



## Namatjira and the Burden of Citizenship\*

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*Albert Namatjira (1902–59), an Arrernte (Aranda) born at Hermannsburg in Central Australia, is one of the best known of Australia's Indigenous artists. In the 1950s, many non-Indigenous Australians, concerned about the regime of discriminatory legislation that governed Aboriginal people and influenced by the assimilationist discourse, wanted to create an opportunity for Namatjira to live 'like us'. This article examines the context in which settler Australians' ideas about citizenship were shaped and in particular the common conflation of equality with sameness, the events that lead to Namatjira effectively being made a citizen and why his citizenship finally was nothing more than a terrible burden to him.*

IN MARCH 1954, the Arrernte artist, Albert Namatjira boarded a train in Adelaide that would take him back to Alice Springs and to his home country. He had just completed a whirlwind tour of the eastern states and his first visit to the big capital cities. In Canberra he had been introduced to Queen Elizabeth II and to Prince Philip and had attended the state ball in King's Hall, Parliament House. In Sydney crowds gathered at his appearances. On one occasion at an exhibition opening, society ladies, unable to get near enough to Namatjira to have him sign their catalogues, crawled on all fours though the milling crowds. Similar scenes were repeated in Melbourne and while Adelaide turned on a less ostentatious display of its affections, no one was left in any doubt that Namatjira had become one of the most fashionable and popular figures of the day.<sup>1</sup> Since his first solo exhibition in 1938, Namatjira's achievements as a painter had received much public attention and praise. On this tour, there had been an opportunity to see and to meet the great artist in person.

Because he was an Aboriginal person, Namatjira was not in any real sense a citizen in 1954. As a mark of respect, many Australians wanted to make Namatjira a citizen, in the belief that this would ensure that he would have the opportunity to live 'like us'. Citizenship was a badge of acceptance and of belonging. Citizenship in its broadest sense signifies the membership of a common society and the rights and duties of that society's members. Many Australians

\* This paper is about one episode in the search for Aboriginal citizenship that has been under way for little more than half a century. The research for this paper is part of a larger project called 'An Ideal Citizenship: Aborigines and Citizenship in the Northern Territory, 1957–1970'. This paper was first presented at the Australian Historical Association conference, University of Melbourne, July 1996. We wish to acknowledge the helpful criticisms of the two anonymous *Australian Historical Studies* referees and Peter Quinn.

<sup>1</sup> For an account of this trip south, see Joyce D. Batty, *Namatjira: Wanderer Between Two Worlds* (Melbourne: Hodder & Stoughton, 1963), chap. 9.

believed that to invite Namatjira to belong, to allow him membership of 'Australian' society, was the greatest reward settler Australia could give him.

The term citizenship, of course, must be placed in context. After 1901, for Indigenous Australians, citizenship or lack of it was prescribed by various regimes of federal and state discriminatory legislation. At federation, Indigenous Australians were excluded from the count of the population of the Commonwealth Constitution (s. 127) effectively making them invisible in the new constitution.<sup>2</sup> Namatjira was born eighteen months after the birth of the Australian nation and in that same year Aboriginal people were excluded from the franchise, a right that is central to democratic citizenship.<sup>3</sup> To exclude Aborigines from the right to vote was to effectively render them 'non-citizens and unfree'.<sup>4</sup> During Namatjira's lifetime, this process of exclusion of Indigenous Australians was compounded by a regime of discriminatory legislation guided by policies based on racism and later assimilationism. Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory were governed by successive Aborigines' Ordinances, initially passed by the South Australian parliament in 1910, and then by the Commonwealth government following its takeover of the Northern Territory in 1911.<sup>5</sup> Under the Aborigines' Ordinances and associated restrictive legislation, the Northern Territory chief protector of Aborigines and subsequently the director of native affairs had primary control over each Aborigine, including legal guardianship of Aboriginal children. The protector could determine where Aboriginal people lived and worked, where they could travel, whether they could marry and with whom women were permitted to have sexual relations.

But by the 1950s, in the final decade of Namatjira's life, significant voices in the Australian settler community wanted an end to discriminatory legislation concerning Aboriginal people and gave their support to the struggle for Aboriginal rights. Namatjira became a focus for the struggle and for a brief time, commencing in late 1957, he lived as a citizen apparently free from all discriminatory legislation. In the struggle that took place around his citizenship, however, there was little reference to Namatjira's own aspirations and even less understanding of his primary obligations and responsibilities to his Arrernte kin and country. His citizenship quickly and tragically became a burden relieved only by his death in late 1959.

The public's response to the events surrounding Namatjira's citizenship provides an excellent opportunity to focus on how the various contemporary settler protagonists such as governments, the press, Aboriginal support organisations, trade unions and intellectuals constructed citizenship and issues about equality in the 1950s. How did contemporaries imagine Aboriginal people could

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<sup>2</sup> Alistair Davidson, *From Subject to Citizen: Australian Citizenship in the Twentieth Century* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 190.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, chap. 6.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 190. Davidson describes the central definition of freedom in a liberal democracy as the right to make laws for oneself.

<sup>5</sup> Specific discriminatory state legislation governed Aborigines in the states. Only in the Northern Territory was the federal government able to legislate for Aboriginal peoples.

be included in the category of citizens? Through the window of Namatjira's citizenship we glimpse the struggle to find a way to make Aboriginal people equal and 'like us'. In the 1950s, Aboriginal voices were not heard. Reflecting the reality of the 1950s, we extract Namatjira from his kin and country and make him a metaphor for issues about Indigenous Australians and citizenship.

In the most general sense, citizenship defines an individual's membership of a common society and the relationship between that society and the individual, the rights and duties of each towards the other.<sup>6</sup> Citizenship as it was conceived at federation and embedded in the constitution was gender-specific and racist. As Davidson argues, the main basis for exclusion, closure and therefore 'antidemocratic rules of citizenship' was the requirement that 'all applicants "belong" to the "national family" before they would be admitted'.<sup>7</sup> One way of viewing the history of the first hundred years of federation is to trace the challenges and changes made to this exclusive citizenship established at federation. Namatjira's story reflects one part of the struggle, by Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians alike, to find a genuinely inclusive Aboriginal citizenship, that is, one in which Indigenous identities and differences are recognised and accommodated.

In *Citizenship and Indigenous Australians*, Peterson and Sanders track the way the colonies and subsequently the federal, territory and state governments used legislative means up until the 1930s to progressively exclude and restrict Aboriginal people from access to rights normally identified with citizenship.<sup>8</sup> After 1945, settler society slowly moved towards formally incorporating Aboriginal people into 'a common Australian society' by progressively repealing and amending the discriminatory legislation that had governed Aboriginal Australia for the first half of the century. Eventually, Anglo-Celtic settler society did provide access to civil rights for Indigenous Australia and for groups with other cultural and historical backgrounds, but coming to grips with the persistence of Indigenous identities proved more difficult. Peterson and Saunders have characterised Indigenous loyalties as primarily to their own individual communities, which often have cultural and social practices that are quite distinct from those of settler society. Loyalty to settler society usually comes second.<sup>9</sup> Currently governments see it as 'fair and equitable' to allocate resources, however parsimoniously, argue Peterson and Saunders, to redress inequalities in health, education and general welfare for Indigenous Australians. They assert, however, that

when it comes to reshaping citizenship-related ideas and institutions in order to accommodate the persistence of indigenous social orders, and to do this by recognising additional indigenous rights, the achievement of any easy consensus evaporates.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Nicolas Peterson and Will Sanders, eds, *Citizenship and Indigenous Australians: Changing Conceptions and Possibilities* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1998), chap. 1. Following Peterson and Sanders, we use 'citizenship' to describe membership of a state society where there is a strong emphasis on individual rights.

<sup>7</sup> Davidson, 255–6.

<sup>8</sup> Peterson and Sanders.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

During the later years of Namatjira's life, non-Indigenous Australia was a long way from conceptualising, much less coming to terms with, Indigenous rights as we understand them today.

Any discussion of equal rights for Aboriginal people was inevitably and inextricably linked to assimilationism. During the 1950s, assimilationism gripped the public imagination and determined federal policies. Contemporaries believed they had finally found an alternative to racism and maintained that if Aborigines could eventually live 'like us', this would herald a greater degree of egalitarianism for Indigenous Australia. When well-intentioned Australians tried to make the great Arrernte artist, Albert Namatjira 'like us', however, the consequences showed in stark relief that the creation of a genuinely inclusive Indigenous citizenship would be a long and complex process.

The assimilation policy and the related legislation in the Northern Territory was based on the assumption firstly, that Aborigines could be transformed and made more 'like us' by careful tutelage and guidance and secondly, that Aborigines, after making the transition from 'primitive' to 'civilised', would then be rewarded by being made citizens. One by one, Aborigines would leave behind their affinity to kin and country and, as individuals, each would take on the mutual obligations and responsibilities of citizenship. A prerequisite of citizenship was that the individual could demonstrate that he or she was in every way 'like us' except for skin colour. The Commonwealth government's policy statement about assimilation, which is now regarded as a statement of the assimilationist orthodoxy, made clear that Aboriginal peoples would not have a choice in this process of individual and social change.

The policy of assimilation means that all Aborigines and part-Aborigines will attain the same manner of living as other Australians and live as members of a single Australian community enjoying the same rights and privileges, accepting the same responsibilities, observing the same customs and influenced by the same beliefs, as other Australians.<sup>11</sup>

Paul Hasluck was the minister for territories from 1951 to 1963 and was the author of the assimilation policy. Hasluck was a committed assimilationist, a position he maintained in the face of the considerable shift in policy in subsequent years and one he defended vigorously in *Shades of Darkness*, published in 1988.<sup>12</sup> He was an exceptionally energetic minister who took an active role in the government of Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory.

#### Namatjira as the ideal Aboriginal citizen

During his life as an artist and after his death, Namatjira captured the imagination of scholars and the general community, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike. His

<sup>11</sup> Policy statement on Aboriginal welfare, Conference of Commonwealth and State Ministers, Darwin, 11 and 12 July 1963, in statement by leave by the minister for territories (the Hon. Paul Hasluck) in the House of Representatives, 14 August 1963.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Hasluck, *Shades of Darkness: Aboriginal Affairs, 1925-1965* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1988).

creative heritage still thrives among the Western Arrernte artists in Central Australia. The most recent Namatjira revival dates back to the first comprehensive exhibition of his work in twenty-five years which was held at the Araluen Art Centre in Alice Springs in 1984.<sup>13</sup> Dr H.C. Coombs noted that the exhibition had created an opportunity to reassess Namatjira's creative achievement and the quality and significance of his contribution to Australian art.<sup>14</sup> Coinciding with the revived interest in Namatjira was the public recognition of Aboriginal art being created in the centre in the early 1980s. The film, *Namatjira—First Citizen*, subsequently placed Namatjira as a symbol of a renaissance in Aboriginal culture understood within New Age spirituality.<sup>15</sup>

This revival has repositioned Namatjira and his heritage and identifies him as a critical figure in the history of Aboriginal art. Scholars such as Jane Hardy, J.V.S. Megaw and M. Ruth Megaw have challenged the popular perception that Western Arrernte watercolourists' landscapes (including Namatjira's) have no spiritual meaning, and simply mimic western art forms. Instead they argue for a new orthodoxy which sees Arrernte watercolourists' work as signifying Arrernte attachment to Arrernte land. These scholars have connected the naturalistic style of the Arrernte with the acrylic painters at Papunya, Yuendumu and other locations in Central Australia whose art unambiguously represents the totemic landscape.<sup>16</sup> We now acknowledge that Namatjira painted his country.

Albert Namatjira was not the name given to the great artist at birth. Namatjira was born on the Lutheran Mission at Hermannsburg in Central Australia, 28 July 1902. His father, Namatjira and his mother Ljukuta, were both Arrernte.<sup>17</sup> Three years later, following their conversion to Christianity, they named their baby Albert. 'Albert Namatjira' was created much later in 1938, when Albert was to have his first exhibition and apparently needed a surname to sign his paintings. The name 'Albert Namatjira' was typical of the way Aboriginal names were made at this time. Later, between 1953 and 1957, the Northern Territory Welfare Branch embarked on the ambitious plan of giving all Aboriginal people both a Christian name and a surname. These were recorded on a register that was the first effective census of Aboriginal people in the territory.<sup>18</sup> Access to the settler economy required Aborigines like Namatjira to take on this uniform naming system. Most were given a Western, Christian first name and an Aboriginal surname.

<sup>13</sup> For accounts of this exhibition, see Nadine Amadio, ed., *Albert Namatjira: The Life and Work of an Australian Painter* (Melbourne: Macmillan, 1986); Jane Hardy, J.V.S. Megaw and M. Ruth Megaw, eds, *The Heritage of Namatjira: The Watercolourists of Central Australia* (Melbourne: William Heinemann, 1992), in particular the introduction.

<sup>14</sup> H.C. Coombs, introduction to *Namatjira*, Amadio, vii.

<sup>15</sup> John Tristram, *Namatjira—First Citizen*, script Nadine Amadio, (Juniper Films, 1989).

<sup>16</sup> Hardy et al., 7–8.

<sup>17</sup> For Namatjira's genealogy, see John Morton, 'Country, People and Art: The Western Arrernte, 1870–1990', in *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> The census was called the Register of Wards and its compilation was essential to the implementation of the *Welfare Ordinance 1953–1955*, (NT). It attracted much criticism when it was released because of both the methods by which the material was collected and the inaccuracies. See Julie T. Wells, 'The Long March: Assimilation Policy and Practice in Darwin, the Northern Territory, 1939–1967' (PhD thesis, University of Queensland, 1995), 110–12.

Both the Arrernte people and the Lutheran missionaries at Hermannsburg educated Namatjira. By all accounts he showed a great aptitude for learning, was a good student and later an able worker. In 1919, when he was eighteen, Namatjira eloped with a young Arrernte woman, Ilkalita, because the relationship was forbidden by tribal law. They did not return to their country until three years later when they were informed that their respective families had forgiven them and would welcome them back. By this time they had three children. Ilkalita subsequently converted to Christianity and took the name Rubina.<sup>19</sup> By the late 1930s, Rubina and Albert had seven children to support at a time when there was increasing pressure for Aboriginal people to move to participation in the settler economy but fewer opportunities to be independent of the missions and government assistance.<sup>20</sup>

In 1926, Pastor F.W. Albrecht took over the Hermannsburg Mission. He was determined to establish various enterprises including the sale of arts and crafts to ensure the economic survival of the mission. Hermannsburg, like most missions in the territory, survived on a combination of inadequate funding from the churches and meagre government subsidies.<sup>21</sup> The missions were under pressure to be self-sufficient, a goal that matched their determination to transform Aboriginal people into functioning members of the settler economy.<sup>22</sup> Albrecht approached these goals with considerable energy. Namatjira was, by all accounts, a willing participant in the quest for his own and Hermannsburg's self-sufficiency. The story of Namatjira's fortunate meeting with Rex Batterbee, his introduction to watercolours and his rapid mastery of the medium has been told many times. Megaw explores what might have motivated Namatjira to take up painting in earnest:

Albert Namatjira was an autonomous individual, an ambitious and capable pragmatist consciously adapting to a new world with new opportunities, rather than a passive victim of circumstances. Thus, it may be argued, Albert painted primarily because his pictures offered a means of survival in a harsh world, rather than because they gave him a means of maintaining his ancestral traditions.<sup>23</sup>

Namatjira's art appealed to the imagination of the Australian public immediately. In December 1938, Namatjira's first solo exhibition was held at the Athenaeum Gallery in Melbourne and in 1939 he exhibited in Adelaide at the Royal South Australian Society for the Arts. Both exhibitions sold out and the Art Gallery of South Australia was the first institution to purchase Namatjira's

<sup>19</sup> Batty, 19–26.

<sup>20</sup> For a chronology of Namatjira's life, see M. Ruth Megaw, 'A Brief Chronology', in Hardy et al., xv–xxii.

<sup>21</sup> Rowse describes the Lutheran missions between the wars as having four goals: to keep Aboriginal people away from the harmful influence of settlers; to teach Christian beliefs and assert their superiority over Indigenous law; to avoid pauperising the recipients of rations; and to teach Indigenous people respect for work. Tim Rowse, *White Flour, White Power: From Rations to Citizenship in Central Australia* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1998), chap. 5.

<sup>22</sup> For a description of the economy at Hermannsburg, see Tim Rowse, 'Painting from Memory: Art, Economics and Citizenship, 1940–1950'; and Robin Radford, 'Aspects of the Social History of Hermannsburg', in Hardy et al., 181–2, 63–96.

<sup>23</sup> J.V.S. Megaw and M. Ruth Megaw, Hardy et al., introduction, 7–8.

work. In Melbourne the police had to be called in to regulate the crowds trying to get in to the Lower Town Hall. The demand for Namatjira's work continued during the years from 1940 to 1945. In the Northern Territory, the influx of servicemen during the war years provided an unexpected market. Namatjira's second Melbourne exhibition and his first since the outbreak of war opened on 17 April 1944. Once again the exhibition was sold out within days. A.P. Elkin, professor of Anthropology at Sydney University, opened the first Sydney exhibition of Namatjira's work in 1945. Within minutes of Elkin's closing words the exhibition was sold out, as was the artist's next exhibition in South Australia early in 1946.<sup>24</sup> The demand for Namatjira's work, and for those Aboriginal artists who followed in his footsteps, steadily increased in the following years. By the 1950s, Namatjira was a household name. Reproductions of Namatjira's paintings were hung in the classrooms of government schools and decorated lounges throughout the country.

Recently Paul Carter has written about the 'poetics informing Namatjira's art'. Carter describes a double mimicry, whereby the Arrernte artists copied the elements of Western watercolour landscapes in order to 'reassert their own identities' and their continuing attachment to the 'totemic landscape'.<sup>25</sup> For Namatjira's settler contemporaries, however, it was the apparent absence of the Arrernte world view that inspired the favourable public response to his landscapes.<sup>26</sup> It was not the mysterious, primitive and discomfiting tjurunga, the eerie song cycles and clap sticks and the dark magic of secret sacred rituals that Namatjira offered, but the familiar forms of the landscape, painted boldly and joyfully. The Australian public believed that in Namatjira's watercolours they had found a language that they could understand. Carter asks whether we were dupes of our own cultural frame of reference in assuming a shared visual reality with Namatjira and his successors. He argues that there was no basis for such an association.<sup>27</sup> The contemporary settler public, however, saw Namatjira's painting as empirical evidence of a pathway from the primitive to the civilised. This view was encapsulated in the words of Lady Huntingfield, wife of the governor of Victoria who opened the Melbourne exhibition. 'We must realise that these people are worthy of recognition when they respond in such a wonderful way to tuition and sympathy.'<sup>28</sup> Namatjira's paintings offered a bracing, fresh vision of country. Namatjira, the successful artist, represented the potential of all Aborigines to assimilate and to live 'like us'.

Namatjira's uncertain status in the non-Aboriginal community moved many concerned Australians to debate what would be best for him, giving voice to their views in letters to the editors of newspapers and in written advice and protests to government.<sup>29</sup> But while this group undoubtedly wanted a better deal

<sup>24</sup> Batty, 43.

<sup>25</sup> Paul Carter, *The Lie of the Land* (London: Faber & Faber, 1996), 41-3.

<sup>26</sup> This view is evident throughout Batty's biography of Namatjira. See Batty.

<sup>27</sup> Carter, 42.

<sup>28</sup> Batty, 35. Lady Huntingdale had previously met Namatjira on a visit to Hermannsburg.

<sup>29</sup> For a discussion of Namatjira and contemporary policy, see Jeremy R. Beckett, 'The Past in the Present, the Present in the Past: Constructing a National Aboriginality', in *Past and Present: The Constructions of Aboriginality*, ed. Jeremy R. Beckett (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1988).

for Indigenous Australians, in a political climate dominated by assimilationist orthodoxy, only the most limited range of options was ever considered. One thing, however, emerged from the discussions and debate within this group—they clearly wanted Namatjira to become a paradigm for the ideal Aboriginal citizen.

### Pathways to citizenship

While it seemed relatively unproblematic to propose equality as a basic human right, the legislative pathway to citizenship for Aboriginal Australians was not unproblematic. Up until the late 1930s, the *Aboriginals' Ordinance* and associated legislation that governed Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory were based on the belief that Aboriginal people would eventually die out as a result of competition with a superior race. Accordingly, legislation for Aboriginal people was premised firstly on the demise of Aboriginal society and secondly on the inherent inferiority of Aboriginal people.<sup>30</sup> A pathway to citizenship was not an issue in either of these concepts.

By the late 1930s, however, change was in the wind. Biological egalitarianism was gaining ascendancy over racism and Aboriginal people clearly were not going to die out. The government of Aboriginal people and their status as potential citizens in Australia had become a pressing issue. Two indicators of change are relevant here. Firstly, in 1936, the *Aboriginals' Ordinance 1918 (NT)* was amended to allow 'half-caste' Aboriginal people, who could demonstrate their capacity to live independently in the Western sense, an exemption from the *Aboriginals' Ordinance* and related discriminatory legislation. Secondly, in 1939, the federal government released the *New Deal*, a policy for Aborigines in the Northern Territory based more on assimilation than segregationist racism. In this document, the possibility that Aborigines might eventually learn to live 'like us' was raised for the first time, though this did not translate into legislation until 1953. The *New Deal* stated that:

the final objective of the Government in its concern for these Native Australian people should be the raising of their status so as to entitle them by right, and by qualification to the ordinary rights of citizenship, and enable them and help them to share with us the opportunities that are available in their own native land.<sup>31</sup>

In both cases, access to full rights was made available to individual Aboriginal people who could demonstrate that they could live independently, that is, as full participants in the settler economy. The federal government linked successful individual assimilation to access to the rights and obligations of citizenship.

<sup>30</sup> In particular see Russell McGregor, *Imagined Destinies: Aboriginal Australians and the Doomed Race Theory, 1880–1939* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1997).

<sup>31</sup> *Commonwealth Government's Policy with Respect to Aboriginals*. Issued by the Honourable John McEwen, Minister for the Interior, February 1939 (Canberra: Australian Government Printing Service, 1939).



Aboriginal peoples were made 'citizens' by being exempted from discriminatory legislation.<sup>32</sup> Aboriginal peoples who were labelled unassimilated continued to be governed by a regime of discriminatory legislation.

Rowse provides a useful example of how this legislation worked in practice in governing Aboriginal lives, even those of such respected figures as Namatjira.<sup>33</sup> In the late 1930s, when Namatjira began earning a significant income from his painting, the protector of Aborigines and subsequently the director of native affairs had the power to control an Aboriginal person's income or to delegate that control to the relevant mission organisation. Rowse describes how both the missionaries at Hermannsburg and the Northern Territory administration attempted to manage Namatjira's income from the sale of his art. Firstly, and increasingly, the successive administrators and missionaries were committed to a tutelary role, believing they had a responsibility to induct Namatjira into a Western economic model of domestic economy. A school of artists quickly established itself around Namatjira, some of whom were immediate family and others to whom he had strict kinship obligations. Administrators and missionaries alike believed these kinship obligations were the greatest barrier to individual Aborigines progressing toward successful participation in the settler economy. Administrative and missionary intervention was therefore about 'protecting' individual Aboriginal artists from kin obligations that would effectively threaten the progress of individuals towards economic independence. As the demand for the Central Australian artists' paintings steadily increased, both the missionaries and the Northern Territory administration wanted to ensure the artists did not compromise their standards in the quest for more money. There was also the possibility that unscrupulous dealers would exploit the artists. In response the Hermannsburg Mission established an Arts Advisory Council to organise the sale of works priced by the artists.<sup>34</sup> Control was subsequently handed to the Native Affairs Branch in 1951 and the Arrernte Arts Council was established.<sup>35</sup> The membership and mandate of the advisory council changed over time but, Rowse argues, it always had as its overarching focus the need to protect Namatjira in particular, from 'too heady an entry into the world of cash and commodities'.<sup>36</sup> Alice Springs was the hedonistic metropolis to which they feared Namatjira would be lured.

When Hasluck was appointed minister for the territories in 1951, he set about overhauling the government of Aborigines in the Northern Territory to ensure the assimilation of Aboriginal people. In 1953, the *Welfare Ordinance* (NT) was passed and, though it was not gazetted until 1957, it became the cornerstone of legislation governing Aborigines. The Welfare Branch was established

<sup>32</sup> The term 'citizen' did not legally apply to anyone born in Australia until the *Nationality and Citizenship Act 1948* was passed.

<sup>33</sup> Rowse, 'Painting from memory', in Hardy et al.

<sup>34</sup> Namatjira's mentor, Rex Batterbee was chair of the council, and its members were Hilda Wurst, the Hermannsburg Mission School headmistress; Pastor S.O. Goss, newly appointed assistant superintendent of the missions; and Mr A.P. Latz, of the mission staff. Batty, 37-9.

<sup>35</sup> Rowse, 'Painting from Memory', in Hardy et al., 187. The mission passed control of the council to Batterbee and the Native Affairs Branch in 1951 and the Arrernte Arts Council was established.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

to replace the Native Affairs Branch in 1954 and its title reflected the new minister's determination to conceptualise the 'problem' of Aboriginal people as a social rather than racial issue. Significantly, prior to the passage of the Welfare Ordinance through the Northern Territory Legislative Council, the Aboriginals' Ordinance (NT) was amended to exclude 'part-Aboriginal' people from all legislation governing Aborigines. Part-Aboriginal people effectively became citizens at that point. Part-Aboriginal people had argued that they were fully assimilated and therefore there should be no barriers to their access to the same rights and responsibilities as non-Aboriginal Australians.<sup>37</sup> Paradoxically, the Welfare Ordinance aimed to renegotiate the relationship between Aborigines and the state so that Aborigines would not be governed as an undifferentiated racial group. In fact, the exclusion of 'part-Aboriginal' people meant that racially based categories endured, defining Aboriginal people using distinctions based on 'blood'. Only 'full-blood' people were now 'Aboriginal' in law. The Welfare Ordinance was intended to establish a specific contract between each 'full-blood' Aborigine and the state by which each individual became a ward of the state.<sup>38</sup> The administrator of the Northern Territory could declare Aborigines to be wards under section 14 of the Welfare Ordinance if, by reason of their manner of living, their inability to manage their own affairs, their standard of social habit and behaviour and their personal associations, they stood in need of special care and assistance.<sup>39</sup>

The gazetting of this ordinance required the registration of every 'full-blood' Aboriginal person in the Northern Territory (approximately 16,000 people), so that, initially at least, each individual could then be declared a ward. Aborigines would be governed as wards until each individual Aborigine demonstrated that he or she could live independently of the Welfare Branch. At that point that person would have his or her wardship revoked, thereby gaining full citizenship rights. This process assumed that such individuals would leave Aboriginal identity, kin and country behind, and live in the same manner, with the same values and beliefs, as settler Australians.

During the registration process, a national campaign attempted to ensure that Namatjira would not be declared a ward and that he would be granted full citizenship rights. He was, after all, able to support himself and his extended family without assistance and could manage his own affairs adequately, thus escaping the first two criteria by which one might be declared a ward under section 14. The second two criteria—his standard of social habit and behaviour, and his associations—were much more difficult to interpret. Once an Aborigine was no longer a ward, he or she had to abide by the same regulations as non-Aborigines and that included severely restricted access to Aborigines and Aboriginal living areas. Aborigines who were not wards were subject, in theory, to absolute

<sup>37</sup> For an analysis of the campaign by 'part-Aboriginal' people in the Northern Territory, see Wells, 71–9.

<sup>38</sup> For a detailed analysis of the Welfare Ordinance and associated legislation see *ibid.*, chap. 4.

<sup>39</sup> *Welfare Ordinance 1953–55* (No. 5) (NT).

separation from their kin, country and community.<sup>40</sup> Unless Namatjira were declared a ward, his associations with his kin and country would, in law, be severely restricted. Here was the paradox. If Namatjira were declared a ward, then he would be identified as an Aborigine, but as a citizen, he would lose the right to live as an Aboriginal person.

The campaign for Namatjira's citizenship was premised on his success as an exceptional and gifted artist who had achieved economic independence. The rhetoric of the campaign described the bestowal of citizenship as more than a human rights issue. Citizenship itself could actively facilitate a rise in living standards for the individual concerned and enable him or her to become more 'like us'. Public reaction to Namatjira's exclusion from citizenship and to his apparently appalling living conditions reflects this analysis. For example, in Frank Clune's article in *Truth*, 11 November 1956, Namatjira was described as living in abject poverty in his camp at Morris Soak, under the continuing control of the Welfare Branch. Photographs accompanied vivid descriptions of squalor at the camp. Outrage and shame at this state of affairs was widespread in the popular press.<sup>41</sup> Donald Look from Brisbane demanded to know:

what immediate action is the department of Native Affairs taking to rectify this humiliating treatment of a man endowed with rare artistic ability—and whose only crime against our supposed democratic Christian society is to have been born dark-skinned ...<sup>42</sup>

When the Register of Wards was finally gazetted in 1957, Albert Namatjira's name was not included. By leaving his name off the register, Namatjira was made a citizen. This was not the preferred outcome for the Department of Territories nor for the Welfare Branch in the Northern Territory. From their point of view, Namatjira was not able to live independently of his kin and country and while he earned a relatively substantial income, they had doubts about his ability to manage that income. Only five other Aboriginal men who were categorised as 'full-blood' were left off the register.<sup>43</sup>

Namatjira's citizenship was a victory for those who supported civil rights for

<sup>40</sup> This difficulty had implications for the pastoral industry and the Welfare Ordinance had been amended in November 1955 (before gazetting) so that Aborigines of mixed descent could request that they be declared wards. The Northern Territory Pastoral Lessees' Association had been active in advocating this amendment as on the stations many 'part-Aborigines' lived, associated with and tribally married wards, yet because of their status as 'part-Aborigines' they would not have been afforded the same 'protection' as wards.

<sup>41</sup> For example, artist Virgil Reilly, supported by William Dobell, informed *Truth* that he was sending a copy of Clune's article to the queen and to the United Nations. 'No country in the world', he declared, 'should treat its native talent with the utter disregard for human rights'. 'Raw Deal for Top Abo Painter!', *Truth*, 23 November 1956. For government response to issues raised in the articles, see C.R. Lambert to Secretary, Prime Minister's Department, 'Article on Albert Namatjira in 4th November 1956 issue of Sydney *Truth*', folios 3–6, CRS A452/1 1956/1386, National Archives of Australia, Canberra (hereafter NAA).

<sup>42</sup> Donald Look to Prime Minister Menzies, 14 November 1956, CRS A452/1 1956/1386, NAA.

<sup>43</sup> Of the 'full-blood' population, only Namatjira, Ted Cooper, Bruce Potts, Holder Adams, Jack White and Smiler Majer warranted full citizenship rights by being left off the register. Apart from Smiler Majer who was a stockman, the other men all lived and worked in Darwin and all had been living independently of the Welfare Branch.

Aborigines. Citizenship, however, had little to offer Namatjira. His citizenship assumed a universal contract with a state that aimed to assimilate Aborigines to the point where they would be indistinguishable, apart from their colour, from non-Aboriginal Australians. Aboriginal traditional law and existing laws governing Aborigines as a separate racial group had no place in this contract. Namatjira's two years as a citizen exposed deep flaws in the federal government's concept of an Aboriginal citizenship, a citizenship rooted in assimilationism.

#### Namatjira's sentence

The right to drink alcohol was symbolic in the struggle for equal rights for Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory.<sup>44</sup> In the early 1950s in the Northern Territory, 'half-caste' Aboriginal people who were fighting for an exemption from all discriminatory legislation used the right to have a drink with a mate after a day at work as an integral part of their successful campaign.<sup>45</sup> By the late 1950s, however, it was still an offence to sell or supply liquor to a person deemed 'a ward' and it was punishable for a first offence by not less than six months imprisonment. Namatjira, as a full citizen, was subject to these regulations.<sup>46</sup> In the twelve months following the award of his citizenship, Namatjira drank heavily and illegally supplied alcohol to Aborigines who were wards. In one instance, Namatjira was identified as a supplier following the alcohol-related death of a young woman at his camp at Morris Soak.<sup>47</sup> After many warnings, Namatjira finally appeared before the Court of Summary Jurisdiction in Alice Springs on 7 October 1958, charged under the *Licensing Ordinance 1957 (NT)* with having supplied liquor on 26 August 1958 to Henoch Raberaba, a fellow artist and Aborigine who was a ward.<sup>48</sup> Namatjira and Henoch Raberaba had been travelling together in a taxi from Alice Springs back to Hermannsburg and had shared a bottle of rum. Namatjira was convicted and sentenced to six months hard labour for supplying liquor to a ward, the minimum penalty for a first offence under section 141 of the Licensing Ordinance.<sup>49</sup>

An appeal was lodged in the Supreme Court of the Northern Territory against both Namatjira's conviction and his sentence. Namatjira took no initiative in determining the way in which his case was defended in the Supreme Court. A Melbourne barrister and Queens Counsel, Maurice. J. Ashkanasy, was briefed by the Federal Council of the Aborigines Advancement League to appear for Namatjira at his appeal, which began on 15 December 1958 in Alice Springs before Mr Justice Kriewaldt. The Victorian branch of the Federal Council for Aboriginal

<sup>44</sup> For discussion, see Wells, 75–6.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 71–9; and Sue Stanton, 'The Australian Half-Caste Progressive Association: The Fight for Freedom and Rights in the Northern Territory', *Journal of Northern Territory History* 4 (1993).

<sup>46</sup> *Licensing Ordinance 1939–55*, (Ordinance No. 27 of 1957), section 141.

<sup>47</sup> Batty, 119–22.

<sup>48</sup> For an account of the hearing in the Magistrates Court, see *ibid.*, chap. 2.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

Advancement (FCAA) seized on the opportunity not only to defend Namatjira but to challenge the Welfare Ordinance. Ashkanasy, a Jewish lawyer, had a particular interest in civil rights and subsequently sought assistance from Professor Zelman Cowen. The FCAA had initially contacted Namatjira's solicitor to seek co-operation from Namatjira and others in a challenge to the Welfare Ordinance but this approach was unsuccessful. FCAA activists Stan Davey and Pastor Doug Nicholls subsequently travelled to Alice Springs and were able to organise a group of Aborigines to give their signatures to a petition challenging the ordinance.<sup>50</sup> This challenge meant a prolonged hearing that covered a range of issues about civil rights. Namatjira's sentence, however, was upheld as it was in the subsequent High Court hearing.<sup>51</sup>

Descriptions of Namatjira at this time indicate he was deeply depressed and physically unwell. He had rejected the opportunity to challenge the legitimacy of the legislation under which he had been charged but again, as with the battle to win his citizenship, Namatjira found himself a cause célèbre. In neither instance did he choose the course of action. After unsuccessful appeals in both the Supreme Court and the High Court, Namatjira's conviction was upheld but his sentence was reduced to three months detention at Papunya.

### A question of rights

Namatjira had been made a citizen but his conviction and imprisonment made a mockery of his citizenship. A profound sense of the unfairness of his treatment was reflected in the national press. Organisations committed to social change called their networks to action and sent protest messages to the federal government and the recently formed FCAA tested its lobbying potential. Three particular themes emerge in these responses. In the first the issues are framed in terms of various rights, in the second the events are conceptualised as a tragedy and finally there is a widely shared and profound sense of shame.

The least radical public response to Namatjira's conviction and sentence was to measure it against a universal humanitarianism. Even Henry Bolte, the premier of Victoria, notorious for his support for capital punishment, wrote to Menzies 'in the belief that I am expressing the wishes of the Parliament and the people of Victoria. I hope the Federal Attorney General will take action to have Namatjira released on humanitarian grounds'.<sup>52</sup> This commonsense approach was widespread and humanitarianism became the unifying theme in the chorus of protests. Mrs Softly from Richmond, Victoria, for example, pleaded, 'Please don't let them do this to our own real Australian Albert Namatjira'.<sup>53</sup>

Left wing networks, particularly trade unions, acted quickly. The federal

<sup>50</sup> Dr Barry Christophers to Don McLeod, 5 December probably 1958, Dr Barry Christophers's Papers, folder 8, box 28, MS7s992, National Library.

<sup>51</sup> Issues raised in the Supreme Court hearing are described in Wells, 114–20.

<sup>52</sup> *Courier-Mail*, 10 October 1958.

<sup>53</sup> Mrs A. Softly, Richmond (Vic), to Hasluck, 4 November 1954, A452/1 1958/4067, NAA.

government was inundated with telegrams and letters of protest. Common to all was the demand that discriminatory legislation governing Aborigines be repealed immediately and Namatjira be released from gaol. The crews from SS *Iron Wyndham*, the *Iron Baron* and the *Iranda*, for example, demanded Namatjira's immediate release. The Sydney Trades Hall Council argued that this case highlighted the need for an immediate overhaul of all legislation pertaining to Aborigines as citizens. It argued that 'such laws' were 'completely alien to a truly democratic, modern society'.<sup>54</sup> Other writers referred to benchmarks established by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Stan Davey from the Victorian Council for Aboriginal Rights expressed this view:

Article 1 of the Universal declaration of Human Rights states: All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. It must be as free citizens that government must seek ... [Aborigines'] integration with other Australians—not by making them inferior serfs.<sup>55</sup>

Radicals believed that the denial of universal citizenship for all Australians regardless of race had created the problems associated with Namatjira's case.<sup>56</sup> Moreover, it was argued that in the Northern Territory at least, the laws governing Indigenous Australians were not only unjust but also clearly unworkable. The Building Workers Industrial Union of Australia concluded:

Faced with the alternative of breaking a stupid law, or departing from the very fine way of life of the aborigine, to share everything with his people, he apparently chose the latter, and broke the law.<sup>57</sup>

By the time Namatjira was in detention, some radical groups had grasped the notion of Indigenous rights as a measure of government policy and practice. In 1957, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) had passed Convention 107 Concerning the Protection and Integration of Indigenous and Other Tribal and Semi-tribal Populations in Independent Countries. Convention 107 stated that the protection of Indigenous rights and identity, usually in the form of the implementation of special measures for such groups, should not impinge or in any way reduce the civil rights of those Indigenous groups. Crucial to this analysis was the recognition of Aborigines' prior ownership of land. The Australian federal government was unable to sign the convention until after the 1967 referendum but many of the more radical unions endorsed ILO Convention 107 immediately.

<sup>54</sup> Letter from Trades Hall Council, Sydney, 9 October 1958, CRS A452/1 1958/3670, NAA.

<sup>55</sup> Stan Davey, secretary to Aborigines Advancement League, Victoria, to the editor, *Age*, 12 December 1958.

<sup>56</sup> Barbara Purse, honorary secretary of the Union of Australian Women (NSW branch) also argued that citizenship was the basic right of every Australian. Barbara Purse to Hasluck, 16 October 1958, CRS A452/1 1958/3809, NAA.

<sup>57</sup> R. Hancock, assistant federal secretary BWIU to Hasluck, 10 October 1958, folios 1–3, CRS A452/1 58/3702, NAA. The National Council of Eureka Youth League of Australia was horrified to learn of the savage sentence imposed on one of 'our country's best known artists', Eureka Youth League, National Council, to minister for territories, 10 October 1958, CRS A452/1 1958/3670, NAA.

The FCAA waited twelve months, but it also included the principles of the convention in its platform at its second annual general meeting early in 1959. The response of the Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU) provides an example of the way Indigenous rights were incorporated as a further benchmark. The AEU echoed the consensus that the problem with Namatjira had arisen because Aborigines were denied citizenship. However, the AEU also argued that of equal importance was:

Preservation of aboriginal racial continuity by the protection of the surviving tribal groups and the preservation of their rights to fertile tribal lands.

Protection against the encroachment by rapacious pastoral and mining interests upon the aboriginal reserves, and the immediate granting of finance and technical assistance to develop water storage and food resources and their own cooperative enterprises.<sup>58</sup>

Douglas Lockwood, the Northern Territory correspondent for the Melbourne *Herald* and its syndicates, was particularly influential in determining the way in which many Australians learned about Namatjira's case. Lockwood warrants further scrutiny because his analysis differed from responses based simply on a sense of fair play and human rights. While he was an advocate of full civil rights for Aborigines in principle, Lockwood found Aboriginal citizenship a vexatious issue. Firstly, he did not believe that all Aborigines should be granted citizenship rights.<sup>59</sup> Lockwood believed Aborigines should become eligible for citizenship rights only when they could demonstrate they could meet the obligations and responsibilities of citizenship. To this extent, Lockwood sided with the official conservative view summarised as gradualism. Implicit in most of Lockwood's articles was the notion that Namatjira should not have been granted his citizenship in the first place, nor should he have been left to fend for himself afterwards. Namatjira, claimed Lockwood, had 'by his own eminence as an artist' and his earning power 'won the right to full citizenship in the white man's society'.

But no one taught him the new values, the new responsibilities, the new attitudes that he must observe as a member of that society. He was left with one foot in each of two camps, the ancient black and the new white. His life was in the white camp; his sons, his relatives, his friends were in the black camp.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>58</sup> J.D. Garland, secretary Amalgamated Engineering Union, to Hasluck, Sydney, 30 October 1958, folios 1 and 2. CRS A452/1 58/3989, NAA. In this letter, Garland went on to argue that the 'original owners, the indigenous people of this great country, have no place in our community, but are condemned to squalor and degradation and debarr-ment [sic] from human and social association which goes with normal citizenship in a land where they hold a natural title longer than the advent of the white race'.

<sup>59</sup> For example, at the same time as Namatjira's case was attracting front page headlines, two other Aboriginal citizens were serving jail sentences for supplying wards with alcohol, but Lockwood took up neither case despite the fact that one of the convicted was Robert Tudawali who was well known for his role in Charles Chauvel, *Jedda* (Charles Chauvel Productions, 1955). See Melbourne *Herald*, 14 March, 1959. Later, in 1961, when three Aboriginal wards had unsuccessfully applied for exemptions from the Welfare Ordinance, Lockwood agreed with the judgment that they were not ready to be 'cast upon white society to fend for themselves'. See Douglas Lockwood, 'The Judge Decided Jack Mulberry Couldn't Be White', *Sun-Herald*, Sydney, 21 May 1961.

<sup>60</sup> Douglas Lockwood, 'Rise and Fall', *Herald*, 8 October 1958.

Singling out individual Aborigines for citizenship, Lockwood argued, could never work. Rather education and patience would ensure the transition of all Aborigines. For Lockwood, Aboriginal citizenship was necessarily complex, not so much in principle—he believed unequivocally in equal rights—but in practice. In the 1950s, to belong, to be a citizen, was still inextricably linked to a single Australian identity—there was only one pathway to citizenship. To talk about cultural difference was to run the risk of being accused of racism, yet in the Northern Territory, Aboriginal people were profoundly different.

For other Australians, the way that Namatjira had been treated became a source of deep shame, because, by its own and by international standards, the Australian nation had failed to achieve Aboriginal citizenship. This sense of national disquietude was expressed by drawing attention to those qualities like a sense of fair play that were understood to characterise Australia's national identity.<sup>61</sup> Being shamed in the international arena was particularly unpalatable for many Australians. International approval was and still is a powerful measure of a government's performance.

Namatjira's treatment and the international publicity that ensued were felt sharply by many Australian artists and scholars. Noel Counihan wrote in protest to the government on behalf of another twelve eminent Australian artists including E. Buckmaster, John Percival, John Brack, Charles Bush, Arthur Boyd and Clifton Pugh.

Namatjira's humiliation is our humiliation and will already appear so in the eyes of the world. We respectfully and earnestly request that on the grounds of humanity he be released.<sup>62</sup>

Australian writer Stephen Murray-Smith wired Hasluck in protest and signatories to the telegram included Vance Palmer, Alan Marshall, Brian Fitzpatrick, Judah Waten and C.B. Christensen.

The undersigned writers and editors respectfully wish to draw your attention to the worldwide unfavourable publicity especially in Asia concerning Namatjira's conviction ... The whole situation is deleterious to the morale of all Australians and the worst possible publicity overseas.<sup>63</sup>

Namatjira's citizenship had failed him and this failure challenged the assimilationist orthodoxy. Concerned settler Australians had believed that in

<sup>61</sup> M.P. Fletcher, a private citizen, wrote that Namatjira's jailing 'is opposed to Australia's sense of fair play'. M.P. Fletcher, Ballandean Qld, to Paul Hasluck, 29 October 1958, CRS A452/1 1958/4068, NAA. See also: Tame Tassie Devonport, 'Plea for the Aborigines—Aliens in Their Own Country', *Advocate*, 20 August 1959; 'Namatjira's Tragedy', editorial, *Mercury*, 10 October 1959; 'Victim of Society', editorial, *News* (Adelaide), 8 October 1958; 'Namatjira', editorial, *Barrier Daily Truth*, 13 October 1958; Clive Turnbull, 'We're All Guilty', *Sun* (Melbourne), 8 October 1959.

<sup>62</sup> Noel Counihan to Paul Hasluck on behalf of: A.D. Colquhoun; W. Frater; E. Buckmaster; John Brack; J. Perceval; A. McCulloch; V.G. O'Connor; L. Annois; Charles Bush; Arthur Boyd; J. Wigley; C. Pugh, 10 October 1958, CRA A452/1 58/3670, NAA.

<sup>63</sup> S. Murray-Smith, editor of *Overland*, to Paul Hasluck, signed by: Vance Palmer; Bill Wangan; Alan Marshall; Laurence Collinson; Brian Fitzpatrick; Judah Waten; Myra Morris; Leonard Mann; C.B. Christensen; Frank Dalby Davison; and A.A. Phillips, 10 October 1958, CRS A452/1 58/3670, NAA.



granting Namatjira citizenship he would be liberated and the last barrier to his full assimilation removed. Surely when he became a citizen, he would live 'like us'? Namatjira's citizenship, however, was flawed, leaving the nation struggling to come to terms with what had gone wrong. In using the language of Indigenous rights, a way had been found to express cultural difference in language that was not racist and which challenged the nexus between an individual's successful assimilation and access to citizenship and civil rights. It would be some years, however, before the language of Indigenous rights would find its way into popular usage. Previously, cultural differences had been explained by race within the context of scientific racism, but once such racist paradigms were rejected, Western thinkers struggled with a deficient language. The discourse about cultural diversity had yet to be created. Most frequently they reverted to a denial of difference. Equality was readily confused with sameness. How could Australians speak coherently of Namatjira's situation? What language could be used to acknowledge both his Aboriginality and his equality? ILO Convention 107 pointed out one way forward but it was still too radical.

Like others, Lockwood struggled with the language of difference in a national community that had come to equate recognition of difference with racism at the same time that the federal policy promoted assimilationism. He could not, however, deny the evidence of his own eyes. Of Namatjira he wrote:

He did unto others as he would have others do to him—he gave a mate a drink of rum.

He knew the white law said he mustn't. He knew the black law said he must. The black law won and Albert lost.

I can see no answer to his problem. It is not hard to be dreadfully sorry for the black skin of Albert Namatjira hides the sick heart of a white man—a *white man if ever there was one*.<sup>64</sup>

### The Tragedy

During Namatjira's trial and imprisonment he was represented in the press as the embodiment of tragedy. He took his place beside the tragic heroes of classical fiction who were drawn to disaster or even death by a fatal flaw. The protagonist carries the seed of his downfall that awaits only a propitious meeting of fates to germinate. What is more, as demanded by the genre, Namatjira's tragic fate had been foretold. C.P. Mountford had spent a day in Namatjira's country with him in 1949 and later wrote:

Darkness had enveloped us by the time we reached the main gorge, and as the camel string threaded its noiseless way among the ghostly forms of the creek gums, I wondered what lay ahead of Albert Namatjira. I continue so to wonder. Will Fame, the fickle mistress, court and then defeat him? Or will he escape to live among his fellows, happy and unspoilt, a living example of the innate artistry of his race.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>64</sup> Douglas Lockwood, 'Rise and Fall of Namatjira', *Herald*, 8 October 1958, our italics.

<sup>65</sup> C.P. Mountford, *The Art of Namatjira* (Melbourne: Bread & Cheese Club, 1949), 79.

In 1951, Pastor Albrecht of Hermannsburg in his pamphlet about Namatjira, worried presciently about the artist's success:

Looking into the future we cannot conceal a great amount of apprehension; he would have gained very little if through the dazzling lights of publicity and wealth he should lose himself—a wanderer between two worlds.<sup>66</sup>

Namatjira was captured in the settler gaze and Albrecht and others waited for the inevitable—Namatjira's fall from grace.

Albrecht's description of Namatjira as a 'wanderer between two worlds' became a resonant metaphor for the 'Namatjira tragedy'. The editorial in the *Adelaide News*, for example, said of Namatjira:

He was tragically stranded in the no-man's land between two worlds. He was a black man with a white man's skill in art and, later, with a white man's financial power. But as a black man he could not completely enter the white man's world.<sup>67</sup>

Usually it was 'part-Aborigines' who were characterised as being caught between two worlds, while belonging in neither. With hindsight it is easy to see that Namatjira was never a wanderer but rather was first and always an Arrernte citizen. For Namatjira's settler contemporaries, however, the 'wanderer' metaphor was compelling, largely because of the absence of a discourse in which an individual could have multiple identities based in more than one culture, or of a reality in which one could be culturally other, yet equal before the law. Journalists used it repeatedly as a way of both coming to terms with and explaining Namatjira's story.<sup>68</sup>

Namatjira was also represented as the innocent abroad, brought undone by well-meaning but ignorant and self-interested southerners. According to the *Sun*, he was 'a Stone Age dweller transported to the highly sophisticated and often cynical society, a dark babe in the woods of the mid-20th century'.<sup>69</sup> Lockwood claimed to know Namatjira's taste for grog had been recently acquired.

What gave him his taste for strong drink? I believe that his downfall was accelerated not in his crude camp at Morris Soak, but in the more ornate and sophisticated surroundings in suburban Sydney.<sup>70</sup>

The view gained credence that Namatjira's innocence, that is his Aboriginality, had been corrupted by European society. He was portrayed as the victim of irresponsible whites, like those who had taken him to Sydney and Melbourne 'to be applauded and stared at like something in a goldfish bowl', plunged into parties and binges that inevitably included 'some of the least conventional

<sup>66</sup> F.W. Albrecht, *Albert Namatjira Native Artist* (Alice Springs: Australian Missionary Society, 1951), n.p., our italics.

<sup>67</sup> Editorial, *News* (Adelaide), 10 August 1958.

<sup>68</sup> See, for example, Lockwood, 'Rise and Fall', *Herald*, 8 October 1958; editorial, *Mercury*, 10 October 1958; editorial, *News* (Adelaide), 10 October 1959.

<sup>69</sup> Clive Turnbull, 'Citizen on a String', *Sun*, 10 July 1958.

<sup>70</sup> Lockwood, 'Rise and Fall', *Herald*, 8 October 1958.

members of society'. Who wouldn't become 'dizzy on this raffish merry-go-round'?'<sup>71</sup> Lockwood was equally critical of Namatjira's Aboriginal friends and kin whom he believed had shamelessly exploited him. This view was never taken up widely as it did not fit well with the prevailing representations of pathos. Particular photographs of Namatjira were chosen and used frequently in the newspapers to represent his apparent bewilderment. Images of Aborigines in which individuals were personified as pathos were common in the assimilation era and the scholar Stanner characterised these representations as those of the 'wistful Aborigines', outsiders longing to belong, yet knowing they never could.<sup>72</sup>

The *Bulletin* attempted to cut through what it called this 'irrational writing' which sympathised with Namatjira's 'fall from grace'. In its editorial of October 1958, the *Bulletin* re-examined the legal case that had led to Namatjira's sentence and concluded that no other course of action could have been taken given that one young woman had already lost her life. Grog, declaimed the *Bulletin*, was Namatjira's 'real jailer', and there was only one escape from such a prison. Nevertheless, the *Bulletin* still characterised Namatjira as a victim. It damned the sophisticated city people, 'those misguided and thoughtless city friends who encouraged him to believe that the badge of citizenship was the right to drink'.<sup>73</sup> Earlier in August when the news that Namatjira had been charged made the headlines, the *Bulletin* had argued that the kindest course of action would be to immediately relieve Namatjira of the 'burden' of his citizenship.<sup>74</sup>

To the Department of Territories and its administrative arm in the Northern Territory, the Welfare Branch, Namatjira's fall was a vindication. His citizenship had indeed become the burden they anticipated. To relieve Namatjira of his burden, however, was simply not an option. Instead, in a press release following Namatjira's conviction, Paul Hasluck expressed his deep regret that Namatjira had been given too much freedom before his citizenship had been granted. His message was clear. Namatjira had not been ready to take on the responsibilities of citizenship.

If anything lies on our conscience it is that at a time when Albert Namatjira was under our protection and was not a citizen, we did not resist strongly enough the pressure from various quarters, doubtless acting in good faith, to take him away from his own environment. Although at that time we sought certain assurances from those who invited him out of the Territory our sad experience was that these assurances were not always honoured. More harm was done to him outside the Territory than anything he learnt in the Territory.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>71</sup> Editorial, *Courier-Mail*, 11 October 1958.

<sup>72</sup> W.E.H. Stanner, 'Continuity and Change among the Aborigines', in his *White Man Got No Dreaming: Essays, 1938-1973* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1979), 53.

<sup>73</sup> Editorial, *Bulletin*, 10 October 1958.

<sup>74</sup> Editorial, *Bulletin*, 20 August 1958.

<sup>75</sup> Paul Hasluck, Minister for Territories, 'The Case of Albert Namatjira', press statement, 9 October 1958, folio 68, CRS A452/1 58/3670, NAA.

### The last act

On 8 August 1959, shortly after finishing his sentence at Papunya, Namatjira died of heart failure. Once again public attention focused on the Aboriginal 'problem' and once again the call went out for full citizenship rights for all Aborigines. Namatjira's death would not be wasted if the issues about Aboriginal citizenship could be resolved. The *Tribune* had this to say:

They said he died of a heart failing of long standing. Would it not be more true to say he died of a broken heart?

Let his sacrifice not be in vain.<sup>76</sup>

For many in the settler community the news of his death was devastating. The circumstances surrounding his burial both enraged and saddened commentators. However appropriate a swiftly organised and quiet funeral may have been for Namatjira's wife, Rubina, and her family, some members of the settler community felt hurt and cheated. That Namatjira was buried within the 'length of a day' was to novelist Alan Marshall deeply suspicious as well as disrespectful.

Was his dark body concealed so swiftly beneath the earth because of consultation and discussion between white men; because white men feared to hear the voices raised in protest and anger of those who believe he died a victim to their injustice! They would have gathered had there been time.

Namatjira's treatment had made Marshall 'ashamed of my race'.<sup>77</sup>

### Conclusion

When Namatjira died in 1959, it had been twenty years since the Commonwealth government had announced its New Deal and the possibility of Aboriginal citizenship. In the intervening period 'part-Aborigines' had effectively become citizens when the term 'half-caste' was removed from all legislation governing Aborigines in the Northern Territory in 1953. For 'unassimilated', 'full-blood' Aborigines, however, little had changed in terms of their status. Through the Welfare Ordinance, and associated legislation such as the *Wards' Employment Ordinance 1953* (NT), exclusion continued, based now on culture expressed in manner of living and associations, rather than biological race. With hindsight we can see that Australia was on the cusp of change. In the next decade, the way would be cleared for some account to be taken of cultural pluralism, multiculturalism and cultural diversity in defining Australian identity. The criteria for who could belong in this new Australian nation would be significantly expanded. In 1959, however, to belong meant to be the same, to live 'like us'. Until each individual Aboriginal person could demonstrate that sameness, there could be no

<sup>76</sup> Herbert McClintock, 'Homage to Namatjira', *Tribune*, 19 August 1959.

<sup>77</sup> Alan Marshall, letter to the editor, 'No Orations for Namatjira', *Age*, 12 August 1959.

equality, and exclusion from the benefits of citizenship and full civil rights was the only alternative. A genuinely inclusive Aboriginal citizenship was still a long way off. Certainly singling Aborigines out for the privilege, as had been Namatjira's fate, was a solution fraught with difficulties. The editor of the *Adelaide News* tried to draw a hopeful conclusion from the tragedy.

[Namatjira's] life has pointed vividly to the fact that Australian aborigines are capable of great things if given anything like a chance. A fitting memorial would be to give them a chance, the full unlimited chance, that he saw only dancing ahead like one of his desert mirages.<sup>78</sup>

In 1959 the challenge for settler Australia was to find solutions to questions it asked itself about an Aboriginal citizenship. But the possibility that Aboriginal voices might be heeded in this debate was still as unsubstantial as those mirages.

*Northern Territory University*

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<sup>78</sup> Editorial, *News* (Adelaide), 10 August 1959.