feel to be 'true', 'pure', 'natural': it is an authentic category of human being. Therefore, at this hyper-performative 'heterotopia' and periodical autonomous zone, transhumant participants—distanced from routine social life, outside the confines of suburban enclaves, centres of learning and business districts and in collusion with fellow outsiders—are given the opportunity to get 'dirty', to assume wildness, a protean symbolic otherness. At ConFest, one enacts ferality whilst negotiating the intersecting parameters of 'play', 'earthiness' and 'tribalism'.

## Play

At ConFest, the routine dictates of rational productivity are placed in abeyance. It is a site of abandonment and re-creation: such is the circumstance of society's 'subjunctive mood' (Turner 1983) of inversion, fantasy, imitation and play-acting. It is an occasion whence the entropic process from birth to death is temporarily reversed as 'one dies to become a little child' (Turner 1974:273). Here permission is given for collective age regression, such that according to a woman of 38, an 'early childhood educationalist', ConFest is 'a whole body experience . . . [it's] kindergarten again'. The open relaxation of dress codes and prevalence of full nudity inverts the sanctioned norm of covering up, a stripping away of propriety and order (initially, this can be a confronting experience for novices, including the researcher!). With workshops encountered including *Spiral's* 'nude years day' and 'naked sensuality', an 'actor/waitress' of 23 remarked: 'I was a bit worried . . . I expected everyone to be naked and thought that would be expected of me, but I found the nudity wonderful as everyone was so unselfconscious; I wish society wasn't so moralistic about such things.'

In *Art*, bodily exposure is accompanied by group mud plastering and skin murals. To be covered with wet earth (which one nine year old girl called 'special mud'), subverts rules of cleanliness and sterilisation to which novices have learned to strictly adhere. To be decorated with water based or fluorescent paints—in a combination of styles and colours on any anatomical location—engenders an almost infinite array of possibilities in refiguring and recomposing one's experience of the body. *Art* is located on the beach—itself a liminal zone (between land and water) often constructed as a place of pleasurable activities (cf. Shields 1990)—where, echoing Rabelaisian carnivalesque, the undisciplined body is celebrated in a grotesque degradation to the material level of earth and flesh (Bakhtin 1968). The clay-clad masses mingle and dance, wandering the site all day in such temporary body modifications. Embodiment of a most unconventional, promiscuous kind, where 'the unclosed body of convexities and orifices intrud[es] onto and into other's personal space' (Shields 1990:57), here surely is a most visible instance of society's

'orgiastic' substratum, which, argues Maffesoli, licences the profligation of sensual alterity in the 'transgression of imposed morality' (1993:92).<sup>7</sup>

A white male Toc 94 participant posed a curious sight. With his body covered in mud, didjeridu painted in a black, yellow and red pattern, and penis decorated in matching hues, he emblematised the sensuous simulation of, and experimentation with, primitivity discovered on site. Here, participants manipulate a repertoire of symbolism (paint, musical instruments, clothing, dance styles, architecture) assuming aspects of the valorised primitive, seeking indigeneity.<sup>8</sup> While workshops like 'Koori astronomy' and 'intercultural sharing'—involving the construction of multi-totemic murals—appeared at Toc 94 (in *Koori Culture*), body decorations using ochre (hence the experience of getting 'ochred') and dot-painting technique have become ephemeral recently. And, like primitive antennae seen on backpackers commuting to and from ConFest, the popularity of the didjeridu has escalated. Non-indigenous Australians (usually males but increasingly females also) desire to create the vibrating drone to which Aborigines have always attributed sacred significance, a trend that is underscored by the popularity of workshops on 'how to play didjeridu' and 'didjeridu healing'<sup>9</sup>, and stalls like 'Heartland Didjeridu', which was signposted:

It's time for Aboriginal spirit to rise in us all . . . The didjeridu is the sound of Mother Earth and is bringing forth the heart spirit, from the depths of our land. The Didjeridu Spirit will guide us . . . By using it in creative ritual in day to day life and going into meditative, reflective and feeling spaces it becomes our soul companion. (Toc 94)

In sympathy with such logic, the didjeridu, a chief ritual tool used in the Toc 96 fire walk, was played over the bare feet of prospective coal walkers with the purpose of guiding their journey. Such discourse and practice is perhaps consistent with essentialising patterns like those located in contemporary world music wherein the instrument is often perceived to resonate Mother Earth (Neuenfeldt 1994), and whose originators are imagined to be so 'in touch' with their natural environment that they themselves are Nature. However, as a conduit between the sacred and profane (1994:93)

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7. *Sexuality*, the frontiers of which are explored on site, goes largely unaddressed here. There is much evidence of cross dressing (of inverting/confusing gendered dress codes). Male expression of femininity is encouraged and pronounced and coupled with the promotion of 'men's gatherings' and weekends. The *Queer*, *Pagan* and *Sexuality* villages were nexi for workshops providing the opportunity to explore sexual fantasies/permissiveness (e.g. 'flirting', 'queer collaboration', 'gay flirting with Shaun and Bazza', 'tantric massage', 'macrame and bondage (BYO rope)').
  8. That which is variously perceived to be: timeless (a source of spirituality, wisdom and moral teaching—keepers of 'the dreaming'); primordial (possessing animal instinct); autochthonous; conservationist (the 'ecologically noble savage': Redford 1990; cf. Sackett 1991:242); and nomadic.
  9. In 'didjeridu healing' the subject's body, or afflicted region, is offered up to the didjeridu player who provides a methodical sonic 'massage'.

the didjeridu's specified use in nascent performances ('didge healing' and the Toc 96 fire walk) delivers us upon fresher ground.<sup>10</sup>

The world's aboriginal peoples have indeed become the embodiment of the sacred. As Lattas has argued, settler Australians discover (and invent), in Aboriginal culture, the perceived healing qualities of timeless archetypal symbols (1992:57), indigenes becoming a 'space of pilgrimage' wherein lost otherness is recaptured and the settler self made whole (Lattas 1991:313; cf. Marcus 1988). Native American Indian cultures, ever-popular repositories of essentialist meaning as a result of their fashionable co-option by North American and European counter cultures,<sup>11</sup> also provide a desirable range of signifiers: *tipis* (as evidenced in the *Tipi* village at Toc 94, as well as a pervasion of old, new or mock *tipis* locally fashioned from logs, bark, scrub and corrugated iron), cow-hide garments, beads, hair styles, chants, percussion, and 'sweat lodges'<sup>12</sup> being typical mediators. However, the subscription to American Indian culture (like other indigenous cultures) is characterised by a diversity of motivations, subscribers possessing different reasons for 'playing Indian'. A brochure dating from the late 1980s (when ConFests were held at Walwa) seems to have targetted clients with specious promises and temporary fantasia: the reader being introduced to 'Good Medicine *Tipis* of Walwa' and ensured that the proprietors make, hire and sell 'authentically constructed' *tipis* and canoes designed for 'a real Indian adventure'. Yet, for the growing numbers of alternative Australians who have become committed to the more permanent 'adventure', *tipis* are practical—they are ideal homes. Accordingly, the founder of 'Trident Tipis' (a New Enterprise Incentive Scheme [NEIS] funded enterprise) proposes that not only do his shelters, 'scaled to the original Sioux design' though with acrylic canvas rather than buffalo and animal skins, offer 'a return to a way of life that honours the cycles of nature, that puts us in touch with the Source of Energy that gives rise to all of creation' (from leaflet); they are also economical, durable and transportable.

Such processes are far from straightforward. There is indeed a tension characterising the process we know as appropriation, one only touched on here and requiring further elucidation by anthropologists and other cultural observers. This tension is expressed by Richards (1995) who finds that a 'fine line between reconciliation . . . and plunder' underlies and problematises the endeavours of people like Daricha, 'New Age shaman' and director of the 'Centre for Human Transformation', who is said to borrow 'without

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10. See Sherwood (1997) who discusses the emerging import of the didjeridu in alternative lifestyles' construction of meaning.
  11. American participation in 'the occult power' and 'mythic radiance' of the Indian, of 'Caliban the Wild Man', has, however, a long history (traced back to the first English colony at Roanoake which had 'Gone to Croatan', deserted civilization and 'went native' (Bey 1990:116-23; cf. Wilson 1993), and more recently clearly apparent in films like *Dances With Wolves* (Alexeyeff 1994).
  12. ConFest 'sweat lodges' are really just wood-fired steam tents, though serious purificatory rituals of this type are becoming more popular amongst non-native American Indians (Lindquist 1995)

shame, ready to wear anything that fits his evolving vision of the cosmos' (1995:63).<sup>13</sup> On the one hand, in the wake of Said (1978) cultural imperialism and its implications cannot be ignored. The recent history of pirating through which the other has been removed, distorted and commodified as noble and wise, as profitably 'pure products' (Clifford 1988:ch.1), and marketed to those seeking spiritual growth, restoration and status enhancement, deserves attention as an appendage to darker, more conspicuous, histories of dispossession.

On the other hand, a great deal of 'othering' is conditioned by deep sympathetic awareness, first-hand knowledge and a serious commitment to social alternatives such that the appropriation involves creative lifestyle adaptations and modifications of a spiritual (e.g. personal belief in spirits, gods and divine cosmos), practical (e.g. diet, medicine, agricultural methods, architecture) and social (e.g. public ritual and communal living) nature. And many 'alternatives' (often widely 'travelled', and who may have themselves, to some degree, 'gone native' like Cohen's 'existential tourist': Cohen 1979) are as captivated by the religiosity and impressed by the simplistic practicality of the 'other' as they are sobered and horrified by the socio-historical contexts and consequences of colonialism. In a period recognised as one of mounting crisis for all of the planet's inhabitants, wherein a cornucopia of discourses, personal philosophies and nascent political, scientific and cultural agendas have drawn inspiration from the knowledge and practice of others (including indigenes), such cultures have become valorised for their real and/or imagined social/ecological record. Such 'connections' or identifications are diverse. At one extreme, identifications may be characterised by the homogenisation of a plurality of imported cultures, or by the kind of conflation of difference and denial of history found in indigenously inspired eco-nations expounded in New Age, environmental and eco-feminist tracts (cf. Jacobs 1994). At the other, one finds a sensitive cultural awareness and validation of indigenous authority in regard to knowledge and practice subscribed to. Caution is therefore required. There is clearly a need for the type of careful contextual research which, for instance, surpasses the defensive, one-sided approach of Marcus (1988), whilst retaining a critical awareness of the politics of othering at work.<sup>14</sup>

Other processes observed at ConFest suggest the complex role of play in cultural formation. Presenting identity, an individual may simultaneously interiorise or exteriorise more than one 'other' (e.g. via curious combinations of Celtic symbolism, didjeridu use, Hindu pantheon and *tipi* dwelling), or may manipulate different sets of symbols at different times. Participants are very much bricoleurs energetically committed to a 'do-it-

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13. Daricha, who takes workshops at ConFest including 'the modern shaman's journey', was spurned by the Anangu Pitjantjatjara for attempting to harness local initiatory themes (the *Wanampi* Dreaming) in a ten-day workshop in Central Australia in 1994.

14. Marcus does not address the complexity of the problem, throwing scant new light on appropriation itself, a concept which is used as a catchall for several processes which are cast together and judged guilty of the crime 'cultural appropriation' (which is not differentiated from any other kind of appropriation). We are left with no direction or solution other than that of placing appropriation ('cultural' or otherwise) under urgent revision.

yourself lifestyle',<sup>15</sup> displaying the vestiges of otherness in an externalised pot pourri of exotic tattoo, or changing their skins like ludic chameleons. Indeed, identity, as it is expressed and performed on site, is an embroglio of signifiers, and to be feral is itself most evocative of such unruly syncretism. This relates to my feeling that the origin of 'artifacts' adopted (e.g. clothing, jewellery, icons, instruments, cuisine, language) is too often unclear as the meanings of such have been refashioned and reinvented in a diffuse, undocumented, and steadily exponential tangle of migrations and fashionable concatenations. In such a creative cultural dynamic, where the ethnicity/culture of the 'player' (the 'self') is becoming as diverse as the favoured 'other/s' acted out, a preoccupation with origins (much like the 19th century search for the origins of religion) verges on the pointless and futile.

Furthermore, and most critical, copying others and assuming otherness is unavoidably human. By 'dressing up', down or across, imitating the desired 'other' (Aboriginal, American Indian, Celt, female, child, fairy, witch, animal) participants enter, via the laws of sympathetic magic, into physical contact with that 'other', whose raiment, whose very image, enhances condition. Such othering demonstrates, in a phenomenological sense, the possibilities arising out of what Taussig (1993) calls the 'mimetic faculty'—the very human capacity and desire to other. In the 'mimetic faculty' lies the potential for 'copying or imitation and a palpable, sensuous, connection between the very body of the perceiver and the perceived' (1993:21). Mimesis, the 'Art of becoming something else, of becoming other' (1993:36), a condition wherein otherness is copied and contacted, makes possible the altering of the self and the manipulation of the world. In the recreational space of ConFest we can clearly perceive Taussig's 'magical power of replication' at work (1993:2). And that which is represented/reproduced is constantly distorted, refashioned, reinvented by the representer/ reproducer. It is thus a context for the mimesis and synthesis of elements of imagined otherness engendering multi-alterity, the protean effect of costuming, mask and paint work not unlike that of Halloween mask work which endows American children 'with the powers of feral, criminal, autochthonous and supernatural beings' (Turner 1969:172).

## Earth

In recommending *DTE* festivals, the international directory for New Age travellers, the *Pilgrims Guide to Planet Earth*, promotes such events as exercises in 'raising our consciousness toward Planet Earth' ((Khalsa 1981:5). At ConFest, a global orientated 'ecological consciousness' (Eder 1990:37), or what one permaculturalist referred to as an 'Earth friendly culture', forged out of disquiet over dominant consumption patterns, is expressed through a profusion of narratives and performances, ranging from the political/instrumental to the personal/aesthetic. It is a 'cultural drama' in which

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15. Deeming this an appropriate description for a motley of New Age traveller, anarchist, road protest and raver subcultures in Britain, McKay (1996) relates that the term was used self-referentially by a road-protester, (probably a member of the Dongas Tribe, a group of 'indigenous Englishers' who emerged in 1992 to oppose the M3 motorway over Twyford Downs (134-48).

participants 'wholly attend' to a sacred, sentient, object from which they are felt to have become ontologically detached—the Earth ('Gaia'). In this liminoid space, ConFesters enact the 'ultimate concern' (Lewis and Dowsey-Magog 1993:201) of, in another participant's words, 'getting back to the Earth, the planet, nature' through performances which have their goal in reconnecting with, or returning to, the natural environment: achieving an 'earthiness'. It is no mere coincidence that ConFest is held in the bush, at distant locations to which urban-dwelling participants must travel hundreds, even thousands of kilometres. Not merely a spectacle to be observed and appreciated, participants are encouraged to actively engage with the landscape encountered, with 'nature': mysterious, indeterminate and primordial, not completely knowable or controllable (cf. Grove-White 1993:24).

Workshops are indicative of eco-consciousness, as numerous frontline organisations and ideologues use the outdoor conference environment to seek support for 'green' philosophical, political and/or spiritual agendas: deep ecology, eco-feminism, eco-sabotage, alternative technology, permaculture, animal liberation, vegetarianism. The agendas of protest-based organisations such as FOE, GECO, HEMP, the Great Walk Network (whose motto is 'less consumption, more joy'), and one workshop holder's position that 'we are all barracking for nature', provide evidence of a strong environmental ethos. Indeed, as a reactionary cultural interface, a 'heterotopic' site of contestation, ConFest is a locale for the expression of such discontent (see also Krasniewicz 1994).

Anxiety awoken by the contemplation of the devastating ecological consequences of mindless consumption and waste is allayed through the serious undertaking, according to a sign at Toc 96, of 'returning the site to nature . . . all welcome'. A responsibility upon which the success of ConFest is said to be dependent, such commitments are nothing short of purification rites. In this vein, at the signposted compost area of the divisional recycling system at Toc 96, we find: 'in celebration we give back to you Mother Earth that which is created from yourself and the energy from the sun'. However, by contrast, we find a pervasive Dionysian propensity towards abandonment, hedonism, eroticism and the conspicuous sampling of drugs (especially cannabis and 'acid'), 'healing' strategies and, in general, lifestyle. I find it curious that the juxtaposition of conscientious consumption and wanton excess finds some homology with the variegated meaning of 'pagan'—the eclecticism of which makes for an attractive identification. Under this polysemous rubric 'heathen' and 'one who sets a high value on sensual pleasures', converge with 'non-Christian', 'polytheistic' and 'magic' (the 'Craft') associations. And such polysemy corresponds with the multiplicity of paganisms subscribed to and explored: the *Pagan* village attracting an ad hoc assortment of occultist themes.<sup>16</sup> In a space where wicca

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16. Over the past two decades Australia has experienced a resurgence in paganism gauged by the appearance of events designed to celebrate nature-oriented spirituality (cf. Hume 1995; Rodgers 1995). An indication of this was the 1984 *Sky to Earth ConFest*, a non DTE event billed as 'Australia's first National Occult and Alternatives ConFest'. ConFest earlier gave rise to smaller events in N. E. Australia like the *All One Family Gathering*, which, celebrated on the equinoxes and solstices since 1986, is described as 'a celebration of the summer solstice and the wonder and joy of living and growing into total health in harmony with mother nature'. (*Down to Earth North East Australia Newsletter* Nov. 1995:4)

groups like 'the Dolphin tribe' and 'Dark Circle' appear, where full moon, seasonal and Earth rites are conducted, workshops like 'men's and women's mysteries'<sup>17</sup> and 'celebration of the Goddess' can be located. Yet, the etymological derivations of 'pagan' have even greater resonance with the ConFest experience—with ferality—since it is rooted in the Latin *paganus* ('villager', 'rustic') and *pagana* ('of the land'). In the pagan scheme divinity is immanent in the world and for all neo-pagans 'the natural landscape becomes a map for human feeling and aspiration, an environment for spiritual odyssey' (Luhmann 1993:232). A crucial aspect of such divinity appears in the common belief that the Earth is mother and that all humans (and non-human species) are her offspring and, as such, indigenous to the planet.

One further way in which a desired 'earthiness' may be realised is via the indigenisation of landscape—the acknowledgment of the site's original inhabitants (to degrees real or imagined). The collective invocation of the Yorta-Yorta on the night of the Toc 94 fire walk, for example, sacralised the site and legitimated the collective performances there. Such a desired means of spatial sanctification is frequently encountered in ConFest mythos. In 1981, Glenlyon (near Daylesford, Victoria) was, for one commentator, an apt location for an event as it had been used as 'a tribal gathering place' for millennia: 'Once an Aboriginal meeting place and spa, more recently a village race track and now a ConFest site' (Robinson 1981:12). ConFesters at Mt Oak 1988, were informed that on the Murrumbucca Creek leading up to the Snowy Mountains there was a path once used by Aboriginal people who gathered to feast on bogong moths, and that 'if we remember that every step we take is on sacred ground, we will be part of rekindling the dreaming' (*Down to Earth North East Australia Newsletter* Dec 1987:4). And, the imagined Aboriginality of a raised area (known as the 'sacred mound') which later became the 'fire circle' at the New Year 95/96 ConFest, seemed to accord that site and its participants with an impression of their own autochthonous grounding.<sup>18</sup>

## Tribe

'Think globally—go tribally'. Perhaps *the* feral catchcry, the slogan of the Nimbin *Star Earth Tribe's* 'Tipi Village Sanctuary' portends the coupling of global consciousness with the formation of close-knit communities. The shape of such human fellowship was

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17. The 'mystery of menstruation' is articulated as a rite of passage and revealed to be a source of wisdom and power. Women are encouraged to connect with their own cycles (and with the cycles of the moon, tides and weather), and are instructed on the value of washable cloth pads, which, whilst not only ethical in their reusability, satisfy the desire to get 'back in touch' as they can be used to transfer a woman's vitamin and mineral filled blood-soak 'back into the earth' (which is declared, on a pamphlet for 'Rad Pads'—'the environmentally friendly modern woman's menstrual companion'—to instil 'a great feeling').

18. The proliferation of Aboriginality at ConFest stands in contrast to the absence of Aborigines in any numbers, a reality which might, in the eyes of some, accord the *Maleny/Woodford* event, with its large indigenous contingents and Gabbi-Gabbi 'permission ceremony' (Lewis and Dowsey-Magog 1993:203-4), greater legitimacy.

formulated in the thought and practice of 1960s and '70s counter culture, as communards, for instance, romanticising indigenes 'tribal' culture as socially, morally and ecologically sound (cf. Newton 1988). Such valorisation is infused in the ConFest imagination. As for Fred: 'ConFest is tribal in the sense of a closeness—a return, as the name says—down to earth. Some of the best aspects of the indigenous way of life are present at ConFest. It is tribal also in the sense of a respect for the Earth and the whole notion of nurturing everything'. 'Tribe' conveys two main senses of belonging here. Some use 'tribe' inclusively to confer the idea of an emerging sense of extended kinship, such that all participants are members of 'the ConFest family', that the site is a place where one can mingle with 'kindred spirits' or 'fellow travellers' (*Wangaratta ConFest 83/84 Guide* 1983:9), or further, that—according to a male music teacher of 53—'we are all members of one Earth Tribe'. Therefore, the extension of affinal ties becomes almost limitless as Daemien (1979) demonstrates in his ruminations upon the ever expanding 'familiness' of 'Rainbow People' attending North American *Healing Festivals* (now international *Rainbow Gatherings*):

In recognition of everyone as a true sister or brother we named [at the winter solstice festival in 1974] our oneness the *All One Family*. Every healing festival that followed this unveiling was conceived and organised to celebrate this growing awareness—we are all one family on this earth, and beyond: sisters and brothers to everyone. (1979:83)

At ConFest, familiarity seems to be enhanced by the prevalence of open nudity, which, as Newton argued for Nimbin's *Lifestyle Celebration*, 'sets asexual rules . . . and greatly increases the number of people deemed to be within an incest taboo relationship' (1988:63). It at least seems probable that at these events, increased public nudity and tacitly correspond with a reduction in the occurrence of sexual harassment and abuse.

Others, however, stress heterogeneity. According to a female 'story teller' of 74, if 'tribe' connotes singularity—sameness—then ConFest is the 'opposite of tribal [as] it's a coming together of many cultures'. This reflects a popular belief that the festival stimulates a tolerance for its own diversity. A 43 year old male musician makes this clear when he says 'the village system promotes a sense of group identification'. *Spiral, Anarchist, Pagan, Great Walk, GECO*, and *Ananda Marga*, for example, attract those connected to networks external to ConFest. In this sense the topography accommodates cohabiting tribes—each with a nucleus of identifiable attitudes, beliefs, rites and numerous interpenetrating nodes of affiliation—a unique neighbourhood of the 'neo-tribal', a spontaneous counter-world of 'Temporary Autonomous Zones' (*TAZ* in fact being the name for 'cyber village' appearing at the Tocomwal 95/96 event). This environ, attractive to the disaffected who search for security and meaning in 'elective centres' (Cohen et al. 1987) becoming affiliates of unstable but affectual *Bund*-like forms of sociation (Hetherington 1994), incubates a heteroglossia of lifestyles: feral, pagan, anarchist, queer, New Ager, 'Mergy', biker etc. Such tribes, ephemeral and tragic, are united through practising the 'forbidden', and the secret aesthetic and ideals that their members share is felt to be non-replicable, resisting imposition: such is the internal resolve of 'underground centrality' (Maffesoli 1996:92).

One tribe or a cluster of many? ConFest's spontaneous vitality, or '*puissance*', nourishing the nuclei of relatively autonomous cells is evocative of both, since, in this organic 'protoplasmic' zone (an example of Maffesolian de-individualised society in miniature) the ConFest '*tribus*' of villages 'constitute both an undifferentiated mass and highly diversified polarities' (Maffesoli 1996:88). Such organicism is evident in the Toc 96 village-based communal kitchen-network centres (see Map B) wherein food and basic cooking facilities are provided by *DTE* in exchange for volunteer work, and is also visible in 'participation tickets' upon which Toc 94 ConFesters were allocated duties (e.g. front gate, garbage, toilets, information, car-park attendant, fire/security, and *Kids*' village helper) to be undertaken during the event. In addition to the essential tension of part and whole, the event encourages cross-membership, a promiscuous inter-village fluidity (or a poly-centredness), which is what Maffesoli has in mind with the 'network' (1996:145): a matrix of interconnectivity in which individuals have multiple sites of belonging.

Together, these elements constitute the 'being together' encountered at ConFest, a feeling captured by a 60 years old 'mother and former teacher'. She writes:

I often say during a ConFest 'Oh God, never again'. It's all too much, too raw, too young, too juvenile. But I usually return. It's my one experience in the year when I can take off the mask of persona, let down my hair, get real dirty, rub shoulders with all age groups and all socio levels. A sort of melange of common denominator humanity.

The 'contact'—as opposed to 'contract'—community (Shields 1992b:110) redolent in the sensate, inter-bodily anonymity of the mud pit, uncovered body painting and other communions, provides a patent rendering of Bakhtin's 'carnival spirit' wherein members of the crowd, archetypal liminaries—human *materia prima*—become 'an indissoluble part of the collectivity' (Bakhtin 1968:255). In this, 'the people's second world', 'free, familiar contacts [are] deeply felt and formed . . . [as people are] reborn for new, purely human relations' (1968:10). Ostensibly opposed to closed, intolerant attitudes, *DTE* propagates the celebration of open, expressive sociality, an other-directedness widely known as 'the ConFest Spirit': an ethos of acceptance and co-operation condensed in a bannered slogan 'strangers are friends you have not yet met'. The 'spirit' had its genesis in 1976 at the Cotter River near Canberra after which it was given expression in the original 'manifesto':

We have in a few, short days, broken through into a consciousness that is so powerful in its newness that it is, as yet, difficult to describe. . . . The Down to Earth Movement has found, here at the Cotter River, that we can live in wholeness, in harmony with ourselves, the Earth and all around us. This sharing has shown us to be so diverse, and from so many walks of life, that we are obviously not an alternative but the possessors of a new and greater consciousness of human potential. . . . We are the seeds of change that will ultimately transform mankind. (*DTE Community News* 1977, no 1:1; Rawlins 1982:34-6)

Such a unifying, vision-inducing experience, is an apposite example of the form of sociality, commensurate with some limina, which Turner called 'spontaneous communitas': an 'immediate and total confrontation of human identities . . . a flash of mutual understanding on the existential level' (Turner 1982:47-8). Parallel to experiences had by pilgrims, tourists, wilderness explorers, and patrons of major sports events,

spontaneous community continues to be achieved in a space where social divisions (based on role, status, class, gender, ethnicity, age) are, to varying degrees, suspended, there developing an homogeneity between those sharing the experiences of cooking, eating, mud bathing, firewalking, sweat lodging, workshopping—*ConFesting*.

Though the event is designed to achieve unification of disparate elements, that divisions and social boundaries are reinforced on site is illustrated by responses to perceived threats to the 'ambience' or 'spirit'. This is seen in the first of two threats I will discuss, that which is embodied in 'space invaders': 'rednecks', 'yobs' or the 'tinnie brigade'. At Moama (a site which has now hosted three events) New Year's Eve has been the occasion upon which groups of 'strangers' (many are young local males) toting eskies and armed with slabs of beer, have stormed the Murray beachhead in flotillas of canoes, dinghies and high powered boats (with names like 'Hooters' and 'Hard on'). Indicating that the consummate ConFester is located at a far remove from Australia's risk-taking 'real man' celebrated in events such as the *Darwin Beercan Regatta* (Mewett 1988), DTE is alarmed by the growing presence of the alcohol abusing male. Women, especially, feel that a safe and neutral zone is threatened as the site is trespassed by drunk male voyeurs and loiterers (a kind of 'yobbo' *flâneur*) who, intoxicated also on the licentious atmosphere, come to observe a lewd and exotic exhibition of tits and bums. A sense of sacrilege is apparent in a comment made by a 23 year old 'womyn' 'performance artist and healer': 'pollutions of the dominant culture/mind set infiltrate [and] . . . sexism and addictions riddle ConFest polluting it like the piles of VB cans at the bases of trees'.

Yet, anxieties evoked by the inauthentic are possibly best seen in disputes over musical production and performance. Professional, amplified and staged music (at *Music* village) is often perceived as a danger to ConFest's folk ethos (reproducing 'the pub scene'), an assumption revealed in the renewed allegiance to 'organic', spontaneous music and dance, incorporating a range of indigenous styles and instruments. In what one informant calls the 'fire circle's' percussive based 'communal music', the emphasis is on total participation not the passive witnessing of an entertaining spectacle: the dissolution of the performer/audience distinction. A contributor to the former *WA DTE News* calls this 'the new tribal music':

No one is 'up there'. The musical leadership seems to rotate in an unpredictable way, unconnected with privilege, flattery or special status. To me it's anarchy, primitive communism. . . . It has to do with mutual respect and affection for all. Its spirit is emotional and cannot be commanded or organised. It may be recorded but no recording can convey the feeling of participation. (Thorell 1980:12)

The *Rainbow Dreaming* (or *Techno*) village (a new site at Toc 96) with its use of 'trance dance' induced electronic rhythm sampling was also contested. Promotional literature seeks to enhance the credibility of such a performance anchoring it to 'over 40 000 year old' healing methods: a reawakening of 'an ancient shamanic practice which invites Spirit to embody us; to heal us through spiritual ecstasy'. Despite such indigenisation, the electronic 'Spirit guide', with its distinctive 'techno-shamanic' conductors and psychedelic drug culture, is, for others, just a 'rave in the bush', a noisy disruption denuding 'the ConFest Spirit' which, it is considered, must be protected from such incursions.

## Conclusion

I have argued that ConFest is a double-edged sword. Its centrality implies resistance: holding unifying potential it reinforces divisions. Yet, it is clearly more than this. It is a journey, a *return* to a site where an abundance of protean alternatives are sought and found. This desired space is a hyper-threshold of authentica, a postmodern juncture inciting the indeterminate [re]production of identity and lifestyle; a promiscuous, sensuous topos where the childlike, indigenous, organic, feminine, earthy, pagan, tribal are approximated for their improving qualities. Straying from the paths of convention, enacting/consuming these 'sacra' (subsumed here within 'play', 'Earth' and 'tribe') participants approach and enter a unique liminal/marginal status I have called 'ferality'—a quality of alterity and authentication within which one becomes less cultivated, more wild. And such an experience is seen to hold great potential, since, as one key informant argues—with the purpose of developing 'community wellbeing'—the ConFest process could be designed, entered and passed through on a national circuit: 50 ConFest sites could be set up around the country, each staged for a week with '250 000 people . . . spending a year in the ConFest circuit before returning to mainstream life with extraordinary skills'.

Such is a possible future for voluntary outsiderhood, the study of alternative lifestyle gatherings providing useful background on current developments in the areas of leisure, health, environment, religion and community. Comparable with the transmission of esoterica to the initiates of secret societies, ConFesters receive the fashionable words of wisdom and the appropriate codes of conduct on the shifting edges of alternative culture. And in this unique counter-space, this 'privileged point of penetration' located beyond the confines of what is, for many, routinised claustrophobia and vicarious lifestyle, participants are engaged in the ConFest journey: such that they nod and smile knowingly in their sharing of the 'ConFest Spirit', a spontaneous community which also approximates the experience of those who have made pilgrimage to a sacred site.

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